

blows through the city; touch down in Toronto, New York, wherever. That's where they are. The wife left to marry a dentist. The youngest is with her. One child settled in Toronto. Another, an actor, is in New York. Maude has never met any of them. She just hears their voices when they call, and she's seen photographs of children posing in a park.

Bob never speaks about his children. Once he said he should have stayed a bachelor.

Montreal's an old whore, Arnold says. A speck of nut flies from his lip onto the table. A warm old whore that everyone loves. No matter who runs her she'll always be the same.

What would you know about whores? Bob says, laughing.

Maude breathes. Her breasts shift slightly, heavy on her chest. She has never felt so full. She thinks of seed pods, milkweed pushing to burst. Brown husks with white spidery fibres inside. Silk hiding seed, exploding silently in fields. She wants to see it grow, this fullness in her belly.

The city runs itself, Arnold says, and wipes froth from his fine lip hairs. Has for years, he continues. Men just like to flatter

themselves they have a say.

Maude's eyes meet Arnold's. His words are wise. Too bad about his looks.

Take this so-called new government, Arnold says. New men with so-called new ideas. Just watch and see in ten years if anything has changed.

But things do change! Maude thinks. They do. She never would have thought she'd feel it so strongly. Before, when she was young, she'd loved carelessly; so many men. And once before, when she was twenty, this thing had happened. It had been in summer with that boy German. When she'd told him he had cried and cried, spilling tears. She'd had to hold him one entire night. She'd been strong then and determined. Then it was nothing. She hadn't wanted it. Simple as burning off a wart.

Hey, Bob says to her. You still there? You still with us? Maude nods and stares at her black lap.

She is thirty-three now. Thirteen years since the last time. Unlucky. Strange how this would pain her. She could feel it already. Like ripping out part of herself. Killing herself. Bob wouldn't cry. No. He wouldn't even want to know.

The sun is dropping. Long shadows fall

across the street, striping it in black. A mess of bottles clutters the table. Saucers spill ash and broken butts. Bob tries to light a cigarette in the wind. Fails.

Jeez, Bob says. Can't even light a goddamn cigarette. He is drunk. It's late, he says. Let's go. He puts dollars under a saucer and Arnold slips a large bill under a glass. They get up unsteadily and navigate through the tables, Bob clutching at the backs of chairs. Maude follows him. He is an athletic man and by the time they reach the street, is walking fine.

Hey you, Bob says, slipping his arm around her shoulders. You're a beauty when you're glum. Arnold looks away. They walk up the middle of a deserted street, three abreast, little Maude all in black flanked by two tall, white-haired men.

At the traffic light they stop. All three together, as if choreographed. There are no cars, but they are creatures of the city, creatures of habit. Maude looks down into a sewer. In the garbage and the leaves a fleck of red catches her eye. It is a poppy stuck in the grating; its pin and black centre fallen off, lying there, scarlet, bright as blood.

The Ride

A Short Story by Chris Wind

Dear Sister—

How I wish it was you lived closer to Coventry! It has been less than a fortnight since our last visit, but so much has happened — that I must tell you — Do you remember that discussion we had, prompted by my journey through Mercia?

Well, as soon as I returned, I talked to Leofric about the absolute necessity — moral *and* economic — of lowering the taxes. I described to him everything I had seen just as I described it to you: the bordars and cottars living in poverty on their little piece of land, in their thatched wooden huts without any comforts; their meagre clothing, that we are a country of wool producers and traders, boasting the finest weavers guild, and yet the people of the land are so poorly clothed; and their



food, only vegetables, many can not even have meat for a Sunday feast (feast! they do not know the word), not even a piece of wheatbread.

And Leofric said well why do they not come and ask if they need their taxes lowered? If the tax is too high, they would say something — and they have not. But I said, the bondmen are not allowed to leave the farms; and the freemen will not leave their families alone — and even if they would, they have no way of getting here. And they can not send a letter, you know they can not read or write, so how are they to 'come and ask'?

But he was deaf to my pleas. He likes being rich — he likes his meat and wheatbread, and his very fine mead, his furs, and his embroidered robes set with jewels. Leofric, I said, have you no charity? You talk of opening a Benedictine monastery, are you not a Christian, are you not bound by mercy, compassion, generosity — justice, for God's sake, Leofric! You're the Lord of Coventry, the Earl of Mercia — *you* are responsible for these people!

