

**DANCE HALL ROAD**

Also by the author

*The Doubtful Guests*

*Bending at the Bow*

*Magic Eight Ball*

# DANCE HALL ROAD

MARION DOUGLAS



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Edited by Catherine Lake

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For my parents, Anna and Stuart Douglas.

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Gillian Rodgerson for their editorial suggestions  
and helpfulness.

*This morning, in history class, a photograph of an electric chair had fallen out of Adrian's textbook. He'd briefly lent the book to Jimmy Drake Junior and that, of course, explained everything. Jimmy hadn't needed it, he had his own textbook, but, as he said, or alleged, pages ninety-seven and ninety-eight had been torn out so could he quickly take a look at Adrian's to make sure he wasn't missing anything too important? Because of tomorrow's test?*

*"Sure," said Adrian, the same way he said okay or fine if asked to roll up his sleeve for a vaccination, which made him think, too bad there was no immunity from James Drake Junior. Not that Adrian was so childish as to think in terms of infectious cooties or any of the other maggotty insects capable of settling in nests of unwashed hair, but this was Ontario and there were rabid dogs and foxes and bats and therefore why might there not be the occasional rabid high school student? There had been some visible flecks of froth on Jimmy Drake's lips the day he gave his expository speech and it was common knowledge he was afraid of the water and couldn't swim an inch. Not one inch.*

*Hydrophobia, Adrian said in a whisper to the back of Jimmy's greasy head, just to see if he'd flinch but Jimmy turned around with such speed and malevolence, Adrian, to his own amusement, became the flincher. And ha ha, he*

thought, *The Ruffled Flax High Flincher*, a new type of bird species discovered right here in the pointless town of Flax.

"Thanks, then, here you go," said Jimmy, his face a bad actor's imitation of gratitude as he passed Adrian the book in a not-entirely-shut condition calculated to allow the picture to fall out and flop, image side up, on the brown, unwaxed and, in Adrian's opinion, probably haunted history classroom floor. Adrian had no doubt the photograph was for him, the message being, if my dad, Jimmy Drake Senior, has to be in the slammer, at the very least, Adrian Drury, you should go to the electric chair.

Jimmy and his dad had electric chairs and capital punishment as a hobby. Last summer they'd gone to look at a chair in Florida and taken pictures of it the way other people photograph monuments or rock formations. They thought Canada should bring back the chair, which showed you how misinformed they were, Canada never having had the chair, only the noose. Then, in February, when it was time for expository speeches in English class, despite his own dad being in jail for assault with a deadly weapon, Jimmy chose to do a talk on capital punishment as a deterrent. If only they could just bring back the chair for everyone who even thought about killing somebody—for no good reason, that is, Jimmy said, slowly and with emphasis—or at least force them to look at pictures of people being fried, make them look up close so they could see the sparks melting their eyes and so on, until Mr. Rigg interrupted to tell Jimmy to please get back to his main thesis point because there were still two more speeches to go that day. And Jimmy did return to his point, which appeared to be—no, was explicitly stated as—some people (obviously not his own proven-guilty dad) deserved to be dead. They think

they're innocent but they're not. They start a chain of events and before you know it, somebody's dead and somebody's in jail and usually it's the wrong person, Jimmy concluded, looking, for his finale, somewhat dimly at the three- to four-desk area surrounding Adrian.

Adrian would call his sister Rose tonight, long distance to Toronto, and tell her about the picture, and she would say, Adrian, it's Jimmy Drake for god's sake, he's a complete jerk. By uttering the words "for god's sake," Rose could reduce the importance of any person or person's behaviour by many factors of ten. She had the worry capacity of a duck and could simply shake her feathers and propel worries on many trajectories from her head, like droplets of water. Even other people's worries could be sent sailing into the surrounding air, grass, and tree limbs. And along with her duck emotions, Rose had the genius capacity of a migratory bird, always having the very much larger, continent-sized picture of any situation stored inside a very small portion of her relatively bulky brain. Like a goose or a trumpeter swan, Rose was the world's leading expert on when and where to go. Not only that, as she made her decision to fly the coop, she was admired by others, most likely watching with binoculars, holding their breath: Oh, look, there she goes. And thus, Rose was in Toronto enjoying early entrance to university while Adrian languished in Flax, walking home from school with a colour photograph of an electric chair in his hand.

Now he holds it close for another look, queasy with Drake-o-phobia as Randy Farrell, Adrian's former best friend would have called it. Drake-o-phobia: a general disgust with all the belongings or interests of Jimmy Drake Junior. Here was this picture, a belonging, which represented an interest,

and Adrian stopped right there to give himself an all-over shudder, a shudder so violent he could have detached his own ghost from himself if he happened to tear a couple of the wrong ligaments. Not so much because of the picture or its belonging to Jimmy but because Adrian was starting to think maybe now Jimmy voiced the majority opinion, and maybe that opinion was justified, many if not all of the people of Flax being more intelligent than Adrian. Maybe he should go to the electric chair for the events he may have caused; maybe he should save the judicial system the trouble and build his own chair in the basement from parts of his old electric train set: line a metal chair with pieces of track, plug it in, put on some wet clothes from the washing machine, stick his feet into a bucket of water, sit down and throw the switch. His father, George Drury, the dentist and also Canada's dullest man, would find him charred and smoking and soon the entire town of Flax would know and there would be further talk of reeling from another adolescent tragedy. That's what Flax had been doing, reeling, which if looked up in a dictionary meant to sway or rock under a blow, or, to sway about in standing or walking.

Don't kid yourself, Adrian, they wouldn't reel. That's that, they would probably say, and good riddance; now we can finally return to normal. As long as Laura Van Epp came to his funeral, Adrian thinks and seconds later concludes that if he is not going to the chair at least that thought and any subsequent thoughts about Laura Van Epp should go to a type of frying pan for unacceptable wants and wishes. An electric frying pan. You'd think he'd learn.

Adrian puts the picture in his pocket and carries on to Flax's main street, Huron Drive, which is precisely and ex-

actly the same as it always is: cars making two or three stabs at parallel parking in front of the Royal Bank, people walking expectantly toward a two-for-one cereal sale at Pond's IGA or standing outside the drug store holding a bag of fresh pills. The only difference is: most are wearing jackets because even though it's May, it's the kind of May you think has put on the brakes and is reversing into April or even March. So the cold breeze has them a little more awake than usual and moving a little faster than the habitual Flaxseed shuffle, as Rose's best friend, Anastasia Van Epp—Laura's sister (there he was thinking about Laura again)—would call it. Flaxseed as in hayseed. Anastasia can always come up with the best ideas because, as she once told Adrian, of her AB blood type, the bloodiest of all blood types and therefore able to carry more oxygen more quickly to the brain. Adrian believed this for many years, which was an example of Anastasia's ability to use her ideas to oppress others. She was like a regime you might study in history.

