Ann-Marie MacDonald

THE WAY THE CROW FLIES

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Many-Splendoured Things

The sun came out after the war and our world went Technicolor. Everyone had the same idea. Let's get married. Let's have kids. Let's be the ones who do it right.

It is possible, in 1962, for a drive to be the highlight of a family week. King of the road, behind the wheel on four steel-belted tires, the sky's the limit. Let's just drive, we'll find out where we're going when we get there. How many more miles, Dad?

Roads are endless vistas, city gives way to country barely mediated by suburbs. Suburbs are the best of both worlds, all you need is a car and the world is your oyster, your Edsel, your Chrysler, your Ford. Trust Texaco. Traffic is not what it will be, what's more, it's still pretty neat. There's a '53 Studebaker Coupe!—oh look, there's the new Thunderbird. . . .

"'This land is your land, this land is my land. . . .'" A moving automobile is second only to the shower when it comes to singing, the miles fly by, the landscape changes, they pass campers and trailers—look, another Volkswagen Beetle. It is difficult to believe that Hitler was behind something so friendly-looking and familiar as a VW bug. Dad reminds the kids that dictators often appreciate good music and are kind to animals. Hitler was a vegetarian and evil. Churchill was a drunk but good. "The world isn't black and white, kids."

In the back seat, Madeleine leans her head against the window frame, lulled by the vibrations. Her older brother is occupied with baseball cards, her parents are up front enjoying "the beautiful scenery." This is an ideal time to begin her movie. She hums "Moon River," and imagines that the audience can just see her profile, hair blowing back in the wind. They see what she sees out the window, the countryside, *off to see the world,* and they wonder where it is she is off to and what life will bring, *there's such a lot of world to see.* They wonder, who is this dark-haired girl with the pixie cut and the wistful expression? An orphan? An only child with a dead mother and a kind father? Being sent from her boarding school to spend the summer at the country house of mysterious relatives who live next to a mansion where lives a girl a little older than herself who rides horses and wears red dungarees? *We're after the same rainbow's end, just around the bend. . . .* And they are forced to run away together and solve a mystery, *my Huckleberry friend. . . .*

Through the car window, she pictures tall black letters superimposed on a background of speeding green—"Starring Madeleine McCarthy"—punctuated frame by frame by telephone poles, *Moon River, and me*. . . .

It is difficult to get past the opening credits so better simply to start a new movie. Pick a song to go with it. Madeleine sings, sotto voce, " '*Que será, será,* whatever will be will—' " darn, we're stopping.

"I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream," says her father, pulling over.

Utterly wrapped up in her movie, Madeleine has failed to notice the big strawberry ice cream cone tilting toward the highway, festive in its party hat. "Yay!" she exclaims. Her brother rolls his eyes at her.

Everything in Canada is so much bigger than it was in Germany, the cones, the cars, the "supermarkets." She wonders what their new house will be like. And her new room—will it be pretty? Will it be big? *Que será, será*. . . .

"Name your poison," says Dad at the ice cream counter, a white wooden shack. They sell fresh corn on the cob here too. The fields are full of it—the kind Europeans call Indian corn.

"Neapolitan, please," says Madeleine.

Her father runs a hand through his sandy crewcut and smiles through his sunglasses at the fat lady in the shade behind the counter. He and her brother have matching haircuts, although Mike's hair is even lighter. Wheat-coloured. It looks as though you could remove waxy buildup from your kitchen floor by turning him upside down and plugging him in, but his bristles are actually quite soft. He rarely allows Madeleine to touch them, however. He has strolled away now toward the highway, thumbs hooked in his belt loops—pretending he is out in the world on his own, Madeleine knows. He must be boiling in those dungarees but he won't admit it, and he won't wear shorts. Dad never wears shorts.

"Mike, where do you think you're going?" she calls.

He ignores her. He is going on twelve.

She runs a hand through her hair the way Dad does, loving its silky shortness. A pixie cut is a far cry from a crewcut, but it's also mercifully far from the waist-length braids she endured until this spring. She accidentally cut one off during crafts in school. Maman still loves her but will probably never forgive her.

Her mother waits in the Rambler. She wears the sunglasses she got on the French Riviera last summer. She looks like a movie star. Madeleine watches her adjust the rearview mirror and freshen her lipstick. Black hair, red lips, white sunglasses. Like Jackie Kennedy—"She copied me."

Mike calls her Maman, but for Madeleine she is "Maman" at home and "Mum" in public. "Mum" is more carefree than Maman—like penny loafers instead of Mary Janes. "Mum" goes better with "Dad." Things go better with Coke.

Her father waits with his hands in the pockets of his chinos, removes his sunglasses and squints up at the blue sky, whistling a tune through his teeth. "Smell the corn," he says. "That's the smell of pure sunshine." Madeleine puts her hands in the pockets of her short-shorts, squints up and inhales.

In the car, her mother blots her lips together, eyes on the mirror. Madeleine watches her retract the lipstick into its tube. Ladies have a lot of things which look like candy but are not.

Her mother has saved her braids. They are in a plastic bag in the silverware chest. Madeleine saw her toss the bag in there just before the movers came. Now her hair is somewhere on a moving van, rumbling toward them.

"Here you go, old buddy."

Her father hands her an ice cream cone. Mike rejoins them and takes his. He has chosen chocolate as usual. "'I'd rather fight, than switch.'"

Her father has rum 'n' raisin. Does something happen to your tastebuds when you grow up so that you like horrible flavours? Or is it particular to parents who grew up during the Depression, when an apple was a treat?

"Want a taste, sweetie?"

"Thanks, Dad."

She always takes a lick of his ice cream and says, "That's really good." Bugs Bunny would say, *You lie like a rug, doc,* but in a way it isn't a lie because it really is good to get ice cream with your dad. And when each of you takes a taste of the other's, it's great. So Madeleine is not really lying. *Nyah, tell me anuddah one, doc.*

Maman never wants a cone of her own. She will share Dad's and take bites of Mike's and Madeleine's. That's another thing that happens when you grow up; at least, it happens to a great number of mothers: they no longer choose to have an ice cream cone of their own.

Back in the car, Madeleine considers offering a lick to Bugs Bunny but doesn't wish to tempt her brother's scorn. Bugs is not a doll. He is . . . Bugs. He has seen better days, the tip of his orange carrot is worn white, but his big wise-guy eyes are still bright blue and his long ears still hold whatever position you bend them into. At the moment, his ears are twisted together like a braid down his back. Bavarian Bugs.

Her father starts the engine and tilts his cone toward her mother, who bites it, careful of her lipstick. He backs the station wagon toward the highway and makes a face when he sees that his rearview mirror is out of whack. He gives Maman a look and she makes a kiss with her red lips. He grins and shakes his head. Madeleine looks away, hoping they won't get mushy.

She contemplates her ice cream cone. Neapolitan. Where to begin? She thinks of it as "cosmopolitan"—the word her father uses to describe their family. The best of all worlds.

Outside the car windows the corn catches the sun, leafy stalks gleam in three greens. Arching oaks and elms line the curving highway, the land rolls and burgeons in a way that makes you believe that, yes, the earth is a woman, and her favourite food is corn. Tall and flexed and straining, emerald citizens. Fronds spiralling, cupping upward, swaddling the tender ears, the gift-wrapped bounty. The edible sun. The McCarthys have come home. To Canada.

When you live in the air force, home is a variation on a theme. Home is Canada, from sea to sea. Home is also the particular town you came from before you got married and joined the forces. And home is whatever place you happen to be posted, whether it's Canada, the U.S., Germany, France. . . . Right now, home is this sky-blue 1962 Rambler station wagon.

Having adjusted his rearview mirror, Jack glances at his kids in the back seat. Peace reigns for now. Next to him, his wife opens her purse—he reaches forward and pushes in the automatic lighter on the dashboard. She glances at him, small smile as she takes the cigarette from her pack. He winks at her—*your wish is my command.* Home is this woman.

The Trans-Canada Highway has been finished: you can dip your rear wheels in the Atlantic and drive until you dip your front ones in the Pacific. The McCarthys are not going that far, although they did start this leg of their journey at the Atlantic. They have been driving for three days. Taking it easy, watching the scenery change, fir trees give way to the St. Lawrence Seaway, the narrow cultivated strips of old Québec all along the broad river, the blue shimmer of the worn Laurentian Mountains, the jet-smooth ride of the modern highway, *Bienvenue à Montréal, Welcome to Ottawa, to Kingston, to Toronto,* extending the summer holiday they spent with Mimi's family in New Brunswick—*Nouveau-Brunswick*—salt swimming among the sandbars of the Northumberland Strait, and at night the winking lights of the

ferry to Prince Edward Island. They rose early to watch the priest bless the multicoloured fishing boats on opening day, *le premier jour de pêche.* Lobster feasts and noisy card games of Deux-Cents late into the night, neighbours arriving to squeeze in at the kitchen table, placing their bets with mounds of pennies and Rummoli chips, until the fiddles and accordion came out and Mimi's mother thumped out chords on the piano, her treble hand permanently bent into the shape of the hook she had used to make every quilt and rug in the house. *L'Acadie.*

Language was no barrier. Jack basked in the French, in the food, in the celestial confusion of a big family. Mimi's father had been lost years before, in a storm that capsized his lobster boat, and her brothers headed the family now. Big self-made men with a chain of seafood restaurants, who took to Jack from the start, when he and Mimi returned home after the war, engaged. Things happened fast back then, everyone understood, the brothers were barely out of uniform themselves. Jack was an *Anglais,* but he was theirs and her family embraced him with a fervour equal to that which fuelled their mistrust of the English in general. They accorded him the status of a prince and extended him the consideration usually reserved for ladies. The best of both worlds.

