

STONE MATTRESS

.....

At the outset Verna had not intended to kill anyone. What she had in mind was a vacation, pure and simple. Take a breather, do some inner accounting, shed worn skin. The Arctic suits her: there's something inherently calming in the vast cool sweeps of ice and rock and sea and sky, undisturbed by cities and highways and trees and the other distractions that clutter up the landscape to the south.

Among the clutter she includes other people, and by other people she means men. She's had enough of men for a while. She's made an inner memo to renounce flirtations and any consequences that might result from them. She doesn't need the cash, not any more. She's not extravagant or greedy, she tells herself: all she ever wanted was to be protected by layer upon layer of kind, soft, insulating money, so that nobody and nothing could get close enough to harm her. Surely she has at last achieved this modest goal.

But old habits die hard, and it's not long before she's casting an appraising eye over her fleece-clad fellow-travellers dithering

with their wheely bags in the lobby of the first-night airport hotel. Passing over the women, she ear-tags the male members of the flock. Some have females attached to them, and she eliminates these on principle: why work harder than you need to? Prying a spouse loose can be arduous, as she discovered via her first husband: discarded wives stick like burrs.

It's the solitaires who interest her, the lurkers at the fringes. Some of these are too old for her purposes; she avoids eye contact with them. The ones who cherish the belief that there's life in the old dog yet: these are her game. Not that she'll do anything about it, she tells herself, but there's nothing wrong with a little warm-up practice, if only to demonstrate to herself that she can still knock one off if she wishes to.

For that evening's meet-and-greet she chooses her cream-coloured pullover, perching the Magnetic Northward nametag just slightly too low on her left breast. Thanks to Aquacise and core strength training, she's still in excellent shape for her age, or indeed for any age, at least when fully clothed and buttressed with carefully fitted underwiring. She wouldn't want to chance a deck chair in a bikini – superficial puckering has set in, despite her best efforts – which is one reason for selecting the Arctic over, say, the Caribbean. Her face is what it is, and certainly the best that money can buy at this stage: with a little bronzer and pale eyeshadow and mascara and glimmer powder and low lighting, she can finesse ten years.

"Though much is taken, much remains," she murmurs to her image in the mirror. Her third husband had been a serial quotation freak with a special penchant for Tennyson. "Come into the garden, Maud," he'd been in the habit of saying just before bedtime. It had driven her mad at the time.

She adds a dab of cologne – an understated scent, floral, nostalgic – then she blots it off, leaving a mere whiff. It's a

mistake to overdo it: though elderly noses aren't as keen as they may once have been, it's best to allow for allergies. A sneezing man is not an attentive man.

She makes her entrance slightly late, smiling a detached but cheerful smile – it doesn't do for an unaccompanied woman to appear too eager – accepts a glass of the passable white wine they're doling out, and drifts among the assembled nibblers and sippers. The men will be retired professionals: doctors, lawyers, engineers, stockbrokers, interested in Arctic exploration, polar bears, archeology, birds, Inuit crafts, perhaps even Vikings or plant life or geology. Magnetic Northward attracts serious punters, with an earnest bunch of experts laid on to herd them around and lecture to them. She's investigated the two other outfits that tour the region, but neither appeals. One features excessive hiking and attracts the under-fifties – not her target market – and the other goes in for singsongs and dressing up in silly outfits, so she's stuck with Magnetic Northward, which offers the comfort of familiarity. She travelled with this company once before, after the death of her third husband, five years ago, so she knows pretty much what to expect.

There's a lot of sportswear in the room, much beige among the men, many plaid shirts, vests with multiple pockets. She notes the nametags: a Fred, a Dan, a Rick, a Norm, a Bob. Another Bob, then another: there are a lot of Bobs on this trip. Several appear to-be flying solo. Bob: a name once of heavy significance to her, though surely she's rid herself of that load of luggage by now. She selects one of the thinner but still substantial Bobs, glides close to him, raises her eyelids, and lowers them again. He peers down at her chest.

"Verna," he says. "That's a lovely name."

