

Chicken Soup

March 3 1982

The world flickered in two beaming white headlights: a stream of slanting white falling flakes surrounded by darkness. The engine whirred and spluttered and finally died in exhausted silence. And now only the howling wind and the headlight world and the angular snow.

A story, I suppose, would start something like that. Really, there was no poetry in that slanted snow, no anthropomorphic guttural splutter from the engine, and when I finally decided to climb out, there was no turning off the world, only the headlights.

At that point, pulling up the hood on my parka, pulling up the zipper, as I trudged through that damn moaning prairie storm, I think I was angry more than anything else. I think I was silently cursing Tom for selling me such a piece of junk. I think I was cursing myself for buying it. It was only after a while that I thought, in one of those trailing off ways, that prairie storms kill. . . .

So the snow swallowed every step. The road invisible, following a line of telephone poles, the ghosts of petrified trees, shrouded in white blankets, carrying unheard voices along unseen lines like some weird psychic communication. Shit . . . Perspiration cling to my face. Cling to my face and make me a mask.

Sooner or later I tumbled, lay in the snow, exhausted, feeling the fingers of cold creep over my skin. Almost content in all that frozen idleness, gasping white breath. There was an idea in the back of my head, moving forward, of course, an idea that this would be my final hello. Think of the Arctic-

surely you've heard of the Arctic—think of cold so cold it burns and think of creeping numbness. You get the idea. Bravo. This was no melodrama. This was no neurotic woman out for a winter's wander and going round the bend. Hell, there is no bend on the prairies.

It seemed awfully easy just to stay put, to lay there and rest; still, I dragged myself out of the snow and onward I trudged, with every step the last step. I think I even forgot to watch the shadowy telephone poles. I think all I did was just keeping taking that last step. Pretty damn eventually there was a light off to one side. Again, in a story, I would almost stagger passed, ready to swoon, perhaps hearing the bark of a dog and catching a glimpse of the light at the last minute. In fact, of course, I saw the light quite early, despite the slanting snow, walked up what was perhaps a driveway. It was a porch light, a naked bulb above the door. More light crept around the edges of dark curtains. I was dwarfed by the house, wood frame, wood siding, wood windows for all I could tell. A big old looming barn in the background. Well, actually, at the time it reminded me of nothing: it was, in my spinning head, just something built around a roaring log fire, a container for hot soup, an enormous blanket box.

I knocked on the door. My mittens muffled the knock and the storm muffled my mittens. I pushed—once I noticed it—the bell button. And then the door opened, a crack, only a crack, and an old woman peered out.

"Hello. My car's broken down—could I use your telephone?" Well, I could hardly ask for a place by the fire with a blanket and a bowl of chicken soup. She seemed, the old woman, to peer a moment too long. I was just thinking it must be some prairie thing, some unfriendly weariness fostered by flat

isolation and Arctic storm, when her wrinkled old face forced itself into a smile and the door pulled open.

"Come in, my dear, come in. You look frozen."

"I am. I walked for miles."

"Oh, you poor *thing*."

I was in. The only thing I noticed, at least at first, was the warmth. She dragged me into the living room, actually pushed me into a chair by that imaginary log fire.

"Sit down. There, that's it. Cook yourself up a bit. Go on, cook yourself up."

Again, I thought this must be some other prairie thing. Strange too how I seem to remember every word she said, word for word, with her way of talking that reminded me of a vulture pulling at bits of meat: her phrases stretched a certain length and then snapped off, arbitrarily, a strangely placed caesura while the meat was swallowed.

"There you are. Wrap this blanket around you, that'll keep you warm and cooking. Off I go, to fetch some nice hot chicken soup."

So there I was, cooking myself up. She was some body's grandma: she had bought all her furniture from some old grandma shop, you know, where everything is thread-bare or scratched or chipped; where everything is beige-grey and held together by knitted dust. The fire flared and crackled and I turned to watch the flames, my mittens off, my hands and face melting like frying pan fat.

