DAN POPE

A SHIPBUILDER'S SON

I CAME TO MONTREAL WHEN I WAS SEVENTEEN, seeking an education in the world. I arrived by train, carrying a duffel bag and a map of the city. I had two hundred dollars and the address of a furnished apartment my mother had arranged for me. It was September 1976.

I was a small town boy, born and raised in Pictou, Nova Scotia. My father died in a shipyard explosion when I was an infant. According to my mother, he was kind, big-hearted, and prone to weeping during theatrical productions. I used to stand before his photograph, which was taken when he was an eighteen-year-old Navy seaman. He had red hair, grey eyes, and straight white teeth. "You're his spitting image," my mother told me the night before I left.

I had been accepted by McGill University to study engineering. I could have attended Dalhousie University in Halifax, but I wanted to get away. My life's goal was to become a shipbuilder. Over the summers I had laboured in the dry dock in Pictou Harbor. I liked handling steel, the clang of hammers, the cutting of metals by torch. From my bedroom I could hear the sounds of the harbour, the ships' horns passing in the night. "Listen to me, son," my mother told me. "Pay no heed to those good-time girls. Don't even give them a second look. Wait for your one true love, like I did for your father."

I tried to take in the city—the clamour, the traffic, the heat. How quickly everyone moved. There was no time to waste. I couldn't believe the number of restaurants—one on every corner. (We only had two in Pictou, Jack's Luncheonette and Irene's Luncheonette, which were located across the street from each other.) A vista opened and I saw Mt. Royal in the distance, rising above the tallest skyscrapers in the centre of the city. The trees along the hillside were thick and green, and there was a large cross at the summit. My mother would be pleased to see that, I thought.

I wandered along the sidewalks with my duffel bag slung across my back. There were women everywhere, like a sickness I'd suddenly contract-

ed—women coming out of office buildings, women in summer dresses sitting cross-legged at outdoor cafés, and pictures of half-clothed women on the St. Catherine Street marquees, beckoning toward night club entrances. *Fifty naked girls on stage at once!* My mother had told me to pay no heed, and I obeyed her, but out of timidity alone. I passed by the night clubs and wandered on, reading the street signs for St. Denis, Peel, Crescent—all places that I would later come to know at different times and different seasons—and suddenly I found myself on McTavish Street, where I was to live.

I became aware of a crowd gathering, moving with me, and then black smoke, surging and swelling into the sky toward the reddening sun. A building was on fire, and people were crowding about, exclaiming in French, Greek, and other languages I didn't understand. I shouldered past them to a line of red police tape tied from one side of the street to the other.

It was a tall, narrow building made of stone—the Hotel McTavish, adorned with enormous flags of Canada, Quebec, and the United States. I watched alongside the others, craning my neck. Ten stories above, the flames roared out of the rooftop and upper windows. The fire hissed and crackled, and there came sudden small explosions from within the building, which caused many around me to cry out in unison. Windows burst and fell onto the pavement, like sheets of hail. Other pieces of the building fell too—charred wood, chunks of brick, and concrete. The hotel appeared to be deserted. No one went in or out. Firemen worked the hoses from two trucks, shooting arcs of water high into the air.

I had to reach my apartment house, which was up ahead beyond the fire. I ducked under the red tape, moving along the opposite side of the street. A policeman called after me, but I kept going, sprinting past the charred debris and firemen into the crowd of onlookers on the opposite side, who parted and then turned to watch me go. After a few blocks I looked back. No one was chasing me, but I kept running. I was young, delivered into a city of three million, where I knew not a single soul. The Hotel McTavish was burning, and women were dancing naked on St. Catherine Street—all in broad daylight. I could have run for hours to the top of Mt. Royal and back again.

I'd come to Montreal for an education, but my shyness followed me. I had no brothers or sisters to explain this mystery—only my mother, who counselled patience. Girls were unfathomable to me, like uncharted territories on old maps. *Here Be Dragons*, those areas were marked, with draw-

ings of sea monsters. I spent most of my time where females didn't go, such as the dry dock, the athletic fields, and my room, the walls of which I covered with pictures of famous ships like the Lion of Scotland and the Great Michael.