"Old-fashioned," she says. "From the Latin word for 'spring.' When everything springs to life again." That line, so filled with

promises of phallic renewal, had been effective in helping to secure her second husband. To her third husband she'd said that her mother had been influenced by the eighteenth-century Scottish poet James Thomson and his vernal breezes, which was a preposterous but enjoyable lie: she had, in fact, been named after a lumpy, bun-faced dead aunt. As for her mother, she'd been a strict Presbyterian with a mouth like a vise grip, who despised poetry and was unlikely to have been influenced by anything softer than a granite wall.

During the preliminary stages of netting her fourth husband, whom she'd flagged as a kink addict, Verna had gone even further. She'd told him she'd been named for "The Rite of Spring," a highly sexual ballet that ended with torture and human sacrifice. He'd laughed, but he'd also wriggled: a sure sign of the hook going in.

Now she says, "And you're . . . Bob." It's taken her years to perfect the small breathy intake, a certified knee-melter.

"Yes," Bob says. "Bob Goreham," he adds, with a diffidence he surely intends to be charming. Verna smiles widely to disguise her shock. She finds herself flushing with a combination of rage and an almost reckless mirth. She looks him full in the face: yes, underneath the thinning hair and the wrinkles and the obviously whitened and possibly implanted teeth, it's the same Bob — the Bob of fifty-odd years before. Mr. Heartthrob, Mr. Senior Football Star, Mr. Astounding Catch, from the rich, Cadillac-driving end of town where the mining-company big shots lived. Mr. Shit, with his looming bully's posture and his lopsided joker's smile.

How amazing to everyone, back then — not only everyone in school but everyone, for in that armpit of a town they'd known to a millimetre who drank and who didn't and who was no better than she should be and how much change you kept in your back pocket — how amazing that golden-boy Bob had singled out

insignificant Verna for the Snow Queen's Palace winter formal. Pretty Verna, three years younger, studious, grade-skipping, innocent Verna, tolerated but not included, clawing her way towards a scholarship as her ticket out of town. Gullible Verna, who'd believed she was in love.

Or who *was* in love. When it came to love, wasn't believing the same as the real thing? Such beliefs drain your strength and cloud your vision. She's never allowed herself to be skewered in that tiger trap again.

What had they danced to that night? "Rock Around the Clock." "Hearts Made of Stone." "The Great Pretender." Bob had steered Verna around the edges of the gym, holding her squashed up against his carnation buttonhole, for the unskilled, awkward Verna of those days had never been to a dance before and was no match for Bob's strenuous and flamboyant moves. For meek Verna, life was church and studies and household chores and her weekend job clerking in the drugstore, with her grim-faced mother regulating every move. No dates; those wouldn't have been allowed, not that she'd been asked on any. But her mother had permitted her to go to the well-supervised high-school dance with Bob Goreham, for wasn't he a shining light from a respectable family? She'd even allowed herself a touch of smug gloating, silent though it had been. Holding her head up after the decampment of Verna's father had been a full-time job, and had given her a very stiff neck. From this distance Verna could understand it.

So out the door went Verna, starry-eyed with hero worship, wobbling on her first high heels. She was courteously inserted into Bob's shiny red convertible with the treacherous mickey of rye already lurking in the glove compartment, where she sat bolt upright, almost catatonic with shyness, smelling of Prell shampoo and Jergens lotion, wrapped in her mother's mothbally

out-of-date rabbit stole and an ice-blue tulle-skirted dress that looked as cheap as it was.

Cheap. Cheap and disposable. Use and toss. That was what Bob had thought about her, from the very first.

Now Bob grins a little. He looks pleased with himself: maybe he thinks Verna is blushing with desire. But he doesn't recognize her! He really doesn't! How many fucking Vernas can he have met in his life?

Get a grip, she tells herself. She's not invulnerable after all, it appears. She's shaking with anger, or is it mortification? To cover herself she takes a gulp of her wine, and immediately chokes on it. Bob springs into action, giving her a few brisk but caressing thumps on the back.

"Excuse me," she manages to gasp. The crisp, cold scent of carnations envelops her. She needs to get away from him; all of a sudden she feels quite sick. She hurries to the ladies' room, which is fortunately empty, and throws up her white wine and her cream-cheese-and-olive canapé into a cubicle toilet. She wonders if it's too late to cancel the trip. But why should she run from Bob again?

