

LISA ALWARD

## **FAMILY OF MAN**

MICHAEL WON'T LET HER GO. At least this is how she will picture it: his face pressed between the fence slats, his mouth twisted from saying, "Please" and, when she won't answer, "Why? Why not?" She must know how the words will sound because she immediately glances down at her shoes, bright red against the mud of the flower bed. She is wearing a dress, which no one does anymore. It is blue-and-white checks, what the Simpson-Sears catalogue calls gingham. The sleeves are gently puffed and the front is trimmed with ruffles. It is the kind of dress that makes her want to twirl under the lilac tree, but she can hardly do that with him watching. He is pacing now, peering through one pair of slats, then another. On his side there is only grass, which is why he can press his face so close. On hers are two symmetrical rows of tulips, their petals just starting to bend. She felt at first rather queenly saying, no, that she couldn't be his friend, but now she wonders why she didn't just turn and go back inside the house. Michael Tanbaum is bad. A bad apple, Elizabeth calls him. Yet, for a moment, Janet feels like taking it all back. She wants to trace around the two of them at the fence with a pair of tiny scissors and crunch the image in her hand.

No one even noticed Mrs. Thompson was gone until the two boys appeared in her yard. "Those poor boys," her mother says, because the Tanbaum brothers are sent outside no matter how cold. Through the kitchen window, Janet can see them kicking the frozen snow. Sometimes, Lars, the littler one, will cry. They watch him shivering in his quilted jacket, his oversized beige toque bouncing down his face as he bangs at the porch door. Michael, however, just keeps chipping at the ice with his boot.

The Tanbaums aren't really poor. Janet knows what poor looks like from *The Family of Man*. Everything she knows about people comes from the book of photos: how they get married, have babies, work in fields and mines and office towers, drink alcohol, fight wars, deal cards in a blur of hands, and die. Life is a sequence of black-and-white moments, happening

at the same time all over the world, in the United States and England as well as Africa. There is badness, but order too. She usually skips past the first few photos, which are of men and women kissing, but has pored over one page so often that the book opens there. There are six children, their photos set in the branches of a tree. In the middle of the tree is a poem she has traced many times with her index finger: "deep inside, in that silent place, where a child's fears crouch." Only one of the six looks afraid: the little girl with her hands folded against her face. But the longer she stares, lying on the den carpet with the book between her elbows, the more she can see that they are all afraid, even the girl in the sack shirt who stares so calmly at the camera.

"Open your hand."

Up close, he looks much bigger than he does through the kitchen window or squatting against the school wall with Lars. His hair where it sticks up at the part is almost white and his eyes squint away from hers. He holds a fist over her wrist and, when she obeys, drops a maple key on her palm.

"You can make it fly."

She knows this but lets him show her how to rub the tiny stem between her thumb and middle finger. He gathers another handful from the edge of the sidewalk and places one above his lips to make green moustache. Then he peels back the sticky centre and presses it on his nose, and she laughs because she can tell he wants her to. His voice is hoarse as if he needs winding. They scoop up more of the pale green seed cases and send them twirling down Beech Street.

When they turn onto her own street, Elizabeth is standing in her driveway holding up a string of bright blue clackers.

"Hello Jannnet," Elizabeth calls out. But she is looking at Michael.

And he is staring back, as if he's never seen Elizabeth before, though they are in the same grade. At her white knee socks and orange hotpants and the bobbles in her hair that are the same blue as the two glass balls that dangle from her hand. And at the asphalt smooth as cake batter lapping up to her open garage, with its new gas mower and three-wheeled grill. Then he is surging towards her, fists clenched, and Elizabeth is raising the clackers as if to sound an alarm. Everything seems to wobble, even the plastic flowers in her window boxes. Just as his feet pound down next to Elizabeth's, he swerves, puts up his hands like it's just a joke and, running so close by Janet that she can smell bologna and soft Ben's bread, whispers, "Ask me and Lars over."

“Your new boyfriend?” Elizabeth snickers after he’s gone.

But Janet knows she felt the same tingling, like the tiny static shock of a radiator.

