

I AND YOU, AND ME AND HER

Barry Grills

ONE

Sometimes, Jan, I want to tell the world how much I'm in love with you. Then again, maybe it's not the world I want to tell. No, maybe it's *you* I believe should know. I want to write it down, I guess, as if this will help explain it. And after I've written it down, I want to give it to you as a story. My love for you as a story. What happened to us . . . what continues to happen . . . as a story.

You and I give new meaning to the concept of star-crossed lovers. Talk about two tiny ships meeting in the middle of the deep, dark night, when we probably should have sailed right by one another, happily lost in the foggy depths of conventional life. Without touching. Without touching the way we did.

Too late now for *that*, I guess.

We just go on, you and I, like nothing ever happened. But *everything* happened. For me, at least. *Everything*.

And here we are again, Jan, drawing close to seeing one another once more. As if life considers us its favourite joke. As if there's one more guffaw, one more chuckle to be extorted from the tragic coincidence you and I appear to be.

Or is love itself the chuckle, the guffaw? Do we make too much of love? Do we not see the humour in it because we're too close to the tragedy?

Maybe I should spill it all -- the beans, the passion -- on my way to answering these questions. Or maybe just to see what happens. Just to understand the story in what has existed between you and me for so long.

As if God will listen to my defence and find some justice in it

It's a long drive from Ottawa to Temagami. I estimate it somewhere around six hundred kilometres. Canada's a big country; Ontario's a big province. And, related to this? Well, sometimes I'm a big liar.

Only of necessity, of course.

For instance, I've lied to Judy about how long it's going to take to reach our destination -- Judy's a shortest-distance-between-two-points kind of woman. I told her driving from Ottawa to North Bay by way of Algonquin Park and Huntsville in Muskoka would only add twenty minutes to our

journey . . . “a half hour tops,” I said . . . when, in fact, it’ll increase the drive by an hour and a half. The liar and the *liee*, if you will, share a culpability, where dishonesty is concerned. Many of us arrive at this point in our relationships with a certain inevitability, covering up to avoid confrontation. Marriage, I suppose, requires its own list of regulations.

Small comfort that I only lie to Judy when I have to, when she will not be significantly harmed by the untruth. It’s just me preventing my cup of grief from unnecessarily running over. Where grief is concerned, I avoid overflow as much as I can.

I’d prefer never to lie. I don’t like it -- lying haunts me -- even when the lie is relatively harmless. But I learned some time ago the world, itself, is often one big lie; no wonder each one of us gives in to fibbing a little, more or less to cling to our place in line in the crush of deluded optimists queuing up for their reward at society’s mythological bosom.

With respect to me taking the long way through Algonquin Park this morning, Judy shares that culpability I’ve mentioned. Had I told her the truth about the extra ninety minutes in driving time, she would have pressured me into taking the more direct route -- Highway 17 . . . Ontario’s anemically-numbered leg of Highway 1, the Trans Canada -- from Ottawa to North Bay. No argument the rest of the way to Temagami, of course. But Tommy taking the scenic route? I would have lost the debate plain and simple.

So you see what I'm saying about lying? You see what I'm saying about culpability?

I run a minor risk as it is, when I take the short way back home on Monday. If Judy notices how much faster our return is . . . and she might . . . she'll mention it. She'll feel at ease mentioning it, too, much more than I will when I apologize for my miscalculation, for being so stupid. In the end I'll get out of the dog house by being grateful for the lesson I've learned. Sometimes Judy *likes* me hapless. She's mentioned, by times, she finds it rather charming. She's your sister, Jan. I guess you know her nearly as well as I do.

My thoughts on these matters preoccupy me, I'm not sure why at this hour of the morning. But I meander in gleeful aimlessness among my speculations like a child presented with an unexpected sunny afternoon off from school. I'm a man who frets. I anticipate events that may or may not happen, then gauge whether or not I will have to do penance for them *if* they happen. It's part of the rhythm of driving at this hour around dawn, just playing with life's various propositions until after we make the turn into Renfrew to connect with Highway 60, to pick up a coffee from Tim Horton's at the point where my ninety minute side trip actually begins, when there is no turning back.

No turning back. I like the finality in that phrase. I like the courage it implies. As I drive, I consider the nature of courage for a time, delighting in

the concept of bravery behind finally making the plunge . . . never mind what particular plunge I have or do not have in mind. Courage is honesty. Even little lies are cowardice. Sometimes I dislike myself for seeming to be so frequently a coward.

At the Tim Horton's in Renfrew, Judy asks me to park instead of using the drive-through. "I'll get the coffees," she says. "I have to pee."

"Okay," I reply.

"Do you want anything else?"

"No thanks. Just coffee."

And I watch in the rearview mirror as she slips into today's parking lot dawn on her quest for our fix of caffeine. Judy still has one of those teardrop asses that appeal to guys so much. Some lout with a ball cap, ten years younger than her, actually turns as he passes her to watch her walk into the restaurant. I'll bet she noticed it too. I'll bet she appreciated it. Judy's beauty -- I'm so used to it. I take her for granted. I barely see her any more. I barely see her at this moment as the glass, bricks, and modern mortar, plus the greyness of this early hour swallow her up like a mist. Maybe I just feel cheated by modern life's inherent lack of adventure. You see, Jan, a side of me would prefer to hunt my coffee down with a club or a lance. Go ahead and laugh; at least I'm being honest. Fast food restaurants are painfully facile where a quest for adventure is concerned.

Still, people are congregating here. The parking lot is filling up. And there are large plumes of exhaust lined up at the drive-through around the side, although it's a relatively mild autumn day.

Judy returns. We depart Tim Horton's. I turn right onto Highway 60.
No turning back.