Jack eats his ice cream, one hand on the wheel, and makes a mental note to start jogging again once they get settled in. Over the past month his sisters-in-law, *les belles-soeurs,* have fed him like a prize calf. Flour, maple sugar, potato, pork and clams—the possible permutations are dizzying, delicious. And fattening. It seems there is nothing that cannot be transformed into *poutine.* What is *poutine?* It is what you make when you make *poutine.*

He has only had to loosen his belt by one notch, but Jack has a beautiful wife. One who still runs into the water like a girl, bikini-svelte despite two children, breaststroking through the waves, keeping her head up so as not to spoil her "do." Yes, he'll start running again once they get to their new home.

Behind him, his son's voice, disgusted. "Madeleine, it's melting right down your arm."

"No it's not."

"Maman," says Mike, leaning forward, "*Madeleine fait un mess!*"

"I am not making a mess!" Licking her wrist, salty skin and murky vanilla.

Mimi reaches back with a wet-nap. "*Tiens.*"

Madeleine takes it and wipes her hand. She tries to get Mike to hold her ice cream cone but he says, "No way, it's all gobbed." So Mimi holds it

and, while Madeleine wipes her hands, she licks the ice cream drips. It is also a characteristic of mothers that they don't mind eating their child's soggy ice cream cone.

Madeleine returns the wet-nap in exchange for her ice cream but feels suddenly unwell. It's the wet-nap smell. Pre-moistened for your convenience. Disinfects too. The smell reminds Madeleine of throw-up. That's because, when you get carsick and throw up, your mother wipes your face with a wet-nap, so of course wet-naps come to stand for throw-up. They smell more like throw-up than throw-up. She passes the ice cream back to her mother.

"I'm full," she says.

Mike says, "She's gonna barf."

"I am not, Mike, don't say 'barf.'"

"You just said it. Barf."

"That's enough, Mike," says Jack, and Mike stops.

Mimi turns and looks back at Madeleine with the are-you-going-to-throw-up? expression. It makes her have to throw up. Her eyes water. She puts her face to the open window and drinks in the fresh air. Wills herself not to think of anything sickening. Like the time a girl threw up in kindergarten and it hit the floor with a *splash,* don't think about that. Mike has retreated as far as possible to his side of the seat. Madeleine turns carefully and focuses on the back of Dad's head. That's better.

As seen from the back seat of the car, it is as recognizable, as much "him," as his face. As unmistakable as your own car in a parking lot. His head, squarish, clean. It says what it means, you don't have to figure it out. His shoulders under his checked short-sleeved shirt. Elbow out the window, halo of light brown hairs combed by the wind, right hand on the wheel, glint of his university ring. Old Spice. Across the back of his neck, one faint line—a seam that stays paler than his sunburn. The back of Dad's head. It's the other side of his face—his other face. In fact, he has told you he has eyes back there. This is reassuring. It means he knows who starts most of the fights in the back seat.

"Mike, quit it!" cries Madeleine.

"I'm not doing anything."

"Mike, don't tease your sister."

"Dad, I'm not teasing her, she pinched me."

"Madeleine, don't torment your brother." Maman does not have eyes in the back of her head or she wouldn't say such a thing.

Mike crosses his eyes at her.

"Mike!" Her eight-year-old shriek like a handsaw. "Stop it!"

"*Tenez-vous tranquilles maintenant, hein?* Your father's driving," says Maman.

Madeleine has seen the muscles in her father's neck contract at her screech, and she softens. She doesn't want to make him have to pull over and face the back seat. That means a spoiled treat, and a good dose of shame for having ruined such a nice drive through such lovely scenery. His voice will be disappointed, his blue eyes bewildered. Especially his left one with the light scar that traverses his brow. The lid droops slightly, so that his left eye always looks a little sad.

"*Chantons, les enfants,*" says Maman. And they sing.

" 'Would you like to swing on a star, carry moonbeams home in a jar, and be better off than you are . . . ?' "

Billboards loom in farmers' fields, *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and Be Saved,* soldier rows of leafy beets that slow down or speed up depending on whether you focus on the dirt between the rows or on the blur of green, *Kodak, Dairy Queen, The Wages of Sin Is Death.* Barns, neat and scrubbed. The congenial whiff of cow-pies and wood fires reminds Madeleine of home—Germany, that is. She closes her eyes. She has just said goodbye to another house, on an air force base near the Black Forest. *Say goodbye to the house, kids.* And they pulled away for the last time.

Each house stands mute and innocent like a poor animal left behind. The windows wide-eyed, bereft of drapes, the front-door-mouth sad and sealed. Goodbye, dear house. Thank you for all the nice times. Thank you for all the remember-whens. The sad house left behind solidifies in memory to become a monument to a former time, a marker for the place you can never get back to. That's how it is in the air force.

This is Madeleine's third move, and Mike's fourth. He insists that she can't possibly remember her first move, from Alberta to Michigan, because she was only three going on four. Yet he claims to remember his first move, from Washington DC, to Alberta, despite the fact that he was barely three. Such are the injustices of living with an older brother.

"Dad," says Madeleine from the back seat, "I do so remember leaving the base in Alberta, don't I?"

"Sure you do. Remember the skating rink we made in the backyard?"

She looks pointedly at her brother. "Yup."

"There you go. But 'base' is actually an American term, old buddy. The correct term is 'station.' "

"Yeah," says Mike.

They left Europe in June and, for the better part of two months, Mike and Madeleine were indulged by their Acadian aunts and uncles in New

Brunswick, and ran wild with their cousins. Dozens of them: wild black-haired boys you are not supposed to have a crush on because you are related to them, sexy girls who shave their legs before they are twelve. They speak rapid French, just try to keep up, and if you've gone somewhere in a car with them, make sure you get in before it leaves again. Mike and Madeleine watched television for the first time in four years.

No one had a television set on the base in Germany. There were movies at the rec centre, reliably preceded by Looney Toons and Mickey Mouse. There were Friday night suppers with Maman, listening to Jack Benny on the radio before Dad got home from TGIF at the officers' mess. But TV opened up a brave new world of pageboys, chiffon scarves and madras shorts, of carefree teenagers and surfboards. The cousins were more Connie Francis than Sandra Dee, more Sal Mineo than Troy Donahue, but they had roller skates, cars and Dentyne. And big fridges. Welcome to North America.

Madeleine accepts the idea that she loves them all, "*parce que c'est la famille,*" says her mother. "Family" has almost as mythic a ring to it as "home." When they pulled away from Grandmaman's old pink bungalow, Dad said, "Let's head for home, what do you think, kids?"

Madeleine waved to Grandmaman, on the porch of the house that looked like a powdery peppermint. Big fat Grandmaman in her bungalow, brightly painted so Grandpapa could see it from his fishing boat out on the water. It was only the second time in Madeleine's life that she remembered visiting her grandmother, but her eyes filled with tears because "Grandmaman" is another word for "home."

"What do you say, Missus?" said Dad as they left behind the sea and dunes.

"Take me home, Jack," said Maman, and wiped her eyes behind her sunglasses.

For a split second Madeleine imagined they were driving back to Germany. To the green lawns and white buildings of the air force base and, in the nearby town, cobblestones, and sidewalk cafés; the tightly stitched countryside, no patch of land unspoken for, no inch uncherished, a different country every couple of hours on a Sunday drive. The German language she had taken to, the language of fairy tales—*Märchen*—in which she felt wrapped up and safe, like dressing up in her mother's mouton coat. The language that made people smile in surprise—women behind shop counters, who were delighted by her proficiency and teased her parents about their bad *Kanadische Deutsch* as they offered tastes of cheese and, always, *Schokolade für die Kinder.* The first German words she and Mike learned: *danke schön.*

If your father is in the air force, people ask you where you are from and it's difficult to answer. The answer becomes longer the older you get, because you move every few years. "Where are you from?" "I'm from the Royal Canadian Air Force." The RCAF. Like a country whose bits are scattered around the globe.

Each bit, each base, looks like every other, so there is a consistency to this nation. Like walking into any Catholic church and hearing the Latin Mass, you can go to a base—station, that is—anywhere in the world and understand it: the recreation centre, the churches, the post office, bank and fire hall, the parade square, the library, the airfield, the building where your father works. And the PX for groceries and everything else—"PX" is another American term they picked up in Europe.

