

## Fish · Cori Jones

I'M CUTTING SCROLLS in linoleum when Jute calls, drunk. It's the first time in a year I've heard from him. His words are hushed husky slurs; he sounds bad. I wonder how long he's been like this: if it's been a day, two days, longer. He keeps saying my name: *Kate Katie Katie*. I hold my hand against my belly and press three fingers against its curve. Under my sweater my skin is private and warm. *Katie*, he says, you're on that bridge with me. The linoleum's dull white; the scrolls wriggle in the square. The cutter's sharp, its blade shiny and thin. I know you, Jute says. You *Katie* you bring me. His words stop and I listen to him breathe. Sometimes when he's like this he comes close to crying, but he won't cry. He never does. My fingers make circles in my flesh. When I stop pressing, the circles will shrink. *Kate*, Jute shouts. Too many splinters in the table *Kate* too many splinters on the bridge. The phone clicks and he's gone. I stand by my kitchen window, watching the straight gray street. Light flickers at the dry cleaner's. On the corner a woman slips a little and grabs at a signpost to steady herself. From here I can't read the sign, but I know what it says: BRIDGE TO CANADA NEXT LEFT. They've called for wind tonight, for freezing rain; tonight Tom will stay here with me and I won't think about Jute. Before Tom gets here I'll finish the scrolls, then I'll cut the cloth for the scarves. In a week or so I'll take them up to customs and the men will wave me through. I'll drive them over the river into Ontario, sell them at a craft store in Brockville. The cloth is red silk; the scrolls will be black. Tomorrow if the road is safe I'll drive out past the turnoff for the bridge. I'll go to Jute's trailer court and do what I always do. I unwrap the phone cord from my wrist, coil by coil. Jute, I say to myself. Tomorrow I'll take care of you. Outside the wind picks up. The last time I went to him a breeze was blowing in from the south. It was January, fourteen months ago; the thaw lasted four days, rain the whole time. Threads of mist floated up from the road. When I got to Jute he was holding onto a chair. He kept pointing to the windows. Water, he told me. Too much water out there *Katie* gotta drink to keep breathin'. He said the mist got into his feet and sneaked up his legs to his lungs. He said the rain made holes in the snow.

I will not tell Tom this. He knows I've had other lovers but he doesn't

know about Jute. Jute was the first, but that's not what matters. Jute and I grew up in Port Martin, on Clinton Street, in the block of duplexes that runs along the river. The street smelled wet and our front yards never had grass. We always sat on the rocks behind his house. We'd look at the river. Sometimes we'd try to fish. We made poles out of loose molding in Jute's mother's living room. It splintered a little when Jute ripped it out from the wall. Tom doesn't know how I look now at the river sometimes and imagine Jute sinking into the dark water, gasping invisible bubbles as the current takes him over. Tomorrow I will tell Jute that this is my last time with him, the last time I'll bring him back from himself. I'll tell him I'm going to marry Tom and my fingers will touch my belly. Tom's child is here, I'll say. Here, Jute, here. Somewhere secret and damp beneath my pale circled flesh.

I leave the phone off the hook. The mouthpiece rests on an empty shelf; the blue cord droops below the table. When the receiver begins to whine I wrap the silk around it. My apartment's almost empty; there's not much else I can use. Already Tom has taken a lot of things home with him; early next week we'll take the rest. He lives near Morristown, near the river hills; he has his own house. He grew up on Long Island, near Bay Shore. I've looked it up on a map but I won't go down there with him, not even for a visit. Once Jute said the only men in this county with money were the ones from downstate. He said it almost three years ago, the time he called from Watertown. The connection kept flickering when the operator asked for change. Downstate, he kept mumbling. Gonna get me something downstate. When I went to get him I drove the back roads all the way from Port Martin. I got to Watertown at sunset, found Jute in the park out Academy Street. I helped him into the back seat. When I drove back through town the street was empty. I passed a factory with broken windows, painted letters peeling on a wall. Behind me Jute pushed himself up. In the rearview mirror I watched him stare at the windows and the bricks. That's the North Country, that's Port Martin, he said. Black holes in the St. Lawrence sinner-river. Twenty thirty forty years gone by, and it's no ship on our docks. He said Yes the death-water and I saw him sink down. He was sweating gin, heavy and sweet. The towns kept going by: Oxbow, Wegatchie, Pope Mills. After dark his smell got closer. It got into my hair and my nostrils and my mouth, rising and falling with his snores.

