



FICTION

I FEEL  
LOUSY

By CAROLINE ADDERSON

**THAT WAS AS MUCH AS ELLEN COULD GET** out of Yolanda, hovering above her in bathroom, holding back her golden hair while she retched. “Maybe you should stay home,” she said.

Yolanda lifted her face, pink with misery, out of the toilet and let Ellen wipe it with a cool damp cloth. “I can’t skip Inorganic Chemistry, Mom. It’s unbelievably hard.”

“Fine then. Just don’t spread it all over campus.”

Later, she wondered how she could be so dense.

**ELLEN HAD FINISHED. SHE’D SEEN HER TWO** daughters into adulthood, Mimi Bolting head-long into it, arms outstretched. Yolanda

she’d had to drag, but anyway, she’d done it, raised her girls all on her own, except for that nine-month blip when they were seven and ten and Larry came back. Before that, he’d been out sowing his wild oats, which he kept in a little bag between his legs.

This was untrue. In the beginning, he was there, when he and Ellen and Mimi absconded to Cordova Island in search of freedom. To be free in a place where feral sheep and deer roamed the forest trails, the locals, too, because it was quicker than the road. Free like the Free Store, which was really just a glorified recycling depot. And anytime you looked up, anytime you consulted the sky, there would be a bald eagle or a turkey vulture high above in a tree, watching your every move, like God.

**WITHIN A FEW DAYS YOLANDA'S FLU SETTLED INTO** a regular pattern. Violent vomiting first thing in the morning. Violent vomiting if she didn't eat. Violent vomiting if she ate anything but bread, potatoes, or mushy, Dalmatianed bananas. She walked around the house with these offensive bananas tucked under her arm. While she studied, she kept a bunch within reach.

"So what do you plan to do?" Ellen asked from Yo's bedroom door.

Yolanda glanced over her shoulder at Ellen and immediately shrunk down, like she was still a little girl afraid of her mother's rages despite the fact that they were never directed at her. Or rarely. Unlike Mimi, Yolanda had been a model child. "I'm going to have an abortion," she said.

Just like that.

Ellen bowed her head in case there was any sign of what she was feeling on her face. What was she feeling? A lot of contradictory things. Relief, for one, but also a painful, almost menstrual spasm.

"Okay. Have you made an appointment?"

"Not yet."

"Well, you have to get on it, don't you think?"

"I've been studying."

Ellen threw up her hands and even this small gesture set Yolanda wailing. "Tell me what I should do!"

"Isn't there a clinic on campus? Make an appointment. Get a referral. For God's sake, you're in Pre-med!" She stormed off, sure of what she felt now.

Two hours later she came back unangry. Something about the matter-of-fact way Yolanda had communicated her decision troubled Ellen. It sounded like she'd been chanting it to convince herself. Or maybe *he* was making her do it. The culprit, whoever he was. Either way, Ellen wasn't going to get involved, but she thought Yo could use a hug, and she was right. Yolanda was still bent over one of the massive tomes that threatened to pop the pegs of her Ikea desk, feverishly highlighting whole paragraphs, flayed peels strewn everywhere. When Ellen drew close, Yolanda flung her arms around her waist. Her glasses were all smeary. She was too preoccupied to clean them, or she'd been crying.

"You'll come with me when I do it, won't you?" she whimpered.

And a great cloud of fruit flies lifted off the half-rotten bananas and swarmed them both.

**ELLEN PHONED HER FRIEND GEORGIA WITH** the news. In the background Gary, Georgia's husband, the last Marxist left standing and an inveterate eavesdropper, asked, "What now? Mimi's up the pole?"

Georgia shushed him. "For once it's not Mimi." To Ellen she asked the obvious question, the one Ellen refused to ask. "Who's the guilty party?"

Yolanda had never even had a real boyfriend, not that Ellen knew of. Last year she took the smartest, gayest boy in the whole school to Grad. "I have no idea who," Ellen said. "I don't want to know."

"But you think she might have been coerced? Or is being coerced?"

