



Girls Fall Down

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The city is a winter city, at its heart. Though the ozone layer is thinning above it, and the summers grow long and fierce, still the city always anticipates winter. Anticipates hardship. In the winter, when it is raw and grey and dim, it is itself most truly.

People come here from summer countries and learn to be winter people. But there are worse fates. That is exactly why many of them come here, because there are far worse fates than winter.

It is a city that burrows, tunnels, turns underground. It has built strata of malls and pathways and inhabited spaces like the layers in an archaeological dig, a body below the earth, flowing with light. People turn to buried places, to successive levels of basements, lowered courtyards, gardens under glass. There are beauties to winter that are unexpected, the silence of snow, the intimacy with which we curl around places of warmth. Even the homeless and the outcasts travel downwards when they can, into the ravines that slice around and under the streets, where the rivers, the Don and the Humber and their tributaries, carve into the heart of the city; they build homes out of tents and slabs of metal siding, decorate them with bicycle wheels and dolls on strings and boxes of discarded books, with ribbons and mittens, and huddle in the cold beside the thin water.

It is hard to imagine this city being damaged by something from the sky. The dangers to this city enter the bloodstream, move through interior channels.

The girl was kneeling by the door of the subway car, a circle of friends surrounding her like birds. Her hands were over her narrow face, she was weeping, and there were angry red welts across her cheeks, white circles around them. Her friends touched her back, her arms, their voices an anxious chirp. There was a puddle of vomit at her feet, and she lowered one hand to wipe her mouth, leaning against the door.

A space had already cleared around them. Some of the passengers in the nearby seats held hands or tissues discreetly over their mouths, but as if this were incidental, as if they weren't quite aware

of anything. As the train rocked through the tunnel, a bubble of light between the dark walls, a few people got to their feet and moved down the car.

The train came into Bloor station and jerked to a stop, and the girl leaned backwards, the pool of vomit spreading, her friends lifting up their feet with little cries. As the door opened, a mass of people on the platform surged forward, then stopped, moved back into the crush and towards another car, their eyes turned politely away.

A grey-haired man in a dark coat stood up and walked to where the girls were standing. 'Does she have an EpiPen?' he asked.

'A what? What's that?' A tall girl brushed blonde hair from her eyes. Another girl was hanging on to the metal pole, resting her forehead against it, her red tie hanging straight down, her plaid kilt rolled up at the waist, brushing her thighs. The train wasn't moving on.

'An EpiPen. For allergies.'

'I'm not allergic,' said the sick girl. The man bent down to look at her rash, keeping a slight distance between them. 'She smelled something,' the tall girl said. 'There's a gas in the car or something. They should tell somebody.' She kept talking, but at the same time the PA system gave a quick shriek, and a distorted voice announced that the train was out of service. Beyond the door of the subway car, the crowd began to move like a huge resigned sigh, pushing towards the stairways.

'They'll have paramedics here soon,' said the man. He was about to leave, it seemed, when the dark-haired girl who had been holding on to the pole suddenly swayed and put out one hand, falling to the muddy floor. The other one, the tall blonde, dropped to her knees beside her friend, crying her name.

The man knelt down, frowning. 'If you want, I could call –'

'Go away,' whimpered the first girl, dabbing at tears on her welt-covered face. 'Go away, it's too awful. It's not right.'

'It's poison,' cried a girl with curly rust-coloured hair. 'Somebody put a poison in the train.'

The girl who had just fallen lay with her eyes closed. She too was covered with a rash, but a different one, a red prickly flush all over her face and hands.

‘Someone put a poison gas on the train,’ shouted the tall girl, trying to lift up her friend. The crowd outside the train heard her, and the volume of their voices increased, heads turning, some people stopping where they were. The man held his breath for a second; then, as if seized by an uncontrollable impulse, he sniffed the air, deeply.

‘What was it like, the smell?’ he asked the kneeling girl.

The station was being cleared now, the crowd on the platform fragmenting, breaking into individuals, a blur of brown and beige skin tones, splashes of bright-coloured fabric, patterns and stripes. Announcements were sounding over the PA system, men in uniform appearing, moving people quickly to the exits. A slender woman with plastic bags in her hand stood still and stared at the train, her mouth partly open.

The girl who had fallen was sitting halfway up, clinging again to the pole. ‘Roses,’ she said. ‘It smelled like roses.’

A heavy-set man sat down hard at the top of the stairs, his face suffused with blood, gasping for breath, and a stranger took hold of his arm and pulled him along as far as the fare booth, where he stumbled and fell.

The girl was creeping towards the door of the train, stopping to wipe at the smears of vomit on her legs, and her friend was sitting up, dazed, leaning her head against the tall girl’s chest. On the level above, a woman took off her parka and bundled it underneath the head of the man by the fare booth.

The man in the dark coat started to put a hand out towards one of the girls, and then pulled it back. He looked up and saw the security guards arriving. ‘They’re coming now,’ he said, ‘you’ll be okay,’ and left the train, heading for the stairs. As he went up, the first team of paramedics pushed past him, carrying an orange stretcher, a policewoman watching from the upper level.

‘They smelled a gas,’ someone was saying at the top of the stairs. The paramedics lifted the first girl onto the stretcher. ‘Roses,’ she said.

One of the girls said, ‘Poison,’ again. The woman with the plastic bags was still frozen on the platform. Then she swayed, fell to her knees.

