

ALEX PUGSLEY

## CRISIS ON EARTH-X

I WAS FOUR YEARS OLD WHEN Uncle Lorne came to live with us. He was my mother's younger brother by twenty-two winters, a mistake of uncertain paternity according to my sisters, and he joined our household when his own was in freefall. "Nanny and Dompá are drunk all the time is why," explained my sister Bonnie. "That's why he's like that." Nanny and Dompá, living in Montreal, were moving into some marital hurly-burly during this time, so it was decided, mostly by my father, that twelve year-old Uncle Lorne would benefit from the relatively steadier environment of our house in Halifax. I was eager to have such company, for in my house I was surrounded by women—my significant mother as well as two sisters above and two below. Uncle Lorne was a singular, decidedly non-feminine addition to our house. He arrived with hobbies fully-formed, with habits and rules and secret disciplines. He made models of Iroquois helicopters, completed abstract jigsaw puzzles, and, in an amazing display of home-made engineering, had constructed a lunar docking station for our Major Matt Mason action figures from the parts of a rotary phone, a discarded bicycle tube, and a Fram oil filter. He showed me how to draw propellers and Gatling guns and Batman's cowl—an image I am still known to improvise on unopened letters from Revenue Canada. Uncle Lorne owned more than a thousand comic books, which he kept in boxes under his bed. Each purchase was thoughtfully registered by title, number and condition on blue graph paper inside a mauve Duo-Tang folder. Though he followed many comics, he was closing in on complete runs of *The Justice League of America* and *The Brave and the Bold*, back-issues of which he acquired from a mail-order concern in Passaic, New Jersey. This endeavour, among others, was funded by delivering *The Mail-Star*, the city's afternoon broadsheet. Uncle Lorne had a route of 163 newspapers, an ambitious amalgam of three existing smaller routes, and on Wednesdays, when the paper swelled with advertising flyers from Sobeys and the IGA ("Try new Beef Noodle Hamburger Helper!" "Two-for-one 1-2-3

Jell-O!') I was pressed into service as sidekick and all-purpose lackey. The dropped-off newspapers came in bales held together by blue twine. In winter they were fearsome cuboid chunks of frozen newsprint. But the day I'm remembering was not winter. The day I'm remembering was one day away from true summer, a Wednesday in late June, one of the longest of the year. I was now ten, Uncle Lorne was eighteen, and the city was strangely warm, daylight endless, dragonflies soft-lifted on an incoming ocean wind. We were far afield. From the Wellington Street drop-off we had ranged to The Nova Scotian Hotel, back through the Dalhousie University campus, and were now tramping westerly on Jubilee Road. We were covering another boy's paper route—Chris Cody, one of Uncle Lorne's intimates—and this added fifty-two papers to our travels. But even four hours into our overland explorations, I didn't mind. This afternoon alone I had been shown a live dolphin in the Life Sciences aquatic tank at the university. I had been taught a new climbing technique called 'chimneying.' And here at the bottom of Jubilee Road I saw that the street literally sank beneath the sea, the Northwest Arm flooding up the slope of a concrete boat ramp, the setting sun a thousand times refracted in its waves. Though I could hear my uncle calling for me above, I took a moment to imagine Aquaman underwater beyond this boat ramp, spinning away from the shallows to some murky sub-stratum of the North Atlantic, perhaps rising buoyant through sun-filtered depths, bursting to the surface to rendezvous with the Batboat, the two superheroes racing toward a far horizon. A few weeks earlier I had read a *Justice League* two-parter about a zombie called Solomon Grundy, a story that featured in an heroic role the grown-up Robin of Earth-Two, and in my mind I decided to place this fully-formed Robin in the Batboat. I admired his blended costume, his motorcycle, and how he had assumed the mantle of crime-fighting when the Batman of his world had begun to dodder—because, to be honest, recently I'd been wondering if events might force me in a similar direction. Solomon Grundy had required a team-up between the Justice League of Earth-One and the Justice Society of Earth-Two, and the series had become my favourite team-up story ever. I keenly anticipated the next inter-world issues, numbers 107 and 108, copies of which had been ordered from New Jersey for both Uncle Lorne and me. My copies would be considered paid in full if I did eight more Wednesdays on the paper route.

Uncle Lorne called for me again and this time I straggled up Jubilee Road, where he was smoking a cigarette. He allowed himself one cigarette after the papers had been delivered. He put the cigarette out on an old and

furrowed telephone pole, leaving the filter inside a vertical crevice, and exhaled, his chin bobbing in time to some percussion in his head. Uncle Lorne had many internal rhythms whose patterns would remain somewhat mysterious to me, just as he seemed someone whose personality might remain fundamentally unknowable. “Kink-man,” he said, using a family nickname. “Ready to race?”

A note of personal history: seventeen months before I had been cut out of hip-to-toe casts, discharged from the Children’s Hospital, and told that I could walk again. So I had spent a few years of my childhood either in a wheelchair or on crutches and was only now, at the age of ten, recovering full motion and strength in my left hip, a joint distorted by something called Legg-Perthes disease. Naturally this conflicted with my desires to be the World’s Best Athlete, because my limp and shortened left leg gave to my walk a crooked, hop-along quality—an extraneous feature, I liked to imagine, which disappeared in the madness of an open sprint. Although I found it tiring to sustain longer efforts, Uncle Lorne had devised a system whereby the distance we ran was increased each Wednesday by twenty sidewalk squares. We had started close—South Street and Tower Road in February—and were now advanced almost to Robie and Jubilee. I was given a head start of sixty resting heartbeats—Uncle Lorne holding two fingers to his throat to count the pulses—then he would spring after me.

