

NANCY BRANCH

ONLY THE FIRE-BORN

“Only the fire-born understand blue.”

—Carl Sandburg, “Sand Flat Shadows” (1922)

“Here’s a bottle for ya,” a skinny kid hollers out the window of a beat-up Aspen. Gertie sees it coming, but it is travelling too fast to avoid. Its weighted base strikes her just below the left temple. When the pain explodes, her head jerks sideways, and in an effort to regain her balance she overcorrects and tumbles over the crossbar of her bicycle. She lands hard on the gravel shoulder, her teeth snapping together in a rude shock. Amidst milling dust and shards of bottles—bottles that have taken all morning to pick and load into the milk crate on her bike carrier—she struggles to orient herself.

“Smoke on the Water” blasts through the Aspen’s open windows as the vehicle slows to take in the spectacle of Gertie’s fall, and a teenage passenger—the one who has thrown the beer bottle—yells, “*Looo-ser!*” He pounds the outside of the car door with his palms, roaring.

Gertie sits on the roadside, feels the heat of humiliation flood over her. The throb at her temple becomes visceral and offensive, as if someone has slapped her face. When she rises, she wobbles at first, but then outrage steadies her.

“You think I dunno who you are, Norval Hachey,” she screeches through the coarse strands of yellow-grey hair caught in her gapped teeth. “You’re all the same, you Hacheys. Let’s see how you like this!”

She lobs a broken pop bottle that misses the boy still hanging out the window. As she bends to retrieve another, his head disappears and the car tears off in a dusty squeal of tires.

At seventeen, when Gertie married Arlie Cole, she hadn’t finished grade 11 on account of the pregnancy. She couldn’t have said whether she loved him, but she supposed he’d make an okay husband, and he’d learn to be

a parent, same as her. She didn't have much choice in the matter anyway. "I'm just plain wore out," her grandmother said the day Gertie broke the baby news. "With that sugar disease and my gimpy leg, I don't got it in me to raise another kid." Besides, the house Gertie shared with Nana had only one bedroom and the broken-sprung pullout where Gertie slept.

On her wedding day, Gertie swayed down the aisle, her belly straining the seams of her Empire-waist dress so that the hemline pulled up in front, exposing her swollen ankles. At the altar, she glanced sideways at Arlie. His ginger-coloured hair, the pug nose, and the heavy brow that made him look like he was always scowling seemed foreign now and a little frightening, but she gave a mental shrug and went ahead with the vows.

"Don't want you worrying about nothing," Arlie told her after the ceremony while they were cutting cake for the handful of guests at Nana's. "I'll take care of you. I'll take care of everything."

A month into the marriage, they moved to a small mill house owned by Gravel Hill Pulp and Paper, where Arlie had found employment as a broke hustler. He had less education than Gertie, but he got his training on the job, so everything turned out all right. He worked four to midnight, and on his days off they got groceries, went fishing, or sometimes took in a movie at the Grand. Apart from her having to bandage up his arms when the broke knife jumped the paper reels, he wasn't too much trouble.

Gertie walks her bicycle up the drive to her house, set a ways off the main road and perched on a knoll the locals call Flanagan's Hill. Stopping to ease her puffing, she regards the house with a critical eye. It's a grey, shingled leaner with an uncertain porch roof that has come away from the main structure because of the maple limb that crashed down on it during an ice storm the previous year. She knows the roof needs fixing, but she hasn't got the money. She hopes only that the house will outlast her.

Balancing the milk crate on her hip, Gertie opens the side door. Inside, stale light reveals yellowed wallpaper steeped in decades of woodsmoke and the dull shapes of her Formica table and two chairs, scavenged from junk dumped over the edge of the riverbank. The smell of smoke worsens her headache, and she collapses on a chair, teeth gritted against the pain at her temple.

Pulling the milk crate towards her across the tabletop, she groans. Rare finds, two 64-ounce growlers have broken. That's a five-dollar loss, money

she could have used for canned goods to tide her over until next Wednesday when she picks up her food hamper from the Volunteer Centre.