I'm a persistent ruminator, I've learned. I chew on my thoughts like a cud -- ideas, reflections, imaginings, or doubts, rendering them finally into nutritionless pulp. If my thoughts were prayers, I think God would answer them just to shut me up, just to avoid hearing me go over them one more time. They're not prayers, though. No way they're prayers. They're just thoughts I contemplate to avoid more important considerations, to avoid addressing the chronic symptoms of some nearly permanent discomfort I suffer continuously. The discomfort of *you*, for example.

There's something else too about endless reflection while I'm driving. I think it complements my enjoyment of travel, my affection for geography. To me, travel and geography represent the act of life itself. Braking, turning, accelerating, going back, spinning wheels, avoiding rough neighbourhoods, dodging potholes. And more -- trying to figure out where the hell I'm going and why, after all this time, I'm still going there. People -- me included -- tend to think they're immortal. Why else would they treat their lives as merely a war of attrition? Just more cowardice, you see. Of course, I'd never be caught

saying so.

Now that we're cruising the highway again, I glance at Judy guiltily because I'm never really certain she can't read my mind. But she's found her own world of reflection too, reaching for her Tim Horton's coffee, double milk and double sugar, as engrossed with her private thoughts as I am with mine. Peripherally, I watch as she sips coffee out of the slash in the lid, noticing -- or remembering from some other previous occasion? -- the small wad of sugarless gum she sticks on the plastic, which she'll retrieve and re-chew . . . eschew? . . . after she consumes her beverage. Eyes on the highway, a cautious driver, I manage to watch too as she replaces the coffee in the cup holder nearby before she resumes filing her nails in silence. I am gently fascinated by the process of Judy's ablutions, even though they are now so familiar.

To me she looks more like a hairdresser at this moment than a nursing administrator. It's not just the nail file she maneuvers skillfully in her hands, but the near perfection of her make-up, her stylish dark hair, coloured to fend off the grey, but still long and thick. And I still vaguely admire the lush, slim figure that has so far resisted the thickening most women of forty-six must endure. It strikes me then, in a bemused, faraway fashion, that I should desire this woman more often than I do. But "should" is a geographic term in the uneven, subjunctive geography of a man's life . . . another reference to travelling, I guess . . . the notion I should have gone left when I ended up

going right. There's a weedy familiarity sometimes obscuring the blooms in the garden of twenty years of marriage, but familiarity isn't the major issue. No, the major issue, Jan, is *you*. And it's never too early in the morning to allow myself to contemplate what awaits me in Temagami, the person who will be there when I arrive -- the most significant reason my marriage seems long and strange to me . . . like it was supposed to happen to someone else but happened to me by mistake -- the person in question being *you*.

I glance at my watch. It's drawing close to eight a.m. We're already zipping over the flat terrain in the Bonchere Valley west of Renfrew, the town falling back in the distance behind us, evaporating back there into the rest of an October morning crouched on its own horizon, halfheartedly glum, not quite willing to be sunny, but not dedicated in any way to remaining stubbornly cloudy.

Judy and I enjoy things in common, an inevitable coherence after two decades of marriage, I suppose. For one thing, neither of us is a morning person. Both of us emerge from our respective states of slumber almost against our will. Not until later, when we are at work, when our morning quota of coffee has been consumed, do we begin to communicate with the world in a way it appreciates. Which is why, this morning, as we make our way towards a distant Temagami, Judy is not yet awake enough to feel oppressed by the

silence I fall into whenever I'm behind the wheel. Soon, though, in less than an hour, I'll wager, she'll ask me why I'm not saying anything. She'll say, "*You're* being awfully quiet" or, if she's running low on her already small reservoir of patience, "You're not talking to me, Tommy." And the fact we're not talking will then become my fault. I'll say something about being sorry, mentioning I have things on my mind, before we gradually begin to converse. Then, shortly afterwards, the way married people do, we'll convince ourselves our halting conversation was actually spontaneous all along. Cowardice, I guess. Sometimes marriage itself is cowardly, depending on how much of yourself you feel you've lost and now seems irretrievable, how much of yourself you're too defeated to try to take back. Of course, I'd never be caught *saying* so.

I've explained to Judy in the past about the act of driving, though, and the silence that seems integral to covering vast distances behind the wheel. I've told her that driving, for me, is a solitary preoccupation. It gives a man time to think. In truth, driving for me is an opportunity to *brood*. I can call it reflection; I can call it rumination. But mostly it's the need to *brood*. And, considering where Judy and I are headed, considering *you're* going to be there when we arrive, *brood* is the operative word.

For nearly half of my life I've been keeping one big secret I haven't

mentioned to a soul. This secret has evolved into a veil worn over the face of even my most innocuous moments in life, moments of casual explanation, for instance, when I would prefer to be silent. Or moments when I want to feel less sorry for a wide variety of sins I have never even committed, yet feel compelled to apologize for anyway. My secret makes me feel constantly that I'm living only half of my life, the half that is an endless explanation to Judy of what only half of me actually is. That's what we do, I guess, after twenty years of marriage -- explain so much about our superficial selves . . . our likes and dislikes over food, hygiene, what domestic priority must be dealt with or not . . . yet admitting so little about our real substance, what we believe in philosophically, for instance, the inevitably troublesome human dilemma we know is buried deep inside our endless personal duality of whom we pretend to be and whom we actually are. Ironical when we must admit the self we present to the world has less personal dignity than the one we must keep to ourselves for fear of offending society's sensibilities. Amen and hallelujah, ain't *that* the fucking truth?

Still, I've told Judy so much about me over the past two decades. I just haven't mentioned anything about the real reason for my need to brood. I haven't mentioned anything about what feels like my *grandest mistake*. No, in twenty years of marriage, I haven't said a word about being in love with *you*.

