

Summer, 1987

Ardele had slept well and she awoke early and refreshed. A light July fog had occupied St. John's harbour and there was no wind.

She sipped her first coffee of the day laced with three teaspoons of demerara sugar. The silent green of the harbour swelled gently against the wet dark pilings of the wharf below her third floor apartment. Through the wide bay window she watched the rising sun dissipate the fog. A solitary herring gull effortlessly ascended a warm uplift of sea air.

"What was that poem about the island's sea? Something like: 'Here the tides flow and here they ebb ... not with that dull unsinewed tread of waters held under bonds ... but with a lusty stroke of life ... '". She could not remember all of Pratt's poem.

She took comfort from sea. The sea that would belong to no one, but was part of everyone who lived beside it, was restoring something in her.

She would leave Tom and Calgary behind. "Close the door on those memories and lock it," Susan advised.

Her coffee was getting cold. She walked into the small kitchen and refilled her cup. No sugar indulgence this time. She was pleased that she had limited herself to two glasses of red wine at last night's faculty reception. Too much wine could make the morning insufferable and she was starting to enjoy an early walk along the shore.

"Justin." His name came in a rush. Yesterday he sat at the back of the seminar room slouching, but alert and attentive. She recalled his hesitant smile that suggested he sensed his attractiveness to women, but was uncertain of it. High cheek bones. Short unkempt blonde hair.

"Maybe twenty-five?" Ardele guessed.

She was pleased to think of another man even if he was more than five years her junior. Pale blue eyes falling away from hers as he reached into his satchel and pulled out a black notebook. Long fingers holding the stub of a yellow pencil.

"I am awake and now is now," Ardele said pulling the light morning air through her nostrils. She breathed deeply.

"Now is now." It was a mantra. A mantra to dispel the confining drudgery and monotony that her marriage to Tom had become.

Tom demanded clockwork mornings.

“Time is money, Del.”

In one motion he shaved, showered, and dressed in the suit, shirt and matching tie always selected the night before. Breakfast – always the same breakfast – three slices of dry, white toast, a half grapefruit, a soft poached egg, two bacon slices – on the table when he came downstairs. The cutlery arranged with military precision left and right. Earl Grey tea steeping in the pot but not yet in the cup.

“That’s my girl.”

An orderly, regulated life.

Ardele shook her head and tucked her hair behind her right ear. “I am here.

Tom is in Calgary.”

The gull was lolling on the harbour swell. A ship’s bell tolled once.

“When a woman reaches the cool side of thirty she comes into her own,” Susan had said on one of their many long phone calls between St. John’s and Calgary. “And when she’s getting divorced ... well who knows what doors might open.” Susan knew. She’d been down this road.

Susan Baker. Trusted friend since childhood. How enthusiastic she had been years ago when Ardele had finally summoned the courage to ask her to read her first, awkward stories.

“You’ll be a writer someday.”

Susan Baker now Dr. Susan Baker. English Professor.

Ardele stepped into the shower. The warm water cascaded over her upturned face, her breasts, and belly. She turned her back into the water.

“Of course you’re unsettled, Ardele. Christ, you knew Tom for five years ... married for three .... You remember what the priest said .... For better or worse. And we’re Catholic for Christ’s sake. Well, raised Catholic. Listen ... why not come home for a while? Maybe I can work out something here at the University.”

And Susan had. The English Department was sponsoring a four week creative writing seminar. An e-mail from Susan invited Ardele to apply for an instructor's position. A month later she was hired.

Here she was - back on the island. Ensnared in a comfortable old York Street apartment. Riding the wave - well, wavelet, really - of her recent writing success.

Susan's administrative clout had opened this door, but the well-received publication of Ardele's collection of short stories and her forthcoming novella had ensured her the job. Her small literary reputation was building and that had been a problem for Tom.

'What's all this writing for Del? You're married now. All these stories about God knows what. Be sensible. Think about me. Some of this stuff is embarrassing. What are people going to say when they read this?' He was thinking about his lawyer colleagues.