If you live in what are called PMQs—Permanent Married Quarters—your house will be familiar too. There's a handful of designs, early suburban blueprints, mostly semi-detached, except for the tiny bungalows and the big house where the CO lives. Commanding officer. There is a flagpole on his lawn. By the time you're eight years old, you have probably seen the inside of each type of house in the PMQs. Sometimes in mirror image. And yet, somehow, each house becomes unique once a family moves in. Unique smells, instant accumulation of treasures, pictures and lived-in mess, all of it emerges from cardboard boxes that kids make into forts and play in for days before they collapse, and by the time they do collapse, the house looks as though the family has always lived there, because an air force wife can put together a home inside a week.

Each regulation lawn bristles with individuality—bikes, strewn toys, a different car in every driveway, each refrigerator opening onto a world of its own. Some people's fridges contain tins of Hershey's chocolate sauce. Others contain Hershey's tins that harbour lard and other horrible surprises; that is the McCarthys' fridge. Madeleine's mother wastes nothing, having grown up in the Depression. Although, considering that everyone else's mother grew up in the Depression too, perhaps it's an Acadian thing. Or merely Maritime—Canada's "have-not" provinces. So, despite the uniformity of design, no two houses in the PMQs are exactly alike until that in-between time when one family moves out and the next one moves in. In that space of time the house is no one's. It belongs to the taxpayers of Canada. During that no one's time, the house is scrubbed, disinfected, painted white, stripped of blinds, invaded by echoes. It stands suspended, like a deconsecrated church. Not evil, just blank. Neither dead nor living. It comes alive again when a new family pulls into the driveway and says hello to it.

Madeleine reaches into her new Mickey Mouse Club knapsack for her autograph book. Everyone in her grade three class back in Germany signed it. She opens it. . . .

Yours until Niagara Falls, wrote Sarah Dowd, the last letters tumbling down the page.

Yours till the mountains peak to see the salad dressing, love your friend forever, Judy Kinch.

Roses are red, lilies are white, I love you dear Madeleine, morning, noon and night, your best friend, Laurie Ferry.

The book is full. All have sworn to write. Madeleine and Laurie Ferry have sworn to meet on New Year's Day of the year 2000, in the playground of their PMQs in Germany.

The printed letters look lonely all of a sudden—gay pencil-crayon colours like party decorations after the party. She closes the book, puts it away and takes a deep breath of clover air. There's no reason to feel sad on such a beautiful day when you have your whole life ahead of you. That's what grown-ups say. She pictures her life rolled out ahead of her like a highway. How do you know when you're actually travelling along your life that was ahead of you but is now beneath your feet? How many more miles?

It's hard to move into a new house without thinking of the day when you will be leaving. *Say goodbye to the house, kids.* And you will all be that much older. Madeleine is eight going on nine now so she will be going on twelve next time. Almost a teenager. And her parents will be older too. She tries to remember that they are younger now, but she can't help looking at it in the opposite way: they are older than they were in the last house. And that means they will die sooner. Every house is a step closer to that terrible day. Which house will be the last? Maybe this one. The one we are on our way to say hello to.

The sun warms the lump in her throat and threatens to set tears overflowing her lids, so she closes her eyes and rests her temple against the window frame, soothed by the vibrations of the road. The wind in her hair is swift but gentle, the sun through her closed lids a kaleidoscope of reds and golds.

Outside, the afternoon intensifies. August is the true light of summer. Thick tenor saxophone light. Unlike the trumpets of spring, the strings of autumn. Visible grains of sunlight fall in slow motion, grazing skin—catch them like snowflakes on your tongue. The land is bursting, green and gold and bark. The stalks sway heavy with corn, slowing the breeze. The countryside reclines, abundant and proud like a mightily

pregnant woman, lounging. "Pick your own," say handwritten signs. Pick me.

The Indians grew corn. This is the part of Ontario first taken from them by settlers. They fought here alongside the English, first against the French, then against the Americans in the War of 1812. Now there are reservations, their longhouses and villages survive as drawings in sixth-grade history books and life-size reproductions in tourist villages. Their tobacco is a big cash crop in these parts, but they don't grow it. The ground is still full of their belongings and many places have been named for their nations and in their languages, including Canada. Some say "Canada" means "village of small huts." Others say Portuguese fishermen named it Ca Nada: there, nothing.

Welcome to Stratford, Welcome to New Hamburg. . . . So many places in Canada where you feel as though the real place is in another country. If you come from London, Ontario, for instance, you might not say, "I come from London." You might have to qualify it with "Ontario." Having to explain this can sound apologetic even if you are perfectly happy to come from London. Ontario. New York was named after York in England, but no one ever thinks of York, England, when they think of New York. Mike would say, "That's 'cause the States has better everything."

Welcome to Kitchener. "Did you know Kitchener used to be called Berlin?" says her father, with a glance in the rearview mirror. "It was settled by German immigrants, but they changed the name during the First World War."

They stop for bratwurst and crusty white rolls, just like home. Germany, that is. Madeleine knows she must cease to think of Germany as home. This is home now—what she sees out the sunny car window. Impossibly long driveways that lead to gabled farmhouses with gingerbread trim. Immense fields, endless miles between towns, so much forest and scrub unspoken for, Crown lands, shaggy and free. Three days of driving through geological eras, mile after mile and still Canada. The vastness is what sets it apart from Germany. Part of what makes it Canada. "You could take the whole of Europe and lose it here in the middle of Ontario," says her father.

Madeleine leans her chin on the window frame. Picture the war in Europe, the planes and tanks and concentration camps, picture Anne Frank writing her diary, Hitler saluting the crowds. There is more than enough room for all of it to have happened in the province of Ontario.

"But it wouldn't happen here," says Madeleine.

"What wouldn't happen?" asks Dad.

"The war."

"Which war?" says Mike.

"The Second World War."

Mike points at her, then at his own head, and spirals his finger to indicate that she's crazy. Madeleine controls her anger. She wants to hear her father's answer. He says, "That particular kind of war could never happen here, sweetie, Canada is a free country."

"If it hadn't been for the war," says Maman, "Papa and I would never have met"—Madeleine squirms—"and you and Michel would never have come along. . . ." Her mother has a way of shifting a subject into a tilted version of itself. Stories of bombs and gas chambers do not go with the story of the air force dance in England where her parents met—The Story of Mimi and Jack. Maman sings, "'Underneath the lantern, by the barrack gate. . . . '" And that's it for any serious discussion of the war.

Madeleine's father is not an actual veteran, but he would have been had it not been for the airplane crash. Most of her friends' dads are veterans—pilots and aircrew. Her German babysitter's dad was a veteran too, of the Wehrmacht. He had one arm and their family went everywhere on a motorcycle with a sidecar. Some Canadian families made trips to see the concentration camps. Laurie Ferry saw piles of shoes at Auschwitz. But Madeleine's father says, "There's a difference between learning from history, and dwelling in the past." Her mother says, "Think nice thoughts."

Madeleine found an old *Life* magazine in the dentist's waiting room on the base. On the cover was a dark-haired girl not much older than herself. Anne Frank. She stole the magazine and pored over it guiltily for weeks, until it disappeared from her room. Maman had rolled it up, along with several other magazines, in order to line a pointed clown hat as part of Madeleine's Halloween costume.

"'My Lili of the lamplight, my own Lili Marlene,'" sings Mimi, one hand lightly stroking the back of her husband's head.

Jack relaxes behind the wheel. She sings the second verse in German. He is tempted to slow down, make the drive last, there is something so full about these suspended times. When it's just the two of them and their little family on the road between postings. No neighbours, no relatives, no outside world except the one whizzing past the windows. *Two drifters, off to see the world. . . .* Benevolent unknown world. Full tank of gas. A good time to take stock. You can see who you are. You can see what you have. You have everything.

He says to Mimi, "Sing it again, Missus."

Farms, wide and prosperous, red barn roofs painted with family names, Irish, English, German, Dutch. This is the southern Ontario heartland. "The Golden Horseshoe . . . ," says Jack to his family. Bounded by three Great Lakes: to the south, Lake Erie and Lake Ontario; to the west, Lake Huron. And although on a map its shape resembles more the skull of a steer, Jack is correct in adding, "It's also known as the Southern Ontario Triangle." The two descriptions conflate for Madeleine and she pictures a glittering golden triangle on a map, their blue station wagon seen from high above, crawling across it.

"Like the Bermuda Triangle?" she asks.

Her parents exchange a smile. "Nope," says her father.

Mike turns to her and mouths the word *stunned.*

Jack explains that in the Bermuda Triangle things are thought to disappear mysteriously, planes and boats vanishing without a trace. The Southern Ontario Triangle is just the opposite. It is packed with people—at least by comparison to the rest of Canada. There are factories and farms, the soil as rich as the cities; orchards of soft fruit down in the Niagara Peninsula and, spanning the whole, vast fields of corn, tobacco, beets, alfalfa; dairy cattle, horses, hogs and high finance. Windsor waves across the water to Detroit; General Motors, pension plans, let the good times roll off the assembly line. The U.S. is, in some places, a stone's throw away, its branch plants springing up to cluster on the Canadian side, reinforcing bonds across the world's longest undefended border. As President Kennedy said last year in Canada's Parliament, "Those whom nature hath so joined together, let no man put asunder." The best of both worlds.

