FICTION

HEATHER DUFF

Toujours La Naissance

SUTTON: AUGUST 1967

Red liquid in the thermometer registers one hundred and one degrees Fahrenheit. Beside it, a calendar, open at July, although it is August, bursts from its bent tack; a cartoon of a topless waitress carrying a cake (with a hidden bomb) that says *Vive le FLQ* in blue icing, flutters into a pail of oats. In the hot straw, Kirsty and I squat; fast-melting popsicle rainbows drizzle down our wrists, making bracelets.

The jersey lies pinned to the cement by her heaving stomach; she moos, soporific. Lost in the birth canal, Claude finally yanks on two hooves pasted together with strings of blood.

"Like when I git a blockbuster bleedin' nose," I whisper to Kirsty.

"Like finger paint," she adds.

"Silence pour la mère," says Claude.

Popsicle juice runs down our chins like Union Jacks. My breath ceases, like momentary death, then, pigeon-like, flies towards sun breaks in the rafters.

Vancouver, 1996

This week, Kirsty phoned to tell me she heard that Claude went and died on the weekend. *Just like that. Bingo.* How he always wanted to go, from a heart attack. He was seventy. Six months before that he had had a stroke but nobody had told us because, we're *Emily's girls, the ones that went out west.* For Kirsty and me, there had been some comforting justice in Claude's purchase of Grammah's farm; he had worked it for forty years after all; but Aunt Beatrice told us he had to sell it pretty soon after buying it, because by then, he was too arthritic to squat beneath a bulging udder. As far as Kirsty and I knew, Claude was still living across from the Hotel with his sister Josette. So the farm changed hands again, this time to Montrealers. Those Montrealers then had the gall to sell the choice bits of meadow down below the house. Apparently, there is now an enormous sign posted in the fossil of a cowpie, with a diagram of the subdivision that will soon replace paradise. I suspect that's what really killed Claude, his heart staked off with numbered white pegs. That and the fact that, of course, he ended up in Ste. Jeanne d'Arc when he had the stroke, which everybody including Claude knows is death row, the same nursing home Grammah Rigsby died in, and Uncle Jerome, Aunt Charlotte, and all sorts of other Sutton folks. Just looking out the window at the statues of Mary would've been enough to depress the hell out of Claude and bring on a heart attack. The Home, as everyone dubs it since there is no competitor—French, English, rich, poor—the whole town ends it in the same place.

Sutton, 1996

> *Yield not to temptation, For yielding is sin;*
> *Each vict'ry will help you, Some other to win;*
> *Fight manfully onward, Dark passions subdue,*
> *Look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through.*
> *—Horatio R. Palmer, 1834–1907*

It's *Hymn-athon* at the Home.

Hattie Puget and Aunt Beatrice, who are regular volunteers, sit behind the spattering of residents at the back, most of whom have come here, not for inspiration, but for something to do. The pianist, a young French woman, who converted from Catholicism and now attends Calvary Baptist, improvises cadenzas and flowery Amens.

"Her Amens are as long as Winston Churchill's funeral procession," says Hattie, seventy-six.

"The old people can't follow it," says Beatrice, who is seventy-four.

"I remember when Mira Gumsby used to play piano. She was worse. She couldn't read music."

"Well, you played for Charlotte's last party, and that was durned good entertainment."

Few years back, when Aunt Charlotte was still in the Home, my mother came down from Ontario and organised a big Easter surprise party in la chambre du soleil. There was a gingerbread rooster cake, made by Hattie Puget, all decorated up with icing sugar feathers, and jelly beans for eyes.

"But then …" reminds Beatrice in a loud whisper, "Charlotte didn't make it till that Good Friday. Broke her hip by the bathroom sink when she was rinsing her dentures, then stroke and double pneumonia. 'Died with our Lord,' Reverend Dibbs said. But how would the Reverend know, since he never visited the Home 'cept when there was a *Hymn-athon* for the English Protestants? An' he ain't even here today. Course he has a six point charge—from Cowansville to Sweetsburg to Farnham to Pigeon Hill and beyond. He coulda been too tuckered out from preaching the same sermon six times over to drop in on Charlotte. On the other hand, Père Bealduc don't have such a sanctified excuse. He ain't here much either. He waits till the very last moment, then he shows up for Last Rites an' figures he's doin' his duty to God, Queen, and Country."

"Well, Beatrice," says Hattie, "You're the real priest around here. Tell the Pope to smoke that in his pipe."

"Haven't missed a day since Claude had that stroke, even when there was an eight foot snowfall."

"Bet even Josette couldn't make it that day."

"Well I had Jerome's old deer gut snowshoes. Brought a jar of plum conserve, and a tub of soft maple sugar. Claude was grateful on account of the fact they get those Lilliputian plastic containers of jam here—not enough for a half piece of toast."