I lived in a studio apartment on the third floor of a turn-of-the-century brownstone, and the rent was ninety-five dollars per month, which was less than the student dormitories. The radiators hissed all day long, clanking and producing vapour even in September, so I left the window open. I could hear people passing on the street below—the clack of businessmen's shoes in the early morning, the thump of joggers heading up toward the mountain paths, the late night hollers of drunks. I found it difficult to concentrate on my reading. I would hear the tap of a high heel or the soft sound of women's voices, and I would rush to the window to see. A Frenchman who lived in the room next to mine played disco music on his stereo, and that was how I woke in the morning, the walls vibrating with the bass pulse.

I walked back and forth to classes at the university. You entered through a pair of columns known as the Roddick Gates, and there was a sudden feeling of openness and green, as if you were leaving the city. In the centre of the quad was a grass field, where boys kicked soccer balls and tossed footballs and Frisbees. Swarms of students crisscrossed the paths between periods, going in and out of the old buildings, which looked like chateaus built of stone and embellished with turrets and towers. After classes I would study at a carrel on the top floor of the library, and I usually stayed until closing time—midnight—even on the weekends. Each night, after completing my schoolwork, I would read from my father's old books. In his edition of Captain Cook's first voyage to the South Seas in 1771 there were illustrations of Tahitian women naked to the waist. *The women are extremely lascivious, and . . . dance in the most indecent manner*, read the caption. The same seemed to be true of the women of St. Catherine Street.

My professors and nearly all of my classmates in engineering were men, and many of the students were foreigners, who kept to themselves. Girls seemed to be indigenous to the arts and management. A couple of times I followed a pretty girl around campus, intending to strike up a conversation, but shyness gripped my throat like a vise, making me mute, unable to do anything but blush. I began to think that I would never make any friends—that I would pass through university like a phantom, alone and unknown—until the afternoon an Englishman approached me after physics.

"Got a quarter, mate?"

I had noticed him before, and I knew his name—Jon Cliff—because it usually went unanswered during roll call. When he did show up for class, he would lounge in the back row, reading Hemingway or doodling in his notebook, sometimes with his boots up on the desk.

I checked my pockets and told him I had no coins, and he slapped me on the back. "Buy me a pint then, and we'll make change. I have to call the wife."

He was older than the rest of us. His hair was long and unkempt, thinning on top. "You a Yank?"

"Scottish. From Nova Scotia."

"Limey," he said, thumping his chest.

At the student pub he drank two pints of Guinness to each of mine. He said he'd left Manchester nine years earlier with a pair of Doc Martens and a backpack, and he hadn't been back since. England was rubbish. He never wanted to return.

"Why don't you come to class? It's mandatory."

"Is it?"

Each time a new song came on the jukebox he shouted, "That's crap, that noise." He named some band I'd never heard of and said they played the only music worth listening to. As he talked, he tapped his feet and drummed his hands against the tabletop.

I handed him a quarter. "Don't you have to call your wife?"

"Keep it," he said. "We'll walk over after this round. Go meet the spouse." He gestured toward downtown. "She's a little worker bee."

I told him I had another class.

"Autumn's the best time, don't you think?" he said. "Something about the smell in the air. I can't stay inside for the life of me."

We left the pub and went down the hill into the city centre. I felt anxious about skipping class, yet at the same time exhilarated. I could get the notes from someone, I supposed. The beer hummed pleasantly in my head, and my shoes slapped loudly against the sidewalk.

His wife worked in one of the glass skyscrapers. When we got into the elevator, he clapped a businessman on the back and grinned. "Nice day for a working stiff, isn't it?" The businessman smiled uncomfortably and looked away. Jon Cliff's leather jacket creaked when he moved. I wished I had a jacket like that—old and creased, the elbows scuffed.

We got off on one of the highest floors, where his wife was the receptionist. She was sitting at a glass-topped table in the lobby, and she stood and came toward us.

"Who's he?" she asked.

"This is my new mate."

"I'm J. P. MacCallister," I said.

"Are you indeed?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I put out my hand, and she held it in both of hers. She was small—a few inches over five feet—and her eyes were a deep brown. The first word that came into my head was *snug*, as her clothes were so tight that you could see the way her body was shaped, her curvy figure in a beige woolen skirt and sweater. She glanced at her husband and then back at me before finally releasing my hand. I looked away, feeling my cheeks colour, worried that my hand felt clammy to her.

"Where do you come from, J. P. MacCallister?"

"He's a Scotsman from Nova Scotia," said Jon Cliff.

"Pictou," I said.

"I've never been there."

"Not many people have."

"I'm Jeannie."