"How many more miles, Dad?"

"A few. Just sit back and enjoy the scenery."

Cutting a swath through fields and woodlots are massive marching steel towers. Follow those mighty X-men and they will lead you to Niagara Falls—twelve million gallons per minute to fuel turbines that never stop, the engine of this province and the north-eastern United States. Pure power carried by those columns of upreaching steel, high voltage honour guard, girders of the golden triangle.

"Are we there yet?"

"Almost."

This part of the world was one terminus on the Underground Railroad, bordering as it does Michigan and New York state. There are still farms around here run by descendants of slaves who made that journey. People pass by and see a black woman driving a tractor and wonder where she's from. She's from here.

A certain amount of smuggling still goes on back and forth across the border—things and, sometimes, people.

Toronto is "the big smoke," and there are major tourist attractions like Niagara Falls, but at the heart of the Triangle sits the medium-size city of London. There are a lot of insurance companies there. Big American corporations have regional headquarters in London, and products destined for the entire North American market are tested first on the consumers in this area. The manufacturers must think there is something particularly normal about the Southern Ontario Triangle.

"Dad," Madeleine asks, "why don't they change Kitchener back to Berlin now that the war is over?"

"Both wars," he replies, "especially the last one, are still very much in living memory."

In living colour.

"Yeah, but Germany's not our enemy now," says Mike, "Russia is."

"Right you are, Mike," says Dad in his man-to-man voice, parade-square clipped, "though you don't really want to say Russia. Russians are people like anyone else, we're talking about the Soviets."

Soviets. The word sounds like a difficult unit of measurement: *If Joyce has three soviets and Johnny has twelve, how many soviets would they have if. . . .* Madeleine doesn't press the issue, but feels that Kitchener probably knows that Kitchener is not its real name. The name change makes it seem as though bright shiny Kitchener has an evil secret: "My name used to be Berlin. *Heil Hitler.*"

Dad clears his throat and continues, "There's an old saying: 'Those who do not remember history are doomed to repeat it.'"

Which is proof that, once your name is Berlin, you should keep it that way. But Madeleine says nothing. There is smart, and there is "being smart."

There is a wall down the middle of the real Berlin now. It's part of the Iron Curtain. Madeleine knows that it's not a real curtain, but the Wall is real. Twenty-nine miles of barbed wire and concrete. The grown-ups say "when the Wall went up" as though it sprang up by magic overnight. "History in the making," her father called it.

Before the Wall went up, the border ran down the middle of streets, through cemeteries and houses and apartment buildings and people's beds. You could go to sleep in the U.S.S.R., roll over and wake up in the free world. You could shave as a Communist and breakfast as a free man. Maybe they could build a miniature wall through the middle of

Kitchener if they changed its name back to Berlin. That's not funny. Communism is not funny.

"Dad, are they going to blow up the earth?" she asks.

He answers with a laugh, as though it were the first he'd ever heard of the idea. "Who?" he asks.

"Are they going to press the button?"

"What button?" says Dad. What snake under the bed?

Mike says, "It's not a button, it's a metal switch and it takes dual keys, one for each guy, and one guy turns his key, then the other guy—"

"And the chances of that happening," says Dad, in his my-last-word-on-the-subject voice, "are virtually nil."

"What's 'virtually'?" asks Madeleine.

"It means it might as well be zero."

But it ain't zero, is it, doc?

They drive in silence for a while.

"But what if they did press the button?" says Madeleine. "I mean, what if they did turn the keys? Would the earth blow up?"

"What are you worrying about that for?" He sounds a little offended. She feels somewhat ashamed, as though she has been rude. It's rude to worry about the earth blowing up when your dad is right there in the front seat driving. After you've had ice cream and everything.

"Would your skin melt?" She didn't mean to ask, it just slipped out. Picture your skin sliding off after it has melted. *Nyah, pass me a wet-nap, doc.*

"What makes you think that would happen?" He sounds incredulous, the way he does when she is afraid and he's comforting her—as if hers were the most groundless fear in the world. It is comforting. Except when it comes to melted skin.

"I saw a picture," she says.

"Where?"

"In a magazine. Their skin was melted."

"She's talking about the Japs," explains Mike.

His father corrects him. "Don't say Japs, Mike, say Japanese."

"Would it melt?" asks Madeleine.

"Can we talk about something nice, *au nom du Seigneur?*" says Mimi, coming to the end of her tether. "Think nice thoughts, Madeleine, think about what you're going to wear the first day of your new school."

Melted skin.

Maman lights a cigarette. They drive in silence. Refreshing Cameo Menthol.

After a while, Madeleine glances at Mike. He has fallen asleep. Maybe when he wakes up he'll play I Spy with her. If she doesn't act like a baby. Or a girl. They used to play together a lot, and shared baths when they were little. She recalls vivid fragments—boats bobbing, bubbles escaping from sinking ducks, "Mayday, come in, Coast Guard." She remembers sucking delicious soapy water from the face cloth until he grabbed it from her: "No, Madeleine, *c'est sale!*"

A bit of drool at the corner of his mouth makes him look younger, less remote. Madeleine's throat feels sore—she is tempted to poke him, make him mad at her, then she might stop feeling sad for no reason.

Welcome to Lucan. . . .

They are standing in an old country churchyard. Not old for Europe, old for Canada. Long grass obscures the gravestones, many of which have keeled over. One monument stands out. Four-sided and taller than the rest, still upright but chipped in places. Five names are chiselled on its sides, each name ending in "Donnelly." They were born on different dates, but they all died on the same day: FEB. 4, 1880. And after each name, etched in stone, is the word "Murdered."

The Donnellys were Irish. Jack tells the story of how they and their neighbours brought their feud with them from the old country to the new. "You have to ask yourself why," he says, "with all this space in Canada, they chose to live right next door all over again." There isn't much to the story. Most of it is written right there in the stone. *Murdered Murdered Murdered Murdered Murdered.*

Mimi calls from the car, "Madeleine, come, we're going, *reviens au car.*" But Madeleine lingers. "How did they murder them?" she asks her father.

"They came in the night and broke in."

"How?"

"With axes," says Mike.

"Come on, kids, let's go," says Jack, heading for the car.

"Did they get the people who did it?" she asks, transfixed before the stone.

No, they never did.

"Are they still out there?"

No, I told you, it all happened a long time ago.

"I don't know why you stopped here, Jack," says Mimi, leading her daughter away by the hand. "She's going to have *des cauchemars.*"

"No I won't," says Madeleine, stung by the implication that looking at an old gravestone might give her nightmares—she isn't a baby. "I'm just very interested in history."

Jack chuckles and Mimi says, "She's a McCarthy, that one." Madeleine wonders why anyone would want to be anything else.

Don't look for that monument nowadays. It was removed years ago, because too many tourists left with fragments of the stone. The McCarthys don't do that. They simply look and reflect, as is their custom. Rarely do they seek out "attractions"—mini-putt, go-carts—despite Mike's pleas and Madeleine's yearnings. Not only are those pursuits "tacky," but the best things in life are free. The wonders of nature, the architecture of Europe. Your imagination is the best entertainment of all, writing is the greatest technology known to man, and your teeth are more precious than pearls so look after them. "'Eat an apple every day, take a nap at three, take good care of yourself, you belong to me'—come on, *les enfants, chantez avec maman. . . ."* And Mike does.

Way up in the sky the moon is visible, a pale wafer. We intend to get there before the decade is out, President Kennedy has pledged it. Madeleine's father has predicted that when she and Mike are grown up, people will take a rocket to the moon as easily as flying to Europe. They were in Germany when Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space. Everyone was glued to the radio—the American Forces network with Walter Cronkite, "the voice of space." The Russians are beating us in space because Communists force their children to study nothing but arithmetic. Madeleine closes her eyes and sees the imprint of the moon against her lids. At least the Russians sent a man up there that time and not a dog, the way they did with Sputnik. That dog smothered.

"What was that dog's name?"

"What dog?" asks her father.

Think nice thoughts. "Nothing."

When John Glenn orbited the earth last February, the principal played the radio over the PA system and the whole school listened to the countdown. They cheered, and when Lieutenant Colonel Glenn returned safely to earth, the principal announced, "This is an historic day for freedom-loving peoples everywhere."

It is important to beat the Russians to the moon before they can send any more innocent dogs up there.

"How many more miles, Dad?" When Mike asks, it sounds like a question posed out of pure interest in maps and triangulated distances. When Madeleine asks, it sounds like whining. There is little she can do about this.