"Tom, you're a fastidious, uptight prig," Ardele had retorted.

"Just be my wife. We can have anything we want."

Ardele's characters assaulted the boundaries of the ordinary and the commonplace in the hungry pursuit of ecstasy. Only the quotidian was on Tom's agenda.

"That stuff just doesn't count, Del. It has no purpose. It doesn't happen."

Even sex was on a schedule. Tuesdays and Saturdays. In the evening. There was a silent efficiency about it. Another plain and ordinary and purposive act. Like a habit. She thought of calling him Thomas Aquinas.

He wanted children. Ardele lied when he asked about the birth control pills. She would not be caught in the maternity trap.

Her writing had been the flash point where Tom's need for order and predictability exploded against her desire for creativity and improvisation. Her characters might seem rash and they sometimes suffered loss, but they were not pilloried by boredom.

Ardele stepped from the shower. She toweled herself dry. She decided not to dress immediately. She wanted to let her skin breathe. "I am here and now is now." Her wet skin felt ... well ... no matter how it felt ... she felt it ... was aware of the feeling of it and of the texture of the rug beneath her feet.

She'd shopped after yesterday's class. A stack of enticing yellow foolscap paper lay next to the pile of sharpened pencils on the oak table in the dining room.

She wrapped herself in a dry towel, poured another coffee, and sat down to write. For an hour the words flew and sometimes struggled onto the paper. The words felt liberating, clean, honest and real. She stopped writing at the point where she still knew where the story was going. Never write passed what you know. That was a cardinal rule. Obey it and your subconscious would tick away on what might happen next and when you returned to the page it would be there for you.

Satisfied, she noted the number of words she had written, and put the pages into her battered leather briefcase. Sealing away the writing of the day was another part of her writing ritual.

Tom had refused to accept it.

"I don't want you to read it, until it's finished," she had repeated. But Tom needed to know.

And then there was the night of the office celebration. Ardele tried to resist the memory, but she could not.

She had not even been certain what contract the law firm had landed.

Apparently she only needed to know it was big and involved one of Calgary's most powerful oil companies. The hearty back-slapping, zealous handshaking and college rah-rah drinking of Tom's colleagues seemed adolescent. It oppressed, and isolated her.

"The guys know how to party!"

"I have to get out of here."

"C'mon, Del. Get with the team," Tom had hissed angrily. "I could make partner out of this." He was flushed with success. "We can have anything we want."

An hour later she had called a cab from the office lobby. The Calgary streets were dark and deserted.



In bed, restless at two AM, she heard the front door open. Then silence. Then the taste of Scotch on Tom's mouth. She was dry. It hurt. She did not know why she did not resist. She told herself it was not rape.

The next morning she found her upturned briefcase on the study floor. Frantic she located her unfinished manuscript in the kitchen garbage. Several pages were soiled.

Through soundless and steely tears she decided she would not forgive.

And now she was in St. John's. Her writing was again in the briefcase and it was closed and safe. She would not allow anymore of this day to be dragged backward by the claws of memory.

Her hair was nearly dry. The new cut was low maintenance. "Lion hair," her hairstylist had called it meaning its colour. A few quick strokes of the brush and it fell easily and comfortably into place.

The Weather Channel promised 26 degrees of sunshine. From her closet she selected a flecked brown and white peasant dress that left her shoulders and arms bare. It hugged her breasts softly and fell freely to just above her ankles.

A tiger-eye necklace, three burnished copper bracelets for her left arm, and a silver chain bracelet for the right.

No watch.

Already the sun and sea air were bronzing her shoulders, arms, and legs and erasing the pale-white circle Tom's ring had imprinted on her finger.

When she turned the key the solid click of the lock of the door of her apartment was reassuring.

The car - purchased from her small separation agreement - retained its new car smell and she enjoyed moving through the gears as she drove to the campus. At the Bagel Café she ordered a whole wheat with light cream cheese.

