

WILDERNESS TIPS





Prue has folded two red bandanna handkerchiefs into triangles and tied them together at one set of corners. The second set of corners is tied behind her back, the third around her neck. She's wrapped another bandanna, a blue one, around her head and made a little reef knot at the front. Now she's strutting the length of the dock, in her improvised halter top and her wide-legged white shorts, her sunglasses with the white plastic frames, her platform sandals.

"It's the forties look," she says to George, hand on her hip, doing a pirouette. "Rosie the Riveter. From the war. Remember her?"

George, whose name is not really George, does not remember. He spent the forties rooting through garbage heaps and begging, and doing other things unsuitable for a child. He has a dim memory of some film star posed on a calendar tattering on a latrine wall. Maybe this is the one Prue means. He remem-

bers for an instant his intense resentment of the bright, ignorant smile, the well-fed body. A couple of buddies had helped him take her apart with the rusty blade from a kitchen knife they'd found somewhere in the rubble. He does not consider telling any of this to Prue.

George is sitting in a green-and-white striped canvas deck chair, reading *The Financial Post* and drinking Scotch. The ash-tray beside him overflows with butts: many women have tried to cure him of smoking; many have failed. He looks up at Prue from behind his paper and smiles his foxy smile. This is a smile he does with the cigarette held right in the center of his mouth: on either side of it his lips curl back, revealing teeth. He has long canines, miraculously still his.

"You weren't born then," he says. This isn't true, but he never misses the chance to bestow a compliment when there's one just lying around. What does it cost? Not a cent, which is something the men in this country have never figured out. Prue's tanned midriff is on a level with his face; it's still firm, still flexible and lithe. At that age his mother had gone soft—loose-fleshed and velvety, like an aging plum. These days they eat a lot of vegetables, they work out, they last longer.

Prue lowers the sunglasses to the end of her nose and looks at him over the plastic rims. "George, you are totally shameless," she says. "You always were." She gives him an innocent smile, a mischievous smile, a smile with a twist of real evil in it. It's a smile that wavers like a gasoline slick on water, shining, changing tone.

This smile of Prue's was the first interesting thing George stumbled over when he hit Toronto, back in the late fifties. It was at a party thrown by a real-estate developer with Eastern European connections. He'd been invited because refugees from Hungary were considered noteworthy back then, right after the uprising. At that time he was young, thin as a snake, with a dangerous-looking scar over one eye and a few bizarre stories. A collectible. Prue had been there in an off-the-shoulder black dress. She'd raised her glass to him, looked over the rim, hoisted the smile like a flag.

The smile is still an invitation, but it's not something George will follow up on—not here, not now. Later, in the city, perhaps. But this lake, this peninsula, Wacousta Lodge itself, are his refuge, his monastery, his sacred ground. Here he will perform no violations.

"Why is it you cannot bear to accept a gift?" says George. Smoke blows into his eyes; he squints. "If I were younger, I would kneel. I would kiss both your hands. Believe me."

Prue, who has known him to do these things back in more impetuous times, turns on her heel. "It's lunchtime," she says. "That's what I came to tell you." She has heard refusal.

George watches her white shorts and her still shapely thighs (with, however, their faint stippling of dimpled fat) going wink, wink, wink through the clear sunlight, past the boathouse, along the stone path, up the hill to the house. From up there a bell is ringing: the lunch bell. For once in her life, Prue is telling the truth.

George takes one more look at the paper. Quebec is talking Separatism; there are Mohawks behind the barricades near Montreal, and people are throwing stones at them; word is the country is falling apart. George is not worried: he's been in countries that were falling apart before. There can be opportunities. As for the fuss people here make about language, he doesn't understand it. What's a second language, or a third, or a fourth? George himself speaks five, if you count Russian, which he would prefer not to. As for the stone-throwing, it's typical. Not bombs, not bullets: just stones. Even the uproar here is muted.

He scratches his belly under the loose shirt he wears; he's been gaining a little too much around the middle. Then he stubs out his cigarette, downs the heel of his Scotch, and hauls himself out of his deck chair. Carefully, he folds the chair and places it inside the boathouse: a wind could come up, the chair could be sent sailing into the lake. He treats the possessions and rituals of Wacousta Lodge with a tenderness, a reverence, that would baffle those who know him only in the city. Despite what some

bers for an instant his intense resentment of the bright, ignorant smile, the well-fed body. A couple of buddies had helped him take her apart with the rusty blade from a kitchen knife they'd found somewhere in the rubble. He does not consider telling any of this to Prue.

George is sitting in a green-and-white striped canvas deck chair, reading *The Financial Post* and drinking Scotch. The ashtray beside him overflows with butts: many women have tried to cure him of smoking; many have failed. He looks up at Prue from behind his paper and smiles his foxy smile. This is a smile he does with the cigarette held right in the center of his mouth: on either side of it his lips curl back, revealing teeth. He has long canines, miraculously still his.

"You weren't born then," he says. This isn't true, but he never misses the chance to bestow a compliment when there's one just lying around. What does it cost? Not a cent, which is something the men in this country have never figured out. Prue's tanned midriff is on a level with his face; it's still firm, still flexible and lithe. At that age his mother had gone soft—loose-fleshed and velvety, like an aging plum. These days they eat a lot of vegetables, they work out, they last longer.

Prue lowers the sunglasses to the end of her nose and looks at him over the plastic rims. "George, you are totally shameless," she says. "You always were." She gives him an innocent smile, a mischievous smile, a smile with a twist of real evil in it. It's a smile that wavers like a gasoline slick on water, shining, changing tone.

