

**Soft Serve: A Collection of Stories**

by © Allison Graves A Thesis submitted  
to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**Masters of Arts/Memorial University/Department of English**  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

**October, 2017**

St. John's Newfoundland and Labrador

## **ABSTRACT**

In Wal-Mart and McDonald's, on Tinder and on the highway, standing on the edge of the CN tower and the top of Signal Hill, this collection of short stories questions how people navigate the places that ultimately make them feel lost. Exploring the often strange confusion and boredom that seeps into the everyday of modern life, this book negotiates this affective dualism by weaving subverted existentialism into casual speech. In this collection, I explore the realm of superficial acquaintance between person and place that plays contrast to moments of sincerity laid bare. Within and around such quotidian spaces, I ask: What is the significance of the attendant feelings? Where do those feelings direct us? Do they teach us something? Do they have the capacity to make us think differently? In this book, I comment on how these landscapes can reflect both the banality and intensity that so often marks our lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my mother and father for everything.

Thank you to Lisa Moore for her supervision, her advice, and her friendship.

Thank you to the Department of English and the School of Graduate Studies at Memorial University for intellectual and practical assistance and for creating an environment that was crucial to the completion of this work.

Thank you to Danine Farquharson for answering all my questions.

Thank you to Drawn and Quarterly, Eastern Edge, The Overcast and Fixed Coffee for teaching me new things while I wrote this book.

Thank you to Noah Bender, Colleen Daly, Becky Gibson, Jess Gibson, Nina Hitzler, Kate Lahey, Jake Nicoll, Amery Sandford, Aley Waterman and Nan Ford for their support.

“IKEA Showroom” was previously published in *The Impression Gang Journal Association*.

“It’s Getting Dark Out” was previously published in *Riddle Fence Journal of Arts and Culture*.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Halfway Somewhere	1
No Man's Land	15
Soft Serve	33
My Friend, My Parrot	45
Stand By	54
Winter Salad	65
IKEA Showroom	76
Value	80
Swiffer Wet Jet	93
Stars	101
Staying Alive	111
Eat Me	124
Tinder Dave	135
It's Getting Dark Out	143
Shallow Water	155
The Amazing Race	170

## HALFWAY SOMEWHERE

1/2

Frank and I broke up at the AGO, the day after Valentine's. Toronto was slushy and dreary and I didn't feel good. We had taken a Megabus from Kingston where we both went to school and we stayed at Frank's parents' house in the Beaches. Frank's father was reading *The Odyssey* and I told him I had never seen anyone over 25 read it. Frank's mother had made a bed for me in the basement and put a mint on the pillow. I ate the mint as I was trying to fall asleep and sent Frank a text saying, what's up?

His parents both worked at Ryerson and they took the subway to work holding hands. They were both disciplined and concerned and as I stared at them over the Valentine's stew, I honestly thought they could have been twins. The stew had been in the slow-cooker since Thursday and Frank's mother said to me, "Roxane, I hope you like carrots."

I remember nodding and saying, "Mmmm" very loudly. Frank's father looked at me from the end of the table with his head tilted to the left. "So, you like Homer?" I asked, folding the beige napkin on my lap in a triangle.

"Simpson?" his mother said. She was scooping the stew onto plates edged with yellow flowers. As she was handing a full plate to Frank it tipped and fell like an avalanche into brown layers on her white tablecloth. In my memory she said something like, "Oh goodness me," and the pile of stew was left there as we began to eat. Then Frank's father grabbed my hand and I jumped until my knees hit the table.

"We have to pray, Roxane," Frank's father announced loudly like a command.

I thought about how my family always prayed before dinner too. We hardly ever held hands because everyone was always too hungry.

“Oh, hold on, I just need to light the candles,” Frank’s mother said, jumping from the table and running on her tippy toes to the kitchen. I was still holding Frank’s father’s hand and for a second it felt wrong. I could feel my hands getting sweaty and I tried to catch Frank’s eyes across from me, but he was staring at the pile of stew left on the table like a dead animal. Once the candles were lit, the room started to smell of lavender and I thought, *Shit I’m allergic*. Frank’s mother sat down and grabbed my other hand, the one that was not holding her husband’s. Frank’s father said the prayer. He talked about Valentine’s Day and how much he loved his wife. I thought they would be looking at each other but everyone’s eyes were closed, their heads bowed almost 90 degrees. I kept my eyes open and looked between Frank’s mother and father. I could have sworn they were related. Later I wanted to tell Frank this, but thought it was better to not.

“Amen,” everyone except me said when the prayer was finished.

Frank’s parents asked me all the regular questions over dinner and I answered with stew in my mouth. “Yes, I like Queens. I want to be a writer, maybe. My parents still live in Guelph. I have a half-brother, but we didn’t grow up together.”

The cat, whose name was Jennifer, hopped onto the table and started eating the stew off the tablecloth. I wondered if that was the intention the whole time. No one seemed disturbed or inclined to even acknowledge Jennifer, although I felt like someone else had joined us.

“We only had Frankie here, but we tried for another one, that’s for sure. Didn’t we, honey?”

I watched Frank eat his meal in heaping spoonfuls, not acknowledging his parents’ conversation at all. He had tucked his beige napkin halfway down his shirt and he was doing things his way.

That night, Frank's mother gave him the keys to the car and told him to be home in 90 minutes.

"Why wouldn't she just say an hour and a half," I asked him as I jumped down his parents' porch steps two at a time.

"I don't know. Don't ask me. I don't understand half of what comes out of their mouths."

"I didn't know that."

"You didn't know what?"

"That they were like that."

"I don't know what you mean."

Frank was the type of person who was not okay with anyone insulting his parents while he simultaneously treated them like shit.

"Never mind," I said, and I grabbed his hand.

"Your hand is all sweaty."

"Oh yeah, it's from the prayer."

We drove to a Scarborough Dairy Queen in his parents' Mercedes. I told him a story about how my brother came to my ninth birthday party and threw a pie in my face.

"What? Why?"

"It was part of the joke. You would like spin a wheel or whatever and one of the options was a pie in the face."

"Why would anybody want that?"

"Because you got to lick it off after." I paused. "But I remember it being funny because I remember this woman who worked at the restaurant was going to do it and then at the last second my brother took the pie from her hand. And I remember it almost feeling like a punishment, but I didn't know why he was punishing me."

Frank squinted like he didn't know where this story was going which is something I felt happened with us often.

“I don’t know. Everyone laughed and so I laughed too cause I was nine. But I think it upset me.”

“Yeah?” Frank asked. “Did you tell him that?”

“No, I never told anyone. I just licked the pie off my face.”

Frank found a CD in the glove compartment that said SUMMER JAMS on it. There was a sun with a smiley face drawn in thick sharpie and it made me feel closer to Frank. He got excited and told me he made this CD when he was in middle school and it would be funny to listen to, like a blast through the past. When he put it on though, it played a Bach Concerto. Someone had recorded over his songs, his summer jams. I didn’t know which concerto it was, but I had a memory of my parents playing it and slow dancing in our living room after my dad retired. Frank got really mad about the CD and chucked it out the window like a frisbee.

“They just can’t let anything be mine.” His face was red and he ran a red light but I didn’t say anything.

Frank used his father’s MasterCard to buy me a blizzard at the Dairy Queen. They were featuring a special love blizzard that was larger than normal. A guy whose name tag said BART stuck two spoons inside, tipped it upside down, which is something I never understood, and handed it to us like it was a new baby.

“Enjoy,” he said.

“Why do they always tip it upside down?” I asked Frank as I leaned in toward his shoulder.

“We have to make sure it stays together!” BART said. “We don’t want any falling out.” He leaned towards us over the counter. “Plus, I think it looks kinda cool.”

Frank told me as we walked out that it was an advertising campaign in the 90’s and he was surprised I didn’t remember. When we got outside, Frank took the first bite, which didn’t surprise me. It had started raining and I noticed

Frank's red spoon was still in his mouth. He handed me his coat, which did surprise me, and said, "I think we're supposed to get a blizzard."

We ran to the car and Frank fell on his back. I turned around and laughed and immediately felt bad so I threw my hand over my mouth and bent down to where he was lying. I moved his dark hair off of his forehead and said, "Are you okay?"

"I heard a crack."

"I think that was lightning," I told him and I think he felt hurt that I didn't just agree.

He limped to the car and before he opened the door, he told me he wanted to have sex.

"Me too," I agreed and we got into the back seat. The Mercedes was perfect and the seats shone. I said, "Should we do this here? I feel bad about the car."

"It's fine, Roxane. It's Valentine's."

I put the half-eaten blizzard on the floor of the car and asked Frank if he was up for this after falling.

"Turn around," he said. So I took my pants off and slid around on the perfect seats of his parents' car, thinking about the prayer at dinner.

"I think your parents really love each other," I told him when I was facing the other way, toward the window. I thought about how my parents used to put our dogs in the backseat of our Windstar so we could drive to the park.

He didn't answer and it was a minute before he said, "Shit, I can't get hard."

The windows were foggy and I felt hot. My knees were sticking to the leather seat and I thought about how I would have rather been looking at him while we had sex on Valentine's. I closed my eyes and breathed deep and could feel him grunting behind me in a way that made me wonder if he really needed me at all.

“Hold on a sec,” he whispered and grabbed my ass in a disconnected way like it was a door knob or something.

Then I saw, out the passenger window, BART, from the Dairy Queen. He was wearing a blue uniformed polo shirt with a little ice cream cone in the corner. His visor was wet and there was water falling off the brim. His eyes met mine from where he stood a few feet away and I suddenly felt embarrassed. My boyfriend had turned me over like a Dairy Queen blizzard.

“Fuck it,” Frank said.

I looked back and saw that he was only halfway hard.

“It’s just not working.”

I pulled up my pants and looked down at the floor. The Valentine’s blizzard had spilt all over the back of the car. It was white and creamy and there were two spoons sitting in either side of the puddle.

Frank’s parents had a membership to the Art Gallery of Ontario and they told us to enjoy. So, the next day we took the streetcar along Dundas and Frank sat down while I stood up.

“I don’t even know this guy.”

“Well he’s dead.”

“Who?”

“The painter, Alex Colville.” The street car stopped and I lost my footing and fell into a girl wearing a Canada Goose jacket. I remembered my mother telling me about Alex Colville. She had a coffee table book at our house in Guelph and on the front there was a woman staring at you with binoculars. “I remember finding his paintings about women really interesting when I was younger,” I told Frank.

Frank looked sad. His eyes were sunken in and dark like they were bruised.

“How’s your back today?”

“It’s bruised a bit, but it’s fine.”

When we got to the AGO, they offered to give us headsets. We both put them on so we couldn't hear each other. When we walked into the gallery they were screening a scene from a Wes Anderson movie, *Moonrise Kingdom*. Frank lifted the headset and held it above his head about two inches. "That girl kind of looks like you."

I smiled and appreciated Frank for being observant and nice when I didn't expect him to. We walked through the gallery like it was a maze. I paused in front of a painting I recognized from my mom's coffee book. In the painting, a mother was putting her two young kids in a car, a boy and a girl.

"I like this one," I said, leaning over toward Frank.

"What?"

"Never mind," I said. I pulled the headphones off and they dropped to the floor and the string hung from my pocket like a leash. I looked around at the paintings and felt happy for Alex Colville and his wife. I really believed that they had found something special with each other. "I think we should break up," I said to Frank quietly like I wasn't sure.

"What?" Frank said.

"I think we should break up," I said louder this time.

"I was just getting to the good part!" he said loudly, pointing to the headphones. I stared at him like I was disappointed.

"I'm gonna go!" I yelled. I looked toward the retail shop. There was a mother pointing at the door. Her head was covering the A of the AGO gift shop. GO, it said, like a sign that I should run. "I'm gonna go!" I yelled again louder and my palms turned toward the sky like I was frustrated or like I was praying maybe. Frank didn't seem to notice and if he did, he didn't say anything.

I took the street car down Queen and back to Frank's parents' house. His mother let me in and I told her something about Frank running into a friend and staying downtown. I told her he loved the exhibit, and he thought it was an interesting comment on women.

After getting my things, I took an early bus back to Kingston and kept my head against the window the whole time. My brother was picking me up the next Friday to go to our dad's house in Guelph and I thought about how I would avoid seeing Frank until then.

2/2

After nearly an hour on the road, my brother asks me if I believe in God. Instead of answering him, I pretend that I am asleep, with my mouth open on the closed window. I can imagine him rolling his eyes but I don't look to confirm because I am pretending to be asleep.

My half-brother Tyler lives in the Ottawa Valley. He's recently met a girlfriend online and she works for the government. He sometimes visits her at parliament and says, "I'm a socialist." I wonder if this makes things hard for them, not having the same politics, but he said they just don't talk about it. They have a rent-controlled apartment and he named their wifi Fuckharper69, so his girlfriend started connecting to their neighbours' wifi instead.

"I can't be seen in that network," she said and I asked Tyler if he was sure she was talking about the internet.

Tyler left Ottawa this morning in the dark to get me. When he picks me up, I'm wearing a pair of sweatpants that say QUEENS across the butt and Tyler tells me it looks ridiculous.

"Do you ever feel like you're just wasting Dad's money," he asked once we were on the highway.

"I don't really think about it."

Our father has been married two times. The first time to Tyler's mother and the second time to mine. My mother and father are still married and live on a cul-de-sac in Guelph. When I was learning to drive, my father would sit in the passenger seat and I would drive around and around the cul-de-sac, not actually going anywhere. He would laugh and then get mad in a matter of seconds and

then he would laugh again. This was the thing about my father, he never felt any particular way too intensely. This made me think about Frank and how he was this way too.

When I pretend to wake up, I put my hand over my mouth and yawn. The thing about a fake yawn though, is it usually turns into a real one.

“Good nap?” Tyler asks and I know then that he doesn’t take me seriously. But I think I’ve always known that.

“Mmmmm,” I moan and think I sound exactly like a tired person.

When Tyler was twenty-five he moved in with us. He barely looked at my mother even though she tried really hard. He would sit in the basement and let his hair grow long. I was ten, and thought Tyler hung the moon. He would let me do things that my parents wouldn’t, like eat chocolate and play Tony Hawk Pro Skater. He would pick me up from sleepovers in his silver Sunfire and we would listen to NOFX. His favourite song was Bottles to the Ground and I remember thinking, *Wow, this guy’s cool*. But I don’t ever remember feeling like we were related, or like this person and I shared something as important as a father. I remember asking him what he wanted to do with his life and he didn’t answer. But after that I always felt like he resented me or looked at me like I had more time and more ways to figure it out than he did.

Tyler asked if I wanted to stop at an OnRoute and I said, “Yeah I have to pee,” but really I felt nauseated, although I didn’t say that out loud. I thought about Frank and how we hadn’t talked since Toronto. It had been two weeks and I didn’t get my period at the end of the month and that’s always when it comes. I thought about taking a pregnancy test and then I thought I was fine just not knowing. Because once I knew, I would have to make a decision, and I just wasn’t good at that. I wanted to tell Tyler, but I knew he would say that making the decision is always easier. Getting rid of the choice is how people get happy.

I threw up at the OnRoute and then I bought jelly beans and a green neck pillow with my father’s credit card. I stood at the door waiting for Tyler to get a

double double. The OnRoute was made of glass and had a Burger King and a Tim Horton's stemming from either side like arms. Tyler walked by me with his coffee and reached out toward me as he was passing, like he was going to punch me in the stomach. At the last second he pulled away and kept walking, but I still keeled over, winded, like he'd hurt me.

When we got back in the car I told Tyler about how I had recently started taking psychology classes and I didn't understand it.

"That's weird. I always felt like you understood everything about everyone."

I thought this was the nicest thing he had ever said to me. Tyler had never gone to university and after he moved out of our house on the court, he became an electrician. "It just seemed easier to pick a thing and stick with it," he would say. He just picked a girlfriend and a trade and a wifi password and he didn't think about it afterwards. I liked this certainty about him.

"I think I'm pregnant."

Tyler let go of the wheel and we swerved into the other lane. "I almost punched you in the stomach back there!"

"I know, I remember."

"I mean, of course I was kidding."

"Of course," I say. I open the car window and begin spitting the yellow jelly beans onto the highway like spitballs.

"Roxane, have you thought about this? Who is the father? That kid Frank?"

I look at one of the jelly beans as it leaves my mouth and I think that's probably the size of the fetus. "Tyler, just calm down. I'm a bit nauseous and I haven't gotten my period. That's it."

"You haven't taken a test?" he asked, and opened his window too, which began to hurt my ears pretty quickly.

"No, I thought it was better to enjoy the weekend and think about it when I had to."

“Have you talked to Frank? What is he saying about all this?”

“Frank and I haven’t spoken. We broke up at the AGO over an Alex Colville painting. You know that painting called *Soldier and Girl at Station*. It’s a man and a woman hugging. She’s on her tip toes.” Tyler whipped his head around like he didn’t understand what I was talking about. “You know, I started to think about family and God and everything and it really seems like Colville loved his wife so much and I just thought that I didn’t love Frank like that. And then I started thinking about you and dad and how close we all were, or if we were close at all.” I put the neck pillow on and it felt heavy like there was a weight on my shoulders. And I wondered if Tyler and I could ever even feel fully related because we are half siblings.

When I used to think of Tyler and our age difference I would think about it like two arms on a clock. Like he was always a quarter ahead of me. It was strange, now that I think about it, but it made me feel closer to him. Like I could see the two of us on the same face.

The only Thanksgiving we ever spent together was when I was eleven and Tyler was getting ready to move out of our house. I remember him grabbing my hand at the table and me thinking, *finally, he loves me*, but instead he said, “Let’s pray.” The funny thing about it all was that Tyler had still refused to look at my mother but she was the only other one at the table who believed in something other than herself. I remember feeling angry at Tyler for not understanding my mother and not trying.

I said, “Maybe we should all say thank you for believing in each other.” I wanted this to be like church when everyone shook hands with strangers. I knew this came after collection because I always remembered my father pulling a green twenty out of his pocket. The twenties in my father’s wallet always looked like they had never been touched by anyone else before him. Tyler took this moment to go to the washroom and I wondered who it was he didn’t believe in. That

Thanksgiving I remember us all reaching in for the turkey, tearing its legs and wings off and stuffing them right in our mouths. We were all hungry for something.

---

Tyler hadn't spoken but his jaw had been clenched for at least the last twenty miles.

"I think I need to stop again. I feel sick."

He said there was an OnRoute coming up and I drank a sip of his double double which was cold and the sugar was at the bottom. I went straight to the bathroom which I didn't have trouble finding because it was in the exact same place as the last OnRoute we stopped at. I puked and full jelly beans of all colours floated around in the toilet, blending with each other. I thought it was kind of beautiful before I flushed. When I opened the door Tyler was standing there with a pregnancy test.

"You have to take this." He held it so close to my face it was almost touching my nose. "Trust me, you'll feel better when you know."

I moved past him and said, "I want ice cream."

Between the Cheetos and the soft serve, Tyler started to yell at me. He threw his arms up and the pregnancy test floated through the air like a baseball. He stared at me like he was waiting for me to react and suddenly he looked like a stranger.

"You don't even know me," I told him as I waited for a woman in a hairnet to hand me my ice cream.

"I know that nothing has ever been difficult for you. Not really." I wondered if he was finally going to tell me he was angry that I got to grow up with our dad and he didn't. But he stopped.

I waited for him at the door while he got a double double. There was a Burger King and a Tim Horton's stemming from either side of the OnRoute like arms.

"This OnRoute looks exactly the same as the last one," I told Tyler when he was close enough to hear. I was almost waiting for him to punch me in the stomach this time, so he could make the decision for me and I could stop sucking him into my world full of choices.

"I'm mad at you for not being more like me," Tyler said.

"Do you remember when you threw that pie in my face, at my ninth birthday?"

"Yeah I remember."

"I felt really far away from you then," I said.

Tyler and I didn't speak as we approached Toronto. I thought about Frank and us taking the Megabus to his parents' house. I thought about his indifference toward me and how I inflated every good thing he ever said because I was surprised when he was nice. I thought about Frank's parents and his father reading Homer and his mother thinking it was the Simpsons. I thought about them praying and Frank's father's hand in mine like he knew me. I wondered if Tyler thought he was deprived of our father which is why he became religious.

We stopped talking for a while and then right before Toronto, Tyler's car broke down. I told him I had Dad's CAA card and he rolled his eyes. I puked again on the side of the road and then called our father.

"We were moving and then all of a sudden we weren't going anywhere," I said over the phone. I thought about my father teaching me to drive in circles around the court, not going anywhere.

"Do you know where you are?"

I told my father we were between two OnRoutes that were organized the same way so I didn't know where we were.

“Are you close to anything?” my father asked.

“I’m not sure.”

A guy with long nose hair from CAA picked us up and we all squeezed into the front seat of a tow truck with me in the middle.

“You guys look a lot alike. You related?” the CAA man asked.

One of us said, “Yeah.”

The other said, “Kinda.”

## NO MAN'S LAND

In her senior year, Beverly discovered the fall of man. Her school was putting on a production of *Paradise Lost*, but Adam and Eve would both be played by women. And Satan too. This was an executive decision made by Beverly's drama teacher who insisted everyone call her Rebecca. Rebecca said she suffered some pushback from the school, who didn't think she should be erasing men from history. When Rebecca told this part of the story she started laughing until she was so red in the face Beverly thought she might puke.

One night in May, Beverly chipped her tooth on a bottle of Black Horse. Steve's father operated the Aquarena and told Steve that Wednesday they would be emptying the pool and replacing all the water with clean stuff. Steve told Beverly and Ginny and Ryan that he would pick them up at ten and he would get a case of beer with his fake. The girls rode in the back and Beverly could see that Ginny had put on eyeliner that twirled at the end of her eye like a wave.

"Did your parents name you after Virginia Woolf?" Beverly asked and couldn't believe she didn't know.

"Yeah, I guess." Ginny said, like she didn't care. "I've only ever read *The Waves* though."

"Did you know that Virginia Woolf drowned herself?"

"Shit," Ginny said and put her head out the window like a dog.

"She did a lot for women though!"

Ginny brought her head back into the car. "Before she killed herself?"

When they got to the pool it was completely empty of water. Steve jumped in and leaned against the wall.

"This is so weird dude. Remember when we used to come here for lessons?"

Beverly nodded and said she remembered. Steve was her oldest friend. Their families were close and she and Steve were baptized on the same day. Beverly's mother had recently shown her a photo of the two of them held beside each other, their hair wet from water. Steve was crying like a baby.