‘Jesus!’ crackled the voice on the PA, someone forgetting he was in front of a live mike. ‘There’s four of them down now. What the hell’s going on here?’

The man at the fare booth told someone that he thought it was his heart, he was pretty sure it was his heart, but when he thought about it he did remember the smell. Yes. The smell of roses.

As more paramedics arrived, a policewoman placed the first call for a hazmat team.

The corridor was narrow and badly lit, the arms of the mall branching off in odd directions, and the stairs were filled now with more police and paramedics coming down, wearing face masks, as the crowd, expelled from the subway, made their way up. No one was paying attention to Alex, as he slid through the turnstile and up the stairs to the mall – and why should they, he was ordinary and forgettable, a thin man who looked much older than thirty-nine, wearing a reasonably good dark coat, his prematurely grey hair cut short. He ducked into the drugstore on his right, hoping it would carry disposable cameras – pieces of shit, they were, he’d never get a decent picture, but at least he’d have a camera-like object in his hands, at least he’d be able to think.

He was not the only person who had broken away from the crowd; in front of him, while he waited at the checkout with a disposable that doubled as a coupon for a Shrek hand puppet, were several people with their arms full of what seemed to be anxiety purchases, vitamin C and ginseng tablets, plastic gloves, antibacterial handwipes. Last year when the buildings fell in New York, in the midst of the aftershock a day or two later, he’d gone into the SuperSave on Bloor and watched people hoarding, all of them apparently unaware of what they were doing – smiling, chatting, walking calmly through the aisles, and at the same time piling their carts full of toilet paper and canned tuna and bags of pasta. Commenting cheerfully on the weather to the sales clerks while stacking up boxes of cheap candles at the cash register. Because you didn’t admit to fear, not up in this country; it would be disruptive and far too personal, and not very nice

for everyone around you. He used to consider this an appalling attitude, but lately he thought he was coming to see some virtue in it; the gentle restraint of people who live close together in the cold, and know that they must be patient.

He stepped out onto the seething pavement, between the concrete buttresses of the mall. People were standing at the curb waving for taxis, the line stretching down the block; in front of him at the corner they crowded together, surrounding the hot-dog vendor, covering all of the broad sidewalk and spilling into the street. A city bus arrived, running west, and was surrounded, rushed by a frantic swarm, a few of them making it inside, cramming up against the entryway until the doors groaned closed, and the bus swayed with the weight and set out slowly into the gridlock of taxis on Bloor Street. Another bus was creeping southwards towards them on Yonge – both lines were shut down, then.

He scrambled up against a buttress, bracing one leg at an angle and getting his head above the crush. It was nearly dark. He knew this camera couldn't really handle the complex light of the swiftly falling evening, but he turned west, tried to frame a shot of the buses, then eastwards, the spire of the Anglican church black against the ink-blue sky and a smoke of charcoal cloud, the line of raised arms hailing taxis down Bloor, an echo of upward movement. Dropping down again, frustrated by the shadows, he slid towards the curb and hopped delicately out into the road, firing shots off quickly in a flurry of car horns as the lights from the stores washed over the traffic, a choppy lake surface. Then, swinging one foot back onto the sidewalk, he realized that the viewfinder was framing the narrow clever face of Adrian Pereira.

'Hey,' he said, lowering the camera.

'Alex Deveney?'

'Yeah. Adrian.' He was still standing with one foot in the road, the traffic motionless now. He stepped back up onto the sidewalk. Adrian Pereira, observant and amused, older, his curly black hair thinner, but unmistakably himself. 'Man, it's been about a million years.'

'Give or take.' Adrian pushed a small pair of wire-rimmed glasses up on his nose. 'So I hear we've had an airborne toxic event.'

‘That’s from a book, right?’

‘Also latterly from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It’s multivalent.’

‘I was there, actually. I mean, I think I was. I was right by these girls who were fainting, anyway, if that’s what started all this.’

‘Oh yeah? So you’re, like, laden with anthrax spores?’

‘That’s what I figure.’ He wondered if he was handling this properly. If he should say more, or less, shake hands perhaps, or apologize for something. Or say something about those times, when they were young and anxious and the world was wide open. A quick sense memory of smoke and music flickered over him.

‘Seriously, though,’ Adrian looked around, ‘I heard there was a gas on the train. A chemical leak, maybe?’

Alex pushed the disposable camera into his pocket. ‘Honestly, I don’t think so. It just, it didn’t look like that to me. It was a weird set of symptoms, it didn’t look like anything that made sense. And I was right there, it’s not like I’m dropping on the pavement.’ He looked at his wrists. ‘I keep thinking I’m getting a rash, but it’s just a nervous twitch.’

‘You should talk to one of those guys,’ said Adrian, waving his arm at the three ambulances which had now stationed themselves at the corner.

‘I’m not attached to spending a whole night in the hospital so they can tell me I’m fine. I figure I’m being a good citizen by saving them the trouble.’

‘If you say so.’

They wove through the seething stationary traffic, crossing from the northeast corner to the northwest. Alex supposed that he was deciding to walk home; where Adrian was going, he didn’t know.

Adrian pulled his jacket around himself. ‘Do you still see anyone from the paper?’

‘Me? No.’ Alex bent forward under a gust of wind, the sky fully dark now. ‘I’m right out of touch with the world. Are you still playing?’

‘Oh, you know.’ Adrian shrugged. ‘Now and then. Here and there. Mostly teaching guitar to little kiddies, actually. I feel they should have the opportunity to waste their lives in turn.’

