



THE GOLDEN HOUR

My brother Carl was hit by a train and survived!

The doctors say it's a miracle and want to write it up in their medical journals. He was out in BC somewhere pretty remote, walking across a field with his buddies (and yes, they'd had a few beers, maybe a joint). He decided to walk along the tracks and he didn't hear the train coming (and yes, his ears are fine). One of his friends saw the train, sprinted across the distance, grabbed Carl and tried to pull him back. Still, the train hit them both and ... they both survived!

This is the story Marion tells the convict on the bus to Buffalo. Of course, at the time she tells the story, she does not know he is a convict. If she had known, she might have chosen another story, or told the story differently, with her eyes less wide. She does not tell him that Carl sometimes forgets where the door to his room is, or that he can now do sums in his head Marion has difficulty with on paper. These are details that float like tiny bits of fluff; they get up your nose or trouble your vision. What is clean

and true about the story is the train – its force and momentum – and Carl, oblivious.

‘Yeah, I was in BC once. Riding with a bunch of guys in the Rock Machine, from Quebec. You heard of those guys?’

‘Yeah. I think they blew up some people outside of Montreal.’ Marion is heedful of her words, but not too heedful. She suspects her seatmate of bluster. ‘Do you live in Buffalo?’

‘Well, sort of. Gotta go back to jail.’

‘Oh.’ Marion is having an affair with a married man named Gene. Gene believes she is too prone to conversation, that it will get her into trouble one day.

‘Don’t believe me, huh?’ He pulls a laminated card from his wallet. ‘Here.’

‘Okay,’ says Marion, taking the card. It is a prison ID card, neat and numbered. ‘Well, okay.’ Is it rude to ask what he’s in for?

‘I got kids, y’know. And I’m a nice guy. I mean, I visit them, tell them stories. In the morning I get up, play a little guitar. I love my kids.’

Marion knows that he does, the same way she knew he would choose her when she saw him outside the Pizza Shack in Albany, *Marlene* emblazoned on his bare shoulder above a roaring red jungle cat.

When she boarded in Brattleboro, Vermont, the bus had been nearly empty. Two kids in rainbow hats sat in the navy blue recliners, heads jiggling, all plugged up with earphones. She chose a seat towards the back, next to a window, and raised a hand to Gene, who was leaning against his car, craning a little to locate her. They had spent the weekend in the woods, talking and grappling benignly by the fireplace. Gene had moved to New York City for a few months to work on a fast-paced, gritty tv series. Most of the scenes were to be shot back home, in Toronto, but there were some things – the soot and swagger – that Canadians could not emulate. Gene was a cameraman with an idea for a screenplay.

‘So, we have a holdup in a café, or maybe a bar, although I don’t want this to get too saloon-like, and when the holdup guy leaves, he says, *No one make a move, because my accomplice is here, among you.* Well, maybe not *among you*, that sounds a little biblical, but you know what I mean ... It’s understood that if someone sets off an alarm, calls 911, whatever, the accomplice will do something. The catch is that when the accomplice finally gets up to leave, he says the exact same thing – that his or her accomplice is now the watchdog. Everyone suspects everyone. Along the way we have little vignettes, little windows into the lives of the people in the café-slash-bar ...’ Gene sighs exuberantly at this – the inventiveness, the volatility. Gene sighs like no one else Marion knows, as if he is shrugging off a sweaty monster of a knapsack. Something about his sighing makes her want to hit him then hug him.

‘And if anything were to happen, the accomplice does what? The threat has to be real for there to be actual tension.’ They are sprawled like sultans by the hearth. Marion keeps her eyes trained on the flames as she speaks.

‘Good point,’ says Gene, and pokes at the blue centre of the fire. ‘Good point,’ he says again, reflectively, encouragingly.

Marion tries to suppress it, the way her blood always rises to the tender turf around her ears when Gene endorses her. ‘It’s all suspense and no resolution. Everyone is an accomplice? That’s life, not movies. Who wants life?’

‘Yeah, too many far-reaching implications ...’ The fire is dying down. Gene moves closer to Marion, then kisses her.