"We're always doing water activities together," Beverly said.

"I wouldn't consider baptism an activity." Steve took a huge slug of his beer and it reminded her of the way her dad drank on the weekends. He handed her a Black Horse and Beverly took off the cap and put it in her pocket. She tucked her hair behind her ear and winced with pain. Yesterday, she and Ginny had gone to Churchill Square and bought vanilla dip doughnuts and then they got their ears pierced at Studio Maxx. Beverly held Ginny's hand tight and Ginny said, "We could have just used a needle and an apple."

"Dude, we should bring our skateboards here," Ryan shouted at Steve. Steve gave Ryan a thumbs up and Beverly sat down beside him. Ginny and Ryan had just started dating and they were making out in the shallow end. Ginny looked up and her eyeliner was smudged.

"It looks like she has a black eye," Steve said as he cracked open another beer and threw the cap toward the shallow end.

"Are you sure this is okay? That we're here? Your dad won't be mad?"

"Just stop worrying for one second. We're fine." He grabbed her hand and turned it around in his like it was something he'd never seen before.

"I feel like this is what Rebecca is trying to do to our minds. Empty them out and replace all the problematic stuff with clean stuff." Beverly gestured at the empty pool so he would know what she was talking about.

Steve laughed and said, "You're insane." Beverly finished her first beer and felt her face turn red. "Hey you got your ear pierced," Steve said as he moved her hair aside, making her feel hot all over. It had only been the last little while that Steve had been making her feel this way, like he wanted something from her but he was too scared to ask. They were graduating in the spring and Beverly had just

accepted her offer to go to Ryerson. Her parents had thrown her a party when she got accepted and they got a cake. Steve's family had come over early and Steve had been wearing a tie with polka dots. As she bent over and blew the candles out, her long, blonde hair caught on fire. Steve put the flame out with a wash cloth and said, "I'm proud of you, Bev."

"Are you going to try out for the play?" Steve asked.

"I guess. Rebecca told me she's feeling really bummed out about the American election and she only wants to be around women. She wants us to feel like we exist for each other and not for men." Beverly took a sip of Steve's beer even though she had her own open. "I think she thinks it's bull shit that Eve came from Adam's rib, you know."

Steve agreed that the whole thing was bull shit and Beverly thought that was admirable. Ginny and Ryan held hands as they walked back toward the deep end and they all sat in a circle as they finished the beer. Beverly was feeling drunk after her third Black Horse and started to do summersaults and cartwheels down one lane of the pool until she reached the other end. On her final summersault she got dizzy and hit her mouth against an almost empty beer bottle. Her front tooth chipped halfway down and half the tooth now sat on the bottom of the pool against the shiny blue tile. Everyone looked at it and Ryan said, "Shit." Beverly covered her mouth with her hand and started laughing. Steve started laughing too and he picked up the tooth and put it in his pocket.

"What am I going to tell my parents?!" Beverly was kneeling on the pool floor now and she smiled. "Oh my God, can you see my tongue?"

Steve said, "I feel like I can see all the way back to your brain." He paused. "I like it."

Beverly's parents noticed her pierced ear before they noticed her tooth. When they finally saw the gap in her mouth, her father said, "It's fine, you just need a cap."

“What is that?”

“It’s like a cover up. So you don’t see what’s underneath.”

Beverly started crying and said, “What are people going to think?”

“Honey, who cares, it will look the same as before.”

Beverly had never cared about her appearance when she was younger. She wanted to care about things that were bigger than that, like her mind. But lately she had been feeling small and vain and interested in looking good. She wanted to think it had nothing to do with Steve but she wasn’t sure. Rebecca, her drama teacher, had taken Beverly under her wing and talked to her about gender politics and the American election and how men always won. Beverly always tried to be strong and durable but she was feeling more vulnerable than ever, more sensitive, and more worried about being hurt.

Beverly’s father had just bought a vape in his quest to stop smoking and he liked the blueberry flavour the best. So he was vaping in the house, and everywhere from the living room to the kitchen smelt like berries.

“This doesn’t bother you, does it girls?”

Beverly’s mother hated blueberries because she had grown up on Bell Island and they were everywhere. Her family used to pick them in empty margarine containers and eat them for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

“It’s fine,” her mother said and Beverly thought it was nice that her mother was lying to her father to make him happy. Beverly thought her father’s smoking was starting to worry them all now that he was sixty.

“All these celebrities are dying really young,” Beverly said while she flipped through an US Weekly. “Like, in their sixties.”

“Since when do you care about celebrities?” her father asked.

Beverly thought it was funny that her parents always concerned themselves with the wrong problem. They cared more about her earring than her chipped tooth. They were more worried about her thinking of celebrities than death.

“I’m going over to Steve’s,” Beverly said.

“Have fun!” Her mother responded. “Tell Denise and Brian we say hello.”

Beverly thought about their families and how her connection to Steve felt almost biological or something. Her father inhaled his vape and Beverly heard him coughing enormously as she closed the door behind her. He still wasn't used to the change.

On her way over to Steve's, he messaged her and called her toothless. He said LOL after though, so Beverly thought it was funny. He asked her to bring snacks and told her he would see her soon. Steve's family lived in a big house on Waterford Bridge Road with lots of trees in the back. They had a tree house that he and his brothers had built when they were kids and Beverly's parents used to have to pull her out of it by the ankles.

Beverly met Steve in the treehouse and hit her head on a branch she had always been too small to notice. She brought Purity cookies and Steve said, “Yum.” She was wearing a pink dress she had bought at the thrift store with bike shorts underneath. She sat cross legged in the treehouse and ate a Purity cookie. The crumbs from the cookie fell onto her chest and she laughed.

“Did you put lipstick on?” Steve asked.

“I don't know, just like gloss or whatever.”

“It looks good.” He was looking at her like he wanted to say something. But she knew he wouldn't. He would never do anything that would make her feel uncomfortable. He was thoughtful and smart and he wanted her to be happy.

“What do you want to do next year?” Beverly asked. She had been avoiding talking about it because she knew he was avoiding thinking about it.

“I don't want to talk about it.” He ate a cookie. “I'm sorry.”

“That's okay, you don't have to talk about it.”

“I just feel like everybody has it all figured out and I just don't, yet. I feel like leaving Newfoundland is hard and weird and everything else is connected. I just want to be here, in this tree fort with you.”

“I think that’s nice and okay.” Steve moved closer to her and put his hands on her thighs. His hands felt familiar even though he had never touched her like this before. He kissed her on the mouth and when he pulled away he had pink lip gloss on. Beverly giggled and tilted her head to the side.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

She nodded with her mouth closed and he kissed her again with tongue. She felt his tongue find hers through the hole in her front tooth. She could taste the Purity cookie in his teeth and everything felt familiar.

“You taste pure,” she whispered against his ear.

Rebecca gave Beverly the part of Eve and said, “I want to watch you be tempted.” Ginny was playing Satan and they were rehearsing the part where Ginny turns into a snake to tempt Eve to eat the apple. This made Beverly think about the green apple her mother packed in her bag that morning and how she was hungry. They were in the Holy Heart theatre and Rebecca was wearing a red beret.

“Ginny, now, slither across the stage on your stomach.”

“But this is a new shirt is the thing,” Ginny said.

Beverly laughed and said, “Ginny, come on, just do it.” Ginny had just moved in with her mother in an apartment on Victoria. Her father had stayed in the house on Elizabeth and in an attempt to cheer her up, Beverly said, “It’s so weird, they both live on such regal sounding streets. Victoria and Elizabeth are both powerful women!”

Ginny had looked at Beverly and a tear leaked out of her right eye with the wave on the side. Beverly had held Ginny until she stopped crying and convinced her that playing Satan was really an honour.

“He’s really a fallen angel,” Rebecca said when Ginny showed hesitation about playing the devil. “Really, it’s a layered and troubled character.”

Ginny said, “It seems I am too these days,” and took the part.

On Friday night, Rebecca had all the girls from the play over to her house to discuss plot. She rented a narrow house on Colonial that was painted yellow and orange. Bookshelves covered every wall of the living room and she put out cheese plates. Beverly wore a black dress and Vans and drank a non-alcoholic spritzer Rebecca had left beside the cheese. She looked through the photos on the fireplace and for the first time, she noticed Rebecca was pretty. Her hair was dark and curly and always thrown up haphazardly and she had glasses with yellow frames. There were a lot of pictures of her with a man who looked older. They went to Niagara Falls and Parliament together and they took pictures with their own arms. Beverly wondered who this man was, because she had never thought about Rebecca being married. Rebecca never wore a wedding ring and besides, it kind of seemed like she hated men.

“Who is this?” Beverly asked.

“That’s my husband,” Rebecca said as she joined Beverly in the kitchen.

“I didn’t know you were married.”

“Why would you?”

“I don’t know,” Beverly thought. “I mean, I guess I wouldn’t.”

Rebecca took a sip of red wine from a glass that was meant for white.

“I mean, I think about it sometimes. What you guys are like outside of school and like if you’re in a relationship and stuff.”

Rebecca said, “Yeah, I don’t want that. I don’t want you to judge me in accordance to a man. That’s why I get you to call me Rebecca.”

“I wouldn’t judge you.”

“You wouldn’t mean to, but people still think this way, Beverly. You have to know that.”

“Is that why you’re not allowing men in the Garden of Eden?” Beverly sipped her wine spritzer and spilled some of it on her chin.

“I don’t want all Adam’s traits in the play to be considered masculine traits.” She paused when Beverly looked confused. “I want love and heroism and

sacrifice to be feminine qualities too. I don't want the first man, the one with power over all of creation, to be the one to sacrifice for a woman. I want it to be the other way around."

Beverly leaned against the kitchen counter and put her spritzer down. "Well can you just do that? This is Milton's story, not yours."

"If I don't change this for women than this is always going to be the reality though. That the woman is the dumb, vain one who is so easily convinced to eat the apple and her boyfriend loves her so much that he will just eat it too. And he's the one who gets the credit. I'm just tired of men getting the credit!" Rebecca's voice was getting louder and the girls from the living room were looking in with spritzers in their tiny hands. "Don't you want women to get the credit, Beverly?"

Behind Rebecca, a HILLARY FOR AMERICA thank you card was pinned on the fridge with magnets at each corner. *Thank you for your Donation of...* The dollar amount that Rebecca donated was blocked by a magnet. Beverly felt like she needed to see it to know just how important this was to Rebecca. Like it would give her a more linear idea of how much this woman cared about women.

"I just don't want you to be tempted by men, Beverly. You're too good for that. You're too smart."

"Thank you," Beverly whispered, like it was a secret between them. Beverly started to think about Steve and him kissing her in the tree house behind his mother's garden. She thought about him sliding his hands up her thighs and asking her if it was okay. She thought that he was different. He didn't want the credit, he just wanted her.

Beverly pushed past Rebecca and said, "C'mon, let's talk about Paradise."

Beverly sat beside Ginny on the couch and squeezed her leg. There were ten girls there, all of them drinking spritzers. Beverly ate a piece of cheese and she thought it was a terrible combination.

"So, Beverly and Ginny, how do you think we should do the seduction scene?" When neither answered, Rebecca continued. "Satan is disguised as the

snake and he seduces Eve with his rhetoric. He gets her to eat the apple by preying on her vanity.”

Beverly’s face turned red like everyone had figured her out. Like everyone thought she could be tempted.

“Why does it even matter if she eats the apple?” Tracy Doyle asked.

“God gave them one rule. They can’t eat from the tree of knowledge, or they’re punished by death,” Beverly said.

“Satan wants to poison them.”

“Why though?” Tracy asked.

“Because he’s jealous of their love. Because he’s a bad person. I don’t know, he’s miserable! He’s Satan.”

Ginny excused herself and went to the bathroom, running up the stairs two at a time.

After they left Rebecca’s, they walked to Ryan’s house. He was having a party because his parents were visiting Fogo until Sunday. His mother had been accepted to do an artist residency and she was waiting on funding. The girls walked down Gower Street and the red light from Halliday’s Convenience lit up their shoes.

“I got into MUN,” Ginny whispered as she kicked a rock down the street, a little further each time.

“What! That’s great!”

“Is it?”

“Yes! Of course.” Beverly responded. Ginny hadn’t gotten into her top two schools, Ryerson and Queens, and she desperately wanted to leave Newfoundland. She had come to Beverly’s university acceptance party and eaten her cake so fast she got the hiccups.

“Ginny, come on. You’ll love MUN. You can live in residence and you’ll like never have to see your parents.”

Ginny walked into Halliday's and the bell over the door chimed like a church. Ginny bought two sour keys for twenty-five cents each and handed one to Beverly. Beverly sucked on her candy but Ginny bit hers. As they walked down the hill toward Duckworth, Beverly could see the top of Cabot Tower. She remembered a few years back when Steve thought it would be a good idea to go to the top of Signal Hill on Halloween. Beverly was dressed as a ghost because she couldn't think of a costume, so at the last minute she cut a hole in a pillow case and called it a day. Steve was dressed as one slice of pepperoni pizza. Ginny was wearing a tiara and her hair was all over the place in the wind. When they got to the top, some of the guys started jumping off the cannon. Beverly told Steve to stop and that he was scaring her. He told her he was just going to jump one last time and then he tripped. The last thing Beverly saw was a large piece of pizza rolling down Signal Hill. Ginny turned around and threw her arms around Beverly's neck dramatically like it could have been bad. But when they looked down the hill, Steve was lying only twenty feet away, his roll stopped by a rock. He got up and dusted the slice of pizza off and screamed that he was fine, but they were right, he probably shouldn't do that again.

When Beverly asked Ginny if she remembered that time, Ginny swallowed her sour key and said, "Yeah, the fall of man." This made Beverly laugh.

When they got to Ryan's house on Prescott they added their Vans to a pile of shoes that were all the same, just different sizes. When the girls got to the kitchen, Ryan was turned upside down over a keg of beer. His legs were held in the air by Steve and a guy named Anthony Marshall. His dirty white socks left a grey mark on his parent's kitchen ceiling and he stumbled for balance when they put him down. He pulled Ginny toward him and kissed her on the mouth. Steve smiled at Beverly and handed her a can of India. She smiled and Steve noticed that she had a cap on her tooth. "Hey, I can't see your brain anymore," he whispered when she was beside him. "How was Rebecca's?"

Beverly said it was fine but she thought that Ginny was mad because she was Satan. The boys had brought Ryan's ping pong table up from the basement and they had set red cups up like pyramids on either side.

Ryan lifted his hands above his head like he was wrestling and said to Steve, "C'mon, you and your girl verses me and mine."

Beverly thought about how she resented being called someone's girl but she agreed to play anyways. It was a game that people seemed to be better at the more they had to drink. Beverly looked to the side as Steve was about to shoot and she saw that he had a drop of sweat coming down off his hairline like water. She thought about their baptism and how they'd always done things together. Beverly sank the winning shot into Ginny's cup and immediately upon seeing her best friend's face wished she had just let Ginny win at something for once. Steve kissed Beverly on the top of her head and said, "We won, Bev."

After ten, the party started to fill up until there were people Beverly didn't recognize, which almost never happened in St. John's. Steve had been holding Beverly's hand since beer pong and she felt tethered but also free in a way that made her feel weird. She thought about her earlier conversation with Rebecca and she thought about Adam and Eve and how God had given them total freedom but not freedom from each other.

Beverly left Steve to go to the washroom and stopped in a bedroom at the top of the staircase. Ginny was in there with two girls from their class and they were stick and poking an angel tattoo onto Ginny's ankle.

"What the hell are you doing?" Beverly asked, suddenly feeling drunk.

"I'm getting a tattoo," Ginny yelled. "Something permanent."

"Why?"

"I don't know, so I can remind myself that I'm not the devil!"

"Stop it. If you read the play or listened to Rebecca, you would know that Satan is a fallen angel."

“Okay, so I’m both then.” Ginny stopped talking and winced with pain.  
“Not all of us can be Eve, Beverly.”

“That’s not fair.”

“NOTHING IS FAIR!” Ginny screamed so loudly that the other girl Eva messed up the tattoo.

Beverly was still standing in the doorway and said, “What is wrong with you?”

“Just get out, Beverly.”

Beverly left and slammed the door after her. When she got to the washroom, she realized she had gotten her period. She searched the cupboards and found one of Ryan’s mother’s tampons. She quickly found Steve and said, “I want to get drunk.”

Steve put his hand on her arm and said, “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just want to get drunk.”

He looked at her like he was worried but he agreed. He pulled a huge bottle of green apple Smirnoff out of the freezer and poured her a shot reluctantly like he didn’t want to. People were elbowing her in the back and she felt hot and crowded.

“I’m worried about you,” he said.

“Don’t be worried about me. I’m fine. I don’t need you to be looking out for me all the time. I’m my own person. I’m a woman.”

She slurred the last part of the statement and Steve said, “What?”

“I’M A WOMAN!” she yelled again. Beverly walked away with the bottle of vodka and had conversations with people she knew she wouldn’t remember having. In the backyard, she could feel Steve talking to someone behind her like he was a part of everything she did. She was talking to Ryan about her tooth and he pulled her gum up toward the sky and said, “Bev, your tooth looks sick. That was gnarly when that shit chipped.”

“Yeah, I know, and I just feel like I had this hole in my head, you know. And I am just like, what is going to fill this hole? Kind of like the pool, you know when we went the other night.” She could feel herself rambling but simultaneously thought she was making perfect sense. “Like when they emptied out the water and they replaced it with new stuff. Like I just don’t know who is going to fill the hole in my head. Also I forget, did I leave the tooth at the pool?”

Ryan started laughing and Steve joined in the conversation, looking at her like he was disappointed. Beverly was swinging the vodka bottle in the air like she was conducting something, she just didn’t know what yet.

“I have your tooth,” Steve said, and Beverly pointed the vodka bottle at him like she would a gun.

“You have my tooth?” she slurred, but she did have a distant memory of him pocketing it. “So you can fill the hole in my head.”

At that moment, Ginny barged out of the back door with blood dripping from her ankle. Her eyes looked hollow in a way that made Beverly nervous, even though she was drunk. “Your ankle is bleeding,” Beverly said and for a second she thought about her period. Ryan put his arm around Ginny so tight it looked like he was almost strangling her, or suffocating her or something.

Ginny put out her palm and said, “Look what I have.” There were four plastic pills with white powder inside. “I bought them from this guy named Buddy upstairs.”

“Buddy? What is this, a Salinger book?”

Steve was the only one that laughed and Beverly appreciated it.

“C’mon. You down?” Ginny said.

“No, I’m not down.” Beverly said, mocking her, which she didn't mind doing, given that she was still hurt about the tattoo.

“Steve?” Ginny said.

“No. Thank you.” Steve was eyeing Beverly and she could feel it like a heat against her face. She wished he would stop looking at her like she was his whole

world. Beverly looked beside her and noticed Ryan's mother's herb garden. His mother was a writer and she wrote poems about food for the local paper. Steve leaned in and whispered in her ear, "I'm going to get you a glass of water."

"Beverly, come on. You deserve this." Ginny was looking at her with that wave on her eye. She had her dark hair pulled back in a low pony tail and she looked nice. "You have spent all year getting these good marks. You're moving soon and you have this huge scholarship. C'mon, you have nothing to lose." Ginny was holding the pills so close to Beverly they were almost touching her. Beverly ran her tongue along her teeth and her mouth tasted like an apple.

"I don't think it's a good idea. I'm not supposed to do this. My parents would kill me."

"They want you to do this. They just say they don't because they want you to be independent. But they want you to have experience. They want you to have fun!"

"I don't think that makes sense."

"C'mon. Yes it does. It will be fun! We'll just have a good time with each other, before you go."

Beverly felt confused and upset and thought about how Rebecca told her never to be tempted. She thought about Eve and she thought her best friend was being a snake. She took the pill and popped it open so the white powder fell into her hand like concealer. Ginny was smiling big like she had finally won. Steve, who had come back with the glass of water, was standing in the doorway as Ginny licked the powder off her own hand. Steve looked at Beverly like he didn't know her and she thought it was the first time that had happened. The bottle of vodka suddenly slipped out of her hand and smashed beside Ryan's mother's herb garden. Everything started to smell like apples.

"Give me one," he said to Ginny as he walked toward them. He put the glass of water he had gotten for Beverly on the ground beside the smashed glass.

"No, Steve, don't do it if you don't want to," Beverly said.

“If you’re going to do it, then so am I,” Steve said loudly as he turned around to face her.

“Dude, chill out.” Ryan said from a chair on the corner of the back porch.

Beverly looked at Steve as he licked the drugs off his hand.

“If something bad happens, at least it will happen to both of us.”

Beverly roamed around the party and lost her phone and also her track of time. She met Buddy—who gave them the drugs—and asked him if his parents liked Salinger. She moved her jaw back and forth and forward and back and she worried about her tooth. She found herself in the bedroom at the top of the stairs, the one Ginny had been in earlier when she had become a permanent angel. She sat down on the bed and decided almost immediately that she was in Ryan’s room. He had a PRO SKATES poster on his ceiling and a lava lamp on the bedside table. His sheets were blue plaid and her skin tingled against them. She climbed underneath the sheets and started to cry. She felt impulsive and sad that she had lost control. She was facing the wall when she heard the door open and when she turned around Steve was there.

“What’s wrong?” he asked softly like he didn’t want to hurt her. For a second she forgot he was high because he looked perfect.

“I’m sorry I was mean to you earlier.” Her blonde hair was tangled behind her and tears were falling sideways off her face and onto Ryan’s pillow.

Steve crawled into bed beside her. “You don’t have to be sorry. I’m just protective of you.” He wiped tears off her face with the pad of his thumb and it felt good.

“How are you feeling? Do you feel high?”

“Yeah. But it’s weird. I’m just trying to decide what it even feels like.”

“I think it feels really good to have people touch you,” Beverly said.

Steve leaned in and kissed her. It felt overwhelming and confusing, like it was completely consuming her. She ran her nails through his hair and felt him moan into her mouth. She thought it was unbelievable, getting to see someone

you know everything about do things you've never seen. Steve kissed her neck and then her cheek and her ear, which still hurt where she got it pierced. He moved on top of her and said, "Is this okay?"

"Stop asking me if things are okay." Beverly whispered. She wasn't feeling things like she normally would. Instead of feeling small touches, she was just feeling everything at once. She thought she was still crying but she couldn't be sure.

"I'm sorry. I just don't want to do anything you don't want to do."

