

# Summer's Lease

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My grandmother died in May, and that summer my mother and my brother and I went east for two months to the old house in Toronto, so my mother could Clear it out. Sometimes she called it that, and sometimes Emptying that Bloody museum, and sometimes Settling up grandmother's affairs, depending on whom she was talking to. I liked Bloody museum the best, though I did not understand why she spoke the words in such a frantic tone to my father and her close friends. I was nine. William was six. I had never been to a real museum but had read about them and seen pictures. William did not know what a museum was, but he got excited when I told him about glass cases with things in them that were hundreds, thousands of years old. Boxes, jewellery, swords, coins. He wanted to know if there were ghosts, and then our mother came into his room—this was shortly before we left Vancouver, and he was in bed recovering from an ear infection—and told me for heaven's sake not to get him upset, she had enough on her hands already.

I remember still how astonished I was as the taxi drove us from the Union Station up to the Annex—astonished at the houses. They looked like castles to me, these giant turreted piles of dried-ketchup brick, draped in ivy. Did people really live in these buildings? Our Vancouver house was on one story, stucco painted white, with floor-to-ceiling windows facing north to the mountains. My mother was silent, looking quickly left and right and left again. Her face

had a tight look which I knew meant she was nervous, but I could not imagine why. William was opening and shutting the ashtray fitted into the back of the front seat. Normally she would have told him to stop that, but she did not appear to notice.

"Oh," she said suddenly, "it's gone."

We were passing a small apartment block.

"My school. The school I went to when I was a little girl used to be right there. I thought we would see it when we came round this corner."

"Not been here in a while, eh?" said the taxi-driver.

"No, not for many years."

"You have so," I said, "you came to Toronto for grandmother's funeral."

"But I didn't go to the house, Megan. I stayed at a hotel. Oh, here's the park."

The park took up an entire small block; sidewalks enclosed it. Paths ran from each corner to a large circular flowerbed in the middle. I could see swings and a waterfountain and some organized shrubbery. Nothing special, nothing like our park off Wall Street in Vancouver with its prospect of the harbour and the bridges and the mountains, but my mother's eyes were very wide open.

The taxi stopped. I was disappointed. Not a castle. It was brick, though; a medium-sized two-story house with a deep front porch. There were fat wooden pillars on the porch, painted

dark green, as were the door and the window frames and the shutters. There was a small front garden. The houses on either side were identical, and so were the houses past them.

“It seems smaller,” said my mother. “I suppose that’s always the way.”

The air in the house was dreadfully stale. Underneath the brownish smell were lemon oil, floor wax, javex, and an aromatic fragrance I found later was pot-pourri. William went rather pale.

There were four bedrooms in the house. I got to sleep in the one that had been my mother’s, and William went into what had

been our grandfather’s study.

“I don’t know what the hell he ever studied,” said my mother, looking at the bookcase which contained nothing but *National Geographics*, packed so tight I had to help William get the first one or two out.

“Then what did he use it for?” I asked.

My mother snorted. “To keep his sanity I should think. Here William, this bottom drawer’s empty, you can put your things in there.”

“What do you mean, his sanity?”

“Not now, Megan, for goodness’ sake. Did you look at the books in my room? There’s a lot of things there I read when I was your age. Oh dear, this is weird.”



“What’s weird?” But she was gone, and I went to her, my room and knelt by the bookcase and found all of L.M. Montgomery. I had never been able to get *Emily Climbs* at the Hastings Library and I went right into it. After a while my knees hurt and I got up and looked out the window. This room and grandfather’s study overlooked the garden at the back of the house. It was not like any garden I knew at home. The only flowers were roses. They were ranged like a border, in full bloom and multi-coloured, around the neat rectangle of lawn. There was one tree, a very large maple, in a corner at the back by the fence. That was all. I counted thirteen different colours among the roses. I went to tell my mother and found her unpacking in what was clearly the guestroom.

“Why aren’t you going in the big room next door?” I asked, glancing in at the tall dark four-poster bed with its long fringed white spread. My mother did not answer. She was sitting on the single bed in the guestroom looking at a small glass globe in her hands. It was one of those paperweights which you shake to make snow fall. There was a tiny ballerina tiptoe in the blizzard.

“Silly thing,” she said with pleasure in her voice. “Your grandfather gave me that for my birthday once. I guess I was eight or so. Why aren’t I sleeping in there? Because I’m sleeping here, that’s why.”

“The garden,” I said, “it’s full of roses.”