Sunday, Gene managed to find a sushi bar in a nearby town. The sashimi sat like fancy paperweights on the red tablecloth between them, and Gene told stories about starlets on famous film sets he had worked on, or his neurotic dog. Marion listened, her breaths coming too quickly, like a starlet on a famous film set, or a neurotic dog. There was a clump of white on Gene’s lapel, a

starchy corsage of mismanaged rice. He was not couth, Gene, or even that comely, but he was brave. Last month he had surprised her with a weekend in Stratford; they spent two nights there while his wife, Joyce, visited her mother in Ottawa. The bed and breakfast had dark wood panelling in the dining room, and a large four-poster bed which made Marion feel unworthy and pampered at once. On the walls were old playbills in walnut frames and a small sketch of Anne Hathaway's cottage in the real Stratford in England. Marion loved the sketch for its tininess and fine scratchy lines and would often study it while Gene was in the bathroom at the end of the well-carpeted hall.

That weekend, Gene rented a tandem bicycle and they rode along the river, stopping to throw the swans balled-up bits of bread. It was on one of these stops that Marion had asked Gene about Joyce, whether she minded that he was not with her in Ottawa. Gene steered the bicycle off the path so they could coast down towards the river bank. Marion found herself pedalling uselessly while gripping her immobilized handlebars. The sun was sinking, mottling the sky with pink, pot-bellied clouds. Gene climbed off the bike and bent to examine a patch of wildflowers growing out of an abandoned garbage can.

'Joyce is a very capable woman. She can manage on her own.' He threw his voice out across the water, skipped it like a flat stone along the shoreline. 'Who's Anne Hathaway, anyhow?'

'Um, she was Shakespeare's girlfriend.'

'Oh.' He turned and walked towards her, squelching purposefully along the bank. 'I love you, Marion.'

'I love you, I love you, I love you,' Marion said. She had become the type of woman who used the word *love* like salt, to heighten the taste of things.

Gene hadn't wanted her to take the bus. 'I think you'll find the quality of people much better on the train.'

Marion stares at the convict's scrubby moustache.

'I'm Randy. You are - ?'

'Renée. Renée Ellsworth.' She uses her soap opera alias.

'Hey, Renée. Aren't you gonna ask me what I was in for?' He stretches in his seat.

She nods but does not actually ask.

'Drugs. The first time, anyway. Then when I got out, on parole, y'know, I'm in this bar, and there's the guy that turned me in, just sitting there, pleased as pie. And I had to say something. Wouldn't you?'

Marion nods again and pulls her finger across the window in the shape of a sideways figure eight. Infinity. But the glass is too clean and dry; what's left is the ghost of a smudge. Across the aisle an old man is muttering unpleasantly about Holy Scripture.

Back in Toronto, Marion is an art teacher at an alternative high school. In the yard, the kids lower their eyelids like venetian blinds when she walks by, surmise their situations through the slits. Marion thinks they like her, in a noncommittal, egalitarian sort of way. In the classroom, they blink and blithely call her by her first name, arch their eyebrows only slightly when she suggests a brush stroke or lectures on colour and form.

Most of them sketch large, abstract egg shapes, and sometimes spirals, then grit their teeth as they throw the colours onto the canvas. One of them, the smallest, Sacha, smiles at her often, and paints only in purple. Sometimes she stays to help rinse the brushes. Marion stands over one of the large sinks watching the colours swirl away as Sacha explains to her how little time they have, really, to clean the air, the water, the sky. When Marion looks up from the swirling she is always surprised at the degree of sadness in Sacha's eyes. It is more textured and stoic than the despair of adolescence; it scares her in a way she cannot name. There is a passive resistance in Sacha that emerges startlingly, in

flashes of orange on the canvas, or in unconscious gestures of concentration. But sometimes, if the barometric pressure has risen or the planets are not properly aligned, she raises her voice. *Mi-iss*. Two syllables, the second soaring in thin complaint. *Mi-iss, he's really disturbing me*. And Marion sends them out in the hallway to resolve their differences. To negotiate a settlement.

The bus careens slightly, then rights itself.

'Wouldn't you have to say something?' Randy stretches again, so that his long legs jostle Marion's; this is bossy, not sexy.

