



TESSA McWATT

DRAGONS CRY

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*Until this day, nobody has seen the trekking birds take their way toward such warmer spheres as do not exist, or the rivers break their course through rocks and plains to run into an ocean which is not to be found. For God does not create a longing or a hope without having a fulfilling reality for them. But our longing is our pledge, and blessed are the homesick, for they shall come home.*

— ISAK DINESEN, *Anecdotes of Destiny*

I  
SALT  
~

“*M*ercy,” she said, with a gurgle like grinding pearls from the back of her throat. “Mercy, mercy me,” when she spotted the broken shards of porcelain scattered in the driveway. Then MacKenzie sucked her teeth in a “*s-t-c-h-u-p*” and pivoted toward the house. Warning enough for Simon who heard in that *stchup* the decree of the lash that would lick his backside when his father got home.

On the heels of mercy came music from the back room of the house as Simon’s brother cranked up the volume on the record player. By the time MacKenzie returned from the house with a broom and dustpan, the singer was belting out the melody with a leathery hunger in his voice. The man who sang all day long about lovin’ a woman, unable to keep his mind on anything else — the man who’d trade the world for this good thing he’d got — was lashing Simon’s heart. The whole neighbourhood sang along,

as though the singer was in their gardens and not compressed on a flat black disc. Simon's brother had bought the record a week before and was wearing it out.

MacKenzie grimaced and cupped her ears for a second before stooping to sweep up the remnants of the vase which, until just a few minutes earlier, had sat empty near the entrance to the house. Placed there four years earlier in an unribboned moment of welcome to the island by his mother's cousins, the vase and its future as an heirloom were shattered. MacKenzie picked up a slice of the porcelain on which a fair, dainty woman in bonnet and flowing dress dipped her ruffled turquoise parasol as she stepped up to a waiting carriage. The servant looked up and cut her eyes spitefully at Simon, who ran behind the house, dragging his cricket bat.

Simon had toppled the vase during an otherwise perfect, full-arched swing of his bat, which would have sent them to their feet at the cricket oval, he was sure. He had been practising all afternoon in the shade of the carport, swinging for fictive cheers. His swing was improving daily.

But MacKenzie didn't understand cricket. She didn't understand the whole Carter family, nor trust their Guyanese continentalism. From the moment the Carters had moved to Barbados from Guyana, they'd had nothing but bad luck with the housekeeping servants they'd taken on, and there'd been many who'd decided to leave before the first week was out. Shining sable-skinned women had stared at the four Carter children and had shaken their heads or raised their hands with the *Hallelujah* or *Lord-I-am-a-witness* flailings of a revival meeting. But MacKenzie had stayed, persevered, as though chosen by her god.

One day, she'd lined up the four children in order of age and height and bent down to stare each in the eye, incredulous that

the four had come from the same parents. Faces of chaos, not one of them resembling the other. Two foreheads were wide bands of copper skin over gentle bumps of bone. The skin was framed in one case by straight black hair, and in the other by biscuit-coloured ringlets. In the third child, the cheekbones were high like the side of a dry valley, the almond-shaped eyes tapering off into the ridges of bone. The fourth child, with natty hair, had the same wide forehead, but the skin was coffee-coloured and pocked with adolescence. Noses: two pugged and flat, one wide and bridged, and the fourth barely making its presence known between chubby cheeks. And eyes: dark except for one pair of shimmering shamrock green. Like a box of assorted sweets, the multiformity was dazzling, and MacKenzie gulped back an anxious hiccup, vowing then and there to do her duty and not be tempted into speculating about God's purpose.

Trust was a winding train for both family and housekeeper, gathering speed throughout the years and arriving, finally, today at Simon's brother's funeral. But on that August afternoon, with Simon swinging awkwardly into puberty, the tension was high. As MacKenzie strained her broad, refrigerator back to sweep up his gallant gaffe, Simon peeked at her from around the corner of the house and watched the crease of the cotton shift enter the crack between her immense buttocks. His boyhood creaked arthritically. Then, from the window, more singers, female voices in unison, joined in the singing, accompanying the man who loved a woman, *ooo oh*. He'd try to hold on to the love he'd known. Begging his baby please not to do him wrong — *oooo*. The neighbourhood moaned, rolling over on itself.

Death always brings that memory. At every funeral Simon has attended in the decades since he broke the vase, that moment

replays itself in his mind's eye. Today was no exception. He worries that he may even have let slip a grin as his mother threw the first handful of earth over the coffin, and that perhaps from the other side of the grave Faye saw it flicker across his face. If she did, she hasn't let on. But what if she misconstrued it? It had been the wind's fault. The wind blew up near the end of the ceremony and the women's hats looked as though they would fly off. But something, a certain requirement of dignity, kept them in place. It must have been that certain requirement that forced the memory — always does. The dignity of a stoop.

It was the police chief's hat that finally held Simon's gaze. The black brim was pulled down over the man's brow, hiding the eyes but not the occasional quiver of the mouth. Simon watched him with teetering sentiments, knowing only parts of the story and the pointed fingers of blame, but he eventually gave in to pity as he watched a tear run down the cheek before being brusquely wiped away.

But the other elements of the childhood memory — the heat, the music — clash with today's indecencies of hymns and wailing, the patting of displaced earth, and the wreath of rust and yellow leaves David's children arranged beside the grave. David used to love October: the changing colours, the dying light. He said it was the month that kept him in Canada, the one time of year he could feel angels around him. Simon never understood that about his brother, along with so much else. His own response to autumn is simple: it drives thoughts deeper into his head and his testicles up into his belly. He remains curled up on himself until April. But it's these autumn ruminations that he must now, tonight, unfurl — straighten like a steamed collar, press hard on the wrinkles in his brother's life, and flatten a path toward tomorrow ... and Faye.

Simon's feet are numb from the cold. He reaches down to his left foot. The compass bulges in his right-hand pocket. He peels back his sock and touches the skin: like refrigerated meat, dead meat ... like his brother.

Is he cold? The earth is beginning to freeze around him, to preserve him until next spring when rain will soak his coffin and leak onto the satin, staining it like tears on a pillow. *The concentration of salt in a tear is higher than in the ocean. The stain is deeper. High salt concentrations are bacteriostatic, but can be washed away by water. Salt of the earth.*

In Barbados, MacKenzie used to tell Simon that God would accept only sacrifices that were salted. "Every oblation that you offer, you must never fail to put on your oblation the salt of the covenant with your God," she quoted the Old Testament. "You are the salt of the earth." She salted their food and sugared their tea beyond all recognition, and he wonders now if his lifelong fascination with salt was spawned through food — a quest to reconcile the inside and the outside, guts and earth.

