

Abstract

This creative writing assignment is my submission for the final BA project in English at the School of Humanities at the University of Iceland. The assignment consists of Part I of my novel *The Simple Life*, which is approximately 30,000 words, followed by an exposition on the writing process, which is about 5,500 words.

The Simple Life is a literary novel focusing on a young girl, Anna, and her move from Iceland to Canada in the 1970s. In Canada, Anna's mother Ella hopes to find a simpler life than the one she has been living. However, her attempt is misguided, as she fails to recognise that one cannot escape the ghost of the past by simply relocating to a new country. The story is told through the point of view of Anna, who struggles to cope with the demands of a new culture and her own mother's betrayal of her, while simultaneously watching her mother decline into her own private hell, with catastrophic results.

The exposition traces the process of writing the book, and discusses what I hoped to achieve in terms of characterisation, plot, setting and theme. Through this work I try to explore the question of identity, in particular cultural identity, and the meaning of emotional legacy when it comes to creating a new life for oneself. Unfortunately due to the length of the novel I was only able to submit Part I, and not the whole work as I would have preferred. I nevertheless hope that it is able to provide a clear indication of what I have learned, and of what I am capable as a writer.

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The Simple Life

Part I

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Reykjavík, 05.05.2014

Chapter One

1971

It seems strange that the first time I meet my father it should be like this.

When I've imagined it, it's always been different. Sometimes I thought that he would ring the doorbell at wherever my mother and I were living at the time. I would go to the door, open it, and there he would be. He would look down at me with warm, twinkling eyes, then scoop me up into his big arms and hug me while telling me how much he had missed me.

At other times I have imagined that my grandparents invited me to their house and he showed up unexpectedly for dinner with a big package under his arm. It would be one of those doll houses that my downstairs neighbour from the last place we lived had, with real curtains at the windows and everything. The whole thing would be a big surprise, and my grandparents would be in on it. Everyone would laugh and be happy, seeing us reunited like that. It would be the best moment of my life.

But instead we are in a supermarket. Or ... no, it's not even that. This town doesn't have a supermarket, just this one store. It's got ads pasted in all the windows so hardly any light gets in, and it smells. We bump into him next to the milk section. I know instantly he's my father because I've seen pictures of him at my grandparents' house. He is tall and pale and has wavy auburn hair like mine. Our nose is the same, and we both have freckles.

My mother is all dressed up – inappropriately so for this dingy place. That's why the handful of other people in the store are eyeing her funny. Her hair is pulled back in a bun, and her eyes are lined like Cleopatra's, queen of ancient Egypt. She has high heels on, and is wearing her only really good dress.

He freezes as soon as he sees us.

“What are you doing here?” he says in a low voice, glaring at her with a mixture of anger and astonishment. He doesn't even look at me.

“What are we doing here? Anna and I live here,” my mother says casually, picking up a carton of milk from the cooler. She does it casually, as though this man standing in front of us is *not* the sole reason she moved across the country from Reykjavík to settle in this godforsaken place.

“You live *where*?”

I wish he would notice me. I want to jump up and down, to shout, to throw myself at him.

“Next street over.” She gestures with her head, almost coquettishly.

“Since when?”

“Since two weeks ago.”

He looks down at me now. Scowling. Then he grabs my mother’s arm and pulls her roughly to one side. I turn quickly and saunter down the aisle with the pet food in it. I stare at the dog food packets with the smiling dogs on the front, their tongue hanging out. I wish I could buy dog food now for my dog. The one I don’t have. The one I desperately want.

I can hear the hissing of my father’s voice, and the slightly higher pitch of my mother’s. Then the voices go silent. I want to peer around the corner to see if they’re there, but I’m too afraid. I hear something hitting the floor and a second later my father storms out of the store, slamming the door behind him so the bell that is on it rattles. The cashier cranes her neck to look after him, then spins her head to look at my mother. Slowly I go around the corner to where she is standing. She is leaning against the wall with an odd expression on her face. Shock, maybe, but also satisfaction. On the floor is the shopping basket that my father was holding in his hand.

As we walk back to the basement apartment we have just moved into she chats loudly about nothing special. The road we walk along is unpaved and has big pot holes in it that are full of water. My mother’s good shoes are getting dirty and she steps gingerly around the muddy parts in the road. Once inside she tosses her coat on the chair that is the only piece of furniture in the empty living room, and goes into the kitchen. She opens a can of fish balls and dumps the contents into a pot, then throws some potatoes into another pot, pours water over them, and turns on the stove.

After we eat dinner, my mother is silent. I wash the dishes while she stands at the window, smoking a cigarette and looking out into the extended twilight of the late Icelandic summer.

Two weeks later, we are back to Reykjavík.

I hear my mother telling our upstairs neighbour that it is because the job she had lined up hadn't panned out, but I know she's lying. There are a lot of things I do not know, like what exactly went on between those two people who made me – my parents, for lack of a better term – but the one thing I am sure about is that she went there to see him, and he did not want to see her. And so she came back.

It has nothing to do with a job. That is just a story to make her look better. Even an eight-year old kid like me can figure that out.

We are now back living in the basement apartment owned by my grandmother, who moved out to move in with a man she met at Bingo. His name is Grímur and he smells of fish because he is a supervisor in a fish processing factory. My grandmother managed to get my mother a job working in Grímur's factory, which is lucky because she has no money. Moving across Iceland and back cleaned her out financially, I overhear her telling her friend Systa on the phone, and she is too broke to even buy a pack of smokes. Which is weird, because she always has some.

My mother gets up early every morning to go to work. She wakes me up just as she is leaving and tells me I need to get myself to the day-care place before school. Here in Iceland children only go to school for half a day, either in the morning or the evening, and those of us who are latchkey children – whose mothers are not at home during the day and so have to wear our housekeys around our necks – have to have somewhere to go when we're not in school. At least those of us who are still eight years old. My mother says that maybe next year I won't have to go there. I can stay at home by myself. I can't wait to turn nine.

I go to the day-care place for about an hour in the morning, eat a bowl of porridge there, and then go to school until 1 pm. I am the only kid in my class who has to go to a day-care place. Everyone else has a mother and a father who live together. All the kids in the day-care place have “a story.” Apparently that's what you call it when something has happened and they don't have a normal home like most people. I'm not quite sure what my “story” is, except maybe that my mother and father aren't married and my mother has had several boyfriends, but is still all hung up on my father, who wants nothing to do with her.

Some days I walk home with a girl named Lísá, who lives near the day-care place. Her house is beautiful, with big French windows and a well-tended garden all around it. One day she asks if I want to come over after school. I run in and ask the manager of the day-care place, a stout woman named Hófi, if I can go.

“Yes,” she says, “if you promise to come back and check in with me before you go home.”

I promise.

Inside Lía’s house there is absolute quiet. I am amazed at how quiet it is. All I can hear is the loud ticking of a grandfather clock. The slanted rays of the sun pour in through the windows, and a few friendly specks of dust dance in them. Suddenly there’s a bustling, and Lía’s mother comes eagerly out into the hallway to greet us. Lía introduces me as a girl from her class.

“Hello,” she says, smiling pleasantly, taking Lía’s jacket and hanging it up. Her hair is perfectly done in curls, and she’s wearing a black turtleneck and a brown skirt that she runs her hands over repeatedly, as if to smooth it.

She leads the way into the kitchen and Lía and I sit down at the table.

“So how was school?” says Lía’s mother, buttering some *flatkökur* – unleavened rye bread – for us. She puts a slice of smoked lamb on top, then puts a plate down in front of each of us, along with a glass of milk.

Lía shrugs. “OK,” she says, munching on her *flatkaka*.

Her mother leans backwards against the counter and looks at us. Instinctively I shrink from her gaze.

“So where do you live, Anna?”

“I live in Efstasund,” I say.

“Oh? Where?”

I tell her where.

“Anna goes to the day-care place up the street after school,” Lía volunteers.

“And also before, for about an hour,” I add.

Lía’s mother crosses her arms over her chest. “Oh?” she says, her voice suddenly unnaturally bright. “Where is your mother?”

“She’s at work.”

She nods, and keeps her eyes steady on me. “Where does she work?”

“At the fish factory.”

“And your father?”

I swallow hard, unsure of how to proceed. “He ... doesn’t live here.”

“Are your parents divorced?”

There is something about the tone of her voice. I am suddenly terrified. I nod. I know I'm lying, but I can't help myself. I don't think I could explain. In fact, I don't think I could utter a word right now if I tried.

"Are most of the children at that day-care place from broken homes like yours?"

I wish I could disappear through the floor right now. There is something about her whole manner that is extremely frightening. The tone of her voice is icy cold and sharp like the edge of a knife.

"I don't know," I manage to mutter.

She leaves the room. A moment later, I hear her sharp voice: "Lísa!"

Lísa looks at me with a hint of surprise, then gets up and leaves the room. I hear her mother speaking to her. Then she comes back into the kitchen.

"You have to go," she says. "I'm going out. My mother forgot to tell me that we have to go to my aunt's house."

I leave my *flatkaka* half-eaten and go to get my things on. Lísa's mother has disappeared. Outside on the sidewalk I turn to look back at the stately white house with the French windows and the incomparable stillness all around it. Suddenly I feel dirty in comparison with the whitewashed serenity of Lísa's life. Smutty, almost.

I trudge back to the day-care place and check in with Hófi, then walk home. When I get there my mother is lying on the sofa. She's home early. My mother is always tired, and like Grímur she smells of fish, even though she tries to wash it out of her clothes and always takes a shower after work.

Inside the apartment there are shadows, even when it is sunny outside. The same shadows are in my mother's eyes. When she talks to me it is like she doesn't really see me, like I am far, far away from her. It is like she is behind glass. I can see her moving, hear her speaking, but it's like I can't reach her, and she can't reach me.

* * *

A girl in my school has a dog.

I don't know how she does it. Dogs are banned in Reykjavík, as my mother never tires of reminding me every time I bring up the subject. I have wanted a dog ever since I can remember. I was born wanting a dog. It is the only thing I have ever really, really wanted. I want a dog even more than I want a father, and that is saying a lot.

So when Hanna – that’s the girl’s name – tells me she has a dog, it is like the world stops turning. As though everything I ever believed has suddenly been exposed as a lie. I know only one thing: I need to see that dog with my own eyes.

I summon my courage at recess to ask her if I can walk home with her. Hanna is popular and lives with both her parents. There is no key around her neck. So I am nervous. She looks at me with her calm grey eyes and replies indifferently, “Sure, OK.”

After school I wait patiently while she puts her things on and gossips with the other popular girls. Her house is in the opposite direction to the day-care centre, but I don’t care if I have to go out of my way. I walk awkwardly next to her. We have little to say. Thankfully her house isn’t far.

There it is. Her house, with an adorable toy poodle staring at us out through the window, all curly white pelt and black button eyes. A moment later the front door opens and a bundle of white joy comes bounding down the steps towards Hanna. “Down, Sugar, down girl!” she says laughing a crystalline laugh, then turns and gives me a quick wave before running up the steps and into the house.

I stand there for a few moments, staring after them, trying to imagine what it is like to be her, to live a life of such flawlessness. Then I turn and start walking. I am far from the day-care place. And yet ... I know this neighbourhood. My grandparents live near here – my father’s parents. I have been here several times before, though not for quite a while. A couple of years, at least. The last time I went my grandmother asked my mother if I could come over because two of my cousins would be there. I went, and it was a fantastic day. We played hide and seek outside in the garden around the house, and my grandmother made hot chocolate for us. But then my cousins moved away and since then I haven’t gone over there.

Somehow I remember the way as though by instinct. It takes me about ten minutes before I find myself standing in front of it: a white, two-storey house with a wide staircase in the middle, branching off towards two symmetrical entrances. My grandparents live in the apartment on the left. Slowly I climb the stairs and hesitate before knocking on the door.

It opens, and my grandmother is standing in the doorway. She is a young grandmother, slender and spirited, with dark hair that has just a few gray strands. When she sees me she looks startled, but then her expression changes. “Well, hello!” she says with a grin, opening the door wide. “Isn’t this a surprise!”

I shift my weight, tongue-tied.

“Don’t you want to come in?” she says.

I feel intensely uncomfortable. Why on earth did I think this was a good idea?

“I think I should go to the day-care place,” I say, stupidly.

“Hm,” she says, “can you stay for a cup of hot chocolate first?”

“I’m not sure. I think I may get into trouble.”

“Maybe you can call your mom.”

My mother was at work, and I know I’m not supposed to call her there. I ponder for a moment. “It’s probably OK if I stay for a little while,” I finally say.

We go into her small kitchen where she sets me down on a chair while she makes the hot chocolate. There is a song playing on the radio about a man who is out at sea and his woman who is sending him lots of love and good wishes from back home. My grandmother puts the cup of hot chocolate down in front of me, and opens a tin of shortbread cookies that she puts on the table. Then she sits down and lights a cigarette.

“Were you at school today?” she asks.

I nod. I tell her all about my day. She asks me about my mother, our apartment, the day-care place, and more about school. She asks a lot of questions, and I talk, not noticing how the time passes until I see that the sky outside is turning purple.

I jump up from my chair, suddenly alarmed. “What time is it?”

My grandmother glances at her watch. “Almost five.”

“I forgot to let Hófi know I wasn’t coming.”

“Hófi?”

“Who runs the day-care place.”

My grandmother springs into action, phoning Hófi to explain my absence. We go back into the kitchen and my grandmother starts washing dishes. I sit there, leaning back in my chair, feeling warm and safe. I cannot remember that last time I felt this way. The steam gathers on the window above the sink, and my grandmother hums to herself. Then, suddenly, I hear the front door open and a voice call: “Hello!”

“Look who’s here,” my grandmother says as my grandfather comes into the kitchen. He stops abruptly, looks at me, and then at her. Something meaningful passes between them.

“Well, hello,” he says. “Are you staying for dinner?”

I glance at my grandmother, and she nods, smiling.

I call my mother, and she agrees to let me stay. We eat boiled halibut and potatoes, which my grandfather mashes for me with lots of butter. They keep the TV

news on during dinner and no one talks much, but it doesn't matter because when you feel good like that you don't need to talk.

A few days later I go back again and sit with my grandmother in the kitchen while the light grows dim.

And again, a few days later.

Soon it has become a regular thing.

Eventually it seems pointless to keep paying for the day-care place. My grandmother talks to my mother and tells her that I can come and spend the afternoons at their place. My mother says very little, but she is evidently relieved.

Chapter Two

It is from my grandparents that I learn that my father moved to Denmark when I was two. He went there to study accounting, but in the end he didn't study at all, he just did other things. What things is not completely clear to me, but it is evident that my grandparents do not approve. They don't like to talk about him. Whenever the subject comes up they give each other strange looks and move on to talking about something else.

One day I am sitting on my grandmother's bed watching her fold laundry and decide to ask her the question I have always wondered about: "Why didn't my dad and mom get married?"

She glances at me sideways. Tiny lines form around her mouth.

"Sometimes people who are not married wind up having children. It happens. That's what happened with your parents."

"But my mom wanted them to be married, didn't she?"

She sighs. "I don't know, Anna. I don't know what your mom wanted, and I don't know what your dad wanted. I still don't know what he wants. I don't think he knows it, either." She pauses. "Sometimes people can be difficult."

"Why?"

"I wish I knew."

"Does my dad have a job in Denmark?"

She is folding the laundry more quickly now, like she's in a big hurry. "Yes, I think he has a job. Sometimes. He seems to have a job sometimes, and then the next time we talk to him he doesn't. The last time he had a job in a bar. That probably suits him perfectly."

"But ... we saw him."

"You saw him where?"

"We saw him when we moved to Djúpivogur."

She stops what she's doing and looks at me. "What do you mean?"

“When we moved to Djúpivogur last summer. Mom and me. We moved there because that’s where he was living. But then he didn’t want to see my mom and so we moved back.”

“You met him there?”

“We saw him in the store.”

“And did you talk to him?”

“No ... he didn’t really see me. He and mom talked, and then he left. I think he was upset.”

“He didn’t see you?”

“No. Not really.”

She comes over to where I am, sits down next to me, and gives me a hug.

“Anna, your dad has some problems but they have nothing to do with you,” she says, holding me very close to her and rocking slightly from side to side.

I bury my face in her sweater. She smells so nice, like a combination of sea shells and soap.

Then she kisses the top of my head, stands up, and says, “come help me set the table.”

* * *

I normally stay at my grandparents’ until my mother comes home from work. But more and more I am staying there for dinner, too. Their house is always warm and illuminated, and my grandmother cooks a meal every evening. At our place it is colder and darker, and there is like a strange, ominous hum in the air, even though you can’t hear anything like that in actual fact. It’s more like a feeling I have.

My mother is usually too tired to cook, so dinner at our place is usually just porridge, or maybe rice pudding with slices of liver sausage. It’s more like breakfast or lunch food. So more and more I call my mother and ask if I can stay for dinner at my grandparents’. At first she always says yes. But when I start wanting to stay overnight, too, she starts to get a lot more tense about it.

One evening I ask to stay for dinner and she says no. I’m upset. My grandparents are having lamb hearts with mashed potatoes, gravy, and homemade red currant jelly on the side. My mouth waters just at the thought of it.

“Why not?” I say. I know I sound petulant but I don’t care.

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because I said so!”

I trudge homeward with my head bent, and hardly speak to my mother when I get there.

For once, she’s made a proper meal. Smoked halibut with potatoes. I like smoked halibut and she knows I do, but just this once, to spite her, I hardly eat anything. Not that I’m hungry, anyway. I had waffles at my grandma’s.

“You’re not going to eat the rest of your food?” she says after I sit there for about ten minutes pushing the mashed fish and potato around on my plate.

“No.”

She stands abruptly and takes my plate, scraping the potato and fish into the trash with an exasperated motion. I immediately feel guilty. I get up and go over to the counter to help her. She tosses the plate into the sink with a clatter.

“Get the tea towel and help me dry,” she orders.

The air is fraught with tension. Then out of the blue she says, “You know he’s getting married to that girl, don’t you?”

It takes me a second to realize who she means. I’m glad I didn’t ask.

“Well don’t you?”

I shake my head.

“What, you’re going to tell me they don’t talk about him over there?”

I say nothing.

She turns to face me, her face flushed with anger. “Why don’t you answer me when I’m talking to you?”

I bite my lips together.

“I know what they’re doing. I bet they talk about me, don’t they? They want to turn you. That’s why they want you to come over there every day ...”

The plate I am holding shatters into a million pieces on the floor.

A second later I am in the bathroom with the door locked. I am shaking from head to toe. The rage I feel terrifies me. She is trying to turn my time with my grandparents into something ugly. I won’t let her. She can’t take that from me.

The doorknob rattles.

“Anna?”

I say nothing, just stare at the door.

“Open the door.”

“They’re *my* grandparents!!” I shout at the top of my lungs.

There is a silence. Time passes – maybe ten or fifteen minutes. Then there’s the sound of the doorknob rattling again.

“Anna.” The voice gentler this time.

“What?”

“Can you open the door, please?”

“No.”

“I want to talk to you.”

“No.”

“Anna, I’m sorry.”

I lie down on the floor and curl up in a ball. After a while I hear her go into the kitchen and sit down. The floor grows cold. I get up slowly and open the door a crack. My mother is sitting at the kitchen table, staring straight ahead, smoking a cigarette. I slip quietly out of the bathroom, go to our bedroom, undress and crawl into bed. Within minutes I am asleep.

* * *

The incident that evening between my mother and me is never mentioned again, nor is the subject matter that had prompted it. I continue on as before, going to my grandparents’ after school, asking to stay for dinner, or to stay the night. Sometimes my mother says yes, occasionally she says no. But there is a new dynamic in our interaction. I felt like she has begun to see me a little differently. Also, she seems more distant than before, but in a different way. A more focused way, somehow.

