



Surfacing

Margaret Atwood

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One

Chapter One

I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have sea-planes for hire. But this is still near the city limits; we didn't go through, it's swelled enough to have a bypass, that's success.

I never thought of it as a city but as the last or first outpost depending on which way we were going, an accumulation of sheds and boxes and one main street with a movie theatre, the itz, the oyal, red R burnt out, and two restaurants which served identical grey hamburger steaks plastered with mud gravy and canned peas, watery and pallid as fisheyes, and french fries bleary with lard. Order a poached egg, my mother said, you can tell if it's fresh by the edges.

In one of those restaurants before I was born my brother got under the table and slid his hands up and down the waitress's legs while she was bringing the food; it was during the war and she had on shiny orange rayon stockings, he'd never seen them before, my mother didn't wear them. A different year there we ran through the snow across the sidewalk in our bare feet because we had no shoes, they'd worn out during the summer. In the car that time we sat with our feet wrapped in blankets, pretending we were wounded. My brother said the Germans shot our feet off.

Now though I'm in another car, David's and Anna's; it's sharp-finned and striped with chrome, a lumbering monster left over from ten years ago, he has to reach under the instrument panel to turn on the lights. David says they can't afford a newer one, which probably isn't true. He's a good driver, I realize that, I keep my outside hand on the door in spite of it. To brace myself and so I can get out quickly if I have to. I've driven in the same car with them before but on this road it doesn't seem right, either the three of them are in the wrong place or I am.

I'm in the back seat with the packsacks; this one, Joe, is sitting beside me chewing gum and holding my hand, they both pass the time. I examine the hand: the palm is broad, the short fingers tighten and relax, fiddling with my gold ring, turning it, it's a reflex of his. He has peasant hands, I have peasant feet, Anna told us that. Everyone now can do a little magic, she reads hands at parties, she says it's a substitute for conversation. When she did mine she said "Do you have a twin?" I said No. "Are you positive," she said, "because some of your lines are double." Her index finger traced me: "You had a good childhood but then there's this funny break." She puckered her forehead

and I said I just wanted to know how long I was going to live, she could skip the rest. After that she told us Joe's hands were dependable but not sensitive and I laughed, which was a mistake.

From the side he's like the buffalo on the U.S. nickel, shaggy and blunt-snouted, with small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction. That's how he thinks of himself too: deposed, unjustly. Secretly he would like them to set up a kind of park for him, like a bird sanctuary. Beautiful Joe.

He feels me watching him and lets go of my hand. Then he takes his gum out, bundling it in the silver wrapper, and sticks it in the ashtray and crosses his arms. That means I'm not supposed to observe him; I face front.

In the first few hours of driving we moved through flattened cow-sprinkled hills and leaf trees and dead elm skeletons, then into the needle trees and the cuttings dynamited in pink and grey granite and the flimsy tourist cabins, and the signs saying GATEWAY TO THE NORTH, at least four towns claim to be that. The future is in the North, that was a political slogan once; when my father heard it he said there was nothing in the North but the past and not much of that either. Wherever he is now, dead or alive and nobody knows which, he's no longer making epigrams. They have no right to get old. I envy people whose parents died when they were young, that's easier to remember, they stay unchanged. I was sure mine would anyway, I could leave and return much later and everything would be the same. I thought of them as living in some other time, going about their own concerns closed safe behind a wall as translucent as jello, mammoths frozen in a glacier. All I would have to do was come back when I was ready but I kept putting it off, there would be too many explanations.

Now we're passing the turnoff to the pit the Americans hollowed out. From here it looks like an innocent hill, spruce-covered, but the thick power lines running into the forest give it away. I heard they'd left, maybe that was a ruse, they could easily still be living in there, the generals in concrete bunkers and the ordinary soldiers in underground apartment buildings where the lights burn all the time. There's no way of checking because we aren't allowed in. The city invited them to stay, they were good for business, they drank a lot.

"That's where the rockets are," I say. _Were._ I don't correct it.

David says "Bloody fascist pig Yanks," as though he's commenting on the weather.