“Your grandfather was a great gardener. He loved flowers. When he was too ill to work in the garden any more he taught your grandmother how to do it. Where’s William? We’ve got to go out and get some dinner, it’s too late to shop.”

We dug William out of a pile of *National Geographics*—he had dozens of them all over the floor. My mother began to be mad and then said, “Oh well, it doesn’t matter I suppose, all that stuff’s going out anyway.” We walked up

to Dupont Street and found a little soda-fountain kind of place, and had hamburgers and French fries, which last we were not allowed at home. It was strange, meeting people occasionally as we walked and not seeing any known faces; and I began to think that we did not know anybody there in Toronto except my mother, and how awful it would be for William and me if we somehow lost her.

In a way that feeling lasted the whole summer. Of course William and I were not alone, for we found children to play with in the park. But we did not make any real friends, and in any case many of them went away to camp or to cottages. Nor was it that our mother did not spend time with us. As I see now, she was very conscientious about ensuring that the summer which was work and much else for her was a real holiday for us. Every few days we went on some excursion, to the Island, to the Science Centre, to Casa Loma, to the Zoo, to High Park. We saved the trip to the Royal Ontario Museum for last. Almost daily she took us on the subway, which William especially loved. We would choose a stop with a name he liked, and get out there and explore for a while, and then ride back to the Spadina station and walk up to our grandparents’ house again. My mother let us stay up late, and watch far more television than we did at home, and have pop-sicles almost every time we wanted them and she made us our favourite things to eat so readily it was hardly any fun asking.

But she was abstracted, preoccupied. William especially found it maddening that he would ask her a question and she would not respond, or he would tell her something and find out later that she literally had not heard him. He even cried sometimes in frustration, and then of course my mother got very upset. I think he felt it so much because he had been accustomed to such quantities of attention from her always. He was sick a great deal as a small

child, ear infections and bronchitis and allergies and skin trouble, and of course it was she who cared for him. I don't mean that my father was indifferent, not at all; he did and was a lot more for us than many fathers as I now recognize; nonetheless he was out of the house all day, five days a week and sometimes six.

One night I was up very late, reading *Rilla of Ingleside* and half in tears over Walter's death, when I heard my mother on the phone in the downstairs hall, talking to my father. I was puzzled, for this was not the routine. We called him every Wednesday and he called us every Sunday, and this was a Friday. Her voice was shaky and my stomach went tight.

"But what in hell am I going to do with them? It's a whole bloody box-ful of letters, Gerry. Letters she wrote to him when they were engaged, letters he wrote to her. And all of my letters to them, and to her after he died. All of them, can you believe it?"

"I can't bring myself to. I just can't bring myself to read them."

"I can't do that either. It doesn't feel right just to throw them out. Oh I'm sorry darling, I know I'm being inconsistent, but I just can't. I guess I'll just hold on to them over the summer and see."

"Yes, I think it's the house. I can't breathe here any more than I ever could. I feel like I'm in a grave and trying to heave the lid off the coffin."

"Yes, I know there's only a few more weeks. That doesn't help."

"I don't mean to be snappy, darling. It's just hard, that's all. I didn't think it would be this hard. I feel as if she's watching me all the time."

"Yes, exactly. And telling me that I'm doing it all wrong and making all the wrong decisions."

"Yes, I know. But somehow her being dead doesn't seem to make that much difference. I wish you were here."

"I love you too."

"Oh they're fine," and her voice was all right again, "I think they're enjoying it. It's so strange, Gerry, seeing them playing where I used to."

"No, I'm feeling better now. We'll talk on Sunday as usual. OK, darling, goodbye now." She hung up and said, "Damn my shrew of a tongue," and I heard her go into the livingroom and blow her nose and switch on the TV. I turned my light out, feeling that she would come upstairs soon, and she did, and went first into William's room and then came into mine. I lay head into pillow so she could not see my face, knowing from experience that I could not keep my eyelids still. I did not want to talk to her, although I wanted badly to know if daddy had said that our cat had had her kittens. "Megan?" she said softly. I did not answer. When she had gone I lay awake trying to understand. The dead She must be my grandmother, but why did my mother speak of her so? My mother frightened? Of someone who was dead? I thought of William and ghosts but did not think that was what she meant.

A lot of the work my mother had to do that summer was really quite interesting, and sometimes William and I enjoyed helping her. She went through the house room by room, sorting and deciding what was to be done with what. She did the kitchen first, and the little dark pantry that opened off it. There were piles of kitchen cutlery, forks with bent tines and big dented metal spoons; there were green felt bags full of silver, ingenious pocketed holders with sets of spoons and fishknives, and dinner-forks so large William could hardly eat with them.

