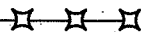


Thien, Madeleine. Simple Recipes. Toronto:
McClelland & Stewart, 2001.

A MAP OF THE CITY



In the years after I left home, I used to glimpse my parents in unexpected places. I would see the two of them in the Safeway, my mother standing patiently by while my father weighed oranges in his hands, feeling for signs of imperfection. I would see them on the opposite sidewalk, blurred and old, traffic streaming between us. During these sightings, I never felt the urge to join them. I only wanted to remain where I was and watch while they negotiated their way through the aisles, their bodies slow with old age.

Of course, it was never them. By this time, my father had returned from Indonesia and my mother was living alone in an apartment outside of the city. I had not seen my parents side by side in almost a

decade. It would be some other couple, vague and kindly looking, who would catch my eye, remind me of things I thought I had long forgotten.

My husband Will once said that longing manifests itself in sight. In therapy groups, people tell of seeing their loved ones long after they have passed away – a father, sitting in his usual armchair, a sister in the garden.

To Will, I said that longing was not the point. In any case, my parents were still alive.

Will said, "Death isn't what I meant exactly. And don't be so sure about the longing."

"Why not?"

"Because it's plain. You miss them all the time."

I let this sit for a moment, then I broke into a smile. Will was unfailingly patient. He let me dance around a topic but never come to rest on it. He forgave all my inabilities, first and foremost my unwillingness to speak with him about my family.

At first, this allowed me to put all my energy into the here and now, our present life. In hindsight, I see it also freed me to walk away, at least for a period of time, from certain obligations. I asked myself, does my family have any hold on me? For a long time, I tried to say *no*. We would remain separate from each other until the end. But then Will and I married, and when I thought about my own future, the possibility of children, I saw how the tables had turned. *Yes*, I realized. Their hold

would never diminish. For the first time I was struck by the disarray of my life. Walking away had not saved me as I had hoped it would.

My father used to own a furniture store.

That is a sentence I might have said to Will, but I can't recall now exactly which details I gave him.

My father used to own a furniture store and the store was named Bargain Mart. The front was made entirely of glass. A big white awning sheltered the entrance. I still remember that, when I was a child, my grade-one teacher singled me out. "Oh, yes," she said. "It's your father who owns that store, isn't it? The furniture store on Hastings Street."

I nodded proudly. Even to me, at that age, the idea of ownership meant something. Along Hastings Street was the bakery, the deli, the children's clothing store, the light shop. My father's furniture store was one among these and it had its place in the accepted order of things.

On weekends, I assisted my father. I turned over the *Closed* sign. Together, we sprayed Windex on the front windows. The couches were used, or sold on consignment, so you could find an armchair for ten or fifteen dollars, a sofa for thirty. When my father made a sale, he let me deliver the receipt and change to the customer, which I did proudly.

I was six years old then, and I dreamed commercials. In my mind, my father was the owner of an exciting retail outlet. Soon the furniture store would be a household word: *Bargain Mart*. Parents would announce to their children that this weekend's excursion would be to *Bargain Mart*, and children across the city would look up from their Cream of Wheat and cheer. From where we lived in Burnaby, in the spill of houses beneath the mountain, to Maple Ridge and Vancouver, people would flock to my father's store, carting away sofas on their shoulders, tables in their arms. My father standing at the front, hands on his hips, young.

My parents were thirty when they emigrated from Indonesia. The first business they owned in Vancouver was a restaurant, the All Day Grill. My father cooked up steak and eggs, sweet and sour pork on rice, and beef dip sandwiches.

I was born shortly after they arrived in Canada. When I was five months old, the doctors diagnosed me with kidney failure. This is what my mother told me — after twelve hours of cooking at the restaurant, my father would drive to the hospital. He would sweep into the nursery and gather me in his arms, careful of all my intravenous tubes. We paced the hallway, my father rolling the IV pole ahead of us. My mother says I recognized him. In his arms, I was peaceful, but

when he returned me to my bed, I wailed and fought. The nurses complained that each time my father left, I threw tantrums then shredded my cotton blanket with my tiny hands. I lost a kidney, but came out of the hospital when I was one. The restaurant went under.

Perhaps because of this, my father would often say that I had ruined his life. This was never said in a malicious manner, or one meant to wound me. It was matter-of-fact, the way one might speak of a change in the weather or an accident far away. If something was troubling him, my father would give a slow shake of his head. "Ever since you were born, Miriam, my life has been terrible." The smallest hint of a smile.

When I tell people this, laughing, they shake their heads in disbelief. I suppose I can understand how these words might sound to a stranger. Insensitive. Cruel. But this is not so. Between my father and me there was always a tacit understanding. Despite the teasing, he had an unwavering faith in me. "My daughter, Miriam," he said to everyone. "When she grows up, she is going to buy her parents a big house."

I would hold on to his hand when he said this, my face glowing with pride.

Of course my father never expected such things from me. It was only a joke, a laughing aside to tell me that his faith in me was abundant. Still, in the years after I left home, I wanted it to be true. I wanted to present my father with a house, hand him the key

to his perfect life. By that time, he was living alone. The years had taken their toll on my family and he was estranged from my mother and me.

I needed to ask him, *Have I disappointed you?* but the question itself seemed too simple. What kind of answer could he give? We had failed each other in so many unintended ways and then we had drifted apart. My father seemed lost in the past and I did not trust myself to guide him into the present. So I kept my distance and thought from time to time how things might have turned out differently. If I had been the kind of daughter I never was, faithful and capable, who could hold a family together through all its small tragedies.

Bargain Mart, with its hall of couches, is now a restaurant. The floor-to-ceiling glass nicely curtained. Ethiopian, my mother thinks, or is it Japanese? Some mornings I wake up remembering the store, not how it looked inside but how it looked when you stood at the front, at the glass, the view of the street and the stores across. It is not the kind of place you can find so easily now, a neighbourhood furniture store, family-owned.

As a child, I faked illness in order to be taken there. Once, I tiptoed into the bathroom and held the

blow-dryer up to my face. Then I stood at my parents' bedside. Two hands pressed to my stomach, I whispered, "Ache." A pause. Then, "Ache." My mother eyed me suspiciously. But my father, somehow, believed me. He held the palm of his hand to my forehead and his face filled with worry.

While I lounged in bed, my father brought me Eggo waffles, a glass of milk, and one tablet of Aspirin crushed soft as sand. Then he called my grade-one teacher to tell her I was sick again. Instead of school, he would take me with him to the furniture store.

Together, we walked across the front lawn, the cold grass crunching like snow under our shoes. I held both hands over my stomach and watched my breath unroll ahead of me, a white windsock. My father scraped ice off the windshield in scratchy lines, he leaned his body far across the car, arms out like a swimmer. After he was done, we sat in silence, watching the ice melt in little triangles off the windshield. When the car was warm enough, my father said, "Okay," and I replied, "Okay." We rolled forward on the grass. He turned down the alley, exhaust lifting like a plume behind us. The car lumbered down Hastings Street, past the bakery and the deli and the light shop.

In front of the store, we stood shivering on the sidewalk while my father fit the key into the lock.

When the door jingled open, the lemony smell of cleanser wafted out. My father mopped the floors every night before closing and the scent stayed trapped inside until morning. In the store, all the couches seemed to call to me — the creaky recliner, the velvet loveseat. I ran ahead of him into the maze of sofas.

Along one wall there was a closet storage room. It had no door and my father had hung a shower curtain there instead. On my sick days, I slept inside the closet. My bed was a plastic lawn chair. When customers began to arrive, my father pulled the shower curtain closed so that I could sleep.

“Dad,” I said once, unable to see around the corner to where he was sitting. “What are you doing right now?”

“Right now? I’m trying to imagine what other people see when they come into the store.”

“How come?”

He paused thoughtfully. “I’m the salesman. I must understand the buying patterns. Then I can find some way to convince them that they need this couch or that chair.”

“Oh,” I said. “It’s like an argument.”

“A bit like one. Only there’s no fighting. Just persuasion. That’s the beauty of my job. The best salesmen do that, they convince you to see their point of view.”

There was a radio he kept on his desk at the

back, and he sang along to John Denver, “Take Me Home, Country Roads,” his voice filled with gusto. “You look a little like him,” my father joked. “With those ears on you.”

I climbed out of the lawn chair. Walking in my bare feet, I took my father by the hand, pointing out the pieces I liked. “Don’t sell this one while I’m at school,” I told him. “Or this one. I put my name on it.” He looked at the scrawl in blue crayon on the upholstery: *Miriam*. No anger. Too tired, maybe, like the time I begged him to let me mow the lawn and I promptly ran over the electrical cord, severing it in two. No anger there, either.