Anna says nothing. Her head rests on the back of the seat, the ends of her light

hair whipping in the draft from the side window that won't close properly. Earlier she was singing, House of the Rising Sun and Lili Marlene, both of them several times, trying to make her voice go throaty and deep; but it came out like a hoarse child's. David turned on the radio, he couldn't get anything, we were between stations. When she was in the middle of St. Louis Blues he began to whistle and she stopped. She's my best friend, my best woman friend; I've known her two months.

I lean forward and say to David, "The bottle house is around this next curve and to the left," and he nods and slows the car. I told them about it earlier, I guessed it was the kind of object that would interest them. They're making a movie, Joe is doing the camera work, he's never done it before but David says they're the new Renaissance Men, you teach yourself what you need to learn. It was mostly David's idea, he calls himself the director: they already have the credits worked out. He wants to get shots of things they come across, random samples he calls them, and that will be the name of the movie too: Random Samples. When they've used up their supply of film (which was all they could afford; and the camera is rented) they're going to look at what they've collected and rearrange it.

"How can you tell what to put in if you don't already know what it's about?" I asked David when he was describing it. He gave me one of his initiate-to-novice stares. "If you close your mind in advance like that you wreck it. What you need is flow." Anna, over by the stove measuring out the coffee, said everyone she knew was making a movie, and David said that was no fucking reason why he shouldn't. She said "You're right, sorry"; but she laughs about it behind his back, she calls it Random Pimples.

The bottle house is built of pop bottles cemented together with the bottoms facing out, green ones and brown ones in zig-zag patterns like the ones they taught us in school to draw on teepees; there's a wall around it made of bottles too, arranged in letters so the brown ones spell BOTTLE VILLA.

"Neat," David says, and they get out of the car with the camera. Anna and I climb out after them; we stretch our arms, and Anna has a cigarette. She's wearing a purple tunic and white bellbottoms, they have a smear on them already, grease from the car. I told her she should wear jeans or something but she said she looks fat in them.

"Who made it, Christ, think of the work," she says, but I don't know anything about it except that it's been there forever, the tangled black spruce swamp around it making it even more unlikely, a preposterous monument to some quirkish person exiled or perhaps a voluntary recluse like my father, choosing this swamp because it was the only place where he could fulfill his lifelong dream of living in a house of bottles. Inside the wall is an attempted lawn and a border with orange mattress-tuft marigolds.

"Great," says David, "really neat," and he puts his arm around Anna and hugs her briefly to show he's pleased, as though she is somehow responsible for the Bottle Villa herself. We get back in the car.

I watch the side windows as though it's a T.V. screen. There's nothing I can remember till we reach the border, marked by the sign that says BIENVENUE on one side and WELCOME on the other. The sign has bullet holes in it, rusting red around the edges. It always did, in the fall the hunters use it for target practice; no matter how many times they replace it or paint it the bullet holes reappear, as though they aren't put there but grow by a kind of inner logic or infection, like mould or boils. Joe wants to film the sign but David says "Naaa, what for?"

Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory. My throat constricts, as it learned to do when I discovered people could say words that would go into my ears meaning nothing. To be deaf and dumb would be easier. The cards they poke at you when they want a quarter, with the hand alphabet on them. Even so, you would need to learn spelling.

The first smell is the mill, sawdust, there are mounds of it in the yard with the stacked timber slabs. The pulpwood goes elsewhere to the paper mill, but the bigger logs are corralled in a boom on the river, a ring of logs chained together with the free ones nudging each other inside it; they travel to the saws in a clanking overhead chute, that hasn't been changed. The car goes under it and we're curving up into the tiny company town, neatly planned with public flowerbeds and an eighteenth century fountain in the middle, stone dolphins and a cherub with part of the face missing. It looks like an imitation but it may be real.

Anna says "Oh wow, what a great fountain."

"The company built the whole thing," I say, and David says "Rotten capitalist bastards" and begins to whistle again.

I tell him to turn right and he does. The road ought to be here, but instead there's a battered chequerboard, the way is blocked.

"Now what," says David.

We didn't bring a map because I knew we wouldn't need one. "I'll have to ask," I say, so he backs the car out and we drive along the main street till we come to a corner store, magazines and candy.