Simon rubs his toes. He thinks he can hear Faye upstairs in her studio. She isn't practising, but she might be studying her part because there is a loud thumping of a heel, a tapping out of rhythm. They have been separated by a storey since arriving home from the funeral. Without a word, each drifted to the extremities of the tiny house, Faye to her studio, Simon to his desk in the basement. *I think it's a fugue she's learning, isn't that what she told me? — I can't keep the forms straight.* She's always working these days, playing the cello all the time and so full of notes that they pop out of her mouth at the dinner table between chews. A week ago she blurted out *ta dee dee ta* in a green spew of spinach. She giggled, almost ashamed of being so happy. Simon had noticed a returning sparkle in her bright

green eyes, the creeping flush on her creamy cheeks. Until all this happened. *I shouldn't stay down here too long or she'll accuse me of hiding feelings from her.*

NANNERL. MOZART'S SISTER. She keeps hopping into Faye's thoughts, as though in a game of skipping, finding Nannerl in the middle, between the beating ropes of all that is going on around her. How in tandem ran the lives of Nannerl and Wolfgang until that age when girls became women and boys went on to be geniuses. The Mozart children played together like a circus act, travelling through Europe performing four-handed music for anyone who paid the entrance fee to the cashier, their father, Leopold. It's said that Leopold heaved huge sighs of frustration when a prince, having deigned to hear the Mozart children play, rewarded them merely with praise, or a small gift for Nannerl, but nothing for the budding divinity himself. Faye is pursuing a moral in this poetic justice, wondering how talent and fate get either braided or left dangling loose, like fly-away hair. Why did Ms. Nannerl surface today at David's funeral? Skip, skip in time with the piston of fate, then in jumped *unfair*, a word she's been sounding out all afternoon: *fair, fair, unfair, who's the fairest, so unfair*. Is that what made her think of Nannerl? She is still numb with disbelief, refusing to accept that David has killed himself, and she has decided to stay busy, to practise, to think only of music, to think in sounds ... *damn, damn, damn*. Perhaps the thought of Nannerl was inspired by the rivalry between siblings, or the shadow of unfulfillment, remembering how much David overshadowed his younger brother.

She pushes away words she is incapable of saying to Simon, unable, as she has been all week, to tear open a corner of the

tight package of death to allow a conversation to pour out about suicide, about how he might be coping with the suicide of his own brother. She knows she must approach Simon about David, about the envelope she hid in the chest a few days ago, about the shadow that has drawn over her too, and how frightened she is about words she doesn't want to hear. *There's no place like ...* But she can't. Not yet. *Push, push, push ...* only sounds.

She pictures Simon in the basement at his desk, pretending to read but staring at bare stucco walls. Instead of going to him, she's hiding up here in her studio pretending to practise and performing the occasional silent arpeggio with her left hand on the cello's neck. *Tap tap tap.*

Faye stares out the window. The last of the leaves are holding feebly onto branches, and the sky is irritated the way she is at this time each month, knowing her body is soon to erupt and flow. The symptoms arrive earlier each month, and even today, a day of ovulation, she feels them: moodiness like glue. *And tonight ... will we? Could we?*

She has been considering a sort of voodoo for herself, wondering if she should perform it at the next opportunity. Wary of cures now, she nevertheless found herself fascinated by how this one was prescribed, with the tone of certainty in Simon's mother's voice that seemed to say *I know, I know.* Grace, Edwin, and the rest of the family arrived four days ago from Barbados, and Faye could sense Grace gripping onto the certainty of birth in the way she held tight to her handbag, as though someone would snatch that too away from her. Faye convinced her to sit down to a cup of tea, but still Grace clutched the bag in her lap. Their conversation turned to the children, to David's now fatherless three, and Grace paused before looking up at Faye to say firmly, "Make haste, enough waitin' now. You two must make a chile."

It was impossible for Faye to tell her it had been months since she and Simon had brushed skin to skin. Grace became distracted in thoughts that brought a frown, and Faye felt a rush of shame, wondering what Grace was thinking about her as she stared at the tiled floor, a hint of knowledge in her lips.

“An Amerindian woman in Guyana once told me a sure-fire way to get pregnant: After intercourse, ya suck the centre out of a raw egg, slap your belly five times, turn in a circle, then lie with your legs straight in the air for an hour. Works in the most stubborn cases.”

Curatives like these have had a way of lodging in Faye’s brain since her days at the clinic, but the tone was far too absolute, and she knows that it’s more than a stubborn body she must deal with. *Push, push ... only sounds.*

*Hup, four, three, two, one ...*

Many years before Faye met Simon, she and Michael tried to have a child. They made their monthly visits to the fertility clinic, where they call them work-ups as though they were a prelude to an aerobics class — *again, four, three, two, one* — demoralising treatments that made her mood even fiercer than the slate grey clouds she can see approaching from the east. She’s grateful to Simon that he refuses to undergo such “therapy,” but she has sensed his recent floundering around science. He who has always relied on reason is now full of contradictions. In the wake of death he is uncharacteristically philosophical, incapable of decoding suicide.

Faye exhales heavily.

Suicide sneaks up, attacks, but doesn’t retreat. Instead it lingers to taunt with missed warning signs. No one in David’s family expected it, not even his ex-wife, Justine, who’d spoken to him on the telephone that morning. Along with their grief, the family is battling guilt and despair for not having prevented

his death. And there was more despair in the tears of the police chief and the sobs of David's fellow guards from the Newmarket jail, who stood confused and awkward in the church.

Simon is coming up the stairs. His gait is as heavy as a work-horse, *clop, clop*. *Will we touch?*

SIMON PUTS ON the sweater that hangs near the front door, then glides into slippers, feeling suddenly caught inside the freeze frame he has of his father: middle-aged, slippered feet propped up on the long mahogany arms of his Berbice chair as he reads *Time Magazine* cover to cover. But his father is an old man now, and Simon feels guilt slithering along his shoulders — the snaky feeling of never being enough has grown heavier. The lightweight things he and his father say to each other these days come out like electrical shocks, and Simon is always surprised by how much he holds back. In letters and phone calls he inquires after health, relatives, changes of government at home, but never what he wants to ask — questions he has yet to frame — and he absorbs his father's electrostatic responses with the grounding *uh huhs*, and *oh dears* he must have memorized as a child. With the whole family in town, including MacKenzie, it was impossible to have them all stay in their small east-end home, which barely tolerates two. Or was it? He might have done more. Always “might” and “more” — strong and obedient words.