The red-headed song leader, Cana, the new Presbyterian minister's wife from Dorval, announces the last hymn: "Our grand finale is going to be 'Nearer my God to Thee,' and she nods towards the pianist; they exchange beatific smirks.

"How is Claude?" whispers Hattie.

"Dang miserable sittin' in that wheelchair, not even bein' able to walk to the Hotel for a pint."

The piano swells with the trills and rolls of "Nearer my God…."

"What do they think this is, the *Titanic*?"

To tell you the truth, I am stunned. That last time I'd seen Claude about ten years ago at Grammah's farm, he talked of his own imminent death: *just put my corpse in the wood stove along with the burned cornmeal muffins so as the smoke goes up the chimney to signal passerbys heading south over the border to Abercorn.* But I never believed in Claude's imminent death. Claude would never age; my mother says he looked exactly the same when she was a little girl, that, like Peter Pan, he never grew old, wore the same manure-caked burgundy pants, hooted at his own morbid jokes, and kept the barn a royal mess. I believed her. Claude, I figured, at least Claude would never *go and die* like the rest. The news of his death comes as a sort of betrayal of immortality. Perhaps my singular childhood devotion to him was a eulogy in disguise; he was my guru, destined to be the guru for generations of children; he spoke with an uncommon eloquence from the manure trough.

Sutton, 1967

"What happened to the big bull, Michel?"

"He died at the market," says Claude, pronounced *doid.*

Claude has a unique accent: French Canadian and English à la Eastern Townships all combined; it spills out like from a hole in a bag of seed, except silken, thick.

"What happened to the guernsey with the shrivelled udder?"

"She doid."

"What happened to King Will the horse?"

"He doid."

"What happened to my true grandfather by blood and guts?" I know the answer inside out but I need to hear it again, just to make sure; it's a refrain only Claude knows how to say right. Claude always says things right.

"Aubrey doid right down there where your Grammah planted them sunflowers that won a prize at Brome Fair. His tractor went and turned over and there he was. Dead."

"Dead," I echo.

"Dead," says Kirsty.

I look down at the mother cow; she blinks; a tear rolls like a silver marble down her nose, then drops into the scorched straw. I want to stroke her neck, bat away the flies, but Claude would send me out of the barn if I interfered. To be cast out would be the most humiliating demotion. That Kirsty and I are the only English kids allowed in that barn is an honour; to compromise this status, where only the milky dignity of the cow ranks higher, would be akin to mortal damnation.

We want to believe we are Claude's only children.

Mississauga, 1967

I used to pretend Claude Leclerc was my father because he had a profession I could actually smell, unlike Guthrie, my blood father in Ontario, who was an international businessman, rarely home, who spoke with a battery of corporate buzz words. I wasn't needed in Guthrie's life. That part was clear. Except for every April when he filled out the *Dependents* section on his income tax.

"How old are you?" he'd ask every April.

"One hunderd and eight."

"What grade are you in?"

"Don't you know nothin'?"

To Guthrie, I was an intruder, like a mosquito. When Guthrie was in Europe or Asia or Latin America, I ransacked his desk drawers and stole paper clips with which I fashioned chain belts for my Barbies. I also stole those mini white donuts (i.e., paper reinforcers), and made pasties for playing *Playboy Empire*. I was the president, and all the pre-pubescent girls in the neighbourhood wandered with abandon through my basement, with the chant we learned from the Grade Six girls by the gym door, composed, they said, by "Author Unknown":

We must, we must,
We must improve our busts
The bigger, the better
The tighter the sweater
The boys are depending on us

I got the idea for the game from my friend Sally Ann's father, who was often out of town selling fold-out chesterfields, like Guthrie, like most of the fathers in the neighbourhood: absentee landlords. Sally Ann's Dad kept a stack of *Playboys* in the magazine rack in the family bathroom; I asked Sally Ann's mother why they were kept there when her husband was never home, and she smiled sweetly (she was a kindergarten teacher) and said, "We've always been a liberal-minded family."

"Does that mean Lester B. Pearson looks at *Playboy?*" I asked Sally Ann later.

"I dunno," she said. "Maybe he goes nude to his house of common."

I had met Sally Ann at Brownies, which convened at the Sherobee Presbyterian Church basement; she was the Seconder in my Sprite Six. I was the Sixer.

Here we are the sprightly Sprites
Brave and helpful like the knights...

To my girls, who on Monday nights skipped around the toadstool in faded, hand-me-down Brownie uniforms, I offered tennis balls, which they positioned under their summer tops. When the tennis balls rolled under the desk or fell between the cracks of the fold-out couch, I supplied more pasties. *Playboy Empire* gave me dominance over that empty oak desk. After July 1st weekend, Guthrie came back from Asia, laden with gifts, like a missionary, with tales of orphans with bald spots from malnutrition. These tales instilled chronic guilt in me for having a bike, even though it was one of those bargain three-speeds you put together yourself from Canadian Tire. Now that Guthrie was back, I instantly lost my imperial status and became again a mealymouthed suburban brat.