Taking off my shirt and tying the sleeves around my waist, as I had seen some older boys do on the Dalhousie campus, I said I was ready. Uncle Lorne inspected the winter pallor of my stomach. “Whew,” he said. “*Fish belly!* Fish belly on the old grub.” He spoke as if this were a joke already established between us. “Fish Belly Grub. Grub-a-dub-dub. Race with the Grub.” It was one of his recreations to explore the associations of words—which he sometimes pronounced in confusing and menacing variations. But I took his meaning as teasing, tightened my laces, and crashed off, propelling myself down the sidewalk beside the Camp Hill cemetery. I took the corner on South Street at top-speed, losing my balance and dispersing my wild centripetal motion by straying into the street itself. As I sped past the Children’s Hospital, I heard a commotion somewhere behind me—a rush of sound that was my uncle closing the gap between us. Slingsing myself around a stop sign for extra momentum, I met Tower Road with out-of-control, berserker ferocity. I knew, like the grown-up Robin of Earth-Two, that there were do-or-die moments when you simply had to prove yourself. Seeing our house, and sensing a win for the first time, I flashed a giddy look behind me—only to

allow Uncle Lorne, on the other side, to dash up the steps of the front porch and, as he always did, touch the door latch, signaling the end of our contest and his victory. I protested if only I *hadn't* looked over my shoulder, losing precious split-seconds, this time I could have won, would've won, *should've* won. Uncle Lorne bobbed his head again, noncommittal, and mentioned that he thought I had run my best race so far. He pushed open our front door and paused in the evening air. I was just noticing a viral spread of pimples on his chin when he said quietly, "Run your own race, Grub. Run your own race." With that semi-cryptic koan, he vanished inside to his basement bunker, and I wandered happily into the kitchen. This was a time before microwaves, when the warm-up of a dinner was achieved through the sorcery of a double-boiler—which meant leaving a plate of dinner (in this case a pork chop, mashed potatoes, and carrots sliced with a serrated cutter) on a pot of simmering water. There were two plates tonight, and I saw it as a sign of my rapidly advancing maturity that I had been so singled out. As I touched the dinner plate with the tip of a quilted oven mitt, a song began on the kitchen clock-radio that Mom used to check her approaching rehearsal times. I didn't really know what radio songs were, or that play-lists turned over, that the song you heard one summer might be gone the next. But 'Band on the Run' was around that year, in the way a new neighbourhood kid might be, or in the way you might notice a surplus of ladybugs on a bathroom window one afternoon. I had heard the song before, but it perplexed me because the opening was filled with so many different progressions, each sounding like a different song, that I often confused it with other offerings on the radio. But as I identified it for the first time, my continued contact with the warmed plate touched off a number of attendant details in and out of the kitchen. The windows were beginning to lose their evening light. The floaty purple fragrance of lilac blossoms was unmistakable in the backyard. The kitchen cupboards, painted turquoise, showed signs of blue where the turquoise paint had been chipped—and so my response to the song seemed turquoise-blue with an after-sense of lilac, and when a crescendo of horns faded to allow for the strumming of an acoustic guitar, alternating between the chords of C and F major 7, the song seemed finally to become itself. In a moment of autistic dreaminess, I stood unmoving at the stove, fixed between these two chords, and it was only when the singer sang about rain exploding with a mighty crash was I released from my abstraction—and a multitude of synesthetic meaning exploded for me, moments at once emotional, sensory, and intuitive, and as they shimmered and gathered and burst again I realized

it was the happiest I've been without knowing particularly why I was happy and this song seemed to be a part of it, and not just accompanying it, but activating it, coordinating the mood and circumstance and manifold instant. 'Band on the Run' on June 20th was a strangely overwhelming solace for me, and it has been ever-after linked with the events of that summer and the possibilities of that year, and though many of the proceedings turned out horribly, I am still grateful to the song for what it engendered in my imagination—for it conveyed a sense of precarious possibilities gorgeously arranged and met and fulfilled.

Uncle Lorne's door was closed when I went into the basement—an obsolete coal room had been done over as his bedroom—so I continued into the rec room, a recently dry-walled creation beside the furnace room and home to rainbow-coloured wall-to-wall carpet, a folded-up ping-pong table, Nanny and Domba's deteriorating wicker cottage furniture, and a Sony Trinitron television on a rickety stand. I turned on the TV and stood spinning the channel selector, alert to the probable appearance of *The Six Million Dollar Man*. As I noticed a familiar and above-average episode of *Bewitched*—the story where Cousin Serena forces a song on Tommy Boyce and Bobby Hart—I became aware of some indications I was not the first to set foot in the room. On the carpet, beside a wicker armchair, was an unopened can of Fresca, a bag of Lik-m-aid Fun Dip, and an SX-70 Polaroid camera, a recent Christmas present to my oldest sister, Carolyn. Not that it would be Carolyn who would leave such a gift unattended in the basement—it was, of course, Bonnie, my older, contiguous sister and long-standing nemesis within the family. With the arrival in the house of this gizmo, Bonnie had taken to photographing assorted personalities off the television screen at extremely inopportune moments. Where these photographs were idiotically hoarded I wasn't sure—but lately a number of blurry, underexposed Polaroids of Bjorn Borg, The Partridge Family, and Tony DeFranco had been found behind the radiator in the upstairs bathroom. I have successfully kept my sisters' specifics out of these narratives, but a few words might be appropriate here. Bonnie, two years my senior, was principally in a lifelong, unwinnable competition with Carolyn, the first-born, who was and has been the perfect child—perfect manners, perfect marks—and thoughtful, serious, responsible, overachieving. Bonnie, when she was alive, was domineering, tactical, and ultra-impulsive—a girl never slowed by an unexpressed thought. She stood

now in the doorway of the basement rec room, holding a CorningWare bowl full of homemade popcorn, her head tilted to one side, looking at me with the smile that Tolerance gives to the Misguided. “Uh, what do you think you’re doing?”

“Watching *The Six Million Dollar Man*.”

“Uh, no, you’re not. Because did you say ‘reserve?’ Were you sitting down and did you say ‘reserve?’” Bonnie quickly touched her tail-bone to the wall, repeated this code word, and straightened up again. “Because if you weren’t and you didn’t then we’re watching what we want to watch. Plus I was here first and you’re out-voted, so tough titty.”

My two younger sisters now materialized in the area behind Bonnie. They were clad in worn and matching flannelette nighties and each held in her hands a cereal bowl of popcorn—the effect was rather like two novice members of the junior choir advancing with opened hymnaries.

“What’re you guys watching?” I asked, stalling, not prepared to walk away from the television.

Bonnie explained they had been planning all week to watch a movie called *The Parent Trap*. I had not heard of this plan. I was offended by this plan. And I refused to believe I’d been consulted about this plan. What was this movie even about?

Uncle Lorne came out of his room to investigate the crowd in the newly boisterous rec room. “What is *what* movie about?” he asked.

“*The Parent Trap*.”

Uncle Lorne looked to the ceiling, as if to properly assemble his thoughts. “It’s about these kids.” He glanced at Bonnie for verification. “Twin sisters, right? And one night they’re waiting for their parents to come home and then—Grub, do you know what gelignite bullets are?”

I said I didn’t.