In the closet, I could always get a feel for the way things were going in the store. Rarely was business brisk. My father was not the type to push anyone into a purchase. “Big commitment to buy a couch,” he said to one person. “It’s important to be sure.”

To someone else, he said, “This piece here? Oh, yes. See the way it reclines. Very smoothly. Just like new. Yes, a very good price.”

On the other side of the shower curtain, a pair of shoes stopped and waited. A low whistle. The man talked about inflation, the way a dollar just didn’t go as far as it used to.

“Yes,” my father replied, his voice filled with sympathy. “That is very true.”

The shower curtain opened suddenly and I was blinded by light. "Jesus Christ," the man said, stepping backwards, his hand dropping the curtain.

My father hurried forward. "My daughter, she is resting."

The man stared at me, aghast. I smiled helpfully.

"No problem, no problem." My father nodded at me and yanked the shower curtain closed.

"I'm very sorry. I didn't realize," his voice trailed off.

"No problem," my father said again, boisterously. "She is resting only."

Their feet disappeared from sight, the door jingling soon after.

That afternoon, I watched my father read the newspaper, cover to cover, retaining names and news for his casual conversation. "Trudeau," he said to one customer, then shrugged his shoulders, or "Bill Bennett," or "Thatcherism," the word hanging disturbingly in the air.

Outside, rain poured down in thin streams off the white awning, splashing the sidewalk. There was a lull and my father reached into his desk and pulled out a handful of photographs. I had seen them before, Indonesian plantations spread out under wide skies. He tapped his index finger down, pointing out the house where my parents lived before coming to Vancouver. Stilts like legs holding it off the ground. My father ran his hands over the trees in the backdrop,

told me about the fruit, strange and exotic things, rambutan and durians. From memory, he sketched a map of Irian Jaya – the shape like a half-torso, one arm waving – where my parents had lived for a short time. "Do you miss it?" I asked him.

"What's to miss?" he said, smiling gently.

I didn't know.

"I only miss the fruit," he said, putting the photos away. "The country, I've almost forgotten."

My father and I played tic-tac-toe until six o'clock, and then my father closed the store. While he counted the cash, I washed the floor, dragging the mop behind me as I paced back and forth. Eventually, my father took the mop from me and scrubbed diligently at the scuff marks and water stains. Then he turned the lights down and locked the door behind us. We drove home in the Buick, past the Knight and Day Restaurant that had burned down three times in the last two years. My father pointed through the windshield. "See that restaurant?" he said. "That restaurant's burning down *night and day*." He laughed almost hysterically.

At home, my father washed the vegetables for dinner. I set the table so that everything was ready by the time my mother came home at seven, exhausted from her job at the tire store.

Over dinner, my parents inquired after each other's day. My mother spooned some liver onto my

plate, wondering aloud why I might be sick. "Did you eat something bad?" she asked.

"Here," my father said, lifting his chopsticks towards me. "Eat more vegetables."

Afterwards, as he was clearing the dishes, they worried over the day's receipts. Only two small sales. "January is like this," my father said. "It's to be expected."

"December was like this too," my mother replied.

"It will pick up."

My mother sighed. "It will have to."

She and I lay down on the couch to watch television. She fell asleep almost instantly, her face buried in my neck.

That night, I slept between them. They stayed on far sides of the bed, me in the middle drifting from one side to another in all their empty space. In the morning, my mother woke first. I could see her in the dark, reaching for her clothes. When I waved goodbye, she hovered above me, planting a kiss on my forehead. Then she kissed my father. By the time he opened his eyes, she was already dressed and gone.

□

I have lived in Vancouver all my life. I seldom pass through the old alleys and neighbourhoods where I

grew up, but when I do my memory astonishes me. How can it be that this street is exactly the way I remember it? I look for the passage of twenty years, find it only in the height of the trees. But the street itself is the same, the crosswalk and stop sign, the broken pavement, *step on a crack, break your mother's back*, the glass storefronts.

When I was twenty-one, the familiarity of this city comforted me. I was waitressing then, working odd jobs. Every night my girlfriends and I stayed late at the bar, lighting cigarettes, throwing shots of vodka straight back. Men came and went; it was nothing. Some nights, we dropped our clothes on the sand and swam in the ocean. Bitterly cold, it shocked us sober. Other times, I drove along the coast, the sky blacked out. I'd park and watch the big green trees rolling back and forth in the wind and the sight would make me fleetingly happy. Legs stretched out, I would lie back on the roof of my car and listen to the sound of my clothes flapping.

It was around this time that I met Will. He lived in an apartment down the alley from me, and I used to sit on my back porch watching him come and go. I liked his grey eyes, which seemed dignified on such a boyish face. He had a tall, stooped body and thin, wavy hair. Will has a straightforward sort of face, an open book. It's the face of an innocent, no secrets in it. Everything laid out, plain and simple.

One day I saw him coming down the alley on his motorcycle, a beautifully beat-up old thing. I walked out into his path and stood in front of him. I said I'd seen him coming and going, heard his motorcycle late at night when I couldn't sleep.

He looked at me, confused and a little embarrassed.

"I just have this feeling," I said, swaying back and forth on my feet, "that we are meant to be."

He looked at me searchingly. A surprised smile. "Who am I to argue?" he said, when he finally spoke. That was good enough for me.

That night, he brought me a helmet and fastened the straps under my chin. "Through this hoop and then back again, just like a backpack. Put your feet there," he nodded at two pedals, "and watch the pipe, it could melt your boots. It gets pretty hot. You'll find that sometimes I'll put the brakes on and our heads will collide. Don't worry, it doesn't throw me off. You can hold on here. Lean right back."

We lunged forward. I held on to his waist. The wind knocked every thought from my head. On every straight piece of road, he hit the accelerator and we seemed to lift.

At a stop light, he turned around, flipping up his visor. "I can't breathe."

"No," I said. "Me neither."

"I can't breathe when you squeeze my stomach. Can

you hold me here?" He lifted my arms to his chest.

Oncoming cars drilled past us. We leaned into a curve, highway veering up. I held on for dear life. He turned around, mouthing, "Okay?"

"Okay."

The palms of my hands were flat overtop of his heart. I worried I would stop his breathing, give him a heart attack. Sometimes I could see his face in the side mirror. The back of his body, his white shirt flapping in the wind, was touchingly vulnerable. One wrong move and we'd be flying. Me, him and the bike coming apart in the sky.

When we stopped I was out of breath. "More?" he asked.

I nodded.

"What does it feel like?"

"Like I can't get enough of it."

On the way back to the city, the moon was low and full, a bright orange round above the skyline. The mountains bloomed against sky, one after the other like an abundance of shadows. I remember watching one silent tanker floating on the water. We sped over the Lions Gate Bridge, a chain of lights. I grasped his chest, kept my eyes wide open and thought, *Things should always come this easy.*

That night I dreamed that I would never wake up. When I did, startled, exhilarated, Will was half on

top of me, one bare arm reaching across my stomach, still sleeping.

Some facts seem, at first, to explain a person. Will's mother died of cancer when he was young. His father died not long after, an electrical accident at the plant where he worked. When I first walked into Will's apartment, I thought it was an elegy, a place of grief. But no, Will said he just liked to keep things simple. The walls bare, the furniture non-existent. Will slept on a mat on the floor. The living room housed his books, stacked in pyramids. He taught art history at one of the nearby colleges.

I admired his restraint. To me, his apartment was the embodiment of his uncluttered life, exactly the kind of life I aspired to — both feet planted, eyes on the future. The present tripped me up. I was forever sorting out my bearings. Will, on the other hand, was tuned towards a distant point. It seemed to me, then, that the troubles of day-to-day life would never burden him as they did ordinary people. Will was also fearless and I loved this in him. He jumped headlong into our relationship, throwing caution to the wind.

The wedding was fast, the kind that's over in half an hour and then you're outside, pictures flashing, thinking, *What just happened?* but overcome by happiness the whole time. During the ceremony we couldn't stop

laughing. Even saying our vows. Will's face was lit up like a kid's and I started laughing so hard I had to bend over, holding my stomach. A bit of hair was sticking up at the side of his head and I reached out to smooth it down. We were all laughing inside the church and even my mom, hair full of grey now, couldn't find a moment to cry.

We had rushed into marriage. I always joked it was the motorcycle that did it, swept me off my feet, and he would say, "I know it." I had no words to describe how exhausted I was that night when I walked into the alley in front of him. Afraid of everything. I thought I'd give it one last go, talk to him. At that time, something in my life was eating away at me. I couldn't shake it. And there was Will, always on the move. I should just grab hold.