Back then she'd had no choice. By the end of that week, the story was all over town. Bob had spread it himself, in a farcical version that was very different from what Verna herself remembered. Slutty, drunken, willing Verna, what a joke. She'd been followed home from school by groups of leering boys, hooting and calling out to her. *Easy out! Can I have a ride? Candy's dandy but liquor's quicker!* Those were some of the milder slogans. She'd been shunned by girls, fearful that the disgrace – the ludicrous, hilarious smuttiness of it all – would rub off on them.

Then there was her mother. It hadn't taken long for the scandal to hit church circles. What little her mother had to say

through her clamp of a mouth was to the point: Verna had made her own bed, and now she would have to lie in it. No, she could not wallow in self-pity – she would just have to face the music, not that she would ever live it down, because one false step and you fell, that's how life was. When it was evident that the worst had happened, she bought Verna a bus ticket and shipped her off to a church-run Home for Unwed Mothers on the outskirts of Toronto.

There Verna spent the days peeling potatoes and scrubbing floors and scouring toilets along with her fellow delinquents. They wore grey maternity dresses and grey wool stockings and clunky brown shoes, all paid for by generous donations, they were informed. In addition to their scouring and peeling chores, they were treated to bouts of prayer and self-righteous hectoring. What had happened to them was justly deserved, the speeches went, because of their depraved behaviour, but it was never too late to redeem themselves through hard work and self-restraint. They were cautioned against alcohol, tobacco, and gum-chewing, and were told that they should consider it a miracle of God if any decent man ever wanted to marry them.

Verna's labour was long and difficult. The baby was taken away from her immediately so that she would not get attached to it. There was an infection, with complications and scarring, but it was all for the best, she overheard one brisk nurse telling another, because those sorts of girls made unfit mothers anyway. Once she could walk, Verna was given five dollars and a bus ticket and instructed to return to the guardianship of her mother, because she was still a minor.

But she could not face that – that or the town in general – so she headed for downtown Toronto. What was she thinking? No actual thoughts, only feelings: mournfulness, woe, and, finally, a spark of defiant anger. If she was as trashy and worthless as

everyone seemed to think, she might as well act that way, and, in between rounds of waitressing and hotel-room cleaning, she did.

It was only by great good luck that she stumbled upon an older married man who took an interest in her. She traded three years of noontime sex with him for the price of her education. A fair exchange, to her mind — she bore him no ill will. She learned a lot from him — how to walk in high heels being the least of it — and pulled herself up and out. Little by little she jettisoned the crushed image of Bob that she still carried like a dried flower — incredibly! — next to her heart.

She pats her face back into place and repairs her mascara, which has bled down her cheeks despite its waterproof claims. Courage, she tells herself. She will not be chased away, not this time. She'll tough it out; she's more than a match for five Bobs now. And she has the advantage, because Bob doesn't have a clue who she is. Does she really look that different? Yes, she does. She looks better. There's her silver-blond hair, and the various alterations, of course. But the real difference is in the attitude — the confident way she carries herself. It would be hard for Bob to see through that facade to the shy, mousy-haired, snivelling idiot she'd been at fourteen.

After adding a last film of powder, she rejoins the group and lines up at the buffet for roast beef and salmon. She won't eat much of it, but then she never does, not in public: a piggy, gobbling woman is not a creature of mysterious allure. She refrains from scanning the crowd to pinpoint Bob's position — he might wave to her, and she needs time to think — and selects a table at the far end of the room. But, presto, Bob is sliding in beside her without so much as a may-I-join-you. He assumes he's already pissed on this fire hydrant, she thinks. Spray-painted this

wall. Cut the head off this trophy and got his picture taken with his foot on the body. As he did once before, not that he realizes it. She smiles.

He's solicitous. Is Verna all right? Oh, yes, she replies. It's just that something went down the wrong way. Bob launches straight into the preliminaries. What does Verna do? Retired, she says, though she had a rewarding career as a physiotherapist, specializing in the rehabilitation of heart and stroke victims. "That must have been interesting," Bob says. Oh, yes, Verna says. So fulfilling to help people.