On the way back to school Jon Cliff told me how they'd met. He had been living in a seaside cave in Greece with some ten or twenty others—college students, mostly. The crowd changed every day; some would leave, others would show up. They went into town each morning to buy food and water, but otherwise they lived on the beach, lighting bonfires at night, swimming naked during the day. The local officials didn't mind. There were tourists in caves all over the island. He had been there an entire summer when Jeannie arrived. She was travelling with some soccer players she'd met in Milan. They kicked the ball on the beach in the afternoon. *Grande*, they would shout to each other. *Bravissimo*. She insisted that he shave his beard—her one condition of marriage.

"We've been here a year," he said.

"Do you like Montreal?"

He shrugged. "Don't much like staying in one place. And you know women, mate. Always keeping tabs."

We crossed Sherbrooke Street against the traffic, darting between cars.

"She's a looker, isn't she?"

"She's very nice."

"That she is. You can't take that away from her."

He threw his arm around me and broke into a rugby song in his loud, hoarse voice. He was as tall as me, and he walked in a headlong, lurching gait. It was two o'clock in the afternoon, and I was as drunk as a sailor.

Each month my mother sent a cheque to cover the cost of my rent plus another hundred dollars for "board and beer," as she said. I would have preferred living in the student dormitories, but we were not a wealthy family, and I could not in good conscience ask for more. My father had been a riveter. On the day of the accident, he'd been on a break, eating ice cream in the shade beneath a Maltese tanker. A welder's torch ignited paraffin and mud on the ship's hull, and the explosion killed him and nine other workmen. My mother received a settlement, and when that money ran out she went to work as a secretary at the Scott Paper mill, which was ten miles inland. She worked long hours to support me, and she didn't object when I began to work summers in the drydock where my father had been killed. *Shipbuilding is in your blood*, she said. *It's in all Scotsmen's blood.*

She wrote two or three letters each week. She followed the Presbyterian dictum of doing everything "decently and in order." Had I found a church, a laundromat, and a place to buy food? Were any of the other boys from Nova Scotia? Did I play football on weekends, like back home? She worried that Montreal was a cauldron of sin and warned me to beware. At the end of each letter she copied out verses from the Bible or the book *100 Most Beloved Poems*, which was a primer from her one-room schoolhouse days. Memorization had been a separate class in her time; she'd had to learn each poem by heart, and she never forgot them. I could hear her clear voice as I read the lines: *I must go down to the seas again . . .*

I suppose she suspected the truth—that I was lonely, feeling far from everything I knew. I wrote her that the poem had cheered me, reminding me of Pictou—that little village on the edge of the Atlantic—and I described the cross atop the crest of Mt. Royal, which was illuminated at night. I could see the beacon blazing on the mountaintop from my bedroom window, and I thought that she would be pleased to know that I lived in a city that had a cross at its highest point, even if it had been erected by French Papists. I did not add what Jon Cliff told me—that criminals frequented the woods

near the cross after dark, robbing and beating people. "And tarts as well," he added, winking, "if you're interested in a toss."

He would show up at my apartment at odd hours and take me to clubs on Crescent Street and St. Denis, where he greeted the bartenders and doormen by name. He always carried a paperback in his pocket, and Hemingway was the only author he liked. He read while sitting in class, walking down the street, and standing in line for a slice of pizza at the student pub. "I've been to all those places he writes about," he told me. "I've knocked around Africa, I've run with the bleeding bulls. I'd like to write it down too, but when I get a pencil and paper all that comes out is *no*!" He shouted the word at the top of his lungs. People were always turning, watching him.

He didn't have a job, and the money his wife gave him each week went quickly, as he insisted on paying for everything—drinks, food, cab fare. A waitress would set a beer in front of him, and he would hand her a two-dollar tip. It shocked me every time, as my mother had taught me thrift. I paid for groceries with the monthly cheques she sent me, but I kept the two hundred I'd brought to Montreal in a drawer in my apartment, intending to save it for the right occasion. To see him spend so wildly—to throw away money on waitresses—made me feel wild myself.

One Friday his wife joined us at the student pub. She came directly from work in her tight skirt and cashmere sweater. Her breasts were high and firm-looking. I stood when she came to our table, as my mother had taught me.

"Don't be a wanker," said Jon Cliff. "Jeannie doesn't care. She's a Pepsi."

"A Pepsi?"

"A bloody frog."

I knew that meant she was from Quebec.

