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Linda Svendsen's *Marine Life*: Undoing Narrative Consolation

Janice Fiamengo

It is something of a critical truism that the discontinuous form of the story-cycle unsettles the illusion of a single, unified subject. In the Canadian context, I think immediately of the story-cycles of Margaret Laurence (*A Bird in the House* [1970]) and Alice Munro (*Lives of Girls and Women* [1971] and *Who Do You Think You Are?* [1978]). By breaking up the life of the protagonist into a collection of "lives" and by emphasizing identity as a shifting textual construction, their story-cycles rewrite the conventional female *bildungsroman*.[1] This understanding is useful as a point of departure for my reading of Linda Svendsen's *Marine Life*. Published in 1992 to critical acclaim but little sustained analysis, *Marine Life* is an eight-story collection narrated by Adele Nordstrom, who is six years old when the collection begins and an adult woman at its end. Each story focuses loosely on a different member of Adele's complicated family of half- and step-relations. Exploring childhood pain and initiation into maturity, the collection certainly invites comparison with Laurence's and Munro's; as in their texts, each story in *Marine Life* can stand alone, but each also works to complicate the reader's understanding of the preceding stories. The emphasis in *Marine Life*, however, is not so much on the fracturing of the narrator's subjectivity as on the fracturing of the family narrative being told.

All the stories in *Marine Life* were published previously, and the significant gap between the first and last story published may partially account for their discontinuity.[2] Svendsen did not set out to write a story-cycle; as Malcolm Page explains, "Svendsen's agent sent all her published stories to Farrar, Strauss, who chose only the sequence narrated by Adele for the book" (17). The stories themselves took at least a decade to write. And in her interview with Page, Svendsen reports her surprise "that no critic has observed the changes in her style" (17); she explains to Marke Andrews that earlier stories ("Who He Slept By" and "Marine Life") are much gentler than her later ones, which she describes as "'unflinching'" (D15). Svendsen's comments suggest a process of change in her writing

belied by an emphasis on the collection as a singular entity. While it would be illuminating to trace the evolution of Svendsen's concerns and technique, my focus here is nevertheless on the cumulative effect of the stories *as a collection*. Given that Svendsen revised the stories before their publication as *Marine Life*, I assume their arrangement and interrelationships to be part of a deliberate rhetorical strategy.

Various techniques disrupt narrative unity in the collection. Temporal discontinuity, gaps in narrative, and disjunction between stories emphasize contradiction rather than coherence. Instead of proceeding chronologically, the stories develop, in a seemingly haphazard order, the relationships between Adele and the members of her large "blended" family: her half-brother Ray, her half-sister Joyce, her step-father Robert, her step-sister Louise, her lover and then husband, Bill, her father Humphrey, her mother June, and finally her half-sister Irene. Although my listing might suggest a schematically organized series of stories, each with a single focus, in fact the portrait of the family that emerges is anything but neat.

Not confined to one story, characters make multiple appearances in the collection, and the crossing of characters from one story to another, rather than producing a sense of coherence or familiarity, is disorienting. Often years older or younger, working a different job or not yet involved in the disastrous relationship we know to be on the horizon, the character who should be familiar is not. The protective step-father who worries over Joyce's marital breakup in the second story is almost unrecognizable as the angry husband who deliberately drives off the road to settle an argument in the third. Dallyce, one of Ray's many girlfriends, receives a one-line mention in the first story when a glimpse of her face in a New Year's home-movie piques the jealousy of Merry, Ray's wife. Dallyce's appearance as a fully-developed character in the third story, "Boxing Day," undercuts any assumptions of normality that readers might have about the kinds of family holidays home-movies record. In "Klingons," Adele tells Louise that her parents no longer fight as much as they used to since "people often have to speak to each other before they can officially fight" (77). Yet in "Heartbeat," a chronologically later story, her parents seem as passionately involved with one another as ever (103). The meanings of characters and events shift as quickly as the pages turn.

The narrator makes no attempt to smooth over these gaps and inconsistencies. Readers willing to accept that character is not fixed at birth but determined by context will find the context incomplete and contradictory. Within stories, abrupt shifts in time and place interrupt

the sense of orderly development. Further, the arrangement of the stories muddles the reader's sense of the relationships between events. For example, it is not clear how "Klingons," in which Adele's step-sister Louise lives with Adele's family for a short time, fits temporally with other key family events, such as the Boxing Day debacle. Rather than working to clarify causal or temporal relationships between stories, Adele tells each story as if introducing the members of her family for the first time, often repeating information told previously — but in slightly altered form. A reference to the presence of Robert in her mother's life in the second story is not clarified until the fourth story, when some details of their affair are explained. The sixth story revisits similar material, but this time in relation to Adele's mother leaving Adele's father, Humphrey, for Robert. Every time the focus changes, the reader's perspective blurs; rather than a more complete picture from multiple vantage-points, readers have the sense of the ground shifting beneath their feet.

