

PROLOGUE

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The people we meet in our childhoods have the greatest effect upon us. For better or worse we owe our education to them. We are given one run at life and everything depends upon how lucky we are in our early encounters and how ready we are to receive them.

To Mildred Dunsfield I owed much of my education, not only because of what she was in her person during her short life but because of what she came to mean to me after her death, my own reflections, over a lifetime, upon this remarkable woman.

I had known Mildred Dunsfield all my young life. She was known to me as my aunt—though she wasn't, in fact, an actual relative of mine but rather a close friend of my mother's from their mid-twenties. I really got to know her when she invited me to spend the summer with her at her home in Dunsfield, a small town ninety miles north of Toronto named after her family.

This was a long time ago, the summer of 1913, when I was a boy of seventeen, and the year before the Great War. I had just matriculated from high school and was to leave my native Toronto that fall for university in Kingston. Aunt Mildred suggested that I get away for the summer, to prepare for "the great leave-taking of university," as she put it in her invitation. She and my mother conspired how I should spend those months. I was to live with my aunt in her grand old house and be employed as an apprentice to a master cabinetmaker and restorer in her town.

As a boy I had shown some talent in woodworking and had won a prize for a submission in school. My aunt had observed what she thought was a sensitivity to antiques, a sensitivity that she hoped would mature into something of value, while living in her grand, antique-filled house and working for this cabinetmaker. Or so she wrote in her letter. My appreciation of antiques, however, wasn't as remarkable as she made out; my interest in old things being more a

curiosity as to how the pieces were put together than any blossoming connoisseurship on my part. But my aunt was determined to see my interest as the latter and was only disillusioned of this belief when, the summer before the one in question, I suggested dismantling a George III chest-of-drawers that she kept in her Toronto apartment and shortening it by a couple of feet. She reacted with horror to my proposal and fortunately didn't indulge me in my folly.

Despite my callowness my aunt had faith in me and believed that even were I to become the barrister and solicitor that she and my mother fervently wanted me to become I could still develop my talents as a furniture maker. My aunt knew truths that I couldn't possibly have delved at the time. For instance, the chest-of-drawers that I had wanted to modernize was bequeathed to me in her will and has occupied a choice spot in the many domiciles I have inhabited over my long life. Years ago I restored it to its original lustre and it remains one of my most cherished possessions. Mildred Dunsfield's great-grandfather had purchased it from a British galleon in Boston harbour and brought it with him when he immigrated to Canada as a Loyalist Officer in 1783. Even in its day it was a well-crafted piece, constructed of Honduran mahogany, which was the rage in English cabinetmaking at the time. A similar piece sits in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It would appear that both pieces were constructed by the same Chippendale Cabinetmaking Works in St. Martin's Lane, around 1765, during the reign of George III. Still today when I open one of its snugly fitting drawers or feed it its annual coat of beeswax I recall the youth who would have dismantled the piece board-by-board and rendered it more compact.

But mostly, when I look at the piece, I think of Mildred Dunsfield—her life—and the small town in central Ontario that her grandfather had founded in 1835 and to which he had given the family name. We learn most from those we grow to love in life—love serving as the great catalyst of our spiritual and emotional development. Certainly I learnt from Mildred Dunsfield, whom I had grown to love very dearly over the course of one summer—the love of a seventeen-year-old boy for a woman . . . of what? some forty-three years—though she seemed at the time ageless.

It was noon, on a sunny June day, when I arrived by Ontario Northland Railways at a junction just west of the small city of Orillia. Williard Spenks, the cabinetmaker who would employ me for the summer, was waiting for me when the train hissed to a stop. The junction consisted of a dry goods store, a scattering of cream and red brick dwellings and a tiny hotel with the date 1880 and no other signifier above its lintel. I stepped from the train and saw this tall, spindly man and thought this must be Williard Spenks.

“Yer aunt sent fur you, eh?” he said gruffly, as soon as I approached him, speaking in a clipped Simcoe County accent. He condescended to shake the hand that I offered him. It was a most vice-like handshake, a grip with the feel of hardwood at its core.

“Youse call me Spenks, now,” was his second greeting.

He didn’t offer to take my heavy belted-valise and actually stood by and watched as I hauled it across the road to his wagon—a loose-boarded contraption that looked entirely home-made, not at all what you would expect from a cabinet maker, and one of the masters of that trade in the province evidently.

“My aunt has arranged I stay with her.”

“Reckon so.”

“She has the biggest house in town, I gather.”

“Reckon so.”

“Is your shop far from town?”

“Three mile ‘n’ a half, exact.”

“Will I walk to work?”

“Bicycle.”

“Oh, I see.”

We soon entered a region that looked as though the fields had been carefully manicured. There was a lush velvet growth, cropped close to the earth, with ponds and copses of regal red cedars scattered about. What a change from the dreary fields that we had passed earlier—rigidly ploughed and symmetrical and planted with corn, the crops barely a foot high this time of the year. I kept expecting herds of English cattle or sheep to appear, some animals that might explain the land’s verdancy, and the pitch, turf-like earth surrounding the ponds.

“Are there cows in these fields, they look so green?”

“Not any more.”

“Oh, so these are your fields?”

“Farther ‘an’ youse can see.”

“They’re so green!”

“Reckon so.”

By then we had debouched from the main road and were plying a stoneless, sheer stretch of dirt, with an even surface. I was having my first insight into Williard Spenks’ mind and its exact and extraordinary husbandry with nature.

We passed another field, spotted with lovely beeches, their leaves glittering like tin-foil stars. We passed beneath an archway of tall sugar maples, turned yet another bucolic corner, and there, upon its own perfect hillock, stood Spenks’ house. The square house, constructed of massive grey stones, had five large shuttered windows on the second floor, and four—two on either side of the great door—on the first. The doorway itself was a masterpiece of neoclassical design, with a half-moon window above it and fluted columns on either side—in the centre of which hung the massive door. A gigantic brass knocker, the facsimile of a lion’s head, shone brilliantly amid the other highly polished hardware.

The house’s beauty amazed me, its tidiness, the immaculately painted door and shutters. The cedar hedges bordering the house were quite mature and perfectly contoured; the rose beds bursting with summer blooms. The lawns sumptuous, as if sodded from the same verdant cow-manured pastures seen earlier. To the rear, discreetly shielded behind a stand of tall hemlocks, stood the barn or workshop. On its painted boards, high in the air, hung a sign with gold lettering upon a vermilion background:

Williard Stanislaus Spenks
Joiner and Cabinet Manufacturer

—the lettering as fastidious as everything else about the place.

“What a lovely . . .”

The words wouldn’t quite form on my lips. Perhaps it was that I knew by then how superfluous words were for this man—how

insignificant; and I didn't want to insult him.

Spenks must have sensed my confusion for he said: "Youse git out of them city clothes now and git to work. I'll show youse where to hang yer things. Youse'll work till six today and sup with us at the house. I'll take you to Dunsfield House after supper. Youse'll work seven till six. Sundays you have off for church and rest. Understood?"

I was both astonished and delighted. Astonished to be treated as a common labourer in this way, whereas I had expected the summer to be a kind of recreation prior to the serious business of university. Delighted to hear that he could run several sentences together at once. But that was all I was to get from the man. Surprised at my own recklessness I mimicked a response.

"Yep, reckon that's fine with me."

If the fellow wanted to communicate in shorthand, I thought, then I'll reciprocate in kind. In fact I wasn't in the least intimidated by the man nor did I sense that I ought to be—detecting neither a malicious nor truly tyrannical nature. And indeed, had I done so, I would have quit on the spot and walked the four miles back to town and my aunt—who, I knew, would rescue me from this man. In her letters to me over the winter she had made it clear that should I find the job at Spenks' workshop not to my liking I could quit at any time. "We'll find other meaningful tasks to occupy that active mind of yours," she had written.

Fortunately my first impression of Spenks was the correct one. The man, reclusive by nature, was also a bit of a misanthrope; but like other misanthropes whom I have encountered in life had many layers to his being. Beneath the barriers he constructed about him was a caring, curious nature, which placed laudable if also impossible demands upon life. Demands upon himself and others. Which meant that he was doomed to be disappointed in life. The brusqueness of manner, the sharp retorts, the trimming down of all excess with regard to language and emotion, these were the fences—the defences—which the man erected about him.

I was led to the barn and a dressing room, where I was presented with some heavy cotton work clothes and left alone to

change. I could hear a saw in the main shop gnawing away on some boards but no other sounds. When I had changed and hung up my good suit of clothing I joined Spenks in the workshop. He introduced me to the two journeymen who worked for him—using their surnames only—Klem and Dyke. Klem was probably in his sixties and just as unyielding in nature. Dyke was a little older than myself and friendly enough—though a bit laconic in nature as well, like Spenks himself.

I was put to work immediately, rearranging a stack of lumber to aerate the boards and separate the ones with signs of rot or mould. Spenks showed me what to look for. The wood was fairly exotic—first-grade mahogany, which was imported from Cuba, along with cherry and red walnut from New England, and some exotic rose and satinwood from the West Indies. The boards were all perfectly fine and needed only to be turned and reshelved carefully upon the same blocks.

“There’s more when youse are finished,” Spenks said.

As I worked I looked about the shop. Klem and Dyke were constructing a chest-of-drawers from mahogany boards. Other chests, tables, secretaries, and at least two dozen Windsor chairs lay drying on stretchers or awaiting some final addition. In another corner stood an assortment of antique furniture in various stages of dismemberment and disrepair. One item, a bow-front chest-on-chest was a lot like my aunt’s own piece. It seemed to be the model from which Klem and Dyke were constructing their own.

Spenks sat in a little self-contained glass hut set against one of the exterior walls—a room about the size and shape of a small greenhouse. This was his office and it looked as neat as the rest of the shop, and the property as a whole. The furnishings included a collection of books, works on joinery and cabinetmaking, I assumed, which indeed turned out to be the case. Spenks’ desk was situated to draw maximum light from the big north window and allow him a view of everything that was going on in the shop—including myself, in a corner, rearranging the boards.

The barn seemed a marvellous place to work. Summer light poured through the south windows that opened onto a meadow. The

he air was redolent with the sweet smell of cut wood, mingled with the aromas of varnish and stain. A whole corner was devoted to the processes of refinishing. There were enamel sinks, canisters, iron nails rusting in jars of mineral spirits (stain to accentuate the tawny hues of the redwoods), brushes neatly stacked according to size in specimen jars—and a great canvas sheet upon the floor, stained like a Joseph's coat with bright red and ochre pigments. When I had finished, Spenks gave me another menial task and then approached me with an armful of rough-hewn boards. He beckoned me to one of the woodworking tables near the north windows.

“Listen carefully now. I'll show youse but once.”

I watched as he quickly assembled the boards into a drawer—or mock-up drawer. Then he led me to one of the antique chests and removed its top drawer.

