

—| **PATRICIA ROSE YOUNG** | Up the Clyde on a Bike

BEFORE DAD LEFT I TALKED ABOUT NOTHING except how much I wanted a horse. I said how miserable my life was and would continue to be without a horse of my own. The sixties were boom years and Dad, a welder, started going away every few weeks to work on construction. The first time he went Mum accused him of accepting the job to get away from her.

“You think I’m bammy,” she said.

“Don’t talk that way,” he said. “Say things like that you’ll have me as daft as you.”

They were sitting at the kitchen table and I was cantering around on an imaginary horse. Between them: an ashtray, a white porcelain swan with a thin curved neck.

“The money’s too good to pass up,” Dad said. “They’re saying lots of overtime. Double, triple pay.”

Mum smoked and flicked ash into the swan’s back. If he took advantage of all the work up-island, Dad said, they could pay off the car, put a few bucks down on the mortgage. We could take a week’s holiday, rent a beach cabin in Parksville. When he said that Mum looked at him as though he’d just said we could rent a rocket and go to the moon. She stabbed her cigarette in the cavity between the swan’s outstretched wings and went to the broom closet. A door slammed and Mum returned with a mop. I stopped cantering to watch her fill the sink with soap and water. Dad ignored her and picked up the ashtray.

“Will you look at this?” he said. “The poor wee birdie’s lost an eye.” On one side of the swan’s head was a black bead; the other bead was missing. Mum started splashing the mop’s stringy head around on the linoleum. “Bloody hell, woman,” Dad said, lifting up his feet. “Are you going to drown us out of house and home?”

Was he the crazy one? I wondered, wading out of the kitchen in wet socks. How could we stay at a beach cabin? Had he forgotten that on her good days Mum didn’t leave the house? On her bad days she didn’t leave her bed?

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BEFORE DAD LEFT MUM BROKE THINGS—platters, ornaments, lamps. Pushing the vacuum, she was a rampaging thing bashing its way into corners of rooms and down hallways. Sometimes I’d sit on a stool in the kitchen watching her chop

vegetables for dinner, imagining myself the calm centre of the world. Three whacks with the big knife and she'd hurl chunks of cabbage into a pot; boiling water would spill over, extinguishing the gas element. Mum would bring down the lid as though bringing down a cymbal.

Before Dad left Ella and I would walk to Quan Lee's grocery after school, hating the metal cart because as far as we could see only humpbacked old women pushed metal carts. Inside the entrance of the store we'd take turns bouncing up and down on the mechanical horse, trying to coax life into its hard fixed saddle. At seven Ella was small with ears that poked through her straight hair. She wore thick glasses. Sometimes a man waiting for his wife at the check-out would take pity on Ella, and put a dime in the metal box. For three minutes my sister would buck and holler *atta girl, giddy up* with such wholehearted joy it was embarrassing to watch.

Before Dad left we'd always forget something on Mum's shopping list. It might be steel wool or toilet paper or bobby pins. That day it was cigarettes. We watched her pull porridge oats and cans of evaporated milk out of grocery bags. "Where's the fags? Jesus Christ, lassies, did I no tell you to buy me a packet of fags?"

While Mum searched desperately for a packet of *Matinée* at the bottom of a bag, I looked past her head at the tobacco tin on top of the fridge. It was full of buttons. Wooden buttons, pearl buttons, glass buttons that rubbed against each other like flat shiny stones. The longer I stared at the tin the farther away it became. Blue speck at the wrong end of a telescope.

"You'll have to go back," Mum said. "That's all there is to it."

Ella groaned and kicked a kitchen chair. "Martha can go."

"Why should I? I always go."

Without taking her eyes off us, Mum raised her mug of tea to her mouth. "No fags," she said. "I'm fair disgusted with the pair of you."

Ella picked up the box of *Tide* and inhaled. "Mmm, lemon flavoured." And then she sneezed, dropping the box. Ella stuck her fingers in her ears and walked around the kitchen, head jerking, making clucking noises in her throat. She looked like a crazed rooster.

