

From *The Malahat Review*, Summer 1995, also *The Journey Prize Anthology*, 1996 and *The Dream King*

Monster Gaps

In the eyes of his parents Dearborn lived in a foreign country and it made him feel like an alien. How on earth would he tell them about Helen? He thought of himself as dutiful -- he phoned every Sunday and between his mother and himself there were even occasional letters - - but there was always reproach. Why had he left his home town? Dearborn said this was life in the Twentieth Century. People left towns and the countryside and moved to cities. People were in motion, not only in Ontario -- he had only moved 170 miles, after all; they ought to put the matter in perspective -- but across the globe. There was greed, fear, hatred, starvation. Immense economic and demographic forces were at work. Dearborn knew these things. He did specialized market research to earn his living.

That was another thing. "What is it you do, dear?" his mother would say. "People ask -- your Aunt Adelle, friends -- and I'm never able to explain. Not advertising, I know that. But something. What exactly? What do you *do*?"

His father had been a bank manager as had his father before him.

They were arriving that afternoon, staying three or four days. Dearborn had the details before him -- his mother's clear handwriting on blue letterhead with a line drawing of the house where both he and his father had been raised. His grandmother had moved next door; his mother visited her every day until she died. His parents' lives made Dearborn feel insubstantial, like the floating cotton from the big trees that grew by the stream at the end of lawn.

They were coming to visit the children, his mother wrote. They thought it would be a help. They didn't know that the difficulty, as his mother always called it, was long over, had all been settled, really, the first year of the marriage.

And his father would visit doctors. He was being watched. For diabetes. For the arthritis that interfered with his walks. He drank too much. ("Eight ounces a day, I said to the doctor!" he'd told Dearborn the last time he was in the city, his eyes bright.) His heart. And the thing they avoided; his spells, his mother called it.

"Stupid!" Roxanne shouted. Dearborn looked up from his mother's letter, working the gap in his teeth with his tongue. "Careless girl!" Roxanne shouted. It was an expression of Anne's. (Dearborn used to admonish Anne: "Don't speak to the children like that. They'll pick it up.")

"Girls," he yelled "stop yelling."

("The reason they're always yelling," Anne would tell him, "is because you're always yelling. You should listen to yourself sometime.")

"We're not fighting," Roxanne yelled back from the living room. She was the older one, almost six. Jasmine was three and a half, liked to be called Dopey, like Snow White's dwarf. Jasmine and Roxanne.

"What kind of a name is Jasmine," Dearborn's mother had asked. "Are there Arabs somewhere back in our family? Am I missing something?"

Roxanne and Jasmine. Anne's choice. Dearborn would have named them Mary and Susan. One of the decisions over which he had not exercised his veto. The latest thing was that Anne wanted one of the girls. She said what difference did it make splitting them apart, since they were adopted anyway. He said this was creepy, and it was crazy; they were supposed to be a family.

"But we aren't a family any more," said Anne. "You and that teenager."

"She's not a teenager," he'd told her. "And you started it." Almost true, Dearborn reflected. We order events according to our own mythologies.

Roxanne, walking around, now with one of the fat lamps in her arms: "It's alright, Sarah," she said to the lamp, "I'm here. Daddy's here."

"What are you playing?" Dearborn asked her.

"Big sister. This is the baby. Her name's Sarah."

"I told you, don't play with the lamps. Use a doll, the cat, something. You drop this lamp, you'll cut yourself."

"Is it made of china?"

"It's made of china. You know that," said Dearborn.

"It's precious, right?"

"Precious. Very precious, but not as precious as you." It was a discussion they'd had before. "Plus you could electrocute yourself pulling the plug."

Dearborn took the lamp and put it back on the table. He handed her one of the dolls from the armchair. But she'd already picked up the bookends, budgies in white marble. "It's alright, Sarah, don't cry," she said to one of the bookends. "Do you want to go to sleep? It's alright, you go to sleep. I'll be right here in the next room. I'll wear my big shoes, so you'll be able to hear me walking."

There was a note from the senior kindergarten teacher attached to the refrigerator door with a Pizza Hut magnet: Would the Dearborns please make a *special* effort to come on Monday? They wanted to talk about Roxanne.

Roxanne came into the kitchen. "Daddy, are you going to marry Helen?"

