

The Prime of His Life

Purdy was at the shop before Winslow arrived. He didn't usually come in this early now that he was sixty-five. Normally, he let Winslow open up and his own crews get the ladders and gallons of paint, and brushes and rollers and drop sheets onto the trucks, arriving himself at seven, just in time to get behind the wheel and drive out of this district of garages and warehouses and car lots to the classy residential neighbourhoods of this coastal city. But today he'd got there first and the look on Winslow's face said he knew exactly why Purdy was early. Winslow said good morning, civil enough, but he avoided looking at Purdy, not wanting, apparently, to encourage his father's intentions. He went about loading up the trucks.

There were two sides to the shop: the painting side, with the shelves of primer, the rollers on long poles, the trays, spatulas, buckets, faux-finish tools, the putty and filler, the scrapers and spatulas and brushes, the sandpaper and edgers and ladders and brooms. Opposite, the window washing supplies: pails, ragbags, squeegees, Windex, liquid soaps, chamois skins, sponges, scrubbers, scrapers, safety belts, state-of-the-art blades for wiping the windows, which Winslow had sent away to the States to get. Purdy had said, "Your mother thinks those are a waste of money."

"Why did you tell her?" Winslow asked. "And anyway, what would *she* know?"

"That's no way to speak about her," Purdy told him.

Confident in his own charms, Purdy was not deterred by Winslow's indifference. He'd got places in life through good-humoured persuasion,

persistence, a general liking of people of all kinds, even strangers. He got up from his desk and went over and stood behind Winslow, who was nearly a foot taller, now, than Purdy. Purdy was not getting stooped but he'd shrunk a little, his joints compacting. Nevertheless, he was still as restless, strong, toned, light on his feet, bursting with energy as a man of thirty. He said, "Your mother has a private room now."

"That's nice," answered Winslow neutrally. He didn't stop what he was doing, getting down the equipment for the day and carrying it out to the truck, which took a dozen or so trips. Normally, he and Purdy didn't have much intercourse in the mornings, and at the end of the day, they might not even see each other, depending on how things went and who arrived back here late or early. After thirty years at this, things ran pretty smoothly, with few screw-ups or catastrophes. They had a lot of repeat business, word of mouth referrals, more customers than they could shake a stick at. Purdy and Winslow made a practice of staying out of each other's hair. They might go a whole month without really talking.

"Your mother has a beautiful view of the hospital gardens. It reminds her of home, I think," Purdy said.

"Swell."

"Her room is full of flowers."

"Good for her."

Purdy felt a little foolish following Winslow around like a little puppy, but he did his best to act casual, his body loose, his hands shoved in his pockets, jingling

the coins there. While Winslow dressed in faded, stained, loose blue overalls that emphasized his girth, Purdy showed up for work in immaculate khaki trousers, a striped dress shirt, good leather shoes. Madonna said he couldn't drive out of their neighbourhood looking blue-collar. And, anyway, Purdy could paint a whole house without getting a drop on these clothes or even on his hands. He could paint a straight line, he could paint window frames without getting streaks on the glass, his drop sheets were always immaculate. It was not practice. He was like that from the start: focused, precise, confident, steady of hand.

Outside, it was heating up, the sun an explosion beyond the sharp shadow cut by the garage, but in here it was still cool, a perfumed spring breeze drifting in through the big open garage door. This was a time of day when Purdy had always thought he was the most blessed man in the world, that it was wonderful to be alive, that no problem the day might furnish would be unsolvable – in fact, he hoped for some catastrophe to work his resourcefulness on, his affability. When he looked around at the orderly shop, at the ladders and tools hanging so neatly on the walls, at the plenitude of supplies, he felt like a millionaire.

“She’s been asking when you’re coming in to see her,” Purdy said.

A small, private laugh from Winslow. “No, she hasn’t, Dad.”

“Well, maybe *I’m* asking. That must be what I meant to say.” It was mid-June, nearly the longest day of the year. The sun had been up since 4:30. Purdy was awake even before that. The early bird catches the worm, was his motto. No, that wasn’t it. His bed was empty now, cold, without Madonna. “*I’m* asking if

you're going to pay her a visit," he went on. He laughed, trying to lighten things, trying to soften Winslow up. He had a way of cajoling people into good humour. He considered it his greatest gift. But with Winslow, he had to tread carefully, he had to find an angle. It wasn't that Winslow was thin-skinned or quick-tempered. In fact, he was not given to highs or lows of emotion. Mirth, anger were not a part of his makeup. Ever since he was a boy, he'd been sober, quiet, observant, inward. Purdy found him a puzzle. He was never quite sure where he stood with Winslow.

"It would be nice if you paid her a visit," said Purdy.

"Really? Why?" asked Winslow.

Winslow's crews and Purdy's crews had arrived, ten men in all. Some of them lingered outside in the parking lot, smoking, others pitched in to outfit the trucks.

"She's your mother," said Purdy.

"Oh? In what sense?" Winslow asked.

"They're saying weeks. That's all she's got with liver. You don't want to be sorry, after it's too late."

"I don't make a practice of feeling sorry."

"It's always good to be able to apologize."

Now, Winslow stopped what he was doing and looked straight at Purdy. "For what? What would I need to apologize for?"

To avoid Winslow's eyes, Purdy turned and looked out the big doors at the street. They would have many months of this perfect weather, sunshine, mild temperatures, brilliant flowers and the beautiful mountains shimmering in the

distance, now blue, now purple, now pink, as they drove about the city. He'd developed an upscale clientele. He was trusted, seen as a perfectionist, honest to the core, a good man. It all came naturally to him. It wasn't hard. He'd had to bust his ass for every penny but life had been good to him.

Purdy was sure he remembered Winslow being handsome, earnest, pliant, as a child, but now he had a square, fleshy, blunt face, not so much obstinate as unswerving, not open and genial, like Purdy's, but secretive and brooding. Purdy tried to remember if it was Winslow's divorce eight years ago that turned him this way. He thought Winslow hung onto things too much, things you couldn't change or make sense of. He was too sensitive.