A cat emerges from a back room and lets out a hungry yowl. It's a ragged calico with one eye and a snub of tail—a stumpy riser, Gertie calls it—odd looking for sure, with long back legs that it uses now to spring onto her lap. It whines again.

“Quit your yanging, Cat. Gimme a minute's rest.”

She brushes the calico to the floor, where it lands with a heavy thud. It aims its baleful eye at Gertie, and guilt washes over her. She remembers the cat when she found it, pain-hunched and bleeding about the face, moaning piteously as two chittering raccoons fled the thwack of Gertie's broom. “Poor thing.” Gertie reaches to scratch it under the chin, but the animal growls low in its throat and spits a warning.

“All right, ya ornery beast. Supper's coming.”

Cranking the hand pump lever, Gertie fills Cat's water bowl and then, with the last of the milk, scrambles two eggs, eats half the mixture, and dumps the rest into a second bowl on the floor. The cat growl-purrs as it gulps, and Gertie chucks it under the chin. This time, the cat permits her touch.

After the meal, Gertie goes outside to check her garden, planted beside the house in the rust-coloured earth that runs along the foundation. In the poor soil, tomato plants grow, most of them blighted, with undersized fruit that hangs in skimpy clusters from the branches. But one plant—Gertie's prize—is tall and healthy, with rich green leaves and strong stems weighed down with near-ripened fruit. She cannot puzzle out why this plant took hold and not the others, so she babies it, mixing crushed eggshells into the earth around its roots and pinching off suckers. She doesn't even mind the daily trudges to the stream on the back property to get water for the plant.

In a few days, the tomatoes will be ready. Her mouth waters at the thought of ripened fruit breaking cool and tangy-sweet on her tongue. She'll have a sandwich with thick juicy slices or maybe a *whole* tomato, eaten greedily without any thought to thrift.

When the child came, Gertie was overwhelmed. She forgot whatever differences in temperament she and Arlie might have had the moment they brought home their baby girl. Amy, pinched and ginger-haired like her father, whined in fits throughout the day and did not let up until her mother

tumbled into bed at ten. There were intermittent feedings throughout the night, during which the baby nursed for five minutes, dozed, and then roused a short time later, bleating with hunger at the very moment Gertie managed to fall into an exhausted sleep. She'd latch the baby onto her chapped nipple and pray the infant would suckle long enough to permit a few hours of unbroken sleep.

Following the birth, Gertie noticed a change in Arlie. He'd always given her household expense cash, and before the baby it had been enough. But with the additional costs of diapers, baby powder, safety pins, plastic pants, and the little onesies Amy kept growing out of, the money never lasted till the next allowance.

"Could we open up a joint account so I can withdraw a few dollars?" she asked him one evening at the supper table. "Just for emergencies."

Arlie's expression darkened. "Money's my business. Didn't I tell ya I'd take care of you?"

When Gertie nodded, he grunted and turned away. Something in his voice made her wary, and she never broached the subject again. Instead, she applied cornstarch in place of baby powder, reused dingy diapers, and cut the feet out of Amy's sleepers when a growth spurt hit.

In spite of her fatigue and strangled budget, Gertie found that, at certain moments during the day, she would look down at her tiny daughter, powder-soft and rosy from her bath, and be overcome with a surge of love so intense it almost flattened her.

Gertie's day begins the same way it usually does: with the fear that she won't have enough money to last her until her Old Age check arrives. She dresses quickly, feeds the cat, and bicycles down a service road to the river flats. School's out, so if she's lucky the local kids will have been partying at the shore. But she can see even before she gets onto the rocky beach there are no empty bottles from an evening's celebrations. Still hopeful, she looks into crevasses and overturns rocks in search of fallen change or maybe a McDonald's bag with a half-eaten burger inside. She finds only a few used condoms in the alders beside the shore. As she pedals back towards the main road, her knees ache and straggles of hair loosed from a neon scrunchie whip her face in the morning breeze. Damn, damn, damn.

A quarter mile down the main road, she turns into the long drive that leads up to Mary Rudolph's. She heads round back of the rambling farm-

house and knocks. Mary peers through the screen door, wipes her hands on a flowered apron, and casts a hurried look behind her.