He is always waiting for her on Beech Street. He likes to tell her jokes. What time is it when an elephant sits on your fence? Time to get a new fence. What’s red and white on the outside and grey and white on the inside? Campbell’s cream of elephant soup. And Janet laughs, even though she’s heard them all before. He never looks at her when he talks. Instead, he looks at the mothers’ parked cars, the laneways between houses, a spot above her shoulder that always makes her turn. Apart from the jokes, he doesn’t say much. Usually, it’s just can he and Lars come over, and she says she’ll ask and then doesn’t. A few times, he’s gotten her to open her hand like that first time, letting drop a marble or a cardboard match or a tiny plastic petal. Once it was a candy necklace, which she knows costs a quarter at the Candy Bowl. She kept it hidden in her fist until she got home, then hid it in her dresser. When she’s alone, she cracks one of the pale beads between her teeth and nibbles on the string, but it tastes funny, as if it’s been lying in the dirt.

Michael won’t open his mouth. He won’t even drink the milk Janet’s mother has poured him, covering up the glass with his hands, while Lars sputters on about all the toys they have at their house and how their father is a Boeing 747 pilot and takes them on free trips to Disneyland, where they’ve ridden the monorail and had dinner with Mr. Disney. Say something, Janet commands silently across the kitchen table, talk. But he won’t, and now she understands why her mother made the clicking sound before saying they could come over. According to Elizabeth, Michael failed a grade, which is why he’s so much bigger than the other boys, with shoulders that moon through his too-small shirts. Also, at their last school, he was almost expelled, and Lars said the f-word to a teacher. That’s why they had to move, why Mrs. Tanbaum yells at them so much, why she never says hello at the IGA, just shoves past the other mothers with her cart.

Still, Janet can tell that her mother likes Lars more, that she’s drawn to all that jiggling energy, even though she must know the Tanbaum father is not a pilot. Janet has seen their father only once, jerking a lawnmower across their yard in his office shirt. He’s skinny like Lars, whereas the Tanbaum mother is broad-backed and tall, with Michael’s squinty eyes. She wears the

same housedress everywhere and always looks mad. They're Germans, which explains a lot, Elizabeth says.

Lars and Robbie are now stretched out on Robbie's green-and-brown shag rug that's trampled in places like an overgrown lawn. They're shooting dinky cars off his Hot Wheels track and whooping with laughter. Janet wishes Michael would lie down on the shag rug too, but he just stands in the hallway between their two rooms until she gives up and leads him into hers. Her mother has recently made her room over with pink and purple flower-power stickers from the teen department of a dress shop downtown. She's also bought Janet a record player, in a white plastic suitcase with a lid, and a David Cassidy record, *Cherish*.

"Does it work?" Michael asks.

"No," she lies, but he has already picked up the record case and is examining David's full cheeks and soft feathered hair.

"Do you like him?" And when Janet shakes her head, "He looks like a girl."

But she does like him, at least she's trying to. Elizabeth has a *Tiger-beat* poster taped above her bed. It's signed "Lots of love, David." Sometimes Janet lies down with *Cherish* and kisses him. His lips are dry and unresisting, slightly rubbery, like a leaf.

Michael has put down the record and is looking at her dollhouse.

"I don't play with it anymore," she says, but he isn't listening. He's dropped to his knees and is fingering the electric switch. He flicks the lights on and off, too fast. Then he starts pulling out beds and dressers, the wooden TV, the pink bathtub with its matching toilet. He touches each piece all over. His fingers are stained and his nails chewed down so far it makes her squirm to look at them. She wishes he would stop. Instead, he rakes the remaining furniture onto her white carpet, picking up the desk and dumping out its little drawers, next the kitchen table with its blue laminate top and the kitchen cabinet and all its dishes. Naturally he breaks a kitchen chair, pawing it like that. One of the tiny legs snaps. That's the moment she knows she hates him. When he looks up at her with the broken chair on his palm, it surges through her.

That night, she drops the candy necklace from her window so that it lands soundlessly on the mown grass.

