

*Annabel, Annabel, where did you go? I've looked high
and I've looked low.*

I've looked low and I've looked high . . .

– Kat Goldman

*Different though the sexes are, they inter-mix.
In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the
other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that
keep the male or female likeness, while underneath
the sex is the very opposite of what it is above.*

– Virginia Woolf

Prologue

Papa!

The blind man in the canoe is dreaming.

Why would a white caribou come down to Beaver River, where the woodland herd lives? Why would she leave the Arctic tundra, where light blazes incandescent, to haunt these shadows? Why would any caribou leave her herd to walk, solitary, thousands of miles? The herd is comfort. The herd is a fabric you can't cut or tear, passing over the land. If you could see the herd from the sky, if you were a falcon or a king eider, it would appear like softly floating gauze over the face of the snow, no more substantial than a cloud. 'We are soft,' the herd whispers. 'We have no top teeth. We do not tear flesh. We do not tear at any part of life. We are gentleness itself. Why would any of us break from the herd? Break, apart, separate, these are hard words. The only reason any of us would become one, and not part of the herd, is if she were lost.'

The canoe, floating in a steady pool at the deep middle, has black, calm water around it, with froth floating on top from the foam around and above and below. The white caribou stands still, in a patch of sunlight between black tree trunks, staring at the man and the girl inside the vessel. The moss beneath the caribou's hooves is white and appears made of the same substance as the animal, whose outlines are barely there, considering the light above and below it. It could have been poured from light itself and made of light, as if Graham Montague and his daughter had dreamed it into being.

'Papa?' Annabel stands up in the boat. She has been told, from the time before she could walk, not to do this, but she does it. For a moment the canoe stays still, then the girl outstretches her arms towards the enchantment, this caribou that now, she sees, wears a mantle of glittering frost around its shoulders and magnificent chest. In fact there are sparkles of frost throughout its white coat, and she cannot believe her father is both blind and asleep. She cannot believe life would be so unfair that a man could miss such a sight, and she stretches out her hands, which are long, and which her father has loved, and for whose practical industry and fruition he has laboured and hoped, and the canoe capsizes in the river's calm, deep heart. It flips easily, in an instant. The gun goes down, the provisions float or go down according to their lightness and the waterfastness of their packaging.

Graham Montague has never had to swim, and he does not know how, and neither does Annabel, his daughter.

Part One

Wayne Blake was born at the beginning of March, during the first signs of spring breakup of the ice – a time of great importance to Labradorians who hunted ducks for food – and he was born, like most children in that place in 1968, surrounded by women his mother had known all her married life: Joan Martin, Eliza Goudie and Thomasina Baikie. Women who knew how to ice-fish and sew caribou hide moccasins and stack wood in a pile that would not fall down in the months when their husbands walked the traplines. Women who would know, during any normal birth, exactly what was required.

The village of Croyden Harbour, on the southeast Labrador coast, has that magnetic earth all Labrador shares. You sense a striation, a pulse, as the land drinks light and emits a vibration. Sometimes you can see it with your naked eye, stripes of light coming off the land. Not every traveller senses it, but those who do keep looking for it in other places, and they find it nowhere but desert and mesa. A traveller can come from New York and feel it. Explorers, teachers, people who know good hot coffee and densely printed newspapers but who want something more fundamental, an injection of New World in their blood. Real New World, not a myth that has led to highways and more highways and the low, radioactive buildings that offer pancakes and hamburgers and gasoline on those highways. A traveller can come to Labrador and feel its magnetic energy or not feel it. There has to be a question in the person. The visitor has to be an open circuit, available to the power coming off the land, and not everybody is. And it is the same with a person born in Labrador. Some know, from birth, that their homeland has a respiratory system, that it pulls energy from rock and mountain and water and gravitational activity beyond earth, and that it breathes energy in return. And others don't know it.

Wayne was born, in bathwater, in the house of his parents, Treadway and Jacinta Blake. Treadway belonged to Labrador but Jacinta did not. Treadway had kept the traplines of his father and he was magnetised to the rocks, whereas Jacinta had come from St John's when she was eighteen to teach in the little school in Croydon Harbour, because she thought, before she met Treadway, that it would be an adventure, and that it would enable her to teach in a St John's school once she had three or four years of experience behind her.

'I would eat a lunch of bread and jam every day,' Joan Martin told Eliza and Thomasina as Jacinta went through her fiercest labour pains in the bathtub. Every woman in Croydon Harbour spoke at one time or another of how she might enjoy living on her own. The women indulged in this dream when their husbands had been home from their traplines too long. 'I would not need any supper except a couple of boiled eggs, and I'd read a magazine in bed every single night.'