"Were my grandfather and grandmother very big people?" he asked.

There were cupboards full of great ironstone basins and blue-and-white striped mixing bowls, piles of cream dinner plates with dark green ivy round the borders, dozens of frilly teacups with roses and birds and huntsmen painted on them, well-and-tree serving platters, vegetable dishes with willow-pattern covers, cheese trays and sauce-pitchers and gravy-boats and preserve-dishes all wreathed in flowers.

“She entertained a lot, of course,” said my mother, piling up linen dinner-napkins. “She used to send me the menus in her letters, and lists of the guests. As if I cared who she had for dinner.”

“She wrote letters to you?” asked William.

“Oh my God did she write letters. She . . .” My mother stopped and would not go on.

Some of the things were to go to auction at the end of the summer and some to the Salvation Army. Some were simply to be thrown out, and a few were to be shipped out to us in Vancouver. My mother bought packets of coloured labels, and William and I went around sticking red ones on auction things and blue on Vancouver things and so on. She said each of us could choose something for ourselves. “Something small.” I chose the ballerina paperweight. William would not at first tell us what he had chosen, but finally gave in and showed us that one drawer in grandfather’s desk was filled with empty cigar boxes. “But William,” said my mother, “there’s nothing special about those, you can get boxes like that in Vancouver any day.”

“But these were my grandfather’s,” said William stubbornly.

“But you never even met him! He was dead before you were born!” She was going to say more but William had that intense look he got—actually, he still gets it—on the verge of one of his upsets, and she said, “Oh all right dear.” So William chose a box with a picture

of a woman in a long flowing red dress, and put it ceremonially in his suitcase ready to go home.

My mother was now through with the furnishings on the first floor of the house and started in on the papers. There was an old escritoire in the livingroom, marked for auction, that was packed tight with them. This was boring, and on afternoons when we were not going out on an expedition William and I took to playing in the back garden. At first there did not seem to be much to do there. We pulled rosebuds off the bushes and they were people and we did long dramas with them, using an orange-crate for a house, and after a long time I succeeded in teaching William to stand on his head. We tried to climb the maple tree, but there were no branches low enough to get a foot-hold on, even when we took a velvet-covered chair out of the diningroom to stand on. Then we found that there was a space between the maple tree and the tall dark green wooden fence at the end of the garden. The ground there was quite bare, and the roots of the maple stuck up out of the earth far enough to be seats. This shaded space, with the dense green leaves above and the tree trunk behind us, became a treasured hiding-place. I sat behind the tree and sent William into the house to check; he looked both from his room and my room and could not see me. So we were safe.

Perhaps the times that we spent there were not really as long as they seem in memory. It seems we spent hours and hours there, and gradually less and less sun sieved through the leaves, and the light which was left was that thick deep gold of late afternoon, and the black earth began to feel chill. Gradually we evolved a play there, a long slow varying play which we did over and over again, that we were very old people, a very old man and a very old woman, the last people left in that country, and when we were gone there would be no one left, no

one at all, and our bodies would be very small and dried up—"like mummies," said William, for there had been an illustrated piece on Egypt in one of the *National Geographics*—and so when the leaves fell from the maple year after year they would soon cover us, there would only be two small low mounds, and then slowly the earth would build up around us or we would sink into it, lower and lower, and there would be nothing but slender knobby bones gradually flaking and slivering away. And we would lie still, very still, on the earth behind the maple tree, and be so quiet that the song of the cicada sounded like a jackhammer, and close our eyes and feel the wind sifting through the dark green leaves above us. I can hear it yet, that sound of the leaves flickering.

Once I left the garden and went into the house to get a spoon. We had some notion of digging. I heard a frightful noise, my mother crying, talking to herself through gulping angry tears, the kind I knew hurt in the chest. I stood appalled by the livingroom door and saw her on the chair before the escritoire with a bundle of papers on her lap. Her back was to me and her shoulders jerked up and down and she slammed her fist on her knee with every sentence. Showers of paper went on to the floor.

"That horrible horrible woman. Everything she did was for herself, nothing for anyone else. I hate her, I hate her. She killed him, the poor old bastard, how he lasted as long as he did I don't know. Selfish snobbish arrogant bitch. Oh God, maybe if I hadn't left he'd have lasted longer. But I had to, father, I had to, I would have died if I hadn't. Oh God don't let me ever be like that, don't ever ever."

