

"The true gift that Shields gives us is that of her enormous wisdom, a wisdom that is achingly apparent in this amazing combination of darkness and light, humour and pathos called *Unless*."—*The Globe and Mail*

CAROL
SHIELDS

WINNER *of the* PULITZER PRIZE



UNLESS

a NOVEL



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Unless

“Without question, her most powerful novel to date... At once witty and acute, deep intelligent and profoundly tender... This novel offers a tunnel into the light, into an alternate plane where the interior voice of an intelligent woman is heard, astringent, tender and clear.”

—*Maclean's*

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“With characteristically magical prose and meticulous observation, Shields brings to life Reta's anguish and bewilderment with a vividness that is so moving, so deeply felt, that you linger over every exquisite word, reading it and rereading it, never wanting the page to end. It is a masterpiece—in the most delicate miniature.”

—*Daily Mail*

“Generous and inquiring of heart, muted in its palette, this is a grammar of melancholy: of particular sadness, both domestic and worldly, that arrives unbidden and settles in. Outrage, humour, compassion, and the elegant arcs of language that distinguish Car Shields's enduring body of work: these are here in spades. Complacency is absent, and anything that smells of defeat. *Unless* is a graceful summing-up—a backward glance, an acknowledgement of this moment, and, finally, the truest assurance that art can give: the future starts now.”

—*The Georgia Straight*

“*Unless* is an extraordinary and dangerous novel. Dangerous because, like good philosophy, asks the most fundamental questions, questions we try to avoid in our daily lives, as we studiously avoid the ‘art of diversion.’ There are no easy answers to those questions—‘what is goodness? what is happiness’—but what makes a novelist great is the preparedness to ask them—and Car Shields asks them more scrupulously and elegantly than most.”

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“Once again, Carol Shields takes the lives of ordinary people and exposes the human heart at its best.... Life in general and the lives of women in particular are viewed in Shields’s work with an elegant confluence of simplicity and complexity.”

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“... poignant, yet often astringently funny.... as ever, Shields’s graceful prose is a pleasure to read. She has a remarkable way of describing things one might already know, but she does so in surprising, fresh and distinctly new ways, ways that allow the reader to understand something *anew*.”

—*Winnipeg Free Press*

“Carol Shields is one of that small group of writers—among them, Alice Munro, Richard Ford, Jayne Anne Phillips, and yes, Joan Clark—capable of making the ordinary utterly and completely extraordinary.”

—*Calgary Herald*

“Shields is probably our most intelligent and beguiling observer of the everyday drama of common existence. *Unless* is her most raw and intentful novel yet, centred on tragedy and loss rather than the more expected themes of marital connectedness, the delicate architecture of desire and the necessity of peace, although all these subjects have a place in this exquisite new work. The novel that Reta wants to write is ‘about something happening, about characters moving against it there.’ This is just what her creator has achieved, with a matchless sensitivity that makes you draw in your breath.”

—*Sunday Times*

“*Unless* is a triumph; a complex and rich study of family, the illusion of happiness, the process of writing and what it means to be a woman trying to find a place in a literal and/or literal world.”

—*The Edmonton Journal*

“She writes like an angel, awesome in the intelligence of her observations and never less than elegant in expressing them.”

—*Sunday Telegraph*

“Some books come along at just the right time—Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*, Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* or Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* come to mind—capturing the exact thoughts and feelings of women at a certain moment in history. Carol Shields’s 10th novel, *Unless*, is just such a book.”

—*The Times-Picayune*

“Her expertly deft touch with character and place, her sly merging of clues with cluelessness ultimately blossom, Shields-like, in gold-minted scenes that not only answer the hard questions pointed at the heart but reward every single agonizing moment spent helplessly watching over a lost child in hope she will come home.”

POETRY

Others
Intersect
Coming to Canada

NOVELS

Larry's Party
The Stone Diaries
The Republic of Love
A Celibate Season (with Blanche Howard)
Swann
A Fairly Conventional Woman
Happenstance
The Box Garden
Small Ceremonies

STORY COLLECTIONS

Dressing Up for the Carnival
The Orange Fish
Various Miracles

PLAYS

Departures and Arrivals
Thirteen Hands
Fashion, Power, Guilt and the Charity of Families (with Catherine Shields)
Anniversary (with David Williamson)

CRITICISM

Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision

ANTHOLOGY

Dropped Threads: What We Aren't Told (Edited with Marjorie Anderson)
Dropped Threads 2: More of What We Aren't Told
(Edited with Marjorie Anderson)

BIOGRAPHY

Jane Austen: A Penguin Lives Biography

UNLESS

A NOVEL

CAROL SHIELDS



VINTAGE CANADA

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About the Author

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.

GEORGE ELIOT

I

IT HAPPENS THAT I am going through a period of great unhappiness and loss just now.