This smile of Prue's was the first interesting thing George stumbled over when he hit Toronto, back in the late fifties. It was at a party thrown by a real-estate developer with Eastern European connections. He'd been invited because refugees from Hungary were considered noteworthy back then, right after the uprising. At that time he was young, thin as a snake, with a dangerous-looking scar over one eye and a few bizarre stories. A collectible. Prue had been there in an off-the-shoulder black dress. She'd raised her glass to him, looked over the rim, hoisted the smile like a flag.

The smile is still an invitation, but it's not something George will follow up on—not here, not now. Later, in the city, perhaps. But this lake, this peninsula, Wacousta Lodge itself, are his refuge, his monastery, his sacred ground. Here he will perform no violations.

"Why is it you cannot bear to accept a gift?" says George. Smoke blows into his eyes; he squints. "If I were younger, I would kneel. I would kiss both your hands. Believe me."

Prue, who has known him to do these things back in more impetuous times, turns on her heel. "It's lunchtime," she says. "That's what I came to tell you." She has heard refusal.

George watches her white shorts and her still shapely thighs (with, however, their faint stippling of dimpled fat) going wink, wink, wink through the clear sunlight, past the boathouse, along the stone path, up the hill to the house. From up there a bell is ringing: the lunch bell. For once in her life, Prue is telling the truth.

George takes one more look at the paper. Quebec is talking Separatism; there are Mohawks behind the barricades near Montreal, and people are throwing stones at them; word is the country is falling apart. George is not worried: he's been in countries that were falling apart before. There can be opportunities. As for the fuss people here make about language, he doesn't understand it. What's a second language, or a third, or a fourth? George himself speaks five, if you count Russian, which he would prefer not to. As for the stone-throwing, it's typical. Not bombs, not bullets: just stones. Even the uproar here is muted.

He scratches his belly under the loose shirt he wears; he's been gaining a little too much around the middle. Then he stubs out his cigarette, downs the heel of his Scotch, and hauls himself out of his deck chair. Carefully, he folds the chair and places it inside the boathouse: a wind could come up, the chair could be sent sailing into the lake. He treats the possessions and rituals of Wacousta Lodge with a tenderness, a reverence, that would baffle those who know him only in the city. Despite what some

would call his unorthodox business practices, he is in some ways a conservative man; he loves traditions. They are thin on the ground in this country, but he knows one when he sees one, and does it homage. The deck chairs here are like the escutcheons elsewhere.

As he walks up the hill, more slowly than he used to, he hears the sound of wood being split behind the kitchen wing. He hears a truck on the highway that runs along the side of the lake; he hears wind in the white pines. He hears a loon. He remembers the first time he heard one, and hugs himself. He has done well.

Wacousta Lodge is a large, oblong, one-story structure with board-and-batten walls stained a dark reddish brown. It was built in the first years of the century by the family's great-grandfather, who made a bundle on the railways. He included a maid's room and a cook's room at the back, although no maid or cook had ever been induced to stay in them, not to George's knowledge, certainly not in recent years. The great-grandfather's craggy, walrus-whiskered face, frowning above the constriction of a stiff collar, hangs oval-framed in the washroom, which is equipped only with a sink and a ewer. George can remember a zinc bathtub, but it's been retired. Baths take place in the lake. For the rest, there's an outhouse, placed discreetly behind a clump of spruce.

What a lot of naked and semi-naked bodies the old man must have seen over the years, thinks George, lathering his hands, and how he must have disapproved of them. At least the old boy isn't condemned to the outhouse: that would be too much for him. George makes a small, superstitious, oddly Japanese bow towards the great-grandfather as he goes out the door. He always does this. The presence of this scowling ancestral totem is one of the reasons he behaves himself, more or less, up here.

The table for lunch is set on the wide, screened-in veranda at the front of the house, overlooking the lake. Prue is not sitting

at it, but her two sisters are: dry-faced Pamela, the eldest, and soft Portia, the youngest of the three and George's own wife. There is also Roland, the brother, large, rounded, and balding. George, who is not all that fond of men on purely social occasions because there are few ways he can manipulate them, gives Roland a polite nod and turns the full force of his vulpine smile upon the two women. Pamela, who distrusts him, sits up straight and pretends not to notice. Portia smiles at him, a wistful, vague smile, as if he were a cloud. Roland ignores him, though not on purpose, because Roland has the inner life of a tree, or possibly of a stump. George can never tell what Roland is thinking, or even if he is thinking at all.

"Isn't the weather marvelous?" George says to Pamela. He has learned over the years that the weather is the proper opening topic here for any conversation at all. Pamela is too well brought up to refuse an answer to a direct question.

"If you like postcards," she says. "At least it's not snowing." Pamela has recently been appointed a Dean of Women, a title George has not yet figured out completely. The Oxford dictionary has informed him that a dean might be the head of ten monks in a monastery, or "as tr. med. *L. decanus*, applied to the *teoding-ealdor*, the headman of a *tenmannetale*." Much of what Pamela says sounds more or less like this: incomprehensible, though it might turn out to have a meaning if studied.

George would like to go to bed with Pamela, not because she is beautiful—she is much too rectilinear and slab-shaped for his tastes, she has no bottom at all, and her hair is the color of dried grass—but because he has never done it. Also, he wants to know what she would say. His interest in her is anthropological. Or perhaps geological: she would have to be scaled, like a glacier.