✠

My father was not present at our wedding. He called in the early morning, his voice weak and sorry. "A cold," he said, "has knocked me down."

It did not surprise me, my father's last-minute decision. At that time, he was living alone. When he left my mother, some years earlier, he had stepped away into a different kind of life, one where family obligations no longer weighed so heavily. In some ways, by leaving, he gave my mother and me our

freedom. We moved on with our lives while he remained in the background, the one we had never understood. Who took his own failures so much to heart, he could no longer see past them, and obliged them by leaving.

My father rarely tried to contact me. I believed, then, that he had chosen his own circumstances and imposed solitude on himself. In some ways, this came as a relief to me. When Will and I married, I was twenty-one years old and I didn't want to take my eyes off the future.

Years ago, it was a different story. My parents and I would drive across the city, going nowhere in particular, all of us bundled into the Buick. Through downtown and Chinatown – those narrow streets flooded with people – then out to the suburbs. On the highway, we caught glimpses of ocean, blue and sudden.

I was the only one of us born in Canada, and so I prided myself on knowing Vancouver better than my parents did – the streets, Rupert, Renfrew, Nanaimo, Victoria. Ticking them off as we passed each set of lights, *go, go, go. Stop.*

But nothing in Vancouver had the ring of Irian Jaya, where my parents lived in the first years of their marriage. In 1963, the country was annexed by Indonesia. They outlawed the Papuan flag, named the territory Irian Jaya, and flooded their own people onto

the island. My parents, Chinese-Indonesians, arrived during this wave and lived there through the 1960s. "There were no roads," my father said, on one of our long Sunday drives. "Nothing."

My mother nodded her head. "The aborigines came into Jayapura looking for work. It was a rough town. Like a frontier. And the fighting. Do you remember the stories?" She shivered, one hand floating down to rest on my father's knee.

"People thrown from helicopters. The Indonesian army threw resistance fighters into their own valleys. There were many rumours."

Despite the violence and the political tension, my parents missed Indonesia. It came out in small ways, their English interrupted by a word of Chinese, a word of Indonesian. The exotic exclamations at the end of their sentences, *ah yahl*, or calling me to dinner, *makan, makan*. My mother told me that *irian*, a Biak word, means "place of the volcano" and that *jaya*, an Indonesian word, means "success." But those were the only Indonesian words I learned. At home, they spoke Indonesian and Chinese only to each other, never to me. My mother would stand on the porch watching kids race their bikes up and down the back lane, and say, out of the blue, "But isn't it so much cleaner here?"

In 1969, the United Nations led a vote, the "Act of Free Choice," to allow the Irianese to determine

their future. The Irianese voted to become part of Indonesia. "Rigged," my mother told me, her eyes clouding. "And everyone knew it."

My parents said the resistance attacked the gold and copper mines. The Indonesian army, unable to penetrate the jungle, swept through villages. They burned them to the ground and people disappeared. My parents decided it was time to leave. They gave up their Indonesian citizenship for good.

"In Irian Jaya," my father told me, "the road stops dead at the jungle. If you want to reach the next town, you must go by boat or plane. You can't just get in your car and drive there." My father was suspicious of Canadian highways, the very ease of crossing such a country.

Perhaps he drove to test them. On those Sunday drives, we piled into the car, my father losing us in side streets, winding us along highways. In winter, the roads were icy with rain but we hurtled through the dark roads anyway, gutters of water shooting sky-high.

On Sundays, the furniture store was closed. Month after month, the old sofas and chairs remained unsold, and my parents fell further behind on their mortgage payments. All the savings they had brought with them from Indonesia seemed to trickle in a thin river out the door, down the street, to some place from which we would never recover it. My family's luck, if a family could have luck, was running dry.

This was the high point, the three of us packed in the car, my mother's voice wavering thin and high over the words on the radio. We didn't know how peaceful we were. Only years later, when my father lay in the Intensive Care Unit at Vancouver General Hospital, a thick tube in his throat to carry his breathing, did it strike me just how much we had changed and how far away that earlier time had gone.



There is my mother, the navigator, a map of the city unfurled on her lap. Me in the back seat, watching my father's eyes as they glance in the rear-view mirror, the way he searches for what might appear. Now, with the distance of time, I look back at my parents differently – I try to re-read their gestures, the trajectory of these events. If I change the way shadow and light play on them, will I find one more detail? Some small piece that I could not see before.

In the first years of my own marriage, I could not look beyond Will. Our day-to-day routine was calming to me. He brought a certain contentment to my life, a settled happiness that I had not yet experienced.

When he read late at night, I fell asleep to the scratching of his pencil, the sound of a page turning. Sometimes he would nudge me awake, show me a photograph. The spires of the Angkor Wat, or a rock

painting unearthed on the Tulare River. Will has an open heart, he can see the mystery in anything. When he tapped a photo with his index finger, I allowed myself to move with him, swept up in one idea and then another, losing myself in Will's generous imagination. I opened myself up to it, letting this old history settle over my own small past.

✧

By the time I was seven, the furniture store had fallen on hard times. I still accompanied my father after school or on weekends. More and more, I caught him resting. He would be sitting on a couch, looking out the window, just waiting. He had always been a restrained man, and whatever emotions he carried, he kept well hidden. Looking around at the couches and the chairs, my father simply waited in silence, turning his head at the sound of the door opening.

One night at dinner, my mother bowed her head. "We better sell now," she said, her voice low.

Beside me, my father ate quietly, bowl held in one hand, his chopsticks lifting slowly.

"There is nothing else we can do. We can't afford it any more."

I pretended I wasn't listening, the polite thing to do. I kept eating, with my legs swinging quietly under the table.

"What about the mortgage?" she asked, shaking her head. "We can't pay the mortgage or the car payments. At this rate we will lose the house, not just the store. Please, don't be so stubborn."

My father pushed his plate away, then stood up and left the table. Beside me, my mother sighed and continued eating. When she was done, she pushed her chair back and went upstairs. I was always the last one. Sitting on my own, I'd forget all about dinner and let my mind wander. Sometimes I was still there at nine or ten at night, lost in thought, my bowl still half full. All the light in the kitchen gone so I would curl my legs up on the chair and rest my face on the table. Small bits of rice stuck to my cheek. Eventually my mother would come and take the bowl away.

That night, my parents went into the bedroom to argue. Their voices were faint through the house like a distant television. Someone slammed a door hard. Eventually I got up and tipped my own bowl of food over the garbage. When I went upstairs to bed, all the doors were closed and the house was quiet.

The next morning, my parents started up again. I was already sitting at the table, eating breakfast.

My father came out of the bedroom and circled the kitchen table. "What do you want me to do? What do I do when the store is sold?"

"Go back to school. Do something for yourself, make yourself employable."

"I am employed. I'm working as hard as I can. Is it so disappointing to you, everything that I have done?"

She shook her head impatiently. "Don't be ridiculous."

I stared from one to the other. My father laughed suddenly. It was a harsh sound, sad and bitter. He smiled, one hand waving up into the air then falling slowly. "Who is it?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"The one at work, the one who promoted you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"What did he do that for, promote you? In Indonesia you couldn't hold down a job. Here, a promotion. I can't understand it."

My mother looked at him in disbelief. "I was miserable there. You know that."

"You tell me," he said, his voice even. "How is this possible? Remember, you are the one who wanted to leave Irian Jaya. It is because of you that we are in this situation."

My mother burst into tears. "This has nothing to do with who you are and who I am. I am only trying to do what is best for us."

I stood then, picking up my plate. My hands were shaking and the dish tipped, spilling milk and cereal. My father looked at me, then turned towards the sink. He picked up a cloth and ran it, end to end, across the table. Then he turned back to my mother. "I do

not think so," he said. "And it is not your decision."

My mother picked up her purse and walked out the back door, the screen swinging behind her.

"I'm doing the best I can," my father said. "Your mother, she wants everything. Do you see that? She wants everything."

I tried hard to behave as I'd been brought up, to ignore what I was not involved in and to hold my tongue and pretend I was deaf and blind. Eyes lowered, I stared at the table.

Afterwards, when he bundled me up and walked me to school, he said nothing. He let go of me and I ran into the schoolyard, immersed myself in hopscotch and California kickball. I would adapt. He knew I would grow up and do well here. My father turned around, he started walking home again.

For six more months, the store pushed on. Whenever my father thought he might have to give in, somebody came along and bought a couch. A sofa here, a loveseat there – this somehow kept us going from week to week.