I hadn't seen her since the day we'd met at her office building, and I was surprised when she kissed my cheeks—first the left, then the right. "I have a secret to tell you, J. P. Would you like to hear?"

I had been taught to look others in the eye when addressing them, but I found it hard to return her gaze, as she never seemed to look away.

Jon Cliff pulled me back into my chair. "Frogs don't know good manners from bad."

"Get me a drink, would you, Jon?"

"Get your own drink, luv."

She took some money out of her purse and passed it to him. "Amaretto sour," she said. "I feel like something sweet."

He stood. "What's the definition of a French-Canadian virgin?"

I shook my head.

"Twelve years old and quicker than her father." He opened his mouth and roared with laughter.

Jeannie smoothed her skirt and took a seat at the table. Being alone with her, I felt my cheeks colouring. I didn't know what to say, so I blurted, "Jon and I just got out of class," even though it wasn't true. I had gone to class earlier that afternoon, but he had skipped, as usual. I'd found him waiting for me in the hallway afterward, and we'd come directly to the pub. I was learning to keep up with him. Guinness was his beer, but I preferred Brador. A dissolute habit, I knew, but I couldn't seem to turn him down.

I had written my mother about my new friend, and I had tried to make him sound less boisterous than he was. I knew that she would not approve of such a person, as he was neither decent nor orderly. Truth be told, I did not approve of him myself. The way he spoke to his wife made me anxious, as did his poor manners, like the way he pushed past people on the sidewalk. But he called me mate and had sought me out as a friend. Things happened in his presence. I met people and took part in college life. Otherwise I would find myself back in the library carrels, rereading what I already knew.

"Jon didn't buy the books," said Jeannie. "He said it was a waste of money. He said it's child's play. Is that true, J. P.?"

"Not for me."

"He's only a freshman, you know. He never went to college before. A thirty-one-year-old freshman. Have you ever heard of such a thing? He tells people he's twenty-five, but you can see by the look of him. His hair's thinning by the day. I pull clumps of it out of the bathtub drain every morning."

I laughed and took a sip of beer.

"Once Jon gets his degree we're going out west, as there are engineering jobs in Alberta. Have you ever considered living in the west?"

"This is as far west as I've ever been."

Jon Cliff appeared beside us and set a glass in front of her. "Rum and Pepsi. They don't have fucking Amaretto."

"I don't want rum."

"Sure you do." He turned to me. "The frogs are mad for rum and Pepsi." He said something in French, exaggerating the accent.

"J. P. doesn't find your jokes funny."

"Course he does. Don't you, lad?"

I couldn't tell if they were truly angry with each other or merely putting on a show for my benefit. I knew that there were mysteries between a man and his wife that shouldn't be questioned. Still, I had been taught never to insult a woman. *Teasing's fine*, my mother had told me, *but never ridicule. Only a coward mistreats a woman*.

I asked Jeannie if I could buy her a drink.

"She ain't the Queen of England, for Christ's sake. She's a bloody receptionist. Rum and Pepsi's more than good enough for her."

"I'm fine, J. P.," she said. "Jon's drinking enough for both of us."

"Am I?" He finished his beer and slammed the glass onto the table. "Well, fuck off then." He stomped onto the dance floor and broke immediately into wild motion.

"He's in a mood tonight," she said.

We watched as everyone stood back, giving him room. He was whirling around, bent nearly double, jerking his neck. It looked as though a cat had jumped on his back and he was trying to shake it off without using his hands.

"I didn't know you were French," I said to make conversation.

"Half. My mother is from Ottawa. She's Welsh. Poirier is my maiden name."

"It's pretty."

"It means pear tree."

"I like pears." It was a stupid utterance, but I couldn't think of anything else to say. After a while a new song came on. I recognized the band as one of Jon Cliff's favourites. He immediately began jumping up and down like a pogo stick, bumping into people.

"He's a great dancer," I said.

"You haven't seen me yet." She picked up the glass of rum and drained it with one swig. "Come on, J. P. Let's show them how it's done."

"I haven't finished my beer."

"Finish it later," she said, pulling me out of my chair. I was surprised at how strong she was.

The music was fast and jittery, and the dance floor crowded. I stood

with my back to the row of speakers, snapping my fingers. Jeannie danced mainly with her hips, shimmying in a way that seemed Middle Eastern. She stayed close, just inches away from me. Every so often she would turn around and point her backside toward me, almost touching. I remained with my feet planted together, snapping my fingers. I felt terribly awkward, and I hoped no one noticed. Halfway through the song Jon Cliff appeared next to me. "You dance like a fucking robot," he screamed.