Adrian stands like he often does now on the street, experiencing the adriftness of having no clear-cut friends. He assumes a post in front of Lalonde's one-star restaurant as if he might be waiting for someone and then sees Maddy Farrell hobbling toward him and worries that people, including Maddy, will think he's waiting for her. Adrian could very easily avoid Maddy but some part of him, a cross-section of his feet showing a vacuole or two of courage, decides to stand right there in front of Lalonde's and wait. Maddy's likely going to the bank to deposit some fish eggs or whatever they use for currency in East Flax and that is fine, that is nothing to worry about. Adrian has no legitimate reason to dislike or fear her. All she ever did was report to Randy, who reported

to Adrian via a handwritten note, what that old asshole Alfred Beel said which would one day be engraved on Adrian's tombstone when he died, which mercifully would be soon. And that epitaph would be: I really lay the blame at the feet of that Drury boy. A gentleman would never have treated a lady like that.

That's what Beel, the old goat who lived at an impasse, at the end of a road way out in the country not even the snowplows could bother with, said to Maddy who told her brother who passed it on to Adrian a few days before Randy's unusual brain advised him to stop talking and switch desks with Jimmy Drake Junior. And this had certainly led to many ramifications, as Mr. Rigg the history teacher liked to say, over the past five months, including today's gift of the photograph.

Maddy's getting closer, hobble, hobble, hobble on her shattered leg—also now directly or indirectly the fault of Adrian Drury who wants to know why she hasn't gotten rid of the crutches yet, do the Farrells not take her for her treatments? She's supposed to be getting treatments, everybody says, because of her shattered leg: shattered is the word everyone uses, as if they all looked up broken or shot-at in the thesaurus and found there in bold letters the only possible synonym. Her leg is shattered and as a result people feel sorry for her; they think she has suffered enough and probably never had anything do with what happened to Cheryl Decker. Another town-of-Flax phrase: what happened to Cheryl Decker. So Maddy's still hobbling but Adrian will not accept any blame for that: Maddy is hobbling because the Farrells are not the type to go for treatments although Adrian wonders, if that family were to undertake treatment, where would they begin? Each and every one required treatment: Randy for his brain problem

and Angel for her sluttish inclinations and Frog for having the name of an amphibian. Yes, the whole entire family needed treatment so taking Maddy for her calisthenics or whatever might open up a whole can of treatment worms.

And ha ha. Adrian laughs to himself and enjoys his own thinking even if no one else does in this humourless town of Flax and that is why he is lonely and willing to talk even to Maddy Farrell on her incriminating crutch. No one except his ex-friend Randy Farrell enjoys Adrian's thinking, which he describes to himself as neither highbrow nor lowbrow but simply brow. Randy appreciates Adrian but—apart from passing him the note with the Beel quotation about laying the blame—has not spoken to him since November 8, 1970 for reasons Randy could no doubt explain with his crazy, unfathomable logic as having to do with the Tamarack Township dump and licorice pipes and manta rays hiding out in Minnow Lake. And Adrian realizes maybe he misses Randy's untreated thinking more than the other way around and this is a brain jolt, like getting the drift after the English exam, after listening to one or two smart girls talk, that you missed the entire point of the main essay question and can already visualize the mark, 1/15, in the foolscap margin, sarcastic red question marks above "What is your point?"

Adrian grins at Maddy, an unnatural grin but it will have to do and she says hi. Adrian asks how's it going and Maddy says it's going okay and her leg is getting better even though it doesn't look like it much. She leans the crutches against the brick wall of Lalonde's and shifts her weight to the unshattered leg.

That's good, Adrian says and thinks of asking about basketball and going to the States but concludes that would be

tactless and says so to himself. That's the l.d. in him, the learning disabled portion requiring a cop of thinking and talking in there, some Jerome Limb-type constable saying or more likely yelling, don't say that you dumbass Drury, don't even think about saying that.

"How's Rose liking university?" Maddy asks and Adrian tells her she says most of the early entrance people are super-serious so it's not much fun but she's glad she went.

"She's got a phone number if you want to..."

"Nah, that's okay. My mom's not that keen on long distance."

"Yeah, my dad too. After five minutes of talking to Rose he's yelling, this is long distance you know, as if long distance is a very rare kind of precious metal with only five or ten ounces left in the solar system."

Maddy laughs a puff-of-air type laugh Adrian recognizes from conversations he has had with teachers and he gets more courage and asks, "What's up with Randy?" then, as a second question, "Anyway?"

"I don't know," says Maddy, looking away to indicate she does know something, she knows at the very least about the desk-switching with Jimmy Drake Junior. "He's always been a bit funny in the social skills department. I mean, he can be mad for three solid months, then start talking again. He did that to me once, actually set an amount of time. It's kind of like his arrangements."

"Yeah, Randy and his arrangements. Remember how last year he arranged all those yellow and black gumballs in rows to make the Bruins win the cup? And then he sent a letter to Bobby Orr telling him about the gumballs and Bobby Orr sent him a picture of himself."

“He’s trying to get Montreal to win this year but he’s not using the gumballs. Some other mysterious system in his room, maybe with red licorice.”

“I wonder what,” Adrian says.

Maddy shrugs and looks ready to leave.

“But, this has been more than three months now, though.” He doesn’t want her to leave, would even consider having a Coke with her in Lalonde’s restaurant but what would that look like?

“Maybe it’s a six-month plan,” Maddy says.

Adrian is uncomforted by this thought. Despite Randy’s appreciation of Adrian’s brow-level thinking, this much is clear: he blames Adrian not for what happened to Cheryl, but for Maddy’s leg. Hence the note. Because, just like Alfred Beel, Randy laid the blame at the feet—the healthy, fully functioning feet—of that Drury boy.

He watches Maddy as she reaches for her crutches and organizes herself for the trip to the bank. “Yes, that’s likely what he’s thinking,” Adrian says. “That’s how he operates, for sure.”

“Yes, it most definitely is,” agrees Maddy’s head atop her six-foot self. She resumes hobbling and heads off without saying good-bye.

“See you,” says Adrian. He might as well go home. He’s feeling a little woozy, to use George Drury the dentist’s term. He’ll go home where there’s a bit more oxygen than here on Huron Drive with all the cars and other lungs. Some days he thinks there might be a general shortage of oxygen in this town. Sometimes, like now, he thinks of Flax as a very large plastic bag fastened around his neck, containing a finite number of breaths.