It had been more than interesting. Wealthy men recovering from life-threatening episodes had recognized the worth of an attractive younger woman with deft hands, an encouraging manner, and an intuitive knowledge of when to say nothing. Or, as her third husband put it in his Keatsian mode, heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter. There was something about the intimacy of the relationship — so physical — that led to other intimacies, though Verna had always stopped short of sex: it was a religious thing, she'd said. If no marriage proposal was forthcoming, she would extricate herself, citing her duty to patients who needed her more. That had forced the issue twice.

She'd chosen her acceptances with an eye to the medical condition involved, and once married she'd done her best to provide value for money. Each husband had departed not only happy but grateful, if a little sooner than might have been expected. But each had died of natural causes — a lethal recurrence of the heart attack or stroke that had hit him in the first place. All she'd done was give them tacit permission to satisfy every forbidden desire: to eat artery-clogging foods, to drink as much as they liked, to return to their golf games too soon. She'd refrained from commenting on the fact that, strictly speaking, they were being too zealously medicated. She'd

wondered about the dosages, she'd say later, but who was she to set her own opinion up against a doctor's?

And if a man happened to forget that he'd already taken his pills for that evening and found them neatly laid out in their usual place and took them again, wasn't that to be expected? Blood thinners could be so hazardous, in excess. You could bleed into your own brain.

Then there was sex: the terminator, the coup de grace. Verna herself had no interest in sex as such, but she knew what was likely to work. "You only live once," she'd been in the habit of saying, lifting a champagne glass during a candlelit supper and then setting out the Viagra, a revolutionary breakthrough but so troubling to the blood pressure. It was essential to call the paramedics in promptly, though not too promptly. "He was like this when I woke up" was an acceptable thing to say. So was "I heard a strange sound in the bathroom, and then when I went to look . . ."

She has no regrets. She did those men a favour: surely better a swift exit than a lingering decline.

With two of the husbands, there'd been difficulties with the grown-up children over the will. Verna had graciously said that she understood how they must feel. Then she'd paid them off, with more than was strictly fair considering the effort she'd put in. Her sense of justice has remained Presbyterian: she doesn't want much more than her due, but she doesn't want much less either. She likes balanced accounts.

Bob leans in towards her, sliding his arm along the back of her chair. Is her husband along for the cruise? he asks, closer to her ear than he should be, breathing in. No, she says, she is recently widowed – here she looks down at the table, hoping to convey muted grief – and this is a sort of healing voyage. Bob says he's very sorry to hear it, but what a coincidence, for his own

wife passed away just six months ago. It had been a blow – they'd been really looking forward to the golden years together. She'd been his college sweetheart – it was love at first sight. Does Verna believe in love at first sight? Yes, Verna says, she does.

Bob confides further: they'd waited until after his law degree to get married and then they'd had three kids, and now there are five grandkids; he's so proud of them all. If he shows me any baby pictures, Verna thinks, I'll hit him.

"It does leave an empty space, doesn't it?" Bob says. "A sort of blank." Verna admits that it does. Would Verna care to join Bob in a bottle of wine?

You crap artist, Verna thinks. So you went on to get married and have children and a normal life, just as if nothing ever happened. Whereas for me . . . She feels queasy.

"I'd love to," she says. "But let's wait until we're on the ship. That would be more leisurely." She gives him the eyelids again. "Now I'm off to my beauty sleep." She smiles, rises from the table.

"Oh, surely you don't need that," Bob says gallantly. The asshole actually pulls out her chair for her. He hadn't shown such fine manners back then. Nasty, brutish, and short, as her third husband had said, quoting Hobbes on the subject of natural man. Nowadays a girl would know to call the police. Nowadays Bob would go to jail no matter what lies he might tell, because Verna was underage. But there had been no true words for the act then: rape was what occurred when some maniac jumped on you out of a bush, not when your formal-dance date drove you to a side road in the mangy twice-cut forest surrounding a tin-pot mining town and told you to drink up like a good girl and then took you apart, layer by torn layer. To make it worse, Bob's best friend, Ken, had turned up in his own car to help out. The two of them had been laughing. They'd kept her panty-girdle as a souvenir.