It surprises me one day when my mother announces, out of the blue, that she is going away for a couple of weeks to visit her sister Klara, who lives in Canada. My astonishment gives way to full-blown incredulity when she tells me that I will be staying with my grandparents for the duration. She has already spoken to them. It is all arranged.

I am *thrilled*. Not only can I stay with my grandparents for two whole weeks, but it also seems like my mother’s animosity towards them is waning a little. Perhaps, with time, they might even become friends. That would make me so happy.

The eight weeks until my mother leaves seem like an eternity. But finally the time comes, I pack some necessary belongings, and hug my mother goodbye. She promises to buy me a swimsuit with a little skirt on it, which I plan to wear to school swimming lessons. One of the girls in my class, whose father is a pilot, had bought her one of those in America, and all the other girls are *dying* to have one. I plan to be the one they all envy next.

It is summer, and my grandfather's garden is in full bloom. There are violets, pansies, and his pride and joy: strawberries. Strawberries are a challenge to grow in Iceland, but my grandfather, through careful tending, has managed it. He built wooden cases around the strawberry beds and made lids to go on top with clear plastic stretched across. Every couple of days he removes them and we check to see if one of the delicate flowers has transformed into a little berry, and if the little berries have started to blush into the full red they will become when they are mature.

Every day when he comes home from work I accompany him into the garden where he teaches me how to know weeds from flowers, cut the edges of flowerbeds, and rake the freshly-cut grass into rows so it will dry. When it is dry he gives it to the man across the street, who has a horse. He even gives me my own redcurrant bush. "This one is yours," he says with a twinkle in his eye, "though you'll have to keep it here, since I'm afraid they don't travel well."

Two weeks pass like two fingers clicking together. My mother returns, I move back home, and the atmosphere is light and easy. One day I am in the bedroom getting dressed for school when I hear a strange sound coming from the kitchen. It is my mother humming. I think that means she's happy, though I can't be sure.

A few evenings later she is sitting in the living room reading a book when I come in. I have been at my grandparents' for dinner.

"Anna," she says, putting the book down. "I want to talk to you."

"OK," I say, kicking off my boots.

"Come and sit down."

I sit down opposite her on the makeshift sofa that she has fashioned out of bricks, a wooden board and some cushions.

"I've decided to move to Canada."

I stare. The weight of those words is immense, yet they are having trouble sinking in.

She hesitates, waiting for my reaction.

“Klara and Jim are going to help us.”

Us.

I shake my head.

“Anna.”

“I’m not going.”

She speaks quickly, intently. “There’s no life for me here. Do you think I want to work in that factory all my life? Having nothing, affording nothing? Do you know how much money I have left over at the end of the month? None. I can hardly afford to feed us those last two days.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head faster.

“It’s a good country. We will have a better life. A simpler life.”

“I don’t want to move again!” I shout, jumping to my feet. “I don’t want to move! Ever!”

She stands up and towers over me, suddenly calm.

“Well, what are you going to do here, then, eh? Live by yourself? Or will you go live with your father, maybe?” Her voice is dripping with scorn.

I go into the hall and stomp into my boots, throw on my jacket and storm out the door. My jacket flaps around me as I half-run up the street, thoughts racing through my head. I won’t go. I won’t. This is my home. And let’s say I went there with her. If she left there would be no one. I wouldn’t know anyone else that I could go live with. Like my grandparents.

Ten minutes later I open the door to my grandparents’ house. My grandmother is nodding off in front of the TV, my grandfather smoking and playing solitaire on the coffee table.

He looks up, startled. She opens her eyes and raises her head slowly.

“We’re moving to Canada,” I say, “mom and I. She just told me. She wants to move to Canada.”

Neither of them say a word, just stare at me. A little too calmly for my taste.

“*That’s* why she went there, so she could make it all ready for us to go.”

They glance at each other, then my grandmother rises slowly to her feet.

“Let’s go into the kitchen,” she says. “Do you want a glass of milk?”

I perch on a stool while she pours me some milk and cuts off a slab of marble cake. She puts them in front of me. “Now why don’t you tell me what happened?”

I explain what has transpired.

“So does your mother know where you are?”

“No, and I don’t care. I’m not going back there. Ever. I don’t want to go to Canada.”

“You’d better phone her, though, and let her know. Otherwise she will worry.”

“No.”

“All right,” she says gently. “Why don’t you go downstairs and say hello to Jon. Bring him a piece of cake, too. I’ll call your mother.”

“I don’t want to go home.”

“We’ll see.”

I take the plate with an extra piece of cake on it, and navigate the steep stairs down to Jon’s room. He’s sitting there picking out chords on his guitar, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

“Hey there,” he says when I open the door.

“Some cake,” I say, holding out the plate to him.

About fifteen minutes later my grandmother knocks lightly on the door and asks me to come back upstairs.

“I’ve talked to your mother and she said you can stay the night on the condition that you come home tomorrow morning.”

I nod, relieved that I can stay here for at least that long. Maybe it will give me time to figure out a plan.

“Good. Now let’s find you something to sleep in.”

* * *

To my surprise, my mother says nothing about what has happened when I see her the next morning. She is her normal self, only some of her heaviness has returned. She doesn’t hum.

A few days later, as we are eating a dinner of pickled herring, eggs and rye bread, she casually remarks: “Your grandmother and I met for lunch today.”

Instantly I feel fear.

“We had a talk about you.”

Tense, I wait.

“So here’s the deal. They are willing to take you. But I would like you to come with me.”

They are willing to take you.

“So we made a deal. We’re going to let you choose. If you want, you can live with your grandparents. Or you can come with me and I’ll give you a dog.”

I’ll give you a dog.

A dog.

Dog.

It is an echo, a reverberation, not only through the room but deep inside me, resonating to the very core of my being.

“There is so much we can do in Canada,” she continues quickly, seeing that she has my attention. “We’ll go live with Klara and Jim for the first little while, then maybe we can move to Calgary. There are lots of people moving to Calgary now. There are lots of jobs now and people are making a very good living. Out there we might even have a farm, and some horses. And definitely a dog, or two, or maybe even more.”

I can hardly believe what she is saying. Horses. I love horses. There are some horses in a corral across the street. I have even been on a horse once, when I went with my cousin Ása to a farm that her uncle owned. I haven’t stopped talking about it. My grandmother has said that she’ll ask the man across the street the next time my grandfather gives him hay if I can ride his horse up and down their driveway. But – to own my own horse! It almost sounds *too* crazy.

“You can have anything you want in life if you want it bad enough,” my mother says, keeping her eyes on me.

“What kind of job are you going to get?” I ask. It seems to me that it would have to be a very good job if she is going to have horses and more than two dogs.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she says with a shrug. “Anything is possible over there. Canada is the land of opportunity. I can go back to school, get an education, and then a good job. I know it will be better, Anna. Better than here.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know. Life here is too complicated. Life in Canada is easier. Klara says so. It’s the simple life I want, Anna. And you want that, too. I know you do.”

I wonder just how she knows that, but I don’t say anything. Sometimes my mother seems to believe that she and I are the same person, that I want everything she wants. And sometimes I am afraid that she is right, that I am merging into her, that soon I don’t won’t know any more what *I* want, but only what she wants.

I don't say anything more, just go into the bedroom and start playing with my deck of cards, building houses with it, trying to stack them higher and higher on top of each other. My grandfather taught me how to do that. He's good with cards. He even taught me how to do a magic trick.

The thought of leaving him, and my grandmother, is terrifying. But the magic word has been spoken.

Dog.

Chapter Three

I am jolted awake by a clanging of metal cutting aggressively into my consciousness. I am lying across a row of hard seats, my head on a carry-on bag, my feet on my mother's lap. Her coat is covering me. I rub my eyes.

It takes me a moment to remember where we are. It's an airport called John F. Kennedy, after a man who was shot to death in his car.

My mother looks down at me, noticing that I'm awake.

"Don't you want to sleep some more?" she says.

I sit up and shake my head. I remember now: our plane from Iceland was late so we've missed the connecting flight that was supposed to take us to Canada. We're spending the night here. My mother has to stay awake because if she falls asleep someone might steal our things.

"I need to go to the bathroom."

Warily we get to our feet and gather our belongings – my travel bag, my mother's travel bag, a plastic bag with two magazines and a half-eaten sandwich. My mother's coat.

The sterile smell of disinfectant envelops us as we walk into the empty bathroom. I catch sight of my reflection in the wide mirror above the sinks. My face is very white so my freckles really stand out. I frown. Freckles are the worst. Pretty girls never have freckles.

When I come out of the toilet cubicle my mother is putting on mascara. "You look pale," she says. "Should we put some makeup on you?"

I brighten. Putting on makeup is one of my favourite things. "Yeah, OK."

I turn my face upwards to the light as she paints a new face on my pallid white one. Foundation on my cheeks, mascara on my eyelashes, a dab of lipstick on my lips. She also puts some lipstick on my cheeks and smoothes it up across my cheekbone.

"There," she says when she's finished, surveying her work. "That looks better."

I turn to look at myself, expecting to like what I see. I don't. That isn't me, just a girl who looks like me, with a new face painted on for a new country.

* * *

When we finally get to Canada, Klara is waiting for us at the airport. She and my mother give each other a big hug. Then Klara leans down and gives me a squeeze. I pat her back, feeling a little uncomfortable. I don't know Klara. I'm told I met her once, when I was about four years old, but I don't remember it at all.

Klara has lived in Canada for a long time - ten years at least. She has a husband here, Jim, and two kids, Billy and Rosa. Billy is eight, two years younger than me. Rosa is five. They live in a town called Kingston, and that is where we are headed.

The air in the airport is cool, but the moment we step outside the heat hits me like a slap. I am so startled that I stop dead in my tracks. What a strange, strange sensation. The air is almost wet, the moisture sticking to my skin. I have never felt anything like it before. My mother and Klara don't notice, just keep walking. I peel off the cardigan I have on and run after them. I don't like this. The air isn't crispy, like back home. It is muggy and has a smell, kind of like sunshine, but darker.

We drive for a couple of hours along a big highway in Klara's long station wagon. I sit in the back and stare out the window. There are several lanes, and the cars drive really fast. Finally Klara pulls off the highway and into a town, and about ten minutes later we are in front of her house.

I climb out of the car and look up at it. It is big and made of red bricks and has a porch painted gray. It appears to have three floors, and next to it is a tree that is even taller than the roof. I think it is the tallest tree I have ever seen in my life. Something moves up in the branches, and my eyes widen: it is a squirrel, with a bushy tail that twitches from side to side. I have never seen a squirrel before, except in pictures. In real life it is even more adorable.

My mother and Klara are busy talking and getting our belongings out of the car. I look around and there, across the street, is a dog. It has short curly hair and black button eyes, and looks a lot like my classmate's dog in Iceland, only bigger. It sits there, tied to the banister with a leash, staring at me.

I walk slowly towards it.

It is on its feet, wagging its behind like it is really excited to see me, jumping up and pulling on the leash. Laughing, I go right up to it and let it sniff the back of my hand. It jumps up and tries to lick my face. I lean down to pet it.

The door of the house opens. I stand up abruptly and take a step back.

A man stands in the doorway. He is wearing pyjama bottoms and slippers and his hair is a mess.

“Hello,” he says.

“Hello,” I say.

He says something else, which I don’t understand. I need to learn English quickly, my mother tells me, and she’s right. The only words I know in English are “hello” and “yes” and “no” and “bye.” I’m suddenly scared, and ashamed of myself for being there. My mother calls my name, and I and run quickly back across the street.

* * *

My mother and I are going to live in two rooms on the top floor of Klara and Jim’s house. One of the rooms is mine and one is hers. Mine is kind of empty; it doesn’t have any of my stuff. But then, most rooms I have lived in since I was born were kind of empty. And I don’t have a lot of stuff.

The next morning it is discovered that I don’t have any clothes, either. At least not clothes suitable for a Canadian summer. The heat is oppressive, and all I have is two pairs of jeans and one dress that I wear only on special occasions. In the shoe department all I have are sneakers, ones that my grandma gave me as a First Day of Summer present in Iceland, and my white patent leather shoes.

So that afternoon we go shopping to get me some clothes. Apparently you need to wear sandals in Canada in the summer, so finding those is our first mission. The mission would have been a great success had the clothes not all been hideous. For one thing, they don’t appear to make any decent sandals for girls of ten. Finally I agree to an ugly brown pair that has like a patch of leather at the top of the foot with metal studs in it. They’re like something a creepy old man might wear. But it’s time to go home, we’re all tired, and my mother insists I have to take them because we’ve looked in every store and there’s nothing else I like anyway.

The following day I come upon my mother, Klara, and a heavy set woman with black gray-streaked hair, standing in the front hallway, speaking rapidly in English and laughing. The woman, whose name is Gillian, has two dresses draped across her arm. Gillian, I learn later, is Klara’s friend.

“Anna,” says my mother, and I stop. She then says something *v e r y s l o w l y* to me in English, as though that is supposed to help me understand.

I stare at her stupidly.

She repeats herself, with no more success than before. Looking mildly perturbed, she switches to Icelandic. “Gillian’s daughter has outgrown these dresses and she’s kindly offered to give them to us,” she says rapidly, pursing her lips like she always does when she’s annoyed.

I glance at the dresses. They look dowdy and horrible, like kids wear in orphanages in the movies.

My mother takes one and holds it against my body. They all nod, clucking their approval.

“Go put it on,” she says, handing me the dress and motioning towards the downstairs bathroom.

I amble in there as slowly as I can. I feel like a deadbeat even before the dress is on. It’s ash grey, has no sleeves and no waist, just a little shoelace-type of thing that is supposed to tie around the middle, but which in my case is around the hips.

“Nice!” exclaims my mother when I come back out. She picks at the shoulders a bit, lifting them up and letting them drop again. “You can wear it for your birthday.”

My birthday is in another week, at the end of July, and so far I am not looking forward to it.

“Come along, Anna!” says Klara. “We’re off to pick up Rosa from nursery school.”

I plod along behind the three of them in the summer heat feeling shapeless, hopeless and grey. A step behind me, Billy drags a tree branch along the sidewalk. So far, this new life doesn’t feel very simple.

* * *

The days pass, and I start to pick up English. My mother makes me read a book called *The Secret Garden*, which she claims will really help me. I can’t decide if I don’t like the book because I just don’t like it, or because I don’t understand it properly. Whatever; I finish it, and receive enthusiastic praise from Jim and Klara. Especially Jim, who is a professor in English literature and who thinks I’ve done well, reading a whole book less than a month after moving to Canada.

I haven’t gone back across the street to pet the dog, which is tied up outside the house pretty much every day. I’m scared the man will come out again and start talking

to me. I don't feel confident enough to answer him, and I don't want to stand there like a fool and not know what to say - much less do what I did the last time: run away.

Finally, late one afternoon after a thunderstorm, I pluck up my courage and saunter across the street. The dog is thrilled to see me, as before. I've taken to calling it Hero, which is the name I've decided to call my dog too, when I get it.

I'm talking to Hero in Icelandic in a low voice, when I notice that his owner is standing in the doorway again. He is smoking a cigarette, the smoke wafting blue into air that is clear and fragrant in the aftermath of the storm.

"What language is that?" he asks.

I pull myself up to my full height. "Icelandic. I'm from Iceland," I say.

"Iceland? Where's that? Up near Alaska?"

"It's ... I don't know." I laugh. And he laughs.

"Her name is Poppy," he says, gesturing to the dog.

"Poppy," I repeat.

He comes down the stairs, flicking his cigarette sideways onto the lawn. "Poppy likes company, don't you Poppy? You can come over and sit with her whenever you want. She'd love that."

He unties Poppy and she bounds up the stairs ahead of him, disappearing inside. I watch the door close behind them, then turn and skip back across the street. I am breathless with excitement. I want to tell my mother and Klara what's happened but they're in the kitchen, chopping up vegetables for dinner, deep in conversation.

I decide that soon, if that nice man remains nice, I will ask to take Poppy for a walk.

"Sure," says the nice man two days later, "you want to take her now?"

I nod.

He goes inside and gets a leash. Takes her off her chain and hooks the leash up to her collar. "Here you go," he says handing it to me. "Just don't go far, OK?"

I shake my head. "No, I ... no."

I am intoxicated with happiness. Holding the leash, I walk to the corner, then turn and look back. The man is still standing on the steps, watching us. He gives a wave. I wave back. Then I keep walking, my back straight and my gaze high, feeling invincible with a poodle at the end of a leash.

Chapter Four

Summer draws to a close, and the time that I have been dreading has come. It is time to start school.

The school building is not far, just down the street and to the right. It reminds me of one of those old buildings they had in *Oliver Twist*, my favourite movie: massive and made of red bricks that are dark with age and dirt. Wide steps lead up to the front entrance, made of two heavy wooden doors. Inside there is a high ceiling, and hallway with a wood floor so polished that it looks wet.

My mother is with me. She walks rapidly ahead of me to the office to find out where I'm supposed to go, her heels clicking on the floor. Then, once she's done that, she leads the way up to the classroom. She is straight-backed and holds her head high, and her hair is pulled back in a bun, accentuating her high cheekbones. Her expression is firm and resolute. I am proud to have such a beautiful mother.

She comes to a halt in a classroom doorway and the teacher steps forward and introduces herself as Mrs. Madison. She is probably around sixty, short and compact, and has blueish-gray hair. She listens to my mother, then nods at me and tells me to leave my jacket and my lunchbox inside the cloakroom on the right. My mother stands there while I do that, then pats me on the shoulder and leaves.

Panic wells up in me when she's gone. The teacher has her back turned and is writing something on the board. I'm wearing a kilt that used to belong to Gillian's daughter, a pair of knee-high socks and those icky sandals. I feel hideously gawky. Slowly I walk to a desk and sit down. The desks are all different – some of them plain wood-top tables with metal legs, others have drawers. The one I've picked is probably the most massive of them all. It has a top that you can lift up and a space for books underneath. It has things carved in the wood – A+E with a heart around it; JOHN, filled in with ink; KELLY STINKS.

The bell rings, shrill and loud.

A couple of minutes later there's the sound of excited voices and many feet on the stairs. Kids push and jostle into the classroom. One girl stops just past the doorway and glares at me before being pushed into the cloakroom by the boy behind her.

A minute later she's standing at my desk with her hands on her hips, two girls on either side of her.

"That's my desk," she says.

"What?" I say.

"That's my desk. You're sitting at my desk."

"Oh. I'm very sorry." I lean down to pick up my schoolbag.

"Oh, I'm very sorry," mimics one of the girls.

They look at each other with stifled giggles.

I stand up, take my bag and look around, feeling so horribly conspicuous that I want to die. Everyone is staring at me. And there are no free desks left.

I look around for the teacher. She is nowhere to be seen.

A wadded up piece of paper lands on my back. Suppressed laughter from the audience.

The teacher bustles in through the door, *oh thank God*. At her desk she stops.

"Anna? Is something wrong?"

I open my mouth but not a sound comes out.

"She needs a desk," the girl who has usurped the desk from me says disdainfully.

"Oh. Yes. All right."

The teacher goes into the cloakroom and a moment later carries out a table with metal legs. She does so with some difficulty, given her short stature. She goes back and comes back with a wooden chair.

"Here you go," she says, leaving the desk just outside the cloakroom. Sniggers and more stifled laughs.

I go over there and sit down. The teacher starts calling out names. Mine is second on the list.

"Anna ... Bern hard sdottir..." she says in a halting voice and looks at me over her glasses, "did I get that right?"

