

Chapter Twenty-Two

They've locked the doors, on the toolshed, on the cabin; it was Joe, he may have assumed I'd take the canoe to the village. No, it was ill will. I shouldn't have left the keys hanging on the nail, I should have put them in my pocket. But it was stupid of them to think they could keep me out. Soon they will reach the village, the car, the city; what are they saying about me now? That I was running away; but to go with them would have been running away, the truth is here.

I stand on the front step and lean sideways, clutching the windowledge, looking in. The canvas pack-sack with my clothes has been moved, it's back inside now, on the table with my case; beside it is Anna's detective novel, her last one, cold comfort but comfort, death is logical, there's always a motive. Perhaps that's why she read them, for the theology.

Sun gone, sky darkening, it may rain later. Clouds building over the hills, anvils, ominous hammerheads, it will be a storm; it might miss though, sometimes they eddy for days, approaching but never striking. I'll have to get inside. Breaking into my own house, go in and out the window they used to sing, holding their arms up like bridges; as we have done before.

The handbarrow is underneath the cabin, beside the stacked wood where it was always kept, two poles with boards

nailed across like rungs. I haul it out and prop it against the wall under the window, the one with no screen. The window is hooked on the inside at the corners, I'll have to break four of the little squares of glass. I do it with a rock, my head turned away, eyes closed because of the splinters. I reach carefully in through the jagged holes and undo the hooks and lift the window inwards onto the couch. If I could open the toolshed I could use the screwdriver to take the padlock hasp off the door, but the toolshed has no windows. Axe and machete inside it, saw, metal utensils.

I step on the couch and then on the floor, I'm in. I sweep up the broken glass; after that I hook the window back in place. It will be a nuisance, climbing in and out, removing the window each time, but the other windows have screens and I've nothing to cut them with. I could try the knife: if I had to leave in a hurry it would be better to use one of the back windows, they're nearer the ground.

I've succeeded; I don't know what to do now. I pause in the middle of the room, listening: no wind, stillness, held breath of the lake, the trees.

To be busy I unpack my clothes again and hang them on the nails in my room. My mother's jacket is back, I last saw it in Anna's room, it's been shifted. My footsteps are the only sounds, reverberation of shoes on wood.

There must be something that comes next but the power has drained away, my fingers are empty as gloves, eyes ordinary, nothing guides me.

I sit down at the table and leaf through an old magazine, shepherds knitting their own socks, weather gnarling their faces, women in laced bodices and red lipstick balancing washing baskets on their heads, smiling to show their teeth and happiness; rubber plantations and deserted temples, jungle crawling over the serene carved gods. Ring from a wet cup on the cover, printed there yesterday or ten years ago.

I open a can of peaches and eat two of the yellow fibrous halves, sugary juice dribbling from the spoon. Then I lie down

on the couch and sleep descends over my face, black oblong, dreamless.

When I wake up the diffused light outside is further west, it feels late, it must be almost six, dinner hour; David had the only watch. Hunger is there in me, a contained whimper. I unhook the window and climb out, one foot on the wobbling handbarrow, scraping my knee as I let myself drop to the ground. I should build a ladder; but there are no implements, no boards.

I go down to the garden. I've forgotten the knife and the bowl but they aren't needed, fingers will do. I unlatch the gate, the chicken wire walls are around me; outside the fence the trees droop as though wilting, the plants inside are pale in the greyish light; the air is heavy, oppressive. I start to pull up the onions and the carrots.

I'm crying finally, it's the first time, I watch myself doing it: I'm crouching down beside the lettuces, flowers finished now, gone to seed, my breath knots, my body tightens against it; the water fills my mouth, fish taste. But I'm not mourning, I'm accusing them, *Why did you?* They chose it, they had control over their death, they decided it was time to leave and they left, they set up this barrier. They didn't consider how I would feel, who would take care of me. I'm furious because they let it happen.

"Here I am," I call. "I'm here!" Voice rising and rising with the frustration and then the terror of hearing no answer, the time we were playing after supper and I hid too well, too far away and they couldn't find me. The tree-trunks are so much alike, the same size, the same colour, impossible to retrace the path, instead locate the sun, the direction, whichever way you go you're bound to hit water. The dangerous thing is to panic, to walk in circles.

"I'm here!" But nothing happens. I wipe the salt off my face, my fingers earth-smear.

If I will it, if I pray, I can bring them back. They're here

now, I can sense them waiting, beyond sight on the path or in the long grass outside the fence, they are pulling against me but I can make them come out, from wherever it is they are hiding.

I start a fire in the stove and cook the food in the darkening room. There's no reason to set out plates; I eat from the pot and the frying pan with a spoon. I'll save the dirty dishes till there are enough; when the dishwasher pail is full I will have to lower it through the window with a rope.

I climb out again and set the scraps from the tinned meat on the tray for the birds. Deep grey, the clouds descending, closing in; the puffs of wind have begun, they advance across the lake like shudders; to the south there's a column of rain. Flickers of light but no thunder, gust of leaves.