In March it gets dark after six. During thaws the sky clouds over at dusk: new earth hangs in the air, funky and thick. But all this week the temperature's been below freezing. I sit on the floor under the window, folding and folding silk squares. Sometimes I work best when I'm cold. Layers of clouds keep shifting. They come from one of the western lakes, Superior or Huron; Lake Ontario sends them up the St. Lawrence to us. Tonight the air will be wet, full of ice and river and fear. I wish Tom would get here. He teaches at Voc-Tech in Massena; he drives sixty miles a day. He says when he gives tests the room gets quiet sometimes and he can feel the boys shaking. The wind comes up hard. Slush and ice hit the window and leave streams of water on the pane. The temperature's dropping; already the street looks slick. Tonight the Towers will be empty. No one will eat in the dining room; no one will drink in the bar. If I was scheduled to waitress I'd call in sick. Nothing will get me outside. If I fall I could lose the baby. Once before this I was pregnant; it was some man between Tom and Jute. I met him at the Towers when they had me working in the bar. He used to sit on a stool next to the wall, nursing a draft, watching the people in the dining room. Best trout in the North Country, he told me once. That's what they say in the papers. He said all you needed to eat that trout was bills, nice green bills. Before I'd known him long he wanted to know everything I did. I knew what would happen if I stayed with him. He'd laugh too loud and we'd have lots of fights. By the time I had the pregnancy test I'd left him. I remember sitting in my kitchen, bowing my head above the tablecloth. It was the color of beets, and I'd done a block print on it. There were rows of black circles, black fish jumping between them. My eyes ached and the curves blurred like flames. That night I woke up with cramps. I started passing clots. When the doctor asked if I'd wanted the baby I felt myself shaking my head. You're honest, he told me. Most of them say they do. He gave me ampicillin and a prescription for birth control pills. This time with Tom I don't need a test. I know. My period is two weeks late. Sometimes when I lie still I feel blood ripening inside me. Tomorrow I'll go to Jute for the last time, then I'll tell Tom. He wants children; he'll be happy. After the baby is born I'll never work at the Towers again; not in the dining room, not ever in the bar. I'll design children's clothes. I'll drive them over the border to boutiques in Ottawa, Toronto, Montreal. When the baby is old enough she'll help me. She'll smooth the cloth with her hands.

Just after dark a pair of lights turns into the driveway. They stop, go out; Tom is safe. He stands in my doorway, rubbing his hands together. When he pushes the door the wind slams it shut. "It's like a skating rink out there," he says. "No one's going over twenty miles an hour." When I link an arm through his, ice from his sleeve melts against my wrist. He brushes at his hair. His nose is perfectly straight. I want the baby to have his nose. I want one of her eyes to be dark like mine; the other like his, not quite green. "Two policemen came into the electronics lab today," he tells me. "They took one of my boys out. I heard they questioned him about some robbery, some 7-Eleven in Massena." He jerks at the zipper on his jacket. I lean against him, close. He always smells faintly of salt. Once he asked me why I came back here. I've told him how I drove west after college, looking for work. I've told him how no one wanted a state college graduate with too many credits in art. I've never said how I followed the interstates to Chicago and turned up toward Minneapolis because I only felt safe going north, how somewhere in Wisconsin my car lights got weak and all the land seemed too big. Flecks of ice cling to his hair, his red beard. He looks wild and cold, like a man climbing through a storm. He's not from the North Country; there are things he'll never know. He'll never know how I had money to get home on but I called Jute from some interstate prairie town and waited for three days while he came for me. I was in North Dakota by then and the sun sucked everything out of the ground. He'll never know how Jute and I were kids and we stole poster paints from the five and ten. We got to work at sunset and decorated his mother's Ford. I looked at the sky and stretched designs across that gray rusty hood: violet pink, violet gold, violet blood. Tom grew up with too many cities around him, too many roads. At school he can feel the boys shaking but he doesn't know Jute. Every summer Jute and I sat on the rocks behind his house, watching the seaway ships move their cargo on past the Port Martin docks and disappear under the bridge. St. Lawrence sinner-river, lying to us like that, Jute said the first time I saw him drunk, both of us fourteen and scared, me retching Boone's Farm puke into the black, briny water; Jute murmuring, holding my head. *Hey. Hey.*