Now, looking back, I see that the store had an impoverished look to it, that the couches were old and worn, and that my father, once so patient a salesman, had begun to speak to his customers with an air of quiet desperation. At home, my parents had fallen

into a deep silence, speaking to each other only when necessary. "Tell your mother that . . .," my father said, and I was thrown out like a line between them.

On the weekends, I kept my father company in the store. Sometimes, during the afternoon lulls, I fell asleep on the lawn chair. Once, just waking, I sat up and listened for my father's movements, the creak of his chair, his shoes on the polished floor. There were no sounds at all. Thinking he had disappeared, I pulled the curtain open and ran out. I can see myself, a small girl in blue sweatpants and a faded T-shirt, my John Denver ears, all keyed up. He was sitting at his desk. I looked at his face, his furrowed brow, and asked, "Is there something wrong?"

He looked at me for a long time, his expression melancholy. Then he said, "No. There is nothing to worry about."

Not long after, the bank sent my father a letter saying they were foreclosing on our mortgage. When we moved out of our house on Curtis Street, my father would be the one who packed. While my mother kept me occupied on the back lawn, he would go from room to room, throwing everything into bags, my mother's good dresses and shoes, my toys and socks. Driving away to our new apartment, we would turn back to the house, catch a glimpse of our excess furniture lined up on the sidewalk, the line of boxes and Glad bags stretching down the block.

But that day in the furniture store, my father was calm. He stood up from his desk and walked to the door. He turned the sign over and said to me, "I don't think anyone else is coming today." My father gathered my crayons and drawings and I started telling him about the book I was reading, *Dumbo* and the crows and how at the end he flies and his mother who cradles him in her trunk. My father just looked at me. This was the last business he would ever own.

That was the end of it. I don't recall stepping inside the store again. When I saw it next, the windows were papered over so that I could no longer see the interior from the road.



The other day, my father telephoned to give me the news. "Fighting in Aceh," he says. "And another ferry has gone down."

I tell him about Will's new teaching position.

He says, "That's very good news."

This new relationship we have is tentative, like moving in the dark. A step forward, then back, feeling for the perimeter of the room.

"Are you free?" I ask. "We can have coffee."

"I can't drink coffee," he says. "It gives me heartburn."

I file this information away, then I suggest tea.

Silence, as he considers this. "Will you come in the car? I'm having some problems with my knees."

"Of course."

When I hang up the phone, I feel a surge of hope, of fierce protectiveness over him. Perhaps, knowing everything that has brought us here, I would redraw this map, make the distance from A to B a straight line. I would bypass those difficult years and bring my father up to this moment, healthy, unharmed.

But to do so would remove all we glimpsed in passing, heights and depths I never guessed at. That straight line would erase our efforts, the necessary ones as well as the misguided ones, that finally allowed us to arrive here.



In the summers, Will and I left Vancouver at every opportunity. When the college shut down after spring semester, we headed out along the west coast. I was doing secretarial jobs then, temp work in law firms or ad agencies. I loved the transience of it, learning a routine then forgetting it in place of another.

Once, we spent the week in Neah Bay. I had set my finger down on the map, touched the westernmost reach of the Olympic Peninsula. "Here," I said, turning to Will. "I'd like to go here." We raced the

motorcycle south, then west. The town sat high on a cliff of rocks overlooking the Pacific Ocean. That first night, in our tiny motel room, Will told me that piercing a lime with pins is said to cause pain for the person you love. "That's it," I said. "We're throwing all the limes out."

He smiled. "Who needs limes?"

"Not us."

"But children, on the other hand."

"To cause us pain?" I said, laughing.

When he didn't respond, I looked over at him. Will's face was serious. He pushed himself up on one arm. "It scares me too. But let's think about it. It won't be so terrible. We can get a car seat for the motorcycle. We can get a baby helmet. Our lives won't change so much."

"Okay, I'll think about it."

He rolled over on top of me. Some emotion, fleeting and sad, hit me then. "What's wrong?" he asked, moving his fingers against my face. "I haven't been near any limes."

I smiled, circling my arms around his neck. We could do this, I thought, if I didn't stop to think. We could have the kind of future Will imagined and that I, in moments of abandon, admitted that I wanted too. Outside I could hear cars on the gravel road, here and gone, the shifting pebbles. Will picked my hand up and I should have said then what I

feared. Instead, I allowed the moment to pass. I let it drop there like glass in the sand.



After the furniture store closed so many years before, my parents declared bankruptcy. In the years that followed, they lived from hand to mouth. My mother took on a second job in order to support us. My father tried his hand at different careers. For a time, he cooked in an Indonesian restaurant. Afterwards, he sold encyclopedias, door to door; then cars at the Ford dealership. Finally, my father went into real estate. I was fourteen years old and I would follow him to Open Houses. Sunday mornings, the city half asleep, we loaded my father's signs into the trunk of his car: *Open House Today*, they said, *Come on in!* He planted them in the soft ground, into the dewy grass.

For years, my father sold "Vancouver Specials." Two bedrooms up, one down, they spanned the east side. Cut-out houses, prefab. In his grey polyester suit, my father never did what other agents did. He never brought flowers to set in the foyer, he never sprayed air fresheners or adjusted the lighting. He just tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, shaking his head at the outside lawn.

When visitors came, he bustled out, all smiles and handshakes, ushering them up the stairs. I sat on the grass reading. I could hear them from the

balcony, their offhand negotiations. The wife, surveying the neighbourhood: "Yes, but it's not quite what I had in mind."

"No? Oh, well, how about —"

"Three-fifty you say? For this side of town?"

For years, my father wore the same suit, loaded the same signs into the trunk of the same car, and drove away. At first, he was optimistic. If he was on the verge of a sale, he paced nervously around the apartment. "We'll buy a new television," he promised my mother. "We'll finally take a vacation." My mother would smile, hopeful. But time and again, his sales fell through. Perhaps he was too polite, too restrained. He could never close the deal, to use his words. My father pored over real estate listings, read articles and books, attended seminars. He laboured over the wording of his pitches. But if there was a housing boom, it bypassed him. My father looked on, uncomprehending, while the tide of wealth and prosperity passed before his very eyes.

One afternoon, he quit. He came home from an Open House, laid his signs and business cards, his book of listings beside the garbage. To my mother and me, seated on the couch, he said, "I'm through." He left her sitting there, wordless.

In their difficult times, at the first mention of money, my father would shut down, close his eyes and ears.

He told my mother, over and over, that it had always been her decision to leave Indonesia, and never his. She had separated him from the country he loved. My father once told me that when he came to Canada, his luck had run out. Everything he touched turned bitter. He looked around at our apartment, the old, sagging couches and plastic runners, and blamed himself. He believed his lack of luck, of ingenuity, had done this to us, forced us to struggle for what he failed to provide.

Our apartment became a silent place. My parents chose not to speak, rather than risk an argument that would shatter their fragile peace.

I longed to be free of them. Some nights, I climbed out my window, inched my way to the fire escape. I dropped silently down to the ground. In those still hours between midnight and dawn, I stepped into different cars. Out on the empty highways, my friends and I sped until the trees and the lights ran together. Some nights I let a hand stray across the seats, find its way to the small of my back. A triangle of warmth on my skin.

During these car rides, I thought of my parents fast asleep at home, tossing in dreams. I was glad to be outside, fully awake, racing away from the example of their love. It did not have to be that way, I thought. I could set myself on a different course, walk in the opposite direction.

One night, my mother heard me climb back through my window. She came into my room just as I was getting into bed. "Where have you been?" she asked, exhaustion lining her face. Outside, the car circled the block, around and around, the sound reminding me of wild animals protecting their young, wordless comfort. I didn't answer her, and she rested her warm hands on my forehead. Whatever protection, whatever security they once gave me, was fast disappearing. My mother must have known that, too. She stroked my hair until my breathing slowed. I feigned sleep while she watched over me.

If I walked with my father then, we walked in almost perfect silence. Through the vegetable stands, my father walked ahead of me, his eyebrows creased in thought. He lifted stalks of broccoli, bags of snow peas, weighing them in one hand and then the other. He would ask me, "Which do you prefer?"

And I would shrug, impatient, pushing the grocery cart straight ahead.

"Where's the fire? You're like your mother. Always in a rush. Always needing to be someplace else."

I was fifteen years old and couldn't understand what he wanted from me. I kept on walking.

Each month, I watched my mother sort through the bills, her face blank. She'd open her cheque book, hold

the pen in her hand, then stay that way, unsure. My father began swallowing pills, Aspirin or some kind of anti-depressant. His actions became slow and meticulous. He said my mother and I made no sense to him. We rushed everywhere, we didn't have a moment to lose. He, on the other hand, stopped answering the phone. It drove my mother mad. "What if it was important?" she asked him once, after trying all day to reach him.