"I don't know," said Purdy. "I don't know what it is between you and your mother." Purdy didn't go in for analysing, dwelling, blaming, taking life apart, looking back or even, for that matter, forward. He believed in living in the moment.

"Maybe you should ask her," suggested Winslow. "You've had forty years to do it. Why don't you ask her now?"

"She's sick. I wouldn't want to stress her."

"Well, I wouldn't want to be a hypocrite." Winslow had turned away again to lift down an extension ladder. He carried it outside as though it were weightless, hooked it effortlessly onto the side of the truck. A big strong bulky boy with a joyless walk. Well, not a boy anymore, of course, a man in his forties but Purdy might at times still think of him as a boy.

"Why not just let bygones be bygones?" asked Purdy.

“Let’s not be too simple about this,” Winslow said. That is just how Madonna had thought of Winslow all his life. Simple. He’d never heard it from her lips but both he and Purdy knew it was how she considered him.

“It would give your mother peace of mind. Closure, I think they call it.”

“She’s not even thinking about me, and you know it.”

“She’s getting thinner already. Every day, I can see it.”

“Dad.” Now Winslow’s voice was kind, patient. “I can’t talk to you about this. It really has nothing to do with me. I’ve got to get going. The men are waiting. You’re holding up the parade.”

“Well, ok,” Purdy said, shifting in a lost, foolish way from one foot to the other.

“Well, I hope you have a nice day.” Still, he followed Winslow outside, unable to stop himself from making one last try. “This distance between you and your mother. It shouldn’t happen in a family.”

“You never seemed to worry about it before now,” Winslow said from behind the wheel. Purdy noticed for the first time that Winslow’s hair was greying at the temples.

“I worried,” Purdy said.

“Are you sure? Maybe you were too busy being her lapdog.”

Purdy stood at the truck window smiling as though he hadn’t heard Winslow’s remark. He had massive calves from climbing ladders, a neck thickened from the strain of painting ceilings. If he was attractive at all, it was the optimistic spring in his step that made him so, not his looks, for he had an overbite, a big

tuberous nose, a bald head with a clown's fringe of fluffy white hair going round the sides and the back.

"I'd fill in for you on the windows if you thought you'd go over," Purdy said.

Winslow shot him a warning look, as if to say: *This is my side of the business, right? This is where you wanted me. Now, keep out of it.* He said, "You've never washed a window in your life."

After Winslow left, Purdy sat at his desk, wondering why Winslow had to be so touchy. What the hell was his problem? He seemed to Purdy indifferent to his work, lacking in confidence, conviction, passion. How had the apple fallen so far from the tree? They weren't close, he and Winslow. They should have been, thought Purdy. They were partners, after all. Well, not partners, strictly speaking. Winslow was, technically, just an employee. It was Purdy and Madonna who together owned the business. ("Though she's never set foot in the place," Winslow once pointed out.) Silent. Madonna was a silent partner. ("When was she ever silent?" Winslow had asked. Purdy noticed Winslow never referred to Madonna as "Mom," just "she.") Though, in principle, Winslow was a partner. Didn't Purdy ask his opinion on things? Wasn't Winslow in charge for two weeks every winter when Purdy took Madonna away to Hawaii?

When Winslow was young, he hadn't shown much promise. That was what Madonna had thought. She'd said he was slow-witted, a clod-hopper, an oaf, the Incredible Hulk. All he'd be good for, she said, was working for Purdy. This remark of course could have wounded Purdy, he could have interpreted Madonna's words as a put-down of himself, his line of work. But Purdy did not

hold things against people. He did not try to second-guess them, he let what people said roll off him like water off a duck's back.

The summers when Winslow was little, Purdy took him to work, let him open the paint cans, lay down the drop sheets, position the ladders. "Don't give him a brush," Madonna warned. "He's got two left hands. His size thirteen footprints will be all over the place. He'll just make a mess and lose you money." She said that Winslow had a short attention span, that he wasn't enough of a perfectionist to make a painter, he couldn't be trusted with the fine art of plastering over cracks, nail holes, popped screws, or sanding the patches down to the texture of satin. That was why they started up the window-washing side of the business. It was less finicky than painting, it required no skill, said Madonna, and it did not put you inside people's houses so much or at such length. You didn't have to go and talk to customers, as Purdy did, discuss paint colours, show them a portfolio of projects you were proud of. Sometimes Purdy spent weeks in people's houses. The ladies got chatting to him, pretty soon they were baking him cookies and begging him for more anecdotes. And these were educated people, ready to pay for quality work. He was a charmer with women, he knew how to compliment and entertain them. He had a store of appropriate jokes to relay, some having to do with husbands and wives. Whereas Winslow had nothing like this, no legacy or record of his life's work. With Winslow, it was quick and dirty, in and out. He never got to know his customers and he said he didn't care.

“Why wouldn’t you let me head up one of the other painting crews?” Winslow had asked Purdy nearly twenty years ago. “Why would you pick a stranger to do it?”

“He’s not a stranger,” Purdy said. “He’s been working with me for five years.”

“He’s not family. I thought this was a family business.”

After Winslow was gone for the day, Purdy sat at his desk a little longer, fooling with invoices. For the first time in his life, he hardly had the heart for work. He didn’t see the point of it at the moment. He’d always worked to give Madonna things, to make her happy. He looked out at the men, shuffling uneasily from foot to foot in the sun. He felt badly for them. They knew about Madonna. They had no idea what to say to him. They could hardly meet his eye. Finally, he took a deep breath, pushed himself up from his chair, forced a smile and clapped his hands enthusiastically. “Ok, boys,” he cried, “let’s hit those walls!”

A nurse stopped Purdy as he was leaving the cancer ward at seven in the evening. “Mr. Cox. This is a lot of work for you. You need your rest just as much as your wife does. You’ll wear yourself out.”

