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Territory

My husband's idea of bliss is to be able to go back to when we first met, when he was a man and I was a woman. We weren't kids, not by then; we were into our late twenties. I was a veterinary assistant and Luke was a clerk at A+B Sound. Then I decided to go to medical school, a six-year commitment, and Luke, later when I was into my residency and had some earning power, decided to try his hand at poetry.

He tells me that if I had never met Holly things would be fine.

“Define fine,” I reply. Our marriage was not without problems, common though they were, even before this started. Luke forgets this. Luke denies this.

He says, “You'd still be a woman.”

What am I supposed to answer to that? Inside me there's a scared corner that worries he's right, that I've taken a step into some sort of abnegation, over a threshold into a void. I think of some of my patients who aren't any longer women, exactly, made into something else by accident or disease. I pinch the bridge of my nose. I think of Mrs. Cranston, comatose after brain surgery. “I'm still a woman,” I say, but I hear both the doubt and the weariness in my voice. I worry that perhaps my womanhood is not all I've lost lately.

This is how all of our fights begin these days. It used to be that Luke and I hardly ever fought, but now Luke has been asked to do the impossible--give me up, and it doesn't look good on him. The quiet, unassuming man that he was--the man on whom I could count, no matter what--has gone into hiding, and this man who picks on me has taken his place, wearing Luke's slightly shabby clothes, using Luke's soft voice. I can rise to his bait or ignore him. There isn't a third choice.

It is very hot out. Luke hates the heat as much as Holly loves it. Holly's out of town, though, across the country, in her own, more severe heat wave in New York, where she has gone to teach. We don't get a lot of hot, hot weather here; the last time Holly called, she said she was sorry she was missing it. She said she missed me.

Luke spends his days in the living room in the orange velour rocker he brought back from a poker game one night in lieu of winnings, writing his odd, circuitous poetry. He has the curtains closed against the sun, but where they don't join, a fierce strip of sun shimmies in, full of sparkling dust motes. Luke writes exclusively in pencil; he shields the page if I come in the room, or even if I'm just passing by the glass doors. I can hear him mutter and often he balls up mistakes and tosses them like lightweight basketballs towards the trash can across the room. Sometimes when he's gone out, I unfold these sheets, but they don't say much. A blue apple sits on the dresser, one said, with the word 'dresser' scratched out and replaced by 'toilet'.

Neither of us knows what the other one is thinking these days. Luke doesn't understand why this happened to me, and really, neither do I. I go reluctantly. I go, but I go reluctantly. Luke thinks that I ought to have known before I married him. Maybe I

should have. But having a crush on my grade five teacher and admiring women's
□Æbacks wasn't enough of a warning.

I bite my lip. My pager shrills. I've been on call a lot for the past nine months. I
say, "I'll just call the service." I say, "Hon."

I wait a minute, scrutinizing him. Luke's hair, since he became a poet, is long and
shaggy. He's only thirty-seven, but his hair is more than half grey. Hair is an issue
between us. I wish he would shave more often; I hate the black whiskers that bristle out
from his white, white chin.

Luke wants more from me, some reaction, a fight.

The call isn't serious. A baby with a fever of 99 degrees: whooping cough. I'm
cautious where infants are concerned because things can go from bad to worse, so I
advise the mom to turn on the shower and stand close to it with her child. I tell her
humidity should loosen the child's lungs. I tell her to call me back, either way, and if the
child suddenly worsens, to take him to the hospital. I try to think up an e□§xcuse to stay
on the phone. I ask her whether the baby I can hear crying is her only child.

After I hang up, I think of Holly, of, for some reason, the scar on her belly from
her hysterectomy. I wonder if eastern babies, given the added humidity, have the same
incidence of whooping cough that western babies do. It's something to think about. It
has its purpose.

Finally I go back to Luke, put flint in my voice and say, "People aren't as bad as
you think they are." I mean Holly isn't. I mean I'm not.

Luke lifts his face from where he's staring at Newsweek magazine. All the anger is drained from it. His expression is lonely and sad, sad and somehow terrible. His green eyes are moist. He looks like he's lost his best friend.

