

Keath Fraser/ MOTHER AND FATHER TALK OF GOING SOUTH

*Inflation gradually pushes the whole community
towards speculation, since ordinary life begins
to require speculator's skills.*

— William Rees-Mogg
The Reigning Error

1

Sun gives me the rapture, lying in it like. Days like this I worked for all my life. *How come you're not lying in it then?* I came in for some coconut oil. *You want to burn?* Right now I'd settle for a burn. *Sam's gone.* Sam? Sam's a professional. By lunchtime professionals have long gone. *You used to be gone by breakfast.* Yeah, look where it got me. Hammering and sawing my life away and not a buck to show for it. *The cost of living ate you up.* Up! Being a carpenter was no guarantee of amounting to a hill of beans.

2

What do you want for lunch? Coconut oil. *Your skin isn't ready for coconut oil. Use your PABA.* PABA wouldn't tan dog dirt. Look at me. I'm white. I've had it with that stuff. *So am I. I'm white.* *Coconut oil hasn't helped my skin.* I'm whiter than white. Albino. Besides, you're a woman. *No whiter than me.* I can see I'm whiter than you. Bleach I use screens out brown rays and lets in white ones. I'm white. *You're used to delayed gratification, it's in your blood.* If it is the chemo's killed it. *Not like Sammy. He wants something he wants it right away.* That's why Sam's an entrepreneur not a carpenter. Why you got Sam to thank for this penthouse, not me. *He's your son too.* Where's the coconut oil? *Sam never listens to me.* I can't figure it out.

3

I'm looking down on the beach and it's like Bombay. I'm using binoculars like. I can see bodies lying around the sand like candy bars. Same with the Park. I'm looking down on the Park and everybody's chocolate . . . picnickers, roller-skaters, men in earrings, children . . . chocolate brown bodies. They're all using coconut oil. I can smell it on the wind. *Maybe it's me you smell.* You? You weren't such a piker you'd let me put that oil of yours on my legs. All over me. I look anaemic. Look. Don't I look like I've been through chemo-therapy? skin shrinking? brain bulging? eyes popping? *Put your wig on.* I look like I need a tan. Head, chest, legs. . . . *You want lunch outside?* I want my legs rubbed. I can't reach my shins or I'd rub them myself. Therapy did that. Pumping chemo into my whole body. Veins running through me like wires . . . red hot wires. They stiffen you up. Therapy stiffens you up. Here. Use this to kneel on. *That's your hair.* Sam doesn't want oily knees on his broadloom. *How am I going to land on that little patch?*

4

Where do you want it? Feel any hair below my knees? *I wouldn't call it hair exactly.* . . . Christ, I'm turning into an Inuit! Better start with the shins. Rub it in good. *Like sorrow?* *You're doing a good job rubbing that in yourself.* I don't take a cane.

5

Listen . . . there's that mouth organ again. On the patio. I don't hear anything. *Your ears are worse than your posture.* The chemo ate away the stirrups in my ears. Which affected my balance. Which definitely affected my hearing. *You're standing on one leg.* You haven't oiled my foot. *I thought you were ticklish.* Tell me about it. Nothing tickles with chemo inside you.

6

Who is that kid anyway? Is Sam training him to be a houseboy or what? *It's lunchtime.* Past lunchtime The sun's past zenith. You haven't done my thighs, my back neither. Tits and skull I can do myself. *That's a funny way to put it.* Talking's a funny language.

7

You still have a healthy pair of thighs. They're bald too. Bald head, bald legs, bald balls. I used to have hair. I used to hate the wind. It blew the kind of hair I had around like horsehair. My barber called it horsehair. It wasn't good hair but it was hair. I had a mane at one time resembling a stallion's. Now it feels like a beachball. *You want your wig back?* A tan would give me some spunk. Look like I *had* spunk.

8

Living here next to the water drains you. The swelter. *You make it sound like a toilet.* Oceans *are* toilets. If you read the newspapers. *Not ours.* The Indian Ocean? Effluence is what they dump in that ocean. Dog dirt spelled wog. You could be swimming off Djakarta and see a lump float past you. The fish don't like it. They're clearing out. They're dying out. *Well, here we've got salmon and crab.* Oysters, yeah, ling cod. . . . *And you want to go south?* Who said? *To the tropics. You did.* We can't stay here the winter. *How come?* *When you retired Sam said come and live here with him.* Here! There's not enough sun to keep a bug alive. Without sun I shrivel up. Already the days are getting shorter. Next thing it's fall. Falling all over you. Fall's no good for tanning. The fog takes half a day to burn off. The sun comes down on you at an angle, not from overhead like now. Right now's still summer. I can't understand how come I'm white. Might as well be lying in the freezer. Soon will be, if I don't go south. *The pension isn't enough to keep us in coconut oil let alone travel.* Retired couples always travel south. *Well, we travelled West. From the East End to the West End.* People freeze to death without sun. *This isn't exactly a stable.*