The basement was no longer my domain. I received his tokens—little woven purses with tassels, silver spoons, coins, stamps, cloisonné earrings, jade pagoda necklaces—like an aboriginal princess trading my people's sacred land for trinkets. I stuffed the pasties back into Guthrie's desk, and did "inane" things like tripping into his new cement job out by the garage; this, I protested, was an accident.

"You ninny! You deliberately ruined my cement job! You're nothing but a menace."

Kirsty and I were both menaces. We couldn't help it.

"Like Dennis?" offered my sister, Kirsty; a licorice whip dangled from her lips.

"No," said Guthrie, "Like Mussolini."

"Is Mussolini an Italian TV comedy?" I asked Kirsty later, but she thought it was a miniature moose.

But to Claude, who leased Grammah's farm in Sutton, Kirsty and I were farm assistants, stinky, ferocious, and loyal to the death.

I wanted to move into the barn. I had it all figured out. I would sleep in the straw in the empty heifer pen, eat a daily porridge of oats and corn kernels, and go to L'École Madeleine; I'd wear a straw hat with a wide brim and a black ribbon at the back that tossed back and forth when I walked. Claude would raise me as his own. Kirsty and I would speak fluent French and Guthrie and Emily wouldn't understand a thing. We would grow up woolly and smelly, like livestock, drink Scotch straight from the bottle in the milk house, and do our short division exercises under the apple trees up in the orchard. I would live in that barn forever. The barn would be safe, silent as a cathedral but with no confession, filthy, and undemanding.

Sutton, 1967

Claude pulls the bloody hooves out with a shhhhlllp sound, and the head of a calf, squished, its ears flattened with more blood; the mother cow groans, heaves, tries to stand up; her leg buckles. Claude holds her down with one hand and slides the rest of the baby calf out on to the straw; there's a long, blackish tube. The scent of hay is sweet: new blood and incense.

"It's the umbilical cord," says Claude.

"What's the unbiblical cord for?" says Kirsty.

Claude guffaws and snips the cord with boiled garden shears. "We'll name him Jean-Marc," says Claude. " He's a big boy, eh. Le pauvre garçon; he won't be growing up. I've got to take him to market in four days. We've got too many bull calves."

"Au marché!" screams Kirsty with a French accent.

"Veal gets a good price. You girls can take care of him for the next four days, if you like. But then it's au revoir."

Kirsty and I are sobbing all over Claude's boots, our faces practically grazing the manure. If we prostrate ourselves before him in humility, maybe he'll relent. "We beg of you, please! Don't do it, Claude! Please!"

"It's the way of the farm," says Claude. "You've got yer birth. And you've got yer death. And then there's more birth. And more death. And more sugar ...." He points to a sugary pile of manure.

Kirsty and I weep into his boot laces. On his greasy pant leg I wipe my nose. He raises his hands; entrails drip from callouses on his palms from the pitchfork handle; he is a life size version of the plastic crucifix his sister Josette nailed up above his bottle of Irish whiskey in the barn window.

"Mais il y a toujours la naissance."

Sutton, 1995

Claude is in the Hotel with Henri Villeneuve, the butcher, and Samuel Hinket, whose son Caleb now runs the family dairy farm near Stanbridge East.

"So how is Caleb doing?" asks Claude. "I think about him every morning at five, when I get up to take a piss."

The three men, who are all retired, crack up laughing. Their waitress, a lined woman with bleached bangs races over to mop up the foam from Claude's beer, which has spilled on the red tablecloth. Her silver bangles ring over Claude's head.

"Celeste, you could hire yourself out as a doorbell," says Samuel.

"If I choose the right door, maybe I would make more money than I do here," says Celeste. She moves on the the next table, which is laden with empty glasses and pork chop bones.

"I like being retired," says Henri. "Let someone else throw the meat cleaver around for a change, eh."

"Who's runnin' yer old business?" asks Claude.

"I sold it to young fellow from Sherbrooke, Clarence Ducette. Seems like a fine butcher, told him if he gets stuck with a flock of dead ducks all at once to hire Gertrude, you know, Jerome's daughter, the one with the five kids and the dink of a husband, but she's sure good at slinging ducks in a hurry. She'll do it, freelance, eh. Like if some skiers from Montreal want to have a party with a lot of red meat and poultry, Gertrude can help out. Christ, with five kids she can use the money."

"Good of you to give him some advice, Harry," says Samuel.

"I've got to go now," says Claude, finishing up his beer. "Josette will be waiting for me; she's as bad as a wife, that woman, waiting for me to come back from the Hotel for dinner with her greasy pot holders on. She's a saint, that woman."

The two men wave goodbye to Claude, who puts on his peaked cap and saunters out the door. The late afternoon sun blazes in his eyes; he squints on the sidewalk, then runs headlong into a woman coming in the opposite direction. She puts down a large plaid suitcase.

"Claude Leclerc, is that you?" says my mother.