“See this drawer. Imagine youse don't have the drawer and must make one that fits. Fits, mind ya, like a drawer should fit a fine chest. Can youse manage it?”

I hardly had time to think.

“Yes,” I blurted. “Well, at least I think I can.”

“Git to it, then. Take yer time but not too much time!”

I started towards the work table with the drawer in hand.

“Oh no ya don't!” he yelled. “Youse don't have the drawer, remember. Youse have the hole that's missing a drawer.”

“Oh,” I said, losing confidence suddenly.

He snatched the drawer from me and put it in his little glass office, a gesture that I thought a bit school-masterish on his part. Then he showed me the tool cupboard.

“Treat a tool to last youse a lifetime,” he instructed, removing a glistening chisel from a felt-lined cabinet filled with over a dozen oak-handled chisels. I had never seen such fine tools in my life.

I set to work immediately, trusting my instincts, which, in this instance, served me nicely.

At six punctually Spenks returned to the shop and the two assistants stopped their labours for the day. I was invited “to sup” with Spenks and his wife at their house. I washed, changed back into my city clothes, and made my way across the lawn to the house.

It had been a perfect day and now was a perfect evening, with a sky that suggested it had hours of daylight remaining—the air alive with bird and insect song. I lingered for a few moments, breathing in the exhalations from the fields, conifers, rose beds. Then I walked around the house to the front door, where I struck the great brass ring that was part of the lion knocker against the lion's flattened snout.

The door opened and Enola Spenks' form appeared in the huge portal. She was a small, wiry woman with something of the same spirited energy as her husband. Even their faces were alike, lean and drawn, the skin ashen about the eyes and mouth; with the sun-line giving out abruptly where skin and collar met. Each was greying in the same way, though the wife had a considerable head start on the husband. But despite their similarities, hers was by far a more generous nature as I was to discover.

I was rushed into the kitchen, which is where we ate. But while passing through the house I glimpsed the formal parlour, which appeared to be a room that was actually used, as there was a newspaper on the floor beside one of the overstuffed armchairs. The furnishings were fine mahogany pieces, possibly crafted by Spenks himself. What struck me was the absolute order of the rooms, the neatness of the house as a whole. Spenks, in faded brown cotton overalls, and with the creases of his palms outlined with stain, seemed a little out of place. But this was mere illusion. The orderliness that I glimpsed was the cold materialization of the man's soul.

Spenks was his usual abbreviated self, except when he broke his silence to utter instructions of some kind.

"Sit here!" "Take the meat first, it goes fast 'round here!" "Eat more carrots! Reckon youse'll need yer eyesight this summer."

Spenks' wife sat quietly, eating discerningly, as though she had already supped. Although she said little she conveyed the impression that she wanted to say more—would have said more had her husband not been present. Her curiosity regarding myself and my Toronto life—and also my aunt—flashed out in places like a match struck in darkness but was immediately extinguished; as though a warning hand had been raised silently at the table's head. Enola

Spenks seemed to carry an inordinate burden in life.

Spenks, watchful of every move, ate with a labourer's appetite but a modicum of good manners. There was nothing vulgar or uncouth about the man, merely this frigid exterior. I was hungry myself and the food was plentiful and delicious.

After a long silence, during which I could hear only the sounds of heavy cutlery clanking against earthenware plates, and occasionally Spenks' teeth tackling a knot of gristle, Spenks spoke.

"He ain't met with Mill-dread yet."

Instantly the silence resumed; rather resonated momentarily throughout the room. I waited, enjoying the obvious drama at the other end of the table. Enola Spenks was about to speak but clearly held her tongue.

"Did youse hear, he ain't met with Mill-dread yet? I had him check in here first."

Spenks repeated the question just as tantalizingly as before.

I pondered whether some trick was being played on me by the pair but then sensed the tension on Enola Spenks' part, her definite noncompliance, her refusal to answer. I could almost believe that there had been an argument between them and that I was the unwitting victim caught in its silent and caustic aftermath.

Still Enola Spenks didn't speak. Then Spenks, setting knife and fork athwart his plate in a very gentlemanly fashion, spoke again.

"Reckon he'll just have to figure Mill-dread out for himself."

That was all. The wife acted as though nothing had been said, looking neither at her husband nor at me, as she collected the supper plates and brought a steaming rhubarb pie to the table.

I followed Spenks' example and wolfed down the dessert. I was anxious to see my aunt, whom I hadn't visited since Easter, and whose country house, indeed, I had never seen—meetings with her always taking place at her Toronto apartment or our own house in the city. The final dishes were cleared away. Tea was poured and quickly drunk. Spenks rose, his body, like a cat's, stretching leisurely and finding a second energy, much as the evening itself seemed to be doing, spreading its glorious golden light over Spenks' fields as though it had many hours of daylight ahead of it still—and striking

the lettering on his barn so that it flashed like a fishing lure.

I thanked Enola Spenks. She nodded her head in a kind of recognition then glided towards the sink on her felt slippers. Spenks put on a fresh shirt and his town shoes and led me out back to the wagon, which was still hitched to his mare.

Nothing was said on the way to town, so I took advantage of the silence to enjoy the peace of the countryside. Spenks and the horse knew each other's needs and the animal, its flanks a burnished bronze in the golden sun, trotted softly along the smooth dirt road at a comfortable pace. What preoccupied me were the day's events—and those that would follow. I had half-completed the drawer to the Georgian chest when Spenks called me to supper, and was pleased with the result. Spenks noticed what I had done but said nothing. I wasn't particularly bothered by this as I was learning about human nature. If neither the drawer nor the summer worked out then nothing would be lost. I still had university to look forward to—and indeed my whole life, which wasn't, thank God, to be spent in Spenks' employ.

The evening lolled me into acceptance of itself. The smell was that of the earth turned over on itself, greening and flowering forever. He possesses all this but seems to take no delight in it, I thought. The man's joylessness, on an evening as sublime as this one, seemed a profanation of sorts.

I could easily have spoken these uncharitable thoughts and stepped down from the wagon. Had I done so I would have had to return to the city next day and would never have gotten to know my aunt as well as I did; a person who, in terms of the generosity of human speech and affection, fulfilled the other part of God's covenant with mankind, the giving, not the parsimonious part; the lightness half, the joyful half. . . .

The sun still stood high in the west when we drove up the steep

hill to Dunsfield manor. My reaction to Spenks' place had been one of mild surprise; to the Dunsfield house it was one of awe. Constructed of square sandstone blocks with a brown and ochre tinge it seemed a jewel of brightness in the evening light. The house—built by Charles Dunsfield II in 1835—was dressed in freshly painted navy shutters, the old uneven panes of the stately nine-on-nine windows twinkling like pairs of old spectacles.

Flowers burst from neat beds in front and alongside the house—peonies, late blooming tulips, bearded irises, and early summer roses. As soon as Spenks' wagon ground to a halt, the great goldenrod painted door opened and Mildred Dunsfield stepped onto the wide flagstone steps. She appeared, to my boyhood vision, majestic in the golden light, more so than on any of my visits to her Toronto apartment, dressed in a long calico dress that seemed to draw the light to it; the dress a golden field filled with delicate blue cornflowers. She gave me a welcoming smile and embraced me in both arms. There were even, I seem to remember now, tears in her eyes—a recognition of sorts that passed through her: a familiarity of face or feature perhaps that invoked some happy memory—for she and my parents had befriended each other when they were in their mid-twenties.

“Oh Laurence, you've grown so tall! And such a handsome young man”—she pronounced, almost laughing, drawing me to her again. “Has Williard shown you our town? I hope he didn't put you to work immediately . . .”

“Put 'm to work immediately,” Spenks expectorated the words gruffly.

“Oh Williard, how could you? My nephew only just arrived.”

“He's here to work, ain't he?”

“Yes, but hospitality comes first, a human virtue. My nephew isn't here to make you even richer than you are.”

“Ain't here to make me poorer, neither,” he grumbled.

His words had grown fainter and it became clear that he was intimidated by my aunt. Suddenly the slim, excessively stern and acerbic Spenks seemed if not human then vulnerable in a human way. Clearly the moment belonged to my aunt, not Spenks. Steward-like

he lowered his head and carried my valise into the house. There, carefully, he wiped his town shoes on a doormat and said: “Did youse get him his bike?”

“Yes, Williard, a fine English bike. It’s out back. He’ll be at work in the morning, but not too early! Not on his first day, Williard!”

Her voice was scolding and Spenks knew it. The joiner withdrew into himself even more.

“How’s eight o’clock, then?”

“Nine o’clock will be fine, Williard,” my aunt struck back. “He’s a growing boy and needs his rest.”

“Reckon I’ll leave youse, then. Someone has to fetch the cows.”

“Oh, Williard,” she returned, “you’ve never had to tend cows in your life, don’t speak for effect.” She winked slyly at me: “He’s as rich as Croesus yet can’t get enough. Who will he leave his money to, I ask myself?”

Spenks, like some beaten beast, retreated from the house and remounted his wagon. The door was closed and my aunt ushered me into her large parlour.

As soon as we were alone she said: “You’ll like it here, I know. We’ll have a lovely summer together. You mustn’t let Williard get to you. He is well-meaning—if also, at times, just plain mean.”

“He’s been decent enough, really. A little difficult to talk to, that’s all.”

“That’s his Presbyterian father. He wasn’t a generous nature. Williard takes his stoic nature from him.”

She apologized for not meeting me at the junction.

“You understand I would have met you at the train station and had supper prepared for you here but Williard insisted we do things his way. I win most of my arguments with him but acquiesced in this instance. In any case, I thought it best you met Williard right away, to see what you thought. I hope that was all right. But here you are. Of course, you’ll eat here from now on. I have lots of special treats in store. I know young men like treats!”

Her voice had a throaty fullness to it, the voice of a contralto as

I would discover when I attended church with her on Sunday. It resonated from the deep recesses of her heart and soul. She put all of herself into that voice. What had she been like as a young woman, I wondered? My aunt had never married. Was she too grand for any of the men she had met? She had spent a number of years in Toronto attending school and then university, and, later, had taught at Bishop Strachan School in that city. Toronto hadn't suited her, however, and she had returned to the family home, teaching in a rural school, until an illness a year ago forced her to take a leave of absence.

She led me through the house, pointing out every detail with great enthusiasm. Its spaciousness, its grandeur, the brightness of its large rooms, were marvellous to behold. This was a house to grow up in. I thought of our own cramped bungalow in the city and how wonderful it would be to have a house like this to return to each day. My mother had been urging me to visit Dunsfield for many summers—but I always had an excuse at the ready; preferring my city friends to the unknowns of village life.

“You like old things, I know.”

The house was more or less the way Charles Dunsfield III had left it when he died in 1892. Modern sofas had been added, and some new rugs and curtains, and a ‘modernized’ kitchen and bathroom on the second floor.