All my life I've heard people speak of finding themselves in acute pain, bankrupt in spirit and body, but I've never understood what they meant. To lose. To have lost. I believed these visitations of darkness lasted only a few minutes or hours and that these saddened people, in between bouts, were occupied, as we all were with the useful monotony of happiness. But happiness is not what I thought. Happiness is the lucky pane of glass you carry in your head. It takes all your cunning just to hang on to it, and once it's smashed you have to move into a different sort of life.

In my new life—the summer of the year 2000—I am attempting to “count my blessings.” Everyone I know advises me to take up this repellent strategy, as though they really believe dramatic loss can be replaced by the renewed appreciation of all one has been given. I have a husband, Tom, who loves me and is faithful to me and is very decent looking as well, tallish, thin, and losing his hair nicely. We live in a house with a paid-up mortgage, and our house is set in the prosperous rolling hills of Ontario, only an hour's drive north of Toronto. Two of our three daughters, Natalie, fifteen, and Christine, sixteen, live at home. They are intelligent and lively and attractive and loving, though they too have shared in the loss, as has Tom.

And I have my writing.

“You have your writing!” friends say. A murmuring chorus: *But you have your writing, Ret*. No one is crude enough to suggest that my sorrow will eventually become material for my writing, but probably they think it.

And it's true. There is a curious and faintly distasteful comfort, at the age of forty-three or forty-four in September, in contemplating what I have managed to write and publish during those impossibly childish and sunlit days before I understood the meaning of grief. “My Writing”: this is a very small poultice to hold up against my damaged self, but better, I have been persuaded, than no comfort at all.

It's June, the first year of the new century, and here's what I've written so far in my life. I'm not including my old schoolgirl sonnets from the seventies—Satin-slippered April, you glide through time / And lubricate spring days, de dum, de dum—and my dozen or so fawning book reviews from the early eighties. I am posting this list not on the screen but on my consciousness, a far safer computer tool and easier to access:

1. A translation and introduction to Danielle Westerman's book of poetry, *Isolation*, April 1981, one month before our daughter Norah was born, a home birth naturally; a midwife you could almost hear the guitars plinking in the background, except we did not feast on the placenta as some of our friends were doing at the time. My French came from my Québécois mother, and my acquaintance with Danielle from the University of Toronto, where she taught French civilization in my student days. She was a poor teacher, hesitant and in awe, I think of the tanned, healthy students sitting in her classroom, taking notes worshipfully and stretching their small suburban notion of what the word *civilization* might mean. She was already a recognized writer of kinetic, tough-corded prose, both beguiling and dangerous. Her

manner was to take the reader by surprise. In the middle of a flattened rambling paragraph, deceived by warm stretches of reflection, you came upon hard cartilage.

I am a little uneasy about claiming *Isolation* as my own writing, but Dr. Westerman, doing one of her hurrying, over-the-head gestures, insisted that translation, especially of poetry, is a creative act. Writing and translating are convivial, she said, not oppositional, and not at all hierarchical. Of course, she *would* say that. My introduction to *Isolation* was certainly creative, though, since I had no idea what I was talking about.

I hauled it out recently and, while I read it, experienced the Burrowing of the Palpable Worm of Shame, as my friend Lynn Kelly calls it. Pretension is what I see now. The passage about art transmuting the despair of life to the “merely frangible,” and poetry’s attempt to “repair the gap between ought and naught”—what on earth did I mean? Too much Derrida might be the problem. I was into all that pretty heavily in the early eighties.

2. After that came “The Brightness of a Star,” a short story that appeared in *An Anthology of Young Ontario Voices* (Pink Onion Press, 1985). It’s hard to believe that I qualified as a “young voice” in 1985, but, in fact, I was only twenty-nine, mother of Norah, aged four, her sister Christine, aged two, and about to give birth to Natalie—in a hospital this time. Three daughters, and not even thirty. “How did you find the time?” people used to chorus, and to that query I often registered a hint of blame: was I neglecting my darling sprogs for my writing career? Well, no. I never thought in terms of career. I dabbled in writing. It was macramé, my knitting. Not long after, however, I did start to get serious and joined a local “writers’ workshop” for women, which met every second week, for two hours, where we drank coffee and had a good time and deeply appreciated each other’s company, and that led to:

3. “Icon,” a short story, rather Jamesian, 1986. Gwen Reidman, the only published author in the workshop group, was our leader. The Glenmar Collective (an acronym of our first names—not very original) was what we called ourselves. One day Gwen said, moving a muffin to her mouth, that she was touched by the “austerity” of my short story—which was based, but only roughly, on my response to the Russian icon show at the Art Gallery of Ontario. My fictional piece was a case of art “embracing/repudiating art,” as Gwen put it, and then she reminded us of the famous “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer” and the whole aesthetic of art begetting art, art worshipping art, which I no longer believe in, by the way. Either you do or you don’t. The seven of us, Gwen, Lorna, Emma Allen, Nan, Marcella Annette, and I (my name is Reta Winters—pronounced Ree-tah) self-published our pieces in a volume titled *Incursions and Interruptions*, throwing in fifty dollars each for the printing bill. The five hundred copies sold quickly in the local bookstores, mostly to our friends and families. Publishing was cheap, we discovered. What a surprise. We called ourselves the Stepping Stone Press, and in that name we expressed our mild embarrassment at the idea of self-publishing, but also the hope that we would “step” along to authentic publishing in the very near future. Except Gwen, of course, who was already there. And Emma, who was beginning to publish op-ed pieces in the *Globe and Mail*.