'Hmm.' Alex saw a mass of people at the next corner, pouring out from the Bay station, waving at the bus as it rocked perilously through the stream of stalled cars. Behind them, the imploring wail of the ambulances.

'Perhaps you've been infected with smallpox,' suggested Adrian.

'Yes, very likely. Or maybe the plague. Plague would be good.'

'I'd take some Tylenol if I were you.'

One of the ambulances had forced itself through the traffic, its blue light splashing against the glass walls of the Gap.

'I see Suzanne now and then,' said Adrian.

'Suzanne.' No one called her that, back then. Except maybe Alex.

'Susie-Paul.'

He kept his voice casual, he thought. 'She's back in Toronto?'

'Did she leave?' Alex stopped walking and stared at Adrian, who put a hand to his forehead. 'I'm sorry, Alex. Of course she did, I forgot. But yeah, she's been back a long time. She was wondering if you were still around, actually.'

'Well, obviously I'm still around. I mean, people can look in the phone book if they're so damn curious.'

'I guess that's true. Nobody thinks of the phone book nowadays, do they? It's like, that's a land-based life form, we've moved on.'

'Well. I'm in the phone book, as it happens. Lumbering towards Armageddon.'

'Yeah, okay, 'cause she might want to know that.'

'It's not a question of knowing, is it, it's like, you open up the book and see it or not. I mean, if you want to know, it's not like it's an actual difficulty.'

'Yeah, okay.' He nodded towards the corner. 'I have to go north here.'

'Oh, well, okay.' Alex shifted from foot to foot, wondering if he should ask for a phone number, if that would seem too demanding. 'Good to see you and all.'

'You too, Alex. Who knows, maybe I'll see you the next time they poison the subway.'

Adrian turned and started to walk up the street. 'Hey,' Alex called suddenly. 'Hang on a sec?'

'Yeah?' He turned again to face Alex.

'What's she doing now?'

'Oh. I don't know exactly.' He put his hands in his pockets and shrugged. 'Something intelligent. You know.' And then he was gone, into the laneways and expensive boutiques of Yorkville, the crowd swelling on the street behind him.

At Yonge and Bloor, bloated figures in papery white suits crept down the stairs, breathing through masks, holding up instruments with lights and dials. The security guard who remained in the station held a towel across his face as he led the white figures towards the train. Behind smoky glass, another guard sat with his head down, trying to breathe, his hands damp.

Decontamination, said a white figure, its voice obscured by the air filter.

The guard nodded.

What about the girls? said a figure.

Telephone the hospital, said another.

Just precautionary. That's all. Can't be too careful.

After the Bloor/Yonge station was cleared at both levels, the trains stopped running north up as far as Eglinton, and south to Union; the eastbound line halted at St. George and the westbound at Broadview. And at every stop along the route the people of the city spilled out, onto subway platforms, into underground walkways and shopping malls, onto the sidewalks and roads, driven upwards into the air. At Queen, as the train pulled into the station, a forty-year-old bass player with thinning red hair, dressed entirely in black leather, was saying to his companion, 'Drummers. They're like a different breed, man, eh? Seriously, drummers are a whole different breed.'

'Yeah,' said the other man, staring out the window. 'They're totally.'

The metallic voice of the PA system interrupted to tell them that the train was terminating, and that they should go to Queen Street to catch a bus northbound. They joined the flow from the train and

up the escalator, pausing on the next level. A group of people were gathered at the wall with the map of the PATH system, that complex underground skeleton of corridors and courtyards that could lead them into the malls or the banks, the bus terminal or City Hall, outlining the shape of the downtown core in concrete and tile.

'It's like they're not even the same breed as us, you know?' said the bass player, as they stepped onto another elevator.

'Fuckin' A,' said his friend.

'Somebody must of jumped on the tracks, eh?' 'Cause it happens like every day, but they don't admit it. It's like a public policy they don't admit it.'

'Fuckers.'

'Or it could be one of those, you know, Middle East things, you know, about the war with Iran or whatever.'

'Iraq,' said the other man. 'They're gonna have a war with Iraq is where.'

'No,' said the bass player. 'No, I gotta tell you, man, I'm pretty sure it's Iran.'

They stepped out into the chilly evening, the corners of the wide streets filled, the tall glass windows of HMV reflecting the arms of people waving at the buses, pushing for space.

'You know what, man?' said the bass player. 'Screw this, is what. I'm seriously going home.'

Between Broadview and Castle Frank, one train waited, poised on the bridge over the ravine. A man with a briefcase took out a tiny silver phone and sighed impatiently. 'Yeah, the train's stuck again ... I don't know ... I don't know ...' Beside him, a pasty-faced boy in enormous pants stared solemnly at a piece of paper on which he had written the heading RAP SONG, and carefully printed *I get more head than King Kong/My style is grim and ...* He studied the page for a few minutes, changed *grim* to *grem*, looked at it for a while longer, and changed it back again. In the seat at right angles to the boy was a couple, probably in their sixties, their faces pouchy and collapsed. The man was very drunk, a smear of alcohol fumes in the air around him, his eyes closed in half-sleep, his head on the woman's shoulder. She was staring ahead, not smiling, not frowning, blank and still.

Another woman looked out the window, down into the ravine, seeing a red tent half-hidden among the trees at the edge of the twisting river. She spread one hand against the window and watched the rain begin to fall, leaving tiny flaws in the water's surface, thrumming against the sides of the tent.