Marion ponders boundaries, but also feels blessed. When she talks to Gene next, she will anticipate his *I told you so*. She will dazzle him with droll, self-deprecating description. She nods at Randy.

'So, there was a brawl. He comes at me with a broken bottle, was gonna slit my throat. I grabbed a chair, smashed it across his head. He fell against the bar. Out cold. They carried him out on a stretcher.'

There is a prompt required of Marion. 'And?'

'Was in a coma for two months, then he died. Just gave up the ghost. Lucky for me the judge understood it was self-defence. I mean, a broken bottle, for fuck's sakes.'

From Brattleboro to Springfield, Massachusetts, Marion had counted twelve new passengers. The seat beside her remained empty; the view out the window hilly, busy with white church spires. But in Albany, Randy was waiting. When she stepped down from the bus, there he was, cigarette snuggled in the V of his fingers, one leg propped up on a cement planter. In the food court, the light made Marion blink and tear up and want a doughnut. She stood in line. Back outside, Randy's cigarette smelled good, bracing and woody. She bummed one.

And then she had found herself telling Carl's story, thieving it really, trying to make it her own. What she wanted to convey was not only the improbability (hit by a train, for God's sakes!), but also her place in the narrative. *You must understand*, she wanted to say, *you must understand, this is my brother we're talking about here.*

On the tiny tvs that hang above their heads, a movie is playing. In the movie, a band of angels is fighting a gang of vampires on some city's mean streets. Randy leans towards Marion as they whiz along the highway.

'You know what my son said when I told him I was sorry but I'd have to go away for a while? He said, "You're not sorry, you don't hurt people if you're sorry." Kind of got things back to front. But I see him sometimes now – he's a teenager, big lug of a guy. My wife left me, though. She's with some boy toy she met at the Legion. Came and visited me for twelve fucking years, then as soon as I get out on parole, good behaviour, she's off to the races. You married?'

'No, I was engaged once, though. Just didn't work out. He was too, I dunno, just too ...'

Randy is looking at her closely. 'Yeah, too ... I know.' He puts his walkman on, turns up the sound. 'Bruce Springsteen,' he says to the ceiling.

Marion knows some Bruce Springsteen songs. *Hey little girl, is your daddy home, did he go away and leave you all alone? Whoa-oh, I got a bad desire. Born in the USA-ay.*

Marion's mother lives in the USA, with her new husband. Marion hasn't seen her real father for twenty-four years. He could live in the USA. He could live anywhere he wanted. Marion's mother says the only real difference between Canadians and Americans is that Canadians believe there is a difference between Canadians and Americans. But Marion does not agree.

‘Space, Ma, it’s all about space. Fahrenheit and guns. It’s a different mentality. We’ve grown up in the shadow of a superpower. That can’t help but influence us.’

Marion’s mother harrumphed. ‘Right. Well, fat lot of good all that shadowy space has done us, eh?’

The bus pulls into another roadside food court, and Marion is glad. She is hungry, and has had to pee for a long time, but was alternately irked and exhausted by the prospect of pushing past Randy’s black-denimed knees. In the small entranceway, he stops to look through the glass into the dining area. Some of the passengers from the bus already have their food; it sits in tidy packages on the chunky green tables.

‘I could really use a coffee,’ Randy says, opening the door for her. Next to two posters of missing children and one of a wanted criminal, a boy in brown dungarees traipses through a booth of brightly coloured plastic balls.

‘That’s the play area,’ he adds.

In the bathroom, a woman is standing with her legs crossed, supporting herself against a stroller. She looks Marion up and down, makes a decision.

‘Can you watch him for a minute, please? I really have to go.’

The woman is wearing a crop top and tight jeans. The exposed portion of her tummy trembles as she speaks.

Marion nods, and the woman disappears into a stall. The baby is sleeping, one angry fist clenched by his cheek. Lambs in sunglasses leap across his T-shirt. Marion reaches down to touch one of them. The woman steps out of the stall.

‘Thank you so much. I was dying.’ She zips her jeans, does the snap, all with one hand.