“Morning, Gertie.”

“Don’t mean to trouble you, Mary. Just wondering if you got any weeding that needs doing.”

Mary hesitates and glances again behind her.

“Guess I come at a bad time, eh?” Gertie turns to leave.

“No, wait. I got no work, but maybe there’s some things you can use.” Mary goes inside, and Gertie hears the rustle of a paper bag and tin cans clunking together.

“Here,” Mary says and hands the bag through a crack in the screen door.

From somewhere inside a querulous voice booms out. “Who’s at the door, Mary?” Wilfred Rudolph’s sallow face appears from behind Mary’s shoulder. “Gertie Cole, don’t be coming here no more. Why can’t you behave like decent people ’stead of bumming all the time?”

Gertie scowls. “I come for work.”

His eyes drop to the bag in Gertie’s hand. “Don’t see no work being done, but sure looks like you got paid quick enough.”

Gertie spins around and waves an irritated hand behind her.

“There’s a reason people don’t feed the bears!” he hollers as she mounts her bicycle and wobbles off down the lane.

Gertie replays the encounter, and her anger rises. Frigging miserly old goat. But the anger is soon replaced by something else, a voice that niggles in a dark, secret corner of her mind, no louder than a midge’s wings: *Wilfred Rudolph is halfway right. Maybe if you tried harder to find work.* But then she recalls other backdoor calls and the women’s hesitation when she asks after work, their eyes flicking over her frizzy hair and stained jacket, which she normally doesn’t give a thought to except at moments like these when it seems ill-fitting and dirty. She feels their wariness and hears again the sharp, hurtful echo of doors snicking shut.

Partway up her drive, Gertie notices unusual sawtooth boot prints in the sand. She drops her bicycle and runs straightaway to the door. The lock has not been breached, and a quick inspection of the backyard reveals nothing off there either, but around the corner she gulps in a mouthful of air. Her garden lies strewn on the ground, the plants uprooted and broken, and her beautiful, ripened tomatoes splatted against the shingles or smashed to pulp

on the ground. For a moment she cannot believe what she is seeing.

“Oh, oh, oh,” she says and sinks right down in the dirt, bawling.

At ten, Amy looked startlingly like her father. The same coarse, unruly red hair. The same brooding brow. Only the eyes were Gertie’s. Blueberry eyes, gentle and widely spaced. And those eyes implored her now.

“*Please*, Mumma. All the other girls in my class are going. And I got a special invitation. I never got no invitation before. Can I go? *Pleeeeeease*.”

Gertie looked into her daughter’s face and took in the bright, beseeching eyes. It wasn’t that she didn’t want Amy to go to the birthday party. More than anything, she wanted this for her child. But parties meant presents, and Amy would be shamed if she was the only one to show up without a gift.

Gertie went to the nightstand in the bedroom, took out a pair of hose, unrolled one leg, and slid her hand down its length. She withdrew a small, heavy pile of dimes and quarters—change she had secreted away after paying for necessities. She counted out three dollars and twenty cents.

“We’ll go to Kmart today after school,” Gertie said when she returned to the kitchen, and Amy’s mouth split into a smile that broke upon Gertie like the sun.

That afternoon, Gertie and Amy got off the bus at the shopping mall, Gertie already working out in her head the cash remaining from the cost of the bus fare. They headed for the Kmart cosmetics department in search of the things Amy thought Ina Frenette might like as a gift. But the Yardley Pot o’ Gloss and the Love’s Lemon Fresh perfume were out of Gertie’s price range. In the end, she settled on a package of plastic barrettes for a dollar.

“She won’t like them,” Amy said, pouting.

“They’re the best I can do, honey.”

When Amy returned from the party on Saturday afternoon, she went straight to her bedroom and slammed the door. Gertie did not go in to her; some hurts you just couldn’t ease. But the Monday after the party, Gertie put on her best, used coat and began knocking on neighbours’ doors for work.