The house is silent. No sounds from Faye's studio, as if it's sealed off. Often at home it feels as though pockets of air separate him from Faye. Bubbles that promise to burst open and allow them to breathe freely and deeply of each other, but never do. He just keeps bumping into them and bouncing away like a stray balloon.

He presses the play button that starts the CDs stacked in the player and walks back downstairs, now delicate in his step. His fine bones are cranky with sleeplessness.

He knows that Faye is being generous, allowing him to bounce away from her, but what he needs now, most of all, is a strong connection to something that will keep his blood flowing in the right direction. Office work doesn't seem to help. Functionaries who cannot function. He sits down at his desk, slides his foot in and out of its slipper, then picks up the assessment data he has been studying.

Functionaries who underfunction. Simon and the other clerks shuffle in each day to their offices on Queen's Park Crescent at the cartography division of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Here Simon compiles, updates, and catalogues grid maps, surveys, and geological data. Plans for developments and subdivisions are registered with the provincial government, and their impact on the landscape is transferred to the appropriate provincial map. Simon's job involves cross-referencing new maps with their immediate predecessor, the careful monitoring of changing topography. This process winds back to original land surveys done at the time of Lord Simcoe, and Simon finds the process prismatic, with each frame of change on a map refracting whole ways of living we can no longer imagine. Rock has become brick and siding. Land adjusts to its users. *Terra* is not *firma* but rather the gentle accident of time, wind, and machines reshaping sediment and water. Rock changes, Simon knows, but the work of the shuffling functionaries remains the same. He has learned to cross-reference everything, including his own life, ticking off items on a check-list — job, home, relationship — and carefully placing life's shifts in neat grids with clear explanations and symbols. He has been careful not to defy the logic of scale, but David's death does just that.

Some days he would like a good fight, like the ones in the mining camps up north. Men from the rigs, in town for Saturday night with more money in their pockets than he now makes all year, would scramble on top of each other over a look or a word inflected in a code he could never decipher. Trained as a geologist and apprenticed to an oil company to conduct seismic surveys, Simon had been helicoptered into the bush of northern Alberta to listen to the earth. To detect in the belching echo of dynamite the layers of hard or soft sediment that would signal oil. But he soon realised he would not last in the bush, that if he stayed he would become like the other men. In the cartography division he sometimes misses the rumbling of anger that ran through his days in the north. Office battles are stale and futile, but he feels an explosive one coming. Rumour has it that the provincial government will restructure the ministry, bring in new technology that will eliminate half of the jobs. He has been wondering what he will do when this work is gone.

For the moment, he is fixed on erosion, the silent falling away of the Scarborough Bluffs into Lake Ontario. Under pressure from both property owners and conservationists, the ministry has commissioned an assessment of the eroding bluffs, the data for which sits on Simon's desk in the basement. He wasn't chosen as part of the assessment team, but he borrowed the reports and brought photocopies home to try to form his own conclusions. The project of sand, as he calls it to himself. He fears the government has chosen the malfunctioning functionaries knowing they will write the report it wants, one which details the inordinate cost and impossibility of saving cliffs of sand that will forever drizzle into the lake. "That's nature," his hard-rock geologist colleagues would say, but the conservationists point to over-development, poor drainage, and abnormal weather patterns. Simon senses something has been left out of both

arguments, so he has been pursuing the hard data these last few weeks in the basement. Sand as sand, its properties and shortcomings — an invisible report that will rescue his reason.

He has been unable to concentrate since long before David's death. At the office, the maple tree that is growing outside his window sheds its leaves, now nearly naked before his day-long stare. Simon taps vigorously on his keyboard and clutches the phone to his ear when anyone comes to his quiet oak office. He wishes he could stare at that brazen maple tree now, here in the basement. But he is alone.

*I should go back to salt.* Or at least return to science that's firm and grounded, doesn't sift through fingers: In the sea there is a 3.5% solution of salts, of which 2.5% is sodium chloride. Evaporation separates sodium chloride from the water, and from other salts, which constitute over 28% of the saline content of sea water. Of the several salts present in sea water or brine, only sodium chloride is present in sufficient quantity and has the appropriate solubility characteristics to precipitate out before the solution has been reduced to a small fraction of the original. There is sanity and beauty there.

*I would like to take her to me tonight, to touch her in a soft spot behind her ear, the spot that makes her dissolve in my hands, but I am frightened.*

BARTOK SLIDES UP into the speakers. The sound a CD makes when it begins makes Faye think of a figure skater gliding up to a bold full stop in the centre of a rink to await her musical cue. She's always wanted to do that: perform a double-bladed parallel stop that sends ice flying.

The string quartet reminds her of Paris, two years ago, with Simon. The airline tickets arrived at work, along with a

dozen roses that were meant to tug at the string of forgiveness that dangled between them. The telephone sales office where she works is crowded with operators in cubicles, and they all watched her as she opened the envelope, embarrassed by the extravagance of Simon's gift. The shame around love and telephones re-emerges, but she pushes the reasons away ... *boing, boing* ... and tries to skate with Bartok back to the charms of Paris. She and Simon had walked through the streets, always touching, temporarily released from the reasons for the trip.

For Faye, Paris was a latchstring to herself. She had lived there for six months just after university, believing that to be a real artist one had to be in Paris, as if inspiration and talent might just rub off the museum walls or be found floating in a café au lait. *Plat, plat* at the braid of fate. But she had walked, lonely and poor, up and down the Champs Elysée like a *femme disparu* looking to belong, daring herself to shout: "*New York Herald Tribune — New York Herald Tribune*" — like the girl in Godard's film. But on her trip with Simon, she delighted in the gaze of cherubs, gargoyles, and sword-bearing angels that watched her from their perches. She saw the Michelangelo statues anew, knowing then that they were imitation Davids; the penises of many had been gashed off by weather and age, but they remained casually reclining, showing her the cracked plaster at their crotches. *Ouch*.