‘You’re welcome. He’s really sweet.’ Marion has a sudden impulse to scoop up both mother and child, one under each arm, and haul them around with her, as proof. Proof of what? She wants

to say survival, trust, something sinewy that lasts. But she does not say anything, she only thinks these things, in a provisional, embarrassed way, and waves hastily to the woman as the bathroom door swings shut behind her.

Back in the bus, Randy is talking again.

‘So, I’m in this work program now, got a job at a garage, mostly I fix bikes. Thing is, I gotta live with my sister in Albany, and she’s a real holy roller. Won’t even let me watch the wrestling. I have it on pretty good authority that her husband’s gonna leave her, he’s not into all that Christian shit. Anyway, my sister, Janie, she’s put this curfew on me, locks the door after nine p.m. Makes it hard to have any fun.’

‘I have a sister like that. Her name’s Yvonne. She lives in Vancouver.’

Yvonne worries about Carl and Marion. Marion because she is thirty-one years old, single and somewhat surprised by this. Carl because he is twenty-eight years old, jobless and happy.

Carl had been visiting Yvonne when he got hit by the train. He called Marion the day before the accident. She could tell by the pleasant, semi-strangled sound of his voice that he was high.

‘Listen to this, Mare.’ She could hear him rummaging in the fridge. ‘The chickens have access to outside pastures and feed on the natural ground cover and other flora and fauna.’ He cleared his throat. ‘It’s on the egg carton. Big as anything, right on the front.’

Marion called Yvonne before she left for Vermont.

‘How’s Gene?’ Yvonne said.

‘It’s like a game,’ Marion had replied.

There was a game they used to play at grade-school birthday parties. The object was to pass an orange along to the next person, clutching it between your chin and your chest. If you dropped the orange or cheated with your hands, you were disqualified. Boy, girl, boy, girl, went the line. It was less of a game, really, than a

manoeuvre; a manoeuvre that forced you to contort and sidle up close to someone.

‘You’re smoking again, aren’t you?’ Yvonne put down the phone to hoist the baby to the other hip. Cam was four months old and perfect, his face a plate of carefully arranged gourmet features, his small body pink and poised for growth.

‘How’s Cam?’

‘You’ve got to find a relationship where there isn’t so much darn strategy involved.’

But that’s the part I like. Marion pictured Yvonne’s sandalled feet, the dried flowers hanging on the wall next to the framed photograph of her partner, Gil. She looked around her own apartment. She had painted the walls a glossy aubergine when she moved in, with the hope that the sheen and luxuriance would make her feel more sleek and healthy than she actually was. Instead, the walls made the room seem dim and pretentious, as if they were sneering at Marion’s inexpensive bamboo furniture. It was a terrible match. She wondered if eggplants even grew on the same continent as bamboo. It occurred to her that she didn’t know where bamboo grew, and this seemed to her a huge, perhaps unbridgeable, gap in her fund of useful lore.

‘Yvonne, does Gil know anything about trees and plants or does he just stick to creatures of the deep?’

‘Of course he does. We’re all part of the same giant, interconnected ecosystem, you know.’

Gil is a marine biologist, a career path he chose, Marion believes, simply because sometimes it is easier to become the stuff of schoolboy chants than to spend your entire life railing against them. *Gil the fish face*, the kids used to call him, in a singsong, as he floundered on the sidelines of the playground, Yvonne has explained to Marion in hushed, empathetic tones. Gil is the sort of man Marion would never allow herself to fall in love with;

his eyes are too ample. They're frightening, like oceans or trash compactors. Things you cannot see to the bottom of.

Randy coughs conspiratorially. 'Thing is, my social worker, she's a nice lady and all, but she keeps emphasizing the importance of family. What she doesn't understand is that my sister is a fucking bitch, excuse my language. I guess it's good I got a roof for now, and only back to the prison every coupla weeks to check in. I guess that's the good part.'

Yvonne is a social worker. Mostly she works with troubled children. She tells Marion stories. Like the one about the seven-year-old who put his mother's cat in a pillowcase and smashed it against the wall until it stopped mewling.

'You know what that means, when the signs are so clear, so early?'

