

ANDRÉ NARBONNE

MY MOTHER IS IN SHADOW AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS

MY MOTHER IS IN SHADOW at the top of the stairs. She reaches into the darkened bedroom, touches the switch on the wall, and light picks up the dust at her feet. This is what she was working on, she tells me; the folding cupboard door was loose and she was fitting a hinge.

I remember at Christmas how difficult the door was. It hadn't occurred to me to do anything about it. Difficult doors are difficult doors. Home for holidays, you don't do anything about them.

She indicates the pile of sawdust, draws a broom from behind the door. "I was sweeping, when I realized."

"Realized how?"

"Too fast. I could tell it wouldn't slow down. Like that time before." She means her pulse.

Downstairs, we tour the living room. The phone book is open on the couch. "When I called St. Stephen ..." she says, holding it for me. I nod. Blue pages. Ambulance. Not the first time.

It continues for a while. In the several rooms of a large farmhouse, we tour the day she might have died. It's been a long trip from Ontario, and I hate to fly, but I'm the most available of my siblings, so I'm the one who has to see her through this transition from critical care to home. I am struck by her sense of audience. She is imagining what it would be like to have found her and to then investigate the circumstance of her death. We are detectives, in a way.

"See here," she says, and points to a five-gallon pail of water resting several steps away from a still-leaking roof. "I couldn't get any further."

"No seventy-eight-year-old should have tried." She shoots me a look and I add, "That's just my opinion."

We arrive at a tin of dog food on the kitchen floor by the wood stove. "The vitamins are wasted now. The neighbour's been feeding her. He didn't know I'd mixed this."

This is her life. She's teaching me, coaching me in the semiotics of her quotidian routine, preparing me for a time when she won't explain. I have a sense of *déjà vu*, remember how she taught me to spell the word "cat" the night before my first kindergarten class. It seemed to take longer than church, but my mother soldiered on, forgiving my ignorance until, at last, I could form the letters correctly.

A skeleton on a page, the word remained fleshless to me—we didn't have a cat.

It was a very long road into the wilderness, and it struck me on the way from the airport that I was traveling on two roads, not one. A trip to my mother's is a trip into my own past. I have been here so often since she and my stepfather bought the farm in the eighties. I was eighteen then, naïve and of necessity strong. I am professional now. Seeing the world in fixed and definable measures is my weakness.

My parents planned to farm the land, but were unlucky. Thirty years after my stepfather died in a car accident with the last payment for the property in his pocket, my mother, who never remarried, stays on as the sole tenant of their dreams. One year she planted a crop of Christmas trees but, with her usual impulsiveness, decided to travel during the winter the trees were marketable, and instead of a crop ended up with a forest. I like this about her. I would have stayed and cut down the trees. I wouldn't have been able to stop myself.

In the morning, I dig out the front door. There's been a blizzard—appropriately keeping time with her discharge from the hospital—and I escape the house through the garage to retrieve a shovel barely visible in the white. Half an hour later, the front door cleared and the car dug out, we could leave if we had somewhere to go. It's a possibility and possibilities are important.

She doesn't want to leave.

She tells me about the neighbour's mother, who was put into a home against her will. "She always thought she'd come back." Such a bad son. She cared for him into her nineties and when she could care for him no more ...

The New Brunswick woods, it turns out, were once filled with strong, wilful women, who were sent by ungrateful children to their deaths into government care.

She tells me about the ones she knows while serving supper: a concoction involving chicken for which there will never be a recipe. As a child,

I disliked her inventions, and her cooking hasn't improved.

After supper, I carry armfuls of wood and make a six-foot-high pile by her wood furnace. It might last two weeks. Everything I do is provisional. I clear ice from her roof. I empty her buckets. The ice will be back. The roof will leak. The buckets will fill. You can't stop nature. No amount of labour will lead to a moral result. The end will never know anything about a family's concern or good wishes.

Before bed we walk the oldest of her two dogs. Ruffia is deaf and worse: she defecates in the garage, which is her dog house. She used to be protective and loud. Now she wears what looks like an expression of embarrassment, or perhaps that's my projection. She ambles stilts-like on arthritic back legs. No vitamins can help, but my mother buys them anyway. We walk slowly so Ruffia can keep up. We never look back. It's my mother's rule. If Ruffia wants to she can turn around and return to the garage. There's no shame. It might not matter to Ruffia's sense of propriety whether or not we see her dropping out. She may be blind. The walk is for my mother's sake, mostly. Exercise keeps her pulse down, and her pulse is a runaway train inside her veins.

There's no traffic on our dirt, now ice, road. The immediate world is a portrait of serenity, the bordering trees heavy with whiteness against a black, black sky. It's a bad joke I told my wife—then, girlfriend—the first time I brought her to the farm: "In New Brunswick, no one can hear you scream." (She wasn't impressed.) But my mother's farm feels that way at night. Quiet like outer space. I have never feared the dark here in this place where I have been most aware of it.

I keep asking my mother if she wants to continue or to go back.

"We'll go on," she says every time.

Then: "They want me to live in a home."

Is she asking or telling?

"Who?"

"Your brothers and sisters."

"They didn't say. What was agreed was that I take a couple days off work to help you settle in."

"I get to decide where I'll die."

It occurs to me suddenly, painfully, that for the first time in our lives, my mother is afraid of me.

Breakfast is smoothies. My mother blends any fruit she can lay hands on—ripe or rotten—with soy milk, blends it for no set time, while I light the wood furnace, feed chickens and dogs, split wood. At breakfast I take my lumps. She offers me a straw like I'm still four, but I exchange it for a spoon. Afterwards she takes me into the basement and we winterize half the house. She knows the pipes and I follow her instructions, close valves, drain water. It's a concession to me. I cannot represent the family's wishes without insisting she slow down.

"I'm not afraid of death," she assures me, and I hope that's true. She's something of a pro at it, having already died once. Three years ago, she was revived on the operating table.

Afterwards, she told me, "I didn't really mind. Everyone there was so nice."

The obvious questions were "who" and "where," but I didn't interrogate her further for fear of being myself able to rationalize her experience. I prefer death the way she narrated it: as something mystical and yet certain, something certainly kind.

I am getting ready to go and my mother is negotiating money with the neighbour, who will drive me to the airport, which is too far for her to drive. I will not leave feeling guilty. That's my rule. Nothing of my labour will remain within a week. I don't mind. I have the satisfaction that only comes from having done something temporary. Love, friendship, companionship—these, too, are temporary. They last while we live.

Ruffia is at the bottom of the stairs. She manages to climb half way, which is no small feat, and I meet her with my bag. She stares at me blankly. Kneeling, I look into her eyes. I have no idea whether she is looking back. I pat her head mechanically. She doesn't wag her tail. She has known me all her life. I don't know what she thinks. I follow her back downstairs.

At the car, my mother and I hug.

"I should be allowed to decide where I'll die."

This is her good-bye? Her jaw set, she is waiting for an argument.

And I am incompetent. I am dull when a creative response is required.

I am aware that we don't know what loss is until it happens. Our pain makes us real. Sometime in the future, my mother will make me real. Reality is temporary, too. I'll beat the sensation back into my personal fictions eventually, and every time I remember having done so I'll feel sorry.

I say, "Yes. If this is where you want to die, then I think it's a good place, too," which are the only words I can find to express my love.

"You'll eat the lunch I packed?"

"Yes."

"Do you promise?"

"I promise." We kiss foreheads.

Then I am gone, and her life continues. Unlike all those other times, I keep my promise and I eat the lunch.