She and Simon visited Père Lachaise, the resting place of Balzac, Molière, Colette, Jim Morrison, and so many others. It was the one place in the city she felt Simon relax, as if in death he could find himself inside the culture, one corpse not surpassing the carbon quality of any other. They strolled through the cobblestone streets of that city of the dead, following maps and signs marking elfin avenues to the tombs. Rows and rows of mausoleums, like miniature chateaux, were engraved with

names — Famille Crépon, Famille Hermand. Generations turning to dust together. Walking among the broken monuments and weedy stone, they talked about burial and faith. Unlike Simon, Faye had not been baptised — another sliver of her history that surprised him.

“You never mentioned that before.”

“Not important, really.” She could see Simon getting uncomfortable. “My parents didn’t believe in it, were never much for ceremonies. Quietly atheist, I suppose.”

Simon was visibly disconcerted. Faye went on, half mollifying, half teasing, “Of course, our children will be christened.” She paused, waiting for his agreement, then couldn’t stop herself from joking, “like taking out an insurance policy on their souls.” She looked at him anxiously. Simon nodded seriously and said, “Yes, good, that would be best,” and even that hint of a future between them made Faye walk more confidently. There was hope in the cracks of every tombstone they examined. Finally, had death released them from the past? *And now? No, push, push, remember just the charms ...*

She remembers the heat from Simon’s face. On the third day of their holiday, his fever was so intense he couldn’t get out of bed, but insisted she go out and enjoy herself. She set off on a shopping spree on Rue de Rivoli. In the metro her eyes caught a flash of blue and green, and a face she suddenly recognised. The woman had been the concierge in the building where Faye had once rented a tiny *chambre de bonne*. Her face was the one Faye had spied every day behind the lace curtains of her always slightly ajar door. Madame Letellier would sit in a Louis XIV-styled chair watching what little coming and going there had been in the foyer — a blank stare surveying all that might have been, given another life, another age. She was a fixture, a daily apparition, and a reproduction of the hundreds of other

diminutive French women Faye had seen sitting endlessly staring out from behind veils of tarnished lace. Amazingly, she now thinks, Madame Letellier recognised her.

“Est-ce-que c’est vous? La Canadienne?”

“Oh Madame, oui. Comment-allez-vous?”

“Ça va, ça va,” the old woman said wearily.

Madame Letellier’s appearance was startling. She was petite and had the most fancifully decorated eyes Faye had ever seen — lime green mascara and turquoise lids. And there they were across the aisle in the metro, looking the same as they had so many years ago through the crack of her door, if only just slightly more wrinkled, and consequently more decorated.

“Are you still always in the *salle de concert*?” Madame Letellier asked, practising her English.

Something punched Faye under the ribs. “No, not recently,” she answered, sensing the deep hole she’d carved for herself by having banished music when she’d abandoned Michael. “I’m here just for a week,” she added. Excuses, excuses.

Madame Letellier blinked, “Mais ...”

Faye knew that the woman remembered her as the auburn-haired music student who couldn’t stay out of a concert hall. But since those hopefully breathless days of Paris when she was twenty-two, music had seized her, devoured her, then spit her out.

“I invite you at my home ... to play ... *et on prendra un coup ensemble ...*”

*Pianissimo*. Until that moment, Faye had not given words to her abandonment of music. She had just stopped, become silent.

“I think I’ve forgotten ... how ...” she mumbled to Madame, whose peacock eyes fanned her with incomprehension. The train arrived at Chatelet. Before Faye got off, she kissed the woman on both cheeks and felt the lashes tickle the side of her face. She

emerged onto the street in front of the Chatelet Theatre. Walking past it on her way to Rivoli, she caught sight of a poster listing that night's performance — Bartok's string quartets performed by the Tokyo Quartet. *Crash*. Bartok's string quartets had been the last music she'd learned and never performed. It was automatic; she found herself at the ticket window buying two places for that night.

She convinced Simon to get out of bed to accompany her, but their seats were up in the heavens, which must have increased the pressure in his sinuses, adding to his misery. She sat nervously awaiting the first chord. On its arrival, something broke through; a gush of fertile tears. She peeked over at Simon who seemed confounded, but, she believes, a few seconds later he must have understood the significance of this moment, because he took her hand, put it to his cheek, and held it there. His feverish skin warmed her, and she entered his deep, laboured breaths, melting into him. She started to feel drunk, and half-way through the andante of the fifth quartet other music entered her head — a pop song she used to listen to when she'd first met Simon — feeling like she'd drunk a whole case of her lover and yet was still on her feet. Music of two worlds playing a duet in her head. She could claim both now. When she and Simon returned to Toronto, she bought a new cello and started playing again, just on and off, the way a person who has reached a point of near starvation has to eat only small morsels over long periods to prevent the system from going into shock. Eventually, all the music became hers again, thanks to Bela Bartok and some green mascara on a funny little woman in the metro.

Tonight the violins in the swelling second quartet are like whitecaps and the house is being heaved about by eighth notes. The crescendo makes death feel small.

BARTOK TRAVELS TO the basement.

The first classical music concert Simon ever went to was with Faye in Paris. He remembers being sick and sleepy and that the first movement was a soft, enveloping blanket. He remembers reaching for Faye's hand, just before drifting off, to touch it to his cheek, offering his fever as an excuse for being disconnected from an event she wanted to share with him. She accepted. When he woke for the final movement, he had the sensation of jumping up high in an effort to reach some unspecified mark, to understand the sounds, only to hit a barrier as visceral as a physical blow. He wanted to go home.

Where he was from classical music was what you heard in church. No one he knew listened to it just for pleasure, and even in church it was a hybrid form — hymns played on an organ with a syncopated bass beat. Music had immigrated to Barbados in the same way as had the Carter family. Calypso from Trinidad, reggae from Jamaica, and soul music from Motown. Simon's family, via David, consumed it all. The music they listened to was "black" — black people's music. David would bring home albums and style himself after the men shown on the covers, wearing an unwilling Afro and calling himself "black" even before everyone else was told they weren't "coloured" anymore.

His skin was the darkest of all of the children in the family; he most closely resembled his great great grandfather, a heavy set Mulatto whose mother had been a slave on a plantation in the Corentyne region of Guyana. As the eldest, David pushed limits, extended family boundaries — the first to drive, the first to come home "stinkin' drunk," the first to defy his father's whip — and Simon and his sisters had to choose between following his exaggerated lead or protecting the family from his unpredictability. Francie adored her big brother, and only she could occasionally sway David from provoking his parents. As

the younger brother, sometimes ignored, more often bullied because of his quiet, tractable nature, Simon was especially susceptible to David's ganglord rule.

