



SIGHTSEEING

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"Why do they call it Goat Island?" Margo asked.

The woman looked at Margo. They were standing in January sunshine at the Niagara Falls viewing area called Table Rock, their backs to the gift shop and restaurant. The woman had appeared while Margo was uneasily eyeing an ice-encrusted stone wall and wrought-iron railing, built to protect people from tumbling headlong into Niagara Falls.

Margo had visited this exact spot four or five times before, but she'd mistakenly curved the wall as being solid stone, and much higher. She'd forgotten that sections of sinuously curved wrought-iron railing rested on top of the wall, which was actually quite low; the wall and railing together were no more than five feet high.

It was typical of Margo to think something was different than she knew it to be. As a child one thing at which she'd been particularly adept — the *only* thing, according to her mother — was inventing stories. As she grew older she hadn't been able to kick the habit; she changed facts to suit her purposes, consequently she often misremembered events or places. A high wall, difficult to scale, is what she believed she'd find at Niagara Falls, not this flimsy railing.

Margo grudgingly acknowledged that the railing did make for better viewing. On this glinting, winter afternoon she could clearly see, between icy, iron tendrils and decorative metal leaves, the living, blue-green brow of Niagara Falls that curved away towards snow-laden trees on the shore of Goat Island. Sturdy masonry posts at intervals of six or eight feet held the railings in place. Nevertheless the whole thing seemed to Margo distressingly ineffective. The woman was a welcome distraction.

"It's over there, you see," Margo pointed. "It says, Goat Island - on the sign - that flat area beyond the Canadian section of the Falls," Margo said. "Do you think it's inhabited by goats?"

Despite the winter chill a huddle of Japanese tourists, most with cameras held up to their faces, hovered by the railing fifty yards or more downstream. Margo and the woman were the only visitors at Table Rock. Apart from the boy, of course. He'd arrived at the same time as the woman, leading Margo to assume that they were together — a nephew perhaps. The railing, the woman and the boy stood, a little apart from each other, a few short strides from the railing.

The woman had a square jaw, and a determined mouth — she was taller than average. Impressive was the word that sprang to Margo's mind when she first glanced at the woman. She was intrigued by two laugh lines that bracketed the woman's mouth. Parentheses around a potential smile were how they appeared to Margo.

The woman turned to look in the direction Margo was pointing. Silver hairs glinted among blonde in the dry winter sunlight. At the woman's throat Margo could see a delicate, gold chain. She was wearing a crisp white and pink striped shirt under a dark blue, quilted jacket.

"I'm not so sure. Perhaps, once, there might have been goats," the woman said. "But I'm not from here so I don't like to say."

She turned towards Margo.

Margo's eye was distracted momentarily by a purple bruise spreading down the boy's left wrist and onto the back of his gloveless hand.

Margo didn't give the boy a thought when she saw him edge towards the railing, but she must have noticed his eyes as they darted from the expanse of falling water to the faces of the women. Afterwards, when she was asked to estimate the boy's age, Margo, searching for a number of years to pin on him, recalled his eyes quite clearly. She saw in her own mind's eye the tic in the boy's eyelid.

Margo detected an accent in the woman's voice. "Are you German?"

"No, from Holland," the woman replied.

"What a coincidence. I was living in Amsterdam until just recently," Margo told her. "I'm English, actually, but I live in Canada now."

"I am from near Rotterdam," the woman said, still looking at Margo's face.

Margo turned her head slightly and gazed towards Goat Island. She lifted her sunglasses and propped them above her hairline. She stared at the turbulent rapids above the Falls. Her eyes followed the river as it surged towards the cliff's edge.

"Yes, I'm a musician. You probably know that Amsterdam has some very good recording studios, everybody records in Amsterdam sooner or later," Margo told the woman. "Rolling Stones, everybody. There's a lot of work for musicians so I lived there for a time."

Margo had been forced to study piano as a child — a talent for music was one of the many things that had been expected of her — but she'd been bored by the tedium of practice and then terrified by the vehemence of the piano teacher's exasperation with her. Margo's story of her career as a musician was a lie.

Margo glanced at the Dutch woman, who stared back at Margo. Margo was stricken by a hollow feeling in some indeterminate part of herself. Maybe the woman didn't find her interesting despite her story. She searched the woman's eyes for some positive effect of her untruth. The woman's pupils were velvety brown and unblinking, her face was perfectly still.