I was glad when the song was over. I started off the dance floor, but a slow song began, and Jeannie blocked my way.

"Dance with me," she said, opening her arms.

I put out my hands the way I had been taught in Pictou, but she came between my arms and simply hugged me around the chest. The smell of her was wonderful. I tried to move my hips backward, so as not to touch her with my groin, but she held me close, wrapping her arms around my lower back, pressing our waists together. I became aroused almost instantly.

"You're a gentleman, J. P. It's nice to be treated like a lady." She raised her head to speak into my ear, just loud enough to hear over the music, and I could feel her warm breath. "Don't you want to know the secret? You haven't asked."

"I was waiting for you to tell me."

"Tomorrow night," she said. "Come to our house for dinner, and I'll tell you then."

I looked around, but Jon Cliff was nowhere to be seen. "I can't tomorrow," I said.

"Why not?" She moved her head from my shoulder, glancing up.

I couldn't think of an excuse. "I promised someone else," I said.

"Oh, I understand. You've got a girlfriend."

"No, it's not that."

"Don't lie to me, J. P.," she said. "Men are always lying to me."

"I'm not lying."

"Say you'll come another time, then."

"Of course."

She placed her head against my shoulder, and we moved in slow circles like sleepwalkers.

My mother sent a letter, telling me about the lilies she had planted that fall. My mother's garden spread all around our house, and she tended to it

whenever she had a free moment. She chided herself that gardens should be put to practical use to grow vegetables, but she loved lilies, so our house was surrounded by them. She said that she'd felt tired lately and had trouble getting to work on time some mornings. She also asked about the Parti Québécois' plan to secede and whether I'd seen the demonstrations in the streets, which she found upsetting. "What hope is there for the world," she wrote, "if little Canada can't live in peace side by side—if the French and English are indeed two solitudes incapable of speaking?" She liked the fact that McGill had been founded by a Scotsman, and she wanted to see the university for herself. She informed me that she was coming to Montreal for my eighteenth birthday in the last week of October. She had arranged to stay at the Ritz Carlton, the grandest hotel in the city, which I passed by each day on my way to school. I marked my calendar for the occasion.

One night I came home from the library to find Jon Cliff sitting on the front steps of my apartment building. I hadn't seen him since he'd disappeared from the student pub a few days earlier.

"Thirsty?"

We walked to McLean's on Peel Street, which he called one of his "locals." It was a smoke-filled, dimly-lit pub housed in a hundred-year-old hermitage with dark mahogany walls and pounded-tin ceilings. A handful of sordid souls were scattered among the small round tables, most of them alone, huddled over their mugs as if in secret conversation.

"I've been drinking since ten this morning," he announced. "Jeannie got on me to move some furniture down to storage, but I've never cared much for menial labour. My dad worked in a textile factory, and he always figured me to work alongside him. Can you imagine me cutting cloth? I left home when I was twenty-two, and I've never been back."

"Do you miss it?"

He shook his head. "You've never been to Manchester, mate. City of wankers."

"What about your family?"

"I call every Christmas. I send a postcard every now and then. My mum and sis came over for the wedding."

I could not imagine being away from home for so long. I had been gone from Pictou for little more than a month and already I felt the absence of the place and, to be honest, my mother. I was seventeen years old—a grown

man—but she was the best friend I'd had growing up, the person I told my stories to every night, and the person I sought out for counsel. Of course, I did not admit this to Jon Cliff. He was a different sort and less likely to indulge sentimentalities.

We drank our beers while he drummed on the bartop in time with the jukebox. In a moment of silence between songs, he said, "Jeannie wants you to come to the house for dinner this Saturday."

"We have a physics midterm on Monday."

"Bollocks to physics." He put his arm around my shoulder. "You'd be doing me a favour. She's got it into her head that she wants to do a dinner party. She fancies you a bit, I should add."

I arrived at their apartment in Côte-des-Neiges carrying flowers.

"White lilies," Jeannie said, meeting me at the door. She held them to her face. "I love them. Look what J. P. brought us," she told Jon Cliff, who was sitting at the table reading a paperback.

"Perfect gentleman, isn't he?" he replied withought looking up.