As a result, the only music that really meant anything to Simon was Motown. Smokey Robinson, The Temptations, Marvin Gaye. That was music. Faye's world, so controlled and structured, was peculiar. She moved to pinched sounds that fell into straight lines. When he met her he tried to move to her music, but found it inaccessible, just as there's a part of her he sometimes can't find; even now, Bartok's siren strings are not pulling, but rather pushing him away from her, from today and the funeral.

Simon gets up and goes to the far corner of the basement to where a newly finished pine bookshelf is standing. It's a little off-kilter despite all the care he took, and he can't figure out why. The bookcase was built over two weeks ago. A place for Faye to shelve her thoughts, to store her musical scores. He wanted to finish it sooner, the first gift he's been able to offer her for such a long time, to approach her, if only just in wood. But too much work, then David, and now his will is thirsty and receding. He runs his finger along the scrollwork on the top shelf. The wood is rough. As he searches for sandpaper, the music pushes him into the past.

That day in August — the day he broke the vase — Percy Sledge was the man who loved a woman and could keep his mind on nothin' else. David and his friends were the same. They were upstairs in David's room gawking at naked women in magazines, laughing, hanging out — liming. Every afternoon, David was on the phone to the boys: "Why y'all don' come lime by me nuh?" and in no time at all Stretch, Frankie, and Nat would strut up the driveway and stride right past MacKenzie, without

so much as a word to the rest of the family. MacKenzie would seethe beneath her helmet of pot-scrub-brush hair, “Laud, give-she faith!”

The mocking look the boys gave Simon as they passed sent a rush to his groin that made his fingers curl in a ready fist. His eyes dipped to the cement and his breathing warped. He swung his bat hard, hard, again, again, his wild swings the only exaggerated movements in the neighbourhood that day.

That afternoon the air was stifling, barely a whiff of sea breeze blowing into the neighbourhood. Green lizards hid under the veranda rather than perching upside down on the ceiling as they did on days when the breeze was cool. The noisy whistling night frogs dozed under rocks in the flower bed where the hibiscus and bird of paradise drooped, forbearing in these last days before the rainy season.

Simon’s older sister, France, named for a trip his mother never took, lay in a hammock under the breadfruit tree reading romance fiction. She was always reading romance. “Francie, Francie, give me some romancie ...” David’s friends would chant at her, cupping their hands to their own breasts, squeezing them and holding them out for a nibble. A single dart of Francie’s sharp slanted eyes would slice off their stares, gelding their lust, then she’d waddle away to find her place in the shade to read.

Francie’s features were the most startling in the family: her mother’s Chinese mother sideswiped her father’s Amerindian grandmother, leaving her face mashed yet ample, with jiggery smiles. In a long line of rugged females, Francie was a fragile and dreamy anomaly. Unlike her female ancestors, she was tall and broad in the hips in a way that made her legs disappear. A demure, squat-faced deer, she traipsed through the Garden looking for love. Boys found themselves stuck to her oozy allure.

Adored from afar by boys and men in the neighbourhood, Francie was the desired yield of the gardener's working days. From time to time, Best, who would peer over ferns to watch Francie as she read in her hammock, would draw her cryptic emblems of love on the back of Ting softdrink labels, fold and sail them over a shrub to land at her feet. On one occasion, after Francie had vacated her hammock, Simon watched Best stoop to pick up the book she had left behind and flip its pages, sizing up his competition. Some expected Best to ask Francie to marry him, though she was then just fifteen to his almost thirty years, but Francie would never have considered such an offer from someone who in no way resembled the great heroes of her romance novels: men with names like Lance and Wesley — nothing as clearly overstated as Best. But the neighbourhood gossips didn't pay much attention to Francie's desires. *When a man loves a woman.*

Simon's younger sister Margaret — Maggie — then seven years old, was the one in love with Best. She would follow him around the garden holding up the hose, gallantly trying to ease his burden in the hot sun. In doing so, Maggie would often get too much sun herself and would have to be put to bed before dinner with a fever. But in her fledgling imagination, it was the fever of love, and she looked forward to more days of swooning. Maggie's looks were puzzling. No one in the family knew of ancestors with green eyes or kinky, biscuit-coloured hair and fair skin. In Guyana, the men used to joke with Simon's father that Maggie's looks were the consequence of staying out of town too long on visits to Berbice; others used to tell tales of white jumbies impregnating women in the market; while others smiled the silent smile of the ages, their shining white teeth parting lips like spice ships carving the sea.

Simon's looks fell somewhere between that of the others — a rich muddy blend — which was somewhat of a balm to MacKenzie. He thinks of her now, picturing her face at the funeral, hearing her sing in the chapel, watching the tears polish her face to glazed tar.

He smothers the present, breathes in the Garden.

After moving to Barbados, the Carters settled in the Garden, a neighbourhood in Christ Church named after the original sugar plantation that had spread over the land like a verdant quilt, and had been handed down through generations until the Depression when it was sold and then divided into large properties, then smaller ones, and eventually the residential subdivision known as Garden Gap. The houses there all had names, not numbers, and the Carter house, which had been built on the site of the original boiling house for cane, was called Willowdale. It may have been for that reason alone that Simon chose his first apartment in Toronto in the suburb of the same name.

In Barbados, tell anyone that you were from the Garden and they knew where it was, that like its name it was splendid with foliage and lawns that had been manicured over the razed cane fields. Much of the plantation's original orchards of tamarind, soursop, seagrape, guava, lime, golden apple, and avocado still stood tall when the Carters moved to the Garden, but, as Simon quickly learned, some of them were known by different names in Guyana, and he resented having to call guenips ackees and five finger fruit carambola because the Bajans said it was so. With breadfruit, mango, coconut palm, fern, and pulsating names to dance your tongue over like hibiscus, bougainvillaea, and frangipani, the Garden was bounteous. And like on other

islands in the region, the tree of life grew there. But the tree of life in this Garden had not gone wild; it was trimmed and managed with the tenderness that characterised Best's work.