She had a corner office. Borrowed space from a faculty member - Dr. Helen Carvery - who was on sabbatical. From her books she saw her specialty was the Romantics. Byron, Shelley, Keats. She remembered a course that Dr. Skanes taught and how, although she had argued her case, he had given her a B not the A she knew her paper on Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" deserved. She took a collection of Blake's poetry down from the shelf and read again, "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough."

She shifted the desk so that when she sat behind it the dappled light from the tree-lined walkway fell through the window and across her shoulders. Not intending to sit behind a desk when she tutored her students whom she considered fellow writers she borrowed a round table and two not uncomfortable plastic chairs from the faculty lounge. The worn sofa she pulled snugly against the book case on the long wall adjusting it so the door opened freely. Some greenery would be needed for the window ledge. A good place to work.

Susan opened the office door. Students were already milling around in the corridor.

“Moving in I see. Not a bad party last night as faculty parties go.”

“Good morning and thanks,” Ardele replied remembering Susan’s introduction to several faculty members.

“See you later. May be lunch?”

“May be.”

“Play it by ear.” Susan left the office door open.

He was sitting cross-legged in the corridor. Their eyes met. Pale sea blue against amber earthy brown.

He walked across the corridor, sandals slapping on the floor, tanned legs below cream-coloured knee length shorts. His satchel was hanging from his left shoulder; he pulled it in front of him, unzipped the front compartment and took out a single sheet of paper folded once in the middle.

“I wanted to show you this.”

He stood in the doorway. His fingers held the paper hesitantly.

“Justin ... Right?” Ardele said, surprised at her pretence of being unsure of his name.

“Right. It’s something that I wrote last summer.” He offered her the paper.

The fingers of her right hand grazed his fingers. “I’ll have a look at it. We can talk ... later.”

Justin smiled. One of his teeth was slightly askew from the others.

Ardele closed the door, sat on the sofa, and read:

*Of Fear*

*Of Fear*

*There are two kinds  
One that protects:  
One that destroys:*

*The first is a shield.  
The second is a wall.*

*Behind a shield  
find  
Courage and Grace.*

*Behind a wall  
find  
Frailty and Reluctance.*

*Of shields  
Maintain  
a vigilant grip.*

*They will  
move with you  
Rise  
In the Presence  
of Danger, and  
Affirm your life.*

*Of walls  
Construct  
an Unconditional End.*

*They will  
enclose you,  
Harden*

*At the Prospect  
of Opportunity, and  
Deny your life.*

“Well. Christ!” Ardele thought wondering what caused Justin to reflect on fear.

The bell rang. She laid Justin’s poem in the centre of her desk, picked up her class notes, and walked downstairs.

The classroom door was open. “Good Morning. I thought we’d get to know each other more today. Let’s start by moving these desks around. Straight rows don’t work. Let’s form a circle so we can see our faces. We’re all writers here and the quicker we dispense with formalities the better.”

Ardele moved a chair into the arc of the circle

“As I started to say let’s get to know one another. I’m Ardele Miller in case you’ve forgotten.” Her maiden name was still unusual on her tongue. “I’m from here. Grew up in Holyrood. Dad was a fisherman and a carpenter. Seven kids. Been away several years. Lived in Halifax and Calgary. I was a substitute teacher - High School English. I’ve published one book. A collection of stories - “Fidelities” - and there’s a small novel coming out soon

about an only daughter in a large Catholic family. Anybody read any of my stuff?"

One person had. "I liked your story about the affair between the man and the doctor he met on vacation. Well ... it wasn't really an affair. It only lasted a week." She was referring to "A Way It Might Have Been" from "Fidelities."

As they went round the room Ardele noted they were a mixed group. Some already published - two in literary magazines she recognized.

Justin mumbled that he wrote, "Poems mostly." Ardele could not decide if he was shy, or aloof. Was this a shield or a wall?

She talked about creative people needing support. She quoted Joseph Pearce: "To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong."

Justin remained inscrutable throughout the morning.

