

On a perfectly still night, that night of the year when the trees begin to wheel with light and the stars come tumbling, and backyard bonfires illuminate the children's faces, the Andersons push the boat out over the lake.

'Whose boat do you suppose it was?' Don asks his wife, when she first tells him of her plan.

'Who knows?' She is like a high-tailed pony, flicking her gathered hair from side to side, her face alight as she phones first one friend then another, telling each one on her list: this is the way we'll get rid of our old baggage, what a sight, it's something different don't you think. 'Look, does it matter?' she asks him, when he still seems irresolute. 'It's not as if you can do anything with that boat. It must have been sitting in the basement at least fifty years by the look of it. Haven't you seen the rot in it? One of the boys might try and use it, even if you tell them not to. You know what kids are like when they're in the mood.'

Of course, he can see that she's right. She is about most things — their finances, what schools to send the children to, whose parents they should be celebrating Christmas with this year, all those things that he never cares to consider. He doesn't know why he hesitates over the rowboat that's been sitting in the basement since they bought the house. Once a solid wooden craft, painted red that has faded to a dingy rust colour, a strip of yellow drawn around it, missing a rowlock, it might have been built by a boy in the backyard. He thinks it is this homely quality that makes him not want to part with it. When they bought the house on the edge of the lake

he saw the list of people who held the title before him, but it was meaningless. The people who can afford to live by the lake these days are people like him, transient in their living arrangements, moving from one better house to the next, able to afford shiny new boats. Upwardly mobile, a term his own mother had lighted on in the eighties. She says it with pride. My boy. My son. He's doing well for himself.

'It's not as if we're breaking any law, are we?' his wife asks.

'Perhaps you should check,' he says absently, studying a window frame that he thinks he might like to shift. This house won't suit his family for ever but, while they are here, he restores and adds to it as previous owners have. In the evening, he walks down to the water's edge at the end of the garden, watching midges dance above the transparent water and trout rise. He will not own the derelict boat for ever, any more than the house. He won't change it and improve it and make it safe for his sons to use. Not that they would, not a boat they would care to be seen in, although there is something about its flowing bow that shows a kind of grace, despite its faults. This evening, before the fireworks are about to begin, he wonders fleetingly about a boy who might have stood under the leafy trees at the water's edge, hammering away on a night like this, getting his boat ready to launch in the summer holidays.

'Please,' his wife had said, when they were holding their territory on the far sides of their king-sized bed the night before. She has small compact breasts and fair skin with a pale moony whiteness that makes him think of treasure. 'I've told everyone, they think it's so neat.' Her voice was sorrowful in the wasteland of duvet between them.

'It's all right,' he'd said. 'Just do it.'

When dusk is settling, and his family and their friends, wrapped up against the breeze of late spring, have eaten the

barbecued meats and salads, they cry, 'It's time, let's set off the fireworks.'

The boat is waiting where it has been dragged down to the beach, not quite floating but bouncing around among the reeds. The women and children have brought an assortment of items to put in the boat. Mostly it is the women, their shining made-up faces gleaming in the light of the fire behind them, who place inside the hull what he thinks of as offerings to the gods. One puts in a bundle of old letters; her sly smile and the nod of appreciation from the other women tell him that they are love letters. Another adds a calendar for what she says was a very bad year, someone else a stained quilt, another some yellowed school books. His wife's best friend whispers to her son that it's his last year's school reports and he need never see them again. Then there are things that would normally go in the white elephant sale, such as a paper lampshade decorated with hieroglyphics. (There is only one rule, that everything must be combustible. He's worried about the quilt and the metal rings in the lampshade but should he say anything? He doesn't.) One by one, then, the women toss in notes they have written, all the old bad karma they are discarding. He tries to see what his wife is putting in the boat, but he can't. It's something very small and she puts it in quickly among everything else. Alongside her, one of her friends wraps an offering in a wad of tissue and slides it in with the rest. She is a slim wily woman, dissatisfied and hungry. When his wife first introduced them, he was surprised by the friendship, she hadn't seemed like his wife's kind of person. But he knows her scent.

Suddenly, he's afraid. This whole idea has always been a mistake.

Finally, the boat is ready for its last voyage. He walks back up to where the bonfire is still smouldering and seizes the

end of a flaming log, carrying it quickly through a crowd of spectators. As well as its freight of cast-offs and memories, the boat contains newspaper impregnated with kerosene. His wife's friend emerges from the shadows and runs to the bow of the boat, now riding the small waves that lap at the water's edge, fossicking for something, as if she's changed her mind. He holds his breath. Her skirt is wet at the hem. Without looking at him, she turns and walks back up the beach. He plunges his brand into the paper and a flame roars, ripping straight away through the length of the boat. The men help him to heave it away, sloshing through the water to push it as far as possible into the eddies of the lake.

And there it burns, this barge carrying its cargo of nightmares to the bottom of the lake. On the shore, the women and children cry out and clap. Some of them join hands and begin to sing.

Perhaps there *is* a law against it. If there isn't, shouldn't there be? What was the message his wife placed inside the boat? Will she really sleep better, released from the dreams that sometimes cause her to wake in panic?

The boat glows in the dark for an hour or more, the sides collapsing inwards, fragments and sparks scattering in all directions. The wind rises and the licks of fire and the choppy waves seem to become one. In the end, there is just a scum of flame, the quilt perhaps, and it too subsides into the depths of the lake.