He had two bags of clothes in his arms. Nightgowns, dresses, stockings, underwear, blouses. “I don’t mind the laundry,” he told her. “It keeps me occupied at night.”

“We don’t recommend street clothes in here,” the nurse said. “As you can see, they get soiled.”

“Madonna is allergic to the hospital gown,” Purdy told her.

“Allergic?”

“She thinks it’s bad luck to wear it.”

“It’s a great leveller, Mr. Cox,” said the nurse. “There’s a solidarity in here, among the patients. Why set oneself apart? Why not wear the team uniform? Nobody is above what’s happening in here.”

“Madonna has always lived with style. Every day of her life she’s put on something different. She loves clothes and jewellery. It makes her feel good to look good.”

“Well, she might just find that the hospital gown can be an actual comfort,” said the nurse. “When patients put it on, they’re accepting their disease. They’re turning themselves over to our care. Your wife has terminal cancer, Mr. Cox. I hope these clothes aren’t a sign of denial.”

The day she checked in here, Madonna told Purdy to go home and get her boucle jacket, her yellow linen suit, certain skirts, blouses, sweaters, high heels. She counted off the items on her fingers, her long red nails flashing in the stark room. He tried to compile a list in his head. The mounting inventory of articles weighed him down. He felt anxiety, sadness, defeat. He had thought they were moving gently, honestly toward something natural and certain and true but this was retreat. This was repudiation. Suddenly it seemed they were swimming backward, kicking against a force that threatened to drown them. Sun poured into the hospital room. Purdy was shocked to see Madonna’s hollowed face, her yellowed complexion, the panic in her eyes.

“Don’t forget anything,” she told him.

“I won’t. And if I do I’ll go back and get it. I’d make the trip a million times for you, you know that.”

She looked around the room wildly. “There must be a better place than this,” she said. It was the city’s oldest hospital, a dark stone building cheaply converted to a palliative care facility.

“I don’t know,” said Purdy. “I think this is where people go.” He’d called the doctor’s office. They’d said to bring her here. He stepped to the window. “Look at this beautiful view of the ravine,” he said hopefully.

Purdy stepped out onto the patio and ate his dinner, a piece of white bread spread with peanut butter. He crossed the flagstones, picked up a net and skimmed a single leaf off the pool’s surface. From the steep, wooded bank behind the house, voices drifted down to him – a couple climbing with their dog. It was a popular place for locals to go walking. It occurred to Purdy that he might have to get himself a dog soon. Madonna had always been against animals. She said they were dirty, they smelled and shed hair and were as much trouble as a child. Purdy had always envied the people he saw climbing behind the house, out for a walk on a beautiful evening, getting a workout. Madonna had never been one for exercise. She was a true lady. She didn’t like to sweat or do physical labour. She had her lunches and she liked to get her beauty rest and plan her parties and go shopping, go to the fashion shows, to the spa. It was what Purdy wanted for her.

This block of houses built against the hill, which, in this balmy west coast city of alarming growth, would never be deforested and developed, was considered prime real estate. For forty years, Purdy and Madonna had lived here, in this suburb on the north shore, once a neighbourhood of carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, roofers, road workers. Gradually, these owners were bought out by professionals who raised roofs, gutted, stuccoed, enlarged, landscaped. Whatever improvements they made, Purdy did them one better. He added a second floor to his bungalow, punched skylights in the roof, demolished walls, put on a solarium, a sauna, hot tub, weight room, movie theatre, performing all the work himself, because not only was he a skilled painter and plasterer, but he was gifted at carpentry, tile-laying, drywall, plumbing, electrical work, welding and soldering. Physical labour was a joy to him and a remedy for his restlessness. To have his muscles burn and ache from a day's work exhilarated him. Even now, he hadn't stopped upgrading the house. Changes, ways to improve it were on his mind. The European bathroom fixtures, the costly lighting, the heavy doors, the ornate mouldings, the Italian marble hallways filled him with pride.

Yes, over the years, he'd held his ground and now he could say that he, Purdy Cox, a man with only a grade eight education, was living among dentists, architects, professors, engineers. Now, Purdy turned on the hose and watered the pots of crimson bougainvillea. He swept the patio. He turned and looked at the pink and blue reflections from the pool dancing against the back of the house. He had Winslow over every month to wash the windows. Well, Winslow didn't come himself, of course. He sent the other crew. Winslow hadn't set foot on this

place for ten years. Of this, Madonna had said, “If he doesn’t want to come home, I don’t care. I don’t miss him a bit.” Purdy did not understand but he knew better than to probe. Madonna could get her back up.

Back inside the house, Purdy heard the washer and dryer going upstairs. The sound was a comfort to him, a connection to Madonna, as though the soft thud of the clothes tossed over and over were her heartbeat. A good part of each evening now was spent spraying, soaking, bleaching out stains – he didn’t want to think what they were from. Of course, he could have asked the cleaning woman to take care of it but to do so, he felt, would have been an invasion of Madonna’s privacy. The spots on some articles would not come out. These items he at first tossed on the floor of one of her closets, but later, as the pile grew, he stuffed the discards into a garbage bag and put it out at the curb on collection day. Walking back to the house, he felt guilty, treacherous, disburdened.

Now, he went down to the cellar and brought up a can of paint and roamed the house looking for marks. This was something he did once a week. Madonna would approve, he reflected now. But what was he thinking? She’d never be home again to see these touch-ups. Soon, the machines upstairs stopped. Purdy stood still, with the paint can and wet brush in his hand and listened to the palpable silence in the house. For the first time in his life, he felt fear. Fear of what he might not understand.