We got married nearly nine years ago, in March. Luke, who loves to gamble, wanted us to get married in Las Vegas, but I couldn't bear the notion. We had very different ideas about our lives even then. I thought I might want to go back to school to become a vet, while Luke was happy with his job at a music store. Last year, Luke suggested that maybe for our tenth anniversary we should go to Vegas, renew our vows at a drive-in Elvis chapel; it was after that that I told him about what I called my proclivities. "I won't do anything about them," I said, touching his hand where the veins rope, "but I wanted you to know."

Luke didn't say anything. It was impossible to read his expression. He's not particularly in touch with his emotions at the best of times, and sometimes that makes his face look uncaring. A good poker face, he calls it, because it's useful at the gambling table. "Why did you want me to know?" Luke finally asked.

"I can't renew our vows," I told him. I couldn't have him go on thinking everything was all right between us, although things were mostly all right. We had the usual problems a couple have after a lot of years together. For instance, I hated how Luke did the dishes. He filled the sink, slid the plates and pots in, then sat down to read while the water cooled and the grease congealed. His idea of cleaning the bathroom was that it should be a yearly event, and then only at the rate of one fixture a week. Sometimes we went months without having sex. There were things Luke found

frustrating about me, too. My distance, for starters, during medical school. My incessant lateness. The piles of unopened mail that accumulated on my desk until he had to abandon our shared office in favor of the living room. But our problems weren't insurmountable. Over time, a couple compromises. A couple adjusts. It was just that there on the fringe was my desire--my obsession, really--to be sexual with women. "I told you so we'd have an honest marriage."

"I don't want an honest marriage," Luke said. He combed his hair with his hand. "What I want is a heterosexual wife."

I have a patient whose husband of fifty-four years has Alzheimer's. He orders items mail order when her back is turned: a silk suit, an ant farm. Although he was never a violent man, now, in his decrepitude, he hits her. I advised her to send him into a nursing home, but she shook her head. "He's my husband," she told me firmly, rubbing a bruise on her arm, "I took vows."

Holly accuses me of being a worry wart. She believes I'm full of frets. Once she had me write down all my concerns and when I was done, toss them out the window. It didn't work. It increased my anxiety, in fact, as if the concerns that fluttered across her yard and pushed against her cedar fence were the only things keeping me from a complete collapse.

When we met, Holly was already dating. For the first while, I didn't say much about it. Holly would come to me weary from being up too late with Gloria, and I, tired from a rotation in the emergency room, sleep deprived myself, wouldn't say anything. Sometimes Holly fell asleep in the middle of sex. When she threw my fret list out the

window, Gloria had the number one position. I looked outside then turned back to her.

“It really does bother me, you know, this thing you have going with Gloria.”

Holly answered with an empathetic half-smile, half-frown.

“It really does,” I said, adding a bit of firmness.

Holly said, “Poor sweetie.” She got up, pulled me close and held me. She softly said, “Love, you're trembling. I thought all those worries were out the window.”

“They're not,” I said on the verge of tears. “It isn't that simple.”

A week or so later, emboldened because we'd just made love, I said, “Why do you keep on with her?”

That's when Holly told me their sex was out of this world. That's also when she said, “Not to put too fine a point on it, but you're married.”

“But Luke and I aren't sexual,” I burst. “I gave that up the first time you touched me.”

“No,” Holly said slowly, pulling away and lying back, hands behind her head, “you're right. I can't keep on making love with both of you.”

I was uplifted.

She turned her head to face me, her eyes round and too big. She said, “I can't make love with you anymore. Not while I'm still with Gloria.”

I felt a stab of pain under my breastbone that I couldn't medically explain. I said, “You tell me you're in love with me. So why? Why won't you leave her?”

“For what?” Holly asked, her brows lifting.

I looked at her and she repeated it.

“For what?” she said. “A married woman?”

Luke and I have a Saturday morning ritual. Whether or not I'm on call, Luke shoots out to the stores on West Fourth Avenue, early, then meets me in the kitchen with newspapers, coffee and croissants. He calls these our "companionable hours". They're sweet hours because we don't have to talk at all. The curtains are parted and the windows cracked to the rain ☐Zor sun. We do no more than rustle the news. Though occasionally we'll say things like "Listen to this, hon," and repeat tidbits we've read.