The sound of morning traffic on its way to Brunswick Smelter wends its way to the house and registers dimly in Gertie’s brain. For the first time in a while, she is not preoccupied with money. This morning she thinks only

of her ruined garden. She has her suspicions about the culprits: *them damn Hacheys*. They'd knocked over the headstones in the Anglican cemetery in the spring, raided Willy Good's garden the summer before, and BB-ed one of Murray Clousten's heifers the summer before that. She riles at the unjustness of what they have done, the deliberate violation of her property.

Cat wanders into the kitchen, stretches luxuriously, and winds its body around Gertie's legs, always the lead-in to breakfast. She opens one of Mary Rudolph's cans of tuna and dumps a few spoonfuls into Cat's bowl. The cat gulps the food, its head jerking back as though it were drawing the full length of a fish down its gullet.

"Greedy little bugger," Gertie says with a fond grin, and when the cat yowls for more, she scoots it out the door with her foot. "You want more, you'll have to hunt it."

Gertie is finishing off the remaining tuna when she remembers she must pick up her food basket today. She fixes the milk crate to her bike carrier and sets off on the three-mile peddle into town.

Within sight of the food bank, she hears someone yell from the street side.

"Well, if it ain't the old grey mare!"

Gertie whips her head around and spots Norval Hachey and his younger brother Louis sitting on a bench in front of the Wheel & Deal. Norval leans forward on his elbows and sneers. Louis' eyes flick between Norval and Gertie, an uncertain curl to his lip. Gertie takes the entrance two buildings away from the pawnshop, careful to hide her bicycle in the bushes in case the Hacheys get any funny ideas.

She walks into the centre with her head high. Five years ago, she couldn't have done this, ashamed as she was about having to sign up for food. But the volunteers know her by name now, and she can finally return their greetings without breaking eye contact. Shopping here is a much friendlier experience than at the Save Easy, where she sometimes goes when she can afford it. She shrinks from the memory of a cashier's disdain at the crumpled-up bills and piles of coins she dumped on the checkout counter; the irritation from the other people behind her, grumbling their impatience as she counted change with slow fingers; and the manager's narrowed, sideways glance as he opened up another cash to accommodate the waiting customers. So condescending and judgmental, as if he wished she wasn't standing there stinking up his store.

Gertie loads up on her allotment of groceries, stows the food on her carrier, and veers onto the street, hoping the Hacheys have moved on. But there they are, still slouched on the pawnshop bench. Louis elbows his brother and juts his chin at her approach.

“What ya got in the box there, *Ger-tie*?” Norval shouts. “Food, I betcha. All you welfare queens go in for the handouts.”

Gertie presses her lips together and pedals hard. She wants to screech at Norval that his old man would be getting dole outs too if he’d qualified, that she isn’t on welfare, and that she pays her OAS taxes, same as everybody else. But she knows he’s bucking for a reaction, so she holds her tongue.

“How’d ya like them tomatoes?”

Gertie slams the brakes. At first she wonders if Norval is just using an expression. Then she notices his splayed feet and takes in the odd, sawtooth soles of his boots. She gives him a look as hard as knuckles. “Stay off my property, you little shit. Ya don’t, I got a friend in the police department who’ll take care of you.” A little blossom of pleasure unfurls inside her as she sees, just for a second, the bravado falter in his eyes, and Louis looks like he is about to piss himself, which pleases her more.

With that, she wheels up the street. A block from the pawnshop, she spots the Hacheys’ Aspen parked out front of the high school. The sight of it makes her cheeks warm as she pulls her bicycle alongside the driver’s door. Slowly, deliberately, she removes the house key from her pocket and presses it to the side of the car, revelling at the sound of metal screeching against metal.

Cleaning house for the mill boss didn’t pay much, but it was more money than Gertie ever had. When her first pay came, she went to Kent’s Department Store. “I’ll die,” Amy had been saying for weeks. “I’ll just *die* if I can’t have them.” *Them* being the Earth Shoes displayed in the department store window, where Amy lingered Friday evenings when she and Gertie went into town for groceries. The shoes, boxy toed and negative heeled, were kind of ugly if you asked Gertie, but Amy wanted to look like the other girls in her class. She couldn’t wait to see her daughter’s delight when she opened the paper-wrapped package.