"Did you learn Dutch in Amsterdam?" she asked Margo.

As Margo answered she was aware of cold air brushing the surface of her lips, and of muscles moving inside them.

"Oh, no, I think it's a very difficult language for English-speaking people to learn," said Margo. "Yes, this is true. Also most of us speak good English."

"Yes, absolutely," Margo said.

Margo felt safe in agreeing that the Dutch often spoke English well because the fact was that she had actually spent some recent time in Holland. She often started her stories with a kernel of truth; embellishment is how she considered the rest of it.

A few months earlier she'd met a man in a Toronto bar who was on holiday from Amsterdam. He seemed to like her. He'd been entertained by her yarns, not seeming to take them too seriously. Margo saw a lot of him. After his return she found herself missing him. She bought an airline ticket on a whim, and surprised the man with a visit. He welcomed her warmly. During the day, when he was out working — in a recording studio — Margo was happy to wander, anonymous, a stranger in a foreign city. Sometimes she spent whole, peaceful days in the man's attic apartment, contented under the eaves of a narrow house whose tiny windows afforded a view of a sparkling canal.

A week or so after arriving in Holland it became obvious that the man was falling for her. She was thrilled but couldn't quite believe it. She'd been led to believe since an early age that there was nothing remotely interesting about her. Margo was unaware that the man could see more of her than she could herself. He was able to dismiss the carefully crafted layers of showy veneer that she arranged around herself because he sensed solidity beneath them. Margo, however, felt the pressure of maintaining the facade of a person with whom she thought the man had fallen in love.

When Margo finally admitted to herself that she too was in love her anxiety intensified. She felt increasingly self-conscious in his presence; she could only enjoy her emotions when she was alone under the sloping ceilings of the apartment, surrounded by the man's possessions and dreaming of their life together. She was afraid that, even if she could act naturally and be herself — whatever that meant — the man would find her dull.

Eventually she couldn't take it any more, she stole away one day when the man was at work. She told herself all the way across the Atlantic that it was for the best. But in the couple of months since her return she'd thought constantly of the man, the attic apartment, and the view of the sparkling canal.

"It's cold," the woman said, watching Margo's eyes. "As impressive as this is," her eyes glanced toward the Falls, "I think I'll leave."

Margo held her gaze. Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed the boy standing by the railing, shivering in the cool winter air.

"You don't feel the cold?" the woman asked.

"I'm accustomed to it," said Margo.

"Ah, yes, of course," said the woman. "Goodbye, then."

"Goodbye."

The Dutch woman hesitated, watching Margo's face, before turning to leave. Margo fixed her gaze on the railing ahead. Any comfort taken from the impression she might have given of herself evaporated into the freezing spray of the Falls.

It was this exact moment that the boy chose to climb, sure-footed despite the ice, onto the top of one of the stone posts. Using the low wall and wrought-iron railing as footholds, he scrambled onto the masonry post directly in front of Margo. He jumped without hesitation. His leap from the top of the wall seemed effortless, one might have thought the frozen stones were elastic as a trampoline.

Margo didn't move. She stared at the top of the masonry post, at the place where the boy had stood. No, not stood, there'd been no delay. The boy had accomplished his suicide — it was certain that he would be dead, he'd plunged into the thundering, frigid water of Niagara Falls — in one fluid series of movements, not pausing. The only evidence of the passage of time was the change in the position of a seagull that had flown ten or fifteen yards through the mist that spewed from the Falls. The boy's self-destruction had taken less than three seconds, from pavement to waterfall.

Margo heard the Dutch woman's cry of "Gadver!," but didn't look in her direction, she continued to stare at the top of the stone post. All Margo could think of was the efficiency of the boy's actions. At the same time she remembered her piano teacher's saliva hitting her young face, shrilled from a final explosion of exasperation. She didn't respond to the slight pain caused by the strong grip of the Dutch woman's hand around her upper left arm. However Margo did flinch at the memory of her mother's unrelenting stare of disappointment and disdain, when, having read the piano teacher's damning letter, she finally looked up at Margo.

"There will be the problem now of my passport," the woman said.

They were sitting, Margo and the woman — Irene Rietsma, Margo had overheard her tell her name to the police — at a table in the restaurant upstairs from the gift shop into which they had gone to report the boy's leap. The only person in any position of authority had been the woman working at the cash desk. Margo saw no alternative but to join the end of a line of Japanese who were waiting to pay for their souvenirs, tea towels, ashtrays and postcards, each carrying a crudely rendered depiction of Niagara Falls. Margo's assumption of a relationship between Irene Rietsma and the boy had been wrong, he was unknown to her. Nevertheless it was Irene who elbowed her way, towering over disgruntled tourists, to reach the cash desk so she could make their story known.