Adrian called this the beginning, the last day life was normal. He and Randy were floating, at a thirty-five degree tilt, on the warm, bald plywood of the ski jump, Minnow Lake rippling beneath them as if a big fish heart on the lake bottom kept pushing the water along in little beats. Nothing appeared to be different. On the east edge of the lake sat rickety East Flax made up of the Farrells' dusty store, the closed-down mill where kids broke in sometimes to have parties, and a few little houses like Russell Hansen's that seemed made for short people, the way they sat too close to the damp earth. East Flax houses didn't have basements. Even the public dock had a forlorn look since somebody in the Ministry of Natural Resources decided to outlaw motorboats on Minnow Lake, causing everyone with enough money to own a boat to go to Blue Lake instead or further up the road to Lake Huron. Nobody understood the government's decision so Adrian had suggested to Randy that maybe they used a formula of not much depth times not much width divided by old exposed stumps plus mercury poisoning equals no motorboats.

Very funny, Randy had said, except there's no mercury, how would there possibly be mercury? Randy thought it might be that this proved there really was a giant manta ray living somewhere amongst the reeds, and the motorboats disturbed its habitat. Whatever the reason, East Flax was now a tourist ghost town with

only the dance hall up on the so-called escarpment exuding what you might call architectural confidence.

The only thing that made this day different was it was the day after the day Jimmy Drake Junior and his dad got back from their trip to Florida to see the electric chair. No one in Flax or Mesmer or even crazy East Flax would have climbed into a car the summer of 1970 and driven two thousand miles in the overcooked American heat to see an electric chair except for the Jimmy Drakes, Junior and Senior. Senior Drake had a sister living in Gainesville and her husband knew somebody who knew somebody who could get them inside.

Now they were back with pictures, and already Jimmy Junior was over at Beel's property shooting cans. Beel told him he could—I have standing permission, Jimmy Junior says. The pop of the gun carried across the water but less sinister than usual. Maybe the humidity slowed the sound and mushroomed it, as if it were coming out the other side of their eardrums.

Randy said, "He came into the store around noon and he was all puffed up with his big news. How he sat in the actual chair with a sponge on his head because that's what they put on you to conduct the electricity. His head was almost glowing like a light bulb with his important new opinion. 'I wish we had the death penalty in Canada' he says to the assembled crowd of my mom and me. If Flax was a person he'd cause it to have a seizure."

Randy had epilepsy and had been educated by his nerve doctor on the uses of electricity in the human

mind, the role of lesions, the chaos of too many plugs and not enough outlets. Adrian had seen the effects with his own eyes: Randy's body out of control on the gymnasium floor, trying to throw its own self to another location as if it were an Olympic sport, the human body shot put.

"I'd have to agree with that," Adrian said. Randy's seizure talk was the one topic he never argued, not wanting to antagonize him and trigger a high-voltage event in what was probably a low-voltage brain.

"Jimmy Junior's got way too much charge in him," Randy went on. "If he stood in the lake we'd probably get electrocuted on this ski jump, even despite its being made of plywood. And the boat's metal. Keep your feet away from it," he said, suddenly agitated and mock serious.

"It does kind of seem to be trying to get us," Adrian said. Powered by ripples and wind, Russell Hansen's leaky rowboat had managed to climb the jump a few inches, thinking it might like to join them, thinking nobody ever asked it if it wanted to be a boat. Two rusted coffee cans washed around in the stern clattering against one another illustrating some law of physics pertaining to listlessness in objects.

Randy sat up now and asked, "Have you ever noticed on the map of southern Ontario how we're completely surrounded by water, how the Great Lakes are like a monster chain around us? If somebody got the idea to put thirty or forty high powered electrical cables into one of them, who knows what would happen? They're all hooked together and underneath us there's

the water table, which is more or less like a circulatory system, and in some places there's got to be one or two veins a little too close to the surface. So I imagine with all that electricity in the lakes and the water table, every once in a while some innocent bystander could get zapped by a random conduction through wet mud, especially if you happened not to be wearing shoes."

"I don't think Jimmy Drake Junior's got the capacity for that much charge."

"I didn't say Jimmy Junior; I said a bunch of high powered electrical cables."

"Well, that's what you meant." Then, sitting up with a start, "Hey, hey, grab the boat," Adrian said. "That was almost a wave there. Wonder where it came from? Maybe one of those springs over in Turtle Bay farted it out. Hey, I've got an idea. Tie the boat to your foot. Why did we never think of that before?"

"Maybe it's the special ed. in us," Randy offered.

"Speak for yourself, Farrell."

There went the gun again. "Funny how we never hear the sound of a tin can falling. Maybe he always misses."

"Or maybe like Mr. Felske said in English, if a tin can falls in the forest and there's nobody there to hear it, did it really fall?"

"Yeah, but we're here to hear it, which is not far from the forest."

"We're not *in* the forest, however," Randy said, wrapping the soggy rope around his ankle. Mission accomplished, he lay down, hands behind his head, armpits exposed. Adrian glanced, shimmied closer to

his side of the jump, and asked: “Have you ever noticed how Jimmy Junior’s so-called goatee actually looks like it’s made of armpit hair, not beard hair? Like there was some kind of horse-up there?”

Randy laughed. “Yeah.” Then said, “Hey, listen.”

Adrian heard nothing, a red-winged blackbird, a dog from so far away it sounded trapped underground. Nothing.

“Don’t you hear that thump, thump, thump? Listen.”

Adrian listened. “You can’t make your ears hear things they can’t hear, you know. You can’t open and shut them like eyes.”

“Oh, I did not know that Professor Drury. Just listen from up in the dance hall.”

Adrian turned his mind to the dance hall, the cliff they called an escarpment, the way the earth hung open, as if it were a big cut of meat. Then he heard it. Thump, thump, thump. “Okay. I hear it.”

“That’s Maddy practicing up in the dance hall. Basketball.”

“That was the object of the hearing test? To listen to Maddy practicing basketball?”

“Well, she’s good.”

“It’s hard to tell that from a ski jump. Anyway, I already knew that.”

“Fine,” Randy said, shrugging his pink shoulders. He didn’t tan, went directly to burn, a symptom of his problems Adrian thought, his multitude of East Flax problems. Adrian could overlook most of them in exchange for passing the time on this ski jump. He loved

floating, loved the sound of the oars creaking in their oarlocks and nothing to look at but sky, which today was reminding him of his own paintings from elementary school, entirely blue because you were too lazy to add clouds.

“Do you ever wonder why your sisters are so different?” Adrian asked. “Cora’s so perfect and Maddy’s so not?”

“Mmmm. Yes and no.”

“I guess Cora comes from the Angel side and Maddy’s from the Frog side,” Adrian said.

Silence from Randy, interrupted by one last crack from the gun. Then Beel’s roaring voice, “Okay, you can take it home now.”