Afterwards, Bob had pushed her out of the car halfway back, surly because she was crying. "Shut up or walk home," he'd said. She has a picture of herself limping along the icy roadside with her bare feet stuck in her dyed-to-match ice-blue heels, dizzy and raw and shivering and — a further ridiculous humiliation — hiccupping. What had concerned her most at that moment was her nylons — where were her nylons? She'd bought them with her own drugstore money. She must have been in shock.

Did she remember correctly? Had Bob stuck her panty girdle upside down on his head and danced about in the snow with the garter tabs flopping around like jester's bells?

Panty girdle, she thinks. How prehistoric. It, and all the long-gone archeology that went with it. Now a girl would be on the pill or have an abortion without a backward glance. How Paleolithic to still feel wounded by any of it.

It was Ken — not Bob — who'd come back for her, told her brusquely to get in, driven her home. He, at least, had had the grace to be shamefaced. "Don't say anything," he'd muttered. And she hadn't, but her silence had done her no good.

Why should she be the only one to have suffered for that night? She'd been stupid, granted, but Bob had been vicious. And he'd gone scot-free, without consequences or remorse, whereas her entire life had been distorted. The Verna of the day before had died, and a different Verna had solidified in her place: stunted, twisted, mangled. It was Bob who'd taught her that only the strong can win, that weakness should be mercilessly exploited. It was Bob who'd turned her into — why not say the word? — a murderer.

The next morning, during the chartered flight north to where the ship is floating on the Beaufort Sea, she considers her choices.

She could play Bob like a fish right up to the final moment, then leave him cold with his pants around his ankles: a satisfaction, but a minor one. She could avoid him throughout the trip and leave the equation where it's been for the past fifty-some years: unresolved. Or she could kill him. She contemplates this third option with theoretical calm. Just say, for instance, if she were to murder Bob, how might she do it during the cruise without getting caught? Her meds-and-sex formula would be far too slow and might not work anyway, since Bob did not appear to suffer from any ailments. Pushing him off the ship is not a viable option. Bob is too big, the railings are too high, and she knows from her previous trip that there will always be people on deck, enjoying the breathtaking views and taking pictures. A corpse in a cabin would attract police and set off a search for DNA and fabric hairs and so forth, as on television. No, she would have to arrange the death during one of the onshore visits. But how? Where? She consults the itinerary and the map of the proposed route. An Inuit settlement will not do: dogs will bark, children will follow. As for the other stops, the land they'll be visiting is bare of concealing features. Staff with guns will accompany them to protect against polar bears. Maybe an accident with one of the guns? For that she'd need split-second timing.

Whatever the method, she'd have to do it early in the voyage, before he had time to make any new friends — people who might notice he was missing. Also, the possibility that Bob will suddenly recognize her is ever present. And if that happens it will be game over. Meanwhile, it would be best not to be seen with him too much. Enough to keep his interest up, but not enough to start rumours of, for instance, a budding romance. On a cruise, word of mouth spreads like the flu.

Once on board the ship — it's the *Resolute II*, familiar to Verna from her last voyage — the passengers line up to deposit their passports at reception. Then they assemble in the forward lounge for a talk on procedure given by three of the discouragingly capable staff members. Every time they go ashore, the first one says with a severe Viking frown, they must turn their tags on the tag board from green to red. When they come back to the ship, they must turn their tags back to green. They must always wear life jackets for the Zodiac trips to shore; the life jackets are the new, thin kind that inflate once in water. They must deposit their life jackets on the shore when landing, in the white canvas bags provided, and put them back on when departing. If there are any tags unturned or any life jackets left in the bags, the staff will know that someone is still ashore. They do not want to be left behind, do they? And now a few housekeeping details. They will find laundry bags in their cabins. Bar bills will be charged to their accounts, and tips will be settled at the end. The ship runs on an open-door policy, to facilitate the work of the cleaning staff, but of course they can lock their rooms if they wish. There is a lost-and-found at reception. All clear? Good.

The second speaker is the archeologist, who, to Verna, looks about twelve. They will be visiting sites of many kinds, she says, including Independence 1, Dorset, and Thule, but they must never, never take anything. No artifacts, and especially no bones. Those bones might be human, and they must be very careful not to disturb them. But even animal bones are an important source of scarce calcium for ravens and lemmings and foxes and, well, the entire food chain, because the Arctic recycles everything. All clear? Good.

