

TOM WAYMAN
DWELLING

THE MAN HAD LIVED for more than two decades in the house beside the forest. One afternoon when he returned home from skiing he was astonished to find that snow was falling inside the dwelling.

The man had skied for three hours on a trail that followed the river. Below the overcast that day, fir and spruce along the route had clumps of snow on their branches, and similarly laden evergreens rose up the mountains that formed the valley walls. On the mountainsides, patches and striations of pure white marked where granite outcrops interrupted the mat of the forest that ascended toward the peaks. Snow also coated the upper surfaces of the tangle of branches of cottonwood and birch that grew at the water's edge and in stands amid the evergreens in the frozen woods. A scrub of hazel, aspen, and vine maple that lined the trail in places also supported blobs of snow.

Near where the man had kicked and poled along, a single raven landed amid the high limbs of a hemlock, sending down a small white spray. Further on, a pair of the black birds glided west across the mid-river islands of snow between which the icy water flowed south. The man could hear the air pushed by their wings as they flapped overhead through the stillness of the winter day. Occasionally one of the birds cawed, the sound loud below the desolate summits that overlooked the trail on which the man skied.

The exertion that propelled the man forward kept him warm. Despite the cold air inhaled as he travelled, he felt exhilarated by the exercise. But when at last he returned to his pickup and had to sit still in the frosty vehicle while he drove home, he began to feel chilled. The truck's heater eventually took the edge off his discomfort. When he had swung up his driveway, parked, and opened the door to his basement, he was glad to step into an enveloping soft heat.

He had stuffed the basement furnace with split cordwood before he left, and closed the damper. The heater had faithfully poured out warmth

during the hours he had been absent. But to his amazement, as he stood just within the door, skis and backpack in his hands, he saw that the air below the floor joists was filled with lazily descending snowflakes. The white particles seemed to be forming out of nothing, the way sometimes outside on a sunny day he had observed snowflakes take shape and descend from an apparently cloudless blue sky.

The man gaped at the scene around him, his mind struggling to comprehend a snowfall in a basement. For a second he was seized by panic at the thought that the main floor and roof above him had vanished—burned in a fire, perhaps. Could he have not noticed the missing upper storey when he had driven up to the house? Then he remembered snow was not falling outside.

Yet already a scurf of white lay two or more centimetres deep on the cement floor, and atop the clothes washer and a table where his ski-waxing vises were set up. Racks of shelves holding an array of extension cords, paint cans, work gloves, gardening hand tools and irrigation nozzles and timers brought inside for the winter were similarly coated. As he took a shaky step further into the room, the powder covering the floor rose and settled from the motion of his boots, as though he were walking a dusty path. When he glanced back at the door after proceeding several paces, no evidence of his passage was visible. The disturbed snow had landed where he had trod and lay as if he had never crossed through it.

With an automatic gesture, he brushed the waxing table clear in order to set down his pack. The snow, however, felt odd: cool and powdery against his fingers and palm. The material that comprised the white fluff seemed devoid of water. He observed that the heated metal of the furnace's level top appeared the same as ever. No snow was displayed, nor any drops or pools of fluid.

When the man removed his boots and climbed the snow-covered stairs to the main floor of the house, an identical skiff of white covered kitchen floor tiles, counters, stove and refrigerator tops, and even the flatware and cutlery piled in his dish rack to dry. In the living room, the rug, chairs, sofa, and sound system were equally adorned with snow. Though his socks plowed through the layer of snow on the floor, the wool encasing his feet never became soaked as would have happened had he walked without boots through snow outside. Nor did the air within the house feel less reassuringly warm than usual despite the flakes drifting down below every room's ceiling.

The man stood in his bedroom, attempting without success to grasp how this meteorological anomaly could occur, and how the indoor snow could

be so dry. At last he began to change out of his ski clothes. While he tugged on jeans and a sweater, the snowfall around him tapered off. But even when the air cleared completely, the powdery white that coated each object in the house remained. Hunger drove him to begin to cook supper. As he warmed some soup, he noticed the snow disappeared from the glowing burner and heated stove top. But as with the furnace in the basement, the snow did not convert to water. He took a shower later, steam filling his small bathroom as always. Yet except for those surfaces on which water flowed, such as the interior of the tub or sink, the layer of snow everywhere remained unaffected.

