

K.D. Miller / MISSING PERSON

Elvira is walking to the sea. She keeps her eyes on the gray horizon. She smells a cold, alien smell and hears a sound like the slow clashing of cymbals.

The dust of the road becomes sand under her feet, dotted with crunching bits of shell. The sand smooths and darkens near the water. At the frothing edge of the sea it is almost black.

Elvira stands looking at the moving waves. Her feet are hot and hurting. She stoops and unlaces her shoes. One of the laces has broken twice, and has been knotted twice. She eases the shoes off, careful of the raw spots on the backs of her heels. Then she lifts the hem of her skirt, unfastens her shredded stockings and rolls them down.

The breeze is cool to her bare feet. The dark sand has the texture of brown sugar. Her footprints are tiny lakes that fill up from below.

At the foaming edge, she stops. She looks around. There is a house in the near distance, but no one watching at any of the windows. She bends, scoops up water in her calloused palm and touches the tip of her tongue to its surface. The taste of salt makes her throat knot up.

The water is inching away from her. It leaves lines of dirty foam and frayed seaweed to mark where it rested before moving on. She imagines the tide inundating some far shore then swaying back like a huge bell.

First she puts one bare foot in, then the other. Salt sizzles in the backs of her heels. The undertow is surprisingly strong. A rope of seaweed, caught on her ankle, snakes away after the tide. She hesitates. Then begins to follow it.

"That's Mister Bunnyrabbit, Elvira. And there's Grandfather Clock in the corner. And see that guy coming in? That's Mister Greenjeans." As I licked a molten dollop of peanut butter from my toast, Elvira would have nodded solemnly beside me on the couch, saying a careful, "Oh yes. Yes. I see."

It was easy enough to talk to Elvira. Nothing I said ever seemed to matter. She wasn't like other adults. She didn't ask me to call her Miss Tomlinson or Aunt Elvira. She didn't fuss over me or make her

voice go tinkly when she talked to me, either. She didn't seem to know I was a child. Maybe because she had no children of her own. She was the only woman I knew then who wasn't a mother.

She and my mother never had those whispered, womanly conversations that ceased the minute I wandered into the kitchen for a cookie. My mother removed her apron when Elvira came to visit, and sat with her in the living room. What the two of them said to each other was safe enough to say in front of me, and so boring that not one word of it stands out in my memory.

Elvira was the perfect guest, nodding and smiling and wearing her manners like gloves. She lived in Toronto, came to Hamilton once or twice a year to see us and my grandmother and my Aunt Heather, then, as my mother put it, knew when to leave.

I didn't know what to call the way she looked. I didn't know then that a woman could be handsome. Her thin, mobile lips pronounced each word precisely, finishing it completely before going on to the next. Her speech didn't slip and slide around the way ours did. She didn't say things like y'know and okay.

She sat very straight, even on the couch. She always wore a suit, and a silk scarf pinned at the neck with a brooch.

But now she is wearing a second- or third-hand dress. She is wading thigh deep in the water, just at the point where the shallows become the depths. The sun is still burning her shoulders, but the water is numbingly cold. She cannot feel her feet, though she can see them, greenish white and moving. All she can feel is the pull of the tide.

Drown, she thinks. She is going to drown. But how will she do it? Is it something she will in fact have to do, or will it just happen to her?

The water is up to her waist. There is a tickle of cold where it laps at her body. She can't see her feet any more.

Will the water simply open her up and flow into her? Or will she have to do it, have to decide, have to consciously, deliberately, open herself?

She can imagine herself dead. Floating like weed, less and less of her, eyeless and eaten away. Washing up on a shore somewhere. Being found. Perhaps even identified.

But that will be someone else's worry. She is not worried about being dead. What worries her is dying. The moment that it happens. The doing of it.

Elvira walked to the sea before I was born. Before my parents were married, or had even met. When my mother was still living at home with her own parents, listening to Rudy Vallee Sunday nights on the radio.

"Now, listen. Don't ever let on to Elvira that I told you this. Okay? Promise?" My mother would have glanced out the kitchen window, as if checking for neighbours cocking their ears.

I can't remember her telling me the story. But I know she did, probably when I was about nine. At nine I was young enough to be my mother's friend. Too young to guess just how badly she needed one.

"Promise you won't let Elvira know that you know?"

I would have nodded hard, skidding my elbows forward on the red-checked oilcloth. I was about to be told some "business," and business meant secrets, and adults kept the oddest things secret. "Don't tell any of our business," followed me through the screen door whenever I was on my way to a friend's house. "That's none of your business!" could swat the most innocent question like a fly.

"I've told you about the Tomlinsons? Elvira's family? How they were part of the old neighbourhood? There since day one? Just like my folks?" I nodded to every question, wanting her to get to the well-what-I-*didn't*-tell-you part.

"Well, what I *didn't* tell you was that when Elvira was only around ten, Mr. Tomlinson, the father, left them all. Ran off one morning with a Chinese cook."

It always amazed me to hear about adults misbehaving. Growing up, I thought, was a kind of drying-out process, whereby all the badness evaporated away. Somehow, magically, the loud, rowdy boys in my class would change into silent men like my father, wearing fedoras and going to work in the morning. And the girls, including me, would stop giggling and become women like my mother, aproned and finger-waved, living most of our lives in kitchens.

Yet here was Mr. Tomlinson leaving his perfectly good wife for a Chinese cook. I saw him as a stubbled, nasty-looking creature, sneaking off in a foggy dawn with a little woman wearing a conical hat and carrying a spatula.

"And if that wasn't enough," my mother went on, "when Elvira was just fourteen and the youngest of the four boys was, oh, about your age I guess, Mrs. Tomlinson had a stroke. And died."

I didn't know what a stroke was. But from the way my mother said the word, and judging from the cartoons I had watched, I could imagine Mrs. Tomlinson seizing her throat, keeling over stiff as a board and raising a cloud of dust as she landed.

"So there was Elvira," my mother went on, picking at a hole in the oilcloth and shaking her head. "All of fourteen. No father. No mother. And four little brothers needing to be looked after."

"So what did she do?"

"She looked after them. She raised them. Did the cooking, the washing, the ironing. Helped them with their homework and got after them. Year after year. All by herself."

"How did she go to school?"

"She didn't. She quit. At fourteen. Well, you could quit whenever you wanted to back then."

"Did she want to?"