"Tuesday and Thursday afternoons are for tutorials," Ardele reminded the class.

"As you know my office is upstairs. We'll use that time on your work, or your plans for work. Feel free to make an appointment anytime. " She gave the class her office and apartment telephone numbers.

She looked at Justin.

“Want to come by around two?”

His reply came slowly. Again she sensed that perplexing combination of awkwardness and confidence.

“Two? Uh ... about my poem?”

Ardele nodded.

“Okay.”

The classroom emptied. A few stragglers remained to pass some pleasantries.

Susan was nowhere to be found. Ardele ate a small salad in the cafeteria and then strolled around the campus. It was her old campus, but the passage of time gave it a strange newness.

Just before two unlocking her office door she heard Justin’s sandals on corridor floor.



She turned and said, "On time. Come on in."

He walked passed her and sat on the sofa laying his satchel between his legs.

"Sorry about this morning," Justin gushed. "I get like that sometimes. I have lots of things in my head to say and I almost say them, but then I don't and time passes." His fingers played against one another rubbing.

"I didn't notice," Ardele said. She remembered suffering from the same inarticulateness. Her thoughts jumbling in her head. It was one of the reasons she turned to writing. Writing helped her see what she was thinking.

"But I must've seemed like a jerk. I wanted to tell you that I've read your book. I read it last year."

Ardele picked up "Of Fear" from her desk.

"And I read you this morning."

She sat on one of the plastic chairs pulling it forward. She crossed her legs, tucked her hair behind her ear, smiled, and handed the poem to him.

“I like this. Tell me about it.”

And Justin began to talk. His words flowed as he shared his experience of writing. He wanted to be a writer, not only for the writing although that was important and satisfying, but for what the writing did for him.

“It’s like when I look at something, or listen to someone, and think ‘I could use this – write about this.’ It’s like I am suddenly there more. Seeing more. Hearing more. The thought of writing about it makes it come alive.” He laughed. “You know?”

Ardele did know. In Calgary she had often escaped to a downtown café carrying her journal in which she tried to capture the way a customer opened the door, the smell of espresso in the cup on the wooden table, or the content of a dream. Writing and awareness were definitely connected.

“Will I write about this one day?” she thought watching Justin relax into his own words. He crossed his left ankle over his knee his toes stretching in his sandals.

“So what prompted this piece?”

He looked at the paper which was now on the sofa on his left and picked it up.

“A friend of mine had a motorcycle accident. I ride too. Not serious. Her accident I mean. Too much front brake and her bike went down. Her helmet stopped her face from getting smashed. Her hands were torn by the pavement. And her head got a banging. They kept her in hospital for three days. She was still scared when I went to see her. Her helmet was on the table they have between the hospital beds and she kept talking about how broken the front of it was and about how that could have been her face. She said she’d never ride again.”

He paused.

“So that started me on writing this.”

They talked about how fear was neither the shield nor the wall but the thing that made them. They considered changing the verb in the second stanza.

“I think the story before the poem is interesting,” Ardele opined. “Why not write that? I mean you ride so you know about that and you could remember one of your own rides and put that into it.”

Justin said he would think about it.

“What kind of motorcycle do you have?”

“Magna 750. Great machine. I’ve had it four summers. You ride?”

“Not for years.” Ardele remembered how Tom had loved his motorcycle until graduating from law school and joining the Calgary firm and trading all that for a closet full of suits.

“No, not for years.”

“Like to? I mean some day. We could take a run around the bay?” Justin was jerked back by his forwardness. “I mean ... you know ... just ...”

“Sure,” Ardele interrupted. “Now, I should get ready for tomorrow’s class.”

Justin stretched out his hand. His palm warm and smooth against hers.

“Thanks.”

Ardele watched him open the door. His blonde hair curled over his shirt collar at the back.

She sat behind her desk and began reviewing her class notes. Thinking what it would be like to be on the back of a motorcycle again made concentrating difficult.

“Pillion position the English call it.”