"I hope not. But it's not like I want her to have it either. Because I'm the one who'll get stuck with it. I know I will. What do I want a baby for?"

"They smell so good." Georgia herself had two sons, Jacob, who was twenty and away at university, and the precocious Maximilian, just four. At two, Maximilian would stand on the coffee table during parties and recite, "Religion is the opium of the people," to guests who were either shocked or delighted, depending on who had invited them. "I'd have another if I could," Georgia said. "But I can't."

"I had my tubes tied," Ellen said. "Ten years ago."

"What I mean is, I need to know that the kid I currently have is going to be all right before I commit to another."

"He'll be fine!" Gary called from another room.

"I don't multi-task with my maternal responsibilities. How did you, Ellen?"

"I made a lot of mistakes," Ellen told her, "as you well know."

She remembered something as soon as she hung up. How when Mimi and Yolanda were in elementary school they kept coming home with lice. The school was good and right in the neighbourhood, two blocks away. A good school but lousy at the same time. Every year, four or five notices would come home requesting a scalp check.

"*Fuck!*" Ellen would roar, which cued the girls to duck and cover before she hurled the comb. Every infestation a toxic ordeal, a nit-picking torture. Both had silky Rapunzel tresses that took hours to properly de-lice. Mimi had to be tied down, but Yolanda would sit paging through a picture book.

During one of these sessions Ellen noticed that Yolanda had been crying, that her whole chest was literally bibbed with tears. "Oh, honey," she said. "Am I hurting you?"

"I feel so sorry for them."

"For who?"

"The baby lices."

**"YOU SEEM UNCERTAIN."**

"Do I?"

"Well, yes."

Spring, the window partially open, letting in a bright green scent. It seemed to be coming from Yolanda when she sighed in the dark. They were in Ellen's bed where Yolanda sometimes liked to come and cuddle in the middle of the night. She only started doing this last year, after Mimi left home. Mimi, who had once slept between two loving parents, while Yolanda, from birth, had been banished to a crib.

After a long silence, Ellen asked how she was feeling. "Awful," Yolanda answered and Ellen gathered her up. It felt strange to be holding a smaller adult in her arms. How many men had she invited into this bed? Too many. Very few who counted and none recently. "Yo? You don't have to. You can do whatever you want."

"Can I?"

"Of course. But I'm not raising it. That's the last thing I'll say about it."

"What about school?"

"What about it?" Ellen said, meaning a baby was an inconvenience, not an obstacle. All over the world women squatted in fields and pushed them out, then strapped them to their chests and hoed the afterbirth into the ground. Look at Ellen. She started Ellen Silver Promotions when Yolanda was a baby and Mimi three. Before cell phones! Nowadays any woman could run a successful business from a playground, but back then? No.

But telling Yolanda this would be getting involved, so Ellen held her tongue. Also, it would sound like she wanted Yolanda to have the baby, which she certainly did not. If Yolanda had that baby the door to Ellen's life, which had only just swung open letting in this delicious, irresponsible breeze, would slam shut for eighteen more years. Ellen was forty-two and only twenty pounds overweight. She was going to tackle the excess poundage, really, and then, who knew? Who knew what delights awaited her?

"How could I keep going to school?"

"No comment."

"Have you ever?" Yolanda asked.

"What?"

"Had an abortion."

## She shouldn't do it. Why did she always do it?

Ellen winced and changed the subject. "You weren't forced or anything? Tell me you weren't."

"No."

"No you won't tell me, or no you weren't raped?"

"I wasn't raped!"

"Okay. Then I don't need to know anything else unless you want to tell me about the man."

"What man?" Yolanda said and Ellen let go a sigh of her own. Actually, in the case of Yo, it could have been Immaculate Conception. She seemed so innocent. Also stupid, the way really smart people sometimes are. Socially hopeless and befuddled and shy. Not that she didn't understand sex, far from it. Ellen had made sure of that, always tucking condoms in with the sanitary supplies.

Finally, Yolanda clued in. "Oh, him! You mean him? He was more of a boy."