"I don't know. I doubt it. But she couldn't just do what she wanted any more. She had to grow up, right then and there. She had to do what was right."

I imagined myself in Elvira's place, my own mother suddenly dead. I saw myself having to grow up right then and there, having to do what was right. Hanging my brother's damp bluejeans out on the line. Opening cans for supper. Cleaning the canary's cage.

"Bit of a shame, y'know," my mother was saying, "about Elvira quitting school. She did well at school. And she used to sing. Whenever there was an assembly or commencement or something, they'd always get Elvira to sing. Most of the time, it was a hymn. Once though, she sang *The Last Rose of Summer*. Up on the platform. In a white dress."

I was mentally trying to iron one of my father's white shirts. Getting a sleeve all smooth and stiff, then peeling it off the board and turning it over to find a zigzag crease on the underside. The kitchen blurred. In another second, I was going to cry, and my mother was going to say, what's the matter with *you*, and I was going to say, nothing, and she was going to say, it *can't* be nothing. And then I was

going to have to tell her about imagining her being dead, and feel stupid.

So I made myself look hard at my mother, alive and sitting across from me in her rickrack-trimmed apron. Her arms were bare for the summer, her shoulders freckled brown. The sun had given her hair that blonde streak on top that she made into a wave and held in place with a bobby pin.

"The neighbours pitched in, of course," she was saying. "Saw to it that the boys had after-school jobs. My mom was awfully good to Elvira. Used to send me over with pots of food all the time. Knit sweaters for all the boys one winter."

"Did she knit one for Elvira too?" I asked.

"Oh, probably. But Elvira was pretty proud, y'know. She'd take things for the boys, but it was hard to get her to accept anything for herself. My mom would have offered her stuff. Anything your Aunt Heather or I didn't wear any more. Your grandmother would never throw anything away. Still won't. If you give her a present, she saves the paper and turns around and wraps something for you in it."

"So, what's the part I'm not supposed to *know*?"

"I was just going to tell you. But first I'll get myself another cup of tea. Do you want a Fizzy?"

"No, thanks."

"It's hot. You should drink lots of liquids."

"No."

"There's orange. Lime."

I shook my head.

"There's grape."

"Okay." I hadn't tried grape.

I didn't really like Fizzies, that is, I didn't like the drink they made, which was even sweeter than Kool-Aid. But I never got tired of dropping the little happy-face tablet into a glass of ice water and watching it dissolve like Alka Seltzer.

Today's tablet was pale mauve. It sank to the bottom of the glass and began to boil up a furious purple. I thought of squid ink, and earthquakes happening at the very bottom of the sea.

Elvira is chest deep in the water when she steps into a hole. The sky disappears. Green soundless cold. Water up her nose. Salt water like a fist in her mouth, punching down into her stomach.

She thrashes, climbs an imaginary ladder. Her head breaks the surface. Her feet scramble for a foothold. Find it. Stumble her back into the shallows against the tide. She stands knee deep in water, sneezing and retching and scrubbing at her eyes. When she can see, she sees that she is facing the shore again. The water has taken her, turned her around and thrown her back.

She can still feel the pull of the tide, dragging her dress skirt away from where it is plastered wet against her legs. Its pull is not as strong as before.

And there, sitting neatly side by side on the drying sand, are her shoes. One of her bloodstained stockings is still rolled up inside its shoe. The other has unrolled itself in the breeze and, held aloft by a lone spike of parched grass, is waving merrily at her.

My mother was taking her time with her tea, adjusting the cosy, sniffing the milk. The cup she was using was one she had pulled out of a box of Tide. It took ages to collect even a single place-setting, and the plates were chip-scalloped by the time she got around to the completer set. But my mother liked things that took time, that happened bit by bit. Chances are, if the detergent box method of collecting china had been unknown, she would have invented it.

So all I could do was wait and drink my grape Fizzy. "This Old House" was singing from the pink plastic radio on the counter beside the sink. The chicken clock was pecking away the time on top of the fridge. There was a barnyard scene painted on the clock face, and a rhythmically moving chicken in the foreground. For as long as I could remember, this chicken had pecked the ground in time with the ticking seconds, while her painted-on chicks looked up at her in frozen astonishment.

"Anyway," my mother resumed over her fresh cup of tea, "when Elvira was, what? Twenty-two? Something like that. Because she's a few years older than me. So she would have been twenty-two or so, and the youngest boy, oh, maybe seventeen. Old enough not to need her any more. Or maybe he was younger. Because kids grew up faster then, especially —"

"What *happened?*" I said. My mother was filled right up with words,

words she heard, words she read, words she was thinking, and she needed to talk them out. She couldn't even read silently to herself. "Just two lines!" she would promise, then read three paragraphs aloud while we all groaned and pleaded. She sang along with the radio, phoned in to talk shows, whistled at the canary, lectured the cat.

"Okay, okay. What happened? Well, one day, without saying a word to anybody, Elvira took what little housekeeping money she had, went down to the train station and got on a train going east. Her brothers called the police once she'd been missing for a whole day, and the police checked the train station, among other things. And they found out that a tall, kind of strange young woman had bought a one-way ticket east, out of the province. So that got the Mounties involved. And the Mounties checked with all the train porters and ticket-takers or whatever they're called, and they found out that this very quiet young woman who looked the way the brothers said Elvira did had sat up, night and day, right to the end of the line. Nobody could remember if she'd had anything to eat, but everybody remembered that she didn't have any baggage with her. Not even a purse."

My mother paused for a sip of tea, her mouth becoming a round O exactly like that of the Dutch-girl string-saver. The Dutch girl had hung on the kitchen wall as long as the chicken clock had sat up on the fridge. Her ceramic lips were puckered around a hole that made her look like she was whistling. When my father needed string and couldn't find any, he would say, "You've *got* a string-saver. Why don't you *use* it?" And my mother would reply, "Oh, I put a ball of string inside her once, but she looked like she was eating spaghetti, so I took it out." This always made perfect sense to me until I started to think about it.

"Did the Mounties ever find Elvira?"

"Oh, sure. The Mounties always find whoever they're looking for. They tracked her down to this big old house near the shore. She'd taken the train as far east as it would go, then she'd gotten out and walked the rest of the way to the sea. And that's where the house was."

"Did anybody live there?"

"Uh huh. A family. But Elvira didn't know them. She didn't even know if there would be anybody there."