“You must be tired,” Judy says as we wait for the light to change in downtown Eganville.

“Tired?”

“You came in late last night.”

“Only eleven.” The light turns green and I accelerate through the intersection, heading towards the long slope that will take me out of town.

“Eleven’s not late,” I say.

“It is when you’re getting up at five-thirty in the morning to go to Temagami.”

“I s’pose.”

“I thought you and David would miss this week. In view of Temagami, I mean.”

I shrug. “No real harm done. I’m feeling okay right now.”

Judy pulls down the sun visor and glances at herself in the mirror positioned there. “Tonight will tell the tale,” she says, removing a blemish from the corner of her eye with a now well-groomed fingernail.

“I guess so,” I reply.

Then, satisfied by either my response or what she has seen in the mirror, she flips the visor back into place.

I’ve known David Cruickshank longer than I’ve known Judy. He was the best

man at our wedding. We go out most Thursday nights for a couple of drinks, just him and me, to talk, to laugh, to pretend we've actually figured out how to sort out what's wrong with the world. During the summer, we team up for a week to go wilderness camping. David's probably my best friend, although I don't actually think about best and worst, where friendships are concerned. It's not the Olympics: it's not about awarding gold, silver or bronze. There's already too much defining of value based on winning and losing in our modern world. Where David is concerned, I just hang out with him on a regular basis and feel a better man for it afterwards.

To me, comfortable gratification is what friendship is all about: feeling better for the experience because you're spending time with someone who almost *never* expects you to compromise. And sometimes, not often, but now and then, I come away from time I've spent with David, if not inspired, at least aware that I glimpsed in the distance some vague, but large inspiration about life I'm fairly convinced I need.

I can't define this inspiration. But I like to think it's that famous, secret epiphany we all believe we deserve -- our romantic fate in life, standing there in tasteful neon, that is, just enough neon to get our attention -- the minute life's mundane elevator doors slide open, presenting us with our once in a lifetime opportunity to seize the moment like we've never seized a moment before.

I've known an epiphany like that, by the way. It makes me rare or fortunate, I guess. I *did* more or less seize the moment. Then, in the end, I *didn't*. Now I dream of another opportunity to seize the same moment once again, this time *permanently*.

"So what did you guys talk about?"

"Huh?"

"You and David. Last night. What's new in David's world?"

"Same old, same old," I reply. "He's working on a new book -- we talked about how *that's* going. Politics, of course. The newspaper business, of course. The Senators, of course. The NHL lockout. David's missing hockey. He wants us to go to a game, Jude, next year, if the league ever settles with the players."

"Both of us?"

"Of course. He sends his regards, as always. He wanted to know what you've been up to. I told him about the Temagami business, you know, why we're going there this weekend, the mystery it represents."

"What did he think of that?"

"He wants a report when we get back."

"Isn't that just like David? Everything's fodder for a novel, for David, isn't it?"

"Maybe," I reply. "But he was really quite interested, Jude. He thinks

the whole Temagami thing is fascinating. He speculated that your mother was up to something. He says it might even be ‘shocking.’”

“Yeah. Right. What did *you* say?”

“I told him I’d have to wait and see.”

Judy says nothing to this. Fascinating isn’t the word *she* would use to describe her dead mother these days. And as for our destination, no matter what happens over this elongated weekend, no matter what is ultimately decided, Temagami will remain a dirty word long into our respective futures. Judy won’t forget. For a couple of months now, Temagami has been pissing her off. Judy doesn’t forget the things that piss her off.

Maybe I shouldn’t have told her about David’s fascination with the mystery. Even after all this time, I’m not always entirely clear on Judy’s criteria about what can be talked about and what cannot, where our personal business is concerned. I can still get into trouble by talking too much. It’s not that Judy dislikes David or mistrusts his motives in some way. No, her major complaint about David is that he’s a decade older than we are. She thinks he’s stuck “back there” in time somehow -- unkempt, rebellious, a bad influence on me in some way, like he’s going to unwittingly push me off the tracks of conventional life, derailing my commitment to towing the company line, inadvertently mentoring me towards a life of deprivation and ruin, sensual, political, altruistic, or some combination of the three.

It hasn't happened in twenty years of marriage, but Judy remains vigilant, ever on her guard. I guess she supposes a man who's charmingly hapless can't help but be mere inches away from faltering on his obligations or recanting his practical convictions to chase some idealistic grail. At the very least, if David is fascinated by "the Temagami business," then I could be *too*. And *that* wouldn't do. These days, the wrench in Judy's life is Temagami. She's going to be out of sorts until Temagami is dealt with once and for all. Of course, I'd never be caught *saying* so.

I remember your mother's funeral, Jan. What affected me most was how empty of emotion it was. Everything took place with impeccable precision, the wake, the funeral, the burial in the Smythe plot. There was an army of black veils and hats. It didn't rain. No one said something they shouldn't have said. No one muffed a line. The ceremony went off without flaw. But no one wept. Your sister didn't weep. You didn't weep. Judy claimed to be in mourning for a couple of weeks afterwards but, except for the occasional crabby period, I didn't see any real evidence of sadness, and she didn't seem to want to talk about her loss. Everyone was convinced Gladys had led a wonderful life. And while she had fallen short of spending eighty years in this world -- she was seventy-nine -- she died peacefully in her sleep, without so much as a symptom of illness. No protracted ailment. No violence. No apparent pain. Her kind of worry-free death seemed appropriate somehow,

an elderly woman told me on the first night of the wake. Fixing me with a stern gaze, as if I wore an armband of heresy around the sleeve of my dark blue suit, she maintained Gladys's generosity to various charities during her life was enough to ensure a comfortable death. More or less because this was an argument I couldn't win, I mumbled something about Gladys's peaceful death reflecting a state of justice unusual in this world. But I felt dishonest about it later. And a little mean, perhaps.