The boy's got a yacht. *Who does?* Sam's got a yacht. Tied up in the tropics. *Turn around, I need the back of your thighs.* I read it in the newspaper. Sam's famous now. A real saviour of free enterprise. *Sam never hears us anymore.* Works too hard, forgets to relax. He's going to have a breakdown. *He's got secretaries.* Secretaries? Sam doesn't dip his pen in the company inkwell. *What?* He's too busy to even go sailing. *How come he's got a yacht then?* Took it in down payment on a hockey team. Can you beat that? Paying a crew just to sit on a yacht. It's probably peeling in the sun right now. I could slap some paint on it for him. If he needed them, I could build him lockers. *No crew wants you barging in with your hammer.* Doesn't matter what the crew wants. They're crew. Just like we're crew here. You cook. I'm the handyman. *I don't take orders.* You anticipate orders. Because you know how to crew . . . instinctively. You enjoy crewing. You get a cranky crew and you get mutinies. *There's that boy's mouth organ again.* . . . I'll broach the matter with Sam. You and me could live aboard the winter taking out charters. We could take charge of his crew. Make sure no one's cheating the absentee landlord. We'd get to lie on the foredeck and suntan. Make our son a return on his investment. *A pipedream if you ask me.* Well, we can't stay here in the winter. *Geese stay. The lagoon is full of geese. The ocean is full of whistlers. They migrate here on account of winter.* Winter would kill me. *Here's your wig.* You haven't oiled my head.

The little bugger likes to stare doesn't he? *He's never seen you without your hair.* He doesn't have to gape. *Just wants his reward.* What for — that mouth organ stuff? I gave him some change a week ago. *He's got his expenses.* Him? What's he need coconut oil for? He's got a suntan. It's in his genes. *He's got to eat. Look at him, he looks like a coat hanger.* Look at me. I don't eat. In this heat who needs to? *I like his playing.* Sounds like a funeral parlour. *The trouble with you is death on the brain.* In case you missed it I've got terminal cancer. That kind of music makes it interterminal. . . . *I know . . . I'm sorry.* I don't want to talk about it.

11

Where's lunch? *You want lunch?* Get me a glass of tomato juice. *I'll bring you a glass, hold your shirt on.*

12

What good's generosity when he's lonely? Got no friends, doesn't speak the language. The tarbrush has definitely affected his social life. *Poor little beggar. All he wants is his reward.* Secret is to make do with what you've got. *Not when you've got nothing. Not even when you've got everything.* I haven't got anything. *And you want a trip to the tropics.* Are you going to oil my back so I can start tanning? *First I'm going to offer him a glass of tomato juice.* Mud in his eye. . . .

13

He was thirsty. Make sure you wash that glass out good. *You were nicer when you had hair.*

14

You want your handlebars oiled too? What? You're still heavy around here. That's where the chemo collects when it's through circulating in the blood. *Feels soft.* Softness incorporated. *I can make my brain move.* Make sure that oil's on even. *Exercising the hemispheres is good for you.* What are you talking about? *Keeping alive my mental fibre.* You're not a ghost or something. *I exercise.*

15

I dream a lot. At night. *That's healthy too.* I'm not bored. *You're up with the sun.* How could you be bored — a man who gets up with the sun? I'm not dead. *A good dream is good for you.* Last night's was a stinker.