"So how did she get inside?"

"Well, I guess she just walked up and knocked on the door."

"Was she scared?"

The house is a big old clapboard with blistered white paint and a wrap-around screen porch. In the middle of the roof is a tiny gable. Elvira stands knee-deep in the water, looking at the window beneath the gable, then at the warped steps leading up to the porch's screen door.

She remembers looking at this house just before she walked into the water. Checking to see if anyone was watching from a window. Now she wishes someone was. Whether she saw welcome or forbiddance in their face, it would make it easier, somehow.

After a long time she puts one foot toward shore, feeling for sharp stones. She didn't feel any on the way in, but her feet are suddenly tender again. In a little while, she puts another foot carefully toward shore.

She walks slowly up to her shoes. The unrolled stocking is no longer caught on the spike of grass. It has tumbled a little way down the beach in the wind. As Elvira watches, it sidewinds like a snake into a crack in some rocks.

She could run and catch it. But she won't. She'll go barefoot. And she won't think about what to say until she gets there. She will just go up the steps, knock on the door, then open her mouth.

When she reaches the porch steps, her dress hem is still dripping but her feet are dry and powdered white with sand. The steps are gray. A lining of cobweb shows through the slats. Her feet ascend slowly, leaving white prints.

On the top step, she pauses. The inner door of the house is open. She can hear kitchen sounds through the screen, and can smell food cooking. After a long time, she makes a fist and raises it to the doorframe.

Footsteps approach from within. A blurred face looks through the screen. There is a pause, then the latch is lifted. The door creaks on its hinges. A small child, round-eyed and solemn, pokes his head out from behind his mother's legs.

Elvira tries to smile at him, but her lips are cracked from the sun and crusted with salt from her near-drowning. Her eyes go from the child to the faded print apron skirt he is clutching in his fist. She doesn't dare look up at the woman wearing the apron until a movement catches her peripheral vision.

The woman has raised her hand to touch her own hair. Her hair is pulled back and pinned. Probably no time for more. Still, when she sees a stranger, a strange woman, even a woman dripping wet and barefoot, her hand goes up to

her hair in a token tidying gesture.

It is this small tribute that breaks Elvira down. Her lips stretch, crack, burn. Sounds come out of her, not words, sounds like the waves make, like the gulls make.

Then there is nothing but the bib of the apron against her face, the hand unmoving on the back of her head.

"It took the Mounties two weeks to find her. She was upstairs in that big white house, in a nice little room. You know? The kind with one pointy gable that pokes up? From the middle of the roof?"

I nodded and nodded, urging my mother on. Without these constant affirmations, she would sit and spin her wheels forever.

"Well, there was Elvira, sitting in a rocking chair in a patch of sun. Rocking away. Just looking out the window. Peaceful as an egg."

"What's that mean? Peaceful as an egg?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's just something my mom always says. Probably her mother said it. Stands to reason, though, doesn't it? I mean, you can't get much more peaceful than an egg."

This was another of my mother's sayings that made perfect sense on a level inaccessible to thought.

"Anyway, all along the window sill in the room were stones and shells Elvira had collected. That's all she'd done. Walked along the beach every day picking up shells and pretty stones."

"Did the Mounties put handcuffs on her?"

"Oh no. Nothing like that. She hadn't done anything wrong. She was just a missing person. So they weren't there to arrest her. They couldn't even make her come back if she didn't want to."

"So why did she come back?"

"Well, I guess she wanted to."

"But why?"

"I don't know," my mother said, and paused, looking down into her cooling tea.

I wondered if she was seeing what I was seeing. That little sun-warmed room with the rocking chair and the shells. Dust motes made into jewels by that long-ago light. I tried to imagine Elvira sitting and rocking, calmly waiting for the authorities to catch up with her. I couldn't. The room had nothing to do with the scarfed and suited

Elvira I saw once or twice a year. But neither did the train, or the walk to the sea, or the knocking on the door of the house.

"Did she ever go back?" I asked. "To the house?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. She's never said, anyway."

"Does she want to go back?"

"I don't know that either. And I would never ask. And don't you go asking. It's none of our business."

Elvira does not know whose room this used to be, whether a departed boarder or a dead child. In the last few days she has memorized its details, giving them to herself like gifts. The honey-coloured hardwood floor, the round braided rag rug, the sloping ceiling, the window facing the ocean. Through this window, day and night, comes the huge breathing of the water.

In the morning, the sun teases pinkly through her eyelids. She is already awake by then, having felt the day's beginning far beneath her in the house. She pulls the sheet and quilt over her head. Though clean, the bedclothes have that deeply personal smell that comes of much using and washing.

She is afraid. The fear is like a cold fingertip pressing right where her ribcage forks. She wakes to it, goes to sleep with it. Maybe she has been afraid like this for years, but all the other fears, what will we eat, what will we wear, how will we stay warm, kept her from feeling it.

All she knows is that one morning last week she woke up to the boys already gone to their days, gone to their lives, and the fear there in bed with her, its cold penetrating the cave of warmth under the sheets. She carried the fear around inside her like a pain all that day. She told herself there was nothing to be afraid of. The boys were all working. Earning. They could look after her now, and they would. So she had nothing to fear, for the rest of her life. Nothing.

She did not know how much a train ticket would cost. It turned out she had just enough in silver and coppers, knotted up in her handkerchief.

Elvira pulls the bedclothes down and opens her eyes. She does not know the surname of the family stirring below. She has no idea what the woman who opened the door to her told them all, only that not one of them seemed surprised by her presence at their table.

She is still afraid. But the fear is at home here, in this house. It is less like a pain and more like a presence. More like something she can negotiate with, silently.

It is a blessing not to have to speak. Her tongue lies soft in her mouth.

This room is a blessing too, and her place at the table, and the plate of warm food all her own.

The plate is set before her in such a way that it makes no sound when the china meets the wood of the table. She looks forward to this gesture, this tenderness, as much as she looks forward to the food she did nothing to prepare but which is still, miraculously, hers.

The smell of breakfast cooking has reached her, filling her mouth with water. She sits up and swings her bare feet out onto the rag rug. Today she will walk along the beach again, and stoop and pry up half-buried shells, and wish them in the water, and carry them up to this room and put them on the windowsill for the morning sun to bleach clean.

"Now, don't go screaming yourself sick," my mother said to me across the kitchen table.

"I *won't*."