He'd been surprised by the extent of Madonna's wardrobe, though surely he'd noticed before this how many closets were packed with her clothes. He ran his hand over the rich fabrics, wondering how he'd get rid of them all when the time came. He'd never complained about her spending, which he now realized had had a certain frenzy, a madness to it. Never once had he criticized her for living to the absolute limit of their means. He hadn't minded working hard, he hadn't objected to killing himself so that she could have everything she desired. "I'm a narcissist and I'm proud of it," she used to say. She'd brought him a kind of class, of which he sometimes, being merely a housepainter, felt unworthy. All his business profits had gone for their travels, for their timeshare, for the things he could buy Madonna, the restaurants to which he could take her, where her beauty turned heads. People looked twice at her and then at him and he knew they were wondering how a man of his homeliness could land such a beauty. Her height, her slenderness and carriage, her long black hair, her broad beautiful face. He walked on air in those restaurants, at times could not take his eyes off Madonna.

Tonight, as he wandered through the house, the glossy rooms seemed to mock him. He couldn't remember why they'd wanted all this, what it had all been for. After a lifetime of giving, after pouring out such a quantity of work, of love, he felt exhausted. He avoided the master bedroom. Madonna's absence there was too painful.

"Mr Cox," the nurse had said when he was leaving the hospital that evening, her face filled with concern. "You might want to think about allowing yourself to

step away. Day by day. Just try to take one small step back from where your wife is going. You owe that to yourself. This is her journey, not yours.”

Purdy dreamed of his childhood. He’d never actually had a mother, per se. He had grown up in his grandfather’s house, a house of women. He never knew which of the grandfather’s five daughters had conceived him. They had all raised him together. No one would ever tell him whose child he was. When he was older, he wondered if his grandfather was in fact his father. Several times, his grandmother tried to kill herself by slashing her wrists. Once, when she did this, his grandfather refused to summon an ambulance. He’d had enough of his wife’s dramas and intended to let her bleed to death. But one of the daughters threatened to call the police if he didn’t get help. The grandfather always said his wife was lucky he’d married her. He asked what other man would wed a girl with false teeth. The grandmother had had all her teeth pulled out when she was eighteen because there was a gap in the middle she didn’t like.

Once more, Purdy had spent the night on the couch, not even changing into his pyjamas. In the morning, he rose, stiff-limbed, with a crick in his neck. He left home before dawn, went to the hospital to check on Madonna, whom he found sleeping, the ward still dimmed, the day shift not yet arrived, the nurses at the desk looking sleepy and ready to go home.

Purdy had met Madonna when he was twenty-five. She said, “I’m going to make something out of you.” Up to this point, he’d paved driveways, and after that he’d worked as a roofer until he got burned with tar and almost lost his arm and spent a month in the hospital having skin grafts. Madonna was poor herself,

a trailer park girl, a grocery store clerk with grade twelve and ambitions to be a model. Purdy, of course, had even less schooling. He'd played hooky. Somehow, he'd managed to evade the superintendent's office until he was sixteen and of a legal age to quit. He was not good at numbers or words. He was good with his hands. Also, he did not like a regime imposed on him. Though it was Madonna who'd had the idea of the painting business, Purdy was soon in love with the transformative powers of paint, the calmness and beauty of the process, the cleanness, the immediate results.

"Tell you what," Purdy said to Winslow. He had lingered at the shop one night, the big garage doors up, letting the fresh evening air flow in, until Winslow came back. Winslow said nothing when he saw Purdy there. He unloaded the trucks alongside his men, dismissed them for the evening, then began to sort through a sheaf of work orders. Purdy walked over and sat on the corner of Winslow's desk.

"Tell you what," Purdy repeated. "Say you quit the window-washing side. Say you hand the management of it to one of the other fellows and come over to painting, work right alongside me? What do you think?"

Winslow looked at him suspiciously. "What are you talking about, Dad?"

"Don't you reckon it's time we worked together, father and son?"

"Why?"

"We hardly ever even speak. It's not good. We hardly know each other."

"Why would we start now?"

“You’ve always wanted to paint. You have to admit that.”

“Yeah,” said Winslow grudgingly, “at one time I *did* want to paint. But I’ve got over that now. I don’t really think about it anymore.” He looked at Purdy with a pitying expression. *Too little, too late.*

“I was considering changing the name of the business. Change it from Purdy’s Painting and Windows to Purdy and Son, or even Purdy/Winslow Painting and Windows. Get your name right up there where it belongs.”

“Is this about Mom?”

“No, it’s not.”

“Funny coincidence, then.”

“She’s slipping down fast.” Purdy hadn’t meant to say this, but he could not hold it in.

“I guess that’s to be expected. She’s no different, is she? Unfortunately, she’s no more special than anybody else with what she’s got. I wish I could do something for you, Dad. I really do. But it’s all outside my life now.”

Purdy had called Winslow on his cell phone one day at five o’clock.

“What is it, Dad?”

“I just wondered what you were doing.”

“I’m up on a ladder.”

“Do you want to go for a beer after work?”

“A beer?”

“Yeah, you know, maybe at the pub down from the shop.”

“We’ve never done that,” said Winslow.

“That doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Well, it might. Why do you want to do it?”

“I won’t pester you about visiting your mother.”

“Dad, I think I’ll just go home. I’m tired at the end of a day. And anyway, you know I don’t really drink.”

Winslow had been a small, slight boy. Then at fourteen he’d grown a foot in one year, put on pounds. Still, he was needy, clingy. Purdy had tried to knock this out of him. He said Winslow should play football. He had a quarterback’s shoulders, the weight to flatten his opponents. Madonna said, “He can’t play football. He’d have to memorize manoeuvres,” and Purdy had answered, “He’s not stupid.” But Winslow was afraid. He was non-violent. “I’m not going to knock someone down,” he told his father. He feigned illness until he got kicked off the team.