My father shrugged.

"An emergency? What if Miriam was hurt?"

He looked at her with an expression of complete and utter indifference.

She held her hands up to her ears. "I cannot speak to you. I cannot get through to you. Where have you gone?"

One night, at three in the morning when I was up late, reading, he knocked on the door of my room. "Come in," I said.

He pushed the door open and stood waiting, old and tired. It bothered me to see him there, his disappointment so plainly evident.

"Are you all right, Miriam?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

"I saw your light on. Why are you still awake?"

"I didn't feel like sleeping."

He said, "You shouldn't be staying out so late at night. It's dangerous."

I nodded.

"There's something we need to talk about," my father said.

He stood there waiting for me to answer. I lifted my head up. "I don't want to talk about anything right now."

"Listen." My father's expression, as if on the brink of speech. He looked so soft, standing there. I could touch him and it would hurt. "There's something I need to tell you."

"Not now, please."

"Are you sure?"

I lowered my eyes again. Whatever it was, I didn't want to know. My parents seemed so childlike to me, so in need of love. I thought they only had themselves to blame that I didn't know how to give it to them. For too long, I had been the line between them, the message carrier. Suddenly, I wanted no part in it. I was willing to cut the string and see where we landed. "Yes," I said. "I'm sure."

My father turned around. He went into his bedroom and shut the door behind him.

On a windy, spring day, my father left. He packed a suitcase, bought a plane ticket to Indonesia, and disappeared.

That afternoon, when I came home from school, I noticed that my father's bedroom door was ajar. I stood

in the hallway listening for him. There was no sound, so I walked inside. The room was neat and clean, the desk bare. For a second, I thought I should turn around and leave. There was something so personal about this abandoned room, so private. But I went to the closet and pulled the doors open. There were two shirts hanging at opposite ends, and nothing else.

I sat down on my father's bed. After a moment, I reached across and opened the desk drawer. There was an envelope with my name on it, as if my father knew, instinctively, that I would do this, look for some clue from him. Inside the envelope was a birthday card. It was early. My sixteenth birthday was still two weeks away. My father wrote that he had returned to Indonesia and that he would call me. There was nothing else.

I opened the curtains, afternoon sunlight filtering in. At that moment, I tried so hard not to be disappointed — in him, or myself, or all the years that had brought us here. Of course, I thought. Of course he would leave. So would I, given the chance. I would take that plane ticket and travel far enough away that the present would obliterate everything I knew.

That night, my mother called from work. "Do you know?" she asked.

"I came home and he was already gone."

I heard a piece of paper shifting, my mother adjusting the phone in her hands. "Your father called me from the airport."

I waited.

"So he's gone back." She paused, a break in her voice.

The moment hit me hard. I took a breath and then I told her, "He was miserable. I'd rather he was gone than miserable."

"Would you?" She didn't speak for a moment then she cleared her throat. "I don't blame you for thinking that. I suppose, in the end, I'll feel the same." We spoke for a few moments more and then she said, "I'll be home soon." We hung up the phone.

Later on, we found out that my father had taken care of everything. He had sold his car. He had moved the credit cards and bills to his name, so that when he declared bankruptcy for the second time, which he did just before he left, he would not drag my mother down with him. He had done all these things in consideration and politeness, but he had neglected to leave her a note. My father left her only the quiet of his departure. He must have known she would just let him go. She was never the type to follow, to beg him back.

That night, I climbed down the fire escape, let my body hang for a moment before letting go. I went next door to the IGA parking lot, where the neon lights lit the concrete pink and yellow. Turning south on Victoria Drive, I walked from street lamp to street lamp. On an upstairs balcony, two men sat playing cards, their voices drifting down, "That's the last I heard."

The sound of the cards shuffling. "Up in smoke." I walked until the wind and the distance exhausted me, then turned around and headed home again.

In front of our apartment, I lost my strength and sat down in the cold grass. I thought of my father standing in the doorway that night, one unspoken conversation. As if I could have changed the outcome with some small, simple act. If there were words that could have kept him here, if I had been the kind of daughter who would say them.

In some ways, leaving was my father's bravest act. He threw caution to the wind. The country that loomed so large in his imagination finally drew him back. Despite family, despite our hold on him, in the end, that place won out.



When I met Will, he was thirty-one years old. There were whole lives behind us both. With him, I hoped, at first, to become someone changed. The kind of person who lives with only the present in mind, who knows in her heart that no failures, however great, are immovable. When Will first asked me to marry him, I was exuberant. I said, "I'm so happy, I want to jump out this window." He smiled and said, "Don't."

For three weeks one summer, we thought I was pregnant. I was twenty-three years old. One night, I

nudged him awake, whispered, "Maybe we need counselling," and he rolled over to face me, hands on my stomach, our breaths held. "Maybe there's been some kind of mistake."

Will smiled gently. "I don't think so."

"There's so much to know. I'm just not prepared."

"What are you afraid of?"

I moved my hands on his skin, then looked up at him. "That I won't be able to get the hang of it. That I'll do something wrong."

"I'm scared too."

"But you wanted this, right?"

He nodded. "You say it like you didn't." The question in his look was unmistakable.

"I do want it."

"The truth?" he asked.

I didn't think, then, of the consequences of what I was saying. One more half-truth seemed so easy, when I had always been so reticent with him about what I needed. "The truth."

On a summer afternoon when the rain was pouring down in sheets, I went to the doctor complaining of back pain. "I was right," I told Will, when the results came back. "There's been a mistake." It's what the doctor told me. A kind of natural miscarriage, most common in the first trimester of pregnancy. "These things happen."

He said, "It was too good to be true."

That night we drank a bottle of wine, followed in quick succession by several more. Afterwards, giddy, we took the motorcycle out and raced to the university, me holding on to Will's chest. When we leaned into a curve it was pure joy. I closed my eyes, tuned to the rush of oncoming traffic, the air shattering. For the first time since I left home, I felt loose and uncontrolled. I pushed my weight back on the motorcycle, releasing my grip from Will's chest, speed tumbling through my body. Will's face, glancing back, alarmed.

That night, all our clothes left on the floor, I sat up in bed, unable to breathe. Will put his mouth to my sternum, calming me, as if he could catch the words I refused to say. And what words were they? *Stop. Go back.* I put my hands to his chest, pressured him gently away from me. Then I stood and walked out of the bedroom. Moonlight flooded our apartment, settling over everything like varnish. The furniture, distant as objects in a rear-view mirror; with each passing moment, they seemed farther behind me.

Once, walking along the suspension bridge in Lynn Canyon, I froze and couldn't move. Will stood beside me, hand on my back. "Try running all the way to the other side, without stopping," he said. "You can do it, if you don't stop to think." He went to demonstrate. My husband sprinting across Lynn

Canyon, scattering children and tourists. The bridge swaying like a high-wire rope. His body safe on the other side, chest heaving, looking back for me.



When my parents left Indonesia, they walked away from a familiar life, but one foreign to all I know. Some years ago, the students in Jakarta took to the streets, protesting the government. Had my family remained there, would I have been among those students, one more in that sea of faces? Or those nights when rioters set the Chinese shophouses on fire, that bitter violence, what might have become of us then? I did not know where we fit in, or on which side of the line we might have lived.

That country lay like a stone between my parents. Once here, my mother did not look back. She worked herself to the bone but set her sights on the future. But my father could not see so far ahead. He held on to those old photographs of Indonesia, and when he pulled them out, he examined them with an appraising eye. As if to see whether the photographs were true to the memory he carried, if a picture could ever do his country justice.

The bad luck of his life was not, as he thought, a lack of opportunity or ingenuity. It was the tragedy of place. To always be in the wrong country at the

wrong time, the home that needs you less than you need it.

After my father left, my mother and I moved out of the apartment in East Vancouver. We spent a month packing, emptying closets and drawers, sorting through forgotten belongings. One night, she showed me the photographs she had found in my father's desk – my parents, young and serious, in a formal portrait; their old house, lifted up on stilts. My father no longer needed to carry these, I thought. I looked at the plantations and wide skies, their unfamiliar beauty.

I set the photographs down. "Do you miss him?"

My mother touched her face, as if feeling for some emotion. "I suppose so. But what good is it? That won't change anything."

That year, there was unrest in Indonesia. Small pockets of violence erupting, then brutally dealt with by the military. I saw clips of it on the news, a few seconds, a tiny window. The Irianese were still organized, still fighting Indonesian occupation though it seemed like no one noticed. I thought of Indonesia as the place of tumult, of unrest, where a military dictatorship muscled these disparate islands together, no matter the cost. For my parents, though, no other country will ever do. Even my mother, so at home

here, thinks back to those humid nights, that once-spoken language.