By summer, the stories about the Tanbaums have seeded like dandelions. Not that they are the only delinquents in the neighbourhood. Girls

have to be careful with their Barbies or Terry Manning will get one of the little kids who follow him around to steal them. He likes to lay them naked on the tracks to see what happens when the train goes over and, according to Elizabeth, has a stash of Barbie body parts in a secret hiding place near the field. And there's Dick Murphy, whose gang stakes out the chestnut tree when the nuts are ready to fall. Even Terry stays away when Dick's bicycle is hurled against its roots. But the Tanbaums are different. They do things that scare adults. It begins with the fires, small piles of charred twigs and lawn clippings hidden in the corner of a garage or down a laneway. Once, Elizabeth's father saw Michael wandering about at midnight and, in the morning, found a rag smelling of kerosene on his driveway. After that, he and the other fathers started locking their garage doors. Another time, Mrs. Chisholm woke to cats fighting on her roof, but the next day her yard was strewn with torn-up shingles. Then there's the sugar. Janet's father discovered a trail of it leading from the gas tank of his new Pinto. "Feral" was the word he used, and when Janet asked what it meant, he said, "like untamed animals."

Sometimes, in her bed, Janet thinks she hears voices, a small rock or stick tapping her window, but she wills herself not to get up. When she sees Michael on the street, she looks at the air beside him.

This is also the summer Elizabeth refuses to do anything but read romance comics in her room or sit on the curb and watch the teenagers. Elizabeth's older sister Debbie and her best friend, Laurie, like to sunbathe on the front lawn. They bring out Debbie's transistor radio, ignoring the high school boys who pop wheelies up and down the street until one flops on the grass beside them. Then they sit up and douse their arms and legs with baby oil. Elizabeth's favourite is Darren. He wears nothing but jean cut-offs.

"Look at his muscles," she whispers, stretching her legs across the gutter so that her sandaled toes stand straight up. She unpeels the silver paper from a stick of juicy fruit gum and puts the whole piece in her mouth. "He looks just like David. Wouldn't you die to kiss him?"

"He's going into grade eleven."

"So what? He's gorgeous."

But Darren scares Janet. All the teenagers scare her. When she walks past them at the pool, she holds her towel tight around her body in case one tries to grab her.

"I think he's too old for you, that's all."

Elizabeth shrugs. "Have you seen Michael's muscles? Michael Tanbaum's?"

And when Janet doesn't answer, "He's almost fourteen, you know. Debbie says she's never seen a kid that muscular going into grade six. Of course, he really should be going into grade eight."

"I thought you said he failed one grade."

"No, twoooo!"

Janet picks up a twig and pokes it against the pavement, but she can tell that Elizabeth is watching her.

"I thought you didn't like him."

"I don't. I was just saying he's muscular. It's weird."

But something is happening with the teenagers. Darren has grabbed a sprinkler from next door and is aiming it at Laurie and Debbie, who leap from their towels, pretending to be mad—though it's obvious they're not. Now, Darren has dropped the sprinkler and is drawing in close to Laurie. He's whispering in her ear, one hand resting on her suntanned shoulder. Janet can feel Elizabeth growing tense beside her on the curb, and even Debbie seems to waver on the lawn. For a moment, she thinks Darren might pull Laurie to him like the jet-haired heroes of Elizabeth's romance comics.

All he does, though, is tease out a piece of Laurie's wet hair and hold it between his fingers. "Nice," he says with a flash of teeth. Then he seizes his bike by the handlebars and calls out, "Later."

"What are you two staring at?" Debbie snaps.

Janet and Elizabeth are peeling potatoes on the front porch and Robbie's washing them in the big pot from the kitchen. Usually when Janet's mother goes out for the day, she leaves them with one of the City Sitters, who watch soap operas and let them do whatever they like. But Debbie seems to think a babysitter shouldn't let her charges out of her sight. Ever since breakfast, she's done nothing but boss them around, and Elizabeth acts like she's second-in-command, showing Janet how to make a hospital corner on her bed and reminding Robbie to put his sandals on when he goes outdoors. Now Debbie's decided that their mother should come home to see them all helping with dinner.

"No, no, you hold it like this," Elizabeth says. "Haven't you ever peeled a potato before?"

The peeler keeps gumming up.

"Here." Elizabeth grabs it and starts skinning Janet's potato with long, even strokes.

Robbie is making submarine noises as he plunges the bared potatoes into the water. He doesn't seem to mind that he is stuck on the porch while all the other kids are down at the field or on their way to the pool.