**YOLANDA SLEPT WITH ELLEN THE NEXT NIGHT TOO,** and the next, so Ellen reasoned that, since sharing a bed *was de facto* involvement, she might as well make an appointment for Yolanda to see the doctor, Yolanda apparently being too busy studying to do the responsible thing herself.

The day of the appointment, Ellen went in first to explain the situation, leaving Yolanda in the waiting room. "She says she wants an abortion. Obviously we have to act quickly because—Well, you know. And see what you can find out. How this happened. I'm appalled."

"Ellen," said Carol, the doctor, whom Ellen had been seeing for so many years they were practically friends.

"What?"

"She's eighteen."

"She sure doesn't seem it. I mean, if it wasn't for her scholarship, I'd think she was retarded."

"Ellen. Go. Tell her to come in. And by the way, you are way overdue for a mammogram."

While Yolanda was in with the doctor trying to determine the date of conception, Ellen opened the biology textbook Yolanda had brought along. The highlighter pen was stuck in the chapter on ferns. Ferns, she read, reproduce with spores instead of seeds. The pretty diagram showed the released spores developing into a little heart-shaped gametophytes. Gametophytes had both male and female sex organs. Convenient! There were photographs, too, that filled Ellen with verdant memories of those hidden paths that criss-crossed Cordova Island and sometimes opened into spectacular waist-high ferneries.

"I'm ready," Yolanda said and Ellen looked up with a start.

"Hold on. I want to talk to Carol again."

"No," said Carol when Ellen nabbed her in the hall to ask what Yolanda had said, "you are incorrigible," which forced Ellen, who really did not want to get any more involved, to ask Yolanda outright in the car, "So? So?"

"She did an examination. She made me pee on the stick just in case."

"It's not the flu then?"

"Ha ha." Yolanda opened the textbook and resumed reading. Ellen asked how

far along she was and when they would call about the referral. Yolanda replied in monosyllables. She pulled off the cap of the highlighter with her teeth.

"What else did she say?"

"We talked about being a doctor. How important experience is compared with knowledge. I feel like I have a lot of knowledge, but almost no experience."

"That's funny," Ellen said. "I'm the opposite."

Abruptly, Yolanda groaned and hugged the textbook. "Oh, honey!" Ellen said. "Do you need a banana?"

"It's why I did it, Mom."

Then she was sobbing her heart out. Ellen pulled over into a loading zone, cutting someone off. She answered his reprimand, a honk for a honk, and turned to Yolanda collapsed over the dash. "What are you saying, honey? Please. Tell me what's going on."

**YET ELLEN HADN'T TOLD YOLANDA WHAT HAD** happened to her, even when she asked. To Ellen, Yolanda was a daughter in trouble confiding in her mother. They were not yet two grown women sharing private aspects of their lives. It was still a one-way street for Ellen, a street Yolanda had driven up in the wrong direction, causing the two of them to crash.

Yolanda was seven and Mimi ten when Larry came back. Some woman he'd been besotted with had dumped him at the same time the television series he wrote for was cancelled. Raw with these failures, Larry called from L.A. to say he wanted to see his children. Ellen allowed it and, watching him get out of the cab a few days later, seeing his overgrown black curls, his wrinkled chinos and sad pouched eyes, the way he set down his suitcases and checked every pocket of his pants and jacket to come up with the fare, drawing out a wadded bill here, a bit of change there, she immediately forgave everything. And Larry did the same, though he had much less to forgive.

She thought they were happy, like during those two crazy, hippy years on Cordova Island living off the grid. Larry had *seemed* happy. They'd had great sex. He and the girls formed an instant mutual adoration society. He even made their

lunches—better lunches than Ellen’s, cheese melts with raisin faces, Rice Krispie squares that weren’t square, but stamped out with cookie cutters.