"Did you have a nice read?" says Portia. "I hope you didn't get sunburned. Is there any news?"

"If you can call it news," says Pamela. "That paper's a week old. Why is 'news' plural? Why don't we say 'olds'?"

"George likes old stuff," says Prue, coming in with a platter of food. She's put on a man's white shirt over her kerchief arrangement but hasn't done it up. "Lucky for us ladies, eh? Gob-

ble up, everyone. It's yummy cheese-and-chutney sandwiches and yummy sardines. George? Beer or acid rain?"

George drinks a beer, and eats and smiles, eats and smiles, while the family talks around him—all but Roland, who absorbs his nutriments in silence, gazing out at the lake through the trees, his eyes immobile. George sometimes thinks Roland can change color slightly to blend in with his backgrounds; unlike George himself, who is doomed to stand out.

Pamela is complaining again about the stuffed birds. There are three of them, kept under glass bells in the living room: a duck, a loon, a grouse. These were the bright ideas of the grandfather, meant to go with the generally lodge-like décor: the mangy bearskin rug, complete with claws and head; the miniature birchbark canoe on the mantelpiece; the snowshoes, cracked and drying, crossed above the fireplace; the Hudson's Bay blanket nailed to the wall and beset by moths. Pamela is sure the stuffed birds will get moths too.

"They're probably a sea of maggots, inside," she says, and George tries to picture what a sea of maggots would look like. It's her metaphoric leaps, her tangled verbal stringworks, that confuse him.

"They're hermetically sealed," says Prue. "You know: nothing goes in, nothing comes out. Like nuns."

"Don't be revolting," says Pamela. "We should check them for frass."

"Who, the nuns?" says Prue.

"What is frass?" says George.

"Maggot excrement," says Pamela, not looking at him. "We could have them freeze-dried."

"Would it work?" says Prue.

Prue, who in the city is the first with trends—the first white kitchen, the first set of giant shoulder pads, the first leather pants suit have been hers over the years—is here as resistant to change as the rest of them. She wants everything on this peninsula to stay exactly the way it always has been. And it does, though with a gradual decline into shabbiness. George doesn't mind the

shabbiness, however. Wacousta Lodge is a little slice of the past, an alien past. He feels privileged.

A motorboat goes by, one of the plastic-hulled, high-speed kind, far too close. Even Roland flinches. The wake jostles the dock.

"I hate those," says Portia, who hasn't shown much interest in the stuffed-bird question. "Another sandwich, dear?"

"It was so lovely and quiet here during the war," says Pamela. "You should have been here, George." She says this accusingly, as if it's his fault he wasn't. "Hardly any motorboats, because of the gas rationing. More canoes. Of course, the road wasn't built then, there was only the train. I wonder why we say 'train of thought' but never 'car of thought?'"

"And rowboats," says Prue. "I think all those motorboat people should be taken out and shot. At least the ones who go too fast." Prue herself drives like a maniac, but only on land.

George, who has seen many people taken out and shot, though not for driving motorboats, smiles, and helps himself to a sardine. He once shot three men himself, though only two of them were strictly necessary. The third was a precaution. He still feels uneasy about that, about the possibly harmless one with his too-innocent informer's eyes, his shirtfront dappled with blood. But there would be little point in mentioning that, at lunch or at any other time. George has no desire to be startling.

It was Prue who brought him north, brought him here, during their affair, the first one. (How many affairs have there been? Can they be separated, or are they really one long affair, with interruptions, like a string of sausages? The interruptions were Prue's marriages, which never lasted long, possibly because she was monogamous during them. He would know when a marriage was nearing its end: the phone at his office would ring and it would be Prue, saying, "George. I can't do it. I've been so good, but I just can't go on. He comes into the bathroom when I'm flossing my teeth. I long to be in an elevator with you, stuck between floors. Tell me something *filthy*. I hate love, don't you?")

. . .

His first time here he was led in chains, trailed in Prue's wake, like a barbarian in a Roman triumph. A definite capture, also a deliberate outrage. He was supposed to alarm Prue's family, and he did, though not on purpose. His English was not good, his hair was too glossy, his shoes too pointed, his clothes too sharply pressed. He wore dark glasses, kissed hands. The mother was alive then, though not the father; so there were four women ranged against him, with no help at all from the impenetrable Roland.

"Mother, this is George," said Prue, on the dock where they were all sitting in their ancestral deck chairs, the daughters in bathing suits with shirts over them, the mother in striped pastels. "It's not his real name, but it's easier to pronounce. He's come up here to see wild animals."

George leaned over to kiss the mother's sun-freckled hand, and his dark glasses fell off into the lake. The mother made cooing sounds of distress, Prue laughed at him, Roland ignored him, Pamela turned away in irritation. But Portia—lovely, small-boned Portia, with her velvet eyes—took off her shirt without a word and dove into the lake. She retrieved his dark glasses for him, smiling diffidently, handing them up to him out of the water, her wet hair dripping down over her small breasts like a water nymph's on an Art Nouveau fountain, and he knew then that she was the one he would marry. A woman of courtesy and tact and few words, who would be kind to him, who would cover up for him; who would pick up the things he had dropped.

In the afternoon, Prue took him for a paddle in one of the leaking canvas-covered canoes from the boathouse. He sat in the front, jabbing ineptly at the water with his paddle, thinking about how he would get Portia to marry him. Prue landed them on a rocky point, led him up among the trees. She wanted him to make his usual rakish, violent, outlandish brand of love to her on the reindeer moss and pine needles; she wanted to break some family taboo. Sacrilege was what she had in mind: that was as clear to him as if he'd read it. But George already had

his plan of attack worked out, so he put her off. He didn't want to desecrate Wacousta Lodge: he wanted to marry it.