Now, says the third speaker, a fashionably bald individual who looks like a personal trainer, a word about the guns. Guns

are essential, because polar bears are fearless. But the staff will always fire into the air first, to scare the bear away. Shooting a bear is a last resort, but bears can be dangerous, and the safety of passengers is the first priority. There is no need to fear the guns: the bullets will be taken out during the Zodiac trips to and from shore, and it will not be possible for anyone to get shot. All clear? Good.

Clearly a gun accident won't do, Verna thinks. No passenger is going to get near those guns.

After lunch, there's a lecture on walruses. There are rumours of rogue walruses that prey on seals, puncturing them with their tusks, then sucking out the fat with their powerful mouths. The women on either side of Verna are knitting. One of them says, "Liposuction." The other laughs.

Once the talks are over, Verna goes out on deck. The sky is clear, with a flight of lenticular clouds hovering in it like spaceships; the air is warm; the sea is aqua. There's a classic iceberg on the port side, with a centre so blue it looks dyed, and ahead of them is a mirage — a fata morgana, towering like an ice castle on the horizon, completely real except for the faint shimmering at its edges. Sailors have been lured to their deaths by those; they've drawn mountains on maps where no mountains were.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Bob says, materializing at her side. "How about that bottle of wine tonight?"

"Stunning," Verna says, smiling. "Perhaps not tonight — I promised some of the girls." True enough — she's made a date with the knitting women.

"Maybe tomorrow?" Bob grins and shares the fact that he has a single cabin: "Number 222, like the painkiller," he quips, and it's comfortably amidship. "Hardly any rock and roll at all,"

he adds. Verna says that she, too, has a single: worth the extra expense, because that way you can really relax. She draws out "relax" until it sounds like a voluptuous writhe on satin sheets.

Glancing at the tag board while strolling around the ship after dinner, Verna notes Bob's tag — close enough to her own. Then she buys a pair of cheap gloves in the gift shop. She's read a lot of crime novels.

The next day starts with a talk on geology by an energetic young scientist who has been arousing some interest among the passengers, especially the female ones. By great good fortune, he tells them, and because of a change in itinerary owing to ice pack, they'll be making an unanticipated stop, where they'll be able to view a wonder of the geological world, a sight permitted to very few. They'll be privileged to see the world's earliest fossilized stromatolites, clocking in at an astonishing 1.9 billion years old — before fish, before dinosaurs, before mammals — the very first preserved form of life on this planet. What is a stromatolite? he asks rhetorically, his eyes gleaming. The word comes from the Greek *stroma*, a mattress, coupled with the root word for *stone*. Stone mattress: a fossilized cushion, formed by layer upon layer of blue-green algae building up into a mound or dome. It was this very same blue-green algae that created the oxygen they are now breathing. Isn't that astonishing?

A wizened, elf-like man at Verna's lunchtime table grumbles that he hopes they'll be seeing something more exciting than rocks. He's one of the other Bobs: Verna's been taking an inventory. An extra Bob may come in handy. "I'm looking forward to them," she says. "The stone mattresses." She gives the word *mattress* the tiniest hint of suggestiveness, and gets an

approving twinkle out of Bob the Second. Really, they're never too old to flirt.

Out on deck after coffee, she surveys the approaching land through her binoculars. It's autumn here: the leaves on the miniature trees that snake along the ground like vines are red and orange and yellow and purple, with rock surging out of them in waves and folds. There's a ridge, a higher ridge, then a higher one. It's on the second ridge that the best stromatolites are to be found, the geologist has told them.

Will someone who has slipped behind the third ridge be visible from the second one? Verna doesn't think so.

Now they're all stuffed into their waterproof pants and their rubber boots; now they're being zipped and buckled into their life jackets like oversized kindergarten kids; now they're turning their tags from green to red; now they're edging down the gangway and being whisked into the black inflatable Zodiacs. Bob has made it into Verna's Zodiac. He lifts his camera, snaps her picture.