Elizabeth looks up suddenly from her pile of potato peelings. "I didn't know those two were friends."

Two boys are walking down the middle of the street. One is Terry Manning and the other Lars Tanbaum. Lars is bouncing on his toes. He seems to be telling the older boy a story, not that Terry is showing much interest.

"Figures!" says Elizabeth. "I wonder where his big brother is. Probably blowing up another car. We should call him Michael Tanb-o-m-b. You know my dad saw him out again after ten o'clock. He was just walking about like it was the middle of the afternoon. Bet he winds up at the Boys' School. My dad says his mom's got a screw loose. Hey, where're you going?"

No one is at the field after all. She pulls one of the wooden swings by its chain and watches the shadow jerk across the packed dirt. Then she sits on the teeter-totter, but she feels stupid with her knees in the air. Also, he's watching her. She saw him in a laneway on her way down and knew he would follow. This isn't the first time, though usually Robbie or Elizabeth is with her. She drifts over to the barbed wire fence that separates the field from the cliff leading down to the railroad tracks. Elizabeth used to tell everyone that it was an electric fence, but the barbs aren't even sharp. Janet presses her thumb against each in turn. An empty beer bottle lies in one of the trenches that teenagers have dug beneath the fence in order to tunnel to the cliff. Glancing back, she can see Michael standing by the swings, his fists dangling at his sides, staring after her with those squinty eyes. It makes her so mad she kicks the bottle aside and slides underneath.

Her foot immediately lets loose a spray of pebbles, and the tracks, when she dares to look, gleam up at her like a row of teeth with braces. For a moment she thinks she might tumble all the way down, but only the lower part of the cliff looks dangerous. She edges toward a clump of bushes not far from the fence, skimming one hand along the cliff face. Someone has cleared out a space in the middle of the clump, just big enough to squat inside. The ground is hard and the tiny leaves prickly. She is trying to decide whether

or not to show it to Robbie when she notices them. First, just one: bare breasts pointing straight up, a shirtless GI Joe straddling her stomach. Then another, wearing nothing but a single hot pink shoe, with a GI Joe in full camouflage on top. There are others shoved underneath the bushes, their arms and waists twisted around, one without a head. Suddenly, she knows where she is and turns to scramble out. But Michael Tanbaum is already swinging in beside her.

The tingling this time is sharper. It makes her want to cry out, but she knows she can't. Michael fills so much of the hiding place that she has to squeeze against the bushes to keep their bodies from touching. His arms and legs, when she lets herself look, are as muscular as Elizabeth says and covered in coarse white hairs. She cannot bear for him to see the dolls, and yet she knows he already has. Maybe he helped Terry pose them. She closes her eyes, but the pictures fill her mind anyway: Terry and Michael poking their fingers up Barbie blouses and tearing the little snaps, bending back arms and legs, mounting the GI Joes on top. And then the first of the kissing photos, the one she skips the quickest. A man and a woman tightly hugging on the dark grass, with the words "and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes."

She pulls her knees to her chest, but still she can't stop. She pictures Michael turning to her like that. And then she sees herself putting her arms around him, "my breasts all perfume yes," and drawing him down. And she feels his cheek so soft against her own and his heart beating. And it is as if she is in two places at once: watching them not touching and yet inside embracing like the man and woman on the grass.

When she opens her eyes, she presses her palms against the damp earth. Michael is looking at her. He is saying something, but she has to strain to hear.

"I'm not bad," he says a second time.

"I know," she tells him.

Somewhere in the field, she slips her hand in his, or maybe he slips his in hers. Together, they walk past the teeter-totter and the swings and climb the ditch to the road. They walk past white and pastel blue and green houses with mothers sweeping steps and cats streaking across lawns, more slowly now. Finally, they reach her street, and she feels her hand growing thinner. They turn the corner by the chestnut tree and can see her house and



Elizabeth's with its plastic flowers. Who draws back first, she doesn't know, only that her hand is no longer in his. The surprising softness has slipped away. And now she feels the rest of him slip away as well—the space between them filling up with shouts, a lawnmower starting, cut grass and baby oil and Juicy Fruit, something burning. Debbie is running down the sidewalk with Elizabeth close behind. What are they afraid of? Janet turns to Michael to see if he knows, but he has let go.