That evening at dinner he neglected all three of the daughters in favor of the mother: the mother was the guardian; the mother was the key. Despite his limping vocabulary he could be devastatingly charming, as Prue had announced to everyone while they ate their chicken-noodle soup.

"Wacousta Lodge," he said to the mother, bending his scar and his glinting marauder's eyes towards her in the light from the kerosene lamp. "That is so romantic. It is the name of an Indian tribe?"

Prue laughed. "It's named after some stupid book," she said. "Great-grandfather liked it because it was written by a general."

"A major," said Pamela severely. "In the nineteenth century. Major Richardson."

"Ah?" said George, adding this item to his already growing cache of local traditions. So there were books here, and houses named after them! Most people were touchy on the subject of their books; it would be as well to show some interest. Anyway, he *was* interested. But when he asked about the subject of this book it turned out that none of the women had read it.

"I've read it," said Roland, unexpectedly.

"Ah?" said George.

"It's about war."

"It's on the bookshelf in the living room," the mother said indifferently. "After dinner you can have a look, if you're all that fascinated."

It was the mother (Prue explained) who had been guilty of the daughters' alliterative names. She was a whimsical woman, though not sadistic; it was simply an age when parents did that—named their children to match, as if they'd come out of an alphabet book. The bear, the bumblebee, the bunny. Mary and Marjorie Murchison. David and Darlene Daly. Nobody did that anymore. Of course, the mother hadn't stopped at the names themselves but had converted them into nicknames: Pam, Prue, Porsh. Prue's is the only nickname that has stuck. Pamela is now too dignified for hers, and Portia says it's already bad

enough, being confused with a car, and why can't she be just an initial?

Roland had been left out of the set, at the insistence of the father. It was Prue's opinion that he had always resented it. "How can you tell?" George asked her, running his tongue around her navel as she lay in her half-slip on the Chinese carpet in his office, smoking a cigarette and surrounded by sheets of paper that had been knocked off the desk during the initial skirmish. She'd made sure the door was unlocked: she liked to run the risk of intrusion, preferably by George's secretary, whom she suspected of being the competition. Which secretary, and when was that? The spilled papers were part of a take-over plan—the Adams group. This is how George keeps track of the various episodes with Prue: by remembering what other skulduggery he was up to at the time. He'd made his money quickly, and then he'd made more. It had been much easier than he'd thought; it had been like spearing fish by lamplight. These people were lax and trusting, and easily embarrassed by a hint of their own intolerance or lack of hospitality to strangers. They weren't ready for him. He'd been as happy as a missionary among the Hawaiians. A hint of opposition and he'd thicken his accent and refer darkly to Communist atrocities. Seize the moral high ground, then grab what you can get.

After that first dinner, they'd all gone into the living room, carrying their cups of coffee. There were kerosene lamps in there, too—old ones, with globe shades. Prue took George flagrantly by the hand and led him over to the bookcase, which was topped with a collection of clam shells and pieces of driftwood from the girls' childhoods. "Here it is," she said. "Read it and weep." She went to refill his coffee. George opened the book, an old edition that had, as he'd hoped, a frontispiece of an angry-looking warrior with tomahawk and paint. Then he scanned the shelves. *From Sea to Sea. Wild Animals I Have Known. The Collected Poems of Robert Service. Our Empire Story. Wilderness Tips.*

"Wilderness Tips" puzzled him. "Wilderness" he knew, but

"tips"? He was not immediately sure whether this word was a verb or a noun. There were asparagus tips, as he knew from menus, and when he was getting into the canoe that afternoon in his slippery leather-soled city shoes Prue had said, "Be careful, it tips." Perhaps it was another sort of tip, as in the "Handy Tips for Happy Homemakers" columns in the women's magazines he had taken to reading in order to improve his English—the vocabularies were fairly simple and there were pictures, which was a big help.

When he opened the book he saw he'd guessed right. *Wilderness Tips* was dated 1905. There was a photo of the author in a plaid wool jacket and a felt hat, smoking a pipe and paddling a canoe, against a backdrop that was more or less what you could see out the window: water, islands, rocks, trees. The book itself told how to do useful things, like snaring small animals and eating them—something George himself had done, though not in forests—or lighting a fire in a rainstorm. These instructions were interspersed with lyrical passages about the joys of independence and the open air, and descriptions of fish-catching and sunsets. George took the book over to a chair near one of the globed lamps; he wanted to read about skinning knives, but Prue came back with his coffee, and Portia offered him a chocolate, and he did not want to run the risk of displeasing either of them, not at this early stage. That could come later.

Now George again walks into the living room, again carrying a cup of coffee. By this time he's read all of the books in the great-grandfather's collection. He's the only one who has.

Prue follows him in. The women take it in turns to clear and do the dishes, and it isn't her turn. Roland's job is the wood-splitting. There was an attempt once to press George into service with a tea towel, but he jovially broke three wineglasses, exclaiming over his own clumsiness, and since then he has been left in peace.

"You want more coffee?" Prue says. She stands close to him, proffering the open shirt, the two bandannas. George isn't sure

he wants to start anything again, but he sets his coffee down on the top of the bookcase and puts his hand on her hip. He wants to check out his options, make sure he's still welcome. Prue sighs—a long sigh of desire or exasperation, or both.