There is absolute silence. All eyes are on me. Oh to be able to melt through the cracks in the floor right now. My name is hideous. It's a disgrace.

I nod. Swallow.

"That's an interesting name, Anna," she says with affected kindness, "does it mean anything in particular?"

I shake my head.

“I see.”

I sigh with relief as she moves down the list.

The day passes like a twisting, turning nightmare. The teacher talks so fast that I hardly understand a thing. Most of all I want to cry, to dissolve in the flood of tears that threatens to burst inside of me, but I will not. I will not let those kids see me break down. Not now and not ever.

“How was your first day at school?” asks Klara when I get home. She’s in the kitchen, baking muffins. Billy is sitting at the table, colouring in a colouring book.

I sit down heavily and stare straight ahead.

“Was everything all right?”

I shake my head, slowly at first, then faster until I’m shaking and shaking and shaking it.

“Anna!” she says, surprised.

“It was horrible! I didn’t understand anything. I picked the wrong desk and these girls came up and told me to leave. Then there were no more desks and somebody threw a bunched-up piece of paper at me. And when the teacher said my name – Bernhardsdottir – everybody laughed. I hate my name! I don’t want to hear it, ever again. I’m going to change it.”

“You can’t just make up a new last name. If you want to change it you have to go through a long and complicated process.”

“I don’t want to go to school here! I can’t even understand what the teacher is saying.”

She looks at me probingly for a moment, then says: “Really? You really can’t understand, or are you just saying that?”

“I can’t! I can’t understand anything.”

“Oh, dear.”

“I’m *not* going back!”

“We’ll see. We’ll see what we can figure out. Here, lick the bowl.”

The next morning, Klara and my mother and I go to see the school principal. He’s as tall as Mrs. Madison is short, with skinny limbs and a protruding belly. His hair is thinning on top and he combs long strands of it across his head. I stand while my mother and Klara sit in front of his big wooden desk and explain my predicament. Klara does most of the talking.

I don't fully comprehend what they are talking about, but I get the gist. Finally they all get up and my mother puts her hand on my back, guiding me out of the room with them.

"Where are we going?" I whisper to her in Icelandic.

"You're going into another class, with younger kids," she says.

My heart sinks. With *younger* kids! How demoralizing; how demeaning!

We march down the long hallway, our footsteps echoing, the principal first, then my mother and Klara, and finally me. The principal gets to a door, stops, knocks once, opens it. He gestures for the teacher to come out into the hallway. She's young and blonde and wears frosted pink lipstick. The principal talks, gesturing towards me repeatedly. The teacher listens and nods. Finally she reaches out and touches my shoulder, still nodding, and guides me into the room with slight pressure. I like her. She seems kind, and my insides flood with relief.

I find myself in front of another class, dozens of eyes resting curiously upon me.

I feel more at ease, though. These kids seem curious, but not hostile. The teacher smiles at me and guides me to an empty desk, next to a girl with long, dark hair. "This is Vanessa," she says to me, speaking slowly and deliberately. "Vanessa, this is Anna. She's new, like you, only she doesn't speak very much English. Vanessa is from Australia," she says to me, by way of explanation.

I sit down. Vanessa gives me the once-over, her expression curious. Then she smiles. I smile.

"Why doesn't she speak English?" asks a boy who sits across the aisle from me. He is thick-set and has black hair and olive skin.

"She doesn't speak English, Jeremy, because she's new in Canada," says the teacher.

"Where is she from?" he asks.

"Anna, would you like to tell us where you're from?" asks the teacher gently.

I clear my throat. "I come from Iceland."

"Iceland! Where's that?" asks the boy next to Jeremy, who looks Asian.

"Iceland is a country in the north. Isn't that right, Anna?"

"Yes." I say, clearly.

"Can you tell us a little bit about Iceland?" asks the teacher. "Is it cold there?"

I shake my head. "Not too much. A little bit. It's more hot here," I say.

"She has an accent," says the Asian boy.

Accent. What's that, I wonder?

"Yes. That's normal. Lots of people have accents. Vanessa has an accent too, don't you Vanessa?"

Vanessa looks a little confused, but nods anyway.

Accent. It's a new word, and apparently I have it. I make a mental note to ask my mother or Klara what "accent" means.

"It's when you talk differently from everyone else," says my mother that evening when I ask her.

Oh no. That is not what I wanted to hear. I don't want to be different. I vow to rid myself of this "accent" as soon as I can, to tune my ear to the way everyone talks in Canada, and to sound just like them.

The kids in my class are OK, and I quickly grow to love my teacher, Miss Preston. I don't make friends, though. I'm shy, I guess. But I have Poppy, and that is all that matters.

I walk her every day now. Kevin and Erin, her owners, have become almost like my family. They invited me in one day after the walk. Their niece, who was around my age, was visiting them, and they probably thought it was a good idea for us to meet and play together. We had snacks and cupcakes and watched cartoons on TV. Klara and Jim don't have a TV. They don't believe in it. They think it ruins your mind, and that everyone should read books. Me, I like TV, even though the TV here is very strange because every time you watch something they keep stopping it to show commercials. They don't do that back home. Or should I say: where I was born.

Kevin and Erin have said that I can come to their house whenever I want and watch TV. Kevin works at a bakery so he gets up really early to go to work, then comes home around noon, and sleeps for the rest of the day. That's why they are more than happy for me to take Poppy out for walks after school. They usually leave the door unlocked for me, so I go in myself and fetch Poppy. When I return her I usually head downstairs into their TV room and watch sitcoms like *The Brady Bunch* and *I Dream of Jeanie*. Those two shows are my favourites. Kevin brings home Twinkies and other goodies from the bakery that I'm allowed to help myself to. I munch on those while I watch, with Poppy's head lying on my lap.

Sometimes I pretend that I'm not me but Kevin and Erin's daughter. I wish they could adopt me so I could have a mom and dad. If they did, I would also change my

name. I'd be Yasmin. Yasmin Jones. I would have a mother, a father, a dog and a Canadian last name. I would bring Twinkies to school in my lunchbox.

It would be perfect.

But I'm not their daughter, and I don't have a dog. Not yet, anyway. Still, my mother did promise, and we've been here for quite a few weeks already. Surely she has a plan up her sleeve.

I decide to ask. The only problem is that I hardly ever see her. When I come home from walking Poppy in the afternoon she's almost always left for school. She goes to evening school to learn English and to "upgrade her education," whatever that means. And when she's not at school she's at work. She got a job at the Home Blest Restaurant on Princess Street, which is famous for having the biggest neon sign in town. 'There's No Blessed Like Home Blest' proclaims the sign, featuring a round, smiling woman holding a pie. My mother is a waitress there.

The chance comes one Saturday, when we're both home. I've been lying on my bed trying to read, but mostly wondering how I will go about asking her. Just posing the question makes me nervous – I don't know why.

I get up slowly and peer into her room. She is on her bed on top of the covers, reading a book for school.

She looks up and sees me there.

"What?" she says.

I shift my weight. "Remember when we were in Iceland, before we left ..." I begin.

"Yeah."

"You said I could have a dog."

She sighs and puts her book down. "Well we've just been getting settled, haven't we?"

"But ... when can we get a dog?"

There is a flicker of something in her eyes. She says: "Work hard and get back up to your normal grade in school and we'll talk about it."

"But ..."

"Not now, Anna!" she says sharply.

I turn and go back to my room.

The following week I stop watching sitcoms in the afternoons. Instead I go home after taking Poppy for her walk and do my homework. Sometimes I even do more

than the teacher says because I want to get better quickly. I know that if I work hard I will move up in school. And if I move up in school, then my dream will come true.

I understand almost everything now. I can even read the newspaper. Well, maybe not all of the newspaper, but the classifieds, and that's what's important. There is a column there I read every day. It is called "Pets" and it has lots of adverts from people offering to give away puppies for free. Cocker Spaniel is the kind of puppy that I want, and I read the classifieds each day to see if there are any being offered. Then, when the time comes, I will be ready.

One Sunday in late November I overhear Klara and Jim talking in the kitchen.

"She's adjusted so well and she understands pretty much everything," I hear Klara say. "I think what she's learning is too easy for her. She needs more of a challenge."

Are they talking about me? I can scarcely believe my ears, and creep closer to listen.

"But she's only five," says Jim. "She may be doing OK in kindergarten, but what about her social development?"

I am crestfallen. No. They're not talking about me.

I lean my back against the wall and let myself slide down to the floor.

Klara sticks her head around the corner. "Anna. What are you doing?"

"I want to move up in school," I say. "Things *I'm* learning are too easy."

They both stare at me. I avert my eyes.

"They did say it was only temporary," Klara says to Jim.

Jim mutters something I can't hear, and then they leave the kitchen.

About two weeks pass. I'm in my room, sitting at a desk, writing in a notebook. We have to practice our handwriting and I'm having a little trouble with Q. The room is dark save for a luminous circle provided by the desk lamp. My mother comes in and sits down opposite me, half inside the circle of light. She's got her hair tied back and a cardigan slung across her shoulders.

"You've done really well in school," she says. "I'm proud of you."

I look at her, astonished.

"When you go back after Christmas you can go into your normal grade." She pauses. "Jim went and talked to the principal this morning."

I put my pen down.

"So that means I can have a dog?"

She looks away, into the corner of the room with the darkest shadow.

“No, we still have to wait and see,” she says.

“Why!?”

“Anna ...” she says in a warning tone, standing up.

“Well, why? You promised.”

“I can’t help the fact that Billy has allergies, can I?” she says heatedly. “And we don’t know how long we’re going to stay here or where we’re going to end up. I was thinking of going to Calgary, remember? We can’t have a dog when we don’t know where we’re going.”

“Why not? Why can’t we take the dog with us?”

“I’m not discussing it any further!” She stands there for a moment as if she’s about to say something else, but then turns and hastily leaves the room.

I throw my pencil after her as hard as I can. It bounces off the closed door and onto the floor.

I get up in a flash, take the stairs down in twos, pull on my boots before anyone can see me, and run out the door.

A moment later I’m on Erin and Kevin’s doorstep.

“Anna!” Erin says when she opens the door. “Look at you. Out in the freezing cold without your coat on!”

“I only have to run across the street,” I say, shifting my weight rapidly from foot to foot.

“I don’t care – you need to wear a coat. It’s winter you know. Come inside.”

Poppy comes running and jumps up on me, wagging her tail so hard I think she might dislocate her hip.

“Can I watch TV with her for a while?”

“Course you can, honey,” Erin says with a slightly puzzled expression.

I go downstairs and turn on the TV. Poppy comes, hops up on the couch and crawls onto my lap. I stroke her absently, staring ahead, trying to make sense of the thoughts raging through my head. My mother is a traitor. She said I could have a dog and now she’s saying I can’t. It’s not fair.

The next day after I walk Poppy I stay longer at Kevin and Erin’s than I ever have before. I don’t care about my stupid homework now. I stay until Erin comes home. She is surprised to see me there.

“Oh, hello, Anna,” she says kindly, putting a brown paper bag with groceries on the kitchen counter. “This is a nice surprise. Have you been here all afternoon?”

I nod and perch on one of the kitchen stools.

“Has Poppy been a good girl today?”

“She’s been really good.”

A dishevelled-looking Kevin comes into the kitchen, running his fingers through his hair.

“Oh hi, honey,” says Erin, “I picked up some ground beef to make spaghetti. Did you manage to get some sleep today?”

“Yeah, I did. Feel like a million bucks. Can’t you tell?”

“Poppy started barking when we went outside and I was scared you would wake up,” I say.

“Oh, really?” he says. “Nope, didn’t hear a thing.” He points a finger at me with an expression of mock surprise, “Hey, are you still here?”

“No,” I say.

He laughs. I laugh.

“Well, do you want to stay for dinner?” he says, looking from me to Erin, who lifts her eyebrows, shrugs and nods.

It feels like the sun has just come out inside of me. “Can I?”

“Sure, if your mom says yes. Why don’t you run over and ask her?”

“My mom’s not home,” I say. “She’s at school.”

“Oh,” says Kevin. “She is?”

“Well maybe you can ask your aunt, then,” says Erin.

I pull on my boots, throw on my jacket and before you can say *walkingonsunshine* I am out the door.

Klara looks a little perplexed when I ask her, but gives her permission readily enough after I convince her that they offered, and that I did not specifically ask, to stay for dinner.

We have a lovely time. Erin makes spaghetti and garlic bread, Kevin tells funny jokes at the table, and we all laugh. Then he has to leave for work at the bakery, and I help Erin put everything away. I stay as long as I can before I know I have to go home and get to bed.

The next few days I go to Erin and Kevin’s after school, walk Poppy, watch TV, and then do my homework there. I go home for dinner, and after dinner I go over there

again to watch TV or listen to Erin's Donny Osmond records down in the recreation room.

The following weekend, they ask me if I want to sleep over.

I do I do I do! Their guest room has a bed with a pink, frilly bedspread that is very girly. Normally Erin's niece sleeps there, only she's spending a year out west with her family now, so the guest room is pretty much unused, or that's what Erin tells me.

It takes me about thirty seconds to run across the street and find my mother to ask if I can stay the night.

My mother looks at me like I'm out of my mind.

"No," she says indignantly.

I stare at her in disbelief. I don't believe she's about to ruin my dream of living with Erin and Kevin and Poppy.

"Why not?"

"Because. You can't just spend the night over there. I don't even know those people."

"I know them."

"Well, I don't. And you're not spending the night over there."

"You always want to ruin everything for me!" I shout at her in Icelandic.

"Anna!" says Jim in a booming voice from the other room.

It's his warning voice, and it's enough to silence me.

I trudge back across the street with my jacket flapping around me.

"I'm not allowed," I say to them, despondency in my voice.

"Hm," says Kevin. "Do you think your mother would change her mind if we talked to her?"

I go back across the street and tell my mother that Erin and Kevin want to talk to her. A few minutes later she and Klara are standing at Erin and Kevin's door, and the four of them are talking. Erin and Kevin talk about what a pleasure I am to have around, what a delightful girl I am, and how much they enjoy my company. My mother looks at me like she's seeing me for the first time. Me, I am filled with anxiety. Will she, or won't she?

She won't. It is all very civil, but my mother is adamant. No sleepover.

"Maybe some other time," Kevin says, and Erin nods, before we head off across the street - me, Klara and my mother.

I run upstairs and into my room without speaking to them. I don't care if I speak to either of them ever again. I don't want them to be my family. Erin and Kevin are my real family - the family I have in my heart.

December rolls around, and then Christmas break. My routine changes: I get up, have breakfast, wait until Kevin comes home at noon, then head over there to take Poppy out for her walk. When I take her back, Kevin is usually asleep, so I go downstairs into the rec room and hang out there for a couple of hours, watching TV.

One Thursday, about a week before Christmas, I am bringing Poppy back from her walk. I open the side door quietly, go in, and hang up her leash on a hook. Suddenly something moves inside the silent house. I jump, letting out a shout.

But it's only Kevin. Standing there at the top of the steps leading up to the kitchen, looking at me strangely.

"Sorry," he says, "I didn't mean to scare you."

"That's OK," I say, embarrassed. "I thought you were sleeping."

Just then I look down and see that the fly on his pyjama pants is wide open and I can see his ... *thing*.

I freeze.

"I was just going to get a glass of water," he says. "How was Poppy today? Was she a good girl?"

I nod.

"Good," he says, moving towards the sink.

As soon as he moves, it is like a spell has been lifted. I can breathe again.

"I have to go," I say rapidly, "my aunt wants me."

"Okay," he says nonchalantly, not turning around.

Outside I run across the street and up to my room. I sit down on my bed and stare straight ahead. After a few minutes, I start to calm down. I tell myself that I'm silly. So I saw his thing. So what? It was an accident. He hadn't closed his fly properly. Big deal.

But the next day when I go over there I'm uneasy, and I don't stay long.

Christmas rolls around. At Klara and Jim's we celebrate on Christmas Eve, just like back home. We have a big Christmas dinner with leg of lamb, caramelised potatoes and green peas from a can that someone has brought over from Iceland. Icelanders always want these special green peas from a can. As though they don't have green peas in Canada.

After dinner we open our presents. Billy and Rosa open theirs from their parents, my mother, their grandparents, and our grandmother in Iceland. I open mine from Klara and Jim (a Jimmy Osmond record), my mother (a new school bag), and our grandmother (a pair of knitted socks). Until the last moment I hope that there will be a present from my very own grandparents, too, but there isn't. They have decided not to stay in touch, says my mother. And I don't want to ask her for their address so I can write to them. I'm pretty sure she wouldn't like it.

But the next day when I go over to Erin and Kevin's place they have a present for me. A big book about dogs. How to take care of them, how to groom them, and all about the different breeds and what they do.

I am very touched that they thought of me, but hardly know how to tell them, so I just feel super awkward.

"I'm sorry, I don't have a present for you," I say quietly.

"That's OK honey!" says Erin, "we weren't expecting anything from you. And anyway, that present is from Poppy, and you give her so much already, every time you take her out for a walk."

I smile. They are too good to me.

A week later it is New Year's Eve. Rosa comes running up to my room.

"Papa bought some sparklers!"

"What?"

"Sparklers! Papa bought some sparklers!"

She is beside herself with excitement. Me, I can't help thinking of New Year's Eve in Iceland, where everyone shoots up firecrackers at midnight and the whole sky is illuminated. I'm told there is nothing like that here. Just sparklers. Which is a pretty lame way to end the year, if you ask me.

After dinner, Jim gives me and Billy and Rosa two sparklers each and we go out in the backyard to light them. We wave them around, making circles of light in the air. When we come back inside a few people that work with Jim are arriving, and a few minutes later Gillian and her husband show up. They all start mixing cocktails in the kitchen, and my mother takes Billy and Rosa upstairs to get them ready for bed.

I slip outside and run across the street.

I don't feel comfortable walking in on an evening like this, so I ring the doorbell. Kevin opens the door. He's got a drink in one hand and a green paper hat on his head. "Anna!" he says in an exuberant voice, "come in!"

I peer past him into the living room. They've got company. There is the sound of people laughing and talking, and the smell of something delicious that they probably had for dinner.

I step into the hallway. "Can I watch TV?"

"Sure you can! You don't even have to ask, you know that."

He's looking a little unsteady on his feet.

I take off my boots and line them up next to the wall, casting a glance in his direction. He's not saying anything, just stands there, eyeing me. I think he's drunk.

Poppy comes, and the two of us head down the stairs into the rec room. I flick on the TV and roam through the channels. There's a movie just starting: *Planet of the Vampires*.

Perfect.

I curl up on the couch. Poppy leaps up and put her head on my lap. The action starts. Spaceships. I like it already.

Erin comes down. Like Kevin, she looks a little tipsy. She gives me a hug and asks if I want anything. I say I'm OK. She goes up and comes down with a bowl of chips and a glass of coke with ice, then goes back upstairs. I dip into the bowl of chips. Sour cream and onion. Yum.

The movie is pretty good. It's obviously been shot in some other language, but they talk in English, which means their lips don't synchronise to what they're saying, which takes a bit of getting used to.

About halfway into it, Kevin appears in the doorway. "Hey," he says, lifting his glass in my direction. "It's New Year's Eve."

Yeah. As if I didn't know that. I glance at him and then back at the screen because the movie is getting good. The astronauts who discover the planet of the vampires have found a spaceship with a bunch of skeletons inside.

"Is the movie good?"

"Yeah," I say, my eyes glued to the screen, my hand in the chip bowl. "Yeah it's good."

Kevin plonks heavily down on the couch next to me. He puts one leg up on the table and takes a swig of his drink.