He considered phoning his nearest neighbors, a young couple, to see if they were experiencing this phenomenon. But if he was hallucinating for some reason, he thought, he didn't want to draw the neighbors' attention to the fact. They were well-meaning, and likely to insist that he seek medical help. He could imagine them with the best of intentions phoning 9-1-1 on his behalf whether he wanted them to or not. Who knew what such a call would set in motion? If others in the valley were also experiencing snow indoors, he reasoned, he would unquestionably hear about it. Somebody would contact him to check if he were affected too, the way people phoned each other when the power went off.

The man did not want to lower his head, still damp from the shower, into snow. So as he prepared to climb under the duvet, he shook the powdery coating off the pillowslip. He also brushed snow from the bedroom chair before piling his clothes on it as usual. Like every night, he opened the window a few centimeters, bending to inhale and savor the thin stream of icy air that entered. But throughout his bedtime routine, his bare feet felt only cool despite being buried in snow to the ankles.

In the middle of the night, he woke once to the distant sound of a plow clearing and sanding the main highway a couple of kilometres eastward across the valley. More snow must have fallen outside in the darkness. He thought drowsily of turning on the bedside light to learn if the snowfall indoors had resumed, but was asleep again before he could act.

When he awakened at first light, snowflakes glittered in the air of the bedroom as they gently floated down. He lay watching their beautiful steady fall. Snow had piled up again on the pillow, and the white on the bedroom rug looked deeper than before. The room was a little chilly, but no more so than any other morning after the fire in the furnace had burned to coals. He tossed aside the duvet, swung his feet over the side of the mattress and planted them in the white fluff.

After breakfast, he shrugged into his parka and pulled on boots. Leaving the house, he walked several metres north to his wood shop. He wondered whether snow would have fallen inside that building, too. After pulling the shop door open, he flicked on the fluorescents. Several centimetres of snow cloaked the linoleum floor and his big workbench with its racked hand tools on the wall above. Snow likewise lay on his table saws, band saw, lathe, and the lumber stacked on the floor on the far side of the space.

A few minutes later he had changed out of his boots into slippers, and had lit a fire in the shop's wood heater. He whisked the snow off his current project, a set of kitchen cabinets for a customer up the valley in Slokan, and extracted the drawings for the cupboards from beneath the powder that coated the workbench. The paper was unblemished. Soon he was absorbed in the day's tasks, measuring and cutting, tacking and gluing and clamping. He had to clear snow off a couple of cardboard boxes beside the workbench before he found the one containing the stain the customer had requested.

All day the snow appeared intermittently in the air of the shop and wafted down, or died away. At times the accumulated snow was a nuisance, as once during a heavier fall of snow than usual he couldn't locate for a minute a pencil he had placed on the bench earlier. Or snow had to be blown off a row of small jars of screws in order to find the size he needed to install some metal corner braces. Yet briefly misplacing items was an ordinary part of his workday. His mind often was focused on the next step in the process of creation. Practical details like where he had deposited a hammer or leaned the remnants of a sheet of plywood would escape his notice until suddenly these items were wanted for another stage in the completion of the project at hand. The unaccountable appearance of snow indoors was simply an irritation, resembling a mosquito loose in the shop in summer or a stink bug suddenly flying past his ear in early fall.

Also, the activities required to construct the cupboards, or indeed tackle any shop chore, mostly displaced the snow where he worked. When he swept or vacuumed the floor at the end of his workday, the snow temporarily disappeared where he cleaned. Only when he returned to the shop after lunch, or the next morning, was the sight of the interior of his shop carpeted with fresh snow a reminder of the extra obstacle he now faced in earning his living.

But he quickly became accustomed to the presence within doors of such odd material, lovely but not chilling. He told no one about the snow. His days resumed their routine, broken only when he drove the sixty kilometres to pick up supplies in Nelson, or by afternoon excursions in the valley to provide

a customer with an estimate or to deliver and install a finished project. More common were mornings devoted to his solitary work, and afternoons skiing through the forest, sometimes past farmsteads and isolated homes, but often deep in the woods. Occasionally in the growing dark he encountered a fellow skier, and one February day as he neared an intersecting road, a young farmer walking the trail stopped the man to ask if he had seen some sheep that had escaped their pen. Most often he met only the ravens, or crows, and more rarely pairs of tundra swans gliding on the water, or upending themselves to feed on the river bottom so only their rear ends bobbed above the surface of the frigid stream.