I swear sister, I would leave, but for the children — I can not think of them left to his ways, but if I were to take them with me — you know I would barely survive myself alone — with the children too, what could I do? — I can not read or write much, women receive so little education, even in the monasteries — I am dependent on him, it is true: I am no different from the peasants I speak for.

Though some are. Do you remember Ethelfled? From 911 to 918 she gave Mercia good and conscientious governance, she built cities, she planned battles, and captured Derby, Leicester, and York from the Danes. But it is true, she was regent and queen, not an earl's wife. And an earl's wife is not listened to. At least not in *this* court — I have heard that some consult their wives about public policy, but not Leofric — he simply will not or can not attend to reason.

Nor to emotion. I told him of that one family — You remember, the woman with seven children, three still little and another one on the way, and her husband lame from an attack by wolves a year ago, and her two brothers killed in the last battle there have been so many lately — so she must work in the fields herself if her children are to be fed, she is almost dead with exhaustion, the neighbours try to

help but they are so overburdened themselves. I cried, I pleaded, Gawaina, I begged! But no. Leofric ordered me out of his room. I felt so — so powerless!

So then I went to those who had power. I know which advisors he listens to. I spoke with them plainly and directly — but they paid no attention. (Well, except one — and you would be surprised which one — he said he would speak to Leofric if I — but I refused of course!) Next I went to their wives — but those with influence did not want to risk losing it for mere peasants and those without did not want to anger their husbands.

Gawaina, I then dressed like a proper little wench and snuck into the mead-hall one night — I thought if I could explain when they were drunk, maybe they would — But I am not as young and fair as I once was, and I was soon discovered. Leofric was enraged! There he was, shining in his power, glory, and virility, with two or three child-playthings (where do these women come from?) and suddenly his fat old ugly wife is hoisted onto the table in front of him. I felt so embarrassed — But I explained my presence, and asked him again to please lower the taxes. Well all those merry red-faced drunkards thought the spectacle quite delightful — coarse rude brutes! When the laughter died, Leofric said with great solemnity, "I will." Well I was so glad — but then he added "if you ride naked through the marketplace at noon." Well again the hall broke into laughter and there was much toasting to that. To save any dignity I had left, I looked at my husband straight when the laughter stopped and said "I will." In silence then, I clambered off the table (not a one would help me — and they think themselves so chivalrous!) — and I walked out.

When I got to my chamber, I fully realized what I had said — ride through the town naked! How could I? I am a God-fearing Christian, I can not show myself in public — only a pagan wench could do that! But if the taxes would be lowered — I prayed to God — Maybe I could —

But no, I could not. I knew why he challenged me in that way — he does not like me, that my body is not young and beautiful. And he is right. I can not go naked through the town. With all the children I have had, since marriage at fifteen, to provide him with heirs — I am indeed a frightful sight. It is good, these fashions,

no one need know how ugly I have become — but he knows — and he wants to make a fool of me. And if I ride, he will. (Especially if he does not live to his word. Maybe he was too drunk to even know what he said. And I will be twice the fool to take him seriously.)

As I was in my chamber, mother heard me weeping and praying — she came and asked what was troubling me. Well, I told her and after, she said the most beautiful thing. She said Godgifu, your body *is* beautiful if you can use it in that way, to ease the burden of all of Mercia, to give the people a good life — to use your body for such a noble purpose is to *make* that body beautiful, my child. She then said, with a smile, that Leofric would never have the strength — the men, she said, they speak of courage and glory, but there is not a one among them who would not feel naked without his *armour*, can you think of him in public without his *clothes*? And God will *bless* your body, Godgifu, it is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

And I saw she was right — she is very wise, our mother. (She offered to ride along with me, naked too!) I know he is trying to trick me, to force me to use my body as women have always had to, never to use their minds. But it is good to use my body in this way. In this way I use my body to serve my mind.

When I first decided, I hoped no one would look — but now I have changed my mind. Sister, I hope everyone looks and sees this beautiful noble body — I may even put up my hair. A body is not ugly that has borne children, a body is not ugly that displays for justice — no matter how it looks.

So, dear sister, ask God's forgiveness for me, wish me luck, and pray the brute lives to his word — for tomorrow, I ride!

— Godiva