"You must mean the old road," the woman says with only a trace of an accent. "It's been closed for years, what you need is the new one." I buy four vanilla cones because

you aren't supposed to ask without buying anything. She gouges down into the cardboard barrel with a metal scoop. Before, the ice cream came rolled in pieces of paper which they would peel off like bark, pressing the short logs of ice cream into the cones with their thumbs. Those must be obsolete.

I go back to the car and tell David the directions. Joe says he likes chocolate better.

Nothing is the same, I don't know the way any more. I slide my tongue around the ice cream, trying to concentrate on it, they put seaweed in it now, but I'm starting to shake, why is the road different, he shouldn't have allowed them to do it, I want to turn around and go back to the city and never find out what happened to him. I'll start crying, that would be horrible, none of them would know what to do and neither would I. I bite down into the cone and I can't feel anything for a minute but the knife-hard pain up the side of my face.

Anaesthesia, that's one technique: if it hurts invent a different pain. I'm all right.

David finishes his cone, tossing the carton-flavoured tip out the window, and starts the car. We go through a part that's spread out from the town since I was here, freshly built square bungalows like city ones except for the pink and baby blue trim, and a few oblong shacks further along, tar-paper and bare boards. A clutch of children playing in the wet mud that substitutes for lawns; most of them are dressed in clothes too big for them, which makes them seem stunted.

"They must fuck a lot here," Anna says, "I guess it's the Church." Then she says "Aren't I awful."

David says "The true north strong and free."

Beyond the houses, two older children, darkfaced, hold out tin cans toward the car. Raspberries perhaps.

We come to the gas station where the woman said to turn left and David groans with joy, "Oh god look at that," and they pile out as though it will escape if they aren't quick enough. What they're after is the three stuffed moose on a platform near the pumps: they're dressed in human clothes and wired standing up on their hind legs, a father moose with a trench-coat and a pipe in his mouth, a mother moose in a print dress and flowered hat and a little boy moose in short pants, a striped jersey and a baseball cap, waving an American flag.

Anna and I follow. I go up behind David and say "Don't you need some gas," he shouldn't use the moose without paying, like the washrooms they're here to attract

customers.

"Oh look," Anna says, hand going to her mouth, "there's another one on the roof," and there is, a little girl moose in a frilly skirt and a pigtailed blonde wig, holding a red parasol in one hoof. They get her too. The owner of the gas station is standing behind his plateglass show-window in his undershirt, scowling at us through the film of dust.

When we're back in the car I say as though defending myself, "Those weren't here before." Anna's head swivels round, my voice must sound odd.

"Before what?" she says.

The new road is paved and straight, two lanes with a line down the middle. Already it's beginning to gather landmarks, a few advertisement signs, a roadside crucifix with a wooden Christ, ribs sticking out, the alien god, mysterious to me as ever. Underneath it are a couple of jam jars with flowers, daisies and red devil's paintbrush and the white ones you can dry, Indian Posies, Everlasting, there must have been a car accident.

At intervals the old road crosses us; it was dirt, full of bumps and potholes, it followed the way the land went, up and down the hills and around the cliffs and boulders. They used to go over it as fast as possible, their father knew every inch of it and could take it (he said) blindfolded, which was what they often seemed to be doing, grinding up past the signs that said PETITE VITESSE and plunging down over the elevator edges and scraping around the rockfaces, GARDEZ LE DROIT, horn hooting; the rest of them clamped onto the inside of the car, getting sicker and sicker despite the Lifesavers their mother would hand out, and finally throwing up groggily by the side of the road, blue asters and pink fireweed, if he could stop in time or out the car window if he couldn't or into paper bags, he anticipated emergencies, if he was in a hurry and didn't want to stop at all.

That won't work, I can't call them "they" as if they were somebody else's family: I have to keep myself from telling that story. Still though, seeing the old road billowing along at a distance through the trees (ruts and traces already blurring with grass and saplings, soon it will be gone) makes me reach into my bag for the Lifesavers I brought. But they aren't needed any more, even though the new road turns from pavement into gravel ("Must've elected the wrong guy last time around," David says jokingly) and the familiar smell of road dust fuming behind and around us mixes with the gas-and-upholstery smell of the car.