Normally, the girls walked themselves to school. Ellen was the only mother who didn’t escort her kids and for her negligence she received a wide range of disapproving looks, askance all the way to deploring. Now Larry walked them and picked them up and, in between, he wrote a play. He would stand at the stove stirring the Rice Krispies into the marshmallow goop, muttering snatches of dialogue. Before getting sucked into television he’d been a playwright. Ellen told him he didn’t need the money anymore. Ellen Silver Promotions was thriving by then, so he could be true to his art again.

“You make me puke,” she told him when he announced he was going back.

## Ellen lost it. “Daddy isn’t coming back! Daddy used up all his chances!”



The girls couldn’t understand his inconstancy. Mimi was too young the first time to remember he’d abandoned her before. Yolanda had been unborn. It was on their behalf that she raged.

At the time, Ellen had been hired to promote a novelist on the Vancouver leg of his book tour. She heaved herself out of bed, got the girls up, their cereal dumped in and around the bowls.

“When’s Daddy coming back?” they asked. Again! Again, again, again!

Ellen lost it. “Daddy isn’t coming back! Daddy’s never coming back! Daddy used up all his chances!”

That went over well. It was one of the few mornings she walked them to school. Well, she dragged them, sobbing, Ellen in tears herself saying, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. But I have to be downtown in twenty minutes. Believe me, I would like nothing better than to stay home with you and cry.”

She met the novelist in the restaurant of his hotel to review his schedule. Interviews, bookstore signings, then

the grand finale, The Reading. He asked straight out, “Did you love my book?”

“I did,” Ellen said. She’d only read the beginning and the end and some of the middle bits. “It’s brilliant.” It was middling, actually, but you don’t feed two children on honesty. “Before I forget.” She slid her business card across the table to him. “Anytime you need to, call.”

He looked at it. “ESP. Cute.”

“Silver isn’t even my name anymore. I’m divorced.”

At first, his reply didn’t register. She was on autopilot, miserable for having shouted at the girls that morning. All through the meeting she kept picturing herself hauling them, wailing and unbrushed, into the school. What he’d said was, “Good.”

Now she looked up and really saw him, the antithesis of Larry. Tall, even when seated. Also full of himself, though

that was more a point of commonality. He would have been gorgeous but for the blond hair ebbing off the promontory of his forehead. But who was Ellen to be critical? Parts of her were too prominent. Fortunately, she was sitting on them.

“Do you have ESP?” the novelist asked.

The business was done, his breakfast consumed, their coffee cups thrice refilled. Ellen relaxed. “Let me see.” She closed her eyes and touched her temples. Under the table, the novelist placed a foot over hers implying, not pressure, but closeness. A shudder ran through her, half-thrill, half-warning. She felt very slightly ill. “The bill will come,” she intoned, “and you will offer to pay it. But I will insist and you will succumb.”

“Succumb?”

The waiter appeared. Just before she closed her eyes, Ellen had noticed him in her peripheral vision making his way across room. The novelist threw back his head and laughed a weird, high-pitched laugh, almost a seal’s bark. “I’ll get it,” he

said, before the waiter even opened his mouth.

“I insist,” Ellen said, reaching for her purse.

The novelist laid the back of his hand across his Gibraltar forehead, behind which all his novels were plotted, his conquests, too, no doubt. “Oh, I succumb!”

Had his publicist in Calgary succumbed? In Toronto? At eleven-thirty in the morning? She shouldn’t do it. Why did she always do it? To spite Larry? He wouldn’t care. To prove to herself that she could collect lovers, too? That she was still desirable, even though Larry didn’t want her? Or just to keep opening her wound? She felt so wretched afterward. She always felt so lousy.

“We could go upstairs. But I warn you, I’ll want to hear more about my book.”

“I could read it out loud,” Ellen said.

“While I do delicious things to you.”

The waiter, who had vanished with her credit card, returned with it on a tray just in time to hear the novelist in mid-seduction. He quickly stepped away. Ellen, blushing, leaned over the bill, dizzy with embarrassment and desire, trying to calculate the tip. Fifteen percent, plus five for discretion.

*Click.*

Something dropped onto the bill, right onto the blank line she was staring at. A crumb or a speck of dirt.

She hoped.