“I think he just lets Jimmy shoot on his property so he can yell at him to go home,” Randy said.

“But you know what I mean,” Adrian said, “about the Frog side. Not that Maddy looks much like your dad but there are ways she looks more like a guy than you do.”

“So what’s your point?” Randy asked, annoyed.

Adrian gave no reply. This was not a day for fast talk. This was the kind of summer day so summery bulrushes got tired of holding themselves together and silently exploded into white, seedy fluff.

“I guess my point is it’s interesting how different two sisters can look.”

“Well, that’s not much of a point,” Randy said, waving a black fly away. “Anyone with even a kindergarten level of genetics can tell you there’s billions of ways the genes can come together. Look at you and

your sister Rose. She's got black hair and pale skin and you've got pale hair and dark skin. How do you explain that?"

"But I look like a guy and Rose looks like a girl."

"Well, congratulations."

"Fine, fine, I'll drop it. But only if you tell me about your dad again."

"That's such an old story."

"Pleeease." Adrian knew Randy liked telling it.

"All right," Randy sighed in fake exasperation, "but this is it for the summer. No more times this summer."

"Agreed," said Adrian. "I won't ask again until September twenty-first."

Three, four, five little ripples and then Randy began. "Long ago," he said, "and far away, they used to call my dad the frog-swallower."

Adrian rolled onto his stomach. "And why was that?"

"Because," Randy caught a deer fly hovering above his chest, smashed it into the plywood beneath his flattened palm, "because he swallowed a SINGLE frog once on a dare. Then he got a reputation for swallowing frogs all over the place. So he had to swallow a second one at the Blue Lake dance hall once. Then people started saying that frog went through him and came out the other end live, which did not happen. Then people made up a story about some new line of brown frogs related to the one that supposedly came out my dad's rear end. It was all made up. Anyway, it was because of my dad's reputation as a frog-swallower

that my mom, the former Angel Cobb, married my dad and as a result, I am here today.”

“That’s a good story. I never get tired of it. It makes me feel at peace with the universe.”

“I know. You’ve told me that,” said Randy, scraping fly guts from his hand.

A jet trail formed straight overhead, one end just now becoming a little ragged. No sound though, which Adrian loved; jet trails with no sound, so far away they couldn’t be bothered. He liked to imagine people five miles high in a silver capsule of quiet, and sky brighter than down here, blue like you would dye the sky if you could, give it a bit more jazz.

“I think Jimmy Junior has gone home,” Randy said.

“Yeah, I noticed the air was a little fresher,” Adrian said, leaning his head over the edge of the jump so as to stare into the water and the weedy lake bottom. “I guess I should be heading home soon myself.” For some reason the bottom of Minnow Lake made him shudder; no matter how many times he saw it, he got goosebumps.

“You know what, Randolph? I saw on a *National Geographic* show how goosebumps are from a long, long time ago when we were covered with fur. The pores would get all tightened up and the fur would stand on end and make people look bigger, just like cats when they’re scared. It’s called piloerection. How do you like that word?”

“It’s better than some,” Randy said, “better than frog-swallower.”

“That’s probably two words. Anyway, I get goosebumps each and every time I look at the bottom of Minnow Lake. I get like a furry animal trying to defend itself.”

“Well, that’s a waste of energy,” Randy said. “It’s just mud. What’s so scary about mud when it’s under water?”

“That,” Adrian said, pointing to the water and its contents, “is not just mud. What about all those roots and logs and things?”

“Well? Same argument. What’s so scary about roots and logs under water?”

“I don’t know,” Adrian had to confess. “The fact they’re rotting, I guess, and you can’t get a very good look at them so you imagine the worst. Stuff bloated with slime, and eye sockets, and skin floating around with nothing inside it. I’m surprised people actually come out here to swim.”

“Not many do. Not many people come out here period.”

“That explains why I like it,” Adrian said, watching the lake sparkle, “even though it gives me piloerections. Someone could pull the plug on this place and in less than a day you’d have acres of muck and a few misshapen fish flapping in the sun with googly white eyes and maybe ears, like people from too much DDT.”

“What people do you know who’ve had too much DDT?” Randy asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe Morley Nickle with his water head.”

No response from Randy. He never liked to make

fun of people's problems, having so many himself. "So I have a question for you, Randolph," Adrian said. "What was the busiest shopping day ever at your parents' store?"

"I don't know. It used to be busy all the time in the summer, before they outlawed motorboats. Up until the summer of nineteen sixty-four there were lots of busy days, especially weekends. People would be lined up at the till."

Adrian squinted, merged the sparkles into one wavering light. "Maybe it would be easier to identify the least busy day."

"There's only been one day when nobody bought anything. It was last November. My mom has it circled on last year's calendar. People came to the store but nobody bought anything. The regulars, that is. The three old regulars who come every day, Alfred Beel and Russell Hansen and the Maestro, but for some reason that day in November even they didn't buy a single thing."

"Wow. That's something for *Ripley's Believe it or Not*. You could send it in."

"How 'bout let's not and say we did."

Randy crabwalked down the incline to the boat, threw a coffee can to Adrian, and started bailing with the other. "I should get going," he said.

"Yeah, me too."

Once Russell's boat was empty of water it would get them back to land, taking on an inch or two during the trip. Neither was a good swimmer but submersion posed no real threat since, between the ski

jump and shore, Minnow Lake was four feet at its deepest. And Adrian always brought shoes along because it was his fervent hope never to have to touch the mushy bottom of Minnow Lake with bare feet. Randy could say all he wanted about only mud and old branches from the time of the flooding but with only one leaky boat for support, Adrian's fur wouldn't relax until they reached the shore.



Reg Decker, Cheryl's father, was counting his words, cutting back on talk. He called this the Word Conservation Plan and he liked it. Allocating a half-page quota of words for each new day was one method of punishing the human race for the death of his son, Richard. His wife, Loretta, Cheryl's mother, was sick and tired of the whole business. She had told him more than once she was going to call the town meter reader, tell him to stop by Reg's Ford dealership, separate the thinning hairs on her husband's steaming old scalp, and see if he could find a row of slowly climbing numbers embedded there. At least Cheryl found this funny. Then Loretta would get the town of Flax to charge Reg a monthly fee and see if that would smarten him up. Counting words wasn't going to change a bloody thing. What's dead is dead and what's gone is gone, she said, and by that time Richard had been dead and gone for one year plus forty-one, forty-two, maybe forty-three days. Loretta kept track on the calendar Cheryl tried not to look at but did every day any-

way, the way people glance at a broken bone that's come right out through the skin.