Beverly grabbed each side of Steve's head and looked at him. "I can't stop crying." She wiped her eyes and moved Steve so he was beside her on the bed. "I'm just feeling too much at once."

"You know I've loved you forever, right?"

"I have known that, yes," she said.

"Your mouth tastes like an apple."

"Yeah, it's the vodka." Beverly kissed him. "You know, after Adam and Eve fell from the Garden of Eden, they had sex."

"I don't want to have sex while you're crying."

Beverly smiled and said, "I don't either."

"Your pupils are really big right now." She felt a weird compulsion to touch his eye ball like she wanted to know what it felt like. Instead she turned away from him and he wrapped his arms around her in Ryan's bed. He put his hand on her stomach and talked about how he wanted to climb into her belly button and never leave. And then he said, "I can feel your ribs."

Beverly met Steve at his tree house the next day and brought Purity cookies. He was sitting cross-legged on a pillow with dinosaurs, and he was reading *Paradise Lost*.

"I wanted to see how it ends before opening night," he said.

“I’ve been puking all morning.” Beverly was wearing jean shorts and an Iron Maiden shirt that she had stolen from Ryan’s drawer before going home. Her uterus was cramping so much she couldn’t stand straight. She sat down and crossed her legs like Steve.

“Have you talked to Ginny?” Steve asked while he ate a Purity cookie.

“No. I’m still mad at her for tempting me like that. I don’t know, she didn’t even seem like herself. I felt like she just used everything she knows about me to betray me.” Beverly’s eyes were dark and she looked dead, like she had lost something. “She tricked me.”

“She’s jealous of you, Bev. You have to know that.”

Beverly ate a Purity cookie and it made her want to puke. “I wish I could feel pure again.”

“It’s going to be okay.”

“I feel guilty.”

“So does Eve,” Steve said, pointing at the book open at the spine beside them. “After she eats the apple.”

Beverly laughed and said, “You read it.”

“I’m almost done but I have to go to Costco for my dad. Do you want to come?”

“Yeah sure! But only if we can eat samples from those little stations in every aisle.”

Beverly nodded and kissed Steve before she maneuvered out of the treehouse. She jumped from the last plank of wood on the tree and waited for Steve on the ground. He threw her his copy of *Paradise Lost* and tripped on the top plank of wood. His body hit the ground and made his mother’s garden shake.

“Jesus, Steve.” Beverly ran toward him and told him not to move. “I’m going to get your parents okay. Don’t move, okay, are you listening to me?” She could feel tears leaving her eyes and falling onto Steve’s face like rain. His parents surrounded him like a fire and called an ambulance. When the paramedics got

there they put Steve on an orange stretcher and ran the stretcher through his mother's garden, crushing her succulents.

"We're afraid he broke a rib," they said.

Beverly let out a noise that sounded something like a laugh. Steve's parents and Beverly rode in the ambulance with him and Beverly held one of Steve's hands and his mother held the other. In Beverly's other hand was Steve's copy of *Paradise Lost*.

"Bev," Steve said quietly.

"Baby, don't talk if it hurts," his mother urged, pushing Steve's hair back off his forehead.

"Bev, tell me what happens at the end of the story."

"They find paradise in each other."

## SOFT SERVE

Hugh

I told Janice to meet me on deck eleven where the soft serve was sweeter than deck six. The ship was docked by St. Lucia and everyone else was on land. With the pool empty, I thought it looked like a David Hockney painting. There were lawn chairs running along the perimeter of the top floor. The lawn chairs were the classic kind with the bands and the holes in between, big enough for an arm to sink into, or a leg. The cruise director encouraged everyone to leave the ship on days at port but I was always too lazy and I wasn't good at following instructions. My parents and grandparents got off the ship that morning with sun block on their noses. They said they would be back for dinner and my mother held my head by the ears and kissed my hairline. I thought she may have said something, but I couldn't tell because she had my ears covered.

I met Janice on the first formal night. I was wearing a tie with little white stripes and she had fallen into the wall in front of me after the ship had hit a particularly big wave. She had broken her sparkly high heel and I could bend it the wrong way like a broken arm. I told her to wait and I ran back to my room with the circular window and grabbed glue I had brought with me to finish a project where I had to stick the names of cities in Greece onto a colourful map. I had glued Janice's heel back in place and she thanked me for getting her back on her feet.

The next day I saw her sunbathing on the top deck and she had untied her halter bathing suit so her tan would be even. I walked by her on the track that circled the top floor. Janice pushed her sun glasses up onto her head and when I said hello I could see her face was getting burnt. "Your face is getting burnt," I said.

“Oh that’s okay. It always turns into a tan,” she replied. “Hey, daddy. This is the boy that fixed my shoe.”

Her father was suntanning beside her and his back was hairy. He flipped over and reached an oily hand my way. I grabbed it and smiled.

“What are your plans for the day?” I asked them.

“We’re going to head to the spa. Have you been?”

Janice was speaking to me with a sort of indifference that made me interested in her. “My mother has been going every day for a massage after she runs on the treadmill,” I said. “It’s not really my thing though. I find it pretty hard to relax.” Her father looked at me like he didn’t understand the anxieties of an eighteen year old kid. His skin had taken on the texture of my favourite leather jacket and his shoulders were starting to bubble.

“Well, I’ll see you around, I guess,” I said and I walked back to my room on the fourth floor. I got jammed in an elevator with a bunch of people dressed for different activities: bathing suits, and running shoes, and fancy dresses and goggles. The whole thing was confusing and made me feel anxious for reasons I couldn’t fully understand. When I got back to my room I stared at the school books that were piled beside a mirror that was always lit up. There was an itinerary on the bed beside a hand towel that someone had folded into a swan. I put the swan on the bedside table and was careful that it kept its shape. I lay down on the bed and looked at the itinerary. There was a hypnotist in the piano bar at noon and a comedy show in the great hall at eight. There was fitness cycle in the gym at three and a belly flopping contest at the main pool at four.

I stared out my small circular window and all I could see was sky. I thought about Janice and her little brown shoulders. My mother had passed on her red hair to me so I could never tan the way Janice could. Janice had her belly button pierced and a pink butterfly jewel hung down onto her stomach and grew greasy from the tanning oil. I pulled down my pants and I started to think about Janice and her broken heel. I usually had a hard time fantasizing about anything when I

would masturbate, like I always knew when I was kidding myself. I hardly ever felt a wave from the ship, which was one of the weirdest parts about the whole cruising thing, the idea that you forget you're doing it. But now, the ship hit a wave and the force made the vessel dip sideways. I looked out the window and for a second I could see water. After the ship stabilized, I realized I had cum at the same time the wave hit. I grabbed the towel and also killed the swan.

Nora

My husband had taken me on a cruise years ago right after we were married. I had feigned excitement but I hated being at sea, something I had wished he'd known. I had grown up on Bell Island and you needed to take a ferry there. Cars lined up for the ferry on both sides and wrapped around the hill like a blanket until they were ushered on by a man whose middle name they knew. This was the thing about Bell Island, everyone knew everyone. When I was a kid, the ferry made me sick as a dog. I would rock back and forth until I could hear the boat hitting rocks and then I would know the end was near. When I was growing up, all the men worked on the boat or in the mines. The mines ran underneath the ground like veins and everyone was happy. When the mines closed, thousands of people moved off the island but my family stayed. My family had five boys before me and they all worked in oil. They would go to town and fill up the trucks and bring the oil back to the island. They would keep people warm in the winter.

Robert insisted we move to town. He hated Bell Island, it made him feel claustrophobic like he was getting an MRI or something. I often told him I felt like that too. Like people were looking at us closely, like they could see inside us, to our brains. When we finally moved off the island I vowed to only go back when I had to.

Now, my parents had taken us on another cruise. They said that they had always wanted to go, it had been a dream. They had been jealous when Robert

and I had gone years ago, so now they were paying and they encouraged us to bring Hugh, so we all got our passports renewed and bought new sunscreen. The cruise reminded me of home in all the worst ways. I kept running into the same people, my parents were in the room next to mine, and we were surrounded by water on all four sides.

“Honey, just relax,” Robert said. We had a room with a balcony and he was on it with his feet up. Hugh was two floors below us with his own room which felt odd considering he still lived at home. It felt like he was further than ever. We would eat breakfast together in the mornings and Hugh and I would get our omelettes made in the same pan by a man named Raphael.

I sat beside Robert on the balcony and told him this whole thing felt wrong. “You know the guy that makes our omelettes?” I put my hair in a ponytail now that it was long enough. “He has to leave his family in the Philippines for six months at a time!” Robert was staring ahead like he wasn’t bothered, which I found weird. “So he can sprinkle parsley in my omelette while the egg cooks. Isn’t that madness!”

“Honey, it’s his job. He probably likes it,” Robert said.

I had been thinking of all the late nights Robert had been working at his new restaurant. When he told his staff he was going on a weeklong cruise, he had gone into the staff washroom and cried after, consumed with guilt that made him feel heavy. I had been messaging a man named Greg online who lived in Cornerbrook. We had gone to high school together on Bell Island and he had found my email on Facebook. I always made sure to delete the emails after they were sent, since Robert and I shared a laptop. Greg and I would stay up late emailing and I would pour myself a glass of red wine to the rim. We would talk about how terrible it was, growing up in a place so solitary, and I would talk about my brothers.

“Remember your brother Andrew? That one summer he moved to town and he came back really fat.”

I was always surprised at Greg's memory, and it made me like him. He had all these memories saved up like a database and it made me feel close to someone while Robert was at work. When my parents insisted on the cruise, Robert had made love to me for the first time in months. He told me he was excited to reconnect, but all I could think about was the water.

## Hugh

For as long as I could remember, my mother marked her upcoming period on the family calendar with a red marker. A couple months ago, my dad spilt apple juice on the month of April and the red marker dripped down the calendar to the bottom. The three of us lived in a baby blue house on Coronation Street. My buddy Kyle told me in September that he was renting a two bedroom place on Duckworth but my parents had convinced me to stay home.

"You don't need to spend money on rent. We have a perfectly good house here," my father had said, like I would be a fool to consider an option that didn't involve them. My father had just opened an oyster bar on the water and it was mostly very popular, but it meant he was never home. My mother, usually disciplined and pessimistic in a way that I appreciated, had turned giddy. She would go to bed early and kiss me on the ear before I would hear her bedroom door close. Sometimes I would hear her laugh and return to the kitchen to refill her glass with wine. My parents' wedding photo sat above our TV and sometimes I looked at it on these nights when I was alone. In the picture, my mother's dress was an off-white which she swears she didn't know until the pictures were developed. Her head was buried in my dad's shoulder and she was smiling. They looked young and unlined.

I wondered why my grandparents had taken just us on the cruise and not their other kids. When I asked my grandfather over pureed asparagus soup one night at dinner, he told me the boys were busy.

“They have a business to run,” he said. It started off as his business and it was assumed that the boys would take it over. My mother was free of this responsibility and part of me thought her brothers never forgave her for that.

“I’m happy you don’t have to do that work, sweetie.” My grandmother said to me.

My mother was a therapist. She had an established list of clients and for years, her money was our family’s only source of income. Because my mother’s work wasn’t physically exhausting, her brother’s always talked about her having it easy. There was a very obvious power dynamic that existed in my mother’s family. Every time we went to the island, I noticed it more than the time before. My uncles believed that men were stronger. They believed men were smarter. They believed men could do things women couldn’t. If it wasn’t for my grandfather, I feared that the whole place would go to the dogs. My grandfather wielded a certain power over the family, like he was the glue that kept everyone in place. Like the glue that kept Janice’s heel from falling off, he kept people’s heads on their shoulders.

### Janice

I met Hugh on deck eleven while everyone else was on land. He was holding two cones of soft serve, one chocolate and one vanilla. I grabbed the vanilla from him and felt the cream melt off the cone and onto my hand. We went to the arcade and I felt like it was the darkest room on the ship. We played a game with big fake orange guns and Hugh killed me first. I accidentally hit his soft serve out of his hand and it landed on the floor upside down; a puddle of ice cream getting bigger as we stared at it.

We walked through the promenade holding hands and Hugh told me he thought it would be cool if we took elevators on opposite sides of the ship and watched each other as we went up. The elevators were all glass and I watched as

Hugh's elevator kept stopping to let people in. Mine shot all the way to the top and I pressed my nose against the glass until it was flat, and waved at Hugh, who was smiling. On the top floor we crossed our arms on the railing and looked out at the sea. There was no land around us and I asked Hugh if he liked cruising.

"I don't know. It's okay. It's weird that everything is so organized for you. I guess some people like that. I'm actually surprised my mom isn't having a better time. She's such a planner. I thought she would appreciate someone else doing the work." He turned around. "I guess maybe she misses being the one with the answers."

Hugh had floppy red hair that he kept touching and he had a big nose but there was something very cute about him, something that felt innocent.

"I don't think my parents are very happy being married to each other," Hugh said. "Actually I think my mom is having some sort of affair."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Hugh said, looking at me. He was still leaning against the railing and part of me wanted to take a photo of him. "And you know what else is so weird. Like this ship is called Carnival Freedom. But like there's Carnival Glory and Carnival Triumph and Carnival Liberty, like what kind of fucking names are those."

He suddenly seemed upset and I didn't really know why so I just nodded.

"Like do people believe that if they spend a week being like glorious or triumphant or liberated or free, they're going to feel better about their lives?"

My back was against the railing now and I looked back at the Carnival Freedom. There was two large green and blue slides that twisted and wrapped around each other like braids. Kids were sliding down them with their arms above their heads.

"I think maybe people do feel better," I said. "You know some people just believe what you tell them. If they're spending a week on the Carnival Freedom they might just feel free."

“That’s bull shit,” Hugh said. I thought it was too, but I wasn’t going to say it wasn’t real. I wanted to hug Hugh and make whatever he was feeling go away. I wanted to knock the sadness out of him and watch it pool around our feet like the soft serve.

Hugh and I went back to his bedroom and lay on his bed wrapped around each other like the slides on the top deck. We talked about feeling free and how it was for suckers. I stared out his window and all I could see was sky. He asked me about growing up in Texas and I told him I never saw the water. I told him he was lucky that he lived on an island and that it must make him feel free. But he said it didn’t make him feel like that.

Nora

I was walking the track, becoming more and more comfortable with the boredom it brought me and how it distracted me from the anxiety of being at sea.

“Miss?” A man in a Carnival Freedom Personnel tank top tapped me on the shoulder. I could see the hair under his arm and I thought a t-shirt would have been more professional. I removed the headphones I was wearing and noticed that I was out of breath. The sun was hot above us and now that I was standing still, I could feel the boat moving underneath my feet.

“Whoa. Rocky today, sir,” I said. The man was holding a tray of strawberry daiquiris in his left hand, balancing them on his forearm. I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand and grabbed a daiquiri from the tray.

“You are Miss Doyle?” he asked. “Your father is in medical down on the second floor, miss. He tried to jump overboard after dinner last night.” He looked at me closely like he was waiting for me to react. “However, he landed in the life boat so he should be okay.”

The daiquiri slid out of my sweaty hand and spilt all over my white tennis shoes. He led me to medical on the second floor and I breathed heavy the whole

way. When I got there, my father was sitting in a bed with pink and blue blankets, looking smaller than I'd ever remembered him looking. I pushed the hair off his forehead and instead of asking why he jumped overboard, I Googled it on my phone instead. Google said that it was very common for people to jump off cruise ships. It happened all the time! I wondered if the ship was reminding him of Bell Island and I wondered if the reminder was making him miserable too. After a while, Robert came rushing into medical. He had a visor on with sunglasses on top. He had a pina colada in his hand and it was spilling everywhere as he ran.

“What happened? Are you okay? Someone came to find me. I was asleep on the top deck.”

I said “Shhhh” quietly so he would stop talking and I turned back toward my father. I felt Robert put his arms around my shoulders and wrap his hands around my front, under my breasts. His forearms were sticky with sunscreen and the whole thing felt suffocating.

That night, after tucking my mother into bed, I told Robert I was going for a walk. He asked where and he reminded me there was nowhere to go. I snuck into the computer lab which was a room with two desks and old PC computers lined up like a dozen eggs. I had never felt so compelled to speak to Greg. I emailed him and said my father had jumped off the ship and landed in the life boat. I typed *HAHA* afterwards and then deleted it. I couldn't figure out if the situation was funny or tragic or both. I hadn't seen Hugh since our morning omelette and I felt like avoiding him forever if it meant I never had to tell him about his grandfather. Greg sent something back in seconds, the email coming through with the small ding of a children's bicycle bell. “Can I call you?” the email said. Greg called me on a ship phone that was beside the computer. It was large in my palm and almost the colour of my skin. Greg's voice came though quietly. “I wish I could be there with you.”

I hadn't yet allowed myself to cry and suddenly I found myself sobbing onto the keyboard of the cruise computer. Tears fell off my face and leaked between the keys, falling between the question mark and the period, never to be seen again. Greg let me cry until I could stop and I realized this phone bill would be charged to my room.

"I didn't know he was so unhappy," I said.

I could hear Greg thinking on the other end and I felt closer to him than I did to anyone on the ship.

"Maybe he's not. Maybe he's just tired of being at sea." It sounded like Greg was eating a chip on the other end of the line and I wondered about the flavour. "We should try to see each other when you're back."

I knew then that I would end my marriage. "You're a life saver," I whispered. I thought about the idea of jumping off of something big into something else that floats. Like my father did.

## Hugh

When I was eight, I had begged my parents for a gold fish. So my mother had taken me to the PetSmart on Stavanger Drive and I had picked out one from the tank. A tall teenager with lots of pimples on his face handed me a large plastic bag filled with water and a gold fish inside. When he asked what I would name it, I said I would name it Hugh.

"Why are they called gold fish if they're orange," I asked my mother and she didn't respond. She just clicked the new electronic thing on our keys that unlocked the Windstar. I sat in the front seat. My dad had just started letting me do that the week before. I fastened the seatbelt and held the bag with the fish in front of my head and stared at it all the way home. As my mom drove by St. Claire's hospital she ran a red light and t-boned a small silver car heading downtown. I screamed until the airbag knocked the wind out me. My mother

reached a hand toward me and one of her fingers was bent the wrong way. I stared ahead in shock and then I felt wet. I looked down and wondered what had happened and then I remembered the Gold Fish. I was small enough to slide out of the seat, even with the inflated airbag, so I opened the door and crawled out onto the pavement.

“Mom! I can’t find the fish!” I was screaming and sweating and my body was still in shock. I couldn’t really feel the ground. “Mom! The fish! I can’t find it!” I lay flat down on my stomach and saw the fish under the car flopping around uncontrollably. I reached out and grabbed it in my hand and I held it there in my fist as I realized the commotion around me. The paramedic ended up giving me his full Nike water bottle and it wasn’t until I saw the fish swimming that I could breathe easy. My mother had broken a finger and she needed stitches on her forehead. I was mostly fine but I would never forget that day.

That night my father prodded my mother for details about the accident. He had been home having a nap when it happened and he hadn’t been answering his cell phone. His joblessness at the time had become a real strain on my mother and I knew that because she told me so. My mother believed in honesty and fairness and discipline.

“Do you think this fish is like us? He can only survive when he’s surrounded by water, right?”

My mother was clearing off her plate into the garbage and balancing it awkwardly because of the finger. My father didn’t offer to help clear off her plate which I always remembered.

“Yeah, honey. He’s exactly like us.”

At ten o’clock, there was a knock on my door. The boat was rocky that night and I felt queasy. When I answered, my mother stood there looking small and sad. Her face was red and I couldn’t tell if it was a burn. She had fair skin and freckles and she thought she could be out in the sun for longer than was safe.

“Do you want to go for a walk, Hugh?”

“Yeah, sure.” I bent down so I could see her eyes. “Are you okay?”

She looked up and it was then I knew that she had been crying. We went to the top deck to the fancier pool with the slide. The lights underwater were pink and it made everything I looked at seem that colour. We sat on the edge of the pool and put our feet in the water.

“Your grandfather jumped off the boat late last night,” my mother said when we were sitting beside each other, our thighs touching.

I moved my foot and it created a splash. “What?”

“He landed in the lifeboat hanging off the side of the ship. He’s going to be fine. He’s in medical on the second floor.”

I stared at the water as it moved around my foot. “Mom, imagine if he had died. Everything would have fallen apart.”

“I know. He’s the glue,” she said.

I jumped in the pool even though I was in all my clothes. I needed to be underwater. Completely submerged. Everything was pink around me. I held my breath for as long as I could and then I came up for air.

## MY FRIEND, MY PARROT

The week Princess Diana died, my brother got a parrot. I remember this because my mother was a wreck. I think they call them flashbulb memories; when you can remember exactly where you were and what you were doing when something significant happened. My mother claims she can still smell the polish of the manicure she was getting when JFK was shot. But it was different with Diana. My mother cut all her hair and dyed it blonde and at one point I really thought that a tiara was around the corner. My brother, six at the time, and too young to appreciate my mother's sadness, begged for a parrot. And my mother didn't have the strength to fight him. She hadn't slept in days. My brother, Neil, trained the parrot to repeat everything. One day he got in a fight with my mother as she looked at a Princess Diana coffee table book with a hard cover.

"I want to watch TV!" Neil yelled.

"I want to watch TV!" the parrot yelled.

"Well, that's too bad. They're televising the funeral today," my mother said. She had strategically placed Kleenex beside her and she had worn black for the occasion. Her feet were crossed beside a martini on the coffee table.

"You didn't even know this person! She's dead!"

My mother looked up at Neil, and from where I was sitting in the kitchen I could see her eyes looked glassy.

"She's dead!" the parrot yelled from his cage in the corner of the room.

My mother started crying.

"She's dead!" the parrot said again. "She's dead!"

I think my brother started to feel bad around then. He took the parrot out of its cage and put it on his shoulder. He went to his bedroom and shut the door, but the parrot wouldn't stop reminding us of death.

My best friend's parents are rich. They live in a gated community in Guelph called Rolling Hills and their house is white and long with windows like triangles and a baby grand piano in the middle of the living room like a rug. My best friend's name is Diana and she reminds me of a princess. Her parents sat her down last week and told her they were seeing other people but they would stay in the house and nothing would change. They didn't want to split their assets. Diana's room had a door off the side that was practically an invitation for her to start smoking. She bought long and thin cigarettes and she looked elegant and beautiful when she smoked. She had short blonde hair that a boy had cut on an angle at a party last week.

"Men don't like to be contradicted," she told me as I complained about how I got a different kind of attention than her.