Still, I remained dismayed that Gladys's daughters didn't weep. When our parents die after reaching an appropriate age, do we feel only relief? I wondered. I would like to ask you about death and relief, Jan. I couldn't ask Judy . . . Judy's a little like her mother when she is asked that kind of question . . . she makes up what she believes is a conventionally acceptable answer. But I'd like to ask *you* why you didn't cry at your mother's funeral. Because I believe you would answer me truthfully. You might even tell me about your feelings. Maybe answering my question would stimulate you finally to weep. I would want to hold you then. I would feel my need to hold you conniving breathlessly along my skin; sorry, but love always has a little sex in it, even when the tenderness is real. I know, eventually, you would believe in my tenderness. You would know it was the truth. In a state of mourning, perhaps, you and I would come to believe how necessary we are to one another.

Thinking about funerals and mourning and love, I just keep driving. I've travelled this route a number of times before, to camp in the wilderness in Algonquin Park. I've even camped north of North Bay a couple of times, but I haven't gone as far as Temagami. Still, when it comes to Algonquin, I'm familiar enough with the route; I could almost drive it by rote -- down the Queensway from Kanata, around the sprawling bend where Four-Seventeen reinvents itself into Highway 17, the left we've taken into Renfrew, then the right onto Highway 60, continuing through the Bonchere Valley, Eganville, Golden Lake, Barry's Bay, Whitney, and finally Algonquin Park. Yes, this area is my familiar stomping grounds, camping for the week with David or, by times, celebrating a weekend on my own, alone with my thoughts and some vague need to write some kind of restless epistle about the hope attached in a persistent way to how I feel about *you*. I like the wilderness. I sense that it likes *me*. I don't feel I keep you a secret in the woods in quite the same, propitious way I keep you a secret everywhere else. And being less secretive, less cowardly, I become more creative, like there's something important inside of me that should one day show itself, that one day should be *known*.

The wilderness and camping are definitely *not* pastimes Judy and I have in common. To allow her her due, she gave camping a try in the first five years of our marriage -- car camping mostly, suburbia in the woods, gravel

crunching under the wheels of heavy traffic, semi-inebriated laughter from around someone's campfire, the sound of a crying child wafting through the silence normally escorting midnight in the general direction of dawn, dealing with too many neighbours as confused as we were about the nature of displaced neighbourhoods and obligatory tolerance, all of these requirements transported prefab from the suburbs to the woods.

Judy tried *wilderness* camping once as well, but she didn't like it much -- a family of raccoons who noisily raided our campsite every other night and her incessant worry about the danger of bears, although I've never had any bears show themselves over the years. And then there was the box out in the woods, the bathroom facility she despised. These and other fears and discomforts eventually dissuaded her from wilderness camping forever.

I blame her decision mostly on the toilet amenities. There are two ways to look at the box when you're sitting out there in the woods, having your morning shit. You can gaze up into the sky and feel an extraordinary sense of freedom, or you can sit there terrified that you're exposed to passersby or bears, missing, for reasons of safety and familiarity -- actually longing for, I'm afraid -- the subtly-splashed, tinted tiles of your modern suburban bathroom. I tend towards the former, feeling by times a tremendous sense of personal freedom while I'm sitting on the box. Judy tended toward the latter because bowel movements in the great outdoors aren't civilized to her. Fair enough, I

said. Since then, she and I have learned to live with our differing views about residing in the cultural vacuum I believe is life in the suburbs and vacationing in the wilderness where I feel so at home. And I don't have to car camp any longer . . . I don't have to trade my urban suburbia for another one in the woods.

Since Judy's admission that she doesn't like camping, we've developed a workable compromise over our vacations. Judy enjoys resorts and beaches. In the winter we go south for a week or two -- Mexico, Cuba, Barbados, whatever we can best afford . . . I don't like Florida . . . there I draw the line -- and, in summer, we find a lodge somewhere, some hotel nestled in the woods. I get one week in the wilderness of Algonquin Park, usually with David who, after a couple of divorces, has been unencumbered for a number of years by any real need to compromise at vacation time. The week I go camping with David is the one Judy uses to visit friends and family in Toronto.

I suspect, when Judy and I retire -- she's six months older than me, and we'll pack in our working careers at relatively the same time -- if I still crave the great outdoors, she'll suggest a large recreational vehicle to travel Canada's many long highways in style, carrying all the modern conveniences in a large barge that scrapes its way under the tree branches, our home away from home, cell phone shrieking shrilly, e-mails arriving on time, a DVD player to view the latest hot release. Maybe, by then, I'll like this idea too.

Hard to say right now. Sixty-five years of age -- and the retirement that comes with it -- is still twenty years away. Judy handles the RRSPs. I leave our retirement in her capable hands. I don't really care right now what we'll be doing then. My one activity connected to retirement planning is the speed with which I mute the investment firm advertisements, on the rare occasions I watch television, resenting, the way I do, their not so subliminal promotion of greed, self-interest and mind-numbing security as human virtues. "David's influence," Judy sniffs when she notices me muting the sound in this way.

Funny, as I drive the remainder of the Bonchere Valley, how this setting can sadden me. Sometimes, as I drive through it, I imagine the valley as the tail of some scenic comet, dragged from place to place by a sightseer's spatial imagination, in a state of perpetual, but hopeless optimism that never truly held any basis in fact. It's as if the anticipated success of the valley, its potential when it was first settled by farmers and merchants, was based essentially on myth. I notice this each time I take this route towards Algonquin Park. And today being early October, even the spectacle of changing and falling leaves can't ameliorate a sense of sad and tired resignation this valley inspires in me. Like this valley and I are similar to one another, sharing the same mistakes, the same unrelenting regret.