Even past Spadina, the traffic seemed locked in a permanent snarl, but when Alex got onto the Bathurst streetcar it was no more crowded than usual. There were no visible effects of the subway incident, but he thought that people did know somehow, fragments and rumours; he was not even sure why he thought this, except for a slight modulation in the atmosphere, a measure of silence, glances of quiet complicity between the Portuguese housewives and the Asian teenagers. He got off the streetcar at College and walked west in the darkness, the rain stinging his face, the fabric of his pants clinging to his knees and calves.

Just past Euclid, a shape moved out of a doorway and into the pool of a streetlight. A man, a big shambling man, with matted red hair and a heavy beard, three layers of ravelling sweaters, his hands shaking, his feet crammed into a pair of women's fur-lined boots that had split along the seams of the fake leather. 'Excuse me, sir?' he said, his voice soft and interrogative, surprisingly high-pitched. 'Excuse me? I hate to trouble you, sir, but I'm being held hostage by terrorists, would you happen to have any spare change, sir?'

Alex reached into his pocket and found a two-dollar coin, dropped it into the extended hand, a pale mass of flesh, blue veins standing out. 'Thank you so much, sir,' said the man, retreating back into the alley. 'I wouldn't ask, sir, only I'm being held hostage by terrorists.'

'Don't worry about it,' said Alex.

'But I'm on cleaning systems now. It's a lot better since I got on cleaning systems.'

'That's good, that's great. Keep it up.'

One day last month he had been walking in front of the Scott Mission, and two men were standing outside, men with bashed-up swollen faces and rheumy eyes, shouting, 'No war! No war! Peace

for the Middle East!’ He’d wanted to film them, send it to the news, grassroots political initiatives, but what happened at the Scott Mission was in a different dimension, he knew that, a borderline zone whose intersections with the world of agreed reality were tenuous at best.

His apartment was just short of Grace Street, on the third floor, up a narrow flight of stairs; when he moved in, it had been above a cluttered little store selling saucepans and floral-print dresses to middle-aged Italian women, but now the store had been replaced by a café with pine tables and rag-painted walls, and his rent had risen precipitously. It seemed odd to him that he could still afford to live here, but in fact he could – he had a good job, he was a proper adult, there shouldn’t be anything so surprising about that.

He unlocked his door and went in, shouldering off his wet coat. Queen Jane shifted vaguely on the couch and batted her tail a few times, then went back to sleep. He sat down beside her, absently stroking her grey fur and inspecting his feet for any blisters that might be forming.

He took a small fabric case from his coat pocket, opened up his glucometer, unwrapped a sterile needle and looked at his fingers to see if any of them were developing calluses; the right index looked best today, so he pierced it with the needle and squeezed a dark bubble of blood onto the test strip. The sugar count was well within his target range. He slid out a syringe and a little glass bottle of insulin and carefully drew the clear liquid into the barrel, inspecting it for air bubbles, then pulled up his shirt and pressed the needle into the skin of his abdomen. He capped and broke the syringe and went into the kitchen, dropping it into the plastic bucket that he used as a sharps container, opened a tin of lentil soup, sliced a bagel and put it into the toaster.

You would expect yourself to be more curious, he thought, when a thing like this happened. You could speculate, now and then, on just how you’d react to a genuinely important incident, but really what you did, it seemed, was to incorporate it almost instantly into the flow of daily life – the way he had gone on with his routine the day the planes flew into the buildings in New York, the way he had gone from his errand at the bank to his office at the hospital, had

spent most of the day at his computer, and forgotten for minutes at a time that anything was wrong. The way you could spend the afternoon in what might perfectly well have been a poison gas attack, check your skin casually for a rash, and not bother with the radio. As long as no one you knew was hurt or sick, you were at least as interested in hearing about a girl you thought you were in love with fifteen years ago.

He wondered if she still called herself Susie-Paul. Probably not. It sounded like she was using Suzanne now. Suzanne Paulina Rae.

He chewed on the bagel and the sharp crumbling cheddar, mopping up the insulin before his blood sugar dropped too low, the intricate dance of chemical balance that he could never ignore, never leave to run automatically as most people did.

There was a photograph he sometimes came across, loose among his files, not properly stored and catalogued like the others because it wasn't one he'd taken himself. A loose colour print of a dozen people, arranged against the wall of the newspaper office, all of them in their twenties, clear-eyed, effortlessly beautiful. Susie-Paul and Chris were well into the final disintegration of their relationship by then, the paper nearly as far along the road to its own collapse, and the people in the photograph were each in their various ways tense, unhappy, embarrassed. Adrian, who was by no stretch of the imagination a member of staff, had been installed on the sagging couch between Susie and Chris as a kind of human Green Line; he was frowning and adjusting his glasses, one sneakered foot curled up on the cushion beside him. Chris, in a heavy sweater and corduroys, faced the camera down, his face hurt and determined under a forced smile. Susie was looking away, apparently speaking to someone. She was wearing a little flowered sundress over a pair of jeans, and a torn brown leather bomber jacket; her hair, in a feathery bob, was dyed a startling pink, the camera emphasizing her large dark eyes.

Looking out of the frame, he thought. As if there were someone beyond the picture who had a claim on her attention, more than any of the people around her. It had always been that way.

