THE RUNNING OF THE DEER

When my brother picks me up at the airport, the streets are clean and what remains of the grass, dark dead brown. But as we head north the roads begin to glaze, the snow creeps to the shins of the wheat stubble then buries it, the wind whips flakes from the fields to blind us in sudden squalls, and the roadside slide-off from the plough blades grows with each mile, funnelling us towards my parents' house.

"I almost didn't make it," I say. My brother can't spare me a look, hand-over-hand on the steering wheel as we fishtail around an unsanded turn. "I had second thoughts. Almost got off the plane."

I haven't been back to see my parents in some while, longer still since I've been around for Christmas. But still, it is Christmas when the pluck of family pulls the most, that tidal urge to return to an invented past of simple emotions and uncomplicated affection. And so here I am, back home for the cruelest season.

"Don't," my brother says. I wait for the rest. But instead he feathers a cigarette from an inside pocket, flicks a match with his thumb and blows a stream of smoke that explodes into frost on the windshield.

Another squall wipes our view clean and suddenly there's the ancient silo with walls crumbling like broken teeth and the black-and-white checkered mail-box and we're swaying up the snow-hardened ruts of the long driveway.

As we pull up, I can see deep, purposeful tracks that bore from the front door to split the yard like a pie-chart: to a packed-down clearing for the parking, to the shelter where my father chops and stores firewood, to the side door of the basement where he fiddles with the furnace and the pipes. Scattered between them are the delicate, musing

prints of the creatures who descend from the scrub and the forest beyond to trifle with our notions of order and settled ways.

Fifty yards from us, a doe freezes at the car's approach. As we get out, she raises a black nose and flees in a gouge of snow.

"Hello," beams my mother as she pats her hands on an apron flecked with errant flour from gravy-makings. She is never happier than when the family begins to gather, plump with good feelings and better intentions. I am hugged and bussed -- I have to lean down farther than I remember, have I grown or has she shrunk? -- and dispossessed of my coat.

"How are things?" she asks. "Robert!" she calls out.

"Hello, chum," says my father, emerging on cue, a little glue-eyed from what I suspect was a late morning doze in his favourite armchair. We shake hands, as men do. "How's the lad? Nasty drive?"

My mother continues the interrogation. Job? Apartment? Romance? I give her the highlights, veering delicately off-subject before any shadow appears on the path of uninterrupted filial achievement.   She bustles me off to the kitchen where she brews and bakes, ringed by pots and pans and spice jars and hundreds of cookbooks, one of which is stretched on an aluminum rack over the stove with the recipe outlined in pink marker pen.

"Where is my damned measuring cup?" she mutters not quite inaudibly -- all household activity ceasing
until the offending article is discovered in front of her on the counter. "Now, who put it there?" she grins and holds out a sherry glass for my father, indicating an inch with caliper fingers. "Please, sir, can I have some more?" she wheedles in her best Oliver Twist, batting her eyelids with vigor.

Nina, my brother's wife of five years, is curled like a cat on the warm flagstones of the hearth, tending to Rachel, their two year-old.

"Darren. Can you say 'Darren'?" Nina prompts.

"Damn," says Rachel, then sobs into the soft cotton shoulder of her mother's sweatshirt.

In an instant, my brother is there, noiseless on new-found quiet feet. He is broad-shouldered and square-bodied, my father's son. Along with the comfort of a bit of a gut, he has acquired a hefty domestic poise. He bends and sweeps the child into his arms, bouncing her gently on his forearm. His fingers -- they are square, too, like a mason's, and when we were boys, bred to trouble, my mother always said, adept at hot-wiring neighbourhood cars or picking locks or prying caps off beer bottles, as able in any delinquent enterprise as the rest of him was unable to disguise the glee of truancy, looking guilty, my mother would also say, before he'd even thought of doing anything -- those fingers now chuck Rachel under the chin and offer themselves for sucking.

I envy him his trinity, his solidity and the sureness of his touch.