"That's insane," I told her and she shrugged like she had long ago accepted this fact as truth, and her life was structured around it.

Diana wanted to be a writer. She had told me this on her back stoop, as she smoked a cigarette and I ate All Dressed chips with her Hudson Bay blanket wrapped around my shoulders.

"I just have so many stories to tell."

"Yeah. I don't really know if that matters to me as much," I said. I had started writing a lot the year before when we had entered high school. My English teacher was looking to find me scholarship opportunities and I knew how to craft a strong sentence. But I just didn't have the same experiences Diana did. And I wondered if this would matter. For a long time, I thought Diana was a liar. She told stories that always seemed fictional. She had done mushrooms with her parents' gardener or slept with her chemistry professor in his wife's Kia Sole. But over time I realized that she wasn't a liar, she was just different than I was. Things were easier for her. She could climb hills without breathing heavy and she knew how to put her hand on a boy's arm. She was like a rare bird. A parrot, maybe.

I was really close to my brother. I was three years older than him and all the things he did reminded me of me. We used to lay in his bed and entwine our feet. On Fridays when we were younger we always bought a movie at the Blockbuster next to the grocery store and we bought snacks with our allowance. After he got the parrot, though, we stopped watching movies and I started spending more time at our father's house down the street. Our father's girlfriend, Anne, had recently moved in and she was pretty. And the house smelled like flowers, which I decided I liked. When I asked Anne if she liked Princess Diana she shrugged her shoulders like she wasn't too attached. I liked this about her. She didn't get too emotional about things. She just let them slide off her back like water. I would braid her hair and I would think about my mother and how nothing was easy for her. I think my father seemed a lot happier with Anne because she could let things go, she could let them slide. She didn't ask too much of him.

Whenever I went over to my Dad's, Anne would say, "How are things shakin', Bri?"

I wanted her to stop repeating herself. It made me think about the parrot which Neil had recently named Charles. I thought the name was a cruel reminder for my mother of something she loved, the royal family, but my mother just didn't think about it. She knew that if she did, it would make her miserable.

"How's your mother?"

"She's fine. She's still upset about Princess Diana." My father rolled his eyes as he cut cheese into cubes at the counter. "I don't know. I think she really loved her. She thought she was so beautiful."

"I wish your mother could learn to have a regular reaction to things," my father said as he violently threw the knife in the sink beside him. "And I don't even know why she bought you guys that fucking parrot." My father's neck was turning red like a rash and Anne rubbed her hand on his back in clockwise circles.

"Well, I mean, it's like we have another sibling in the house, which can be frustrating. But Neil is really happy and I think it's teaching him about

attachment and maturity. You know, he's never had to watch out for anything else. I've watched over him, and Mom has watched over me, and so now it's his turn."

My father was looking at me while he leaned against the kitchen counter. He looked upset that I hadn't included him in my breakdown of who took care of whom, but he didn't say I was wrong. He just turned around.

"You know, parrots are actually really beautiful and you should see this one. It's yellow but in a way that almost just looks like blonde hair." I pointed at Anne. "Like yours, kinda." Anne smiled. "And parrots are basically almost extinct so it's special and rare and it's important for Neil to be around Charles, he's intelligent and entertaining and —"

"Who the hell is Charles?" my father asked.

"Charles is the parrot, Dad." I didn't know why I was defending it when it wasn't very long ago I was resenting its relationship with Neil. But it felt important to acknowledge that there was a new man in our house where my father used to be.

A boy named Aaron Walker asked me to go to the moving carnival at Stone Road Mall on the weekend. He picked me up from my mother's house and kissed her on the cheek which I thought was nice. It had been a while since the parrot had died but we all still paused, waiting for it to speak. When we got to the mall, Aaron parked in the back of the parking lot so we could look at the carnival and know what we were getting ourselves into.

"The rides can all be dismantled in like a night and then they just move to the next town and set up in their parking lot," Aaron said like I hadn't been coming to this carnival every year since I was a kid. I wanted to tell him that I didn't trust anything that could be dismantled that easily.

“I want things to be more complicated than that,” I told him as I tucked my hair behind my ear and turned toward him so my knee was shoved against the gear shift. “You know, when I was younger, my brother had a parrot.”

“That’s sick. Did it like talk and stuff?”

“Yeah. It was like this living breathing thing in our house, with a voice. My brother basically stopped talking after he got it.”

“That’s so weird, dude.”

“Yeah. And this one year, my mom wanted to take us to this carnival so we could ride the apples.” I pointed to the ones I was talking about. “And, my brother wouldn’t leave the house without the parrot. So, my brother brought the parrot to the carnival and it rode the apples with us.”

Aaron laughed and then leaned over the gear shift and kissed me.

“You’re interesting and I like it,” he said.

I didn’t respond because I didn’t want to be interesting. I wanted to be something else. But I liked him too. We rode the apples and I puked on his shoes afterwards. Then we got cotton candy and I ate it in the front seat as Aaron drove me home.

As we pulled into my driveway he said, “What happened to the parrot?”

“It died.” I turned and looked at Aaron and ran my hands through his hair because I thought it would be nice. “My brother was never the same. The parrot took his voice.”

When Charles died, we buried him in the backyard under the tree with my brother’s tree house. Neil cried until he had the hiccups and my mother wore the same dress she wore when they buried Princess Diana.

“He was the best friend a boy could have,” Neil said while he placed a dandelion the same colour as Charles on his grave.

“I think he brought honesty back to this house after dad left,” I said and my mother cried at this and dabbed at her cheeks with her sleeve. “He was intelligent and important and I’ll miss him.”

When we went inside, the three of us had pigs in a blanket that my mother had heated up in the oven but were still cold on the inside.

“Do you think I’ll ever have another friend like him?” my brother asked.

The house seemed so quiet it was almost eerie. I didn’t know what to say to him and I didn’t know how to fill the silence. That was Charles’ job.

“I think you’ll find someone better than Charles,” I told Neil and he looked at me like I’d slapped him. “I just, I think that you’ll find someone who has new and interesting things to say, things that will help you think and learn.”

“I don’t know if I want that,” Neil said and I thought maybe I didn’t either. I thought that it was nice to just have Charles say back to you what you just said to him. It made it feel important, like it was worth repeating. I thought maybe we were all just looking to have our ideas reaffirmed. We were looking for validation, we were looking to be flattered and copied. I wondered if this was why my parents had called it quits. My mother was never interested in copying anyone. She was unique and obsessive and she hardly ever gave people what they wanted.

I didn’t meet anyone who could imitate the human voice like Charles until I met Diana. I would tell a joke and a week later I would hear her tell the same one. I would write a story and she would write one in the same voice. I had broken things off with Aaron because I was scared to talk to him. He didn’t think that I knew how to communicate and I told him he was probably right. I wondered why, so I went to see the high school guidance counsellor. Her office was an off white and the couch inside was green.

“My brother and I used to be really close, but then Charles, his parrot, just gave him things that I couldn’t.”

The guidance counsellor kept crossing her legs and uncrossing them and it made me angry that she couldn't make a decision.

"I think your father leaving so quickly must have been very difficult for you."

"No, it felt fine," I said. I ate a sour candy from a dish on the guidance counsellor's desk. It was yellow and I thought that meant lemon but it was really banana which I wasn't expecting and I didn't like. I left and didn't feel any different. I think I just wanted the guidance counsellor to agree with me and tell me that I was right and that it was in fact the parrot that fucked me up by giving me a false sense of confidence and by never challenging me.

Diana and I went to The Salvation Army in her mom's Lexus and tried to find treasure. I was flipping through the men's jeans when Diana said, "I kissed Aaron." She looked up at me for affirmation. "He told me he thinks I'm interesting."

I didn't say anything and moved to look at dishes. I was willing her not to follow me. I was always the best at finding things while thrifting, but Diana looked hotter than I did. She found short shirts in the kids' section and she would cut the sleeves off and call it a day. I picked up a skirt with flowers on it and put it in my cart but when I got to the change room it didn't fit right.

Diana tried it on after me and said, "I'm buying it."

"No you're not," I said from the change room next to hers.

"What's wrong with you?"

"You don't just get to take the things I don't want. You can't just take my ideas and my boyfriend and make it yours."

"I don't do that."

It was strange doing this while I wasn't looking at her. It made it easier to have this divide between us, something that could separate us enough so that I could finally be honest. "Yes you do!" I said. "You change it just enough so that

you think I won't notice. And part of me thinks you won't notice! And then you can continue pretending you're morally better than I am."

I could tell Diana left the change room because I could hear the door slam and I couldn't see her feet anymore. I opened my change room too and she was standing there, holding a discount sweater that reminded me of my mother.

"You're the one who pretends you're morally superior. You judge me for drinking too much and having sex with people. You pretend you're above all that and you get mad at me for not living the same way you do!"

"That's not true," I said and suddenly I felt hot, like she had found me out. "You steal things from me."

"Only because you want me to."

Diana walked away and I watched her throw the skirt I had picked out—the one with the flowers—onto a rack with the loafers, like she didn't want it anymore. I called a cab to take me home and I left everything I had found behind too.

I stood outside waiting for the cab and I felt cold but also hot. My chest felt tight and I felt bad for all the things I didn't say. I wanted to tell Diana that I thought she was beautiful like a princess and that her hair was the same colour as my brother's dead parrot. I wanted to tell her that I would never find anyone else like her and that parrots were becoming extinct. It was becoming harder and harder to find them. I wanted to tell her that it was true, I judged her when she did things I wouldn't do and got mad when she did things I would. I wanted to tell her that we buried my brother's parrot in the ground and put a dandelion on top of him. I wanted to tell her that I hoped she would never die. I started crying and I dabbed my cheeks with my sleeve, like my mother. I hopped in the back of the cab and the man asked my address. I gave him Diana's address in Rolling Hills and I crossed my legs underneath me.

"You okay, sweetie?" the cab driver asked and it made me feel taken care of.

I nodded and hoped he would understand me. We drove down the Hanlon in silence when I noticed he had a toy parrot hanging from his rear view mirror. It was green and yellow and I thought it was beautiful.

“Do you have a parrot?” I asked.

“I used to. Best friend I ever had.”

## STAND BY

Kathleen sat down in the food court of Yorkdale Mall, right in front of Thai Express. She got New York Fries and pretended she was somewhere else. Richard must have parked at the entrance by the Sears because he was coming up the escalator, a little bit more of him becoming visible as time passed, until she could see all of him. He was wearing khakis and that brown leather jacket she hated. He sat down across from her and wiped the crumbs off the table in front of him with his sleeve.

“You’re late,” Kathleen said.

He looked at his watch and said, “Barely.”

Kathleen shook her head. “Do you want something to eat?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to eat if you’re not eating anything.”

“Well, I’m not hungry and you already bought food.” He stole a fry soaked in gravy and popped it in his mouth before he dramatically exhaled. “Too hot,” he said.

“Yeah, I’m letting them cool off.”

“Do you remember you used to take me to the mall when we first met,” Kathleen said.

“Yeah, and we would walk around and you would drag me to all these stores but you would never buy anything.” He popped another fry in his mouth. “I always hated that.”

Kathleen squinted her eyes at Richard like he should have learned his lesson—that the fries were too hot—the last time. But this was the thing about Richard, he wanted things to be hard. He took the divorce papers out of the long leather pocket she used to stick her hands in years ago to keep warm. He put the papers on the table and he grabbed another fry. A drop of gravy fell on the page, right over the words *irreconcilable differences* and he said, “Oops.”

The spilt gravy drove Kathleen crazy since she hated things that were messy. Richard knew this about her which made his carelessness all the more insulting. “That’s great, Richard,” she said.

Kathleen signed on the line with the arrow and her pen exploded. It went all over her hands and the mess spread everywhere.

Richard worked for Air Canada and so did Kathleen. People always asked if they met in the air but it wasn’t as romantic as that. Really, they had met at the Avalon Mall when they were both based out of St. John’s. They had both been at Winners looking for sheets to fit double beds. Kathleen was wearing her uniform and Richard had asked where she was coming from.

“Oh just a San Fran turn,” Kathleen said, picking up grey sheets with the Ralph Lauren logo in the corner. “I’m Kathleen,” she said, extending a hand.

“Richard,” he said. “You like the San Francisco?”

“Yeah. I mean, I used to bid for more overseas stuff but I’m finding lately that it’s a lot of work since they’ve taken some people out the back galley.”

“I’m a pilot,” Richard said.

Kathleen wondered how she didn’t know him. He told her he transferred from Toronto after his divorce and then he picked up red sheets which Kathleen was surprised by. They got a pretzel and shared it in the food court and when they walked to their cars, Richard told her he was happy they met and she gave him her number.

Richard and Kathleen had two boys in high school. Right before the divorce they all went on a family trip to Hawaii for March Break. They travelled on employee passes and it took them two days to get there. Kathleen broke down at Gate 33 in Pearson Airport and sobbed into her knees. When she looked up, her eyes were red and there were veins in her forehead that you could trace with your finger.

“This is exhausting. I’m exhausted Richard.”

Their son Ben was asleep on the floor, his head on a backpack, lumpy with socks in the front pocket. And their son Andy was sitting beside them watching Friday Night Lights with headphones on.

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” Richard said.

“It’s like this every time.”

“Yeah, well, you knew it was going to be like this. There’s never any guarantee that we’re going to get anywhere.”

Kathleen wiped underneath her eyes and shook her head. “No there’s not,” she said. Travelling stand by was a specific kind of misery. Of course she and Richard had flying privileges but nothing was ever guaranteed. They never got anywhere unless there was room.

“Collins, Party of Four,” was called from the gate and Kathleen exhaled loudly like she was relieved. Richard went up to get their boarding passes.

“We didn’t get seats together,” he said, “But we’re on.”

When they landed in Hawaii, the flight attendant put leis on their necks as they deplaned. They got off the plane onto the tarmac instead of the terminal. It was hot and the boys took off their sweaters and tied them around their waists. Richard grabbed Kathleen’s hand and kissed her on the cheek. She was sweating and she felt tired.

“Well, it took us three days, but we’re here.”

“Finally.”

There were palm trees on the side of the runway and planes landing in the distance. Richard could look up at a plane that was so high in the sky it was barely there, and he would know all the details about it. It was a skill of his that the boys always thought was impressive when they were younger.

“That’s a 320, heading to Vancouver, Delta Airlines,” he said looking up. All their necks craned upwards to look.

“Dad, there’s like an app for that now.” Ben pointed his iPhone at the sky and the plane details came through with a ding like a message. Richard didn’t say anything but Kathleen thought he looked hurt that he was no longer needed.

When they got to the hotel, Richard told the boys that he was going to have a shower and would meet them at the pool. The boys changed into bathing suits that were different primary colours. When they left the room, Richard kissed Kathleen like he hadn’t in years and told her he missed her.

“I miss you too,” Kathleen said and she meant it. She appreciated that he organized this trip and she appreciated that he missed her, but she felt terrible like there was something pushing against her chest. Richard put his hand on her chest and she pulled away and told him to stop it.

“Are you okay?”

Kathleen was backed against the wall that Richard had pushed her against and she was breathing heavy. “I’m seeing someone,” she said.

Richard looked at her like he didn’t understand. “What?”

“I met someone.”

“What about the rules?”

“I broke them. I’m sorry.”

Richard and Kathleen had decided to try an open relationship a year before Hawaii. They had sat down one night at the kitchen table with glasses of water filled to the top and then Richard got a beer too. They talked about rules and guidelines for this sort of thing and acknowledged that they were both unhappy but they didn’t want to separate. They both wrote out rules that were important to them on pieces of lined paper that Kathleen had ripped out of Andy’s math notebook. Her small cursive writing had five numbered points:

#### Rules for Open Relationship - Kathleen and Richard

1. Set Boundaries

2. No Emotional Attachment
3. No talking about other partners to spouse
4. Must disclose that you are married to other partners
5. Always protect yourself (sexually+personally)

Richard looked over the page and nodded his head like he agreed. “Are we sure about this?”

“I don’t know, are we sure about anything?” Kathleen got up and poured herself a tea in a mug Richard had given her for their tenth anniversary. He had given it to her right after they had found out she was pregnant with Ben. That month they had also been notified that the St. John’s flight attendant base was closing down. So they moved to Toronto and got a house in the Beaches. She remembered them being so happy then, like they could depend on each other.

Richard had been the one to ask for the open relationship. Kathleen had cried that night in the bathroom and then taken two Gravols so she could sleep. They didn’t discuss the idea again for weeks until Andy broke his ankle at school and she met Richard in emergency. He was late, like he always was, and he was in his uniform. He had just gotten back from London. They sat beside each other in plastic chairs and Kathleen said, “Do you just want to have sex with other people?”

“Kathleen—it’s,”

“It’s what?”

“Can we not talk about this here. Please.”

There was a man across from them eating a sandwich with mayo and Kathleen wondered who he was waiting for and who he was close to that was hurt. The waiting room made her want to cry: the not knowing of it all. She needed answers from Richard in a new way. She needed him to commit to the dismantling of their marriage or to their monogamous marriage. She wanted to

tell him that he didn't understand commitment and if he did he would make a decision. He would show up on time. He would think about the implications of his actions. The reason she didn't say all this though had to do with one thing: Richard loved her. And he wanted her to be happy and he wanted their life together, when it was good.

When they got home, Andy was in a wheel chair. He asked how long until he was healed and Kathleen told him it could be a lifetime. Richard rolled his eyes because she was always more dramatic than she needed to be.

"Buddy, you should be fine to move in a month," Richard said, ruffling Andy's hair until it stood up.

When Andy and Ben went to bed that night Kathleen said, "Okay, let's do it. But I want to know everything." She didn't realize this was already breaking the rules.

Two weeks later, Richard slept with a flight attendant named Phoebe Klein on a layover to Paris. He told Kathleen over a beef stew with no carrots, because Richard hated them. The boys were at a sleepover and so Kathleen had lit candles. The first thing she thought when he told her was that she wished she'd added carrots to the stew.

"Remember when we were going to go to Paris?" Kathleen said, taking a bite of meat. "But we got trapped in Vancouver and it was so foggy that all the flights were cancelled."

"So we stayed in the airport hotel," Richard said. "Yeah I remember."

Kathleen wondered where everything went so wrong. She remembered when she and Richard would look into each other's eyes for long periods of time. They would find hairs on each other's heads to play with. They would touch and they would moan. She always felt like happiness came to her late in life. She had grown up in St. John's and her best friend, Darcy, got engaged when they were twenty.

Darcy and her high school boyfriend, Matt, had thrown a punk show to fundraise for their destination wedding to Mexico. Darcy had wanted to get married on an island and she wanted it to be warm. Kathleen reminded Darcy that she already lived on an island and that warm weather was coming up, even though it wouldn't last long. A bunch of their friends had played the show, which they threw at The Ship. People lined up the stairs smoking until their eyes started to close. They had made enough money to cover their flights to Mexico and they got married on the beach with their shoes off. Darcy had worn flowers in her hair and that night their hotel gave them bed bugs. Darcy and Matt got divorced two years later when he told her he had slept with other women that weren't her. Kathleen always felt like she was failing everyone around her by not finding someone named Matt or Mike and flying to Mexico to elope, so when Darcy got divorced it made her feel better, which she didn't say, she just assured Darcy she was better off.

Darcy and Matt's destination wedding made Kathleen wary of relationships until she met Richard. Richard was flawed but he was also transparent about his flaws. He was abrasive and honest and these things always made Kathleen sure that she understood him. When he asked for an open relationship she hadn't seen it coming. She told Richard it felt like turbulence, which he knew she hated. He didn't mind turbulence though. In fact, he thought it was kind of fun. He would tell her turbulence was just like driving a car on a gravel road. It was nothing to be scared of.

She met Tony at Ben and Andy's high school. He was tall and shy, both things that Richard was not. He was separated from his wife who was blonde and ran the children's bake off every winter. Kathleen told him that she was in an open relationship and she felt sad and weird about it, and he told her that it was admirable that they weren't just giving up. He took her out to a bar around the corner from their children's school and Tony ordered them paper planes which was an orange cocktail with Amaro that made Kathleen feel loopy.

“Why are people in relationships?” Kathleen asked as she looked at Tony and started to feel drunk. “It seems to me that you have to be secure and trustworthy and sure to make anything work. And I don’t know anyone who is sure about anything!”

Tony agreed with her and admitted that he always put way too much pressure on his wife to give him everything. “I was always like that though. When I didn’t have the answers, I expected her to give them to me.”

Kathleen had shaped their backyard in the Beaches so her plants lined the perimeter of the fence all the way to their neighbours’ house. She would sit out there and water her plants any time she needed to be alone. Richard resented how much time she spent out there and would comment on how the backyard looked better when they moved in years ago.

“Why do you always make things so hard? I don’t even know why you care about the backyard. You’re never out here. This is something that makes me happy. Don’t you want me to be happy?”

Richard sleeping with Phoebe Klein had hurt her less than she thought. It was actually kind of liberating. After that she started telling Richard exactly how she felt about everything, plus she started seeing Tony more. He would take her to the movies and kiss her on the neck. He would buy her dinner and ask her about work. He said he wanted to go somewhere far away. He said he wanted to be on her flight.

Richard did a Halifax layover which he was way too senior to fly, but he was trying to be home more. He was trying to try. Kathleen was in their backyard practicing evacuation drills for her recurrent training. Recurrent training always happened at the beginning of May which Kathleen knew because she would always study outside and she would feel the sun getting warmer on the back of her head.

“Emergency, Emergency, Keep your head down!” Kathleen yelled in the backyard. She could see Richard watching from the back porch and he was still in his uniform. Kathleen was moving her arms, pointing to either side of the backyard like they were evacuation exits. Richard was smiling and Kathleen could see the dimple in his left cheek.

“Richard, what are you doing?”

“I like watching you do this. Remember when you would practice in our little place in Newfoundland and that one time our neighbour told you to shut the fuck up.” Richard laughed and it made Kathleen miss him. She wondered if he had been with anyone else since Phoebe Klein and then she thought about Tony and how she hadn’t mentioned him to Richard, which she knew was against the rules.

“We should go to Hawaii,” Richard said. “We could take the boys. We haven’t done it in years.” Back at the start of their relationship they would bid their Hawaiis together.

“I don’t know, Richard.”

“It will be fun. The boys will love it.”

“Richard, c’mon, you’re distracting me. I’m serious. This is an emergency.”

Tony told her he loved her over a paper plane and Kathleen reminded him that she was married.

“I know, but you guys are seeing other people.”