And far over to the other side was Alex, the rarely photographed photographer, a slender young man in black jeans and a black cotton

shirt, staring down at the floor, long sand-coloured hair falling over his face like a screen. Adrian probably assumed that Alex and Susie-Paul had been sleeping together when the photo was taken; a number of people believed this, it was one of the generally accepted reasons for Chris and Susie's rather noisy and public breakup and the subsequent failure of the paper. Alex couldn't remember now who had taken that picture – it didn't look like a professional shot – but whoever it was, they or the camera had been more perceptive, had understood that Alex's real position was then, as ever, at the margin, a half-observed watcher of the greater dramas.

I don't know, said the girl, lying on a cot in the hospital, her legs covered with a sheet. I don't know. I can't tell you. I don't know.

They had been doing nothing, her friends said, talking to the doctors in the hallway. They went to Starbucks. They walked in the park. They got on the subway and then she said she was sick, and they thought maybe there was a funny smell, and she said yes, there was this rose kind of smell, but she was too sick to tell them much, and then the other one fell down as well, and they could all smell it now, and somebody ought to do something because it totally wasn't right.

The white figures bent to the floor of the subway car, their heads lowered, their eyes intent behind the masks. They searched for traces of liquid or powder, greasy smears; they collected old newspapers and food wrappers and sealed them into plastic containers. The instruments registered no danger. The tests they could perform in the small metal space of the car told them of nothing, of absence. They would take their sealed containers to a secure lab for further testing. The girls in the hospital watched their blood flow into tubes that would be carried to another specialized facility, but the blood would say the same thing, it would say that it could tell them nothing.

The rain was turning into a light icy snowfall now – not too bad, not impossible weather to work in. For a minute Alex leaned back

against the wall, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness before he walked to the streetcar stop.

He did not admit to urgency. He did not admit to himself that missing even a single night bothered him, that this was becoming compulsive. He had always worked on his own projects in his free time, legitimate creative projects that were exhibited and published here and there, and he would not grant that he was behaving differently now.

He took his Nikon with him, and a shoulder bag with lenses and rolls of film. The digital technology was getting very good, he could see why a lot of people had made the shift, but he still preferred film for his own work, still liked the darkroom process, the smell of chemicals and craftwork on his hands. The Nikon was his standard personal camera. There was also the old Leica, but that was special – it was quirky, felt somehow intimate and tactile. There was a particular kind of photography that needed the Leica; he didn't use it very often.

He had always done this. Maybe not every night. It was true that he spent more time on it now. He'd broken up a while ago with Kim, a graphic designer he'd been seeing in a rather desultory fashion anyway. Sometimes the people in the imaging and computer departments of the hospital went out together, but missing these occasions seemed like no great loss.

Instead he wandered – down to the junkies and evangelists of Regent Park, or up the silent undulating hills of Rosedale, taking pictures by the pale light laid down from the windows of the mansions. Through dangerous highway underpasses to the lake, slick shimmering water rasping on the shores by deserted factories. To the bus station, the railway station, the suburban malls where his footsteps echoed by shuttered stores in the evening.

Tonight, perhaps because he'd been thinking about Susie-Paul and the paper, he went only as far as the university, got off the streetcar at St. George and started walking north. It seemed surprisingly quiet, the broad pavements almost empty. Maybe the students left the campus in the evenings. Or maybe students these days didn't go out, maybe they stayed in their rooms and read books about management techniques – but he was showing his age, one of those

old people who no longer complained that students were too wild, but that they were too good, they ate right and married young.

Susie had been his grand passion, he supposed. The phrase amused him. A grand passion. Everybody needed one. Not the most serious relationship necessarily, or the most real – that was surely Amy, who had lived with him, who he might almost have married – but the one that burned you out, broke you to pieces for a while. At some point in your life before you were thirty, you needed to be able to listen to ‘Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands’ and cry real tears.

Outside the Robarts Library, he took a picture of a nervous girl buying french fries from a cart, then stepped back and shot a series of faint human figures, hurrying under the brutalist concrete shoulders of the massive building, blurred by the tall lights and the faint haze of snow. The wind whipped his scarf across his face as he walked up the broad curve of the stairway. He pushed open the glass door and went into the library’s forced-air warmth. He was pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to take pictures here, but he usually managed a few, inconspicuously. A row of students awkwardly curled up asleep in the chairs; an elderly man in rubber boots, puddles around his feet, reading one magazine after another.

He left the library and kept walking, east past the darkness in Queen’s Park, statues and whispering men among the trees, then the cheap bright flare of Yonge Street, ADULT DANCERS and VIDEOS HAFL-PRiC, the neon signs reflecting in nearby windows like flame.

The white figures rose up from the station, the air judged innocent, uncontaminated, to the extent that the instruments could detect.

This is the nature of safety in the measured world – you can be certain of the presence of danger, but you can never guarantee its absence. No measurement quite trusts itself down to zero, down to absolute lack. All that the dials and lights and delicate reactions can tell you is that the instruments recognize no peril. You can be reassured by this, or not, as you choose.

It was later on that night, and Alex had come home, packed away his film and lenses. He was in the kitchen reaching for a jar of peanut butter, not thinking about anything in particular, when he caught himself blinking.

There was something in his field of vision.

He blinked again, and it didn't go away. He shook his head quickly, knowing this was useless. No change. Tiny black spots, just two or three. Up a bit and to the right. He closed his right eye, leaning against the counter. Standing in the empty kitchen, listening to the sound of his heart.