I walk up the hill to the outhouse, forcing myself to go slowly, holding the panic at a distance, looking at it. Inside I hook the door shut, it's doors I'm afraid of because I can't see through them, it's the door opening by itself in the wind I'm afraid of. I run back down the path, telling myself to stop it, I'm old enough, I'm old.

The power would have protected me but it's gone, exhausted, no more use now than silver bullets or the sign of the cross. But the house will defend me, it's the right shape. Back inside I put the window up again, hooking it to the frame, barricading myself in, wood bars. The four broken panes, how can I close them. I try stuffing them with pages torn from the magazines and crumpled, *National Geographic*, *Macleans*, but it doesn't work, the holes are too big, the wads of paper fall to the floor. If only I had nails, a hammer.

I light the lamp but the air drafting in through the broken window makes it flutter and turn blue, and with the lamp on I can't see what's happening outside. I blow it out and sit in darkness, listening to the gush of the wind, but it doesn't rain.

After a while I decide to go to bed. I'm not tired, I slept in the afternoon, but there's nothing else to do. In my room

I stand for a long time wondering why I'm afraid to take off my clothes: am I worried that they'll come back for me, if they do I'll have to get out quickly, but they wouldn't try it in a storm, Evans knows better than that, the open lake is the worst place because of the electricity, flesh and water both conduct.

I tie back the curtain so there will be more light. My mother's jacket is hanging on a nail beside the window, there's nobody in it; I press my forehead against it. Leather smell, the smell of loss, irrecoverable. But I can't think about that. I lie down on the bed in my clothes and in a moment the first rain hits the roof. It patters, changes to a steady drumming, sound of an avalanche, surrounding. I feel the lake rising, up over the shore and the hill, the trees toppling into it like sand collapsing, roots overturned, the house unmoored and floating like a boat, rocking and rocking.

In the middle of the night silence wakes me, the rain has stopped. Blank dark, I can see nothing, I try to move my hands but I can't. The fear arrives like waves, like footfalls, it has no center; it encloses me like armour, it's my skin that is afraid, rigid. They want to get in, they want me to open the windows, the door, they can't do it by themselves. I'm the only one, they are depending on me but I don't know any longer who they are; however they come back they won't be the same, they will have changed. I willed it, I called to them, that they should arrive is logical; but logic is a wall, I built it, on the other side is terror.

Above on the roof is the finger-tapping of water dripping from the trees. I hear breathing, withheld, observant, not in the house but all around it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

In the morning I remember the window outline, beginning to emerge; I must have been watching till nearly dawn. Then I think it might have been a dream, the kind that creates the illusion of being awake.

For breakfast I eat canned stew, heating it first in a pot, and instant coffee. There are too many windows, I move so I'm sitting on the wall bench, from there I can see all of them.

I stack the dishes in the pan with the ones from last night and pour the rest of the hot water over them. Then I turn to the mirror to brush my hair.

But when I pick up the brush there is a surge of fear in my hand, the power is there again in a different form, it must have seeped up through the ground during the lightning. I know that the brush is forbidden, I must stop being in the mirror. I look for the last time at my distorted glass face: eyes lightblue in dark red skin, hair standing tangled out from my head, reflection intruding between my eyes and vision. Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it's toward the wall, it no longer traps me, Anna's soul closed in the gold compact, that and not the camera is what I should have broken.

I unfasten the window and go out; at once the fear leaves me like a hand lifting from my throat. There must be rules: places I'm permitted to be, other places I'm not. I'll have to

listen carefully, if I trust them they will tell me what is allowed. I ought to have let them in, it may have been the only chance they will give me.

The enclosure with the swing and the sandpile is forbidden, I know that without touching it. I walk down to the lake. It is flat calm, the water is pollen-streaked, mist is drifting up off the bays and from behind the islands, the sun burning it away as it rises, the sun itself hot and bright as light through a lens. Something glimmers out on the surface, a swimming animal or a dead log; when there is no wind things venture out from the shore. The air smells of earth, midsummer.

I step on the dock: the fear says No, I can be near the lake but not on the dock. I wash my hands from the flat stone. If I do everything in the right order, if I think of nothing else. What sacrifice, what do they want?

When I'm certain I've guessed what is required I go back to the cabin, enter it. The fire I made for breakfast is still smouldering: I add another stick of wood and open the draft.

I snap the catches on my case and take out the drawings and the typescript, *Quebec Folk Tales*, it's easily replaceable for them in the city, and my bungled princesses, the Golden Phoenix awkward and dead as a mummified parrot. The pages bunch in my hands; I add them one by one so the fire will not be smothered, then the paint tubes and brushes, this is no longer my future. There must be some way of cancelling the samsonite case, it can't be burned. I draw the big knife across it, x-ing it out.