I turned and ran softly up the carpeted stairs to the second floor and stood on the landing, and looked through the open door to my grandparents' bedroom, and there on the bed

was a mummy wrapped in whitest gravecloths. I screamed and screamed and my mother came leaping up the stairs crying, "Megan, Megan, what is it?" and I could hear William running into the house, and my mother caught me in her arms and saw what my pointing finger aimed at and said, "Oh Megan darling, it's just laundry piled on the bed, I did the laundry this morning. Oh my God, you poor child." When I had calmed down she tried to get me to go into the room with her and touch the sheets and underpants and towels on the bed, but I would not, and I suppose she saw it was no use that way. So she took us downstairs and made us cheese soufflé for dinner, and we had strawberries afterwards. Then when William had gone to bed we sat on the front porch and she tried to explain.

"Megan, I suppose I should have told you before we came, but it's hard for me. I never liked my mother. No, that's not true. I hated her. I know I tell you and William not to use that word, it's a dreadful word, but the fact is it's true. I did hate her. That's why I left and never went back. Not even for my father's funeral. In a way I'm sorry about that, but he was dead, it wouldn't have meant anything to him if I had. But it would have been a sign I guess."

"But why did you hate her, Mum? What did she do to you?"

My mother looked away and then lit a cigarette. "She made me believe that I was wicked."

"Is that all?"

"All? All?" Her voice rose a little and then she subsided and gave me a very gentle smile. I could see wet at the corners of her eyes. "Yes Megan, that's all. It's a terrible thing to do to a child." And then she got me to play Scrabble before I went to bed.

Next day in the garden William said, "Why did you scream like that?"

“Oh, I just made a silly mistake. I thought there was someone on the bed and there wasn’t.” He did not ask any further.

I think it was soon after that when the jam thing happened. My mother decided to clear out the cellar before moving on to the second floor. Down there was an old wringer washer and a quite new dryer, and behind the laundry room was a fruitcellar. William and I had never seen anything like it. A small dark room, almost a cave, the walls lined with shelves. The jars shone in the acid light from the bulb in the ceiling: strawberry jam and plum jam and marmalade, and greengage jam of a beautiful melting chartreuse, mustard pickles and dill pickles and cucumber pickles, mincemeat and apple butter and tomato butter and corn relish, cherries and pears and brandied peaches. Each bore a label with my grandmother’s spiky black handwriting, and a date. The earliest was 1947, the most recent 1965.

“I guess she must have stopped after father died,” my mother said in a puzzled tone. She brought some of the jars up to the clear light of the kitchen and we watched her open some mustard pickle, which William loved.

“The seal’s not right. It’s gone bad.” There was an awful sour whiff and grey-green fuzz oozed over the circle of white wax.

“What are we going to do with it then?” asked William.

“Throw it out. All of it. I’m damned if I’m going to spend time checking all this stuff to see which is OK and which isn’t. Who could we give it to anyway?”

So we did. William and I took all the jars off the shelves and packed them into cardboard cartons. Then my mother laid newspaper over the jars and closed the cartons and tied them tightly with string, and we carried them out to the garbage cans at the side of the house. She

looked at the cans and her mouth went tight in a curious pleased way.

“Would that stuff have been good?” I asked.

“Good? Oh yes indeed, she was a very good cook, your grandmother. Yes, very good. A lot of people used to beg her for recipes but she’d never give them out. Typical.” She smacked down the last can lid and went back into the house.

At the back of one of the shelves in the fruitcellar I found a notebook bound in black leatherette, filled with recipes in my grandmother’s hand.

“Shall we take this home?”

My mother looked at it.

“So that’s where she kept it. She would never even show me. Oh for heaven’s sake throw it out, Megan.” I made for the wastebasket and then she said quickly, “No don’t, give it to me.” I stood by her as she turned the pages. My Best Apricot Jam. Checkerboard Corn Relish. Chinese Ginger Marmalade. At the bottom of that page was written, “Gordon likes this very much.”

“Who was Gordon?”

“Your grandfather,” said my mother absently.

“Are you going to make some of those things for Daddy and us?”

“What?” She snorted. “Maybe I will at that. She’d hate to think of him eating anything she’d had a hand in.”

“Why?”

“Oh she never liked him, Megan. Never wanted me to marry him.”

“But *why*?” I did not understand why anyone would not like my gentle cheerful father, and I was getting annoyed because my mother was not really listening to me. She

went on turning pages as she talked.

“Maybe I should say instead that she disapproved. Because he’d been married before. A marriage to a divorcé wasn’t really a marriage. Something like that. No, that’s not altogether it either. Strawberry Rhubarb Jam, I remember that, it was damned good. No. The real thing was, she called it ‘getting another woman’s leavings.’ I suppose she despised me. As usual.”