'No more pets?' said Marion hopefully.

'No.' Yvonne paused. 'Psychopath.'

It used to be, when they were kids, that Marion was the smart one. Or maybe she was just lazy, with a good vocabulary.

'We'll play Cloak,' she would say to Yvonne, and drape herself over her sister's shoulders so that her arms hung down in front. 'You get to wear me all day.'

'All day?'

'Unless you can undo the secret antique clasp.' Marion would lace her fingers together, tightly, and not let go.

'You got a boyfriend, though, don't you? I can usually tell. Something about your eyes or something. Sometimes I don't get it, though. There's this girl, she works at the gas station next to the garage, young, maybe even a bit younger than you. I thought she had a boyfriend. You're not that young, though, are you? How old are you?'

‘Twenty-nine,’ says Marion, jealous of the gas-station girl. Jealous of the gas-station girl?

‘So, we been out on a coupla dates. She’s the first person I ever told about when the guy, the guy who turned me in, was in a coma, how it felt, waiting all that time. That it was a relief, really, when he died. The waiting’s always the hardest part.’

‘Carl was in a coma for two days after the train hit him.’ Marion has to shout over the revving and rooting of the bus.

‘So we got something in common, then,’ Randy shouts back. ‘Besides this stinkin’ bus.’

Marion sniffs. She doesn’t mind the bus so much, although she can see the trip has begun to wear on some of the passengers, who appear torn between the desire to nap and the fierce feline need for a stretch. The old man across the aisle is sleeping in short staccato sentences, his head jerking definitively upwards every few minutes. The bus slows and then stops in Syracuse, where three college kids in leather jackets board, cursing and chortling under their breaths. Marion is not tired, although she does feel relaxed and benevolent, and curious in an unfocused sort of way. There is a small zigzag of a scar just above Randy’s temple.

‘What’s it like, you know, on the inside?’ Ungainly question, but she indulges herself.

‘Fine. I just kept to myself, didn’t get involved in anything, played my guitar. More waiting. Got pretty good at Scrabble, though.’

He played Scrabble, Gene, Scrabble! Marion can hear herself exclaiming, although she has difficulty picturing where or when.

‘People think you just sit around, plotting the perfect crime. Not me. There’s no such thing. It’s just how much you can get away with. Wish he’d turn that down.’ Randy points to one of the rainbow-hat kids, whose earphones are leaking talk radio. ‘Traffic reports always make me sad. Ever since I was a kid.’

Traffic reports remind Marion of her father, of front seats.

‘Hold on, honey, too much traffic.’ Marion’s father is driving her to skating lessons. Marion is holding on.

‘Not a great idea, pulling a U-ie in front of the fuzz.’ Her father places an open palm protectively on her tummy, which is bulging over the seatbelt, as they swing around. Just like a U, just like he said.

‘Whoop! Made it. Don’t you ever do that. Do as I say, not as I do. Got it?’

Marion nods, and digs her fingers into the rubbery piece of the door that hugs the bottom of the window. The road ahead is clear. Something unlatches behind her breastbone as they speed up.

One day, when Carl was five, Marion eight and Yvonne ten, their mother reached the end of her rope.

‘If you three cannot learn to behave like human beings, I’m reporting us all to the Children’s Aid, because, God knows, I could use a little aid right now!’

They went to their rooms. Moments later, Carl was chasing the girls, brandishing a plastic mallet from his mini tool set.

‘C’mon,’ Yvonne said, and ran downstairs into the dining room, ‘we don’t want to disturb Ma.’ She pulled the tablecloth off the table. ‘Under here.’

Under the tented tablecloth was like a secret office where you make important decisions. Yvonne whispered things to Marion, who took notes on her knee.

‘Safe,’ said Yvonne.

Marion was not convinced. ‘Maybe when Dad comes back he’ll buy us helmets.’

‘He must have just seen our little pea-pod heads sticking up. Bonk! Bonk! Jesus, that hurt,’ Yvonne says.

Marion has just arrived at the hospital. Marion and Yvonne are sitting on either side of Carl, who is in a coma. They are waiting for their mother. They are waiting for Carl to wake up.