"Has your passport expired, Irene?" asked Margo.

The restaurant was empty, it was four o'clock in the afternoon. A policeman had had no trouble placing them at one of a line of empty tables next to large windows overlooking the Falls. The policeman had said a few words to a drowsy waitress. The giving of their accounts of the boy's suicide to the matter-of-fact policeman had diminished the horror of it. Both women felt calmer, yet saddened. Before leaving, the policeman had asked for ID and told them to wait.

Irene applied pale pink lipstick with the help of a small mirror. Then she turned her attention to the view outside. After a few seconds she looked at Margo.

"It's the question of gender. I am a transsexual," she answered. "My passport states that I was once male, it's often a cause of concern for the bureaucracy."

"I see," said Margo, thoughts of the boy and suicide were thrust aside by Irene's astonishing statement. Margo immediately assumed — as she would — that Irene was telling a colossal and wonderful lie. She was impressed. Irene held Margo's gaze, her clear blue eyes steady and unblinking. Something about her stare suggested to Margo that perhaps there was no pretence. She considered Irene's bone structure, thought about the register of her voice. Irene was clearly telling the truth. She had once been a man.

Margo glanced down at the tablecloth. Irene interpreted Margo's downcast eyes as a sign of confusion, or perhaps animosity. Irene looked away, returning her gaze to the view outside, giving Margo time to come to terms with whatever emotions she might be experiencing. She stared at frosty trees glinting in the sunlight on Goat Island where spray from the Falls had frozen on lower branches.

Irene would have been surprised to know that Margo had lowered her eyes because she was overwhelmed by flattery. The fact that Irene had confided in her without any trickery on Margo's part delighted Margo. The sociability that she always hoped would result from her stories had arrived quite spontaneously. Margo was overjoyed, flushed with the warmth of what she considered to be true intimacy.

Margo glanced at Irene's hand where it lay on the table. She considered the thickness of Irene's wrist where it disappeared into the crisp pink and white striped sleeve of her blouse. Margo strained to think of something to say, anything to maintain the closeness she felt had been established by Irene's confession.

"I'm so glad you told me," Margo said. "You see I have a brother, Ben," Margo lied, she was an only child. "I really can't talk to most people about him but I'm sure you'll understand."

"What do you mean?" asked Irene, looking at Margo.

"Well, I first thought there was something odd ... no, not odd, that's a terrible thing to say. Unusual, that's what I meant. I thought there was something unusual about him when I found him trying on one of my sundresses when we were kids."

Irene continued to look at Margo, saying nothing. Instead of the knowing smile Margo had hoped for she thought she saw a flicker of annoyance in Irene's eyes.

"Anyway to cut a long story short," an expression Margo often employed when she sensed things weren't going as well as anticipated, "I told him as far as I was concerned he could wear whatever he wants. He often wears women's clothes now, we even go on shopping expeditions together. He's a gas, you'd love him."

Irene stared at Margo for several seconds. Margo tried a smile but Irene's expression didn't change.

Eventually Irene said, "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that you told me this story in an attempt to somehow reassure me, to make me feel comfortable. However I need no reassurance, I'm perfectly comfortable as I am." She turned her gaze away from Margo. "Also if you had any experience whatsoever you'd know that I have very little in common with your brother."

Margo was filled with anguish. "Look, I'm awfully sorry. The last thing I wanted to do was offend you. I don't know what came over me, I'm ..."

"I think perhaps you'd better stop now before you make matters worse," said Irene.

"I'm really sorry," blurted Margo.

Irene sighed. "Apology accepted," she said. In the awkward silence that followed Irene sat contemplating the scene outside. Margo glanced at her, hoping for a softening of expression. She couldn't help examining Irene's plucked eyebrows, her eyelids with their hint of blue eye shadow. She immediately hated herself for noticing them. Eventually Irene turned her attention from the view outside to look back at Margo. Margo glanced away. She pretended to look around at the waitress.

"Look, we're forced to sit here until that poker-faced policeman returns," said Irene, "so let's talk about something — anything."

