HEATHER DUFF

Tea with the Milk Snake

> The King asked the Queen
> And the Queen asked the dairymaid,
> Could I have some butter
> *for my royal slice of bread?*
> — A. A. Milne

SUTTON, 1967
Guess I'm about nine years old.

It's 7 a.m. I slop into the kitchen, wearing Grampy's enormous rubber boots. The kewpie doll clock won at Brome Fair in 53 ticks an even madness. Grammah's ceramic bird sanctuary perches on every shelf; birds peek out from real climbing ivy trails—blue jays, cardinals, bluebirds, blackbirds, hummingbirds, lovebirds, doves. Sometimes they look so real, I stare at them and wait, certain they'll fly. Grammah rolls out a pie crust over a circle of flour.

"Sleep well?"

I grunt.

"Well if you don't sleep we'll have to stew you up a batch. If you eat too much or starve yourself, sleep too much or lie awake, wax pale or tan dark, chatter on or sit too silent-like, you take prunes. Stewed up warm as a frog pond. In the whole province of Quebec, there ain't nothin' like a righteous prune."

"Some shrivelled plum ain't righteous."

"Well," says Grammah, "I don't fancy myself some high-fiddled doctorate in theology. But I do know prunes. Now git your-

self some cereal from the cupboard. I've made more buns. Gladys's berry jam there—."

I hear the crackle of hot oil in the doughnut pot, which is full of tiny knobs of over-fried doughnut, floating earlobes, which I'm too hungry to wait for. With my fingers, I dip into the box and grab up a pile of Spoon Size Shredded Wheats, then pitch them, one by one, into one of Grammah's forget-me-not bowls.

"Milk fresh this mornin' in that pitcher in the fridge."

Claude, who rents Grammah's farm, lets her have as much milk as she can use. I open the fridge, only to be faced by the vile china pitcher. Straight barn milk is thick as house paint, with a sour Guernsey skin on top like paint gets when it's sat in the pail awhile. So as to avoid a "scene," my mother usually buys me a quart of 2% from town; I can't think why she has forgotten. My fingers are locked frozen onto the French's mustard jar in the fridge door. I can't move forwards, backwards, can't take a stand for or against that darn milk.

There's something about milk, the scummy undertaste, perhaps, that I despise. I feel like I'm betraying an almighty edifice, i.e. Grammah's dairy farm. Not liking milk, I'm betraying my Grammah Clara, my deceased great grandmother Emmeline, all Grammah's daughters: Auntie Mabel Ann (who rests in relative peace), Auntie Gladys, Auntie Pansy, Grammah's sister Great Aunt Charlotte, and Great Aunt Beatrice, Jerome's wife, Jerome being Grammah's kid brother. The great aunts don't have to be "auntie"; there has been some unspoken promotion. I am surely betraying every decent working cow in the herd, Pastor Samson and his wife, Ula, down at Calvary Baptist Church, as well as Mary, the Protestant, non-divine mother of Jesus, John the Baptist's head on a silver platter, Mr. Dressup, Casey, and Finnigan. I'm not worried about the Friendly Giant, because the miniature cows outside his castle aren't worth milking.

By her white lace curtains, Grammah scratches her hip through lavender muslin. She can't hear my thoughts, which is providential. "The Lord peruses them hollyhocks," she says.

From the window in Auntie Mabel Ann's old room, you can see the new milk house, which was built when I was small to replace the old milk house. This new milk house is a yellow shed

with a steel vat in the middle of a cement floor; there's a handle on it, like an enormous cafeteria serving dish. I've always thought of it as the Crypt. Death by milk; it shrivels down, endless; there is, no doubt, some vile milk snake, white as a maggot, down there among the steel echoes; and there are echoes of voices without mouths, mouths without names. My name, the nasal schoolyard chant—*Bridget the Midget*—is lost among them; or worse, my name not a name at all, but rather, some evasive, gurgling utterance of the milk snake.

The old milk house is now a ramshackle tool shed up the meadow towards Grampy's pine grove, with four-foot grass, a canopy of morning glories, and wind that rakes through hundreds of rusty nails sticking out through the morning glories. My mother used to play dolls in the old milk house; she put burlap grain sacks in the windows for curtains, and her porcelain-head dolls lay in broken cattle troughs for cradles, like baby Jesus; the dolls were swaddled with more grain sacks. My mother was the Virgin Mary, re-enacting Christmas Sunday School pageants all through the year—in secret, given that her family was staunch Baptist, and a perceivable obsession with the Virgin Mary would be *papal* and *idolatrous*. I can't picture my mother as the Virgin. But I can see her never-ending Christmas hidden in the milk house, her pink satin boxes full of buttons, pressed wedding ribbon, and dreamy childhoods depicted literally by sepia photos.