Verna's heart is beating more rapidly. If he recognizes me spontaneously, I won't kill him, she thinks. If I tell him who I am and he recognizes me and then apologizes, I still won't kill him. That's two more escape chances than he gave her. It will mean forgoing the advantage of surprise, a move that could be hazardous — Bob is much bigger than she is — but she wishes to be more than fair.

They've landed and have shed their life jackets and rubber footwear and are lacing up their hiking boots. Verna strolls closer to Bob, notes that he hasn't bothered with the rubber boots. He's wearing a red baseball cap; as she watches, he turns it backward.

Now they're all scattering. Some stay by the shore; some

move up to the first ridge. The geologist is standing there with his hammer, a twittering cluster already gathered around him. He's in full lecture mode: they will please not take any of the stromatolites, but the ship has a sampling permit, so if anyone finds a particularly choice fragment, especially a cross-section, check with him first and they can put it on the rock table he'll set up on board, where everyone can see it. Here are some examples, for those who may not want to tackle the second ridge . . .

Heads go down; cameras come out. Perfect, Verna thinks. The more distraction the better. She feels without looking that Bob is close by. Now they're at the second ridge, which some are climbing more easily than others. Here are the best stromatolites, a whole field of them. There are unbroken ones, like bubbles or boils, small ones, ones as big as half a soccer ball. Some have lost their tops, like eggs in the process of hatching. Still others have been ground down, so that all that's left of them is a series of raised concentric oblongs, like a cinnamon bun or the growth rings on a tree.

And here's one shattered into four, like a Dutch cheese sliced into wedges. Verna picks up one of the quarters, examines the layers, each year black, grey, black, grey, black, and at the bottom the featureless core. The piece is heavy, and sharp at the edges. Verna lifts it into her backpack.

Here comes Bob as if on cue, lumbering slowly as a zombie up the hill towards her. He's taken off his outer jacket, tucked it under his backpack straps. He's out of breath. She has a moment of compunction: he's over the hill; frailty is gaining on him. Shouldn't she let bygones be bygones? Boys will be boys. Aren't they all just hormone puppets at that age? Why should any human being be judged by something that was done in another time, so long ago it might be centuries?

A raven flies overhead, circles around. Can it tell? Is it waiting? She looks down through its eyes, sees an old woman — because, face it, she is an old woman now, — on the verge of murdering an even older man because of an anger already fading into the distance of used-up time. It's paltry. It's vicious. It's normal. It's what happens in life.

"Great day," Bob says. "It's good to have a chance to stretch your legs."

"Isn't it?" Verna says. She moves towards the far side of the second ridge. "Maybe there's something better over there. But weren't we told not to go that far? Out of sight?"

Bob gives a rules-are-for-peasants laugh. "We're paying for this," he says. He actually takes the lead, not up the third ridge but around behind it. Out of sight is where he wants to be.

The gun-bearer on the second ridge is yelling at some people straying off to the left. He has his back turned. A few more steps and Verna glances over her shoulder: she can't see anyone, which means that no one can see her. They squelch over a patch of boggy ground. She takes her thin gloves out of her pocket, slips them on. Now they're at the far side of the third ridge, at the sloping base.

"Come over here," Bob says, patting the rock. His backpack is beside him. "I brought us a few drinks." All around him is a tattered gauze of black lichen.

"Terrific," Verna says. She sits down, unzips her backpack. "Look," she says. "I found a perfect specimen." She turns, positioning the stromatolite between them, supporting it with both hands. She takes a breath. "I think we've known each other before," she says. "I'm Verna Pritchard. From high school."

Bob doesn't miss a beat. "I thought there was something familiar about you," he says. He's actually smirking.

She remembers that smirk. She has a vivid picture of Bob capering triumphantly in the snow, sniggering like a ten-year-old. Herself wrecked and crumpled.

She knows better than to swing widely. She brings the stromatolite up hard, a short sharp jab right underneath Bob's lower jaw. There's a crunch, the only sound. His head snaps back. Now he's sprawled on the rock. She holds the stromatolite over his forehead, lets it drop. Again. Once again. There. That seems to have done it.

Bob looks ridiculous, with his eyes open and fixed and his forehead mashed in and blood running down both sides of his face. "You're a mess," she says. He looks laughable, so she laughs. As she suspected, the front teeth are implants.