Now, Purdy began to go into the hospital around seven in the morning to dress Madonna in her wools and silks. He was there after her sponge bath and he went in and undressed her following dinner and got her into her satin and lace and silk nightgowns. It became harder to do this. Her arms and legs did not slip easily out of their sheaths. They’d become wooden, uncooperative. Her breath was sour. An odour of decay hung about her. She began to look more and more incongruous among the other patients in their humble cotton gowns. She stood out like a Christmas tree. It was what she wanted. She needed to be noticed.

But her clothes began to hang hollowly on her body as from a wire hanger. She didn't seem to notice. Of course she would not detect this gradual change in herself. She was thin before, but now she was skin and bones. The doctors said she might have lasted longer if she'd had more physical reserves. Her earlobes drooped under the weight of heavy costume jewellery. Her arms swam in the sleeves of her jackets, the shoulder pads slid off her bones, her rings slipped round and round her fingers. On her shrunken feet, her shoes were loose. Purdy felt an irrational surprise at all of this, though surely it was exactly what he should have expected, had he been thinking ahead. It became more and more troubling, more wearying to carry on this charade. The face Madonna put on herself, her magnifying mirror set up on the hospital table, the mascara she applied unsteadily, smudging it, the vermilion lipstick and the circles of rouge contrasting with her pallor had a burlesque effect. Her face, against the white pillowcase, was a grotesque mask.

The nurse said to him, "I've never seen anyone in a terminal care ward smile so much as you do, Mr. Cox. There's nothing wrong with showing fear."

"I don't think I feel fear."

"Grief, then. Sorrow. Maybe to see that in you would help your wife realize the end is coming. It's important for her to know that."

One night on the couch Purdy couldn't sleep. He got up and walked around trying to ease the pain in his back. He stood at the living room window and looked out. A very young child passed by alone in the dark, her blonde curls,

under a street lamp, shining. She turned and looked at him there in the window and continued on without taking her eyes off him. Surely this was his daughter, Betty. He was shaken by this vision.

Betty was killed at the age of two. She'd been sitting on the curb in front of the house and for some reason had run out into the street just as a pickup truck was passing. The driver could not see her small figure over the nose of the vehicle. After the ambulance had come and taken her away, after the police and the reporters had dispersed with their notepads and their cameras, and the neighbours had trickled home, Purdy had called the driver who'd struck Betty. He told the man not to blame himself. He said that it was an accident and that it was not his fault. That he should not torture himself with feelings of guilt.

When he hung up, Madonna was standing in the hallway behind him. "How could you do that?" she shouted at Purdy. "Whose fault do you think it was? Betty's? She was only two years old. Why didn't the driver have his eyes open? I can never forgive you for that call. You've betrayed Betty. You've cheapened your daughter's death."

Purdy asked the doctor, "How much longer will it be?"

"I think your wife will die this weekend," said the doctor.

"Is there any way we could make it go faster?" asked Purdy. The doctor looked taken aback. "I just wondered," Purdy explained. "It seems cruel to prolong her suffering. She's struggling for breath, even with the oxygen."

“There’s nothing we can do legally,” said the doctor, but soon after this he returned with an intern and a nurse and they asked Purdy to step out of the room and they were in there about ten minutes with the door closed and then they came out. Purdy went back in and Madonna seemed to be asleep. He stood at the bedside holding her hand. Her breathing had eased a little.

Presently, he stepped to the window and looked down into the ravine, where figures in red kayaks were navigating an obstacle course in the creek. When he came back to the bed, something had changed. A relinquishing, a withdrawal, ever so subtle, a dissipation of energy in Madonna’s face. He felt for her pulse. Nothing. He went out into the hallway. There was the same nurse walking toward him, and just the way he approached her, she seemed to know, she was familiar with the physical vocabulary, the silent language of death.

She said, “She’s gone? Oh, dear. I’m so sorry. Wait here, take this chair. Just try to rest here for a moment. The doctor is still on the ward. I’ll go get him.”

When the doctor came along, Purdy said, “Did you give her something?” He was thinking guiltily that he might have cheated Madonna of a few more hours, possibly a few more days of life. And what right did he have to do that? “Did you give her something? The question I asked you – about making her go sooner.”

“I’m not sure what you’re suggesting,” said the doctor brusquely. “I told you it would have been unethical.”

Purdy sat in the hallway and eventually the doctor and the nurse came out of the room.

“I think I’ll just sit with her for awhile,” Purdy told the nurse.

“That’s a fine idea. Take all the time you want.”

He pulled an upright chair close to the bed, where they’d tucked the sheet in tight around the mattress, and folded Madonna’s arms classically across her chest. He remained there out of respect for her, and out of loyalty and an unwillingness to abandon her. He sensed that she was still there in the room with him, her spirit at least, though he realized this was irrational, unscientific. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to feel at this moment. Now it was *his* time, there was space for him, there being no more caring to do or laundering or denying or shoring up. He made an effort to gather up his memories of their life, because something told him that they were at risk. Suddenly, everything he thought he knew about them seemed at risk.

After some time, he went out and found a pay phone at the end of the hallway and called Winslow. “Your mother is dead,” he said.

“Oh,” said Winslow. “Well, ok, Dad. I’m sorry. Sorry for you, is what I mean. I guess you’ll be taking some time off work.” Purdy heard wind over the line and pictured Winslow up on a ladder, a rag blowing from his hip pocket.

“I don’t know,” said Purdy.

“Stay home and rest, Dad. I’ll organize things for you with the painting.”

“The funeral will be on Thursday,” said Purdy.

“I don’t know if I’ll be there, Dad. Don’t look for me.”

“It would be nice to have someone sitting beside me in the pew.”

“What about her sisters? They’ll be flying in.”

Before hanging up, Winslow did say, "I'm sorry she went so fast." Purdy wondered: What difference did it make how fast it was? Three weeks, or three months? If he wasn't going to come and see Madonna, what difference did it make? Winslow read his mind. "I feel badly for you that you didn't have much time to prepare."

Purdy went downstairs and out through the hospital doors. He gulped air. He felt his own life surging back up in him. Like a drowning swimmer breaking through the surface of a lake. His lungs burned, they exploded with oxygen.