I am easier to live with now, Luke admitted a couple of weeks ago, because I am not as unhappy. I no longer demand that he be perfect. I used to think that if he couldn't be a woman, the least he could do was be perfect. Since Holly, something's loosened. I no longer notice dishes in the sink.

In bed last night, I turned on my side away from Luke. I do this night after night, shiver to the furthest edge of the mattress hoping he won't want sex. But last night everything about him seemed familiar and comforting. His size, his scent, the sound of each short breath. The room was still and dark.

"Luke?" I said. I was starting to cry and I pushed my face into the pillow to muffle the sobs.

"Honey?" ☐ç

"It's like I'm an alien," I said finally, rolling over. "You know what Holly says? She says I make love like a man."

I couldn't really see my husband but I could sense him poised and waiting.

I said, "She says I'm goal-oriented."

Luke told me he didn't want to hear this. His voice was muffled, low.

"I want to stay with you," I said. "I don't want to be a lesbian."

Luke sighed heavily. "So give her up," he said and I heard desperation subdued in his voice. "That's all you have to do."

Nobody said anything for the longest time, then he said, "C'mere."

I snuggled close and dropped my head into the crook of his shoulder. In Ontario, where I joined Holly for the first leg of her trip, and we had the privilege of nights together, six of them, she always cuddled up to me. It confused me. I didn't understand who was supposed to be the man and who the woman. Holly called this butch an□nd femme, or top and bottom, and said she was femme through and through. I, on the other hand, was butch. "Baby butch," she said, teasing me. "But all butch," she added.

I stroked the hair on Luke's chest for a minute, thinking instead about Holly's soft skin, the gentle swell of her breasts. I cried out, "Can't I just be me?"

"I'll let you," Luke whispered solemnly, holding tight. He kissed the top of my head.

"No," I said abruptly, pulling away. I sat up fast. "Don't," I said.

"Don't what?" Luke asked, angry now, grabbing my arm. "You're my wife."

"I love you," I said helplessly.

"Then love me," he said, "love me." His hand tightened. He said, "Please."

"Let go," I said and shook him off.

"You don't want that," Luke said, choked, but he loosened his grasp.

I said, "Luke, I think I should move out."

Before Holly left on her trip, her younger daughter, Morgan, left a message on our machine asking if I had a blood pressure cuff she could borrow for Medical Day at school. I don't why it surprised me that Morgan should think of me and then call, apparently unassisted by Holly, since she is twelve, but I was stupidly flattered. It was a late day at the clinic. I slouched home and Luke, who'd made us a tuna casserole, mentioned the message. I'm ashamed to admit I stopped, fork halfway to my mouth, took the stairs two at a time, hit 'play' on the answering machine, then burrowed through my medical bag.

The truth is that I should have known better. Holly was, as I knew perfectly well, only away, with Gloria, at an hour's dance class.

Gloria was an attractive woman. All women are attractive to me, these days, but what I mean is that Gloria was full of attractiveness outside, but also inside, a spirit. When Holly, uncomfortable after she and Gloria came in and found me there, slipped downstairs to tend to her older daughter, leaving us alone, Gloria said, "This is fucking weird."

Which is pretty well what Luke said, too, later after Holly walked me to my car and I drove home.

Luke was at that juncture my point man, the spouse to whom I brought home my anecdotes and confusions.

It is the first morning since we bought our house five years ago that we've missed our Saturday morning croissants. Luke won't talk to me. Luke is in the living room with the

glass doors shut tight. I slip out and go pick up pastries myself, along with a copy of the New York Times, but when I get them home, Luke is gone.

Last night Luke said that if I was going to leave him, he should keep the house and I should support him. He's losing everything, isn't he? Isn't he?

Luke's idea is to turn the clock back.

I've been jogging a lot. It keeps me relatively healthy--a plus for a doctor--and relatively sane. When I'm jogging under the chins of the mountains along Jericho Beach or under the canopy of trees at the UBC campus, cut off from urbanity, I feel washed, clean. But just as often I run at the cemetery nearer our home, stopping sometimes to wipe my face and read the oldest gravestones, thinking about the diseases that used to wipe out whole families. My wedding certificate says I'm a Buddhist, but I'm actually agnostic after six years in medicine.

