

FEBRUARY MORNING

by Helen Portebenko

Just before I woke up, I heard my mother calling. Although she has been mute and in a hospital for years, she still calls me frequently, looking shadowy but whole--unparalyzed, able to speak. I don't know what she wants and have long since ceased trying to figure it out. Poor old lady, I yawned that morning; there she is, mute in Winnipeg, so why doesn't she stop calling? When she first began calling, I thought it was some kind of portent of disaster but it had happened so often now it just seemed like a normal part of life--if life had been normal.

Life hadn't been normal for months. I was unemployed for one thing. And Jason was gone. Months already. How long, I asked the doctor, as she wrote another prescription for tranquilizers. A long time, she said. How long? She looked at me with cold and unsympathetic eyes. Never, she said, never.

Shaking off the drugged sleep, I go up to make coffee for Jeanette.

-What are you doing up so early? she yawned.

-My mother called, I yawned back.

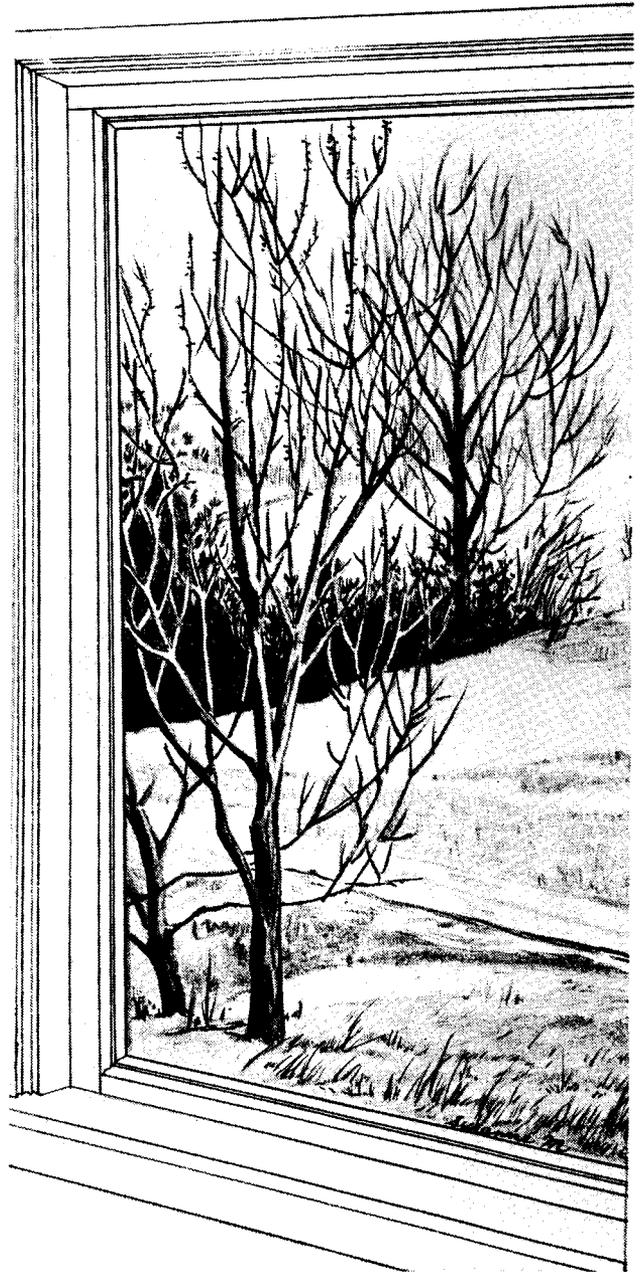
-I know, she said, coming awake, since you're up you could drive me to work. It's cold.

-Not that cold. I don't drive people to work.

-You could stop by the Manpower office on your way home.

-Won't.

-You think I'm going to support you?



-UIC won't cut me off. I'm unemployable.

-So what you gonna do? Sit around another two months? Wait for Jason to call? Listen for your mother? Your mother was telling you to get a job.

-Won't. My mother worked all her life. Now she's paralyzed, unable to talk, unable even to die. That's where it got her.

-Maybe she'll get her reward in heaven.

-Shit. She's already got her reward--hoping mutely to die. Only sinners get saved.

Nevertheless, I had been sufficiently guilted that I got dressed and took Jeanette to work. I almost went to the Manpower office. I did stop, in actual fact, having to my great annoyance found a parking spot. But I only got as far as the first door and fled again, shaking with terror, covered with sweat. I sat in the car muttering, then drove away.