1995

Don't tell anybody. You've had a cancer scare. It's what the doctor calls a *slight abnormality*, which you presume is a clinical euphemism. It may be entirely in your mind, this cancer, or in *their* minds, or in the collective *no mind*. You half-wonder if cancer is an actual disease, or if it is a medical label invented by church and state to control the ignorant masses.

Nonetheless, you start composing your will; you wonder who might inherit your collection of engagement rings—souvenirs of planned obselescence. You see there are advantages to this cancer. You play Pollyanna's *Glad Game*, notice grey hairs, some of them on your chin, like Grammah had, and hope to hell the grey ones will fry off via radiation; you are glad; this will save the cost of electrolysis. You will suddenly know everything in knowing the

end of things; perhaps in dying early, you'll have saved yourself several decades of painfully acquired wisdom. Yet there is one fate worse than cancer. On CBC, you hear that eventually every woman becomes her mother, who has meanwhile become your grandmother. Perhaps you will kick the bucket before this inevitability. You envision yourself choking in an ochre sea, and then down to the sludge at the bottom of the milk house vat, where the rest of the family bones lie, having tea with the milk snake, *untimely corses* as in the Capulet monument, these bones languid and starched.

Sutton, 1967

"C'mon, Bridget. It's time you learned to like cow's milk!" says Grammah. "Yer Mum, Pansy, Gladys, Sid and Mabel Ann all liked it right fine when they was all young. Sakes alive! You close that fridge door 'fore we all freeze to death!"

I pull out the heavy pitcher with shaking fingers, hoping it'll splat on the floor. I pour some in my bowl; it drops in clumps, like curds of cottage cheese, just enough to soak up the shredded wheat isles, the Caribbean, I figure, or Fiji Islands. I slide the pitcher onto the shelf in the fridge, just before my elbow buckles. When Grammah isn't looking, I pack a half-inch layer of brown sugar over the islands. With the bowl, I stand in the kitchen beside Grammah, who, with arthritic bear claws, pinches crust against the side of the pie plate.

Out the window, a few feet away, a cow grazes just on the other side of Grammah's picket fence. I stare into that cow's blinking eyes. Lu Lu. Lu Lu is Claude's name for most of the herd. Lu Lu's neck is wrinkled like a closed accordian; she slaps at circling yellow-jackets with her tail, which is caked in dried manure. A hunk of grass and white foamy spit drools out of Lu Lu's mouth. I gingerly place one Fiji isle in my mouth; it's a horrible fight with my throat muscles to keep from gagging. I resort to a crude kind of self-hypnosis, where I talk to my throat. I learned self-hypnosis from a talk show Grammah was watching yesterday.

I hate barn milk
I hate barn milk
It tastes like dirty-rotten silk

I can't vomit because then I'll be a traitor. I'll be poured into the hell below hell, lumped in with all the backsliding Free Methodists, Dutch Reforms, Mennonites, Plymouth Brethren, and Pentecostals.... There I'll fester in curds, cheesy, open-mouthed, and very stupid.

Through the glass window, Lu Lu and I stare each other down; shredded wheat hangs out of my mouth, grass and clover out of hers. The soundless blinking cow mesmerizes me so I won't puke up the barn milk. In unison, we chew our cuds. As a reward for this torture, when I grow up, I'll be the Dairy Queen at Brome Fair, in a real antique dress, with lace-up bodice, ribbons and butterflies hand-embroidered by Hattie Puget; it'll be a dress perfect enough to keep me from barfing.

Brome Fair, 67

In late August, Kirsty and I hide by the winning butter sculptures which are displayed inside a giant cooler at Brome Fair. There's a calf all sculpted in butter. And a hog with etched bristles. And a butter chicken perched on a sugar maple branch. Beside the cooler, the Dairy Queen stands there in maxi-length silver and pink dress, made by Hattie Puget from a McCall's pattern, and a pink satin sash with letters: *Dairy Queen, 1967.*

"I wanna lick the butter chicken," says Kirsty.

"She's givin' out free samples in Dixie cups," I whisper to Kirsty. "But her crown's gonna fall off any second, on account of the fact her hair's as greasy as a tractor gear box."

"Fresh Jersey milkshakes!" calls the Dairy Queen.

"Is she really a queen?" says Kirsty.

"No, it's Bernice Hoad's girl all in costume."

"I'll try a milkshake!" calls Kirsty.

The Dairy Queen tosses her sash and her ponytail; she hands Kirsty a Dixie cup.

"I know yer really Ella Hoad, from up Mountain Road," I mumble.

Just then, Ella's tiara slides off her forehead and into the dirt of the road below, just misses getting trampled by the hooves of cattle and horses on parade.