"And don't stand too close to anybody who is screaming themselves sick, because you could get ear damage."

I glowered. She meant my best girlfriend, Michelle. Michelle probably would scream herself sick, come to think of it. And cry, too, and maybe even faint. She was better than me at everything else, so why not this?

"And the two of you stay *together*. If you get separated or if something goes wrong before Michelle's parents can pick you up, find a policeman. There'll be police all over Maple Leaf Gardens, thank God. So find one of them if you need help. Don't go walking the streets of Toronto." She might have been saying, the streets of Sodom.

"I'm not stupid," I said.

"Oh, I know *you're* not."

Another dig at Michelle. She was just jealous that I had a best friend. At fourteen, I spent a lot of time analysing my mother, trying to put my finger on exactly what was wrong with her. Her main problem, I had decided, was that she was lonely. Well, I'd be lonely too if I stayed in the house all day waiting for my husband and kids to come home. The only time she talked to people was over the phone to my grandmother or my aunt, or over the backyard fence to Mrs. Kiraja. But she could get out of the house, if she really wanted to. Join committees. Make friends. Even get a job, now that my brother and I

were growing up and didn't need her any more. So if she was lonely, I told myself, it was her own fault, and she had no business taking it out on Michelle.

"Michelle's father won't let her play Beatle records for a *whole hour* after he comes home from work," I said fiercely. "And when he saw her Paul McCartney haircut, he said, That's not coming out of my wallet, and then he made her *pay* for it. Out of her *allowance*."

"This is the same man who stood in line for ten hours to get you both tickets to the concert."

"He only did that to keep Michelle from doing it. Because she would have."

"Oh, I know she would have."

"She had her sleeping bag all ready and her bus tickets to Toronto and everything, but then her parents caught her sneaking out and they *grounded* her. Except for the concert tomorrow, she can't go *anywhere* for a *month*."

"Somebody should get the Children's Aid after those two."

I tried to sulk, but I was too full of emotional helium. The very next day, tomorrow, in just twenty-eight hours and seventeen minutes, I was going to be breathing the same air as John, Paul, George and Ringo. I had never heard of molecules, but I had a notion that that air would contain tiny bits of the Beatles that would somehow bypass the other thirty thousand screaming fans to enter my nostrils alone.

I would come home changed. In what way, I didn't know, but I would be different. How could I possibly be the same after breathing the dandruff of the gods?

"Excited?" my mother said, watching me.

I shrugged. "A bit." I stared down into my mug of milky tea. The mug was printed with a black and white photograph of Ringo Starr, and had cost \$2.95. My mother had said that was highway robbery for a cup, but she had paid it anyway. I took a sip. I didn't like tea, but the Beatles drank it.

"You know you're getting pretty?" my mother said. "In spite of that haircut?"

I rolled my eyes. I had had my hair cut like Ringo's. I didn't like Ringo's hair either, but I had to be loyal. *Somebody* had to love Ringo. Besides being the least attractive of the four, he had nothing witty to

say to reporters, couldn't sing, and as far as I could tell, wasn't even much of a drummer.

I could have guessed that Michelle would go for Paul. She belonged with the best-looking of the Beatles. She was tall and blonde, with cheekbones she didn't have to suck in to make show. I used to imagine the two of us somehow meeting the four of them. I could see Michelle going right up to Paul, giving him that cool look she was starting to give boys. And there would be me in the background, finally managing to catch Ringo's eye.

I didn't know if I was getting pretty or not. But if I was, I wanted Michelle to tell me, not my mother. All Michelle ever said were things like, "You know, it wouldn't *hurt* you to pluck your eyebrows."

"When I was fourteen," my mother was saying, "for me, it was Rudy Vallee." She was using that shy, coaxing tone she used when she wanted us to talk. It made me itch with embarrassment, but it also made it impossible to get up and leave.

"He used to come on for Fleischman's Yeast on Sunday nights, and I used to dress up and sit in front of the radio."

Oh God.

"And one night, when he was singing, I lost a button off my blouse. It just popped off and went scooting across the kitchen floor. And my mother said, Well, *somebody's* heart's beating."

"What did Grandma think of him?" If I asked questions I could at least steer the conversation away from anything truly nauseating.

"What did my mom think of Rudy Vallee? Oh well, he sang nice songs, and he always ended with a hymn, so she didn't mind." I had once seen a picture of Rudy Vallee singing into what looked like a giant lollipop. He had a face like Howdy Doody and a mountain range of hair parted as by a river. There was nothing there that I would scream at, let alone lose a button over. "And she'd had kind of a crush on Maurice Chevalier herself when she was younger," my mother continued, "so she knew what it was like."

"Grandma?"

"Your grandmother was a girl once, believe it or not. So was your mother."

"I *know*."

I looked up at the clock on top of the fridge. Twenty-seven hours

and fifty-seven minutes to go. It was the same chicken clock, still pecking away. The Dutch girl string-saver still hung on the wall, still without string, despite my father's pleading. My mother continued to wear aprons, though I had told her not to, and she still got her hair done just like the Queen's.

"There might be something on the radio about the Beatles arriving in Toronto," she said, getting up and going to the counter. At least the radio was new, a transistor. But she wouldn't throw out the pink plastic one. It was down in the basement with my and my brother's old toys and books.

"... pushing through the crowd..." an excited announcer was saying. "Security personnel are having great difficulty getting the Beatles safely to their waiting limousines. They are having to guide them, because they're bent over with their jackets up over their heads, and — What? Which one is it? Some fans have broken through the police cordon and have grabbed hold of one of the — Who? Ringo? Ringo Starr?"

My mother and I looked at each other. Her eyes were as big as mine felt.

"... Security personnel have pulled the fans away from Ringo Starr, and have gotten him and the other Beatles safely into the..."

"Thank goodness," my mother breathed when the broadcast was over and *A Hard Day's Night* was belting out of the radio. "They could really have hurt Ringo, y'know. Pulled out his hair. Grabbed his nose. He's got *such* a nose."

I was suspicious of my mother's fondness for the Beatles. I thought it might have more to do with trying to be my friend than anything else. But maybe not.

"Oh, they're *cute!*" she said the first time they were on the Ed Sullivan show. "Their hair must be really *clean* to flip around like that."

"I give them three months," my brother said. "Six, tops."

"Jesus God," my father whispered, raising his newspaper like a shield.