Dearborn shrugged; he couldn't talk, he was eating a muffin.

"Moon and June and kissing," said Roxanne. "Yuck," she turned and left, back to the living room, where Jasmine was monkeying with the cassette machine.

"Daddy, show us your monster laugh." Jasmine had sneaked up behind, through the dining room door.

During an argument on their first anniversary, Anne had reached across the glass table - - they had crammed her patio furniture onto the tiny balcony of their twenty-first floor apartment -- and slapped Dearborn so hard she loosened an old tooth. Now he had a crown, cloned on some fragment of the actual tooth. It kept falling out. He couldn't afford to go to the dentist every time, so he endured the gap. Did the monster laugh. For special occasions -- nights out, meeting with clients -- he shoved the tooth in with some chewing gum. It was usually good for two, perhaps three hours.

Roxanne came in with a tangerine. She wanted Dearborn to do Marlon Brando from The Godfather, another of his specialities.

"Not today, girls. The monster has a headache."

"You and Helen had too much wine, right daddy?"

Dearborn led them into the living room and put The Three Stooges on the video.

"How could you have bought that for them," Anne had asked. "You think its funny, hitting people over the head, sticking things up nostrils? You want them to grow up like that?"

Dearborn did think it was funny. And he hadn't grown up like that. What about your mother? She thinks farts are funny. Dearborn was at the stage where he was still framing responses, composing ripostes to old wounds.

Upstairs, Helen was sitting on the floor in the corner of the bedroom, playing with the cat. She was just out of the bathroom. She was wearing bikini underpants, no top.

"I love you," Dearborn told her. He bent down and kissed her left nipple. She smelled of his shower soap. "But you have to move your things out of the house."

She shrugged her shoulders. "You're forty-four, right? Maybe it's time to tell them. Your parents. You know, like, you have a penis? You like girls?"

"You're only twenty-four. My mother is seventy-two."

"Great. Now we know everybody's age."

"They haven't taken it in that Anne is out of the picture. They think we might get back together."

"Doesn't matter to me. Really. I just think you should level with them. I don't believe in shame."

"It's not a question of shame," said Dearborn. "I just don't want them to know I'm involved so soon after my wife's departure with a woman twenty years younger."

"Like it might give them the wrong idea? I think they're old enough, you know?"

"How about your mother," Dearborn asked. "What does she think about us?"

"She likes you. She does. Anne first left, she wanted to ask you over for dinner? She wanted to go out with you herself. I think so. I really do. Get you in the sack."

"What about the age difference?"

"She's only two years older than you."

It wasn't just his imagination: he and Helen seemed always talking about people's ages. "I meant the difference between you and me," he said.

Helen's mother was on her own; her husband had just come out. "We used to wonder, like, why he never came home?" Helen had told Dearborn and Anne when she'd first found out. "Those walks in the park?"

"Another homo," Anne had said, glaring at Dearborn. She was at the stage where she still blamed everything on man, the species. She saw herself as enmeshed in a world of vile men.

Dearborn took Helen by the hand and pulled her up, towards the bed.

"I got class today," Helen said.

She taught gym, Saturday mornings. Dearborn told her he would give her a lift. Anne had left him the car. He'd won that argument: he needed the car for his work. In the end, When Anne moved out, Dearborn had quit his job and gone freelance. He now hated being out of the house, hated being away from the children, a complete reversal of poles. He stayed at home with the kids and his modem, Helen and teenagers from the neighbourhood helping out with the sitting. But he still had the car.

Before she got out, Helen said, "Warren called again."

Her ex-boyfriend. Warren Blue -- he had invented his own name -- played bass in a bar band. Otherwise, he did nothing. Dearborn would sometimes notice him loitering on the side walk in front of the house. Warren's career allowed plenty of time for watching and besetting. It was hard for Dearborn to understand how Helen had ever become involved with such a person. She said it had started when she was in her freshman year, when she hadn't had the confidence to say no. Warren Blue was six foot three. No doubt he was tireless in bed, thought Dearborn.

"Won't take no for an answer," he said.

"Won't take an answer, period," said Helen. "Bass players are strange."

Dearborn took this as some kind of message, a vague threat. "I'll tell my parents about us soon," he said. "Perhaps, before they go home."

"See you tonight."