“Yes, in an effort to stay together.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know. I agree with you. It’s confusing.” Kathleen sipped her paper plane. “We’re going to Hawaii next week.”

“Who is?”

“Richard and I, and the kids.”

“Does he know about me?”

“No.”

“Isn’t that breaking the rules?”

Kathleen didn’t know what the rules were anymore and she didn’t know who was following them and who was breaking them. She was pretty certain that while she was protecting herself sexually she was not protecting herself personally and that people were going to get hurt. Kathleen had always wanted to follow the rules. She was a rule-follower and she was a pleaser. It was in her blood.

Richard had cried after Kathleen told him about Tony. She had never seen him cry before and it made her feel things toward him that she never had. It made her realize that he had never stopped loving her and if he had, then he would have just left instead of coming up with games and rules and generating creative ways to fix things. She realized that while it never felt good to be on stand-by, you almost always got to where you wanted to go in the end. And that was the life they had signed up for years ago.

They met the boys down at the beach and Richard walked a few feet in front of Kathleen the whole way there. They sat on towels as they watched people swim with the tide. When Ben and Andy came back to shore they built a sandcastle with the empty cup of a margarita Kathleen had just finished off in big gulps. Richard wore sunglasses and read a magazine about flying. There was a plane on the front tilted sideways which is something Richard told the boys he had done in flight school. When he was done reading, he got up and put sunscreen on Ben’s shoulders, rubbing it in until it disappeared. The boys put windows and doors on their sand castle; they turned it into a beautiful home. Andy said he was tired and wanted to head back to the hotel. When Kathleen stood up she accidentally stepped on the side of the sandcastle, watching its walls fall down around her feet.

“Mom!” Ben yelled, extending his fingers and pointing his palms toward the sky.

“Let’s go,” Andy said, angry at his mother for not being more careful.

They all walked back to the hotel with flip flops dangling from their hands. Kathleen walked behind Richard and she noticed that with his toe, he was drawing a line in the sand.

## WINTER SALAD

“There should just be doctors and soldiers and farmers. The rest is just hocus pocus,” Sean said as he descended the stairs of the house they shared. “I don’t know, actually, maybe we need firemen too.”

Jasmine had just finished her book and she bought a Kanye West long sleeve on his website as a way of patting herself on the back. She had put post-its of all her short stories on her wall and grouped them according to place and character and then put them in some sort of arbitrary order that she thought worked. Jasmine and Sean lived in Toronto with one other girl named Harper. Jasmine was finishing a Master’s in creative writing and worked part time at Starbucks.

“So you’re saying that everything I’m doing is useless?” Jasmine asked. But Sean was a writer too, so Jasmine mostly thought it was funny and laughed like if she was obsolete then so was he. Jasmine had known Sean since they were kids. Their parents went to the same Mommy and Me group in Guelph and they had drank out of the same sippy cups from IKEA with the built in straws.

“Did you hear about Simone?” Jasmine yelled because Sean was downstairs now.

“I heard she walked into oncoming traffic and she’s in intensive care.”

“Yeah. Isn’t that fucked?” Jasmine said, and Sean popped his head into the stairs so he could see her. Then he nodded.

Jasmine’s adviser is a well known writer and critic. These days he was mostly writing reviews in *Canadian Art* and publishing stupid poems in *Toronto Life*. He was young and lucky, Jasmine thought. His name was Wayne Barry. She thought he was very charismatic for a man with two first names because she was of the opinion that that those people were usually weird.

He was reviewing her full manuscript which she had titled *Winter Salad*, and he told her to come to his office because he had notes. His office was propped open with an anthology of Allen Ginsberg's poetry which she thought was pretty tacky. She sat down in his office and stared out the huge window behind his desk. She could see the top of the CN tower, but just barely, because it was foggy.

"Hey you," Wayne said from behind her, touching Jasmine's shoulder. He was holding her manuscript in his hand, clutching it like a secret, and she noticed that his fingers were hairy in certain places.

"Hi," she said, and suddenly felt anxious looking at her thoughts on a stack of pages held together with a massive chip clip. "My parents used to have a chip clip like that," she said. "But we used it for like Doritos and stuff."

Wayne smiled at her and leaned his head on his hand. His hair had grown longer than the last time she had seen him and he had facial hair. She had been in her room writing for weeks so they had only been corresponding on email. Sometimes he would sign off his emails with a winky face or symbol for a heart which to her always looked like a penis.

"Jasmine, let me just say. You can get this published."

Jasmine felt her chest tighten and sighed. "I was hoping you would say that."

Wayne reached across his desk and put his hand over hers. "I'm proud of you."

"Thank you." Jasmine said. She heard footsteps outside his office and she moved her hand onto her lap.

"I want you to come to my fiction workshop Wednesday night at the downtown campus. I think it will be really nice and I want you to read from *Dull Pen*."

*Dull Pen* was a story Jasmine wrote about her high school boyfriend. There was a scene where she lost her virginity that she absolutely never wanted her mother to read. "Okay, maybe," she said.

“No. I need you to. I’m trying to talk to my class about writing tasteful and accurate sex scenes. And I think you really nailed it here, Jasmine.”

Jasmine thought about what Sean would say to Wayne. She thought that he would think Wayne was full of shit and someone who became successful too early. Sean would think that the world could use fewer Waynes.

Wayne Barry had been one of her favourite authors when she was younger. She had a distinct memory of her father taking her to Chapters when she was thirteen and buying Wayne’s book. It was the first collection of short stories she read that made her feel like she could write. The cover of his book looked like the sky and she thought it was beautiful. When she told her father Wayne was going to advise her graduate thesis, her father had read his book and told her she was lucky. But now Jasmine was older, she lived in a bigger city and she was sure that she and Wayne were really different people and really different writers. And she didn’t know what he was doing to her.

Jasmine worked at Starbucks on Monday and Tuesday mornings. She would open while it was still dark and she would usually work bar. She would always open with the same girl, Sadie. Sadie was older than Jasmine and she only worked cash. She had a piercing on both nostrils and she had a big blonde streak in her hair. Sadie’s girlfriend Bea would come get Sadie after work and sometimes the three of them would get a beer. One day, during a rush, while Jasmine was making a caramel macchiato, Sadie reached over and ran her hand over Jasmine’s arm.

“How are you doing? You okay?”

Jasmine nodded and told Sadie she was fine. They had steak paninis on their break and ate them together on the stoop outside Starbucks so Sadie could smoke.

“So what’s your deal? You dating anyone?”

“No. I’m not. I live with this guy Sean and sometimes I think maybe that would be interesting, but I’ve known him forever so mostly I’m just like writing and slinging lattes.” Jasmine could make anything serious into a joke. It helped her answer things she was uncomfortable with.

Sadie put her hand on Jasmine’s leg. “You’re a catch, you know that.”

Jasmine went to the dentist the next day and the hygienist, Betsy, asked if she had a boyfriend. When Jasmine said she didn’t, Betsy said, “Well that’s okay, too.”

Then Betsy asked Jasmine what she did for a living. Jasmine told her that she was a writer and she had just written a collection of short stories for her Master’s thesis. There was an instrument on her molar that made a humming sound.

“What are the stories about?” the hygienist asked.

She pulled the instrument out of Jasmine’s mouth and Jasmine said, “I don’t know, all sorts of things.”

“You know I think that’s great. Because that’s what stories should be! They should be about more than one thing. Like, you know, in the latest Nicolas Sparks novel, there’s love but there’s also suspense and there’s even a murder in there!”

Jasmine nodded but she couldn’t respond because Betsy was scraping the back of Jasmine’s front teeth until they were clean.

“I knew that you were a creative type when you walked in,” Betsy said.

A light was shining down onto Jasmine’s face and making her tired. Jasmine always thought the reaction was funny when she told people she was a writer. Because they were a reader! Which meant there had to be a conversation.

“Do you like Nicolas Sparks?” Betsy asked.

“Yes.” Jasmine said. “He’s great.” She smiled and her teeth felt cleaner.

Betsy moved a bunch of instruments in Jasmine’s mouth and then she took x-rays of her bite.

“I want to see what’s really going on in there!” Betsy said. Jasmine looked down and noticed Betsy was wearing baby pink Puma shoes with her scrubs. “Honey, how tall are you!?” Betsy said as she put an x-ray vest around Jasmine’s neck. Betsy told her she had just started seeing a guy who was 6’8. “Do you have a boyfriend, sweetie?”

Jasmine wanted to tell her that they’d been over this but instead she stuck her chin in the x-ray machine and told her that she did.

She went to Wayne’s class Wednesday night, like he asked, and she wore lipstick. She brought her story in her bag, printed out with extra spaces between lines so it was easier to read out loud. She had jotted some stuff in the margins and she felt excited to see Wayne. She took the subway to Osgoode and walked the rest of the way. It was April and it was starting to get warm.

“Hey,” Wayne said when she walked into the seminar room. “Guys, this is Jasmine. She’s finishing her thesis and I wanted her to come tonight to workshop one of her stories.”

Jasmine looked at him like she didn’t think that’s why she was there.

“Jasmine why don’t you tell us a bit about yourself and your artist practice.”

She hated stuff like that but she agreed. “Hi, I’m Jasmine. I work at the Starbucks on Queen West and I just wrote a collection of short stories called *Winter Salad*. That title sounds ridiculous to me now that I’m saying it out loud.” A few people laughed. “I don’t know, I’m going to read a stupid thing I wrote called *Dull Pen*.”

Wayne was sitting beside her at the head of the table and looked at her like he thought she was funny and important and it made Jasmine feel strange.

Before she read *Dull Pen*, they workshopped other student’s stories. One kid who she had seen around campus read a story about having dreams that you roll over and kill your cat and wake up with a boner. Another girl, who Jasmine

thought was beautiful, read a story about her boyfriend getting in a violent car accident and her finding out he was dead while she was eating fries with gravy. Jasmine pitched in and told them that the voice was confusing or she didn't think the reaction was right. Wayne looked at her the whole time and then told her it was her turn.

“Guys, I want you to pay attention to how Jasmine writes about sex.”

This made Jasmine feel really uncomfortable and then she felt Wayne's foot against hers under the table. She moved her feet underneath her on the chair and then she started reading.

The scene about how she lost her virginity felt personal and weird to read to the class. She talked about how her high school boyfriend, Reid, had taken her to the drive in and kissed her on piled blankets in his trunk which was propped open so they could watch the animated movie *Cars*. Reid had been frustrated because it had taken Jasmine forever to want to have sex. But now he was seducing her slowly like that would help, and it did. He had moved his hand up her leg and he whispered in her ear that he thought she was beautiful. They had gone home after the drive in and had sex on Reid's parents' couch in the basement and he had cum on a cushion that he washed with hand soap and just turned over, hoping no one would notice.

After she was done reading, Wayne led everyone in a round of applause. “Now, let's workshop *Dull Pen*,” he said.

“Oh, I don't need to take up your time with that.”

“No, Jasmine.” Wayne put his hand on her arm. “We're going to workshop the story.”

The guy with the cat and boner story said that he didn't think it sounded real. “It doesn't sound like it would actually happen. Like her giving him a hand job during *Cars*. Would that actually happen?”

Jasmine thought about how it did actually happen and then she felt embarrassed.

“Yeah, and like this Marcy character, she seems like a bitch. And like why would she wait so long to have sex with her boyfriend,” another guy said.

“Yeah, I could do without that character,” a girl said from the other end of the table.

Wayne looked at her. “Alright Jasmine, well you’ve got some things to consider.”

Jasmine didn’t have many friends in the city so after the workshop she texted Sadie and asked her to go for a beer. Sadie met her at a bar in Kensington Market with taps on the wall and a good balcony. Jasmine told her about Wayne and how she thought he was fucking with her.

“I don’t know. It’s really weird to have someone who you really respect reading your work because they can like get inside your head you know.” Jasmine took a massive sip from an IPA brewed in Muskoka, near her parents’ cottage.

Sadie put her hand on Jasmine’s hand and told her she was amazing and she was a good writer and she didn’t need this guy to validate her.

“But I do need him to validate me! He like helps decide if I graduate and get this collection published.” Jasmine paused and looked at Sadie. She liked how much Sadie liked her but there was something strange about her. “And you know what else is crazy,” Jasmine sipped her beer. “This girl I know from back home like walked into traffic last week and now she’s dead.”

“Maybe you should write about that.”

“Oh my god. You’re so right. I should.” Jasmine thought about how she probably shouldn’t manipulate the situation like that but she thought Wayne would love it and that made her want to use it.

Sadie asked Jasmine about her past relationships. She told Sadie about Reid and how she’d thought she was in love when she was very young. “He was a really good guy but I didn’t really feel like myself when I lived in Guelph. I don’t know, I think I want different things now. I want to write and feel successful

professionally and creatively and I'm not as concerned with personal relationships."

Sadie nodded and started talking about Bea and how it was their one year anniversary in a few days and Sadie just wasn't sure how to feel. She talked about how she didn't think Bea was very funny and how they had pretty normal sex and Sadie just wanted different things. Sadie bought Jasmine another beer and said, "Don't worry, it's on me."

When Jasmine got home she wrote the story about the girl walking into traffic. She thought the dialogue between the parents was really strong and she thought with some editing, it would be ready for a whole handful of lit journals. She hoped that Simone's parents didn't read it because it was fiction! And it was only loosely based on their daughter.

She woke up with a splitting headache and emailed it to Wayne. He told her to meet him at his office that afternoon. When she arrived he told her to take a seat on his couch. The couch was leather which Jasmine thought was weird. He sat down and angled himself toward her with his arm slung over the back of the couch. He took out a copy of her story that he had printed and stapled at the top. There was a lot of red pen on the page and Wayne said, "Don't worry, it's really brilliant." He went page by page telling her his favourite parts. "And the part in the traffic. I mean, I think it's amazing that you start naming the brands of the cars before they hit her. It really prolongs the grief and then when it happens you just feel it hit you all at once, like a car."

"I'm really glad you like it," Jasmine said. "You know, I felt weird about writing it at first because it's just this like really fresh thing that happened in my hometown but—I,"

When Wayne kissed her she felt the leather of the couch. It felt like an animal underneath her. She was sweating and she was worried that when she got up the leather would be wet. Wayne grabbed her hip while he kissed her and she

felt like his handprint would be there later. He pulled away and walked back behind his desk. He picked up a green and yellow stress ball on his desk and squeezed it until the veins in his arm popped out.

“You’re a very talented writer, Jasmine.”

When Jasmine got home she told Sean what happened and he dropped the mug he was holding and when it hit the floor only the handle came off.

“That is not okay,” Sean said. He was still finishing courses and was jealous of Jasmine being able to write all the time.

“I don’t know. I showed him this story I wrote about Simone walking into traffic, and he really liked it and I don’t know, it was confusing. He’s validating all my thoughts. It’s like he knows me.”

“That’s sexual harassment, he’s not allowed to do that,” Sean said. He was standing in the kitchen, separated by an island that held all their spices on a rack that spun clockwise. “And why are you even writing about Simone. That’s not your story to tell. Did you even know the funeral is like this weekend?” He threw the whole mug in the garbage and Jasmine thought to herself that she would only have thrown out the handle. “I think I’m going to go home for the funeral.” Sean looked at Jasmine like he was disappointed and sad for her. He told her that she was strong and her work was important and she didn’t need to kiss Wayne Barry to feel like all that was true. Then he told her she needed to be smarter.

When Jasmine got to work the next day, Sadie didn’t speak to her the whole morning. At lunch, Jasmine drank a bottled smoothie from the work cooler and paid six dollars for it. Sadie came into the back room and took off her green apron, throwing it on the milk order.

“Hey, is something wrong?”

“Do you think that you’re gay?”

“Excuse me?”

“I think you might be gay.”

“Well, you don’t really know me.”

“I have a crush on you.”

“Sadie, that’s nice, but I’m not interested.” Jasmine’s apron suddenly felt tight on the back of her neck. Like it was pulling.

“I’m going to break up with Bea.”

“Don’t do that. You guys are great together.”

“Well, I have feelings for you!”

“I don’t know what to say, Sadie. I’m sorry.” Jasmine chugged the end of her smoothie and the last sip tasted like celery. She went back to the floor and punched in early on the till with her employee number. There was a line out the door and she hopped back on the bar. She drizzled a Caramel Macchiato with her right hand as she stopped a shot of espresso with her left. She called drinks out at the bar, “Extra hot, No foam, Skinny Vanilla Latte.” She was good at this. This is something she could manage, even though it was complicated.

That night Jasmine’s phone lit up every ten minutes while she slept. It was Sadie calling her a bitch and saying that she didn’t care about people. It was Sadie saying that she needed to confront her sexuality and stop being seduced by her teacher. And then it was Sean saying that he was sorry and she should come to his room so he could apologize. She stood in his doorway in her pyjamas and when he looked up she climbed into his bed.

“It’s not your fault. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have blamed you. But you need to tell someone about this. What he did is not okay.”

“Sadie told me she has a crush on me.”

“What?”

“Look at these messages.”

“Holy shit,” Sean said. “What are you going to do?”

“I think I’m going to have to transfer. Or quit.”

“You can’t quit.”

Jasmine blocked Sadie's number the next day which cost forty dollars with her phone company. She talked to her shift supervisor who laughed and then realized she was serious. He transferred her to the store at the Eaton Centre which was really just a booth outside Victoria Secret and Jasmine thanked him with a hug. Jasmine took the Greyhound with Sean to Guelph that Saturday and went to Simone's funeral. A lot of people from her high school were there and they all looked pretty and healthy. Jasmine had dinner in her parents' newly renovated kitchen and told them everything in her life was on track. Her parents asked her questions about Wayne's influence and Jasmine told them his influence was powerful and her father smiled like it was a good thing. Jasmine and Sean walked downtown and drank six beers in the parking lot of Church of Our Lady. The church was so tall you could see it from everywhere in the city, or that's what people said anyway. When Jasmine got back to Toronto she dragged the story about Simone walking into traffic into the trash can on her desktop, then she cleared the garbage and it made the sound of paper shredding.

## IKEA SHOWROOM

I tell them start at step one. Stay organized! Stay positive! It's all easier than it looks! Ha. The caller sometimes laughs but mostly cries, and I tell them they're good and worthy of things that fit together. I tell them this is what we want. We need to know how we can improve and be there for you in the way you need us to be. I tell people to follow instructions of how to build things that will never fall apart. Unless you wear them down of course! I usually laugh after I say that. Some people say they don't want my help, and a lot of women say they always feel men are trying to break things down for them in ways they don't want. When they say this, I usually transfer them to Jenna.

At work, I sit beside Jenna. Our cubicles are separated by dividers that vary in their primary colours. They are translucent enough for me to see Jenna's silhouette. How she crosses her legs when she needs to pee and puts her hair in a ponytail when she's bored. The dividers don't let me see her face though. I hear her say to a customer, It's okay, stay positive, and I think, *God, she's good.*

People usually call before they've exhausted all their options. They say, I don't speak Swedish, and I say, The trick is the pictures. If you look at the full picture, you'll be able to see where you're going wrong. They usually grunt here. A lot of people tell me that nothing fits where it's supposed to, or, It doesn't make sense.

“Everything that's worth anything is complicated though, right!?”

A lot of people say, “No, I only want the simple things.”

I usually look at Jenna when they say this, but I can't actually see her.

The company sends its employees to the store in Brooklyn at the end of every year and encourages us to explore how things work. The company says: A new year is

coming up, and people want to put things together. I stick my head over the divider and ask Jenna if she wants a ride to Brooklyn.

She is eating a salad with no dressing and her legs are crossed. She says, "I can only see your eyes and not your mouth, only a little bit of your nose."

I laugh because I think she's really funny.

"It's weird to look at someone talk without seeing their mouth move. Where's all the noise coming from you know? It's like the neighbour in Home Improvement."

I think about how our floor of the building is called Home Improvement. Jenna says yes to a ride.

When I pick her up, I am wearing a blue and yellow striped shirt. The stripes are vertical and parallel in that they never meet. Jenna is wearing a white t-shirt and jeans and I say, "Where's your uniform?"

She explains that corporate encouraged them to dress regularly. "We don't want people to think we know how to assemble everything."

"But then we would be tricking them. It would be dishonest."

"Customers don't want to feel like there's something they can't do that we can. This way we all share the struggle of trying to build something."

I nod my head and say, "I guess you're right." I drive us from Jersey to the Brooklyn store on Beard Street, number one. I tell Jenna to look out at the water.

"It's the Statue of Liberty," Jenna says.

"Who do you think built it?"

Jenna laughs, "I wonder if there were steps."

When we enter the store Jenna and I get meatballs and corn bread and Jenna moans while she eats. She sucks chocolate milk out of a small straw and calls it delish. We walk down stairs and through rooms that lead to rooms I didn't know were there. Jenna tells me to wait up. We are supposed to record our findings on clipboards the front desk gave us. Mini pencils swing from the

clipboards like bungee jumpers and Jenna and I hold our clip boards upside down, laughing at our complete control of the movement.

“I know how to build everything here,” Jenna says as we step into a children’s room.

I say, “I know me too. I think it’s the only time I’ve ever felt useful.”

Jenna sits down on the bed and I think of her holding a baby. The baby sucking her breast. Latched onto her like a secret.

“Come on, we have to rate the furniture in here.” She bends down to check out the bed frame assembly and I think of her picking up a soother.

“How do you think everything looks?” she asks.

“Perfect,” I say before entering the room.

We stop in the master bedroom next and Jenna lies down against the pillows on the double bed and pats the spot beside her twice. She puts down her clipboard and connects her hands behind her head. I lie down beside her and wish I wasn’t wearing this shirt. I connect my hands the same way as hers and stare at the ceiling. It’s the top floor of the building and there’s a big wet patch on the ceiling above us. A drop of water drips onto Jenna’s face and I think it’s a tear. I wipe it with my thumb and she connects our hands against the bedspread.

“We should tell someone about the ceiling,” Jenna says as we continue to stare at it. “Everything from this room should probably be moved out.”

“Should we offer to take the furniture apart for them? People are never good at dismantling.”

After we fill out our clipboards with our tiny pencils we tell the front desk there’s a leak in Master Bedroom Showroom 4 and offer our services. “We’re from Home Improvement.”

“We’ll take care of it,” they say, and I think, *we’ll see*.

I kiss Jenna in Bathroom Showroom 6. I know the mirror beside us was assembled in nine steps. I think Jenna and I were easier to assemble than that. I

watch the men down the hallway take apart the double bed we were just lying on and I kick the bathroom door shut.