I slip the ring from my left hand, non-husband, he is the next thing I must discard finally, and drop it into the fire, altar, it may not melt but it will at least be purified, the blood will burn off. Everything from history must be eliminated, the circles and the arrogant square pages. I rummage under the mattress and bring out the scrapbooks, ripping them up, the ladies, dress forms with decorated china heads, the suns and the moons, the rabbits and their archaic eggs, my false peace, his wars, aeroplanes and tanks and the helmeted explorers;

perhaps at the other side of the world my brother feels the weight lifting, freedom feathering his arms. Even the guides, the miraculous double woman and the god with horns, they must be translated. The ladies on the wall too with their watermelon breasts and lampshade skirts, all my artifacts.

Theirs too, the map torn from the wall, the rock paintings, left to me by my father's will; and the album, the sequence of my mother's life, the confining photographs. My own faces curl, blacken, the imitation mother and father change to flat ashes. It is time that separates us, I was a coward, I would not let them into my age, my place. Now I must enter theirs.

When the paper things are burned I smash the glasses and plates and the chimney of the lamp. I rip one page from each of the books, Boswell and *The Mystery at Sturbridge*, the Bible and the common mushrooms and *Log Cabin Construction*, to burn through all the words would take too long. Everything I can't break, frying pan, enamel bowl, spoons and forks, I throw on the floor. After that I use the big knife to slash once through the blankets, the sheets and the beds and the tents and at the end my own clothes and my mother's grey leather jacket, my father's grey felt hat, the raincoats: these husks are not needed any longer, I abolish them, I have to clear a space.

When nothing is left intact and the fire is only smouldering I leave, carrying one of the wounded blankets with me, I will need it until the fur grows. The house shus with a click behind me.

I untie my feet from the shoes and walk down to the shore; the earth is damp, cold, pockmarked with raindrops. I pile the blanket on the rock and step into the water and lie down. When every part of me is wet I take off my clothes, peeling them away from my flesh like wallpaper. They sway beside me, inflated, the sleeves bladders of air.

My back is on the sand, my head rests against the rock, innocent as plankton; my hair spreads out, moving and fluid in the water. The earth rotates, holding my body down to it as it holds the moon; the sun pounds in the sky, red flames

and rays pulsing from it, searing away the wrong form that encases me, dry rain soaking through me, warming the blood egg I carry. I dip my head beneath the water, washing my eyes.

Inshore a loon; it lowers its head, then lifts it again and calls. It sees me but it ignores me, accepts me as part of the land.

When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges gently against the dock.

They offered clothing as a token, formerly; that was partial but the gods are demanding, absolute, they want all.

The sun is three-quarters, I have become hungry. The food in the cabin is forbidden, I'm not allowed to go back into that cage, wooden rectangle. Also tin cans and jars are forbidden; they are glass and metal. I head for the garden and prowl through it, then squat, wrapped in my blanket. I eat the green peas out of their shells and the raw yellow beans, I scrape the carrots from the earth with my fingers, I will wash them in the lake first. There is one late strawberry, I find it among the matted weeds and suckers. Red foods, heart colour, they are the best kind, they are sacred; then yellow, then blue; green foods are mixed from blue and yellow. I pull up one of the beets and scratch the dirt from it and gnaw at it but the rind is tough, I'm not strong enough yet.

At sunset I devour the washed carrots, taking them from the grass where I've concealed them, and part of a cabbage. The outhouse is forbidden so I leave my dung, droppings, on the ground and kick earth over. All animals with dens do that.

I hollow a lair near the woodpile, dry leaves underneath and dead branches leaned over, with fresh needle branches woven to cover. Inside it I curl with the blanket over my head. There are mosquitoes, they bite through; it's best not to slap them, the blood smell brings others. I sleep in relays like a cat, my stomach hurts. Around me the space rustles; owl sound, across the lake or inside me, distance contracts. A light wind, the small waves talking against the shore, multilingual water.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The light wakes me, speckled through the roof branches. My bones ache, hunger is loose in me, belly a balloon, floating shark stomach. It's hot, the sun is almost at noon, I've slept most of the morning. I crawl outside and run towards the garden where the food is.

The gate stops me. Yesterday I could go in but not today: they are doing it gradually. I lean against the fence, my feet pawprinting the mud damp from the rain, the dew, the lake oozing up through the ground. Then my belly cramps and I step to one side and lie down in the long grass. A frog is there, leopard frog with green spots and gold-rimmed eyes, ancestor. It includes me, it shines, nothing moves but its throat breathing.

I rest on the ground, head propped on hands, trying to forget the hunger, looking through the wire hexagons at the garden: rows, squares, stakes, markers. The plants are flourishing, they grow almost visibly, sucking moisture up through the roots and succulent stems, their leaves sweating, flushed in the sunrays to a violent green, weeds and legitimate plants alike, there is no difference. Under the ground the worms twine, pink veins.

The fence is impregnable; it can keep out everything but weed seeds, birds, insects and the weather. Beneath it is a two-foot-deep moat, paved with broken glass, smashed jars