

Maureen slid the paring knife smoothly through the skin of the watermelon, practicing.

She liked the sound the blade made as it revealed the secret pink flesh underneath; the act of slicing open fruit gave her the satisfaction of shredding a love letter, or of ripping up an unwanted bill or a disturbing newspaper article. She enjoyed experiencing the feeling of control and security it roused in her; she liked to know she had this power, the power to destroy; to make information useless, tearing it up into tiny pieces more complex to fit back together than any jigsaw puzzle.

Maureen's fridge was full of these practice fruits. She would rehearse using lemons, oranges, bananas, apples, pears, zucchini, eggplant, cucumber, tomato...they were all covered in deep slash marks: criss-crossing scars that held her released curiosity and allowed her to unleash her anger.

She vented into these vegetables. Her labour, her energy – it was driven into them. They were the nails and she was the hammer. She liked that.

The devastation she inflicted on the fruits' surfaces created marks that bruised and browned the longer the fruits remained uneaten, ripening and, ultimately, decaying.

Each fruit had its own feel. The knife slid through the flesh of pears and peaches like butter. Bananas crackled, and then gave. Watermelons were thin-skinned but tough.

For the umpteenth time that day, Maureen wondered vaguely what her skin would feel like if she were to slide a sharp blade across it. No, not across; through it, penetrating it deeply in this final act of angst and passion.

Touching her wrist lightly now, and then running her fingernails across the little blue and red lines that were her veins, she imagined it. She felt her stomach lurch at the thought. Mustering up the courage, she dug her nails in deeper, watching the constricted veins swell, the blood river's flow dammed.

She wandered into the bathroom, restless. She looked into the mirror at her face, expecting to see a pale Maureen, gaunt and sallow with poor health, staring back with harsh eyes. What she saw instead was a face, tired and sore and swollen, with puffy eyes and irritated skin, red and raw as if from a bad sunburn. The eyes were dull and deep-set: empty, but alive with a terrifying energy.

Maureen reached for the razor. She removed the blade and shaved her legs with it, her head, her eyebrows. Blood ran down her cheeks and nose and she didn't wipe it away.

The blood was hot and dry, like the summer had been. It was a rich burgundy colour, and granular, coagulating and cracking like the countryside's red dirt roads.

Death wouldn't be like this, she thought. It wouldn't look like this. Death would be more than a calming trickle of blood. There would be more pain, she thought, and it would take far more strength to slice open an artery than it would to shave – it would take strength Maureen didn't seem to have.

For days, Maureen had been thinking about suicide, pondering it, savouring the blackness of the thought of it. The desire for it was excruciating, like wishing for a potent poison to be swallowed, or a plague to be cast. These thoughts excited her. Her longing for death was not so much due to unhappiness, as to boredom. She left the house only to go out to SuperShopper for fruit and vegetables. She did not reply to phone calls or e-mail. She did not watch television or read. She seldom ate, and never slept. She didn't cry, or scream, or throw fits, but her face grew bloated and sore anyway, as if water were

building up behind her eyeballs, in her brain. Bags formed under her glazed and shining eyes.

She sat calmly, day and night, staring out at the summer sun; and the summer moon, and the summer stars, and the sun again, and the occasional cloud passing by. She hoped for a thunderstorm – anything to upset the life she found so disgustingly mundane.

She waited. For what, she didn't know. Time passed, and she barely noticed the clock. She drank coffee, and when the coffee ran out, she drank tea – there was an almost unlimited supply of Earl Grey in the cellar. She liked it down there – cool and dark, like the entrails of a hunter's freshly killed game.

She hadn't been to work in weeks. The café was likely to have fallen into total calamity by now, but she resisted the urge to reply, with snide retorts, to the "Where are you?" and "What the hell are you doing?" messages. She imagined herself picking up the phone and dialing the number for Café Ramosa.

"Hello!" she would say, much too brightly.

And when asked those bothersome questions about her mental health, she'd yell "FUCK OFF!" and hang up angrily, like those bipolar serial killers in bad horror movies.

People care too much, thought Maureen. They talk too much, and stray too often from the bubbles that they blow up around themselves.

Not walls, she thought, but bubbles.

People build walls to shut out the world; people build bubbles so they can shut themselves in, but still manage to watch the world go by, selfishly, with no need to communicate or socialize. All this, she thought, out of laziness and lack of motivation! Like any hypocrite, she sat, feeling guilty and lethargic.

No. Life was not worth living. But to die and miss the chance to have made a difference was a scary thought to Maureen.

Then again, she wasn't making a difference; she was stagnating, rotting like the fruit. So what was the point, really, in any of this?

It was with this kind of thinking that Maureen dug herself into a sort of solipsistic hole. She was buried alive, by herself. She was alone and suffocating.

But then, as Monday's morning sun rose, she felt she needed air. The feeling came on at midnight, and by sunrise it was too much. This misery she was causing herself imploded and she had to release herself. She came up to breathe, a fish out of water, in discomfort.