4. *Alive* (Random House, 1987), a translation of *Pour Vivre*, volume one of Daniel Westerman’s memoirs. I may appear to be claiming translation as an act of originality, but, as I have already said, it was Danielle, in her benign way, wrinkling her disorderly forehead, who had urged me to believe that the act of shuffling elegant French into readable and stable

English is an aesthetic performance. The book was well received by the critics and even so moderately well, a dense but popular book, offered without shame and nary a footnote. The translation itself was slammed in the *Toronto Star* (“clumsy”) by one Stanley Harold Howard but Danielle Westerman said never mind, the man was *un maquereau*, which translates crudely, as something between a pimp and a prick.

5. I then wrote a commissioned pamphlet for a series put out by a press calling itself Encyclopédie de l’art. The press produced tiny, hold-in-the-hand booklets, each devoted to a single art subject, covering everything from Braque to Calder to Klee to Mondrian to Villon. The editor in New York, operating out of a phone booth it seemed to me, and knowing nothing of my ignorance, had stumbled on my short story “Icon” and believed me to be an expert on the subject. He asked for three thousand words for a volume (volumette, really) to be called *Russian Icons*, published finally in 1989. It took me a whole year to do, what with Tom and the three girls, and the house and garden and meals and laundry and too much inwardness. They published my “text,” such a cold, jellied word, along with a series of coloured plates, in both English and French (I did the French as well) and paid me four hundred dollars. I learned all about the schools of Suzdal and Vladimir and what went on in Novgorod (a lot) and how images of saints made medieval people quake with fear. To my knowledge, the book was never reviewed, but I can read it today without shame. It is almost impossible to be pseudo when writing about innocent paintings that obey no rules of perspective and that are done on slabs of ordinary wood.

6. I lost a year after this, which I don’t understand, since all three girls had started school though Natalie was only in morning kindergarten. I think I was too busy thinking about the business of being a writer, about being writerly and fretting over whether Tom’s ego was threatened and being in Danielle’s shadow, never mind Derrida, and needing my own writing space and turning thirty-five and feeling older than I’ve ever felt since. My age—thirty-five—shouted at me all the time, standing tall and wide in my head, and blocking access to what my life afforded. Thirty-five never sat down with its hands folded. Thirty-five had no composure. It was always humming mean, terse tunes on a piece of folded cellophane. (“I am composed,” said John Quincy Adams on his deathbed. How admirable and enviable and beyond belief; I loved him for this.)

This anguish of mine was unnecessary; Tom’s ego was unchallenged by my slender publications. He turned out not to be one of those men we were worried about in the seventies and eighties, who might shrivel in acknowledgment of his own insignificance. Ordinary was what he wanted, to be an ordinary man embedded in a family he loved. We put a skylight in the box room, bought a used office desk, installed a fax and a computer, and sat down on my straight-from-a-catalogue Freedom Chair and translated Danielle Westerman’s immense *Les femmes et le pouvoir*, the English version published in 1992, volume two of her memoirs. In English the title was changed to *Women Waiting*, which only makes sense if you’ve read the book. (Women possess power, but it is power that has yet to be seized, ignited, and released, and so forth.) This time no one grumped about my translation. “Sparkling and full of ease,” the *Globe* said, and the *New York Times* went one better and called it “an achievement.”

“You are my true sister,” said Danielle Westerman at the time of publication. *Ma vraie soeur*. I hugged her back. Her craving for physical touch has not slackened even in her

eighties, though nowadays it is mostly her doctor who touches her, or me with my weak embrace, or the manicurist. Dr. Danielle Westerman is the only person I know who has her nails done twice a week, Tuesday and Saturday (just a touch-up), beautiful long nail bed matching her long quizzing eyes.

7. I was giddy. All at once translation offers were arriving in the mail, but I kept thinking I could maybe write short stories, even though our Glenmar group was dwindling, what with Emma taking a job in Newfoundland, Annette getting her divorce, and Gwen moving to the States. The trouble was, I hated my short stories. I wanted to write about the overheard and the glimpsed, but this kind of evanescence sent me into whimsy mode, and although I believed whimsicality to be a strand of the human personality, I was embarrassed at what I was pumping into my new Apple computer, sitting there under the clean brightness of the skylight. Pernicious, precious, my moments of recognition. *Ahah!—and then she realized*; I was so fetching with my “Ellen was setting the table and she knew tonight would be different.” A little bug sat in my ear and buzzed: Who cares about Ellen and her woven placemats and her hopes for the future?