Partly as a result of the fragmentation and temporal discontinuity, readers have little sense of Adele's consciousness developing over the course of events, no central intelligence or emotional presence to create unity; instead, a proliferation of stories forces readers to confront assumptions about the family as a source of stable meanings and certain identities. In turn, readers' confidence in their ability to recognize the signi- ficance of any comment or action is gradually undermined; as a reader, I feel a bit like Adele watching a cat in the snow, not sure "if it was scared stiff or smart" (48).

One might conclude that such is reality, and indeed the stories are characterized by a minimalist realism — complimented by reviewers with phrases such as "exquisitely crafted" (James-French 45) and "intense and understated" (Page 17) — in which the suggestive but inconclusive detail takes precedence over explanation. But textual reality is itself a construct, and the effect of reading these stories — for this reader, anyway — is not recognition, but a subtle loss of stable markers. Amidst the confusion of character and event, there is one constant in the story-cycle, and we reach for it more quickly because others are denied: the inescapable fact of family and the frustrated search for home. A certain emotional orientation towards family — rather than the family portrait itself — lends thematic and structural coherence to the collection; as I will argue, even this tenuous, over-determined coherence is shattered in the end. I will focus particular attention on the first and last stories in the collection, examining how they frame and ultimately disrupt the family narrative developed in *Marine Life*. Moreover, I will argue that the process of reinterpretation

encouraged by the final story engages readers with the politics of home.

In "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?" Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty identify home as a charged site for women's life narratives and for feminist theory. Home is often a metaphor for safety, comfort, and recognition, that longed-for, lost place of identity and belonging. To feel at home is to feel protected within secure and familiar boundaries. Yet Martin and Mohanty insist on the salutary recognition "that home [is] an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself" (196). Mohanty and Martin are primarily concerned with the unacknowledged privilege and exclusion in white Western women's evocations of home, emphasizing that home as traditionally conceived involves the violent suppression of others who threaten the self-identity of community or family. Yet their reference to repression of differences *within* the self recognizes that home is also oppressive for those ensconced within it.

Many feminist writers have made the point that home is the place where women and children are most vulnerable to violence and sexual abuse.[3] In the nightmare of Gothic fiction, the refuge of home becomes a prison. *Marine Life* situates its exploration of home on precisely this contradiction: home is the place both longed for and feared, a contradictory space where love and fear cannot be separated, parents are volatile in their caring, and siblings cannot protect one another from harm. Implicating the reading subject in this desire for home, *Marine Life* suggests that the narrative of home is most powerful — and most dangerous — in its loss; as Rosemary George describes it, home is most evocative when "articulated in an event that evicts the subject from that very space" (15).

"First, our mother, June, although I can't swear" (3). With the abruptness of an oral response to a question (the question implied in the title, "Who He Slept By"), *Marine Life* begins, like a conventional family genealogy, with a story of the narrator's mother. The scene as Adele introduces it is intimate, a darkened room on a hot day, a young mother trying to soothe her baby with words and music. In this initial portrait, June appears as a benevolent sorceress: in stifling mid-afternoon summer heat, she performs piano concerts of wintry tunes to cool the air, "exerting a maternal power over weather" (4). Her baby sits under the grand piano, watching her feet on the pedals as the atmosphere cools. According to Adele, the music never fails: "after her concert, the room seemed somehow lighter, chillier"

(4). Yet Adele is not the baby under the piano, the scene not properly her memory at all; as she informs the reader, she was not yet born in 1940, when her mother played for her brother Ray. Constructing a family history that extends fourteen years before her birth to the time when Ray was a baby, Adele is prepared to invent memories when needed. And such made-up memories, the narrator suggests, are necessary to anchor a family always on the verge of collapse.

This magical scene is also marked by ambivalence. Although Adele names her mother as primary, June is "first" only in reference to the list demanded in the chapter title. And Adele qualifies her statement with a subordinate clause acknowledging that she "can't swear" to the truth of the scene she is relating. The tentativeness of the narrator's family mythology is also revealed by the conditional perfect verb tense in the opening description, which underlines its wishful, imaginary quality: "Some summer afternoon, hot in Montreal, after a cool wipe and a quick caress of talcum, she might have lain down beside him on a blanket in shade, or in the darkest room in the house, venetian blinds tight" (3). The tenderness of the scene, particularly when contrasted with the bitter sadness of Ray's life as the story unfolds, suggests the nostalgia for home created through loss.