I suppose even a beautiful memory is just a memory in the end. It's way back there, stuck in history, permanently uncompromised, a scab to be

picked at, someone's misdirected hope or lack of judgment. In this sense, I am the Bonchere Valley; the Bonchere Valley is me. Even on a warm autumn day, both of us give off some kind of barely discernible sense of tragedy because, in ways neither of us wish to actually define, we did not become what we were supposed to become. We did not ultimately do what we probably should have done. We failed in many ways, this valley and me, to become all that we could be.

Judy and I expect to be away for the better part of four days and three nights. We've taken Friday and Monday off from our respective jobs at Ottawa Civic Hospital and the Ottawa Citizen, to give us time to examine what awaits us in Temagami, to even enjoy ourselves if the opportunity presents itself, if we can find a solution to the Temagami dilemma in time to decide to relax. In terms of my rusting Maxima, *it is* a long drive -- Ottawa all the way to the woods around Temagami. That being the case, it wouldn't be a bad thing to enjoy ourselves a little, making lemonade out of the apparent lemon this unseen lodge near Temagami appears to be.

Especially after the process surrounding a trip like this, the rituals we develop over the years. Judy thinks I'm gifted when it comes to packing a car. So it was this morning that she carried out her share of the numerous bits and pieces of our luggage, the grocery bags of food stuffs and the mounds of bedding because the nights will probably be chilly, and set them on the asphalt

by the trunk of the car. While she was checking to see the stove was turned off, nothing was crawling up the shower curtain or the water heater hadn't sprung a leak, I worked my loading magic in our Kanata driveway, labouring away in the darkness, feeling like it was still the middle of the night, squeezing six tons of baggage into ten square feet of car trunk and childless back seat. It's a dubious gift, by the way, being able to pack a car. When the subject of inspired car packing comes up at your average party, it doesn't draw a crowd. I don't see why Judy mentions my packing as often as she does. After all, I have *other* talents. Of course I'd never be caught *saying* so.

"Jesus," Judy is saying for the umpteenth time. "Temagami, for God's sake."

"I know."

"I mean *what* was she *thinking*, Tommy? What could she possibly have intended?"

"I don't think we'll ever know," I reply with an irony I don't intend.

"Obviously not," Judy snaps, peeved at the apparent slight to her mother and her mother's death.

"Sorry," I say then. "I wasn't trying to be funny."

Mollified by my apology, my wife nonetheless falls silent again.

By then we're approaching Whitney on the eastern edge of Algonquin

Park. We're now driving through a moody series of sun showers falling to earth in crabby outbursts. I watch the cycle of these rants. I view a buildup of clouds just above the windshield tint, then watch the approach of the falling rain, which takes so long to arrive the sun breaks through again by the time the drops collide with the glass. Watching these exploding droplets against a sunny backdrop of Algonquin area autumn leaves improves my mood. I stop brooding for a time to enjoy the growing ecstasy I'm beginning to anticipate in the potential of the rest of this day, when we at last reach our destination.

I know what's bugging Judy. She doesn't like it when she doesn't understand what motivates people close to her. Over the years she's narrowed her definition of how people should behave. When they do something unexpected -- something outside her definition -- it puzzles her deeply, much moreso, for instance, than it would mystify *me*. Her dismay over the behaviour of your mother in the decade before her death is now so deep, she is resentful that we have to make this trip. Judy doesn't want to accept that Gladys might have been crazier at times than we ever realized. Now dead for more than six months, your mother continues to control, at least briefly, where Judy is going and why she is going there, not to mention how much money could be lost or gained after this early weekend Friday in an otherwise innocent October runs its course. Why, Judy wants to know, would her mother end up owning some rundown lodge somewhere on a lake in the Temagami area? And why, for

more than a decade, did she purposely keep the property secret from her children?

I'm not as surprised as Judy is about the mysterious lodge or the secrecy it represents. As far as I'm concerned, your family has always been secretive. A lot of families are, my own as well, I guess, although to a much lesser extent. For many, it's preferable keeping issues undisclosed than confronting them when they rear their ugly heads. If you wear thick-soled enough shoes, you can tread relatively unscathed over the lumpy issues you've swept under the carpet to avoid dealing with them in some way. I believe my family was more direct than the Smythes and in the end everyone knew where everyone stood. We've got nothing left to argue about, thanks to the curative passage of time. So it's strange, in my dealings with your family, how I've adopted *your* family's approach to being secretive, as a means to resist a satisfactory resolution to any troublesome issue. As if *your* family's approach to tribulation has overpowered what I learned dealing with my *own* family. But who's right and who's wrong? Who among us then is actually the outlaw? Is it me or is it them? Have *I* become the stranger or is it you Smythes?

Perhaps it's merely a matter of personalities. I think you need to be obstinate to prefer the complexity of keeping secrets over resolving conflict. As far as I'm concerned, Gladys Pinkster-Smythe was the manipulative mastermind behind her family's habit of keeping important matters and basic

human conflicts hidden away in the closet. She faked most of society's conventionally sentimental occasions in a conventionally appropriate way. She was polite rather than caring. She favoured platitudes and homilies to any kind of actual honesty. She preferred consideration to empathy, manners to real understanding. Everyone was expected to be well-behaved mostly; whether good behaviour was warranted or not rarely entered the equation. In my more honest moments, I never forget I didn't like your mother much. She made certain I didn't fit in well with her concept of her family. After all, perhaps Judy could have done much better in marriage -- there were times Gladys made me feel this way.

