

# C o l f o r d

Ian

**Ian Colford's** stories have appeared or are forthcoming in a number of periodicals as well as in the 1998 *Journey Prize Anthology*. From 1995 to 1998 he edited the literary journal *Pottersfield Portfolio*. He has completed two story collections and two novels. *A New Life* is from a manuscript of linked stories entitled *The Sara Stories*.

## A N E W L I F E

An image of my mother from our old life comes to mind. She's laughing and doing the dishes after supper. I'm helping her, even though I'm only five years old. It's so warm that it must be summer. The sun slants through the window and sets her hair alight and it's as if she's burning up or acquired a halo. Her eyes are liquid, laughing. I don't realize it, but I'm in love with my mother, as protective and demanding as any lover. I can always find the humour in what she says, in what she does. She's bigger than I am but she's still tiny and slight, barely five feet tall. Her long honey-gold hair veils her entire back. She's like a toy, and I'm greedy; I want her to be mine. When my father enters the kitchen I don't look at him — I wish him away. But I sense her attention shift and her body become alert to his presence, and then he's there with his arms around her

and she's kissing him. I think about dropping the plate she's given me to dry.

My father was sick. I'm not sure what was wrong, but it was pretty serious. When his hand moved once in the middle of the night they called my mother on the phone and she had to go over. That's how sick he was.

He was in an accident over a year ago, but nobody ever said what kind of accident it was or how badly he'd been hurt. The only thing I knew for sure was that he stayed in his bed in the hospital and never did anything. When my mother took Julie and me to see him he never showed any sign that he recognized us or that he even knew we were in the room with him. They were always boring, these visits. His eyes were open and he seemed to be staring out the window across from his bed. But my mother explained that he couldn't even see that far. She told us that his gaze was fixed for good on something deep inside and that none of us would ever know what it was. This seemed to make her angry and sad at the same time, to know that his attention was always going to be somewhere else. She spent all those months after the accident sitting by his bed studying him, stroking his forehead or just holding his hand. She seemed to really believe that if she stayed with him long enough she'd finally get to see what he was seeing. Or maybe she expected him to just wake up. Maybe she wanted to be there when he got out of bed and started walking around as if nothing had happened. It took a long time for her to realize that all this waiting was getting her nowhere. Finally, one day, instead of taking us to see him, she said they'd know where to reach us if anything happened.

After she sold the house and we moved out, my mother did her best to make up for what we'd lost. She tried to get a job, but when that didn't work she started her own business instead. It was a used-clothes store. Julie and I would go in there after school and help her sort through boxes filled with old shirts and dresses and moth-eaten sweaters and mittens with holes in them. Sometimes I spent hours staring at the men's shoes piled like dead things of the floor and the tangle of ties heaped on the counter, remembering. The colours and styles reminded me so much of my father. I often wondered if my mother had sold his things, because they weren't anywhere in the apartment. The store was at one end of a long dirty street, right on the corner where young people hung around in noisy clusters smoking and laughing. There was a restaurant next door, a diner where a big lady named Mrs. Cornelius spoke quickly in a

loud voice to everyone who came in. Her only helper was a scrawny little foreign-looking man in an apron and a white hat who never said anything and never smiled. I don't think they were married. When my mother got tired of having Julie and me in the store with her she sent us next door. Mrs. Cornelius sat us in a booth away from the other customers and fed us fried potatoes and leftover noodles and milkshakes and never charged us anything. I think she was sorry for us because she would ask sometimes in her clotted English if we'd had any news about our father, and when we said no she'd turn away, shaking her head as if we were the two most pitiful little girls in the whole world, mumbling to herself in a language that sounded like praying.