"My crown!" screams Ella. "My crown fell plum straight into the manure!" Ella runs screaming into a green and white striped tent beside the butter sculptures. "Hey, Miss Puget!"

Kirsty jumps over the fence into the parade; she grabs the tiara, which is half-buried by the hoof of a Guernsey heifer, who stops the parade to send out a torrent of pee. My sister squeezes back through the barnboard slats of the fence, then puts it on my head; the tiara is now almost brown, with glints of silver shining through.

"Matches yer overalls," says Kirsty, and then she starts calling out: "Step right up, folks! Lookit here, my sister Bridget is the real Dairy Queen of Confederation Year, 1967. Don't take no notice of Ella Hoad; she's an emboss-ter."

By the time Ella comes back out of the tent, with Hattie Puget, her tape measure clenched in her teeth, a whole crowd is gathering. I find myself signing autographs with somebody's purple felt pen: *Dairy Queen, 1967, Bridget,* I sign on the backs of people's crumpled livestock show programs, and I draw peace signs and flowers with *Flower Power* written underneath.

"That's my there crown!" screeches Ella and points a strawberry fingernail. "That dirty runt of a girl from up the Rigsby farm thinks she's the queen, but she ain't no queen."

Dressed in a hot pink polka dot dress, Bernice Hoad steps out of the crowd. "My daughter Ella was voted *Dairy Queen of 67* in a beauty contest fair and square."

"Well," I announce, "my sister Kirsty saved this here crown from bein' trampled by Samuel Hinket's heifers, so I'd say she was the rightful Dairy Queen." I take off the tiara and place it on Kirsty's head. It slides down over her eyes.

My Grammah Rigsby hoists her girth over from a bench she was sitting on to watch the parade. "Well is it the second coming?"

"We're tryin' to figure out who's the actual Dairy Queen," drawls Will Gumsby, who went to school with Grammah decades ago.

Grammah hitches up her skirt a bit and jams herself into the crowd. "All us womenfolk in the township," she says, "we work ourselves down to the bone marrow. I'd say in a manner of speaking, we was all Dairy Queens."

There's a hush, and Kirsty hands the mud-caked tiara back to Ella. Ella hands it to Hattie, who says, "I got another gold paper crown here for Ella."

Hattie dusts off the original tiara and gives it to Grammah. "Go ahead, Clara, wear it."

"Ah, go on, I couldn't," says Grammah with a bashful wave of her hand.

Hattie gives Grammah a stern look, then steps on a bench and crowns her with it as the small crowd yelps approval. Grammah wears the tiara all day at Brome Fair; that night, she says her nightly devotions and lays it on her bedside table, by her Bible, open for six days at Proverbs 31:10, not because she thinks she is particularly virtuous, but because storms knock down a good portion of the fence and there is no time to find a new daily scripture reading.

Who can find a virtuous woman?
For her price is far above rubies.

1995

You cling to Kirsty, to the thought of Kirsty, like to a seventh sense you don't know you have. Your sister is all: *Bridget, you are my shadow,* she says, *or perhaps I am yours. You act out the outgrageous parts of me.* The thing is, Kirsty, above and beyond revelations, is actually a good person. She takes your mother to Gilbert and Sullivan, to buffet luncheons, and chats gaily about non-controversial topics. Meanwhile, being ill, you are the epitome of controversy. There's an envelope on your desk amongst the phone bills and Revenue Canada harassment notices (now the Sheriff threatens to seize your assets). The envelope, decorated with daffoldils from the Cancer Society, requests that you take another test. You think about maroon and yellow tropical bandanas you can wear on your head when you, inevitably, go bald, about handing over your assets to the Sheriff when he comes around: radiation-fried chin hair, a rusty bike, a TV that drops green snow over every program, a box of stale Triscuits. You think about how Kirsty will get the rest when you're gone. Sometimes it seems Kirsty is all you have left of the Sutton manure hill; as you face a premature end, however, cow manure is a sure indication of life.

After Brome Fair, there's another morning.

Kirsty and I open the sunflower door of Grammah's new milk house, which bangs behind us with a shudder. I lift the lid of the Crypt, which no one but Claude is supposed to do; this exposes

a quivering sea fresh from the black-and-white speckled udders, and from the pinker Guernsey udders. Grammah's herd is a motley collection of Holstein, Guernsey, and a few Jerseys.

"Kirsty, don't you think cow udders look like flabby penises lined up in a row?"

"I never seen flabby penises lined up in a row."

"There's a fly in the milk cooler with flourescent eyes. Like sequins on the bra of that trapeeze girl we saw in Montreal."

"Well, fish 'im out," says Kirsty. "Fish 'im out with this here durned shovel."

"Shovel's too dirty."