I certainly didn't care.

Because I had three kids, everyone said I should be writing kiddy lit, but I couldn't find the voice. Kiddy lit screeched in my brain. Talking ducks and chuckling frogs. I wanted something sterner and more contained as a task, which is how I came to write *Shakespeare and Flowers* (San Francisco: Cyclone Press, 1994). The contract was negotiated before I wrote one word. Along came a little bundle of cash to start me off, with the rest promised on publication. I thought it was going to be a scholarly endeavour, but I ended up producing a wee “gifted” book. You could send this book to anyone on your list who was maidenly or semi-academical or whom you didn't know very well. *Shakespeare and Flowers* was sold in the kind of outlets that stock greeting cards and stuffed bears. I simply scanned the canon and picked up references to, say, the eglantine (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) or the blackberry (*Troilus and Cressida*) and then I puffed out a little description of the flower, and conferenced on the phone (twice) with the illustrator in Berkeley, and threw in lots of Shakespearean quotes. A sweet little book, excellent slick paper, US\$12.95. At sixty-eight pages it fits in a small mailer. Two hundred thousand copies, and still selling, though the royalty rate is scandalous. They'd like me to do something on Shakespeare and animals, and I just might.

8. *Eros: Essays*, by Danielle Westerman, translation by Reta Winters, hastily translated—everything was hasty in those days, everything still is—and published in 1995. Huge success, after a tiny advance. We put the dog in a kennel, and Tom and I and the girls took the first translation payment and went to France for a month, southern Burgundy, a village called La Roche-Vineuse, where Danielle had grown up, halfway between Cluny and Mâcon. Red-tiled roofs set in the midst of rolling vineyards, incandescent air. Our rental house was built around a cobbled courtyard full of ancient roses and hydrangeas. “How old is this house?” we asked the neighbours, who invited us in for an aperitif. “Very old” was all we got. The stone walls were two feet thick. The three girls took tennis lessons at *l'école d'été*. Tom went hacking for trilobites, happy under the French sun, and I sat in a wicker chair in the flower-filled courtyard, shorts and halter and bare feet, a floppy straw hat on my head, reading novels day after day, and thinking: I want to write a novel. About something happening. About characters moving against a “there.” That was what I really wanted to do.

Looking back, I can scarcely believe in such innocence. I didn't think about our girl growing older and leaving home and falling away from us. Norah had been a good, docile baby and then she became a good, obedient little girl. Now, at nineteen, she's so brimming with goodness that she sits on a Toronto street corner, which has its own textual archaeology though Norah probably doesn't know about that. She sits beneath the lamppost where the poet Ed Lewinski hanged himself in 1955 and where Margherita Tolles burst out of the subway exit into the sunshine of her adopted country and decided to write a great play. Norah sits cross-legged with a begging bowl in her lap and asks nothing of the world. Ninety tenths of what she gathers she distributes at the end of the day to other street people. She wears a cardboard sign on her chest: a single word printed in black marker—GOODNESS.

I don't know what that word really means, though words are my business. The Old English word *wearth*, I discovered the other day on the Internet, means outcast; the other English word, its twin, its cancellation, is *worth*—we know what that means and know to distrust it. It is the word *wearth* that Norah has swallowed. This is the place she's claimed, a whole world constructed on stillness. An easy stance, says the condemning, grieving mother, easy to find and maintain, given enough practice. A sharper focus could be achieved by tossing in a caustic astringent fluid, a peppery sauce, irony, rebellion, tattoos and pierced tongue and spiked purple hair, but no. Norah embodies invisibility and goodness, or at least she is on the path—so she said in our last conversation, which was eight weeks ago, the eleventh of April. She wore torn jeans that day and a rough plaid shawl that was almost certainly a car blanket. Her long pale hair was matted. She refused to look us in the eye, but she did blink in acknowledgement—I'm sure of it—when I handed her a sack of cheese sandwiches and Tom dropped a roll of twenty-dollar bills in her lap. Then she spoke, in her own voice, but emptied of connection. She could not come home. She was on the path to goodness. At that moment I, her mother, was more absent from myself than she; I felt that. She was steadfast. She could not be diverted. She could not “be” with us.

How did this part of the narrative happen? We know it didn't rise out of the ordinary plot lines of a life story. An intelligent and beautiful girl from a loving family grows up in Orangetown, Ontario, her mother's a writer, her father's a doctor, and then she goes off the track. There's nothing natural about her efflorescence of goodness. It's abrupt and brutal. It's killing us. What will really kill us, though, is the day we *don't* find her sitting on her chosen square of pavement.