By nine the wind has died down. I go to bed before Tom does; I climb under the quilt in my panties and socks. He stays in the kitchen, reading something from a folder. In an apartment this small I can see everything. I

watch the light over the sink, the curve of his shoulders as he leans forward in his chair. Ice coats the window, the snow, all the roofs on the street, but as I lie here I am almost too warm. The river feels foggy and close. My breasts are heavy; my fingers circle the nipples. Tom gets up and opens a cupboard door. I shut my eyes, watch the dark curl around. I hear the door close. When I go into labor I will fall into pain. I'll gulp wet air and swim in it, kick on and on while Tom tells me to breathe. He'll bathe my temples in ice, and when he tells me to push his face will float through gauze.

The next morning we sleep late. Tom gets up first and brings me coffee. He sits on the edge of the bed and looks out the window at the street. The sun streaks my quilt. "Weather did a turnaround," he tells me. "All the ice is melting. Look at that sky." I keep picking at the styrofoam rim on the cup. The sun hurts my eyes and the pink squares are too bright on the quilt. The coffee smells sharp, as if Tom has burned it. He traces my knee with his finger. "Do you have to work tonight?" he asks. I shake my head. "Not till tomorrow," I tell him. "I have every other Saturday off, remember?" Something sour grows in my throat. I keep tasting fish, the fresh trout they serve at the Towers in the summer. Tom is telling me about errands, how he should be through with them by two. "Come over after two," he says, "and we'll get more of your things unpacked." When he goes toward the door I watch him move. He's very tall; a daughter wouldn't want his height. A daughter shouldn't be taller than me. He's wearing the sweater I made him for Christmas. It's dark red and thick, loose on his skinny hips. He's thin; he'll always be thin. I lie back and shut my eyes. At Christmas we bought each other skis. The first time we used them there was snow coming in from the north. We skied around small fields; patterns of fences stretched toward the river. Tomorrow when I'm at the Towers Tom will probably take his skis out again. My teeth start chattering. He'll be outside, cold, and at the Towers I will remember the smell of fish. The taste of the coffee hurts; I can't stop swallowing. The bathroom's somewhere on my left. The toilet gets closer and I vomit bile and air. Something takes me over, then it's gone. I lie on the floor, reach for the damp washcloth on the edge of the tub. First I press it against my forehead, then I rub my mouth. When I start swallowing again I lie back down. The floor tiles are cool against the side of my face. When I shut my

eyes tight I see white dots in dark. They shoot off color after color, float in spirals in front of Jute's face. He's got that boozed-out light in his eyes and I smell the blond heat of his hair. I hear him laugh, say Katie you're on that bridge with me. Behind his grin his throat is black. He says Katie you gonna make me die and his beard is a circle of flames. It shimmers, burns, tapers to an arrow of ice. It swims inside me, writhes and bloats in my womb.

When the room feels warmer I turn the shower on. In porcelain and tile I stand up straight, arms around my waist, pressing my knees together. Water spits, then pours from the nozzle. It runs down my back and down pale round stains in the wall. In water like this I can figure things out. When I still slept with Jute we used to take baths together. That was nine years ago, down in Oneonta, when I was going to college. Sometimes in the early morning I'd take long walks alone. I'd think about how it rained for days down there and there was so much land beyond the hills. I'd call Jute up and he'd come spend the night. He did floor inventory over at Northern Discount then; he had Mondays off. My fingers scratch at my scalp. One Sunday we spent the whole night in the tub. He kept soaping my breasts, and under the water his hands slid to my hips. Lather drops onto my shoulders. I shake my head to keep it off my face. His drinking wasn't that bad then, but he had a bottle with him, bourbon or scotch. He held it for me and I took small sips. When the water got cold we ran the hot faucet hard. I remember Jute sitting in steam, holding the bottle up, running his fingers down the brown dark glass. When he kissed the label his hair was pale against his neck. I remember his eyes when he smiled, how they weren't looking at anything at all: not at the bottle, not at my face, not at the beads of water that ran down my breasts. He said Katie brings me downstate. Yes she does. He held me for a long time, both of us shivering in the heat. The first time I heard him drunk on the phone I was afraid he'd die. He'd pass out before I got to him, choke on his own vomit. That day I found him in the kitchen, lying next to the sink. The sink was full of water and he kept hugging my leg. He said Katie yes Katie gonna stay with me. When I put my hand in the water it felt grainy and cold. I found the plug and it all swirled down. Today I will not stay with him. I'll tell him this just as I told him that day, just as I told him that last night on the road back from North Dakota, when he said I'd make him die. I'll tell

him he won't die and I'll tell him about the baby, how she has nothing to do with him. The baby is Tom's, Tom's and mine.