"There you are, that's good, cook yourself nicely. Now lookie here: some nice chicken soup. You like chicken soup? Of course you do, who doesn't like chicken soup!" I took the steaming bowl and offered a smile. It was just then I noticed the only thing in the house not beige-grey: her eyes, set in that foil of creases, beamed blue, too blue, awfully blue. She

smiled, again that same forced, tired, I'll do it if I have to but you know, dear, I don't particularly like it, smile. I think, well, actually, I know, the eyes were too strong, too bright, too glaring, like a couple of weird shiny pebbles, or jewels stolen and lost, and even though the face pantomimed that smile, the eyes refused to play along. I think, at the time, with my face mostly in the bowl of soup, that most of this escaped me. Sure, certainly, I saw the amazingly awful blueness of the eyes, but that, I think, was all.

"That's a good thing, drink up your chicken soup."

Actually, it was the strangest chicken soup I'd ever tasted.

March 4 1982

Well, like a nice piece of chicken, I was well and truly thawed out.

"Could I make that phone call, then?"

"Well, my ducky, you could, only the electric telephone has gone off. It must be the storm. Oh, we have some terrible storms in these parts. I remember one time . . . wicked it was. Days? It lasted for days. The worst storm ever. And then, come spring, worst flooding ever. Half the town was swept away. Terrible, I remember it like yesterday. But then, no. Come to think of it, tch, silly me. The things I sometimes say. Now, off I go to take care of a few things. You stay where you are, have a nice comfy rest by the fire."

She took her bright blue eyes off and away, out of the door, into the hall, and the living room seemed to breathe, gasp, heave and huff in relief—or perhaps it was just me. There was something, besides the blue eyes, something about her, like a distant smell of foul aged decay creeping from unknown cracks, crannies, crevices, creeping from the crinkles of her mouldy beige-grey skin. I say this now, of course. Oh, and as she

left, the electric cut out, light blinked off, silence and the crackling fire.

She was preceded by a shadow, cast by the gloom of a candle she carried, her hook vulture nose moving across the wall of sky. "Ah, here I am, back again. I made up the spare bed for you. It's nice and toasty warm in there, you'll see—"

"If it's not any trouble . . ."

"—and maybe tomorrow the electric telephone will come back to life. Then you can do some of your telephoning, can't you. Some nice telephoning. Won't *that* be nice!"

"It's my car. I have to get someone out to fix it."

"Of course you do. There's a lovely garage in the town. Very handy."

"Which town's that?"

"Which town is it? Well I never. It's Greystone. Always has been Greystone."

"Really? That's where I'm moving to."

"Moving to? Well, isn't *that* lovely."

"I hope it is. They hired me at the elementary school."

"Elemeatary school, mmm." She licked her grey lips with her grey tongue. "I think that should be very nice my dear. So you'll be living in town."

"When I find an apartment, yes."

Her blue eyes flashed.

March 5 1982

I've decided to take my time. A few lines, a bit each day, hide it away, a bit more. It gives me something to do and all the rest. The old woman, Edna she called herself, showed me up to my room—a small fireplace burning wood—sat on a beige-grey creaking chair, chattering about the storm and how nice it was that I would be living so close, refusing to leave—"Now you

get ready for bed"—watching me with her awful eyes—"You can wear this nice nighty"—taking an unnatural interest in my breast—"What lovely breasts you have, my dear"—and, quite frankly, giving me the creeps.

"Off I go then, and sleep tight, see you in the morning."

Outside the snow still sliced downwards, once in a while the wind howled. I closed the curtains. The blankets were heavy and felt like an age of old woman horrors pressing down on me.

How could I sleep? The mattress was a long hole with no way out. A clock ticked, its hands moving silently in pale imitation of movement, luminous from the corner of the eye, invisible to the stare, lost to the gaze. I wrestled with the covers, fought with the mattress, twisting and turning in the firelight darkness, my eyes closed, my head busy, listening to the silence and the ticking clock, the snapping fire, listening to the occasional growl of gusting wind.