“I grew up here and it seemed right to keep things as they were. Besides, I like having old things about me. They provide life, I always say, with the qualities that character provides the human face.”

As she led me from room to room she was always touching things: a richly polished cherry bannister here, an old pine blanket chest there, an Indian burl bowl—“Charles Dunsfield traded with the Ojibwa, imagine that! They would camp near the mill every spring!”—a set of painted arrow-back chairs. Her surroundings were as fresh to her as if she were encountering them for the first time. Yet she had dwelt among these things for what . . . over forty years?

My own quarters were on the third floor—four spacious rooms, each with its own window facing a different direction, one a sitting room with a desk and mahogany case for books. There was

even, at the end of the hallway, a tiny bathroom, which had been installed that winter especially for my visit. The desk in the sitting room, in brilliant tiger maple, had been her grandfather's at the mill.

"It's tiger-striped, all right," I said—and it was, its surface alive with stripes just like a tiger's hide.

She led me outside and showed me her garden and the path to Dunsfield lake a short distance away.

"It's deep and very cold—some say bottomless in places—but you can swim there. We draw our drinking water from its deep springs. No tar-bottomed boats are allowed, only canoes. That was in father's will."

She took particular delight in showing me her rose garden—"my little novices," she referred to them—and began snipping at some of the blooms with a pair of clippers that she kept in a rain-proof metal box amid the bushes. She cut half a dozen barely opened yellow "novices" and brought them inside.

"You'll have tea and strawberry cream pie, won't you?"

"Yes, please."

"Then you can draw your bath. This winter I had a whole new system installed for hot water."

That evening, sitting on her back porch, we talked of my mother and her life and how Mildred had come to know her in her mid-twenties. I knew only a little about my mother's life at the time. She and her younger brother had been born into a poor family in nearby Orillia and orphaned at an early age. Her brother had remained behind in Simcoe County, the town of Dunsfield in fact, and she had moved to Toronto, where she had studied to be a nurse and where she had met my father, who was born in Northumberland. She returned to Dunsfield briefly when her brother died suddenly. She had met Mildred Dunsfield then and they had become close friends. These were the facts as I knew them and Mildred Dunsfield didn't add substantially to them, except with respect to her own part in my mother's past.

My aunt spoke also of her own life. Her mother had died when she and her twin sister were twelve; her father "also prematurely" when they were twenty-two. Her greatest sadness in life, she told me,

was that her mother had died at such an early age—“early for her and early for all of us.” “Her death changed everything. My father’s, my sister’s, my own life—none of us was the same afterwards.” She and her twin—Emily was her name—had lived in this house after their father’s death; and then, just a few years later, Emily herself had died. Evidently her twin had met with a sudden death in an accident of some sort.

Hearing her recollect so many lives and so many events starkly in this way, many touched with sadness and untimeliness, was too much for my boyish imagination—an imagination that was riveted upon the future not bound to the past. We sat on the glassed-in back porch and watched a crescent moon lodge itself in the sky among a scattering of gossamer clouds, like a silver hoop lodged in a sandbar. We must have talked until nearly eleven that first evening. When we rose, there was still a reddish glow to the sky, “promising a perfect tomorrow,” my aunt assured me in her deep-timbred voice that carried so much authority.

I drew my bath and went to bed, exhausted.

Next morning I awoke to the unfamiliar sound of a rooster crowing. My aunt had left Charles Dunsfield’s gold chronometer on the bedside table for me. The hands registered seven o’clock. I lay in bed a while longer and then rose. My aunt was already dressed and in the kitchen preparing breakfast, sipping her Indian and Ceylon tea, when I descended the stairs.

Her mood was buoyant. Her voice filled the room with its rich organ tones as she charted our summer—the trips to Orillia and Lake Simcoe, the Muskoka Lakes, the giant expanse of Georgian Bay that she planned—adding to a list that she had already started; noting also the foods that I liked and didn’t like, a subject on which she seemed to know a good deal, having no doubt consulted with my mother beforehand.

But although her spirits were lively, there was a weariness to her that I had never noticed before and certainly hadn’t noticed the evening before when had seemed as spirited and ageless as Williard Spens. A tiredness weighed down that lovely face, a face that had always struck me as very beautiful but which now gave off a certain

weariness—but not a passing weariness, I was convinced; rather some deeper life weariness more aligned to disappointment than fatigue. I felt a sudden crushing insight that perhaps she was unwell. There had been some talk at our family table that winter regarding her health—and genuine concern expressed on my mother’s part. I felt a collapsing feeling of my own, a sudden stab to the heart, as I realized how quickly life must run its course, must eventually end—despite the fullness of the heart that contains it.

We ate breakfast together, she mostly sipping her tea, then I set out on my beautiful new Raleigh bike for my first day at the shop; a canvas lunch bag crammed with delicious sandwiches and other treats stuffed in its wicker basket.

A few minutes past nine I arrived at Spenks’ place, somewhat out of breath.

“Y’re late! Near ready fur lunch, I reckon,” Spenks mumbled under his breath, informing me that it was ten minutes past the hour by his watch. He then instructed me to return to my drawer and withdrew to his own glass hut. It took him until lunch to look me directly in the eye. I guess my aunt’s scolding the evening before had affected him deeply.

That day, working away on my drawer—it would take me the entire day to finish it—I began my apprenticeship under Williard Spenks; and an amazing tutelage it would turn out to be. Watching and taking instructions from the man I learnt a great many things, including the art of cabinetmaking; though little of this education took place in actual words. Intentions were conveyed through a flash of the eyes; instructions rendered through an exchange of Spenks’ expressive hands. Dissatisfaction through guttural rumblings deep in the throat; satisfaction . . . ah satisfaction, through a slant but just a slant of a smile on the otherwise parsimonious lips.

Spenks’ hands were a separate part of his being from the rest of him. They possessed an intelligence, a communicativeness, which the rest of him didn’t possess or at least didn’t reveal to others. Given a construction task, a problem in wood, the man deliberated feverishly until he arrived at a solution; then applied himself to the task with deftness and artistry. The result was a magnificent piece of furniture

that anyone would be proud to own.

I learnt about rare woods and about the art of sawing, boring, joining mortise and tenon; but also about communication, human communication. Spenks himself seemed entirely aware of and at ease with his limitations—which, of course, weren't limitations at all but his economy of style. When language became necessary he could rise to the occasion and condense and drive home his point with the precision of a hammer striking a nail. That afternoon, after my emotionally taxing day, he sidled up to me and made the terms of his employment clear.

“Yer job is to watch ‘n’ lern—‘n’ let yer hands do the lernin’. Let yer hands do the talkin’. If yer’re good ‘n’ if youse lern then youse’ll get to work on yer own. I’ll let youse work on yer own. Yer hours are seven to six o’clock, six days a week. Time here is as time should be: exact ‘n’ precise. Today was a holiday only. Mill-dread knows the rules. Take it or leave it.”

“Understood,” I answered tersely. “That’s what I expected when I took the job.”

“Understood then,” he acknowledged and grunted off. It had taken him this long to confront me, after the bashing that his ego had sustained from my aunt the evening before.

At quarter past six exactly I quit work and cycled home.

The evening was a sampling of the previous one. I had always loved my excursions into Ontario’s heartland, trips taken with my father when he was alive and with my mother in my teens. My mother had grown up here and knew this region of the province very well, though she tended to shun the Orillia area and vacation more to the north and northeast: among the Muskoka and Haliburton lakes. There is a sublimity to the skies of Ontario and a sweetness to its forests after a scorching summer day unlike any other sensations I have known in this life. The pines and spruce and junipers give the air its most characteristic aroma but the summer grasses add their scent as well, particularly the species known as ‘sweet grass’ by the native people of the region, which lends a hint of musk or sandalwood to the already fragrant evening air.

Nothing was troubling my mind this evening, as I made my

way on my spangling English bike, the manufacturer's specific in gold-leaf on the crossbar. I stopped at the edge of Spenks' property, the verdant paddocks and ponds that I had admired the evening before, and the view suddenly was of an Eden-like garden. Birds gathered in the trees or glided from branch to branch. Swallows seined the skies over Spenks' pastures and over his house hidden behind the screen of hemlocks. Extraordinary creatures, their playful antics combined the gracefulness of the ballet dancer with the bravura of the acrobat. Their presence, I knew, had a practical side to it as well, as these birds swept the skies clean of horseflies and mosquitoes. They nested, old Klem had told me, under the eaves of the barn, returning from their winter sojourn in central and south America at more or less the same time each year.

The coolness from the ponds filled my lungs. I had had a good day at work. I had learned much and been able to contribute to the life of the shop. I had finished my drawer and Spenks had taken it to one of the big windows to inspect it and then to the chest that it was meant to fit. With darting eyes and gnomish hands he inspected every mortise and tenon and ran his workman's fingers along every sanded surface. Not a word of praise fell from his lips. But he didn't criticize my work either. His hands, inspecting the piece, showed no signs of irritability—which they certainly would have done had he found the work wanting. Regardless, his silence in this regard offset his silence in the other, and I was put to work on a more challenging project.

I remounted my bike and hurried home to Dunsfield, not wanting to be late twice in the same day.

My aunt had supper ready when I arrived. She asked me about my day and told me a little about her own. Despite the after-effects of a bout of pneumonia that winter, which she mentioned now for the first time, she kept quite busy: gardening, shopping, needlework, and twice a week driving with a female friend in the latter's new Ford automobile to Orillia, where she spent the day assisting the nursing staff at the Huronia Mental Centre.

After dinner we strolled down the hill to the stone bridge fording the small river that ran through the village, the bridge built by her great-grandfather to bring the community together. She pointed

out the intricacies of the arch and lovely emblem chiselled into its limestone facing: a single giant white pine upon a plain escutcheon—*Pinus strobus*—hallmark she explained, of the family's new Loyalist life in Upper Canada, and of the lumber business that her great-grandfather had successfully established here. Charles Dunsfield I and his son had supplied his Majesty's Government with thousands of impeccably straight masts for the Royal Navy, crafted from the giant white pines that dominated the forests of the area.

We spent our first few evenings like this. Or listening to gramophone records in the parlour (she had a collection of the best operatic voices from all the great opera houses of the world) or sitting and talking on the back porch. The porch faced northwest, so that the sky remained bright until ten o'clock. Then the stars came out and filled our vision with the landscape of night—and on the fourth night with something even more spectacular. I had seen the aurora borealis from our backyard in Toronto, during cold winter nights, but nothing like the light displays witnessed that evening from Mildred Dunsfield's back porch. The ink-blue empyrean seemed to split apart and a great river of shimmering green lava flow across the universe. I sensed how distant the auroras were from earth though I felt I could reach out and touch them as well, as though the exhalations of some vast metropolis beneath the horizon.

3

The week passed quickly.

Spinks treated me kindly if not warmly and slowly coaxed me into the life of the shop—the active worklife of the shop, at least; there was no other life in the shop. Klem and Dyke kept to themselves, I mean their individual selves—no discourse passed between them of which I was aware. And Spinks . . . Spinks spoke to no one but himself and possibly his God.