In the hour before dawn, the city is private and surprisingly cheerful, optimistic; hopeful, in the dark, of the coming day, the sunrise a slow dilution of shadow, a grey wash over the sky, tinged gently with pink.

On the Danforth, a handful of people sat in a coffee shop drinking espresso. A man and a woman, who met here every morning before work; he was bearded and aging, she was younger, black-haired, round-faced. Another woman in a second-hand army parka, reading a newspaper. A policeman buying muffins to take away. These were the ones who rose early and ventured out with the wind, at the coldest time on the clock.

Across the river, among the towers of St. Jamestown, a Somali girl tightened her head scarf, zipped up her red jacket and set out on her bike to deliver newspapers, and on the street an Iranian man who had once been a doctor cleaned vomit from the back seat of his taxi. A woman put a pan of milk on the burner of her stove, and stared at the creamy ripples on the surface.

The subway began to run, the first train on each line half-empty, the second and third filling up as the rush hour gathered mass and density. Underground bakeries drew fresh pastries out of metal ovens, the sweet hot smell of dough and yeast touching the platforms.

Alex left for work early. He had barely slept anyway. The floaters in his right eye were a shock, maybe more of a shock than they should have been, and he was far too anxious, too wound up to sleep, only skimming and plunging for a few hours through tangled twilight dreams. It was a relief to be outside, to drink hot tea with milk and sugar from his plastic travel mug as he rode the College streetcar, the world solidifying around him. On the northbound subway, a tall and muscular Buddhist monk, with orange robes and a shining round head, was fingering a circlet of wooden beads, a tiny secret smile playing over his lips, as he listened to three girls across the aisle from him

having a nearly unintelligible giggling conversation on the general theme of chocolate cake.

Alex arrived at the hospital during the hollow quiet of the morning shift change, his footsteps audible in the lobby, and went up to his office, unlocking the door and booting up the computer. When he checked his voice mail, he found a message already waiting for him – an unexpected work call from the cardiac OR, scheduled to start within an hour. He downloaded his mail, looked it over quickly, then collected his equipment and took the elevator up to the surgical floor.

In the prep room, he reached into the rack for a green gown, tied on a mask and slid disposable gloves over his hands. Despite the gear, he would not be sterile, not fully scrubbed in; that was the normal procedure, the photographer only ambiguously part of the team, outside the sterile field. Thus the first and most unbreakable rule, that he and his camera must under no circumstances touch anyone or anything.

He could hear the music through the door, so he knew that Walter Yee was doing the surgery today; Walter, usually over the objections of the team, played REM relentlessly, and insisted on singing along with his favourites. He did not sing well. They were in the early stages of the operation when Alex arrived, the chest already opened. Walter was humming ‘Losing My Religion,’ his gloved hands moving delicately among the veins and arteries.

‘Hi. I’m Alex Deveney, I’m the photographer,’ he said for the benefit of anyone there he didn’t know, and moved towards the table. Walter gestured with his head to indicate where he wanted Alex to stand.

‘Can we get a picture of this before I start working?’

Alex nodded, framed a shot of the chest cavity, the heart’s red throbbing muscle and glistening fat, then kept shooting as Walter placed a clamp on the largest artery and gestured for the infused medication that would paralyze the tissue.

‘So who got caught in the traffic jam last night?’ asked the anaesthetist.

‘That was the subway thing, wasn’t it?’ said one of the nurses. ‘I saw something about it in the paper this morning. Somebody smelled a funny smell or something, and the security guys went crazy.’

'Girls fainting, I heard,' said a resident.

'Oh yeah, I was there,' said Alex. 'It was very strange, private-school girls just crashing.'

'Probably dieting themselves to death, poor kids.'

'No, they were having rashes and stuff. Thought they'd been poisoned. It looked like some kind of hysterical thing.'

'I've never liked the word hysteria,' said Walter thoughtfully, as he cut into the heart and began to open it, exposing the cavities. 'I don't find it helpful. And it has a bit of a gender bias, don't you think?'

'Yeah, the wandering uterus.'

'Oh my God, my uterus has escaped!'

'It's taken off down Yonge Street!'

'Can I move over there, Walter?' asked Alex. 'I'd like to get some shots from the other side.'

'Hang on a second ... yeah, okay. Linda, squeeze over for Alex there? Thanks.'

'Anyway,' said Alex, 'you can call it somatization if you want. I spent half an hour convincing myself I didn't have a rash. Like instant cutaneous anthrax or something.'

'And we're letting you into the OR? Standards are really slipping.'

'But if we don't, the terrorists have already won, right?'

Walter was singing again as he probed the mitral valve, professing along with Michael Stipe that he was Superman and that he knew what was happening. Alex took some longer shots of the gowned figures clustered around the table, then moved in closer and focused on the thick meat of the heart.

'Tell you what I saw on the subway this morning,' said the resident. 'I saw the kid who owns evil.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Really. I got on and there was this kid, this teenage boy, holding this big old box, like a computer box or something, and he'd written on it in pink marker: CAUTION, DO NOT OPEN. CONTAINS EVIL. The pink marker was what I liked.'

'Do you suppose it was true?'

'My thinking is, why would someone lie about a thing like that?'

Alex zoomed the lens onto Walter's careful hands, coated with the patient's blood. 'David, could you come over here?' the surgeon was saying. 'I think you'll be interested to see this.' The resident shifted around the table, and Alex moved back, wondering what it was that was interesting and hoping he'd gotten a good picture of it.