And then, all of a sudden, came a new sound, vague and distant. I opened my eyes, you know, like everyone does. The sound, almost imaginary, muffled, like the cry of a small child. The wind, perhaps. No, I listen. The muffled cry of a small child, lost and helpless. Listen, with beads of cold polka-dot sweat bubbling on my forehead. The wind, perhaps. What else could it be? Maybe Edna had a cat. A cat in heat. Or the wind. I climbed from bed into the half chill of the room and reached for the curtains. When I pulled them apart I almost died of shock. A cat sat on the window ledge, outside, a black cat covered in white snow, staring in at me with cold blue eyes. I know cat's never have blue eyes, and this is one detail that makes me think that maybe I was already round the bend.

I banged on the window pane, "Shooo." The weird cat sat, still watching me, calm, unconcerned. I could hear the pumping

of my racing heart thud-thud-a-thudding through my head and then the cry again. The small child cry. The cat gave a meow. I turned around, looking into the dark room, concentrating on the cry, trying to discover it, or at least recognise it, and when I next turned felinewards the weird beast was gone.

Back in bed. The cry seemed to multiply, two, three, four, into a Greek Chorus of infant wailing, distant still, lost, still hardly more than a nightmare. Something moved inside my head, like the awakening stirrings of a sleep monster, and then everything faded into complete black silence.

March 6 1982

The next morning—fire out, room chilly—the whole thing seemed like an absurd nightmare. I tugged open the curtains, shivered, wondering madly if the cat would be back, looked out of the window, shivered, and saw only the storm still going strong. It was 8:30. Dressed, I opened the door and creaked my way down the cold hardwood corridor, passing closed doors that seemed to have appeared over night, doored their way into what had seemed a blank beige-grey wall. Down the steps with the same eerie creek following me. There was something wrong, something missing and it took a few seconds before I realised what it was: the old woman was not down in the kitchen, making sizzling sausages on the old fashioned wood burning range, brewing tea, clattering cutlery, wiping dishes; nor was she in the living room, Hoovering away invisible dust. For some reason she had not been up since 6 a.m. like every other respectable old woman, busying herself with all the odd jobs she could dig up. There was an emptiness in the house where there should have been an old woman. I looked out of the front window, kitchen window: the snow was deep and trackless, an endless space of white with no old woman off to church

indentations. The house, a ghostly island surrounded by that endless blowing and surging white, blasted by sporadic gusts, lost in twilight. A sudden silent corner of the eye movement, the stupid cat again, dashing from one side of the room to the other like a frenzied maniac, down the corridor and up the stairs. And yes, a flash of blue eyes.

I lit the fire in the living room. In the kitchen, everything was in grim order, cleaned to beige-grey perfection. A door with cat scratching etched along the bottom, beside the fridge, a blind keyhole looking out rather than in, locked up and tight and surely leading to the cellar. I could hardly imagine racks of vintage wine; maybe some dandelion concoction invented by an alcoholic farmer way back when and now a great prairie tradition. In any case, it was locked. I made some tea, boiling the kettle on top of an oil stove in the corner, picked up an old antique book, published in 1782 with leather binding, written in what looked like antique German, picked up another, the first edition of something vague, sipping and reading and once in a while watching out the window for the storm to end, time marked by a scrawny cuckoo clocking its way in and out and gasping its bellow call. Twelve cuckoos and Edna came swooping down the corridor.

"Good morning, my dear. Having a nice cup of tea? [It was already my third.] That's the way to do it. Well, lookie, lookie, look at that storm, still blowing. And you lit the fire: now isn't that nice of you, especially with the electric still off. They can be terrible, these January storms, days and days they last. Sometimes longer. Sometimes it looks like they'll never end. Well, off I go, really, I have to fill up all kinds of pots and pans before the pipes freeze in the basement. Water, water, water. Oooh, these storms. . . ." She

chattered on, pulling at the short stringy word-meat with her vultures beak.

"I really have to get into town—"

"Into town?"

"How far is it?"

"Oh, quite a ways, and in this storm . . . well, you remember last night. Maybe the electric telephone—"

"It's still not working."