"I know what you want," Mum said, drawing in her breath and letting it out slowly, "you want me in the nut house. Well, I'll be climbing the walls soon enough and then you'll see."

We'll see what?

By the time Dad came home from work we were exhausted, battle worn.

We ate in silence. Afterwards, he leaned back in his sleeveless undershirt and khaki work pants, patting his stomach. "You're a right connoisseur of spuds, you are," he said to Mum. "Now where's dessert?"

"Up my jumper," Mum said.

And they laughed. Every night the same dumb joke.

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BEFORE DAD LEFT WE'D CLIMB the apple tree in the back yard, swinging down from the branches. We did this so many times, blisters formed on our palms. "Garden gloves," I said one afternoon, charging ahead of Ella into the shed. Back in the tree, I reached for a branch but had no grip. When I came to, I was lying on the couch and Mum was shouting into the phone.

"Three one three five Blackwood Street. Can you no understand King's English?"

Ella was standing in the doorway holding an enormous leek. I glanced at my arm propped on a pillow. Arm the shape of an S.

The taxi arrived and Mum said: "I'm awful sorry, hen, I cannee go with you."

"I know," I said, not knowing what I knew or why she could only stand on the top step waving goodbye while the taxi driver carried me to the car.

At the hospital I sailed down the hallway in a bed that eventually slid through swinging doors into a room with blinding lights.

"Count backwards from ten," a nurse said, placing a black toilet plunger over my mouth.

Later, when Dad walked past my room I wondered what he was doing in the children's ward of St. Joseph's Hospital. Each time he passed the door I thought how handsome he looked with his hair combed back, but it didn't occur to me to call out. Finally, he came into my room and sat on a chair beside the bed. I'd never seen him in a sports jacket and tie.

It had been a short fall but I'd broken two bones and cracked two more. The first doctor straightened the arm and set it in an L-shaped cast, but after looking at an x-ray, the second doctor decided the first doctor had done a poor job. "Shoddy work," he said, rapping his knuckles on my plaster. The next day he broke and reset the bones.

Sandra Parsons, the girl in the bed beside me, talked non-stop about all the Jell-O and ice cream she was going to get after her tonsils came out. I had never met such a jabber-box.

"Will your mother be coming up, dear?" Mrs. Parsons asked the day of

Sandra's operation. She was sitting on the edge of her daughter's bed, long legs crossed at the ankles, and I could feel her watching me as I tried to colour a picture of a boy pushing a girl on a swing. Using my right hand required all my concentration.

"Maybe tomorrow," I said.

After her operation Sandra's face was bruised and swollen, and that night she lay facing the wall, sobbing. When she went home, a shadow of her former self, I was alone in room 303, except for a baby who slept all the time. And then the baby was taken away and a nurse pushed his crib down the hall, one gimpy wheel hobbling all the way to the elevator. I decided the baby had died. Now I lived in dread of the eight o'clock juice cart. When the lights went out I lay awake, heart pounding, convinced that I too would die in the night and my bed would be removed as unceremoniously.

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BEFORE DAD LEFT HE'D BRING HOME news of the outside world. Women's magazines, religious literature, library books with titles like *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*. He'd bring home newspapers and political pamphlets handed out in the street. One day he came home with a paperback he'd picked up from a drugstore rack: *Apple Cider Vinegar and Honey: Good Health The Natural Way*.

Now Mum would greet him at five o'clock with a tall glass of amber liquid. They'd sit on the back steps, smoking *Matinée*s, and sipping slowly just as Cyril Watson, the author and a preacher from Minnesota, advised.

"Och," Dad would say, "it's bloody vile."

"Bloody revolting," Mum would answer.

Before Dad left my right eye twitched but with the vinegar and honey Mum insisted this tic could be cured once and for all. To keep the peace I held my breath and gulped down a morning and evening tonic. Ella, however, was not interested in the peace. The first time Mum insisted she drink vinegar and honey for her allergies we were waiting for a ride to the matinee of *National Velvet*.

"I won't," Ella said. "It's cruelty to children."

"Och away you go," Mum said. "It'll no kill you."