"Their talking doesn't match the sound," he says after a while.

"I know. They're speaking a different language but someone has put the sound over it."

“Dubbing. It’s called dubbing.”

“Dubbing.”

“They don’t do that where you come from?”

I shake my head, staring at the screen. “No.”

“You don’t get films in other languages?”

I wish he would stop talking. “Yes, but we have words at the bottom.”

“Ah. Subtitles.”

“Subtitles.”

Now a really scary part comes on and Kevin stops talking. I keep expecting him to go back upstairs but he doesn’t. After about twenty minutes he gets up, but instead of going back up the stairs he closes the door. I look at him, surprised. But then I realise that they’re being pretty loud up there. Maybe he wants to watch the film in peace.

He sits back down, but he’s not as slouchy as before. He’s staring straight ahead, but it’s not as though he’s watching the TV. His expression is tense.

“I was wondering,” he says, “if you’ve ever seen a man naked.”

There is a whooshing sound in my ears, and suddenly it is like the film has gone silent.

I shrug. He’s not talking to me.

He turns his head and looks at me, expecting an answer. He was talking to me.

“What?” I say.

“You ever see a man naked?”

I am suddenly petrified. Slowly I shake my head, staring straight ahead.

“I’d like to show you sometime,” he says casually.

Everything vanishes from the room except me and Kevin and this huge, shapeless terror.

“Would you like that?”

I swallow. I say nothing.

“I’d like to show you if you want.”

I stammer: “OK.” I don’t know why I said that. I don’t want him to show me.

My mind races back over all the times I have been alone in this house with Kevin upstairs, sleeping. Or maybe not sleeping. Maybe lying there in bed, waiting for me to come in. So he could show me his ... thing.

Which he did show me, the other day. I understand now. It was no accident.

I am holding my breath, as though by holding it down I can make all this go away. I want nothing more than to leave this room, but I can't move.

He says: "OK, then." And takes another swig of his drink.

There are voices on the stairs. I leap up the sofa, propelled by some instinct and an overwhelming feeling of guilt. A moment later Erin bursts into the room.

"So there you are!"

I mumble something about having to go, push past her, and make my way quickly up the stairs. I want to run, but that would make it look like something had happened, and it must not look like something has happened.

"Bye, Anna," Erin calls after me, and I can tell she's a little surprised. "See you tomorrow?"

"Yes," I say, pulling on my boots and slipping out through the door.

Outside there is a palpable feeling of excitement in the air. As I hurry across the street, I can hear loud, merry voices counting down: five ... four ... three ... two ... one.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

It's coming from Klara and Jim's house.

That means the year is finished.

I stand on the porch, looking in through the window. All the lights are lit, and people are laughing and talking. They're having a party. I turn around and look across the street from where I've come. My stomach is churning. I sit down on the steps and put my head on my knees. Suddenly everything seems very wrong. I miss the place I've come from. I miss my grandpa and grandma.

The insidious cold slips through every slight opening in my clothes, like icy fingers caressing me.

I shiver to my core. Still shuddering, I stand up and go inside.

Chapter Five

I go to Kevin and Erin's house only once after that.

It is the following day. A bleak, overcast New Year's Day. The light coming through the small window in my room seems weary and benumbed, like it has cost it much effort to rise and cast a few tired rays through the pane.

When I come downstairs I find Klara in the kitchen feeding Rosa orange slices. She asks me if I want some breakfast. I say no thanks, I'm not hungry. She says, "You have to eat something." I say, "I can't."

In the end, we settle on a glass of orange juice.

I don't want to go over there, but I have to because I said I would.

This is a completely new feeling, this not wanting to go. The feeling is me. I am the feeling. The feeling is bad.

I trudge across the street and ring the doorbell. My insides are like a coiled spring and I wonder how long before I can leave and say that I tried to come over but no one came to the door.

I start counting inside my head. I get to ten and turn, wanting most of all to sprint away. Then the door opens. It's him. He looks a mess. Dirty bathrobe, hair all dishevelled, stubble, sallow skin.

Suddenly I feel trapped, like someone has thrown a net over me and is pulling me back towards the door. I take a step towards it.

"Hi," he says quietly, stepping aside to let me in, his eyes drilling into me.

I can smell the rancid old liquor on his breath.

"Listen, Anna," he says, casting a furtive look down the hallway, "I'm sorry about last night, I got a bit carried away. I was a little drunk."

"It's OK," I say, or at least I think I do, I'm not sure. I'm having some trouble getting the words out.

"We'll just keep it between us, eh? If you don't tell your mother, I won't tell Erin. OK?"

I nod, my eyes fixed to the floor.

I head downstairs without further discussion. Poppy follows. I turn on the cartoons and stare blankly at the TV. The noise it emits sets my nerves on edge, like nails on a blackboard. Everything about this room has changed. Yesterday it was warm and inviting; today it is hollow and vaguely terrifying, like empty eye sockets in a human skull.

I strain to hear if there are any sounds upstairs. There aren't.

I put my arms around Poppy's neck and kiss the top of her curly head. She licks the underside of my chin.

Then I creep upstairs, careful not to make a sound. I snatch my shoes from the front hallway like a thief and make my way to the side door where it is less likely that they will hear me leave. Inside me there is a tension, like I am afraid that the net will again descend on me from nowhere and I won't be able to move.

But no net falls. I go out through the side door, closing it quietly behind me.

Every day for the next few weeks I have to pass by the house when I come home from school. The first day that I saw Poppy tied up outside I almost gave in and went to her, especially when I saw her jump up on her hind legs and pull on the leash, trying to get to me. But I put my head down and ignored her, hurrying into the house as quickly as I could, a sharp pain in my stomach.

But happily, thankfully, deliverance comes soon. My mother announces that we are moving. Gillian and her husband are going away for a year, and they have decided to rent us the downstairs of their house, which is a few blocks away.

Our new home consists of just a living room, kitchen and bathroom, but the living room can be closed off in the middle with sliding doors. My mother sleeps in one part of the living room, and I sleep in the other. It is not very elaborate, but I don't care. All I care about is that I don't have to pass by Kevin and Erin's place on my way home from school any more.

One Saturday afternoon, to my surprise, one of the girls in my class comes to call on me. She lives on the same street, and asks me if I want to come out and play double Dutch with her and a friend. They need a third person. It's the first time anyone has called on me in Canada, and I am overjoyed, though I try not to show it. We go down to the school yard and stay there for about an hour, then a couple of boys from another class show up and start talking to us. They know about a house nearby that they say is haunted, so we go down there to check it out. We see no signs of any ghosts, just

a bunch of graffiti over the torn wallpaper inside, and bottles and cigarette butts strewn here and there.

When I come home I find my mother in the kitchen. She's got a man with her. They're sitting at the table drinking tea - there is a pot on the table between them, and some shortbread biscuits on a plate. I stop short. My mother jumps to her feet.

"Anna," she says with an affected smile. "This is Richard. My friend."

My mother has that vaguely manic air that she had with my father that time in the grocery store. I still remember. I shift my weight uncomfortably.

"Come here. Give him your hand."

I walk to the table and extend my hand towards Richard, my mother's friend.

He has black, short-cropped hair and wears glasses with thick black rims. His long fingers are cold to the touch as they close around mine. "Hello Anna," he says smoothly.

"I was just telling Richard how well you've been doing in school," my mother says in a high-pitched, unnatural voice, sitting back down on her chair but remaining on the edge.

"That is very impressive, Anna, given that you've only been in Canada for a few months. Congratulations to you," says Richard.

I mutter a thank you, then turn and go into the bedroom where I throw myself on the bed. A few minutes later I hear my mother and her new friend get up, and she accompanies him to the door. There's a silence. I grab a book and crawl under the covers. A moment later I hear my mother go back into the kitchen. There's a sound, and I strain my ears to hear. She's humming to herself. I can hardly believe it. I don't think I have heard my mother hum to herself before.

After that, Richard becomes a regular guest. He stays for dinner, and one evening he stays the night. In the morning I can hear him and my mother on the other side of the thin sliding doors, laughing. I hear movement that sounds like my mother is getting out of bed, and soon a delicious smell wafts out from the kitchen. I pad out there in my bare feet. She's making blueberry pancakes.

I stand there silently. When she turns around, she jumps.

"What the hell are you doing?" she says angrily.

"I was just standing here," I said.

"That's what I mean! Don't just stand there without saying anything."

She's got some things on a tray - a plate of pancakes, some syrup, and some tea in a pot. She points to the table. "I made some pancakes for you." She picks up the tray and goes into the bedroom. I sit down and pull the plate of pancakes towards me. She's poured some syrup over the top. I eat them, chewing slowly, while I listen to them laughing in the other room.

* * *

Richard doesn't sound Canadian. That's because he's from England. He has an accent, just like me and my mother, whom he calls "dahling." Apparently he came to Canada to work at the local military college, and that's why he has an army haircut. Apart from that he doesn't look like a typical army guy - he's slender and lean, almost delicate. He's nice enough to me. One time when he comes over for dinner he brings me a pack of Wrigley's Spearmint gum. "This is for you," he says and gives me a peck on the top of my head as my mother looks on. It feels weird for him to do that. It makes it seem like we're close, and we're not close at all. When he comes over he only talks to my mother, hardly ever to me.

School finishes for the summer, and before I know it my mother and Richard are planning to move in together. They find a place soon enough in an apartment building up near the Kingston Shopping Centre, and within a month we have moved. "That's the great thing about not having any belongings," says my mother as she slides the last of our few boxes into the back of Richard's station wagon. She gets in the front, I get in the back with some clothes on hangers and an ironing board half hanging over me, and then we drive the ten minutes to our new home.

It may be great not to have belongings when you have to move boxes, but it sure isn't great when you have a new place with no furniture. All there is in this new apartment is a wooden table with four hard chairs, painted green, set up in the dining area, and two old armchairs that don't match in the living area. In my room there's a narrow bed, a plastic garden furniture table next to the bed, and an old vanity table with a mirror that belonged to Richard's ex-wife before she ditched him for another man. Apparently she threw him out of the house and that's why he had to find another place to live so quickly, my mother tells me, her voice brimming with indignation. Why he took the vanity table with him is anybody's guess.

My mother makes it sound like Richard's ex-wife was a real mean bitch, but I'm starting to think she was pretty sensible. Richard is like a different person now that we're living with him full-time. None of this gum-giving, peck-on-the-head business now. If I was her, I'd be happy to be rid of him.

Like for instance one day when my mother is out and I am lying on my bed reading a comic book I suddenly hear him calling my name. "Anna!"

I get up, a little worried by the commanding tone of his voice, and go to the front door where he is standing. He points at my shoes, which I have kicked off and left askew.

"What's this?"

I look up at him and blink. "My shoes."

"Line them up next to the door, please."

I glance at him. His lips are pressed tightly together, small lines at the corners of his mouth.

I do as I am told.

"Please do that in the future," he says coldly and turns away.

The next night, a similar scene repeats itself at the dining room table, except this time my mother is there. We're eating Spam with this yucky pickled chutney stuff that Richard likes. It's English, as is the Spam.

"Chew with your mouth closed, Anna. And hold your fork in your left hand, not your right."

I close my mouth, stop chewing and look up at my mother. She looks disoriented, glancing from Richard to me and back.

My stomach seizes up, and after one more bite I can't eat any more.

I sit there, staring down at my plate. I'm not supposed to leave the table until everyone's finished. That's another of Richard's rules.

"What's the matter, Anna?" It's Richard.

"Nothing," I say.

"Why aren't you eating your dinner?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Finish your dinner," he says calmly. It's an order.

"I can't."

"Well, you'll just have to sit here until you do," he says.

I glance at my mother. She puts her fork down.

“Anna, you can go to your room, now.”

I stand up and walk stiffly to my room. I close the door, sit down on the edge of my bed and stare straight ahead, my thoughts racing around in a white, buzzing void. I can hear them out there, talking in low voices.

I feel like I’m sinking into quicksand and I don’t know what to do.

After a while I lie down on my side and draw my knees up to my chest, careful not to make a sound. It grows dark outside. After a while I think that I should probably go to sleep, but I need to brush my teeth first. My grandmother taught me that: never go to bed without brushing your teeth. Ever. Otherwise your teeth will turn black and fall out.

I turn the doorknob gently, then creep out and into the bathroom. I pee, then wash my face and brush my teeth. I notice that my hair is all in tangles, so I get out the hairbrush and start trying to work it through the knots. If I don’t my hair will be in even worse shape in the morning.

There is a knock on the door. “Anna.” It’s my mother, speaking in an urgent voice. “Let me in.”

I open the door and she steps inside.

“Please don’t take so long in the bathroom,” she says quickly, speaking Icelandic and glancing at herself in the mirror.

“I’m just brushing my teeth and my hair. I’m not taking long,” I protest.

“Richard wants to use the bathroom.”

“Well, we live here too! Why does he get to make all the rules?”

She leans down so that her face is close to mine. “Now listen,” she says, “Richard pays for almost all the bills in this house, even though I should be paying more than him because I have you. I brought *you* into this relationship. *That’s* why he gets to make the rules.”

“But you have a job! You work!”

She snorts. “Anna, I’m a *waitress*.”

Suddenly I feel ashamed. Really ashamed.

There is a momentary silence. Then she presses me to her quickly, intensely, before taking hold of my shoulders and pushing me away so that she can look into my eyes.

“Just be a little more considerate,” she says. “Do it for me. OK?”

I nod. “OK.”

* * *

Our apartment building does not allow dogs. This is proclaimed by a large sign down in the lobby: NO DOGS. I find it really annoying. What do people have against dogs? Why do they constantly bar them from places, and even whole cities? The world would be a better place if only more dogs were allowed in it.

An answer, of sorts, comes one scorching summer day. My mother and I are heading over to the swimming pool that our building shares with a couple of others nearby. The pool was closed when we first moved in, but opened for the summer a couple of weeks ago. This is the first time we go down there.

As we push out through the big glass doors in the lobby, my mother narrowly escapes plonking her foot in a pile of dog poo that has been strategically left on the sidewalk.

“Argh!” she cries, hopping clumsily to one side. “Disgusting.”

I can’t help thinking that some dog probably dumped it there in protest at the big NO DOGS sign just beyond the door.

Poolside, my mother finds a sun lounger on which to lie and unpacks her things – towel, book, suntan lotion, some of which she asks me to slather on her back. Then she lies down on her stomach and puts her sun hat over her head.

I go over to the pool and stick my foot in the water. It is freezing. This is a surprise. I am used to the geothermal pools back in Iceland, with water that is deliciously warm. Since it is so hot out, I thought this would be lukewarm at least. But no, it is glacial. No wonder most people are lying on loungers off to the side.

I sit down on the edge of the pool and slowly lower my shins into the water, which smells strongly of chlorine. Two boys around my age are tugging at each other and laughing on the edge opposite. They could be brothers. One of them throws the other one in, who screams and grabs onto the other’s legs. I watch them and grin, moving my legs slowly through the water.

I’m starting to get bored, though. Plus, it is really hot. I think of the mall on the other side of the road, which is air-conditioned. Maybe, if my mother gives me some money, I can go over there and get an ice cream.

“Can we go soon?” I ask my mother, towering over her.

She pushes up her hat and looks up at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“Weren’t you the one whining about wanting to come down here?” she says.

She’s right. I was that one.

“The water is freezing,” I say.

“Well, we’re not leaving. Go upstairs and get a book or something, so you can read.”

I sit down on the lounge next to her and pick at a scab on my knee. “When are we going to move to Calgary?”

She lifts her sunglasses and looks at me sharply. “What?”

“You said we could move to Calgary.”

“When did I say that?”

“When we were ...” I am about to say ‘home’ but instead I say, “... in Iceland.

“Well maybe I did, but that was before I met Richard, wasn’t it.”

It is not a question.

“You said we could have horses and ...”

She lowers the sunglasses again and lies down.

“You promised.”

I might as well be talking to a blank wall. After a while I take my towel and go upstairs. From the balcony I can see her lying there, in exactly the same position as before. She hasn’t even noticed that I’m gone.

The next Saturday at breakfast my mother tells me that we’re going for a drive.

“When?”

“In a bit.”

I go to my room and settle in with some comic books. About fifteen minutes later, I hear Richard call out:

“Come along, Anna! We don’t have all day.”

We all climb into the car and drive west, past that big building on the outskirts of town that looks exactly like a Disneyland castle but which is actually a prison. Just past there we turn, and a few minutes later we are in a completely new subdivision with houses in varying stages of construction and muddy, pot-holed roads, waiting to be paved.

Richard brings the car to a stop in front of a two-storey house made of yellow bricks that sits on a corner lot.

“What are we doing here?” I say.

“Going to talk to some people,” says my mother.

Inside, a professional-looking woman wearing a pantsuit and pumps greets my mother and Richard with a handshake. This house is furnished and carpeted and everything, but there is something eerily soulless about it. My mother and Richard sit down at the kitchen table with the woman, and while they discuss whatever they're discussing I wander around the house. On this particular floor there are two bedrooms and a bathroom, plus the kitchen and a living/dining room. In the basement there is another bedroom and a bathroom, plus a large room that has a bare concrete floor and stone walls. I gather that it is some kind of recreation room, but it is clearly not finished. Everything is vaguely flimsy and second-rate, like the thin indoor-outdoor carpeting on the downstairs bedroom and bathroom, which is a nasty yellowish-brown colour that brings to mind certain bodily excretions.

They're strolling around the house and talking about it in such a way that I start to have this hazy suspicion that maybe ... maybe ...

No, we're leaving now.

On the way to the car my mother and Richard take a walk around the yard, and I follow. They speak to each other in hushed tones while gazing around with thoughtful expressions.

"So what did you think of the house, Anna?" my mother asks me that evening, in Icelandic. We're in the kitchen, putting things away after dinner. She keeps her voice down because Richard hates it when we speak Icelandic. He's in the bedroom now, so he probably can't hear us, but she tones it down anyway.

I shrug. "It was OK."

"Richard and I are thinking of buying it."

I stare at her, allowing the implications to sink in. "So we'll move out there?"

"Yes, obviously, if we buy it."

"OK," I say with perhaps a bit too much enthusiasm. I know what this means for me. But I don't say it. My mother tends to get all tense when I mention the dog.

"You can have your own bathroom," she says, giving me a nudge and a lopsided grin.

"Really?"

"Yep. The bathroom downstairs will be yours."

I smile at her and she smiles at me. And for the first time in what feels like forever I think that maybe our new life will be better than the one we had.

Chapter Six

But that glimmer of hope is short-lived.

Richard's behaviour was a little alarming before, but now that we're living out in the 'burbs it has become amplified to the point where it's impossible to pretend it's normal. It is almost like the more isolated we are, the more secure he feels in having his own little kingdom and fashioning it into whatever he wants it to be.

The first sign of this comes on the day they're having their new living room furniture delivered. They've bought a floral-print sofa with a matching armchair and an ottoman. Richard is busy orchestrating the seating arrangement. "Put the sofa beneath the window, would you? And that armchair goes against the far wall please."

"Divine!" I say dramatically when the deliverymen have left, letting myself fall backwards into the armchair and putting my feet up on the ottoman.

Richard is standing a few feet away. "That will be my chair," he says, not unkindly.

I frown, not sure I understand.

"Your chair?" says my mother. She's smiling, but there's a hint of incredulity in her eyes. She's very much hoping that it's a joke, I can tell.

"I've always wanted my own Master's Chair," Richard says amiably.

"You mean ... a chair that only you can use?" says my mother, disbelief creeping into her voice.

"Well, yes. That's the whole idea." He smiles indulgently.

I sit there and glance at them in turn. My mother's smile is frozen on her face.