When Margo turned to look at Irene she remembered the expression "an open face", which had always puzzled her. Irene's face, Margo realized, was "open." There wasn't a cunning line; her eyes held no hint of artifice. "OK," said Margo, smiling. The glow of fellowship returned.

"Tell me about your time as a musician in Amsterdam. What Dutch words did you learn?" Irene asked.

The glow retreated, Margo's smile disappeared. "I told you I didn't learn Dutch."

"You must have picked up something," Irene insisted. "Perhaps *jenever*, the gin everybody drinks? Or the name of a place? *Scheveningen!* It's impossible for most foreigners to say *Scheveningen*, so we ask them to try. To tease them."

"I didn't learn a word," said Margo. "Sorry."

"Ah," said Irene.

Margo looked around again for the waitress.

"Such a young person. I wonder why?" said Irene.

"Pardon?" said Margo. Irene, deep in thought, said nothing.

It took Margo a moment to understand. "Oh, you mean the boy," she said, thankful for a change in the direction of conversation, despite the subject.

From their seats they could plainly see the spot from which the boy had jumped.

"He was bruised," said Margo. "Literally, I mean. He had a bruise on his wrist."

"It's ridiculous," said Irene. "Now I'm feeling the anger!"

She snorted.

"You fight, you fight like hell. And then, in front of your eyes, somebody throws their life away."

"Excuse me," Margo called to the waitress.

She asked if she might have a cup of tea. Irene ordered coffee.

"You English like tea," said Irene. "It is a restorative, no? In times like this, times of stress."

"I suppose it is ... I hadn't thought, I mean, of the stress!"

Having delivered their tea and coffee the waitress shuffled into the darkness at the back of the café leaving Margo and Irene to look out of the windows, waiting for their drinks to cool.

"He gave no sign," Irene said, "I hardly noticed him, I was thinking of you."

"Of me?" asked Margo.

"Of you, yes. About our conversation."

"Ah," said Margo.

The lower the afternoon sun sank the yellower it shone. Out of the window Irene and Margo could see frost-encrusted rocks turning the colour of vanilla ice cream along the near shore of the river. Irene's mention of their earlier conversation had panicked Margo. She struggled to think of something to say that would draw attention away from herself.

"Do you think the ... the problem with your passport is why the policeman is taking so long?" asked Margo, turning to look at Irene.

"Perhaps," said Irene, still staring out of the window.

Margo couldn't help thinking about the squareness of Irene's jaw, the sturdiness of her neck muscles.

"It's OK, you don't mind me asking," asked Margo. "Your gaze, your" Margo hesitated.

"I hope you do. I'm glad you asked," said Irene, switching her gaze from the scene outside to Margo. "Would it be enough to say that I had no option?"

"I don't quite understand."

"I could no longer appear to the world or myself as something I wasn't," said Irene. "How's that?"

"You mean you thought you were a woman?"

"I was, I am, a woman."

Margo glanced at the swelling of breasts under Irene's pink and white striped shirt.

"But you were born a man?"

"Correction. I was born with the body of a man."

"It seems such a drastic step — the surgery and everything."

"I didn't give it a second thought, it was necessary so that the rest of the world could see me as I saw myself," said Irene.

Margo sipped her tea. Something in Irene's words brought to mind Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Was it lack of modesty? It couldn't be innocence, surely the opposite should apply to Irene. Margo cradled her teacup between her hands and gazed into it.

At last she said, "But it must be incredible to have had such a clear impression of yourself, of exactly how you wanted the world to see you ... especially when it was so different to how you were."

"Different to how I appeared, you mean. How we appear is often not how we are, don't you think? I was lucky, my mistaken appearance, my male countenance, was so obviously not me. And I was fortunate to be able to do something about it."

Irene lifted her coffee cup as if to drink, but, instead, held it in front of her. She continued to look at Margo.

Margo noticed that the pink of Irene's nail varnish matched the colour of her lipstick. "Well, all I can say is it must be marvelous to know yourself that well," Margo said.

"Mine was rather an obvious case. But all of us have unwanted attributes, characteristics imposed upon us — usually family members are the guilty parties. We adopt them unwittingly. Consequently we often appear — and behave — differently than we truly are, or would wish. Only the lucky ones realize this." Irene took a sip of her coffee.