Then, amid snow indoors, the following morning would be spent fashioning store counters for a new bicycle repair shop that was scheduled to open down the valley at Playmor Junction in the spring. Whenever commercial work temporarily became scarce, the man crafted from scrap wood cutting boards, bowls, and toys such as wooden trains or letters that could be hooked together to spell out a child's name. These products he took to Nelson periodically to offer to a craft store or a particular children's boutique receptive to purchasing his work.

Some afternoons during or following a prolonged outside snowfall were devoted to pushing a snow scoop to open wheel paths up his driveway. Many of his neighbors hired someone who operated a skid-steer loader or a tractor rigged with a plow. But the man felt the hours spent removing snow to enable his pickup to climb the drive helped develop and maintain muscles he used for skiing.

When the midwinter thaws arrived, overnight dumps of snow turned to rain around noon. Then the white that blocked his driveway was wet and heavy, making the task of keeping the drive open exhausting and requiring two or three hours longer than usual to accomplish. Indoors, however, the snow retained its light consistency whatever the weather outside. And the man eventually realized that no matter how snowy the world beyond the windows became, within the house and shop the depth of snow never rose higher than eight or nine centimetres.

By mid-March, fresh snow only fell outdoors late in the evening, and the new accumulation was mainly gone by noon, thanks to a strengthening sun. Now the man's afternoons were busy with pruning his apple, plum, cherry and pear trees, often requiring an orchard ladder with its three supports to be propped into a third of a metre of snow that still remained on the ground. When pruning was completed, the man fetched hoses from storage

in a garden shed, connected them to the house's outside taps, and over a couple of afternoons sprayed his fruit trees with dormant oil and lime sulfur.

Each day during this flurry of orchard chores, less snow covered meadows and lawns. One night at supper the man's elbow accidentally knocked his fork off the kitchen table. When he bent to retrieve the utensil, he noticed that spaces had begun to open in the white that covered the floor. A quick check revealed the same change was occurring in other rooms. And where powder lay atop chairs, side tables, lamps and bookcases, its thickness had appreciably diminished.

Within a week, the snow was gone entirely from the house. The man spent an afternoon vacuuming rugs, sweeping and mopping floors, and dusting bookcase tops and chair seats. When he was finished, the snow inside might never have been.

The man's business picked up as the valley inhabitants awoke as if from hibernation and began to plan renovations or new constructions. The phone rang frequently with requests for estimates. Many afternoons now he drove through the valley from house to house, or to this or that store or barn, to listen to people's ideas, then suggest what was practicable and calculate a likely cost. Even merchants in Nelson contacted him with possible jobs. Certain town days became extra-long as he measured and prepared estimates for potential customers, or visited a couple of Nelson's building supply stores to check on current prices for lumber, stain, paint. He was too occupied for weeks to store away his skis for the following winter. Poles and boots and skis remained propped against the wall just inside the basement door, a reminder each time he passed that this chore remained undone.

Outdoors, he lifted the mulch from his vegetable gardens, and forked the soil over. He also stripped the mulch from flower beds around the house, exposing crocuses and the first shoots of tulips, hyacinths and daffodils. These had to be sprayed to keep the deer from gnawing them. He saw where the does who lived up in the woods west of his house had attacked a rhododendron bush beside the deck stairs. The animals obviously found the rhodo leaves inedible: individual leaves were scattered around the base of the plant. Yet the deer had tugged leaf after leaf from the branches as if expecting the next leaf to be a delicacy. Cursing the deer's mindless hunger, he sprayed the rhodo to protect it from further predation, and for good measure that afternoon sprayed every fruit tree that was beginning to leaf out.

The evening the man discovered the harm to the rhodo, he was dawdling after dinner at his kitchen table reading the valley's weekly newspaper. He thought to glance toward the stove to make sure he had turned off the oven where he had baked a potato, one of the last of the previous summer's. Gazing down the room, he observed that the ceiling, in the glare of the electric lights, was tinged a yellowish-green rather than showing its usual stark white.