“Plastic explosives used primarily in automatic weapons where—”

“That’s *not* the movie, Uncle Lorne” said Bonnie with maximum indifference. She was now pointing at her stash of junk food, ready to launch into a further defense of her viewing rights, when from upstairs we heard Mom and Dad come in the front door, their shoe-steps resounding over our heads. All of us, through acquired habit, wordlessly decoded the noises above for signals of disposition, humour, inclination.

“Mom’s drunk, you guys,” concluded Katie, my youngest sister, with casual nonchalance, nibbling a single piece of popcorn. “Bet you any money.”

Our mother, as it would turn out, was not yet drunk. She and our father had been at a party celebrating the opening night of a play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the gathering held across the street in the rented rooms of some new friends, Mr. and Mrs. Abbot—although my sister Bonnie maintained these two were not formally married. When first informed on this point, I wondered if Mr. and Mrs. Abbot were perhaps a gypsy duo who assumed diverse identities and traveled the countryside defrauding townspeople out of their children. But the Abbots, it turned out, were neither gypsies nor con-men. They were something else altogether as exotic: they were draft-dodgers, expatriate Americans from Wheeling, West Virginia, who had driven to Nova Scotia on a Honda 450 motorcycle in the summer of 1968. They lived first in an unheated commune in the Annapolis Valley, on the other side of West Paradise, but came to Halifax a year before, when their two daughters reached school age. These two daughters, September Dawn and Jessamine, were fourteen months apart and inexplicably identical to me. Both wore tie-dyed shirts and home-made pants with no pockets. Both had blonde hair down to their waists. Their hair was sometimes held back in pinched thicketts by glass-baubled elastics, but September Dawn, and especially Jessamine, did not care for these elastics and often the girls ran around with hair loose and unfastened—so encountering them in a neighbourhood game of hide-and-go-seek was like coming face-to-face with a feral child lost some months in the black mountain hills of Dakota. The Abbot household had a somewhat lax philosophy toward personal upkeep, and one or the other girl was always scratching a sty out of an eyelash or separating a scab from a kneecap. Since arriving in Halifax, Mr. Abbot had secured a situation as the stage carpenter for Neptune Theatre. Mrs. Abbot had an undefined connection with a new organization called the Ecology Action Centre. She was also a folk artist of some commitment. She worked mostly in macramé, collage, and silkscreen. Because my father had done some *pro bono* legal work for the Abbots regarding their immigration, our family had been the recipient of two silk-screened prints—and, as we kids trooped up the stairs from the basement, I saw my father was now in possession of a third, a sort of lacquered beige silhouette of three ponies in a salt marsh.

“Jesus, Mackie,” he said to my mother, shaking his head. “Where are we going to *put* this goddamn things?”

My mother, who this evening was wearing a lime-and-purple print dress—what my sister Carolyn called the Jo Anne Worley dress—pulled open

the refrigerator and reached for a bottle of Blue Nun before saying, “Your father made us leave the party early. Like anything’s new.”

My father put the silk-screen print down on the kitchen table and made a slight tip of his head, his eyebrows contracting in bemused concentration. It was a familiar gesture that meant he was wondering whether or not he should imply his real reaction—which was, in this case, that he considered the party over-run with dubious people and dubious practices—or simply forgo any response at all.

“Because,” continued my mother. “This one couple was passing around a marijuana cigarette.” My mother grabbed a plastic juice glass from the dishwasher and poured herself four fingers of wine. “As soon as your father saw that, we were out of there.”

“Well,” said my father. “How’s that going to look? It happens to be against the law.”

“Loosen up. Their friends were very nice. When in Rome—”

“Okay, Titania. That’s plenty, thank you. Time to get these kiddles to bed.” He pointed at my youngest sister. “You? Bed. Now. And I mean it, Ditsy.”

Unfazed, my mother turned to Bonnie. “They’re anti-war, you know, these people. Flower children. They think anything’s possible. The wife’s a women’s libber. Vivien. But very sweet. Him? I’m not so sure. Wes is the saintly type. Wants to do good. Like build a barn for mentally retarded kids in New Brunswick.” She tossed back half the wine. “Sure, why not? But what are they going to do with a *barn*—shear sheep? Honest to God. Be careful of these so-called saints, children. Believe me, people who act like saints—a lot of so-called saints are trouble. They’re living in a dream world. Telling people what they don’t want to hear in the first place. And the more Wes is doing good for some retarded kid, the more he’s neglecting his own family, you watch.”

My parents’ conversation continued over the next few hours, sometimes softly in almost inaudible murmurs, other times erupting into strident tones of outright drunken hostility. By this time I was lying in my bed, sleepless, restless with every wrongful twist of my bed sheets, staring at my ceiling. The lights in the street created a familiar overglow in my room and I stared as tiny dots of winking dimness generated patterns on my paint-cracked ceiling, patterns I often collected into recognizable images—the man with the nose, the happy cow, the mud-splattered ogre—the last of which I was having trouble looking at more than once. As I heard my parents make their



way up the front stairs, I closed my eyes and prayed to God they wouldn't get divorced again.

"Stewart, would you mind not being such a—"

"Mumsy? I don't want to hear another word of this."

"—prig. They're just trying to do good in the world. *Their* life isn't only about making money."

"Sure, sure, Mumsy. Relax. Relax, kid."

"I hate it when you get like this."

"Here we go. Here it is. It's all coming now. I'll take the rest of that wine, thank you very much."

"You want to lose your hand? Just tell me something. Why don't you try something new for once in your life—like in the last forty years? That's the problem between me and you. You don't care two shits about the environment. And I do."

"The environment? How in the *hell* are we talking about the environment?"

There were a few thudding and bumping noises—which I guessed to be my mother's foot slipping off a step and her subsequent stumble into the creaking banister. "Well," she said. "I hope *I* never ridicule what is wise and good. That's a quote. You can look it up."

"Yes, Mackie. Beautiful performance. Exit stage left with a bear."

"It's exit *pursued* by a bear. Get it right, for Chrissake. For once in your crumb-bum life, would you get something *right*?"

This exchange was followed by the closing of their bedroom door, a brief lull, a night shriek, and the smashing of a bottle. My parents began as actors—they met in a play in college—so we kids were used to these kinds of theatrics. But tonight seemed a return to the drear uncertainty of five years ago, and as I tried again to fall asleep I began to wonder if what I wanted for myself was really relevant at all.