Now that the old lady is dead, I only have to contemplate her in the context of her daughter's surprise that she would keep secret a lodge she purchased near Temagami. I can keep to myself my conclusion that, at some point, secrecy becomes such a habit the need for secrecy itself develops into the most profound secret of all.

Maybe I don't have the right to be so critical. Maybe I'm just a hypocrite. While it's true I have only one secret, there's no denying it's a fucking lulu. That single secret is you. But I keep it so well concealed, I manage to keep it hidden even from *you*. I *think* so, anyway. I *hope* so, anyway.

Judy's been feeling her dismay about the mysterious, small resort in Temagami for the better part of three months, ever since the reading of the will. Over time, knowing we would have to travel some distance eventually to see the place, Judy's been transforming our destination into a monumental annoyance, just another in life's long list of aggravating excuses for angst that will occasionally block her path in life to the end. Life, for Judy, must be dealt with therapeutically. Judy's studied psychology. Most of life's developments only reinforce her belief in the need for analysis, hers or someone else's, or some combination of the two.

"I mean," she's saying now, as we enter Whitney and prepare to leave again just as quickly, "what are we supposed to *do* with the goddamn thing?"

"The lodge, you mean."

"Yes, the lodge. What do you do with a lodge located somewhere out in the woods in the middle of fucking nowhere?"

"Keep an open mind," I offer, my eyes glued to the explosive windshield display of a new sun shower, my right hand turning the windshield wipers on.

"Well, you heard the lawyer, Tommy. He says it's not in the best shape."

"Do we know how he knows what kind of shape it's in? I mean, when he said it was rough, I wondered how he knew."

“He’s a lawyer. It’s his business to know.”

“Or his business to *sound* like he knows. Who can figure out what a *Toronto* lawyer thinks is rough?”

“Yeah, yeah,” says Judy. “Always the critic. Has anyone ever told you you mountain men are snobs?”

The trouble is, preoccupied the way I am in anticipation of *you*, I haven’t been very interested during this long Friday morning drive about what kind of shape my mother-in-law’s secret resort is in. I’ve been pleasantly-unpleasantly brooding the way I always do when I am thinking of you. I’ve been considering once again the cosmic joke inside the question I’ve asked myself for years . . . what am I doing with Judy, when I should be with you? And why don’t you . . . the woman I’m convinced I love in a much more complete fashion than I love Judy . . . realize in some wondrous way that I ask myself this question so often in barbed and bloody vowels, in brutal equivocation? Why can’t you recognize it, see it for yourself? Am I so capable at hiding love from you? Or is it that you don’t believe love is *everything*, the way, God help my soul, *I* believe it is? Do you even realize *everything* is my personal definition of romantic love, a definition I can’t outgrow, no matter how hard I try? Do you have any idea you inspired this definition virtually from the moment I met you? Do you notice all this in me? Does it embarrass

you, if you do? Or am I just like Judy's version of my best friend, David Cruickshank . . . stuck somewhere in the past with a few precious moments in time . . . unable to limp towards the harsh reality of the present, an inertia inspired by my resistance to the way a dull-witted society transforms love -- and everything else it encounters or invents -- into another boring myth?

Ah, that's the thing about love, I guess. Failed love, anyway. One wants to transform it into a larger metaphor for life, comparing it to pentameterless poetry or ambulances with engine failure or gods with a cruel sense of irony, transforming love into another spiteful little joke of hope and futility from which life seems so often crafted. Sometimes, when thinking about you makes me bleak, I cannot escape the conclusion that most of us are two people in one, us and our shadows, inextricably bound, our three-dimensional selves only slightly favoured by the gods, our other selves, our shadow sides, dragged along in our wakes like chains, perpetual, clanking victims of metaphysical perfidy.

"What if the lodge *is* in good shape?" Judy is asking me now.

She's reaching back to tie her long, dark hair into a ponytail. Somehow, in a way I could never explain, her question seems more devious because she's working with her hair. Like I'm being duped into the commonplace, away from the hidden importance of her query, by the distraction of her ablutions. I suspect I've been gently ambushed before by this method of delicate

interrogation; Judy can be cagey.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“C’mon, Tommy. What if the resort has potential?”

“Well, if there’s potential in it, Greg will want to sell it. Right?”

Greg, your husband, our brother-in-law, is in real estate. Somehow, perhaps because I’m a journalist of an extremely liberal stripe, his dedication to his occupation of selling someone *else’s* hard work has transformed him into cliché in my mind. I can’t help it. I like him at times, I guess, but we don’t have much in common. He can talk about bad service in quality restaurants for hours, about his most recent purchase from some big box store somewhere, and about what is or is *not* a good investment seemingly endlessly. Fittingly, his best friend is a stock broker, not a reformed newspaperman turned novelist like *my* best friend. No, *his* best friend is another one of those people who buys and sells someone else’s vision. And your husband, in my opinion, is focused on amassing wealth in a way I can never be.

His opportunism, in itself, is not an insurmountable obstacle to our potential friendship, when you consider he’s my brother-in-law. I mean, my disapproval isn’t entirely *personal*. I try to keep separate from my love for you, his wife, the larger issues at the base of my disapproval. I prefer that my dislike is based on a revulsion I feel over excessive greed and material gain in the larger sense. I am repelled that material self-interest has become the

accepted paradigm in our social convention at this particular time in history. Greg's greed, as a perfect example of our times, is what makes it difficult for us to be friends. Because our current cultural period considers self-interest a virtue, Greg has "right" on his side and I dare not say a word in opposition. Any objection I could muster would emerge from my lips as some pathetic, idealistic squeak. No one listens to a rebel these days unless money can be made from it.