"Well, that's a bad sign. When the electric telephone goes off, well, that's a bad sign. Maybe later."

She showed me the beige-grey bathroom with its beige-grey bath and shower; and there I stood, a sense of hot water comfort, taking my time, tired already of Edna and her empty prattle. My imagination, I thought, was working over time, whispering that a bluer than blue monocular eye spied in through the empty key hole.

When I opened the bathroom door, I could hear voices downstairs. I knew the minefield of creaking boards would give me away, so I stood in the doorway, trying to catch snippets of conversation:

"It's was in the newspaper . . . before the storm . . . lucky . . . hide . . . doesn't say much . . . no clues at least . . . there never are [a laugh] . . . upstairs . . . bathroom . . . really."

There was really nothing to understand, nothing interesting, though still I remember every fragmented word.

Downstairs, still drying off my hair, a guest with his own pair of blue eyes.

"This is my cousin, Cousin Charlie. He has a butcher's shop in town, don't you, Cousin Charlie."

"That'll be me."

"I'm sorry, my dear little thing. I don't even know your

name." Strange how I can remember every single word. Then again, maybe I'm only imagining remembering. I told Edna and Cousin Charlie that my name was Siskin. They said it was a strange name. I agreed. I told them my father had an aviary. I asked cousin Charlie about my car.

"Well, there's nothin' you can doos about that, not till the storm dies down."

"How did you get to the house?"

All four eyes exchanged blueness: "Came on my ski-do."

"Could you give me a ride into town?"

"It's a long way," Edna joined in.

"Sure is. Everythin's closed down. Boarded up, most places is. No phones. No 'lectric."

"I have to notify the school and let them know I arrived."

"Like I says, everythin's closed down."

"Best wait till after the storm dies down."

Well, what chance did I have? The old woman was extraordinary—even if I didn't quite know in what way—and there she was, flaunting hospitality, and—even if there was a way out—I was a prisoner of politeness, a jail bird by any other name.

The afternoon dragged on like an endless swoop into the wind, a sort of static movement with no way out. Cousin Charlie hung around, painting me blue with his eyes, licking his lips like the old woman the night before, keeping the fire going, bringing in wood, washing the ditches—cross that out, dishes, demonstrating with perfect servility the house-bound pecking order. He lived in the town, over the butcher's, the owner of the butcher's—there was bloody money in that there family.

"There you are. Righty. Sit yourself down. We're having some of that lovely chicken soup again. That's a good little thing.

Comfy?" Peck, peck, peck, pull at the meat, tear at the meat, snap the sinuous. "We don't often have chicken here. It's a special kind. We bring them up ourselves. Very healthy. Isn't it Cousin Charlie."

"Very healthy."

"Keeps you young."

"Keeps you young."

"Not much left, so we make the most of it. Now, just sit yourself there. Cousin Charlie. Go on. Bring in the supper. I can hardly wait."

"It very unusual." Spooning that weird chicken soup.

"Keeps you young."

"Keeps you young."

Outside, the storm growled.

That night, in bed, like a silly plot in a horror story, one of those that breeds pages by repetition, lays pages like eggs, over and over, well, with the storm still sporadically roaring, whistling through the gables, penetrating the loft and pushing icy fingers though the cracks in the window frame, the eerie cry started up again, this time so clear and so close and still so vague and so far away, I was sure there must be a real child in the house. A retarded grandchild, kept locked away from the eyes of sniggering neighbours. What else could it be? But then, again, there seemed to be other cries that criss-crossed, weaving a terrible horrible tapestry of wretchedness. How many retarded grandchildren could there be? The whole thing seemed ridiculous. The wind? The wind playing games with the house? The cat? Only one retarded child with a weird criss-cross cry? A fabric of lies rather than cries? My skin turned cold and beaded perspiration turned to ice.