This opening scene, which links a number of memories, establishes the preoccupations of the stories that follow. It explains the story's title by alluding to "a particularly somber birthday supper" (5) at which June tells of an American doctor's theory of dreams:

> She urged this newspaper filler into the realm of premonition and hindsight through her tone of voice. She altered its impact, the same way she had influenced seasons, raised and lowered temperatures, when we were children. "He says who you sleep by determines your dreams. That's something to consider." (5)

On one level, the passage illustrates June's credulity; Adele tells the reader, somewhat dismissively, that "our mother believed what little she read" (4). And yet, Adele cannot entirely dismiss June's pronouncement because her mother's belief in the newspaper piece is so powerful. The passion of her telling, like her piano magic, creates reality for her children. What June accepts as scientific fact becomes something of a controlling metaphor for the stories, with their focus on the unfulfilled dreams and waking nightmares of June's family.

The scene is also characteristic in that it establishes a recurring pattern by first asserting and then undermining — but never relinquishing — its narrative of family love. Adele remembers that her mother had

"said she could watch her babies — each one of us, Ray, Irene, Joyce, and me — breathe for hours" (4). June's comment becomes a badge of family legitimacy, proof of how each child was uniquely and intensely loved. June does love her children, but despite the fact that she is "always on the lookout for treachery, crawling or flying or freakish" (3), she cannot protect them from pain. Still, she maintains faith in her "crumbling domestic empire" (145) and in the possibility of a cure for her own and her children's domestic woes. Rather than a guarantee of permanence and connection, the family becomes, for June, a necessary fiction: though its promise of healing love is never fulfilled, the fiction itself may hold the family together. June repeats to each child her belief in maternal power: "'Even if I was blind…I could pick my baby out of an orphanage'" (4). Adele explains that this means not only that June can recognize her baby's size and shape but that she recognizes herself in her child "because the scent of her own mouth was upon him, implicit" (4). The memorable image suggests the enduring "imprint" of a mother on her children, a theme developed in subsequent stories.

At first, it seems as if we are to understand June's tenacious faith as a necessary certainty amidst multiple ambiguities. "Who He Slept By" foregrounds, through its fragmentation and indirection, the difficulty of interpreting. The story is a rambling list of Ray's numerous sleeping partners and a chronicle of his troubled life, marred by alcoholism, unemployment, and aimlessness. The story is also about Adele's changing and intermittent relationship with her brother. As they both age, Adele's appreciation of her brother's loneliness increases; at the same time, her pleasure in his company decreases. Where once she had longed to be a part of her big brother's life, gradually he becomes a duty, added to her "to do" lists and tolerated as a too-frequent visitor, "a given" (21). The only constants, it seems, are their blood connection and shared history.

Adele makes few comments on the disparate scenes she relates, leaving the reader to notice Ray's simmering violence. At age six, Adele is the detached spectator of a beach expedition turned sour when her brother pushes his girlfriend's head under water. Towards his second girlfriend, who loves horses, Ray is both "doting" and slightly menacing, sliding his finger "across her mouth" to ask "'Chafing for a bit?'" (10). In the story's most disturbing scene, Ray's presence in Adele's life verges on the pornographic. Adele is twenty-one and showing slides of her trip to Europe to her brother. She confesses that she had a sexual encounter in a

Hovercraft flying between England and France; in exchange, Ray tells of his trip to Mexico when he was younger. Walking around Dos Reales, he meets a young boy who arranges a sexual transaction between Ray, then twenty-six, and the boy's twelve-year-old sister, an arrangement sanctioned by the family, who serve Ray dinner. The girl, Capulina, wants to learn English, so in the afternoon and evening he spends with her, Ray teaches her words: "earlobe, hard, cut-offs, bruise" (14), a list suggesting erotic enumeration and also the piece-by-piece objectification of a body made into a commodity.

> For months after that, he had worried he might have caught something incurable: a desire for skilled little girls.
>
> I shut off the projector and we sat in the dark.
>
> "It was great," he said, then reminded me: "You were twelve years old then, too, Adele." (14)

The scene ends here, with characteristic sparseness. We don't know Adele's reaction, if any, to her brother's story, unless we can infer something from her shutting off the projector: ambiguity is the keynote.