* * *

"Where are we going?" Dearborn's father asked. He gazed around the hall. He had just left the TV room. He wore an old tweed jacket with saggy pockets. His glasses were crooked.

"Maple Leaf Gardens," said Dearborn.

"Don't see why," said his father. "Don't see why we have to go out."

"Jack, try to fit in," said Dearborn's mother. She held his coat over her arm, waiting.

"You used to like hockey," Dearborn said.

"He still likes hockey," said his mother. "He watches on television all the time."

"Matlock was just starting," said his father, somehow vaguely affronted. He shuffled along to the bathroom. From the hallway, Dearborn and his mother heard the click of the lock. They heard him urinate. They heard a gurgling sound. Dearborn's father kept a bottle in his shaving kit.

"One good thing," said Dearborn's mother, "he's drinking less. He forgets where he puts it. He forgets that he likes it."

His father opened the bathroom door. He positively beamed. "Hockey!" he said. "They've finally started to win."

Downstairs, Helen was waiting. She was dressed in pressed faded jeans and a black ribbed turtle neck. Her hair was glossy. She would be sitting the children.

"I'm glad to meet you at last. I've heard so much about you," Helen said when Dearborn introduced her to his parents.

"You have?" said his mother, glancing at Dearborn. She had eyes like a hawk.

After the game, Dearborn took them out for a coffee. The restaurant was brightly lit with huge orange globes over brown and orange decor. The place was crowded and the manager sat them at a big table with a father and two young boys. The boys looked remarkably like the father, Dearborn noticed. As he aged, he took note of family resemblance more and more. He was becoming something of an expert on nature versus nature, the various theories. What effect would divorce have on his children, he wondered.

The two boys had souvenir programmes from the game spread on the table.

"Good game," said Dearborn's father, smiling at them.

The boys nodded.

"I used to play for the Leafs," said Dearborn's father.

Was this true, Dearborn wondered. His father had played for McGill, before the war, and Dearborn remembered something about his father having been asked to try out for the pros. But nothing more, surely.

"Yeah?" said the older boy. He would have been about nine. "Wicked," said the younger, about six.

"Yup," said Dearborn's father. "Played with Eddie Shore and Turk Broda. Teeter Kennedy.

The boys' father looked at Dearborn's father in studied silence. The boys were silent too. Perhaps the way Dearborn and his mother were watching, waiting to see what would happen next, gave them a signal.

"Johnny Bower. Gordie Howe. All the greats," said Dearborn's father.

"Johnny Bower?" said the older boy, puzzled.

"Really," said the man. He definitely knew now that the chronology was impossible. He was young, maybe twenty-eight. Dearborn noticed that he had the same kind of intonation, used the same expressions as Helen.

"When did Gordie Howe play for the Leafs?" the older boy asked his father. "Gordie Howe never played for the Leafs."

"Eat your cake," the father answered.

"Is that guy weird, or what?" asked the six year old, half-whispering.

Dearborn's father looked down at his coffee. He took off his glasses; his eyes were red-rimmed. Dearborn thought his father might weep, and he put his hand on his arm.

"I think I'll go downstairs and have a pee," said his father, with immense dignity. Dearborn and his mother watched him shamble towards the kitchen. He looked up at the clock on the wall, stopped, then kept on towards the kitchen door. The boys beside them watched too, clearly fascinated by a man who became lost in a restaurant.

"I think you'd better go with him," said Dearborn's mother.

On the way home, she sat in the front seat, talking about the town where he had grown up, people he had known when he was a child. "You heard about Henry Rollins," she said, looking at him sideways. "He's up at Penetang, locked up. He was in a variety store. He fell asleep standing up at the magazine rack. That's what he does, you know, falls asleep standing up. Happens all the time. When the owner woke him up, Henry stabbed him. So the police came and they took him up to Penetang." Henry Rollins was Dearborn's age. He was adopted.

After a few moments silence, Dearborn's mother said, "It's not Helen, is it?"

"It's not Helen what? She babysits."

"Old to be a babysitter," said his mother.

"Not that old."

"Not that old -- you're right about that. She can't be more than twenty-five."

In the rear-view mirror Dearborn saw his father put his finger in his ear and shake it with a vigour that made him wonder his father didn't dislodge his own yellow teeth. His mother noticed too; she turned and gave Dearborn a look. The finger-in-ear business -- it was a sign, a warning flag in their family. Dearborn's father did not like discussions about personal matters. He preferred undercurrents.