Running at the cemetery reminds me of the day I was jogging the cemetery's perimeter, outside the cedar hedge, and Holly drove by, honking. When she called me later, she told me Gloria had been in the car. Gloria having taken a rare Tuesday off work. Gloria and Holly having danced together Monday evening. Gloria having spent the night. There is a part of me that resists this change because it is not what I imagined: I thought women's relationships would be trouble free. I put lesbians on pedestals.

Holly was Luke's friend first. He introduced us. He came home from retrieved. I thought if we could only furnish our house, we'd also furnish ourselves with a good marriage. My feelings for women would just disappear.

We haunted the antique stores along Main Street. We found one shop, Sofa So Good, that had a couch and two matching chairs for just \$800. Having been told that it was the way to suss out quality furniture, Luke hefted them; he could barely lift them from the floor. That meant the wood frames were solid and sturdy. Tina, the shopkeeper, was happy to refurbish them for us. Each chair, completely stripped, rebuilt and reupholstered, would cost \$600. We could afford that, just, but couldn't afford to have the couch done too.

When we took delivery of the chairs, I wept. Having been weighted down in the store, they were now as light as feathers. The old fabric hadn't been taken off at all--we could feel it underneath the new fabric, which was carelessly applied. We called Tina to take delivery of our couch. She told us it was in storage and we'd have to pay another \$300 to retrieve it.

Sofa So Good closed down overnight; Tina moved to Vancouver Island. We were stuck with about \$200 worth of substandard chairs for the whopping price of \$2000.

I answer the door to find Luke's lesbian friend Sylvia on the porch.

"Luke's not here," I say automatically, stiffening. The last time I saw Sylvia was during a kayaking trip earlier this year. I wasn't sexual with Holly yet, but I knew I wanted to be. I didn't want to be taken as straight, as a wife, when I was actually, I thought, just like Sylvia and her girlfriend; it embarrassed me. But, faithful to Luke, I was unable to say a word.

I lost my wallet on the ferry up from Horseshoe Bay, which seemed inauspicious, and I stood at a pay phone trying to remember what credit cards I should cancel. I was

pretty sure on the Master Card and American Express, but less sure than I should have been about department stores. It was cool and misty. Drizzle fuzzed down while I read numbers into the phone. I worried about what Luke was telling Sylvia and Dory. I kept the phone crooked in my shoulder and gazed back to where they bunched around the Volvo's bumper, laughing in the grey mist.

"I came to see you," she says, grinning over white, bell-shaped teeth.

I don't answer. Luke has said he wants me to stay away from Sylvia; he worries I'll sleep with her. Or that Holly will.

She says, "Luke told me."

I look past her as if Luke might be there, home from where ever he's gone to lick his wounds--the poker club, maybe--but all I see is how the paint on the porch is wearing down to the old wood, how the lawn needs cutting and how messy the rosebushes are. Finally I ask Sylvia in.

"Well," I say when we're at the table with sweating glasses of lemonade.

Sylvia smiles. She says, "I had no idea when we were kayaking. I didn't have a clue. Luke says he knew."

I'm not going to be the first to talk about what she's got on her mind. I wait. I trail my finger through a milk spill and don't look up. I brought two cups of coffee home. When I discovered Luke had gone out, I drank mine sitting here, reading the Book Review, weeping. The New York Times is still scattered over the tabletop.

"Is this too strange?" Sylvia asks. "Me being here?"

"It's strange," I agree. She's very beautiful. Her eyes are the identical auburn of her hair.

“Because I’m Luke’s friend?”

I reach out and riffle a newspaper folded to the sports section. I shrug.

“Look,” Sylvia says. “Dory left a marriage to come to me. Dory had a husband. I wanted to let you know that.”

I glance quickly up and back down.

“I know what you’re going through,” Sylvia says.

I make a sound. I say, “Luke wouldn’t like this.”

“Why not?” Sylvia asks.