Margo was dismayed to find that Irene's tone annoyed her. She was alarmed because it was her experience that intimacy, if it existed at all, fled in the face of disagreement. But Margo's idea of disagreement had been formed by her mother's inarticulate glares, her "tut buts," her oblique yet barbed comments. She'd never thrown Margo a bone of a specific accusation to gnaw on, a definite criticism that might indicate areas for improvement. Instead, her mother's unexplained yet obvious distaste for her daughter left Margo feeling worthless and isolated. However — like mother, like daughter — instead of confronting Irene about her smug tone Margo asked, in a suitably sceptical tone of voice, "Don't tell me you've never had moments of doubt?"

Irene glanced at Margo.

"It's recommended one lives as a woman for the limbo stage, I'd been taking — just to be certain," she said. "I remember when I was in the limbo stage, before the operation — honest for a year-and-a-half, I had small breasts and I'd grown my hair long, but I hadn't yet had surgery. All I wore during that time was a loose sweatshirt and jeans. I flew somewhere; it doesn't matter where. At the airport security I froze, not knowing if I should approach the male or the female guard to be frisked. When the woman called me to her it was all I could do to stomp myself from hugging her. After that I could have wielded the knife myself."

"What a wonderful story," muttered Margo, her annoyance with Irene forgotten. She almost wished she had a penis that she could despise!

Irene lifted her coffee cup to her lips. "But, as I've said, mine is rather a drastic case." She swallowed a mouthful of coffee. "I'm sure there's something about yourself that you would consider important? An expression of who you really are?" Irene raised her carefully shaped eyebrows inquiringly.

"Of course, all kinds of things," muttered Margo. She took the teaspoon that was resting on her saucer and made a performance out of vigorously stirring her half-drunk cup of tea. She considered saying something like, "I adore modern jazz," or she could insist that French food was her "absolute favourite cuisine." But she stirred her tea and said nothing.

Irene examined Margo's face and her hair, looked down at Margo's hands. At last she turned to gaze out of the window. "As desperate as I was I never doubted I'd eventually be able to be myself," said Irene. "I was never so hopeless as this poor boy."

Margo struggled to suppress another prick of irritation at what she saw as Irene's superior manner. "Doesn't everyone consider suicide at some time or another?" asked Margo.

"Never. Not me. Not suicide," said Irene. "Have you?"

Margo hadn't anticipated the question being thrown back at her. She was suddenly struck by the silence of the restaurant. Out of the corner of her eye she caught the movement of the river and the Falls, but they were rendered soundless by thick layers of glassy window. Margo felt lost, wondering at what point during the conversation she'd found it impossible to lie.

She decided to act nonchalant, yet worldly. "Of course. I've even tried it ... a couple of times," she said.

"How?" asked Irene.

"The first time was with pills."

Irene leaned forward, her breasts rested on the edge of the table, hands clasped in front of her.

"And this time the boy he, how do you say, it's a poker term I think, he ace'd you? Or maybe it's tennis," said Irene.

"What on earth do you mean?" Margo asked.

"That's why I turned around to take another look. Not at the Falls, but at you. To see if I could tell what it was about you that made me feel uneasy. Then, when I saw your expression of, how do you say — chagrin — when the boy jumped. I knew you weren't here for the view only."

"Chagrin?" Margo echoed. If asked she'd have found it difficult to explain why she felt stirrings of anger towards Irene. She felt exposed. Why should she be the one to feel like a fraud? If she hadn't been told by the policeman to stay Margo, she'd march out right now, leave this Irene person to her — or his — own devices! "You speak English so well," she said, sarcastically. "I'm sure I haven't a clue what *chagrin* means."

"Disappointingly at failure," replied Irene. "Especially in the light of another's success?"

Margo panicked at a thickening sensation in her throat. "Ridiculous," she gasped. If challenged she'd claim her choking was the effect of stale air in the restaurant.

Irene reached her fingers across the tablecloth toward Margo's hand. "To fail at suicide is not such a bad thing, no?"

Margo slid her hand under the table, watched her two tons of water each other in the privacy of her lap. The women sat motionless. Thousands of hands of clutch surged silently over the Falls. It wasn't until Irene finally withdrew her outstretched hand that Margo realised how much she'd wanted to grasp it.

Irene pulled herself upright. "Tell me, where were you born?" she asked.

Margo looked up, she considered the velvety quality of Irene's brown eyes for so long that she almost forgot the question. She looked away, out of the window. A seagull was gliding with motionless wings in ever-decreasing circles above the Falls. The wrought-iron railing appeared even more insubstantial from where they were sitting. The blue-green brow of the Falls glistened. The water was mesmerizing, but Margo tore her eyes away, forced herself to look Irene in the eye.