"The fly's dirtier. It could contamy-nate the whole batch of milk."

"Kirsty, you stick your hand in to fish out the fly. I'll hold your legs."

I lower Kirsty into the vault; she thrusts her popsicle-smeared hand into this milk I must defend, in awe or terror, a perishable legacy, chalky, like Pepto Bismol. I hold on to her legs, still rippled with baby fat, like to my life. Kirsty's legs are my own legs; without them I will never run again. Or else the ancestors might vacuum her down to an unpasteurized underworld where family secrets are known and unknown, where the bones of greatest grandmothers rule fiercely.

Kirsty scoops out the fly. "Got 'im."

I pull her out by the legs; we collapse on the cold slab of cement, and we laugh like drunken hired men on pay-day, in some darkened back bench of the Sutton Hotel.

Kirsty pulls out her dirty palm to reveal the squished fly, its wings dripping with milk. "Oh blast! He's gone an' drowned. I'm gonna dig that fly's mortal grave."

"We weren't tryin' to save the fly, Kirsty. It's the milk we were tryin' to save."

1995

You'd created this fantasy deathbed, the stage for tender partings, with a white lace canopy and matching pillow shams, and a white chiffon nightgown and lots of lace hankies to delicately spit blood into. But it turns out you don't have cancer. The naturopath says what you do have is a (less romantic) gall bladder

problem, which is the kind of thing Bernice Hoad or Hattie Puget would complain of. According to traditional Chinese medicine, says the naturopath, gall bladder troubles indicate anger and frustration; this is not surprising, somehow. It could be your raging rite into middle age. You have to take bovine bile salts with every meal; luckily, from the barn milk days, you've trained yourself to keep from wretching. Perhaps you have to get your "cow" somehow, so as to re-unite with the family matriarchs, despite ironic attempts at escape. So you do bile now, exhorbitant, from the alternate pharmacy, like others do coke; you snort bile at parties from straws, in strips of green powder. You lumber now instead of walking. Your name is Lu Lu. We are all Lu Lu.

Kirsty carries the drowned fly in the palm of her hand, trips over rocks in her farm galoshes. I hold her other hand so she won't fall into the mud. We make the solemn trek to the cemetary—that is, the manure pile out behind the barn, that sprouts grass and tiny maple trees. It's where Claude Leclerc flings the dead kittens who don't survive distemper epidemics or the brutality of a Quebec winter. He always says: "Them kittens died on a farm. Might as well bury 'em in sugar."

Kirsty and I have planted tiny crosses all over the manure pile, fashioned of Scotch-taped popsicle sticks which are carefully labelled with felt pen. Tufts of new grass sprout around the crosses, and some Queen Anne's Lace.

Sweet Marie, 1967
Sammy, 1966
Turtle, 1967
Pea Pod, 1967
Peony, 1967
Kitten Face, 1966
Kit Kat, 1967
Manure Mama, 1967
Cartier, 1967
Champlain, 1967
Daniel, 1967 (named after Quebec's premier)
The Fur-Faced Twins, 1967

"Where should we put 'im?" says Kirsty.

"Beside Turtle," I tell her. Turtle was my favourite kitten: tortoiseshell, with a black mask, like a racoon, and extra long tufts of fur on his paws.

Kirsty climbs up the manure pile, slowly sinking; she pokes a hole in the sun-dried surface layer and stuffs the drowned fly into it. She covers the fly with a stick load of fresher manure from the top of the pile. "We don't got no more popsicle sticks," she says.

"It's just a dumb fly."

Kirsty may be the gravedigger, but I give the eulogy, drawling each line, like Pastor Samson down at Calvary Baptist.

Dust to dust
cow plop to cow plop
fly to fly
heaven to heaven

"Amen!" blurts Kirsty.

After the graveside memorial, Kirsty and I trek up to the upper meadow where the grass is short as on a golf tee, except for oases of clover and tall grass. I pluck out a piece of new hay, the way Grampy does, by gently pulling the more delicate inner stem from the thicker base stem; the thin section with the tassel on the end is sweet to suck on, like sap in a pail. I often pluck out ten lean stems at a go, then line them up on the barn window sill, like a pack of Popeye candy smokes.

Behind us, there's a Jersey calf, with bloody strings tied to it, sleeping in a patch of cooler clover.

"Eyelashes like Bambi," says Kirsty.

We kiss the calf's soft wet nose, wrap our arms around its neck. Just then, one of the Lu Lus charges down the hill snorting like a bull; she bellows loud, bores a hole through us with her marble eyes.

"Run like stink, Kirsty!"