Then all of a sudden the shop was closed and we never went back there anymore. My mother explained that the money had run out. But then I heard her swearing at someone over the phone and crying that everything had been stolen from her, that it wasn't her fault and they had to give her another chance. Not long after this we moved from our first apartment into a smaller one and my mother began acting strangely, going out and coming in at odd hours, or else staying indoors for days at a time and wandering around in slippers and a bathrobe and not eating anything. Her voice became very soft and when she smiled there was something vague and unfocused about it. I remember once leaving her at the kitchen table when I went off to school, and when I came home in the afternoon she was sitting in exactly the same place, her head propped on her hand just as it had been that morning.

Julie and I both hated the school we had to go to. It was noisy and dirty and all the windows were covered with stiff wire that made me think of the pen where they kept the dangerous animals at the wildlife preserve. We'd left all our friends behind when we moved away from the old neighbourhood and we weren't making any new ones, so we spent most of our time at home.

Sometimes my mother got her friend Claire to stay with us. Claire was one of the people who helped my mother run the used-clothes shop that went out of business and took our money. She cooked meals for us and cleaned the apartment when she came over. I knew she was just babysitting, but she always seemed to stay longer than she had to. She did things my mother never thought of, like take us out for ice cream or rent movies that were interesting for kids to watch. She was young and she didn't seem to

have any worries. She spoke to us softly but in a voice you just had to listen to, and her breath smelled fresh and sweet when you got close to her. Everything she wore looked just right on her, even the floppy hats and the long billowy skirts and the faded denim jacket with the elbows ripped open. None of her outfits really matched up the way normal clothes were supposed to, but she didn't seem to care. She said she was happy just to have something on her back.

Once she took us out for a walk in the park. The trees were turning orange and there was something crisp and frosty in the air only you couldn't see it. Claire walked slowly so we could keep up. She was talking.

"You know, you mom's really a special person. I admire the way she's handled things. I think I would've lost my mind."

A breeze was tossing the loose hair back from her face. Julie kept her eyes on the pathway. We were all holding hands. With my mother we hardly ever held hands.

"What things?"

"Well, you know. You dad and everything. Losing the house and having to move into the city and find a job. Most women her age wouldn't be able to cope. Not with two children."

"My mom's not that old."

"I know, Sara. Buy she's been through a lot in the last while. Trouble changes people. You have to be patient with her and make allowances. She has to get these feelings out of her system. She does her best to be there for you, but I know that sometimes she says things that hurt. She doesn't mean it. She's under a lot of pressure."

"She swears at us all the time," I said. I probably should have kept this to myself. But it was true.

Claire stopped walking and looked at me. I always like it when she looked into my eyes.

"Sara, you mother's a sweet person. She loves you both very much. I know, sometimes it seems strange, the things she does. But you have to understand. Without your father she feels alone and she doesn't make friends easily. I hope you never know what it feels like to be lost. Or to be in trouble and have nobody there who really cares."

"Is Mom in trouble?" It hadn't occurred to me before. Suddenly I was worried.

"Oh, no. No. I'm sorry, Sara. I didn't mean to frighten you." We started walking again. "I meant she was having trouble getting enough money to buy food and pay rent and everything else. It's not easy, looking for a job and raising children. Sometimes I think she doesn't know what to do next and it gets to her. Sometimes nothing works out and she doesn't like herself. And she worries about you two. She doesn't like leaving you alone but she can't afford a babysitter."

"What are you?" I asked. "Aren't you a babysitter? Doesn't Mom pay you?"

I felt a warm pressure on my hand. She smiled.

"I'm your friend, Sara. People have to have friends." She smoothed Julie's hair. "I'm just trying to help."

"Don't you have a job?"

"I manage," she said. "I work part time at odd jobs. I don't really care what I do. I'm not trying to get rich. I do what I have to get by. But it's different for me. I'm by myself but I have lots of friends. We go out and keep an eye on each other. I always know help is there if I need it. But your mother doesn't have that. She's in a whole new situation. It's scary for her."

"She's scared," I said, nodding my head as if I'd reached a new understanding. It was as good an explanation as any.