Ella refused.

"You'd make a saint swear, so you would."

Ella said she couldn't drink it. The smell alone made her sick.

"You'll no be leaving this house until you've taken that drink. Every drop."

As though from a distance I watched Ella and Mum, the mauve tumbler between them. Their hands and mouths were moving in an exaggerated way and their voices came from a long way off. It was like watching cartoon characters work themselves into a frenzy, the volume turned low. The phone rang in the front hall. Mum left the kitchen and Ella leapt up, pouring most of the vinegar and honey down the sink. When Mum came back she looked at the tumbler.

“Do you think I came up the Clyde on a bike? Answer me. Do you?”

Ella squinted, glasses on the end of her nose.

“I drank mine,” I said, quietly.

Ella turned to me—incredulous, betrayed—but she lifted the tumbler to her lips. She took a sip, and then doubled over, making retching sounds.

“You can quit your antics right now,” Mum said.

A car honked in front of the house and Mum picked Ella up off the chair and shook her by the shoulders. “You’re a bad stick,” she said. “A bad, bad stick.”

I walked dizzily out to the car and slid into the front seat beside Lorraine O’Connor. For two hours I sucked on lemon gumdrops in a kind of delirious sweat, watching a girl named Violet win a national horse race, dressed as a boy.

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BEFORE DAD LEFT MUM WOULD SING as she washed the dishes. *I belong to Glasgow, dear old Glasgow too-oon.* I’d stand beside her, holding a towel, waiting for the water to drain from the plates in the rack.

“Where’s Glasgow?” I asked once, and Mum said it was on the River Clyde, the wonderful, wonderful Clyde.

Glasgow was also the hometown of the radio talk show host she listened to each afternoon at one o’clock. Jack Webster’s voice penetrated every corner of the house. If he agreed with a guest or wanted to sum up a point, he’d say “Precisely,” in a loud and exacting way. If he disagreed, he’d say, “Och away you go and dinnee be daft.” Just like Mum. The same fierce language.

Before Dad left she cut out a picture of Jack from a magazine and put it in a little frame above the fridge so she could look at it while he was talking. His face was as gruff as his voice, but Mum liked Jack because, she said, he didn’t back down from anyone, no matter how high and mighty they were. He scrapped with union leaders, members of parliament, even premiers, calling them rogues and scoundrels, the bloody lot of them. At least once during each program he’d quote Robert Burns, “A Man’s a Man for a’ that.”

Before Dad left Mum canned and froze and pickled all the vegetables growing in the garden. One afternoon I was at the sink, scrubbing beets, hacking off the leaves, when Jack interviewed Christine Dove, a woman who'd written a book, *Twenty-Three Years Locked Inside*. Apparently, Christine suffered from a psychological condition that no one, not even psychiatrists, fully understood. She spoke of all the occasions she'd missed because of her condition: picnics and family gatherings, her sons' lacrosse games, her daughter's wedding in Nanaimo. And the little things she couldn't do: walk to the corner to mail a letter, take a bus into town to buy a new dress. Mum stopped slicing beets into a mason jar and pulled up a chair. She sat and listened to Christine describe the symptoms she experienced whenever she tried to leave her house—racing heart, panic, sweating, nausea, indescribable dread. My blouse and shorts were sticking to my skin. The air was thick the way it is before thunder.

"People think you're crazy," Christine was saying to Jack. "All the lies and secrecy. The shame." Until recently even her husband hadn't known what was wrong with her.

"At least prisoners have company," Mum said.

"What?" I said.

"Whisht."

Christine was telling Jack that she'd tried explaining her symptoms to her family doctor but he told her she was a worrywart and prescribed Valium. "Relax, he'd said, "if you're going to be raped, you might as well lie back and enjoy it."

"Daft bugger," Mum said.

I looked at the beets on the floor. Dirty bouquets wrapped in newspaper. "How many more do I have to wash?"