"It's my furniture," he says calmly, addressing my mother's look. "I'm paying for it."

"Well I'm paying for it, too," says my mother.

He chuckles. "A little of it," he says, "but I'm paying for most of it. Surely enough to be able to claim a chair for myself." He sounds jovial, like he's having a little banter with a friend.

"Are you saying I can't sit in that chair?"

“All I’m saying is that I’ve always wanted to have a master’s chair, and yes, I want that chair to be mine.” Suddenly all trace of affability has been stripped from his voice.

Without a word I push myself up and walk stiffly out of the room. The tension has infiltrated every muscle in my body.

I still entertain some hope that my mother will put up a fight, that she will demand that he reconsider his claim to the chair, but those hopes are dashed a few days later when another delivery truck arrives with another chair, this one tall and straight-backed, covered in gold velour.

“This one’s mine,” my mother says to me in Icelandic. “You can sit in it, too.”

I look at her, silently vowing never to sit in either of those chairs.

The weeks pass and my mother and I become more intimately acquainted with Richard’s rulebook. It is scrupulous and exact, and extends to every aspect of the household. And ostensibly it makes sense. You see, Richard is convinced that the world is headed south at breakneck speed, and so we must all cut corners. But I think he just does it to save money. He is stingy to the point of delirium.

This stinginess manifests in a variety of ways. Richard keeps a fierce eye on the thermostat, for instance. He insists that it must be kept at 60°F if no one is home, but may be turned up to 65°F if someone is. But no higher than that. “If you’re cold, put on a sweater,” Richard says, and we obey.

I am cold a lot. The thermostat, which regulates the temperature in the house, is upstairs in the living room, which is the warmest part of the house. My room, where I spend almost all of my time, is downstairs in the basement, where there is hardly any insulation. The rec room, which is next to mine, still has the bare walls and floor. The indoor-outdoor carpet in my room does nothing to keep the cold from seeping up from the cold concrete underneath, especially in the dead of winter. Although I have turned my back on most things that define me as Icelandic, I cannot but be thankful for my Icelandic duvet, my Icelandic lopi wool sweater, my thick socks and the sheepskin gloves that my grandparents gave me as a present the last Christmas before we left. I am thankful because I don’t think I would sleep if I did not wear them to bed every night.

Richard is obsessed with saving energy. He says we are headed for an energy crisis and that’s why we must conserve. This is why he keeps the house so cold, and it is also why I am not allowed to take baths unless I only fill the bottom of the tub. Anything else is a waste of water in Richard’s opinion. The rules for showers are

equally stringent: I must turn off the water while I am shampooing my hair, and again when I put the conditioner in. Consequently, showering in the winter is torture. I stand there, shivering, scrubbing as quickly as I can and cursing my thick, unruly locks, before I turn the water back on and rinse, feeling the warmth wash over me with exquisite relief. The plug must be kept in the tub when I shower, so that the hot water collects in the bottom. On stepping out of the shower I must leave it there until it turns cold, so the heat from it seeps into the house and doesn't go to waste.

While all this is going on I am hyper-aware of Richard's presence outside my door. Maybe he's not there, but sometimes he is, and I never know which is which. He has this compulsion to check, to make sure I'm not cheating. And for some reason I cannot bear to think what would happen if I defied him. I feel too weak to even try.

Under the stairs, in a corner of the recreation room, there is a stash of canned foods that Richard has bought on special. If, say, canned soup, or Spam, or whatever, is reduced by a couple of cents at the supermarket, Richard goes and buys several cases, and adds them to his hoard. I sometimes get the feeling that he measures the success or failure of his day on whether or not he got a good deal at Dominion or Loblaw's, because on days when he's made a deal he tends to whistle to himself. Richard is all about saving a few pennies. The added bonus to this, he says, is that if there is a food shortage he'll have enough to last far longer than most people.

Personally I can't see why he would want to, after everyone else is dead.

I have some chores to do around the house, one of them being to wash the dishes after supper ... I mean after dinner. Richard insists on me and my mother using that word, even though my Canadian friends all say "supper." According to him, supper is something people in England eat as a snack in the evening. I want to point out to him that we are in Canada and not in England, and that in Canada people use supper for a meal they eat at dinnertime. But I don't. I never talk back to Richard, except in my own head. And anyway, at the rate he criticises my word usage, it won't be long until I have no words left to say to him.

One evening after I've washed the dishes he catches me rinsing the dishwashing liquid out of the washing sponge.

"What are you doing?" he says, looking at me like I've just pulled down my pants and peed on the floor. Or something equally appalling.

I look at him, and then down at my fist. "Rinsing the sponge," I say.

"Rinsing the dishwashing liquid *out of* the sponge," he says.

“Okay,” I say.

“Why are you doing that?”

“Because ...” I feel like I’m on a quiz show and the audience is waiting in breathless anticipation for my answer. I can feel the pressure from all sides; my nerves flare and my stomach clenches, “... because it makes the sponge cleaner?”

I look at him hopefully to see if I’ve won the prize.

“No.” *Daaaaannnn*. The buzzer goes off, loud and abrasive, to indicate the wrong answer. “You leave it *in* the sponge and use it the next time you do the dishes. Why would you waste it?”

I have no answer for that.

“Leave it in next time,” he says hastily, and then leaves the room.

A similar scene takes place about a week later. My mother is making a cup of tea. She puts the tea bag into a mug, pours some hot water over it, swishes the bag around, then takes it out and throws it into the trash.

Just then Richard comes in and sees her.

“What are you doing with that teabag?”

My mother spins around, alarmed. “Throwing it away.”

“Did you just use it for that one cup?”

My mother nods slowly. I can see that she is afraid.

“Each teabag is designed to be used for two cups. There is no need to throw it away. Put it on a saucer and leave it to dry, then use it again.”

His tone is lighter with my mother, but still commanding.

She is standing with her back against the wall, like she would prefer to push right through it. For a moment they look into each other’s eyes. He nods almost imperceptibly, then turns and leaves.

I almost expect her to open the trash can and fish out the teabag, but she doesn’t, just leaves the room without a word.

The following day they come home from grocery shopping with five cases of soap. I don’t have to ask: I know the soap was on sale. My mother goes into the bathroom, puts a case on the counter, opens it, then starts unwrapping each individual bar of soap and placing them in a stack under the sink.

“What are you doing?” I ask her in Icelandic.

“Unwrapping the soap,” she replies.

“Yes, but why?”

“So it will dry out and become harder. That way it will last longer. And it gives the bathroom a nice smell. I’ll bring some downstairs to your bathroom too in a minute.”

I don’t like the look in her eyes. The spark that used to be there, at least perfunctorily, is completely gone. It’s like she has resigned herself to everything. Like she has no will of her own any more.

“Is that what Richard says?” I say.

“Sure. And he’s right. It makes sense.”

To me, nothing makes sense. I find myself more and more confused about what I think is right and what I think is wrong. Except one thing: I hate Richard. I hate him fiercely, abhorrently. But it is an impotent hate, because I am terrified of him. I am terrified of the quiet sort of tyranny that he carries about his person, a tyranny that implies that there will be consequences levied against any sort of rebellion. Perhaps the terror is contained in the swords he has hanging on the wall, the combat knives that decorate the side table like so many trinkets, or the hunting rifles he has stashed under his bed. Or perhaps it is conveyed via the shame he manages to instil with a derisive look or smile, or over dinner when he smugly relates his conquests at the gym, or the 100 lengths of the pool that he swam at lunchtime, and then turns to me and says: “So what did *you* do for exercise today?” knowing full well that I did nothing except walk back and forth from school.

At which I want most of all to pick up my plate and hurl it at his head. But instead I sit obediently until I am allowed to leave the table, then go down the stairs to my room, close the door, and then proceed to flick the light switch on and off, on and off, on and off, for about half an hour, because Richard once said that turning the light on and off costs a lot more than just leaving it on or off, and this is the only way I can think of to hurt him, that won’t give him the opportunity to hurt me back even worse.

* * *

One day I’m at home after school washing up the breakfast dishes when the phone rings. I quickly wipe my hands on a dishtowel and pick it up. “Hello?”

The connection sounds a little crackly.

“Hello, is that Anna?”

“Yes.”

“Hello, Anna, this is Pamela, Richard’s sister in England.”

Pamela. Richard’s only sister, who is single and has two children and lives on something called “a council estate” and is very poor. I’ve seen pictures of her and her kids; she looks like Richard, tall and lanky, except she has sunken eyes and dark circles beneath them.

“Oh, hello.”

“Is Richard there?”

“No. He’s at work.”

“Is your mother there?”

“No, she’s at work too. Can I give them a message?”

“Yes, please. Could you tell Richard please that our father has died?”

I mumble some incoherent condolences, and hang up the phone.

I tell my mother to tell Richard that his father has died. I’m genuinely sorry for him and tell him so when he comes home from work.

“Thank you, Anna,” he says, and for once something genuine passes between us.

Three days later, Richard is on a plane to England. He calls my mother the day after he arrives to tell her that he’s going to have to postpone his return because of what he found in his father’s house. My mother relates the story. Evidently Richard’s father, who lived in Newcastle, had gone a little off the rails after the death of his wife, Richard’s mother, several years earlier. He started to frequent flea markets and to hoard things. Gradually, without anybody knowing, as Richard’s sister lived in London on that council estate with her two children and could never afford to visit, Richard’s father’s house became crammed with stuff. When Richard arrived, he could barely get through the front door. Stuff spilled out to greet him. Stacks of magazines piled on top of boxes piled on top of tables and chairs, flea market bric-a-brac on every available flat surface, old, broken-down appliances randomly scattered throughout the lower floor. His father’s bed was piled high with books and newspapers, rendering its intended use impossible, so a small army cot had been set up next to it. Underneath the bed there were thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of coins all sorted into individual glass jars. The kitchen was filled to the rafters with boxes containing empty bottles and jars. A large fridge that had been put in the dining room was filled to the brim with cheese remnants, of all things. No one had suspected this, for Richard’s father was always impeccably dressed and reminded people vaguely of Prince Philip.

Fortunately, Richard's father collapsed at the local flea market. Had he died at home he probably would have slowly disintegrated among the mountain of useless belongings he had accumulated.

I listen aghast to my mother's account of this bizarre neurosis and draw silent parallels in my mind.

Richard returns almost three weeks later. His suitcase contains clothes bought for my mother at Marks & Spencers: two polyester dresses, the same but different colours, two pairs of knee-high leather boots, and underwear, which he calls "knickers." They both disappear into their bedroom so my mother can try these on. She comes out a few minutes later wearing one of the dresses – it is long, almost to the ankle, and has a slit up the side. The fabric is a sort of psychedelic circle pattern, white and purple, with small buttons in the bodice. It is the most hideous excuse for a dress I have ever seen.

"It fits perfectly," says my mother as she twirls around.

For me, Richard has bought an olive green plastic nailbrush and a matching spiky thing to put soap on so that it won't go all soggy and will last longer.

* * *

I have a new best friend. She's the first real best friend I've had here in Canada. Or maybe ever. Leanne - that's her name - understands this problem. She's moved around a lot, too. Her dad is in the army and she's just moved here from Belgium, where he was stationed. But even though her dad is in the army, and Richard is in the army, they are nothing like each other. Also, our houses couldn't be any more different. Leanne's rec room, for instance, has its own TV and a ping-pong table – not to mention plaster on the walls and a carpet on the floor. In fact there is wall-to-wall carpeting everywhere in Leanne's house, except in the kitchen. Leanne's parents don't hoard food, they just buy it when they need it and don't stick to the cheapest brands only. Also, once when I went to her house after school I snuck at glance at their thermostat. It was at 75°F, even though nobody was home. And if Leanne gets cold she turns the thermostat up without bothering to ask anybody.

I am pretty sure this is how sane people do things.

Leanne and I met on the first day of school. She sat next to me and looked at me curiously when I corrected the teacher during roll call.

“Anna Bern ... hards ... dottir,” stuttered the teacher, looking up and casting around somewhat helplessly.

“It’s Bernhard.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s Anna Bernhard.”

“It says here ...”

“I know. I’ve shortened it.”

He looked at me puzzled for a moment, then continued with the names. I glanced at Leanne, who smiled. And just like that, I shed my Icelandic name and became Canadian.

That first day of school we walked home together, and now we walk home every day. We talk non-stop during those walks, about everything and nothing in particular. At first, Leanne would also phone me in the evenings after supp ... after *dinner*, mostly to gossip. That was great. But then Richard caught on and I had to tell her to stop calling. Because of the party line.

“What’s a party line?” asks Leanne, who, it turns out, was a tad surprised that the last two times she called I had hung up after five minutes. It was because after two minutes, Richard had started hovering. After five, he ordered my mother to tell me to get off the phone.

I am mortified and can hardly bring myself to talk about it.

“It’s like, we share our phone line with another family.”

She comes to a dead stop. “Get outta town!”

“I know, right? It’s Richard. He’s so fucking cheap.”

“What do you mean you *share* it?”

“I mean we have the same phone line as some other family. Like, sometimes I go to make a call and somebody else is on the line. Talking. The other family that shares the party line.”

“So you can listen to what they say?”

“Yeah. And they can listen to what I say.”

“Do they ever say anything, you know, juicy?”

“Nah. Not that I know of. I don’t know - I don’t like to listen.”

“So ...” I can tell Leanne is struggling with this, “... so, when the phone rings, does it ring at their house, too?”

“No, it only rings at our house.”

“But if they pick up the phone while you’re talking they can hear you.”

“Right.”

“That’s the most fucked-up thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I know. And if I’m on the phone longer than two minutes or something, Richard has a conniption and tells me to get off the phone just in case the party line people want to use it.”

We walk on a few steps.

“So how much money does he save with this?”

“About half off the normal price, I guess.”

“Jeez. Is he really poor?”

“I don’t think so. I think he’s just cheap for the sake of it.”

We’re in front of my place. “Wanna come in?” I say.

“Sure,” says Leanne. “Got anything to eat?”

I hesitate. At Leanne’s place there is always something to eat after school. A Betty Crocker cake, or chips, or Hostess cupcakes or maybe Leanne’s mother has made her a grilled cheese sandwich. She doesn’t have a job and is usually home.

“I can make mud pies,” I say.

“Okay,” she says.

Mud pies are this concoction I’ve come up with. I melt some butter in a saucepan, add sugar and cocoa and oatmeal, then drop them on a baking sheet and let them stiffen. This is a particularly good snack because it contains ingredients that normally nobody misses. Richard doesn’t want me eating his food between meals, so I have to eat on the sly and then clean up afterwards so that nobody will know. Also, with mud pies there is no baking required so I don’t have to heat the oven, which might give me away. My mud pies are actually pretty tasty and, well, I’m kind of proud of myself for having invented them.

When we’ve eaten our fill, we get onto the subject of Richard. We’re high on a sugar buzz and it’s hard not to burst into fits of laughter.

“I dare you to sit in his chair,” Leanne says.

“No,” I say, “eww.”

“You scared? I won’t tell.”

“No! I just don’t want anything to do with him.”

“Hey, let’s see those dresses he bought your mother.”

“Oh, God, yeah.”

We go into my mother and Richard's bedroom. I open my mother's side of the closet and rifle through, looking for the dresses. But Leanne is more interested in Richard's side.

"What the hell is this?"

She is looking at row upon row of pants hung neatly upside down on hangers. Pants spanning years. Leanne pulls out a particularly unsightly pair made of polyester, with a paisley pattern in beige-tinted rose on a white background. "Are these for real?"

"You think that's bad? Check these out!" I pull out another pair, also polyester, way too short for Richard, lime green in colour.

"You can't be serious!"

"And then there's the belt collection," I say, opening another closet door with a flourish to reveal dozens of belts hanging in neat order, sorted by colour.

Leanne bursts into a fit of giggles. She takes Richard's pants off the hanger and starts putting them on over her own. I'm laughing so hard that I'm bent over double. She's laughing and I'm laughing, so loud that we barely hear the car pull up outside.

I glance out the window and see my mother. She's got Richard's car and she's home early.

"Shit! Get those off, my mother's home!"

Leanne pulls the pants off in a jiffy, jumping on one leg, almost toppling over. I'm stifling laughter as I pull them off her and snap them back on the hanger, quick as a flash.

Turning back to the window, I see my mother by the hatch of the car, doing something. A second later there is a movement, and a dog jumps out.

I can hardly believe my eyes.

It's a dog. It's really a dog. Not a puppy, but not fully grown, either.

It's a German shepherd. Not the breed that I wanted most, but that's OK.

And here I thought this day would *never* come!

I tear down the hallway and fling open the front door.

"Hey!" I say breathlessly, my face one big grin.

My mother's got a mysterious smile on her face. She's pulling the dog towards the garage.

"What are you doing?" I say.

"I'm putting him in here," she says. "He's supposed to be a surprise."

I feel the blood drain from my face. I feel it drain out of me, everywhere. If I look down now, I will probably see a pool of red blood, expanding all around me.

“It’s Richard’s birthday today. Don’t you remember?”

“And this is ...”

“His present,” she says with a tinkling laugh that sounds strangely macabre.

I stand motionless and watch her open the garage door. Leanne has come up behind me. I turn and look into her face, searching her face. I don’t know what I’m searching for. Maybe some sanity, maybe proof that people can actually be what they claim to be. Because right now, I doubt that. I doubt that, and everything else.

“What’s going on?” Leanne asks under her breath.

I turn and grab my jacket from the hall closet. “Let’s go.”

Leanne doesn’t ask, just follows me. I keep walking for about four blocks, until we reach the woods. I follow a path until I see a tree stump, on which I plonk myself down. Leanne sits next to me.

“What happened?”

I tell her the whole story. How my mother promised that if I came to Canada with her I could have a dog. How it was never possible – there was always some excuse. And now she’s gone and bought Richard a dog for his birthday.

We sit in silence for a few minutes.

“What are you going to do?” says Leanne finally.

I shrug. Stare at the ground.

“Do you want me to ask if you can stay for dinner?”

I shake my head. “No. Thanks.”

I can’t tell her that I don’t want to stay for dinner at her house because I want so much more. I want to *live* in her house. I want a whole new family. A whole new life.

This simple life. This promised land.

They’re in the kitchen when I come back. I go straight down to my room and lock the door.

A few minutes later I hear my mother come down the stairs. She tries the door, then knocks.

“What?” I say. I’m lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“I want to talk to you.”

I get up and unlock the door without opening it. Lie down on the bed again. She comes in and closes the door.

“Richard’s always wanted a dog,” she says, “and it’s his birthday. His father just passed away and I wanted to give him something special.”

“What about me? I’ve always wanted a dog, too.” My voice feels like it might break.

“Anna, you’re fifteen and soon I know – I *know* – that you won’t be wanting to look after a dog.”

“How do you know that?” I say, my voice dangerously shrill. Tears threaten to force their way from under my eyelids but I won’t let them. They’ll stay where they are.

“I just know.”

“You don’t know anything!”

She speaks quickly now, the words hissing from her mouth. “I know that you were looking after that dog across from Klara and Jim’s, and then suddenly you just stopped. You got bored with it. Don’t think I didn’t notice.” She stands up abruptly. “You’d soon get bored with looking after a dog here, too, and then it would end up being *my* responsibility!”

I lie down on my bed and slowly my legs come up until I am curled into a little ball. I cover my face with my arm. Inside me there is one big knot. I don’t even want to try to explain.

“Come on,” she says after a moment, her voice artificially chirpy, and gives me two short claps on my thigh. “Come upstairs and have dinner. I’ve made beef stroganoff.”

“I’m not hungry.”

She sits there for a minute longer. Then she says, “Suit yourself,” and leaves.