"Good God," he said, looking out the window. "Do you see?"

"What?" said Dearborn's mother.

"The people. Where are we? Africa? Pakistan? Where do they come from? Why do we let them in? Used to be a perfectly good country."

"You and Anne, you should never have moved down here," said Dearborn's mother, ignoring this diversion.

"Mother, grow up."

"I'm seventy-two. How much more grown up do want me?" She sighed heavily. "Alright, I accept this divorce business, although I never thought we'd have it in our family. Perhaps now you'll have children of your own." Her family had been in Ontario since the American Revolution.

Dearborn glanced up and caught his father looking at him in the mirror; there was a momentary bright look in his eyes; he was with them again, had broken through the haze of whisky, the floating cobwebs, the ganglions in his brain. He said, "He already has his own children. Bonny children they are, too."

They drove the rest of the way in silence. When Dearborn pulled into the driveway, his father said, "You have a garage?" He knew perfectly well they had a garage; Dearborn had parked the car there -- it was halfway behind the house -- when he'd brought them back from the bus station.

"I would like to see the garage," said his father.

"Don't tell him how to get into the garage," said Dearborn's mother under her breath.

"Door halfway down the basement stairs," said Dearborn. His father nodded, turned to shuffle up the front steps. He would be getting something from his shaving kit, a stash to hide in the garage for the duration of the visit. He kept bottles in the garage at home. Wherever he went he liked to establish a safe haven. Dearborn's mother glared at him, and Dearborn was suddenly enraged again. This was a recent phenomenon, the rage that seemed to come in waves. Dearborn said to his mother, "If he wants a drink he can have one."

The truth was his father didn't actually drink that much any more, certainly less than Dearborn. He simply liked the routines, the hiding bottles and so on, and Dearborn understood that.

On Monday evening Dearborn stood before the bathroom mirror, affixing his tooth in the gap with a big wad of gum in preparation for the visit to the school. He could hear the television from the den along the hall where his parents were watching the six o'clock news. Then he heard different noises. Someone entering the house. Could it be Helen, ignoring his warnings? The door from the porch closing quietly. The footsteps stopped. Intruders! Teenagers, no doubt. Dearborn's heart raced. He poked his head in the door of the den. His parents sat staring at the television; they had heard nothing. He told them he was going to check the casserole. He crept down the stairs.

It was only Warren Blue, six foot three and skinny as a rail, standing in the middle of the kitchen. He wore a greasy buckskin jacket that hung shapeless from his shoulders. "Where's Helen?" Warren stepped towards Dearborn, as though he were going to push by him and make his way upstairs to the bedrooms. He looked angry; his face was blotchy.

Dearborn said, "No need to get riled up."

"Fuck you," said Warren.

Upstairs, there was a stirring, Dearborn's father on one of his trips to the bathroom. Then his mother's shoes along the hall floor; the footsteps grew silent, muffled as she descended the carpeted stairs. Weren't they supposed to be hard of hearing?

"She's not here, Warren. I'm sorry. I think she said something about an aerobics class. If I see her, I'll tell her you're looking for her. Listen, I have guests. I think you'd better go."

Dearborn made a move toward the back door, to show him out. Warren grabbed Dearborn's arm, twisted him around and slapped him across the face, as though Dearborn were a cheeky school girl. Dearborn's hand shot out in a reflex movement, a light shove to Warren's chest. Warren responded with a real punch, a blow to Dearborn's mouth that nearly knocked him off his feet. He tasted salty blood and salty tears; the tears were not tears of emotion, nor tears of engagement; they welled up involuntarily with the pain. He felt the gap in his teeth with his tongue. His mouth was filling with blood.

Suddenly the room was filled with people. His parents hovering behind him -- it appeared that they could move fast and quietly when they wanted to -- the children up from the basement, and Helen bobbing behind Warren in the back door.

Roxanne said, "Daddy, are you going to need a needle?"

Jasmine saw the blood and began to weep.

Dearborn said, "Mother, dad, this is Warren Blue, a neighbour of ours. And Helen, you know Helen of course."

"The babysitter," said Dearborn's father. "Delighted to see you again. Are we going out?"