"Emily! Well hello, Emily."

"I'm here for a family get-together," says my mother, "to see Aunt Beatrice, mostly, since she's alone now."

"Well I'm happy to see you," says Claude. " I must make my confession. I had to sell the farm. It was a sacrilege I tell you. Now it breaks my heart to see it. I won't go by there. When I have to go north, I just take another route; there's always another route, thank God."

"I went by there today. Hollyhocks still blooming."

"How are you, Emily?"

"Well I'm still kicking around. Don't know if I have one year left or another thirty. I've had so many surgeries, who knows. Had so many parts of me taken out." Emily laughs.

"Well," says Claude, "You don't have any innards left, eh. Sacrement. But that's good news, because now there's there's nothing left in there to go wrong."

Mississauga, 1967

After Canada's hundredth birthday, *Playboy Empire* took a different turn. My parents went to Expo '67 in Montreal, so Kirsty and I had a live-in babysitter, Mrs. Sniller, who sang mezzo-soprano in the Baptist church choir. In Christmas pageants, she always played the Head Archangel. She was wide-hipped and blue-haired, except that in those days, blue hair wasn't cool. Mrs. Sniller made me eat soft-boiled eggs sliced up in a fruit nappie, cold and congealed.

"This is like eating somebody's runny nose," I gagged. Mrs. Sniller wouldn't let me play until I ate it, so I clenched my eyes shut and swallowed, thought about Uncle Jerome's maple sugar on toast.

I got sick of using paper reinforcers for pasties, and turned to food colouring from my mother's baking cupboard. The kit was tantalising; little glass bottles glistened with rich liquid: sapphire, emerald, topaz, ruby. The girls and I lined up in the laundry room by the washing machine and I suggested, "Let's strip off our shirts. Mrs. Sniller is upstairs taking a nap so she won't know the difference."

"Okay, I'm first," said Sally Ann. She dipped a paintbrush into the blue food colouring and painted her indented chest blue.

"Like sunken treasure," I grinned.

The rest of the sprightly Sprites each painted their own flat chests, each a different colour, some a blend to make orange or turquoise or purple. I wanted indigo on mine. Teresa gave herself a rainbow right down to her belly button.

We skipped around the kitty litter, like it was a toadstool, and sang:

Flat is where it's at.
Flat is where it's at.
Flat. Flat.
Flat is where it's at.

"Author Unknown," I added.

"How come Sally Ann has a blue chest?" whined Isabel, "She used up most of the blue."

"Tawny Owl and Brown Owl would both die if they saw us now, eh," I said. "We'd lose our Homemakers badges."

"I never got no Homemakers badge," said Kirsty. "So I ain't gonna lose it."

Then we heard Mrs. Sniller's cracked voice on the stairs. "How many girlfriends are down there? Didn't I precisely say two was the absolute, very limit?"

"Quick—behind the furnace!" I pointed to the back corner of the basement, and the seven painted beauties crushed in amongst the dust balls behind the furnace. By the time Mrs. Sniller arrived in the laundry room—she limped on account of the fact that her varicose veins hadn't been stripped for awhile—Kirsty and I were standing there, fully clothed, shoving all the T-shirts into the washing machine. Kirsty shook enough Tide in the washing machine to wash the underwear of the whole Baptist denomination.

"We're washin' our underwear for Sunday School," said Kirsty.

"So when is supper?" I asked. "I really loved those turnips and boiled cabbages last night. Sure hope we're havin' heated-up leftovers."

Kirsty grimaced at my lie; I stepped on her toe.

Teresa, who was violently allergic to dust, sneezed from behind the furnace. I started to sing in a raucous voice:

Hundred bottles of beer on the wall
Hundred bottles of beer
If one of those bottles should happen to fall
Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall ….

"If your father knew about this hooliganism," pronounced Mrs. Sniller. "We Baptists are a temperate lot! And to think, you were a White Ribboner as an infant."

"White Ribboner?" I said.

"In fact, I've seen the signed certificate in your Baby Scrapbook. Didn't you know, your father's parents signed an oath on your behalf that you would never touch a drop of liquor. It's already signed, as witnessed by the Lord in Heaven."

Mrs. Sniller scratched her gigantic thigh, rolled her eyes, one of which had a broken blood vessel and made her look like the Bride of Frankenstein, and she shuffled out of the room.

On pain of death, my Empire wordlessly donned their T-shirts dusted with soap crystals; one by one, I snuck them out by the cat dishes at the side door.

"Let's promise to never wash them rainbows off," Sally Ann said.

"Like White Ribboners," I added.