The work occupied us, its variety and kind. I was led from one project to another, each of which fulfilled another stage in my

summer's apprenticeship under this man.

Furniture arrived at Spenks' workshop weekly from all over North America—from dealers, museums, auction houses in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, even as far away as Boston, New York, Philadelphia—for repair and restoration, and, in some cases, duplication; for the people who owned these grand seventeenth and eighteenth century specimen pieces often wanted them replicated in kind, though for what purposes remained obscure; perhaps to reassure themselves that they owned the original piece and that they had a copy should anything happen to it.

Then there was Spenks' "bread and butter" business, as he referred to it—the manufacture of tables, sideboards, bureaus, secretares, Windsor and other fancy chairs, bedsteads of the finest hardwoods and in the most tasteful and traditional styles of the past century and a half; furniture to fill the grand houses of the upper classes of North America. Sometimes he received an order for the 'newfangled' office furniture—some sleek desk or bureau—but he generally contemned such "baldly mod'nist concoctions"—and refused to give much of himself to them. Spenks, Klem, Dyke—and to a lesser extent myself—were kept busy six days a week. The two journeymen did the basic construction work—I the more ancillary tasks. Spenks worked on the veneers, did any moulding or sculpture work that needed to be done, and oversaw all the refinishing. Thus the pieces came to life only when Spenks, God-like, brought them to life. Often he would let me assist him with some difficult task, much as a surgeon might allow an assistant to help him during an operation—to hand him things and hold his tools or wipe his brow. A few times he let me work on a piece on my own, such as a drawer, or the veneer on some utilitarian piece. Once he let me try my hand at carving, when he saw that I had a talent for it.

I had arrived and begun work on a Monday. By Saturday I was bone tired. Spenks, in deference to the day of rest that was to follow, closed his shop early on Saturdays. I hadn't known this and had expected to be kept until six as usual.

"Youse can go now," he sidled up to me, at exactly three o'clock. The whir of Klem's great bandsaw had stopped a few

minutes before and I had wondered what was happening. “We quit a’ three on Sat’ days.”

“Oh,” I said—the news was gratifying to my weary body.

“Mind youse don’t get too rested tomorrow,” he said, after I had changed my clothes and was heading for the door.

I smiled and shrugged my shoulders. It was his awkward way of patting me on the back and offering a modicum of fraternity. God forbid he should have thanked me or said that he found my employment satisfactory. That acknowledgement would never cross the man’s lips; though a kind of surrogate acknowledgment would be passed along through my aunt. Querying Spenks after the first week, she learnt that he was “satisfied enough.”

“He thinks you’re a fine worker, with a bright future,” she reported with that uplifting voice that would raise anyone’s spirits; though the actual wording—the generosity—of the praise could only have been her own. No matter. A hurdle of a sort had been mounted.

That afternoon I cycled home slowly, looking forward to a day of rest. Summer was high on the wing. Birds seemed to grow more plentiful and various by the day. Baby swallows were testing their fledgling wings. That morning, as I was getting my bike from the back shed, a pair of royally clothed tiny blue jays had landed on the lower branches of one of the pines. I whistled to them and they fluttered in the air several feet above my head, their wings awkward and only newly tested; they seemed about to land on my shoulders. The high-pitched squeal I made held some fascination for them, for they appeared as though they wanted to make some physical contact, which pleased me very much.

When I pulled round back this afternoon I looked for these birds but they were nowhere in sight. No sooner had I put my bike away than my aunt appeared on the back porch.

“You’re home early, Laurence. I expected you would be,” came her throaty welcome.

I felt very much at home at my aunt’s house by then and her warm greeting, together with the thought of enjoying her company for the day, must have brought a smile to my face; for she embraced me as soon as I set foot on the porch, kissing me on both cheeks.

“Oh, you have such a lovely woodsy smell.”

Then, almost as if she had said or revealed too much, she said: “You wash and change now. I’ve prepared a special supper for the two of us. Your first week is over, after all, and we have to celebrate.”

The meal was a splendid one. Roast chicken with gamy sage stuffing, new pink potatoes, and a side dish of cooked spinach and beet greens, the vegetables all from her own garden. Also a delicious white wine, a fruity Kabinett from the Rheingau region of Germany, with the coat-of-arms of some noble house emblazoned on the label; the first such wine that I had ever tasted.

After the meal she suggested that we sit on the porch and have our dessert of lemon meringue pie.

The wine had a softening effect on her and she spoke openly of herself for the first time. She described a trip to Europe that she had taken on the Cunard Line: the sleek *Olympus* with its wedding cake decks and yellow and black funnels.

“The sea must be in my blood. My great-grandfather longed for the New England coast where he had been born; my own grandfather and father, too, though both were born here in Simcoe. My father could always smell the sea, he used to say, when the winds from Georgian Bay were brisk in summer. I must take after him. When I saw the sea for the first time, after our ship was free of the St. Lawrence, at Anticosti Isle, I recognized the smell. It was as though I had known that smell my whole life. That’s heredity for you!”

I had lots of questions of my own. My curiosity ran to factual matters, though her replies went beyond mere factual replays. I was learning things about this impressive lady that probably no one else on earth knew; for I sensed that with the exception of her friend with the automobile she had no close friends in the village. She had a close friend in Orillia, however, a male doctor—a widower much older than herself, I gathered, from what she told me that night. She had known him for many years and had, she told me, travelled to New England with him the previous summer, in his white Oldsmobile convertible. She would later show me photographs that a stranger had taken of them on Cape Ann, the two of them very prosperous looking in their white linen suits and Panama straw hats.

We spoke of the warmongering antics of certain European nations and the possibility that Great Britain would be drawn into an unpopular war. She was very well informed, from reading the main Toronto papers, which arrived in the mails weekly; and from discussions with her physician friend. The pair had planned a trip to Europe that summer but had had to cancel because of her illness the previous winter and the perilous state of European politics . . . “and, of course, most especially because you chose to visit me here.”

It took a long time for the light to ebb that evening because the solstice was but a few days off. Even after the sun had set an intense orange glow pulsated for some time above the horizon, like the glow of a furnace. After it had faded the sky turned a luminous cobalt from end to end. Long silences followed upon each exchange. I was listening to the sounds of night in the woods and still recuperating, I suppose, from the *Qualitätswein* I had drunk over supper. I may even, for a time, have lapsed into sleep.

“I have something to tell you,” my aunt’s words burst with great expectancy through the veil of sleep.

“Your mother has told you a little about my life and here tonight I have told you a little about it as well. But my life hasn’t always been as peaceful as this moment. These gentle Dunsfield evenings belie much that has happened in our sleepy little town . . . and in this lovely old house . . . things that have happened to us Dunsfields . . .” and then began a plaint that took me completely by surprise and that shook me from my lethargy.

“My mother, who was the beacon of our father’s life, became a consumptive when my sister and I were young children, so that the dear woman didn’t have much of a life with her family . . . nor we, her family, much of a life with her. Our father, who was a good man, did all in his power to compensate. He provided us with a real family life, through our dinner conversations invariably revolved around mother’s illness.

“Then, to make matters worse for our dear mother, she learnt she was with child once more. The pregnancy was very hard on her and my father, who blamed himself for making matters worse for them both, but which proved in the eight month the greatest sacrifice

of all . . . her death and the unborn baby's as well.

“Emily and I were twelve at the time. I remember the day as clearly as if yesterday. It was a late January day and the winter sky was achingly blue. Mother was resting in bed, the room I reserve for myself now, and father was caring for her. Emily and I were playing ‘grocery store’ in our favourite spot, our sun-filled landing upstairs. Suddenly father called out to us—‘Emily, Mildred! Come quickly!’ We knew his different calls and this one was the most urgent of all. Emily and I rushed into the bedroom. Mother was sitting up in bed, a startled look on her face. I mean bolt upright as though someone had forced her upright from behind—awakened her from sleep—and father sitting on the bed beside her.

“She called out to us—using that compressed locution she liked to use: ‘*Emlymildrd.*’ By now father was doing what he could to comfort her, moving close to her on the bed and taking her in his arms. Mother started to say something but only painful sobs left her throat—obviously she was in terrible pain. ‘Emily—run and fetch Mary,’ father called to my sister. Mary was the family midwife who had assisted at our births. Emily darted from the room. We could hear the downstairs door slam shut behind her as she flung herself from the house. I remember feeling some small resentment towards my father—that he had sent my sister on such an important life-saving errand and not me. The mind of a twelve-year-old child filters reality in the strangest ways. But he had his reasons. Instead I got to go downstairs and make a pot of herbal tea.

“It was too late. Mother died in father's arms while I was in the kitchen preparing the tea. When I returned to the bedroom with the tray my father was cradling her in his arms like a child, tears streaming down his face. ‘Your mother is dead. Your beautiful mother is dead,’ broke through his desperate sobs. Never before or since have I seen such complete and crippling loss. I stood there holding the tea service, feeling as useless as I had ever felt in my life.

“Emily rushed upstairs with Mary. She entered the room with what I thought was a smile on her face, satisfaction at having done something good—I suppose. But when she saw father cradling mother's limp body she broke down herself. She screamed—she

screamed as I have never heard a human scream before—least of all my own sister. Mary had to restrain her for it seemed she wanted to strike out physically against everything in the room—father and myself included. ‘Oh no! No, you can’t! No, no, you can’t,’ the words a desperate plea of their own; as though someone in the room were responsible for this death. Father had Mary hold her against her will and then take her downstairs, leaving him and me alone in the room.

“For many years our home, our peaceful home, had lived under the pall of mother’s illness, an illness that came in fits and starts, bringing its bright and dull days, yet manageable overall—with mother holding herself together most of the time. But nothing was as terrible as the pall that settled over our home, our lives, after her death. Father fell into a deep silence, a withering silence, that seemed, like a malicious cancer, to devour him cell by cell—taking first his joy in life and then, little by little over the next ten years, his actual life. One evening I found him going through some of mother’s letters in near darkness. I turned on the light, thinking that I was doing the right thing. ‘No—Mill,’ he pleaded with a sobbing tone in his voice. ‘No light, please.’

“Father fell into a deep silence, my sister into a state of rage; first an actual rage, which dominated her life up to and even after the funeral, on that bitterly cold January day. Then, as spring softened the land, a quieter rage that was like a slow poison released into the air—making all of us sick at heart.

“I don’t think my sister and I ever played together after that. One day I opened the cupboard where we kept our games, our favourite ‘grocery store’ game in particular, only to discover that they were gone. Emily had burned them in the outdoor stove behind the barn. Our childhoods, Emily’s and mine, ended with our mother’s death.