My stomach feels like when I'm swimming upside down in Brome Lake and I've forgotten which way is up. I barrel down the hill. Kirsty follows and trips over trailing blackberry; I grab her tiny arm and drag her down the hill with the whole blackberry vine. We slide our wet bums down wet grass, just inches under the electric fence on to a home base of olive green mud which is

probably manure. The mother cow stands on the other side of the electric fence, twists her tail angrily; her eyes are wet glass. I shudder. Kirsty's arm is almost pulled out of its socket and she's crying. I wipe hot manure from the corner of my lips. We discover we're on the same side of the electric fence as the old milk house, with its camouflage of morning glories. We scrub ourselves clean with bunches of damp glory leaves, then find an opening behind two slats of wood, which collapse as soon as we've climbed in. Inside the sunless milk house, it's dank, with piles of barn boards, rusty hoes, rakes, shovels, and a dead weasel in the corner, curled into its belly.

"You ain't takin' that cruddy weasel to the manure pile," I inform Kirsty.

In the corner, there's a milk can with *Aubrey Goodman, Dairy Farms* engraved on the top. Inside the milk can, there's a porcelain-head doll, her face chipped off except for the eyes. I pull the doll out of the milk can and cradle her in my arms. She looks like she got blown up in a bomb. Mouse turds are buried in her blonde ringlets. In the darkness, I clench my eyelids and try to know my mother as a girl, try to picture her playing dolls here, with old cow troughs for cradles, but there is only the damp, broken floor and a rain barrel outside which drips rain water through a hole to the milk house floor.

"Lookit, Bridget!" Kirsty points to a small, sunlit patch of wall where the roof is caved in. There, etched with a jackknife:

Emily Alexandra Goodman
Red Cross Nurse
1944

"That's our Mum," I say, relieved to see her name.

"Was she really a nurse?"

"Hell, no. She must've been playing World War II."

"Who was the enemy?"

"Dunno, Kirsty."

I rock the baby Jesus in my arms; she's a weeping girl-Christ; bits of her scalp chip off into my fingers. Between thumb and forefinger, I crumble those pink chips into powder.

Summer, 1995

Kirsty is going to Europe, so you walk over to her house to say *bon voyage*. Your impending death is over, both a relief and a disappointment. There was something in belonging to the club of the dying, where you knew things you no longer know; you knew, if temporarily, the embarrassing glory of culmination, peace in relinquishing control. You imagined death to be some advanced yoga posture; to be robbed of it was to win another measely chance on this godforsaken planet. Now, it is the curse of the living that propels you onward—chores to do each morning, cows to be milked. Officially, on income tax forms, you are a private tutor. They park their Toyota Camrys in the street, come to your dusty, basement suite, politely drink your offerings of filtered tap water, play with your orange cat, who steps daintily over the pages of their essays. You feel at home in basements, which are usually dark and dusty, like barns. Your herd: university students, academically-driven young Asian-Canadians, who come to you for pails of subject-verb agreements, biblical allusions to merge with Buddhist roots, and tips on structure in Michael Ondaatje. You are a nameless farmer. In the deficit of language, you create magnificent hybrids; you watch them flourish in your Canada with more decorum than you have ever had.

Kirsty is working in the garden, out back in the driving rain of June in Vancouver, mud up to her elbows, smeared all over her cheeks and forehead like a tribal rite. I squat in the basement stairwell by a splintered garden table, grip a tattered black umbrella. I feel like a toad there, like one of the myriad toads that graced every basement window-well back east.

"I always wondered why you're so obsessed with umbrellas," says Kirsty. She pulls a flowering lavender plant out of a pot and slides it into the ground.

"I have a Mary Poppins complex."

Not much has changed. We're girls in women's bodies, pagan dairymaids hiding in an oblique city. Kirsty, with a teaching job in biology at a community college, and permanent gravedirt under her fingernails. Younger than I but she seems as wise. Grammah Clara (Goodman) Rigsby died ten years ago, but my mother, who is quiet these days from the other side of Canada,

says it seems like yesterday. The aunts are all preoccupied with Baptist women's mission circles, or so I imagine. And Kirsty, it would seem, is all I have left of the fierce dairy queens. The rain pelts down, rivulets from Kirsty's tomato plants towards the broken down picket fence of her small house, its white paint faded except for patches, the fence overgrown with glories.

"Glories'll take over a garden if you let 'em," states Kirsty in a voice like the Sutton folks. "You've gotta get tough and yank 'em out by the roots."

I curl my arms around Kirsty's waist. She doesn't hug me back, but instead, stretches blackened palms high into the rain. She laughs in explanation: "But I'm much too dirty from diggin'."

Late summer, Sutton, 1967

Brome Fair is good and over. The fly is good and buried. The barn milk is good and rich. It's time to drive back to Ontario.

"This time, I sure as heck ain't goin' back!" calls Kirsty.