“What are leavings, Mummy? Mummy?” She came out of the notebook then, startled.

“Oh Megan, I’ve said all sorts of things to you that I shouldn’t. I’m sorry dear, now take the book and put it in that Vancouver box in the livingroom.”

The weather was now extremely hot, far hotter than it ever gets in Vancouver, and William and I found the cool green shade behind the maple tree more of a refuge than ever. Because of the heat we developed some new dramas, particularly one about being castaways on a desert island in the South Seas and finding treasure there. Then somehow this got merged with the play about the old people, for William got the idea that we should bury something under the maple, leave something when we died.

“But who for? We’re going to be the last, there won’t be anyone to find it.”

William was stubborn, said perhaps millions of years later new kinds of creatures, people, might grow up upon the earth, and they would find it and spend centuries trying to figure out what it was and finally would.

“Archaeologists you mean.”

“Yes, that.”

I did not think this made much sense, but I liked the idea of making our own buried treasure, and so we set about finding a suitable

place and thinking of something to put in it. We took a couple of the big dinner-service spoons without telling my mother, and dug about among the roots of the maple. I heard William say, “Aaah!” in fright. He was staring at the earth before him and had gone pale so the freckles on his nose looked dark.

“There’s something here, Megan. Look. Someone’s buried something here before us.”

There was a metallic strip shining in the black dirt. We waited a moment—I know I imagined that a bony hand might be holding whatever it was—and then we began to scrape and shove with our big spoons. There it was then, a cigar-box, with a picture on it of a woman in a long flowing red dress. It was wrapped about with yellow brittle Scotch tape, and dirt lay deep in the long cracks between the strips of tape.

“Let’s open it, here, the tape starts here!”

“No no no!” cried William, and he got up and backed away from me, holding the box to his chest. “No no. It was my grandfather’s. We can’t open it yet.”

“What do you mean, not yet? Come on William, I want to see what’s in it!” But he began to cry, and I did not want our mother to come out, so I said, “Oh all right, well what do you want to do with it then?”

“I want to leave it till the last day, the day before we go home to Vancouver.”

“But why? Whatever for?” But I could see it was no use. So we put the box back where it had lain for who knew how long, and covered it with earth again. Then every time we started to play behind the maple tree we made a little ceremony of checking to see that the box was still there.

“What did grandfather die of?” I asked my mother.

“Something called arteriosclerosis. It’s a disease that makes your arteries harden, and



after a while you can't walk any more. And with a lot of people it makes their brain go funny too."

"Did that happen to him?"

"I think it did, at the very end. He was ill for years. Just gradually getting weaker and weaker. The last couple of years of his life I don't think he even went downstairs any more."

I imagined an old man sitting in William's room, looking out the window at the roses and the maple tree; sitting and looking, sitting and looking; watching her do what he told her to, in the garden; thinking about the box buried under the maple?

"What did he look like?"

"Goodness, why are you so interested in your grandfather all of a sudden? Here's a picture of him. With your grandmother. I'm taking this one home with me. God knows why, but I am. Here William, you come and look too."

My grandmother sat in a garden chair in front of the maple tree, looking up at my grandfather who stood beside her. Hers was a strong face, aquiline nose and piles of dark hair. She looked as if she had just spoken and was waiting for an answer. He was looking past the camera, perhaps trying to evade the sun, which glinted on his glasses so his expression was not visible. He was smiling faintly.

"He looks nice," said William with satisfaction. "Why is she holding him like that?" My mother and I looked and saw that her left hand was clasped around his wrist.

My mother humphed. "Probably just finished telling him to do something. Or just starting to tell him to do something." She turned the picture over. There was that familiar handwriting: "Gordon and Louisa."

"Why did she tell him to do things so much?" asked William.

"Oh William, you do ask the most impossible questions." My mother sighed. "Well, try to understand. She was what's called a managing kind of person. Do you know what I mean? She was always wanting to run things and get them organized and be in control. My father used to say she should have worked in the bank instead of him, she'd have ended up president."

"Did he?"

"Oh God no, he never made it past manager of a small branch I don't think."

"Well couldn't she have worked in a bank too?"

"Oh William." My mother was getting very impatient. "She wasn't like that, things weren't like that. Yes, sure she could have worked in a bank, or somewhere else. Your grandfather wouldn't have objected. In fact I think he would have been glad, and it would maybe have taken some of the heat off him. God knows it would have off me. But she didn't believe in women working outside the home. She thought women who did were low-class, do you know what I mean? Even if they had jobs like being a doctor or a lawyer or something. She thought they were failures. Failures. Even if they were married too. A woman's place is in the home. Period. She really believed that. Does that make sense to you, William? To you, Megan?"