One year plus forty-two days since Richard took that Mustang from his dad's car lot, late on the night of July 2, 1969, which made the date in fact July 3, after days or more likely months, who would ever know, of calculations based on formulas cooked up in physics class. His plan? His plan was to race the CN freight train and miss it by a heartbeat. And you'd think he could have done it, winning all those prizes in science fairs the way he had, getting a perfect 100 per cent on one of the June finals. The problem, Reg said, was not Richard; the problem was the velocity of the freight train. How could anyone, no matter how smart, ever predict that? It was an unknown and thus something to let  $X$  be equal to and as long as there was an unknown, that proved it wasn't suicide, that's for sure, anyone could see, with the plans he left behind, his diagrams, his conversations with Nathan Thom, it wasn't suicide. IT WAS NOT SUICIDE.

Richard left some rubber, though, a car-dealer point of pride for Reg, visible to this day where Concession 21 meets the highway. That's where Richard took off from. He knew what he was doing, knew he needed a car, a Mustang, that would accelerate accordingly. Exactly 2.5 miles to the level crossing. Reg could see it, saw it every day, the brilliant white eye of the train closing in on Richard's peripheral vision like a near-death experience but yet not. There would be the thrill. He'd have believed in his flawless timing until the final millisecond, believed in himself, because

that's what Reg had taught him.

Nathan Thom said Richard had had six beers, or maybe more like eight most other people said, and this allegation fuelled Reg's word-cutting rage and blame because Loretta was a drinker. Not serious but regular, daily, and on display. In summer she drank gin and tonic on the front porch, and in the spring, vodka, also usually on the porch, weather permitting. In the fall she liked to have red wine at the Legion, and in the cold of winter, rye and ginger, inside her own house in the La-Z-Boy. Maximum three per day. But the maximum wasn't the issue, Reg told her; it was the dailiness.

Why?

Because it's the example, Reg said, combined with the chromosomes. Look at Loretta's mother, she died of cirrhosis. On the Booth side, Reg thought maybe the genes were shaped like microscopic bottles or corks or maybe they tinkled together like ice. Maybe *that's* what he was really hearing when Loretta walked around with her drinks.

"Well, on the subject of family history, let's take a look at the Deckers," Loretta had said more than once. "They don't need alcohol because they're hopped up on testosterone and that's the opinion of many, not just me. Ask anybody in Flax about the Deckers and they will use those very four words: hopped up on testosterone." Take, for example, Reg's brother, Clive: he couldn't keep his pecker in his pants. And their old man, Martin, got his nose broken so many times it looked like a bag of chopped walnuts by the time he

died. And, most incriminating evidence of the supernatural of inheritance, Richard's great-granddad Decker had been famous for racing trains on horseback, until he got thrown under one. According to Loretta, the women's side had no effect, got skipped over like checkers. Decker's checkers, she called this phenomenon of suicidal sperm and she said to Cheryl, prepare yourself for it. Your children will be all, pure, unadulterated Decker.

Be that as it may, Reg was too tired to fight and he didn't have the words for it, literally. He wanted nothing more than to sit in the showroom, especially that day and time, late afternoon when sunlight poured into the place as if it were a customer and this was the one place on earth it wanted to be shopping. Reg wanted to sit there alone and swivel in his chair without that sullen girl of his, Cheryl, his angry wife, Loretta, and most definitely, without the aggravating Jimmy Drake Senior who was on his way over to the dealership to show off his vacation.

Jimmy Senior had pictures; he always had pictures because of his darkroom, and plenty of talk, and his talk on hot days was like white lard he'd layer onto his pictures until listening was similar to being force-fed a soggy white sandwich. Reg could tell by the sound of Jimmy on the phone that since Ohio, no Florida, he'd been planning what to say and how, interviewing and rejecting certain vocabulary, even gestures. No doubt he'd have a new theory. Jimmy Senior liked his theories, liked to extract *larger* meanings from *small* events because, and Reg quoted, *this was the noblest work of the*

*human mind*. He could not shut up because he laboured under the illusion, as George Drury would say, that he was a public speaker. Even the administration at Flax Composite High, where Jimmy Senior was custodian, had been shanghaied into allowing him to make comments on the public address system. The kids had told Reg and they'd had some good laughs over it. Richard could do a mean impersonation. "Let's say one day you kick your locker door in frustration and break a hinge," Richard once said, in the spooky, dirty, confidential voice of Jimmy Drake. "Your locker is no longer secure. Someone plants something in it, you get blamed and really, who do you have to blame but yourself? Who do you have to blame but yourself?" Always said the last thing twice and this became the best part of the joke for Richard, repeating himself for emphasis, to the amusement of all, back in the days when Cheryl used to laugh.

Who do you have to blame but yourself? This was invariably the Drake Senior message, with intermittent encouragement to blame the provincial government or the federal government and once, when he went too far, the Pope, after which Jimmy fell silent for a couple months. But then he was back, same as ever: "Good morning ladies and gentlemen of the jury." In the halls, Richard said and he was right, no one even stopped moving, everybody just talked louder. More to be pitied than despised, Reg supposed, and it was pitiful, the way Jimmy relied on Reg to be impressed but who else was there besides that whore Angel Farrell.

Reg tapped the eraser end of a pencil against the

surface of his desk. God he was pissed off, sick of the human goddam race. He'd gladly tell every complaining, clutch-riding, warranty-abusing Ford owner to get out of his shop and stay out. As for Jimmy Senior, the duty of listening, of shoring him up, fell, forever, as it was in the beginning and ever shall be, to Reg because they'd been friends since grade one and only Reg knew about Jimmy Senior's dusty school records, his achievement awards in history and geography and occasionally English. And only Reg understood about Jimmy Senior's bad luck with Jimmy Junior. He saw the whole picture of Jimmy more than he saw the whole picture of Cheryl or even Loretta, a picture Jimmy Senior was frantic to keep clear and in focus, polished and framed.

"I see the Deckers are all present and accounted for," Jimmy said, pleased to find everyone out to see him. He nodded to Loretta, standing where she liked to smoke, one elbow propped on the filing cabinet. "Cheryl. How are you?"

"Fine, I guess." She was at the bookkeeping desk, tracing pictures onto onion skin—her hobby, or so she said.

"Where to begin?" Jimmy's standard, fey beginning, a trait Jimmy Junior had inherited. He'd have some story, loosely tied to some opinion, loosely held together with some strands of bullshit, then ask, like a girl, *where to begin?* "I told you before I left," Jimmy said, "my sister knows a guy who knows a guard at the state prison." He was looking from Loretta to Reg, back to Loretta, back to Reg.

"We're not playing tennis here, Jimmy. Calm your-

self down,” Loretta advised.