I notice Sylvia’s breasts are extremely large. Then I notice them medically and wonder if she’s ever considered a reduction.

Sylvia says, “Luke came over while you were away. When Dory asked him where you were, he said and I quote: ‘She’s in Ontario with her lesbian lover.’” Sylvia laughs and says it again: “Lesbian lover.”

□’ I don’t know how to respond. Answers tumble through my brain, such as, Holly is not my lesbian lover. Although she is. Such as, We were not in Ontario. Although we were. But what I finally say is, “Oh. Uh.”

Sylvia says, “Doesn’t it make Holly sound ten feet tall?”

“Luke’s in a lot of pain,” I say. “He’s hurting so much. He doesn’t deserve this, Sylvia.” I stare out the window at our chipped, yellow shell windchimes. Holly has tuned ones. Once as she kissed my neck, they rang out Baroque, like a vibraphone. I sigh and add, “Neither does Holly. For that matter, poor Holly. She thinks I’ll love her and leave her. She keeps her distance because she thinks I’m fly-by-night.” I wince.

Sylvia says, “Luke says you’ve known you were gay for years.”

“But maybe Holly’s right,” I say, “maybe I’m just using her to bring me out.”

I think of Holly pulling me into her garden the day before her trip east. “My scabiosa’s blooming,” she’d said, excited. “Isn’t it lovely?” She took a stem in her hand and stroked the furred blue petals. I told her it had a horrible name. She grinned, knocked me on the arm and said, “Well, so do other lovely things.”

I remember an anecdote Holly told me about a friend of hers who’d spent a night with a married woman. The married woman woke in the morning, rose from bed and walked accidentally into the closet.

“Heh,” Sylvia says, and reaches to take my hand.

I blink at her, pull away.□□

A couple years ago, I decided to make a thousand origami cranes for the commemorative of Hiroshima, August 8th. This notion struck me in mid-July. I wanted one thousand cranes, but I had no idea how many cranes one thousand really was. I needed each to be white--orange or blue or yellow cranes wouldn’t do. I ordered Luke to toy stores and hobby stores again and again for paper. He tried to reason with me. He tried to say that a thousand cranes in four weeks when I worked more than full time--a rotation in obstetrics--was too much, a little crazy. Couldn’t he help? he wanted to know. He could not help, I said. Each crane had to be folded by my two hands. Yet by August first, I was waking up in the middle of the night, weeping.

That’s when Luke, behind my back, called our□ friends and arranged a crane-folding party. What could I say? Seven of us, including Sylvia and Dory, stayed up all

night, then drove to the Peace Arch at the border and strung up exactly, precisely, one thousand white cranes.

Holly's house is a large, green-shaded place in the south city. I'd been at one of her readings and I'd made that first excruciating call to her that landed us in a greasy-spoon restaurant together, but I hadn't seen her house until the night she asked us both to dinner. To eat what she called 'grunt.'

"Grunt?" I asked Luke when he told me that she'd called. I didn't understand that I was attracted to her at that point; I just knew my heart began to pound when her name was mentioned. My face felt hot.

"She hates to cook," he said. Then he said, "Her stepson's coming and she needs foils."

"Stepson?" I asked, intensely curious. How could a lesbian have a stepson?

"Her ex-girlfriend's son."

"Oh," I said.

Luke and I don't have children and don't want any. That Holly had two of her own--and then this sort of third--intrigued me. Plus she was an author. I'd been reading her when Luke was out, staring at her author photographs on back flaps.

Her house was large, light, airy yet still cozy. She used soothing colours. She had framed black and white photos of women all over her walls.

The stepson, who'd showed up earlier to cadge money, didn't appear. The dinner was a lot less than good. The kids took their plates into their rooms while we ate. All I

kept wishing was that Luke wasn't with me, that Holly didn't know me first--only--as Luke's wife.

In Toronto, Holly took me to the Pride Parade. I was scared; I thought my parents might see me on national TV and know I was a lesbian. Before the parade started, sitting at a restaurant called The Dundonald, a woman asked what I do for a living.

"I'm a physician," I admitted reluctantly. Most lesbians, I'd noticed, didn't seem to be much of anything, professionally speaking.