I leave to wrap the presents I have brought. In our house at Christmas, there is always one room devoted to the task. There is paper of all kinds, gold and green and scarlet, paper in bags and boxes and piled in corners, paper with stripes and St. Nicks, new-bought paper cellophaned in tight rolls and paper saved from other years, ribbon and cards and stick-on holly wreaths and scissors for cutting and curling bows. Everything for the wrapping that none of us can ever manage with my mother's flourish, and where she inevitably loses at least one present per annum, to be located and delivered, with regrets, in the New Year's clean-up.

My father knocks. "All done?"

He fits the role of the retired colonel to perfection, clear-eyed, still slim, straight-spined, hair hardly thinning, hinting at the officer's mess with his ascot and house-serviceable grey flannels. Well into his sixties, he could pass for a decade younger.

"This one's the last. How about you?"

He sighs. "Except hers." He is comfortable in the military world of order and appropriate conduct, proud -- as alumni are of their old college -- of the Great Game, regiments and redoubts, of khaki and commissions and cavalry charges. He regrets he never saw action. Sprinkled in his conversation are aphorisms like "Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted", applied equally to checking the morning temperature or remembering to bring a road map for a trip. Next to his advice about winter dressing -- "Any asshole can be cold", coarseness a rarity for him and a consequent delight for me -- it is my favourite. But after thirty-five years of marriage he still has no sense of how to please his wife. There is, apparently, no manual of procedures governing women.

"As usual," he admits, “I don't have the foggiest." And, as usual, he gives no sign of daring to think further than the perennial rope of pearls.

"We'll go this afternoon. No problem." I have somehow acceded to the position of sole and ultimate arbiter of what will satisfy my mother.

"No trouble? You're sure?" I nod.

"Good, good," says my father, his face once again purpled with cheer.

"This one?" My father peers at a display case in The Kiln, a country boutique halfway to the city. There are ceramic dishes and vases and pendants, earrings and bracelets and necklaces, amulets and vials and bottles of blown glass.

My father plucks off his good gloves finger by careful finger, then, in an anxious, unconscious flurry, stuffs them into the pocket of his duffel coat as he starts and stops around the store. If there were tires, he would kick them.

"Why don't you?" he complains. "You know her. You're better at this sort of thing."

I watch him fidget. Let him.

"Choose," I tell him.

It is strange to command your parents, to take them in hand as they once took you, to recognize the eerie, retributive pleasure that my gentle bullying affords me. Did they ever feel, did it ever occur to them -- the thought turns over like an engine starting slowly -- the mark they made when they had me in their sway?

"Damn diamonds are easier," he harrumphs.

"Choose," I insist.

I've kept my distance for so long, why now this lust to meddle with my family?

At last, my father beckons a young woman behind the long counter, indicating with no great confidence a lustrous object propped up on velvet.

It is a hand-blown perfume bottle shaped like a large tear, with strands of teal, mother's favourite colour, swirling to the neck.

"That should do."

"Yes," I smile. "I think so." He is startled, but not displeased, when I cuff him approvingly on the shoulder.

The bottle is beautiful.

We have returned and now the house is stuffed with aroma: savoury and sage, dressings and bastings, currant and mince and shortbread. Walking through the living room is like wading through marzipan.

I am bloated with the smells, begin to itch everywhere, as if I have swollen so large that I cannot turn without tumbling the lamps with the covered shades and the candy dishes and the bowls filled with polished stones, cannot move without my skin scratching every wall.

I find my sweatsuit and my running shoes as my mother finds me.

"Off running? It's cold out."

"Good," I say. "Bracing."

I can hear my father snoring lightly, having retired for his afternoon nap. "How's Dad?"

"A little problem with his medication," my mother confides. "Made his nose bleed. But it's fine now."

"He should be walking every day. Does he?"

"No."

"Goddamn it." My father's family is renowned for the weakness of their hearts. Diagnosed for angina and mild arterial thickening, he employs it cheerfully as an excuse to avoid the exercise that would prolong his life.