Jenna says, "Should we get in the shower?"

## VALUE

Amber's father took her to buy a second hand car when she turned seventeen. He said he would cosign and she would have to make monthly payments for the insurance. She was considering universities and she thought that the car was a tactic by her parents to convince her to stay in Guelph. Amber and her father drove up to Woodlawn Road and went so far they were almost in Cambridge. There was a man with a handlebar moustache at Honda who tried to sell them a second hand Civic. He got in the front seat and put his hand on the wheel like he thought Amber would immediately want to imitate him. Amber and her father both bent over slightly to see him do this and then Amber told him she would take it.

"What's she worth?" Amber's father asked and she thought that unless this guy was from Newfoundland too, he wasn't going to understand what this meant.

"Sorry, sir, how much is who worth?"

"The car!"

"Oh, well, it's valued at about ten, but I'll give it to you guys for eight," he said and he winked at Amber, which made her shake all over.

Amber walked outside to the middle of the lot. There was a Hatchback sitting on a platform and Amber wondered how it got there. The windshield was painted like a rainbow and it said HALF OFF in block letters that drew the eye. Amber could see all the way down Woodlawn to the Guelph Galaxy.

The week before at their high school's semi-formal, Amber's friend Sophia had drank a full twenty-sixer of cherry vodka out of the bottle with a twirly straw. Sophia had puked all over the new strapless dress her mother had found at the BCBG in the Eaton centre. She wiped the puke off with toilet paper and said she was fine to go to the formal. Their friend Kelly, who wasn't drinking because she had field hockey in the morning, pulled over into the parking lot of the Guelph Galaxy when Sophia passed out in the back. Amber and her best friend Erin lay

Sophia flat behind the back door of the theatre. Star Wars was playing at eight-thirty and Amber saw a father and his son entering the theatre with their own Doritos. Sophia started choking on her own vomit so they rolled her on her side. There was dirt all over Sophia's new cream dress with the bow at the front.

"I'm not fucking dealing with this," Erin said.

"Well you don't have a choice. We're not going to leave her here," Amber answered, and wrapped her shawl around Sophia like she was tucking her in.

The G in Galaxy was burnt out but the rest of the letters shone down on the girls as they all bent over Sophia, who could only moan. Kelly said she would drop the girls at the formal and take Sophia to emergency. Sophia shook her head when Kelly said this and the girls picked Sophia up by her arms and legs and put her in Kelly's mom's Range Rover.

When Kelly dropped the girls at the hall, Amber suddenly felt cold and she wanted her shawl. She wanted to be wearing sweatpants and she wanted to be at a movie. Their high school had started breathalyzing at the door of the formal and two cops stood outside smoking cigarettes.

After they served sliced chicken breasts on a bed of rice, everyone was encouraged to dance. Erin grabbed Amber's hand and told her she thought the DJ was cute. All Amber could smell was the vodka on Sophia's dress. It was stuck in her nostrils forever, it seemed. Amber moved her hips and her shoulders to the music and Erin grabbed her hands and put them over her head. All Amber's friends snuck into the bathroom to chug spiced rum they had taped to their underwear and Amber called her dad to pick her up. She waited outside for her father and her arms were cold.

"How was the dance, sweetie?" he said when she climbed into the front seat. He was wearing his softest sweater and his reading glasses, which meant he had been in bed when she called. Amber started to cry and her shoulders shook up and down like they did when she was dancing.

“Honey, you ready to go! You’re a car owner!” her father yelled from the door of the dealership, pulling Amber out of her head.

Amber turned around and gave him a thumbs up and then she yelled thank you and he smiled like she was thanking him for the Civic.

That summer, Amber had started dating her friend Luke. They had known each other since they were kids and shared a neighbourhood bus stop. Amber had always been really good friends with Luke’s sister but now when she went over to their house, she didn’t know how to delegate her time. They usually went to Luke’s room after Amber said hi to his parents. Luke’s mom would usually pull her into a hug and talk about how she remembered when Amber was just a kid. And when they would get up to Luke’s room he would try to undo her bra through her shirt. Luke had a basketball net hanging above his door and tiny rubber basketballs dispersed around his floor like socks. Sometimes he would lie on his back with her on his chest and he would shoot baskets while they talked. He had mastered the shot that allowed the ball to roll back onto the bed and into his hands so he didn’t have to move.

“What is Erin doing anyway?”

“I don’t know she’s like up at her chalet or whatever.”

Erin had been Amber’s best friend since middle school. Her parents were part of a pretentious ski club up north and they drove two hours every Friday afternoon to get there. Erin’s parents were both lawyers and they worked at the same firm. Amber had gone to the ski club once and twisted both ankles on a double black diamond, so she never went back.

“Is she coming back for the party?” Luke asked and he ran his hands through Amber’s hair which she thought felt nice.

Amber’s arms were crossed on Luke’s collarbone and she leaned up and kissed him on the chin. “Yeah, as if she would miss that.”

Luke and his hockey team were having a bush party to fundraise for matching tattoos of hockey sticks on their arms.

“Dude, we’re gonna make so much money.”

“Where is it anyways?”

“Southvale,” Luke said and then rolled Amber off of him. They lay beside each other on his Toronto Maple Leaf sheets that Amber thought smelled like sweat. They hadn’t had sex yet and Amber was terrified. She always wore her best underwear when she went to Luke’s and she shaved her legs. When she thought about being that close to someone though, she felt short of breath. The thought of lying to her parents and doing things they wouldn’t approve of made her feel like someone was stepping on her lung. She stood up and shot a basketball into the hoop.

“You should go pro,” Luke said and squeezed her hip as she put her shoes on.

That night when she got home from Luke’s, Amber could hear her parents talking in the kitchen. She stood in the doorway of the living room so they couldn’t see her.

“There’s just no way we can pay for this right now,” her mother said, and Amber thought about the down payment on the Civic. She looked at the table and both her parents’ backs were toward her. Her father was leaning over her mother and he was rubbing small circles on her back. Her father was a financial adviser at the Royal Bank and Amber thought there was something funny about him advising other people on their finances when his weren’t together. Her family had been following the American Election and they would watch the debates together with popcorn. Whenever the moderator asked a question about the financial crash, Amber’s father would shake his head and talk about how those guys got away with murder.

“We’ll be fine. The kids may have to get a job and we will probably have to take out another mortgage on the house if Amber wants to go to school, but that’s okay.”

Amber wanted to reach out and hug her dad until he couldn’t breathe. She wanted to give back the Civic if it meant he could sleep at night. She never wanted to tell him that she and Erin both talked about Montreal and how Concordia was her first choice for school. She went to a private school and everyone had money. Their parents bought the expensive hummus with the pine nuts and they all had glass cabinets with expensive liquor bottles lined up inside. Every weekend since her friends started drinking, Amber would find herself at a different house party where she would be drinking wine out of a red plastic cup beside a pool with a rock floor. The lights from the pool would illuminate the backyard and country music would play from the ten thousand dollar sound system inside. The ping pong table would be pulled out onto the grass in the backyard so everyone could play beer pong. The guys would get so drunk that they would stumble around the backyard and sometimes they’d fall.

Erin had an overbite. Sometimes when they were alone Erin would see what she could stick between her top and her bottom teeth. A small tangerine, the table salt shaker, the remote control. When they were younger, it was funny, but as they got older it made Erin hate herself. Her parents took her to Oakville to see the best orthodontist in Southern Ontario who told Erin on a consult that surgery would change her whole face. He said that she would need to have braces before they could break her jaw. Erin had laughed until she’d cried and suggested that maybe Amber should just break her jaw for her. She should punch her in the face, really hard until they heard a crack.

The bush party was that week, so Amber and Erin had driven to Toronto in Amber’s car to get new outfits. They parked at Yorkdale and took the subway

downtown so they didn't have to deal with traffic. When they got back to Erin's, her mother asked where the party was.

"Southvale," Amber said even though she didn't know where that was exactly.

Erin's mother was making a spinach smoothie in her Vitamix. "Southvale is not a residential road. It's the street with the factories that ends by the highway."

"Ugh, mom, maybe it's like Southport or something, I don't know, it doesn't matter. We're staying at Sophia's, so I'll call you in the morning." Erin kissed her mom on the cheek and Amber was amazed at how easily she could lie to her.

They gave Sophia money and her brother bought all the girls individual mickeys of Smirnoff that they had started making in plastic bottles. They took a cab to the end of Southvale down a long dirt road. The factories were visible in the distance, their lights far away like stars. There was a low hum you could make out if it was quiet enough. The 401 was on the other side of them and the sound of transport trucks driving toward London got louder as they drove. Amber thought about how her father would be heading down the highway in a few hours. He had to drive to the bank headquarters in Toronto every week while it was still dark if he wanted to miss traffic. Mary handed the cab driver forty dollars and he shook his head like he didn't approve of where he was dropping them. There was a sign written on cardboard in blue writing that had an arrow pointing toward the field. Erin started walking in the direction of the arrow and Amber thought about how she was wearing new two-hundred dollar jeans.

Wedged between the twenty-four hour factory workers and the cross-country truck drivers, were a bunch of rich kids partying in a field. There was a clearing in the middle of the field that Luke and his friends had mowed that week. The boys had slung their parents' christmas lights on some bushes and people were doing keg stands. There were multiple pairs of feet in the air at once.

Amber found Luke and his eyes looked empty with drunkenness. “Babe, this party is sick,” he said, slurring.

Amber gave ten dollars to one of the guys with a fanny pack whose name was Mike. Mike was scary and terrible to girls and he dreamed of making it to the NHL. Amber didn’t drink any beer from the keg and just sipped from her mickey of vodka. Luke fell into her and whispered in her ear that the boys filled the tops of the kegs with water. His breath was hot and she remembered when they were kids, playing road hockey on Luke’s street down by their elementary school. She wanted things to be that simple again.

“You can’t do that. You’re ripping people off.”

“Shhh,” he said and put his hand over her mouth. It smelt like beer and sweat and she pulled it off.

Luke leaned toward her and said, “No one’s gonna know. It’s fine.”

“Luke, you can’t take people’s money and then not give them what they asked for.”

Luke squinted and Amber thought he was too drunk to understand her. He smiled like he thought she was ridiculous when she was serious. He put his hand on her back and slipped it beneath her new tank top she had bought in Toronto that morning. A girl Amber didn’t recognize bumped into them and knocked Amber’s mickey out of her hand. It fell sideways on the ground and spilt into the grass.

“That was almost twenty dollars,” Amber said to the girl and the girl laughed.

“COPS!”

A flashlight lit up Amber’s face and made it hard for her to see.

“COPS!” she heard again and she felt Luke leave her side.

Everyone started running in every direction out of the field. She turned and started sprinting toward the city. Luke was in front of her and he was fast even when he was drunk. Amber felt her camera fall out of her pocket, or maybe it

was her phone, either way it was something valuable that she couldn't go back for. She looked around and kids had run in every direction, like ants after their anthills had been stepped on. She kept chasing Luke and she pretended they were kids, playing hide and seek or tag. They finally got to the parking lot of their high school and Amber keeled over behind a dumpster trying to catch her breath. Luke turned around and picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. The cops weren't behind them and Amber wondered who they had caught.

"Luke, put me down, I'm serious!" Amber was hitting him on his back but he had all the control. Luke was laughing and it scared Amber because she was terrified.

"You're always so serious!" he said, and that bothered her.

When he finally put her down she hit him in the stomach. "How can you be laughing right now!"

"C'mon, lighten up."

"We were almost just caught by the cops!" Everything cumulated in Amber's head to convince her that it was all wrong; the drinking, the bush party, the new clothes, Luke wanting to have sex. It all seemed dirty to her now. "This isn't worth it," she said.

"Isn't worth what?" Luke seemed to have sobered up after the run. The lights from their high school parking lot were shining down on them and lighting up Luke's face so she could finally see him.

"I don't know where Erin is, or Sophia!"

"They're fine. Just chill."

"Does this seem worth it to you?"

"What?"

"All of this. What are we doing it for? Was it worth having that party so you could get a fucking tattoo of a hockey stick on your arm?" Amber was still breathing heavy. "I just don't see why we're doing all this stuff. What's it all worth?"

“We’re doing it because it’s fun,” Luke said and he moved so he was out of the light.

“Getting chased by the cops isn’t fun for me,” Amber said. Her arms were waving which was something that happened when she got angry. “I want to be serious. I want to think about my future.”

“Well, great,” Luke said. “Maybe you should move to Montreal and date a dude who buys you those long loaves of bread that you can’t bite into. And you guys can speak French or whatever.”

Amber and Luke hadn’t really talked about her moving to Montreal and even if they weren’t dating it would have been weird. They had never not been in each other’s lives. Amber thought Luke was confused and probably felt like she was leaving him behind which wasn’t entirely false.

“You know, you really mean something to me,” Luke said.

Amber wished he would quantify it more clearly but instead she just thanked him.

Erin got her jaw surgery at the end of the year. Her face was twice the size and Amber visited her in the hospital. The doctor said she couldn’t eat solid food for six weeks so Erin blended meals her parents made into their Vitamix and sucked it through a straw at the table while they ate. They even set a place for her. When the doctor unwired her jaw, Erin had lost thirty pounds and gained everything else. She was pretty and people noticed. She started sleeping with the guys who used to tell her she looked like a horse, and the whole thing made Amber sad. She wanted things to mean something; she wanted people to suffer the consequences of their actions. She wanted things to be right and moral and good.

Amber’s mom started selling running shoes downtown and told people how they could lose weight fast. Her parents sat her down with her brother and said they were having financial trouble. They said it wasn’t anything to worry about, but Amber couldn’t sleep until the end of the week. She got a job at Value

Village and she started teaching herself graphic design through YouTube videos. She sold her favourite coat on Kijiji and got two hundred dollars for it. She gained weight in her face and felt undervalued. Everyone had sent in their applications for university except for most of the guys who wanted to stay back a year in high school. She thought they wanted more time to feel special.

Erin got into Concordia first and then Amber got in two months later. Erin accepted first even though it was all Amber's idea. The summer before they left for Montreal, Amber's car broke down and the engine smoked out. Her father had called the dealership and said they hadn't got their money's worth. The dealership explained that the guy with the handlebar moustache—the one who gave them a deal—didn't work there anymore. He wasn't telling the customers the truth, the man on the phone said.

On her father's advice, Erin took out a thirty thousand dollar loan before she moved to Montreal. She broke up with Luke and told him they didn't value the same things. He told her that she broke his heart and she patted him on the head and told him he would be okay. Before she moved away, she heard that he was selling weed. When she ran into him at a party she took a sip of his beer and said, "I heard you're starting a grow-op."

"Don't tell me to grow up!" He screamed and it made heads turn. "You need to grow up!"

Amber laughed and told him that he needed to start listening to people.

Amber and Erin drove to Montreal in Erin's mom's hatchback with a U-Haul dragging behind them. On Kijiji, they found a place in the Mile End. It was falling apart but the rent was only \$350 each. They put a plant in the front window and they combined their books on a shelf in the living room. They went to IKEA and bought orange chairs for the kitchen and they sat on the back patio that looked over a children's daycare.

“I guess we’re growing up.”

Erin started smoking a cigarette which was something she was trying socially. She looked impossibly cool, Amber thought, but she didn’t try one.

A week before they started school, Erin had walked into the American Apparel on St. Denis and they had asked her to model. When she got home that night she had five hundred dollars worth of new crop tops and high waisted jeans in a large paper bag with all the states American Apparel had stores in.

“They said that I was exactly what they wanted. That I was pretty in a normal way.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. You’ve seen the ads. It’s just like normal girls doing normal things.” Erin put a bag of popcorn in the microwave and slammed the door really hard since that was the only way it would heat things up. “They’re going to give me a thousand dollars a shoot. Isn’t that crazy?”

Amber thought about how she had transferred to the Value Village on Jean-Talon and how she had to take two buses and a subway there and still got paid minimum wage. “It’s crazy.” She hugged Erin and she could feel her bones through her back. She stuck her index finger between the top two and it made her feel closer to Erin until she pulled away.

That night, they shared the bag of popcorn in Erin’s room while they watched *The Wire*. They went on Erin’s Facebook and saw that Sophia had sent them a message that appeared as a little red dot at the top of the screen. The message said that she felt lost without them in Guelph and she didn’t have anyone taking care of her now. She sent a bunch of sad face emojis after that, and Erin minimized the conversation and called it a distraction. Amber went back to her room at midnight with greasy knuckles and thought about how she was mostly happy for Erin, that people were finally noticing that she was beautiful.

The next day, Amber biked to Value Village. She got off her bike and noticed that the neck of her t-shirt was soaked with sweat. She took long and laboured breaths as she locked her bike against the side of the building.

She went to the back room where she was surrounded by piled clothes that people had given up. She put on the red vest with long pockets big enough for a forearm. Her coworker Johnny was sitting on a floral couch that had a \$29.99 price tag on the top and a white stain on the side. Johnny had headphones on and was listening to something that she could almost hear. He had a white cupcake on his lap with different coloured sprinkles and an unlit candle stuck in the middle. When he saw her he pushed his headphones back so they were slung around his neck and she could hear that he had been listening to Zeppelin.

“Hey! I got this for you! Since you just started and all.” She guessed Johnny was a few years older than her. He was tall and wore all black under his red vest. He told her on their last shift that he lived in Parc Ex and played the drums.

She took the cupcake from him and noticed it was on a plate that was on clearance the other day. It was rimmed with small red flowers. “You really didn’t have to do this. I’m serious. I did nothing to deserve it!”

Johnny laughed and said, “Really, Amber, it’s my pleasure. It came in a pack of four and I’m going to eat those three later so really it’s a gift for me.”

She picked it up hesitantly because it looked like he wanted her to eat it. She thought better of it since she noticed how people acted around bigger women who eat in public. She took a big bite out of the side and Johnny wiped icing off of her lip with his thumb.

She worked cash that afternoon and she felt full and happy from the cupcake, or something else maybe.

“Excuse me. How much does this cost?” an older man with a lot of beige things in his cart asked her as he held up a sweater vest. “There’s no tag.”

Amber charged him \$1.99 for it and felt good.

After work, Johnny and Amber biked to Place de la Paix for an outdoor screening of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*. Amber sat cross-legged and got a grass stain on her shorts. Johnny grabbed her hand and told her he'd always been a sucker for Westerns. Amber bought popcorn from a guy with a cart and she thought about Erin and how much she loved her. The sky went down behind the screen in different colours of orange, yellow and red, and Amber asked Johnny how much the movie cost. He told her it was free.

## SWIFFER WET JET

When the dog died, they got Big Macs. They sat in the dark parking lot with their car running and ate out of brown bags with greasy bottoms that made their legs wet. Noah reached his hand over and covered Bridget's knee.

"He was a good dog." Noah said and Bridget could see the meat in his mouth tossed around and around like clothes in a dryer. He couldn't seem to swallow, she thought.

"He was." When Bridget said this, she started crying so when she swallowed, she choked. The heat from the car was shooting at both her face and her ankles and making her hot. She tried to open the car door but it was locked. She was breathing heavy and Noah's hand was still on her leg. Every time she would go to pull the handle, Noah would press unlock at the same time, to let her out. This would lock the door again, keeping her inside. She finally got out and keeled over on the curb, putting her head in between her legs. Noah stayed inside the car and finished his Big Mac. The headlight was pointing at Bridget so she had to squint when she looked up to see where he was.

"I'm going to get you a drink," he said, getting out of the car. "That will make you feel better." He sounded so far away they could have been separated by something big, like an ocean. She watched from the curb as he walked out of McDonald's. One hand was in his pocket and his eyes looked dark. She noticed that his hair was getting more grey by the ears and down by the neck. He handed her the drink like it was all he could do and he sat down on the curb beside her. She heard his knees crack with the bend.

"It's hard to think about our life without him."

"It's impossible." She looked up at him and her eyes were wet with little red veins running around. "We got him before we were married."

Noah kissed her shoulder which felt like something he had never done before. He kept his mouth there and rested his forehead against her ear. “I hope we’re not lost.”

They got back in the car and drove up to Queen East. Bridget kept the heat off and told Noah to take Kingston road. “What? It’s faster,” she said, when he looked at her sideways.

When they walked into the house, there was a silence so sad it was crushing. Bridget thought about it just being her and Noah now, and how the dog had kept them from having conversations they should have had about commitments they should have made. Noah walked toward the bathroom undoing his belt. She heard the shower running seconds later and she felt thankful for the noise.

Noah worked for an advertising agency called ReImagine. He had been reimagining for twenty-one years this June. There was something funny about having people work so long at a job where things are always supposed to be new. Noah would come home and tell her stories about how twenty-two year olds were now sitting in on their meetings. They were crossing their legs the same way as Noah and chewing on the end of their pens with new and exciting vigour—the way he used to.

After the dog died, Noah lost his *joie de vivre*. Or at least that’s what his boss said. He pulled Noah into his office and said he needed to get creative and start thinking of new ideas. Things that were fresh! They were in charge of promoting a new Labatt beer, brewed in Newfoundland, and they wanted Noah to be their point person. They gave him a blue binder and told him not to fuck it up.

When Noah got home he kissed Bridget on her forehead in the same place as always and said, “Let’s go to Newfoundland.”

“Why would we do that?”

“I have to promote this new beer and it’s brewed there and I’ve never been!”

“Noah, I don’t think they meant you have to go to Newfoundland. Just think of some ideas.” Bridget was making a lasagna for dinner and she was adding new layers with precision. “Plus, we can’t afford it right now anyway. You know that.” They had just paid a fortune in veterinary bills and they had still lost something profound, it seemed.

“Lasagna?” Noah asked, changing the subject. They lived in a small bungalow with beige walls. The living room was attached to the kitchen and Noah always turned on the TV when he got home, crossing his feet on the coffee table as she made dinner. They always had lasagne on Thursdays but Bridget hoped this went unnoticed. Noah turned the TV up louder than normal and she thought it was because there was no dog.

“See, look at this commercial! Everything is big, it’s new, it’s fresh.”

“So? You can do that!” Bridget said.

“Yeah, but am I just going to do what everyone else is doing? I need to move away from the obvious. I need something shocking.”

Bridget looked at Noah’s eyes and for a second she thought he looked manic. She looked back at the lasagna, six layers, getting worse as they went. She slid it in the oven and waited.

Bridget was a high school teacher. She taught at Malvern, which was only seconds from their house in the beaches. Every morning, she would take the dog for a walk before she would come back and make herself a salad with spinach, chickpeas and olive oil that she would put in a long and thin glass Tupperware.