I'll tell you . . . maybe you won't believe this . . . I had a dream I was fresh dead. That I went up to heaven in the rapture. I went up in the rapture, and when I got there it was so real I could hardly believe it. Then it started to stink. Right under my nose. Boats, junks, sampans, rafts started sailing in off the gulf, landing on the beaches below me. Scrambling out of these junks were families . . . Indian, Chinese, Indonesian . . . black families talking wog. The tanners in the sand, of course, they all stood up to watch. Couldn't believe their eyes. They thought they were dreaming. *I* thought they were dreaming. They got pushed back by the boats landing, people landing . . . dozens, then hundreds, thousands. Thousands of junks, thousands of people, thousands of rags, covering the sand. And fires! Burning all night, all over the beach. When the sun came up I couldn't see the shoreline for smoke, rags, bodies. . . . You couldn't hear the gulls for the babble babble babble. For the screaming and crying. I could smell the garlic. I could see men tearing apart their rafts to build lean-tos in the sand. When it got too crowded for spitting they started walking into the forest. . . . I was watching them from on high, a whole migration. Clogging the trails, tramping down ferns and salal to set up their hovels in the Park. Boys in loincloths grabbed squirrels and wrung their necks. Acted like they'd skinned squirrels all their lives . . . cooked squirrels. Families spilled into the lagoon. Knotted the necks of the geese. Cooked the swans. All of a sudden a thousand acres of wilderness were real wilderness. The Park looked like a jungle. The zoo looked like a slum. These wogs opened up cages to let out monkeys they ate. Same with the parrots and penguins. I'm telling you, instead of peacocks crying and seals barking, nothing but a hullabaloo of sing-songing voices. Which people in the city must have heard. They got in their cars and drove down to see, locked their doors and wouldn't get out, crawled through the Park peering out their windows, the rose gardens littered with defecating humanity. Trees kept falling for firewood. Smoke hung over the forest like a cloud. I could smell it. Spreading out across the city, up the coast. I could see it, day after day. No rain fell and the lagoon nearly dried up. Millions used what was left to wash in. Their laundry covered the rocks and rushes. They squatted, fought, ate grass, crapped. They murdered the policemen's horses, cooked the timber wolves, ate the buffalo. At night their fires burned on the beaches and in the forest.

I kept watching them with my binoculars. They were staring out of the forest, pointing up at the skyscrapers. You couldn't stop them. You didn't want to watch them. They were copulating like rabbits. No sir. I went up in the rapture and got stuck with a stinker.

17

You're done. We ought to put our money in gold bullion. *What money?* Our pension money. *The cost of living ate that alive.* Sam's then. He's got money to burn. It's *going* to burn unless he puts it in bullion. His stocks, his hotels, his shopping centres, his arenas. All his hedges up in smoke. *And your skin.* What? *Your skin is going to burn too.* My skin is goddam asbestos.

18

Listen! He's playing a jig. Must think we're made of money. *I've got a little something in my bag here.* . . . You've always got a little something, haven't you, in that bag. A little something, a little treat, a little nest egg . . . It's usually a big disappointment your littleness. *Five dollars?* What? *All I've got.* Exactly! Give him a quarter. *Look at him, Father. He's hungry.* Give him a Smartie. I can tell you he'd turn down a Smartie, a trained seal like him. He isn't hungry. *Don't shout.* He's trying to skin me!

19

He looks disappointed. He doesn't understand the language. *He can translate spectacles like yours.* Sam, when he started out, wasn't any older than him. I can tell you he didn't start with handouts. Sam will tell you. He worked for what he got. He wasn't a musician. Sam never asked for more money than the value he gave. *You can't put a price on music.* *Music isn't a commodity like pots.* Pots! Sam never sold a pot in his life. *Music is priceless.* *The Queen of the Arts.* I know it is. But it isn't worth five bucks. Not that music. For five dollars you could buy the mouth organ. Violins are different. *Listen! . . . Bravo!*

20

He can play all the tunes he knows, I'm not giving him five dollars. That beats the band, that does. *Go on, Father. Give it to him.* Nope. *He played his little heart out.* I appreciate his talent, believe me. I wish I could talk his language to tell him how much. Plus to explain why I can't give him this. *Nonsense. That bill's losing value anyway. Since you've been holding it it's probably lost a nickel. Since I took it out of my purse it's dropped a dime.* It's the principle of the thing. He can stand there till his toes jam. *What principle? Times change. They're changing all the time.* If you don't stand on principle where are you?

21

Suppose there's a special on cellulite where a woman can get rid of all her cellulite for two hundred and fifty dollars. What's cellulite? *Fat. Only it looks like cottage cheese a woman gets on the thighs.* Suppose the woman's thighs look like holy hell. *That's why she'd need a salon . . . to tone them.* For two hundred and fifty bucks? She'd be a lunatic. *It wouldn't be just one treatment, it'd be a number, a whole series. If you look at the way prices are going up, it'd be a bargain.* Bull toot. *It's got to do with time. The price of time keeps going up. The salon's time, this boy's time. People's principles change. They've got to. They lose their value.* Not mine. You go to that salon don't bother coming home. *Me? I'm using it as one example. Five dollars isn't what it was in the great arc of time.* Huh? *We don't need it anymore.* What, time?