Best came from the country every morning to prune, water, and feed the Garden. He was a tall skinny man with spidery limbs, who to this day has boyish, timeless looks. He and MacKenzie took the same bus in from St. Andrew every morning. Best once told Simon that it was the name of the neighbourhood that had drawn the servant MacKenzie to it in the first place. Paradise. And Best followed. Only when MacKenzie saw the mixed up faces of her charges — “a cook-up family, worse than rice” — did she consider its apostasy.

MacKenzie was a zealot, stern and unwavering in her beliefs. Her evangelism tolerated only purity or complete balance, only what she could interpret using Scripture. Simon was by no means easy, the incident with the vase not being out of character, but compared to the rest, especially David, he was a muddy angel. MacKenzie would tell him stories from the Bible and her own from the country. She said that he was either Simon the Apostle, zealous as fire, second best, or he was Peter, leader of the Apostles, who fished the Sea of Galilee, and who was originally called Simon until the Lord said to him: “Thou art Peter, and upon his rock I will build my church.” She preferred the latter interpretation, thinking that one day Simon might be saved and thus transformed. She said: “I know you gon' deny it boy, gon' deny it three times or maybe many more, like he did, but when time comes, you'll be shoutin' his name higher 'n ya natty head and be feedin' he lambs and he sheep.” Her fire and brimstone pushed him towards the worship of reason, as he sought shelter from her sermons in his father's practical approach to the world through science. MacKenzie's determi-

nation to make him a saint also collided with his own desire to feel like the man in the song who loved a woman to distraction.

Fourteen that August of the broken vase, Simon was obsessed not only with cricket but also with the possibility of his often painful and annoying erection finding a more human deliverance than it had so far experienced. Even at age eleven, in Guyana, he had experimented with ejaculation.

Knox gelatine. Perfect. His instincts had sought out the soft limpid place inside a woman. In their house in the Georgetown neighbourhood of Kitty, on a day when his mother was at the market with Maggie, his father in the country, and neither Francie nor David were at home, he started the careful preparations he had hoped would relieve him once and for all. He retrieved the box of gelatine from the shelf where it sat beside Winston Salt, Quaker Oats Flour, and Lea and Perrins Worcestershire sauce — their shelf of staples imported from England. The tingle in his penis was like a craving for sweets, and Knox gelatine and dessert had always coincided. Dessert was reserved for parties and would arrive as a dome of orange jelly, dotted with marshmallows. He poured half a box of Knox into a bowl, then followed the instructions to the letter, cooling the gelatine in the freezer for faster result. When it was firm, he placed it in the sun a few minutes to bring it back to a hospitable temperature. By the time it produced a warm, inviting glow, he was ready.

He carried it to the room he shared with David, placed the bowl carefully in the middle of his bed, and barricaded the door with a chair. After stripping, he climbed onto the bed with his jiggling orange companion. A pause while he perched above it, then his eager organ dived in straight, and, with a splat, leaped out again, shocked and shrivelling. The gelatine split apart along a fault line, slithering and bouncing onto the bed. Defeated, he

peeled the mess off the sheets and threw it out the window into the flower bed just as David banged at the door asking why it had been barricaded.

A few months later, he found himself alone in the house again. While rummaging through his father's closet, he came across a condom. He knew that condoms and sex were synonymous, so he took his new treasure into the bathroom, locked the door, unravelled the sheath, and placed it over his now hard penis. He sat on the edge of the bathtub, waiting. Seconds elongated in sync with his blinks. More waiting. Nothing. He endured endless blinking seconds until the sounds of the keskidee bird's repeated question outside the bathroom window became hypnotising. *Kes kidee? Kes kidee?* Nothing. He had been fooled. Disillusioned, Simon yanked off the condom and flushed it down the toilet. It resurfaced. A twinge of panic. Another flush, but there it floated disobediently. He'd be caught. He waited for the water to refill in the toilet bowl then pressed the handle again, finally sending the latex membrane swirling down the drain.

An organised and efficient man, Simon's father soon noticed his depleted store and confronted David about the missing condom. David's face drooped like a sad dog's, and he looked to Simon, needing for once to be bailed out of a situation not of his own making. Simon avoided his eyes, plunged his hands into the pockets of his shorts, and remained silent. For all the times he'd covered up for David's lies to his parents, hidden the rumours of David's thieving escapades at school, agreed under threat to versions of stories he found difficult to keep consistent, he now did nothing, and felt the moment wage its mute revenge.

Despite his tender eleven years, Simon knew that his older brother had not begun to think about sex. Even before the experiments with the gelatine, Simon had tried to glean some

understanding about what was going on with his body, but at his naïve questions David turned quiet. David was humiliated by his father's accusation, not for what it insinuated but for what he had not yet considered. No one suspected Simon. Just the opposite; his girlishness had always been a source of teasing, and not even David thought to accuse him. Instead, that night after dinner, David went into his father's study, where Simon was doing his math homework, and, as though by way of irrefutable explanation, he held up a single sheet of paper on which he'd written a song. He sang it with a clear, ancient voice. Simon can remember that it began with "Biding my time, necessary waiting," but doesn't recall any other words except the chorus, which rang out with the word "Joy."

Edwin put down his *Time* and listened intently. The *Joy, Joy, Joy* in near falsetto voice rang throughout the room. When David was finished he stood still and blade sharp, waiting for a reaction. Edwin cleared his throat and shuffled the pages of the magazine, looking first at Simon, back at David, and finally fixing his gaze on the bookshelf.

"Well, I think we should all be turning in ... and you give more thought to what I said earlier."

David disappeared silently into his room.

Simon remembers David, later, in Barbados, in the thick of adolescence, obsession swelling in his neck along veins that striped him with desire. Desire that seemed more than necessary. *Has this all come back to me?*

He feels the sandpaper in his fingers and bends to rub it on the pine. His hand warms as he rubs, and the skin along his forearm feels alight. He slips his foot out of his slipper, folds back the sock and rubs his heel. The music upstairs is softer now. He reaches under the sock to rub his toes with the grainy paper. The skin starts to burn.

Perhaps it was from that incident with the condom that Simon began to track his father's reaction to David.

Edwin and David's attitudes converged on one point: neither could suffer the sermons of MacKenzie. David loudly dismissed her narrowly defined sense of right and wrong, tossing his head like a wild steed as he confronted her views. His father pretended to accept her faith in the eternal and unchanging, quietly undermining her stance with diffident questions that would make Grace secretly smile. The only cross he held to was a Mendelian one of gametes and inheritance. Sentimental in regards to his family — teary to the point of embarrassing his wife on occasion — Edwin viewed his work and much of the world with a dispassionate logic. He held fast to the tenets of science, the gospel of Enlightenment. And, although a veterinarian, he would not tolerate animals to be sentimentalised or anthropomorphised; they were food and for labour, not pets, much to the chagrin of his children.