"I've seen you walking up and down the sidewalk in front of the house," Dearborn's mother said to Warren Blue.

Warren and Helen looked at each other. She put her arm on his back, running her hand up underneath his buckskin jacket. She seemed to whisper something, calm him down. Then he turned, her fingers grazing along his back as they walked through the door.

Dearborn knew then he would not have to face the problem of how to tell his parents about Helen. She was going back to Warren. It was simply a matter of when.

"That was something," his father said. "Never seen a fight before."

"Very stupid," said his mother. "You're far too old for this sort of thing."

It was true, he was too old. And his father was wrong: it wasn't a fight. It was Dearborn standing there, and Warren hitting him in the mouth. It was as though it had happened to another person.

His mother appeared with a wet washcloth. When Dearborn examined himself in the mirror, he saw that blood was coming from the gap where he had jammed the tooth in. Usually when it came loose, he caught the tooth rolling around in his mouth, an immense foreign object. This time it was gone. He phoned the dentist, a neighbour, who told him to stuff a piece of cotton batting into the gap. The flow of blood would likely stop in a few minutes. Dearborn asked him about the tooth.

"This too, will pass," said Dr. More.

"What?"

"You probably swallowed it. You could sift through, you know, after you go to the toilet."

"Absolutely not. Out of the question," Dearborn told him.

"At least a thousand bucks to do a new one and put it in," said Dr. More.

Dearborn would live with the gap. He cleaned himself up. He left his parents in front of the television eating the casserole.

The school evening was set up so the children could greet parents at the door and show them around. There were big scrap books filled with drawings, scraggly numbers and alphabets. Then the pictures. The teacher would add the titles afterwards. ("What's this a picture of, sweetie?" "Daddy playing monster.")

Ms. Fish, the efficient one, was there by the desk to greet him. Tall, about thirty-eight, red hair done up with elaborate clips. The old friendly one, Mrs. Wesley, stood a few feet behind, clasping her hands. She reminded Dearborn of his grandmother. She hugged the children when they came in the morning.

Mrs. Fish took him aside. "Will your wife be joining us?"

"No," said Dearborn.

"Yes," said Anne. She came hurrying toward them, wispy blonde hair plastered across her forehead.

"What are you doing here?" said Dearborn

"They called me about Roxanne."

"Why would they call you?"

"Roxanne talks to things," said Ms. Fish, quiet and solicitous.

The wave came: Dearborn was enraged. He listened to his wife and Mrs. Fish talking about Roxanne. He grabbed Ms. Fish by the wrist. He could feel the heat in his face. No doubt the vein in his forehead was sticking out.

Anne said, "Jack, take it easy. It's not serious, only mild troubles, they said."

"Mrs. Fish," said Dearborn, still holding her by the arm.

"Ms," said Ms. Fish.

"Mrs. Fish," said Dearborn. "I am aware that Roxanne talks to things. I live with her. She talks to lamps. She talks to bookends. She calls them Sarah. I am her father. I talk to things myself."

Other conversations in the room stopped.

"Mrs. Fish." Should he tell her everything, that the girl's mother had left despite her presence here tonight, that Roxanne was adopted, that he'd swallowed his tooth, that his father became lost on the way to the washroom in restaurants? Should he tell her about the inevitability of Helen and Warren Blue? "Mrs. Fish." Dearborn was aware that he was speaking through clenched teeth. "Do not speak of psychologists and professionals in front of my child."

"Oh, God," said Anne.

Dearborn turned; he picked up the children at the play-dough table and fled from the room. In the parking lot, they sat in the dark car, waiting for the defroster to clear the windows. He was exhausted. He was half asleep. His legs ached. His gap ached.

Roxanne said, "Daddy, what are you thinking?"

He didn't tell her. He was watching himself walking around the house, talking to the fat lamp, sifting through his own waste for some forty-year old remnant.

On the radio, they were playing some kind of torch music.

Roxanne said, "Hey, hot lips." It was a mystery to Dearborn where these expressions came from. There was a new one every day.

"Poo-poo head," said Jasmine.

"Girls," said Dearborn, in warning.

Roxanne said, "Daddy, can I be the man of the house?"

"Who makes the hardest hugs?" said Jasmine, hugging him.

"Who makes the softest hugs?" said Roxanne, also hugging him. They sat tangled in the front seat of the car.