"Thought you said this would be bad," David says over his shoulder, "it's not bad at all." We're nearly to the village already, the two roads joining here but widened--rock

blasted, trees bulldozed over, roots in the air, needles reddening--past the flat cliff where the election slogans are painted and painted over, some faded and defaced, others fresh yellow and white, VOTEZ GODET, VOTEZ OBRIEN, along with hearts and initials and words and advertisements, THE SALADA, BLUE MOON COTTAGES 1/2 MILE, QUEBÉC LIBRE, FUCK YOU, BUVEZ COCA COLA GLACÉ, JESUS SAVES, melange of demands and languages, an x-ray of it would be the district's entire history.

But they've cheated, we're here too soon and I feel deprived of something, as though I can't really get here unless I've suffered; as though the first view of the lake, which we can see now, blue and cool as redemption, should be through tears and a haze of vomit.

Chapter Two

We slur down the last hill, gravel ping-ponging off the underside of the car, and suddenly there's a thing that isn't supposed to be here, MOTEL, BAR BIÈRE BEER the sign reads, neon even, someone is trying; but to no avail, there aren't any cars parked outside and the VACANCY notice is up. The building is like any other cheap motel, long grey stucco with aluminum doors; the earth around it is still chunky and raw, not yet overgrown with the road weeds.

"Let's pick up a few," David says, to Joe; he's already swerved the car.

We head towards the door but then I stop, it's the best place to leave them, and say "You go in and have a beer or something, I'll be back in about half an hour."

"Right," David says. He knows what to avoid.

"Want me to come?" Joe offers, but when I say No relief gleams through his beard. The three of them disappear through the screen door of the bar and I walk the rest of the way down the hill.

I like them, I trust them, I can't think of anyone else I like better, but right now I wish they weren't here. Though they're necessary: David's and Anna's car was the only way I could make it, there's no bus and no train and I never hitch. They're doing me a

favour, which they disguised by saying it would be fun, they like to travel. But my reason for being here embarrasses them, they don't understand it. They all disowned their parents long ago, the way you are supposed to: Joe never mentions his mother and father, Anna says hers were nothing people and David calls his The Pigs.

There was a covered bridge here once, but it was too far north to be quaint. They tore it down three years before I left, to improve the dam, and replaced it with the concrete bridge which is here now, enormous, monumental, dwarfing the village. It's the dam that controls the lake: sixty years ago they raised the lake level so that whenever they wanted to flush the logs down the narrow outflow river to the mill they would have enough water power. But they don't do much logging here any more. A few men work on railway maintenance, one freight train a day; a couple of families run the stores, the small one where they used to speak English, the other where they wouldn't. The rest process the tourists, businessmen in plaid shirts still creased from the cellophane packages, and wives, if they come, who sit in two's on the screened blackfly-proof porches of the single-room cabins and complain to each other while the men play at fishing.

I pause to lean over the railing on the river side. The floodgates are open, the froth-coloured and brown rapids topple over the rocks, the sound rushes. The sound is one of the first things I remember, that was what warned them. It was night, I was lying in the bottom of the canoe; they had started out from the village but a heavy fog had risen, so thick they could hardly see the water. They found the shoreline and followed it along; it was dead silent, they could hear what they thought was the howling of wolves, muffled by forest and mist, it meant they had taken the right direction. Then there was the pouring noise of the rapids and they saw where they were, just as the current caught them. They were going backwards, the howling was the village dogs. If the canoe had tipped over we would have been killed, but they were calm, they didn't act like danger; what stayed in my head was only the mist whiteness, the hush of moving water and the rocking motion, total safety.

Anna was right, I had a good childhood; it was in the middle of the war, flecked grey newsreels I never saw, bombs and concentration camps, the leaders roaring at the crowds from inside their uniforms, pain and useless death, flags rippling in time to the anthems. But I didn't know about that till later, when my brother found out and told me. At the time it felt like peace.

Now I'm in the village, walking through it, waiting for the nostalgia to hit, for the cluster of nondescript buildings to be irradiated with inner light like a plug-in crêche, as it has been so often in memory; but nothing happens. It hasn't gotten any bigger, these days the children probably move to the city. The same two-storey frame houses with nasturtiums on the windowsills and squared roof-corners, motley lines of washing