In Guyana, Edwin had been district supervisor of agriculture, assigned to the eastern province of Berbice. Often he spent weeks away from Georgetown travelling up and down the east coast road performing artificial insemination on local cattle and horses — performances that dropped crumbs on a trail Simon would follow his whole life.

Guyana was toddling toward independence. Agriculture was a primary concern, the key to future stability, and investments were made in cattle stocks, irrigation for rice fields, and sugar mills. Edwin was a consultant on bulls. Venereal disease had plagued the local stocks, and their breeding had resulted in miscarriages and infertility. The tick fever that turned the urine of bulls to blood also transformed the faces of many farmers, who could be found in local rum shops cradling their heads in their hands in despair. But with the introduction of artificial

insemination from the finest imported breeds, the country was experiencing an agricultural boom unknown since the height of the sugar trade. The best cattle came from abroad — Brazil, Canada, even India. The imported sires were chosen for their resistance to tropical conditions, primarily heat, and to parasitic infestations. Edwin assisted in the breeding of black-and-white Holsteins, known for their large frame and high milk yield. Smaller brown Jerseys and Guernseys, their butter-fat ratio higher than that of the Holsteins, were bred for the production of cream, butter, and cheese. Diseased beef cattle were eliminated and replaced with hybrids of Brahmans, zebu, and Santa Gertrudis.

For Edwin, nature was dynamic. Heterogeneity was the agenda of living systems: life was fed by all available energies. He was a mogul of reproduction without copulation, an active participant in a great experiment of mongrelization. The infiltration of exotic breeds increased the likelihood of agricultural success; Guyana would become the force of the continent, he assured his clients. Edwin was a chef, scrambling up gametes, mixing blood, and concocting food for his country with all the hope and anguish of a proud father.

When persistent bellows and continual frustrated mountings indicated that their cattle were in heat, the farmers signalled for Edwin to visit. He was their expert. He led bulls up to a teaser cow, a dummy covered with a convincing soft cowhide. When the bull jumped the teaser, Edwin would grasp its erect penis and lead it into a suitably lubricated rubber sleeve inside a hot-water jacket. The foamy semen collected in a test tube at the end of the sleeve was often enough to impregnate more than one hundred animals — outstripping nature's plodding process.

For inseminations, Edwin's team of technicians first washed the cow's rear with soap and water, grasping the tail and holding

it to the side. Then, with his rubber-gloved left hand, Edwin reached into the rectum of the animal, raking out feces in order to reach the uterus at the cervix. A glass pipet was then inserted into the vagina, and the expanded, in-heat cervix was manipulated over the tip of the pipet with great care. Pressing the syringe at the other end of the pipet, he would express the estimated 1,000,000 sperm found in the 1cc vial of diluted bull semen.

Simon often accompanied his father on day trips to Berbice during the holidays or when he begged long and hard enough to be allowed to skip school. *Daddy, please tek me nuh, Daddy? I don' learn anything in school, and maybe I should be a doctor too.* Appealing to Edwin's acute sense of family usually worked, and along Simon would go on the journey that would bring them home late at night; his mother would find him curled up in the passenger seat, too exhilarated from the day's events to sleep, but exhausted enough to feign slumber in order to be lifted and carried into bed.

The east coast road was a flat, lazily serpentine path connecting the capital to the agricultural heartland. To the right, rice paddies sparkled like breeze-brushed tinsel. To the left lay the sea, flat and brown, stained with jungle silt carried up by the Demerara and Berbice rivers to dirty the coast. This brown water made Simon notorious at school. He had been shocked by the bright cyan of the ocean and sky in Barbados, and the boys in his form, made aware of the muddy coastal waters of his birthplace, used to tease him about being born below sea level, and chant "mudslinging Simon, the simple pie man."

"Man, ya'll could swim in dat brown mess?" they asked. Simon's only retort was one he had learned from David: "Look, we could drag y'all 'hole bloody island down the mouth o' one of we rivers with a steamer, so ya'll watch ya own mouth."

When driving with his father along the east coast road, Simon was put on the lookout for green. It was his responsibility to spot the tell-tale green flags with which farmers signalled that they wanted the vet to stop, either to perform an insemination or to treat a sick animal. White flags for the doctor, green for the vet. The flags were made of anything — green clothes or leaves or branches tied to a stick or a lamppost. Sometimes, his father noted proudly, the farmers had no work for him; they simply flagged him down to share in a celebration, often having slaughtered a sheep for the occasion. Simon took his responsibility seriously and kept a watchful, happy eye out for the various flags. These trips were his early education in applied science, introducing him to the cool glass of the thermometer, the cold steel of the stethoscope, and the warm full vials of the syringes.

On one trip, just after pulling out of a ranch along the road near Fort Wellington, Simon and Edwin were stuck at a crawl behind a truck carrying a load of cattle headed for market in New Amsterdam. Edwin checked to his right for oncoming traffic, pulled out to pass, but ducked back when he saw an approaching car. Just then a tall, gangly man in a torn shirt and old straw fedora appeared at the side of the road in front of the truck. Something flashed. The straw hat flew towards the wind-shield. Edwin stopped the car with a screech of tires. His arm shot protectively across Simon's chest, though Simon's head still tapped the dashboard lightly. When Simon looked up, the truck driver had climbed out of the cab and was examining something beneath his vehicle.

"Wait here, don't come out," Edwin said to Simon as he joined the other driver at the side of the road, where they examined the ground, looking grave and shaking heads. Simon peeked over the hood of the Reliant, on which the fedora now lay, and could see what he thought were rose petals and white

driftwood crushed together in a red and white paste, from which sprouted a callused, black foot. It took him a few seconds to realise that the driftwood and hemorrhaging roses were the mangled leg of the man who had materialised at the side of the road. When his father returned, they reversed, pulled out in front of the truck, and sped along the road to a nearby farm from where Edwin telephoned for the police and ambulance — the ambulance being a mere formality and transport to the morgue.