Since she hadn’t told Arlie about her job, she wondered how to explain the purchase. She tried to tell him several times, but her courage failed. When Amy came sashaying out of her bedroom in her new shoes on Monday

morning, Gertie was not surprised at his reaction.

“Where’d you get them shoes?”

Amy stood stock-still, her eyes flying to her mother.

“At Kent’s,” Gertie said.

“How much they cost?”

Gertie took a breath. “Twenty-three fifty.”

Arlie’s mouth tightened. “Where’d you get that kind of money? Sure not from me.”

Silence hung in the room. Amy flicked another glance at her mother and then scooted outside to wait for the school bus. When the door slammed, Gertie turned back to Arlie.

“I got work. I know I shoulda told you, but I was afraid what you’d say.”

“And where, can I ask, are you working?” His eyes went sharp and glittery.

“Mr. Gammon’s.”

“*Archie* Gammon? My boss?” And when she nodded, “*Jesus Christ*, Gertie! D’you know how that makes me look? Like I can’t support my own family.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean . . . It’s just that Amy needs things for school, and I thought . . .”

“I don’t give a shit what you thought. You’ve stuck me in a bad place. I can’t pull the plug on your little venture without looking worse in front of Mr. Gammon.”

As it turned out, Arlie needn’t have worried. Gertie was barely two months at her job when she discovered she was pregnant. The pregnancy was difficult, and when blood began to spot her panties, the doctor put her on bed rest, but she lost the baby anyway. Several days after the miscarriage, Arlie came into the bedroom where Gertie lay curled up on the covers.

“I brung you something.” He lowered himself onto the mattress and withdrew a tatty wristwatch from his pocket. Apart from Christmases and birthdays, he never bought her gifts.

She looked up through her matted hair. “What’s that for?”

Arlie shrugged. He lifted a hand and patted her shoulder. “Things is better this way, Gert. See what kinda problems can happen when you go out to work?”

Gertie drops off her groceries and heads for the recycling dumpster up-river beside MacMillan's Canteen. She returns to the house a little after four with several bags of pilfered soda cans. When she opens the side door, heat smacks her in the face, along with the odours of smoke and unwashed tins in the garbage.

"Cat!" she calls. The vague memory of booting the animal out for the day returns, and she calms. But then a terrible thought. "Oh, God. Cat!"

She rushes into the yard. Cat isn't in the narrow space under the front porch, the shady patch of wild daisies that grow beside the toolshed, or even in the broken barrel at the edge of the woods. Panic rises in her throat. "Here, puss, puss, puss." What if the Hacheys got him? She should never have scratched their car.

Just as she begins to despair, Cat emerges from a clutch of birches with a chipmunk in its teeth. "Oh, you miserable creature!" Gertie wrenches the chipmunk from Cat's jaws, and the cat moans its displeasure as the chipmunk scurries through parched strangleweed. "Naughty boy. Don't be scaring me like that again." Gertie is relieved at Cat's return but still feels a creeping apprehension.

Evening comes gusty, and Gertie opens several windows to rid the house of smells. The yard outside is lit with angled sunlight, and she goes up to bed despite the early hour. She sleeps fitfully in the summer heat and is startled awake an hour later by Cat's yowling. Sitting full up, she sniffs the air. She moves to the top of the staircase and scans the room below, then goes down a few steps to take in the view beyond the kitchen. Everything seems normal.

As she climbs back into bed, she hears whooping from somewhere in the fields beyond the house. Drawing back the window curtain, she squints through the dusty pane. There in the meadow in a widening arc of flames stands a male figure. She cannot make out his face in the twilight, but the gesture he makes is unmistakable: *Up yours*. Then he turns and flees across the back burn.

The fire gains momentum, orange flames licking upward, leaping and devouring the dry grass with frightening speed. When the wind gusts, putty-coloured smoke billows and roils as the head fire surges faster towards the house. Gertie flies downstairs in her nightgown and gumboots, releases Cat through the side door, and makes for the brook with the bucket off the front porch. She douses the rear of the house and the toolshed, hoping it will stall

the flames until the volunteer firemen arrive. With no phone of her own, she prays a neighbour has already called.