It was a cloudy morning and not as cold as Jeanette had pretended. There must have been only one patch of ice in the whole city. I hit it. The tail end of the car ahead of me swerved a bit but before I could appreciate the significance of this, I hit the ice. I didn't brake because I was too surprised. The car swerved in a sickening fashion; I turned the wheel in the direction of the skid, then went flying across the road into the path of the oncoming traffic. I saw a man's startled face as the missile I was

riding hurtled past him. Another car braked before it hit mine, and I was flying sideways towards a large green car in the far right lane. The driver wasn't looking at me, just driving along as if everything was normal. My missile didn't reach him. There had been only one patch of ice and the car slid sideways across three lanes of dry pavement and stopped.

I rubbed my forehead, then looked around to see other drivers rubbing their heads in bewilderment. The green car was gone, it's driver presumably never noticing how close he had come to being blasted. I got out, checked the tires, then found to my amazement that the car started immediately. So I drove away again, in the direction the car was facing, which was back downtown again.

But once again, I didn't make the Manpower office. Was I really obligated, having been so nearly dead? At least I made it home without further mishap.

Mr. Moysiuk, the landlord, called me in for coffee. I refused but after getting upstairs and finding we had nothing to drink in our suite, went back again to accept. He poured out a vodka as well as coffee.

The woman wasn't there. She had been old and broken, hopelessly addicted to cigarettes, coffee and alcohol, shaking all over, makeup slightly awry,

her soul long since shrivelled by a long succession of horrors. Dyadya, don't hurt this woman, she's already used up. He had said she was his friend's wife, but what did that mean these days?

Grinning, Mr. Moysiuk handed me a letter, written on a scrap of paper with a shaky hand.

Dear Dennis. It's 2 a.m. I've called a taxi. I won't be back. You're not the man I thought you were. I see now that I never meant anything to you. Goodbye and god bless you. Love.

-She wash the floor, Mr. Moysiuk said, still grinning. Then she leave. I poured myself another drink of vodka.

-You look for job today? Mr. Moysiuk asked.

-None of your business. I almost got killed today. You sleep with your friend's wife?

-None of your business.

-I write letters like that.

-You? No, not like that.

-Sure. Humble letters of love. All women do. Bless the men who screw them.

-Don't be foolish, he said angrily. You're my relative. She, alcoholic, Indian. . . .

-So she gets screwed more often. Why don't you look for a woman, Dyadya, a person?

I left my coffee unfinished and went back upstairs. Crying. I had written Jason a letter like that once. Probably

my mother wrote my father a letter like that.

I hadn't eaten anything and the vodka felt warm in all my blood vessels so I crawled back into bed. But as soon as I closed my eyes, the sickening swerve started again. How long, Doctor? Never. Never? The car stopped eventually. But the swerve goes on and on, and I'm flying and flying out of control.

My mother could have told me. My mother knew. But my mother was silent and spoke only in my dreams. She probably wouldn't even recognize me this year. She recognized me last year but there was no joy in the recognition. Anna said the same thing. Anna visited more often but there was never any joy in my mother's eyes. So why did we go? We just went. Year after year, like pilgrims. All my generation, in an annual mystic trek. Maybe if I'd made a home with Jason, there wouldn't be any more pilgrimages. But Jason was gone. How long, Doctor? Never.

-What did I do? Why? Why? Why?

-No reason. It just won't work.

You're too intense, it's your Slavic temperament. I'm not ready to be tied down.

It's so difficult nowadays to find even a one-night stand. A few hours, if we're lucky. A baby, if we're lucky, to bring up in a shabby, basement suite. No baby, but I'd got to wash Jason's

floors for two years, not just once while waiting for a taxi.

Why didn't she say goddamn you? Why didn't she stick a knife in his gut while waiting for the taxi?

She doesn't know how to hate. Women are taught love and men are taught hate. Fuck off, Jason said, just fuck off. And I had said I loved him.

I fell asleep and didn't awaken until the afternoon. In my dreams, the car flew

and flew. Just before I awoke, I heard my mother again. She was in a long black dress and black kerchief--whole and walking, hands clasped in front of her. Proschai, she said. That means good-bye, but it also means forgive. I didn't know which one she intended. I hope she meant good-bye. There is no possibility of forgiveness. She never killed anyone, or drunk up all her kid's money, or molested a child. She had only laboured incessantly all her life and never had quite enough money to live on. There is no redemption for those who have not sinned.