I stand by my bed, looking for clothes. Most of them are at Tom's, but I still have things here in bags. I dig out an old skirt, a pink flowered thing that I made in college. The flowers are pale; they have lots of white. I sewed five more from the same pattern, but I can't remember who bought them. My scholarship paid for a lot of things, but I always needed money. Underneath the skirt there's a blouse folded up. I shake it out, put it on. It's loose and blue, a dark violet blue like the dots at the bottom of the skirt. I first slept with Jute when I was fifteen but that Sunday night in Oneonta he called it my virgin skirt. When I took it off for him he sat in the tub and drank from the bottle and watched me. I unzipped it and let it slide down my thighs. All those flowers, he said. They're falling. After I got in the water I sat very still and he touched my face. When he bowed his head I smelled him, soap and liquor and sweat. Look, he said. The water's stopped moving.

In the mirror I look tall. My hair's still wet; it's almost black. There are shadows under my eyes but Jute won't know I've been sick. I reach into another bag. At the bottom is a scarf I bought on the road out west. It was in Wisconsin, in Madison; they were trying to fix the lights on my car and I had the whole day to walk around. Up by the university there were booths on the street. They had belts, handpainted rings, shirts in bright colors; they had scarves. My scarf was lavender; it was the first time I'd ever bought silk. When Jute drove me back I kept it loose around my neck. Now it's faded almost white; water stains make round flowery lines. Something pulls in my belly when I wad it up in my fist. When I get to Jute I'll show him the scarf. I know he won't hit me but my hands will shake. He hit me just once, that last night on the road in Ontario, in some truck stop parking lot with dumpsters and lights. I said No Jute I can't stay with you I have to live alone and when he punched me once in the arm I crouched on the floor and waited. He told me then I'd make him die and he covered his face with his hands. If he starts to pass out I'll have to slap him awake. After I hit him and he holds out his arms to me I'll wet the scarf in the sink. I'll kneel on the floor when he tries to sit up. When I wrap the scarf around his head I'll pull it tight, loosen it, tighten it again. I'll tell him I'm squeezing the death out of him and he'll stare at me,

booze-sweat and water on his face, and I'll slap him again, hard, once with each hand. When I know he won't pass out I'll take the scarf and I'll leave. I'll run out to my car, drive past the arc of the bridge back to Port Martin. I'll swallow heat and tears and I'll whisper it over and over: *Damn you. Goddamn you to hell. Goddamn you.*

My car starts slowly; it must still be wet from the storm. I move out onto the street, past the cleaners, the laundromat, the Kinney Drug sign at the corner of Leyden Street. Ahead of me is the sign for the bridge. I signal, turn left. On Bridge Street there are lots of trees. Their branches are dark and wet. One of the houses has new paint. It's pale gray; the trim is dark wine. Gingerbread shingles look like gray frozen waves. When I get to the edge of town the street widens into Seaway Road. I pass a Sunoco station, an Ultramart, a motel with no name. At the Am-Can Shopping Center, the Northern Discount parking lot is almost full. Some of the cars look new. The sun makes them shine, black and red and metallic green. After I pass the bridge turnoff I see the sign for the Port Martin Trailer Court. I turn left onto dirt. In the distance is the bridge, a high green arc over dark water. On each side of me trailers are lined up in straight quiet rows. Their bottoms are different colors, pink or aqua or red. All of their tops are white. Jute's trailer is at the end of the row on my right. I pull up by the MANAGER sign and leave the key in the ignition. When I shut the door a little girl runs behind the trailer across from Jute's, grinning. Her hands are bare and her cheeks are flushed. As I walk toward the stoop a vague pain pulls at my thighs.