“Years later, after Emily’s own untimely passing, I realized that I had never properly mourned my mother’s death. Father’s grief—and Emily’s—had been so powerful and powerfully expressed by them both that I hadn’t myself had a chance to personalize my own grief—I was too worried about them; never had a chance to experience her death for myself.

“Not until years later did I do so. What is loss, as its pain reverberates through a family? Such loss is a deep reflective and all-consuming sorrow experienced by those who have been left behind—sorrow for ourselves. Someone has said death is hardest on those who survive it—and it’s true. The grief I felt for my mother, driven within me all those years, blossomed forth in my late twenties, after my twin sister’s untimely death. Then I felt it, as if for the first time; felt it from the vantage of a twelve-year-old girl trapped in an adult’s body. The loss I felt was for that child—that long ago child—who hadn’t at the time been able to express its grief and then had to store that grief away for later in life, when it combined with other losses and came startlingly to life . . .

“Oh dear Laurence—why do I burden you with such a wrenching tale? I suppose, quite simply, I wanted you to hear these things from my own lips; wanted you not to confuse the peace of my present life with some of the things, the heart-rending things, which have occurred in that life; which have affected the Dunsfield line so deeply. My life, it seems, has been built on a staircase of losses. Some day I shall tell you the rest of our story—the Dunsfield story . . .”

Never would I forget my aunt’s summing words that night on the porch.

“Our greatest losses are the ones that burrow deeply within us only to burst forth and surprise us later in life . . .”

Like all words of wisdom these would ripen over time. Only a fraction of their meaning did I fathom at the time; their full significance wouldn’t dawn on me until much later in life, when I was advanced enough in my own life to receive them. Her sad words, too, became trapped in a seventeen-year-old boy’s heart and wouldn’t be released until much later; when a lifetime of experiences of my own formed a context for such understanding. . . .

4

Many evenings were spent together like this but after the

second week my aunt insisted that I get out and meet people. She arranged some introductions for me with families in town, particularly ones with sons and daughters my own age. But the young people of Dunsfield and I had little in common. With one exception: a girl a year younger than myself, who had just finished high school as well, and who would be attending Teachers' College in Toronto in the fall.

A sort of romance developed between this girl—Christine was her name—and myself. Christine had never had a boyfriend and I had never had a girlfriend so the experience was new to us both, thus fraught with shyness and awkwardness on both our parts. In part her interest in me had to do with my being from the large metropolis to the south, which she had visited only once. What fascinated me about Christine was her free, spirited nature, a combination of wild beauty and aloofness. There was also her considerable rapport with nature—which was different from anything I had experienced before; my aunt's own passion for nature excepted. Christine's childhood, unlike my own spent in the city, had been one long encounter with nature. She was delighted to show an ignorant city boy what sweet grass was. Or how to make sachets from it, using tobacco leaves, as the native peoples had done. Or to reveal some mystery about the native people—Ojibwa and Algonquin—who had once dwelt in the area. Or to show me where the most valuable granite could be found for monuments. She had, in a way, the kind of acute observational sense that Williard Spenks himself possessed; with another of Spenks' characteristics thrown in for good measure—namely that this part of her nature was to a degree developed at the expense of others. Christine, however, was much more complex as a person, understanding intuitively more about life than most people do over a lifetime. As a result I became transfixed; irritated at times but also transfixed.

Christine was lovely to look at, too. Tall, slim, with long beautifully contoured legs and skin bronzed from the summer sun, except where protected by her long mane of hair—hair that fell in the straightest most shimmering curtain of golden light to her narrow shoulders. Christine befriended me. I had met her formally at a

gathering arranged by my aunt but thought no more about her. A few days later she was waiting for me on the stone bridge when I bicycled home from work. At least I saw her there, daydreaming on the bridge's crown, and in my boyish egotism thought that she must be waiting for me. In the city one can bicycle past a neighbour and simply nod "good evening" but not in the country. I stopped, we chatted, and she asked quite blankly whether I would like to accompany her to the Indian campground after supper.

I was pleased but a little irked as well, for I had sensed at our first meeting that she was lonely and that, should I befriend her, she would place impossible demands upon my time. This was my fear at least, though later in life I would wonder about my hesitation, my archness in nearly shunning this beautiful girl—who wore this evening the sheerest cotton dress that revealed every part of her slim, athletic figure, and that, because of the casual way she was sitting on the bridge, stopped just short of her lovely nut-brown knees.

My aunt was delighted when I told her of the encounter and rushed me through supper so that I could embark on my "first social outing." I was nonchalant about the whole thing. Christine led me along a path by the river to a spot where the Ojibwa would camp in summer. She stopped suddenly and with her delicate fingers seemed magically to unearth some artefacts half-buried in the soil, a mortar carved from a river stone and an arrowhead from a piece of flint. Later, I wondered whether she had planted these objects for us to find. Many of the objects I have found or purchased over a lifetime have gone astray or been discarded but these are still in my possession. The mortar, though relegated now to an old desk in the basement, has served as a paperweight for most of my life. The arrowhead I keep almost superstitiously in a leather gentleman's box that I bought in Florence, along with an assortment of gold cufflinks and mother-of-pearl studs—a kind of talisman or lucky piece as I still think of it to this day.

Of course these objects didn't just remind me of Christine; indeed, in time, they didn't remind me of her at all. Rather they became tokens, mementoes, of my summer with Mildred Dunsfield, in the town of her name. For though Christine was to monopolize my

attentions within two weeks of my arriving in town, and to keep them focussed on her for the rest of the summer, she was, and over the summer became much more so, an adjunct to the larger experience of Mildred Dunsfield herself.

Christine was a wild spirit—a wondrous creature. She liked to tease me, and, of course, since we were in her natural habitat and in her world, she could do this quite naturally—locate and make fun of my city ways, my city ignorances. But every so often I would mention Toronto and, in a very mature voice, tell her what she could expect to find in the big city. I could see that my knowledge of urban life was as strange and intimidating to her as her knowledge of the country was to me; more so, in fact, because I could exaggerate certain features of city life, which she wasn't in a position to query or deny, whereas her own special intimacy with nature was something that I could share with her, had the capacity for myself, though lacking in specific details. I was pleased, I think, that I wasn't going to be in Toronto when she arrived there in the fall for already I knew that I didn't want a relationship to extend beyond the summer, though even today I can't fathom what aberrant instinct guided such a decision on my part. For Christine was truly a lovely being, a natural beauty, passionate and compassionate, and a delight to be with in every sense.

A relationship developed nonetheless, more through her management than mine. My own indifference, perhaps, contributed to her fascination with me—though I certainly enjoyed her company. Christine was well-read too, much better read than I was myself at the time, and well-spoken, and would show me things that she had discovered in books much as she would unveil the wonders of a pitcher plant or show me her favourite patch of painted trilliums, which, a month prior to my arrival in Dunsfield, she assured me, “had draped the forest floor with Aladdin carpets of colour.”

Winters in Dunsfield I imagined as desolate and bleak. The bleakness I could hear at times in the drone of Christine's voice or in a certain distant or abstract look that sometimes transfixed her eyes. Though I considered the place pastoral in summer I had a very different image of Dunsfield in winter: the imponderable winter

skies, the great distances made greater by the area's heavy snowfalls, and perpetual winds gusting from the northern Great Lakes, an arctic steeliness at their core. We got the same weather in Toronto but somehow seemed better equipped to deal with it in the city—its brick and stone buildings more fortified against the elements and the dreariness and longevity of winter than the meagre clapboard cottages of Dunsfield—my aunt's and Williard Spenks' magnificent stone edifices excepted.

In fact, this was ignorant supposition on my part, for whenever Christine spoke of winter she did so with as much enthusiasm as when she spoke of summer. The look I often saw in her eyes, which I took to be a reflection of barren winter itself, was really the look of self-reflection and self-sufficiency and nothing more. For her winter was as magical a season as any other, with its own distinct features and disclosures, its "own subtle transitions," as she described them.

Like myself, Christine was an only child, given to parents who were different in every respect from her, less spirited, less sensitive, more materialistic; and who were disappointed, she told me, that they had given birth to a dreamy, nature-loving daughter instead of a utilitarian and practical son. I felt very uncomfortable the few times that I met them and found the father in particular to be abrasive and a little crude. Christine was a fairy child who inhabited her own world, separate from theirs—a reincarnated spirit dropped into this ordinary family, in this bucolic but bleak country, fending for herself with only her instincts and imagination to guide her.

Though I respected Christine, and learnt from her too, I didn't grow to love her, though she probably grew to love me. Or thought she did, at least. But such, I imagine, are the ways of the heart when we are very young. The fact is that I did not love Christine. That deep turning, that visceral shifting of the axes within oneself, that heightening of selfless devotion that are the hallmarks of love, weren't feelings that I shared at the time—though I can't speak of Christine's own feelings for me. She praised my wood-working skills, miscalculating, I think, their significance in my life and the importance of my apprenticeship under Spenks, thinking perhaps that I would pursue this line of work, that I would settle in the country and

become another Williard Spenks, a man, surprisingly, with whom she got along excellently well—as did he with her.

Spenks was, I was to discover, a little in love with her. One afternoon, a week or so after we met, she rode out to the shop on her bicycle unannounced—hoping to surprise and bike home with me at the end of my shift. I was sure Spenks would be upset as it was only five o'clock, an hour before we shut down for the day. I was upset when Christine sauntered into the workshop. But, instead, to my surprise, Spenks gave every indication that he welcomed her visit. He stopped his lathe and, without uttering a word, seemed to signal me to do likewise. I was fitting another drawer to a cabinet at the time. And Spenks began chatting amiably with our visitor outside his glass office.

Christine was wearing one of the two summer dresses she owned, this one as thin and ethereal from washing as the other, and it clung to her body as closely as skin to bone. The lower hem of her dress swished over her knees as she dismounted from her bicycle. Her long slim legs, tooled like a runner's but without the latter's disfiguring muscularity, shimmered with fine golden hairs. Spenks was unusually friendly, though without sacrificing a word of his measured speech. I watched them together without stopping what I was doing, observing painfully that the teasing that I thought was reserved for me alone was in fact natural to her. It was more artfully practiced on Spenks, to be sure, than on myself, because she had known the man all her life, and no doubt spoken with him on numerous occasions. Spenks became more gangly in her presence yet surprisingly younger, too, and Christine became more self-confident and grown up.

“Suppose youse like to quit for the day,” he spat the words like a plug of tobacco at me. A grin split his face from ear to ear and gave him a slightly idiotic look.

I had given no indication whatsoever that I expected or desired consideration of this kind and neither, as far as I could tell, had Christine. But then she spoke up for herself.

“Oh, let him, Williard, you work him to death otherwise,” she said in a brazen voice.

“Reckon I do. But he likes it, I can tell,” he chortled back, clearly flirting despite himself. Spenks wasn’t disturbed or daunted by Christine’s forthright behaviour and even seemed to delight in it. Beneath his sand-coloured tan his cheeks blazed a boyish, excited blush.