In this moment when Adele and her brother share a sexual confidence, ostensibly united by their breaking of taboo, Adele is reminded by her brother of the meaning of sexual difference. Ray's story is unsettling not only because it reveals his pleasure in exploitation, but also because he uses his account to position Adele as the sexually-violated twelve-year-old girl, forcing her to see, in retrospect, her own vulnerability. Yet this scene is not the story's final word on Ray; it is simply one of a number of scenes involving Ray and Adele. "Who He Slept By" ends with Adele's memory of sharing a bed with her brother when she was thirteen. Central to the memory, ironically, is her feeling of safety during a lightning storm: "I heard the thunder, moving east, and I slept soundly, safely" (23). The meaning of the story as a whole seems to be that meaning is difficult to assign. Ray "might be an asshole" (19), as Adele realizes belatedly, but that's not all he is. He also spends hours folding clothes in the laundromat with his fiancée, Merry, and holding her legs down when she practices her sit-ups. No single narrative can account for the multiple roles that Ray plays in Adele's life, and, as Lawrence Mathews notes, it seems that "his failures are to be mourned, not reported with anger or with an ironic and dismissive shrug" (108-09).

One might conclude from reading "Who He Slept By" (and hold to this reading throughout the first seven stories) that the fragmentation of Svendsen's style is designed to express the difficulty of interpretative closure. From family, Adele derives comfort, pain, identity, and despair,

irreconcilably and in equal measure. Val Ross has suggested that the stories are about the inevitability of family dysfunction, in which moralizing is irrelevant: "Ray's messy life has evolved naturally, alongside those he slept by, beginning with his charming, erratic, oft-married mother" (C9). Thomas Blom interprets the stories as expressing the universal conflict between sexuality and the institution of family (168). In a 1989 review of selected stories by Svendsen, Mathews is relieved to find that "Who He Slept By" is "not a fictionalized polemic of the all-men-are-jerks school" and judges Svendsen's stories ("White Shoulders" had not yet been published) to be "credibly affirmative" (108). Svendsen herself, in her interview with Andrews, speaks of co-dependency in families, observing "'You can't blame anyone. All you can do is observe it'" (D15). And yet, this message of indeterminacy and suspension of judgement is not absolute. For the effect of the final story is to impose a terrifying co-herence on the earlier ones.

The last story in the collection, "White Shoulders," is about Adele's oldest sister, Irene, her struggles with cancer, her strained marriage, and her daughter's suicide. At the beginning of the story, Adele introduces Irene as someone who "has never hurt anybody" and as the one family member who has held her marriage together "quietly, and despite tragedy" (145). As it unfolds, "White Shoulders" thwarts the promise in the narrator's reference to the "lone success" (145) of Irene's domestic life by showing the sacrifices required of Irene to maintain it. The story comments upon and cataclysmically rewrites the stories that have preceded it, forcing readers to reconsider the foundational assumptions that have made those stories meaningful: that families, no matter how muddled, are sources of strength; that loyalty and compassion lead to healing; that adults who love their children will somehow know what is right for them; and that the shattering of illusions is liberating.

Anticipation about Irene's story is built up in the seven earlier stories. Irene is the only member of Adele's family who does not make significant appearances in the story-cycle before the final chapter. She is a shadowy figure who awkwardly comforts Joyce when Joyce leaves her abusive husband, and who keeps the Boxing Day turkey warming in the oven when family plans are thrown off course. In "Flight," a story about Joyce's divorce and subsequent mental breakdown, Adele's mother chooses not to invite Irene to a brunch for Joyce because "Irene's zest usually depressed everybody else" (30). Irene seems to be one of those annoyingly happy and well-adjusted people who make everyone else feel inadequate.

The narrator's comments about her sister suggest stability and a rather bland happiness outside the boundaries of the narratable. For ex-

ample, her marriage is first announced in the parenthetical comment that "she'd eventually wed [Peter] and proceeded to do boring Belgian things — bake sour pastries, fuss with tulips, and nurse a prim baby daughter" (27). In a later story, even these details are reduced when Adele reports to her father that "Irene married Peter — the Belgian boy from down the lane" (117). For the young Adele, Irene has disappeared into domesticity, a space of non-story. Yet although she is largely off-stage until the final story, her absent presence frames the accounts of messy passion, directionlessness, and failure in the first seven chapters. Irene's (non)story, her life in the "fussy brick house on the southern slope" (39-40), forms the backdrop of middle-class respectability that the other characters use as a yardstick to measure success. Dependable and secure, she represents the promise of a happy ending, the "living storybook" (152) that the other characters yearn for.

In refusing to carry through on its promise, the final story comments obliquely on the narratives available to women — despite postmodernist self-consciousness and postfeminist self-determination — for plotting their own and others' lives. The happy ending powerfully maintains its currency. Our attention is drawn to this element of plotting even though, or perhaps because, Svendsen's stories are not overtly metafictive. Seemingly simple and direct, they appear to tell themselves rather than to focus on the process of their telling, unlike Munro's narratives of female development, to which I have suggested they might be compared. None of the characters, except Irene's daughter, Jill, is a storyteller, and the narrator rarely comments on the processes of memory or her reconstruction of the past. Our awareness of the stories as shaped, as embodying a particular teleological impetus or set of assumptions, is largely retrospective, impelled by the failure of the final story to deliver the satisfactions of the suburban family's triumph over tragedy. The stories are not about the process of writing — the treachery, inadequacy, or beauty of language — but about the seductions of reading.