Sutton, 1967

Kirsty and I practically live in death row with Jean-Marc. Kirsty tacks little handmade drawings of cows on the barn boards above Jean-Marc's head to make it feel like home. We lie in the straw beside him, rest our heads on his tepid stomach. I let him suck on my fingers until they're dripping with milky spit. Jean-Marc has bewitching lashes over marble eyes. We cry a lot, into Jean-Marc's neck. He moos like a pigeon who can't find the sun hole in the roof. We plan to kidnap him and take him back to Ontario. We can't, of course. There is only market day, hovering, like the worst dental appointment. Kirsty and I plan to die with Jean-Marc, be Christian martyrs, like in the Children's Crusades, make all adults look evil. We will go to market in the back of Claude's pickup truck, still clinging to Jean-Marc's neck. We will be chopped up and sold in Styrofoam trays at IGA. It's the least we can do.

Sutton, 1996

Claude sits in one of the Home's grey canvas wheelchairs, his knees covered with a fleur-de-lys afghan crocheted by Josette, which he hates because it makes him look like some aged terrorist, which perhaps he is, but it was nice of Josette to make it while she watched *Roseanne*, which is her favourite show these days. He stares out the window at snow on top of the Pinnacle, and at some chickadees feeding on seed someone threw into the snow around the Home's statue of Mary.

"That snow on her head, or pigeon shit?"

"C'est la neige," says Celeste, the waitress from the Hotel, who visits today with a half dozen blueberry muffins in a pie plate covered with cellophane.

Minou, who has been a nurse at the Home for twelve years, changes the sheets as she hums the theme song from Zeffrelli's *Romeo and Juliet*. "Tu aimes nos oiseaux, n'est-ce-pas?"

"Them pigeons flew down from the hole in the hayloft and shit on the Mother of God."

"Monsieur Leclerc!" says Minou.

"Ils détestent la voiture de malade," says Celeste.

"They're like homing pigeons, eh," explains Claude. "I could die here from the boredom, but I can't because you keep changing my pissed sheets."

"Monsieur Leclerc!" says Minou again; she grabs the bundle of soiled sheets and marches briskly out the door.

"She's been here for a long time," says Claude. "The rest of us, we're the winners, eh. We leave here in well-sanded, pine boxes, nailed by Thomas Smythe from up the casket factory. You should be blessed to have sat in the Hotel drinking the Molson's with the architect of your coffin. You wonder sometimes if he sizes you while you're having a drink. But hell, that nurse Minou's a lifer. She was here when Grammah Rigsby was on her last legs, and Aunt Charlotte. I suppose they were polite to her, even though they were both in pain."

"Everybody misses you at the Hotel," says Celeste.

"You got a whiskey sour in your purse?"

"It'd conflict with your medication."

"Bloody medication."

"You miss the farm, eh."

"Y'know, a Montreal doctor once forbade me to work a farm, said if I did I'd be sure to live a short life on account of the dust in the barn. Asthma, eh. He said I should be an insurance broker. I laughed in his city face. 'If I croak in the manure trough,' I said, 'and they find me stiff as a pitchfork there and smelling like cow sugar, at least I'll be myself.' Forty years in that barn and I never sneezed once, 'cept when Bernice Hoad came in doused with her home brewed gardenia perfume. Then the whole herd started wheezing. It was like a symphony."

"I got a raise, eh."

"Can you take me to Disneyland? Always wanted to see Mickey."

"I can take you down the hall."

"I would burn this damn chair if I could get my hands on some matches."

"N'est-elle pas confortable, Claude?"

"I'm going to die in this chair."

"We miss your jokes at the Hotel."

"This chair is a dead man's chair. I'm just borrowing it."

"I love you, Claude. Did I ever tell you that before? Mais non. I was too scared to say the truth. But I do. I always wished you would marry me. That we could have thirteen babies and name them all after your favourite cows. Susie. Betsie. Lu Lu .... But, blood of Jesus Christ, I was past the change of life when I realized this."

Claude hoots with laughter, screeches the tire of his wheelchair away from her. "Nobody can stand me except Josette."

"Josette is lonely at the house all by herself. She watches English talk shows all day."

"She always watched TV all day. She can pretend I'm just out in the barn shakin' hay bales, that I'll be in any minute for meatloaf stew. It's not much different."

"I still want you, Claude." Celeste kisses his forehead, a touch yellowed, she notices, under the fluorescent light.

"Why don't you kiss me lower down or are you afraid of going to hell."

"I'm afraid the wheelchair will burn."

Celeste smooths her blonde bangs down, puts a toque on, and her black woollen cape. She moves a box of Kleenex and rearranges the plate of muffins on the shelf by Claude's bed, peels away the cellophane, and turns to leave.

Claude mumbles, but loud enough for her to hear: "I never went to mass 'cept at eight on Sunday mornings when they don't do baptisms. The priest will have to baptize the thirteen babies in the milk cooler."

Mississauga, 1967

My imperial curiosity escalated when Mrs. Sniller was invited next door to have tea with Mrs. Harris, who also had varicose veins. Most of the seven rainbow gals came over that afternoon, with the exception of Teresa, who had developed the chicken pox since the food colouring episode.