At the funeral, Purdy tried not to watch for Winslow but with every turning of his head he knew he was looking out of the corner of his eye for him. Every sympathetic hand that fell on his shoulder or touched his back, he was hoping it would be Winslow. And yet, he did not know why. Over the past twenty or so years, he had hardly ever thought about Winslow. He and Madonna had had such a busy life together, with their friends and their parties and their golf club and their travel, that there hadn't been time.

The funeral was on Saturday and the following Monday when Purdy returned to work, Winslow called in sick, for the first time in two decades. On Tuesday and Wednesday, he didn't show up. Thursday came and Purdy phoned him from the shop. "Are you alright?" he asked. "What have you got? The flu? Do you need anything? Should I come over there? When will you be back?" The following week, one of Purdy's men spotted Winslow working with a landscaping crew. He stopped to ask Winslow what the heck he was doing. Winslow told him

he wasn't coming back to windows. He liked working with earth, he enjoyed the change, it was more creative. He was quitting Purdy's outfit. Landscaping was harder and dirtier work and they were not paying him what Purdy had been but his needs were simple and also he had money put aside for a rainy day. He liked the idea of not having management responsibilities anymore. He wanted to be freed up to do new things with his life.

New things? Winslow?

Also, Winslow said, he would not have to see Purdy every day. When Purdy heard about this last remark, he was surprised at how much it hurt him. Now, he missed Winslow deeply – his constancy, his doggedness, his common sense, his self-effacing attitude and even – yes, even the friendship Purdy imagined they'd had. He began to wonder if he'd ever seen the true Winslow or only the son Madonna had described. Despite his cumberdom, his bear-like gait, Winslow had learned to run up and down a ladder, agile as a gazelle. He'd proved himself surprisingly adaptable as a window washer.

Purdy tracked Winslow down at a worksite and waited until he was finished for the day. He asked Winslow if he didn't miss the window washing. "You've been doing it for twenty years, you must have liked it," he said.

"It was just a way to pay the bills," Winslow told him. Purdy felt wounded by this. He, personally, had always found his work challenging, enjoyable.

Winslow's remark seemed a put-down, a trivialization of Purdy's business, a dismissal of something he was proud of and had spent his life building. He asked Winslow the real reason he'd quit. Winslow said that it just seemed like

the right time for a break, an opportunity to pass on to something new. Purdy didn't understand this. If Winslow didn't care about Madonna, why would her death precipitate such a dramatic decision?

For a few months, Purdy tried to get one or the other of the men to take over Winslow's duties, but none of them was any good at it. They couldn't hold onto employees the way Winslow could, they couldn't inspire loyalty in the crew or manage the workflow or deal with paper or get along with clients. They stole from him. Finally, Purdy shut the window side of the operation down, got rid of three trucks, let six men go.

Purdy asked Winslow if he would move home. They were walking through Stanley Park. They'd begun to go for walks on Saturdays because Purdy was so lonely. At first Winslow resisted this ritual. Purdy had never been interested in seeing him on Saturdays. The suggestion being that only now was Winslow good enough for Purdy. Good enough to be noticed, important enough to need, now that Purdy had no one else left in his life.

It seemed silly, Purdy said, for Winslow to be living in a little apartment, and Purdy all alone in the big house. It would save Winslow money to move in with him. Purdy had never understood why Winslow lived in a bachelor flat. Purdy paid him enough to own a house with a yard and pool, even. "That's for families," Winslow had told him. "I'm alone. I wouldn't know what to do with it."

"It might help you to attract another woman," Purdy told him.

"Like you did with Mom? Is that why she was with you? The house and the pool?"

Purdy was stung by this remark but he let it go. People didn't mean half of what they said. He could see that Winslow was lonely and bitter from his divorce. There were no children. Winslow's wife had left him before he had a chance to get her pregnant. She was running around on him the week after they tied the knot. "A gold digger," Madonna had said before the wedding. Then, after the divorce, she said, "He had that nice girl and he lost her." Winslow's wife's betrayal had permanently shaken his faith in relationships, in life itself, it seemed. Purdy thought Winslow should have looked for another woman. He believed that Winslow took a certain pleasure in being crushed by his wife's defection, that he enjoyed licking his wounds.

"When things start to go wrong," Winslow had said sometime after the divorce, "it's always about women. Life has a lot of clarity without them. They make things murky. You can't trust them. You can't predict anything they do. And then you get blamed."

Winslow's wife had blamed him for her affair. If he'd been more complex, if he'd come up with things they could do together, if he'd been what he'd represented himself to be (an entrepreneur and not just a window washer), she would never have looked around for someone else. She was an addictions counsellor. She fell in love with a client. How much worse this made the desertion, how insulting it was that she would leave Winslow for a lowly substance abuser. This was the part he never got over. Winslow went around telling people his wife had left him for a drug addict, though this client was no longer using by the time she started sleeping with him.

Winslow turned Purdy down. He said, no, he did not think he wanted to move back in with Purdy. He was accustomed to living alone. He liked his apartment, which overlooked a park. If he moved in with Purdy it would only dredge up unpleasant memories of the past.

One day when they were sitting on a bench looking out at the ocean, Winslow told Purdy that Madonna was in bed with another man the afternoon that Betty was killed. Winslow was ten at the time. Madonna had put him in charge of Betty, while she entertained this lover. Winslow remembered the stranger's tan trousers and his brilliant white shirt and his flowered tie flying out of his hip pocket as he fled the house by a side door moments after the accident. Over the years, there had been a number of men like the one who leapt off the porch and sped away in a sedan. Winslow had caught Madonna with them. Other times, once he'd learned to drive, he'd followed her in the family car to the point of rendezvous.

Purdy did not know why Winslow told him about Madonna's affairs. He thought it uncharacteristically cruel of him to do so. It was the first time in his life Purdy was uncertain if he could forgive a person for an unkindness. He could not decide if he was glad he knew. At first he didn't know if he believed it.

