SUBLIMATION By Lee MacDougall

The Fahrenheit temperature scale was invented by a German scientist in 1789. He posited that water froze at thirty-two degrees, and boiled at two hundred and twelve degrees. Another scale, developed by a Swede named Celsius, is based on water freezing at zero degrees, and boiling at one hundred. Britain and her colonies used the Fahrenheit scale for centuries, but gradually converted to align themselves with the rest of the Celsius world. These two scales meet, or give the same reading of temperature, at one point: forty below zero.

During the winters in Kirkland Lake in the mid-twentieth century it was often forty below. Forty-five below was not uncommon. With the wind chill, it was often sixty below. Notice that I don't identify the temperature by saying "sixty below zero". For those of us who grew up in northern Canada, where the temperature is often well below freezing, the zero is understood.

When it's forty below or colder, you experience it in different ways. Stepping outside, you catch your breath; the air is so cold it sticks in your throat. It takes a couple of breaths to convince your body to accept the frigid air, to acclimatize. The moisture in your exhaled breath freezes instantly; it looks denser than normal breath mist, more like exhaled smoke. As kids we could pretend we were smoking for about four months of the year. At forty-five below the tears in your eyes are caught by your eyelashes and freeze instantly. If we'd been playing outside, the first thing we'd do when we came in was unstick our eyes. Wet hair would freeze and snap off; wet clothing would solidify on your body. My mother used to hang wet laundry on the clothesline; hours later she would wrestle the dry but frozen sheets into the house. Only when they thawed could she fold them. Frozen water does evaporate. This explains why ice cubes shrink over time. The process is called sublimation, from the Latin "subliminis": to transform into a higher or idealized form. When you grow up in this kind of cold, you take it for granted. You forget how cold it really is.

Mornings at our house, getting ready for school or work was a well-timed ritual. My mother knew exactly what time to wake each person, and what threats to use to get us out of bed. We dressed quickly, then ran to the kitchen to eat. Cereal, toast or porridge; mother knew who

liked what and how much of it they would want. During our rush we listened to the local morning show on the kitchen radio. They would play music, give the ominous weather reports, sometimes there would be phone-in contests, and there was always the eight o'clock news. It was mostly national or world news, and a bit of sports. If there was anything local, we were always surprised. We all froze at the table the morning we heard the name Gordie Cardon.

The Cardons lived a couple of blocks from us in a small ramshackle house at the edge of our subdivision. The area was called Federal, because of the number of federally sponsored houses that had been built there in the years after the war. Beyond the Cardon place was deep northern bush; dark and impenetrable. The summer before, two of the Hong kids and I had been on their street, doing nothing, when we saw the Cardon boys approaching. Gordie, at fourteen, was the oldest; Gary, the middle boy, was my age; and the little guy, Dwayne, about ten. Together they could be trouble, so when we saw them we started to wander away as if we'd just remembered where we were going. They caught up to us, and Gary pushed me from behind. I pretended to trip, then kept walking. If Gordie hadn't been with them we might have said something, but as he was, it would have been crazy to start anything. Gary asked if I was chicken, and announced to all present that I probably couldn't even take Dwayne. I knew what was coming. Dwayne was a runt, and had a couple of things wrong with him, but the Cardon boys wouldn't accept that he was anything less than a cold-blooded killer. They were always goading him to prove his ferocity. I knew I could have knocked Dwayne down, having spent many an hour wrestling with my brother, but I also knew that if I so much as touched him, the rest of the clan would reduce me to pulp. We danced around each other for a while, fists raised, while I tried to figure out which of his eyes was following me. Then I did what any sane boy would do: I ran. The Hongs were right behind me, and the Cardon gang took it as another knock-down for little Dwayne, taunting me as a fag and a chick-chick-chicken from afar.

The radio news was discreet. No details were released. My family sat for a few seconds, listening. When the announcer went on to another item, my mother got up and turned off the radio.

"That poor family," she said.

Everybody at school was subdued. Word spread like wildfire. Apparently he'd been out skidooing with his father. That was all we heard at first.

* * *