

fourteen

The wind was raw and damp. Al pulled her collar up around her neck, tucking her chin down inside it. Her mom had said the cold in the east was different from the dry western cold. And was it ever. It seeped right into your bones.

It didn't help that the sun hadn't shone in days.

Al decided to take a short cut through the alley that ran behind some of the shops and restaurants, where she'd be a little more protected from the wind. Yellowed newspapers tumbled past parked cars. Beside one of the many garbage bins stood two small children wearing only light jackets and thin summer pants. They shouldn't be playing back here, Al couldn't help thinking, and didn't their mother care about dressing them properly for the cold?

But they weren't playing and they weren't alone. Reaching into the next bin was a woman, also thinly dressed. Disgust rose in Al's throat. Till the woman, handing the smaller of the children a half-eaten hamburger, raised her eyes, then lowered them quickly when she saw Al watching. The two children began to turn then. Before Al could see their eyes, too, she hurried on as if she had witnessed nothing, had not invaded this family's private indignity.

The look on the woman's face followed her out of the alley to the busy street, and over to the subway. The same man who was at the top of the stairs every Tuesday was there in spite of the cold. Above the old brown blanket

wrapped around his shoulders, his cheeks were pink. He caught her eye. Again embarrassment burned through her. There was nothing threatening about this man she was always so nervous of passing. He wanted money, but he wasn't going to rob anyone for it.

Still, most people were ignoring him, so Al did too.

When she got home from her Art class, the smell of beef stew greeted her. Her dad was just stirring in the parsley, listening to the news on the radio.

"The accident that tied up traffic on the Don Valley since early this afternoon has at last been cleared away. One person died in the crash. One was taken to hospital in critical condition."

"Good timing, Alison. Dinner's just about ready. How was your day?"

"Alright." She headed up the stairs.

"Don't go away. I'll be serving this up in about two secs."

Al plunked herself down at the kitchen table.

"Good class?"

"Mhm."

Her dad set down a plate of stew. Steam rose from it and her stomach cried out its hunger. She reached for a slice of bread and dipped it into the hot gravy swimming around the chunks of beef and vegetables. The eyes of the woman in the alley appeared before her.

"You okay?" Her dad sat down with his plate.

Al nodded.

"Eric Nugent," the newscast continued, "aged fifty-four of no fixed address was found dead in the stairwell of a building at Gerrard and Parliament last evening. Authorities say there are now hundreds of homeless people in Toronto, sleeping over subway grates, in stairwells, lobbies, or wherever they can find a bit of warm shelter."

Al pushed her plate away.

"Come on, honey. Not eating won't help anything."

"Maybe later. I'm not that hungry."