Not alive. Not a living thing.

Yes. It definitely moved, was probably on its back, kicking its imperceptible legs in the invisible air. You needed the magnifying glass that came in the nit kit to actually see their legs.

In an instant, her whole scalp was crawling. She glanced at the novelist, to see if he’d noticed; no. He was signing her copy of his book. Ellen swept the whole tray onto the restaurant floor, oopsed and picked it up.

“Excuse me. I’ll be right back.”

She barely reached the bathroom in time. Vomited, rinsed her mouth in the sink, scratched her whole head hard enough to draw blood. With the comb, she made herself presentable again.

Back at the table, she told him. “Sorry. Suddenly, I’m not feeling so hot.”

Deep inside her, a factory was churning out cells. Of course, she had to have it, the assembled product. A sister or a brother to her girls. A living thing.

She was in the tub in the middle of the day, having stopped at the drug store for shampoo and a home pregnancy test. Suds dripped down her shoulders, over her breasts. It took ten minutes to kill the lice. Then you had to comb out the corpses and the eggs.

Except Larry would accuse her of doing it on purpose. To lure him back. She didn't have to tell him. She could claim it wasn't his. Thank God she hadn't slept with the novelist or she'd have him to contend with, too.

But how could she have another baby on her own? She wouldn't be able to work for months. Larry had no money. She didn't qualify for Unemployment Insurance. She'd have to sell the house. And, as if the judgmental looks she received on Parent Teacher Day weren't bad enough, imagine if she sauntered into the school pregnant with no obvious father around? She didn't care for her own sake, but it wasn't fair that Mimi and Yolanda should be stigmatized.

That had to be ten minutes. Eyes watering, stomach twisting from the smell, she lay flat on the bottom of the tub, just her face and knees out of the water, legs bent like she was already in the stirrups.

It was her only option. Then she'd start volunteering on hot dog day.

**WHEN THEY GOT HOME FROM SEEING DR. CAROL,** Ellen brought Yolanda a piece of bread and a glass of water and sat her down on the couch for a proper talk. Yo, cross-legged and swollen from crying, tore off the crusts, rolled some of the soft part into a pill and swallowed it with the water.

"Come on," Ellen said. "Tell me what's going on."

Yolanda lifted her face, which was pretty yet always naked and defenceless. Only the glasses protected her. "I thought I should know what it was like."

"What?" Ellen asked.

"Sex."

"Don't tell me you didn't use a condom. After how I brought you up?"

"It broke."

Then the inevitable complications. She liked him. Especially after the sex. "I read about it," Yolanda said. "Your body releases a hormone during sex to make you bond."

"Maybe he likes you, too," Ellen said.

"Men don't have that hormone."

"Ah," said Ellen. "That explains a lot."

Yolanda rolled herself another bread pill, washed it down. "Also, I hardly know him."

"So what do you really want to do?"

"I've never had any kind of operation. It would be another experience. Except, I have. I have these—*feelings*." Her glasses misted over again.

"That's hormones, too," Ellen said.

"I already love it," Yolanda announced.

Ellen remembered her glass of wine on the kitchen counter. When she came back, Yolanda's UBC t-shirt was hiked up, her hand on her belly, which looked more sunken than anything. Ellen set the glass down and light moved through the wine and shone on a magazine, the opposite of a shadow, a burning spot so fierce it seemed the magazine would ignite. Why can't we feel that purely, she wondered. Always mishmash, contradiction. She wasn't a sentimental person. She really believed that Yolanda should have the abortion and get on with her life. Yet when Ellen was in the same predicament, she hadn't been able to do it either. The hospital had called with the date of her procedure and she'd cancelled it in a gush of tears. "I'm sorry," she'd said. "I didn't know I was going to do that."

"No problem," the woman said. "There's a waiting list."

"What should I do, Mom?" Yolanda pleaded. "What would you do?"

Ellen took a sip of wine. "No comment."