“Well,” Jimmy took a deep breath, “he told us he’d get us in and sure enough. Jeeesus. Talk about the hee-bie-jeebies. The thing hasn’t been used for four years, the last guy got fried in nineteen sixty-six, but you’d swear it just happened yesterday. You can feel it in the air. Like something’s been embalmed right next to you in the oxygen. You know how the smell of bacon kind of sticks on things? Well, I don’t think it was my imagination.”

“*That* is really disgusting, Jimmy,” Loretta said. “For god’s sake. I have to go home and cook pretty soon.” She moved her ashtray a little closer, the miniature tire with the glass insert for a hubcap.

“I know. I know it is just that. That’s why they got ordered to stop. The Floridians aren’t too happy and that includes my own sister and her husband, the skin doctor.”

Reg raised his eyebrows, obediently. Any reference to the skin doctor, Jimmy Senior and Junior’s one respectable relative, required some response.

“Did you know they have to put a sponge on your head?” Jimmy asked Reg. “See, here’s a snap of Jimmy Junior with a sponge on his head,” and he showed around a photo as if this were a social studies class. “And only in Florida do they use actual sea sponges. I guess it’s cheaper for the state to go find one on the beach than go out and buy one from Kmart. So we’re in there with the chair and Larry—that was the guard’s name—opens a drawer and there sits a sponge. He says, ‘that was intended for the next dead man. Then the

courts put a stop to it.' Larry pulls it out, says 'Here' and slaps it onto my bald spot. Says, 'We wouldn't have to go to the trouble of shaving you.' That's when I got the heebie-jeebies. Took me til Ohio to get rid of them. The guy was an ass. But Jimmy Junior wanted to see that chair."

Deciding to crowbar a single word from his aggravated mouth, Reg said "Kids."

Loretta blew a smoke ring, the sign she was a little impressed, and her idea of sexy sarcasm. Everybody but Cheryl watched it travel decisively to the wall, collide with the Valvoline calendar, disintegrate like a quiet atom bomb.

Jimmy looked into the showroom. "I heard Bill Laine's thinking of getting himself one of those Mavericks. That right?"

"He's been in a couple of times," Reg said, swivelling, steady as a pendulum; swivelling felt good between the legs.

Jimmy had a few words of wisdom about Mavericks, something he'd read in the States. Then he was back onto the chair again.

"Anyways, the thing I realized after I left that place is that there are certain things you remember forever and that chair was one of them."

"Oh, oh. I smell a theory close by," said Reg. Fine. He'd throw in a couple of words for now.

"You don't know that, Jimmy," Loretta said, putting out her smoke. "You have no idea what you'll remember when you're eighty-five. You might be like my grandpa was and remember nothing but some poems

you learned when you were six.”

“Oh yes I do, Loretta Decker,” said Jimmy pointing a wienerish finger at her. “I know what I remember and what I forget and that chair has gone right into my memory bank with all the unforgettable things and do you know why?” He was worked up now, had failed to calm himself as Loretta suggested. “I’ll tell you why. Because it’s a thing that looks exactly *not* like what it’s supposed to be. It’s a chair, see? Designed for comfort and rest, right? Like that swivel chair. Only this chair wants to kill you. So you can’t ever forget it. It’s like when that tornado rolled in last August. The sky was really blue, then kind of too blue and everything was perfectly still. It was a peaceful day and yet it wanted to kill us. So I never forgot it. Also, another example: the men on the moon. Suddenly there’s the moon, this yellow circle we see in the sky, and now it has people walking on it. That’s not supposed to happen. Since then you look at it and it’s not the same, because it did something it wasn’t meant to do. It *looked* one way but it *was* another. Once that happens to a thing, you can’t forget about it. Not only that, you can’t *stop* thinking about it. So there you go. Chairs, the sky, men on the moon, they’re all capable of raising the hair on the back of your neck. That’s my theory.”

Reg shook his head as at a recurring problem, a dog shitting on the porch or a Kotex clogging the women’s room john at the dealership. “Here we go again, Jimmy. That’s not a theory; that’s an opinion. You’re not Charles Darwin and you’re not Albert Einstein.”

“Well, I’ve thought about it quite a bit. It’s a long drive from Florida to here and Jimmy Junior’s not much of a conversationalist. Ask yourself, do you remember a noose in the same way? Does it make you feel a little crazy? No. A noose might make you not want to break the law but it won’t make you feel queasy to your stomach. And why is that? Because a noose is what it appears to be. It’s a noose. It doesn’t have some other clandestine purpose.”

“Clandestine, huh?” Reg rolled his eyes. He condemned the blowhard trait in others. “Anyway, I still say it’s an opinion. Not a theory.”

“Same difference.”

“Fine with me,” Reg said.

Loretta leaned her head back, stretched her arms the way she did before any important announcement, took a couple of steps toward Reg, and said, “You know what, dear? I just thought of something. I don’t want to do the books anymore.”

Reg locked his eyes on her, stopped short in mid-swivel. This was news. Even Cheryl looked up. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m tired of doing the accounts. Rocket can do them. I’ll show him how. All it takes is a bit of time and the adding machine.”

“Suit yourself,” Reg said, shrugging. If Loretta wanted a reaction, she’d have to get it elsewhere.

“I’m going to take on some more hours with George Drury. He asked if I would. He wants his girl to take the rest of the summer off, says he’d rather have someone a little more professional in the front office.”

“Suit yourself,” Reg said again. Words repeated only counted once.



Just take the bike and go. A flat and lifeless Wednesday afternoon, mid-August, sky the colour of white weather that wasn't about to change. And Rose, Adrian's sister, redundant as they sometimes said in the newspaper, fired from the dentist's office by her own old man. So why not go out of town on the bike? Go someplace new? She had her licence, could take the little Vega whenever she wanted but cars were no good for stealth. You still had to ask, or at least make an announcement, explain yourself. And even with the windows down, sixty miles an hour, departure roaring past your ears, that car was contaminated. Owned by one Flaxian after another, passed down from Limb to Limb to Drury; the thing was full of Flax. Caked, Rose had told Adrian more than once: the car was caked with the town of Flax. Emerge from the blue interior and behold the crumbs as they fall from your lap. Could be in Mesmer with Adrian, could be in Kitchener-Waterloo with Anastasia—didn't matter. Flax was stuffed between your ears like old cake.

Away she went. Even at this age, seventeen, and on a fat-tired girl's bike, taking off without telling Dad was as good as truancy. Not that Rose was often, or even ever, truant and if she were to be, excuses would most certainly be made, her history clattering like a museum printing press behind her back, publishing counterfeit

notes of permission. If you looked you could almost see the grey ink of explanation on everyone's fingers. Yes, Rose Drury, such a lovely girl despite everything, her mother and all, so long ago now, ten years, eleven is it, but no doubt she remembers and a girl needs a mother, such a help to her father and that *brother*.