‘I had a goose egg for a week. I guess that was a pretty stupid idea.’ Yvonne blinks quickly.

‘Well,’ says Marion, ‘you meant well.’

‘Yeah.’ Yvonne begins to cry. ‘You know, if he comes to, it might not be real. I mean, it might just be the golden hour.’

‘What?’

‘The golden hour. It’s when people who are very sick or gravely injured seem to rally and get better right before the end. It’s just a last chance for them to say goodbye, forgive people they’ve wronged, that kind of thing.’

Forgive people they’ve wronged? ‘Right. Well, how will we know?’

‘I guess we won’t. We won’t know until we know.’

For the first hour Carl is awake, Marion goes to the bathroom five times, stops to check the large wall clock in the hall, following the red second hand, that lucky racehorse. In the bathroom, she washes her hands with the mauve soap from the dispenser, dries them on her skirt.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ says Carl, when she pulls back his bed curtain.

‘Too much coffee,’ says Yvonne.

And by the time their mother arrives, the golden hour has spun out, as if by wizardry, into a whole golden afternoon.

‘Were you drugged, Carl? What were you thinking?’

‘It’s on *drugs*, Ma, not *drugged*,’ Marion corrects.

‘So, were you on drugs?’

‘The doctors say the marijuana might have helped him, Ma. It’s the reason he didn’t sustain a lot of injury – his body was so relaxed.’ Yvonne flops Carl’s hand around to demonstrate.

‘Don’t social-work me, young lady. We might not be worrying about his body so much if he hadn’t got himself hit by a train in the first place. Am I right?’ She grabs Carl’s hand from Yvonne and presses it to her cheek, which is smeared with tears and travel.

‘Chicken or the egg,’ says Carl. ‘Age-old question.’

‘So, this girl. The first time I saw her, I was just paying for my gas – I got this motorbike the guys at the shop let me use – and she looks at me, she looks at me and says, “Wouldn’t mind going for a ride on that bike.” Yeah, she’s one bold piece of work.’ Randy stops speaking, reclines his seat, straightens it up, performs a practised two-fingered groom on his moustache. ‘Thing is, and this is the thing – I really like this girl. I mean, I could really see myself with her, y’know? I mean, she represents something.’

In the sushi restaurant, Marion had wanted to talk. What she wanted to talk about was availability.

‘Yes,’ Gene said, ‘I’m listening.’

‘You are a spectre, Gene. You are a bunch of confused molecules.’

‘I thought we agreed that what’s most important right now is that I’m committed to you and our projected future.’

Marion thought of the word *projected*. It reminded her of school science films and home movies – catapulted flakes of colour appearing suddenly, inexplicably, on a blank wall. ‘You’re not listening.’

'I am listening, sweetness, really I am.'

But Marion did not believe that he was. What Sacha did before she began to paint – her palette mixed and at the ready, her mouth slightly open like a slow-motion goldfish – that was listening. Whether Marion herself had ever really listened to Gene was also up for grabs; she was not convinced that waiting your turn – your own tale twisting and turning in your throat – really qualified.

'So, your boyfriend, what's he like?'

'Married.'

'Huh. Married.' Randy leans over her to look out the window. 'Guess we're almost there.'

Another thing Yvonne tells Marion is that she should monitor her self-esteem. Yvonne believes hearts can be charted, fine-tuned. That you can control the shape of your love, squish it into the mould that best suits your mood, so that, at the right moment, it will slide free: solid, quivering and perfectly formed.

'Did you see that? Thought it was a crow, but it was a hawk – you can tell by the way they glide. I got a theory about that, y'know, predators and prey. There was a hawk I used to watch when I was out in the yard, saw it swoop down to catch mice thousands of times.' Randy holds his hands like claws in front of Marion's face. 'We're not so different. And y'know, when things go bad, there's always those people you thought were your buddies, just standin' by, watchin' the carnage. And who can blame them, really? I'd do the same.'