"Ooooooh!" my mother was singing, trying to imitate Paul and John's falsetto. "Ooooooh!"

"Ringo must be Jewish, with that nose," she was saying now.

"No, he's *not*," I said. "He's from Liverpool."

"Well, there are probably Jews in Liverpool. There are Jews all over. I was reading somewhere the other day that there are even Chinese Jews."

"But not all Jewish people have big noses."

"I know. But lots do. Look at Elvira."

"Is Elvira Jewish?" I pictured her high-bridged nose, her large brown eyes, the lids sliding slowly down when she blinked, then slowly back up.

"One of her grandmothers was. I forget which one. But look, don't mention I said that, all right?"

"I *won't*. Why would I?"

"People kept that kind of thing quiet back then. And then the war came, and they *really* kept it quiet."

I hadn't said more than two words at a time to Elvira in years. The fact was, she had started giving me the creeps. The last time she had visited, I had come down the stairs on my way outside just in time to catch a glimpse of her sitting in the living room. My mother must have left her alone for a minute to go to the bathroom or do something in the kitchen. She was sitting absolutely still, in perfect profile, as if cut from paper. I suddenly got spooked by the idea of her turning and seeing me. I tiptoed out the side door so she wouldn't.

Waiting, my mouth said all by itself once I was safely outside. She had been *waiting* for something. Almost as if she believed that if she just sat perfectly still for long enough, she would find it. Or it would find her.

Elvira has found a beach of stones. It is low tide, very sunny and hot. Tidal pools are forming and the gulls are circling down to feed on whatever is trapped inside them. Weeds like bunches of tiny dirigibles crunch and pop underfoot.

Elvira picks her way across the slanting, tippy surface with the help of a stick. The stones of the beach have been rolled by the waves into egg shapes. The boulders are like the eggs of dinosaurs; even the pebbles are pointed at one end, round at the other.

Her dress pockets are already full of stones. They knock softly, insistently against her thighs like the fists of small children.

She'll empty them when she gets back to the room. She'll arrange the stones on the windowsill, perhaps by size, big to small, or perhaps by colour, grey, salmon, speckled, striped.

Her ankles begin to ache for a flat surface. Bracing with her stick, she steps over a tidal pool onto a huge egg half buried in sand. She sits down and rests her stick in a pebbled groove beside the stone. Then she draws her knees up and circles them with her arms.

She looks around at the seashore and laughs silently to herself. She should abandon the idea of putting her stones in any kind of order on her windowsill. There is no order here, or none that she can discern. The seashore is a torn edge, a smelly mess at low tide. The waves and gulls make a racket that never lets up. Things are dying and being born everywhere, fish flopping in tidal pools, insects flying up out of the weed, baby crabs skittering on tiptoe.

Maybe she was expecting the kind of thing she had seen in paintings. Postcards. The smells are another surprise, everything from this salty, fishy stink to the wintry smell of high tide. An awful smell, she thinks. Awful in the Biblical sense of awful. The smell of a maker of stones into eggs.

The big stone she is sitting on has gotten so hot in its few hours in the sun that it seems to be generating heat from within. Elvira imagines it submerged at high tide, still warm at the centre, sending up shimmers of heat through the water.

A breeze cools her face for a second. It catches one of the waves and pushes it further and faster than the others. She watches the wave snake through the twisting waterways of the low tide shore and find her rock. Actually lick the toe of her shoe. Cold seeps in through the broken stitches in the cracked leather. Lorna, the woman in the house, has given Elvira a new dress and underwear, well, new to her, but there are only enough shoes to go around in the family. She explained this softly, apologetically, while Elvira was stepping into the offered clothes. Elvira nodded and reached and touched Lorna's hand. She still has not spoken. She knows she will talk, in time, when the time comes. At least, she will open her mouth and make a sound. She has no idea what the sound will be, whether words or singing or something she cannot even imagine. Her tongue is still resting soft in her mouth. She is very aware of her tongue, now that she is not using it. It feels oddly new, almost alien, a thing she must get to know.

Perhaps she will never get to know it. Perhaps it will keep changing, and she won't be able to keep up with the changes. She might wake up tomorrow

morning with her tongue forked, divided down to the root, and herself speaking in tongues. Or she might find her tongue gone altogether, a small nub or nothing where it once was, and a hard beak instead of lips and teeth. She might sing like a bird.

Another cold wave licks her toe. She inches her foot up a bit higher. She notices that the gulls have stopped circling and feeding. They are sitting on the water now in bobbing flotillas, smiling long, thin smiles.

Her tailbone is starting to ache. She is not sure she has ever sat this long on a stone. Or on anything. Doing nothing. She knows she should be ashamed of herself. She isn't. Not that she's proud of herself, either. She couldn't say what she is, right now. Maybe she's lost her mind. She's acting the way crazy people act. She's done what crazy people do.

Well. If this is crazy, then it's very ordinary. Very simple. She eats, she sleeps, she walks the beach. Nothing surprises her. If the largest stones were to shiver and rock, hatching in the sun, and sticky baby dinosaur heads poke out, squealing for their mothers, she would not so much as blink.

Even the extraordinary kindness she has received, and in a dimmed, waiting part of herself she knows it is extraordinary, even that seems only natural, like water flowing into a hollow.

She feels hollow. Empty as the shells she finds. Maybe when you lose your mind you really do lose something, and there is a space left.

Her mind used to be so full and hard and tight with all she had to do, had to make happen, had to keep from happening. She had to stretch a loaf of bread. She had to find a dollar. She had to see to, look after, make sure.

And she did. She did what was right. She did all the things she was raised to do. Have pride. Not ask. Mind her own business. Never beg. Keep control. Hold in. Not let on. Never break down.

Where did all that go? Did she leave it in the station like a lost suitcase when she boarded the train? Is it waiting for her?

A wave washes right over her foot. She reaches for her stick and touches wet. Her stick is floating. She watches it lift free of the pebbles it was resting on, watches one end swing toward shore, and the whole thing begin to move with the incoming tide.

She grabs the stick while she can, then stands up on the half-submerged rock, rubbing her numb backside. She had better get back to the house. Her stomach tells her it is time to eat.

She smiles, walking the stones with the aid of her stick. Her cracked lips

have healed, thanks to a homemade balm Lorna gave her. Her tongue moves in her mouth, as if with a life of its own. The time is coming to sing.