She takes a moment to steady her breathing. Then she retrieves the stromatolite, being careful not to let any of the blood touch her or even her gloves, and slides it into a pool of bog water. Bob's baseball cap has fallen off; she stuffs it into her pack, along with his jacket. She empties out his backpack: nothing in there but the camera, a pair of woollen mitts, a scarf, and six miniature bottles of Scotch. How pathetically hopeful of him. She rolls the pack up, stuffs it inside her own, adds the camera, which she'll toss into the sea later. Then she dries the stromatolite off on the scarf, checking to make sure there's no visible blood, and stows it in her pack. She leaves Bob to the ravens and the lemmings and the rest of the food chain.

Then she hikes back around the base of the third ridge, adjusting her jacket. Anyone looking will assume she's just been having a pee. People do sneak off like that, on shore visits. But no one is looking.

She finds the young geologist — he's still on the second

ridge, along with his coterie of admirers — and produces the stromatolite.

"May I take it back to the ship?" she asks sweetly. "For the rock table?"

"Fantastic sample!" he says.

Travellers are making their way shoreward, back to the Zodiacs. When she reaches the bags with the life jackets, Verna fumbles with her shoelaces until all eyes are elsewhere and she can cram an extra life jacket into her backpack. The pack is a lot bulkier than it was when she left the ship, but it would be odd if anyone noticed that.

Once up the gangway, she diddles around with her pack until everyone else has moved past the tag board, then flips Bob's tag from red to green. And her own tag too, of course.

On the way to her cabin she waits till the corridor is clear, then slips through Bob's unlocked door. The room key is on the dresser; she leaves it there. She hangs up the life jacket and Bob's waterproof and baseball cap, runs some water in the sink, messes up a towel. Then she goes to her own cabin along the still-empty corridor, takes off her gloves, washes them, and hangs them up to dry. She's broken a nail, worse luck, but she can repair that. She checks her face: a touch of sunburn, but nothing serious. For dinner, she dresses in pink and makes an effort to flirt with Bob the Second, who gamely returns her serves but is surely too decrepit to be a serious prospect. Just as well — her adrenaline level is plummeting. If there are northern lights, they've been told, there will be an announcement, but Verna doesn't intend to get up for them.

So far she's in the clear. All she has to do now is maintain the mirage of Bob, faithfully turning his tag from green to red, from red to green. He'll move objects around in his cabin, wear different items from his beige-and-plaid wardrobe, sleep in his

bed, take showers, leaving the towels on the floor. He will receive a first-name-only invitation to have dinner at a staff table, which will then quietly appear under the door of one of the other Bobs, and no one will spot the substitution. He will brush his teeth. He will adjust his alarm clock. He will send in laundry, without, however, filling out the slip: that would be too risky. The cleaning staff won't care — a lot of older people forget to fill out their laundry slips.

The stromatolite will sit on the geological samples table and will be picked up and examined and discussed, acquiring many fingerprints. At the end of the trip it will be jettisoned. The *Resolute II* will travel for fourteen days; it will stop for shore visits eighteen times. It will sail past ice caps and sheer cliffs, and mountains of gold and copper and ebony black and silver grey; it will glide through pack ice; it will anchor off long, implacable beaches and explore fjords gouged by glaciers over millions of years. In the midst of such rigorous and demanding splendour, who will remember Bob?

There will be a moment of truth at the end of the voyage, when Bob will not appear to pay his bill and pick up his passport; nor will he pack his bags. There will be a flurry of concern, followed by a staff meeting — behind closed doors, so as not to alarm the passengers. Ultimately, there will be a news item: Bob, tragically, must have fallen off the ship on the last night of the voyage while leaning over to get a better camera angle on the northern lights. No other explanation is possible.

Meanwhile, the passengers will have scattered to the winds, Verna among them. If, that is, she pulls it off. Will she or won't she? She ought to care more about that — she ought to find it an exciting challenge — but right now she just feels tired and somewhat empty.

Though at peace, though safe. Calm of mind all passion spent, as her third husband used to say so annoyingly after his Viagra sessions. Those Victorians always coupled sex with death. Who was that poet anyway? Keats? Tennyson? Her memory isn't what it was. But the details will come back to her later.