Later, Simon heard rumours about the man's death: that he had thrown himself in front of the truck because his land had been appropriated by the government. He had no children, no wife, and people said that as a child he had been ill and so his sex didn't function and he wanted to end the rest of his functions as well. Other people said that they'd seen him having sex with the goats he'd kept. Some avoided the subject of the man himself, but joked that on the east coast road it was better to hit a man than a pig — pigs, when they burst, excreted a treacherous oil that could cause tires to spin out of control and cause severe accidents and possibly death.

"That's bunk," Simon's father said. "Don't listen to that kind of bunk." Simon knows now, from the cold tingle in his toes, which have lost their sandpaper glow, how much his father had wanted to deny what had been going on in Guyana at the time, how much he had wanted to stay. He knows that the first story was the truth, that the man had lost everything, had nothing to live for if he didn't have his land, and that deterioration was hobbling toward their country like the twisted leg of slavery.

Simon dips his hand into his pocket to touch the compass he has been carrying, and he remembers his father's distracted state during this period, and his own vague foreboding about events swirling around them. He had watched his father's face tighten at

news reports on the radio, at stories of violence and the misfortunes of people in the countryside, and Simon sensed the chaos that was undermining the spirit of some and igniting that of others.

The broom and the cup. They were the symbols of the two rival parties, the PNC and PPP, racially delineated black and Indian, the first one promising to sweep out all the decadence — tidy up a black state — the second one promising to feed the poor — Indian broth. The broom and the cup were the symbols that would appear on the ballots at the voting booth — simple, decipherable messages for the illiterate. When the broom ruled, the supporters of the cup suffered, and vice versa. One of Edwin's clients, an East Indian man in Rose Hall who kept horses and grew rice, had been producing Grade #1 rice for twenty years before the party of the broom gained power and graded his crop a #3. On the day he received notice of his new standing, he took a bottle of rum to his home above the confectionery store and threw his leather-bound ledger out the window, scattering its unhappy figures in the middle of the road. He stayed drunk for two days and never cultivated another grain of rice. When Simon and his father visited him, the man was nostalgic about the days of Empire, before independence. "Them was different days — good days, doc," he said to Edwin while holding his own hands together in a prayer. "What missin' is prayer dees days, doc. Hindu and Muslim and Christian should still pray, all on de same day — don' matter which is de day, just pray."

Simon knows that his father filed away these events so that when the extremist polemics of Guyana politics lashed out near his own family, the incidents spilled out in fast forward, propelling him into a future outside of his country, a country whose waterfalls were his tears, whose savannahs were his breath.

Simon remembers the day perfectly. It was a Saturday in Stabroek market, the smell of fresh-baked patties wafting from

stalls and people pushing through the aisles choosing fresh produce that came in weekly from the country. “*Where de lizard, teacher lizard ...*” Calypso blared from one of the stalls selling records. After their shopping and a small battle of wills in which Edwin told David he could not buy a record — “*you know the lizard musse ticklin’ she*” — the family headed home. At the exit from the market, a group of PNC party members wielding brooms made of thick straw stopped traffic with a rally demonstrating their confidence in winning the coming election. The Carters, stuck in traffic, waited for the parade to pass. Curious, the children decided to get out of the car to have a better look. Edwin encouraged them, against their mother’s wishes. “Don’ fret, Grace,” said Edwin. “It’s good education for them,” and joined his children at the corner. Grace stayed alone in the car, presentiment curling in her brow.

The demonstration was a spectacle of drums and horns, like a carnival, but instead of feathers and fans, the participants waved placards and flags and brandished brooms, sweeping the air in a gesture of what was to come. One man jumped on the roof of a car and used his broom to bar others from joining him, pushing them back onto the road. It reminded Simon of a game he had played on a mound of dirt in their yard in Kitty: “*I’m the King of the castle, and you’re the dirty rascal.*”

A sudden whisk of air, the sharp smell of straw, and then a broom swept before his eyes, brushing his forehead. In the same second came a deep whimper from beside him. Simon turned to see David’s cheek split open like a ripe peach. There was commotion and pushing. Someone pulled Simon out of the way. Francie shrieked and ran back to the car pulling Maggie by the hand. Simon saw his father bend down to pick up the sharp straw that had flown from the broom. Edwin examined it and touched the blood on its tip, wiping it from his fingers into his

trousers, and then he hustled the boys back to the car and to the hospital. The doctors there assured them that the cut to David's face was not as bad as it might have been, but stitching was necessary and there would likely be scarring.

Simon sat patiently with his sisters on the wooden bench in the corridor; Grace stood by the door waiting for the doctors to finish. A tall woman like her English grandfather, she seemed, to Simon, to tower over everyone else in the hospital. Balancing on her left leg she would rub her right foot to the back of her calf, pushing up the hem of her skirt. It was a twitch she repeated every two or three minutes throughout the duration of the wait. Her calf became red and chafed at the spot her shoe rubbed it up and down. Her face didn't betray anxiety when she turned to glance at her children; she even managed a smile and a wink. Finally, David emerged with his face bandaged. The children piled silently into the Reliant; at home, Grace treated them to ice cream and tamarind candies.

After that day, a granular, dusty despondence grew in Edwin. He had believed in progress, but also in order. When the broom party won the election, Edwin and Grace would talk late into the night, and Grace's letters and calls to relatives increased. A few months later the Carters were on a boat to Barbados, an island that Simon had heard was more British than England — a slow, orderly place with no waterfalls and no riots. In the cabin of the steamer, Simon's father wept as they left the coast, as though pouring himself along with the Demerara and the Essequibo into the ocean.

In Barbados, David blossomed into adolescence, and his new scar, which crossed the tip of his eye and pulled it farther in a slant, was like a mark of a seasoned street fighter, which he used to his advantage with girls and with new friends who would listen, mesmerised, to the embellished tale of the scar's origin.

He grandstanced it and learned to walk with a strut that escorted the mark handsomely.

The China scar on his brother's cheek reminded Simon of the ritual symmetrical cuts on the faces of African men he has seen in the subway. Dark and round against the coffin-white satin, David's face was an incomplete mask, the echo of a lonely darkness. A sacrificial face. Simon touched David's skin and a cold rubbery irony tingled up the tip of his finger.

From the couch at the back of the funeral parlour, Simon watched his mother as she stood in front of David's coffin. Without Edwin beside her she appeared shorter. Her face creased in a scowl. When she bent to say something to David's body, Simon watched her legs and counted, *one, two, three*, as she raised her right toe to scratch her left calf.