"Didn't you ever wonder about all those night courses she was supposedly taking?" Winslow asked Purdy. "Where she really was? Did you ever see the bills for them on your credit card?"

Bridge courses, palm reading, Buddhist philosophy, flower arranging, watercolour, first aid, self-awareness, calligraphy, Italian conversation. Madonna

had gone to elaborate lengths to make it all convincing. She bought Italian grammar books. She had Italian conversation tapes playing when Purdy came home from work. "Parlo Italiano!" she'd call from the kitchen. She set books about palmistry out on the coffee table. She bought special calligraphy pens, pots of India ink. She practised doing splints on Winslow's arms.

On the bench, Purdy felt his shrunkenness next to Winslow. He felt his own diminishment and decline and once again, fear swept through him, powerful as a tidal wave.

"You'd have another child if she'd been faithful to you. Betty would be thirty-four now," said Winslow. "Think of that."

But Purdy could not think about it and get through the days.

One afternoon, driving in his car, he was overcome by nausea and breathlessness. He thought he felt a pain in his arm and shoulder. Certain he was having a heart attack, he raced to the hospital. In Emergency, they said there was nothing wrong with him. He was disappointed. Maybe he'd been hoping to die. A nurse asked him if he thought it would be a good idea to go and talk to someone.

"A shrink?" asked Purdy.

"Any kind of counsellor," said the nurse kindly. "Someone who's trained to listen. You look like you might need someone to open up to." She asked him if he'd had a recent loss. Well, no, not really, he told her. Nothing significant. And then he said, Well, yes, maybe I have. To his surprise, he was thinking not of

Madonna, but of Winslow. He told the nurse he was not a person who liked to dwell on yesterdays.

“You are still searching for your mother,” the shrink told Purdy.

“I had a handful of them,” he objected. “I had five times more than most.”

“But none of them would claim you for their own,” she said. “None of them loved you enough for that.”

This had never occurred to Purdy. He did not think broadly about human relations in those kinds of terms.

Walking beside the ocean, Purdy thought about Betty. The shrink had told him to do this. Even so, he could not figure out why he felt so sad. After all, Betty had been dead for over thirty years. All his life, he'd moved on quickly from loss. The shrink had told him he had unfinished business. But instead of telling him to grieve for Madonna, she'd told him to turn over in his mind his thoughts about his lost daughter. He was not sure why he'd promised to do this, except perhaps that the shrink was pretty. From the list the nurse at the hospital gave him, he'd consulted the websites of a number of psychologists and studied their photographs. He'd wanted to make sure whoever he went to was attractive. If he was going to look at a woman for an hour a week, she might as well be pleasant to behold.

In thinking about Betty, Purdy started to wonder if he'd been disloyal to her when she died, in his failure to press Madonna about what had happened, how the accident had occurred, in his failure to give in to sorrow, in his eagerness to

put away grief and get on with life. Had he short-changed Betty so that Madonna would not be burdened by his suffering, so that she wouldn't be made to feel guilty by his pain? He'd always thought he'd marched to the beat of his own drum. But was this what he'd done or had he marched to Madonna's beat? Had he been his own man or had he been Madonna's man? These were not pleasant questions but he considered them nevertheless, as he walked along the shore wearing his Bermuda shorts, his running shoes and floppy cloth hat, while he watched the seagulls wheel and dive and turn senselessly in the wind.

Looking back on those weeks following Betty's death, Purdy did not remember anything about Winslow. He could not recall talking to Winslow about Betty. He did not know if he'd taken care of him during that period. Certainly, Madonna, hysterical, beyond comforting, then sedated, had not. Winslow was not a child who brought attention to himself. He seemed to absorb things and not react. He was not given to displays of emotion. He took his feelings away and sorted them out for himself.

Purdy thought back to when he'd phoned the man who'd struck Betty with his truck. He'd never wondered about why he'd called him. In retrospect, he realized that he'd simply needed someone to talk to.

Now, he wished that he had not spread Madonna's ashes on Betty's grave. But what was the point in even thinking about this?

Purdy decided to move.

“You love that house. You always said you wanted to die there,” Winslow told him on the phone.

“I can die just as easily in an apartment.”

“And a lot sooner too,” said Winslow.

There was so much to get rid of. Purdy himself was a dresser. Madonna had turned him into one. Four-hundred-dollar pairs of pants, jackets at one thousand dollars. In the pockets of these garments he found the lists of her requests for clothes he should bring to the hospital. Purdy’s wardrobe was in good condition, but he put these costly purchases in plastic bags and delivered them to the Thrift shop. Packing up the house, he tried to resist the feeling that the quantity of love he’d poured out to Madonna had not been returned.

The day of the move, Winslow didn’t come over to help. He’d never offered to, but Purdy had hoped he’d show up anyway. Some of the men from work were there. Purdy paid them to come, they eagerly took the cash, though a few of them had been in his employ for a decade and might have considered helping him for free, out of friendship.

In his new apartment, he slept for two whole days on a mattress thrown on the floor. From his balcony, he looked down on the transit way. He watched buses passing far below, a steady stream of red roofs. On the phone, he said to Winslow, “I might learn how to cook. You and I could have Sunday dinners over here.”

Winslow did not say that this would interest him.

“I never knew what a father was supposed to be,” said Purdy. “I never had one.”

Betty had come along late. She was eight years younger than Winslow. Madonna had never wanted a boy. When Betty was born, Winslow became even more irrelevant. Winslow believed Madonna had always wished it had been he, not Betty, who'd got run over.

“Did she ever say that?” asked Purdy.

“No.”

“What good does it do for you to think it?”

When he packed up the house, Purdy had found photos of Betty. Madonna had put them all away after the accident. He'd asked her why. “She was a part of our lives,” he told Madonna. But she'd answered, “We're not going to look at them. They're too depressing. We're going to forget.”