"He won't go." My mother, on the other hand, still plays tennis four times a week, always a contender for the "Experienced Ladies' Doubles" crown at the club.

"Why don't you go out with him? Kick his ass?"

My throat tightens and my voice is suddenly hoarse, the caw of a crow. My mother's head tilts up and her eyes widen: the sound surprises her. But a blurt of concern during the occasional visit doesn't really count as care and she eventually shrugs.

"You know your father."

Cold. Breathing is like mainlining ice, but I have read somewhere that, outside the Arctic, it can't damage the system. And the sun's grace gives me an hour before the skin on my face will begin to freeze.

I settle into a rhythm, feeling the waffles on my shoe soles dig into the packed snow of the driveway, spinning the world with each footfall. Near the main road, I find a trail set by cross-country skiers and strike off into the bush, imagining myself gliding with the ease of a pole push. There are no longer any straight lines: the track is suddenly sinewy and veering constantly: branches jump out of unseen turns to scourge my calfs or flail my back when I bend to avoid them.

The riot of nature reasserts itself. There is one jay, then several, then a rush of birds bitching in an old, peeling birch. Paw marks I cannot identify cross the trail, and the tip of a fox's tail disappears into a wall of evergreens. I burst into a clearing, chest heaving, and stop.

Deer again. A buck, a doe, a pair of fawns. They see me, their nostrils twitch, but they do not bolt. Deer live by their sense of smell: it is the keenest of all animals. There are different smells for berries when they are budding, berries when they are in bloom, different smells for every day of their ripening and when they go to seed, smells for berries on the ground, berries at first frost, berries when they freeze, berries under powder, pack and drifts, smells for the thirty-five types of snow. There is a different smell for all the deer clans and all their members, the living and the dead, and the deer know them all. The winds carry their legends: the 10,000 sagas, the crossing of the great northern bridge, the battles with the tempests and the ice floes, the hunts and the foraging, and when they sleep, they dream, nourished by the history of their race with each indrawn breath.

I want to be a deer, sleek and fleet and living on berries and dreams. I suck in air through my nose, trying to scent them as they do me. But they know I have no part in their story, and when I step off the trail and sink up to my thighs, the deer vanish, spurning the heaviness of humans with a light scuff of kicked-up snow.

My father is up and tweaking his ascot before venturing into the kitchen with his customary offer of assistance, declined by my mother before it is half-uttered.

"The Messiah's on the radio at six," I say.

My father is a stalwart of the church choir, not that religion really enters into it. He has a soldier's view of the matter: good for the troops, imparts order to Sundays, but mainly he is there for the singing. He has a fine baritone and muscular harmony is his particular joy,

always humming or singing to himself or improvising a resonant counterpoint to whatever melody is in the air.

"Where are the speakers?" asks Brian, dumping a load of kindling from the shed.

My father is mute. Brian and I both look at him, then each other, shamed by his silence. It infuriates me, this abdication of will, this refusal to express any desire that he imagines might vex my mother. He is content if things happen to go his way, more content still to do nothing so that no ripple appears in the taut canvas they have tethered between them.

"Mom!"

"Yo!" Bellowing back to match me from the kitchen.

"Speakers!"

"Speakers," Brian repeats as she skitters in.

"I don't know," she says, fluttering her hands, not wanting to be bothered. "Some place."

We find them in the front hall corridor, one serving as a stand for a potted geranium, the other piled high with English histories and detective paperbacks. Downstairs we discover a dust-covered receiver that was out of date when my father bought it, and twenty years older than that now.

"This is pathetic," says Brian, running his fingers over the pin-plugs at the back.

"Why don't you have this in the living room?" I ask my father.

"Now don't go disturbing everything," my mother intervenes from the kitchen, as if we were five years old and planning to run a full-gauge train track through the house.

"How can you live without some music?" I press on.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," says my father, burying his blankness deeper behind a newspaper.

"Where are you going to put it all?" asks my mother.   We won't be able to move." She flicks a finger at a tiny, ugly AM-FM barely adequate for the eleven o'clock news. "What's wrong with the radio? It's good enough for us."