In contrast to the stories that have preceded it, "White Shoulders" de-mands that readers interpret it because it is a story with a secret at its heart. Also unlike the other stories, which are all, to some extent, about the unknowableness of people we seemingly know, "White Shoulders" is about the urgency of knowing. At the beginning, we learn that Irene's family has closed in on itself in an attempt to escape being made intelligible to the rest of the world. Visiting to support Irene through her operation for breast cancer, Adele is struck by the wall of silence that the family has built around it. Peter is "markedly guarded" (147) when discussing Irene's

illness in the car on the way back from the airport. After the operation, Adele is "shocked that there weren't more calls, or cards, or visitors except for Mum," realizing that her "sister's life was actually very narrow, or extremely focused: family came first" (156-57). Irene seems to have chosen silence over story.

The narrator understands her older sister as having been trapped by narrative, betrayed by a romantic myth, an idea of Peter as unappreciated and forlorn, when in reality he is a bully. When the family had first known Peter, Adele too felt sorry for him because of his terrible experiences as a child during World War II. She created a romantic context by comparing him to the character of Emile from *South Pacific*, "greying, autocratic" and "misunderstood" (147). Despite Peter's meanness and racism, Irene seems somehow to have maintained the romance, for she continues to protect and placate him. If Irene has ever had any doubts about her choice, she keeps them to herself, never having "said a word against the man" (151).

On the night before her operation, Irene admits to Adele for the first time that there have been difficulties in the marriage because they "'married not speaking the same language, really'" (152). But her concern remains Peter, his pain and fear about her possible death. She is saddened at the thought of him alone once again, metaphorically orphaned as he had been during the war when the Germans killed his mother and sister. "'If I move on,'" she tells Adele in the hospital, "'I leave two children'" (153). She therefore asks Adele to promise that if she dies, Adele will not allow Irene's daughter Jill, the once "prim baby daughter," now a teenager, to live with Adele in New York as Jill wants. She must stay with her father. Adele is at first uncomfortable with this dedication of Jill to Peter's comfort, and then half-convinced by the passion of her sister's belief. Although Peter's "European charm" (147) has proven a false veneer, Irene is holding to some kind of narrative of redemption, something Adele herself, recently divorced and accused by her mother of being "bitter" for not liking Peter (147), has never found easy. She marvels at her sister's faith, her enduring "zealous[ness] about the silver lining" (153). Aware of her own failures in love, Adele can't say no to her sister. She can't refuse the invitation to loyalty, misguided as it might be.

In fact, though, the secret of her sister's entrapment by narrative is more terrible than Adele realizes. When Adele returns home after Irene's operation, pronounced a limited success, Adele is shocked to receive two poems from her niece, Jill, that reveal, in not-so-subtle code, her sexual abuse by Peter. In one poem, the narrator flees in a dream from her fa-

ther, who pursues her over a frozen lake that melts with every step until she is underwater. She wakes from the nightmare only to discover that her father is in her bed: "'He makes night / Come again / All night,' by covering her eyes with his large, heavy hand" (161). Adele doesn't know what to do or who to tell and the narrative emphasizes, through flatness and repetition, her sense of speechlessness: "I didn't know what to do; I didn't know what to do right away; I thought I should wait until I knew clearly what to say and whom to say it to" (161). She doesn't know how to tell this story with- out an authorized script. So she waits. In quick succession, she learns that her sister is undergoing chemotherapy for returned cancer and then that Jill has committed suicide by jumping off the Lion's Gate Bridge. Adele returns to Vancouver for the funeral, where she witnesses her sister's grief, Peter's self-absorption (he tells a story about his childhood in Belgium when the Germans came) and the family's faith in the couple's love for one another. As Irene leads a distraught Peter away from the family gathering, closing the bedroom door as if to assert the inviolability of their private space, Adele's mother says, "'Thank God, they have each other. Thank God, she has him'" (164).