We walked a bit further. The sky was an unnatural shade of blue, so deep and clear it was eerie. It seemed to hover above us, just out of reach. The trees moved with the breeze, but I couldn't hear anything. It was like none of it was real. And as if I were dreaming I felt my head become light. Everything shone. My father had taken us here often. It always felt weird coming back without him.

Then Julie said, "Mommy hates me."

"Oh, no. Julie. Why would you say such a thing? Your mother doesn't hate you."

Claire crouched down and took my sister's hands in hers.

"She does. She said so."

"Oh, no."

"She ..."

Julie's words were lost in sobbing. I tried not to look. It wasn't hard for me

to guess what she'd say next because I was always there when it happened. I heard everything my mother said. But there was never anything I could do about it. She got so mad.

I wandered off, leaving the two of them a short distance behind on the path, Julie crying in Claire's arms. I studied the trees. The leaves this time of year were like jewels, all colours. In a week or so they'd be at their most brilliant. Then without any warning they'd shrivel up and fall to the ground. I wouldn't want to come back here after that happened. The trees with bare limbs always make me feel like I've lost something and can never get it back.

My mother was staying out later and later every night. There were times when she didn't come home until long after we'd gone to bed. I wouldn't see her until the next morning when she got up to make breakfast before we went to school. She'd be telling us what she had planned for that day and when, or if, we could expect her home. Sometimes I was so sleepy I didn't even hear what she was saying.

"I guess I don't really have any idea how long all this is going to take," she was saying this morning. "I have to go way over to the other end of town for an interview and then I want to pick up a few things. So don't wait around for me. I'll leave something out for supper. And I'll call Claire to see if she can come over. But if she can't you're on your own. Oh, and listen, Sara, make sure Julie brushes her teeth tonight, okay? I don't want any more dentist bills like the last one. And both of you, try not to leave too much of a mess around when you go to bed. I hate having to look at your junk all over the place when I get home."

"Okay."

"Don't worry, sweetheart. Someday all this business will be done with and we'll settle down somewhere and live normally. I won't be running around like a fool all the time. We'll be able to go places together and do things like we used to. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"And Julie? You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Julie picked at her food, silently turning it over on the plate. The egg was squishy but the bacon was fried black. I prodded her under the table with my toe.

"Wouldn't you Julie? You'd like that."

"Yuh."

Then one morning I woke up early and couldn't get back to sleep. The air was strangely scented as if someone had been burning candles and the door to our room had been shut. I couldn't sleep. I was too warm and damp. Then I remembered hearing sounds, hours ago, in the middle of the night. And my mother's voice too. There must have been people here with her. She probably closed the door so they wouldn't wake us up.

I got out of bed.

The door was struck and it groaned when I pulled on it. I could see a light coming from the kitchen and when I peeked around the corner I saw a bottle on the counter. The smell was stronger. Like some kind of soap. And the air was smoky so it seemed you take a handful and put it in your pocket. Someone's clothes lay like a sleeping animal on the floor in the hall. I stepped on cloth that felt rough to my bare feet. The door to my mother's bedroom was ajar and I nudged it open the rest of the way. Inside it was dark and the blinds were drawn so the light from the street couldn't get in. I tried to move quietly even though her breathing was loud. It sounded like she was going to sleep forever.

I could see better now. There were movements under the covers in the bed. I realized suddenly that my mother wasn't alone and that the movements and the breathing belonged to someone else. I guess I was still half asleep because before I knew what I was doing I'd crawled up on the bed, convinced somehow that my father had come home to us. If I'd bothered to think for even a second, I would have realized how unlikely that was. But I didn't, and once in the middle of the bed I found myself confronted with a stranger's face, a stranger's smell. It startled me awake, but I couldn't move now without disturbing them both. He smelled like hand lotion, and something burning, maybe toast or candle wax. He had a small nose and his arms and chest were covered with black hair. I don't remember how long I stayed like that - crouched down on the bed watching him, trying to keep still. But I do remember thinking that if I could smell him, then he could smell me.

Just as this thought began to sink in, his nose twitched, and with a frightening swiftness his eyes snapped open and found mine. It was as if he'd only been pretending to sleep just so he could scare me.