Uncle Lorne was an archivist, a tinkerer, a published poet. The year he came to live with us, when I was ten, he was seized upon by the middle school English teacher, Mr. Jones, who chose three of Uncle Lorne's poems for the literary section of *The Grammarian*, the school yearbook. Two were about Third Empire Rome ("Roma Aeterna") and a third, and for me most vivid, was titled "Wild Dogs." It moved with the pace of a Blake lyric and started with the line, 'Perturbed eyes and carious teeth ...' What was this

word—perturbed? or carious? or gelignite? In what furnace burned these words? Where had he gleaned such lore and stuff? The poems were signed “Lorne Anthony Wheeler,” one of the few times I saw my uncle’s full name in print. When he was in Montreal, living in Notre-Dame-de-Glace, Dompas had given him a rubber stamp with his full name and address on it (a very Dompas gift), and this blue, inky imprimatur appeared on the cover of many of my uncle’s earliest collected comics—before he realized making such a mark might devalue the artifact. Uncle Lorne left Montreal just before Expo 67 and, though he seldom talked about it, I could feel, from how he once pinned to our corkboard postcards of the geodesic dome and the Habitat 67 housing complex (communiqués from Benoit Charbonneau and Thompson Oldring—precious friends I’d never meet), I could feel that Nova Scotia must have seemed for him a far and distant outpost of the empire, and Halifax, vis-à-vis Montréal, a city much reduced in circumstance. I decided it was to cosmopolitan Montreal that he owed his strange intelligence. My uncle and his abilities I regarded mostly with reverent awe, though I knew he was somewhat eccentric—as if his clockwork required further assembly. Because while Uncle Lorne was made up of a lot of quick parts, not all of them worked, and some were changing colours, and still others awaited their final function. His vocabularies, his silences, his keen intrigues and esoteric associations were all clues, as I sensed them, to the inverted kingdom of his imagination. “My brother’s mind certainly works weird,” my mother would say. “No, Lorne’s brilliant, he is, but he’s not always exactly *here*, you know. In the real world.” I sometimes wondered if I would ever understand him. And I wanted to—I wanted the fellowship and solidarity and stability such an understanding would supply. My sisters had no idea how Uncle Lorne thought and had mostly stopped trying. “You know,” said Carolyn when the gelignite comment reached her desk. “That’s just Uncle Lorne humour.” Bonnie agreed. She tended to speak about Uncle Lorne in a respectful but detectably marginalizing manner—and sneaking into her tone lately was the implication that Uncle Lorne was increasingly out-of-touch and peculiar—as if, for her, he was already beyond the point of no return. At the end of June she said to me, “You know the Abbots are atheists, right?”

“So?”

“So Faith asked Uncle Lorne what atheists are and you know what he said? That atheists were families that drown their own pets. Is that supposed to be funny? Like a Chris Cody joke?”

“Faith knows what atheists are.”

“But what if Uncle Lorne tells Katie that? She’s young and she’ll believe him.” There was no attempt at a tolerant smile here—Bonnie was offended by Uncle Lorne’s deliberate subversion of a religious matter and she would attribute this wayward attitude to the growing influence of the other paper boy, Chris Cody. Christopher Cody was a giggly, bushy-haired teenager who would arrive at our backdoor door ostensibly to watch *Kung Fu* with Uncle Lorne. Later he might be found shambling around our furnace room in tinted aviator glasses, eating Munchos Chips, and listening on headphones to Grand Funk Railroad or Badfinger or Santana—albums whose psychedelic cover art used to frighten and confuse me as a small child. To my uncle, Chris was Commander Cody, a name always spoken in a hoarse, back-of-the-throat style, as if Uncle Lorne’s voice were suddenly parched with fatigue or thirst. This voice was used in all manner of Chris Cody settings, often with purposefully sinister implication, and recently even in non-Chris-Cody situations, when a bored Uncle Lorne might seek to surprise you by creeping into the TV room to whisper into your ear, “Boris the Spider!” which was the name by which this diversion came to be known—as Uncle Lorne’s Boris the Spider trick.

I was wary of Commander Cody. On a winter Wednesday at the newspaper drop-off, he once chased me into a snow bank and put snow down my back. In May I was kicked out of the TV room so he and Uncle Lorne could watch a Clint Eastwood movie. And lately, now that both had grown greebly moustaches, Chris Cody had taken to commandeering my uncle on missions into the musty Halifax nightlife, to places with names like The Hollis Street Tavern, The Ladies Beverage Room, The Green Dory, and some bar called Angie’s. On Dominion Day Sunday, stepping out our back door to walk to St. Matthew’s United Church, my younger sisters and I happened upon Chris Cody’s recent vomit, some of which had fallen through the porch slats, but most of which was still intact, congealed in a kind of fractal dispersion pattern, swirls and streaks emanating from a wet epicenter not far from an unfortunately situated Malibu Skipper doll. Chris Cody was found in his clothes in our basement bathtub, Uncle Lorne in the wicker armchair, and our family’s stationwagon on a sidewalk on Barrington Street, the passenger’s side of the vehicle wrapped around a utility pole. My father, not known for his severity, grounded Uncle Lorne for the rest of the summer and grimly recommended to him that he seek out a better class of companion than Christopher Cody, who had been driving the car.

“Commander Cody has crash-landed,” my uncle said afterwards in his Boris the Spider voice. “He will be flying with his Lost Planet Airmen no more.

He has been marooned on the Red Planet. Commander Cody, over and out.”

My sister Bonnie was blunt in her relief. “Thank God—that guy was *such* a gook.”

“A gook?” Uncle Lorne repeated in his normal voice. “Bitsy,” he said, using my Mom’s nickname for Bonnie. “Do you know what a gook is?”

Bonnie used the term as she and Carolyn always did—to mean an awkward or unseemly person. “Chris Cody’s a gook,” said Bonnie, flatly.

“No, Bitsy,” said my uncle, with some impatience. “A gook’s a Viet Cong. As in Victor Charlie. As in they *were* blown up with gelignite. Why don’t you get that straight?”