Sometimes Marion tries to imagine it. Sometimes she dreams herself in the engineer's seat: the impact. When she asks Carl, he says nothing, except: 'You know when you taste something and it's

so exquisitely disgusting or awesome you know that you will never, ever taste it the same way again? Then sometimes you think you see the taste in places – you see the taste on street signs, in a dog’s eyes, or in the patterns in an ashtray. You lick your own skin, because you think you see the taste there. Your molars ache and pine all the fucking time.’

‘So, Randy, are you serious about this girl?’ Marion feels formal and inappropriately collusive using his name, like a father trying to sound like a peer.

‘Oh, I’m serious, all right. I am see-ree-us. But the problem is she’s living with her brother and sister-in-law right now, helping out with the kids, saving a bit on rent, y’know? Man, but the way she looks at me, and her arms all solid around my waist on the bike ...’

‘I’ve never ridden on a motorcycle before.’ This is not true, although it *seems* true as she says it.

‘Oh, it’s somethin’. Gotta watch out for the black ice in the winter, though, that’s for sure.’ He taps his fingers on the armrest between them. ‘So, Renée, what’s the first thing you’re gonna do when you get home to Toronto?’

Marion hates these kinds of questions. They are tests designed to ascertain your provenance and domestic aspirations; they make her feel slow in the head. ‘I was thinking of painting my apartment,’ she says, closing her eyes and pushing herself back into the soft clean paper that hangs over the headrest.

Once, Marion remembers, Sacha had painted something very unlike her normal work. It was relatively realist, and drab – a house that looked to be made out of chocolate perched on a grey cliff overlooking the black churning sea.

‘It’s called *Yearning*,’ she said, tapping the toe of her army boot against the floor tiles. ‘Or *House Near Sea*.’

‘Who lives there?’

‘Me, of course.’

‘Right,’ said Marion. ‘I get you.’

‘Yeah, it’s not really my style anymore.’

When Marion and Gene first got together, they spent a lot of time in a clinch in his car. He picked her up from work and drove her home in his four-door Volvo and they steamed up the windows making out. Sometimes he showed her pictures of Joyce. In the pictures, Joyce was always in motion, her hair loose and flying free, her mouth frozen mid-exclamation. She had the kind of face that was described in books as having ‘planes’ and ‘mysterious shadows.’

Marion finally convinced Gene that it would be both more practical and more comfortable to grope at each other without the obstacle of the gearshift, but the sex was still frantic and graceless. She was reminded of the slap fights she’d had as a child with Yvonne. Their schoolgirl tussles had been half-hearted – ineffectual flurries of limp-wristed frustration. Neither of them knew how to throw a punch.

The hotel room they rented was dingy and small, and Marion was left with the unenviable task of waking Gene in time for him to get home for supper. This was what made her love Gene, finally: how he slept, his arm slung heavy across her back, face muscles slack and surrendered. He slept as if he were falling through the air, free-form, with no need of a parachute. She imagined that if she had Gene to sleep beside, consistently, at nighttime, his easy slumber might rub off on her. She imagined them entering sleep together.

Sometimes Marion tries to see herself in one of Gene’s films, ordering a cappuccino or a Bloody Mary, heading towards the bar or a low oak table. For some reason she is always wearing a pillbox

hat in these scenes, and her walk is mincing: half spinster, half strumpet. Then she is sitting with Joyce, who appears relaxed and is not wearing a hat of any kind. They share a plate of onion rings to pass the time.

What does Marion want from Gene, then? Not only distraction and validation, but a more original linkage of happenings, a new means of ordering. Instead, what she is coming to understand is that often a story is just a glint: swift, shiny and vulnerable to vantage point.

‘So, my sister, she drives me nuts, always with her Our Saviour this and Our Saviour that ... And I don’t really believe in God, y’know, except when it comes to baseball. Last time I was home, I convinced my son to go to a game with me, and we’re sitting there in the stands, him all huge and hunched over. Then the pitcher winds up, lets fly, and you can tell, you can just tell that some holy spirit is on the batter’s side, ’cause when the bat connects it’s like fucking paradise has erupted over that plate, y’know?’