Taking in the outside world was an agony she needed to endure now. Being inside all this time had torn at her consciousness, and she had lost the willpower to keep digging herself in; it took far too much effort to sustain a depression like that.

And so she went for a walk.

The Canadian countryside was beautiful; she hadn't walked this way in months. Usually, her only movement was to take the bus into town and back. But the horses, the dirt roads, and the fresh air cleared her mind. She was just beginning to feel better, when she saw something big lying motionless on the road ahead. A moose? No, a deer.

She approached, the euphoric anxiety she'd felt at first rapidly vanishing. She began to feel worse: sick, nauseated by the sight of the dead creature. Seeing death splayed out in front of her like that, even if it was just a lowly forest creature several hundred metres away, made her sad again. The deer had not deserved an early end like that.

Here we are, she thought, building our roads through their land, and not even having the patience or decency to pay attention as we rushed from one place in our lives to another.

But as Maureen came closer to the animal, she saw that it was not a deer, because it wore clothes. Her first, ridiculous thought was, Who would put clothes on a deer?

It was a human being.

It appeared to be a young woman, with round hips and a dark ponytail. She wore an orange suit. Escaped from the prison, no doubt. A number – 6876 – was printed across her back, and she lay facedown in a pool of dark blood, coagulating and blending in with the dusty gravel of the back road. Her arms stuck out at odd angles. Flies buzzed, and the air stank.

It was seven a.m., and not a soul in sight. Miles and miles from town. Maureen panicked, screaming, afraid to come any nearer, but all at once rooted to the spot in paralyzed shock. She couldn't run or react, but through her voice. And so she screamed, and screamed, and screamed.

She had no phone. Tears streaming down her face, screaming incoherent strings of words that made no sense, she grabbed at the woman's ankles and dragged her into the bushes. She didn't know why she did this. For the shade, the protection of the trees and ferns maybe? The woman would be secure here, hidden from the world.

A trail of blood followed Maureen as she pulled the woman, face down, across the road. The flies buzzed louder. Deep in the bush, Maureen released the woman's ankles and crashed back onto the red road.

She ran, shrieking words she didn't register or hear, and cursing language she would never be able to recall having uttered.

In a daze, she sprinted the miles back to the house. In a half-hour, she had made it, calmed slightly by exhaustion.

The phone rang as she entered the house.

Dizzy with adrenaline and rage, she picked up.

"Hello?"

"Police. Are we reaching Maureen Sanders, 5467 Rural Route #3?"

"I...what?...It's—"

"We received reports that a Maureen Sanders was sighted with the dead body of one Angela Hansen, an escaped convict from the Penitentiary. We have a team stationed outside your home who will be questioning you shortly. They are armed. Good afternoon."

"Wait –"

The man hung up, his flat, hollow voice echoing through Maureen's aching head.

She looked out the grimy window, and saw the car. It was not a police car; it was a beat up old black mustang, and a short, heavysset man in a plaid shirt stood by the driver's side door, smoking a cigar that produced plumes of smoke like spiraling staircases, forming a halo around his ugly, bald head. The man was holding a cell phone.

Nausea took over Maureen, and she sobbed, hiccoughing wildly, her whole body shaking and convulsing. She vomited all over the floor, and a fountain of water and fruit spilled out. The sickly sweet smell drifted like dandelion seeds, even through the stagnant, windless air, and her nausea only increased.

When the contents of her stomach had been emptied onto the scarred hardwood floor, Maureen backed away from the window and into the kitchen. She flattened herself against the refrigerator, hidden from the hideous man's sight.

Something told Maureen she was in too deep, far too deep – dragged into a situation that was rapidly becoming more dangerous. She had to get out. As quietly as she could, she crept to the cellar door and entered the basement, lowering herself down the stairs, her legs like jelly. Stupidly, she was not digging herself out, but literally digging herself further in.

The phone rang again.

“Shit, shit, shit!”

She didn't answer it.

She ran down the remaining stairs and kicked up the rug, revealing the trapdoor to the root cellar, deep underground. She went inside, shut the door behind her, and waited, heart pounding, in the darkness. It was as black as pitch.

She waited for what felt like minutes, hours, days scraping by; a train of seconds; units of time transported on rusty rails. She listened intently, sure her heart's loud beating would give her away.

Twice, she thought she heard footsteps above, but the footsteps faded, and she was left with a dull feeling of lightheadedness and fear so intense she felt like collapsing in a heap. Adrenaline pulsed through her. She should run, but to where?

And then, all of a sudden, a tiny crack of light appeared above, as though an angel were descending from heaven. A single light ray wound its way through the dust to meet her eyes.

Soon, the sliver became too much; light was streaming, then pouring, then flooding in through the now fully lifted trapdoor. The silhouette of the bulky little man stood, slouching, smoke still curling up around his head.

Even the dim light cast down through the basement's cobwebby windows was too much for Maureen's eyes, and they couldn't adjust quickly enough. A pudgy but strong hand gripped her arm. With fingers like iron sausages, the hands lifted her out and dragged her roughly up the stairs.