#### **A BUTTINSKY. WHERE DID THAT COME FROM?**

Probably Esther, Ellen's former mother-in-law, an odious person, yet charmingly stuffed with Yiddish *bons mots*. "I'm *curious*," Ellen said in the car, in her own defense, to no one. What mother wouldn't want to get a gog at the boy who had deflowered her daughter? Who had *impregnated* her?

She found parking just off campus then asked directions to the liquor store.

Right next door was a café. "You call it Tall," Ellen told the girl behind the counter, "but it's actually Short. It's Small, yet you call it Tall."

The girl sighed.

"I'm just saying," said Ellen. "Some people have it figured out."

She took her coffee outside and, at one of the metal tables, pretended to read *Pride and Prejudice*, holding it upside-down for fun. He wasn't there. Yolanda had said he always was. After a few minutes she turned the book the right way and that was it. Completely absorbed by the Bennett family's delightful problems, she forgot the stake-out. In the middle of Chapter Three, a sound like a train clacking over the rails returned her to her proper task. Him for sure. As he pirouetted to a stop, the skateboard took flight, its coloured underside flashing. He caught it in one hand. Dreadlocks, dirty jeans barely clinging to his hips, a bad cough. His name, Yolanda had said, was Sean.

From behind *Pride and Prejudice*, Ellen watched. He rooted through his pack. Out came crocheted juggling balls, a cigar box. To warm up, he flipped two balls in each hand and coughed. A university liquor store was not the most lucrative place to ply his trade. While the coloured balls orbited, frat boys went in and out for beer, ignoring him. "Hi!" he kept saying. "Hi!" The cough sounded like a chair being pushed out, scraping the floor. Occasionally he'd cajole someone into tossing him a set of keys, or an apple, for a few turns with the balls. Or he'd look at his watch without altering his rhythm. "These balls have been in the air for thirteen minutes. Only your generous donation can keep them going." Yolanda must have donated. Ellen pictured her scooting past, hurling change in the *Romeo y Julieta* box. The bus stop where she waited was just across the street. When you see a person every day, you start to feel connected. You start to worry when they're not there, or when their cough won't go away.

Ellen gave him a twenty, which was stupid, because he watched it flutter down on the mosaic of pennies and dimes in the bottom of the box, then looked at her, amazed. And smiled. Very

boyishly. All the while the balls kept circling. Blushing, her cover blown, Ellen slunk off.

"Hey, awesome! Thanks! Good karma to you, lady! That lady just gave me twenty. I didn't put it in my—"

He broke off hacking.

**LATER THAT NIGHT, DELIVERING ROTTEN BANANAS** to Yolanda at her desk, Ellen noticed she was highlighting every word in *What to Expect When You're Expecting*.

So, she thought. So.

She made no comment.

But then *the feelings* jackbooted in and they were not at all what Ellen had expected. Almost faint with them, she took to her bed with a cold cloth over her forehead and a box of tissue balanced on her stomach. She wasn't angry. She wasn't even relieved that Yolanda had finally made up her mind.

Back then—ten years ago—Ellen had been all business. She'd had no time to feel anything but nausea. She took on extra contracts, wrote grant proposals for arts organizations, too, just to earn enough money to get them through the year after the baby was born. Ironically, it made her an even worse mother. Where once she'd rationed the TV—thirty minutes a day, no more—now it babysat Mimi and Yo. Or she farmed them out shamelessly to Georgia and picked them up late. No time to patiently comb every strand. Off to her hairdresser they went, the girls bawling in side-by-side chairs while Tony lopped off their infested ponytails and tossed them to the floor, making a face.

"Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby*," Ellen told him. "Remember? As short as that."

"Mama?" Mimi said afterward. "I'll hate you forever and ever now."

Little did Ellen know she would hear those words so often they would eventually have no effect, but that was the first time and they felt like a wrecking ball to the chest. Back then, in the sunshiney world of childhood, where forgiveness was dispensed like lollipops, she made everything right just by taking them to get their ears pierced.

Later in the week, one of the mothers from school, whom Ellen had assumed

despised her, came up to her in Shopper's Drug Mart. "Mrs. Silver? I just wanted to say that your two girls?"