But I didn't know any of this when I sat in that Burgundy garden dreaming about writing a novel. I thought I understood something of a novel's architecture, the lovely slope of predicament, the tendrils of surface detail, the calculated curving upward into inevitability yet allowing spells of incorrigibility, and then the ending, a corruption of cause and effect and the gathering together of all the characters into a framed operatic circle of consolation and ecstasy, backlit with fibre-optic gold, just for a moment on the second-to-last page, just for an atomic particle of time.

I had an idea for my novel, a seed, and nothing more. Two appealing characters had suggested themselves, a woman and a man, Alicia and Roman, who live in Wychwood, which is a city the size of Toronto, who clamour and romp and cling to the island that is their life predicament—they long for love, but selfishly strive for self-preservation. Roman is proud to be choleric in temperament. Alicia thinks of herself as being reflective, but her job a

assistant editor on a fashion magazine keeps her too occupied to reflect.

9. And I had a title, *My Thyme Is Up*. It was a pun, of course, from an old family joke, and meant to write a jokey novel. A light novel. A novel for summertime, a book to read while seated in an Ikea wicker chair with the sun falling on the pages as faintly and evenly as human breath. Naturally the novel would have a happy ending. I never doubted but that I could write this novel, and I did, in 1997—in a swoop, alone, during three dark winter months when the girls were away all day at school.

10. *The Middle Years*, the translation of volume three of Westerman's memoirs, is coming out this fall. Volume three explores Westerman's numerous love affairs with both men and women, and none of this will be shocking or even surprising to her readers. What is new is the suppleness and strength of her sentences. Always an artist of concision and selflessness, she has arrived in her old age at a gorgeous fluidity and expansion of phrase. My translation doesn't begin to express what she has accomplished. The book is stark; it's also sentimental. One balances and rescues the other, strangely enough. I can only imagine that those endless calcium pills Danielle chokes down every morning and the vitamin E and the emu oil capsules have fed directly into her vein of language so that what lands on the page is larger, more rapturous, more self-forgetful than anything she's written before, and all of it sprouting short, swift digressions that pretend to be just careless asides, little swoons of surrender to her own experience, inviting us, her readers, to believe in the totality of her abandonment.

Either that or she's gone senile to good effect, a grand loosening of language in her old age. The thought has more than once occurred to me.

Another thought has drifted by, silken as a breeze against a lattice. There's something missing in these memoirs, or so I think in my solipsistic view. Danielle Westerman suffers; she feels the pangs of existential loneliness, the absence of sexual love, the treason of her own woman's body. She has no partner, no one for whom she is the first person in the world, no one to depend on as I do on Tom. She does not have a child, or any surviving blood connection for that matter, and perhaps it's this that makes the memoirs themselves childlike. They go down like good milk, foaming, swirling in the glass.

11. I shouldn't mention Book Number Eleven since it is not a fait accompli, but I will. I'm going to write a second novel, a sequel to *My Thyme Is Up*. Today is the day I intend to begin. The first sentence is already tapped into my computer: "Alicia was not as happy as she deserved to be."

I have no idea what will happen in this book. It is a mere abstraction at the moment, something that's popped out of the ground like the rounded snout of a crocus on a cold lawn. I've stumbled up against this idea in my clumsy manner, and now the urge to write it won't go away. This will be a book about lost children, about goodness, and going home and being happy and trying to keep the poison of the printed page in perspective. I'm desperate to know how the story will turn out.

W

WE ARE MORE THAN halfway through the year 2000. Toward the beginning of August, Tom's old friend Colin Glass came to dinner one night, driving in from Toronto. Over coffee he attempted to explain the theory of relativity to me.

I was the one who invited him to launch into the subject. Relativity is a big piece of knowledge I've always longed to understand, a big piece, but the explainers tend to go too fast or else they skip over a step they assume their audience has already absorbed. Apparently, there was once a time when only one person in the world understood relativity (Einstein), then two people, then three or four, and now most of the high-school kids who take physics have at least an inkling, or so I'm told. How hard can it be? And it's passed according to Colin, from crazy speculation to confirmed fact, which makes it even more important to understand. I've tried, but my grasp feels tenuous. So, the speed of light is constant. Is that all?

Ordinarily, I love these long August evenings, the splash of amber light that falls on the white dining-room walls just before the separate shades of twilight take over. The metallic leaves that flutter their round ghost shadows. All day I'd listened to the white-throated sparrows in the woods behind our house; their song resembles the Canadian national anthem at least the opening bars. Summer was dying, but in pieces. We'd be eating outside if it weren't for the wasps. Good food, the company of a good friend, what more could anyone desire? But I kept thinking of Norah sitting on her square of pavement and holding up the piece of cardboard with the word GOODNESS, and then I lost track of what Colin was saying.