"She brought her lab coat," Holly said and wiggled her eyebrows.

This got hoots from the assembled women.

"Well," I said, "I did bring my stethoscope."

Holly said, "And a speculum, too."

Someone said, "Oh, la, la!" and everyone laughed.

A woman sobered and said, "My father was a doctor. He got called to the hospital one night when we were playing Concentration and I said to my mother, "Why can't Daddy just let them die?""

"No kidding," someone else said. "I hate doctors."

I looked out at the milling streets. In the hour since we'd arrived on Church Street, I'd seen men in pants with bare bottoms, men in drag, women topless, and plenty of TV cameras.

In Ontario, Holly said, "I'm scared to be in love with you."

"Why?" I asked.

Holly shrugged. "Someone will get hurt."

"I'm worried too," I admitted.

"But I am in love with you," she said. "I just don't know what I want to do about it."

I said, "I'm really not sure if I love you."

Holly looked at me. "Oh, you love me," she said definitely, then laughed, a short, barking laugh. "I know you're in love with me," she said. "But I don't even want to be involved. And I don't want to hurt Gloria."

"We're involved," I said, wounded.

Holly sighed.

"I can't be with you if you keep on with Gloria," I told her.

"No," Holly said, "I realize that."

"Do you?" I pressed.

"Yes," she said. "I do know that much."

It was hard to do, but I asked if she loved Gloria.

"Very much," Holly said, and my heart sank. She reached and took my hand. She looked at it a moment, patted it and said, "But I'm in love with you. When I look at you I see white picket fences. The whole shebang." She stroked the back of my hand with her thumb, absently. "Except I feel vulnerable and don't like it. Except that I like being alone. Except what if I screw it up? I have kids. I don't have much time. I'm distracted and busy and I love to fuck women."

Waiting a beat, bravely, I grinned and said, "Me, too."

"And what about Luke?" Holly asked.

On the phone from New York, Holly and I catch up on mundane things, my practice, her students. Then she says, "I really love you. I wrote Gloria."

Luke, from the kitchen, calls out that a coon is washing its paws on the back stairwell. He came home near dinner time and said he'd won about \$400, but other than that, we haven't spoken. He shouts, "It's been in the garbage! Hurry up!" Instead of getting off the phone, I relay what he's said to Holly and she says, "There's plenty of roadkill in NY state." She says, "I've seen raccoons and squirrels and skunks. Opossums."

She says, "Why do more animals get killed on eastern highways?"

I say, "I love you."

There's a silence. Then quietly Holly says, "I'm so very glad that you do."

After a minute, I say, "You really wrote to Gloria?"

Holly says, "I broke it off."

"I'm happy," I say. I consider telling her that Luke and I are breaking up. But it's too hard. Instead I say, "I'd better go." Æ

"Is Luke hovering?" Holly asks.

Luke is hovering at every moment whether he's there in the room or not, because I conjure him. He's there telling all our friends about me. Or there sitting with the lights out, morosely, a magazine unread in his lap. Or there with a paint brush, climbing up a ladder to touch up our window sills. Or there writing poems about cuckolded husbands.

As Holly is on the east coast writing stories about women in love with married women and how married women will--it's inevitable--let them down.

As I am listening carefully to the lungs of children and, in one boy's case, ordering x-rays that won't be good.

I clear my throat. I say, "It's just hard to talk now."

"He's there, isn't he? In the room?"

"No, but--"

Holly sighs. "Is he okay?"

"He says he's an orange and I'm not leaving him for another orange, I'm leaving him for an apple, so--"

"Are you leaving him?" she breaks in to ask.

I back-track, just not ready. "I meant emotionally."

"Oh," she says. Then she says, "He makes it sound like an apple doesn't really count."

"He just needs it known there's no trouble between us."

"Right," Holly says, sounding skeptical.

"Are you mad?"

"I'm not mad," Holly says.

"Are you mad? You sound mad."

"I'm fine."

"Are you fine?"

"Didn't I just say I was fine?"

I say, "Okay, okay, you're fine. That's good. Because everyone else I talked to today was sick."