"Well, you're in luck 'cause you ain't goin' back," says Grammah. She wipes her brow on the edge of her apron. "Your Mom has a bleedin' ulcer. She needs a rest from the likes of you two."

"What's a bleedin' ulcer?" I ask her.

"It's when yer stomach linin' is about to rot, but it doesn't. It just bleeds. You need to take rest on yer backside with no giggling gerties to cook for."

"Oh," says Kirsty.

"Where will we go to school?"

"Sutton School, likely," says Grammah. "All mine went there after they finished attending Sutton Junction School, which was right close to the milk train, so we could deliver the milk and the kids at the same time. Like Sutton Junction, Sutton School used to be a one-room, then they built the bigger school in 53, goes from grades one to eleven. Your mother was a teacher there when she was eighteen."

I remember my mother telling me that she had been like Anne Shirley staying to teach and look after Marilla. I can't see Grammah as Marilla; I think of Barbara Hamilton playing Marilla at the Royal Alex in Toronto on my ninth birthday. Barbara Hamilton had smooth, long grey hair in a ponytail, and a long blue dress that nipped in at her waist. Grammah doesn't have a waist.

On Labour Day Tuesday, Grampy drives Kirsty and me down to the school in the village, past the Catholic girls in their white blouses and black tunics, playing hopscotch in French around the white statue of the Blessed Virgin. The Sutton Public School is beside the red brick Catholic School, smaller, plainer, and browner.

"Our school ain't got a statue," says Kirsty.

Grampy lets us out of the car; we carry our enormous bagged lunches full of cold pork sandwiches, and a handful of blackberries each. It's still hot as hell, so we're wearing matching sun dresses made by Grammah with hot pink flowers on them. We walk up the front lane, which is lined with wilting marigolds and English kids staring at us with wide black eyes.

It turns out Ella Hoad is in my grade four class because she flunked a grade or maybe two. She sits in front of me. The desks are all ancient; each one has an ink-well in it, minus the ink. Many of my classmates are farmers' kids, but they're dressed for town, with hair slicked back for boys and peace sign barrettes for girls. Ella is wearing a mini-version of her Dairy Queen of 67 dress, which Hattie Puget altered for her out of the goodness of heart.

"Just on account of it bein' the first day of school," Ella explains to all who will listen.

"Yeah, right," adds Will's grandson, Sly Gumsby. "I seen her in that very same dress at the 4H Club Barbeque. She wears it so as no-one will make her squat to wash a cow's udder."

Everyone laughs.

Ella sits, whimpering, in front of me. I can hear her gasp, trying to stifle a sob. Every few minutes her pink satin back heaves, and her three fat ringlets quiver.

The teacher, Miss Gallum, says, "We're going to write a paragraph about the most interesting thing we saw in the summer of 67. Now, be descriptive."

I chew on my new pencil, which is the absolute best time to chew on a pencil, the familiar sappy taste of wood and paint chipping off; it's red, with gold letters: *Sutton School District.* I try to gnaw off the word "school," like a rat. I try to write about my mother's bleeding ulcer, but I'm stuck on how to describe a stomach lining, so I rip it up, then stuff the crumpled ball of paper into my empty ink-well.

Miss Gallum frowns, and gives me a new piece of paper, and with a sigh: "Bridget MacCurdy, I know you come from On-

tario where, heaven knows, the School Boards are flush with funds, but here in Sutton, Quebec, we do *not* waste paper."

I nod in guilt-ridden agreement. All I can think of writing about is how Ella lost her tiara at Brome Fair, how it flew down into the manure of Samuel Hinket's prize heifers. By recess, I feel so horrible that I invite Ella over for a hay ride on Saturday.

She says, "I'll have to ask my mother first as Mountain Road is a piece away."

At lunch, Kirsty and I sit on a big rock in front of the school. My pork sandwich is so thick I can barely bite into it; the fatty bits get stuck in my teeth, so I try to spit them out onto the asphalt below.

"Ella's comin' for a hay ride on Saturday."

"No way—" says Kirsty.

"After she asks her mother."

"I thought you hated her."

"I don't hate her. I just hate her voice, the way she talks."

"Why Ella?"

"Because I gotta make it up to her."

The hay ride is scheduled for Saturday afternoon. It's not a fancy hay ride, not like the kind the church youth have with quilts and guitars. It's really just that Claude Leclerc needs to collect all the hay bales in the meadow. His thirteen-year-old nephew, Michel, will be there to help out. Claude says it's okay if Ella comes as long as she isn't any trouble.

"Gotta watch out for those kids up Mountain Road," he says.

"I'll look out for her," I promise Claude.