While we stared at each other I got the feeling that, like me, he could scarcely believe what he was seeing. Everything was a total surprise.

Then he turned over and began slowly to get out of bed. I heard him mutter something and then he grunted and rubbed his face. Roaming around the room, he knocked his leg against the end of the bed and swore. He stooped over and picked something up, held it for a second, and then tossed it away. He was looking for his clothes. I could have told him they were out in the hall, but I didn't dare open my mouth. I knew I was already in enough trouble. I didn't want to make it worse.

My mother started shifting herself around. She sighed and turned over.

He found the light switch and flicked it on.

"Oh, god," she moaned, covering her eyes. "What is it, Michael? What are you doing?"

I was watching him. I'd never seen a man with nothing on.

"Sarah, where are my clothes? What did you do with my clothes?"

I was shocked. I thought he was talking to me. Then I remembered that my mother's name was the same as mine only spelled differently. For some reason it struck me as funny. But I didn't laugh.

She looked at the clock.

"Michael, it's only six. You don't have to go yet. Please come back to bed."

He came right over to us and waved his hand in my direction.

"Sarah, I think I've had enough surprises for one morning."

She'd seen me now. How could she not have? But she didn't do anything. Maybe she was too sleepy. She just closed her eyes and kept her hand on her face like she was trying to keep it from falling off her head.

"Michael, it's not -"

"Sarah, please. Don't bother. Just let it go."

I thought he'd be really mad. But he wasn't. He just seemed sorry.

"She's pretty, Sarah. You should be proud of her. You shouldn't hide her in the closet."

"Oh, Michael, I was going to tell you. I was. You have to believe me."

He'd found the things and was getting dressed. After she said this he laughed.

"Sarah, I don't think I have to believe anything."



She got out of bed and went over to him. She was naked. I wondered how she could do that with a stranger.

"I was going to tell you. But you said you didn't like kids and I wanted you so badly."

"You told me you weren't married too. Are you married?"

She hung her head.

"Yes. But it's not .... It's over."

"And I suppose Mitchell isn't your real name."

"No," she murmured after a pause. "It's my maiden name."

"No wonder I couldn't find you in the goddamn phone book," he said as he pulled on his pants. "What's your real name?"

She looked at him then.

"Sloan. Sarah Sloan."

He didn't seem to be listening any more. He was putting on his tie. He flipped it over, then pulled it through and gave it a yank. Cranking it up, like my father used to say.

She went to him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Michael, don't leave me like this. Please. I'll make it up to you. I will. Just give me another chance."

She tried to kiss him.

He grinned and put his hand on her bare behind. But then he pushed her away.

"Sarah, I can't do this. You're great fun and I like you, but you lied to me. I asked you a few simple questions about yourself and you lied. Do you have any idea how that feels? You couldn't even tell me your name. How many other things are there that you can't tell me?"

"There's nothing, Michael. You know that. Don't be childish."

"I don't know anything of the kind. So far everything you've told me has turned out not to be true."

He left the bedroom. She grabbed a flimsy little belted robe from the floor and followed him.

"Okay. Okay. I blew it. It's my fault. I should have told you the truth. But I wanted you to like me first. I wanted to give myself a chance. I didn't think it was fair to count myself out just because I have kids."

He didn't answer. I went out to the hall while he put on his coat. My mother stood there watching with both hands clutching her head, panic blooming on her face, the front of the robe wide open, her long hair draping wildly down her back.

"I'll do anything, Michael. I'll do anything you say. I love you. You know that, don't you?"

Very gently, as if bestowing a blessing upon her, he placed one hand on her cheek and left it there. He was smiling.

"Goodbye, Sarah."

She followed him out of the apartment. I didn't hear anything else. She went down the corridor with him. She was telling him things and making promises. I heard the elevator arrive and the doors open and close. Then for a while it was quiet. I should have run somewhere and hid, but she was gone for so long I started thinking she'd gone with him into the elevator. I was ready to go and check to see if she was still there. But then I heard steps. She came in and saw me standing in the hall. She was crying and her face was red and wet.