Downhill was the only realistic direction, entering humidity like the school locker room, and insects wanting up your nose, thicker than the smell of sweaty girls. Rose had never taken this or any gravel road out of town, her best friend Anastasia living on the Mesmer Highway, the Number 4. Though this was hardly gravel, all of the loose stones having been nudged to the edges by country tires, leaving a smooth surface, more or less the colour of a Band-Aid. Rose sped up, faster than the bugs and the time of day. Nobody else in sight, the quiet of summer heat in her ears, and growing toward her from both ditches, those dusty, dusty grasses. They were like little towns of roadside ghosts, thousands of them, stooped, greying, maybe looking for some company. *Why don't you stop, girly?* they seemed to be muttering. *Why don't you stop?*

No reason. Except for she was probably scared.

Here now the road became flatter with curves, grass giving up to evergreen trees and swamp. Rose kept an eye out for the mud-loving forms of life, hopping things that took on water and popped like grapes if you drove over them. She didn't want to spoil her record. For more than two months now, since Skokie'd gone to sleep, she hadn't killed a single creature, not an insect or, she said, even a blade of grass. Mos-

quitoes, she shooed away. Houseflies were encouraged to use the door. Yeah, well what about single-celled organisms, Anastasia had asked, finding her friend's new Jesus-type, seeing-the-little-sparrow-fall worry a little far-fetched; what about, for example, a tiny bit of mould you might wipe up and swoosh down the drain? "It's not anaerobic, you know," Anastasia said. "It can't survive without oxygen."

"I can't control everything," Rose said, "much as I'd like to."

"That's right," said Anastasia.

Anastasia liked to undermine the good intentions of others. No big deal; Rose was used to it. She pedalled faster, then braked, coming to a complete stop beneath the overhanging trees. Look at this: bulrushes. She walked her bike closer to the ditch. Might there be a baby Moses abandoned in the reeds? She wasn't kidding. One secret she had never told Anastasia: Rose was often on the lookout for abandoned babies. She'd look in cardboard boxes outside grocery stores or behind exhibits at the fall fair. It was a kind of hobby. But if Anastasia ever found out she would turn it into an art-scene with her Barbies and invite everyone over for a laugh.

No babies today, no crying to be heard and still no traffic, nothing. Even the frogs shushed as she approached and so she stood perfectly still, wanting to experiment, waiting for them to think she was gone or an unusual species of tree.

Ha! They fell for it, one or two choirmasters clearing their throats and the others joining, freakishly in

unison as if someone were conducting.

“Ahem,” said Rose and they stopped again, all at once, apparently under the influence of one collective frog worry. Maybe they couldn’t see her but the inhabitants of these ditches were listening with their tiny flap-ears. She’d seen them in biology, during the dissections she’d never do again. The school allowed for conscientious objection and, unlike the baby-hunting, on this issue Rose was prepared for the scoffing of Anastasia, could even predict her response. *You know, nature’s not all sweetness and light. Remember that plant somebody brought into biology class last year? That pitcher plant? Doesn’t that prove to you that nature isn’t as nice as you might think? Nature is made up of carnivorous little throats with spiny slanting hairs that drag flies or spiders to their doom. Slowly and with malice aforethought, Rose Drury.*

Rose would admit this road was a little like the mouth of the pitcher plant. She couldn’t seem to turn around, there was no going back, and the smell was amphibian, like breath held under water for long periods of time. And here she was with nothing but a bike, no money, not even any identification, nothing but too much Anastasia on the brain. Rose looked over her shoulder. If a farmer were to drive by, would he shoot her? Such malfeasance occurred in the country, there being such a chronic lack of witnesses. Any outsider might be shot for target practice, left to fall into the ditch, spouting a tie-dyed bloodstain into the lonely murk. Eye-to-dying-eye with bullfrogs as big as softballs. A banquet for mosquitoes although you had to wonder: did they like dead people? Perhaps the

freshly dead. Just ask Adrian, he would probably know. He'd be pretty sure they would not like blood blended with swamp water. That they would not go for. His guess: you would lie there forever, Rose, decomposing until you were just a few bones, unrecognizable even as a skeleton. More like pick-up sticks. What are you doing, going out there on your bike anyway?

Rose pushed off and rode further to a break in the trees, up a steep little hill, past a barren field of yellow grain and a green road sign. East Flax. Oh yes. Rose's knowledge of East Flax was a View-Master reel of images, the dentist's daughter's three-dimensional impressions of rotten teeth and disregard for higher education. But that wasn't all there was to East Flax. Don't forget the lake. Rose had been to Minnow Lake twice, for the eighth grade picnic and once on an outing with Mom, long ago, before Rose was even in school. By then Mom would have had the cancer but not known, or known and not told anyone so that the day's events stood back and watched the way they did when you were keeping a secret.

They were supposed to have a good time, just the two of them. Adrian stayed home with Dad, but some man talked Mom into waterskiing, tried to convince her to go over the jump, and he wouldn't take no for an answer, he said. Don't be crazy, Mom said, laughing. It was all in fun but seemed a little dangerous. Dragged by a boat over a piece of wood in the middle of a lake? Rose remembered how the ski jump angled out of the water like her one loose tooth and she had made a deal: pull out the tooth, the ski jump will sink,

and Mom will be safe. But she couldn't; those rags of skin anchoring it to her gum were tough as old meat. And Mom didn't go anyway which was a big relief. From the point of view of kids, Rose realized now, adults' ideas of fun often seemed to overlap with sinister.

Rose cycled past Dance Hall Road. She decided to go and take a look at the ski jump; it was still there, Adrian made frequent reference to both it and Randy Farrell. Still no traffic. Where were all the people? Even on the sleepest Sunday in Flax you would hear lawn mowers, screen doors or one of the Limb kids practicing the piano. Apparently, on a business day in the outskirts of East Flax, people were told to keep it down. Dogs were muzzled. Shhh. As if Minnow Lake were some big sleeping baby that might be wakened.

Now Rose could see the lake and smell it. Not a bad smell but also not the good smell of Lake Huron with its ocean-sized capacity for washing and dissolving and rubbing things smooth. Minnow Lake was so shallow and warm, it smelled more like something cooking, the water table rising up and offering you a mud casserole. And some people said not all residents of East Flax had septic systems, so who knew where their toilets flushed. Rose did remember at the eighth grade picnic, the feel of the lake bottom curled up between your toes like wet diapers or worse. *Nobody* had wanted to come to Minnow Lake but there were already three schools booked at Blue Lake, so that was that. Since they'd built the pavilion and boat ramp and restaurant at Blue Lake, everybody went there. And

you could see why. Rose let her bike clatter into the tall weeds at the edge of the gravelly beach. Beach? Hardly. The owner of Blue Lake resort had hauled in loads of sand and strung buoys in the water to define the swimmers' area. If you went past them and drowned, it would be your own fault.