That Wednesday there was no race home after the paper route. Uncle Lorne’s mood precluded it. He chain-smoked all the way back to Tower Road, preoccupied and changed. In the last few years I had noticed divagations. For most of my youth, Uncle Lorne was the lilting fall of the Byrds’ high harmony line in “Mr. Tambourine Man.” He was the kid staring with steady excitement at the movie poster for *Endless Summer*. He was that brief half-second when he bent his face forward before clearing his bangs from his eyes with a flick of the head. But now—now he was no longer the sort of candid, open-air kid you might approach on your first day in the Scout Troop or at the soccer skills camp. He was no longer a boy. In one moment he was my colleague and pal, ironing the creases out of a comic book, constructing a lunar docking station, and the next he was bringing home a fluorescent black light to place above a felt poster, or watching Bruce Lee movie marathons in cut-off jeans, his dark bangs so swoopy and shaggy they barely allowed for a sight-line. By June of that year Uncle Lorne had become a long-haired freaky person, a hippie in an untucked t-shirt, a fringed leather jacket, and bell-bottoms fraying beneath the soft heels of his red suede Adidas sneakers. He was reedy, stretched, finishing a growth spurt that would top him out over six feet, taller by far than Domp or my father. He was still proudly himself, equal to any context, unsurprised by developments great and small, but he was losing interest. Just as I was beginning to really read and appreciate and care for *The Justice League of America*, Uncle Lorne couldn’t care less. For a while his curiosity was stayed by the Marvell Comics universe, specifically the metaphysics and Kirby dots of *The Silver Surfer*, a loner adrift in the cosmos, as well as the Kirby titles started at DC, *The New Gods* and *Mister Miracle*, but his previous absorption was no longer evident. It was an effort

for him to dream the super-heroes when before they had dreamed him. His thoughts entered their mythology only when my presence reminded him. “This place, Grub,” he said to me on that walk home, dropping a last cigarette on the sidewalk and scuffing it out with his suede sneaker. “This burg ...” He sighed as if unable to delay a judgment that had become screamingly obvious. “It’s like living in the Bottle City of Kandor. It’s so cut off, it’s bogus. It’s beyond bogus. It’s so bogus, it’s *rogus*. It’s an embarrassment of rogueness. And everywhere fossilized. Fwa!”

Arriving at our house, we saw my mother had left a note taped to the door: ‘Dinner at the Abbots! Love, Mom.’ There had been considerable interplay between the two households since the solstice. My sisters Faith and Katie were turning seven and five that summer, and September Dawn and Jessamine were turning six and four—and so best-friendships were made fast and fixed. It worked for my mother not only because she was in *Midsummer* every evening, but because she was rehearsing a new play during the afternoon—something called *Godspell*—so she was at the theatre day by day by day, from eleven in the morning to eleven at night. When he wasn’t in New Brunswick volunteering at a summer camp, Mr. Abbot was building sets for *Godspell*, so Mrs. Abbot became the de facto guardian for both families—a responsibility she met with deliberate composure. Of the two, it was Mrs. Abbot who seemed to me saintly. Vivien Abbot was the calm of a Peter Paul and Mary song. She was slimness and silence and ovals. She wore her hair long and unstyled and parted in the middle, shaping her face in the oval of a cameo brooch. Soft on her nose were the side-lying ovals of her granny glasses. From her neck, a pendant swayed in elliptical arcs as she stirred a vegan stew made from backyard zucchinis. Beside her, leaning against the kitchen wall, were two twin-arched gothic windows rescued from a falling-apart farmhouse, and, as she looked at us kids with calm, impassive eyes, supplying us with a very patient, open-ended expectancy, it was as if, in all her self-effacing ovals, *she* were somehow transparent—as if she were merely a frame through which to view the world. She was, on the contrary, at least to us kids, highly palpable, for she conveyed in an instant her respect for the aims underlying a child’s inarticulacy, mystification, and helplessness. Vivien Abbot was one of those vigilant, soft-talking mothers who never had to raise her voice because children, sensing her intrinsic decency, never wanted to disappoint her. She went about braless in paint-flecked peasant smocks and

overalls, sometimes the side-swell of a breast plumping into open sunlight. But Mrs. Abbot, and the Abbot family in general, acted as if nakedness wasn't anything to particularly panic about—a principle rather new to our street. For some reason she had a reputation as a free-thinker and radical—censures I tried not to hold in mind as I was worried they would lead to restrictions on our visits. Earlier in the summer she let September-and-Jessamine and Faith-and-Katie paint the kitchen furniture any way they wanted—I was sitting on a chair splashed with many colours—and I decided these kinds of experiments explained her reputation for licentiousness.

The Abbots' house, if not actually under construction, was primitively open-concept. An interior wall had been partially demolished, plaster-and-planking waiting by for the insertion of those gothic windows, and the place had the air generally of a workshop or folk art *atelier*. There was no real distinction, say, between Kitchen and Bedroom, where September Dawn had forgotten three dinner bowls on a bedside table, or Painting Studio and Bathroom, where a collection of unframed canvases were furled and stored in the plunger stand beside the toilet. Delivering the evening meal to Mr. Abbot in his garage workroom, it was not a shocker for Uncle Lorne and me to pass a salamander's terrarium given pride-of-place in the middle of the dining room table, or to find the back porch steps littered with yarn-and-stick God's Eyes, and covered in sundry books, where, for example, *Harry the Dirty Dog*—a long overdue library book—competed for stair space with two hardcover copies of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*—an apt compilation, as the day would have it. For Mr. Abbot, wispy in a plaid shirt, wide-wale brown corduroy trousers, and Wallabee shoes, was working on cleaning and reassembling the Honda Black Bomber he and Mrs. Abbot had ridden to Canada six years before. But, even to me, it looked like a never-ending side project, with all those parts and pieces lying on the floor and worktable, sacred relics of their fourteen-hundred-mile pilgrimage across the Allegheny and Appalachian mountains. But, as a single moth sputtered against the swaying light bulb that hung from the garage ceiling, shadows forming and re-forming under Mr. Abbot's eyebrows, I remember shivering with an augur of different days to come as Uncle Lorne, placing the bowl of zucchini stew on the plywood worktable, asked in an unusually clear and respectful voice if Mr. Abbot might like some help repairing the motorcycle.