Boy, was I going to get it now.

She slammed the door so hard that for a few seconds everything rattled.

"What do you think you're looking at?" she said. She came toward me, but I was too scared to move.

"I don't want to see you today. Okay? I don't even want to think about you."

She took my arm and dragged me back to my room where she threw me into bed. Then she started.

"What do you think you're doing, coming into my room in the middle of the night? Who gave you the right to do that? I may be your mother, but what I do in the privacy of my own room is no business of yours!" She backed away toward the door and stared at us, hands on hips. "God! You're nothing but little spies, the pair of you! I can't do anything for one minute without you watching me. You're always in the way or you want something. You never stop pestering me. And now you come barging into my room like you own the place. How could you be so stupid? How could you do something like that? You really messed up good this time. I hope you realize that. Do you have any idea what you've done? Do you know what that was? He's a lawyer and he really really liked me. Do you know what that means?" She paused to drill it home. "It

means I never would have had to do anything ever again. We would have been rich. But you had to do it, didn't you? You couldn't just stay in your room." She stood there shaking her head at us. "I had it all worked out too. God! I can't believe you did that!"

Something wasn't quite right.

"But Daddy isn't dead, is he?" I asked.

"He is to me."

"But you're still married -"

The expression on her face changed suddenly. All at once the anger was gone and she just looked tired and fed up. A few tears appeared on her cheek and she swatted them away as if they were flies.

"Look. Don't bother me today. All right? Stay away from me. I don't want to hear you and I don't want to see you. If you come near me today I won't be responsible for what happens."

She banged the door shut behind her.

In her bed Julie was crying. I was going to tell her to be quiet until I remembered that none of this was her fault. She looked so small lying there, and I knew that she didn't really understand what was going on. But I couldn't bring myself to go over and hold her and tell her everything was going to be all right. Something spiteful in me wanted her to suffer for my blunder at least as much as I did.

That day I didn't go straight home after school. I knew my mother wouldn't be happy to see me. She hadn't bothered to get up and make breakfast for us, and when Julie and I left for school she still hadn't stirred. I had a feeling we'd all be better off if I stayed out of her way, so I went for a walk. I was tired and it was getting cold out, but I didn't really mind. The air was clear and it wasn't supposed to rain or anything and I wasn't all that hungry yet. I felt like walking for hours.

I was thinking that I could over to Claire's apartment to see if she was there, or maybe to go to the hospital to visit my father. I could have gone to the shopping centre too, or taken the bus downtown to the park. I had a little money. But I didn't feel like doing any of those things. I didn't really want to have to talk to anyone. I saw some kids from school walking up ahead, but before they spotted me I cut through someone's yard and came out on another

street. I guess I just wanted to be alone.

It hadn't been all that long since my teacher Miss Fletcher had called me aside and asked me if everything was okay at home. It was probably right after my mother had done something strange or said something really mean, and I guess I was being more quiet than usual. She looked into my eyes and told me that I shouldn't feel ashamed and that whatever it was, it wasn't my fault. I got the feeling she expected me to break down and start crying right there in front of her and tell her all kinds of horrible stories. But I didn't. I looked her straight in the eye and said I was okay and that everything was fine. But I don't think she believed me.

I wondered what my mother would do if I never went home. She was always saying these things, about how much trouble we were to her, about how easy her life would be if we weren't around. It never occurred to me that she was serious. She hugged and kissed us too, but only when other people were there to see. Whenever Claire came to visit my mother gushed all over us and made me feel stupid. I wasn't always sure of myself around her either. She had these strange moods that came and went like a summer storm. She could ask me to come up on her lap and hold me or just as easily yell at me for something that wasn't even my fault. I never knew what was coming until it happened.