After umpteen treks to the brook, Gertie weakens and collapses. Then she spots Lionel Landry coming through the smoke with a broken-handled shovel. The two of them put out the worst of the fire, but not before the back of the house has been singed and two windows cracked from their efforts to beat out the flames. Lionel is the only neighbour who comes out to help this night. Willy Good from across the road, the Cloustens, and the Rudolphs from further down stay in their homes. Gertie knows they'd be only too happy if her place burned clean to the ground.

In the distance, a fire truck wails.

Forty years with Arlie, so you'd think she'd be used to it: the tight control of the money and the emotional parsimony that had always made him say "Where's the change I give you from that five?" or "What d'you need me to keep saying that for?" when she asked if he still cared. Gertie hoped things would improve once he retired, but the situation only worsened, especially after Amy, jobless and newly separated, moved back home. "Don't want no strangers in my house," Arlie would say when Gertie asked if she or Amy might have a friend in to tea. And if Gertie dared to suggest they go out to visit, "You ain't going. I oughta be enough company for the both of you."

Not long after his stroke, Arlie began acting queer. Sometimes a mood would take him, and he'd knock things off the kitchen counter, like the little can of pencil stubs Gertie saved out of thrift, and stamp them into shivers with his foot. Or he'd holler at Amy while she was scrubbing the floor: "No wonder Melvin kicked you out. Can't even get a floor decent clean." Then he'd trail muddy boot prints across the freshly washed linoleum as Amy's large, frightened eyes stared after him.

It still came as a great shock when, returning a half hour late from errands one day, Gertie found Arlie raging in the living room: "Where in Christ you been?" Then he was on her like a coiled rattler, knocking her glasses off, popping the button from the flap of her blue wool coat. What she remembered most was the suddenness of the attack and his hands around her throat, their skin corded with veins like bruised worms.

"I'm sorry, Arlie. I missed the bus."

He dragged her into the kitchen and fastened her mouth shut with a strip of duct tape. "That'll stop your goddamn excuses." He left her quailing

against the counter edge while he rifled her jewellery box for every cheap faux-pearl brooch or rhinestone pendant he ever gave her. "There, now." He dumped the skimpy lot into the garbage can. "You don't deserve them."

Less than two weeks later she was on the street, sitting at a bus stop, wondering what in God's name she was going to do. Before she'd even got out of bed that morning, Arlie had handed her two hundred dollars and her birth certificate and told her to get the hell out. This time she was not surprised, and she'd taken the news stoically. What had wounded her, though, was Amy—her beloved Amy—standing in the bedroom doorway clinging to Arlie with that dead expression on her face.

If she really thought about it, she might have predicted what Amy would do. She was living under Arlie's roof, after all, and he controlled all the money. What did Gertie have to offer? Except for that brief time at Archie Gammon's, she'd never worked outside the house, written a check, or had a social insurance number or credit card of her own.

Gertie sat on a bus bench and watched people driving by, her mind spinning like a clothes dryer. She had no idea where to go. She considered a motel, but the two hundred dollars Arlie had given her wouldn't last more than a couple of nights. Arlie had nipped any friendships, too, and with Nana gone, she had no relative who might have taken her in. She finally hopped a bus into Bathurst, where she asked around for emergency shelters. It was a long walk across a windy causeway, up a steep hill, and down a confusing snarl of dead-end roads and backstreets before she found it.

Hope House was a flat-roofed, brick building, spartan and unwelcoming in appearance, with a bare asphalt parking lot shaded by scanty bushes and a single, tar-spotted maple that had dropped most of its leaves. To one side was a big green dumpster extruding garbage and frantic sounds Gertie could only assume were rats.

She waited anxiously for the 6pm check-in, ignoring the florid-faced men draped across the steps. A rude, spiky-haired teen called out, "What's an old bird like you doing here?" Three boys he was standing with barked with laughter when she dropped her gaze in embarrassment. The only other female in the crowd of twenty was a fusty, middle-aged woman, who was all kneeknobs, eyesockets, and wild hair. Gertie clutched her purse to her chest, relieved when the doors at last opened for admission.