After we finished packing that evening, my mother fell asleep on the couch. I haunted the bedrooms, the stacks of half-full boxes, stopping for a moment to watch my mother, her chest lifting up and down, her greying hair spread out against the cushions. For the first time I pitied my father. He had gone away from us and perhaps we would not let him come back again.

From Java, Irian Jaya, then back through Sumatra, my father sent me postcards. I marked his progress through those vivid pictures, the water buffalo and *padi* fields. Once, he asked my mother to wire money to him, and she obliged. We could not guess his circumstances in those years and he did not confide in us.

One Sunday morning, four years after he had gone, my father called and said, "I'm home."

"In Jayapura?" I asked.

He paused for a moment. "No, no. Here. Vancouver."

"Where are you exactly?"

My father laughed, as if this was the question he'd been waiting for. "I've got my own bachelor suite," he said. "I'm a new man."

By that time, I was living on my own. I called my mother to give her the news. "He's back, is he?" she said. "Living in some hotel, I suppose."

"He has an apartment."

"Is that right? Well. That's a good sign."

I went across town to see him. His apartment building, near Commercial Drive, stood out, grey and rectangular. I hesitated outside. From the sidewalk, I thought I glimpsed him – this elderly man in jogging pants and a sweatshirt, standing at a fourth-floor window. He was looking out to the shipyards, the tankers on the water, the rooftops muted of colour.

When my father opened the door, he was wrapped in sweaters. Vancouver was taking the bloom from his tropical tan but he looked relaxed. "You're here," he said, smiling broadly.

I smiled back, trying to feel at ease. "I'm here."

We embraced very briefly, and I noticed then how thin he had become. He had aged, and his face was dark and lined. Standing in the entrance, I could see the entire apartment. It was small, a kitchen and a living room in one. My father ushered me inside. He gave me the tour, laughing as he did so, saying, "I'm living the bachelor life now. I don't need much more than this." I glanced at his furniture – a table, a mattress, and one plastic chair.

He busied himself at the stove, disappearing behind the steam. The air in the apartment was rich

with the smell of spices, ginger, lemon grass, hot pepper. "*Chilli kepeting*," he called to me, over the sound of the food frying. "I remember how much you liked this."

Up in the corners, the walls were mouldy and grey and the carpets had a lingering scent, part cigarettes, part damp. He'd done the best he could with decorations. There were Christmas cards, hung up along a line of string, and certificates from the real estate office framed on the wall. *For Devoted Service. For Congeniality.* I walked onto his tiny balcony, looked across the road at the ramshackle apartments, the wet leaves running bright along the gutters. Out on the harbour, two yellow sulphur hills glowed neon against the grey sky.

"It's ready then," my father said, setting lunch down on the table. There was only one chair so my father sat on his mattress, plate balanced on his lap. He looked me up and down. "Eat," he said, smiling happily.

Through the walls, I could hear the shadow of a conversation, interrupted by the play-by-play of a ball game. At one point, my father asked me, "How is your mother?"

"She's fine. She's been working hard, as usual."

He nodded, face lifting up. "Does she want to see me at all?"

I shook my head. My mother had prepared me for this question before I came. "I don't think so," I told him, as gently as I could. "Not right away."

My father looked at me, his expression bewildered. We ate in silence for a few moments. Then I asked him, "Will you be going back to real estate?"

He glanced at me searchingly, then dropped his gaze. "I don't know."

"But what will you do for money?"

My father didn't answer. He moved on to a different topic, the cold weather, the early winter. I noticed how the cuffs of his sweater were frayed and his hands were those of an old man, wiry and marked by liver spots. After we had finished lunch and he was clearing the dishes, he said, "I managed to borrow money while I was away. But it ran out while I was in Indonesia." He turned the tap on, moving the dishes underneath. "I'm on welfare, but don't worry about me. It's only for the time being."

We went outside and stood together on the balcony, and I told my father that I was planning to marry. He looked out at the grid of streets running down to the docks and said, "So soon?"

It made me smile, because I knew he still thought of me as a young girl. I laughed. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll like him."

My father seemed to consider this. Then he smiled at me. "It's good that you found someone. It isn't necessary to be alone."

Afterwards, when I stood up to leave, he walked me to the door. He waited there, as if he could not

step over the line that would separate him from where he now lived. One hand gripped the door frame, the knuckles white.

I leaned towards him and kissed his cheek. "I'll call." Then I ducked out into the hallway, down the elevator to the ground floor. Outside, I couldn't see straight, the rain was coming down so hard. On Commercial Drive, a man and his two Labradors sat on the sidewalk. He held his hands out to me, asking for spare change, but I hurried by, anxious to be gone. So this was the result, I thought, of being brave. Of dismantling your life. I walked away from my father's apartment, under the rain cascading off the awnings, past the barred-up storefronts. No emotion came to me, though I walked across the city that afternoon, kept walking until my body could go no more.



Will used to say that happiness is something you just take. It's sitting there like a package in a store and you either pick it up or walk by. I told him nothing was that simple. Sometimes circumstances colluded against a person. It's a nose-dive, I told him, and you can't pull out of it.

"Some people choose unhappiness," Will said.

"Sometimes unhappiness chooses them."

"Like your father."

"Will, we've been through this before."

"At some point, you're going to have to deal with this. You can't pretend he doesn't exist."

"This is not something I want to talk about with you."

"Then what is? What do you think we should be talking about?" He put both hands to his temples and shook his head.

By that time, I had not been to see my father in almost a year. But this failing of mine was private. The grief I felt was not open to discussion. When Will tried to talk about it, I shut down, turned and left.

Now and then, it disappeared. All that tension evaporated and we could approach each other again, though tentatively. I lay in bed, Will's entire body flat on top of mine like a wrestling move to pin me down. Will looked at me with an expression I thought was long gone. Amazement, wonder. But underneath his expression there was sadness. "Don't worry so much," he said. "We'll get through this."

He put his hand to my stomach, traced a line from left to right as if he could see that tension and he could track it down.

The night that we learned that the pregnancy was over, I finally felt released. Removed, suddenly, from the course I had set out on. I leaned back on the motorcycle then, arms dropping, and Will put one hand to my thigh, as if that could hold me there. He

kept going, along a curved road overlooking the cliffs. He was the kind of person who would love me despite all my failings. But I could not continue. That image of my father remained with me, his one suitcase, his solitary self crossing the ocean in search of things remembered. A backwards journey to remake the future.

Living alone and on social assistance, my father's condition did not improve. During my infrequent visits, on my way to somewhere else, I noticed that the walls were slowly emptying. The Christmas cards came down first. Then the plaques. There were pills lined up on the kitchen counter, an arsenal against depression and loneliness. My father put on weight and lost it, put on weight and lost it. Once or twice, late at night, he had called my mother, hoping to go back. She had let him down gently. When he confided this to me, I could only nod, unsure what response I could give.

How could I change his circumstances? I didn't know and so I chose to withdraw. There were emotions that he carried – disappointment, regret – that I wanted gone from my present life, as if they had everything to do with him and they had no root in me. My father saw my reluctance and accepted it, as if it was all he could rightly ask for. He did not demand more.

During our visits, he always reached for his photo album. When he bowed his head, I could see how thin his neck looked, how precarious. That air of resignation that he carried was still palpable, it filled the room.

We would start at the beginning. My father as a boy, standing in short pants at someone's wedding. Then at twenty-five, my age now, leaning against a tree, his face full of pride. He had a picture of us from years ago, blue mountains in the backdrop, but only my father is staring straight ahead, into the camera. My mother and I are distracted, drawn to invisible points to the left or right. When we came to a picture of my mother, alone, my father always paused to examine her. He half-covered the photo with one hand, as if he could only manage a piece of her at a time, now her dress, now her arms, now her face.

One night in September, Will and I fell into our old habit. He brought out both the helmets and we climbed onto the motorcycle.

He took us out to West Vancouver, where the highway is cut into the cliffs, precarious above the ocean. The road curved dramatically and Will leaned far to the side, wind rushing on the downhill slope. Over the city skyline, the sun was lowering and the moon was full; neither day nor night. Those thin skyscrapers seemed to float on the water. In all the newspaper

boxes along the way, there were pictures of Indonesia, flags flying in Timor, a referendum, finally, to decide the future.

At a lookout, Will leaned the bike onto a shoulder. We got down, pulling our helmets off. There were islands in the water, bare trees sharp on the surface. Will pointed out the nearest one. "That's Bowen, isn't it? Didn't we camp there years ago?"