"The Messiah?" asks Nina, drying her hands after swaddling Rachel in a new diaper. "What's that?"

"You see," says my mother, delighted to enlist a confederate. "For some people, some things that are more important. Come," she continues, graciousness itself, beckoning Nina to the kitchen for the first time: the keys to the kingdom. "Give me a hand with the dishwasher. Then we can finish up the stuffing. If you'd like."

The concert blasts out as loud as we dare, turned down when my mother sallies out to complain about the din, turned back up by degrees when she retreats. My father sits with an ancient red-bound folio of the score in his lap, the title inlaid in gold thread, pom-pom-pomming in approval as he conducts with his forefinger. When the Hallelujah Chorus begins to surge, he switches to falsetto for the tenor and, as he tracks the notes on the thick paper, Brian and I try to recall the bass part we learned so long ago. Once in a while, we astonish ourselves -- three pairs of gleeful eyes -- with harmony and approximate pitch.

Even my mother and Nina are drawn into the room.

"He's got a really nice voice," Nina marvels.

"Yes," says my mother, wistful. "On our honeymoon, every place we stopped had a piano, and Robert would sing to me." The last part as if it had come to displease her.

When it is over, my father leans back in his chair rosy with effort: a slow, sated smile seeps across his face.

"Hallelujah," says my mother. "Now could we please have everything back the way it was before the great recital?"

It's Brian who comes up with the idea of games. We pile all the old favourites on the dining table: Monopoly, Trivial Pursuit, Clue, the infallible Boggle. We haul out the twenty-pound two-volume Oxford with the magnifying glass along with pads and pencils for Dictionary. Brian even loots a drawer for a fresh deck of cards and breaks it open, a sound usually guaranteed to bring my mother at a gallop, lusting for a hand. She taught us to cut and shuffle as soon as we were out of high chairs, now, she would say if Brian and I were were careless enough to reach for the cards before they were all dealt, words punctuated with a pounce of the wrist and a light rap on the back of our hands with the undistributed deck, tut tut, a small, grave shake of the head and a complicitous smile at our temerity in trying to slip one past her, remembering, I have no doubt -- because there was nothing condescending about the smile, it was her sheer delight in daring, we basked in it too -- a similar reprimand from whoever tutored her at cards, now, she would continue, when I was a girl, you could lose an arm that way.

She appears.

"Oh," she says, "are you going to play?"

"Yes," says Brian with a victorious smile. "So are you, right?"

"No. But you go ahead." And the clatter of cooking resumes in the kitchen.

"This is nuts."

Brian taps a cigarette on the hearth. "Don't bother. It's not worth it."

"Dad?"

My father looks up from his reading and shrugs. "You know your mother."

I march into the kitchen with Brian a few reluctant steps behind.

"Mom," I announce, "I didn't come here to watch you cook."

She steps back from the stove where copper-bottomed pans simmer on all the elements and the microwave beside her buzzes for attention.

"Feel free," she says, opening her arms and pretending to untie the knot at the back of her apron. "Be my guest."

"That isn't the point," I say. "We could order Kentucky Fried Chicken. I don't care."

"Well I do." Her eyes are fierce and her voice sharp. "Somebody's got to damn well do it."

From downstairs, a tiny cough and a tentative wail: tension diffuses in the face of infant plight.

"She just won't go to sleep without us in the room," says Brian as he deserts.

"Why don't they put her in another room?" my mother asks. "She's got to learn to be on her own sometime. We all have to."

"Mom..."

"Shush," she interrupts. "The sooner I get started, the sooner I'll be finished."

The issue decided, my father enters with a yawn. "Dear, I'm going to bed."

"Yes, dear," she says without looking at him as she bends down to retrieve a casserole dish from the oven, "you go ahead. I'll be along in a while."

In the guest room next to the kitchen, I unfold the sofa-bed and the sheets that my mother has left, crisp-cornered and mint-fresh. Beside them, a plumped-up towel and matching face cloth, something I have never used since I was of an age to refuse and which, with equal insistence, my mother has never failed to lay out: I come by my stubbornness naturally.