He wondered if some flaw in the latex used when the ceiling was previously repainted had caused the color to vary over time. He was uncertain when the kitchen had last been done. Yet when he went into the bathroom, he saw that the ceiling there was now the exact shade as in the kitchen. The bathroom had been repainted only the year before when he'd replaced tub, tub surround and toilet. A quick check of the rest of the house revealed that all the rooms' ceilings—uniformly painted white—had adopted this new shade of yellowy green. He decided that this shift was related to the inexplicable indoor snowfall. Next morning, he found the same alteration in the color of the shop's ceiling.

As the weeks passed, however, the intensity of the green in the ceiling's pigmentation began to overshadow the yellow. The man found the color not unpleasant. But he resolved to add repainting the ceilings white to his list of future household chores. During this period, besides having to adjust to the increased pace of his business, he took delivery of his annual truckload of composted manure. The fertilizer was dumped onto newly snow-free grass at a spot about half way up the drive. For the next few afternoons, the man trundled wheelbarrow loads of manure to his various vegetable gardens and flower beds, and turned the former over once again. After a morning spent at precision work in the shop, or carefully measuring and figuring a price at a potential client's home, the afternoon's toil preparing the gardens seemed pleasantly routine. These tasks around the grounds were ones the man had undertaken every year during his entire stay on the property. Returning to the garden shed for a trowel, part of his mind was absorbed in figuring out some intricate rabbeting joins in connection with a chest of drawers he was constructing for a customer at Perry Siding. For a moment at the shed door, the man was confused about whether he was obtaining a tool needed to put the gardens in, or to tuck them away again for winter.

Early May also was when his annual purchase of firewood was delivered. Ever since he had acquired the property, he had bought from the same supplier of cut and split cords. The seller now drove a much larger dumptruck

than all those years ago. Yet the long association between the two of them meant that the supplier was thoroughly familiar with navigating a heavy truck up the man's driveway and jockeying it into position at the top. Each truckload of winter wood was dumped just past the workshop, ensuring that dimension lumber needed for the business could still be unloaded. As a break from other chores, over the next month the enormous heap of firewood was, wheelbarrow load by wheelbarrow load, partially stacked in the basement before the majority of the fuel was arranged in neat piles behind the garden shed.

Other spring afternoons, the man planted young evergreens, birches, and a few new fruit trees. When he had purchased his acreage, the land between the house and the road was open meadow, reflecting the original use of the lower third of the property as part of a farm. That first year the man had begun planting evergreens along the edges of this open space, as well as starting a line of birch to cloak the house and shop from passers-by on the road. Now the firs, pines, cedars and hemlock he had planted year after year were shading out some of the place's original fruit trees, so the man was slowly developing a new orchard where his plums and apples could receive more sun.

Meantime, in the forest on the ridge above the house, the deciduous trees' array of leaves thickened week by week. Around the grounds, too, such foliage shifted in color from a first tentative lime to, eventually, a flamboyant emerald. Indoors, the man's ceilings echoed this transformation. To sit reading now at the kitchen table under the electric lights resembled, the man thought, spending a sunlit hour below the fully leafed-out canopy deep in the woods.

Then vegetables had to be planted, including both seeds and small pots of already-started kale, tomatoes and peppers the man bought from a neighbor, a woman down the road who operated a seasonal nursery. The nursery owner once pointed to an isolated white clearcut near the top of the mountain across the river from where they stood. The snow on the area's clearcuts was the last to disappear each spring. "Keep your tomato seedlings indoors until that area has melted," she advised. The man also purchased small flats of annuals from her.

During the weeks of afternoons required to commit to the earth rows of seeds—radish, lettuce, bean, corn and more—and to transplant all the marigolds, petunias, lobelias, fuchsias and other annuals into their

beds, the man worked past his former supper hour, taking advantage of the lengthening period of daylight. As a consequence, he often lacked enough energy after dinner to do anything but drag himself to bed. Late one Tuesday evening, he lingered over the plate that had held a meal of baked chicken and rice while he attempting to summon the requisite will to take a shower before stumbling into the bedroom. Happening to glance toward the sink, he was startled when his eyes became aware that the kitchen ceiling now showed large white patches amid the green he had become accustomed to. He realized then that the room's illumination was far more a product of the overhead lamps than of the jade glow that had suffused the space for what seemed months.

Surprising himself by the quickness with which his tired legs propelled him to his feet, he stalked through the house snapping on the lights in each room. Every ceiling displayed the same piebald appearance.