As she moved up the intake line, she caught a glimpse of the open, low-ceilinged interior. It was filled to capacity with dented metal lockers and

crowded rows of used hospital beds. Horrified by the lack of privacy and the ripe odour of human bodies, she turned and fled the building.

With no clear idea of where she was going, she walked away from the horn beeps of city traffic into the country, where the houses grew smaller and further apart, and bony cattle grazed in hummocked fields. At sundown she fell into an exhausted slumber in a hedgerow where, on her first night sleeping rough at a roadside, she slept better than she had in years. The next day she stumbled upon a shingled house a little ways off the main road. The house looked abandoned—rusted tin roof, vacant windows, so desolate all alone on a hilltop. But it was great luck when the back door yielded to the thrust of her shoulder and even greater luck that evening when no one came to toss her out. By month's end, when still no one had come to claim ownership, she began to hope that she'd found a home.

It is Gertie's favourite time of day, that gentle-coming hour when the rush of shift workers on their way to the smelter ends, the persistent carolling of the robin stills, and silent trees stand out in dark relief against the salmon-coloured sky. This is normally the hour when Gertie drifts into dreamless slumber with Cat nestled beneath her chin. But tonight, like all the nights that have passed since the fire, she is keyed up. As she sits staring out the bedroom window at the back property, her discontents rise in the half-light. They swirl and expand within her until she is overcome. "Bastards," she says aloud to Cat. "Try to burn me outta my own home. Well, I'm ready for you now."

Earlier in the day, after a useless visit to the Regional Police Department to report the fire, she'd headed to MacMillan's Canteen, where she figured the Hacheys would be hanging out. They were there all right, sticking around like bad weather. "Think I don't know it was you set my place on fire?" she yelled at them from the recycling dumpster. "Come anywhere near my house again, you little pissbutts, and I'll split your heads wide open." The boys snorted, and Norval, puffing himself up in front of the kids outside the storefront, hollered back, "Awful big talk for a scrawny twat." That's when Gertie rode her bicycle over and smiled a languorous, taunting smile. *Come get me, you bastards.*

She sees them coming across the fields just after 1am, like the dogs they are, slinking low against the fence line. She left the toolshed door unpadlocked and ajar, with her bicycle leaning in plain view against the back wall

as extra incentive. What tools had been stored inside the shed—a rusted hammer and a snaggle-toothed saw—she already removed to the house basement.

Gertie watches as the dark figures draw closer, and she tastes fear in her mouth, sharp and metallic. She is frightened by what she has set in motion, but she is committed to seeing it through.

The Hacheys sniff around in the darkness, from time to time glancing at the upstairs window where Gertie's face is pulled back behind the ratty sheers. When they move towards the toolshed, Gertie bolts outside and waits in the bushes until they are inside.

"The bitch's bike," Louis says. "What you wanna do with it?"

There is a sudden crash and then the *twang* and grind of wheel spokes buckling under force. Gertie emerges from a snarl of bushes and stands in the open doorway. Hunched over the bicycle, Norval doesn't see her, but Louis does. Even in the scant moonlight, Gertie sees his eyes widen, his face muscles contort as he fish-mouths a silent warning. In a blink of movement she slams the door, snaps on the padlock, and wedges a heavy plank under the crosspiece ledge.

Swearing erupts, and then come the concussive thuds of boots against the toolshed door. As Gertie moves towards the house, the heaped injustices return to her in a rush: the beer bottle exploding against her temple, the waste of her tomatoes, the name-calling that still burns like molten solder under her skin, the grass fire. Her mind travels further back to Arlie and Amy, and their memory pains raw as an undressed wound.

Inside the house, Cat emits a fretful mewl and rubs against Gertie's legs, sensing maybe the not-rightness of things. Gertie no longer trembles with adrenaline. Instead, she steps with dull purpose towards the woodstove and removes a box from the stovetop shelf. Withdrawing a match, she drags it along the length of the striker and watches the flame flare up—yellow, orange, and the tiniest bit of blue at the centre where it is hottest. She lets the match burn down to her fingertips and does not flinch as flame licks at her stained, chapped skin. She pushes the cat outside, and a numb certainty settles over her.