Ellen braced herself.

"Well, you have the most elegant children in the whole school."

Carol sent her for a twelve-week ultrasound. The technician buried the transducer so deep into Ellen's fat it hurt, then suggested a transvaginal scan. For this Ellen had to clamber off the table, put her pants back on and go empty her bladder, which she'd painstakingly filled on Carol's orders.

## What could you do at a time like this but crack a joke or fake an orgasm?

"Well, that was a relief," she told the technician after she had dumped all those cups of tea. "This? Not so much." She meant being penetrated with a cold, KY Jelly slathered rod. What could you do at a time like this but crack a joke or fake an orgasm? Except the technician seemed so humourless.

Because it was dead. She didn't say that. She called it *blighted*.

On the phone later, Carol said Ellen could wait until she miscarried naturally, or she could have a D&C. Really, she shouldn't have cared. She'd been ambivalent, anyway. Yet after the *procedure*, after Georgia drove her home from the hospital, Ellen made Mimi and Yo peanut butter sandwiches and an enormous bowl of cheese popcorn. She set a travel clock on the TV and started the cartoons blasting. "When the alarm rings, come and get me. But don't come until it rings. No matter what."

"What if we're hungry?" Mimi asked.

"Eat something."

"What if we're thirsty?"

"You know how to turn on a tap."

"What if the house catches fire?"

"Run out the back. Don't worry about me."

She shut herself in her bedroom and sobbed until, hours and hours later, four hours to be exact, Mimi and Yolanda crept in and woke her up. "Mama," they whimpered. "We thought it wasn't ever going to ring."

Somehow Ellen managed to put that grief away. She also took measures to ensure she would never feel it again. Until now, with the cold comfort of the cloth across her forehead and the tissue box her belly, weightless as the very thing her body would never again contain.

### THE NEXT TIME, HE REMEMBERED HER.

"Last week."

"No," said Ellen.

It was actually just four days ago. Yolanda had an exam today and Ellen offered to drive her. She had to drop off some posters anyway. She wanted to take another look. Birthmarks, eye colour, et cetera. Things she hadn't looked for the first time, when she'd been merely curious.

So there wouldn't be any surprises.

So she would know what to expect.

"Do you want something from me?" Sean asked.

"Absolutely not!" Ellen said.

"But you gave me a twenty last week, too."

"I must have a doppelganger. This tall? This wide? A lot of money to throw around? I'm taking it back." She retrieved the twenty and, when she straightened, he was laughing. The chair pushed out in his chest, scraping his lungs, yet the balls didn't fall, or even slow or falter. She was impressed. Quite won over. She noted blue eyes. Ellen had blue eyes but Larry's, nearly black, had trumped hers. Larry had blotted the blue right out of his daughters.

"What else could I do for twenty dollars?" he asked.

Ellen, normally unfazable, drew back. "I give a good back rub. Or I could teach you to juggle."

It would seem Oedipal if he touched her, even if by "back rub" he actually meant rubbing her back. Juggling? Ha!

They went for a walk.

"How does your meter work?" Ellen asked. "Am I paying by the minute, or by the yard?"

"I'm easy," he said.

A nearly eight hundred-hectare forest grew right up against the university. In Ellen's day, when she was a student here, it had a different name. Barely anything on campus was recognizable. Over there, a familiar building—Chemistry?—but it lacked all context. What context! She'd met Larry here, got pregnant, dropped out, ran off to Cordova Island.

They turned onto Westbrook Mall, Sean clacking beside her on the board, clacking and coughing. The hospital looked the same but the old frat houses had been torn down and replaced by frat condos.

As they entered the forest, Sean stashed his skateboard in a tree. It was easy to get him talking then. His whole story he offered up, how he'd got pneumonia tree planting and ended up in hospital. Afterward, he didn't want to go back home.

"Where's home?" Ellen asked.

"Ontario. My brother's there, but he doesn't give a shit about me."