“When’ll youse finish my garden fur me?” he intoned plaintively.

Evidently, though I hadn’t known about it at the time, she had come to some arrangement with him to work his vegetable garden three afternoons a week, as Enola Spenks had been suffering from her gout again.

“Oh, I’ll do it all right, soon as you pay me enough.”

“Dollar a week, as promised. Expect more’n that?”

“Two dollars! I need the money for school.”

I stood at my bench as this exchange took place, thinking that this was more a game than a real bargaining tactic and frankly astonished at Christine’s boldness and at the indelicate word “money” falling from those chaste lips. For we hadn’t talked about such things and I had spent no money at all on her or indeed myself since arriving in Dunsfield.

“Two dollars, youse have it. But I expect real work from yer ladyship. Understood?”

“Oh, I’ll work hard enough. I can start tomorrow afternoon.”

“And youse! Git off with you! You better make up the time ’morrow morn. You can start at six-thirty instead of seven.”

He spoke, as he always did to me, in a niggardly fashion. He knew, of course, that Christine and I were friends, because one evening the week before he had passed us in his wagon, as we were strolling along the riverbank together; and Christine had tossed a very friendly “hello” his way. He turned his attention to Christine again and I could see the stiffness in his features ease off and his mouth soften as though about to dispense a half-smile. By now the three of us had stepped outside the barn.

“Reckon youse’ll not wear such a pretty dress when you work fur me. Soil’s real dirty round here.”

“Oh, I have an old linen smock I can wear,” she answered

Spenks seriously but also coyly, giving a swing of her wide hips as she ascended her well-used bike. She raised one bronze leg on the peddle so that it revealed a taut knee-cap, the bone as well-turned and fragile-looking as fine china.

I should have stood up for myself, I suppose, and refused to be dismissed in this way. Refused to be ordered to work a half hour earlier than usual, and for what? So that I could bicycle to town with Christine. I was angry but cloaked my anger in silence. I would practice Spenks' laconic art, I thought, though later I would speak my mind manfully.

"Let's go swimming," Christine proposed, once we were on the road, her manner relaxed and friendly again, neither girlish nor flirtatious. I had noticed the towel in her basket and we had spoken of going swimming a few days before.

"I'll need to stop at the house, then," I said.

We hardly spoke on the way into town. I was upset with her for another reason as well. She had mentioned nothing about working for Spenks three afternoons a week and the idea didn't sit well with me. My job with Spenks was my own affair and I didn't want Christine to spoil it or make the relationship more tense. Spenks was difficult enough as it was. But again I caught myself. Or perhaps I was unable to express how I felt. My emotion had tied itself in knots and I was rendered mute by the experience, as mute as Spenks himself in one of his moods. Indeed, for the return trip, I felt much as I imagined Spenks himself must feel—trapped in himself, with no lifeline of language to save him from himself.

I stopped at the house but my aunt wasn't home; so I left a note saying that I would be late for supper and asking her not to fuss in any case. Though I neglected to say where I was going.

I got my swimsuit and Christine and I walked past my aunt's vegetable patch to the path that led to the lake. Charles Dunsfield's private lake.

"Sure we can swim there?"

"It's all right. No one ever goes there."

Christine knew the path and confidently led the way.

The trail was a natural one through the trees. Little grew under

the tall pines and hemlocks except some unidentifiable groundcover and the occasional patch of spring wildflowers, some of which, where they lay totally in the shade and the ground was perpetually moist, were still in bloom, though streaked with that brown hue that signifies their season has passed.

The smell was heady under the big conifers. Christine was particularly pleased with herself and I particularly displeased with her. I followed her as I had all the way from Spenks' place—but not too closely and with a dragging gait. She always led the way whenever we went exploring together. As she moved and her dress flew sideways I eyed her long bronze legs, fitted this afternoon into a pair of scruffy white moccasins, and felt an aberrant desire course through my veins; the first such passion that I had experienced for her. On another occasion there might have been an element of mystery and excitement in our little outing but this afternoon my heart was confused with youthful desire; heavy, too, with my first articulated resentment of this girl—though, heaven knows, Christine hadn't behaved badly or improperly with Spenks. Nevertheless my resentment simmered as this spirited girl led me through the woods, this girl for whom I sensed an all too illicit passion. I could feel my skin blushing.

We came to a sandy cove. A great granite promontory, speckled with lichens and mosses on its shady side, cut off our view of the lake. Low lying juniper bushes clung to the shelves of the rock where soil had mulched, the plants dwarfed as in Japanese bonsai horticulture. Where the woods met the arc of sand, clumps of aromatic wintergreen flourished. There was a wide bed of moss under some taller juniper bushes and upon this Christine discarded her towel. I could see immediately, and alarmingly, that she had no swimsuit. She had brought nothing but her towel. Without the slightest self-consciousness on her part she dropped her dress to her ankles. She had on only a thin cotton shift, a kind of boy's sleeveless undershirt, below which she wore these loose cotton underpants—neither of which did much to cover her flesh. She didn't own a bathing suit, she said, catching my dismay. She couldn't afford one. Immediately she ran into the water. I seemed to know enough

not to look but, of course, I did look.

“Hurry, are you afraid?” she called ashore, surfacing after making the most graceful of horizontal dives.

Her hair was wet and flat about her small skull. I had never seen her head so perfectly configured before. Her green eyes stared at me innocently from her bronzed face. My breath was taken from me as if I were struck in the abdomen. Her sleekness was that of some beautiful water creature, a seal perhaps or an exotic sea bird.

I went behind the granite promontory to change. I had a brand new tricot swimsuit, which my mother had bought for me that winter and which was much too tight for my already well-developed frame. I ran into the water, hurling myself at its protective cover, as Christine made a show of looking the other way.

She became very intimate in the water, holding hands or trying to hold hands, and wrapping her arms about my neck at one point. But I wasn't very generous or acquiescent in my response and after some minutes of this playfulness struck out on my own for the heart of the lake. She followed. But after a time she called out breathlessly. The tone of her cry was such that it couldn't be mistaken for anything but real fear. She had come too far, she cried out, still breathless. “The water's ice cold—I'll get cramps. I often do,” she coughed in distress. I swam to her and fixed her arms about my shoulders, while treading the cold depths for support.

“Let's just float a while. I'm out of breath. You swim too fast.”

“So you know Will Spenks,” I said, surprised at this calculated turn in my thoughts. By then I was breathing quite heavily myself.

“Oh, he's not so bad,” she swallowed a mouthful of water and gagged as a result. “I can pretend with him and he lets me. He seems to like it. With everyone else he's grumpy.”

“I can't talk to you when you come there, you know,” I said, continuing to tread water and keep her afloat, our legs touching often and even becoming entangled at times. “He expects me to work. And I don't want to anger him.”

“I understand,” she said. “I'll be outside and won't bother you. It's only three afternoons a week. Maybe those afternoons we can bike home together.”

“Maybe,” I said, taking my time before replying, treading water forcefully still. She was shivering and I felt sorry for her. “I’ll see you safely back in. All right?”

“All right.” Her voice was as frail as her weightless girl’s body in its thin cotton garments, her arms strung about my neck like a cat’s soft paws.

“Can you manage?”

“Manage,” she said.

“Hold on tight till we reach shore.”

That afternoon something shifted in our relationship and we changed towards each other; the centre of gravity of our relationship changed. Christine became a little less insistent and bossy in her dealings with me and I a little more respectful and dutiful in my dealings with her. Something else manifested itself as well. We began to experience passion for each other for the first time—a definite physical passion. It wasn’t yet love, at least not on my part, and whenever, after that experience, I thought about the two of us together this was what I thought: that I desired but didn’t love this girl; at least not enough to choose a life with her.

Christine’s beauty became a lure for me. She allowed this to happen, orchestrating her femininity the whole time, I suppose, though there was nothing meretricious or devious in the way that she did this; and indeed there was much that was honest, tremulous, and beautifully innocent in her nature as well. I thought of myself as honest and innocent too, though on one or two occasions I doubted myself in this regard, doubted my own decency, because of this intense but extraneous passion that I was feeling at the time.

This reorientation in our relationship, together with the accompanying guilt on my part, did have one unwanted result: that it blurred to a degree my relationship with my aunt. This I regret for Mildred Dunsfield was the real focus, the real test of my nature, that summer, not this precocious if also very lovely young woman. Years later the balance would be corrected, however, and it is Mildred Dunsfield’s memory that has remained with me a lifetime, the memory of that remarkable woman. Christine, three years later—I was to learn—would marry a labourer with the railway company. The

union would last only a few years and produce, ironically, a set of twins of her own. Then Christine and her children would disappear, submerged in the vastness of the big metropolis to the south, where she had moved with her two daughters after her divorce. These facts I would glean through inquiries after the war, on a return visit to Dunsfield, some years after Mildred Dunsfield's death.

5

It was a Saturday night towards the end of the summer and my aunt and I were again sitting on her back porch.

Saturday nights were welcome events because I could sleep in an extra three hours in the morning, rising at nine in time for church, instead of six in time for work. Christine had wanted to spend the evening together but I had declined her offer, explaining that I wanted to spend the time with my aunt.

"My aunt and I haven't spent an evening together in weeks, because of the time you and I spend together," I told her curtly.

We were long past the solstice and the evenings were beginning to grow noticeably shorter. I wasn't ready to acknowledge in my heart that my visit was approaching its last days. In our conversations, too, my aunt's and my own, something was beginning to wane, to grow more muted—our silences more enveloping. It was past eleven, the final faint expirations of light from the west had faded; the sky jet black from end to end—a jeweller's black velvet tray filled with glittering gems. My aunt had grown silent. I was by then used to these silences that would from time to time envelope her—and respectful of them. Both of us had been very talkative over dinner and later on the porch, my aunt especially. After a long silence, I said: "Should I turn on a light?"

"No, please, no lights. The darkness is ample."

My aunt hadn't spoken for some time, perhaps as long as ten minutes, and I detected an emotion, some resonating tone, in her voice that I hadn't heard before and didn't at first recognize. Hearing

it herself, perhaps, she tried to disguise it.

“The darkness is so final now. It’s nice to enjoy it for what it is.”

I recognized then what I was hearing. It was a force at odds with the casual cast of her words and of our pleasant conversation earlier: my aunt was crying. Looking sideways I glimpsed what I thought was the faint smear of tears on her cheek. I don’t think I was mistaken in this. Definitely there was the sound of tears in her voice; probably she had been crying for some time and I hadn’t noticed.

I felt suddenly very foolish. Was I the cause of her mood change? I had done most of the questioning, to be sure, and she hadn’t held back her responses. Her stories always fired my youthful imagination. I felt sad as I had experienced no such mood change of my own and indeed wanted this night to last forever. Then, as I was pondering what if anything I could do to comfort her, she rose and asked quietly to be excused.