"Oh, George," she says. "What should I do with you?"

"Whatever you like," says George, moving his mouth close to her ear. "I am merely a lump of clay in your hands." Her earlobe holds a tiny silver earring in the form of a shell. He represses an impulse to nibble.

"Curious George," she says, using one of her old nicknames for him. "You used to have the eyes of a young goat. Lecher eyes."

And now I'm an old goat, thinks George. He can't resist, he wants to be young again; he runs his hand up under her shirt.

"Later," Prue says triumphantly. She steps back from him and aims her wavering smile, and George upsets his cup of coffee with his elbow.

"*Fene egye meg*," he says, and Prue laughs. She knows the meaning of these swear-words, and worse ones, too.

"Clumsy bugger," she says. "I'll get a sponge."

George lights a cigarette and awaits her return. But it is Pamela who appears, frowning, in the doorway, with a deteriorating scrub cloth and a metal bowl. Trust Prue to have found some other urgent thing to do. She is probably in the outhouse, leafing through a magazine and plotting, deciding when and where she will next entice him.

"So, George, you've made a mess," says Pamela, as if he were a puppy. If she had a rolled-up newspaper, thinks George, she'd give me a swat on the nose.

"It's true, I'm an oaf," says George amiably. "But you've always known that."

Pamela gets down on her knees and begins to wipe. "If the plural of 'loaf' is 'loaves,' what's the plural of 'oaf'?" she says. "Why isn't it 'oaves'?" George realizes that a good deal of what she says is directed not to him or to any other listener but simply to herself. Is that because she thinks no one can hear her? He finds the sight of her down on her knees suggestive—stirring,

even. He catches a whiff of her: soap flakes, a tinge of something sweet. Hand lotion? She has a graceful neck and throat. He wonders if she's ever had a lover, and, if so, what he was like. An insensitive man, lacking in skill. An oaf.

"George, you smoke like a furnace," she says, without turning around. "You really should stop, or it'll kill you."

George considers the ambiguity of the phrase. "Smoking like a furnace." He sees himself as a dragon, fumes and red flames pouring out of his ravenous maw. Is this really her version of him? "That would make you happy," he says, deciding on impulse to try a frontal attack. "You'd love to see me six feet underground. You've never liked me."

Pamela stops wiping and looks at him over her shoulder. Then she stands up and wrings the dirty cloth out into the bowl. "That's juvenile," she says calmly, "and unworthy of you. You need more exercise. This afternoon I'll take you canoeing."

"You know I'm hopeless at that," says George truthfully. "I always crash into rocks. I never see them."

"Geology is destiny," says Pamela, as if to herself. She scowls at the stuffed loon in its glass bell. She is thinking. "Yes," she says at last. "This lake is full of hidden rocks. It can be dangerous. But I'll take care of you."

Is she flirting with him? Can a crag flirt? George can hardly believe it, but he smiles at her, holding the cigarette in the center of his mouth, showing his canines, and for the first time in their lives Pamela smiles back at him. Her mouth is quite different when the corners turn up; it's as if he were seeing her upside down. He's surprised by the loveliness of her smile. It's not a knowing smile, like Prue's, or saintly, like Portia's. It's the smile of an imp, of a mischievous child, mixed in with something he'd never expected to find in her. A generosity, a carelessness, a largesse. She has something she wishes to give him. What could it be?

After lunch and a pause for digestion, Roland goes back to his chopping, beside the woodshed out behind the kitchen. He's

splitting birch—a dying tree he cut down a year ago. The beavers had made a start on it, but changed their minds. White birch don't live long anyway. He'd used the chain saw, slicing the trunk neatly into lengths, the blade going through the wood like a knife through butter, the noise blotting out all other noises—the wind and waves, the whining of the trucks from the highway across the lake. He dislikes machine noises, but they're easier to tolerate when you're making them yourself, when you can control them. Like gunshot.

Not that Roland shoots. He used to: he used to go out for a deer in season, but now it's unsafe, there are too many other men doing it—Italians and who knows what—who'll shoot at anything moving. In any case, he's lost the taste for the end result, the antlered carcasses strapped to the fronts of cars like grotesque hood ornaments, the splendid, murdered heads peering dull-eyed from the tops of mini-vans. He can see the point of venison, of killing to eat, but to have a cut-off head on your wall? What does it prove, except that a deer can't pull a trigger?

He never talks about these feelings. He knows they would be held against him at his place of work, which he hates. His job is managing money for other people. He knows he is not a success, not by his great-grandfather's standards. The old man sneers at him every morning from that rosewood frame in the washroom, while he is shaving. They both know the same thing: if Roland were a success he'd be out pillaging, not counting the beans. He'd have some gray, inoffensive, discontented man counting the beans for him. A regiment of them. A regiment of men like himself.

He lifts a chunk of birch, stands it on end on the chopping block, swings the axe. A clean split, but he's out of practice. Tomorrow he will have blisters. In a while he'll stop, stoop and pile, stoop and pile. There's already enough wood, but he likes doing this. It's one of the few things he does like. He feels alive only up here.

Yesterday, he drove up from the center of the city, past the warehouses and factories and shining glass towers, which have gone up, it seems, overnight; past the subdivisions he could swear

weren't there last year, last month. Acres of treelessness, of new townhouses with little pointed roofs—like tents, like an invasion. The tents of the Goths and the Vandals. The tents of the Huns and the Magyars. The tents of George.