By the weekend, the ceilings of house and shop had returned to their normal condition, much as the floors of the house had when the visitation of the powdery snow had ended. The days began to be hot. The man's afternoons now involved uncoiling and connecting his system of irrigation hoses, and activating timers to ensure that before he arose each morning the watering of beds would already be underway.

One early July afternoon, he wheeled his bicycle out of the basement, and used a small compressor to inflate the tires after their long winter sleep. He lubricated the chain and wheel bearings. Then he ventured out along some of the trails where he had skied months before. The route was lined with tall dense foliage. The trees on either side broadcast the calls of robin, siskin, nuthatch, and jay, plus those of songbirds the man could not identify. Crows and ravens continued to lumber or soar overhead, and to squabble with each other in the uppermost green boughs of fir, cottonwood, cedar, and birch.

Each afternoon when the man returned indoors from weeding or other garden duties, or wheeled his bike into the basement weary after a long ride, he looked anxiously around the walls, floor and ceiling to see if the sunniest season would transform his home as well. Day after day he was relieved to see the rooms he lived and worked in untouched by any mysterious changes. As with the interior snow, he had not spoken to anyone about the metamorphoses to his ceilings. He was by nature solitary, although he occasionally invited the couple who were his closest neighbors for supper, and was himself invited a few times a year to dinner parties at the home of

the owners of a valley fencing company, a couple with whom he had become friends over the years. Since the snow had fallen inside his walls he had not entertained a single visitor.

After three weeks of good weather had passed without anything odd occurring indoors, a woman he knew phoned him long distance. She was a former resident of the area currently living two thousand kilometres to the east in Winnipeg. His friend was one of the few female woodworkers he had met; their paths had crossed when they both had taken an upgrading course in lathe work in Nelson, sponsored by the provincial apprenticeship board and offered through the trades training division of the local community college. They had been assigned as partners, sharing a machine for the practicum portion of the course. The relationship they developed was easy, even flirtatious: they seemed, the man thought to himself, to genuinely like each other. Outside of class they spent hours in coffee shops and restaurants chatting about far more than course material. He couldn't tell how much she saw him as a brother and how much as a potential partner, but he loved spending time around her quick wit and small but shapely body.

Her home was in Manitoba, however. She had chosen to take the course in Nelson because she had an uncle and aunt she was close to who lived up the lake from the town, and she could visit with them for the three weeks the course lasted. The man and she had stayed in touch ever since she had returned home: they emailed frequently, and even talked on the phone two or three times a year, updating each other on their lives. One Christmas she emailed him a photo of herself in a revealing bathing suit. He wasn't sure how to process this gift. But he had copied it to the photo file on his computer, and sometimes he would bring the picture up on his screen and look at it.

She returned to Nelson to visit her relatives every few years, and on the phone now she informed the man that she would be out again at the end of July and would love to see him while she was in the Kootenays. He suggested she stay at his place for a night or two on this trip—he had a spare room, and could show her his shop, which he had expanded since the last time she had been his guest for supper two years before. If she was driving west, he said, she should bring her bike. In any case they could go hiking.

The man's older sister, who also lived east of the Rockies but in Calgary, repeatedly urged him on the phone or via email to become more socially active. I hear Nelson is a happening place, she wrote. Friends of mine who visited there raved about the restaurants, the nightlife, the ski resort. You

should be out meeting people, meeting women. Do you want to turn into a complete hermit? He steadily assured her he had sufficient interaction with other people through his woodworking business, and that at the end of a week, especially if he'd had to deal with a difficult customer, he often felt peopled-out. "One carpenter I know," he told his sister on the phone, "always says, 'People ask me to give them an estimate. What they don't know is that they're participating in an audition.' If the carpenter senses they're going to be trouble, he either never gets back to them, or names an impossibly high price. I wish I could do that. But I worry about money so I'm always nice to people. I bid on everything I can."

Now, though, he had a visitor to look forward to. Whatever happens between us when she's here, it will be fun, he told himself. Maybe I am alone too much.