Mum leaned closer to the transistor. Christine said she drank to deal with the anxiety and depression, paying her sons to buy her liquor. She even paid them to not tell their father. Jack, who normally barked questions at his guests, was quiet as Christine related her story of insomnia and dread and wine bottles stashed beneath dirty laundry. Only once did he speak: "You're all right, love, I'm listening."

Standing at the kitchen sink, I turned to look at Mum. Tears were running down her face. When she saw me looking she brought her hand up to her mouth. "I didnee know," she said.

"Know what?"

"I'm no mad."

"Mad?"

"Bammy."

“So.”

“Did you no hear? There’s a name for it. It’s got a name.” And she pronounced the word properly, without an accent. The way she might have if she were imitating London toffs. “Agoraphobia.”

A scream ripped the heavy afternoon air and Mum snapped upright. Ella hopped into the kitchen on one foot, crying, “I stepped in a wasp’s nest, I stepped on a zillion wasps.” Mum moved across the room, slowly, as though over spongy ground. She opened the fridge and took out an onion.

“There now,” she said, “a poultice. To draw out the poison.” She took Ella’s foot in her lap and rubbed the sliced onion on the swelling skin. A local newscaster was now announcing the opening of the Woodward’s mall that coming Saturday. Everyone was invited. There’d be balloons, soft drinks, and free samples for all. Not only that, The Junk Yard Beats would be playing rock hits from two till four.

“The Junk Yard Beats,” Ella said, leaping up, forgetting her pain. “Can we go? Can we?”

Mum didn’t say yes but for the first time she didn’t give an outright no.

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BEFORE DAD LEFT, I WROTE TO HIM CONSTANTLY.

Dear Dad:

How’s construction going? Ella and I got scalped at the barber’s. Nothing exciting has happened except Mr. Gartrell put the perfect spelling tests (three) on the wall under a sign that says *We Tried Hard*. He put all the other tests under a sign that says *We Will Try Harder*. Ha ha! Mum yelled at Ella for stealing money from her purse. She bought licorice gum. It looks like you’re chewing black tar. Don’t forget to bring me home a present.

Love from your adorable daughter, Martha.

p.s. The present starts with H.

Before Dad left he came home with a horse, or, rather, a horse’s head on the end of a pole. I named it Gondola. Now, at every opportunity, Ella and I played farmyard in the spare lot beside the house. As the farmer and the oldest, I’d give the orders but Ella wouldn’t pick dandelion heads to feed the ducks. The sheep would be dying of thirst but she wouldn’t fill the metal bucket at the outdoor tap. She’d just stamp her feet and wail for her turn to ride my horse. One morning she wailed until Mum stuck her head out a window and shouted, “Is there no rest for the wicked?”

"I hate being the wife," Ella screamed, but Mum had already gone inside and shut the window.

"Okay," I said, "but first you have to milk the cows."

And Ella went berserk, running through the thistles, stomping the fallen plums with the heels of her gumboots.

That night I couldn't sleep. Mosquitoes buzzed around my head, dive bombing for my ears and eyes. Earlier, I'd gone into the kitchen to ask Mum to sew my pant leg; it had ripped on a nail. I went through the house, calling. When she didn't answer, Dad and Ella and I searched all the rooms, checking behind curtains and under beds.

"Well, she keeps saying she's going to head for the Sooke Hills," Dad said, trying to be funny. Ella began to cry. "I'm no serious," he said. "Your mum's just playing a game. You wait and see, we'll find her."

I didn't know where the Sooke Hills were though I did know members of a religious cult had recently gone there to wait for the end of the world. Mum had read in the newspaper that hundreds of people were camped on the highest hill, believing it would be easier for God to lift them into heaven. I imagined her standing on a hilltop surrounded by people in white gowns, a huge hand reaching down from the clouds.

I rushed around the kitchen, even looking inside the fridge and flour canister. My mouth was dry; it felt like my heart was stuck in my throat. When I opened the broom closet I hadn't expected to find Mum but there she was huddled in a small space with room for only a few mops, the bag of rags, the Hoover. Knees pulled up to her chest, she looked frightened, the way the rabbits looked, their nostrils quivering.

"For the love of the wee man," Dad said quietly.