Down comes his axe on the head of George, which splits in two. If Roland had known George would be here this weekend, he wouldn't have come. Damn Prue and her silly bandannas and her open shirt, her middle-aged breasts offered like hot, freckled muffins along with the sardines and cheese, George sliding his oily eyes all over her, with Portia pretending not to notice. Damn George and his shady deals and his pay-offs to town councillors; damn George and his millions, and his spurious, excessive charm. George should stay in the city where he belongs. He's hard to take even there, but at least Roland can keep out of his way. Here at Wacousta Lodge he's intolerable, strutting around as if he owned the place. Not yet. Probably he'll wait for them all to croak, and then turn it into a lucrative retirement home for the rich Japanese. He'll sell them Nature, at a huge margin. That's the kind of thing George would do.

Roland knew the man was a lizard the first time he saw him. Why did Portia marry him? She could have married somebody decent, leaving George to Prue, who'd dredged him up from God knows where and was flaunting him around like a prize fish. Prue deserved him; Portia didn't. But why did Prue give him up without a struggle? That wasn't like her. It's as if there had been some negotiation, some invisible deal between them. Portia got George, but what did she trade for him? What did she have to give up?

Portia has always been his favorite sister. She was the youngest, the baby. Prue, who was the next youngest, used to tease her savagely, though Portia was remarkably slow to cry. Instead, she would just look, as if she couldn't quite figure out what Prue was doing to her or why. Then she would go off by herself. Or else Roland would come to her defense and there would be a fight, and Roland would be accused of picking on his sister and be told he shouldn't behave that way because he was a boy. He doesn't remember what part Pamela used to take in all this.

Pamela was older than the rest of them and had her own agenda, which did not appear to include anyone else at all. Pamela read at the dinner table and went off by herself in the canoe. Pamela was allowed.

In the city they were in different schools or different grades; the house was large and they had their own pathways through it, their own lairs. It was only here that the territories overlapped. Wacousta Lodge, which looks so peaceful, is for Roland the repository of the family wars.

How old had he been—nine? ten?—the time he almost killed Prue? It was the summer he wanted to be an Indian, because of *Wilderness Tips*. He used to sneak that book off the shelf and take it outside, behind the woodshed, and turn and re-turn the pages. *Wilderness Tips* told you how to survive by yourself in the woods—a thing he longed to do. How to build shelters, make clothing from skins, find edible plants. There were diagrams too, and pen-and-ink drawings—of animal tracks, of leaves and seeds. Descriptions of different kinds of animal droppings. He remembers the first time he found some bear scat, fresh and reeking, and purple with blueberries. It scared the hell out of him.

There was a lot about the Indians, about how noble they were, how brave, faithful, clean, reverent, hospitable, and honorable. (Even these words sound outmoded now, archaic. When was the last time Roland heard anyone praised for being *honorable*?) They attacked only in self-defense, to keep their land from being stolen. They walked differently too. There was a diagram, on page 208, of footprints, an Indian's and a white man's: the white wore hobnailed boots, and his toes pointed outward; the Indian wore moccasins, and his feet went straight ahead. Roland has been conscious of his feet ever since. He still turns his toes in slightly, to counteract what he feels must be a genetically programmed waddle.

That summer he ran around with a tea towel tucked into the front of his bathing suit for a loincloth and decorated his face with charcoal from the fireplace, alternating with red paint swiped from Prue's paintbox. He lurked outside windows, lis-

tening in. Trying to make smoke signals, he set fire to a small patch of undergrowth down near the boathouse, but put it out before he was caught. He lashed an oblong stone to a stick handle with a leather lace borrowed from one of his father's boots; his father was alive then. He snuck up on Prue, who was reading comic books on the dock, dangling her legs in the water.

He had his stone axe. He could have brained her. She was not Prue, of course: she was Custer, she was treachery, she was the enemy. He went as far as raising the axe, watching the convincing silhouette his shadow made on the dock. The stone fell off, onto his bare foot. He shouted with pain. Prue turned around, saw him there, guessed in an instant what he was doing, and laughed herself silly. That was when he'd almost killed her. The other thing, the stone axe, had just been a game.

The whole thing had just been a game, but it wounded him to let go of it. He'd wanted so badly to believe in that kind of Indian, the kind in the book. He'd needed them to exist.

Driving up yesterday, he'd passed a group of actual Indians, three of them, at a blueberry stand. They were wearing jeans and T-shirts and running shoes, the same as everybody else. One of them had a transistor radio. A neat maroon mini-van was parked beside the stand. So what did he expect from them, feathers? All that was gone, lost, ruined, years and years before he was born.

He knows this is nonsense. He's a bean counter, after all; he deals in the hard currency of reality. How can you lose something that was never yours in the first place? (But you can, because *Wilderness Tips* was his once, and he's lost it. He opened the book today, before lunch, after forty years. There was the innocent, fusty vocabulary that had once inspired him: Manhood with a capital M, courage, honor. The Spirit of the Wild. It was naive, pompous, ridiculous. It was dust.)

Roland chops with his axe. The sound goes out through the trees, across the small inlet to the left of him, bounces off a high ridge of rock, making a faint echo. It's an old sound, a sound left over.

. . .

Portia lies on her bed, listening to the sound of Roland chopping wood, having her nap. She has her nap the way she always has, without sleeping. The nap was enforced on her once, by her mother. Now she just does it. When she was little she used to lie here—tucked safely away from Prue—in her parents' room, in her parents' double bed, which is now hers and George's. She would think about all kinds of things; she would see faces and animal shapes in the knots of the pine ceiling and make up stories about them.