In the summer heat, he wore shorts and a T-shirt every day, and often went barefoot to work in the garden or around the house. Every window that would open in his rooms was screened, as was a sliding door onto his deck, and he kept everything possible fully ajar while the sun blazed down. Electric fans and a couple of screened windows meant the shop was tolerable. Because he lived in the mountains, his home cooled down nights, so he slept well even under the duvet. Yet the master bedroom faced east, and despite the window being wide open all night, once the sun crested the eastern valley wall around 6:30 he would be sweaty if he lingered too long beneath the covers.

One morning he sat groggily at the edge of his bed having just awoken, with the first sunbeams streaming in from above the mountain rim. The sky was a faultless blue. As the foginess of sleep drained from his mind, he was aware of a peaty odor in the room, a heavy scent as of fecund soil. His house was on a septic system, and once in a while outside he caught a whiff of unpleasant stink from the rooftop opening of the stack. The smell that pervaded the room that morning was, by contrast, earthy rather than fecal: thickly redolent with flourishing life, akin to the odor he inhaled while staking up stems and leaves of tomato vines or when he sniffed the nighttime perfume of nicotiana.

At first he thought the odor might originate with something outdoors. But the scent diminished as he pushed a window screen aside and leaned out into the freshness of the morning. His heart sank, and he turned to scan the bedroom rug, ceiling and walls to see if some manifestation of the season was visible that could account for the smell. Nothing was out of place. To his

dismay, however, he found the scent now pervaded each room of the house. A quick visit to the shop revealed that the smell there overpowered the rich odor of sawdust that constituted his workplace's usual olfactory backdrop.

The man acknowledged he was bothered that his house would be tainted during the much-anticipated visit of his friend. Plus I get to spend several weeks smelling muck whenever I'm indoors, he raged to himself. He prepared and ate breakfast that morning in a black mood. He took his coffee out onto his deck, where he stood in the sun by the rail and watched the wind rustle through the tremulous leaves of the aspen. Can these occurrences in the house—the snow, the green light, and now the scent—be a delusion? Am I punishing myself for some reason by conjuring these up? Am I losing my mind? He had installed bathroom cabinets one Saturday the previous fall at the home of a social worker employed by the regional health authority's mental health division. She had had told him, while they chatted as he worked, that the defining characteristic for mental illness was functionality. No question I'm functional, the man told himself as he heard from the porch a flicker hammering at the wooden power pole down by the road. A moment later the bird flapped over the lawn toward the forest west of the house. I can work, feed and clothe myself. I interact with people no worse than I always have. So unless I've developed a tumor or something, there has to be another cause for what is going on.

The man admitted part of his feeling of anger had to do with not wanting the unexplainable odor to mar his friend's enthusiasm for spending time with him. Of course, if she can't smell it, he noted, I'll know I'm crazy. Maybe this visit they might finally become intimate, he thought. Each time they parted, they hugged and kissed each other. No question she was very attractive sexually. But whatever happens between us, he told himself again, having her around will be fun. That's the main thing.

That afternoon he loaded his canoe into his pickup and drove north a quarter hour to Slocan. From the village's beach, he paddled up the lake through the bright summer weather. To his left the high peaks of the Valhalla Ranges rose, their granite spires lifting far past tree line. His route lay close onshore along the west side of the lake. As the craft travelled smoothly forward, his mind was lulled by the lap of low waves against the huge stones lining the shore. The boulders often had good-sized cedars growing implausibly from cracks in the rock's surface. His thoughts, while his arms repeatedly stretched forward in the sun to drag the blade of the paddle back through the water, settled on the impending visit. His sense of agitation about the odor

calmed. Maybe his sister was right, he pondered. Perhaps he should be living with a woman. Among other things, he acknowledged ruefully, he'd know if what transpired in his rooms and the shop was a hallucination.

Long ago, in Victoria, he had been married for a dozen years. When he considered that chapter in his life, he concluded the first four years had been good, and the rest increasingly unsatisfactory. He didn't like to recall some of his actions, infidelities really, nor how he had handled attempts by his wife or himself to discuss their marriage. Her wish for children. His fear that his woodworking could not support a growing family, that he'd be forced to work for someone else at a job only tangentially related to his love of making things from wood. The beauty of grain in every species. The specific attributes of fir, cedar, oak, pine. Relocating to the West Kootenay, establishing a life alone in these remote mountains, had been a balm to his spirit after the turmoil of his years in the city.