My mother seemed to know that She Loves You, the first song I ever saw the Beatles perform on the Ed Sullivan Show, had a religious significance for me. She said nothing until the last “Yeah” had died away and I had stopped the almost Hasidic rocking that took over my body whenever the tune was playing on the radio.

“Did I ever tell you that your grandmother saw Buffalo Bill? In Glasgow? When she was just a little girl?”

“Grandma saw Buffalo Bill?”

“Uh huh. She did. And all she ever said about it was that the Indians smoked cigars, and the horses looked awfully thin, because the poor things had come over in the hold of a ship.”

“What was Buffalo Bill doing in Glasgow?”

“It was his Wild West show. He took it all over Europe. So my mom and her family and the whole village came down on the train.”

I couldn’t stand it any more. “What made you think of Grandma seeing Buffalo Bill?”

“You seeing the Beatles tomorrow. I just thought it was kind of interesting. Buffalo Bill and the Beatles. Hey! Sounds like a song title, doesn’t it? Buffalo Bill and the Beatles.”

I had to cut her off, or she’d start making up lyrics and a tune. “Did Elvira like Rudy Vallee too? The way you did?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think the Tomlinsons even had a radio. And Elvira wasn’t going to school, remember. She was just like a mother with four kids. So she didn’t hear what all the other girls were talking about. She might not even have known who Rudy Vallee was. She didn’t have any kind of a girlhood. No dances. No boyfriends. It was as if a great big apple corer had come along and just lifted all that stuff right out.”

“Is that why she’s so weird?”

“How do you mean?”

I couldn’t say. I kept thinking about the last time I had seen Elvira. That sense of waiting. There had been a terrifying patience to the waiting, like the patience of statues, the patience of portraits. Whatever it was, it had sped me out the door.

"It's like she's not *real*," I said at last. "Like she's not really *there*."

"Well," my mother said, "she's very, very reserved. That can happen, when somebody's been through something. And Elvira's been through a lot. She's been scarred. And they say that scar tissue's tougher than skin. Maybe that's a good thing. Because nothing ever came easy to Elvira. She did everything the hard way."

"What about walking up to that house?" I said. "She got taken in. Just like that. For nothing."

"That was luck. That was just pure luck. Happening to find the right kind of people. I mean, when you think about what she could have found. People who'd have set the dog on her. People who'd have had her jailed as a vagrant. Anything could have happened to her. She could have ended up in a mental institution. There were people who thought she'd gone crazy. And in those days, crazy was next to criminal. You didn't get any sympathy."

"Why would anybody think she was crazy?"

"Well, look at what she did. Oh, I know. It looks awfully brave, going off on her own like that. That's how people think of it now. But then? A young single woman? Going away by herself? Without telling her family?" My mother shook her head. "In those days what you should and shouldn't do was chiselled in stone, especially if you were a girl. And if you once did something you shouldn't, you were either bad or you were nuts. Take your pick. So if you think Michelle's parents are being hard on her for trying to sneak off to Toronto . . ." She shook her head again. "I don't know what was riskier for Elvira. Running away or coming home again."

"What happened when she came home?"

"Well, over night she stopped being the brave little girl who raised her brothers single-handed, and turned into the woman who ran off. Amazing how people can drop one thing and pick up another without missing a beat."

"Is that why she moved to Toronto?"

"Oh, she didn't move then. She couldn't have gone anywhere then. She didn't have one red cent to her name."

I thought of the quality of Elvira's suits, the silk scarf always at her neck. "So where did she get her money?"

"She worked for it. Starting with a little nothing job she managed

to get somehow. Remember Bing's Variety? Down on Commercial?"

"Yes."

"Where we used to get ice cream? And now it's a drug store?"

"Yes!"

"Well, Leonard Bing hired Elvira as a clerk. There was talk about that too. The theory was that Bing figured people would come into the store just to get a look at the woman who ran off. And he was right. So help me, people would come in and buy some silly little thing, a spool of thread or a pair of shoelaces. But they'd really be there to look at Elvira."

"So what did Elvira do?"

"She counted out their change and looked right back at them. Oh, there was talk. My mom went to a Ladies' Aid meeting where Elvira might as well have been the only thing on the agenda. And the talk didn't stop until some pillar of the church announced that she for one had not been born yesterday, and she was keeping an eye on the girl's waistline and just waiting. And that's when my mom stood up and said if they didn't all quit tying their tongues in knots about Elvira, she'd quit the Ladies' Aid."

"Grandma said *that*?"

"Hey, listen. Your grandmother doesn't open her mouth much, but when she does it's to *say* something. Besides. She had a lot of clout with the Ladies' Aid back then, and she knew it. It was bazaar season when all this happened. And she was their champion knitter."

"Lorna? My name is Elvira. May I sit down?"

Lorna's heart jumps at the sound. The words were dry. Sticky-sounding. But they were words. So she has a voice after all. And a name.

She knows she should be relieved to hear the woman speak at last. But she's actually a little sad. There was something child-like in the silence. Trusting. But of course, it couldn't last. That kind of thing never does.

The two of them sit carefully at the kitchen table, facing each other. Elvira has eaten with Lorna at this table three times a day for more than a week. She has slept in a bed whose sheets Lorna has changed. She has shared the privy with Lorna and her family.

But now they are beginning all over again. With words. The words will be a difficulty, at first. A thing to get used to.

"Lorna, I'm going to have to go back where I came from soon. They're looking for me. I can tell. I can feel them getting closer."

Lorna nods, gets up and pours Elvira a cup of tea. She moves slowly, deftly. There is listening in every gesture.

"Something like this happened to me once before," Elvira continues. "When my mother died. I woke up one morning, and my whole life was gone. Just like that. But there was another one waiting for me. The boys were hungry. The boys were scared. The boys needed clean clothes. So I got through that day. The next day, they were hungry and scared and dirty all over again. So I got through that day too. And the next one. And the next."

"But the boys are men now. Whatever they can't do for themselves their wives will do. I've lost my life again. It's gone. Just like it was before. Only this time, there's no other life waiting for me."

There is a time to speak. Lorna knows that. It's a very precise time, very exact. She can feel it coming now, like a wave still far out to sea. Speak too soon, and the wave dies. Too late, and it's already crashed.

"I'm afraid, Lorna. I keep telling myself there's nothing to be afraid of. But it's the nothing that I am afraid of. And the nothing is me."