They lived in a long, narrow apartment on the first floor, which led to a patio in the rear. She handed me a glass of red wine, which I had rarely tasted, and I took a sip. My mother sometimes had a glass of white wine with dinner, which didn't appeal to me, but I enjoyed the musky taste of the red and drank it down in less than a minute. A beef stew was simmering on the stove, and she stood next to the pot, examining me with an amused expression. She told me that wine should be sipped rather than gulped like beer, and she poured me another glass.

During dinner she talked about her travels in Europe, as she had purchased a Eurorail pass after college and backpacked to every country on the continent, staying in hostels and campgrounds. The stew was excellent, and I ate quickly, finding a sincere hunger. She filled my plate again and got up to open another bottle. Jon Cliff chewed with his mouth open and drank Guinness, as he said wine was for fairies.

"My favourite country was Greece," she announced. "That's where I met Jon."

When dinner was over, she cleared our plates and directed me to the sofa in the living room. Jon Cliff went out to the patio with his book—Hemingway, as always.

"Why do you want to be an engineer?" she asked.

"I'm going to be a shipbuilder."

"What sort of ships?"

"Schooners, yachts, anything that floats."

She went to the bookcase, picked some art books off the shelves, and sat close to me, turning the pages. Impressionism was her favourite, she said. I recognized some of the paintings—Monet, Van Gogh. I made sounds of assent, finding it difficult to speak. Her heavy scent seemed to scatter my senses. She wore a tight wool sweater, her breasts pronounced. She pointed to a painting by Manet. "What kind of ship is that?"

"That's a clipper," I explained.

"How can you tell?"

I pointed out how she was square-rigged on all three masts, her low freeboard and raking masts, stern and stern-posts, the yacht-like lines. She turned pages to more paintings of ships, and I told her what they were—frigates and paddle-wheel steamers, barges and towboats—the same way I had learned from the workers at the drydock in Pictou Harbour. Ten or twenty minutes passed that way. Then we fell quiet, and in the silence I became aware how close she was to me, her thigh touching mine.

"How tall are you, J. P.? I've always found tall men so terribly attractive, which is strange because I'm only five foot one myself."

Before I could respond, Jon Cliff returned from the patio. He stood in the doorway, watching us, and I inched away from Jeannie while reaching for my glass on the coffee table.

"We're looking at paintings of ships," she explained.

"How grand," he mumbled.

"Do you remember when we met?" she asked her husband.

"I couldn't forget that, now could I?"

"We were living on a Greek isle, in caves," she explained to me. "There were ten or twenty of us. No one had any money. People came and went—tourists, travellers, college students, crazy people. One Australian hadn't been sober in a year, he told me. That sort of crowd."

"She was wearing a string of beads around her neck," said Jon Cliff.

"They were garlic cloves. I'm a witch, you know."

"Poppers, I found out later," he said.

"Poppers?" I asked.

"Amyl nitrate," he said.

"They have a certain function during sex," she explained.

"A function?"

"Should we tell him, Jon? He's still a minor, technically."

"I don't give a shite what you tell him."

"You use them during lovemaking. When a man is about to climax you break the capsule under his nose. It prolongs the pleasure."

"I felt like I was coming for an hour," he said. "I'd never felt anything like it."

"The night I met Jon, I made love to three men. Jon was the last."

"That's the first I heard of that," he said.

"A German, an Italian, and Jon."

"Who was the best?" he asked.

She turned to me, her voice lowered. "They say those things about Italians, and you want to say, 'Oh horseshit. Italians aren't any better or bigger. It's just movie stuff.' But for God's sake, that man couldn't get enough. I thought I'd pass out. He was like a horse."

Jon Cliff turned to leave. "You're a right slut, Jeannie," he said.

"Jon can't take a joke," she whispered.

After he left she said, "I'm making it up for you, J. P. Jon was the only one. But I wanted to turn you on. Are you turned on?"

She was drunk, I realized. Her eyes were red and heavy. Her expression was avid, nearly maniacal. I couldn't tell if they were putting on a show for me.

"Excuse me," I said. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"I'll take that as a yes," she said.

In the bathroom I stared at myself in the mirror. She was correct, of course. Her talk, and sitting so close to her, had excited me terribly. I ran the water in the sink, stalling for time. I felt hunted, trapped. Finally I opened the door, trying not to make a sound, and crept down the hallway to find her sitting in the same place on the couch, her back to me, sipping her wine. Then I went out to the back patio, where Jon Cliff was standing by a low stone wall, smoking a cigarette, and looking out toward the small fenced-in backyard. When he glanced at me, I thought for a moment that he was angry and I stood with my hands by my sides, ready in case he might attack.