That's the thing about living in our society. In the game of cultural ideals, by the end of the ninth inning, it's always society ten, yours truly, Tom McNamara no score. Society comes out of the dugout with all its human components braided together like rope. My own small voice is one-pound test fishing line. In the end, I'm wrong only because I'm tiny, a mere individual. Conventional society is right because its vast majority of *tinies* have adhered in large enough numbers to make it strong and relentless, to give it majority rule

"Of course we're going to want to sell it."

"Sorry, Judy," I say. "What'd you say?"

"I said, 'Of course we're going to want to sell it.'"

"Yeah. I know."

"You need a new car. Maybe we could pay off our mortgage. I'm suggesting we could make good use of the money. We'll want to sell the lodge

for sure. I just hope it's not so dilapidated we have to *give* it away."

I do not comment, distracted by an unexpected twinge of anticipated excitement. We've entered Algonquin Park now and our arrival at this wilderness explosion of autumn colour, combined with a whimsical notion -- that Gladys' resort will be beautiful and welcoming and we will all want to keep it -- invigorates me. My imagination taxies down an unexpected runway and soon begins to soar. What if *you* want to keep the resort? What if *you* share my whimsy that a wilderness lodge, owned free and clear, could represent an opportunity to change direction in life? What would happen then? It's an unlikely scenario, I know. But it's enjoyable imagining it, you and me together, rejecting a world that places mere money too near the top of the list of our various human needs. You and me resisting convention together, sharing the courage of our convictions. The *end* of cowardice.

It was the Smythe family lawyer who stressed that the lodge in Temagami is owned free and clear. This bonus was discussed a number of times when we gathered to figure out the terms of the inheritance. To me, the news there was no mortgage seemed somehow part of the ignominious quality of the day, like debt has become conventional and mortgage-free resorts reflect some kind of shocking infamy, a rebellion against accepted tastes or mores.

Greg was there that day. We *all* were. "Taxes paid up?" he asked.

The lawyer, an obese, balding man named Tremblay, with an oily scalp and red, capillaried cheeks, nodded soberly.

“Well, that’s something, I guess,” Judy muttered.

“Yes,” said the lawyer.

Everyone seemed in a state of mild shock that afternoon. Conversation was halting and gruff. For me, the state of shock pervading the room wasn’t legitimate -- I don’t care enough about property and what is to be or not be inherited. I admit only that I *wanted* to care at this moment, but I was forced to realize I was only out in sympathy, for Judy, for Greg, for you.

We were seated that afternoon in various chairs and a love seat in what your mother used to call her sitting room, at the western end of the large house in Rosedale. This place had intimidated me ritually over the many years of my marriage to Judy, but I felt recovered from this intimidation that day, now that someone else would soon own the place. But oh the long, bemused silences that day. Even out only in sympathy, I could feel the oppression in this room . . . the white stucco walls moving in sinister fashion toward us . . . I swear it felt this way . . . everyone trying to deal with the news that the Smythe inheritance would be only a fraction of what some among us had anticipated.

Judy was angry, you’ll recall. So was Greg. He kept suggesting that his late mother-in-law had erred grievously over the years when she hadn’t come to him for financial advice.

“Mother would never have done that,” you said gently.

“Well, she *should* have,” snapped Judy.

It was now clear to everyone that the home in Rosedale was deeply mortgaged. Although left in comfortable circumstances by your father years before, a man I had never known, we discovered Gladys Pinkster-Smythe had repeatedly borrowed against the equity of the home to live the kind of lifestyle to which she had become accustomed. A housekeeper and maid, a few favourite charities, extravagant clothing, lavish gardening and renovation projects, all of these preoccupations over the years had eaten up much of the equity in the house. And then there was the resort property she had purchased in northern Ontario, to everyone’s shock and dismay.

I don’t think about inheritances much. To people like me, they’re more important to those who leave their property behind, less so to the inheritor. I tend to prefer everyone live forever. I even feel enough spite over the issue to imagine delightedly the economic crisis immortality would unleash on humankind -- we’d have to share our wealth without requiring its recipients to outlive us in some way. I’ve never respected human beings who seek to control their families from beyond the grave. Bottom line to me? Let’s all just live as long as we can and never mind who gets what when we eventually die.

But Judy and Greg were angry that day when they learned net proceeds from the sale of the house might leave less than one hundred and fifty

thousand dollars -- and there were still some outstanding bills.

“None to do with the property in Temagami, though?” Greg asked, needing still more confirmation, restraining himself, already switching focus in fact from the lack of opportunity reflected by this property in Rosedale to the possibilities that might exist in a sale of property in the back woods of Temagami.

“None,” replied Tremblay. “Your mother-in-law treated the northern property as a priority. There are no outstanding obligations.”

Which is all part of the mystery now over what awaits us when we arrive several hours from now. Not only was ownership of this property a secret, but it never occurred to Gladys, even towards the end of her life, to mortgage it with the same recklessness with which she mortgaged her Toronto home. I wonder about this sometimes, although I wonder privately. What made the property in Temagami so much more important to her than her home in Rosedale? Why was it never mentioned to her children? I like to imagine -- because I am prone to these kinds of fancies -- that there is another secret to be uncovered which might help it all make sense. I would personally delight in uncovering over the next few days some spicy, little network of reasons for Gladys’s duplicity. I would love to learn your mother wasn’t so righteous after all, that there is a skeleton in her closet that will put things to rights between us now that she is dead.

Of course, I'd never be caught *saying* so.

Traffic in Algonquin Park is light. The few passing cars there are move along the highway with unusual patience, the kind of polite calm that will evaporate quickly when the autumn colour weekend traffic arrives later today. The people up from Toronto will bring with them their ritual need for hurry and maintain its urgency until mid-afternoon Sunday. Judy and I will escape most of this. It's only Friday morning, still relatively early in the day, and we are making good time.