*Godspell* in our town was an event, a portent, an advent of the Sixties a few years after the decade had passed. Stages in Halifax were mostly determined by Noel Coward and George Bernard Shaw and, as my mother called them, “these jeezly Agatha Christie adaptations.” My mother’s loathing was a by-product of her rising animosity for Dawson Redstone, the artistic director of Neptune Theatre, a cunning Yorkshireman from whom she got, or sometimes didn’t get, parts in plays. But these pommy, cobwebby dramatic choices faded into the shadows beside the bright lights of *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*. My mother was forbidden to audition for *Hair*. Regardless of the purity of the work’s vision, my father thought it professionally questionable to pursue a situation whereby a client might hire a lawyer in the morning only to see that same lawyer’s wife “flouncing naked downstage” later that night. A deepening feud with Dawson Redstone precluded involvement in *Superstar*. But *Godspell*, the Broadway soundtrack for which was rarely off our living room turntable, set off my mother’s sense of possibility and vocation. Now in the newsreels of my mind, my father often appears in black and white. There he is in skinny suit-and-tie, holding a swaddled Carolyn for her christening photo. Or there he is in a formal, grey-toned studio portrait to mark his appointment to Queen’s Counsel. Or there he is in a white-bordered snapshot where he seems to be giving the toast to the bride in the bigger dining room at the Waegwoltic Club. But the images of the 1970s were suddenly free of borders and crowded instead with bright instamatic colours—just as the designs of the day were crowded with starbursts and poppies and flowers. My father’s concession to this freedom was to grow for a few months frizzly side-burns, and to acquire, while on a vacation in Antigua, an absurdly speckled batik sports jacket that he was permitted to wear in continental North America exactly once. But my mother’s response was manifold. My mother came of age in the 1950s—when Doris Day was the very model of the modern wife-mother-woman. When a social situation required my mother to be on her best behaviour, she went first to a Doris Day routine. She twinkled with good humour, good will, and good grace—with what a young woman thought was pleasantly expected of her in Polite Society. There was a pressure of unsaid opinion, yes, most often released in the steam of an awkward pause or an abrupt turn in topic. This implied what was thought but was never directly stated, so, moving on, no one need feel embarrassed. My sister, Faith, thinking later on this distillation process, would say, “You could never say anything bad with those ladies, but the truth would always come out in a kind of backhanded compliment—mak-

ing everyone feel weird and uncomfortable anyway.” Now my mother, after managing five pregnancies and six children, more than once blew a gasket. “Motherhood sucks,” was her post-partum remark when bringing home a final baby from the Grace Maternity. But her policy in public—in her mind—was always on the safe side of convention. She was a 1950s mom stranded in the 1970s. But meeting Vivien Abbot (and to a lesser extent another woman, Madge Wicker, who lies outside the purview of this current history), changed my mother, adjusted her understanding, and moved her to consider new strategies altogether. Why should she have dinner prepared every night at six o’clock—hurrying home to float olives and sliced radishes in a cut-glass water dish? Why should she be the one to ferry the kids to gymnastics and piano and basketball? There was an informal Sunday drop-in session at the Abbots. With *Godspell* up and running, Mom began attending what Gregor Burr, a colleague of my father, would describe as “some leftist, radical women’s lib bullshit.” How much value my mother saw in Vivien Abbot’s persevering logic and fair-mindedness I don’t know, but these meetings appealed to something not yet fully formed in her character; and my mother, who for various reasons was always looking for the other half of her personality anyway, began not only to question the assumptions and conditions of her life—but to cast around for a means to transform them.

All of this belonged, of course, to the doings of the adult world—a parallel universe a ten-year-old boy did his best to disregard. I kept to my crafts and sullen arts—stayed on the watch for super-villains, mutant zombies, alien invaders—mostly on the look-out for radioactive spiders and the remains of the intergalactic space pod that had brought me here from some distant, red-sunned planet. Charging recklessly down the basement stairs, I touched only the steps that didn’t squeak. This meant leaping the bottom three stairs and immediately somersaulting—purely as a means to dissipate the tremendous shock of impact. This feat accomplished, I swung my hand into the darkness of the rec room—not wanting to be surprised by enemy operatives—found the wall-switch and flicked on the overhead light. Satisfied I was alone, I turned the television on and, in a show of private athleticism, jumped backward into the wicker arm-chair. There settled, I began to consider my future with the cast of the PBS series *Zoom*. They were not the Justice League, true, but there was a costume of a sort (a horizontally-striped crewneck sweater and bare feet) and one did have to bring to the side one’s own signature power, witness Bernadette’s arm-swinging thaumaturgy. My



musings were interrupted by my sister Bonnie. She stood between me and the glowing television, portentously flicking the pull-tab on an unopened can of Fresca.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “I said ‘reserve.’ And I’m sitting down.”

“You can’t watch TV right now. You have to water the ficus.”

“What ficus?”

“If you don’t water the ficus, it will die. And you’re supposed to fill the humidifiers. Mom said.”

“She’s not home.”

“She will be. She’s coming home for the family meeting.”

I said I didn’t know about any family meeting, but even if I did, there was no knowing for certain if I would be there.

“Oh you’ll be there,” said Bonnie. “Everyone has to be there.”

Continuing my own line of reasoning, I made a comment about people being surprised by what I might do. If, for example, I decided I wished to become a professional decathlete and compete in the Montreal Olympics, then how did anyone know for sure I wouldn’t win the Montreal Olympics? Obviously they didn’t. I was unpredictable.

“Yeah, like you’ll go to the Olympics,” said Bonnie. “You can hardly run. You’ll probably never be able to run like a normal person. And you’re supposed to get a hip replacement when you’re thirty-five. That’s what the doctor told Mom. The orthopedic surgeon. So you probably won’t win anything.”

This interpretation did not exactly square with my own plans for myself and, in a gesture of correction, I slapped at the can of Fresca in Bonnie’s hand, sending it flying towards the wall, where it collided with a metal bracket on the exposed underside of the folded-up ping-pong table. The can was now spinning on the carpet, a thin mist of Fresca spraying from a dented perforation in its center.

Bonnie watched it for a moment, unmoved, then addressed me with matter-of-fact sangroid. “You’re paying for that.”

I said I was not.

“You’re getting me a new one. You’re replacing it.”

I said that if I wanted, I could *run* to the store and replace it. I just didn’t happen to want to run to the store at the moment.

“You couldn’t run to the store.”

I said that of *course* I could run to the store—and back—and faster than she could ever dream of running to any store anywhere in the worlds of the universe.

Bonnie considered her own thumbnail. “You want to make a bet?”