The terse irony of the conclusion, which includes the narrator's de-cision not to tell her sister about her suspicions, shatters even as it invokes the threadbare narrative consolations that the narrator has held to through-out the stories. Adele concludes that she will never tell Irene what she believes about Jill's suicide, "*because life is short and very hard*" (165, emphasis in original). The homiletic brevity of the statement leads to further rationalizations: "*Yes, a bad marriage is better than none*, and I thought, *Adele, let the sun go down on your anger, because it will not bring her back*, and I turned to my mother. 'Yes,' I said. 'Thank God'" (165). The narrator's response seems tragically inadequate. One wishes for some final act of retribution, some truth or justice to emerge out of this narrative of undeserved suffering and loss. It is not clear how the narrator regards these final statements — whether as ironic mockery, ravaged truth, or the necessary conditions for survival. In seeking a desperately needed reassurance, Adele returns to the rhetoric of home, with its promise of certainty and time-honoured truths. Yet the conclusion has made such certainties impossible, including the statement introducing Irene, that "she has never hurt anybody" (145).

If I hadn't read this story, I would have said that the collection articulated the painful necessity of family. Although filled with loss, barely suppressed violence, misunderstanding, and cruelty, there seemed an undercurrent of hope in the stories, suggesting the desire for connection and

the human striving after wholeness. Even in their breach, the principles upon which June built and struggled to hold together her "crumbling domestic empire" (145) were worth articulating: loyalty, enduring love, belief in the impossible. The final story, however, demonstrates that faith in family has not only proven a source of consolation but has also directly enabled Jill's abuse.

Rereading the story, I discovered that the narrative clues about Jill's abuse leap out like markers lit by headlights along a dark road. Once "one of those unnaturally well-rounded kids," she has become "unathletic, withdrawn, and bookish" (146). When Adele sees her, "the change in her appearance and demeanour exceeded the ordinary drama of puberty; she seemed to be another girl — shy, unsure, and unable to look [Adele] in the eye" (149). Jill's actions and responses become signs to be deciphered, semaphores of distress. Sharing a glass of water with her mother, Jill "took great care, twisting the glass in her hand, to sip from the very spot her mother's lips had touched" (149). We interpret this gesture as a wish to share her mother's disease only when we learn about the poems she later sends to Adele, which crack the code of her desperation. A scene in which Peter joins his wife and daughter on his wife's bed, lifting his shirt and demanding that Jill scratch his back — in which Jill resists and her mother directs her to obey — is sinister in retrospect, but I think we are meant to recognize these clues only after we have read to the end; we thus become implicated in the layers of rationalization and denial.[4]

Just as the reader may miss clues in the narrative, so Irene consistently misreads. Her belief in the overriding importance of Peter's childhood pain causes her to misread his brutal insensitivity to her during her illness as well as his tyrannical possessiveness over their daughter; the narrative calls attention to her act of faulty interpretation by noting that "Irene had speculated about [his coldness and demands after he discovered she had cancer] … until she'd realized he was acting this way because of what had happened to him when he was little" (152-53). She quickly reinterprets his selfishness as pain. Conversely, she misreads Jill's distress as selfishness and disregard for her father, lamenting that Jill won't "'lift a finger for her father'" (151). When Adele confronts Peter about his abusive language to Irene, Irene regards her sister's intervention as not only a mistake but also a betrayal: "'Oh, Adele,' Irene said warningly. Disappointed" (158). After this incident, Irene warns Adele not to intervene in her family's business, invoking Adele's "lost children" (159) as a re-buke and charging her not to tempt Jill away from her father. In the face of Peter's callousness, she stresses his needs and claims, commenting that he "sometimes wasn't able

to exercise control over his emotions" and "needed more love, more time; more of her, God willing" (159). Irene in-sists fiercely upon owning the family pain.

Irene is not alone in her inability to see, or willful blindness to, what is happening to Jill. Both Adele and her mother misinterpret the family situation. Mourning the injustice of Irene's cancer, June laments that the disease has happened to her "'only happy child'" (151), affirming Irene's silence and passivity. Sitting in the hospital on the night before Irene's operation, Adele worries that she'd "been too tough on Peter and had distressed [Irene]" (151). Coming upon Jill one afternoon, sitting outside a department store on a schoolday, Adele cannot avoid registering Jill's distress, hardly recognizing her in her shabby aloneness, but she remembers Irene's demand that Adele honour the family's privacy and accepts that privacy as a fundamental right: "I was going to go over and simply say, *Yo, Jill, let's do tea*, and then I remembered my sister's frightening talk with me at the hospital and thought, *Fuck it. Butt out, Adele*, and walked the long way round. I turned my back" (160). Her search for simple interpretative solutions is revealed in her wish to discover that Jill "might be on drugs" because "it would explain everything" (160).

