

Fern refuses eye contact with the others as she takes a seat in the waiting area. She stows her purse and the plastic bag containing her street clothes between the chair's cold chrome legs before studying her clean-shaven, middle-aged counterparts.

"We all look like members of a cult. Kool-Aid, anyone?" trills a woman in sling-backs. The green-gowned adults shun her, but the blue-eyed boy who swings his feet across from Fern whispers to his mother: "Will I get Kool-Aid after this?"

A young man in cross-trainers emerges from a change room. His head is threaded through one of three armholes. Fern is treated to a partial view of his sprinting backside. The baffled look he displays as he takes the seat beside Fern under the fluorescent lights reminds her of Kyle. The mother hen is aroused.

"All three are arm holes," she instructs. "One of them overlaps."

"Ohhh," he nods. "Now I get it!"

He jerks to a stand. Yanking the gown tight to his hip, he sprints back to the change room. Minutes later, when he emerges, he sits as far from Fern as is possible.

"Mr. Smythe?" the tiny, blonde technician calls.

No answer. "Mr. Smythe?"

"He's in there," Fern volunteers, pointing to another door. "Perhaps he's having trouble with the gown?"

Goldie-Locks raps at the door.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Smythe?"

"Yes, fine, goddamn it!" His muffled reply.

The door swings wide. A grizzled Mr. Smythe—all three of his armholes properly positioned—lurches out in plaid bedroom slippers. Droplets of sweat cling to his forehead and fragile comb-over. He focuses on the technician through the lenses of his drug store reading glasses.

"Where do you want me now?" he growls.

"Follow me, sir; they're all ready for you."

"And I suppose I should be grateful?" he snaps.

Fern forms a teepee with her hands, covering mouth and nose as he limps past, refusing entry to his stale odour. There's no excuse for it, she'll tell Buck when she gets back to town. If ever I get to the point where I refuse to bathe, get rid of me!

Buck offered to accompany her this morning, but she turned him down. He feels about hospitals the way she feels about nursing homes, and the last thing she needs during the procedure is Buck complaining about palpitations.

Fern glances at the clock's round, institutional face: 8:45 A.M. Buck is opening the store right now. Pulling the blinds, making room in the display windows for the new fall stock that arrived last evening. Sitting back behind the cash to sip his Double-Double and watch friends and neighbours flock like pigeons to the Penny Parlour across the street.

Fern's abdomen issues a massive rumble of protest.

*Absolutely no food or drink after midnight.*

Fern turns, ready to offer an apology to the heavysset woman in Birkenstocks who is reading Hannibal, but she appears not to have noticed.

*Can I brush my teeth?*

*Of course, but don't swallow any water. Your stomach must be empty for the x-ray to tell us anything.*

Buck refused a poached egg on toast this morning in a show of solidarity. He's not fooling her—he's eating a blueberry fritter right now. Watching a teenage mom flick her cigarette into the gutter before pushing her little consequence through the entrance. Or maybe it's one of those old widows on a fixed income, trailing a lightweight shopping cart.

They cater to hostages.

It wasn't always so, not back when Buck's father ran O'Brien's. When the oil crisis made Kingston seem distant and fuzzy, like Toronto, and people were content to take quality over quantity. If she had to endure one more customer leaning across the counter to tell her how they are doing her a favour because they could get shoelaces cheaper in the city, she might explode. Kiss my ass, she thinks.

Buck winces whenever she talks that way. It's not the customer's fault, he'll say, it's the politicians—local, provincial, federal. Buck may only have his high-school diploma, but he stays current, reading between the lines of the *National Post* at the breakfast table, flapping newsprint like the clipped wings of some endangered bird. He'll talk a person's ear off, if given half a chance, about free trade and welfare for the rich, holding the line on municipal taxes, the town's failure to attract new industry. He plans to spoil his ballot in the coming election. In the end, nothing he has to say will halt their slow slide into bankruptcy.

Buck doesn't want to see it.

*Are you under any personal stress, Mrs. O'Brien?*

No.

When Keeley phoned last month to whine about how far her apartment was from campus, didn't Buck run straight out to Blodgett's and buy her a Tracker? Second hand, sure, but not free.

I had a car when I was nineteen.

What if she quits like Derreck did last year on Babe?

She won't quit. She's not a quitter.

Remember piano lessons, guitar lessons, art classes, tae-kwon-do?

Fern had had to bite her combative tongue. Keeley could do no wrong in Buck's eyes. Babe would have understood.

Friends since kindergarten, each married to their high-school sweethearts, they'd even coached each other through labour, leaving the men out of it. Fern had been Babe's shoulder when Harley decided to go find himself and never did.

Babe provided the voice of reason last winter when Fern found Kyle's stash of porn in his sock drawer.

An embolism.

Fern removing the garden shears from Babe's hand, closing her naked eyes, covering her with the blue gingham tablecloth from the picnic table. Fern sitting cross-legged on the grass in the still spring sunshine with Derreck for twenty-three minutes, waiting for the ambulance to make its way back from Brockville General.

*Have you suffered any recent losses?*

*Well, I did lose a close friend, this past year.*

Four months of heart burn and stomach aches before Doc Mills managed to yank the right string and get her in to see a specialist who, during a fifteen-minute consultation, pronounced a probable ulcer and ordered a barium x-ray for confirmation.

It's the little boy's turn.

"Remember," his mother admonishes as she hands him off to a smiling, male technician, "you have to drink it."

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

What if it's cancer? Fern didn't have the guts to ask the specialist.

Her town so often hushed these days by the solemn, paralytic scent of cancer. In the grocery store, or milling about down at centennial park during the craft fair, or serving up casseroles at the community potluck supper. Did you hear about so-and-so? Went in for surgery and damned if they didn't find a tumour. Malignant, radiation, chemo, nothing else they can do, sad-so-sad, you just never know, do you? Will you be having mashed or scalloped potatoes?

There must be twenty people down here in this windowless cavern. Everyone booked for 8:30, no one expecting good news. A cold clutch of panic takes hold of her stomach and clamours into her chest.

Buck should have come, after all. They could have gone out for lunch to one of those fragrant, dark places on Brock Street. She could have made a few Christmas purchases though, of course, her list is shrinking each and every year. Both of Buck's parents dead. Her father gone. Her mother insisting she no longer has need of material things while shakily affixing her grandchildren's names to all her worldly goods with masking tape and ballpoint pen.

And now Babe.

Fern had loved to open gifts from Babe. Unlike her presents from Buck, which Fern paid for, then wrapped, she never knew what to expect from Babe. Her gifts were always thoughtful and measured, well planned and executed. Not like her death at all.

The boy busts out of the radiation room, shadowed by his male technician.

"Your son did great."

“It didn’t taste like nothing,” the boy reports in a rush, “but it jumped around in my mouth like it had feet and when I was done? I had the second biggest burp of my whole life!”

The gowned ones chuckle. Even the woman in Birkenstocks permits a quiet snicker to escape while turning a page in her book.

“Mrs. O’Brien?”

Her turn. Goldie-locks is standing at the X-ray room entrance, a bright smile fixed to her lips. Fern returns the smile and steps through the door.