

Annette LaPointe /

## THE LAST HOURS OF THE ICE

She'd become used to Miranda's sketching her on the notepad by the phone, or in pencil on the countertop. Small cross-hatches of lines suddenly resolved themselves into the shape of a back or a shoulder. Camille was vaguely aware that Miranda had other pictures of her, complete sketches and photographs, but she rarely got to see them. Only once she'd woken to find Miranda sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed with a sketchbook in her lap and one hand resting on the back of Camille's knee.

//Mine.//

Of course.

That casual possession arrested her. She hadn't been anyone's in that way since she'd ceased to be her parents' baby, carried with them everywhere. If her own drawing skills had extended to anything more than clean, precise engineer's diagrams, she would have wanted to make the same kind of records of Miranda that Miranda made of her.

Eight months ago, she'd driven in from field work in Kimberley, come home at four in the morning so tired she couldn't keep her teeth from chattering. From the rest stop in Swift Current she'd called Miranda, left a long, almost incomprehensible message on the answering service when no one picked up. It was late March, liquidly warm out, so that even in the dark water ran down the pavement, and there was slush in the gutters when she parked. Her fantasies by that time hadn't extended even as far as a shower; she'd only wanted layers of bedding heavy enough to imitate another person's body and two days' sleep.

Camille had come into her bedroom with her coat still on and palmed on the lights, looked at herself in the mirror with slack eyes for a moment and then stripped. But when she'd turned to the bed, Miranda had been there, curled up fully clothed with a sketchbook in the curve of her body. Camille had lifted it away automatically, smoothing the pages that had caught under one thigh.

Miranda had sketched each of the small items Camille had adopted from her parents' house. Next to the sketch of her desk lamp, Miranda had scrawled, Camille's B. Engineering (geology), U of Sask./94 (summa). Field work: Nov, Jan, Jan, Feb, Mar. Two of her father's north Saskatchewan landform maps had been reproduced in cartographic detail. Each of the insulators was pictured separately, the drawings noting minute differences in shape and texture. With almost visible deliberateness, Miranda had avoided disturbing any of the books.

Still life with Camille.

She'd been delighted. By the time she had sunlight to read by properly, it had been warm enough to open the windows and leave them open. She must have dozed, because she was very aware of waking when a cumulus flock of sparrows ascended suddenly from the ground to the still-naked trees. She was naked with the sketchbook on her lap, and Miranda was watching her, curled on the bed and still dressed.

"Have you been to bed yet?"

"No." She stood and put the book on her dresser and went to lie down, suddenly wide-eyed and unnaturally energetic. Too wired to sleep, too strung out to concentrate. She thought sometimes that she was always tired, but the elusiveness of sleep was a special cruelty, not one she was sure she could face.

Miranda gathered her up and arranged Camille on her side, settled one pillow under her head and the other behind her

shoulders. She settled again behind her, wrapped one arm around Camille's waist and held her hand with the other, rubbing a thumb in slow circles across her palm.

She'd been very still under that touch, letting the sleep-warmth of Miranda's body push into hers. Miranda had talked quietly against her hair, petting her like an animal until she relaxed and drifted.

"When I was in England, a friend of my mother's gave me a painting of the Owl and the Pussy-cat. It's one of the things that got misplaced when we came back. I would have liked for you to see it. You remind me of it. Your habit of taking off on me. You have to promise that the next time you decide to disappear, you'll take me with you."

The demand went by Camille without registering. She was trying to remember the poem, the Owl and the Pussy-cat who went to sea in a beautiful pea-green boat . . .

"Shh, love. Sleep."

And she'd been able to. When she woke up, Miranda was pressed against her. Her shoulders ached from the position, but she could feel Miranda's radiant happiness, and it wasn't something she was willing to give up. In mid-afternoon it was greyer than it had been, and the birds were everywhere, moving loudly on the surface of the snow.

Only small irregularities in the breath coming against her skin let her know Miranda was awake. She shifted a little, let Miranda stir and let her loose. The window was open, still, making the room cold, and she could smell the humidity coming in. The streets would be slop in that weather; she was grateful not to be driving on them. On the Trans-Canada she'd hit ice and nearly spun, and then been so frightened she'd almost vomited. She wondered if she could legitimately give up driving forever and engage Miranda as her chauffeur.



At the edge of her vision, she could see her computer desk, crowded with rock samples from her father's mines and the antiquated survey glass he'd once lifted for her. The stones were loose granite and sandstone, fragile enough that they'd continued their course of erosion even after they'd come to live indoors, and the resulting sand had settled into the grooves at the top of her monitor and added a layer of grit on everything. She missed the CPR lamp, though, and it was only by twisting her neck that she could make it out on the floor, where Miranda must have sat working.

"Why the sketches?" she asked.

"I have to keep track of you somehow." Rubbing Camille's fingers and feeling all the tiny bones in the back of her hand. "You disappear so easily, just take off, do your job, you come back in the middle of the night."

Silence.

When Miranda let her go, Camille got up and showered. The water was too hot; the heat and chlorine in it were going to dry her skin out, but in that moment it felt ecstatically good. There was still dirt in her hair from the work site. Really, she was so dirty that she couldn't believe she'd slept that way. Everything on her bed would need to be laundered. She wondered if her clothes weren't a loss. She'd never learned to carry dirt gracefully; it clawed at her attention. For someone of her profession, she was almost compulsively clean.

It was late in the day, but if she begged Miranda would take her to the Mendel gallery, sit with her in the conservatory, take her for Chinese at the Tsu King Lau on Avenue H. The ice on the South Saskatchewan river was just breaking up. It wouldn't be safe to walk out on, but she wanted to see it before dark.

Wrapped in her bathrobe and still dripping from the ends of her hair, Camille padded out. The bed was stripped and stiffly clean

clothes were laid over her desk chair for her. She accepted them without dressing and went to find Miranda. The open room beside the hallway was brilliant, the curtains back and her books still scattered on half the surfaces. Her mother's *Jane Eyre*. *Never Cry Wolf*. Robertson Davies under the couch. Thomas Hardy on the windowsill.

CBC radio attracted her attention, the soft notes of the Disc Drive theme cutting through the room's humidity. She turned. In the kitchen, Miranda was like an illustration from one of the Mendel gallery's children's books, precisely detailed and moving through a world of too-vivid colours.