I remember our house in the city where we all lived before my parents moved out here, when I was downstairs and my brother up. As the older, I was granted first basement rights, to a room with cement walls painted with bile-coloured Thoroseal to keep out the water, a low ceiling and one tiny window. And a door from the outside that no one could use unless they asked me first.

The basement's other large room was tenanted by my mother, surrounded by the washer, the dryer, the iron standing to attention on the ironing board, the mitten with

scorch marks on the padded palm, the E-Z Glide starch in aerosol cans and laundry overflowing in latticed plastic bins.   And there was always a book, open and upright and glaring back the fluorescence of the cheap light angled over it.

My mother was a librarian by profession and delight. She would stay up forever, filing and flipping pages and chuckling when she finally ferretted out the answer to a reference question that had vexed her all day long.   Hours later than my father, whose snoring would sift down from the bedroom above, outlasting even me on every night that I can recall.

How much she must have loathed her domestic lair, her daily burdens heaped around her. For it was an uneasy truce between my mother and the slog that falls to women, the cooking and the cleaning and the supplying of us all, the broken nails and the fingers pierced with pins. Not that she ever faltered, ever voiced complaint -- any resentment was ground down in her determination to acquire with toil the mastery that, in all else, she attained with ease. How it must have gored her when Brian and I, heedless and hurtful as children so often are, snatched the jeans with perfect, Euclidean hems from her hands without a word, or slopped down the dinner she placed in front of us so we could dash out and demonize the evening.

I remember at twelve or thirteen poking in my father's chest of drawers for a pen-knife he kept there and finding a slim leather case that unfolded into three parts, containing pictures of my mother about the time they were married. There was a head shot, a wedding portrait, and another one of her in a gown at a military ball. I was stunned at how beautiful she was, slim and radiant, dazzled by this woman, thinking of my mother not in the way sons usually do. Years later, back from prep school, I took out the photographs again and faced them to the oval mirror above my father’s chest-of drawers, absorbing how my face had come to resemble hers.

I stretch out on the bed, already feeling the metal struts pressing through the thin mattress, and, to the rustle of my mother's skirts and the intermittent clack of utensils through the thin wall, I will myself to slumber.

"Dad." I rouse him with a shake of his shoulder.

"What is it?"

"Mom's still in the kitchen. I can't sleep. Will you give me a lift to Trudy's?" Trudy, my favourite cousin, is out of town this year, leaving me keys to her apartment and her car. Downstairs, Rachel wakes and starts to moan. It is three o'clock in the morning.

My father struggles upright but doesn't question or complain, but ever-acquiescent in a voice silted with sleep, merely nods and says: "Okay, boy." Sometimes the soldier's habit of obedience comes in very handy.

My mother stops us in the hallway as I pull on my coat, me shielding my father as he pats the closet shelf in search of his warm mitts.

"Where are you going?" she asks quietly, with rancour.

"Trudy's," I say. "I can't sleep. I'll be back in the morning."

"Wonderful," she says. Her eyes are red-rimmed; tears tremble in her voice. I am aware of her pain, knowing that she knows as well, both of us conscious of my cruelty. But something has changed: part of me is thrilled -- over the wall at last. I stick to my spite, my belligerent silence defying her to declare herself.

"I'm sure Brian will appreciate how you feel about Rachel," my mother finally says, evading, as is our habit, of what we both know is the real issue, this, as we lock eyes, bouncing back and forth like a face in an infinite series of mirrors.

I say nothing more. Besides, she is armed with a long wooden baking spoon.

I stand beside the car while my father warms it up. Coloured Christmas bulbs outline the eaves troughs and the long porch railing, while several strands of clear lights trace the frail, desiccated limbs of a willow out front. My mother's shadow crosses the curtained kitchen window.

There is little traffic, but my father's eyes never leave the road for an instant. He is the good soldier, mission-bound. I huddle deep in my coat, trying to word the logic of my resentment.