The time is now. Quick, before the crash. Lorna prays, no more than a breath, then says, "What do you love?"

It was the right question. Elvira's cheeks darken. In a rush, she says, "Here. This place. This house. My room. The beach. The sea. The tides. The stones. The shells. The seagulls. The sound of the place. The smell."

Lorna nods. Says nothing. Now it's time to be silent. That's about the only thing she knows, come to think of it. When to speak and when to be silent. She seems to have been born knowing it. She can remember, as a tiny girl, being astonished when people spoke during a necessary silence.

"Nothing else matters," Elvira continues. "I think of having to go back, and I do have to go back, I think of all the years to come, and it's nothing. It's like seeing my own ghost. It's like being my own ghost."

"But here? I know that I could be old here. No. It's more than that. I know I'm going to be old here. I can see myself old, picking up stones and putting them in my pockets. Keeping them for a little while on my windowsill. Then bringing them back to the beach, and picking up different ones."

She takes a deep breath. "I could sing here. I haven't sung in years. Probably haven't any voice left. But I could sing here. Sing and gather stones."

She looks down at her hands. In the space of a few days of no work, no dishes to wash, their redness has started to fade and their callouses to soften. "But that's not a life. Singing and gathering stones. You couldn't plan for that. Live for it. Make a life out of it."

Lorna says nothing. Elvira raises her head and looks at her. "Could you?"

"Why don't you go back to school or something? Take art? You always wanted to go to art school."

"Yes," my mother said obediently, nodding over her mug of tea. "I did, once."

I had finally bullied her out of her Tide box china, and gotten her a set of lumpily glazed, earth-coloured mugs that crunched like concrete when they were set down. She used them when I was home from university, but I suspected that when I was away she reverted to her old, chipped teacups and saucers.

"Well? Why don't you sign up for some courses or something? Dad's said he'll pay for them. And he worries about you having nothing to do, what with him at work all day and us both away at school."

Actually, what my father had said was, "Just chat with your mother when you come home. And try to keep it light. I think she's lonely."

He had put my back up, saying that. He was her husband, after all. Wasn't it his business if she was lonely? And what did he mean by "keep it light"? Couldn't he see that she was in a rut? That she wasn't realizing her potential? That she hardly knew there was a world out there? She was like so many women of her generation, living in a time-warp, clinging to roles that had become useless, meaningless. So if I didn't tell her these things, over and over, who would?

"You could even get your B.A.," I went on. "Lots of women your age are doing it."

"I'd look like the Wreck of the Hesperus, sitting there in a class full of kids."

"We're not kids. And most of the professors are your age or even older."

"Well, anyway. I don't think I'm bright enough."

"Yes, you *are*! Don't be *stupid*!"

We drank our tea in silence, save for the hum of the digital clock

on top of the fridge. It had been my Christmas present to her, the only way I could force her to get rid of that damned chicken. The thing was probably still pecking away in the basement with all her other banished treasures. Probably she wound it, surreptitiously, every time she did the laundry.

I couldn't force a replacement for the string-saver on her, since she still didn't use it to save string. At least she had painted the Dutch girl's hat when she painted the kitchen, so it blended into the background a little.

But robin's egg blue! Hadn't she heard of avocado? Or Chinese red? *Nobody* painted a kitchen robin's egg blue. Except my mother.

"Pincurls. She actually does her hair in pincurls. With bobby pins. Little metal crosses, all over her head. It looks like Arlington."

My roommates and I swapped mother stories, shaking our heads, sipping cheap red wine, sharing a cigarette.

"Margarine. I kid you not. I go home. What's on the table? White bread. White sugar. And margarine." The fact that these had been staples of our own diets as little as six months before was conveniently forgotten.

The chicken clock and string saver had me tied for first place with a girl whose mother not only still went to church, but did so in white gloves and a hat. "A *new* hat for Easter, of course," this girl would say. "But white shoes and gloves and purse *only* after the twenty-fourth of May. *Never* before."

In our waist-length hair, peasant skirts and pooka beads, we would groan as one. How lucky we were to have escaped the restrictions and conformity that ruled our mothers' lives!

"How long is your hair getting now?" my mother asked.

I bristled. "Why?"

"I was just wondering. Did I ever tell you that your grandmother could sit on her hair when she was a girl?"

"I wear my hair long because I *want* to," I said. I could never pass up an opportunity to educate my mother. "Grandma had no choice in the matter. Keeping a girl's hair long in those days was just another way of turning her into a sex object and limiting her freedom. If she had chosen to cut her hair short, she would have been a social out-cast." I tried not to imagine my roommates' cool stares if I walked in

with a pageboy or pixie cut.

My mother's lips twitched. She tried to stop them, but they twitched again.

"What?" I said. I hadn't said anything funny. Had I?

"Oh, nothing. Just something I've noticed lately. Now and then you talk like Elvira."

I flushed. I didn't want to be compared to anybody else. I wanted to be unique. Everybody at school was trying to be unique. "What do you mean?" I said.

"The way you pronounce things. Every single word a little jewel."

I flushed darker. Sometimes my mother could surprise me, and this was one of those times. She would show just a bit of grit, a cool-eyed touch of humour that had nothing to do with being a mother. It was as if she had a whole other self, a selfish self, one that could just get up and walk away from all of us and never look back. Except for these split-second glimpses, she kept it hidden. But it was there, and it could make me feel very young.

"What's Elvira doing these days?" I said, trying to change the subject without appearing to do so.

"I got a postcard from her. Just the other day. Tuesday? No, Wednesday. No, it would have been Tuesday, because —"

"Where was it *from*?"

"Just a minute. I'll get it." She got up from the table and rummaged through the stack of coupons, bills, letters and junk mail that had always lived behind the radio. "Here it is."

I put my hand out. "Don't read it to me. Let me read it for myself," I pleaded. But she had already sat back down, holding the card and squinting at it.

"It's from Land's End. Where she always goes. Dear June, she says. I am taking my usual two weeks here. The sea and the beach are what they always are. I hope all goes well with you and your family. Elvira."

"That's it?" I said.

My mother nodded. "She never writes much."

"Did she ever explain why she ran away from home that time?"

"No. She never talked about anything personal. And she hasn't even been to visit in a while. She's too busy. She was taking night school

courses in business for a couple of years. On top of working all day. And now she's an office manager. For a big firm in Toronto."

