

P R A X I S

Sometimes Clara thinks a family is just an excuse for cruelty. Usually she thinks this after she and Jacob have fought about something, if she's had to take him to bed by the ear, or he won't finish his supper and she refuses to let him watch *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* in retaliation. But that feeling, the one in the pit of her stomach when she's afraid she's acting like her mother or father, doesn't last long. Sometimes she thinks it isn't fair to herself, sometimes she thinks it isn't fair to her parents. "Lay down," she says, like she's talking to a skittish animal familiar with her voice. More often than not, it does.

Clara was twenty-two when her mother left for good, moving back to St. Lawrence where she found a job tending bar at the Legion Hall. It didn't pay much, but she was saving her tips toward a trip somewhere, maybe Florida, maybe the Grand Canyon, she hadn't decided yet. Clara was working at the Company staff office in Black Rock and had a place of her own by this point. Eric was teaching English as a Second Language somewhere in South America, Columbia or Ecuador, she couldn't remember which.

Clara and Jacob moved back in with her father after he had spent a couple of months on his own. If anyone asked, she said she was trying to save money, but the truth was she didn't

think her father was capable of taking care of himself. He seemed to deflate slightly after the break-up, his customary bluster and coldness shifted to something more like bewilderment. He went on working at the mine, spending his free time drinking at the Union Hall or lost in the television. But there were days when he sat staring blankly for hours, as if he were going over his whole life, piece by piece, trying to fit it together in a way that might make sense of things.

When Clara does this, when she tries to make a story of it with a beginning, a middle and an end, she comes back to one October afternoon during the '72 strike as the point where she felt it coming apart for good. She'd just come home from school, her father was on shift at the picket line. Her mother was usually cooking supper by this time, or watching "As The World Turns" in the living room with a cigarette and a gingerale, but there was no sign of her. Clara called to her as she pulled off her shoes in the porch. She walked into the kitchen over the cool linoleum in her white stocking feet, her hand reaching automatically for the door of the refrigerator, calling again.

She remembers the shock of the unexpected resistance, the weird metallic rattle. There was a length of chain looped through the door-handle; a cheap padlock from the Imperial General Store held it around the thick waist of the refrigerator, the soft lips of the door clamped shut.

The walk-out at the mine was well into its fifth month. Negotiations broke down after the first two weeks, with each side blaming the other for leaving the table. The strikers and

their families were surviving on sixty dollars a month, plus two dollars a week per child. The Premier of Newfoundland, facing increasing unpopularity and a looming election, became the first government official to publicly criticize the Company's labour practices since the mine was established in the 1920s. In the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, he referred to ASSAMCo as a "nineteenth-century company" and "a poor corporate citizen," hoping to goad management back to the table and score points with voters, without success on either count.

The strikers set up stone barricades at the dam and picketed the main entrance twenty-four hours a day. Over a period of weeks, all the windows in the Company's office buildings were broken out. After a train caboose was burnt to the wheels by strikers, two dozen RCMP officers were dispatched from St. John's to assist the single policeman stationed in town.

The Company printed up a flyer and sent it around to every house in town. The union-management relationship, it said, was akin to a marriage—complicated but mutually beneficial—and it was in the best interests of both parties if problems were discussed rationally and openly. They appealed to people's sense of decency, requesting that level-heads prevail during these difficult times.

No one had ever heard of such a thing. The union grieved the flyer as a breach of the collective bargaining process. Clara's father found it amusing and infuriating at the same time. He sat at the kitchen table in his white undershirt, his free hand circling the bald pate of his head as he read and re-read the flyer. "They're right about the marriage thing, the bastards," he said finally. "They've been screwing us for years and now they're in for one hell of a spat."

Clara assumes that's where her mother got the idea, but she's only guessing.

Her mother's best friend, Charlene Pottle, answered the phone when Clara called. "Betty," Charlene said over her shoulder, "it's Clara."

"You tell your father," her mother said, "that I don't cook another meal, and I don't spend another night in that house until he books a ticket to Florida. You just tell him that."