I started to speak but my mother had got all wound up and went on.

"So she could have, but she didn't, she stayed here in this house, and controlled every inch of it. There wasn't a single thing my father or I could do or say that she didn't know about and criticize and oversee. She was like a, like a searchlight in a little room. She ate us up, at least she ate up my father and she tried to eat me."

“Eat you?”

“Oh William darling, not like that.” She took William on to her lap and held him close.

“You don’t have a job either, Mum,” I said. I had not really thought about that before. My mother looked sharply at me.

“No I don’t Megan. It’s different, though. I mean the reasons are different. I like being at home with you. And this fall when William’s in school all day I’ll start back. I’m going to take that refresher course for nurses, you know that. And likely by next spring I’ll have a job in some hospital in Vancouver. But I wanted to be home with you both when you were little. I’ve loved it.” And she reached for me and held me with her arm while I leaned against her and looked down at William’s nice brown hair. I could feel her trembling. “I hope you’ve been happy. I hope I’ve done right by you. Being here makes me feel I don’t know what the hell I’ve done or why I’ve done it.” William kissed her and then she really did cry for a bit, and said, “I’ve wanted it to be different for you, so much I’ve wanted that.”

The *National Geographics* had all gone to the Salvation Army, and so had the closet-full of my grandfather’s heavy dark clothes. My mother was giving his study a final cleaning. There were stains on the wall by the window; I had worked it out that his chair had stood there, and his hand had rested on the wall while he looked out.

“Who took care of my grandfather while he was sick?” I asked.

“Why she did, of course,” and my mother sounded surprised. “Your grandmother. Who else?”

“All by herself?”

“Why yes. Until the end, they had a nurse then, for the last few weeks before he went into hospital to die. I suppose she couldn’t cope any longer. She wouldn’t have anyone before that.

Didn’t want anyone in her house.” Her voice was very cold. She made a few last scrubbing motions at the stain. “Well, I can’t get that out. Whoever buys this place will paint it anyway. All right. That’s done.” All that was left in the room was the mattress on the floor; William’s clothes were in cartons and in his open suitcase with his cigar box. My room looked much the same, except that there was a pile of L.M. Montgomery books next to my mattress. My mother had given way and said I could take these as well as the little ballerina. William did not even make a fuss over this. He was more and more preoccupied with going soon to the Museum, and with opening grandfather’s cigar box. We played our play by the maple tree still, but William kept breaking out of it to talk about these approaching events, and that spoiled the continuity.

The guestroom my mother used was also almost bare, and that left only the master bedroom with any furniture in it. The mahogany double bed and the matching dresser with the swinging mirror were marked for auction. The dresser was empty. I had watched my mother take the stuff out—long peach satin nightgowns with what looked like bags for my grandmother’s breasts; things I thought were bathing suits but my mother said were foundation garments, white with lace around the tops and smelling of javex; stacks of packages of seamed nylons. Out of the clothes closet came dresses, somehow heavy in the same way as my grandfather’s suits, though of course the fabrics were different. Greys, browns, blues, dark greens. My mother held one up to her, and it came almost to her feet.

“Was my grandmother bigger than you then?” William asked.

My mother laughed shortly. “No. It’s just that the styles she wore were longer. Even when skirts went up she never changed. Said they weren’t ladylike, like that.”

“Why do you talk always about her and not about him?” said William crossly. “You never say anything about what he was like.”

“Don’t I?” My mother set down the dress she was folding and looked at William. She frowned, not angrily. “Well, why don’t I? I guess because, because he was gentle, not like her. Yes, he was gentle, and he didn’t say much. But I loved him a lot, William you must know that.”

“Did she love him?” I asked, picking up a blue flowered nightgown.

“Put that down, dear, for heaven’s sake. I’ve just finished folding it. Did she love him? Oh dear heaven.” She sat very still. “Yes,” she said slowly, regretfully, “I suppose I would have to say that she did. In a way. But christ, what a way.” She shook herself. “Now Megan, get that box off the shelf in her closet and put it in my room.”

“What’s in it?” I got it down; it was the last thing in the closet.

“Letters.”

“What letters?” asked William.

“Just letters, that’s all. Put it on the floor by my bed.” I did. My mother’s tone made me uneasy, for it was not one I knew, and although I wanted very much to look at those letters I did not dare to. Somehow I did not think my mother was looking at them either. In fact she used the box as a night-table, putting her ashtray and whatever book she was reading on it before she went to sleep.