"It's all your fault, Bridget," said Isabel. "It was all that chicken bone marrow in behind the furnace."

"Let's go into the walk-in closet off the rec room," I said.

I lead them all into the walk-in closet, which was piled high with dusty suitcases, trunks full of wool tartan blankets that had been in the MacCurdy family for eons, and boxes full of stuffed animals, like Kirsty's handmade kangaroo she never slept with anymore. Sometimes the kangaroo made a guest appearance on my stuffed animal version of the *Ed Sullivan Show*, where I had my furless koala bear be Ed: "We're going to have a really big shew, now, a really big shew!" The kangaroo always did a tightrope act over a skipping rope.

"I don't wanna play Ed Sullivan," said Sally Ann.

I turned off the light, felt for the switch in the darkness, my control panel. The girls screamed. "Okay now," my voice calm. "Why don't we all just take everything off now, even our underpants."

The girls screamed.

"Come on you sprightly Sprites. Don't be wimps. The lights are even out."

I clutched the light switch with my right hand, like a trigger, and listened for the zippers and swish of cloth, to the hysterical squeals, like hungry hogs at cousin Gertrude's farm.

"Is everything off?" I said.

"Yeah—"

"Every last stitch?"

Then I snapped the light on. The four other girls from my sprightly Sprite Six (except Teresa, of course) were totally nude; they clutched at themselves and yelled bloody murder.

"I'm cold," said Isabel; her teeth chattered. No matter what we did, Isabel was always cold, exhausted, or sick.

"I'm not," said Sally Ann. "I'm just right. I think we should parade into Brownies like this."

"Yeah," said Kirsty, "Brown Owl wouldn't even notice. She'd just take points off for forgetting our uniforms."

"Or maybe, just maybe there's a *Playboy* badge," I said.

After the walk-in closet episode, we never played *Playboy* again, because I finally realized it was a stupid game. This moment of dawning was the death of the Empire, which had been some freak, ironic twist in the fatherless wake of sixties' suburbia. Perhaps all I can do, in retrospect, is forgive myself the girlish cries from the dust balls of the walk-in closet. At night, I hear them howling against the Empire, against the lace-veiled, predestination of their mothers: the homemakers and sex bunnies of Southern Ontario; the girls scream both to be reborn and not to be born at all; their voices are echoes of mine; thirty years ago, in naive splendour, I exploited them and my own heart.

The summer of '67, while Kirsty and I waited for our beloved trip to Sutton, my compatriots and I went back to playing ballerinas with Emily's gold scarf, which mystically transformed into a moonbeam for the Sugar Plum Fairy; I was Veronica Tennant while Kirsty was Karen Kain, because of the "K"; and we played Guthrie's 78-rpm *Nutcracker Suite* from his collection of fat records in the vinyl trunk. I sniffed those relics, with tentative fascination—the smell of pixie dust on new boot soles, all tucked into a million brown paper wrappers.

Sutton, 1967

Grammah has two kitchens: one in the back where the wood stove is, full of fire and brimstone, like the witch's kitchen in *Hansel and Gretel*, except Grammah, who does fatten us up with sugary treats, doesn't then eat us. The other kitchen is also the dining room, where the only table and chairs are, but everyone always just calls it "the kitchen"; it's where everyone hangs out on a saggy couch, reads, talks, nibbles, and yells out to Grammah in the back kitchen where all the steam is. In the kitchen, there's a long white table covered in a white vinyl tablecloth, etched in fake lace, and about ten chairs around it for all the hired hands from the thirties and forties, whom Grammah still cooks for as if they were there. Every chair is a completely different style, odd pieces bought from different sets, but all are painted with oil-based white paint, so it's like one matching set frosted with icing. My favourite chair is the one with tiny holes in its back rest, cut out into shapes of miniature roses. The seat has a powder blue cushion on it to cover up an unpainted slab of wood.

Kirsty and I slouch, sullen, kicking the legs of the chairs under Grammah's kitchen table. Kirsty sits beside me, grimacing. Blobs of veal smeared in gravy untouched on both of our plates.

"Eat up," barks Grammah. "If you girls want blackberry tarts."

Guthrie and Emily sit with pained expressions across from us, devouring Grammah's homemade buns, still hot; butter dances up into the steam. Only the buns, the buns of perfection, like baby soothers, keep them from saying something Kirsty and I don't want to hear. Meanwhile, Grampy snorts and goes into the back kitchen, by the wood stove, for one of his tubercular coughing fits—"left-over from the squirty thirties."

"I tell you, I ain't eatin' Jean-Marc," I say to Grammah. "It's cannibalism."

Guthrie chuckles; Emily gives him a glance of capital punishment.

"Me neither," echoes Kirsty. "I'd ruther be dead."

Emily almost laughs, too, but she covers her mouth politely with a napkin and somehow is able to keep her face morosely sympathetic.

"It ain't Jean-Marc," says Grammah. "It ain't anybody you girls know. Land sakes, it's just veal on sale from the IGA."