Richard names his dog Chappy. He keeps him in the garage. He doesn’t want him in the house because he doesn’t want anyone to get too cosy with him. Richard doesn’t believe in spoiling dogs.

One afternoon after school, a few days after my mother brings Chappy home, I open the door to the garage to have a look at him. Chappy is tied up in the farthest end of the garage with a blanket to lie on and some food and water. He stares at me. I stare at him. He does not wag his tail.

I take a step towards him. He growls.

“It’s OK, boy,” I say.

He growls again.

I go back inside.

Richard takes Chappy for walks after work, on a short leash. He's teaching him to heel. Chappy pulls on the leash, and Richard gets impatient. I watch from the window for a moment, and then I go downstairs.

Chappy barks at people. He lunges, too. I overhear Richard telling my mother this in a somewhat accusatory tone, like it's her fault that Chappy behaves this way.

Finally, about three months after the start of his miserable life in the garage, Chappy is taken to the vet and attacks the vet's assistant. Richard makes an impromptu decision to have him put down. After all, why risk a lawsuit?

I know I'm supposed to feel bad for Chappy, but I don't. Instead I feel like my faith in divine justice has been restored.

Chapter Seven

My mother and I hardly ever talk any more, save for the bare essentials. I've grown very independent, very fast. I stopped eating dinner with her and Richard because I dislike having to sit there until everyone is finished, plus I want to do all I can to dodge Richard's shame-inducing questions. It's not like they put up much of a protest when I made the suggestion, which tells me they don't really like having me there, anyway. I normally make myself something to eat around six, then head out. Either I go to Leanne's, or I go to Leanne's and we head out somewhere, like down to the little mini-mall where kids hang out and smoke cigarettes. Sometimes someone brings a joint and passes it around. I never say no. Why would I? I like being high - it beats reality by a long shot.

Now it's Wednesday and I'm sitting at the kitchen table eating a grilled cheese sandwich and reading the comics in the newspaper when my mother comes in. She shuffles around a bit, then sits down. I look up.

"How would you feel about living out in the country?"

I blink.

"On a farm."

I stare at her.

"We've made an offer on a farm near Sharbot Lake and our offer has just been accepted."

I put my sandwich down.

"We're going to move out there."

Long pause.

"Well thanks for telling me," I say.

She stands up abruptly. "Don't be like that."

"Like what?"

"So sarcastic."

"Well you've clearly got it all planned and didn't even think to consult me. What do you expect me to say?"

"We think this is the best thing for all of us."

I snort. “Yeah? Really? The best thing for me? How do you figure that?”

“Well, you wanted a dog and horse, right?”

It takes me a minute. Almost a full minute for her words to sink in. I stand up, walk over to the trash bin, and let the rest of my sandwich slide off the plate and into it. Then I leave the room without another word.

I soon learn that Richard’s father left a lot more money than anyone expected. Apparently he didn’t just hoard cheese remnants, he hoarded money, too. I overhear my mother telling Klara this, in so many words. It turns out that Klara knew all this before, though. It seems that everyone was in on my mother and Richard’s plans, except me.

“So Richard’s rich now?” I say, walking into the kitchen where they’re sitting.

My mother is startled. Klara glances from her to me and back, waiting to see what transpires.

“Does that mean you can stop hanging the teabags out to dry?”

“When did you become such a cynic, Anna?” my mother says.

“Oh, gee, I don’t know. Maybe when you started making up my mind for me?”

There is a silence now, fraught with tension. I can see that my mother is struggling with her anger.

“Your mom and I were just discussing your options, Anna,” says Klara calmly.

“Ah. Discussing them without having me around. That would be a first.”

“We had planned to consult you,” Klara says, unperturbed. “But now that you’re here, we can tell you what we were thinking. Basically you could come and live with me and Jim, or we could find you a room to rent somewhere and you could come over for dinner a couple of times a week. That way you could be on your own. Your mom says you’ve become very self-sufficient lately,” she says, casting a glance at my mother. “On the other hand, you wouldn’t have a lot of money. You might have to work to make ends meet.”

“I’d cover your rent for you, but not much else,” says my mother.

I want to say something about Richard’s unexpected lottery win and ask why he couldn’t pay a little something to be rid of me, but I bite my tongue. Instead I turn around and pretend to busy myself at the sink.

“You can think about it,” says Klara. “You don’t have to let us know now.”

* * *

My mother and Richard move in the spring. We've decided that I'll live in the house until it is sold, since there is no point paying rent for a room when there's a perfectly good house there for me to take care of.

They move bit by bit. First they stay weekends at the farm, and then gradually longer and longer. I get used to being alone, and I don't mind it. Although, to be perfectly, excruciatingly honest, a part of me really didn't want them to leave. Or, should I say, didn't want my mother to leave. It's too soon, and I'm only sixteen. We came here to Canada together, as a team, and now she's gone off to live her life with Richard. Amazing that it was only six years ago. It feels like a lifetime.

But I don't wallow. This is a new era. The era of living alone. No longer do we, the neighbourhood teens, need to go down to the store to get high. Now we can do it right in my kitchen. And we do. Someone introduces us to a new method for smoking hash, called hot-knifing. You break the hash into small chunks, then heat two kitchen knives on the burner on the stove until they're red hot. Then you put the chunk of hash between them so that a rush of smoke comes out, which you suck in through an empty paper towel roll. It's a blast.

I have a new job now, working as a cashier in the Dominion Store supermarket in the Frontenac Mall. It's good money. I get a ride with a friend from school - Andrew Delaney, who works there, too. He likes to get high, and so after our shift we sometimes drive out back and smoke a joint before heading home. Andrew is cool, and he thinks I'm funny. His girlfriend doesn't think it's funny, though, that the two of us are smoking joints after work, so after a while we stop.

My shifts at work usually start at five, and finish at ten. When I come home, I often find that my mother and Richard have been there and have taken something from the house. The master's chair is long gone, of course - it went with the master. The gold velour throne went with the mistress. The sofa stayed with me, until one evening when I get back from work and find it is gone. A few days later I find that some pictures are missing. Then it's the dining room table and chairs. The stereo. Kitchen utensils.

Gradually, everything is gone from the house except my bedroom furniture and the kitchen table and chairs. The place is so empty that it almost echoes. Sometimes at night I think I can hear someone up there, and I am filled with a dark, unspeakable dread.

Then, just when I think I won't be able to stand it much longer, an offer comes through on the house.

Klara is the one who tells me, as my mother and Richard are very busy out at the farm.

“You’ll have to move out by the end of the month,” Klara says.

I lean back against the kitchen counter and cross my arms.

“It’s short notice,” she says, as though in acquiescence to a statement I didn’t make.

I shrug. “I don’t have a lot of stuff,” I say, before I realise that this has nothing to do with anything.

Klara pulls a rolled-up newspaper from her bag. “There’s a place down on King Street that has rooms for rent, with a shared kitchen and bathroom. There are mostly students living there, including some of Jim’s, but obviously they’re away for the summer now. They have a couple of rooms available.”

“Okay,” I say.

“Do you want me to check it out for you?”

My first impulse is to say yes, but I stop myself. I’ve pretty much had enough of people checking things out for me.

“No, that’s OK,” I say. “I’ll go down there myself.”

She drops the newspaper on the table. “It’s in the classifieds.”

She turns to leave, then stops. “There’s another thing. Jim and I have decided to get a new car, and we were thinking that you could have our old Toyota. It’s not the prettiest car on the road, but the engine is in good shape.”

She’s brisk and businesslike, but I can feel warmth seeping through. Warmth, and maybe something like empathy. A lump forms in my throat. I force it down. “Really? Are you sure?”

She comes over and gives me a squeeze - a quick one. “I’m sure. As soon as you get your licence, you can have it.”

When she’s gone, I sit down with the paper she brought with her. There are a few places offering rooms for rent. I circle three, then get on the phone and make some calls.

I check out all three the following day. The place on King Street has about nine people living there and a very small kitchen. Also, it is very university-oriented, with Queen’s U banners all over the walls. I’m still in high school. This just feels wrong.

The second place is a dive. The rank smell of stale smoke and sweat greets me as I walk in the door. The landlord is short with a large beer belly, and wears his shirt

open with a wife beater underneath. There is a large grease stain near his belly button. I glance into the room that's being offered and immediately recoil. Nope. This is not the place.

The third place is located on a small side street north of Princess Street. It is a large brick house that at one time must have been stately, but which has suffered somewhat in the maintenance department. The landlady, Mrs. Woo, leads me up a wooden staircase to the second floor and opens a door that is directly ahead on the landing. The room is a good size, big enough to fit a bed and a table and chairs, and has a mock fireplace at one end, which gives it a somewhat genteel look. The ceilings are high with moulding around the edges. There is a brown carpet, which has a large stain near the door, as though someone spilled a whole jug of coffee. On the upside, it looks like it has been freshly painted.

“How much?”

“One fifty a month.”

“Is there a chance of having that carpet cleaned?”

Mrs. Woo gives a little shake of the head, apparently more to indicate her disinterestedness in my request than an actual denial.

“I'll take it immediately if I can have that stain cleaned from the carpet.”

I don't know where this assertiveness is coming from, but I like it.

“OK. We have carpet cleaned tomorrow,” she says in heavily accented English.

Within a few days I have moved in. As I had expected it didn't take much effort. Just a few boxes that needed to be moved, my bed, and the kitchen table and chairs that my mother and Richard have donated to the cause. I passed on the plastic garden table, though, despite Richard's kind offer to let me keep it, opting instead for a couple of plastic milk crates stacked one on top of the other, on which I place my books, my alarm clock, and a lamp.

There are three other people living in the house. One is a fine arts student from Italy, who speaks very little English. The other is a somewhat hyperactive salesman named Rob who has just left his wife and children and who talks incessantly when I happen to meet him down in the kitchen. The third guy, Jeremy, has the room next to mine. I hardly ever see him, but I can frequently hear him strumming his guitar through the wall. I'm guessing he's some kind of musician, because he tends to be home during the day and out in the evenings. And one time I met him going down the stairs carrying a guitar case.

Klara takes me out driving a lot that summer and at the beginning of August, less than a week after my seventeenth birthday, I pass my driving test, which I have been saving up to take for months.

“Congratulations!” says Klara smiling as she hands me the keys to her old Toyota. It is a dark gold colour, which actually veers more towards a dull shade of brown, and has some rust spots near the rear fender. Otherwise it has been immaculately maintained. “You can drive me home now, and take the car.”

Oh wow. Freedom. Over the next week or so I drive and drive and drive. Out past the prison and all the way to Belleville, then in the other direction, nearly to Ottawa. On the weekend I pick up Leanne and we head out to the beach at Picton where we spend the day sprawled in the sun on the hot baked sand. Leanne is jealous of me. Jealous of the fact that I have my own place and my own car. And I must say, it feels good. Though, deep down, I, too, am jealous. I’m jealous of Leanne, her family, her house, the rational order of her life.

Because the fact is that, even though I am glad not to have to live with Richard’s craziness and my mother’s duplicity any more, there is something inside me, just below the surface, that I have a dread of touching. It’s fear. Fear that the fragile ground on which I am standing will begin to tremble, and then shake, and then heave. That it will crack open and I will fall, helplessly, into a deep and dark crevice from which there is no escape. And no one will hear me shouting, because no one is there.

* * *

I wake to muffled sounds from the next room. Loud voices. A door being opened. Shouting in the hallway. I spring from my bed, alarmed. Someone is ranting; a woman. She’s drunk. Slurring her words. I can hear her bumping into the railing on the way down the stairs. There’s another voice too - a man’s. It’s Jeremy. He seems more in control than the woman does. Now the front door slams shut.

I don’t really know Jeremy. I have only met him twice down in the kitchen. He’s around my age, stocky and muscular and a little shy. He’s got a way of moving that intrigues me – a little timid, like he doesn’t know his own strength. He’s got black hair, dark eyes and olive skin, and he smiles a lot – out of awkwardness, I think. And despite only meeting him twice I feel like we’re similar in some way. I can’t explain.

I open the door now and peer out into the hallway. Jeremy is coming up the stairs with a grim expression on his face.

“Is everything OK?” I ask, keeping my voice down, conscious of the other tenants. As though that’s going to help, given the loudness of the scene that just transpired.

He stops dead in his tracks.

“Oh.” He’s startled, but quickly regains his composure. “Sorry about that. I hope I didn’t wake you up.”

“It’s OK.”

We stand there awkwardly for a moment, like neither of us knows what to say. There is something in the air, a bonding that is happening, maybe because of what I’ve just witnessed and maybe because of that strange sense of kinship that we have.

“Good, I ...”

“It was just a ...”

I shift my weight. “Well good that you’re OK.”

“I’m fine. Just an incident to deal with.”

We hesitate a moment. Then I say, “Well, then, good night.”

“Good night Anna.”

Good night, Anna. He said my name. Almost like he knows me.

* * *

That weekend I drive out to the farm for the first time on my own. I’ve been out there a couple of times before, once with Klara and Jim, and once with my mother when she had some business in town and took me back home with her. That time I stayed the weekend and drove back to town on Monday with Richard, who still commutes to work every day. That drive was fraught with tension, we had exhausted our polite conversation within the first ten minutes, which left around fifty minutes with hardly anything to say. I have, therefore, not been in a great hurry to repeat it.

The farmhouse is nothing to write home about. It is made of wood and the white paint on the outside is peeling. Also, the roof needs work - there are patches of shingles missing here and there. Inside there are dated fixtures in the kitchen and bathroom, old carpeting on the floors, and the entire place smells vaguely of manure. A short distance from the house there is a barn, and also a shed. By the looks of it neither have ever seen

a coat of paint, and so are that dull gray colour that weathered wood gets over time. The place is surrounded by trees, and there is a very pretty pond just beyond in one of the clearings, or so I am told. I haven't been to investigate.

My mother steps out to greet me. She is wearing tired, discoloured overalls that are way too big for her. She wears no makeup and her hair is very short. Evidently she feels no need to keep up appearances out here. An orange tabby runs out behind her with its tail sticking straight up in the air. This is Bubs, who apparently came with the farm.

Inside my mother makes tea and talks. Talks and talks. In fact I have never heard her talk so much in my life. She's not talking *to* me, but *at* me, and seems unfocused and out of touch. Without even asking how I am doing or what I have been up to, she launches into a long tirade about a pig she's got now, and which is growing so fast. It's a sow, and my mother has given her the unimaginative moniker Miss Piggy.

"When we first got her she was just small, this big (with her hands she indicates something about the size of a Yorkshire terrier), and she was like a puppy, she followed me *everywhere*, and whenever I was out of sight she would let out this high-pitched wail, really a *wail*, until she saw me again, and then she'd come running as fast as she could. She was so adorable, you should have seen her. And that little squiggly tail of hers ... I would have kept her in the house if I could have but of course that wouldn't have been right. And now she's so big that she probably weighs as much as I do, even though she's only a teenager, just a little younger than you, in pig years of course. She still follows me around, and she even answers me, you know, like if she's in her pen she'll make a noise, like she's talking to me, and I'll answer, and she'll respond. Back and forth, like that. It's crazy! I don't know whoever came up with the idea that pigs were stupid. Or dirty. They're not dirty in the least. I mean, of course they're dirty if their pens are kept dirty, but that's the fault of the humans and not the pigs. It's like people are always trying to put the blame for something on someone else."

I nod, and make sympathetic sounds, all the while watching my mother carefully. She seems manic.

"Finish your tea and we'll go out into the barn and I'll show you."

I finish my tea, and trudge behind my mother out to the barn wearing a pair of rubber boots that are too big for me.

“There she is!” says my mother as soon as we enter the barn. My eyes take a moment to adjust to the dark, and then I see the pen at the far end of the barn with Miss Piggy’s pale pink snout sticking over the top. “Hello, Miss Piggy!”

There is a snort from the pen.

“You see! She talks to me. She recognises her name.”

I nod and acknowledge that this is, indeed, marvellous.

“That’s right. You do talk to me, don’t you? You’re a such smart creature,” she coos, rubbing Miss Piggy’s head. “Look, Anna. Look at her eyes. See how intelligent they are?” I nod. I see.

My mother continues rubbing Miss Piggy’s head and chattering to her. I turn and go out into the barnyard. The sun is setting behind the trees in the west. It is idyllic out here, and yet I have a feeling that is profoundly disturbing. It has something to do with my mother’s behaviour, and something about this place. She says this is the simple life she wanted ... but how simple is it, really? Is life ever really simple? Don’t we always just take the past with us, wherever we go?

I turn back inside. Dusk is falling rapidly and I can barely see my mother in the shadow by Miss Piggy’s pen. There is the sound of a car on the road, and my mother straightens up, brushing something from the front of her overalls. All of a sudden her movements seem laboured and sluggish.

“That will be Richard,” she says. And sure enough, his car pulls into the driveway in front of the house.

When I get back to Kingston that night the house is quiet and dark, save for a bit of light shining up on the second floor landing. As I ascend the stairs, I see that the light is coming from Jeremy’s room. His door is slightly ajar.

I fumble with my keys and let myself into my room. Throw off my coat and kick off my shoes, and then slip out again to go to the bathroom.

I’m surprised to see Jeremy’s door open. It’s unusual - he’s usually not there in the evenings, and when he is, he usually has music playing. I find this a little disconcerting, especially given the commotion the other night. On the way back from the bathroom, I hesitate at his door and peer into the room. He’s there, sitting at a table, poring over a million little pieces of something that looks like it was once an electronic gadget. He looks up and I retreat quickly, embarrassed to be caught spying like that.

“Hey,” he calls out, and a second later he’s out in the hallway. It’s almost uncanny; he must have sprinted.

“Sorry,” I say, “I was just wondering if everything was OK. I’m used to your music being on.”

“Yeah,” he says, “I thought it might help my concentration if I give it a bit of a rest.”

“Oh. Are you dissecting a radio or something?”

“Camera,” he says.

“Oh.”

He’s grinning like mad. Like he’s nervous, or something.

“OK, well ...” I say, about to go into to my room.

“Hey, do you want a beer or something?”

I’m a little startled. He’s looking at me intently, and somewhere in his eyes I catch a flash of deep sincerity. It rubs me the wrong way. I don’t want his sincerity. I don’t want him attaching to me emotionally.

“Um, yeah. OK. Why not.”

Why did I say that?

“Great!” he says with just a tad too much enthusiasm. “That’s great. I’ll just ... I’ll be right back.”

He bounds down the stairs to the kitchen. I go into my room and give myself a quick once-over in the mirror. I’ll just drink the beer, I tell myself, then get out of there fast.

I hear him come back and go into his room. A moment later the caps are being lifted off two beer bottles with a fizzy pop.

His room is like an authentic Chinese restaurant, overly bright. Against one wall there is a futon, and next to it a plastic milk crate. Against another wall, more milk crates, acting as a bookshelf. He has a bunch of books, which for some reason I find surprising. There is also a coat rack on which some clothes are hanging. Then there’s the table at which he has been sitting, two bare wooden chairs, and against the far wall a worn green sofa that looks like it was hauled out of a dumpster.

He hands me a beer, and I sit down gingerly on the sofa. He sits on one of the chairs, and puts one foot up on the other.

“So what did you do today?” he says casually, as though we talk all the time.

“I was out at my mother’s place,” I say.

I see the flicker of a shadow in his eyes, or am I imagining it?

“Oh, nice,” he says and takes a swig of his beer. “Where does your mother live?”

“On a farm about an hour north of here. They moved out there last year.”

“Who’s they?”

“She and her boyfriend.” I fiddle with the label on the bottle. “So have you been living here for a long time?”

“A couple of years.”