Time was now getting jammed together, and we found all sorts of places we wanted to go to and things we wanted to see in this last week of our stay. My father said that the kit-tens were now trying to get out of their box, and within a few days we would be home and could see them. I could hardly wait, but William was not very interested.

We went finally to the Royal Ontario Museum, and it was a terrible disappointment

to me. Oh, I was fascinated at lots of the things—the amphorae (I had not realized they were so big), the dinosaurs, the mummies, the stuffed animals, the great glass cages in which were life-size models of native Indians caught dead-still weaving baskets and pestling corn, the echoes of the hall lined with Greek statuary, whiter than I had ever imagined. But, except for a few large free-standing objects, I could not *touch* the things. I had thought the cases would open, that we could take out the combs and mirrors and jewellery and hold them, turn them over, and feel what other hands had felt, hundreds and thousands of years ago. Where do children get such ideas? The frustration was terrible. I can think of few other times in my life when I have felt so blocked, prevented. I can see my hands yet, flat against the glass guarding a dozen little Chinese horses, and how I longed to feel the hard delicate hoof in my palm.

William did not mind as I did, and walked about with intense enjoyment in everything. Then he found the thing he liked best, and wanted to go back and back to it till finally my mother said he could just stay there then, and we would go and see the dinosaurs and the Roman coins again and come back to fetch him when we were ready to go home. His exhibit was in a section where there were a lot of stuffed animals; I remember polar bear and marten and a great eagle. A glass case hung on the wall, and in it was what looked like a cross-section of two steep hills with a valley between. Down the hill on the left were arranged hundreds of tiny skeletons, some very little animal like a shrew? a deermouse? all as if running for their lives to get down into the valley and across to the other hill. But their numbers decreased as they went down the steep slope, and in the depths of the tiny valley there were only a few skeletons running along in a line, and then finally on the rise to the other side

there was only one solitary set of minute bones, so small you could hardly imagine there had once been a heart beating under the thimble-sized ribcage. My mother read the accompanying legend to William about five times before we left him there, something about Nature's way of ensuring the survival of the species in face of illness and disaster and attack. When we went back to get him he was standing quite still, gazing, and the freckles on his nose looked very dark. He was quiet that evening, but when I reminded him that next day we would open grandfather's box he smiled at me.

We waited until after lunch. My mother went upstairs to finish packing, and we went out to the dark green space behind the maple tree and began to dig. My mother had found the two big dinnerspoons missing when she came to prepare things for the auctioneers' truck, and had scolded us sharply and given us two old wooden spoons from the kitchen instead. They were dark from use, and the edges of the bowls were worn thin; they were actually very good for digging. We got the cigar box out, and I let William open it. No, really I was afraid even to suggest that I might do it, being older, because his face was so intent. So he got the end of the tape free and unwound it, breathing noisily, for he was getting a cold. As he unwound I saw that grandfather had not made a perfect seal around the box, and I suppose that should have prepared me. When he had got all the tape off William sat there, he sat there holding the box on his lap.

"Oh go *on*, William, open it."

He did, and there was a horrible mass of squirming bugs and worms and soggy dirt and wilted paper, and William cried out and threw the whole thing away from him on to the bare earth away from the tree, and everything fell

out in a heap. We both got up and jumped back, and William began to cry. I was afraid my mother would hear, so I worked as hard as I could to calm him and finally did, though he was very pale.

"If we touch the papers carefully with the spoons we can scrape off the yuck," I said, "and then maybe we can look at them."

We squatted a couple of feet away from the mess and stretched out our spoons and began to scrape. Soon the pile of insects and worms and dirt began to look just like that, insects and worms and dirt, and we moved closer to the bundle of papers and spread them out on the ground. But it was no use, the damp had done its work. The writing—pale blue, sloping—was all sodden and blurred, and although the papers were clearly letters we could make out nothing. We were working with our hands now, turning over page after soggy page, trying to find something which could be read.

"Can you read that? Can you read that?" William kept asking. But I could not. And then I found one small note which I suppose had been tucked into the middle of the pile and so escaped some of the wetness, and on that I could read two words and two words only.

"Darling Rachel," I said.

"Darling Rachel," William repeated, giving the words no meaning. He looked up at the house and screamed. I looked and saw at grandfather's window a human shape, and then my mother opened the window and called "Children, what are you doing? Megan, what's wrong with William?" He had fainted, I knew that was what it was, he had done it once when he was getting flu.