"Take a look at the map there, Mike," says her father in his man-to-man voice. It is a different voice from the one he uses with her. The man-to-man voice makes Mike seem important, which annoys

Madeleine, but there is also a note in it that makes her worry that Mike may be about to get in trouble for something even though he hasn't done anything.

"*Voici la mappe, Michel.*" Her mother turns and hands it to Mike.

"*Merci, maman.*" He shakes out the map importantly, peers at it, then: "I estimate arrival at 1700 hours."

"What time is that, Mike?" Madeleine asks.

"It's Zulu time."

"Mike, quit it."

"Five P.M. to civilians," he says.

"You're a civilian too," says Madeleine.

"Not for long."

"Yes, you're only eleven, you can't join till you're twenty-one."

"Dad, you can join the army at eighteen, can't you?"

"Technically, yes, Mike, but then who in his right mind would want to join the army?"

"I mean the air force."

"Well, during the war. . . ."

During the war. When her father starts this way, it's clear he's going to talk for a while, and probably tell them things he has told them before, but somehow that's the best kind of story. Madeleine leans back and gazes out the window, the better to picture it all.

But Mike interrupts, "Yeah, but what about now?"

"Well, now I think it's eighteen," says Dad, "but during the war . . ."

Mike listens, chin perched on the backrest of the front seat. Mimi strokes his cheek, his hair. Mike allows himself to be petted and Madeleine wonders how he has managed to fool their mother into thinking he is pettable. Like a fierce dog with bone-hard muscles that can only be patted by its owner, and its owner thinks it's fluffy.

" . . . you had fellas as young as sixteen training as pilots—they lied about their age, you had to be seventeen and a half. . . ." Her father was training at seventeen but he wasn't in the war. There was a crash. Madeleine closes her eyes and pictures his aircraft.

But Mike interrupts again. "Could I train at eighteen?"

"Tell you what, Mike, when we get to the station, I'll ask around. I know there's a civilian flying club and I don't see why we shouldn't get you up in a light aircraft before too long, eh?"

"Wow, Dad!" Mike punches his thighs. "Man oh man!"

Mimi reaches over and caresses the back of her husband's neck and he returns a casual glance that says, "No big deal," but really means "I love you."

Madeleine is embarrassed. It is as though she were suddenly looking through a door that someone ought to have closed. Mike seems not to notice that sort of thing.

"Dad," says Madeleine, "tell the story of the crash again."

"Yeah, Dad," says Mike.

"How about you settle back and enjoy the scenery, and when we get there I'll show you exactly where it happened."

Mimi sings, "*O Mein Papa*."

Mike allows Madeleine to put her feet on his side of the seat. They sing for miles, until they forget where they are going, until they forget where they have been, and the drive becomes a dream, and that's what a drive could be back then.

Welcome to Paris, Welcome to Brussels, Welcome to Dublin, New Hamburg, Damascus, Welcome to Neustadt and Stratford, and London. . . . Welcome to Ontario.

So many unseen companions in this countryside, so many layers of lives. A collective memory has risen from the land and settled over the Triangle like a cumulus cloud. Memory breeds memory, draws it out of new arrivals, takes it in. The soil so rich, water so abundant, the bounty so green; it has absorbed us many times over, then breathed everything out again, so that the very air is made of memory. Memory falls in the rain. You drink memory. In winter you make snow angels out of memory.

Twenty-five miles north of London lies the Royal Canadian Air Force Station at Centralia. RCAF Centralia. Don't look for it now, it has lost its memory. A temporary place, for temporary people, it was constructed so that memory would not adhere, but slip away like an egg from a pan. Constructed to resist time.

The station is named for the nearby village of Centralia, but there the resemblance ends. The village is old and getting older. Gardens change in the village, shops go in and out of business, houses age, are altered, people are born, grow up and die there. But everything about an air force station is new. And it will stay that way for its entire operational life. Each house, each building will be freshly painted in the same colours they have always had, the cadets who jog across the parade square will always be young and about to get their wings. The families in the PMQs will always seem like the first families to move in, they will always have young children of about the same age. Only the trees will change, grow. Like reruns on television, an air force station never grows old. It remains in the present. Until the last flypast. Then it is demobilized, decommissioned, deconsecrated. It is sold off and all the

aging, the buildup of time that was never apparent, will suddenly be upon it. It will fade like the face of an old child. Weeds, peeling paint, decaying big-eyed bungalows. . . .

But until that happens, the present tense will reign. And were a wanderer to return after being lost in time, she could walk straight up to her old house and recognize it. Open the door and expect to see Mum with a pan of cookies—"I've laid out your Brownie uniform on the bed, sweetheart, where have you been?"

No, this part of the world is not the Bermuda Triangle. But from time to time people do come here in order to disappear.

Welcome to Centralia

I know it sounds a bit bizarre,
but in Camelot, that's how conditions are.

Camelot, *Lerner and Loewe, 1960*

"Wake up, Madeleine. We're here."

Royal Canadian Air Force Station Centralia. Six hundred and thirty-eight acres of government issue dropped into the middle of one continuous agricultural quilt. A good place to train pilots, farmland being ideal for emergency landings. Jack trained here during the war. "Welcome to the MON," his flight instructor had said: the Middle Of Nowhere.

He slows the car on the Huron County road. To their right, the station. To their left, the houses of the PMQs. "Let's take a tour, shall we?" he says and turns right.

Just outside the main gates, a World War Two Spitfire speeds on a steel pedestal, legendary little fighter, its propeller welded to a stop, clear canopy bolted over the single seat. *Per ardua ad astra,* says the plaque, motto of the RCAF: Through adversity to the stars.

"Dad, can you show us where it happened?" asks Madeleine.

"We'll get there, little buddy."

Jack would have flown a bomber had it not been for the crash. A big heavy Lancaster with four Merlin engines, the opposite of the nimble Spitfire. "That little airplane is one of the reasons why we're alive and free today," says Jack.

Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few. When Churchill said that, he was talking about the pilots who flew in the Battle of Britain. The Spitfire helped save Britain from Nazi invasion in 1940. When England stood alone, ninety-nine Canadian pilots stood with them, fending off the might of Goering's Luftwaffe while ordinary Britons watched from the ground.

The bolted and mounted Spitfire is another difference between Canada and Germany. Here the emblems of battle are proudly displayed, refurbished tanks and cannons, cenotaphs in town squares commemorating "our glorious dead" from the Boer War through to Korea. But in Germany there were no Messerschmitts shined up and on show. There were bullet-pocked buildings and heaps of debris, abundant ruins amid the "economic miracle"—the *Wirtschaftswunder.* It's a long word, like many German words, but Madeleine remembers it because it sounds like a magic spell. Her father explained what it meant and told them how the women of Germany rebuilt their cities brick by brick with their bare hands after each bombing raid, as undaunted as Londoners during the Blitz. Madeleine pictures them as though in a black-and-white newsreel, *die Trümmerfrauen*—"the Women of the Ruins." In headscarves, bent over foothills of rubble.

Jack pulls up to the guardhouse, chats and chuckles with the guard, who says, "Welcome to Centralia, sir," and salutes with casual courtesy—the type of salute that distinguishes air force from army. Jack touches two fingers to his forehead in response and pulls away. The Rambler drives slowly up Canada Avenue.

If her father had gotten to fly a bomber, he would have made more rubble in Germany. Unless they shot him down first. Hamburg, Dresden, Cologne. . . . Dad always shakes his head sadly at the mention of Dresden. When you hear the name Dresden, you picture beautiful china and wedding-cake buildings. They are gone now, bombs away. "Total war was Hitler's idea," says her father. Imagine going into someone's house and breaking all the plates. That'll teach you. All the women in the world couldn't put them back together again.

Madeleine watches the buildings go by, silent white siding with green trim, all neatly landscaped, labelled and laid out. The Protestant chapel, the Catholic chapel, the fire hall, the library. Shopping carts parked outside the PX, all quiet on this Sunday afternoon. Turning onto Saskatchewan Street now. . . .

They are driving very slowly. Like a military slow march, the muffled bootfalls a sign of respect or mourning. The McCarthys are carefully,

reverently beginning to say hello to Centralia. Moving among a herd of unknown sleepy creatures, their future—don't make any sudden moves, don't anyone take a picture yet.

Up Nova Scotia Avenue, past administrative buildings where the dads work, past H-shaped barracks where the non-dads live. Heat shivering up from the parade square, chessboard black against the white buildings. The movie theatre—*Pillow Talk* is playing—the curling arena, the hockey arena—a flurry of activity behind the rec centre where kids are cannonballing into an outdoor pool. Madeleine watches it all inch by under the loving August sun. This is where whatever will be, will be.

As abrupt as a flock of gulls, a squad of young men jogs past, white sneakers in double-time, billowing singlets and blue shorts, sweat-stained cadets all sinews and Adam's apples. Some are African, others Asian, the rest Heinz 57 Caucasian. Mimi watches them pass, then raises her eyebrows ever so briefly at Jack, who mutters, "Avert your eyes, woman." She smiles. Jack underlines his mental note—he will definitely start running, once they've settled in.