"There is something," he says after a minute's pause. "I've been talking to Brian."

About what? The possibility that my father might have an inkling of the mountain moving in me has me suddenly alert, quivering.

"Are you giving regularly to Hawthorne?" I shake my head like a cartoon triple-take. Hawthorne? The prep school where I was dispatched to diligent study and friendlessness? Where, a few years later, Brian had teetered on the verge of expulsion because his room was the hallucinogenic centre of the school? Hawthorne? Fucking Hawthorne?

How can even my father be so inert, so oblivious and unresponsive? A sidelong glance checks whether this is merely his way of disguising an embarrassment of emotion, but no, nothing has disturbed the sober placidity of his concentration on the road. With a mittened hand he pushes his army beret slightly higher on his head, the fall of the fold now perfect.

I feel as if I've been knocked cold by a rice-paper brick.

"No," I eventually say.

The incongruity of it all brings back another Christmas, years before. When I was home from university and Brian from Hawthorne and we were inspired to add to the spirit of the season by dropping some of his acid on Christmas Eve. We sat giggling in

front of the tree, tripping on the lights and the foil icicles and the star on top, until my mother caught us, returning late from shopping.

"What did you put in your Cheerios this morning?" she demanded.

Too much for both of us. We fled downstairs to the TV and the safety of shared lunacy, hooting as we collapsed on the couch.

There my father found us an hour later, mute and hypnotized by an animated version of the Mother Goose Tales. I don't know if he even broke step as he surveyed the situation, walked briskly to the television and switched it to a Georgia Tech football game.

"What are you laughing about?" asks my father, distracted for a moment.

"Christmas," I say, and settle on silence for the rest of the journey.

After only a few hours of sleep, I awake to the darkness of Christmas morning.

The roads are clear on the way to my parents' house in Trudy's car, good Christians still a-bed or at least decently at home, every station on the radio caroling on, interrupted several times with warnings of a severe storm expected in the afternoon, sweeping out of the North and burying half the country already.

I am about to open the front door when I hear sounds from the other side. Peeking around the corner, I see my father in slippers and flannels and a good shirt standing on the back deck, both hands braced on the railing like a sailing captain at the helm, the morning and his frozen domain comfortable in his calm hands. He is singing.

> The holly and the ivy
>
> When they are both full grown
>
> Of all the trees that are in the wood
>
> The holly bears the crown.

I have mostly heard it sung by boy's choirs, quick and light, but he pitches it deep, trying it on for size, measured and slow, a lament raftered with sturdy melancholy.

The holly bears a blossom
As bright as any flower
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
To be our sweet Saviour.
The rising of the sun
And the running of the deer...

His voice is strong and clear, but nothing echoes back back from the ice, nothing from the cold, flat stones on the shore of the lake or the low, wind-scoured snow dunes and the white waste.

I leave before he can notice me, and press the doorbell a long time to announce my arrival.

"Come in," says my mother, banishing the tremors of night with her fund of cheer. "Merry Christmas. You don't need to ring, you know."

"I was hoping you were still asleep so I could wake you all up."

An hour later, we are invaded by the Banducci's, Nina's family, when a convoy of cars bursts over the hill and slews to a stop. A dozen children launch themselves from back doors, pursued by a coven of spinster aunts who haul them upright from snow angels, dodging inexpertly flurries of snowballs that threaten to decapitate them. In the space of a minute, there are two bloody noses, one black eye, and, magically, near peace as the last howling recalcitrant is led by the ear to summary discipline at the side of the house. As the spring on the front door snaps shut, I see the line of crystal lights, wrenched from the willow branches and trailing despondently in the ploughed up snow.

The Banducci's grapple everything in sight: each other, Nina, Brian, me. I am embraced, kissed, squeezed and back-pummeled down a gauntlet of relations-in-law,

many of whom I have never heard of before, much less laid eyes on. At the finish, I see my parents standing at opposite ends of the room and realize that I have never seen them touch in public, except for a daily, fleeting, morning kiss on the cheek when my father was on his way to his command, staff car and driver idling three feet away. And, of course, when he when he helps her on and off with her coat.