The proposed race is to The Little General—an ice-cream dispensary and grocery store whose storefront is decorated with a bootleg Cap’n Crunch figure. It is on Spring Garden Road, not an insurmountable distance for me, though it does almost double my recent Wednesday runs. Bonnie takes off like a shot. I choose a steadier pace, knowing that these ‘rabbits,’ as Uncle Lorne calls them, tend to peter out after the adrenalin subsides. But Bonnie does not peter out. She vanishes up Tower Road until her shirt is a speck of blue wavering into invisibility. By the time I arrive at the store counter, Bonnie has come and gone, a localized ache is persistent in my every other step, and I am unable to keep from limping. Trying to stay focused on the race, I draw on my reserves of berserker ferocity. It lasts two blocks before a searing pain escapes from my hip, as if my femur is beginning to crack. On College Street, I stop running and swear at the sky, repulsed by my inadequacy, crazed to be living on a planet where such injustice is allowed to occur. In a sulk, I do not finish the race, and a half hour later, I am walking up the back steps with a pint of chocolate milk and a *Haunted Tank* comic. The back door, strangely, is a quarter open, the hallway empty. On the kitchen table, double strangely, a mug of coffee is still steaming and so is the meatloaf-and-rice on the seven served plates. I call out for my mother, my sisters, my uncle, my voice wending its way from righteous confusion to plaintive unease as I traipse upstairs to a vacant second floor. In the bathroom I turn off a hot water tap. There is not a soul in the house and only now do I recall previous evenings when we have been directed to the Abbots’ for dinner. But ten minutes banging on both front and back doors rouse no light or movement. I am in the third stage of panic, my worried brain flashing with paramedic scenarios, when our stationwagon coasts up the street, everyone in it but me: the family meeting. Uncle Lorne, untangling himself from the back seat, is wildly overtaken by my youngest sister, Katie, in such a rush her yellow flip-flop is left on the grass behind her. “Oh, Aubrey!” she says, ecstatic with information. She hugs me around my waist, her head sideways at my elbow. “We’re moving. We’re getting a new house! It’s so big. And everyone gets their own room—even me!”

We would be leaving the only home I had known. The new house, on Dunvegan Drive, was not far from the Jubilee Road boat launch where Uncle Lorne and I strayed that June afternoon. It was a split-level modern place with brown wall-to-wall carpeting, white-painted rail banisters, up-to-date plastic windows. And it was big—the finished basement had five rooms of its own. There the kids were given a rec room big enough for the TV, the now fully-extended ping-pong table, and the old living room stereo, an all-in-one Clairtone console. Carolyn had come home with the *Band on the Run* album and one evening I was staring mesmerized at the spinning green apple of the record label, the headphones fully on my ears, when the ceiling lights flashed on and off—a phenomenon I connected with Bonnie’s presence in the doorway behind me. “What are you *doing*?” I asked, talking over the music in my ears and indicating by my tone that I was moments away from all-out rage.

With tired officiousness, Bonnie mentioned that I had to come upstairs for another family meeting.

“Another family meeting?” I took off the headphones. “What’s it for?”

Bonnie exited the rec room. “Didn’t you hear? Mom’s leaving Dad again.”

“Who said that?”

Bonnie started up the stairs. “Because she wants to start her life over. She’s leaving. You really didn’t know, did you?”

I sat beside Faith and Katie in the spare living room, all of us on chairs pulled from the dining room. My youngest sisters’ legs were not long enough to reach the floor, and their flip-flops swung hysterically back and forth as they tried to keep from crying, though their faces were already wet with tears. The meeting was notable for their efforts to choke away their sobs, my parents chain-smoking menthol cigarettes, and the serious monologue that issued from my father as he informed the family that he and our mother would be separating in the next few days, explaining that she would be moving to Toronto for an unspecified period of time. I stared at the systems of cigarette smoke as they rose and dissolved into the corners of the ceiling. Apart from numb surges of sympathy for my father, I wasn’t sure what to feel, but I remember thinking it was unspeakably inappropriate that Uncle Lorne was not present. He had lived with us for eight years, as long as Faith had been alive, and, yes, he had misbehaved but he had been grounded for it, and to decide not to include him in such a family meeting seemed irresponsible and repulsive and just *wrong*. At that moment, as if only a little behind cue, Uncle

Lorne pulled open the side door. All of us in the living room went silent and for a few moments we listened to Uncle Lorne move about the new house. There was the sound of two brief nasal sniffs and the noise of him sorting through the most recently re-routed mail, before he went still, having heard Faith and Katie's sniveling.

My father called to him. "Lorne, would you come in here a minute?"

Uncle Lorne stepped into our proceedings, shared a glance with my mother and then, as if acknowledging a pre-existing understanding, simply shook his head and turned around and glided back out the side door.

I ran to him and found him on Jubilee Road smoking a cigarette in front of a telephone pole, his chin bobbing in time to his imaginary music. In his left hand he held a packaged envelope from Passaic, New Jersey. "Whose race you running now, Grub?" he asked, smiling, contemplating me with amused affection. He carefully slid the comic books out of the package, showing me the newest team-up issue of the Justice League and the Justice Society. "Crisis on Earth-X, Grub," he said, reading the issue's title and presenting me with my copy. The story was about a mix of super-heroes sent through a dimensional transporter to an alternate world where the Nazis, having won that earth's Second World War, control everybody with a mind control ray. It was a bit much for me to absorb all at once and I asked to look at Uncle Lorne's comics. Spying the distinctive checker-top of Silver Age DC comics, I realized with an excited jump that his new acquisitions finished a run of *Justice League* and that my uncle, Lorne Anthony Wheeler, was now in possession of a perfect, unbroken consecutive sequence of the *Justice League of America* from November 1960 to the present moment. There were rumours of two cousins in Dartmouth who had amassed a whole run, and a brother-and-sister team in Cape Breton who had all but the first three issues, but those were achievements shared between two people. Uncle Lorne had done it on his own, as he moved from city to city to city, as he'd moved from his own family to ours. A collection started when he was seven years old, with a purchase at a Lawtons Drug Store in Truro, was now inviolably complete as of August 26, 1974. I asked about his plans—to complete another title? To put his *Justice Leagues* in a vault? "Negatory, Grubster," said Uncle Lorne, pushing his still-lit cigarette into a wrinkle in the telephone pole. He moved his gaze to look across the North West Arm, contemplating the far horizon, before speaking to me in a tired voice, suggestive of the Boris the Spider diversion, but more as if he really *were* tired. "I don't think so. Time to exit the Bat-Cave. Time to leave before the planet explodes. Time to get the hell out of Dodge."