In stressing interpretative failure, the stories suggest the ethical diminishment of women by narrative. In *Femininity and Domination*, Sandra Lee Bartky has argued that the unequal balance of emotional caregiving in the traditional family structure not only disempowers women economically and emotionally but also denies them epistemological and ethical auto-nomy, the ability to make sound judgements and to take appropriate action in the world. The problem, Bartky argues, is in the very nature of caregiving, for "to support and succor a person is, typically, to enter feelingly into that person's world; it is to see things from his point of view, to enter imaginatively into what he takes to be real and true" (111). Bartky dis-cusses the many small ways in which women are "morally silenced or morally compromised…because we thought it more important to provide emotional support than to keep faith with our own principles" (113). Bartky suggests that it is psychologically necessary for women to accept the values of the men they care for, even if (especially if) that acceptance involves self-negation when the alternatives are to lose the relationship or to go crazy. In "White Shoulders," even caring is a dubious value.

Whereas earlier stories had emphasized that language inevitably fails, "White Shoulders" insists upon the need to break silence. The unspoken is associated with poignancy in an earlier story, "The Edger Man," in which Adele describes her relationship with her real father, whom her mother

divorced when she was five. Humphrey is a difficult man to love: self-isolated, undemonstrative and inarticulate. Adele sees him infrequently, and their meetings are constrained. Although they care for one another, Adele can never speak her love for her father. After one unpleasant Saturday visit, she phones him, irrationally convinced that he has had a car accident. But when he answers in his "calm, annoyed voice" (119), she hangs up, relief pulling her back out of emotion. Years later, her father attends her wedding as the sole family representative, and she cannot find words to speak to the frail old man. Their terse final exchange is pervaded with a sense of loss, as if this is the one constant of family love: that we cannot speak what we most want to say.

But whereas this silence is associated with poignancy in the early stories, in "White Shoulders" it is linked to moral failure. The story of Jill's death is surrounded by silences intended to be protective. Just as Irene "[doesn't] intend to allow her illness to interfere with [her family's] life" (146), as if her cancer were an affront to Peter, Adele and the rest of the family adhere to the principle of non-interference out of respect for family privacy. Speaking to her mother on the phone about a month after she receives the poems from Jill, Adele learns that Irene's cancer has returned, and that Jill "had disappeared for thirty-two hours" (162). Their conversation reveals the interlocked silences of the three women. Irene had explained away her daughter's disappearance, saying that she was "upset because of a grade" (162). June knows this isn't the case, but doesn't want to press Irene, so says nothing. Adele, in possession of Jill's poems, also remains silent, determined to find the right time. Each is trapped in a silence of false allegiance. The final story returns us to the collection as a whole, asking readers to notice the suppressed violence of the family genealogy. Ray's mistreatment of his earlier girlfriends, his partner's mysterious death, Joyce's bruised face, "all the rich blue marks" (27) accumulate meaning retrospectively. The final scene in "Boxing Day" takes on predictive force. Ray arrives home a day late for Christmas, bringing Dallyce, a woman he has met a day or two earlier (he can't remember which). Adele fears that her step-father Robert will be angry with Ray. Her parents had fought the day before over his absence. Instead, Robert engages in a jovial if hard-edged conversation with Dallyce that humiliates June by revealing details of her personal life. As Adele rides in the car with her mother and step-father to Irene's for Boxing Day dinner, Robert complains that he is neglected by the family; Adele's mother, in a rare moment of defiance, accuses him of flirting with Ray's girlfriend. To punish her, Robert drives the car off the road toward a tall cedar, slamming on the brakes just before

they hit. The last paragraph of the story describes the quiet moments in the car, in the calm following danger:

> In the car we sat still. No one was hurt. The night was back outside us and the brights lit up the ice. The gauges on the dash glowed blue. He stared straight ahead, breathing rough. In that big cold quiet, she turned to him and kissed him, and kissed again, until she kissed him into kissing, kissing her back, until I couldn't hear the in, out, in again of our breath. (62-63)

Adele watches the dynamic of heterosexual love play itself out. In the moments after the near-crash, the night is "back outside" because it has not been there all along. In that time of fear when "there was no way [they] weren't going to hit" (62), the space inhabited by Adele and her parents seems closed off from the rest of the world, hurtling through space at its own speed. Similarly, there is no outside to the violence that Adele learns to be inextricable from love and desire.

An earlier scene in the same story reveals the configuration of compliant mother, sexually aggressive father, and vulnerable daughter. Adolescent Adele is reading in the livingroom on Boxing Day, more interested in her teen novel, *Milestone Summer*, than in her father's anecdote about their neigh-bours. Annoyed by her inattention, her father stands and strides towards her, crouching with his face next to hers. Adele can feel his alcohol-laden breath on her face as he demands "'And what are Judy and Kent on the brink of? Love? Hate? Wild sex? All three?'" (54). After he leaves the room, June chastises Adele for failing to show her step-father the respect he deserves as the family bread-winner. Although Robert is loud and violent, June sees him as vulnerable and in need of protection, always watching him for signs of hurt and training her daughter to do the same.