"So, you're the older brother," says Sam, Nina's father, as he has said on each of the four occasions we have met. Heavy-set and just tall enough to avoid being squat, he punches me amiably on the shoulder to counterpoint our conversation.

He is a contractor. Among Nina's uncles are a plumber, a garage owner, a police captain, an accountant and a dentist. Brian, it seems, is related by marriage to virtually every useful trade and profession.

"It comes in handy," says Brian, drawing me away. In parting, Sam pats Brian's stomach, comparing it admiringly to his own.

"But it has its price," says Brian.

My mother is in her element, the consummate chatelaine, everywhere at once in her holly-red hostess dress, as radiant as the morning. Innumerable platters issue from the kitchen, the fruit of her midnight labours: crackers and pretzels and nuts and bread and cheese, then turkey and tender-as-butter beef ringed by mashed potatoes in oceans of gravy and sweet roast onions.

When dessert is finally produced, there are deep murmurs of appreciation for the Christmas cake and the mince tarts, groans and vows of immediate diets following large scoops of hard sauce, and higher-pitched squeals from the children when candies appear in apparently bottomless bowls. I stay close as I can to the floor with the young and play the kennel master, freeing peppermints and butterscotch that have stuck to soft hair.

Aunt Loretta brings out a camera, and suddenly, it's showtime! There are camcorders and mini-cams with miner's lights mounted on top and flashes exploding like fireworks. Brian drags two chairs to the center of the room, seats himself with a sigh

beside Nina and sets Rachel on his knee. Relatives clamor for a place behind them, each insistent on having Rachel's most winning smile, each with their own infallible technique for summoning it forth.

"Aunt Rina, your turn."

"Come one, Rachel, smile, baby, smile, that's it." Flash.

"Uncle Benny!" Rachel squirms.

"Tickle her. It always works." Flash.

"Cousin David and Mary.

"Stick out your tongue, Rache!" Flash.

"Now Tino and Betty."

"C'mon, Rachel, this is fun!"

"Admit it, Rachel," I say from the floor. "This is the worst day of your life."

My mother turns, beaming. "It's true, isn't it? How lucky they never remember." Chortle. Flash.

After the Banduccis finally leave, I sink into a chair, having said barely a word to anyone over the age of ten. They are good, kindly people with whom I have nothing in common.

"Time!" my mother announces, flushed with the afternoon and the outdoor farewells.

I claim the place at the base of the tree. It's the best job: you get to hand out everything and open your own presents last.

My mother is our recording angel. From a special drawer in the wrapping room, she retrieves a Moroccan-bound ledger that she has used since our earliest Christmas, inscribed in its ledgers the real history of our family, three pages per year. Our names head columns, under each name a description of the gift and giver. Under 'Darren' there are check marks beside each entry, a check to the left meaning that the card had been correctly matched to the present, on the right, that I had been sequestered on Boxing Day

until I had produced the requisite number of lines, thanking since strayed cousins for the brown argyle socks, vanished uncles and aunts for knitted mittens and grandparents, now long dead, for a succession of plaid scarves.

Rachel is in pandemonium, all but hidden in the wrappings of a score of presents she has gleefully destroyed. My parents receive a huge assortment of odd gifts from old friends Brian and I have never heard of but, when pressed, agree for the sake of peace that, of course, we remember. Brigadier and Mrs. Spitall? Certainly. You bet. They are labelled "To your house from ours", or "To your kitchen from ours" and contain mysterious objects that look like instruments of the Inquisition and turn out to be spoon racks, potato fluffers and whisk dryers. And, of course, catnip for Jeremiah and Job, the two Siamese, who predictably get stoned in a minute, wreak havoc for ten and pass out near the heating vents.

It is my mother's year for shawls, and mine is the third she has unfurled in five minutes. When she reads the card, she impatiently pushes aside the other two and unwinds it slowly, drawing it across her body, running her fingers along the threads.