"Do you want to take a turn on Jeannie?" he asked.

"What?"

"She wants you to. She's bloody obsessed by the whole idea."

"What do you mean?"

"It's why she wanted you to come for dinner. She's been on about it all week."

"Are you joking?"

He shook his head, exhaling smoke.

"I couldn't. She's your wife."

"Don't worry about me. There's a pub down the corner. I'll go out for a smoke. I'll smoke a whole bloody pack."

I could hardly believe what he was saying. He *knew*. He was a party to it.

"You'd be doing me a favour," he said. "She's a fine little ride, I might add."

I stumbled for an excuse. "I . . . I couldn't."

"I didn't think so. Thanks for coming all the same."

I felt that it would be rude simply to leave, so I went back into the living room, picked my jacket off the chair, and told Jeannie from the hallway that I had to be going.

When she turned toward me, she looked stricken. "So soon?"

"I have to go, yes."

"Please don't."

"I really should," I said. "It's late."

"But I haven't told you the secret. Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I guess."

"I want you, J. P. That's the secret. I want you so badly that it makes me sick to my stomach. Do you remember the day when you came to my office that first time? I knew at that moment you'd never been with a girl. I could tell by the look of you. You haven't, have you?"

She got up and blocked my way to the front door.

"The buses have stopped running by now," she said.

I checked my watch. "I can walk."

"You won't stay?"

"Really, I shouldn't . . ."

"It's not true, those stories. I was only trying to excite you. You don't think it's true, do you?"

Jon Cliff appeared behind us, and she turned to him. "Jon, how will I sleep tonight?"

"You'll be fine, luv."

"I won't."

"Shush, now."

He signalled for me to go, and I let myself out. The desperation in her eyes haunted me as I walked home that night. It was flattering that a woman would want me with such undisguised need, but it also made me sad, as she didn't know me in the least. What she had proposed disgusted me too, but mostly I felt humbled because even though she was a beautiful woman in some sort of heat I'd mainly felt *fear*—fear that I wouldn't know what to do. All these thoughts ran through my head, and by the time I got home I was livid at my own cowardice and unable to sleep until first light.

A week later my mother came to Montreal by train to celebrate my eighteenth birthday. She called from the Ritz Carlton to tell me to meet her in the bar outside the main dining room at 8pm.

I wore the blue blazer she bought me, which she called my "college blazer," but I lost track of time and found myself rushing through the windy streets to the hotel. I asked the concierge for directions to the main dining room—the hotel was enormous—and he directed me to the escalator, which led to the second floor.

At the top of the escalator I came to a long, wide hallway with a gold carpet, which seemed like an entranceway to some other realm. From the opposite direction came a woman in a red evening dress. My first thought was that she had to be a movie star. I had seen film crews several times on Sherbrooke Street, and I had once seen a famous actress duck into a limousine outside an enormous apartment complex called The Chateau. Now, as I came closer, the woman looked me in the eyes and smiled as if she knew me, and I couldn't look away. It seemed to take ages for us to reach each other. She stopped in front of me and asked me something in French, and I explained that I only spoke English. "Please, then," she said in English. "Will you follow me?"

I assumed that she needed my assistance. I hesitated, as I knew my mother was waiting in the bar at the end of the hallway, but she took me by the arm and led me to the elevator. "It will not take long," she said. We went up two floors. Her perfume seemed to overpower my ability to speak. She led me down the hall and opened one of the rooms, closing the door behind us.

"You can put your wallet on the dresser," she said, and I did as I was told.

"How much is there?" she asked.

"I have two hundred dollars," I said.

"That's too much. Half."

It seems impossible, but I did not realize even then who she was. As she slipped the colourful bills into the top drawer, I thought she might need the money for some emergency. Then she slipped out of her dress and stood before me wearing nothing but a brassiere and garters.

"Do you like how I look?"

I couldn't fashion a reply, and my heart was beating so terribly loud that I could hear it thumping in my chest.

"Yes?" she said with a strange smile.

"Yes," I managed.

I thought of my mother waiting for me. I thought of her reciting poetry to pass the time. *I must go down to the seas again* . . . But I couldn't disobey the woman when she led me to the bed. Up close, I saw that she was not as young or beautiful as I'd first thought. Despite her wonderful smell and the smoothness of her skin, I saw that she had lines around her eyes and beneath her makeup. She was twice my age, perhaps more. She must be a professional, I thought.