“I am suddenly so very sleepy. Please excuse me *Lau . . .*,” and she stumbled over my name. I can’t be sure what name it was she uttered or almost uttered before catching herself in time but it wasn’t my own, not beyond the first syllable at least. She must have blushed for she reached out to touch my shoulders, almost as if to steady herself from falling. Immediately she corrected her mistake and repeated my name without hesitation. Her touch conveyed the same loving warmth that it always did, the same reassurances, too.

She withdrew her hand, disappearing inside the dark house with the words: “I shall see you in the morning but not too bright and early. You need your rest. . . .” And then, the words trailing behind her from the cavernous kitchen: “You’re a fine, earnest young man. It’s very important to me you chose to spend your summer in this house . . . more important than you can imagine . . .”

Christine and I continued to see each other. Too much, I had decided by then. There were evenings when I wanted to be alone and even a few when I told her as much. Usually, though, she didn’t complain. She had a deep need for solitude herself; indeed she still strikes me now, after all these years, as a solitary figure, leading a quiet nun-like existence, during the long Dunsfield winters

especially.

Our passion remained innocent, though one night it veered dangerously close to something else—when a certain look in her eyes, a moonbeam of tears, told me that I was going too far; that I was taking advantage of this gentle soul. Neither of us ever referred to the incident again. And then one evening towards the end of the summer, when even the passion between us had started to wane, or would no longer catch fire—she told me something quite shocking about my aunt. At least neither of us felt that there were any sparks present this evening to set that passion alight. Or perhaps having passed through the groping stages of the thing we realized that there was nothing more to discover. We had learned all that there was to learn about the other. We had reached some quietus in our seven-week-old relationship and the extended silences that now passed between us signified the fact. Then it was, after an evening of these palpitant silences, that Christine took a turn in the conversation that would alter our relationship for good. She told me something quite horrible about my aunt—my aunt's past.

I suppose, realizing that we had reached a terminal point in our relationship, she had to fill the void, had to fill it with something dramatic, something to break or abort the silence. She had to shock me, to elicit some shock, as a substitute or even retribution for the passion that she now saw had waned between us, waned because in my prudishness I hadn't wanted it to progress further; whereas she, from the start, had wanted it to do so; to move into the deeper stages of love, commitment, and possibly marriage.

It was a fairly complete story that Christine told—though parts of it were missing or condensed or ill-informed—and she commanded my attention with every word. The story had to do with my aunt when she was in her mid-twenties and about the two others in her life who were closest to her at the time—Mildred's twin sister Emily and my mother's younger brother Laughlan.

The story was horrible. I mean horrifying and humbling at once; a tragedy, I thought, such as befalls certain lives and such as one reads about in the newspapers. Something, thankfully, which one never has to experience in one's own life. Afterwards, I was stunned.

I know now that Christine embellished the telling, as indeed any of us might embellish such a story—by means of such story-telling, I am convinced, the species progresses from one stage of its bored existence to another, one stage of its collective education to another.

Christine must have embellished the story for she was inspired in the telling. She was good at revealing things, too, as I had seen that summer. I had spent a whole summer tutored by her and Williard Spenks (this small town took my education very seriously). Christine knew very well that she held me in her spell for the duration of the telling and well beyond.

What she told me belied the Mildred Dunsfield whom I had grown to love and cherish over the course of a summer; and indeed I rebutted what she told me in my mind and in an actual rebuttal after the telling.

But no, she was sure of her ‘facts’ and told me to consult the newspapers of the period in question if I didn’t believe her. “Even the Toronto papers printed the story, you’ll see. I think in Toronto they have a special library for old newspapers.” I didn’t know whether this was true or not. I didn’t care. What she had told me was distasteful in the extreme and offended my boyish sensibilities; especially in that it also involved my mother’s dead brother.

Christine’s ‘story’ was the most powerful single experience I had in Dunsfield. The days went quickly after that, and once back in Toronto there was barely time to pack and see a few friends before setting out for my new life at university. Fortunately I didn’t have to see Christine again and indeed arranged to leave Toronto a day early so as to welcome her to the city. I never wanted to see her again. For what she had told me continued to disturb me greatly. I didn’t like a word of it, though I suspected there was more truth than untruth to what she had revealed; though truth of the kind that I was too young and inexperienced to fathom at the time.

My aunt was particularly affectionate during our last week together, continuing to open her heart and home to me though ‘not her life’—a voice ominously, sadly, resonated through my being—upsetting my otherwise good feelings, my love, my respect for this woman.

Still, we parted on the most affectionate terms and the best of friends. I gave her a big hug and thanked her for everything that she had done; and presented her with a little gift, a blanket chest of plummy Cuban mahogany, lined with cedar boards, which I had made for her in Spenks' workshop.

My relations with her, by letter that first year in Kingston and on the two subsequent holidays that we saw each other in Toronto, remained cordial. Sadly, I was never to stay with her in that lovely house again. Sadly, too, this troublesome codicil had attached itself to my otherwise happy memories of our summer together. But no matter. I would grow to understand her story as I unravelled it for myself over the course of a lifetime.

It took some effort on my part to do this. The war interrupted my education or rather brutally imposed another education upon the former one. When I returned from Europe—impetuously I joined the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Forces the October of my second year at university—I was older in terms of experience by at least a decade, though lacking that other kind of education a young man in his twenties would normally have acquired. I concluded my formal education and was called to the bar. Then followed marriage and the beginning of a career. It was not, in fact, until many decades later that I was able to put Christine's 'story' to the test, after another Great War had nearly destroyed civilization. Only then did my own life allow the peace of mind and, I suppose, maturity to do so.

Why did Christine tell me what she did? And why did she wait until the end of the summer to do so? Her actions, in both respects, were suspect; though now I hold no grievance towards her for tainting somewhat my image of this perfect lady. Perhaps she intended no malice. But then again perhaps she did intend such. Perhaps some part of her unconscious was determined to revenge itself upon me and upon Mildred Dunsfield by revealing the unspeakable. Calumny is justly considered a grievous sin, I have learned in life, for it works its poison in secret and often doesn't allow the injured party access to its malice—thus its clandestine and sinister nature; especially when levelled against those we love. Its evil is its hiddenness. It is the sin that can't withstand the light of day.

Defamation and slander are its legal equivalents. Dante, I believe, places its practitioners in one of the darkest circles of hell.

Would I have preferred not to know? At the time I would have given a defiant ‘yes’ to that question though later in life I would have given an equally defiant ‘no,’ having come to accept such knowledge as essential in life. Certainly I didn’t need to know, didn’t feel that something was missing in my aunt’s and my own relationship. The deeper evil of this act would lie in the fact that she would die while I was away at war. Thus long before I would learn the truth and long before I could understand such things for myself.

Even that summer I sensed that she was unwell. Her deep, melodious voice, a musical instrument in its own right, was the harbinger of this news. Every so often she would break into a deep catarrhal cough, such as accompanies the last phase of an illness. The cough, however, didn’t diminish but always seemed to renew itself at night, when she often had to take something to bring it under control. After the war I learnt from my mother that the cough had grown worse, until one day Mildred Dunsfield had begun expectorating blood along with catarrh, and she learned of the malignancy that was to put an end to her life.

I received the news the penultimate year of the war while convalescing in the scenic Devon countryside from shrapnel wounds to one of my legs. It was a particularly lovely spring day and I was allowed a walk through the fields to exercise my injured limb. With me I carried my mother’s letter that bore the news. Mildred Dunsfield’s death registered itself in a powerful way. I read my mother’s letter and was devastated. My aunt was so young and had such an indomitable spirit. My eyes filled with tears and I raised them to stop the pain. Music seemed to swell from the Devonshire vales and hills; a torrent of music. It was as though I were feeling my aunt’s spirit depart the earth. What I experienced was grief—but also a sense of triumph, too. Mildred Dunsfield was telling me not to bemoan her death but to see it as part of life’s natural progression; of one generation passing along its good wishes, its *ave atque vale*, to another.

Upon returning to Toronto I was summoned to a law office on

Temperance Street and told that I was the beneficiary of Mildred Dunsfield's estate: house, town lands, goods and chattels, and a soundly invested fortune. Millworks and lake were left as public preserves to the province.

The Christmas after my return I put my questions to my own mother. Her face lit up instantly, whether with embarrassment or plain surprise, or perhaps regret that she was now obligated to tell me painful things that she otherwise would have kept from me; for she knew how happy my memories of my summer with my aunt had been.

"Yes, oh indeed yes. Who told you? Oh—that Christine. How did she tell you? Not maliciously, I hope! People can be so cruel. I'll not be sorry to leave that side of human behaviour behind in the next world. Yes, indeed, what she told you is true. Horribly true . . ."

And she told me what she knew about certain events in Dunsfield in the summer of 1895; events transpiring in the lives of Mildred Dunsfield, her twin sister, Emily, and my mother's younger brother Laughlan.

"You must, however, never think badly of her. She paid her debt. For many years she paid it as a teacher in Simcoe County, working her grief off, forfeiting the many prospects that were available to her as a lovely young woman of talent and means. But in Dunsfield she achieved a kind of peace. She was on good terms with herself when you visited her, but there had been bad times, too. Oh, she never wanted for anything, anything material; but as we both know material comforts provide the liniments of the body merely, not the soul.

"Remember her as you knew her, for her sake and my own. Let your good instincts about her character beat down the malice of others. She loved you dearly, as you know. In her person and her letters she never stopped talking about you. I have shown you her letters . . . sometimes life deals us such blows. If they happen too early we may not be ready to receive them. The rest of life grows heavy with the burden of trying to understand them. But oh, what unhappiness they can bring!"

"Did she tell you her story herself?" I asked.

“Yes, when I visited her in Dunsfield some weeks after the tragedy she did so, her parlour filled with twilight. ‘Some people don’t like me very much in this town,’ she said. ‘I fear one day the venom will out and poison all our lives.’

“I had heard a version of my own at the inquest—involving my dear brother Laughlan. But Mildred’s version I hadn’t known until then. She held back nothing. It wasn’t in her nature to deny or bury what had happened. By the time you visited her she had grown to live with her sorrow; the wounds had mostly healed; the pain diminished. Had you been older she would have told you everything, I’m sure. She always said she wanted you to know—one day . . .”

But even my mother’s version was incomplete; had to be incomplete, I suppose, so painful was it for her to recount. Or perhaps, wise mother that she was, she realized that absolute truth wasn’t possible under the circumstances and was a grievous concept in any case—wisdom that the law profession teaches like no other. And perhaps she left the final discoveries to myself, the final phase of understanding to myself, an older self—I was, after all, only in my early twenties at the time and had just been to war—knowing that I would discover my own truth in due course. Never did my dear mother rush anything upon me in life—this was her gift to me—and for that I remain grateful to her.

It was much later in life that I arrived at the truth—‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,’ as the law profession wisely decrees; that I took time from my busy life to arrive at the truth—after my mother’s death.