I know the door's unlocked. I kick it open, hold the scarf in one hand. "Jute," I call. Smells answer me: bourbon and cooking oil and dust. I know just where the light is and I switch it on. "Jute." Then I hear him breathe and I turn. He's off in the alcove, sitting crosslegged on top of the dinette. His chest is bare but there's a red tie around his neck. His hair is stringy and long, but he's shaved off his beard. Little scabs, razor nicks, dot his cheeks and chin. "Katie," Jute says. His smile is a lopsided grin. Next to him is a plate. I move closer. On the plate is a fish, long and mottled and black. Its belly is silvery-pale. Jute reaches behind him and picks up a carving knife. When he points to the window the blade gleams in the light. "Now," he says. "Out there tomorrow trailer to get ready to rent Katie." The silk is damp in my palm. "Tomorrow out there Katie that

friggin' slapslap mop." Behind him a picture is tacked into the fake wood wall. The last time I was here the wall was bare. When he turns and looks at it with me the knife rattles against the plate. It's a postcard of an ocean: gray water, gray sky, lots of white wild foam. Jute smiles, shakes his head. "Yeah," he says. "That's where the sinner-river goes." His cheeks and eyelids look swollen. When he holds up the knife I don't move. "This fish," he says. "I am going to eat this fish. Caught it under the bridge Katie and I am going to eat this fish." He points to the refrigerator. "Froze up since summer and I am going to eat it now." The fish stares at me, its eyes open and dead. Grains of ice are stuck to its fins. My legs feel very heavy. "In a rowboat Katie all by myself but you were there with me and I caught it." Then he laughs. He laughs the way he did when we crossed from North Dakota into Canada, my car lightless and cold somewhere south of us, no river keeping us from the north. We drove through Kenora, Thunder Bay, Sault Sainte Marie, North Bay: all those towns near lakes. It took us four days to get back to the bridge. He smiles again; he seems almost sober. He lifts the knife and brings it down. When it slides through scales and flesh the eyes don't shut and the head falls onto the table. It keeps staring. I start to touch my belly, then stop. My back keeps hurting and I know there's nothing more I can do. I whisper "Jute" once and I leave. As I walk toward the car I dangle the scarf in my fingers. Just before I open the door I trip on a pebble and drop it. When I pick it up it drags a little on the ground.

I get back on Seaway Road and head toward Port Martin. On my right, the St. Lawrence is a wide cobalt line. Between the road and the river are fields. Clumps of new grass stick up in the snow. When I see the sign for the bridge I slow, then speed up. When I've almost passed the turn I hit the brakes hard. The wheels skid, then straighten. I turn right slowly. The water seems close, even from here. Whitecaps jump, dissolve into black. Between the road and the bridge the customs office is squat and neat. A man walks out of the building and stands on the pavement, waiting for me. My brakes catch; I stop. When the man signals me to come closer, I hold up my hand and wave. Then I shift into reverse, back up, turn around. There's nothing for me to say to him, just as there was nothing to say to Jute that morning we crossed back over the river and watched the shoreline grow. It was dawn; there were no other cars. The light was

quiet, almost pink, and we coasted down toward the fields, the shopping center, every house in Port Martin. I leaned against him and he rubbed at the bruise on my arm. Just before the Seaway Road intersection I slow down again. Something hot keeps pulling in my belly; something's not right. When I start to sweat I pull over and open the door. I put my head between my knees and the nausea is gone. I sit up, turn around. The bridge curves, soars. Beyond it in Canada the road opens up, but it doesn't matter. It only goes north. Just before I shut the door a sharp pain pushes through me and everything's too wet. I slam the door, jerk at the seat belt, press the accelerator down hard. I keep driving. Warm sticky pain oozes down my thighs. I should stop, clean myself, but I know there's no point to this. I know everything that will happen. I'll drive to Tom's house; it won't take long. It's after two; he'll be waiting for me. The air smells like earth and he'll come out to greet me. He won't see the blood that has soaked through the flowers in my skirt, that is trickling down my thighs. I'll get out of the car, I'll stand still, I'll say it. I'll say *I'm bleeding* and he'll figure it out. He'll come to me, he'll want to hold me, but it won't do any good. I'll tell him to stay away. He'll say *Kate* and maybe he'll shiver a little, then turn back toward his house. He's a man; he won't know quite what to do. I will stand in the yard, hold my arms against my waist, feel the dead wet warmth at the center of myself. I'll watch Tom go through his door and I'll know that I'll marry him. I know I'll have a baby but it's not the right time. I will stand there till all the blood flows down my legs, over the bones of my ankles and feet, till it soaks into the ground. It will sink into deep earth and run down the hill toward the river. Some time, tomorrow or next summer or next winter or next fall, I'll look out at the bridge and I'll see it, a circle of red in the water and air.