$E = mc^2$. Energy equals mass times the speed of light, squared. The tidiness of the equation raised my immediate suspicion. How can mass—this solid oak dining table, for instance—have any connection with how fast light travels? They're two different things. Colin, who is a physicist, was patient with my objections. He took the linen napkin from his lap and stretched it taut across the top of his coffee cup. Then he took a cherry from the fruit bowl and placed it on the napkin, creating a small dimple. He tipped the cup slightly so that the cherry rotated around the surface of the napkin. He spoke of energy and mass, but already I had lost a critical filament of the argument. I worried slightly about his coffee sloshing up onto the napkin and staining it, and thought how seldom in the last few years I had bothered with cloth napkins. Nobody, except maybe Danielle Westerman, does real napkins anymore; it was understood that modern professional women had better things to do with their time than launder linen.

By now I had forgotten completely what the cherry (more than four dollars a pound) represented and what the little dimple was supposed to be. Colin talked on and on, and Tom, who is a family physician and has a broad scientific background, seemed to be following; at least he was nodding his head appropriately. My mother-in-law, Lois, had politely excused herself and returned to her house next door; she would never miss the ten-o'clock news; her watching of the ten-o'clock news helps the country of Canada to go forward. Christine and

Natalie had long since drifted from the table, and I could hear the buzz and burst of TV noise in the den.

Pet, our golden retriever, parked his shaggy self under the table, his whole dog body humming away against my foot. Sometimes, in his dreams, he groans and sometimes he chortles with happiness. I found myself thinking about Marietta, Colin's wife, who had packed her bags a few months ago and moved to Calgary to be with another man. She claimed Colin was too wrapped up in his research and teaching to be a true partner. A beautiful woman with a neck like a plant stem, she hinted that there had been a collapse of passion in their marriage. She had left suddenly, coldly; he had been shocked; he had had no idea, he told us in the early days, that she had been unhappy all these years, but he found her diaries in a desk drawer and read them, sick with realization that a gulf of misunderstanding separated them.

Why would a woman leave such personal diaries behind? To punish, to hurt, of course. Colin, for the most part a decent, kind-hearted man, used to address her in a dry, admonitory way, as though she were a graduate student instead of his wife. "Don't tell me this processed cheese," he asked her once when we were having dinner at their house. Another time: "This coffee is undrinkable." He loved pleasure—he was that kind of man—and took it for granted and couldn't help his little yelps of outrage when pleasure failed. You could call him an innocent in his expectations, almost naive on this particular August evening. It was as though he were alone in a vaulted chamber echoing with immensities, while Tom and I stood in attendance just outside the door, catching the overflow, the odd glimpse of his skewed but calm brilliance. Even the little pockets under his eyes were phlegmatic. He was not a shallow person, but perhaps he suspected that we were. I had to stop myself interrupting with a joke. I often do this, I'm afraid: ask for an explanation and then drift off into my own thoughts.

How could he now be sitting at our table so calmly, toying with cherries and coffee cups and rolling the edge of his straw placemat, and pressing this heft of information on us? It was close to midnight; he had an hour's drive ahead of him. What did the theory of relativity really matter to his ongoing life? Colin, with his small specs and trim moustache, was at ease with big ideas like relativity. As a theory, relativity worked, it held all sorts of important "concepts" together with its precision and elegance. Think of glue lavishly applied, he said helpfully about relativity; think of the power of the shrewd guess. Such a sweeping perspective had been visionary at the beginning, but had been assessed and reinforced, and was, moreover, Colin was now insisting, useful. In the face of life's uncertainties, relativity's weight could be assumed and then set aside, part of the package of consciousness.

He finished awkwardly, sat back in his chair with his two long arms extended. "So!" That, it seemed to say, or that's as much as I can do to simplify and explain so brilliant an idea. He glanced at his watch, then sat back again, exhausted, pleased with himself. He wore a well-pressed cotton shirt with blue and yellow stripes, neatly tucked into his black jeans. He has no interest in clothes. This shirt must go back to his married days, chosen for him, ironically for him by Marietta herself and put on a hanger, perhaps a summer ago.

The theory of relativity would not bring Colin's wife hurrying back to the old stone house on Oriole Parkway. It would not bring my daughter Norah home from the corner of Bathurst and Bloor, or the Promise Hostel where she beds at night. Tom and I followed her one day, we had to know how she managed, whether she was safe. The weather would be turning cool

soon. How does she bear it? Cold concrete. Dirt. Uncombed hair.

“Would you say,” I asked Colin—I had not spoken for several minutes—“that the theory of relativity has reduced the weight of goodness and depravity in the world?”

He stared at me. “Relativity has no moral position. None whatever.” (“This coffee undrinkable.”)

I looked to Tom for support, but he was gazing with his mild eyes at the ceiling, smiling. I knew that smile.