"But who was she?" said my mother, weeping, as she stood before the kitchen sink, burning my grandfather's letter to Rachel. We

had got William into bed, and she had laid out the letters over the kitchen counter to get them dry enough to take the flame, and now was picking them up one by one and burning. Periodically she ran the cold water, and the grey-black shreds went down the drain. "Who was she? And why did she send the letters back to him?"

I did not answer, wishing only that she would stop crying. I tried to make myself think there was something romantic in it, love-letters buried for years under a tree. I had just finished *Kilmeny of the Orchard* and thought perhaps that L.M. Montgomery would have approved of such a notion. But the nasty mess in the box and William fainting and my mother's tears did not fit, would not go into that shape. I did not know what to do. Finally my mother finished burning the letters and stopped crying, and she made some lemonade and we sat together on the steps of the front porch and drank it, looking out at the square tidy park. The water-fountain wasn't going any longer, the city was trying to conserve water or something. My mother sat very close to me with her arm around my waist. All that evening she was very gentle to us. William got up for supper, his nose streaming with cold, and afterwards we watched a program about game reserves in Africa together. I looked over at my mother in the semi-dark and saw that she was crying silently, and did not look at her again.

The next day the lawyer came to the house and my mother gave him the keys and we left. We stayed that night in the Royal York Hotel, which was wonderful for William and me. When I woke next morning, my mother was sitting by the window, looking out at the lake. She was drinking coffee and smoking; she never smoked before noon. On the table before her was the box of letters from my grandmother's closet.

"Please now won't you tell me?" She took me on her lap, which she rarely did now that I was so big.

"I told you before, Megan. It's letters." She sighed. "Letters your grandmother and grandfather wrote to each other when they were"—she paused—"when they were young. And all my letters to them, and all my letters to her after he died."

"What are you going to do with them?"

She sighed again. "I'm taking them home, Megan. At least, I'm going to mail them, that box is too big to go in my suitcase and we have enough stuff to carry on the plane as it is." She turned me on her lap so our eyes met, and it was as if her glance was coming from very far away. "I've been thinking about these all summer, dear, trying to know what I should do. I thought finally I would throw them out, but now I've decided I have to read them. I've not been able to do it yet, but I will. Your father will help me, I know. Oh my God it's going to be hard, but I have to. I have to try and understand what was going on in this house all those years."

"But won't that be interesting, to read all the letters you wrote way back then? Like reading a diary?"

"At least in diaries people tell the truth. Or I guess they do, I've never kept one. But what I wrote to them, what I wrote to her—well, it was mostly lies."

"You told them lies?"

"Oh not like that, Megan," and my mother set me down and took another cigarette and walked back and forth in front of the view of Lake Ontario, not looking at me or at

anything. "Not real lies. I just didn't tell them what was really going on in my life. What I was really like. They were sort of form letters. Dear Mum and Dad. Dear Mum. Years and years of form letters. Dear Mum. Why she kept them I do not know. I truly do not know. And as for those letters they wrote to each other . . ." I thought she was going to cry again, but instead she went over to William's bed and shook him and said, "Hey come on William, do you want us to miss our plane?" And then she phoned the desk to see if the hotel could provide us with wrapping paper and string, which it did, and then we had an enormous room service breakfast and counted all the boats we could see on the lake, and five planes, and then we left.

On the way to the airport my mother got the taxi to stop at the main post office and we all went in. She registered the parcel, and then William begged to be allowed to deposit it in the mailbox with the special large opening for big packages. We watched him walk away across the great shining marble floor, and my mother smiled, I suppose because William looked so serious and responsible.

William was sick on the flight home, but by the time we reached Vancouver he was feeling all right again. It was wonderful to see my father. The kittens were tumbling on the rug and trying to catch dust in the sunshine. William and I played again in Burrardview Park with the blue wind rushing in off the water and the mountains brilliant to the north, and I was very happy.

But the parcel of letters did not come and did not come and did not come. My mother waited and waited, and then got on to the Post Office. There were tracers and searches and angry telephone calls and letters. Finally, towards the end of November I think it was, she recognized

the hard fact that the parcel was not going to come. She cried harder and longer than I had ever imagined a person could, and my father was half-sick with worry over here. It was terrible, and William got bronchitis again.

Then my mother pulled herself together. She wrote her Christmas exams for her nursing refresher course and passed them well, and in the New Year she got a job at the Vancouver General and things were better again. And it was not until many years later that William finally told me what he had done; that on that walk across the gleaming floor of the Toronto post office he had licked his fingers and then smeared and smeared across the address and the registration slip until they were pale runny blue and quite illegible.