"It's just a coincidence, dear," offers Emily.

Kirsty gags dramatically, and catapults from the table.

"I detest veal," I explain and join Kirsty. We make gagging sounds and drag our legs all the way up the stairs. For once, no one follows or forces us to eat our main course. We're left alone, to huddle at the open hot air grate in Auntie Mabel Ann's old bedroom; we listen to the grownups totally crack up over some story about Grampy's old job driving a meat truck through the mountain roads near Smuggler's Notch, Vermont.

"Just like a scared garter, them roads was," he says, "an' then the back door popped open so as a line of hog carcasses rolled out, their tails waggin' over the cliff. You should have seen the lady holler in the car behind; she was a tourist from Montreal."

"That explains it," laughs Emily. And then they crack up about radio shows they all remember like *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Ma and Pa Kettle.*

The Home, 22 May 1996

"Anudder one, eh."

Minou and Marie turn the body over on the sheets, cold as shrouds of Turin, his face in shadow; they douse his skin with white cloths in hot soapy water.

"And anudder and anudder. Every day it's the same thing. I wish I worked in a maternity hospital."

"You know what he said today?"

"He was a joker, that one."

"He said mais non, it's not pigeon shit out there on the Mother of God. And I said it's snow, eh. I told him every day it was snow. And he said, all right, you win; it could be dove shit."

"Did the priest come?"

"Yesterday. Gave last rites while Monsieur Leclerc watched a rerun of *Gilligan's Island*."

"Josette is going to take it hard."

Sutton, 1967

The day after Jean-Marc's death, Kirsty and I sit in the green plastic couch that swings sideways, hanging from rusty chains hooked into the ceiling of the veranda. It screeches just like a train. Kirsty stands at one end and I'm at the other.

"All aboard!"

"I'm the Connector," says Kirsty. "First stop, Iron Hill."

She drags her feet on the floor and grinds the swing to a halt. I sit there with hands neatly folded in my lap, like I've seen Aunt Charlotte do during the sermon.

"Well, get the heck off," says Kirsty.

"I want Sweetsburg. It's after Cowansville. I'm going to buy a lace pinafore. I'm in an L.M. Montgomery novel."

Kirsty gets the swing going again, leans into it with her hips, moves back and forth till it screams like crows. I can see the house windows behind me, a blur of white lace, coloured china birds, ivy spider webs, and a thermometer with *Henri Villeneuve, LA BOUCHERIE, Sutton, Québec.* Temperature 89°F. There's a wooden wall plaque, just inside, with:

Christ is the unseen guest
at every meal.
The silent listener
to every conversation.

‘"You're goin' too fast, Kirsty. I'm dizzy."

"Ain't goin' fast." The front screen door slams. Christ is the silent listener. Then my mother is on the veranda, with my father two feet behind her, who has been working outside on a card table. He brandishes a worn brown leather briefcase; bits of white show through and papers bulge out from the top.

Kirsty stops the train. "Sweetsburg!"

I climb off the train.

"You're not working in *Sutton*, Daddy."

He doesn't answer.

"We have to go home tomorrow," says my mother. "School on Tuesday."

"But Grampy's takin' us blackberry pickin' tomorrow."

"I know you want to stay," says my mother.

"Then why won't you let us?"

"You can play for another twenty-five minutes, then it's time to pack."

"I won't pack," says Kirsty. "I'll hide in the orchard under a lemon meringue cowpie and you'll never find me."

My mother sighs and shifts her feet back and forth. "I grew up here," she says, fingers the green plastic on the swing where it's mended with silver duct tape. "I played in that orchard. Do you think I like leaving?"

My parents go back into the house. Kirsty and I scurry down the veranda stairs to the gravel driveway overlooking the garden—sunflowers, hollyhocks, then beyond, a fenced in vegetable patch—corn, cabbages, Swiss chard, carrots, wax beans, sugar peas, onions, potatoes, tomatoes, squash, pumpkins, but not the size of a washtub like Grampy says they oughta be—almost, but not quite. And the mountain view beyond the meadow. Claude's herd grazes down near the wild berries.

"Why don't grownups do what they want?" says Kirsty.

"They're stifled."

Grampy turns up behind us, tickles Kirsty, who hollers.

"We have to go home tomorrow," I announce.

"That's a tootin' shame," says Grampy. "I was goin' to take you girls down to the blackberry thicket, put you girls to work with a couple of buckets I been savin' in the woodshed."

"We're going to stay," says Kirsty. "We're going to hide in the haystack."

"We can't," I say, "We'll fall through the slats into the bull's cage."

Claude's on his way down the driveway in his tractor, the same one Aubrey turned over. Claude's dog, Pierrot, is riding in the shovel part at the front of the tractor; he barks. Claude stops to talk to Grampy, who is painting a birdhouse sunshine yellow. Two black kittens follow the tractor and stop in the sunflower patch to attack the leaves.