"Silk?" she asks. "I thought so." She caresses its length with the back of her hand. "It's beautiful, Darren. Now I can be warm and pretty." She strokes it some more and finally settles it around her neck.

"Thank you, love," she says, and blows a kiss from the couch to me at the tree.

Next, she opens the small box from my father, teasing apart the tissue like onion skin. She seems irritated.

"Who's this from?" she asks, holding it up as it glows in the afternoon light. "Where's the tag. Where did I put my reading glasses! What's it say?"

My father is silent.

"Dad. It's from Dad." My contribution.

"With help from someone?" my mother asks with a knowing grin and a tilt of the head towards me.

My father is resolutely mute so I continue to trumpet his cause. "It's a perfume bottle. Isn't it great? He went down and chose it himself. Right, Dad?"

"Yes, well, yes," my father allows, slowly.

"Beauty," says Brian.

"It's gorgeous," says Nina, putting Rachel aside for a moment's inspection.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" says my mother tersely, burying the bottle quickly in its box before Nina can get her hands on it, as if, coming from my father, it is somehow tainted.

"Thank you, dear." She bestows a barely perceptible nod on my father, then back to stroking the shawl with her long fingers. He is placid, seemingly content, satisfied never to risk losing a battle by never fighting one, sunk back into the cushion of the chair, eyes half-closed, not here, not there, not anywhere.

I stare at both of them. But I am silent, as we all are, always. I know now what I was taught, and how well I learned the lesson.

"Now," my mother says briskly, "where were we, Nina? A crayon set for Rachel. Where in Heaven's name did that card get to?"

"Time for you two to go for a walk," I announce when all the presents are done. My parents generally take a Christmas stroll around the lake to inspect the scattered houses of the neighbours they have never met.

"What?" My father is startled.

My mother dismisses the idea. "Don't be silly. There's the clean-up."

"Mom, you did all the cooking. The least we can do is take care of the rest," says Brian.

"You don't know the dishwasher," insists my mother.

"I do," says Nina. "You showed me. Remember?"

"Dad," I say, "a walk would do you good."

"The old ticker," he says, trying to weasel out.

The only way to make it stick is to pin him down in public. "The doctor said you should walk ever day. How long's it been?"

"Well, I suppose you're right," he admits.

"Okay. Time to start." I clap my hands. "Coats on. Both of you."

"I don't want to go," says my mother.

"You're going together." Brian grimaces at my harshness. "You should," I continue, more gently. "Good for you, too, Mom."

"I will not leave this house in this state!" My mother is vehement, and Brian rises to his feet with her voice.

"We'll take care of it," he says, family man now, one to be trusted. "It'll all be done by the time you get back."

I pull their coats from the closet. "Come on."

"All right, all right!" My mother is exasperated to anger as I close in on her. "Just stop all this goddamned fussing!"

My father opens the front door. It has begun to snow, heavily enough to obliterate all trace of our recent visitors, layers of low cloud promising a leaden universe beyond.

"Doesn't look good," says my father.

"It's nothing," I reassure him. "We would have heard."

My mother makes a show of choosing the shawl I have given her, smoothing it around her neck and under her lapels. The wind howls, snow swoops in and the outer door slams shut. My father backs away.

"Come, dear," she says to him, but smiles at me, eyes sparkling with the accepted challenge. "If Darren says we have to go for a walk, then we must."

My father holds the door open and ushers her outside into the snow that is even heavier than a few minutes before, and adjusts his toque.

"Darren," says my brother.

"Ssh," I tell him.

I hunch over on a low bench in the hallway, clasping my arms around my knees and peer out through the door panes. My parents are moving slowly, kicking up tufts of powder. All of a sudden, my mother's glove finds my father's mitten, and, with their backs to me, they walk on, holding hands like children.

A cry wells up in me but still I say nothing. The snow thickens and with each step they become less distinct, smears against the storm that move closer and finally merge into one. At last, in the swirl of a squall, the veil is pulled down and they vanish altogether.

There is nothing to do but wait.