22

NO MONEY! NEXT TIME! I GIVE YOU MONEY NEXT TIME! *Oh, brother.* NO CHANGE! SAVVY? NO MONEY! *You're making it worse.* He doesn't talk English so I got to talk pidgin. *You sound like a skinflint.* I know I sound like a skinflint. *You look like some tourist.* I feel like one. In my own country! *He's going to cry.* It won't wheedle anything out of *me* if he bawls. *A principle is a principle.* That's right! . . . At least he isn't diseased. I'm diseased, I can't even tan. I'll talk to Sam. He likes the kid. He'll give me some change. I might ask to borrow his kid for the yacht. In the tropics, he'd feel right at home. Playing for the tourists. We could adopt him. If he keeps practising that mouth organ, who knows what —

23

That — that is bloody disgusting . . . *I think it's the funniest thing I've ever seen!* Shutup, Mother. *Look!* Gimme your bag. My lighter . . . where's my lighter? *He thinks you're looking for money.* This here's one language he'll understand. *Understand what?* This . . .

24

That's using your brain, that is. Sending it up in smoke instead of giving him the money! He's got to learn he can't go around insulting people. *It was you insulted him!* Not my fault he can't understand English. *You've burned off your nose to spite your face.* What kind of a principle is that? *A nice little boy who loves music . . . and you go and insult him twice in a row.* Nice? You call rubbing his bum in our faces nice? His asshole? Even *I* could hear him. I could *smell* him. He was making smells. *He wasn't!* He was insulting us both very deliberately.

25

Mother, go into the kitchen, this isn't for a woman's ears. *It's you he's insulting.* Where'd he learn language like that? *Paying you back.* *You probably turned him into a delinquent.* This is Sam's doings. *You talk about adoption?* Who? Don't make me laugh.

It hasn't happened overnight. Things have a way of building up. Little things out on the patio. Like you acknowledging his presence. His music. He threatens you. Why? Just because he has a suntan and you don't? I don't know why. Maybe you think he's lazy. Why doesn't he go off and find himself a job you said. I don't know why he doesn't. Maybe he'd rather play his mouth organ. Maybe he's too young. Maybe he thinks you're lazy. Maybe he thinks we're both senile. Oiling ourselves up to lie down in the sun. Trying to burn our skins. What he must think of your wig! What he must think of mine. . . . We're kept people, Father. Has beens. Your son, my son . . . he shares his penthouse with us . . . food if we want it . . . views. We can see the sea. Making harbors inside harbors. Sea, mountains. Those islands way out. Not a worry in the world up here. No struggle anymore. And we can't even adapt. We didn't need that money. We don't need any money. Our big shot son's got money to burn. And you end up burning the little bit we could've given the child! You talk about adoption? I'm ashamed, Father, I am ashamed. . . .

I don't take a cane. That sounded like the foghorn. May not have any hair on my head or my balls but I don't take a cane. I can still walk. What time is it? There's still heat left in the sun. Didn't you hear it? Hear what? The foghorn. What are you saying, woman? That foghorn is saying it. Can't you hear it? Winter is coming. I know winter is coming. Before it comes I want to get a suntan. Well, you'd better get a wiggle on. What for? It's hot enough to cook eggs out there. By the sound of it there's fog rolling in. Fog? I just oiled myself. Have a look. What? What kind of holy smoke is this with fog rolling in? . . . It's white! . . . Fog. We've missed the goddam summer. Nothing ever changes. I've got to talk to Sam. What for, a miracle? I'm not spending the winter here. Sam's got a yacht. The sun is still shining. Pretty soon it won't be shining. If you hadn't taken so long oiling my back. . . .

28

Just think, days like this you worked all your life. I'm going to lay in what's left of it. When Sam comes home I'll ask him about his yacht. Good Shepherd Sam.

29

Sam, I'll say . . . I'm cold. My marrow's like ice. You can hear the goddam foghorn, Sam. What we need, your mother and me, is to be standing around in the shade at a hundred and four. Under a flame tree. Having a mango, Sam. Coconut milk's the thing to keep us warm. We'd get a rascal to climb a palm tree. We know one we could take with us. He could help us anchor your yacht, Sam, in deserted coves. Over the winter. Rowing us in, rowing us out. Rowing around the tourists . . . the ones that rent your yacht which we'd be taking care of, Sam. At night he could build fires on the beach out of monkeypod wood. We could lie out under the stars. Tropical nights, your yacht at anchor, the smell of the fire. It's a lot to ask, Sam, I know. After what you've done here, setting us up in the sky, in your own penhouse. This is Paradise, Sam, believe me. But with winter coming I can't breathe. Smell even. My wrinkles freeze when I smile. My liver feels like iced cod. I want to wear my sunglasses for a reason, Sam. If we were wealthy, son, like you I'd climb into my Lear and whip it into the sun. I had a dream your mother was making milk again in the grass.

30

I'm going outside. *So go.* I am going. *What's the matter?* Nothing. Did you oil my neck? *From your neck to your toes. You're ready to be cooked alive.* I'm going then. *So go. My love.*