March 7 1982

I suppose I'd noticed it the day before: the old woman, while I whiled away the hours reading her old dusty books and drinking endless cups of tea like a captive in a novel, well, she would be off into the kitchen, there she was and then there she wasn't. Once, twice, three times, I went in and found the fridge and stove all alone, the sink and table; and there was that basement door, closed but with a key in the keyhole. Once I almost opened the door to ask if she was down there. Once, I went into the kitchen and there she was, rifling through the junk draw, turning, giving me the blue-eyed look:

"Now, now, you precious little thing, don't you be bothering yourself in the kitchen. No need for you to be in here. Off we go, back into the living room. Oh, yes, it's much nicer in there."

Get out and keep out, and she took me with her bony fingers and lead me away. Still, it was early days, and I thought she was one of those women who sees the kitchen as their own private domain. Well, I had no idea now, did I—how could I?

"Is Cousin Charlie coming over?"

"Today? Well, surely, I would think so."

"It's just that I'm supposed to go to the school and meet the headmistress today."

"Today? Well, there's no good thinking of that. A little bird told me the school's still closed. Everything. All the town's as dead as the grave."

Cousin Charlie came over and told me the same thing. He was still there when I went to bed. He was still there when the crying started again, the child crying, softly this time, so softly I was sure I thought I was imagining everything. And then, with the imaginary cry fading away, a strange feeling swept over me, like a blast of wind, a strange feeling that

once again eyes—blue eyes, surely—that once again eyes watched me from some hidden spy eye hole.

March 4 1982

The storm was almost dead.

"It's over."

"Well, lookie here, not quite. It's still bitter cold—and the wind—"

"I really have to get into the town."

"Today? I don't know if—"

"I have to. Even if I have to walk all the way there. I have to see the headmistress and find an apartment."

"Well, I understand what you mean, surely I do, if your sure, we can ask Cousin Charlie."

"Is the phone working?"

"The electric telephone? Well, let me see if it is. That's a good idea. Let me see . . . No, not yet. Sometimes they can be ever so slow. I remember—"

Cousin Charlie came over by eleven. The snow plough had passed, he said, and the road was just about open and he would take me in. My suitcases were still locked in my car. The car was still buried, he said. So off we went into town. It was hardly two kilometres—not such a long way after all—from the old woman's house. We passed Cousin Charlie's butcher's shop, a desolate place, with his apartment perched on top. Greystone was not the prairie town I had imagined. It was barely a village, with all the houses separated from each other by vast empty white spaces. The school managed to fill its tiny classroom by busing in children from hamlets far and wide, from lonely homesteads and lonelier farm houses. Cousin Charlie dropped me at the school gates.

"I'm sure it ain't open."

I trudged up the cleared path way, pushed on the door, sighed with relief as it gave way, swung open, heavily, turned and waved at Cousin Charlie. The corridor echoed the dull thud of my winter boots, all the classroom empty, the tiny seats pushed neatly under tiny tables.

"Hello. I'm looking for Mrs. Derstwhile."

"That's me. You wouldn't be [glancing at a sheet of paper] Siskin Pen?"

"I would, indeed."

"Well goodness [big smile] me, thank heaven. We were getting quite worried. [Stands up and shakes my hand from across the desk. Nice eyes. Very brown. In her forties, wearing the years well.]

"I was caught in the storm."

"Well, that's what we thought—only it can be quite hazardous. Still, you managed, that's the main thing."

I told Mrs. Derstwhile my storm story. She smiled consolatory.

"Oh, Old Edna?" she realised. The smile vanished. Wiped out like a field of strawberries under a cover of unseasonable snow. And then it was straight to business, worried business, and five minutes later I was back out trudging through the snow.

Greystone has a weekly paper, handed out free, racked in the doorway of Jim's Cafe, spreading its advertisements far and wide. The front page story, of course, was the storm:

Greystone Snowed Under

Well, this latest assault from mother nature is one for the record books. Most of the region is still, like

you and me, digging out.

Transport Canada spokesperson predicts it will be two to three more days before all the roads

are opened up. Manitoba Hydro spokesperson says crews are working round the clock to restore power.

But don't get your hopes up. It could be days before you get turned back on.