Now, Purdy set the photos around his apartment.

Winslow had said of Madonna, “That high society pose? Going to the opera? Eating in expensive restaurants? That wasn't her. She was a fourteen-carat phoney. All she wanted was your money.”

“That's an unkind thing to say.”

“The truth hurts.”

Was there such a thing as too much truth? wondered Purdy. Maybe this was Winslow's biggest problem.

Purdy began to go to the Y to swim. He was waiting when they opened the pool doors at six on Saturday mornings. He had hoped to join the Masters group but he found he couldn't keep up with them. The other swimmers were in their twenties and thirties. Purdy thought about wearing fins, but they weren't allowed. The coach pointed out that there was a seniors' swim later in the morning. Purdy was insulted. He felt in the prime of his life. But he went one day. There were a number of women there, all of them heavy. They wore plastic shoes in the pool. They waded in cautiously from the stairs, dog paddled in circles in the shallow end, their chins lifted high out of the water. Purdy remembered Madonna surfacing in their pool at home, laughing and flinging water out of her long dark hair, her brown shoulders gleaming. How she'd shriek with delight when he swam beneath her. At the Y, he flirted with the pretty young lifeguards. He asked one of them out for coffee. She declined. After that, they all smiled at him ironically and moved away when they saw him coming, busying themselves with their clipboards.

Purdy took up pottery. He enrolled in a night course at the nearby community centre. He was not one to let grass grow under his feet. More to the point, he didn't want to be home alone every night. It turned out he had some talent. His pinch pots and slab-built vases had an originality the teacher said she'd never encountered in a beginner student. Purdy proceeded entirely on impulse and intuition, without regard for convention. A little tweak of the clay here, a twist or a

slash there, and he'd produced something eccentric and unorthodox, walking a fine line between grotesque and beautiful. His glazes, especially his blues, were deep, rich, entirely personal.

"How do you do it?" the other students asked him.

He shrugged. "I just go with the way I feel."

There were only eight of them in the studio, pushing at their clay. There was the preparatory room with the long tables forming a square, where they kneaded and folded and leaned on the lumps of raw clay with the heels of their hands, softening and loosening and warming it up. There was the hand-building room and the room for the wheelwork and, behind a thick door, the kiln room. There were shelves designated for works in progress, for vessels glazed and ready for firing, and for finished pieces.

Of course, Purdy was not shy about being the only man in the pottery class. Sometimes a couple of the women would pause to watch him. "Funky," one of them said of his work. Quirky. Organic. Abstract. He did wonder if they praised him out of pity. The fact that he was a widower had leaked out. Actually, he'd told them the first night. He didn't see any point in hiding things. He could not conceal his feelings.

"My wife just died. So I decided to make pots," he said in a tongue-in-cheek, self-mocking way. They rallied around him, these women. They teased and flirted, though they were young and married and merely trifling with him.

There was one woman who was older, who kept her distance. Purdy noticed her thin, razor-like teeth, her puffy ankles. At break time, he always went to the

alcove at the back of the studio and made tea for everyone. One night he brought this woman a mug of chamomile tea. She was still sitting at one of the wheels, absorbed in her work. He sat down beside her and placed the tea at her wrist and tried to look sympathetically at her bowl. As far as he could see, she had no talent with clay. She was a retired librarian. Reaching out, he brushed some ochre dust off her thigh, brushed it off her thick corduroy skirt.

She sipped her tea and told him he had nice hair. White and fine and shining. This compliment astounded Purdy. Madonna had never praised his appearance. The librarian was not attractive. Purdy liked this for some reason. A woman no better looking than he. Her broad backside appealed to him. In contrast, of course, Madonna had been slender, obsessed with thinness, some would have said. She used to stand in front of Purdy naked, her painted toenails gleaming like two rows of cherries on the plush broadloom, and say to him proudly, "Look. Look how prominent my pelvic bones are. See. They're like little wings." The thought of her body still aroused him. She was a fiend for sex, but in retrospect her body was brittle, fleshless, unsympathetic,ropy in the neck and arms, of little comfort to embrace. They'd had sex at all times of day, everywhere in the house.

"I asked a woman out to dinner," Purdy told Winslow.

Winslow said, "Jesus Christ, Dad. A woman? You're nearly seventy years old. Can't you keep your dick in your pants?"

"I think I'm in love," said Purdy.

“In love. How long did you talk to this person?”

“About ten minutes.”

“And you already know you’re in love.”

“I don’t have trouble making up my mind about people.”

Winslow threw him a betrayed look and Purdy suddenly realized that Winslow had seemed a little happier since Madonna’s death. Occasionally, he even smiled. Had he seen an opening, an opportunity to have Purdy all to himself? And now, here was another woman pushing onto the scene.

Winslow was going to the library a lot, in the evenings. He sat in the Reference section, in a big armchair, enjoying the company of others trying to expand their minds. At home, he progressed through *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. The enjoyment of it had made him think of taking some college courses. He’d always wished he’d gone on in school. Purdy had never known this. He was learning to listen to Winslow, to listen to the way he thought about and looked at life, to see what he could learn from this son of his, this slow-talking, cautious, unimaginative, maybe sexless man with sad eyes, lumbering beside him on their Saturday walks. Winslow was not a simulator. He was no counterfeiter. *Stalwart*. That was how the shrink referred to Winslow when Purdy described him for her. Purdy had had to go home and look the word up.

Winslow had turned out to be everything Madonna said he wasn’t.

All his life, said Winslow, all his life, Purdy had been so in love with Madonna that he’d never noticed Winslow.

Was this a sin? To be so smitten? To forget about your own son? Perhaps.
Yes. Yes, it was a sin.

Purdy knew he would have to put these thoughts behind him. Soon, he would put them behind him, or he could not survive. But for the moment he was ready to admit that he had failed Winslow, especially in the big things. He had displayed an egregious lack.