Now the only stories she ever makes up are about George. They are probably even more unrealistic than the stories he makes up about himself, but she has no way of really knowing. There are those who lie by instinct and those who don't, and the ones who don't are at the mercy of the ones who do.

Prue, for instance, is a blithe liar. She always has been; she enjoys it. When they were children she'd say, "Look, there's a big snot coming out of your nose," and Portia would run to the washroom mirror. Nothing was there, but Prue's saying it made it somehow true, and Portia would scrub and scrub, trying to wash away invisible dirt, while Prue doubled over with laughter. "Don't believe her," Pamela would say. "Don't be such a sucker." (One of her chief words then—she used it for lollipops, for fish, for mouths.) But sometimes the things Prue said were true, so how could you ever know?

George is the same way. He gazes into her eyes and lies with such tenderness, such heartfelt feeling, such implicit sadness at her want of faith in him, that she can't question him. To question him would turn her cynical and hard. She would rather be kissed; she would rather be cherished. She would rather believe.

She knew about George and Prue at the beginning, of course. It was Prue who brought him up here first. But after a while George swore to her that the thing with Prue hadn't been serious, and, anyway, it was over; and Prue herself seemed not to care. She'd already had George, she implied; he was used, like a dress.

If Portia wanted him next it was nothing to her. "Help yourself," she said. "God knows there's enough of George to go around."

Portia wanted to do things the way Prue did; she wanted to get her hands dirty. Something intense, followed by careless dismissal. But she was too young; she didn't have the knack. She'd come up out of the lake and handed George's dark glasses to him, and he'd looked at her in the wrong way: with reverence, not with passion—a clear gaze with no smut in it. After dinner that evening he'd said, with meticulous politeness, "Everything here is so new to me. I like you to be my guide, to your wonderful country."

"Me?" Portia said. "I don't know. What about Prue?" She was already feeling guilty.

"Prue does not understand obligations," he said (which was true enough, she didn't, and this insight of George's was impressive). "You understand them, however. I am the guest; you are the host."

"Hostess," said Pamela, who had not seemed to be listening. "A 'host' is male, like 'mine host' in an inn, or else it's the wafer you eat at Communion. Or the caterpillar that all the parasites lay their eggs on."

"You have a very intellectual sister, I think," said George, smiling, as if this quality in Pamela were a curiosity, or perhaps a deformity. Pamela shot him a look of pure resentment, and ever since that time she has not made any effort with him. He might as well be a bump on a log as far as she's concerned.

But Portia doesn't mind Pamela's indifference; rather, she cherishes it. Once she wanted to be more like Prue, but now it's Pamela. Pamela, considered so eccentric and odd and plain in the fifties, now seems to be the only one of them who got it right. Freedom isn't having a lot of men, not if you think you have to. Pamela does what she wants, nothing more and nothing less.

It's a good thing there's one woman in the universe who can take George or leave him alone. Portia wishes she herself could be so cool. Even after thirty-two years, she's still caught in the breathlessness, the airlessness of love. It's no different from the

first night, when he'd bent to kiss her (down by the boathouse, after an evening paddle) and she'd stood there like a deer in the glare of headlights, paralyzed, while something huge and unstoppable bore down on her, waiting for the scream of brakes, the shock of collision. But it wasn't that kind of kiss: it wasn't sex George wanted out of her. He'd wanted the other thing—the wifely white cotton blouses, the bassinets. He's sad they never had children.

He was such a beautiful man then. There were a lot of beautiful men, but the others seemed blank, unwritten on, compared to him. He's the only one she's ever wanted. She can't have him, though, because nobody can. George has himself, and he won't let go.

This is what drives Prue on: she wants to get hold of him finally, open him up, wring some sort of concession out of him. He's the only person in her life she's never been able to bully or ignore or deceive or reduce. Portia can always tell when Prue's back on the attack: there are telltale signs; there are phone calls with no voice attached; there are flights of sincere, melancholy lying from George—a dead giveaway. He knows she knows; he treasures her for saying nothing; she allows herself to be treasured.

There's nothing going on now, though. Not at the moment, not up here, not at Wacousta Lodge. Prue wouldn't dare, and neither would George. He knows where she draws the line; he knows the price of her silence.

Portia looks at her watch: her nap is over. As usual, it has not been restful. She gets up, goes into the washroom, splashes her face. She applies cream lightly, massaging it in around her fallen eyes. The question at this age is what kind of dog you will shortly resemble. She will be a beagle, Prue a terrier. Pamela will be an Afghan, or something equally unearthly.

Her great-grandfather watches her in the mirror, disapproving of her as he always has, although he was dead long before she was born. "I did the best I could," she tells him. "I married

a man like you. A robber king." She will never admit to him or to anyone else that this might possibly have been a mistake. (Why does her father never figure in her inner life? Because he wasn't there, not even as a picture. He was at the office. Even in the summers—especially in the summers—he was an absence.)

Outside the window, Roland has stopped chopping and is sitting on the chopping block, his arms on his knees, his big hands dangling, staring off into the trees. He is her favorite; he was the one who always came to her defense. That stopped when she married George. Faced with Prue, Roland had been effective, but George baffled him. No wonder. It's Portia's love that protects George, walls him around. Portia's stupid love.