"Lay down," she told me, and I did.

I hurried to the bar afterward, but my mother was not there. I considered asking the bartender to call her room, but instead I ordered a beer. I sat at a small table and drank two or three beers very quickly. I stared at my hands, feeling altered in some way. A waiter appeared, saying my name. He handed me a slip of paper in my mother's hand and said that she had gone to her room, feeling ill. *I'll see you tomorrow*, she wrote.

I ordered another beer. I glanced up when someone came to the table, expecting to see the waiter again, but it was her—the woman in the evening dress.

"Did you get stood up?" she asked.

"I was late," I said. "She left."

"Would you buy me a drink, please?"

Instead, I stood. I feared my mother might suddenly appear and find me with this woman. "I'd like to spend the rest," I said. "The other hundred."

"So soon?"

I nodded.

"You're a healthy boy," she said, taking my arm.

"I'm eighteen today," I told her.

The next day I arrived at the hotel for lunch with my mother. She was waiting for me at the same table I'd used the night before. Now, the room was crowded, everyone talking at once.

"I'm sorry for last night," my mother said. "I was tired from the long train ride."

"It was my fault. I was late."

"Come sit. Let me order you something to eat."

We went into the main dining room and were seated by the window overlooking Sherbrooke Street. After the waiter took our orders, my mother handed me my birthday present—a new wallet and a gold-plated money clip. I thanked her, but I couldn't look her in the eyes. I felt sick over the money I had spent the night before, and I was lightheaded and feverish from lack of sleep. I was famished by the time our food appeared, and when I finished my meal my mother passed me her egg salad, saying that she had little appetite. I should have suspected something then, or noticed what she had tried to conceal with makeup and powder—that she had lost weight and her cheeks were sunken. She told me the news from Pictou—that my cousins Lynn and Ruby were planning a summer trip to Scotland—but it was not until after the waiter had taken away our plates, as I was watching the busy passings on the street below, the cars and people hurrying about, and all of the possibilities the world seemed to have opened to me at last, that she told me, almost as an afterthought, the terrible news.

"I'm sorry to spoil your birthday," she said.

That was the last time I saw my mother. Before she died she wrote a long letter, saying that she had faith in me and that I was different from the rest. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." I recognized this passage from the Gospel of John. It happened quickly only a month later. She had told me to stay at college, as her health was not dire yet. Perhaps she intended to spare me the suffering of watching her die, or perhaps she did not know how quickly it would come. I received the call from my aunt in December, while I was studying for my final exams. That night I stared out the window for hours, watching the cross at the crest

of Mt. Royal and the searchlight from a downtown skyscraper crossing the dark skies.

A week after the exams, Jon Cliff knocked at my door. "Jeannie threw me out," he explained. He was too drunk to stand. I had to help him up the stairs. Inside my apartment, he refused to take my bed and slept on the hardwood floor without a pillow. He simply lay down on his back, closed his eyes, and fell asleep like a soldier.

"I failed all of my classes," he told me the next day. The snow was coming down on that late December morning, transforming Montreal into a city of white. "None of it was my idea anyway."

"What will you do now?"

"She's been in a state ever since that bloody dinner party. I can't keep her in the house. She had trouble with her dad, you know."

"I'm sorry," I told him.

He shrugged. "It's time to move on. I can't stand staying in one place." He looked up at me. "Care to come along?"

"You're leaving?"

"Off to see the States. I've got a mate there in Colorado. He says it's the best place on Earth."

"How will you get there?"

"How else?" He stuck out his thumb.

Could it be that easy, I wondered, to simply put out your hand and disappear?

"I can't," I told him. "I have to go back to Pictou. My mother died."

"Your mum?"

I nodded. "I have to take care of her things, her house, her garden . . ."

And then I could not go on, remembering the beautiful lilies she had planted around the house, the scent of their bloom in August, filling the rooms of my childhood. The tears struck, as if held back too long. I wept, unable to control myself, while my friend patted my back and listened to my story.

He left the following day, and I never saw him again. I went home to sell my mother's house in Pictou—my childhood home—and never went back. I became a salesman of ship engine parts who travelled the country. I spent my nights alone in hotel rooms, where I often thought of Pictou—the sounds of the ships' horns passing in the night, my mother's voice reciting poetry. I

was a man without a mother, wife, or children—an orphan in the world, then and now.