I felt sorry for her sometimes. Claire didn't have to explain it to me. I knew how hard it was for her. It seemed everything she tried to do went wrong. She said people were mean and never turned out to be what they said they were. She complained about how everyone wanted something for nothing. She could be happy in the morning and sad or angry at night. I could see that her life was out of whack, but the things she said made me feel like I was part of the problem. I didn't know for sure if she wanted us gone from her life, but more and more I was curious to find out.

I like it here on the street, away from her. I felt safe knowing she couldn't blame for anything. I'd made up my mind that one of these days when I was old enough I was going to leave for good. She could do what she liked. As long as there were streets leading from one place to another I'd have somewhere to go.

I put my head down and walked faster.

I was still walking when it started getting dark. It had been such a miserable

grey afternoon that the cars already had their lights on. It was getting colder now too. I wish it had come up.

I didn't know where I was, but it didn't matter. There were little shops on both sides of the street. Letters were missing from most of the signs and paint flaked in huge hunks off the sides of the buildings. I had to step around the garbage on the sidewalk. After a while I saw people looking at me funny, like I didn't belong. I was thinking maybe I should be scared, but I wasn't. In front of one store I watched a man talking sternly to a small boy, and it made me remember my father telling me, after I'd been bad, how much he loved me. He wanted me to be good so he could love me even more, but most of all he wanted me to do what my mother told me. He didn't seem to realize how complicated that could be. Even though he was married to her, I don't think he ever understood what she was like. Nothing Julie and I did ever made her happy. She'd spend all day complaining, but as soon as he got home she'd be sweet as honey. It was if she had to pretend she was happy, just for him. Maybe that's why she seemed so mixed up these days. She'd been pretending for so long she didn't know how to cope with not having to pretend.

It was dark now.

After a while a police car pulled up beside me and they asked if I was lost. I said yes. I got in and told them where I lived and they drove me home.

My mother hugged me so hard I couldn't breathe. She was crying and she held me for at least a minute. I was okay until I remembered the last time I saw her she was standing there with her little robe open and her body exposed, hollering at me with her face all red.

Then I started crying too.

Claire was in the kitchen making hot chocolate. She was sniffing and her eyes were wet.

"Do you have any idea what you put us through?" my mother said. "What happened to you? Where did you go?"

"I got lost, Mom."

"But where? How? Where did you end up?"

"I don't know. It was dark."

I was sitting on a kitchen chair. She crouched down and looked into my eyes and kissed me on the mouth.

"Mmmmm. Please, don't ever do that again. If I say something rotten, just pretend I didn't say it. Okay?"

I nodded. I tried to smile.

She looked at Claire and laughed through her tears. She wiped her face with the back of her hand.

"The little dope was sulking because I yelled at her. She wanted to torture me by staying out all night. But we were lucky, weren't we? We were lucky they found you."

I looked over at Claire. She was so tired her eyes seemed bruised, but she kept smiling. She came over and kissed me on the forehead. I could imagine my mother on the phone sounding crazy and hysterical, saying things to her that didn't make any sense.

"I have to go. It's late."

After Claire left, my mother bathed me and rubbed baby powder all over me and then put me to bed. She hadn't done anything like that for years. I was tired and I have to admit it felt good. I was glad to be home.

"Don't you ever do anything like that to me again, Sara. Please? Will you promise?"

I was lying in bed, so drowsy I couldn't keep my eyes open.

"Okay, Mom."

"I'm sorry, Sara. I'm so sorry I yelled at you. I was upset. I didn't mean it. I didn't mean any of what I said. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you or Julie. I don't know if I'd be able to go on. I might just lie down and die."

It frightened me, that she spoke so easily, almost wistfully, about dying. I didn't want her to die, and I especially didn't want her to die because of me. The thought of it made me wish I could pull the blanket up and hide from her and what she was saying. But I could feel her standing over me, watching. I didn't know what to do, and the next time she spoke her voice echoed strangely, as if she were standing at the other end of an enormous empty room.

"I love you, Sara. I promise I'll never do anything like that again. You have my word."