Where he was standing now he could see the man's face, slack and still, his mouth distorted by the breathing tube. He thought of this man getting up and walking away, damaged and healed. The heart cut open and motionless, this man as dead right now as anyone would ever be, short of the final death. He stepped back and photographed Walter leaning over the man, touching his heart with a knife.

The boy with the box of evil sat in the cafeteria of his high school, the box on the table beside him, eating a hamburger and feeling unusually cheerful. He hadn't heard about the problems on the subway the day before, and didn't know that a security guard had phoned in an alert while he was on the train, though it would have made him happy to know this.

He was a medium-sized boy with brown hair and thick glasses, and he had carried the box with him into every one of his classes that morning and sat it on the desk. When anyone asked him what it was, he said it was a prop for a play, which was almost sort of true.

The box had previously contained a computer game that wasn't much fun, just your basic maze game when you stripped away the effects, and the effects weren't so great themselves. There was nothing inside it, because he hadn't been able to think of what evil should look like, aside from maybe a lot of bugs, and you couldn't just fill up a box with bugs that easily. Or maybe if you lived in some really bad neighbourhood you could.

'Did you hear about the guy who found the biggest prime number in the world?' he asked the girl sitting next to him.

'Did he go insane or what?'

'No, he did not go *insane*, Sharon, why would he go insane? He just discovered the biggest prime number. It was, like, huge.'

'I just thought. Like the guy in the movie.'

'He was not like the guy in the movie, okay?'

'Yeah, okay, so he found the biggest prime number, what did he do with it?'

'Oh, like he had to *do* anything.'

'Well, you'd just think. What good is it if you don't do anything with it? And are you going to carry that box with you all afternoon?'

'I'm gonna carry it forever. You can't let evil run around unguarded.'

'You're such a freak.'

'Yeah. I try.' He moved the box so that the sign could be more easily read by people passing the table, and took another bite of hamburger.

Alex left the OR at lunchtime, and paused to check his blood sugar and inject his afternoon insulin before he went into his studio, checking the list of ambulatory patients he'd been assigned. A few hours later a girl came in, a last-minute addition to the list – a pale teenager, strawberry blonde, in tight jeans and a powder-blue T-shirt, carrying her coat and sweater and flanked by a nurse and a woman in business clothes, presumably her mother. He could see that her face and arms were splattered with bright red hives, but he didn't make the connection right away.

'Hi,' he said, smiling, reaching his hand out to the girl and then to the mother. 'My name's Alex, I'm the photographer.' He took the file from the nurse and glanced at it. 'Okay. Looks like they just want some pictures of that rash there. Could you put your coat down here, and take a seat in that chair? Thanks.' He checked the lights and adjusted his lens. 'I'll take some pictures of your arms first. Could you lift up your right arm?' He adjusted the lens, focused and clicked off a few shots. 'You're Christine, right?'

'Yeah,' muttered the girl.

'How are you feeling today, Christine? Bit under the weather?'

'Kind of.'

'Left arm now? Great, thank you. What happened? Allergies?'

'I was *poisoned*,' said the girl in a sudden rush of emotion. 'Somebody *poisoned* me.'

'It was on the subway,' said the mother, controlled anger in her voice. 'It was just like those girls on the news. Someone's got to do something about this.'

'Huh.' Alex took a step back and looked at the girl, her limp hair and red-rimmed eyes. 'Well, let's just get these photos for the record, and we'll see what the doctors have to say. I'm going to do a couple of profiles and then some pictures facing me, okay? So first I need you to turn your head to the right. Perfect.'

The sleet was coming down again. Alex wrapped his scarf around his face and bent his head, walking into the wind as the frozen rain rattled on shop windows, the tiny ice pellets not melting but clustering on the sidewalk, bright and slick. The wind rose and tugged at his coat, stinging the tips of his ears, as he crossed the broad intersection towards the subway and descended into the damp cold of the tunnels. The subway car was crowded, thick heat issuing from the radiators and from the bodies that pressed against him as he stood, grasping a metal ring, drowsing standing up.

In the faint elastic time of half-sleep, he thought of the falling girls, and though he didn't for a moment believe it, he began shaping in his mind a story, a man who stepped onto the train with a package. Let him be a tall man, and good-looking, and educated. He must be a man with some scientific training. He could be a chemist, say; but in this story he would be a doctor. The doctor steps onto the train with a package wrapped in newspaper. He carries it as tenderly as if it were a damaged child, resting it gently on his knee as he sits.

Motive was not a question that Alex in his waking dream considered in detail, but he did not think the man was acting out of anger. The man believes, at any rate, that he is acting out of something like love.

At a particular stop, the man places his package unobtrusively on the floor of the subway car, just beneath his seat. The movement is

smooth and subtle. The package lies on the metal floor among shoes and dust.

At another particular stop, chosen long in advance, the man, the doctor, rises from his seat and picks up his folded umbrella. Quietly, swiftly, he stabs the package three times with the umbrella's sharpened tip. The train comes to a halt, the doors open, and the doctor moves swiftly out the door. An invisible twine of gas curls upwards.

The doctor watches the train pull out, and contemplates the end of the world.

At College station, Alex shook himself awake and joined the flow upwards to the streetcar stop. The car that arrived from the east emptied itself onto the street, and he found a seat by the window, rubbed his face with his hands and watched the lines of stores and office buildings gliding past.