And yes, speaking of those record books, the last time we had a storm like this was

the great one in 1856. Remember that, anyone?! The great one lasted nine days. That's right, *nine days*. It was followed by the worst spring flooding on record, when half the town was washed away. Well, that's something to look forward to, right readers?!

Do you like the way I re-wrote the article in columns? I know it's hand written; but still, it adds a nice touch to the look of the page; and it took extra time—and I have to go slow. This front page bonanza was sandwiched between adds for road salt and grit, snow-blowers and shovels, and a small list of contents. Of course, reading it through, half of my mind drifted back to the beige-grey house, to Edna telling me about the worst storm she could remember; and about the spring floodings. I think I shook my head and imagined the passage of time washing away most of the old woman's brain.

It was warm and cosy in Jim's Cafe, I sipped my coffee and flicked through the pages, looking for the classified ads. "Appliances." "Auctions." "Furniture for Sale." I flicked backwards and forwards but there seemed to be no "Apartments for Rent."

I asked Jim, who had just refilled my cup. Apparently, apartments for rent, or at least "rooms" as he said, were scarce and word of mouth not ink and paper was the usual way of advertising. He sent me over to the convenience store, ask Marge, she was usually up to date.

Marge sent me to Mrs. Hargrave's house, down just after the

Post Office—Mrs. Hargrave's opened the door and peered through the narrow crack, knowingly, it seemed, telling me the room was not for rent, sent me to Mrs. so and so, who nervously sent me to Mrs. someone else, who shook her head and closed the door without a word.

Jim, suddenly, headmistress-like, had changed his mood, poured my coffee—"Is there anywhere else?"—shook his head, hardly listening, no, shaking his head in anticipation of anything I might say, skulking off, mumbling to an old man, glancing at me, the old man too. The word was out: the new school teacher was insane, diseased, dangerous—who knows what—drinking my coffee, ready to cry, wondering, wishing, cursing myself for why I was on the prairies in this grey place, for why, for why, for why, drinking the coffee and hoping not for comfort in the black bitterness, but at least for strength, for wake me up and knock me about strength, for why . . .

Insanity taking over, or going on holiday and leaving some strange reality that should be insane but was now missing, now, its essential insane quality, insanity insane. The whole place, it seemed, was insane. I had no idea what to do, took myself out into the snowy street, empty, as if everyone had been warned to keep out of my way: the strange school teacher, watch out, stay away until she has gone away, keep your children indoors. Keep. Your. Child. Ren. In. Do. Ors.

Greystone Warning

Greystone's bird brain school council now admits to hiring a mentally unbalanced young woman to teach grades 1-3. Siskin Pen, who arrived here last week, was recently

released from Stoletan Lunatic Asylum, Sask., where she has spent the last two years flapping her arms and thinking she is a bird. Unfortunately, the contract is already signed, and she

cannot be dismissed until at least one child is murdered. Mrs. Derstwhile, the school headmistress, admits a mistake has been made and that heads will roll.

Copy, copy, copy. Out into the street. Oh, yes, I'm already there. A single figure straggles his way towards me, his green parka a riot of stains and gaping seams, hair dripping from beneath his pom-pomed tuck, walking my oh my oh my way.

"Well, helloo helloo." Faint smell of old beer as he walks by, still, a nice smile, someone, at least, who didn't believe everything he read in the newspaper, who believed in my innocence, even if I hardly, well really, what am I saying, believed in it myself.

"Hello."

And then he was gone.

March 5 1982

Was it really just a coincidence? Cousin Charlie rolled up in his car, pulled up along side me, rolled down the window, how's everything? bad, rolled his eyes, his blue eyes, in sympathy, beckoned me into the warmth, I climbed in, start teaching the day after tomorrow, no where to live, strange people, not too friendly, oh yeah, they're a nasty bunch, never liked them myself, come back to Agent's house, just in the mean time, yeah, sure, I'll ask around for you, they all know me, there's bound to be a room hiding away some where, some nice little hide away room just for you. A bird in the hand, after all. . . .