Orphan, Ellen noted with a pang. Also, weak in the lungs. "Are you living on campus?"

He flipped the dull ropes of his hair back and smiled. "For now. I was staying with friends, but they went planting again and subtlet their place. What about you? Where do you live?"

"The North Shore."

"Mountains. Awesome. Here. Let's go this way. I want to show you something."

He tried to take her hand, but she plucked it back. Had he led Yolanda off the marked trail like this, into the thick of the green where no one would hear them? Ellen followed, freshly appalled at Yolanda's stupidity. Yet here was Ellen moments later with no idea where she was. She stepped over logs, kicked

through salal. The ground, wet and humusy, sponged underfoot. Eventually they came to an enormous cedar, its limbs shagged with moss. Great hanks hung all over it like green tangled hair. What interested Sean was how the tree had grown over a fallen log, its roots partially above ground, elongated, like a pair of straddling legs. "Doesn't that look alive?" he asked.

"It is alive."

"I mean, doesn't it look like it could walk and talk? It's the fucking *Lord of the Rings* in here. There's nothing like this in Sudbury. I can tell you that much."

All around ferns clumped, their outrageous crowns like giant Copacabana headdresses. Ellen turned over a frond and saw the tiny regular circles roughing up its underside. They were pale green now, but as the spores matured they would darken to a powdery brown.

"So sperms and eggs are, like, floating all around us?" Sean asked when she explained it.

"Yes."

He gazed up, squinting, and the dreadlocks slid heavily down his back. Ellen looked up, too, at the light penetrating the canopy of branches. Something moved. A very fine filament, a silken tail, tracing an otherwise invisible trajectory. Then the molecular burst of connection.

Probably a spider web. Probably a water droplet snagged on the afternoon.

Sean said, "Awesome."

And it was. It filled her with awe until she remembered that she'd only paid the parking meter for an hour.

"This way," Sean said, striking off ahead of her. "It's faster."

"Would you say you're generally a happy person?" Ellen asked.

"I'm really happy," he said, coughing.

"That's so comforting to know. One of my daughters gets really low. Because of her father. Of course, she blames me."

He pointed deeper into the trees. "There's my pad."

He had rigged up a tarp, green to camouflage it. "Can I?" she asked and he gestured to go ahead.

Ellen bent and peered inside the plastic shelter where Yolanda had probably

lost her virginity and gained more experience than she counted on. Butane camping stove, sleeping bag, some mildewed paperbacks. Things in garbage bags, but everything else damp looking and not very clean.

"Cosy," she said, though already she was fretting about his cough. This was a rain forest. What he really needed was to dry out. And the other thing—she'd been avoiding thinking about it, trying not to notice how often he wormed a finger through the dreadlocks to scratch his scalp.

As he sauntered ahead of her in the tree-dappled light, a song came to her. Her mother used to sing it when Ellen was a little girl. *Nature Boy*. By somebody famous.

*There was a boy. A very strange enchanted boy. A little shy, and sad of eye, but very wise was he...*

"Is there a place you can shower?" she asked.

Nat King Cole.

"The pool's too expensive. I found a shower in one of the science buildings. Then, last time? I got caught." He lifted one arm and sniffed. "Sorry."

**SOME PEOPLE HAVE IT FIGURED OUT, BUT PLENTY** are *meshugeners*. Back at the car, a sixty-dollar parking ticket decorated Ellen's windshield. Plus twenty for Sean.

"You don't have to pay me," he said. "You're letting me use your shower."

She stuffed the bill into the pocket of his t-shirt, over one weak, rattling lung. "We have to stop for some bananas on the way."

"No problema."

What would Yolanda say when she got home? Ellen would deal with that after she made some calls. She was going to call a few old friends and see if anyone had an empty cabin. He could chop wood, do some construction. He was probably strong when he wasn't sick. Or he could teach juggling at the Waldorf School. Almost everyone had a cabin out back, or a shack they used to live in while they built their permanent place. A lot of people still owed Ellen. They owed her for the oats they let Larry sprinkle all over their beds. ☒