“What happened that summer?” my sister Faith would ask me many years later. “We were like the perfect frigging family. Mom and Dad’s friends were shocked. Weren’t you? I remember Mom saying she felt Dad was just checking things off. ‘Get a law degree? Check. Get a job? Check. Get married and have kids? Check.’ But without stopping to think what it would mean to her. I’m not sure that justifies running off with what’s-his-nuts who played Jesus in *Godspell*. That lunatic in the Winnebago. But do you know I have not seen Uncle Lorne since the day of the family meeting? Since that summer? He didn’t come to Carolyn’s wedding, did he? My God, do you blame him? Why would he? What a sin, the poor thing. It falls apart with Nanny and Dompa and he gets fobbed off on us. It falls apart with Mom and Dad and what’s he going to do? Live with Aunt *Kate*? The poor bastard.” Faith’s choice of words was not consciously literal, and however treasonous it might have been to suggest in childhood, later evidence would point to such an assessment—that someone else beside Dompa was Uncle Lorne’s father. What were Uncle Lorne’s secret origins? I never knew. Even my father, keeper of a hundred of the city’s secrets, may not have known. Uncle Lorne makes a cameo appearance in a Super-8 movie of Katie’s fifth birthday. In that footage, he runs beside the birthday cake to smile absurdly into the camera, squinting from the incandescent camera light, but holding his smile in close-up, setting both sets of teeth together before prankishly kissing Katie and withdrawing offscreen. He must have been eighteen at the time and you could tell how, in his adolescent years, his features had elongated—eyes slanting, eyebrows darkening on the crest above his nose—charismatically vampiric. He always had for me the dash and darkness of a nocturnal super-hero like Deadman or Nightwing or Dr. Fate. It was only when this birthday film was transferred to video twenty years later that I saw with adult eyes, when he withdrew into the shadows, just how shy, how recessive, how Aspergers-y, how *nervous* eighteen-year-old Uncle Lorne really was.

What happened to my parents’ marriage was happening everywhere. Divorce, a social state prohibited the generation before, rushed toward its 1970s statistical zenith. Many families were dissolving—there were crises on infinite earths—but this did not exactly reassure me. After reporting to a bearded pediatric psychiatrist who asked rather over-placidly which parent I wanted to live with—and me not being able to answer—I lapsed into a surly, uncomprehending funk. Everything seemed in disarray and, as we began the

exercise of unpacking in the new house on Dunvegan, I was noticing omissions. There was a yellow water pistol that had not made the move, a number of *Laugh-In* stickers, and, most ridiculously, Uncle Lorne's entire comic book collection. "We moved everything," Bonnie informed me. "Carolyn said the old house is finished. There's nothing left but garbage."

"It's *not* garbage—"

"If it was in a box, Aubrey, it got moved. Did you check the basement? Why do you even care? They're just Mom's brother's old comics."

I began to explain the reasons why this collection was significant but, for whatever reason, my ideas came out all at once—emotional, jumbled, and, in anticipation of Bonnie's disapproval, abruptly defensive.

She regarded me with a mix of puzzlement and disdain. "I feel sorry for you," she said, gradually, shaking her head. "You're just like him—weird. You're going to be just like him—weird and alone with no friends and pathetic, loser."

Quite immediately I formed an interior resolution that Bonnie would have to be considered absolutely irrelevant if I wanted to preserve any of my own ideas about my life—and, in response to her last statement, I simply made for the side-door and pushed it open.

"Where do you think you're going?" she asked. "You can't be like this if you live with us!"

I did not answer and, stepping outside, swung the door shut so it cracked the door's peek-through window. From inside the house Bonnie asked again where I was going and, already sprinting away, I screamed that I was going to the store to get her a Fresca—to get everyone in the world a fucking Fresca—*that's* where I was going. But I ran without knowing where I was going. I was passing by the Camp Hill cemetery before I realized—as some maple seeds helicoptered into my eyes—that the late-summer evening had darkened into night. For some minutes my mind had been empty of self-awareness, and turning the corner on Summer Street I eased into a single-pointed, euphoric state where I was—finally and simply and transcendently—running my own race. I arrived at our Tower Road house as the last hints of colour vanished from the sky. I went to the back door, where Chris Cody often banged to be let in, and turned my key in the old Otis lock. I stood a few moments in the back porch, my clothes damp with sweat, listening for cues to other occupants. Curiously, recalling the Marie Celeste moment of a month before, a plate of dinner had been left on a double-boiler but, as

I could quickly see, the water had boiled dry and the meal was crusted and cracked and sticking to the plate. I turned off the burner and opened the unplugged refrigerator—four tins of Coca-Cola, a shriveled carrot, a moldy jar of Dijon mustard.

I took a Coke, closed the fridge, and walked to the front hall. There was a trace of Mr. Clean in the air—a faint and bitter smell that made the few straggly details all the more hopeless, remote. The rooms were bare, but here and there were a few abandoned expressions of our family. A plastic container of Kaopectate, a chalky medicine Carolyn used to swig during exams, it stood like a forgotten sentry on the front stairs. The fallen leaves of the departed ficus plant, whitened, dried, dead, trampled into the shag carpeting of the living room. At the end of the hallway, a mimeograph from Katie's kindergarten forgotten on the floor. I picked up the page and saw it was a spelling test that once had been folded into a paper fortune-teller. Katie had made some effort to decorate it using a blue Flair marker. But all the verve of the home, all the dreams and desires, all the hopes and fears of all the years, of course all of that was gone. The Tower Road house was now some anonymous structure—hardwood floors, stained carpets, mottled walls where late Mrs. Abbot's silkscreens had hung. Turning from the living room, I opened the basement door and descended the stairs two steps at a time, calling out for Uncle Lorne. In the centre of his room, a fluorescent black light tube was stuffed in a metal garbage can along with a pillow, a broken model of a gunboat, and his mauve Duo-Tang folder. I took a moment to open and drink my Coke, feeling the taste from the tin, the sense of disturbed dust in the air of the basement. Then I dropped the can into the garbage and retrieved the Duo-Tang. Across from each entry, in Uncle Lorne's expert and miniature handwriting, was a dollar value for each comic book. At the bottom of each page was a tally and, flipping to the end, a grand total for the entire collection, the circled figure of thirty-four hundred dollars. He would not use any of this money for the motorcycle—the Abbots, free-minded Americans, would give him that as a gift—and he spent very little as he motorcycled along the Trans-Canada, sleeping in camp-sites, staying with the Oldrings in Vermont, and a cousin in Calgary. The purple of the Duo-Tang and the blue marker on Katie's fortune teller paper I found very calming, in the way that the colour combination of lilac and blue can calm you when your family is falling apart and you have no control over your future, and the colours recalled to me my experience of Band on the Run, and so the song returned unbidden inside

me, complete, continuous, the soundtrack to a few more moments of my summer, and in the upstairs hallway I found a blue mattress, diagonal on an empty floor, and fell on it, face down, my hands under my hips, and lay there, exhausted, sweat evaporating from my forehead, soon falling asleep, knowing I was absolutely alone for the first time in my life.