East Flax had definitely seen better times and so had Minnow Lake. One slanted dock and Russell Hansen's old rowboat under three inches of water. And there stood the ski jump floating on its unsinkable oil drums, a hollow-brained tribute to the laws of physics. And up there, the dance hall, clearly visible on its cliff, watching the lake from its row of windows. Rose knew there was a store, the Farrells' shaky enterprise, but would it be open or even still in business? Probably, this *was* East Flax, birthplace of unlikelihood and home of the beautiful and intelligent Cora Farrell. No one for a minute thought *she* would be chosen school queen. Anastasia said, simply by entering the competition Cora had taken the Farrell chromosomes as far as they had ever been selected to go, that Cora was born to be a runner-up, but she beat Lillian Gee and Connie Laine. You could almost see the town of Flax's eyes bulging in communal disbelief.

Rose knew the entire Farrell clan was weird, what with Randy and his habits, his need to have the inside of his locker just so with little plastic horses glued to the shelf and that time he asked Adrian not to go *in* the shop wing door because he hadn't gone *out* the shop wing door. Their father, Frog Farrell, had swallowed a frog and their mother, Angel, had a reputa-

tion. And Cora's sister, Maddy, was a girl-boy, or a boy-girl and the hero of the basketball team, so had done some chromosome-hauling herself.

But most quizzical of all was the Farrells' store. Who exactly on earth would shop there? It would seem the road was closed, for example, to cars. Maybe in these parts people walked, in which case, would they ever arrive or would they fall asleep en route? Fall asleep in a dusty ditch, sprout little roots from the soles of their feet and, upon awakening, find they had grown leaves. No need for the Farrells' store now, honey, we've got photosynthesis. Cancel our account.

Rose was thirsty and a drink would be nice. She didn't have a cent but maybe she could finagle one with her Flaxified charms. Worth a try. Rose rode back along the weed-rimmed lake access, turned right past a tipsy mailbox, a long laneway ending at a metal-clad house by the lake, a former garage with its single out-of-order gas pump. More weeds, foxtail and milkweed and goldenrod crowding up to everything, green and wavery bodies intent on pushing past and under and into the civilization of the humans. Finally! A car, driver waving in slow motion, driving in slow motion, lifting a spectacular cloud of dust, a billow of billows. Rose licked the grit off her teeth. No wonder frogs jumped to the nearest bog. Skin-breathers could be asphyxiated with each passing vehicle.

There was the store, plate glass windows dark as night beneath the overhanging balcony. Looked like someplace out of *Gunsmoke*, Miss Kitty's sister's place perhaps. Empty, no doubt, closed for the afternoon.

Everybody out hunting varmints or settling feuds. But to Rose's surprise the Drink Pepsi door opened into an unlit habitat, the nocturnals' exhibit at the zoo. Her eyes adjusted to the gloom. Where she anticipated wombats and opossums were three old men in chairs, hillbillies she presumed, and at the till, the beautiful Cora Farrell.

"Hi, Cora," Rose said, six night-vision eyes of old men fixing on her, Geiger counting her history, DNA, purpose in this store, and on this earth.

Cora was not bothered by the unexpected, living as she did in the municipality of Oddness, so Rose Drury shopping at her parents' store probably made as much sense as she herself working there, as much sense as her Flax Composite High crown probably being used, by now, to repair a broken leghold trap.

"If you're looking for Maddy," Cora said, "she's up at the dance hall."

Of course. She should be looking for Maddy. Maddy was her age, also heading into grade thirteen whereas Cora was finished, a graduate and a queen. Rose wouldn't be here to inquire about Cora's plans. And she couldn't very well claim to be visiting for sociological reasons, or would they be anthropological? "Yes, I'm conducting some research for the University of Mesmer and I've been wanting to interview Maddy Farrell for quite some time now. It's about that ridiculous orange hat she wears in the winter. She's so tall, and well, what both I and Anastasia Van Epp would like to know, as well as the public in general, I'm sure: Does she think she's a character in a Dr. Seuss book?"

Does she think she's living on Mulberry Street?"

"Well, in fact, I was just out for a bicycle ride, finding myself unemployed because my father, the dentist, George Drury—maybe you know him, maybe you wish you didn't know him—anyway, he decided he doesn't really need me working in his office and so I thought why not go to East Flax? Maddy might be around." Rose saw her voice landing on the shelves of dry goods and from there, watching the action wonderingly. "I'd buy a drink but I didn't bring any money. Not a single dime."

"Dentist's daughter should have a dime," said one of the men from his old and mud-coloured armchair. Alfred Beel, Rose now saw, an occasional patient and known to be a grouch, known to be the type of person who looks at young people who are laughing as if they are waving their private parts in the air and therefore should be hidden behind a portable divider. The other two, opposite him, sat on wooden chairs, mute and slouchy, soft spined in appearance, creatures who had just yesterday made the switch from water to land and weren't quite sure what to make of the move.

"Yes, she should. That is true enough."

"Well, have a drink," Cora offered. "My treat. What do you want? Orange? Root beer? Cream soda?"

Rose had wondered if the place was even wired for electricity. No lights appeared to be on. But behind Alfred, the glass-fronted cooler emitted fluorescence. Designed for cuts of meat, most likely salvaged from an old butcher shop, here in East Flax it contained single bottles of soda pop arranged in rows and off to one

side, packages of wieners and Velveeta cheese stacked in, Rose had to admit, rather decorative pyramids. That would be the renowned work of Randy Farrell.

“So what’ll it be?” Cora was behind the cooler, sliding the door open.

“Cream soda.”

“Good choice.” And Cora, moving her arm like a mechanical device to the head of the cream soda row, withdrew the lead bottle, edged the others forward a spot, and said “Here. You likely know Randy likes to organize. If we don’t keep the pop in rows and the other stuff in stacks, he gets a little fidgety or something. Anyway, the opener’s on the counter. See that string? If we don’t tie it down, it grows legs.” She was busy finding a replacement cream soda from a carton behind the cooler. Rose figured that, according to what she knew about Randy’s brain, the bottles on display were required to line up and take turns.

Having engineered the free drink, Rose was ready to spend some time with Maddy. Maybe. Could be educational and she didn’t want these four mouths speaking unkindly of her when she left, in particular the two mushy-looking men on the wooden chairs. She didn’t want them hissing and bubbling judgments through their East Flax gills.

“I guess I’ll go find Maddy now.”

“Sure. You know where the dance hall is?”

“Yes. Oh yes. Everybody knows where the dance hall is,” and she left, the door slamming shut behind her, its rusty spring unloosened by many years of use.