“But isn’t it possible,” I said to Colin, “to think that goodness, or virtue if you like, could be a wave or particle of energy?”

“No,” he said. “No, it is not possible.”

I made an abrupt move to clear the table. I was suddenly exhausted.

Still, I am thankful for the friendship and intellectual ardour of such an unpretentious man as Colin Glass, who despite his suffering and shame really wanted me to understand a key concept of the twentieth century. Or was he simply diverting himself for an hour? This is what I must learn: the art of diversion. He said not one word about Marietta all evening long. Tom and I understand that he is reconstructing his life without her. But a daughter is something different. A daughter of nineteen cannot be erased.

I

IT WAS UNDERSTOOD that I would do the publicity, such as it was, for Daniel Westerman's third volume of memoirs. At eighty-five she was too old, and too distinguished, to handle a day of interviews in Toronto, even though she lived there. I, as the translator, could easily field questions from the press. A very light schedule was organized by the publisher, since Dr. Westerman already possesses a long twilight of faithful readership.

In early September, I drove into Orangetown, down its calm, old-fashioned main street and into the countryside again. The city of Toronto, monumental and lonely, glowed in front of me. Its outskirts are ragged, though its numbered exits pretend at a kind of order. Traffic was light. I drove slowly by the corner of Bloor and Bathurst for a glimpse of Norah. There she was, as always, on the northeast corner, seated on the ground near the subway entrance with her bowl and cardboard sign, even though it was not yet nine o'clock. Had she had breakfast? Did she have nits in her hair? What is she thinking, or is her mind a great blank?

I parked the car and walked over to where she was. "Hello, darling Norah," I said, setting down a plastic bag of food: bread and cheese, fruit and raw vegetables. And, in an envelope, a recent photo of Pet with his straight, proud muzzle and furry ruff. Norah, of all the girls I doted on Pet, and now I was bribing her shamelessly. It was a chilly day, and it iced my head to see her unreadable immobility, but I was glad to notice that she was wearing warm mittens. Glad? Me glad? The least little signal will gladden my heart these days. Today she looked not quite at me, and nodded. Another wave of gladness struck. I allow myself only one such glimpse a week, since she's made it clear she doesn't want to see us.

It is like watching her through plate glass. All week I will draw expensively on this brief moment of voyeurism, at the same time trying to blot it out with images of Norah on her bicycle; Norah sitting at the kitchen table studying for exams; Norah reaching for her green raincoat; Norah trying on new school shoes; Norah sleeping, safe.

After a while I went to have my eyebrows arched and tinted at Sylvia's, which calls itself "spirit spa," meaning, it seemed, that while Madame Sylvia swiped at my brow with a little paintbrush, she murmured and sang into my ear. It was now nine-thirty in the morning and I lay on a narrow table in a tiny white room. "You are at the age when you must protect the fine skin around the eyes," she warned. "A woman's face falls, it is inevitable, but the eyes go on and on, giving light. You will be eighty, ninety, and your eyes will still charm."

She knows nothing about my life. I've never been here before and have never thought of having an eyebrow tint. I have perfectly decent eyebrows, nicely shaped and regular, but I did look into a mirror a week or so ago and noticed that the small hairs at the outside corners were coming in grey. There was a little grey at the temples too, but nothing to be surprised about, not for a woman whose forty-fourth birthday is approaching, not for a woman who has never even thought of herself as possessing "temples," such august body parts.

"Are you by any chance a Gemini?" Madame Sylvia asked intimately. Swish went to the paintbrush. She stopped, peered at me closely, then swished again, a deft little stroke.

“No,” I said, ashamed to acknowledge the astrological universe. “My birthday’s September. Next week, in fact.”

“I can tell, yes.” She had a touch of the harridan in her voice. “I can always tell.”
What could she tell?

“Twenty-four dollars,” she said. “Let me give you my card. For next time.”

Presumptuous, but yes, there will be a next time. I calculated quickly. My face would make it through the next few weeks, but by November I will probably be back in Madame Sylvia’s hushed white cell. I may well become a regular. Eyebrows, lashes, full facials, neck massage. I have led a reflective life, a life of thought, a writer, a translator, but all this is about to change. The delicate skin around my eyes was demanding attention. Has Tom noticed? I don’t think so. Christine and Natalie don’t really look at me in that way; they just see the watercolour blob that means mother, which is rather how I see myself.

“A woman’s charm is with her for life,” Madame Sylvia said, “but you must pay attention.”

No, I thought an hour later, no. I’m sorry, but I have no plans to be charming on a regular basis. Anyone can be charming. It’s really a cheap trick, mere charm, so astonishingly easy to perform, screwing up your face into sunbeams, and spewing them forth. The calculated lift of the wrist, chin up, thumb and forefinger brought together to form a little feminine loop, the trick of pretending to sit on a little glass chair, that concentration of radiance, *l’esprit*; little sprinkles of it everywhere, misting the air like bargain scent. Ingenue spritz, Emma Allen calls it.