"I wasn't born in England," Margo said.

"But you said you were English?"

"My mother was English. She married a Canadian, my father. They met in London but then moved to Canada, he worked for the family business, a law firm. I was born here, in Toronto. I was sent to boarding school in England at age seven. I stayed until I was eighteen."

"So young to leave one's parents. I suppose they thought it would be better for you, a good education and all that."

"No. My mother couldn't stand to have a daughter around her who talked with an "American" accent, so I was sent away to lose it."

"She was probably jealous," said Irene.

"Jealous," gasped Margo.

"Sure. Parents are, you know. She probably envied your youth, your lack of inhibition perhaps, that sort of thing."

Margo was astonished; it had never occurred to her that her mother might envy her.

"But I think you sound Canadian, no?" asked Irene.

"I don't know how I sound, I guess I'm a bit of a chameleon. I pick up whatever accent I'm surrounded by."

"This is OK for chameleons but rather confusing for a young woman, don't you think? Do you think of yourself as Canadian or English?" asked Irene.

"I don't think of myself as anything particularly."

"Oh, but you must!" said Irene.

Until then Margo had always thought "must" was the worst possible thing anybody could ever say to her. She looked out of the window savouring the concern that Irene had managed to inject into the words "you must." The sun was slipping down the sky, and the rapids above the Falls had taken on a coppery sheen. The colour of the falling water had darkened to jade. Margo sat quietly for several minutes, aware of Irene watching her. Their silence was interrupted by the voice of the policeman.

"I'm sorry for keeping you waiting for so long," he said. "You're both free to go now."

He handed Irene her passport. He gave Margo her driving licence. "We may call on you for the inquest," he said to Margo and smiled. "Since you live so close."

"Sure," said Margo, and attempted a smile in return.

"You might like to know that we've established an identity. A coat with a letter in one of the pockets was found on a nearby bench. It belonged to the ..." he hesitated and glanced at Irene. "... to the young man."

"Well, I should be going," he said. "Enjoy the rest of your coffee."

He turned on his heel and took several steps.

"Just a second," Irene called out. The policeman stopped.

"If you have any information about the young man I think it would be helpful for my friend," she indicated with her head in Margo's direction, "and I to know something of him."

Friend! thought Margo.

The policeman turned and stepped towards them. "Well, I can't tell you his name, of course, but I suppose there's no harm in telling you that he'd run away from a half-way house. He's the usual story — abuse, removal from the parental home, foster homes, and so it goes. He had a record, a little fraud, nothing very ambitious. It's unlikely that anyone will miss him. Good night." He walked briskly away.

As he'd been talking the sun had disappeared completely. Now the sky was turquoise at the western horizon changing quickly to dark blue and then to indigo in the east. Margo cradled her tea-cup in both hands.

"Idiot," said Irene scathingly. "He had it wrong about the coffee too."

"What?"

"He told us to enjoy our coffee, but you are drinking tea."

"Yes, I suppose he did," said Margo. Now that she was free to go she discovered she was reluctant to leave.

"It didn't occur to you to tell him?"

"No, I didn't give it a thought," replied Margo.

"People make assumptions. Sometimes it's understandable, but I think it better to correct them if they make the wrong ones."

"About whether one is a coffee or a tea drinker?" asked Margo.

"It seems a small thing, but sometimes the small things are the most telling," said Irene.

"It's true, I am a tea-drinker," Margo said. "I suppose it means something."

"Not herbal tea either. Proper English tea with milk and sugar. It says a lot."

Margo could see lights appearing in the buildings on the other side of the Niagara River gorge. She drained her teacup. The drowsy waitress had woken up and was noisily setting up tables for next day's lunch. If this was a hint for them to leave, Irene and Margo were oblivious to it.

"In Toronto?" Irene asked.

"In Toronto."

"With your parents?"

"God, no."

"Did you like English boarding school?"

"I hated it but in our family one doesn't make a fuss."

"Oh, but making a fuss can be so satisfying," said Irene, her eyes shining with mock mischief. Margo couldn't stop herself from laughing.

"What do you do for a job?" asked Irene.

Margo stopped laughing abruptly. The question stung. From somewhere deep she remembered being slapped across the face.

"I told you, I'm a musician."