She wrote that night. She put long spaces between each word so that she could think of each word. Almost three hundred words. She tucked the nine pages into her briefcase, and went to bed. She fell asleep swiftly.

She did not hear the soft rain that fell over night cleaning the stifling humidity from the air and leaving the pavements fresh and black in the morning.

She woke at six. She had a vague recollection of a dream in which she had been running with a pride of lions. They had come to a slow-moving stream and looking into the water, drinking, each of the animals had clearly seen its reflection, but she could not see hers. She had had the same dream in Calgary, but now the images were grainy like an early black and white silent film.

She decided to walk around the nearby lake. A light mist promising a hot day hovered over the water as she strode the gravel path. The mist muffled the oar sound of two racing shells as their crews practiced for the upcoming Regatta.

The morning coffee was black and sweet. The phone rang just as she found her keys. "I've got to find a definite place to put these."

"Hello."

"I hope I'm not calling too early. I figured you were an early riser. I was wondering if you were free this afternoon for that motorcycle ride. The forecast is good and we could go out around Marine Drive." Justin said all of this in one breath without pausing or saying hello. His words sounded formal like he had been rehearsing them.

"Well, I haven't been free for a long time, Justin, but I want to be."

It was Wednesday – no afternoon appointments. He would pick her up at the apartment.

"See you in class."

At lunch Susan said, “There’s something different about you today. Like the old Ardele is back. What’s happening?”

Ardele shrugged and steered the conversation to the more mundane. “I was talking to Mom. She said that Frank and Jane and the kids are coming down in early August. Be good to see them. She still asks about Tom.”

On her way back to York Street she cranked the car’s air conditioning to the maximum. The heat made her regret the pin-striped slacks and high-collared blouse she had worn that morning.

Walking from the car to the sidewalk and up to her front door she felt a centipede of sweat scurry between her shoulders. The apartment was stifling. She tried several windows; three opened. She turned on the overhead fan.

Stepping from a cool shower, eyes shut, reaching for a towel she felt exhilarated like the world was cracking open. The thick, blue towel was sumptuous. The chaotic pattern of water droplets on her skin was fascinating. Her body felt free and light.

She wandered the apartment.

“That child never wants to wear clothes, I swear. Remember when she ran out of the house and onto the road without a stitch?” It was her mother’s voice.

Her Dad nodded and laughed. He was the libertarian in the family and the magic freedom of her childhood had been granted and supported by him. She was two then and the naked run to the middle of the village road had become a family legend.

“Gotta wear something, but it’s hot. Dammit.”

She pulled on a pair of denim shorts. Soft. Pre-faded blue. A just beginning raggedness to the cuff. She fastened the three copper buttons at the front. She didn’t need a belt. She pulled a khaki long sleeved T-shirt over her head.

In the full length mirror through her brown sunglasses she was pleased with what she saw.

“Definitely minimalist,” she said fastening her sports sandals.

The door bell rang.



Outside the door's glass panel she saw Justin in jeans and a white ribbed T-shirt, a helmet in his hand. She opened the door.

The heat struck her legs and face. He handed her the black helmet.

"This should fit."

She pulled it on and he helped fasten the buckle. She snugly tightened the strap below her chin.

"Let's go."

The leather seat was warm against the inside of her thighs. Justin's long legs supported the bike comfortably while her feet found the riding pegs below the two small leather saddle bags. She relaxed against the ample back rest.

The engine hesitated and then throbbed into life.

"I've always felt that motorcycling was the next best thing to flying," she shouted.

“Me too,” Justin responded and they pulled into the street heading down Torbay Road and out of town. He turned the throttle and geared up. She held his hips lightly with each hand.

He pulled the bike smoothly to a stop at the first traffic light. Turning his head he said, “I thought we could head out to the coast.” He spoke above the engine rumble. “It’ll be cooler out there.”

“Towards Flat Rock?” she said naming a village around the bay. “That’s a great road. Lots of twists and bends.”

The light changed. Over his shoulder she watched him ease the clutch out.