On Saturday, Bernice Hoad arrives on the veranda gripping Ella's arm with one hand like she was under arrest, and a crabapple-huckleberry pie with the other. "This pie's for Clara," she says. "Don't worry. It ain't sour. I loaded it with syrup."

"Why thank you, how kind," I smile and say, all polite. I open the screen door and go to give Grammah the pie. At least Ella isn't wearing her Dairy Queen dress. She's got on a pair of plaid cotton pants, and a red shirt, and a straw hat.

"I thought I better wear the straw hat as it's a hay ride."

"I've got my mother's old miniature teaset to bring along," I tell Ella. "She used to use it for her dolls' tea party."

The teaset fits into a shoebox. It's white with blue forget-me-nots in wreaths around each piece. There's a tiny teapot with a cracked spout, a missing lid, four saucers, and three teacups, two with missing handles.

"Don't know why you're gonna bring that old teaset," says Kirsty, who meets us on the veranda in her jeans, and a T-shirt with Kildeer Park on it.

"I've got some Nestle's Quick chocolate barn milk in the teapot, that's why."

Claude is already oiling up the stick shift on the tractor. He won't help us up onto the hay wagon. We have to climb up ourselves. Michel, his nephew, is standing at the front of the wagon, smoking a cigarette. He is only thirteen, but Claude lets him do whatever the heck he wants. Michel is "cute," but very shy and French-speaking, with black bangs he tosses to one side every few seconds.

The wagon is flat and very long, with long slats of lumber across it, no walls except at the back. Kirsty finds a ledge near the back and climbs up onto the wagon. I pass her the shoebox. "Watch you keep it level," I tell her.

Kirsty puts the shoebox down on the wagon floor. I climb up to join her and there Ella stands with a blank expression, not knowing what to do.

"Put your foot on that ledge," says Kirsty.

Ella puts her foot on the ledge, almost falls over.

"Now," I say. "Grab on to the ledge of the wagon and just pull yourself up."

Ella grunts and heaves, then falls to the long dewy grass.

"All aboard," calls Claude, and revs the motor of the tractor.

"Hurry the heck up, Ella," I say.

I hold out my hand and Kirsty holds my other hand, to steady me.

"Now, for goodness sakes, jump up Ella," I say.

Ella grunts again, hangs onto my hand for dear life and somehow lands on the wagon face down. She whimpers softly for a few moments. I pat her pudgy hand, like it was a very sick kitten.

"Etains ta cigarette," calls Claude to Michel. "On ne veut pas un feu de foin."

The tractor starts up and pulls the wagon with a lurch that makes us three girls in the back almost topple over. Ella looks like she'll cry, so I put my arm around her; she smells like lye soap.

Claude stops every few yards as Michel leaps down to the meadow, picks up a hay bale or two and flings them onto the wagon. Soon there is a carpet of hay bales. Kirsty, Ella, and I sit on one at the back. "Let's sing," I say to Ella. "What do you know? Do you know Kookaburra sits in the Old Gum Tree?"

"The Ants Go Marching," suggests Kirsty.

"Or how 'bout 'The Corner Master's Store'."

"God Save the Queen," says Ella.

So we sing:

... send her victorious
happy and glorious
long to reign over us
God save our Queen

We sing it three times until Claude says, "No more bloody Brit songs."

So then we sing:

Alouetta, smoka cigaretta
Chew tobacco
Spit it on the floor

Michel is seated at the front of the wagon, toying with his cap. We smile shyly at one another. "Bonjour," I call.

He doesn't answer.

Then we sing:

Row, row row your boat
Gently down the stream
Throw your teacher overboard
and listen to her scream!

We all take turns being Miss Gallum and scream like she would, with both hands on our perfumed cheeks. By now the hay wagon is four bales deep and we've climbed up to the top layer. "Now that we're perched on top of the mountain," I announce, "it's time for tea."

"Where is that special shoebox?" says Ella.

Kirsty looks horrified. "'Bout two bales down, I think."

"Well reach for it."

Kirsty reaches down but can't reach far enough. The next time Claude stops the tractor, I manage to push apart two bales wide enough to see that shoebox, white and miraculous, gleaming in the green-gold hay. I squeeze my body sideways into the crevice, which is just like squeezing in between my bed and the wall, which I love doing on hot summer nights. I manage to pull that shoebox up to the top layer of bales.

"Now," I say. "Carefully open it. We don't want to spill the tea."

Kirsty and Ella take the lid off the box. I pick up the teapot and saucer and gently pour the tea into the only teacup with the handle on it. Some of the tea has spilled into the box, so I stick my finger in and lick up the chocolate spots. I hand it to Ella, with one of the saucers. "Guests first," I say.

Kirsty and I get the other two teacups, with missing handles.

"Be careful," I say to Kirsty. "Now everyone, sip."