"I asked Mrs. Flotsam downtown there if she wanted some sugar, eh," says Claude. "And she said, 'Sure,' but I held out a pail of manure and she looked like she was goin' to have an attack of the spleen."

There's an echo of Claude's chuckle down through the valley. Then he starts to laugh and can't stop; it's high-pitched, like Guthrie's laugh when he's watching a Peter Sellers movie. "I remember the time when Kirsty was about three. She wanted to help me with the hens in the hen house, eh. And Tabernacle! I told her to pick up each egg from the straw there and put it in the basket. So she started throwing one egg at a time into the basket. Splat. And then anudder one. Splat. And then anudder one."

Grampy is laughing now, too. They sound like two broken train whistles from this side of the Round top. "Every single egg she threw in the basket. Every single egg broke. But I didn't stop her, eh. To see it, it was worth the price of a dozen eggs."

I have heard this story a hundred times but I laugh again, and Kirsty turns beet red.

"I didn't do that!" she squeals. Then all of a sudden, she starts crying, big cow tears.

I start crying, too, but it won't come out; it's a chunk of hairy sawdust. "I just hate leaving Sutton."

"I'll ask your mother if you can stay till Christmas," says Grampy.

"We can't stay."

"We'll jest play croquignole every day in the fall. Come December, we'll jest chop ourselves one of them jack pines up the hill there, decorate it up nice."

"We have to go to school on Tuesday. It's the end of the summer holidays, the absolute very end."

Kirsty squeezes my fingers, sniffs and wipes her nose with a sleeve.

Claude leans against his steering wheel. I notice his leather gloves, covered in grass stains. His whole body is dipped into the gloves, eyes bright like Big and Little Dippers you can see from the orchard after dark.

"You know," says Claude, "If you don't leave, you can't come back."

Sutton, 1996

In the cemetery, Hattie Puget and Aunt Beatrice stand in floral sundresses at a fresh grave. The Catholics have gone home already to tend their gardens. Only the Baptists are left standing there, grey hair askew, with a bowl full of pansies. Aunt Beatrice weeps. "Course Claude took over the farm after Aubrey's accident."

Hattie places the bowl of pansies by the grave, takes Beatrice's arm, and walks her to the iron gate, against a wind that scrapes down from Mont Sutton.

Rumour has it Celeste had Claude's baby back in 1953, but that she had a secret abortion in Montreal by an agnostic doctor, and never went to confession on account of the fact it was a mortal sin anyway so why bother, that Grammah's niece, poor cousin Gertrude, took her there when she went to talk to an accountant about her husband's bad financial planning.

Rumour has it Celeste had a son by Claude in 1954, and that son is now dating Wilhelmena Gumsby, Will and Mildred's daughter, but thank the Lord, Wilhelmena doesn't know who Ralph really is. She thinks Ralph is just Samuel Hinket's adopted son.

Rumour has it Celeste used to be a whore in East Montreal, that Bernice Hoad and Sara Samson saw her there when they were passing by to get new boots at Place Ville Marie, except that granted, it maybe wasn't Celeste since they only saw that whore from the back.

Rumour has it Celeste often gets drunk after work and goes to sleep at Claude's grave. Some people think she's the ghost of Claude's mother, Dominique Leclerc, wandering among the stones. Bernice Hoad says it ain't no ghost as she's seen Celeste there when the rooster crows, curled 'round the gravestone, wrapped up in a black woollen cape.

Vancouver, 1999

Funny how my connection with Claude was most tangible in girlhood, when from Guthrie I was most alienated. Later, to my surprise, I was there in loyal force at my father's dying bed, whereas when Claude faced brittle meadows I didn't even know it. Strange how things turn.

It's the turn of the century. I crawl into a corner of my closet, huddle amid the myriad slippers, including pink artifacts handknit by Grammah Rigsby in the early seventies. I am the adult Wendy huddling in the cinders. Peter Pan doesn't come back to the nursery. Claude Leclerc doesn't come back to my dreams of sun-streaked barns. Jean-Marc doesn't come back to the stall in which he was born. The farm doesn't come back to itself. Guthrie doesn't come back to reclaim the oak desk after his international conference to the Afterlife, a place I can't somehow imagine him inhabiting as a mere civilian after the conference is finished, the overhead projector unplugged, his felt pens put back, carefully, into the tattered briefcase.

This hiding in closets is what I used to do when I was a primary student in Ontario, squatting behind the musty hung clothes, beside my Barbie suitcase, which I always kept packed in case I had to escape into the darkness of the night. Packed with favourite books like *Little House in the Big Woods*, *Carbonel*, *Five Children and It*, *The Golden Pine Cone*. Learning to read was a second birth. I planned to smash my bedroom window with the iron cat door stopper, throw a blanket over the shredded glass, like the visiting firemen told us to do in grade three, and I'd hop into the dew with my suitcase full of breathtaking sentences no one could take away.