He watches the young men jog away under the brutal accumulated heat of afternoon. He's been there. Here. Wore the coveted "white flash"—a triangle of cloth inserted in the front of the wedge cap to signify aircrew in training. One of the "Brylcreem boys," irresistible to the fair sex. He did his ground training, sweated over an instrument panel in a classroom, surrounded by a cyclorama of painted landscape and horizon, trying not to "crash" the Link trainer—an ingenious little flight simulator still in use—drawing the hood over its cockpit, flying blind, *trust your instruments.* They drilled it into you, *take off into the wind, even on the throttle, hands, feet and head. . . .* Speaking aloud the cockpit check, powering up for the first heart-pounding solo—God watches over your first solo, after that you're on your own. And later, at the officers' mess, legs still trembling, raising the glasses high, *Here's to being above it all.*

Jack trained here, but he would have gone operational in the skies over Germany—Mühlheim, Essen, Dortmund. Mission after mission to the "land of no future," as they called the Ruhr Valley, industrial heartland of the Third Reich, where an Allied bomber crew's life expectancy was even shorter than usual. But the war is history. Many of these cadets are training as NATO pilots. They will be assigned to squadrons around the world. They may never see combat, but they will take turns on Zulu standby, ready to scramble and be airborne within minutes of the alarm, armed with nuclear bombs and missiles, knowing

that, if the balloon goes up, it could all be over one way or another in a matter of hours. Not just for a flight crew, or for hundreds, even thousands of civilians on the ground. But for all of us. It's a very different world now. Jack turns the wheel and the Rambler rolls into the shadow between two huge hangars.

Moments later they emerge onto a quiet expanse where concrete strips fan out to form a vast triangle within a triangle. The airfield. Perfectly still and baking.

Jack stops the car. Cuts the engine. Out on the runway, a shimmer of heat. "There's the old scene of the crime," he says. His tone is affectionate—a time-worn joke about a long-dead loved one. "Son of a gun," he says. Shakes his head. Mimi watches him. He turns to her and winks. Can't complain. He leans across and kisses her.

In the back seat the children look away, out at the airfield. Then Jack and Mimi are looking out too. It's as though the four of them were at a drive-in. Silent picture in broad daylight. The liquid air in this heat, a blurred screen.

Madeleine blinks. This is where Dad trained as a pilot. This is where he crashed. Surveying the smooth runways, she experiences one of those mental jolts that mark the passage between being little, and being a kid. Until now, she has pictured Centralia in the middle of the war—gritty landing strips swarming with cheerful men in fleece-lined leather bomber jackets, cracking jokes, sharing smokes, fearless and uncomplaining. Bombs exploding around the airfield, Dad dodging and dashing to his airplane. Although she knew very well that Centralia was in Canada, one aspect of being little was her ability to place it nonetheless at the centre of European hostilities.

When you are little, you can believe two things at once. Madeleine often had to remind herself that her father had not been killed in the crash—*how could he have been, when he is right here telling me the story of it?* Yet somehow she had come to think of it not only as The Story of the Crash, but also as The Story of When Dad Was Killed in the War. Now she realizes the absurdity of the images she harboured, and is chilled at how the latter title used to float through her mind with no sense of fear, no sense even of contradiction. All part of the semi-hallucinatory world she inhabited when she was little. Five minutes ago. She looks out at the airfield and feels as though she were waking from a dream. There are no bullet-riddled airplanes, no craters in the concrete, there are certainly no Lancaster bombers or even the bulky Anson trainers that her father flew. There are no weapons at all. The old Spitfire anchored back at the gates is the closest thing to a combat aircraft on the

base. For there, ranged on the tarmac, are Centralia's main operational aircraft: Chipmunks.

Cheerful little yellow training machines. Cadets get their first taste of the wild blue in the cockpit of a de Havilland Chipmunk, then work their way up to sleek Sabres, Voodoos and CF-104 fighters, or hefty Hercules transports and Yukons. But not in Centralia. This is a Primary Flying School. And a Central Officers' School. With a Language School, an Engineering School and a Supply School, the whole place is one big school.

Centralia plays its role in the web of NATO defence but it is far from the Berlin Wall. Far from the Bay of Pigs, the Suez Canal, Cape Canaveral and the Russian Cosmodrome, far from it all. The Middle Of Nowhere. This is where Jack was awarded his medal: the Air Force Cross. *For valour, courage and devotion to duty whilst flying, though not in active operations against the enemy.*

The government built Centralia in 1942, part of Prime Minister Mackenzie King's vision of a vast network of aircrew training bases that prompted President Roosevelt to call Canada "the aerodrome of democracy."

Canada was one-third of the great North Atlantic Triangle, poised between Britain and the United States. This triangle worked in cunning ways. Under the Lend-Lease plan, many of the airplanes were built in the U.S.—"the arsenal of democracy"—but until the Americans entered the war the planes could not be flown into Canada without violating the United States Neutrality Act. So pilots would fly the new aircraft to Montana or North Dakota and land just shy of the border. Only feet away, a team of horses waited on the Canadian side. The airplane was hitched up and hauled into Canada, then flown to RCAF stations to supply the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

Recruits from all over the Commonwealth—Britain and every corner of its former empire—and many American flyboys, before they had their own war, came to Canada. Far from the front lines and out of range of German bombers, over a hundred thousand aircrew were trained—pilots, wireless operators, air gunners and navigators. They got their wings and fed the skies overseas, where they died in droves—most of them on night bombing missions, seven to a crew, in broad moonlight.

At that time Centralia was a Service Flying Training School, last stop before operational training in England, followed by the real thing. Jack was ready to go to England when he pinwheeled in his twin-engine Anson and exploded in the field south of the landing strip. Just short of the ditch. You can see the fringe of longer grass out beyond the taxiway. They

pinned a gong on him for valour because he had done the right thing. It felt like reflex at the time but, as it turned out, Jack had made a courageous decision in the air, *though not in active operations against the enemy.*

Last April, when he got his posting notice, Jack laughed. Centralia. Son of a gun. Considered asking for an extension of his European tour of duty, but when he told Mimi, she said, "I want to go home, Jack." In all the years of their marriage they had spent only four in their own country. She said, "I want our next baby to be born in Canada." He smiled, needing no more persuasion than her desire for a third child. She loved Europe, but it was time. Time for the kids to know their country. Time, he knew, although she didn't say, to put some distance between them and the Cold War. When the Wall had gone up last summer, she had said, "We're too far from home."

This is the first time he has been back to Centralia. After the crash, he wore a bandage over his eyes for six weeks. His right eye is fine; he lost some peripheral in the left; he wears prescription sunglasses for driving and otherwise none at all except for reading. If he had been operational at that point, had he been injured by flak over Europe, they would have sent him back up once he recovered. No reason you can't drop your bomb load with an eye and a half. But he was CT'ed. Ceased Training. Like an obsolete aircraft, he was Struck Off Strength. He kept his wings but lost his aircrew category. His war was over. He was bitter at the time. He was young.

Mimi takes his hand.

Now he is back in Centralia. And Centralia is still a flying school, except these days the cadets come from NATO countries. And there are families. There are station wagons, barbecues and sprinklers. There is peace.

Most of his friends were killed.

He squeezes then releases his wife's hand, and starts the car. He rounds slowly back between the hangars. Time to show Mimi the social hub of RCAF Centralia. It's bound to be nice, they always are. High-polish wood and leather, sterling silver, white linen, and gardenias. The officers' mess. Worth squeezing yourself into a monkey suit, if you are an officer, and, more important, worth spending hours slipping into your best satin décolleté if you are an officer's wife. But formal events are far from the rule. Weekly dances require nothing more than a sports jacket and tie for the men, party dresses for the wives; bingos, raffles, barbecues and corn roasts are even more casual.

Mimi considers her husband's profile. She likes to tease him that he looks too young for her, although he is a year older. Something innocent

about his blue eyes—it could be his lashes, golden brown and too long for a man. She wants to rest her head on his shoulder while he drives, the way she used to when they were courting. Feel his cheek light against her lips, his smooth shave, knowing he can feel her breath, wondering how long it will take him to pull over. . . . Jack looks unconcerned but she knows it means something to him, being back here. He teases her about being "dramatic" but she knows this is where he had his heart broken. Not by a woman, by an airplane.

She knows better than to talk about it, or to show him she knows by any sign other than being happy here. By plunging in and organizing their life, unpacking her formals along with the pots and pans, joining the Officers' Wives Club, sending his uniform to the cleaners. . . . Something she would never tell him: she is glad not to be married to a pilot. Salt of the earth, life of the party, some of their best friends, but . . . the worry for the wives when the men are flying. And the waiting after work when the men are together, drinking. High-strung esprit de corps, for all her husband's belief in how relaxed the air force is compared to the army. Mimi knows, but does not say, that men who are relaxed with other men are sometimes anything but once they get home. She is grateful to be a wife, not a cheerleader. She has the best of both worlds: a man in uniform whose first love is his family.