"I think so. I can hardly remember now."

Will looked out, nodding. "It rained," he said, his breath clouding the air. "I remember that it rained the whole time."

He stood up and walked to the edge of the lookout, pointed out the other islands, their strange, heavy shapes. I watched his glance moving over the ocean. "You're barely here," he said, turning.

I reached my hand out to touch his face. But his expression was so open and so trusting, it made me hesitate. "I didn't expect this."

He looked at me questioningly.

"Perhaps I never knew what I wanted." Will's whole body seemed to sag but I continued on. "I mistakenly thought I wanted this. And I don't. I know that now."

"Miriam," Will said.

"This isn't what I want," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Explain it."

I shook my head. I didn't know any more if I even loved him, or what I had once believed. Will's

expression was beseeching. He deserved an explanation from me, but I could feel my emotions shutting off, clean and hard. "I'm sorry," I said. "I can't."

Will looked at me for a long moment. "Forgive me," he said, when he finally spoke. "But it's cowardly. This is a cowardly act."

"Don't tell me that."

"You're walking away with as little resistance as possible. You think this will save you somehow. From what, I don't know."

"I'm just trying to do what's best."

"What's best? You don't even know that. You can't even be bothered to figure out what that would be." He shook his head, impatient. "It angers me, how little you're willing to risk for me and for yourself."

It had started to rain and Will pulled his hood up. The water fell forward in front of his eyes in a thin waterfall. All I had to do was lift my hands and grab hold, but I refused. How could I tell him that I did not understand it myself? Whatever feeling was necessary, whatever energy I needed, seemed gone. He was right, I wanted it all to disappear.

Later, when we climbed back onto the bike, I put my arms around his chest, hands flat. The bike took off and I watched the highway. The line of a mountain range ran alongside us, an unbroken, hazy shadow, a separate history, a different life.

Will booked a ticket home to Ontario to give us some time apart. After he had left, I tried to picture him there – exhaling drifts of air, man in the snow. Walking, he sinks a few inches down. He's very cold and the expression on his face is stoic. At home, I lost myself in wild thoughts. Catching my face in the mirror, I was surprised by my expression – stunned. Uncertain. Cut loose from what I knew.

Once, Will and I stood in my father's apartment and tried to find all the ways that the map of the world had changed. The Soviet Union was the most dramatic. The country crumbling at the edges – Estonia, Latvia, then falling away like a landslide. We stared at the map in wonder. My father knew Southeast Asia. Will knew the ancient cultures of art, the old foundations – Mesopotamia, Byzantine – that once existed. I loved Vancouver, the city wading out into the ocean, the border of mountains. There we are in my memory, each of us drawn to a different region, each of us straying our hands across a different country.

In the days after Will left, I turned that picture of us over again and again in my mind. At that time, the news was filled with Indonesia. In East Timor, the region had exploded in violence. There were photographs of refugees, the widespread displacement. I

stood at my kitchen table, turning the pages of the newspaper, unsure then whom I was, in fact, grieving for. I recognized my own selfishness. When I saw those pictures, I ached for the country I had never seen, the parts of Will and my family I had never recognized, the loss that seemed so unresolvable.

When I was younger, I used to study all the details of Indonesia, its wealth and beauty, its lost ages. As if I could understand my father and myself by knowing this, as if what I needed could be compiled, written down, and it would shore me up against the present day.



Two weeks after Will went back to Ontario, the first snowfall of the year took the city by surprise. I lay in bed listening to the phone ringing. It must be Will, I thought, but I did not know what to say to him. Lying in bed, I could see rooftops. The snowfall had cloaked the landscape, so that now it seemed a place where you could walk for days with no sense of moving forward.

I remembered the time I was a child, when I came down with pneumonia. My father blamed the snow. We had tobogganed on Mount Seymour, sliding on Glad bags down the hill. Late at night, my father bundled me up and we drove home, down the dark

mountainside, the quiet roads where only a handful of cars slipped and skidded on the ice. The radio warned us to "Stay in if you can. If you can't drive in the snow, don't." My father drove with both hands gripping the wheel, squeezed the brake worriedly. The sky was luminescent with stars.

By morning, I was feverish and hallucinating. My father was already at work, turning the *Closed* sign over, polishing the glass, dusting the gleaming wood of the French Provincial sofas. My mother and I caught a bus to the hospital. In the late afternoon, my father came and drove us home. I was bundled into the back seat. Through the windows I could watch the city blur by — tops of trees, neon signs. The car was warm and self-contained, a moving house.

In the front seat, my parents spoke in whispered voices. "Noo-moan-ya," my father said, testing the word out.

At home, my father fed me rice porridge from a plastic spoon. In the hollow of the spoon was a picture of two boys playing soccer. They became part of my dream state. I thought I was speaking to my father. I was telling him how the boys were running ahead and I was so far behind them, but my father was holding out a blue bicycle. He was running beside me, pushing me off on my blue bike. Out I went, twirling like an acrobat, into the wide world. My father nodded and smiled, his hand cooling my forehead.

On a cold, windy day when I felt stronger, we took a walk through the tree-lined streets, beside the drifts of snowbanks. My father cut an icicle down and presented it to me and I held it gingerly in my mittened hands. "You have to take care of yourself," he said sternly. He was always concerned about my well-being.

I nodded, comforted by his attentions.

"Don't strain yourself or get upset."

"I won't."

"Good girl," he patted my hair. "One day you will buy me a very large house."

After the sun went down that afternoon, I sat at my bedroom window. In the backyard, my father was building a snowman. My mother took a photograph, white flash in the dark, of my father standing beside his creation, one arm wrapped around its snowy body. Inside, the image, ghostly, stayed with me. My father in the snow, smiling for all the world to see.

The phone rang all morning but no one left a message. I wandered from room to room in the apartment, picking things up at random, then putting them down. Will's books were still stacked in pyramids on the floor. *Art in the Byzantine Era*, *Rubens to Picasso*, and, at the very bottom, *What to Expect: The Toddler Years*. I flipped through, laughing at Will's notes in the margins. He must have gone through and underlined

the art references: "Food blowing. Certain foods lend themselves better to dramatic expulsion." And: "To some toddlers, a bowel movement is a remarkable personal statement, a crowning achievement, something to celebrate, revel in, and if the spirit so moves them, decorate with." In the margin, Will had sketched a big-headed baby, with a list of names underneath: *Dumbo. Tin Tin. Babe. Hey Yu.*

I turned the radio on but all they could talk about was the weather. This city, with its temperate climate, was always struck dumb by snow. Buses were grounded, the roads undriveable. I rummaged through the fridge, found an old frozen pizza, and set it in the oven. Then, pulling a jacket on, I walked outside. The kids next door stumbled through the white, diving head first into snowbanks. They pelted each other with snowballs. Beside them, an elderly man shovelled his driveway. He tipped his fragile body forward, his breath unfurling into the thin, blue air.

What would Will say if he were here? He'd say, "This is packing snow, all right," both arms stretched out, a wide smile. "Ontario packing snow." When I lifted my face to the sky, the snow headed straight for me, converging between my eyes.

Inside, while I shook the powder from my shoes, the phone started up again.

"Thank God," my mother said, before I'd even said hello. "Thank God you're home."

A car outside the window stole my attention. It fishtailed left, slow motion, then burrowed into a snowbank.

"Miriam, I'm so sorry. Something's happened."

The passenger door of the stalled car popped open. The driver climbed out and stood still, watching the snow come down.

"Miriam? Are you there?"

"I'm here."

"Your father," she said. "Someone found him."

The room was moving. I couldn't concentrate. Outside, the driver of the car was walking away. "What happened?"

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Her voice broke. Then, "Miriam, you need to get here now. We're at Vancouver General. Your father attempted suicide."

I looked around the room. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"There's something in the oven," I said, my voice rising higher. "I can't come right now."

"Miriam, listen. The buses are stopped. There are no cars on the road. I couldn't get hold of you. You need to come right now, okay? Do you understand?"

She hung up first. I stared out the window, at the car abandoned in the road. An inch of snow coating the roof.

I was still wearing my coat. When I opened the oven door, the pizza was still there, wrapped in plastic,

frozen solid. The oven was cold. This made me laugh, an unsettling sound that filled the room then stopped, broken off. Somehow, I knelt down on the floor and put my shoes back on. I turned all the lights off, then let myself out the front door. The walk to the hospital wasn't long, perhaps fifteen minutes, but I wondered if it was possible that I was too late. Not only in body, but in desire, in thought. And if not too late, then something else. Too blind.