"Away you go," Mum said.

We didn't move, just stood looking at her.

"Can you no see I'm trying to get a moment's peace," she said.

Dad closed the door and we stood in silence. I tried to imagine other adults—Dad, Mr. Gartrell, Lorraine's mum—sitting on a Hoover in the dark. And then I wondered if I'd just imagined it. Maybe there was no one on the other side of the cupboard door.

Later, Ella and I stood in front of the bathroom's little vanity mirror brushing our teeth. Toothpaste foamed over her face and hands, right up to her elbows. Blobs of toothpaste dripped on the floor.

"Why do you have to make a big production out of everything?" I said.

Ella's eyes were bright behind smudged glasses. "It's none of your bloody business," she spat through a beard of white froth.

In bed I kept seeing Mum huddled in the broom closet, Dad's pot room socks loose around her ankles. The more I thought about it, the farther away the image slid, but still I lay awake. The house was quiet when I stole down the stairs and through the kitchen, carrying Gondola. As I passed Dad's sunflowers growing against the house I noticed several had been ripped out. The gaps in the dirt looked like spaces in a mouth where teeth had been pulled. The McKeechie boys, I thought. They couldn't wait.

The sky was pale blue, and everything—the pears hanging from the branches, the tall grass, my own moving legs—seemed shockingly alive, much more alive than they were in the glare of day. For a while I cantered around the edge of the lot, whinnying softly, the breeze ruffling my hair. And then the strange light seemed to fill my bones; I could feel it lifting me up.

Before Dad left I imagined fantastic things. That Gondola and I would take to the air; we'd fly above the rooftops, girl and horse, and look down on the sleeping city. The few people walking their dogs would look up, amazed, pointing, shaking their heads. Mum, too, would wake and peer out her bedroom window—from my perspective, small as a prison cell—and see me soaring above the willow tree, the compost heap, the rabbits who mated day and night, and she'd gasp, and say, "Och aye, there goes Martha, my own brave lassie."

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AND THEN DAD LEFT. He left on an ordinary Saturday, on one of those long golden days at the end of September. He left after making pancakes and crispy bacon, after drinking three cups of cowboy coffee.

Living with Mum, he said, was no kind of life. He was sorry for it, he was truly sorry. He'd hoped it would never come to this, but he didn't know which way to turn. At first he'd thought Mum was just high-strung, that she had a bad case of nerves, but it was obviously more than that. And she refused to get help, refused even to go to the doctor despite the fact she knew what ailed her. If it had a name for Christ's sake, surely it had a cure. Dad said he felt like he was suffocating or losing his mind, often both. Maybe Mum was better off without him. He said all this while Ella and I sat at the table putting small pieces of pancake into our mouths.

After Dad left Ella and I would put tea and toast beside Mum's bed before going to school. For months she stayed inside her room with the transistor radio,

the blinds shut. She was like someone hunkered down behind the iron curtain and Jack Webster was the voice of the free world. On weekends we'd spend whole days at other people's houses, and beyond, where Blackwood Street tapered off into wild swampy places, we fished with baking sieves, catching things in jars, fluttery things, things that looked back at us with tiny O-shaped mouths and bulging eyes.

After Dad left the garden turned to weeds and the rabbits ate their young. We learned to negotiate Mum's darkness. And then one day when I was thirteen and Ella was eleven, we came home to find her slicing apples and rolling out pastry. There were ten pie plates lined up on the counter. With the help of no one, Mum gradually began to ease herself back into some kind of light.

After Dad left she must have cursed her pride and the terrible cage her body had become, but that morning as he stood on the porch, unshaven, hands at his sides, waiting for something—a sign that Mum needed him to stay? She just slid her fist inside one of Ella's shoes and began to paint the scuffed toe with whitener.

"No one's holding you," Mum said. "You'd better be off if you're going."

She brought the shoe to her lips and blew. For a moment she might have been someone whose world extended beyond a gouged table and scrape of a clothesline. She might have been someone with somewhere to go, a woman who, having just applied nail polish, was blowing it dry.

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