That day at work, one of her students booked an appointment with her after school and told her she was pregnant. Her boyfriend had come inside her and she didn’t know what to do. She hadn’t had forty dollars at the time for the Plan B pill and now she needed an abortion. The girl’s name was Alicia and she

was a good one. And she didn't know how good, which was an important thing about her. Bridget knew Alicia's parents from the neighbourhood and she remembered Alicia's small pink bike with the training wheels from years ago.

"Honey, you have options," Bridget said and Alicia started crying. Bridget wanted to take her out for a Big Mac and explain loss like she knew something. Bridget was suddenly angry at this boy who got Alicia pregnant. She was mad that he didn't pull out and didn't follow up. She was mad that he didn't kiss her on the shoulder and buy her a root beer.

The dog's name was Swiffer. When he was a puppy they had spent weeks on a name. Noah had been fascinated with the new Swiffer technology right before the millennium, and he couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it first. So he took the name for the dog because he wanted it to mean something different, and stop reminding him of his shortcomings.

"It's a broom that shoots water. Isn't that amazing!" Noah said as he held the Swiffer towards her like a shot gun. When the puppy peed on the floor, Noah was so excited about getting to use the Swiffer that he decided on the name and picked the dog up over his shoulder like a trophy.

Bridget came home from work and Noah was home first, which almost never happened. He was sitting at the kitchen table, clicking a pen in perfect rhythm. After Bridget toed off her shoes she came up behind him and looked at the list he was writing. It had three, three letter, bullet point words on it: New, Big, Wet. Bridget chuckled and put her hand on his shoulder when she passed him. Bridget had stopped getting her period that year. First there was some spotting and then there was nothing. She would wake up in the middle of the night with sweat running down her cheeks. She would tip toe to the washroom down the hall stepping on the floorboards she knew didn't make noise.

That night when she got back to bed, Noah's eyes were open. She lay down beside him and turned to her side so she couldn't see him. "Why didn't we ever have kids?" she asked quietly.

"You didn't want them," Noah said back immediately like he had known why all along.

It was so quiet, Bridget could hear the clicks of Noah's watch he never took off.

"Do you think that was a mistake?" she asked as Noah's hand on her waist began to feel heavy.

"Why are you thinking about this?"

"One of my students is pregnant and she wants an abortion," she said. Noah hummed like he was sorry and Bridget thought about how she loved him. "And our dog is dead."

"Do you want to have a kid?"

Bridget laughed hard and turned around so she was facing him. "I'm old and small and dried up." *New, Big, Wet.*

Noah kissed her when she said this and it made her want to kiss him on the eyelids and tell him he was perfect. She rolled on top of him which was how they always had sex. Noah took her tank top off and she felt cold with dried sweat. His hands felt so familiar like it was her own skin. She knew where his hands were lined on the palms. He put his hand on her breast and said, "Baby."

"What?" Bridget put his hand on her stomach and she felt his body still.

"I think somethings—I,"

"What?"

"I can feel a lump. There." He put pressure on her breast with his thumb like he was having a thumb war. "Here, feel it."

Bridget turned the light on and she told him to stop it. She thought about Alicia and she thought about the dog and losing things you loved. She kept her hand on her chest all night and dreamed of being on cruise ships with waves

coming over top of her, soaking her to the bone. She woke up in a sweat and Noah had left a note on the bed telling her he called the doctor and had gone to the office to brainstorm how to sell things.

Bridget hadn't had a mammogram in two years and she was kicking herself. She took the week off work and she thought about Alicia and who would be there for her. One day she even made the spinach salad with chickpeas and olive oil and put it in the fridge after she realized she wasn't going to work. Noah met her downtown near his office for an appointment with their doctor, who had more hair in his ears than she remembered. He told her that her cancer was treatable but she might want to consider a mastectomy. "You know, breast cancer is more common in women who decide not to have children."

This made Bridget's breath hitch in her throat.

"Dr. Harris, we just lost our dog," Noah said.

"I'm sorry to hear that. However, you're going to have to think about your options." He handed them a binder that was the same blue as the one Noah's boss had given him for the LaBatt deal. "I usually recommend that you go see our grief specialist. Her name is Missy and her office is on the first floor. Something like this can be very traumatic when you don't see it coming."

They booked an appointment with Missy for the end of the week. Her office was an inoffensive green and she had lots of plants to match. When Missy asked Noah how he was feeling about everything he went on a long tirade about how everything in their lives had been the same for so long and he felt almost crippled by having to confront serious things he didn't anticipate. He talked about advertising and how it was his job to create new and meaningful reasons for people to buy things they don't already have, but how it was getting harder the more it became clear that he had everything he was ever going to have.

Bridget responded by saying that she wasn't sure Noah cared about her feelings all the time and also that she felt he had always resented her for not giving him kids. She said she was tired of always being on top and how she longed

for the past when her breasts were full and without lumps and when she would have to use super tampons for at least the first two days of a period. She said that she felt she and Noah knew each other too well and they suffered from an overwhelming and intimate knowledge of how the other thought.

Missy said that it was normal for them both to long for things past and she charged them one hundred dollars for the hour.

“I feel like I was just mugged,” Noah said when they left the building. They were spit onto Yonge street out of revolving doors.

“Did you know this is the longest street in Canada?” Bridget said.

“What, Yonge?”

That night Bridget found a letter from Alicia in their mailbox. She was having the abortion in two days and she wanted Bridget there.

Bridget picked Alicia up at the school two days later and when Alicia got in the front seat Bridget spent a minute looking at her face that was unlined with worry. “You know, I used to watch you ride your bike with the training wheels. I remember the day your dad took them off.”

“Really?”

Bridget stopped at a red light. “Yeah, I looked out my front window and your little helmet was falling off the back of your head. I would only push my curtains aside a little bit though so you wouldn’t see me.”

Alicia looked scared but also comforted and her hands were under her legs.

“It was the only time I thought I may want children,” Bridget said. She pulled the car over and hit the curb. “Are you sure you want to do this, honey?”

Alicia nodded her head and bit on her bottom lip until it started to bleed.

“I’m sure,” she said.

Bridget felt happy and proud of her certainty.

Afterwards, Bridget drove them back to her house and Alicia came inside for a camomile tea. She put her hands on either side of the mug and she shivered.

Bridget turned on the TV and it made her feel better. She patted the spot on the couch beside her twice and Alicia sat down. They squeezed under the same blanket and Bridget said, "I think you're strong. You remind me of me."

There was a late daytime episode of *Days of Our Lives* playing which Bridget knew because she had become acquainted with the realities of daytime television this past week.

"Why are you taking time off school?" Alicia asked.

"Oh, just some things in my life are changing."

The television switched to commercials and Bridget instantly recognized the beer. It was Noah's commercial. It started in the living room of a married couple with no children, drinking LaBatt beer that was cold from the fridge. A woman with a silky voice said, *Have a drink that fits your new normal*, and the commercial flashed back to the couple. They had no kids and they were eating a lasagne with six layers. The layers got worse as they went.

## STARS

When I told my mother I was gay she threw an egg at me. It cracked right in the middle of my forehead and dripped down into my facial hair and onto my lips so I could taste it. My mother used to play baseball for Newfoundland and she pitched a good game.

When I was eight she told me I was getting thick in the hips and then she pointed so I would know where she meant. I started losing weight by eating my meals differently. I had read in *InTouch* magazine that stars were eating six small meals a day as opposed to three big ones. A couple of years after I changed my diet my father suggested we go to California as a family. He wanted to check out the Hollywood sign. When we got there, my father took a photo of me sitting cross-legged on the A at LAX. He made a comment about how the letter matched my name, Adam.

In California, the sun was so hot I had to wear a visor. We went to the studio where they filmed the TV show *Friends* and we sat in the live audience with numbers hanging from our necks. I personally thought *Friends* was a bit homophobic but my father thought it was a hoot. When I went to laugh, I noticed a guy with headphones controlling a laugh track. He told me to be quiet and that there was no laughing until after the show.

That night I held my mother's hand as we walked down Sunset Boulevard and stomped on the stars of celebrities. I was walking all over Robert De Niro when she asked me if I was happy.

"I don't know, Mom. I'm ten."

"Yeah, but you must know. Like what do you think about all day? Do things scare you?" She paused on Barbara Streisand. "I just don't feel that we're as close as we used to be."

I wanted to tell her that we weren't as close because she had sabotaged the relationship by treating me like an adult. I didn't know anyone else who had a mother like mine and it seemed that I loved her too much to make it stop.

Before we left LA, we went to the studio that looked like a neighbourhood in New York. You could walk the streets and pretend you were in the Big Apple. There were men zipping all around us on little carts like in the airport. They were there to patrol our behaviour.

"Are we in LA or New York?" my father said as he climbed some steps to a fake brownstone.

My mother and I both didn't laugh. Usually we felt the same way toward him at the same times. We loved him at the same times and hated him at the same times. I put my hand in my father's hand and encouraged him to join us in fake Greenwich Village. I walked in between them and I felt small. I counted to three and they lifted me up on either side so my feet were high above the ground. My mother could always do the lift better than my father. I thought it was because of her baseball arm.

Back at the hotel that night, when my father began his snoring, my mother looked over at me in the double bed parallel to theirs. "You know, I've never felt as close to anyone as I feel to you."

"Thank you, Mom." It was like she was waiting for me to say it back. But I was feeling far away from the things I knew. I couldn't be sure that any way I felt in LA was the right way because nothing seemed real enough to be right.

The next day we went to see the Hollywood sign. My dad wore a huge camera around his neck like a rosary and I thought he looked ridiculous. We walked up the hiking trail in a single file line with my mother at the front. She was always the most competitive. I could hear her breathing heavy and I wondered if she missed being an athlete. When I turned around to find my father, he pointed his camera at me and told me to smile.

"We're going to want this memory. Trust me."

I rolled my eyes and knew my mother was probably rolling hers too. When we got to the Griffith Observatory, my father encouraged us to go further. He wanted us to reach the Hollywood sign. He wanted to take a picture of me on the O. My father led the single file line this time, to the Hollywood sign, a trail I was pretty sure was off limits. When we got there, he started talking about structure and how looking at this word, Hollywood, had become a sensation he didn't understand.

"It's like a reminder of where you are, dad. People want to know that they are somewhere special. People need to be reminded that they're famous and rich. So they look up and they see this and it makes them breathe easier. They're a star."

My mother put me in a headlock after I said this and ruffled my hair like she loved me and she thought I was right. She gave me a boost and I climbed onto the O and stood in the middle. My father took a photo of me that was too close up so it just looked the same as the one he took at the airport.

"A-Ok," my father said as we headed back.

When I was younger, my father would tuck me in and tell me the story of how he had met my mother. While he talked, I would stare at the fake plastic stars my mother and I had glued on my ceiling when I was four. She had put me on her shoulders and I could feel how strong she was. My father's story of how he met her was different every time but some details stayed the same. He had gone to see her play at a field in CBS when they were freshmen and he remembered that her right arm was bigger than her left. After the game, he had wandered across the pitch with his hands in his pockets. When he got close, he could see that she had sweat dripping down her cheek like tears. He always made sure to tell me this part because no one had ever seen my mother cry. He told her she impressed him and this made her blush.

---

My father is an architect. His office has high ceilings and a woman who sits at a desk with her hair twisted in the back like a dinner roll. He builds luxury hotels and there's talk of one going up down by the water. I think this would be a sin because it would block the view of The Narrows but my father says it would be great for the family. He said I should expand my thinking and stop thinking so narrowly.

When my father got home that night, we didn't talk about the egg. Instead my father talked about a new project at work and how they had to build new urination infrastructure for dogs. "Everyone at the office is interested in using space differently," he said.

My mother stuck a brussel sprout in her mouth and when it was too hot she spit it out. She didn't think anyone noticed, but I noticed almost everything she did. My father was going on about how young architects these days wanted new room for play, they wanted space to be more than it had been in the past, they wanted to be better than they had been before. My father would go on these rants and usually my mother and I would let him. And the longer he talked, the stronger the feeling was that we were in something together, the three of us. My mother always seemed much stronger than my father. She didn't let things bother her in the same way. This is why I was surprised by the egg. I thought I knew her. I thought I'd cracked her.

I was seeing a guy named Isaac who had recently moved from Toronto. He was hired as a line cook at the same restaurant where I was a server. The restaurant was new and the lighting was low. Whenever I would be running food I would look up and meet his eyes. He asked me to go to the new Boston Pizza on Friday and I met him there for drinks. We sat in a booth meant for a large party and Isaac put his feet up beside me. I was distracted by the wall of TVs behind him playing a variety of sports and news channels. Isaac talked about how Memorial

had a really good geology program and the tuition was cheap. But he had never been to Newfoundland before and he had already seen all the same people twice.

“Also there’s like no brown people in Newfoundland. It’s so weird.” Isaac’s mom was German and his father was Indian and they lived in a big house in Toronto on the water. “You know, when I was younger I wanted to be a star,” Isaac said.

I watched a red carpet event play behind his right ear and I told him about when my parents took me to LA. “It was weird. My dad is an architect and he was just like obsessed with the Hollywood sign. We have pictures of me like posing on all these different things and like walking on Hollywood Boulevard.”

Isaac was sipping a grape martini but I ordered a beer.

“That’s awesome,” he said.

“Yeah, it just didn’t feel real or whatever. It was all so fake. All the stardom.” Isaac leaned forward and kissed me on the mouth. I had never kissed anyone before other than my mother and I felt terrified that someone might see me and finally figure me out. Isaac wiped his thumb across my bottom lip and it made my whole body shiver like it did sometimes when I was cold.

“What do you do besides work at the restaurant?” he asked when he pulled away.

“I paint a bit,” I said. Isaac smiled and nodded like it made sense that I would do that. “I don’t really know how good it all is but I’m thinking of maybe applying to Grenfell for next fall.”

“I’d love to see you paint sometime,” he said. He put his elbow on the table and leaned closer to me. I wanted him to kiss me again and then wipe it off after.

Isaac and I started going to places we thought no one would see us. Isaac had moved into a two bedroom place above International Flavours and he wanted to repaint. He had paint chips hanging from different walls of his apartment that he had left there with thumb tacks. It confused me and I didn’t know which colours worked best.

“Maybe just leave the paint chips there. I like how they go from light to dark, it’s like you’re getting all those colours and you don’t have choose.”

“No, I want to choose,” he said.

So we went to the Wal-Mart on Kelsey Drive and he kissed me and put his hand on my ribs while the lady searched for a sea foam green Isaac wanted for his bathroom. He went and looked at appliances and light fixtures while I went to buy gummy worms in the big value pack. As we walked back out to his car he squeezed my hand until it hurt. I hopped on the end of his cart full of paint and he pushed the cart really fast and started running until I felt like I had no control. It was scary but I was laughing like I was happy. Ever since I was young, I always loved Wal-Mart. My mother would take me and I would get a small cart and push it beside her big one. I liked it because we could get everything at once: groceries and plants and clothes all piled up in the cart until she didn’t have any more room. Then she would start throwing stuff into my cart like she would a baseball.

When we got back to Isaac’s place we lugged the cans of paint up behind International Flavours and up the stairs into his house. Isaac was hungry so we went down to eat at International Flavours. We drank water out of red party cups and Isaac talked about how it was his favourite restaurant because he could have both chicken and lamb at once.

When we went back up to his place, I saw that his bedroom was still empty, with just a red sleeping bag on the ground. He took his shirt off to change into one with holes and no sleeves. When he began to undress, I walked up behind him and kissed him on the neck. He smelled like sweat and Gilette Speed Stick. The hair on his chin tickled my cheek as I put my hands on his waist right above his brown leather belt. I felt him shiver and it made me wonder if he was nervous too.

He put on the shirt with holes and opened the can of paint by loosening all around the edges. He handed me a brush and said, “Show me what you got, champ.”

I realized he wanted me to paint because I had told him I was a painter. But I had never shown anyone my work before and it felt personal and important.

“Oh, that’s okay, I’m not very good,” I said as I turned away from him.

“Dude, just paint something. It’s fine, it’s not going to be there forever.”

Isaac went to the kitchen and made a sandwich and when he came back he leaned in the doorway of the bedroom with his arms crossed. He took large bites of a ham sandwich with mustard and said, “Is that your Mom?”

The painting was my mother with one leg in front and the other one behind. She was standing on a base and she had a ball in her hand, or maybe it was an egg. She was pitching something. She had lines around her eyes and also on her forehead.

“That’s really good, man,” Isaac said.

“When I told my mom I was gay, she threw an egg at my head.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“I really didn’t expect it.”

Isaac approached me and grabbed the brush from my hand. He dipped it into the paint and started to paint over it. I hugged him from behind and thanked him for covering it up.

That night over dinner, my father talked about how two floors had been added to his hotel on the water. My mother had made Shepherd’s pie for dinner and the crust was soggy.

“How’s the restaurant?” my father asked me and a piece of potato left his mouth like a word.

“It’s okay. We started making a new kind of tartar sauce for the fish and chips.” I looked at my mother who looked positively bored. I hadn’t told them about Isaac and I felt good about something still being mine. “I’m thinking of applying to school.”

“Honey, that’s great,” my mother said, suddenly interested.

“What are you planning to do, son?” My father wiped his mouth with his napkin and crossed his legs.

“Well, I think I’m going to apply to Grenfell for a BFA.”

“Interesting, interesting,” my father said like he was considering a proposal at work. “Maybe you’ll keep thinking about it for a while?”

Sometimes my father proposed things like a question so it didn’t feel like he was being overly definite in his criticism. I wanted to tell him that I thought his hotel was blocking something special and I wanted to tell him that painting was creating space too. I wanted to tell him I was gay and things weren’t always how they appeared to be at first. I thought about California and the laugh track and how it all seemed fake.

When I got to my room, I watched Netflix. Lately I had to have it on to fall asleep. Sometimes, I watched old movies with my favourite Hollywood stars, but usually I just watched a sitcom and felt myself getting tired as I listened to the laugh track. The familiarity of it made me feel happy, like I could depend on it. It was nice knowing when the laughs would happen.

The 2017 Briar was in St. John’s and I took Isaac to a draw. I bought us a large poutine and the gravy leaked out of the bottom and made our hands smell. My mother had always been really into the curling. She had spent all week bundled up on the sofa with a crocheted blanket wrapped around her feet. She got excited about most televised sports but she really loved curling. She liked the precision of it, the banality of it. I thought about taking her to the live game instead of Isaac but I still felt hurt about the egg. I remembered the texture of it running down my face. I remember it being a sticky situation.

Isaac and I sat right by the announcer’s booth and we could hear them analyzing the game above us. Our seats were sticky from the spilt drinks of previous games and I grabbed Isaac’s hand and told him I was excited. Eight teams played at once and it was hard to focus your eye. The curlers all looked

smaller than they did on TV and when I said this to Isaac, he told me stars always looked smaller in person.

“It’s weird, I’ve been like watching these men curl since I was a kid.”

“That’s so weird. My parents think curling is so fucking boring,” Isaac said and took a slug of a Black Horse we were sharing.

“These people are like celebrities to me or something.” I scanned the crowd for people I knew. I wanted to tell Isaac that the idea of celebrity always excited me and made me think about things outside of myself and outside of Newfoundland. I wanted to tell him I watched every red carpet. I wanted to tell him that I always thought I would be famous. “I think my Mom gets really sad when she sees stuff like this happen in Newfoundland. You know she almost made it pro. Her coaches set her up with scholarships and stuff and she had a full ride to the University of Texas and then she threw out her shoulder.” I took a sip of the beer. “And she met my dad, and that was it.” The crowd cheered and stood up when Team Newfoundland won the end. People rang cowbells and swung Newfoundland flags in the air. One half of the stadium screamed Newfoundland and the other half screamed Labrador, like a question and answer. “It’s weird to think about her making it big,” I said.

“It sounds like you and your Mom are really close,” Isaac answered. “Have you told her about me?”

“No. She hurt my feelings so much I don’t want to tell her anything important now.”

The fries turned cold and the cheese curds fell to the side of the tray. Newfoundland drew to the button in the final end, and the crowd lost their minds. A woman in front of me cried until her shoulders fell forward.

We left Mile One holding hands and walked all the way down Duckworth and went down the stairs by The Ship. As we approached Water Street, I saw my dad’s hotel.

“You know, you used to be able to see all the way past The Narrows. Sometimes, on a really nice day I would sit down here and plan my escape from Newfoundland by swimming as far as I could go.”

“Your Dad has nice taste,” Isaac said, pointing to the hotel.

“That’s not the point,” I told him. I looked up and I could see the stars. I told Isaac I thought they were beautiful.

“You can’t see the stars in Toronto with all the garbage and shit in the air, and all those new buildings” Isaac said.

We walked past Raymond’s, all the way to the four sisters before we climbed up the hill to Isaac’s place. He was still holding my hand and even though both of our hands felt sweaty, neither of us let go. As we turned the corner where Quidi Vidi Road meets Duckworth, when Isaac’s house was finally in sight, a car of people drove by slowly with two guys hanging out the back window. One guy was holding a carton of large white eggs. He had kind eyes. The eggs came toward us faster than we could duck and when one hit my head I immediately saw my mother’s face, her kind eyes and the smile I loved. I felt the egg run down into my facial hair as I heard the word, *faggots*, screamed softly with the wind.

## STAYING ALIVE

When Olivia was six she fell in love with her babysitter who was three times her age. His name was Daniel and he had blue eyes like her father. Daniel would always suggest they play games. His favourite was charades because he liked pretending he was someone else. Olivia told him she liked it too, although she wasn't sure. Sometimes they would play Monopoly and Daniel would always buy the cheapest properties. He said he couldn't be trusted with Park Place. When they would play Connect Four, Daniel would always let Olivia win.

“Nothing ever connects, Olivia, remember that,” he would say.

There was something so sad about Daniel that made Olivia want to hold him, like he was the child. She wished she was older so that would be okay. Daniel would tell Olivia that she had a baby face. She never knew what this meant and it wasn't how she saw herself. The thing about Olivia was she was confident in a way that was not just projected. Her mother's friends would come over and say, “You know confidence is the best thing you can give a child.” Her mother would agree and pick up a hand weight.

Daniel had just started going to King's College and he would walk to Olivia's family's house on Connaught Avenue after he finished Intro to Philosophy. He had grown up in Newfoundland and he thought Halifax was huge. He would tell Olivia about Homer and Heidegger and Dante and Derrida and Olivia would rush to her room and sound out the names, writing them in her journal like secrets that she never wanted to forget. She felt challenged by Daniel which was important since she so rarely felt challenged by the people around her. They treated her like a baby and Daniel treated her like something more than that.