'I'd wear the same clothes for a week,' Eliza said. 'My blue wool pants and grey shirt with my nightie stuffed under them. I would never take off my nightie from September till June. And I would get a cat instead of our dogs, and I would save up for a piano.'

The women did not wish away their husbands out of animosity – it was just that the unendurable winters were all about hauling wood and saving every last piece of marrow and longing for the intimacy they imagined would exist when their husbands came home, all the while knowing the intimacy would always be imaginary. Then came brief blasts of summer, when fireweed and pitcher plants and bog sundews burst open and gave the air one puff, one tantalising scented breath that signaled life could now begin, but it did not begin. The plants were carnivorous. That moment of summer contained desire and fruition and death all in one ravenous gulp, and the women did not jump in. They waited for the moment of summer to expand around them, to expand enough to contain women's lives, and it never did.

When Jacinta was not groaning with the mind-stopping agony of having her pelvic bones wrenched apart by the baby that was coming, she too indulged in the dream. 'I don't believe I'd stay here at all,' she told her friends as she poured scalding coffee from the small enamel pot, her belly as big as a young seal under her blue apron covered in tiny white flowers. 'I'd move back to Monkstown Road and if I couldn't get a job teaching I'd get my old job back at the Duckworth Laundry, washing white linen for the Newfoundland Hotel.'

Thomasina was the only woman who did not indulge. She had not had a father, and she regarded her husband, Graham Montague, with great respect. She had not got over the fact that he could fix anything, that he did not let the house grow cold, that he was the last man to leave for his traplines and the first to come home to her, that he was blind and needed her, or that he had given her Annabel, a red-haired daughter whom she called my bliss and my bee, and who helped her father navigate his canoe now that she was eleven years old and had a head on her as level and judicious as Thomasina's own. Graham was out now, as were all the hunters in Croydon Harbour, on the river in his white canoe, and Annabel was with him. She rode the bow and told him where to steer, though he knew every movement he needed to make with his paddle before Annabel told him, since before she was born he had travelled the river by listening and could hear every stone and ice pan and stretch of whitewater. He told her stories in the canoe, and her favourite was a true story about the white caribou that had joined the woodland herd and that her father had encountered only once, as a boy, before he had the accident that blinded him. Annabel looked for the white caribou on every trip, and when Thomasina told her it might not be alive any more, or it might have gone back to its Arctic tribe, her husband turned his face towards her and silently warned her not to stop their daughter from dreaming.

As her baby's head crowned, Jacinta's bathroom brimmed with snow light. Razor clam shells on her windowsill glowed white, and so did the tiles, the porcelain, the shirts of the women and their skin, and whiteness pulsed through her sheer curtains so that the baby's hair and face became a focal point of saturated colour in the white room; goldy brown hair, red face, black little eyelashes, and a red mouth.

Down the hall from Jacinta's birthing room, her kitchen puckered and jounced with wood heat. Treadway dropped caribou cakes into spitting pork fat, scalded his teabag, and cut a two-inch-thick chunk of partridgeberry loaf. He had no intention of lollygagging in the house during the birth – he was here for his dinner and would slice through Beaver River

again in an hour in his white canoe. His hat was white and so were his sealskin coat and canvas pants and his boots. This was how generations of Labrador men had hunted in the spring.

A duck could not tell a white hunter's canoe from an ice pan. The canoe, with the hunter reclining in it, slid dangerously through the black water, silently slowing near the flock, whether the flock flew high overhead or rested their fat bellies on the water's skin. Treadway lived for the whiteness and the silence. He could not see with his ears as Graham Montague could, but he could hear, if he emptied himself of all desire, the trickle of spring melt deep inland. He could inhale the medicinal shock of Labrador tea plants with their leathery leaves and orange, furry undersides, and watch the ways of flight of the ducks, ways that were numerous and that told a hunter what to do. Dips and turns and degrees of speed and hesitation told him exactly when to raise his gun and when to hide it. Their markings were written on the sky as plain as day, and Treadway understood completely how Graham Montague could hit ducks accurately even though he was blind, for he had himself noticed the constant mathematical relationship between the ducks' position and the hollow, sweeping sounds their wings made, a different sound for each kind of turning, and their voices that cracked the silence of the land. The movements of the ducks were the white hunter's calligraphy.