When he was climbing down from the car near his apartment, he realized that the floaters were gone. It meant nothing, really, it signified no long-term hope, but he felt some of his fatigue lifting, his body not quite so heavy. He blinked, and breathed deeply in the metallic air, and crossed the street, the end of the world held off for now.

Queen Jane dropped off the couch in a slow jump, forelegs and then back legs in separate movements, as he walked in the door; he took his boots off and picked her up, shifting her heavy purring weight against his chest as he sat on the couch and sorted his mail with one hand, smoothing her thick fur with the other. She was clearly disinclined to move again, so he stayed on the couch for a while, wondering what to make for dinner and where he should go tonight, what he would do about the increasingly nasty weather. 'Fat old cat,' he muttered affectionately. 'Dumb old thing.'

He could go to Parkdale tonight maybe, ragged transitional Parkdale. Ten years ago, the place you didn't dare go after dark. Now the hookers and the junkies stood on the steps of boutique hotels, and there were articles in the newspapers about the neighbourhood's character and charm. That phase in the process could be

something to document, though of course anything could be something to document. Wherever you went there was light, there were bodies in space.

Once Jane seemed soundly asleep, he heaved her onto the couch and stood up, heading for the kitchen. On the way, he lifted the phone and heard the rapid beeps that signalled a voice-mail message, punched in his code and listened. The person on the voice mail cleared her throat. 'Hi, Alex.'

Her voice was crazily, confusingly familiar, but at the same time he couldn't put an identity to it, somehow thought for a second that it was someone he'd heard on the radio. 'It's been a long time,' the voice went on, 'but it's Suzanne, Susie. Susie Rae.'

'We were unable to find any significant abnormalities in the blood tests performed on the young women,' said the public health officer.

'What does that mean, significant abnormalities?' asked the reporters at the press conference, the stand-ins for the worried city. 'What is an insignificant abnormality?'

'We found no abnormalities that would be associated with the release of a toxic substance,' said the public health officer.

'When you say you were unable to find them, does that mean they weren't there?'

'It means we were unable to find them with our most sensitive tests. In practical terms, it's as good as saying they weren't there.'

'But it's not the same thing.'

'It's effectively the same thing. We don't make absolute statements.'

'So you can't be sure they weren't there.'

'We can be sure that there is no cause for the public to be concerned.'

'How can you be sure of that?'

'Because we found no significant abnormalities.'

'So what kind of abnormalities did you find?'

We are not at home in the measured world. We would prefer our safety to be an unmeasurable absolute. Not an approximation. Not

the mere knowledge that on this particular day we, unlike others, did not die, and that, if we are lucky, there is no specific reason to assume we will die tomorrow.

Finally Alex was undone by simple curiosity, as he had known he would be. But he put it off for a while, going to work on Thursday and almost forgetting her call, coming home and spending the evening in the darkroom he had rigged up in his apartment, printing a stack of contact sheets. On Friday morning he knew that he would phone her, but he didn't know what her schedule was. Calling her during the day seemed safer; if she had left only one number, it must be her home, and she probably wouldn't be there in the middle of the day.

Late in the morning he dialled up his personal voice-mail box from the phone in his office and copied down her number. Then he went out into the hallway and got a cup of coffee and drank it, came back and looked at a few more files on his computer. The number was nondescript and revealed little about her location. Probably somewhere in the east end.

At lunchtime he went down to the cafeteria in the lobby and bought a sandwich and a bottle of juice, and then, as if it had only just occurred to him, went across to one of the pay phones. Her number rang three times without an answer, and he thought that he would get her voice mail, and he could just hang up. At the beginning of the fourth ring he began to relax, and then the ring stopped and there was a live voice saying hello on the other end.

'Susie-Paul?' he said quietly.

'Alex,' she said. 'I was starting to think I'd called the wrong number.'

'No. No, that was me, I've been busy. Sorry.'

'Adrian said he'd run into you. It made me think I should ...' her voice trailed off.

'Yes. Well.' He tried to think of something to say aside from *it's been a long time*, which was self-evident, or *it's good to hear from you*, which wasn't entirely true.

'Are you ... you know, I'd like to see you. Could we meet for coffee sometime, or ...'

He thought, *let's get it over with*. 'I'm free for a little while tonight.'

'Oh. Okay, let me ... okay. Tonight's fine.'

'We could have dinner. But there's things I need to do later.'

'Sure. Is, is seven good for you?'

'Yeah, I'm, I live around Little Italy, so ...'

'We could go to Sneaky Dee's,' said Susie.

'Aw, no,' he said, smiling despite himself. 'I'm too old to go in there. The young people would laugh at me. Really, I'm, like, I'm really old these days.'

'Well, don't say this to *me*, Alex. What about that place, the Thai place at Bloor and Bathurst?'

'That's not a useful description.'

'You know the one. The place that used to be the place that had the Caesar salad?'

'Oh yeah. The Royal Whatever.'

They had been to the place with the Caesar salad, he remembered now. Remembered riding his bicycle home in the middle of the night, his eyes stinging, shaky and confused. One night like all the others.

'They have this Buddha that lights up.'

'Well, you know. The Buddha's like that. Can you win little plastic prizes from him?'

'I'm afraid not. Sorry to disappoint you.'

'Well, I guess you can't have everything.'

'I'll see you there?'

'Yeah. I'll see you. Cool.'

He hung up the phone and turned around to face the lobby, shaking his head. 'Alex, man,' he said to the air, 'do you have a clue what you're doing here?'