Where is George? Portia wanders the house, looking for him. Usually at this time of day he'd be in the living room, extended on the couch, dozing; but he isn't there. She looks around the empty room. Everything is as usual: the snowshoes on the wall, the birchbark canoe she always longed to play with but couldn't because it was a souvenir, the rug made out of a bearskin, dull-haired and shedding. That bear was a friend once, it even had a name, but she's forgotten it. On the bookcase there's an empty coffee cup. That's a slip, an oversight; it shouldn't be there. She has the first stirrings of the feeling she gets when she knows George is with Prue, a numbness that begins at the base of the spine. But no, Prue is in the hammock on the screened veranda, reading a magazine. There can't be two of her.

"Where's George?" Portia asks, knowing she shouldn't.

"How the hell should I know?" says Prue. Her tone is peevish, as if she's wondering the same thing. "What's the matter—he slipped his leash? Funny, there's no bimbo secretaries up here." In the sunlight she has a disorderly look: her too-orange lipstick is threading into the tiny wrinkles around her mouth; her bangs are brazen; things are going askew.

"There's no need to be nasty," says Portia. This is what their mother used to say to Prue, over the body of some dismembered doll, some razed sandbox village, a bottle of purloined nail polish hurled against the wall; and Prue never had an answer then. But now their mother isn't here to say it.

"There *is*," says Prue with vehemence. "There is a need."

Ordinarily, Portia would just walk away, pretending she hadn't heard. Now she says, "Why?"

"Because you always had the best of everything," says Prue.

Portia is astounded. Surely she is the mute one, the shadow; hasn't she always played wallflower to Prue's frantic dancer? "What?" she says. "What did I always have?"

"You've always been too good for words," says Prue with rancor. "Why do you stay with him, anyway? Is it the money?"

"He didn't have a bean when I married him," says Portia mildly. She's wondering whether or not she hates Prue. She isn't sure what real hatred would feel like. Anyway, Prue is losing that taut, mischievous body she's done such damage with, and, now that's going, what will she have left? In the way of weapons, that is.

"When *he* married *you*, you mean," says Prue. "When Mother married you off. You just stood there and let the two of them do it, like the little suck you were."

Portia wonders if this is true. She wishes she could go back a few decades, grow up again. The first time, she missed something; she missed a stage, or some vital information other people seemed to have. This time she would make different choices. She would be less obedient; she would not ask for permission. She would not say "I do" but "I am."

"Why didn't you ever fight back?" says Prue. She sounds genuinely aggrieved.

Portia can see down the path to the lake, to the dock. There's a canvas deck chair down there with nobody in it. George's newspaper, tucked underneath, is fluttering: there's a wind coming up. George must have forgotten to put his chair away. It's unlike him.

"Just a minute," she says to Prue, as if they're going to take a short break in this conversation they've been having in different ways for fifty years now. She goes out the screen door and down the path. Where has George got to? Probably the outhouse. But his canvas chair is rippling like a sail.

She stoops to fold up the chair, and hears. There's someone

in the boathouse; there's a scuffling, a breathing. A porcupine, eating salt off the oar handles? Not in broad daylight. No, there's a voice. The water glitters, the small waves slap against the dock. It can't be Prue; Prue is up on the veranda. It sounds like her mother, like her mother opening birthday presents—that soft crescendo of surprise and almost pained wonder. Oh. Oh. *Oh*. Of course, you can't tell what age a person is, in the dark.

Portia folds the chair, props it gently against the wall of the boathouse. She goes up the path, carrying the paper. No sense in having it blow all over the lake. No sense in having the clear waves dirtied with stale news, with soggy human grief. Desire and greed and terrible disappointments, even in the financial pages. Though you had to read between the lines.

She doesn't want to go into the house. She skirts around behind the kitchen, avoiding the woodshed where she can hear the *chock, chock* of Roland piling wood, goes back along the path that leads to the small, sandy bay where they all swam as children, before they were old enough to dive in off the dock. She lies down on the ground there and goes to sleep. When she wakes up there are pine needles sticking to her cheek and she has a headache. The sun is low in the sky; the wind has fallen; there are no more waves. A dead flat calm. She takes off her clothes, not bothering even to listen for motorboats. They go so fast anyway she'd just be a blur.

She wades into the lake, slipping into the water as if between the layers of a mirror: the glass layer, the silver layer. She meets the doubles of her own legs, her own arms, going down. She floats with only her head above water. She is herself at fifteen, herself at twelve, herself at nine, at six. On the shore, attached to their familiar reflections, are the same rock, the same white stump that have always been there. The cold hush of the lake is like a long breathing-out of relief. It's safe to be this age, to know that the stump is her stump, the rock is hers, that nothing will ever change.

There's a bell, ringing faintly from the distant house. The dinner bell. It's Pamela's turn to cook. What will they have? A strange concoction. Pamela has her own ideas about food.

The bell rings again, and Portia knows that something bad is about to happen. She could avoid it; she could swim out further, let go, and sink.

She looks at the shore, at the water line, where the lake ends. It's no longer horizontal: it seems to be on a slant, as if there'd been a slippage in the bedrock; as if the trees, the granite outcrops, Wacousta Lodge, the peninsula, the whole mainland were sliding gradually down, submerging. She thinks of a boat—a huge boat, a passenger liner—tilting, descending, with the lights still on, the music still playing, the people talking on and on, still not aware of the disaster that has already overcome them. She sees herself running naked through the ballroom—an absurd, disturbing figure with dripping hair and flailing arms, screaming at them, “Don't you see? It's coming apart, everything's coming apart, you're sinking. You're finished, you're over, you're dead!”

She would be invisible, of course. No one would hear her. And nothing has happened, really, that hasn't happened before.