It wasn't travel her mother wanted, Clara thinks, so much as escape. Florida was just a word, the name of some place she'd never been. She'd always spoken of it in a wistful "what if" way as she washed dishes or put away a bag full of groceries. Clara's father didn't even acknowledge the request, absently scratching at his forearm or leaning toward the television screen to hear the weather forecast. Something ignored long enough, he believed, would go away eventually.

Their summer vacations didn't vary from one year to the next. They visited her father's mother near Harbour Grace, and her mother's parents in St Lawrence. Then they crossed the island to spend a week camping in the Codroy Valley. Hours cooped up in the car, her mother and father in the front seat like diplomats from countries involved in an ongoing dispute. Clara began conversations about anything neutral, the condition of the road, towns they passed through. She initiated travel games: who could be the first to guess the colour of approaching cars, the next out-of-province license plate? Even these eventually dissolved into arguments, or sly and petty insults about eyesight.

Eric, as usual, was lost in a book, or was sleeping with his head against a window, his glasses perched precariously at the end of his nose. His blank face shook with the rough movement of the car, as if he was experiencing a mild epileptic seizure. Sometimes Clara felt like slapping his glasses off his face.

They reached the park just after dusk. Eric and her father set up the camper, while Clara helped her mother cook a meal by the hissing light of a gas lantern. "This isn't a vacation," she'd say to Clara, standing over a frying pan on the Coleman stove, waving away mosquitos with the metal spatula. As far as she was concerned, camping was much like the rest of her life, with fewer conveniences. "What I wouldn't give for a decent beach," she muttered.

The Valley was a series of low rolling fields that was clear of the broken stone and tangle of roots that covered almost the entire island. Summer storms off the Gulf of St. Lawrence were common, without so much as a shrub to offer shelter from the gale force winds that threatened to topple tents and campers. Every other year, it seemed, her father and Eric would have to climb out into a vicious thunder storm and lash ropes over the top of the camper to keep it upright. Clara would never admit it to her mother, but she was exhilarated by those nights: the pistol shot crack of canvas on the camper frame, the dark rumble of thunder. All four of them lay awake, not speaking, both separated and connected by the noise and the darkness.

She looked forward to the cool evenings spent outside beside a fire after supper was cleared away, the night closing over them like a tarp of black felt. Eric tormented his father into singing the old songs, joining in on the choruses of the

ones he remembered, "The Star of Logy Bay" and "Lukey's Boat," bits and pieces of "The Kelligrew's Soiree." Even her mother, who grew up singing in the United Church choir, accompanied them on a few, adding a warbly harmony to her father's almost tuneless voice; the shadows and moving light of the flames on her face bringing a younger face to the surface. Sometimes they would be joined by people from neighbouring campsites, a stranger walking out of the darkness into the red glow of the fire carrying a guitar and a lawn chair or an open bottle of beer, drawn to the music like moths to a candle.

Clara knew it was her father's stubbornness that kept them returning to the Valley, but there were things about it she'd come to enjoy. Eventually, she learned to dismiss her mother's complaints in much the same way her father did.

And then there was the chain on the fridge, the streaks of grease it had dragged across the cool white surface. Clara stared at it as she waited for her father to come home from the picket line. She thought of her mother's anger and how strong it must have been, how often she must have pegged it down, roped herself tight to avoid being carried away by the force of it.

Clara's brother had always been more aloof from the family battles than she could manage, retreating to his room with a book, losing himself in the American Civil War or the French Revolution. Clara wasn't as shrewd or as self-absorbed and she became a kind of envoy between her parents, a child forced into an impossible adult role.

Her relationship with Eric, on the other hand, was predictably, almost relentlessly, ordinary, at least on the surface.

He was four years older and they had little to do with one another. Their interactions tended to be brief and amicable, as if they were tenants of neighbouring apartments. But there was also something clandestine and unspoken between the two, something covert.