Marion does not know that she will tell Gene Randy’s story after all. What she does know is that she could do it; she could love this convict. When she was eleven and her grandfather died, she had forced herself into mini heart attacks. Every night she would wake up, shoulder throbbing, a sensation like somebody opening an umbrella inside her chest. Over-identifying, Yvonne might say. But it was not only empathy, or the power of suggestion – it was more than this. It was an alternate neon reality that flashed inside her, large as advertising. *My accomplice here, among you.*

There is something about the last leg of a journey home that brings to mind the golden hour: anticipation and absolution. The

mood on the bus, once raucous with engine noise, impatience, has settled into something almost sweet, more refined than regret. The old man across the aisle from Marion wraps something carefully in tissue paper, pushes it gently into his carry-on, brushes dust from his black dress shoes.

How would Marion forgive the people she's wronged? Have Gene's Joyce to dinner maybe, pardon her for loving and keeping the man she, Marion, cannot surrender? She can envision the candlelight, the courtesies, the napkins shielding their laps, Joyce's animated hair. There is nothing, really, to forgiveness. Maybe even Marion's wayward father could forgive her, forgive her the rage she carries like a large limp bird, draped stubbornly across her body. No, there is nothing to forgiveness; it is finding your way out of the chocolate house on the cliff, into the sting and pound of the surf, into your own battened-down self.

Marion had once tried to explain the golden hour to Carl. 'It's about second chances, reprieves.' She poured him some coffee.

'Sounds more like a lot of waiting, forcing the issue.' He fiddled with Marion's tablecloth. 'Remember when you and Yvonne thought you could hide?'

'Yeah, Mr. Handyman. I kept hoping Dad would come back and put you in your place.'

'No fucking golden hour there, eh?'

'No, but you made a comeback, smartass.'

'I guess I did. You got cream instead of milk?'

At the border, the customs officer ticks a tiny box on a form when Marion reports she has nothing to declare.

Gallons and gallons of water falling over some rocks, a gorge with a terrifyingly turquoise whirlpool, some powdery, blue-haired ladies outside a casino. Beyond that, her city, a city invoked by other nations. And north of that, some trees being felled, some trees being planted. So much shadowy space. Oh, Canada. She is glad to be home.

On the highway into Buffalo, Randy had taken her hand in his. He examined it, then turned it sideways to shake. 'It was nice meeting you, Renée. Good luck with everything.'

'Thanks, you too. It was good talking to you.'

'Yeah, well, that's just my story, I guess ... I got this other story I tell myself, about what might actually happen with this girl, if she could get a place of her own, if I could get away from my sister.' He shook his head. 'Man, now there's a good story.'

Marion has a story like this. It is an old story, and borrowed; she once heard her aunt tell it to her mother. Still, she keeps it like a pet, strokes it when she feels at odds. The story goes like this: *Marion's aunt, whose name is Donna, is a young woman, flushed and keen. Donna has a boyfriend who lives in Washington. She has only ever been on three dates with the boyfriend, when they both lived in Australia, where Donna taught for two years. But they've written letters; they are pen pals. Now the boyfriend, whose name is Jonathan, not John, has invited her for a visit. She will take the train from Toronto to Washington. Since it is an occasion, she dresses up. Donna wears a knee-length black skirt, tight, but not too tight, a blouse that is sheer but tasteful and black patent-leather mules. She does not anticipate the arduous limbo of the journey, or, if she does, she does not care. On the platform, other people wait. A man in a beltless trenchcoat bobs his head at her. He is handsome, but short. A girl-toddler rocks back onto her padded*

bottom, just sits there in the griminess. The girl's mother hums a tune to the railway tracks. Jonathan, who is a lawyer, who is tall, waits for Donna at the other end. When the train finally pulls into the station, it is night, there have been delays. Donna drags her bag to the edge, where a man in a cap hefts it easily into the baggage compartment. The step up is steep; Donna lifts her leg like a karate star, and for a moment her mule dangles dangerously from her foot. Then it falls. Three porters come immediately to her assistance. They have the casual yet weighted stance of officialdom. They assess and confer, then one climbs down onto the tracks, where the rats scurry and duck, busy henchmen in the shadows. Once the chosen porter has located the shoe, he holds it aloft elatedly, like a lover, a lantern clutched in his free hand, illuminating the entire scene.