Through the snowfall, I could see the red Emergency lights. I walked through the automatic doors to the reception desk and gave my father's name. A nurse pointed me upstairs. Somebody took my hand, another nurse, and we turned off the main hallway, pushed our way through a set of double doors, into a very silent corridor. She opened a door to the waiting room, off to the side, and led me through.

"You're here," my mother said, looking up. She came and embraced me, her warm hands against my face. "You're freezing."

"Is it too late?"

She put both hands on my shoulders. I bent my head towards her until my forehead was resting against her chest. "You made it," she said, very gently. "It's okay."

Her eyes were red and tired. She took my coat and then together we walked to Intensive Care. A doctor joined us and he started speaking very softly. Then

we stepped behind a white curtain and I looked away, up to the ceiling. When I looked down, I could see the machine that monitored my father's breathing. His heartbeat was amplified in the room, the sound like a slow dance, open and even, open and slow. There was a metal pole, silver hooks to hold an intravenous bag. A deep cut ran along his forehead, partially bandaged. They had fastened an oxygen mask to his mouth.

Eyes closed, my father swiped clumsily at the mask, trying to dislodge it. His hand missed, then grazed it, moving the mask slightly to the left. He swiped once more, hitting the tube in his throat. I grabbed his hand and held on; it seemed very small and light. His eyes stayed shut.

"It's me," I said. His hand felt loose and full of bones, not at all like what I remembered. My father opened his eyes and looked at me. He breathed my name. I wept, then. I couldn't stop it.

That minute, standing beside him, seemed to last forever. I was holding on to my father when the doctor came to re-adjust the mask. "He fell," someone said.

I nodded and then I pulled away. My father's grip grew tighter. I brought my other hand to rest on his and I removed his hand, as gently as I could, until both hands were free. Behind me, someone lowered the blinds. A nurse came and unhooked an intravenous bag. I pushed through the curtain blindly. My

mother's hands were on my shoulders. "Miriam," she said, but I was already walking away down the wide hallway, through the double doors, walking until they let me go, through the maze of hallways and staircases, following one coloured line then another, as if to lose them. Past white walls and reception islands, nurses moving and laughing and watching. Will, I thought. If only Will were here. I felt my way outside, blind now, into the cold afternoon. The snow was dropping fast. I stood still, one of my arms reaching out to catch it, swimming in front of my eyes as if it had come loose.

I remember my father had a calendar on the wall in his apartment. He used to cross each day off, one by one, as if counting towards an end point. For me the years were indistinguishable, unbordered pieces of time. But he was never blessed with such forgetfulness. Pills and alcohol, my mother told me. Until he lost consciousness and fell, cutting his forehead. He was on the floor eleven hours before someone found him. They had heard his voice calling from the apartment. The apartment manager unlocked the door. My father was dressed in a suit, like one worn for a wedding. The paramedics came. My father asked for his family, kept asking until he lost consciousness.

Inside the apartment, the walls were bare. The calendar, the map folded up and put away. The balcony door ajar, letting the cold into the room.

We stayed with him all night. Through the glass windows, I could see the snow falling. It wiped the landscape clean. It seemed that only we existed, my mother, my father and me, as it had been on those long drives across the city, the miles we covered. The hospital staff walked in and out, passing through the periphery like figments of my imagination; only the three of us in the centre.

My father's body was thin beneath the blankets. The skin on his neck fell in loose folds. Once, he used to be so careful, dyeing the grey from his hair. Now his hair had gone completely white, that coat of colour disappeared.

From time to time, he opened his eyes and regarded us as if from a great distance. Then my mother would take his hand, she would stroke his brow. It was the same as before, I thought. Where he was going, into another country or into another life, I could not follow. Yet when he opened his eyes I knew he was looking back for us. His eyes were no longer guarded and neither were ours. They said only the most essential words. *No. Not like this.* And the fear and

doubt that I had hoarded and kept near, I finally saw them for what they were. Nothing at all. The aftermath of memory.

The intimacy of seeing his body in the bed, of listening to each private breath. His hands, loose and open. My mother beside me, one hand on the small of my back.

Throughout that week, my father remained in critical condition. We kept a vigil, my mother rising and standing beside him, then I would take my turn. We kept our silence, as we always had, but this one was different. It was not filled with the unspoken. We simply existed in this tiny room, the lights dim. My father's vital signs like handwriting, moving across a black screen.

When the sun rose on the fourth day, my mother walked me to the hospital entrance. "You need to sleep," she told me, touching my forehead. "This is the long haul."

Outside, she looked at the empty road. "He loves you," she said. "He's always had such dreams for you. I'm sorry," she stopped, seeing my expression. "I'm not saying it to hurt you. I just want you to understand. You never could have disappointed him." She looked away.

I watched her turn back to the Emergency entrance, the doors parting to let her through. Then I walked through the parking lot, past the ambulances lined up and waiting.

A thick fog had settled over the skyline. It wiped the sky clear of mountains and water. I walked along Broadway, past Main Street, where paper cups and newspapers littered the sidewalk. Past the sign that, years ago, my father told me was the tallest free-standing sign in the world. "There it is," my father said proudly. "Bowmac. Biggest sign in the world." He also showed me the narrowest building that still stands in Chinatown. My father, the tour guide who took me everywhere. He must have loved this city. Now it was coated with snow. A white-out, everything vanished, as if this were a game, as if I could bring it back from memory.

At home, I unlocked my apartment and turned all the lights on. The message light was flashing, a slow red like a heartbeat, a siren.

My mother's voice. "He's resting comfortably. They say we might be through the worst."

I stood listening to the message play itself out. The tape ended. My warm, empty apartment with all the lights blazing, my sadness like another body beside me, making me unsure, making me weep. If I could lay it all out, every detail, every gesture, would I come to peace with it, and then myself?

Will would say, look at it differently. Turn it all upside-down. Say that we let each other go as a gesture of love.

I called Will from a pay phone outside the hospital. Feeding quarters into the slot every few moments because I could not stop speaking.

I told him that it used to be that I would wake thinking of my father, his life as it was then, him alone in his apartment, living from hand to mouth. I would think of him and yet I could not bring myself to go to him.

I can see now how my father and I were the same. Waiting until the breaking point. Then, for him, pills and alcohol one night, an act that made all the words fall silent.

"I'll be home soon," Will said.

Even now I go back, holding the details up to my eyes, magnifying the tiny pieces to find the one that speaks volumes. In the end, this must only be for me, my selfish love. Packing and unpacking it, to see if something different comes to the surface. I want to know because there's hope now, and I do not want to make the same mistakes again.

When my father became conscious finally, he was frightened. "You must leave now," he mumbled.

"Hurry. Call the police." A side effect, the doctor told me. The drugs were making him fearful. When I stood at his bedside, he grasped my hand, said, "Did you call the police?" and I said, "Yes."

Anything seemed possible. The walls were shifting, straight and curved like an Escher print. My father lost himself in wild imaginings that none of us were privy to. My father said, "There's been a mistake."

"Yes," I told him. "I'll straighten it out."

He muttered in Indonesian, *Apakah anda pasti?* and I answered, "No, I am not certain at all."

In the nights that followed, I slept on a chair beside my father's bed. I woke up to the night sky, its flood of stars, and remembered the three of us traversing the empty roads on our Sunday drives. Those tunnels and arteries. It used to be that we could lose ourselves in them, before we came to know the city well.

Each morning, my mother arrived with a cup of coffee in one hand, the newspaper in the other. She took the chair that I vacated, and read to my father for a short while. Slowly, my father came back to the world, his eyes open and full. I watched, from outside the room, knowing this moment would pass. But I drank it in, to see them side by side.



Last Sunday, I drove out to Hastings Street and the neighbourhood where I grew up. I looked for the old store, but the glass storefronts had changed too much. I had thought that what was so vivid in my imagination would call out to me in real life, as if in verification. Will, in the passenger seat, said perhaps the building had been torn down long ago. To make way for something else, a different building, a new development. He was right, I knew, but still I thought I should recognize the place.

We got out of the car and walked along the sidewalk. It was fall, and the leaves had come down. The branches were stark and lovely. Near to us, on the sidewalk, a little boy in a blue raincoat ran headlong through the crowd of people. We could not see where he was headed, only that his arms were stretched out to both sides, like an airplane. I thought that someone would eventually catch him, his feet swinging off the ground, and lift him high. They would give him an aerial view of this street, these stores, all the people crowding along. On the hill, the cars struggled up the incline, halting and nervous, and the street lamps began to burn. The little boy disappeared ahead of us, into the crowd. I knew, then, that I would not find it. But still I walked in the direction he had gone, at home in this place, though every landmark had disappeared.