“A couple of years, really? How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.” He pauses. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“So why are you living here?”

“Because they moved out to the country and I didn’t want to go. You?”

“My mother moved to France with her boyfriend.” He pauses. “My foster mother, that is. I was the same age as you when they left.”

I observe him. There’s something profoundly sad about him; I see that now. He puts his beer down and leans forward, his elbows on his knees, and looks at me. His gaze is so candid that I flinch and look away.

“Why didn’t you want to go to the country?” he asks.

“I just didn’t.”

“You don’t get along?”

I meet his eyes. “No. We don’t really get along.”

He nods. “Hm.”

“So what was all that commotion about the other night?”

I figure if he can ask direct questions, I can too.

He sits up and runs his fingers through his hair. “My mother came to visit. My birth mother.”

“Was she drunk?”

He gives a short, sharp laugh. “Yeah. She was drunk. She’s Native Indian. It’s what they do.”

“So you’re Native Indian?”

“Yeah. At least I’m half Native Indian. I don’t know who my father is. I was taken from my mother when I was five and put in foster care. She didn’t know, either.”

“But you stayed in touch with her.”

“I always knew who she was. It’s only recently, though, that she’s started bugging me. Coming around and asking for money. And when I don’t give her money she asks for something to drink. Anything will do. Rubbing alcohol. Aftershave.”

“Oh. That’s bad. I’m sorry,” I say.

“Where’s your dad?” he asks.

I’m startled by his question. “What do you mean?” I ask, my voice more defensive than I intend it to be.

“You said your mother went to live with her boyfriend, and you have to live here. So why don’t you live with your dad?”

I want to say something cynical, something sarcastic, but for once nothing comes to mind. I redouble my attack on the beer bottle label.

“Well, I had a choice to live with my aunt,” I say, “but I chose to live here.”

“So where’s your dad?”

I don’t say anything for a while. So long that he’s about to say something else but stops when I speak.

“He lives in Iceland.”

“Iceland?”

“Yeah. The last I knew.”

“Is that where you’re from?”

“Yeah.”

“When did you move here?”

“When I was almost eleven.”

“You sound Canadian.”

“I am Canadian.”

“Are you a citizen?”

I hesitate. “No. I’m not a citizen.”

“So you’re not Canadian, then.” He pauses. “Don’t you want to be Icelandic? Are you ashamed of it?”

I’m about to say “no” because it is an automatic response, something I would say because it is the right thing. But that’s not the truth. And sitting here with him, in this room with the almost-fluorescent lighting, I feel incapable of being untruthful.

“I’m not ashamed of it,” I say. “But I don’t want to think about it. This is my life now.”

I feel desperate, like I want to get up and run. Run far away.

“I was ashamed of being Native Indian. I hated it. I was working on killing myself with booze and drugs. I wanted that part of me to die. But then I realised that I couldn’t escape myself or the past. Now I’m working on getting my name back.”

“Your name?”

“My native name.”

“Oh, so Jeremy isn’t your native name?”

He grins, and I realize the question was pretty silly. “No. Jeremy was the name my British-born foster mother gave me. There aren’t many native Indians named Jeremy.”

“So what’s your native name?”

“Mingan.”

“Mingan? Oh. That’s ... nice. What does it mean?”

“Gray wolf.”

“So that’s what you’re going to call yourself when your name change goes through?”

“Yep.”

I finish my beer and stand up. “I should go. I have school in the morning.”

He jumps to his feet, and suddenly the shy Jeremy is back. “Oh. OK. You sure you don’t want another beer?”

“No thanks, really,” I say. “I have to go. But thank you.”

I go into my room and shut the door, then turn the lock. I lean my back against it and let myself slide down to the floor.

I want to cry, but I can’t. The land of tears is thousands of miles away, just like the land of my birth.

* * *

Klara and I talked about me having dinner at her place a couple of times a week, but that hasn’t panned out. The reason is that I don’t go. I’m grateful for everything that Klara and Jim have done for me, especially giving me their car, but I feel much better being by myself and not having to talk to anyone. I guess I’ve become an introvert, or maybe I’ve always been one. I like being at home by myself, reading, or writing stuff. Sometimes I write poetry, sometimes stories, but mostly just journal entries about my day. I don’t know why I do it. Some kind of compulsion, I guess. Some people always

feel they have to be talking to someone else. I talk to my journal. It's easier than talking to people, who either judge you, expect things from you, or leave you.

Several weeks pass without me seeing Jeremy again, which is kind of remarkable, given that we live practically in adjacent rooms. I think a lot about him, though, and that brief conversation we had. How different we are: he wants his name back, whereas I want mine gone. He wants to stand out, I want to blend in. And yet, we have this kinship. I feel it, very strongly. Probably it is because we have both been discarded. Left to fend for ourselves at a time when most people are still at home with their parents, having their meals cooked, their laundry done for them. It's strange having to interact with those kids now - the kids I still go to school with. A wide chasm has opened up between me and them, like I have no way of relating to their world any more. They live in an innocuous, sheltered place, far from the place I now reside. Even Leanne and I have grown apart. Her concerns seem so petty now, her responsibilities so lightweight. I hardly know what to say to her any more.

I still hear Jeremy's music from the other room occasionally, but not as often as before. Sometimes I hear voices in there, especially at night - sometimes a woman's voice, and I wonder if he has a girlfriend. I find the thought vaguely upsetting, even though I don't want anything from him. Still, sometimes when I am lying in bed, I think of him on the other side of the wall and I wonder what it would be like to be able to reach out and touch him. Touch another warm, human body. And yet, for all that he might as well be living on another planet, because I know there is no way I could ever let him near me.

One evening, about eight weeks after we had that conversation, I leave my room for the bathroom and literally crash into him.

He must have come out of his room super silently because by now I've developed a sixth sense about him being there, and never enter the hall when I think I may run into him. This time, however, my sense failed me.

Making the moment still more awkward is the fact that I am wearing only a thin robe and panties. He, on the other hand, is fully dressed in a thick coat, with a hat, scarf and mittens.

"Oh," I say, exceedingly flustered.

"Sorry," he says, clearly disconcerted.

We stand there for a couple of seconds, like we both want to say something but don't know what. Then I give an embarrassed laugh, and he mumbles something like

“I’ll get out of your way” and then I go to the bathroom and he heads down the stairs and I can’t think of anything else for the rest of the evening than the fact that I ran into him and our bodies actually touched.

* * *

“Anna.”

I hear his voice before I see him. I’m standing at my door, weighed down with textbooks. Christmas exams are coming, and I’ve got a shitload of studying to do.

I turn around.

He’s standing in the doorway to his room, and takes a step towards me. “I was just wondering if you had Woo’s new phone number. My radiator’s not working.”

“New phone number? Does she have a new number?”

“I called the old number and got some person who didn’t speak English, but who managed to get across that she’s not there any more.”

“I only have the number that I’ve had since I moved in.”

“Which was in July, right? That may be the newer number. Can I have it?”

“Sure.” My heart is racing as I fumble with my key. Inside I drop all my stuff on the table and then rifle through a box I have in the closet containing all my odds and ends. I find the number, and step out into the hallway to give it to him. He’s still standing in the same place.

“So how have you been?” he says, taking it from me.

“Not too bad. You?”

“Good, good.”

He hesitates, then says: “Hey, I was wondering, did you go to Victoria Public School?”

The question catches me off guard.

“Yeah,” I say carefully. “Why?”

“I think you were in my sister’s class.”

“No way.”

“Yeah.” He smiles, like he’s relieved to get this reaction from me.

“What’s your sister’s name?”

“Brandy. Her name was Brandy.”

“Was?”

“She died.”

I blink.

“Oh. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah,” he says, that awkward shyness suddenly coming through, like he doesn’t know what to do with his body.

“What happened?”

“She drowned. At a friend’s cottage.”

“Oh. That’s ... oh, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. We didn’t live together then, though. She was my half-sister. We didn’t have the same father, or the same foster family.”

He looks so vulnerable, standing there in the dark hallway. I don’t want to leave, so I ask, “I was just going down to make some tea. Do you want some?”

“Sure,” he says, and I can see him brighten.

“I’ll just put some of these away and then I’ll come down.”

He’s sitting at the table when I come into the kitchen, flipping through a day-old newspaper that I can tell he’s not really reading. I put the kettle on.

“I’m sorry I can’t place your sister,” I say. “I’d probably recognise her if I saw her picture. I’m really terrible with names.”

“No, that’s OK. Totally understandable.”

“That whole year in Victoria Public is like a blur. It was my first year in Canada and I hardly spoke any English.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of like that for me, too. I went into foster care the previous year. It was just by chance that Brandy and I went to the same school. I didn’t really know her. She was adopted when she was four. Apparently girls get adopted more easily than boys.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I nod.

“I felt really protective towards her, though, even so.”

I nod again.

The kettle boils. I take out two mugs and two teabags, then hesitate, wondering if one teabag would be enough. Then I toss one into each mug, with a little more force than is necessary.

Richard is no longer in my life, but he still speaks inside my head.

That’s pretty fucked-up.

“So I’m thinking of going out west soon,” Jeremy says out of the blue as I sit down across the table from him.

“Out west? What, like to Calgary?”

“North of there. Do some tree-planting. You can make pretty good money out there.”

I think of the scene I witnessed a few weeks back, the one with his mother, and wonder if he wants to get away.

“Oh,” I say, and stir my tea, hoping that the dismay in my voice isn’t too evident. “What are you doing now? Do you have a job?”

“I do some gigs with a band a few nights a week. And sometimes I work at the post office, sorting mail. It’s more of a seasonal thing, though.” He looks embarrassed, and avoids my eyes.

“What grade did you finish in school?”

“Ten.”

“Are you going to go back?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t see myself going through the education system and then getting a nine-to-five job. I don’t see myself living a conventional life, like everyone else. I need to be close to the earth. Or maybe I need to find my own identity. I don’t know anything about my people, except that they live on reservations and get drunk all the time. I don’t fit in with the regular people, and I don’t fit in with my own people, either. I’m a misfit.”

“Well, then I’m a misfit too,” I say.

He chuckles. “You’re not a misfit. You’re white, WASP, from a privileged set.”

“Ha!” I say.

“Well? Aren’t you?”

“We’re all misfits. Pretty much everyone in Canada is an immigrant. They’ve all come from somewhere else and are cut off from their roots and traditions and everything, except they take all their inner junk with them. I think everyone is here because they wanted to escape something back home, thinking they can just get away, but they can’t. It’s always inside you.”

He looks at me with an amused expression. “Okay.”

“The only people who should *not* feel like misfits are your people, because you were here first.”

He laughs. “No one is more cut off from their roots than my people. We were uprooted, stuck on reservations, forbidden from speaking our own language and practicing our own customs. The white man did that. And now they keep us down with cheap alcohol, and kill us with cheap tobacco. Did you know that Native Indians are exempt from paying tax on booze and cigarettes? They give it to us cheap in order to keep us wasted. Keep us ashamed. Shame is the most powerful force for oppression that there is.”

I stare at him. He meets my eyes and holds them. His are on fire. Mine are scared, cowering from the terrifying possibilities that his nearness represents.

“I should go to bed,” I say, hating the incongruous lightness of my voice. “I have school in the morning.”

He shifts in his seat and there is a moment of pure awkwardness.

“Listen ... I’m sorry to get all heavy on you. I don’t talk about these things with many people and it’s so refreshing.”

“No ... it’s not that. I don’t mind. I just ... it’s been a long day.”

Awkwardly he reaches out and touches my arm.

Just as awkwardly my hand goes up and touches his.

Then I drop it.

“Good night,” I say, meeting his eyes.

“Good night, Anna. Sleep well.”

Chapter Eight

Two weeks before Christmas, just after the end of my exams, I make a decision to drive out to the farm to see my mother. It is Saturday and Richard is scheduled to be in town for some Christmas event at the military college. I know this because my mother mentioned a couple of weeks ago that for the first time since she met Richard she wouldn't be going. I want to use the opportunity to catch her alone, partly because I want to tell her that I won't be spending Christmas Eve at the farm. I don't want to have to spend the night out there, and neither do I relish driving home in the dark after we open the presents, which, like always, will be of the depressingly cheap, second-rate variety.

The two-lane highway stretches on, the landscape dull in the December gloom. Gnarled trees like crooked fingers line each side. Dirty patches of snow remain on the ground, leftovers from the last snowfall. Thankfully the roads are free of ice.

As I pull up to the farm I see Richard's car in the driveway. I feel a clenching in my stomach and slow the car down as I try to make up my mind whether or not to turn around, to go back to town. I don't want to talk to my mother while Richard is there. In fact, I don't want to see Richard at all. Damn! I should have called first. Telephones were invented for situations like these.

Just then I see them, heading towards the barn, trudging in unison. They disappear around the corner. I pull into the driveway, still unsure of what to do.

I don't know what it is that makes me get out of the car. Some impulse, I guess. Neither do I know why I feel I have to go after them, but I do.

The orange tabby comes bounding towards me, tail held high. "Hey Bubs!" He is adorable. I pick him up, rub his head, stick my nose into his fur. He purrs and nuzzles me back for a second, then twists and jumps down. I start walking, and he follows. First he stays a couple of steps behind me, then runs ahead, then finds some excuse to wait until I've caught up before running a few steps ahead of me again. Playing coy.

I'm about to say something to him, but am cut short by a sound, like a stifled wail, coming from the barn. I stop. It's my mother.

"I can't!"

“Do it!”

Richard’s voice. Harsh and commanding.

“I can’t ...”

“Do it!”

I scoop the cat into my arms and peer silently through the open door, my breath coming in short spurts. They’re at Miss Piggy’s pen and they’ve got their backs to me. My mother’s got a rifle in her hand and is holding it slightly away from her body. Miss Piggy’s got her snout up over the side of the pen.

“It’s a goddamned pig, Ella. It’s for eating.”

My mother is trembling. She takes one step backwards and raises the gun, then lowers it again.

“Oh, for Chrissakes!” exclaims Richard and grabs the rifle from my mother’s hands. He raises it, points the barrel at Miss Piggy’s head and fires.

Blood splatters onto the side of the pen and onto my mother’s overalls. She stands motionless.

“It’s a goddamn pig,” says Richard, turning. He sees me, and our eyes meet. My arms go limp. The cat lets out a pitiful meow at my feet. Richard strides past me without acknowledging my presence. I stare at my mother. She’s still standing there motionless, staring down into Miss Piggy’s pen.

Slowly I walk over and put my arm around her shoulders. She’s completely rigid.

We stand like that for a minute. I’m searching for something to say, but find nothing that seems right.

Finally my mother speaks.

“He’s right, you know,” she says, and I hardly recognise her voice. It’s high-pitched, like the voice of a little girl.

“About what?” I ask gently.

“It’s only a pig. It’s for eating.”

A feeling of nausea wells up in me, slowly, starting in the hollow of my belly and spreading outwards until my entire body feels sick.

My mother turns from me, trance-like, and starts walking out of the barn. Just before she gets to the door, she stops.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she says.

“What?”

“You’re thinking I should leave him.”

I don’t say anything.

“I’m not going to. I’ve spent my whole life yearning for a life I didn’t have. There comes a time when we all have to accept the life we’ve been given, and this is the life I got. It’s a road I have to follow.”

“It seems to me like you’ve come to a dead end,” I say.

She shakes her head. Her hair is in a tangle, and there are deep lines in her face.

“You don’t understand,” she says. “You probably never will. I just hope you remember that I did what I thought best.”

I listen to her footsteps walking away, towards the house.

Next to me in the pen is a dead pig. Miss Piggy, the pig that my mother loved.

I leave the barn and walk in a big arc so that I don’t have to go near the house. I reach the car, get in, and drive away, a shuddering deep in my bones.

I don’t hear from my mother again and I don’t call, not even at Christmas.

On Boxing Day Richard finds my mother’s body swinging from a rope attached to one of the rafters in the barn, right above Miss Piggy’s pen.

Klara calls to tell me.

My mother left no note. No explanation.

But I understand.

Part II: Exposition

On Writing *The Simple Life*

Section 1: Introduction

I had had a novel rattling around inside me for a number of years before I sat down to write *The Simple Life*. It was always something I meant to do later, when I had enough time. Eventually, however, I came to the realisation that I would probably never be a lady of leisure who could pen a novel in her spare time – and even if that time did come in some distant future, there was no guarantee that I would have the health or ability required to do so. It became very clear to me that if I wanted to write the novel, I would have to *make* the time.

I am a firm believer in taking first steps. There is a famous quote, commonly ascribed to the German writer Goethe, but which has been identified as being from W. H. Murray:

[T]he moment one definitely commits oneself, the providence moves too. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way. (GSNA)

At the time I had a nine-to-five job, and after a full day of working and other activities I rarely had the energy in the evenings to sit down and write. Hence I started getting up at six in the morning to write. Eventually I decided that I no longer wanted to be at my job, and resigned. My boss, much to my astonishment, offered me the chance to leave immediately if I wanted, yet retain the three months' salary that I would have earned during my severance period. This, it seemed to me, was a manifestation of Murray's maxim about providence moving too. I gratefully accepted, made that three months' salary last for six months, and in that time wrote the entire novel.

I was aiming for publication, and within a year I had found an agent in London to take on the manuscript. She shopped it around to several large publishers, but when there were no takers decided that she did not wish to spend more time on it. I was crestfallen, stuffed the manuscript into the proverbial drawer and decided I would never write another book. After all, I had put in all that time and effort – and for what?

Cut to the present day. I have since written three books, including a second novel. All of them are published, and have been favourably received. *The Simple Life*, however, remained in the drawer. Yet upon the positive reception of my second novel, I began to wonder if something might be done to salvage *The Simple Life*. After taking a brief look I decided to embark on a rewrite, and since the writing of my BA thesis was imminent, I asked whether I could do that rewrite as my final project. I am greatly indebted to Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir and others in the English department at the University of Iceland for allowing me to do so.

Soon after beginning the project I realised that a rewrite of the manuscript would be more akin to major surgery than the nip-and-tuck I had first envisioned. Not that the first manuscript was a disaster – I simply came to see that it had far more potential than I had initially thought. I also had to accept that I would never be able to fulfill that potential in the time allocated for my final project. Therefore, after consulting with my instructor, I decided to submit only Part One of the novel for this project. Part Two will have to be completed after graduation.

I have divided this exposition into four sections: Writing, The Revision Process, Research, and Conclusion.

Section 2: Writing

I should begin by saying that “writing” in this case means both the writing I did of the original manuscript, and also the editing I did during the revision process, since so much of that process involved writing original material to replace the chunks I removed from the original. I will focus on four main aspects in this section: characterisation, setting, plotting, theme and point of view.

2.1 Characterisation

Part One of *The Simple Life* has three main characters: Anna, the protagonist, her mother Ella, and Richard, Ella’s boyfriend. What follows is a brief description of each, along with my thoughts on creating them.

Anna is without a doubt the central character in the novel. She is the protagonist, and the story is told from her point of view.

Much of this book is based on my own experience of moving to Canada as a child. Consequently there was a risk of my identifying too strongly with Anna, something that Sol Stein calls the “autobiography trap” (*Stein on Writing* 163). While *The Simple Life* is not an autobiographical novel, I can easily sympathise with Anna’s plight. Thus I had to carefully detach from Anna to be adequately able to bring her to life on the page.

When there is a risk of the author identifying too strongly with the main character Sol Stein recommends giving the latter a distinctive trait that is very different from the author. In the case of Anna, I gave her a head of unruly red hair and freckled skin, which is in sharp contrast to myself. The main thing that differentiates me from Anna, however, is her non-relationship with her father. This major difference, established on page one, gave me the necessary distance from Anna as a character, despite the other similarities in our experience.