"Of course, of course, forgive me. I don't usually forget such things," said Irene. She reached across and laid her hand on top of Margo's. Margo's reaction was to pull her hand away, she was glad when she managed to resist the impulse. "It's just that I'm sure there are all kinds of things you could do if you wanted to, with your education, and good looks. I'm sure our young policeman thought you attractive."

Margo, reassured, smiled weakly and looked again towards the lights on the other side of the river.

"How do you feel about men, Irene?" asked Margo, and suddenly, unexpectedly, felt gleeful — to be sitting around talking about men with a friend!

Irene gave Margo's knuckles a soft pat as she removed her hand. "I enjoy their attention, it makes me feel more feminine," replied Irene. "However sex has not really been my preoccupation. But don't misunderstand me. I have as much the body of a woman as modern science can allow, which is considerable. To all intents and purposes I am anatomically like a woman who has undergone a hysterectomy. I can have orgasms, my oogenous zones retain their sensitivity."

"You sound like a medical text book," said Margo, and smiled.

"Perhaps that's because genitals and hormones only interest me insofar as I wanted mine changed to match my true gender," replied Irene.

She drained the last of her coffee.

"Why do you think the city of Paris, and all ships are referred to as 'she'?" asked Irene, eyes wide with delight, even though she'd posed the question a thousand times before.

Irene and Margo could have left the building by way of an exit at the rear, which would have been more convenient for the car park where they'd both left cars, Margo's rusty Honda and Irene's gleaming rental. However they went out of the front doors, through which they'd entered, placing them in the exact location where they first met.

Once outside, they paused. The rear of the Falls drowned all other sounds.

Margo looked towards the wall. She could see the outline of wrought-iron railing against star-studded sky. It was hard to remember the shock when she'd discovered, earlier in the day, the existence of the railing, twisted and slippery yet such an effective steepladder. Unlike the boy, she hadn't anticipated — or welcomed — its convenience.

"Did we imagine it?" asked Irene. In the light falling from the windows behind them Margo could see steam drifting from Irene's mouth, warm breath colliding with freezing air.

Margo remembered the boy's eyes, she saw them as clearly as when he was standing in front of her, poised by the railing. Margo recognised the damaged expression that permeated his eyes. She was reminded of crushed, blue petals in the pale palms of her hands — a bunch of violets her Sunday school teacher had handed out one Mother's Day. The flowers were intended as a gift for the children to give to their mothers but Margo had squeezed the life out of hers on her way home. She'd thrown the strangled flowers in the gutter outside the house.

Frigid spray pricked the women's faces. Margo shuddered with grief — grief for the flowers, grief for the boy, grief for the kind of mother she'd never had. "God, no," Margo said. "We didn't imagine it."

She turned abruptly and walked quickly around the building to the rear. Irene caught up with her at the curb, where they waited for some cars to pass so they could cross the road to the parking lot.

"Are you OK to drive?" asked Irene.

"Why didn't they build a better wall. It's ridiculous, so ineffective. It's Niagara Falls, for Christ's sake."

"You can't blame this," said Irene. "The wall is only ineffective, as you put it, in the face of desperation such as his."

Margo looked around, stared into the darkness towards where they'd been. "After all, you didn't disappear, did you?" asked Irene.

Irene took Margo's arm in hers, and gently turned her away from the Falls to face the road again. Margo was instantly reminded of local women in the English town where she'd gone to boarding school. She remembered how she'd often watched, enviously, while a woman, standing at a roadside kerb, would hook her hand through the arm of her companion so that they could both cross safely to the other side of the street.

"Why don't you come and visit me in Holland sometime. Perhaps you could revisit your old haunts?"

Margo turned her head to look at Irene, she couldn't remember being so close to another person's face in her entire life. "Haunts?" she asked. She thought of the man in Amsterdam, his attic apartment, and the view of the sparkling canal. She remembered the warmth that emanated from his body in bed as she lay next to him.

"In Amsterdam. Perhaps you could get work again as a musician."

Margo averted her eyes. She looked across the road, beyond the steady stream of cars, to the kerb on the other side. "I'm not a musician," she said. "I never was."

"Ah," said Irene. After a moment's silence she tightened her hold on Margo's arm. "Come anyway," she said.

"Honestly?" asked Margo, daring to look into Irene's eyes.

"Of course, you can stay as long as you like," said Irene, and Margo watched the laugh lines that bracketed Irene's lips soften and deepen as she smiled at Margo. At that moment the traffic cleared, allowing them to cross safely to the other side of the road.