The revelations of "White Shoulders" also highlight the references to reading in earlier stories. I have already mentioned the narrator's comment that their "mother believed what little she read" (4). In the context of her mother's love for her children, it is not a particularly damning assessment. When June sends her youngest daughter to accompany Ray to the beach with his first girlfriend, Adele comments that "she must have read that sibling responsibility curbed passion" (5). As evidence of her hope for clear directions and enduring truths in a baffling world, the mother's faith in received narratives seems harmless and endearing. But read in the light of "White Shoulders," such faith is more sinister, suggesting the power of narratives to immobilize, reducing mother love to impotent wishfulness. When Adele visits Irene to take care of her, Adele's expressed desire "to be a mother again" (146) is thus ironically appropriate in light of her

ineffectuality.

Adele too is a reader, devouring novels as an adolescent and studying cultural anthropology as an adult. But her informal schooling in family knowledge — her absorption of offhand remarks and unspoken assumptions — is most influential. When Joyce refuses to press charges against her abusive husband, claiming that "the blame was fifty-fifty and he'd been provoked" (31), no one in the family argues with her. What matters is finding Joyce another man. As June tells her daughter, "'She's a woman, Adele. She needs *somebody*'" (44). Repeated messages of male entitlement and female insufficiency serve to naturalize the violence that Adele witnesses — to make it both necessary and inconsequential. June's statement to Adele that "'when you're older you'll know'" (45) — that the worse thing is for a woman to lose her man — is both a self-fulfilling prophecy and the promise of saving knowledge. Adele and her step-sister Louise, who as children fought over their position in the jaggedly "blended" family, are united only in their hatred of the woman Robert has an affair with, and Adele comments that "we all needed to believe something — even that the widow was to blame" (82). Narrative consolation, these stories suggest, is not an escape but is part of indoctrination into self-destructive ways of being that seem inescapable because they are connected to everything that matters most.

It seems as if the only escape for the women of these stories is into not feeling, into the comfort and quiet of a different element. Escape is frequently figured as descent into water, not as baptism and rebirth but simply as nothingness, the non-sense of detachment, wordlessness. Marine life is a life outside of language. At the end of "Klingons," Adele and Louise go to Wreck Beach to escape the wreck of their parents' marriage. Louise takes Adele's hand and they walk together into the ocean where "for those wonderful seconds, we'd never been born" (84). In an earlier scene of the same story, Adele and Louise share another moment of numbed peacefulness by walking through a sprinkler. In "Marine Life," June confides to Adele her love of the automatic car wash, the feeling of immersion in water. She explains that it's like "'driving under the ocean'" (131), and that it has the power to make her migraine headaches vanish. June's pleasure in the car wash is the illusion that she has left the world and her life behind. Ultimately, of course, there is Jill's descent into water, calculated to allow no return. If escape from story can occur only in death, Svendsen's collection suggests that there is no alternative but more stories, no easy escape from the narrative power of the family saga.

The rereading initiated by "White Shoulders" does not obliterate

the longing the story-cycle has evoked. On the contrary, Svendsen's stories of family love and violence alert us to the power that family narratives continue to have in women's lives, and suggest the ethical implications of how we read them. In making her final story speak back to the rest of the collection, Svendsen suggests something about the imperatives of interpretation. This is not a question of rejecting postmodern indeterminacy, but of following an ethics of reading that considers the social context of the text, in this case, women's socialization as caregivers who forgive — or do not even recognize — men's violence. It is not finally enough to write an elegy for family, a tribute to the desire for home despite its failure. In the end, the collection also insists upon the terrible knowledge to be gained from these stories, and the consequences of denying that knowledge.

Notes

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[1] Ajay Heble is representative in his claim that the formal structure of Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* works to "emphasize both the problem of identity posed by the title of the collection, and the ways in which an ostensibly 'realistic' story-line is thrown into question and rendered unstable by disruptive patterns, gaps in time, and discontinuous histories" (96).

[2] "Who He Slept By" was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in July, 1980; "White Shoulders" did not appear until 1992, in *Saturday Night*.

[3] See, for example, Vikki Bell's contention, in *Interrogating Incest*, that far from being a sign of family breakdown, incest and sexual abuse are actually the paradigm of "the familiar and familial order of patriarchy" (3).

[4] I realize that other readers may well respond differently. My thanks go to Clare Hauer, who suggests that the impact of the story may be heightened when the reader's growing awareness of what is going on contrasts with the narrator's blindness, thus affirming that we are all blinded to the truths in our own families.

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