But my stomach has begun to grumble. I feel the need for a break from the driving. "You getting hungry?" I ask.

"What time is it?"

We both glance at our watches. Barely eleven.

"Kind of early for lunch," Judy says.

"I'm starved."

Judy has made tuna salad sandwiches which she assembled last night while I was out with David. Normally I do most of the cooking, most of the meal preparation . . . I enjoy the art of food while Judy has no interest in it . . . and normally we would eat out to break up such a long drive. But Judy has been preoccupied with arriving in Temagami as soon as possible after you and Greg get there. Because you live in Toronto, she is convinced you do not have

as far to drive. In view of my side trip through Algonquin Park, my harmless self-indulgence, she is unknowingly right.

“Do you want your sandwich now?” she asks me, reaching down towards the floor and the small thermos bag positioned there.

“No, I’d like to stop at a picnic table, Jude. The weather’s good now. I wouldn’t mind a few minutes break.”

It’s true. The weather has improved. Somewhere behind us in the middle of the park, the sun showers have fallen behind. A final cloudburst, one more steep grade when it seemed we quite literally drove into a low-lurking cloud, then we came out the other side into sunshine so apparently permanent it seemed never to have rained at all.

“If I’d known we were going to stop, I wouldn’t have made sandwiches,” Judy says. “I thought we could eat in the car. That was the idea, Tommy.”

I sigh. “Okay.”

“Then we can stop at that Tim Horton’s in Huntsville. A pee break, dessert, if you want.”

“Okay. Whatever.”

“Do you want your sandwich now?”

I nod. “My stomach’s growling,” I murmur.

She locates my sandwich and unwraps it, placing it on its plastic

“plate” on my right thigh. “Don’t be petulant,” she remarks gently, when I glance at it there in ill-concealed hostility.

I nod. I eat in a meek, chagrined silence, polishing the food off quickly, balling up the plastic wrap and handing it back to her, all the while driving through Algonquin Park in nearly perfect autumn sunshine that beckons seductively to me. I am possessed by you and this setting, and by some childish, sulky disappointment that has begun to ache in my belly.

“Tommy?”

“Yes?”

“You aren’t going to like this place, are you?”

“Huh?”

“The lodge. You aren’t going to like it, are you?”

“Well, Jeez, Judy, I don’t know. How would I know what I’m going to like?”

“It’s out in the woods, that’s all.”

“And?”

“I know how Kanata sometimes makes you crazy. I know how much you like the woods.”

Her observation is accurate, of course. I don’t like strip malls and shopping malls, fast food restaurants, traffic, cheap, decorative fountains, crowds, ringing cell phones, or minimum wage earners wrapping their tongues

around, “How may I serve you?” then ending the experience with, “Have a nice day.”

“What would you have them say?” Judy’s asked me more than once.
“What’s better than ‘have a nice day?’”

“See yuh? Take care? Bye-bye? Thanks? Nice to meet you?”

Judy just shakes her head at my obstinacy.

I rented a DVD the other night from a video chain store. As I was paying for the rental, I was asked if I was interested in purchasing stuffed versions of the two annoying animals they feature in their television commercials.

“No thank you,” I replied.

Driving home, though, I kept wondering how two stuffed animals get to be elevated by some corporate marketing department to the status of cultural icons. Do we, as modern humans, actually succumb to this kind of vapid marketing prowess? Do we actually care or are we merely numb? I imagined asking these questions of the young whippersnapper who’d offered the stuffed animals to me. I imagined myself suggesting she tell the corporation she works for that I’ll let them know when I want to buy a copy of their stupid marketing gimmick. But I knew she wouldn’t understand what my complaint was actually *about*. And in the end, I remembered that sometimes I just want to be left alone with my own version of myself, unassailed by a society that will

ultimately be remembered in history chiefly for the vacuity in its consumerism. Of course, I'd never be caught *saying* so.

"Tommy?"

"Huh?"

"Where do you go, Tommy, when you go away like that?"

"Huh? Whaddyuh mean?"

"Just now. We were talking and then you were gone."

"Sorry, Jude," I say, hastily covering my tracks. "I was thinking the suburbs make me crazy but I don't think it's fair to nail poor Kanata with the entire wrap."

"You're going to like the lodge, though, aren't you? Just to spite me."

Her supposition surprises me. "Judy, for God's sake, what difference does it make what I like? Gladys wasn't *my* mother. What happens to the place is up to you and Jan. Not me. Not Greg. *You* and *Jan*. Maybe I'll like the place and maybe I won't. Either way, it isn't going to matter. I'll support you and Jan and what you decide. End of story."

Chagrined by my outburst, she doesn't say anything for a long moment. Then, "Tommy?"

"Yeah?"

"Even after twenty years. . . ."

"Yeah?"

“ . . . There are things about you I’ll never understand. There are things about you that are pretty fucking weird.”

“I know,” I admit with what I hope is a placating smile. “All part of the rewards, my sweet. You wouldn’t want me to be dull, would you?”

To make amends, no doubt convinced of my innocence, she reaches over and pats me on the thigh. I squeeze her hand a moment. Just keeping the peace, just endorsing her verdict.

“How was your sandwich, Tommy?”

“Excellent,” I reply.

Judy calls me Tommy, but you have always called me Tom. I remain convinced I stopped being Tommy twenty years ago, the day *you* first called me Tom. In my mind, Tom is whom I’ve been ever since. I have become, in so many ways, what you inspired me to become such a long time ago. It’s just one of the reasons I seem to belong so irrevocably to you.

Of course, I’d never be caught *saying* so.....