This was a kind of message younger people had lost, but Treadway was attuned to every line and nuance. There were words for each movement of a duck, and Treadway had learned all of the words from his father. People five years younger than he knew only half the words, but Treadway knew them all, in his speech and in his body. This was how he lived, by the nuances of wild birds over land and water, and by the footprints and marks of branches in snow on his trapline, and the part of him that understood these languages detested time in houses. Clocks ticked, and doilies sat on furniture, and stagnant air rushed into his pores and suffocated him. It was not air at all, but suffocating gauze crammed with dust motes, and it was always too warm. If the women dreaming of life without their husbands could know how he felt, they would not imagine themselves single with such gaiety. Treadway did not tell this to other men, laughing over broken buns of hot bread and pots of coffee, but he dreamed it nonetheless. He dreamed living his life over again, like the life of his great-uncle Gaetan Joseph, who had not married but who had owned a tiny hut one hundred miles along the trapline, equipped with hard bread, flour, split peas, tea, a table made out of a spruce stump with two hundred rings, a seal-hide daybed, and a tin stove. Treadway would have read and meditated and trapped his animals and cured pelts and studied. Gaetan Joseph had studied Plutarch and Aristotle and Pascal's *Pensées*, and Treadway had some of his old books in his own trapper's hut, and he had others besides that he read deep into the nights when he was blessed with the solitude of his trapline. A lot of trappers did this. They left home, they trapped, and they meditated and studied. Treadway was one of them, a man who studied not just words but pathways of wild creatures, pulsations of the northern lights, trajectories of the stars. But he did not know how to study women, or understand the bonds of family life, or achieve any kind of real happiness indoors. There were times he wished he had never been seduced by the pretty nightgowns Jacinta wore, made of such blowy, insubstantial ribbons and net that they would not have enough strength to hold the smallest ouananiche. The closest thing to these

nightgowns in his world outdoors was the fizz of light that hung in a veil around the Pleiades. He had a Bible in his trapper's library, and he remembered his wife's loveliness when he read the lines Who can bind the sweet influence of the Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion? He read these lines on his hard daybed when he had been away from her for months, and they made him remember her loveliness. But did he ever tell her this? He did not.

Home from the trapline, recovered from all loneliness, Treadway loved his wife because he had promised he would. But the centre of the wilderness called him, and he loved that centre more than any promise. That wild centre was a state of mind, but it had a geographical point as well. The point was in an unnamed lake. Canadian mapmakers had named the lake but the people who inhabited the Labrador interior had given it a different name, a name that remains a secret. From a whirlpool in the centre of that lake, river water flows in two directions. It flows southeast down to the Beaver River and through Hamilton Inlet and past Croydon Harbour into the North Atlantic, and another current flows northwest from the centre, to Ungava Bay. The whirling centre was the birthplace of seasons and smelt and caribou herds and deep knowledge that a person could not touch in domesticity. Treadway left this place at the end of the trapping season and faithfully came back to his house, which he had willingly built when he was twenty, but he considered the house to belong to his wife, while the place where waters changed direction belonged to him, and would belong to any son he had.

And now the head of his and Jacinta's first baby glittered beautifully in the white bathroom without his witnessing it, and so did the shoulders, the belly with its cord, the penis, thighs, knees and toes. Thomasina hooked a plug of slime out of the baby's mouth with her pinky, slicked her big hand over face, belly, buttocks like butter over one of her hot loaves, and slipped the baby back to its mother. It was as the baby latched on to Jacinta's breast that Thomasina caught sight of something slight, flower-like; one testicle had not descended, but there was something else. She waited the eternal instant that women wait when a horror jumps out at them. It is an instant that men do not use for waiting, an instant that opens a door to life or death. Women look through the opening because something might be alive in there. What Thomasina knew, as she looked through the opening this time, was that something can go wrong, not just with the child in front of you, another woman's child, but with your own child, at any time, no matter how much you love it.

Thomasina bent over Jacinta and the baby in a midwife's fashion, a ministering arc, and wrapped a blanket around the child, a cotton blanket that had been washed many times. She did not believe in putting anything new or synthetic next to a newborn's skin. As she adjusted the blanket she quietly moved the one little testicle and saw that the baby also had labia and a vagina. This she took in as Treadway, in another room, threw his teabag in the garbage, as he gave his crust to the dog and clicked shut the front door, as he went out on the last perfect duck hunt of his days, and she let Treadway go. Thomasina asked Eliza and Joan to get the warm towels for Jacinta. She herself handed Jacinta the thick pad to soak up the postpartum blood, and helped her into the terrycloth robe that Jacinta would wear for the next few days.

Then she said, 'I'm going to ask the others to leave, if it's all right with you. We have something to talk about.'