At eleven and a half, Clara bloodied her bed sheets and woke up screaming for her mother. She'd heard rumours at school, vague comments in washrooms about pads and spotting, but she had no idea what they meant. She could tell it was something secret and unpleasant, something as illicit as sex, but definitely to be avoided if possible. Leona Quinlan said it had something to do with babies, but that was as much as she knew.

Her mother didn't say a word when she came into Clara's bedroom, just shook her head solemnly, her once delicate features creased by a bruised look of disapproval. She brought her daughter to the bathroom and put a box of belted pads in her hand. "Read the instructions," she said and went out, pulling the door shut behind her.

That afternoon, Eric placed a book under her pillow, something he'd found at the public library called *Almost Thirteen*. There were pencil drawings of boys and girls with and without pubic hair, chapters on dating and sex, discussions about wet dreams and menstruation. She imagined him sneaking it up to the desk among a stack of history books, one about Napoleon maybe and one about the Great Irish Potato Famine, Mrs. Tucker looking furtively up at him over the rim of her spectacles before she stamped the return date in the back.

In her last year of high school, the year she had her first steady boyfriend, Eric had given her a copy of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* as a graduation present. There was an

envelope marked "Open in Private!" between the pages. Inside she found three condoms in their square tin-foil wrappers. She remembers the embarrassment of his conspiratorial consent, the shame of it. And she remembers thinking about what he didn't know, what no one knew yet but her.

It was Eric who got her through the worst of the pregnancy. And it was Eric who supported her when she refused to marry the father, something both her parents had insisted on.

In the face of their parents' ongoing hostilities and sulking retreats, Clara and her brother had discovered a bond, an unusual sense of solidarity. Much later, Eric said it had been his first experience with class analysis. "There's no substitute for praxis," he said. Honest to God, Clara thought, sometimes it's like he speaks a different language.

What brought her mother home was the strike.

When her father finished his shift on the picket line that afternoon, he sat at the kitchen table, buffing the shiny pate of his crown with his palm and shaking his head in amazement. Even to suggest a vacation in the middle of a strike was ludicrous, inconceivable. They could barely afford to feed themselves. He seemed almost pleased by his wife's outrageous behaviour, the desperation of it, the uselessness.

Eventually he resolved to wait her out, to carry on as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He decided to warm up a can of soup for their supper, but when he went to the cupboard he found it had been glued shut. Every cupboard in the kitchen was sealed, including the cutlery drawers.

"And a good goddamn thing too," he yelled, growing

more and more furious as he moved from one door to another, "because if I could get my hands on a knife right now I'd have her black heart for supper!" Clara tried to calm him down, but only succeeded in making things worse. "Don't you go taking her side in this!" he told her. He slammed out the door and headed for the Portle's place. Clara sat on the floor in the kitchen, fighting an almost uncontrollable urge to cry. She thought of calling her brother in St. John's, but she had no idea what to tell him.

She was still sitting there when her father walked back in the door. Charlene's husband had intercepted him as he'd arrived: Betty didn't want to talk to her husband at the moment, Lester Portle told him. He should go home and try to cool down, Lester said. Her father didn't speak or acknowledge Clara for the rest of the night. He sat alone in the cold blue light of the television, a furious silence hedging his body like the aureole of a star.

There was a lot of talk about it on the picket line after that. The union's strike fund was almost depleted and the first weeks of collective rage had settled into a more sullen and less-focused sense of frustration. There were shoving matches over cigarettes, vehement arguments pitting the skills of the current Montreal Canadiens against those of the 60s' Maple Leafs.

Her father and Lester had to be moved to separate shifts on the line and one by one the other men began taking sides. Most of them felt Lester had no right to interfere in a private dispute and should send Clara's mother home. Others thought he had no real say in the matter and was just making the best of a bad situation. The debate threatened to break down the little collective resolve the men had left.

Even the kids at school were talking about it. Leona Quinlan passed on the gossip during recess as they shared a cigarette behind the school. "Jackie Houtman says something must be going on between your mother and Mr. Pottle," Leona said. Clara took a long helpless drag, feeling the smoke curl to the bottom of her lungs and burrow in there. "And Rod Harris says no, there must be something going on between your mother and Mrs. Pottle." Leona shook her head. "I think I'd die if my parents were that weird," she said.