She looks away, not wanting him to feel watched. He is whistling through his teeth. He's going to be fine. *I have such a good man.* There is nothing more erotic than this knowledge, no Hollywood scene could rival this station wagon in the sunshine with this man and his children and the secret that only she knows: his face, hovering just above her own, deserted by his defences. At the mercy of his own strength, needing her to take it from him, keep it safe. Then give it back to him. She slips her hand onto his thigh.

Jack turns left on Alberta Street and follows the one curve on the base. A slow circular drive leads to a stone building couched in hedges and flower beds. Low-slung Frank Lloyd Wright, its granite facade a glamorous contrast to the architectural whiteout everywhere else.

"There you go, Missus," he says.

Flagstone steps lead to a pair of oak doors. Tilted wood-framed picture windows afford a glimpse of cocktail tables and chairs between burgundy-and-blue curtains—the air force tartan. The dance floor gleams. It is possible to fall in love with your wife all over again in the time it takes to escort her up to the open doors where the sounds of a swing orchestra greet you, along with the clink of glasses, the aroma of the buffet, the laughter of men and women. Enchanted evenings.

"*Bon,*" says Mimi. And they drive on.

Mike says, "Where's your building, Dad?"

"Oh we just passed it, buddy, it's back there on the right."

Receding through the rear window of the station wagon, a two-storey white building with a green shingled roof and concrete steps. Benign as a snowfort. That is where Jack will be running the Central Officers' School. That is where he will fly his desk.

Mimi takes a hanky from her husband's pocket and wipes the lipstick from his mouth, left over from their kiss at the airfield. Then she kisses him again and whispers in his ear, "*Je t'aime,* baby."

Life is beautiful. He lets the steering wheel unravel beneath his palm as he completes the leisurely turn back onto Canada Avenue. He is a lucky man. He wants what he has.

He knows that, had he gone operational in '43, he might well have been killed. The crash spared him. He has been given the gift that many of his friends sacrificed. He has children. It ends there, there is nothing better, not fast cars or caviar, not Playboy bunnies or money. Your children. And the woman who has your children. He says softly to Mimi as she squeezes his thigh, "Behave yourself, Missus." She glances down at his lap—"You behave, Mister"—and smiles. Pleased with herself.

As the Rambler passes the gates, the guard touches his cap and Jack lifts two fingers from the wheel.

They near the Spitfire again, and Madeleine feels the butterflies wake up in her stomach. We are finally going to our new house. Which one will it be? In Centralia there are 362 to choose from. In a variety of colours.

Opposite the Spitfire stands a wooden pole. It's not a telephone pole, Madeleine can see that. Way up at the top is a large birds' nest. And protruding from the mass of straw is a thrust of metal. Like a rusty mouth.

"It's an air-raid siren," says Mike.

It's unlike the ones she knew in Germany—freshly painted loudspeakers mounted on concrete posts. No birds allowed.

"It's left over from the war," says Dad.

"Did you ever hear it?"

"Nope."

She knows what an air-raid siren sounds like. There were drills on the base at 4 Wing. It's a terrifying sound that makes you have to go to the bathroom. "Does it still work?" she asks.

"Who knows?" says Dad, "but it sure would give the crows a fright if it did."

The Rambler crosses the Huron County road. No traffic on either side as far as the eye can see. MON. Madeleine turns and looks back up at the raggedy nest. Glimpse of a black wing, then a crow rises and flies away.

The Rambler enters the PMQs and Canada Avenue becomes Algonquin Drive. It leads through a little Levittown, planned suburb of semi-detached houses and bungalows in every colour of the rainbow. None of this was here in '43.

Each house is surrounded by a big lawn, a view of the cornfields never far away. Lawns can make slaves of their owners, but all anyone does in Centralia is water and cut, and the grass flourishes thick and green. Same with the maples that cast their twirling keys to earth, the blossom-raining elms, the shaggy bushes that erupt in snowstorms of confetti each spring, *Just married!* There are no fences. Crescents and bends form tulip-shapes, the whole place is hugging itself. Madeleine looks out the window at this bright new world.

Bikes and trikes and red wagons, sprinklers going, the distant roar of a lawnmower, the smell of freshly cut grass. Kids glance up, mildly curious, strange adults wave casually at the car, Jack and Mimi wave back.

"Who's that?" Madeleine asks.

"We don't know yet," says Dad.

"But we will soon," says Maman.

Or maybe they won't. The people who waved may be moving out just as the McCarthys move in. Or you may run into a family from two or three postings ago, and it's a great reunion but either way it's just as well to start off as old friends. That's how it is in the forces. You bond, you move on, there is no contradiction.

They drive past a park with swings, a slide, merry-go-round and teeter-totters. Paved footpaths run between the houses and open onto empty fields full of possibilities invisible to the adult eye. Among Centralia's PMQs there are sixty-four such empty acres—big grassy circles rimmed by the backs of houses. Someone's mother can always see you. No one worries about children in Centralia.

"Dad, why is it called Centralia?" asks Madeleine.

"Because it's at the centre of the world." Jack winks at his son in the rearview mirror.

"Every place is the centre of the world," says Mike, "'cause the world is round." And Centralia feels round, the looping streets, the neatly mown fields that fill the centres of these loops. Madeleine pictures a target. And in the crosshairs, Centralia. Bombs away. Rubble. Women in kerchiefs picking up the coloured pieces of the PMQs. Lego.

"Madeleine, stop daydreaming and look at your new neighbourhood," says her mother. "Where do you think your best friend lives?"

Gee doc, maybe in that garbage can with Popeye the Sailor Man. "I don't know, Maman." *I like to go swimmin with bare naked wimmin, I'm Popeye the Sailor Man!* Rude lyrics she learned from Mike. She pictures her Popeye ukulele. It's on the same moving van with her hair and the rest of their stuff—including, unfortunately, her accordion.

"Madeleine."

"*Oui, maman?"*

"I said, pick one and then later you'll see if you were right."

Madeleine rests her chin on the window frame and tries to guess where her best friend lives. The one she has not yet met. Does she live in the pink house, the green one . . . ? Suddenly she remembers that she already has a best friend, Laurie Ferry. But she can no longer quite picture her face.

"There's your new school, kids." Jack stops the car. Modern single-storey white stucco with big windows and a taller section at one end, the gym. J.A.D. McCurdy School, kindergarten through grade eight. Deserted, deep in its summer sleep. The flagpole stands empty. The swings hang motionless, the slide and teeter-totters static.

"Hop out and take a look," says Dad. Mike opens his door and Madeleine slides out after him.

Their parents watch from the car as they cross the playground without stopping to swing or slide, past the bike racks and up the broad front steps. In a week and a half they will line up here with other kids, some of whom they will know by then. Friends.

Brother and sister cup their hands around their eyes and peer through the glass of the big double doors. The first thing they see, once their eyes have adjusted to the gloom, is an arrangement of framed photos. Mike rhymes them off: "Sabre, CF-100, Lancaster. . . ."

Two larger photos preside over the rest. Queen Elizabeth II, "our gracious Queen," and her husband, Prince Philip. Their portraits greet you in the foyer of every Canadian school here and abroad. The Queen and Prince Philip, your old friends. Your godparents, in a way.

Hi, Your Majesty. Madeleine stares up at the Queen and thinks, this will be my last year in Brownies. This spring, I will fly up to Girl Guides. There is the congenial sense that the Queen has heard her and serenely agrees, "Why yes, Madeleine, it is high time you flew up to Guides."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"You're welcome."

Mike has strolled away and hoisted himself onto a window ledge to get a better look. She joins him and he hops down and gives her a boost. She gazes in. "I wonder which one is my classroom."

"This one is."

"It is not, Mike."

This classroom has the alphabet marching in block letters above the blackboard, and happy numbers skipping hand in hand. It is obviously the kindergarten classroom. The pile of pastel-coloured nap mats in the corner clinches it. Madeleine is going into grade four, you do not have naps on mats in grade four. Mike is going into grade seven.

"Due to my superior intelligence," he says suavely.

"Due to it's automatic when you're turning twelve," she says with withering sarcasm. Mike never withers.

"You have to pass first, stunned one."

"Like wow, man," she drawls, "you passed. How womantic, how positively gwoovy," snapping her fingers and swaggering like a beatnik, "Hey Daddyo."

Mike laughs. "Do Elvis."

She swivels her hips, wrinkling her brow over the microphone, dropping her voice, dribbling it like a basketball, "'We-hell it's won foh the money, two foh the show. . . .'"

"Do Barbie!" he yells, giggling furiously—it's so easy to make her go crazy. Madeleine goes up on tiptoes, sticks out her chest, points her hands, and totters about with a plastic face and mechanically blinking eyes. "Oh Ken, can you pick up my handkerchief for me, please?" she simpers. "I cannot bend my legs, I cannot bend my arms, eek! Oh Ken, save me. My hero!" Mike takes out an imaginary machine gun and Barbie dies in a hail of bullets.