When the man's friend stepped out of her rented car at the top of his driveway, she looked lovelier than ever to him. She was dressed in shorts and a short-sleeved blouse with a plunging neckline, where a pendant hung in the cleavage between her breasts. After they hugged, she exclaimed several times about how beautiful she always found his place. She had forgotten, she said, the way the forest above, and the mountain vista on all sides, set off the house. Behind her, he struggled with her luggage along the side of the building to the deck and then in through the door to the main floor. She stopped just inside. "What is that fabulous smell?" she asked.

"Yeah, sorry about that," he said. "I've been trying to figure out what's causing it."

"Mmmm. I love it," she said. "Very earthy. Very sexy." Her laugh tinkled out, and his heart flooded with joy and nervousness.

They spent a couple of hours in the shop, while he showed her his current projects, and, heads almost touching, bent to leaf through his ring binder of photos of jobs completed that year, while they talked about the technical aspects of each contract. Later they sipped wine while he cooked a chicken vindaloo, and prepared a salad of fresh produce from his gardens. They ate by candlelight as the evening darkened, and he learned to his surprise that she had been involved with a man for much of the past year, before breaking up in March. After her initial disclosure, she didn't seem to want to dwell on the topic, and the conversation shifted to the doings of her uncle and aunt, plus those of her brother who was working as an engineer in the Alberta oil patch.

With the last of the wine bottle in their glasses, they stood side by side leaning on the deck rail to listen to the valley night: dogs barking away over the hills, and the rhythmic pulses of the frogs in the marshes along the river's edge calling for a mate or proclaiming territory. Overcome by the moment, he leaned down and kissed where her neck met her shoulder. She rested her glass on the railing, and swung around to look up at him, her eyes wide. Their lips met in a long kiss, and then another.

A muted negotiation ensued, as his palms, free now also of a wine glass, traced the sides of her body. She took his hand, snagged her glass with her other hand, and led him indoors, depositing the glass on the kitchen table. She sniffed deeply. "I can't get enough of that smell. It's like that cologne some guys wear. We girls call it 'Sure-fuck.'" She laughed at his startled expression in response to her words. Still holding his hand, she turned off the kitchen light. He felt himself tugged along into his bedroom.

Two mornings later, he watched from outside the basement door as her car descended his driveway, the horn sounding a farewell beep as her vehicle reached the road. A surge of loneliness swept into him. The feeling of loss wasn't just about the sex, he told himself as he trudged around the corner of the house toward the wood shop, although making love with her had been wonderful. She was enthusiastic and energetic, and seemed to enjoy tenderly shocking him with some of the things she uttered in the midst of their coupling. Her presence had filled his days during the visit: having someone else to try to please had been a rejuvenating break from his ordinary concentration on himself and his routines. Now that the interlude was ended, he felt bereft, facing the thin and dreary prospect of paying attention once more only to his own concerns.

Yet at some level the man knew that his too-familiar structure would carry him past this sense of deficiency, of a shallowness to his existence. A phone call an hour later from a client pleased with a dining room table and chair set he had delivered the previous week helped ground the man. He became immersed in the challenges of attaching a Formica countertop, and when later that afternoon he was pedaling vigorously down a riverside trail he experienced satisfaction again with the life he had built for himself. The visit, he perceived, had been as welcome, enriching and fleeting as any season. Except, of course, for the sex, which he admitted was a dimension to existence no season could match. On the other hand, he thought as he coasted down a long stretch between the trees, good sex is temporary. The orderly appearance and turn of the seasons is permanent.

In mid-August, the low dogbane began to turn brown in the meadows and ditches alongside the road. As did some of the bracken, then more and more of it. Leaves of the hazel, the first deciduous tree to acknowledge summer's end, started to yellow and drop. Daylight diminished in intensity, as though less of it was reaching the dry and dusty earth. Though the days continued as hot as ever, the nights grew distinctly cooler than the sun-filled hours.

The visitor from Winnipeg had left the man in a pleasant mood, overall. Happy memories of her brief stay surfaced, and he was cheered by these. They emailed frequently, and he phoned her every couple of weeks. Occasionally she phoned. Nothing was promised about a more enduring connection; he knew they both had fulfilling lives thousands of kilometres apart. Yet he found himself whistling tunes, or even singing half-remembered lyrics as he applied wood stain in his shop or maneuvered his orchard ladder to pluck the first ripened apples. In house and shop, the scent of fertile soil gradually lessened.