A momentary bafflement came into my mother's eyes. She had the entrenched Hamiltonian's combined worship and dread of Toronto. Why anyone would go there willingly to live was beyond her, as was the idea of a woman being an "office manager" in a "big firm." One of my roommates was heading for law school, and my mother's only comment was, "Imagine a girl wanting to be a lawyer." She didn't disapprove. She just couldn't understand.

She couldn't understand my wanting to go away to Guelph, either, when I could have stayed home and attended McMaster. "Why would anybody who has a home want to *leave* it?" she had asked rhetorically, over and over. Leaving home for marriage she could at least relate to. She had done as much herself. But all the years of her wifehood and motherhood, whenever she visited my grandmother, she called it "going home." And she had told me about lying awake in her childhood bed the night before her wedding, homesick in advance.

"Fugue," I said. "It's called fugue, suddenly running away for no reason." I was taking Psych 100.

"I thought a fugue was something you played on the piano."

"It just means flight."

"It does? Fugue. Flight. Well, there's fugitive."

"And refuge."

"And refugee."

Her cheeks were getting pink. She loved playing with words, always had. In a second, I saw all that she needed and wanted. Just some conversation with me, a bit of wordplay, an easy, uncomplicated kindness.

But it wasn't easy. Not for me. It meant letting go my cool scorn for the things of her life, seeing my new, shaky independence for what it was. It meant growing up, right then and there. Doing what was right.

She was still playing with words out loud.

"Let me see that postcard," I said abruptly, reaching for it. She handed it over, hurt from the interruption showing in her eyes for just a second.

I studied the back of the card. The handwriting was neat, almost

unnaturally legible. A professional businesswoman's script. *The sea and the beach are what they always are.*

I flipped the card over and looked at the picture. Land's End. Typical east coast scene. Water. Rugged, stony shore. And far up the beach, tiny in the distance, a big old white house.

Elvira is sitting in her room, rocking in her rocking chair. She is holding one stone. She has taken the others from the windowsill back to the beach, but has kept this one. It fits perfectly in her cupped hands.

She lifts it near her face. Touches it with her lips. It is cool. Less smooth than it looks. She sniffs. Dust. She touches it with her tongue. Salt.

The stone's colour is subtle and complicated, a stippling of gray, blue and pale magenta. The spot where her tongue touched is darker, like meat, like blood. For just a moment, when she saw the stone under the water, she thought it was a heart.

She rocks in her chair, holding her stone. She hears a car pull up beside the house. A car door open. Shut.

The stone is getting warm in her hands. She imagines it dimly alive, with presence and awareness. It has been heaved into place by ice, rolled into shape by water. And now picked up and placed on a windowsill by herself. She wonders if it knows where it is, what has happened to it. If it wants, if it can want, to get back to the sand and the waves.

She hears a knock. Hears Lorna getting up and going to see who's at the door. Hears men asking questions. Hears Lorna's answers, reluctant but truthful.

Elvira rocks and thinks. She could take the stone with her. Or she could leave it in this room. Or she could return it to the beach. What does the stone want?

Steps on the stairs up to her room. Heavy. Slow. Authoritative.

She brings the stone once more close to her lips. She whispers to it. Then she rocks and waits, listening to the steps, hearing them pause. She does not even turn her head to look at the uniforms filling the door to her room.

"Miss Tomlinson? Miss Elvira Tomlinson?"

"I got a letter from her the other day," my mother tells me. "She's taken early retirement and bought herself a big old white house. You'll never guess where."

"No!" I say, slowly grinning.

"Yup. That's what she's gone and done. Worked hard and saved her money, all those years."

She puts her hands flat on the kitchen table in front of her and looks down at them. She deliberately stretches and flattens them, I know, to check on the encroachment of her arthritis. The flesh of her face hangs a little forward, deepening the creases at her nose and mouth.

We are silent together for a little while. We often are now. Sometimes I'll ask her questions, to get her going on her old stories. Then I sit and listen to her digressions, which are becoming fewer and shorter. There are lapses and omissions, too. I usually remember the parts she has forgotten, but I don't correct her. I'm not sure that it isn't natural and right for parts of her stories to be falling away now, like petals.

"Didn't you tell me once that Elvira used to sing?" I coax. She glances up, her eyes round and young.

"Did I?"

"Uh huh. You told me once that she used to sing in school. At assemblies."

"Did I tell you that?"

"Yeah, you did. And you told me that once she had on a white dress . . ." I go on encouragingly. The memory comes suddenly into focus for her.

"Oh, *right!* I remember now. And she sang — Damn it, what did she sing?" After a moment, she looks at me. "When did I tell you that about Elvira singing?"

"Ages ago. I think I was just a kid."

"Well, kid, you've got some memory. Funny. I can remember her singing, I can hear her voice, I can see her clear as anything. But I can't remember what she sang. And I can't remember telling you about it either. Funny." She looks at her hands again, smiling a little to herself.

I have come for the day from Toronto, where I live now. I visit her more often than she visits me, though she can still manage the bus trip now and then. I meet her at the bus station and take her north on the subway. Each time we pass Wellesley Station, she says, "Elvira used to

live on Wellesley Street.”

Just once, early on, I suggested looking Elvira up and going for a visit. “No, oh no,” she said quickly, her eyes taking on that young, fearful look that used to infuriate me. It is equal parts longing and fear, and in old age the fear is winning.

But there’s more to it than that. My mother knows something about Elvira, has known it all along. And I’m beginning to think that I’ve known it all along too. You don’t visit Elvira. She visits you. You do not haunt a ghost. You let it haunt you.

I suppose that’s why, though I haven’t seen Elvira in decades and will probably never see her again, hardly a month goes by that I don’t search my mind and find her in it somewhere. Walking to the sea.

In my apartment I take my mother around, showing her my things. They are new to her each time, even the old things she has given me. “Did I?” she asks wonderingly when I remind her that yes, she actually gave me the chicken-pecking clock, the Dutch girl string-saver and the pink plastic radio. She doesn’t remember coming up from the basement during my last visit, wiping dust from something with her sleeve. And, when I tried to protest, pressing it on me, saying, “Oh, come *on!* You *love* this old stuff!”

Elvira is walking the beach. She walks with her head bent, looking for stones to pick up and take back to her house. Her hair is as gray as the sea.

She is singing. I strain my ears. I think I know what song it might be. But the words and the tune are shredded to silence by the wind and the waves.