Madeleine gets up. "Hey Mike, want me to do Sylvester? 'Thufferin' Thuckotash!' Want me to do Elmer Fudd? 'A hunting we wiw go, a hunting we wiw go—'"

But Mike takes off around the corner of the building. She follows. They run around the whole school three times, then they run to the teeter-totters and hang over the steel bar on their stomachs.

"Hop on," says Mike, and they teeter-totter violently while Madeleine hangs on for dear life, not complaining about the bumps, laughing every time she wants to cry, "Ow!"

He abandons the teeter-totter. Madeleine crashes onto her tailbone, laughs and follows, convinced her bum is flashing visible cartoon pain behind her. He has climbed halfway up the mesh of the baseball backstop by the time she reaches it. "Come on men, follow me," he cries,

making explosion sounds, pulling a pin from a grenade with his teeth, "I need ammo!" and she tosses up a bandolier of bullets, "Thanks, corporal," he calls through the hell of battle—normally Madeleine is just a private, she swells with pride.

"Sarge!" she yells, "look out!"

Mike turns to see a Japanese soldier clambering up after him. Madeleine takes aim and snipes. "Got him!" she yells and, as the Nazi tumbles to his death, "*Auf Wiedersehen!*"

"He was a Jap," says Mike, "not a Kraut."

"Mike!" says Madeleine. "Don't say Jap and Kraut, we're not allowed."

Mike's head snaps to one side. "I'm hit!" His grip loosens and he half-tumbles down the mesh, bleeding, dying.

"Sarge! I'll save you!" She slides down the backstop, fingers and toes skimming the metal links, and releases her hold an impressive eight feet from the ground, tuck and roll. "It doesn't hurt," she announces before he can ask.

Their parents are still in the car, chatting. Mike and Madeleine are sweating. He pulls out an imaginary pack of smokes, and offers her one. Lucky Strikes. They lean against the backstop and puff, gazing across the road at a farmer's field and a stand of woods beyond. "First chance I get, I'm going to light out into those woods," says Mike.

"Can I come?" asks Madeleine, tentative—this could be pushing things too far.

"Sure, why not?" he says, and lets a squirt of clear spit escape his lips.

Times like this with Mike are precious. She does not want to move or say anything to wreck it. At times like this it is almost as if he has forgotten that she is a girl, and is treating her like a brother.

The sun tilts across their shoulders. Their shadows have grown up on the ground before them, long and lanky against the loose weave traced by the backstop.

"You ready to roll, kids?" Dad calls.

They walk back toward the car, comrades, no need to speak—as they say in the Marine Corps, *Deeds Not Words.* Their parents are smiling, amused at something. Madeleine reflects that sometimes your mother and father look pleased with you and you can't figure out why.

They pile into the back seat and it's funny how this is the first time since they arrived in Canada that Madeleine has not felt as though she were climbing into the new car in the new place. It's just the car. It's just Centralia, where we live, and that's our school, J.A.D. McCurdy.

"J.A.D. McCurdy made the first heavier-than-air powered flight in Canada, in 1919," says Dad.

You 'spect me to remember dat, doc?

A breeze lifts and the pulleys clank against the empty flagpole as the Rambler backs from the parking lot. On the first day of school the flag of our country will be raised. Not our flag, precisely, but the Red Ensign: the Canadian coat of arms, and in the upper left corner, the Union Jack. Canada does not have an official flag, we are not officially a country, we are just a dominion. What is a dominion? We're not sure. It's the name of a grocery store chain.

Madeleine is nervous now. Her hands are cold. The Rambler's creeping pace is taking them back through the PMQs, and closer to their house. Which will it be? Look for one with blank windows and an empty driveway. Algonquin Drive, Columbia Drive. . . .

At the corner of Columbia and St. Lawrence Avenue is a two-tone tan house with an orange VW van in the driveway. A plump girl with curly hair is Hula Hooping on the front lawn. As they turn right down St. Lawrence, Madeleine wonders, will I ever Hula Hoop with that girl? Will I get to drive in her van? Or is she moving away?

A purple house ahead on the left catches her eye because PMQ driveways are not usually full of old cars and washing-machine parts, or big German shepherd dogs that are not tied up. Who lives there? Scary people? That too would be unusual.

"That dog is loose," says Mike.

Mimi looks. "Tsk-tsk."

Her mother's *tsk-tsk* is the only time Madeleine is ever aware of her French accent. She puckers her lips and *tsk-tsk*s in a way English people think of as sexy. Madeleine twists her mouth to one side, à la Bugs Bunny, at the mere thought of the word. It makes her think of Bugs dressed up as a girl Tasmanian Devil, with a big bosom and red lipstick.

"What's so funny, squirt?" says Mike.

"Zat's for me to know and you to find out, *chérie,"* replies Maurice Chevalier, thanking heaven for "leetle girls."

The Rambler pulls into a driveway directly across from the purple house and stops. Dad says, "Say hello to the house, kids."

A two-storey white aluminum-sided semi-detached house on St. Lawrence Avenue. With a red roof.

Dad opens his door. "Let's inspect the premises, shall we?"

Madeleine is happy their house is white. Make of me what you will, it says, you need not behave in a yellow or green way in order to live in me. An asphalt path leads from the driveway to the front porch, which is located at the side of the house for privacy from your neighbours, who

live on the other side. Jack gets out of the car, walks around and opens Mimi's door. She gets out and takes his arm.

Their parents always lead the way to the door of the new house. Mike follows, hands jammed in his pockets, observing the tradition but looking down. He is getting old enough to feel conspicuous—this walk up to their new house, an intimate act performed in public. Madeleine slides from the back seat and turns on the movie camera in her mind—I must remember this, the first walk up to our door.

They are coming to the end of their homeless sojourn. In these last few moments they are still vulnerable, soft-shelled. Roofless for another few seconds, open to the rain, to kindness, to cruelty. Jack climbs three concrete steps to the small porch, opens the screen door and reaches into his pocket for the key. Mike runs back to the car for something as Jack slides the key into the lock.

Then Jack does what he always does, over Mimi's squeals and protests. He scoops her up in his arms and carries her across the threshold. Madeleine covers her face and peeks through her fingers, mortified and delighted. Mike returns and tosses her mangy Bugs Bunny to her. "Come on, kiddo," he says. She hugs Bugs and follows her brother into the house.

To the left of the vestibule, stairs descend to the basement. Directly in front it's up three steps and a quick right to the kitchen—functional Formica, frost-free Frigidaire and Westinghouse oven, with just room to spare for a small table and four chairs. A window over the sink looks onto the front lawn. In Mimi's mind it is already curtained. To the left is the living room with fireplace and, immediately off it, the dining room. It never seems possible that the china cabinet and buffet will fit once the dining suite is in, but somehow they always do. A bay window in the living room overlooks the backyard and one of Centralia's big empty green fields ringed by the backs of houses.

Mimi squints, mentally arranging the furniture—couch under the window, framed oil painting of the Alps over the mantlepiece, reproduction of Dürer's Praying Hands on the kitchen wall. She leads the way up fourteen steps that turn on a modest landing, to three bedrooms and the bathroom. She makes the sign of the cross when she enters the master bedroom. Once the moving van has arrived, she will call up the Catholic padre and have him bless the house. Mimi is not as devout as her mother, but the master bedroom is where children are conceived.

Madeleine and Mike know better than to squabble over the choice of bedrooms. Maman is the commanding officer at home and she will assign quarters.

They troop back downstairs, footsteps clattering, voices hollow. Mimi turns to Jack, arms folded.

He says, "What do you think, Missus?"

She tilts her head. "*Ça va faire.*"

He smiles. Passed inspection.

The four of them stand in their new living room. The empty smell. Fresh paint and cleanser. The white echo of the place.

Tonight they will sleep in a motel. Tomorrow the moving van will come and, though they will eat in a restaurant again, they will sleep in their own house. On the third night, Mimi will make a fabulous supper in their own kitchen, and from then on the house will breathe with the smells of home. An invisible welcome will billow like sheets in a breeze when they walk in the door. *Hello.*

That night in the motel, tucked into a rollaway cot, Madeleine asks her mother to tell The Story of Mimi and Jack.

"*Oui, conte-nous ça, maman,*" says Mike, snug in the extra bed.

And Mimi tells the story. "'Once upon a time there was a little Acadian nurse called Mimi, and a handsome young air force officer named Jack. . . . '"

If you move around all your life, you can't find where you come from on a map. All those places where you lived are just that: places. You don't come from any of them; you come from a series of events. And those are mapped in memory. Contingent, precarious events, without the counterpane of place to muffle the knowledge of how unlikely we are. Almost not born at every turn. Without a place, events slow-tumbling through time become your roots. Stories shading into one another. You come from a plane crash. From a war that brought your parents together.

Tell the story, gather the events, repeat them. Pattern is a matter of upkeep. Otherwise the weave relaxes back to threads picked up by birds to make their nests. Repeat, or the story will fall and all the king's horses and all the king's men. . . . Repeat, and cradle the pieces carefully, or events will scatter like marbles on a wooden floor.