We owe to others our education in life, certain others. To the memory of Mildred Dunsfield I owed, as I’ve said, a great personal debt. And so many years later, after another Great War had nearly destroyed civilization, after a summer at Dunsfield house (I keep the house as it was in Mildred Dunsfield’s and, indeed, her own father’s time), I put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Every morning for a week I journeyed to the Orillia Public Library to sieve through its archives—in search of the events of June 1895. I found what I was looking for easily enough and one article or account led to another much as it does in the articles of law. Sadly, it

is the terrible acts that mark human history most definitively not the beneficent ones. Here were the terrible facts or one set of those facts at least. I had glimpsed Mildred Dunsfield's life up close towards its end and I and a few others—my mother, certainly—had become part of that life; but no one but ourselves would remember the goodness and value of that life. Certainly no record of it was to be found in the public archives. Yet this other record could be found there for the world to read about. . . . And indeed, the world had read about it, for the scabrous *Globe* in Toronto had underscored its accounts of these tragic events with the subscript “American and foreign papers please copy,” as though seeking a certain notoriety abroad by such a notice—a disclaimer of our sad provincial lives. (I would rummage through the Toronto papers when I returned to the city in September.)

There was also the transcript of the formal inquest, initiated and conducted by the police and overseen by a magistrate imported from the provincial High Court in Toronto. This was perhaps the most difficult document of all, written in the coldest, most removed language, the language of the courts, the language of justice—not the language of the heart. Mildred Dunsfield would have had to sit through the entire proceeding, to have relived every moment of the protagonists' lives, every excruciating detail—though her imagination must have traversed the ground of these events many times over. Had my heart not already gone out to her it would have done so then . . .

I now had three versions of the story. Christine's crude version, which probably, I deduced, had come from her mean-spirited father. I had never, as I said, liked the man. A real estate broker, and a late-comer to Dunsfield, he had the opportunity to enter people's lives at their most vulnerable moments. Probably he had heard versions of the story in his travels and had passed them along to his wife and daughter. Christine's own version, though not out-and-out malicious, wasn't charitable either, though undoubtedly kinder than her father's version had been.

Then there was my own mother's version—in which she presented my aunt in the highest possible light, despite the egregious nature of the events themselves. This information, as I said, I received

shortly after Mildred Dunsfield's death. This version I trusted, though incomplete in many respects, because told to me by my own mother. Thus its deep effect upon me.

Then there were my own archival investigations years later. In the interim I had constructed my own version of the truth, always exonerating Mildred Dunsfield as best I could, though it would seem, from what my mother had told me, that my aunt hadn't so readily exonerated herself—that she had taken a large portion of the blame upon herself for what had happened.

I knew, then, that I would have to tell Mildred Dunsfield's story. Though I couldn't have imagined that it would take so long to do so. I had kept all my notes, fortunately, of my talks with my mother especially, but most of all I had my own memories of this extraordinary woman to fall back on and lead me confidently forward.

Life is most mysterious in its phases of recognition. Sometimes things that reveal themselves partially when we are young only reveal themselves fully later in life. I remember, in my late twenties, having completed my law degree, spotting in Britnell's Bookshop in Toronto a volume by the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard—a work, I surmised, which I would like to read one day. I had skipped through its pages, I suppose, and thought: Yes, this is a book that will fill a need one day. So I purchased it. For years it gathered dust on my shelves, unread; decades, in fact. And then, during another felicitous summer at Dunsfield house, I opened it. I was shocked to see the signature and date of purchase in so youthful a script and to realize how much time had elapsed since purchasing the volume. But indeed that summer I read this book in its entirety—and read it meaningfully, too. I was ready to encounter the mind of the Danish philosopher, so to speak—and must have known when I purchased the book that one day I would be ready for this encounter. I was preparing an important case at the time, one that I would present before the Supreme Court of Canada, and the Kierkegaard volume was of considerable value both spiritually and substantively in helping me prepare my submission.

I had to pass through many stages before I reached the point where I could understand Mildred Dunsfield; where she had begun

and where she had ended up in life. As Mildred Dunsfield, no doubt, had to pass through many such stages of understanding to reach a point of understanding in her own. How very glad I am, and have always been, that we knew each other at the point in her life that we did. She gave me so much that summer, and, I, in my boyish eagerness to please, gave her something in return—or so I would like to believe. At least I will die happily with such a hope.

I had married, of course, and fathered a son, and enjoyed several decades of exceptional happiness before my wife passed away; and then I was left as I had begun—alone again in life except for a son, wondering what relationships are about; whether anything lasts in and of itself . . . but this, however, is another and not terribly important story and, in any case, secondary to the one at hand. But having a son of my own, a loving son, memories have become very important to me. Become, in effect, these phases of meaningful recognition that I am speaking about—links in a long chain of otherwise meaningless events; yet links that connect to form our better selves.

In life we strive hard to think well of ourselves and our most fervent prayer devolves to this: that others should think well of us. That others should treat us with the respect and tolerance—even the forgiveness—with which we treat ourselves. That they remember us with joy and continued good will.

It is for this beloved son that I write this book, that I tell my aunt's story.

MILDRED DUNSFIELD'S STORY

Dunsfield, Ontario, June 1895

1

Frustrated and a little annoyed with herself Mildred Dunsfield pulled away from the parlour window. The hour was nearing seven o'clock. Laughlan had promised that they would be home by five and he usually kept his word. The trip from Orillia Centre took a little over an hour. Perhaps the doctor had decided to keep her sister in the clinic after all. The sky was a fan of ethereal blue and pink rays—nursery colours. The conceit had the force of an admonishment.

She returned to the kitchen to rescue the steak and kidney pie. The pastry was the colour of roast turkey on top, its curled edges singed brown. With heavy canvas gloves she removed the steaming dish from the oven and set it on the iron trivet. In her heart a premonition seemed to grow. Her sister had experienced another restive night; none of them had slept. At three and again at four in the morning she had heard Laughlan moving about, caring for his wife. Several times that day, while teaching her class, the premonition had returned. Now it took hold of her with renewed force. Something wasn't right with her sister's pregnancy; it had, since the beginning, been fraught with difficulty. Now, nearing the end of its term, it seemed to be declaring its unnaturalness.

She poured the water that she had put in the glass pitcher hours ago down the sink. The kitchen table was set for three. Whether Emily would join them, even were she to return, wasn't clear. Often over the past few months her sister had complained of nausea and refused to eat, repairing to her room to moan inconsolably on her bed. Mildred was glad that she had her teaching job to fill her days, that she returned to the house only in the late afternoons, at which time she prepared supper for the three of them. Her sister was always too tired to help except in the most rudimentary way. So unhelpful was

she, in fact, in the kitchen, that Mildred preferred when her sister did nothing at all. Laughlan, of course, was always helpful. He washed up afterwards—while Emily sat and glowered or escaped to her room—and did the heavy chores such as bleaching the counter boards or waxing the maple floors of the downstairs rooms.

Because of her sister's imminent delivery, Mildred wasn't looking forward to the summer—to July at least. Another two weeks and her teaching duties would be over until September. In August she planned a two week vacation at a new inn on Georgian Bay. That left most of the summer at Dunsfield house. Laughlan worked every day running the family lumber mill and often, now that the weather was fine and the evenings bright, would return to the mill after supper for another two hours of work. But her sister would be home all day alone, after giving birth to her baby in two weeks' time.

Mildred couldn't imagine her sister as a mother—or the presence of another needy soul in the house. As much as she loved children—especially the ones she taught in the two-room school near their village—she could summon no advance love in her heart for her sister's child. Emily, who always as long as she remembered had relied on her to deal with the difficulties of her life, would place impossible demands on her. Would her husband, good-natured soul that he was, be able to manage these new responsibilities in their lives? Her thoughts towards her sister could be black—steeped in an entire adolescence of blackness—but never more so than when she tried to imagine Emily as a mother. Emily as a impossibly needful twin, Emily as a perpetually needful sister, was understandable and even tolerable; but Emily as a mother was neither understandable nor imaginable.

Throughout their childhood, and into early womanhood, she had been Emily's custodian, her guardian of sorts, despite the fact of their equal birth; despite the fact that they were twins. Fraternal not identical twins—or as their father, in a very atypical bout of rage, had once addressed the pair of them—“unidentical twins.” But even the ugly phrase didn't come close to describing their birth and later relationship; which was not as sisterly as it should have been. Nature had intended a fairly synchronous birth but nature, it seemed, had

changed her mind at the last moment.

Emily had been born a full twenty-four hours after Mildred herself had been born; on another day in fact. The delay, an extraordinary event to everyone at the time, made Emily a “lucky” child; or so the midwife, who had helped with their births, had informed their mother. And Emily was “lucky” in life. Emily had always appeared the more wondrous child—to people who met the two of them for the first time. Always she drew the first wave of attention from strangers. Her bright pretty face, her curly golden locks, her slim straight figure, her gay hazel eyes heavy with lashes, drew an instant response from a world that probably since the beginning of time had stopped to notice such natural beauty. Only secondarily, as an afterthought, did strangers notice or pay attention to Mildred herself.

Emily has always been prettier than I, more winsome than I—she thought, with the reflex twinge of an old wound.

But Emily had become less attractive in recent years. Age was wearing even Emily down. Life, and Emily’s attitudes towards life, were roughening the soft, pretty edges. Her temperament had soured over the years. At twenty-five her twin was, in some respects, already a little old-maidish. She had little to occupy her except her fancy picture magazines—the English and American rotogravures that she received in the mails weekly, on which she squandered a great deal of time and money. She bullied her young husband Laughlan, and Laughlan, fledgling creature that he was, took the abuse as if his due. Mildred had seen him wince at Emily’s criticisms. Little love seemed to exist in Emily’s heart for anyone; not for her husband and not for Mildred herself, Emily’s twin.

How mean her thoughts towards her sister could be at times; a meanness equal and opposite, she supposed, to the warm affections that she felt towards her brother-in-law. Was this meanness a form of disguised jealousy? Sibling jealousy? For in truth she hadn’t always experienced this enmity towards her sister and in their childhood hadn’t experienced it at all. Only in adolescence, when other parts of her nature began to develop, and she began to experience different needs—when her sister began to experience different needs—had she

begun to do so; did nature seem to separate them most in their talents and temperament.

In childhood the relationship had been different—equal and sisterly in almost every respect; or at least that was Mildred’s recollection. Twins, after all, were supposed to experience things in common; to share special feelings; form branches of the same tree. She couldn’t recall one incident from her childhood of enmity—out-and-out enmity. Arguments, hurt egos, sour feelings, there were plenty of those, but emotions that flared a day at most and then extinguished themselves by nightfall. (“Never go to bed angry at each other”—their father would say.) Only later, in their teens, did things change. While many happy sisterly moments flashed out still from memory . . .

A carriage’s steel rims crunching the flagstones of the driveway interrupted her reveries. . . .