As the book opens, Anna is nine years old, and we track her progress for the next eight years or so. During that time a great deal happens in her life, with the accompanying changes to her person. I decided to show Anna’s development primarily through her thought processes and interactions with others.

For instance, when she is young, she views the world with childish eyes and her dialogue, both spoken and internal, reflects her age. When she meets her father for the first time in the milk aisle of a general store and witnesses her parents' argument, she escapes into thoughts about a dog she desperately wants: "I wish I could buy dog food now for my dog. The one I don't have."

Anna grows into a fairly cynical teenager. That cynicism, or dry sarcasm, allows her to detach from the crazy making behaviour of the people around her, most notably Richard. To me, Anna's internal thought processes clearly reflect her age and experience: "At the rate he criticises my word usage, it won't be long until I have no words left to say to him." She is no longer a child.

In the final chapter of Part One, when Anna has been abandoned by her mother and Richard, she has reached a level of maturity unusual for her age. Speaking to Jeremy, she notes: "I think everyone is [in Canada] because they wanted to escape something back home, thinking they can just get away, but they can't. It's always inside you."

By showing the changes in Anna's internal dialogue I hoped to convey her development as a character, from an innocent child to an adult who has gained more wisdom than most people her age. On the whole, I am satisfied with Anna. I happen to like her as a character, and would willingly take a vacation with her – something that Sol Stein uses as a mark of successful character creation (*Stein on Writing* 163).

Anna's mother, Ella, is arguably the most complex character in the novel. She is borderline psychopathic (Hirstein), treating her daughter with a callous unconcern that is particularly evident when she brings a dog home to give to Richard, her boyfriend. Her psychopathy is accompanied by delusion, which is evident right at the beginning of the novel when she is stalking Anna's father, hoping he will reunite with her if she moves across Iceland to be near him. Later, a deep sense of worthlessness and low self-esteem become apparent in the way she completely gives away her power to Richard, getting dragged down by her own demons in the process.

My initial temptation was to present Ella as a straightforward villain. However, in the course of writing I began to find sides to her that surprised me and almost made me feel compassionate towards her. She is a deeply disturbed and lost person, and is almost like a child in the way she is unaware of the harm she inflicts on people. At the same time, she is inviting harm to be inflicted upon herself.

Richard, Ella's partner, is the villain in the story. He is a narcissist, who feels that his way of doing things is the only correct way, and variously forces or manipulates those around him to do his bidding. He uses "gaslighting" on Ella, a term referring to the 1944 film *Gaslight*, in which a man convinces his wife that she is going insane by constantly forcing her to doubt her own sense of judgement. The term has been adopted by psychologists to refer to a subtle form of emotional manipulation where:

[The] gaslighter ... needs to be right in order to preserve his own sense of self and his sense of having power in the world; and [the] gaslightee ... allows the gaslighter to define her sense of reality because she idealizes him and seeks his approval. (Stern 3)

Richard slowly gains control over Ella, her sense of conviction slowly vanishing as she begins to blindly accept everything Richard says as truth, with disastrous results.

Richard's talent for gaslighting is, in my view, the most chilling part of his villainy. He is a very disturbed individual, an absolute control freak in just about every aspect of his life. However, he has this uncanny ability to act as though his machinations with, for example, "the master's chair" are perfectly normal. Anna, however, through her cynicism or perhaps her moral integrity, is able to detach sufficiently from him to escape his gaslighting efforts. She may not be completely unaffected by his madness, but she has enough strength at least to instinctively avoid him.

Other characters in Part One are a supporting cast, so to speak. I bring some of them back in Part Two of the novel, such as Anna's grandparents and her father. Jeremy, who is introduced near the end of Part One, returns as a stronger character in Part Two. To characterise the minor actors, as it were, I have tried to give them defining traits, such as describing Jeremy as stocky, muscular, shy and "a little timid, like he doesn't know his own strength." Kevin, the pedophile, is "wearing pyjama bottoms and slippers and his hair is a mess" the first time we meet him, giving a slight indication of his slovenly morals (to put it mildly) that become evident later in the section.

Two of my minor characters needed some work in this revised edition of the book, namely Billy and Rosa, Anna's cousins. This is mainly because they had been described in greater detail in a section that I completely scrapped from the initial manuscript, so their entry into the rewritten manuscript was very incomplete.

2.2 Setting

Part One of *The Simple Life* is set in the 1970s in two countries – Iceland, where Anna and her mother initially live, and Canada, the country to which they move. In Part Two of the novel Anna returns to Iceland, completing a circle that she needs to close if she is to continue her life as a whole individual.

My choice of those two settings and the time frame was elementary: I was basing the story on some of my own experiences and so needed to have a setting, or settings, that I was familiar with.

Because the story is told from a first person point of view, setting has to be experienced through Anna. Consequently there are no florid descriptions or excessive detail of what the setting is at any given time. For example, the setting of the general store at the beginning is seen through Anna's eyes as being small and shady, and on leaving there she notices the unpaved roads and her mother's shoes getting muddy. On their arrival in Canada, I tried to convey a sense of setting for example through the heat that Anna feels when she steps out of the airport, and the strangeness of the tall trees and the squirrels when they reach Clara's house.

2.3 Plotting

In his book *On Writing*, Stephen King writes:

I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our *lives* are largely plotless ... and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible. ... [M]y basic belief about the making of stories is that they pretty much make themselves. The job of the writer is to give them a place to grow (and to transcribe them, of course). (*On Writing*, Chapter 5)

With *The Simple Life*, I was more interested in writing a literary novel than a plot-driven novel. I am, in general, more interested in literary works than plot-driven ones, and rarely read anything where the plot has clearly been thought out first, simply because I tend to quickly lose interest. I agree with Sol Stein in *Stein on Writing*: "If the [characters] come alive, what they do makes the story" (29). For that reason, I chose to focus more on the characters in *The Simple Life*, and less on a predetermined plot.

However, Sol Stein also writes: “[T]he essence of plotting ... [is] putting the protagonist’s desire and the antagonist’s desire into sharp conflict.” (*Stein on Writing* 49.) Plot-driven or not, a good story has to have conflict. In Part One of *The Simple Life*, the main desires at odds are Anna’s intense longing for a dog, and Ella’s holding out on giving her one. That dog becomes a plot device that helps move the story forward in every chapter but the last. Moreover, it becomes a strong symbol of Anna’s longing for loyalty and stability in her life.

2.4 Theme

In *On Writing*, Stephen King has this to say about theme:

When you write a book, you spend day after day scanning and identifying the trees. When you’re done, you have to step back and look at the forest. ... What are the recurring elements? Do they entwine and make a theme? (*On Writing*, ch. 11)

After the first draft, he suggests that the writer put his or her book away for a while, then re-read it, trying to identify the underlying theme of the story. He continues:

In the second draft I’ll want to add scenes and incidents that reinforce that meaning. I’ll also want to delete stuff that goes in other directions. ... All that thrashing around has to go if I am to achieve anything like a unified effect. (*On Writing*, ch. 11)

I found this to be excellent advice, and it is precisely what I did when I picked up *The Simple Life* to revise it for this project. In re-reading the manuscript, I realized that the main underlying theme was the question of identity, in particular cultural identity. I immediately felt that I wanted to reinforce that theme and explore it a little more.

To do that I had to revise some scenes, and add details to make the theme stand out. The scenes I added include the one where Anna is mortified to hear her first teacher stutter when trying to say her last name, and also a scene a little later where she corrects a teacher who uses her Icelandic name, dropping the – dóttir suffix: “And just like that, I shed my Icelandic name and became Canadian.” I also revised the scene where Anna

wonders about the word “accent” and, on learning what it means, vows to perfect her diction so that she won’t be “different.”

The main change I made in reinforcing the theme, however, was through the character of Jeremy. In the original manuscript, Jeremy as a character was barely a bleep on the radar, and he was Canadian. In the revision I decided to change his role drastically to make him a foil to Anna’s character. I made him into a Native Indian who had been conditioned as a Canadian and who was actively searching for his own identity – an identity that had been forcibly taken from him, both personally and culturally. He had been raised by a Canadian foster mother who had changed his name, and his people were of a race that had been oppressed and abused by the white race, and that had robbed them of their cultural identity. Jeremy is struggling to reclaim that identity and pride in his own culture, and that way is in direct opposition to Anna who has given away all of those aspects of herself willingly, fearing that otherwise she would not be accepted into this strange new world. As I mentioned, Jeremy’s role in the book becomes more pronounced in Part Two, where he becomes a catalyst for Anna to return to her roots and seek her own identity.

2.5 Point of View

The point of view (POV) in this novel was never a question for me. I knew I wanted it to be written in the first person because it is the “most intimate, immediately involving mode” (Stein, *How to Grow a Novel* 108). Anna’s story is specific but also to some degree universal, and I wanted the reader to deeply empathise with her struggle.

There are challenges in writing in the first person. One of those is describing appearance. It is far easier to have someone else describe a character than to have a character describe him- or herself. Some writers use the mirror technique – having the character look at himself or herself in the mirror. Sol Stein is not a fan: “Forget it. A character seeing himself in a mirror is a cliché.” (*Stein on Writing* 79) In the initial version of the manuscript – before reading Sol Stein – I did, indeed, have Anna looking at herself in the mirror and describing what she saw. After reading Stein, I took a different approach: having Anna describe her father, whom she sees for the first time, and remarking on how similar they are in appearance.

Another difficulty with the first person POV, according to Stein, is writing scenes that happen when the first person character is not there. Moreover, this POV has the potential to become monotonous. (*How to Grow a Novel* 114) I found neither of these to be a problem. In *The Simple Life* there are not many scenes that happen when

Anna is not there, and when there are, this issue is easily resolved through dialogue with other people, or by having another character relate the scene. As for the monotony, I think the fact that Anna changes and grows so much and so rapidly through the course of the novel provides a counterweight to any monotony.

Section 3: The Revision Process

As I mentioned above, I wrote *The Simple Life* ten years ago. Since then I have gained a great deal of experience as a writer. Some of the things in the original manuscript literally made me cringe when I re-read them, and I had many “what was I thinking?!” moments, hardly believing that I had sent a manuscript so trite and full of clichés out into the world.

It is impossible for me to discuss all the changes I made to the manuscript. Suffice it to say that they are extensive. Here, however, are some of the broader strokes I made when I was revising.

3.1 Hooking the Reader

The initial manuscript had a rather weak beginning. I had Anna describing where she was born, her parents being very young, their announcement of their divorce, and so on. It was not very exciting, but I happened to think that some of it was pretty cleverly worded. In this instance, as in many others, I had to do what Stephen King calls “kill your darlings” (266), meaning get rid of anything that did not support the absolute best version of the story, “even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler’s heart” (266).

Sol Stein recommends exciting the reader’s curiosity right at the outset, preferably about a character or relationship, and also to create resonance. (*Stein on Writing* 8) In the revised manuscript, I decided to start with a scene in which Anna meets her father for the first time. I imagined this would arouse the reader’s curiosity: why is this girl, who is clearly old enough to talk, meeting her father for the first time, and why in a dull and dingy general store? In the scene I had Anna saunter down the pet food aisle, where she looks at dog food. This sets up a major plot device, which is her longing for a dog, and creates resonance with the rest of the story.

3.2 Cutting the Flab

One thing I became aware of when I began revising the manuscript was my propensity for using unnecessary words. In particular the word “just.” “Just” was my overused word of choice and appeared sometimes in every other sentence, as in: “I learned this just after dinner” or “just like in the last place.” I could not believe that I had missed all

those “justs” the first time around. They weakened my narration. It was almost as though I had not been confident enough to state what I meant, and had to use “just” to qualify everything. Needless to say, I ruthlessly cut just about every “just” from the manuscript. (See? Even there I could not resist sticking in a “just”!)

Something else I noticed after reading *Stein on Writing* was my tendency to use unnecessary adjectives and adverbs. For example: “he looked tired and drawn.” One of those words is unnecessary, and having a single adjective gets the meaning across even more effectively. I cut unnecessary adjectives and adverbs out wherever possible, as well as any other unnecessary words, phrases, or even whole sections. For instance in “I stared straight ahead in shock at what had just transpired,” I cut out “at what had just transpired.” All this resulted in a tighter, firmer narrative.

3.3 Adding Detail

While I had a lot of unnecessary flab to cut away, there were also places where I needed to add detail to give the scene or characters more life. In the original I was very often vague in places where just a few more words would have added a great deal. During the revision process I changed all that. Indeed, this part of my rewrite, as well as cutting the flab, was probably the most extensive of all, even though it was composed of small details that I either added or deleted throughout.

An example of adding detail is in the section where Anna meets her first teacher in Canada. In the original, the teacher was “old and short,” whereas now she is “short, almost shorter than me, probably around sixty, and has bluish-gray hair.” I also became more precise in my descriptions. In the original manuscript, when Anna and her mother arrive at the school, Ella simply goes with Anna up to the classroom. In the current version they enter through the front door, go to the front office, find out where Anna is supposed to go, then Ella leads the way and Anna follows. All the while I describe Anna’s sensory perceptions of the new school. All of these create a far stronger image for the reader.

3.4 Narration

In re-reading I came to see that the narration was very trite and unnatural in places. There were things that a girl of Anna’s age would never say, such as “I stared at them across the painful silence that hung suspended in the air between them like a bubble” or “My secret stash of memories after the lights had been turned out. A little bouquet of sunlight.”

In the revised manuscript I simplified this and made it more natural. Both of the sentences above were sent directly to the trash, and were replaced by things like: “This town doesn’t have a supermarket, just this one store. It’s got ads pasted in all the windows so hardly any light gets in, and it smells,” which in my view sounds far more like a real girl talking – or, well, thinking.

3.5 Show Versus Tell

One of the cardinal rules of good writing is that it should be mimetic, rather than diegetic. Peter Barry, in his book *Beginning Theory*, defines the terms thus:

‘Mimesis’ means ‘showing’ or ‘dramatising’. The parts of a narrative which are presented in a mimetic manner are ‘dramatised’, which is to say that they are represented in a ‘scenic’ way with a specified setting, and making use of dialogue which contains direct speech. ... By contrast ‘diegesis’ means ‘telling’ or ‘relating’. The parts of a narrative which are presented in this way are given in a more ‘rapid’ or ‘panoramic’ or ‘summarising’ way. (151)

The novice writer, I believe, is particularly susceptible to the “diegesis” trap. This was certainly the case with me in the first version of *The Simple Life*. I had far too many scenes that were diegetic rather than mimetic. For this current version I moved more into “film and TV scenes” mode (*Stein on Writing* 26) to make the action more mimetic than diegetic. For example, I scrapped the entire first chapter of the original, and rewrote it so that the book opens with a visual scene. I also added as many more mimetic scenes as I could. Furthermore, in the scene where Anna corrects her teacher when he tries to say her name, I originally had her describing what had happened, rather than showing it as I did in the rewrite. These are only two examples of many.

3.6 Dialogue and tagging

On the whole I was satisfied with my dialogue, even in the first version of the manuscript. I grew up around theatre people and read a lot of scripts as a child, and as an adult I studied acting, so I think somewhere along the way I developed a fairly good ear (or eye) for dialogue.

What needed work, however, was my tagging. I had a tendency to over-tag, especially in direct speech. Example:

“It’s like, we share our phone line with another family.”

Leanne comes to a dead stop. “Get outta town!” ~~she says~~

In the above instance I removed “she says” because it was not necessary. It is very clear who is speaking, and specifying it is merely “flab.”

3.7 Pacing

After reading *Stein on Writing*, I became far more aware of the importance of pace than I had been previously. Consequently I became more conscious than before of the pace of my novel, and various techniques for either picking up or slowing down the pace. Stein writes:

The success of a book is measured by the satisfaction of readers. The measure of a reading experience is often expressed as “This really moves fast” or “This book is slow going.” Each describes the pace, or tempo, of a book in which fast is good and slow is bad. (*Stein on Writing* 114)

To my satisfaction I realised that I had been using some of the pacing techniques instinctively, like varying the length of the sentences, and using carriage returns so that some sentences, which I wanted to emphasise, stood alone. However, after reading Stein, I began actively using these techniques to call forth a specific effect. For instance, in the scene where the reader learns of Ella’s suicide, I used short sentences and carriage returns to denote the shock that Anna felt on hearing the news. An additional effect I was trying to convey was that only the main points were sinking in with Anna, the implication being that the real meaning of what had happened would hit home later:

Klara calls to tell me.

My mother left no note. No explanation.

But I understand.

Section 4: Research

As I mentioned at the beginning of this exposition, much of the novel is based on my own experiences as a child. Consequently I did not have to do a great deal of actual research on the events I am describing in the book. The ones that did not apply directly to my own experience I simply made up.

What I did do, and which I found invaluable in the revision process, is read some books on writing. Below is a list of the main ones, with a brief summary of how I was able to use them.

***Beginning Theory*, by Peter Barry**

I became acquainted with this book last semester in a course at the university taught by Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir, entitled Literary Theory. In relation to this particular project, I found the chapter on Narratology most useful, particularly in becoming more deeply aware of the different elements of dialogue and tagging.

***Stein on Writing*, by Sol Stein**

Prior to starting my BA project I had never heard of Sol Stein, but I most certainly have now. I found his book *Stein on Writing* extremely illuminating. Some the most useful aspects for me as relating to this project were the importance of a strong beginning, his discussion on resonance, especially as it applies to the title of the book, his discussion on pace, and his tips on creating strong characters. I will certainly be referring more to Stein's books during my future writing endeavours.

***On Writing*, by Stephen King**

I first learned about this book during the aforementioned Literary Theory course last semester. Like many people I had been accustomed to thinking of Stephen King as a commercial novelist, but with this book he surprised me with his wit and clever insights into the craft of writing. Most useful in this book were, for me, his discussion on spotting theme during a re-reading of the manuscript, and then adding scenes and details to reinforce that them, and his advice to "write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open". (55-56)

***How to Grow a Novel*, by Sol Stein**

Having read *Stein on Writing*, I wanted to also read his other book on writing, *How to Grow a Novel*. I was not able to read the whole book from start to finish due to time constraints, but I did dip into parts where needed. Particularly useful for me in terms of this project was his discussion on point of view.

Other

The other significant research I did for this project was on Native Indian culture, and names in particular. I wanted to give Jeremy a Native Indian name that resonated with the rest of the story – more specifically, I wanted his name to mean dog, or wolf. Most of that research I did online, first searching for Native American tribes in Canada, then deciding which tribe I wanted Jeremy to belong to (Cree) and finally choosing a name from that tribe that meant “gray wolf” (Mingan).

Section 5: Conclusion

I am very grateful to have been given the opportunity to revisit and rewrite *The Simple Life* for my BA project, even if the initial plan to rewrite the entire novel turned out to be more ambitious than possible. The process of rewriting was extremely educational, particularly reading the books on writing mentioned above, and subsequently applying the tips and techniques to my own manuscript. It was satisfying to realise that I had been using many of those techniques instinctively, and bringing them into conscious awareness will undoubtedly help me a great deal in the future.

I am particularly indebted to my instructor, Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir, for her keen eye, astute comments and – not least – her positive thoughts and encouragement in the feedback she gave me.

Researching the craft of writing and applying it to my manuscript has resulted in a firmer text, far better characterisation, a much clearer theme, a better sense of timing and setting, and more natural narrative and dialogue. I am very much looking forward to moving on to Part Two of the novel, and wish only that I could have had the benefit of my instructor's expertise and insight in writing the second half. However, I am positive that what I have learned so far has given me a strong and solid foundation to carry on, not only with this novel, but with others in the future.

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