Quite frankly, what choice did I have? And after the strange reception in town, Edam seemed like A DEAR OLD LADY. Really. She seemed like a dear old lady. You can stay here as long as you like, my dear little thing, well, until you find somewhere else, well, well, well, what could I say? I'm game. What else? Nattering about some nice chicken

soup, a real treat, don't you just love chicken soup?

That night, hating the town and hating the people, hating the school and the invisible children, wishing the whole thing was just a bad dream, wake up, time to wake up, all alone, no blowing wind now, no growl, only the silent chill of a subzero world, only the child downstairs, crying hick-up cries that become long sobs and then wailing wails and then others, how many others, joining in the tragic chorus and the feeling that I really was going round that non-existent prairie bend. Kill me kill me kill me kill the kid.

March 6 1983

The next day I decided to walk into town. Paranoid, perhaps only paranoid. Maybe the town was bursting with warm greeting and chicken soup welcome. It was early, Agonies was still in her weird old woman sleep, Cousin Collin was probably in his butcher's apartment, and for the second time I noticed the old massive barn behind the house, frozen in the minus 900 degree air, trudged through the snow, let's see what's in there, barmy barny barn, open your rickety door, silent rows, steel caged, too many to count, each containing a chicken corpse, frozen in death with frozen eggs funnelled downwards. Did the old woman know? Did Cousin Collin know? Sure, they knew, though not a word, well, well, all that eerie death, and off I went, walking back in my own footprints.

Of course, the town was like a graveyard. Greystone Library, open, warm, cold stare from the librarian, an old woman. *The Winnipeg Free Press*—like the italics?—maybe some classifieds there, somewhere. The snow had stopped delivery and the last copy was the pre-storm edition, with a big

front page news story about Greystone, all about a 45 year old woman, identity unknown, had been found dead, her body dumped outside town, identity unknown, though she was certainly someone's mother, the autopsy revealed signs of countless births, a large family, killed by a twist of the neck. The story, somehow, sounded familiar.

All the classified ads were for Winnipeg and other weird places with names like Saint Norbert and Saint Adolph and Saint Anne, God's servants one and all, blessed people, surely, with blessed streets instead of veins, town halls instead of brains; so back out into the minus 900, Toms Cafe?—no, no, not today, why not a quick stop over in the tavern, *The Red Cactus*—good one that, in minus 900, very witty, and all the seats like rows of chicken cages, only here the Arizona heat kept the chicken beer drinkers almost alive, stooped over, surely, barely conscious, yes.

Well, look who it is, the new school teacher. Jack, I think that was his name, the green parka a riot of stains and gaping seams, hair dripping from beneath his tuck, offering me another genial alcoholic smile. How does he know who I am? Well, everybody knows. Staying with old Edmer. Has the bird flown? No? Not yet? Well, I'm not surprised you couldn't find a place. Everybody knows. I don't know. If there's one thing I don't listen to, it's all that trash. Still. if I were you I'd get away from Edna and her son. That's the last place you want to be staying. Well, I had no idea what he was talking about: what son was that? Sure you do. Charlie Boy. Good old Charlie Boy—the weird bastard. Charlie's her cousin. Cousin Charlie, oh is that what the story is now. She has lots of stories, old ones too, older than you can imagine.

Well, I paid a paltry sum for a couple of rye and

gingers, decided that what's his name was as mad as everyone else in the town—and outside the town for that matter—and left the Arizona heat for minus 900, walking back, thinking, really considering, on the point of deciding to give up on the whole business, the job, the town, and get the next bus back to Stoleton, out of the prairies, on the point of all that, passing some kind of hop-sotch man on the way out, who saw who I was and then threw his eyes to the snowy ground.

Again, always again, the lost cry, infant cries, through the night until sleep blurred the sound, erased, wiped out—and then dreams of madness.