Holly laughs.

“Even Luke's sick. He has a headache that won't quit.”

“I don't want to talk about Luke,” Holly says.

“No, me either.”

“Well,” Holly says.

“Well,” I say, and tangle the phone cord around my fingers.

I go out to sit with Luke on the back stoop. “Look,” he says, pointing, “one's going up that tree.”

I say, “That was Holly on the phone.”

“And how is Holly?” he asks tightly. I really don't know how I expect him to behave.

“Fine,” I say.

□“Whatever,” Luke says.

The coon is up a peach tree that badly needs pruning. Everywhere I look, I can see detritus, even though the yard isn't well lit. It's still exceedingly hot. I wipe sweat from my brow. I can see our recycling pile and the spilled garbage. I can see strips of white paint peeling from the side of the garage. There are parts of several bicycles Luke is mucking with. The night is too warm, but I wrap my arms around myself, feeling chilled. I look up at the sky. The only ritual that Holly and I have, so far, is trying to share the perfect sunset. Trying to find a dusk where the horizon colours dazzle and the sky above flushes a perfect shade of indigo. Tonight's sunset is long past. The sky is impenetrable.

“Look,” Luke says, “it's coming down. Don't move.”

I watch a rotund shape shimmy backwards down the peach trunk, pause, then skitter towards the house.

“There's a litter, too,” Luke whispers. “Watch.”

I think about Holly. When she was small, she adopted three abandoned coon kittens. They slept in bed with her. In the morning they followed her down the stairs to the kitchen where she made pablum. She sat with them while they ate on the grass. I think about the broken blood vessels on her neck, how one raccoon, the smallest, Benjamin, suckled her as if her skin was a nipple. I don't tell this to Luke. I just sit beside him watching the coon and her young scoot in a line across our yard to the bottom porch step. Luke's put out cat chow. I listen to the coons trill, watch them stand on their hind legs to wash the kibble. I wonder if Holly's coons tried to wash pablum.

Then Luke says, “I shouldn't encourage them.”

We haven't had dinner. Nobody thought to cook. I go inside and bring back the croissants I bought this morning. I didn't wrap them properly; they're a little stale. When we finish them, I fish in my pocket and bring out a piece of paper.

I start to read.

Luke interrupts me.

“It's your poem. Be quiet. It's lovely.” It is lovely. I read and read until I come to the end. It's a poem about loss. I fold it up when I'm through. Luke isn't looking at me. I touch his arm. “You wrote it for me, didn't you?”

Luke sighs. The mother coon chitters. Luke takes the paper from me. “A poet by the name of Thom Gunn wrote that.”

“Oh,” I say.

My beeper goes. The coons don't seem to mind the noise. It's the □Z service again, giving me a number that seems vaguely familiar. I bring the phone out onto the porch and return the call. It seems the baby's temperature is back to normal. He's still coughing, though. I ask the mother to bring her son to the clinic first thing in the morning and not to hesitate calling again if things worsen.

When I get off, the coons trill. Luke says, "I still have that headache."

"Do you?" I ask.

He looks straight at me. "I do," he says. "I have the worst headache I've had in my whole life."

I touch his arm. Luke's idea is that I should be able to fix what's wrong. I say, "Can I get you a Tylenol or something?"

"You could prescribe something stronger," Luke says. "Morphine."

The coons' masks shine.

"You want morphine?" I ask.

"I'm also catching a cold," he says.

"It's the weather," I say. "You just hate t□□his heat."

I have the precipitous, dizzying feeling that I am not actually a part of this. I am not sitting on a Vancouver porch with my husband. His name isn't Luke. I even wonder if the coons in the yard are coons in love with a little girl named Holly. There seems to be something romantic in the air, but I don't know why.

I take Luke's hand. I say, "You won't always feel this rotten."

"I don't want anything from you. I know I said I want you to support me, but I was just mad."

“I’ll give you money,” I say.

“No,” he says, “seriously. I don’t want it.”

Together we tilt our heads to the sky, to the Big Dipper, and I think how the stars are too high to reach. Even from the top of the peach tree, even on Luke's shoulders, I'd be way too short to touch a single one.