A week after her mother had locked the refrigerator shut, Clara came home from school to find her in the kitchen cooking supper. "There are some things," she said, "that are more important than Florida." And nothing more was said about it. When her father came home that evening, he sat down at the table without a word.

Clara thinks everyone knew it was only a temporary truce. That no one was surprised when it finally happened. Her parents didn't speak at all after the divorce went through. Clara kept in touch by telephone, but her mother didn't even ask after her father. He stood over Clara during the weekly calls just to make sure his life didn't become a topic of conversation.

Even after the tests confirmed the cancer, he refused to allow Clara to tell her mother what was happening. Sometimes she thought her father just didn't want to give her mother the satisfaction; other times she thought he wanted to be spared the pity. There was nothing to be done but wait, the doctors said. Too many years of cigarettes, too many shifts in the mine.

Clara was alone with him when he died. She stood at his side, brushing her hand against the hair on his forearm, its slight resistance against her fingers a small, physical comfort. He had been drugged into a state of near unconsciousness for the last hours of his life and even before he passed away Clara thought his face seemed strangely vacant against the blank hospital pillow, his body under the white sheets like a crate emptied of its contents. It made her think of a night in the Valley as she was making her way to bed in the camper, looking back at him from the doorway, at his silhouette between her and the fire. It was the first time she saw what it was her mother had been attracted to: a regular income, a silence she would have taken for maturity. His body was featureless, a bulk of darkness outlined by the fire's dark light.

Clara was laid off later that year. The entire night shift had been cut before she was let go, rumours had been circulating for weeks that more lay-offs were coming. Most people said there were less than five years left in the mine and then the whole thing would be shut down. The strike in '72 turned out to be the last protracted labour dispute at the Black Rock mine. All the Company needed, people said, was an excuse to pull out early and cut their losses and the union wasn't willing to provide one.

Clara decided to move into her grandmother's house near Harbour Grace which had been sitting empty since her death, and had been left to her by her father. Her mother drove up to help pack for the move. She sat with Jacob in her lap, running her fingers through his short brown hair. "What are you going

to do for work out there?" she wanted to know. "Why don't you and Jake come stay with me?"

"I'll find something," Clara told her.

"It's Jacob you have to think about now," her mother said, "not yourself. What a single woman with a six year old is going to find out there I don't know. If you had gotten married to his father."

"Mom," Clara said, "we've been through this."

"Well, the boy needs a father," she said sternly. "He needs a family."

Clara slapped a handful of plates into a box. "And is that what you were thinking when you left, Betty? What about our family?"

Her mother stiffened in the chair, lifted Jacob off her lap and stood up. "I didn't leave until you and your brother were on your own," she said. "Until you had something for yourselves. It wasn't you two I walked out on." She moved her hands down her thighs to straighten her skirt and Clara thought she was about to leave, but her mother simply turned her back and began packing cookbooks into a box.

Clara had found an envelope among the few papers her father set aside before he died, sealed and addressed in his shaky handwriting: *To Betty*. When her mother opened it after the funeral she didn't say a word, didn't even remove the contents. She passed it to Clara and left the room for a long time. Inside the envelope was an airline ticket to Florida. Clara knew her mother was too stubborn to use it, that she'd worked too hard to find her own way out. And in that respect, at least, she was just like her daughter.

Jacob stood on a chair at the counter beside Clara. He was

industrious and competent in a childish way, taking exaggerated care with each glass as he wrapped it. She thought of how she had spent the first months of her pregnancy ignoring him, wishing he would disappear. That memory scraped at the delicate skin of tenderness she felt for him until it was raw, until it was almost a new thing altogether. He was singing quietly to himself and as she watched him Clara felt like a stranger walking out of darkness into the spare, comforting light of a fire. She reached out her hand, touching the bare nape of his neck as gently as she knew how.