March 4 1986

There was something going on back at the house, some late afternoon hustle and bustle, with Alice cooking up a storm on the range, a strange chicken meal for supper: no bones, reddish meat, sweet taste, special chicken. Cousin Carlos was outside, a dizzy mess of snowy footprints outside the barn, a mountain of wood and chicken corpses, the smell of oil, the spark of a match, the stench the burning feathers on singeing flesh. Odd looks between both of them at the supper table, between bites of chicken meat. They were both going out, a vague evening excursion to visit somebody or other, keep the fire going, my little thing, wood in the box in the kitchen.

The blue eyed cat kept an eye on me, jumped on the kitchen counter to lick away the chicken flesh, the wood, the basement door slightly, ever so slightly, ajar, the cat, licking and watching as I give the scratched wood a indecisive shove and see the black stairs leading down into further blackness, yellow light leads me down, quickly, no,

slowly, well, quickly but cautiously, down to a small room hiding another door, a large solitary white chest, open, it becomes a freezer before my very eyes.

There are no clues, but what clues could I need? It was the chicken store, only the chicken looked nothing like chicken: large plastic bags, twisted and sealed, with legs of lamb, arms of lamb . . . of course, not lamb: limbs, a torso, cut in two, twisted and sealed, the skin white, blue white, frozen solid like the corpse of a chicken, killed by unnatural disaster, and even the head; the limbs, hands even, torso, of a child twisted and sealed and of course, ready to cook up. Flash vision, the bits of body in a few seconds, only, digested the bits and recognised the whole and dropped the lid shut, turned to run to the stairs where suddenly and silently the old woman and the butcher had appeared, blocking the hole into the kitchen, wearing smiles that stretched through eternity. Now, you curious little thing, what are you doing? Down the steps she lead the way, the rickety steps, leading her down, it's a child—did I say it's a child?—did I realise her chicken soup had always been child soup, innocence butchered and boiled? Open the door, well, at least it was away, open the door and darkness and a quick change of mind, a vision of the hole into the kitchen and then a hand pushing me into the darkness, swallowed up, the rectangle of light closes, a flick, bare naked bulb, the damn woman and damn man standing, don't you be afraid now, we wouldn't hurt you, you're too precious to hurt, backwards, step backwards, hard steel on my back, like a metal rib cage, turn, just a cage, bars burrowed into the cement—I realised later—extending up into the ceiling, a rib cage door to one side, in you go now, well, at least it was away from the sense of

touch, from the old woman's bony hand, clang, click, locked inside like a caged bird, doing time . . . time . . . time. But this is no good, this is all bad: the two of them are inside with me, what's his name is opening the fly on his trousers. We need more meat, so she says. The old mother stopped laying, so we had to put her down. There's no good keeping . . . but don't you worry, there there, off they come, you see how nice and big it is? Oh yes, there's nothing to worry about it: you'll like it after a while—they always do. How can she be saying, what can she be saying? The butcher's skewer in his hands, the old woman pushes me down onto the mattress, that's it, don't you bother to struggle, there's really no need, a pull on my underwear, you have such nice breasts to feed your babies, don't you now, oh yes. Nice fat babies. Nice fat children. Just think of it.

There is a single candle, solitary night light stuffed into the neck of a bottle, rammed inside, a thin ragged and stained mattress on the floor with an old stinking blanket. And all around the solitary flame darkness flickers and creeps and silence whispers. There is a door where there is no door, in a room where there is no room, in a cage; and the door opens, slowly, oh so tentatively, and first I see eyes, round large eyes the size of broken plates, soft focus eyes and then the soft focus face.

Have you seen my mummy? She's gone away. Or maybe I went away. Have you seen her?

The chubby girl, five if she's a day, steps out, the darkness seems to pass through her, I can see shadows inside her though none outside, moving to the corner of my cage, huddled on the mattress, hugging my legs, scared of the child and her broken eyes. And then the cry, the cry of

a thousand and one nights, from the open black door comes another cry, and another, and another, the chorus. The girl, between sobs, splutters words, her hands clutching her chubby translucent face, the hidden and lost chorus of cries becoming louder, her stained white night-gown dangling to the floor like a final curtain:

They won't come out. They *never* come out. They've all been eaten. Have I been eaten too?