The chocolate "tea" is completely gone in about two sips. All of a sudden, Ella starts screaming bloody murder. She keeps screaming and pointing towards the bale beside us.

"Sacrement!" shouts Claude and stops the tractor.

Then we all see a long grey striped snake. Its head pokes out, then it slithers out of the top of the hay bale. Michel climbs over the rows of bales to where we are, and pulls the snake by the head, all the way out of the bale, and with a dimpled grin dangles it in the air.

Ella screams again and pulls on her own golden ringlets.

"N'ais pas peur," says Claude. "C'est seulement un serpent de lait."

"You mean there's such a thing as a real milk snake?" I ask.

"Mais oui," grins Claude. "Some folks call it a chicken snake. Won't harm anybody."

Michel flings the writhing snake out into the meadow. It flies into a patch of clover, curls up in a ball, then slowly uncurls and winds through clover petals, pink and white like the bows on Ella's Dairy Queen dress.

Oro Station, 1997

My gall bladder problem disappears completely.

I'm at a family reunion in the summer of 97 (my father's side), near Oro Station, where the train tracks curve away over tar

through the poplars. Craving solitude, I borrow a ten-speed bike from the shed and ride into the wind towards Shanty Bay. The farmhouses are that striking red brick so characteristic of rural Ontario, with whitewashed verandas, shutters, and widow walks, sheets on clotheslines like whips in the wind, grey, red, or even green barns, with black holes from missing boards, barking Border collies out front, and emerald cornfields. I listen to the whir of my bicycle wheels, which is like driving a hive of drunken bees.

Back further east in Sutton, Claude Leclerc used to remind us: "... there are four roads to West Brome, but you still get there." It's an aphorism I think about in many contexts, to become more tolerant of a variety of cultures, faiths, differences of opinion. I quote it to my Asian students, when they bemoan their lot by comparing their progress to other new Canadians, who seem to have learned English on faster, more direct roads. But my own opinion never seems to alight on any of the four roads to West Brome; it's hard to give advice to yourself.

I turn south on Concession #5, which suddenly takes on an other-worldly significance. I suspect this might be a segment of the elusive fifth road to West Brome, the one Claude didn't mention, the road I am always on, I figure, that stretches across the provinces towards Quebec and away from it, like a rubber snake, the kind you get in your Christmas stocking. No, it's not rubber at all; it's the milk snake herself, from the sludgy bottom of the milkhouse Crypt, whom I now know I must befriend, who sheds her skin along my road. Sometimes, the road of the milk snake is not a road at all, but a line of dirt, a half-trench built for a half-war. It's the road of unknowing, stroke of earth past death and in it. Sometimes, I fancy that the dairymaids from "The King asked the Queen / and the Queen asked the dairymaid" poem move, seamless, along this line, their petticoats laden with clots of mud. They carry buckets of white foam and sing songs from different eras that all dovetail, like counterpoint: *Till we Meet Again, The Bells Are Ringin' For Me and My Gal, Just like a Rolling Stone, Clouds, God Shuffles His Feet....*

Cowbirds cross over Concession #5. The cowbirds are all of them—all names given back, spoken without speech. There's me, in Lycra bike shorts, my mother, Emily, who swishes calico rosette, her mother, Clara, in chestnut cotton, then, her mother Emmeline, in widow's black, who barks every few feet: "Mercy sakes now!

Don't you girls dare tip yer pails. Wasting milk is a blacker sin than adultery! Now don't you tell the Pastor 'bout what I just said. He'd say it ain't biblical, which it ain't. But I'd say a dairymaid hasta have her own creed." Emmeline's mother, Mehetabel, stumbles, grinning, at the end of the line, in grey wool. Buckets bob on hips, spill into tiny pools of foam. Lost milk moistens the dust, makes clover sprout, and new hay. In a field by the road, ghostly dairymaids march above the backs of cattle, then vanish, quivering, into the mirage; I am left clean as hot bone, in the sun's ache and the clarity.

I put the bike on its side and sit by Scotch thistles in the ditch, by a herd of light brown cattle with calves, who stop grazing to stare at me from their side of an electric fence, their eyes huge and protruding. I eat yoghurt, but I still don't drink milk; in the bottomless cow eyes, I discover milk isn't the only legacy to protect.

There is a moment when you see the fathomless legacy of self; it's humble: the prickle of hairs at your sock line, a mosquito bite, a chain grease line on your calf, a pack of gum in your pocket bought at the Oro Station Post Office where, as a girl, you used to buy liquorice pipes with red candied fire (which the store still carries), and where your father bought them as a boy; it's not about milk at all; it's another innocence, obscure, like silent wind. The cowbirds circle the herd, then swoop up and off the backs of cows—a rush of shadow, and wing.