Maureen imagined, in retrospect, that she had struggled to resist the unwarranted abuse, but at the time, she felt nothing but pain and heard nothing but her own heart beating. In fact, the slap of Maureen's ankles against each wooden stair was deafening, but at the time she was effectively deaf, shutting out all the noise, focused entirely on the magnitude of the situation.

Maureen's yells of protest, emitted subconsciously and hopelessly, were lost in the big old farmhouse. The man's grunts were lost, too, as he dragged so much dead weight up the steep steps and into the morning's sunlight.

Shoved roughly into the car, and restrained with buckles and locks that seemed to appear from nowhere, conjured up by the cigar angel, Maureen sat; a gargoyle in the backseat.

“How much do you know?”

Having expected a gruff voice, toughened by hard labour, too much drink and too many pub brawls, Maureen was taken aback by the squeaking, shrill words that should have come from the mouth of a small girl in a pink floral dress.

Maureen couldn't reply. She sobbed, and tore at the buckles uselessly.

“How much do you know?”

The man repeated the question several times, with increasing urgency. Finally, he got into the front seat, slammed the door, and revved the engine, which sputtered and stalled.

Maureen prayed, something she had never done before in all her life. She did not do it consciously, and felt silly as she realized she was repeating in her head, “Dear God, let the engine die. Let me go. Let me escape.”

The engine started, and the man went tearing down the road. Coughing from the dust and the cigar smoke, Maureen tried hard to breathe normally. The windows were down, and the heat was heavy and stifling; it crushed her hungry lungs.

She failed miserably at calming herself with deep breaths, and fell instead into hysterical fits of more sobbing. It was dry sobbing now, because she’d run out of water for tears; she was putting all the moisture she had left towards producing a horrid, cold sweat that made her shiver, even in the harsh sunlight. Under the greenhouse effect of the car’s closed windows and absorbent black leather seats, Maureen felt as though she were dying. She regretted having looked forward to this feeling.

They drove down dirt road after dirt road, at speeds unmatched by the fastest of ambulances and fire engines. A left here, a right there; they ended up next to a swamp, somewhere. Maureen, in a dazed panic, had stopped sobbing. Fear had enveloped her completely, and she sat perfectly still. Her eyes had dried, and they throbbed painfully now. She couldn’t even blink for the paralysis of shock. Even if she had been able to force her swollen eyelids shut, she was sure they would have scratched her eyes like sandpaper, blinding her.

Feeling cold metal at her temple, Maureen continued to stare straight ahead. As if her blood had not been heated and flowing fast enough already, her pulse quickened further: something she had not thought possible.

The putrid stench of alcohol, tobacco, and urine wafted up from the little man who stood beside her, holding the gun to her head with a steady hand, and saying nothing.

There was a click: the gun. He would pull the trigger, the merciless bastard. Maureen knew it, and waited.

Just then, a butterfly landed on the windshield.

Maureen had never seen anything like it before – its wings were of the purest white. They were spread wide, huge and magnificent, scintillating with life and beauty. The shimmering blue veins, tiny like the veins of a dried autumn leaf, were almost invisible. They were streaked through the white like miniature cracks through porcelain pottery. It looked as though this insect would be at home in a tropical rainforest.

The wings opened and shut daintily, like the petals of a morning glory. Like a heart, they beat delicately and quickly. Maureen felt their rhythm align with the steady drumming of her own racing pulse.

The butterfly did not take flight. It remained where it was, basking, for what felt like an age.

When it finally did break the tableau, it was to wander across the windshield, its miniscule feet marching dutifully to the rhythm of its own frail wings. So fragile a creature though it was, Maureen knew it had the power to capture the full attention of the

forest, of the wind and trees and lakes, and the frogs in the swamp, and of herself, even in this panic – the power to captivate everyone and everything; even the stout man.

Indeed, she heard his head turn in the direction of the butterfly. The collar of his plaid shirt rustled and she smelled the stench as he shifted. She felt him relax the gun then, as he took in the rare pleasure of sighting a thing of such divine beauty and unbelievable frailty.

And there was a moment in which none of this mattered.

The situation dissolved, and there was only the butterfly, innocent and separate from the world – an ethereal, immortal mirage interrupting the bitter agony and tension of Maureen’s predicament.

The moment did not last. Although the butterfly remained, ugliness resurfaced and took over, and violence reigned.

A new moment dawned, in which they came down from the high generated by the creature that their eyes had soaked up so hungrily, taking in every detail of its little body.

Maureen’s teeth clenched. She could feel the moments as they passed, dissolving.

And she could feel what was coming as the gun was pressed again to her temple, harder this time, its cold metal heating up with the pulsing of her veins, energy flowing into her head like electricity, transferred to her, forced into her from the hands of this man who had been given far too much power.

Maureen blinked, and the gunshot echoed through the desolate swamp.