I know that cheapness so intimately—the grainy, sugary, persevering way charm enters a fresh mouth and rubs against the molars, sticking there in soft wads, promoting mouth ulcers or whatever it is that’s the metaphoric projection of self-hatred. Of all the social virtues, charm is, in the end, the most unrewarding. And compared to goodness, real goodness, or the unmovable self-abnegation my daughter Norah practises, charm is nothing but crumpled tissue paper, soiled from previous use.

Sincerity? No. Sincerity’s over. Sincerity’s lost whatever edge it had. It’s fine, fine matter, but wasted on the press, who all grew up post-Holocaust, devoted readers of *Mad Magazine* and wouldn’t recognize a bar of willed innocence if it came wrapped in foil.

Nor will I ever again be pointlessly, endlessly polite. I got over that two years ago when I did my author tour. It seems I’ve lost, like a stream of pebbles leaving my hand, the kind of endurance that professional courtesy demands: suck in your breath, let your face go numb, listen to the interviewer’s questions, register optimally, let your breath out, evaluate the feelings of those who depend on you (agent, publisher, editor, that nice Sheila person who does publicity, and of course Danielle Westerman), and perform again and again like the tuned-up athlete you are, the fit physical specimen that each new book demands, then move on to the next task.

Mrs. Winters, who has just translated The Middle Years, the unfolding memoir of Holocaust survivor Danielle Westerman, is a woman of grace and charm, whose thick brown hair is arranged into a bun. Putting down her coffee cup, she shrugs off her beige raincoat and ...

I’ve entered early middle age now and I have a nineteen-year-old daughter who lives on the street. I no longer require a reputation for charm, those saving lilac shadows and contours. Maybe I never did. I won’t—not now—tuck the ends of my sentences into little licks of favour, and the next time a journalist pins me down with a personal question, trolling

for information—Tell me, Mrs. Winters, how are you able to balance your family and professional life?—I will stare back hard with my newly practised stare. How do I balance my life? Tinted eyebrows up. Just what kind of inquiry is this? Wouldn't you prefer, Mrs. Winters, to pursue your own writing rather than translate Dr. Westerman's work? Please, not that again. How did you and your husband meet? What does he think of your writing?

I will in the future address my interviewer directly, and say with firmness: "This interview is over." There is nothing to lose. Rude and difficult people are more likely to be taken seriously. Curmudgeons are positively adored. I've noticed this. Even the fascinating unknowable earn respect.

And when I read in the paper tomorrow that "Mrs. Winters looked all of her forty-three years" and that "Mrs. Winters with her familiar overbite was reluctant to talk about her work schedule," I will want to phone the editor and complain bitterly. This from the pen of a small, unattractive man, almost entirely lipless beneath a bony, domineering nose, sweating with minor ambition, head tilted like something carved out of yellow wax.

He interviewed me in a cappuccino bar in mid-Toronto. A chilly, stooped, round-headed man in his thirties or forties—it was hard to tell—slow to smile, pathetically in need of human attention, thinking his superior thoughts. Fluff on his shoulders begged to be picked off. I, on the other hand, was wearing a soft jade jacket of cashmere lined with silk, which represented a rare splurge on my part, but I could be sure this man would overlook the garment with its crystal buttons and mandarin collar and concentrate instead on my dark raincoat, beige, and not quite pristine at the cuffs. In print he will be certain to refer to my chignon as a bun. It's taken me years to learn to do a glossy little chignon—I can get my hair brushed back and securely pinned up each morning in a mere two and a half minutes and consider my coiffure one of my major life accomplishments. I really mean this.

Sheila from publicity had filled me in before the interview, and I felt the information packet hovering; what to do with it? This young/youngish man was the newly appointed books columnist at *Booktimes*. He was well known for holding pious opinions about the literature of the Great North, about his own role as advocate of a diverse new outpouring of Canadian voices, the post-colonial cry of blaming anguish. The stream of current fiction about middle-class people living in cities was diluting the authentic national voice that rose from the landscape itself and—

Oh, shut up, shut up.

Cappuccino foam dotted the corners of his undistinguished mouth. And just one more question, Mrs. Winters—

Of course he didn't call me Reta, even though there might be only a year or two between us. The "Mrs." gave him power over me: that vexing *r* rucking things up in the middle and making one think of such distractions as clotheslines and baking tins. He was the barking terrier, going at Mrs. Winters's ankles, shaking out his fur and asking me to justify myself wanting me to explain the spluttering, dying, whimpering bonfire of my life, which I would not dream of sharing. He seemed to forget he was interviewing me about Daniel Westerman's new book.

I understand you're working on a second novel, said he.

Well, yes.

Takes nerve.

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