There had not been much traffic and as they left the city it thinned even more. Justin shifted into fifth gear. The air cooled as it rushed by. The pavement sped beneath their feet. She shifted her hands aware of the tautness of his belly.

The road rose as they reached the coastline. It traced each inlet and cove.

Leaning into each bend and turn was a delight. Ardele easily matched the rhythms of Justin’s body.

An onshore breeze wrinkled the ocean swell.

Way out on the flat horizon a bulky freighter crawled the edge of the world.

Large, cumbersome, white-crested waves tumbled onto the pebbled beaches beneath the granite cliffs.

They climbed up in the shadow of a steep hill, leaned together into the turn as the road bent left at the crest, and sped once again into the sunlight down the other side.

“You can ride,” she said complimenting his easy skill with the machine. He did not answer.

She thought of other rides on earlier times with Tom when he was in law school and she was paying the bills by substitute teaching. She shrugged off the memory.

Justin spotted ahead and to the right a paved viewing area overlooking the ocean. He glanced over his shoulder and indicated that they might pull over.

“Yeah. Okay,” she nodded.

They banked the bike into the empty space.

Justin lowered the foot stand and stepped off. Ardele followed and hung her helmet over the left mirror.

Her back and legs were stiff. Arms over her head and looking out over the sea she stretched long and languorously skyward. The gesture felt like an ancient prayer. The pavement was warm beneath her feet. She turned back to the bike.

“I brought some bread and some cheese and a little wine. Want some?”

“You think of everything.”

Justin was in his place here on this high promontory overlooking the blue Atlantic. Heat waves rose from the cycle engine and rippled the air.

In the left saddlebag the wine was wrapped in a damp cloth to maintain its coolness. The bread was a crusty baguette broken in two pieces - the cheese ordinary cheddar.

“Even a corkscrew,” he said handing her the wine in its wrapper and carrying the baguette, cheese, and a rolled blanket.

They stepped over the low guard rail that edged the viewing area and onto the long grass that covered the point as it fell gradually towards the cliff and the ocean. They walked forward. The tall grass tormented by an easterly breeze bent beneath their feet.

Near the cliff edge the ground fell away into a grass-covered hollow that allowed a full view of the expanse of ocean, but was hidden from the highway above. It reminded Ardele of the secret places she had sought, found, and luxuriated in as a child escaping into the solitude of her own imaginings.

“Perfect,” she said and took the blanket roll from Justin.

The grass in the hollow was much shorter. The breeze caught the corner of the blanket and Justin trapped it beneath his foot. Ardele anchored the opposite corner with the wine bottle and sat down.

He removed his leather boots and tucked his socks inside them.

“Too warm for these,” he said lowering himself at her side. He leaned up on one elbow and gazed over the ocean.

They fell silent. Ardele lay on her back. The grass was sweetly cool through the blanket. One piling cloud hung high and suspended in the late afternoon sky.

The bank of the hollow above and behind them cut the breeze and the shadow of the bank fell diagonally across her face leaving her legs, her torso, her arms in the warmth of the sunlight. She closed her eyes.

They did not speak for several minutes. The silence was not awkward. The silence contained them. The silence was surrounded by the susurrus beat of the sea on the pebbled beach. Pratt’s sea.

Ardele felt Justin reach across her and retrieve the wine. She heard the cork leave the bottle. She felt herself enter a ceremonial space. Something was being given back to her.

When she opened her eyes Justin was offering her the wine.

“No glasses, I’m afraid.”

The wine was Sancerre. The chill of it made the bottle wet. She took a long, slow draft. The wine's cool whiteness, sharp and clear, flowed over her tongue. She held it a moment in her mouth before swallowing.

"Now your turn."

"Sancerre," he said. "Nothing like it."

Ardele removed her glasses. She smiled and decided not to think of the way she might feel tomorrow. She felt an easy confidence and knew that she could rest in it. She felt vulnerable but knew that this time there was strength in it.

Bodies in the sunlight.

Awakening.

Now.