One morning during the second week of September, the man, en route to dumping his kitchen scraps on the compost pile, noticed that the leaves of his cucumbers, squash, and peppers had withered overnight. A touch of frost in the early hours of the day had been enough to finish these vegetables. Closer inspection of flower beds that afternoon showed that some frost-sensitive annuals had also shriveled in the darkness.

Weeks might elapse before another frost struck, but the man knew its first appearance prefigured how the new season would establish itself in the valley. Snow would one day coat the summit ranges, and not long afterwards descend part way down the valley walls. For weeks, winter would loom above the autumnal valley floor: the snow and ice soon to assume dominion over daily life was visible to everyone if they looked up. One midnight the snow would silently lower itself to the valley bottom, but would retreat up the mountainside by midmorning. Like the first frost, this taste of winter's authority might happen again a day or two later, or might not be repeated for another month. Spring and autumn were forthright about their arrival: each twenty-four hours more of the changes they brought were evident. Winter, however, toyed with the world like a cat playing with a mouse or injured bird the feline would eventually kill.

Harvesting now began in earnest. Potatoes and carrots were dug, tomatoes were picked, and each day ripened apples and pears were gathered in a race against the inevitable looting of the fruit trees by a wandering bear fattening herself or himself for hibernation. The man raked into piles the fallen hazel leaves, and also the first birch leaves that had yellowed and dropped.

These were bagged to be used for mulch. A large Japanese maple off the deck displayed a few of the crimson leaves that by late October would transform the tree into a bonfire of color. Where the contents of a flower or vegetable bed were nearly all wilted or picked, the man stripped it of vegetation and covered the empty soil with a layer of fallen leaves.

Taking down the gardens was as time-consuming as planting them in spring, except the job was a more melancholy one. In May, the chores were full of hope and expectation. Now, as the woods and fields faded into sere yellows and browns, and what greens remained looked pallid, exhausted, the tasks of autumn were, despite the bounty of the harvest, more about loss and memory than promise. Although still cheered by the connection with the woman from Winnipeg, the man at times found his mood dimming. When he feared he was becoming too gloomy, he would abandon the afternoon's planned garden work, and steer his bike through the autumn woods on the trail beside the river. The water was low and the current sluggish, but the river banks and the wooded mountainsides of the valley were reflected perfectly in the stream as the man pedaled past. On the high slopes around him, stands of larch blazed golden amid the expanses of fir, spruce and pine.

Guiding his bike tiredly into the basement after one long ride, the man saw that a number of desiccated tree leaves littered the cement floor: he recognized aspen, maple and oak, as well as birch and hazel. He wondered if he had tracked in the assortment of dead leaves when he had fetched his bike earlier that afternoon, then returned inside to fill his water bottle and locate his helmet. After parking his bike in its usual spot, he grabbed the basement broom and swept up the leaves, carrying them out to dump on the lawn. But when he reopened the door to step inside, leaves were again scattered across the floor.

He climbed leaf-strewn stairs to the upper hallway. As he guessed he might find, sprays of dry brown leaves lay on the hardwood. A rapid inventory of the rooms revealed that the leaves had appeared only on tile and wooden flooring. The rugs were unaffected.

The man over the next few days learned the characteristics of this phenomenon. As with the winter snow, his passage across the leaves left them ultimately undisturbed, though unlike the snow the leaves crackled underfoot when he walked on them. The detritus might crumble under his socks, slippers or bare feet, but the resultant flakes and dust did not get tracked onto rugs. The leaves slowly accumulated as the weeks passed. Similarly to the

snow, however, the layer never mounted beyond eight or nine centimetres in thickness.

He grew used to the gentle crunching underfoot as he passed through the house. His peaceful toleration of the leaves he attributed to his earlier experiences with snow and green light and fecund odor: the leaves, too, would vanish. He had only to be patient. Yet he marveled at how, in the space of less than a year, he could accept the unfathomable. When he finished work for the day at the shop, he customarily swept and vacuumed up the shavings, chips and sawdust he had produced. The discarded foliage of course was removed in this process. By next morning, though, leaves entirely concealed the shop floor. He met this fact with an equanimity that at times he thought should trouble him more than it did.

One Thursday when he rose and looked out his bedroom window, the top of the east valley wall was white with snow.