Olivia was eight when Daniel took her to see *An Inconvenient Truth*. After it was over, he smoked a cigarette outside the Oxford Theatre and then he smoked another one. His hands were shaking and it scared her. She remembered that it

snowed then and he bent down like a ninety degree angle with his cigarette still hanging from his mouth. He was blowing smoke into the air and Olivia looked up to see where it was all going. He pulled her scarf tighter around her neck and said, “We’ll all be dead soon. This planet just can’t sustain us all.”

Olivia’s father was a doctor and her mother was a trainer. They both had next to no body fat and they had recently stopped eating fish and red meat and cheese and dairy. Her mother ate spinach with no dressing and always wore leggings, like she was ready to run. Her parents would go to the gym together in the mornings and sometimes at night.

“Your father and I are trying to see who can lose thirty pounds the fastest,” her mother said one day after opening a tin of tuna for Olivia.

“That seems like a lot of weight.”

“We’re just trying to live longer, sweetie! That’s the point of life!”

Her mother walked away from her and Olivia could see the step counter on her wrist light up like she had reached her goal. Olivia wondered if her mother ever wanted to be free of all this.

“Mom, do you ever get sick of all this health stuff?” Olivia yelled.

She could hear her mother climbing the stairs. “Well if I stopped that would be like putting a gun in my mouth and pulling the trigger, Livy!”

Olivia finished the tuna and cleaned out the tin like her mother had showed her.

When Daniel came over he would bring Sour Patch Kids and root beer and they would ride the city bus downtown. On Spring Garden, Daniel would hold Olivia’s hand until they got to the Public Gardens and then Olivia would run ahead. He would chase her down the gravel path until Olivia would bend over, her little hands on her knees and say, “I’m tired.”

“Your parents would be proud of you. You’re getting your cardio in!”

Olivia would always laugh when he was trying to be funny, because she loved him. Daniel would sometimes run into people he knew and his friends would pat her on the head and call her kid. Sometimes Daniel would call her kid too, which Olivia hated. When they would get home Daniel would make them KD and she would tell Daniel, "If you put an I in the middle, it spells KID." Then she would refuse to eat it, for that reason.

Olivia would always ask Daniel to talk to her about school. So he would talk to her about Freud's superego and not being able to have what you desire. He would talk about Nietzsche and the forbidden. He would talk about how we all had to unlearn and forget so we could figure out how to grow into new people that can get what they want out of life.

When she was ten, Olivia's parents got a Golden Retriever and named it Calorie. They said the dog was going to make them happy and fill them up. Olivia wondered what prompted getting the dog because her parents were not dog people. But one night in October she overheard them in the living room, talking about having another child and everything started to make sense.

"Do you think we should see a fertility specialist?" her mother asked and it sounded like she was eating, which added to the fraudulence of the memory. Her father said that the problem probably had to do with their fitness. And Olivia thought about her mother's self-regulation and how she just wanted to take care of something else other than herself. Because it was Daniel who took care of her daughter.

---

Olivia told Daniel to meet her at Sears in the mall and told him to bring snacks. Daniel showed up with Sour Patch Kids. He said that he had remembered they were her favourite. Olivia was in the furniture section and was lying in a kids double bed with pink and purple striped sheets. She patted the spot beside her

twice and rolled down the covers. Daniel turned his head sideways and Olivia thought he looked handsome.

“I don’t think we should be doing this.”

“Doing what? C’mon, it’s fun to pretend you’re a kid.”

“That’s funny. I remember you hating it,” he said.

Daniel got under the covers like he would when he tucked Olivia in for bed years ago when her mother paid him eight dollars an hour. When he got under the sheets Olivia turned sideways and hugged her knees.

“How are you?” she asked. She hadn’t seen him in years, before last week, when she ran into him at new public library downtown. He was sitting in a red chair against a white wall and he was reading *War and Peace*. She remembered when he stopped babysitting her like it was yesterday. Her mother had caught him smoking on the back patio one night when she got home from the gym and said she couldn’t have her daughter protected by someone who was killing himself.

Daniel told Olivia that he stopped going to school and that he moved back to Newfoundland. He said that there it was easier there to just pretend you existed separately from all the terrifying stuff.

“Remember when you took me to see *An Inconvenient Truth*?”

“Yeah.” He opened the Sour Patch Kids and they flew all over the bed like company. “The truth really scared me back then.”

“I know. I remember.”

Olivia picked up a yellow Sour Patch Kid and sucked on it until it was slimy. “You used to hate the yellow ones,” she reminded him.

Daniel smiled and for the first time in her life she realized his age. He had little lines around his eyes that she thought were inevitable with how much he worried. They looked like little maps. She wanted to touch them and ask, *do you know where you’re going?*

He stood up and ran his hands through his thick, brown hair. "I'm gonna go out and smoke," he said.

Olivia fixed the bed and ate the remaining Sour Patch Kids that were trickled on the mattress. She followed Daniel outside and said, "Can I bum one off of you?"

He laughed and threw his head back so she could see his soft chin.

"You're a kid."

"I'm eighteen."

He handed her a smoke between two fingers and said, "That is terrifying."

When Olivia got home her mother was watching reruns of *The Good Wife*, which she had recently started marathoning on Netflix. She always marvelled at how the couple in the show were able to stay together when he couldn't give her what she wanted.

"Where's Calorie?" Olivia asked.

Her mother looked unwell. Her face had sunken in over time and she looked hungry. She had gotten lip fillers and it looked like someone had punched her in the face: life, maybe.

"Where's dad?"

"He's upstairs. I think he needs to run out and get some spinach for dinner."

Her dad came down the stairs seconds later with Calorie chasing his heels. "Honey!" Her father put each hand over her ears and kissed her on the forehead. "I'm going to take the dog for a walk to the grocery store. Want to join me?"

Olivia's father was handsome in a way that was obvious. He looked like he had just gotten off a sailboat most of the time. His age hadn't caught up with him in the same way it had caught up to her mother, which seemed unfair.

It had started raining and all the colours of the stores were reflected on the wet road like a painting. Her father walked slightly in front of her and asked her about school and dance and her friend Natasha. Olivia always had these

conversations with her father. It was like a checklist that they ran through to make sure things were in order. People told Olivia she looked like her father. But Olivia thought it was just because they were similar. Both of them made things look effortless which her mother had a harder time doing. When Olivia was younger she would move all her food to different corners of her plate and eat the food separately. This was when her parents still ate potatoes. Her mother would tell her she should eat it all at once because there was more flavour and her father told her to figure it out herself. She always felt more freedom with her dad. Olivia was wearing a shiny yellow raincoat and suddenly she felt like a child. They left Calorie outside and Olivia and her father entered the Atlantic Superstore.

Olivia and Natasha had come here a few weeks before to get gin. They waited outside the Superstore for a person who looked nice enough to buy them alcohol. It was a flawed system but Natasha swore it would work. The man they asked said he was a police officer and they should be getting home. The way he looked at them made Olivia feel younger than she ever had before.

Her father went to the produce aisle and Olivia went to get dog food. Their shoes squeaked on the tiled floor and Olivia told her dad to wait up. She joined him in the produce and watched as he bagged everything separately. There was an inflatable palm tree hanging above the pineapples and Olivia thought about how the forecast was calling for snow.

They waited to pay behind a bunch of college students who looked the same, and Olivia thought about Daniel. She thought about how he never looked like these kids. She thought about his soft chin and him handing her a cigarette. “I saw Daniel today,” Olivia told her father.

“No way!” Her father turned around suddenly to face her and a mango flew out his arm and rolled on the floor beside them. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s good. He’s thirty.”

“Ah, yes, we’re all getting up there.”

“Up where?” Olivia said and her father laughed.

Her father asked her if she wanted to stop at McDonald’s on the way back home and Olivia said, “Are you serious?”

“My treat,” her father said, and Olivia thought *I’m loving it*.

Her father stayed outside with Calorie and insisted that he shouldn’t eat when Olivia asked him if he wanted anything. Olivia got chicken nuggets to go, with three packs of sweet and sour. She had always ordered the same thing as a kid when Daniel would take her to get fast food.

“Ready to go?” she asked her father as she walked out into the rain.

When they were standing under the golden arches—her father bathed in a yellow light—he turned to Olivia and said, “I have prostate cancer.”

Olivia choked on a long and flimsy fry she had snuck from the bag and barely chewed. It flew out of her mouth and onto the sidewalk by her father’s shoe. It looked the same as before she had eaten it. Calorie sniffed it and Olivia said, “Dad look, he’s a retriever of golden food.”

Her father didn’t laugh.

“I’m sorry, honey.”

“Is it serious?”

She was holding a chicken nugget and it suddenly felt like a hand weight. Everything immediately felt heavier and even the rain started to feel like it was stabbing her head as it fell. Her father moved them to the bench outside the McDonald’s and Olivia stuffed a chicken nugget in her mouth. She chewed on it for what seemed like minutes, but she couldn’t swallow.

“They’re going to do surgery and after that I should be able to return to life as normal.”

“Well, that’s good, right?”

“It is. But there’s some risk involved.” Her dad paused and grabbed one of the fries from her bag. She hadn’t ever seen her father eat fried food and she wondered if his time for discipline was over now that he was sick.

“I might lose urinary control.” He paused. “And I could experience erectile disfunction.”

Olivia didn’t know what to say. She bit her bottom lip like it was food and wondered if this was the first honest conversation she had ever had with her father. It was like she hadn’t been thinking of her parents as human beings who could get sick and scared. She never thought about them having sex and she definitely never thought about them dying. “What’s mom saying? Does she want you to get the surgery?”

“Your mother is terrified of death, sweetie.” He ate another fry. “Which I’m sure you probably know.”

“I guess,” Olivia said. She did know that, but she never thought about her mother’s craziness as being a reaction against losing something.

“I don’t know. It’s like all the things that make me a man are being threatened right now,” he said.

Olivia put her head on her dad’s shoulder and said, “We’re all losing youth all the time.”

“You’re not losing me.”

“No. Youth, not you.”

The next day Olivia called Daniel and asked what he was doing. She told him she would pick him up and they could cross the bridge to the other side. He asked her to clarify and she said, “Dartmouth.”

She picked him up from his apartment in the South End and when he got in the car he said, “I can’t believe you can drive.”

“Why?”

“Well, you’re just so young. You’re just a kid.”

Olivia drove them to the McDonald bridge in her mother's Lexus and asked Daniel if he had change. He pulled a toonie from the back pocket of his Levi's and halfway over the bridge Olivia said, "I think my dad is going to die." She told him about the prostate cancer and her father eating fries. Daniel said he was surprised by both. Olivia drove down the highway until the airport and said, "Let's just stop here."

They got double doubles from Tim Hortons and sat by the Cargo garage, parallel to the runway. Daniel talked about dropping out of school and feeling like it was a waste of time. He wanted to do things that felt more immediate and he missed Newfoundland. He said he just wasn't ready to be leaving home when he was seventeen because there was still so much for him to learn that wasn't Derrida. And he never got a chance to figure out what it was he really wanted to do because he was too busy reading and taking care of her.

"I'm sorry," Olivia said.

"Don't be," he whispered, and took a sip of his coffee. "You're what kept me here so long. I really loved taking care of you."

"I loved it too."

A plane flew above the car and Olivia said, "Tell me about Newfoundland."

Daniel said it was different than anywhere else. The people were nicer and more understanding. He talked about the houses all connected like a bunch of handshakes and said, "I think you'd like it."

"Yeah?"

"No one there ever makes you feel bad for feeling confused. It's like everywhere else I've lived there's been this competition to see who can graduate first and who can get published before they're twenty. People notice who has the nicest jean jacket and people wonder who will live the longest. But in Newfoundland, that stuff matters less. Or it feels like it matters less."

"None of that has ever really mattered to me," Olivia said.

“I know. It’s what makes you special. It’s like you exist outside of the rules or the boundaries or something. You’ve always been like that.” He paused and fiddled with his lighter. The flame kept coming and going. “It’s like you’re free of something big,” Daniel said and he lit a cigarette in her parents’ car. He gave her one too and the car became smoky enough that she could barely see him. She reached her hand out to touch his chest and it felt fine as long as she couldn’t see him.

Friday night, while she was drunk, Olivia called Daniel from campus. She walked out into the middle of the King’s quad and sat down cross-legged like a kid. She looked at the buildings around her and thought about tradition, and how she mostly came to this school because of Daniel. She romanticized times in her childhood when she was soaking up Daniel’s knowledge like a sponge. She still had the notebooks that she filled with ideas about philosophy and Daniel. She wanted to feel the same way he did, burdened and emotional and attached to things. She wanted to feel bothered by the world.

“Hey? Olivia? Are you okay?”

“I’m at this party at King’s,” she said. “It’s themed Dante’s Inferno and all the different floors of the residence represent the different levels of hell.”

Daniel laughed through the phone and said, “I can’t believe they’re still doing that.”

“Can you come pick me up.”

“Sure. I’ll be there in ten.”

“Thank you,” she said. “This is seriously hell.”

Daniel picked Olivia up in the Toyota Corolla he shared with his best friend Matt and took her back to his apartment. He lived in the South end by Point Pleasant Park and told her to be quiet because his roommates were sleeping. His bedroom was at the end of the hallway and when they walked in there was a yoga

mat on the floor and an exercise ball that he used as a desk chair. Olivia sat on the yoga mat and Daniel sat on his bed.

“Sorry, I was working out before I came to pick you up.”

Olivia laughed and said, “Do you think this shit really works?”

“I don’t know. It makes me feel better, I think.”

“Why though?”

“I just don’t want to go soft.”

“I think I’m going to puke,” she said, running to the washroom.

Daniel followed her and pulled her hair back when she puked, like he did when she was a kid. Olivia’s puke was red and it almost looked like blood.

“Jesus,” Daniel said.

“Don’t worry, it was just the martinis. They were themed.”

Daniel sat down beside her and leaned against the bathtub. Olivia put her feet on his lap and she knew that it made him uncomfortable. “Thank you for taking care of me,” she said.

“I used to do it all the time,” he took her sock off and rubbed her foot. She wondered if he had finally stopped thinking of her as a kid. The bathroom was silent except for the faucet that was still dripping slightly so the pipes didn’t freeze.

“Why did you come back here?” Olivia asked.

“I guess I always felt best when I was taking care of you.”

“But you were always miserable. And scared of everything.”

“No I wasn’t,” Daniel said and he smiled.

Olivia moved so she was sitting beside Daniel with their backs against the bathtub. She leaned over and kissed him on the mouth. He tasted like cigarette smoke and also sweat and she thought that made sense. He was always killing himself and trying to save himself at the same time. When she pulled away she noticed that his eyebrows were going grey.

“Olivia,” he whispered. “I don’t want to be with you.”

“What?”

He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear like he didn't want anything to be out of place. “I want to *be* you.” He paused and brushed his thumb over her cheek. “There's a difference.”

Olivia didn't think there was a difference. It was like her parents and Daniel were existing in a world where everything was fleeting and whoever could hold onto life the longest was the one who would win. But Olivia was looking to hold onto something different; something that meant something. She really believed that people could love the wrong thing and still be okay. And maybe Daniel didn't believe that, but she wanted him to. She thought about the board games they would play and how Daniel loved charades the best and how he loved to pretend. She remembered how he called her kid and still pretended that she was one. Olivia puked once more in the sink before she left.

“Hey, I was just playing,” he said, reaching for her hand.

“I don't want to play. I'm too old.” She descended three floors and found the ground. Her legs felt shaky like nothing she had depended on would hold her up anymore.

When Olivia got home her parents were watching *An Inconvenient Truth* and asked her to join them. Her father was eating McDonald's out of the bag and it made Olivia cry silent tears that fell off her cheeks and onto the Persian rug her mother brought back from Vancouver years ago.

“Sweetie?”

Olivia wiped her eyes and sat in between her parents. She wished they were both bigger and softer so she could hold onto them easier.

“Are you okay?” her father asked.

“This movie scares me. It was the first time in my life I thought about dying.”

“We don't have to watch it honey,” her father said and changed the channel.

The musical *Fame* was on channel 200.

“What’s this song called?” her mother asked.

“I’m going to live forever.”

## EAT ME

Miranda was studying Bill Clinton's erections for a critical theory class: when he got it up and when he went soft. She wanted to make an argument about what it means to be presidential and if you have to be hard. Miranda was doing a Master's degree in Social Anthropology at the University of Toronto and working at a coffee shop with no wifi where you needed a key to open the washroom. Her boss told her it was trendy not to have wifi, she said it made people concentrate and think outside of the internet. Miranda thought this same boss was very annoying on Facebook but she didn't tell her that.

Miranda was dating a woman named Sasha who was making large light installations for a show at the Cooper Cole. The show also incorporated a performance where Sasha sucked on lightbulbs of different wattage while people moved through the gallery. When Miranda asked why, Sasha shrugged her shoulders and said it had something to do with power and relationships and electricity.

Sasha's performance at Nuit Blanche was recently profiled in Canadian Art, where she was said to be one of the nation's new prolific thinkers. For her performance, she had projected images of herself on the roller coaster Photo Booth filter and cut it with scenes of classic film. She had projected it against a wall in Kensington Market and she held Miranda's hand like she was nervous. When Miranda asked Sasha what she thought the show was about, Sasha said it was about the subversion of projection and tradition to understand what it actually means to identify as female. Afterwards, Sasha did a lot of ecstasy and skipped around the town like she'd made it.

Miranda was finishing her thesis and had to have eighty thousand words submitted by December. Her work was disciplined and unrecognized. She had moved from London, Ontario to go to Trinity College, after she was encouraged by her father, a professor at Western. He said Trinity College was really the crème

de la crème, and promised he would loan Miranda money if she finished with honours.

The doorbell of Miranda's apartment rang like the sound of a classic bell. She lived in a walk-up on the corner of Ossington and Bloor and paid nine hundred dollars a month and lived with an old boyfriend named Dominic.

When Miranda answered the door, it was Sasha. She leaned in and kissed Miranda in the middle of the forehead. Sasha was wearing a dress and a coat, both to the floor. Her bangs ended in a blunt line, high on her forehead, and she had filled in her eyebrows with a pencil crayon.

"They're flying me to New York."

"Who is?"

"MoMa! They want me to do my performance. The one about food!"

Miranda smiled but her heart wasn't in it. "That's amazing," she said.

"You're coming with me! They said I could bring a companion."

"That makes me sound like a dog," Miranda said and Sasha laughed heavily, from her stomach.

They got ice cream in a dish and went to Trinity Bellwoods. Sasha fed Miranda the ice cream in small spoonfuls and talked about the show for the MoMa. Sasha was going to cover her body in weapons and also cinnamon rolls and danishes and it would be a comment on food as power and danger.

Miranda thought Sasha had an eating disorder. And if she didn't, she had an incredibly unhealthy relationship with food. She was always happiest when she was eating but that never lasted long. Sasha grew up in Toronto and her mother had raised her alone. Sasha had very strong ideas about what women should be, or not be, and she knew from a very young age that she would never sleep with men. Miranda, however, had slept with men for years until she got herpes and then she stopped. The first time they had sex, Miranda told Sasha she had herpes and Sasha hadn't let it bother her. She had tucked Miranda's hair behind her ear and kissed her on the nose and it made Miranda feel safe. Miranda believed she

had gotten it from a guy she had known from high school named Lou, and it made her resent going home, and probably made her resent men.

Sasha had convinced Miranda to go to the Blue Jays game with her that afternoon. The Jays were playing the Yankees and the game was sold out. C Magazine had given Sasha two tickets after she convinced them to let her write a cultural review. Miranda almost never left the West end of Toronto and getting to the SkyDome was terrible. There were a lot of people wearing blue hats and jerseys with names stitched on the back. Miranda bought a six dollar hot dog and a fourteen dollar beer and smoked in her seat until she was told to stop.

“Isn’t this great. It’s so culturally funny,” Sasha said. She was sitting forward in her seat like she cared about the score. Miranda nodded and agreed that it was pretty ridiculous.

The CN Tower hung over them like a deadline and Miranda started talking to Sasha about her research into Bill Clinton’s erection patterns.

“Ugh, the Clintons are so over. The Democrats have a serious Clinton problem, I’m telling you.” Sasha was drinking a beer and a bit dribbled down her chin and Miranda kissed it off.

“Well, this isn’t really about the Clintons,” Miranda whispered in Sasha’s ear. “It’s about what makes someone presidential. And like toxic masculinity and positions of power.” Sasha listened like she didn’t care and it made Miranda angry. “Sasha?”

“What dude? I’m trying to listen to this fucking game. I don’t even know what’s going on and I have to write this goddamn thing about it.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” Miranda said angrily and lit another cigarette even though she knew it wasn’t allowed.

“What does that mean?”

“You know what it means. You’re getting all this fucking attention and everyone loves your art and you’re showing at the MoMa and it’s all really great for you.” Miranda wanted to eat her hot dog so she picked it up and it suddenly

reminded her of a penis, something that shouldn't be there. "It would just be nice if you could listen to me for one goddamn minute. What I'm doing is important too, even if no one gives a shit."

That night Sasha fucked Miranda with a strap on and Miranda freaked out and said, "I can't fucking do this right now."

"What's wrong with you? You don't want to have sex, you don't want to see the Blue Jays."

Miranda and Sasha lay beside each other on Miranda's red IKEA sheets and Miranda said, "I'm jealous of you."

"Why?"

"People love your stuff and it's real and weird in a way that people like and my stuff is inaccessible and tired and my dad is paying for it."

"Your stuff is not those things," Sasha said and Miranda reached for her hand because she thought that was nice. The Penguin Edition of *East of Eden* was open on Miranda's bedside table and Sasha said, "Why the fuck are you reading this?"

"What? It's amazing."

"I read it in high school and was like so disturbed by that female character. What's her name?"

"Kate."

"Yeah. I don't know. It's like so many men have trouble writing a strong woman character without like making her evil."

Miranda thought this was probably true but she just didn't want Sasha to be right for once. She was staring at the ceiling when she heard Sasha undo the strap on and something felt like it evened out.

The next day, Miranda and her roommate Dominic went for lunch at Momofuku. The meal was two hundred dollars and Dominic paid for it without a conversation. He had recently been promoted to manager of Toronto's Koodo

office, which was mostly a job he hated. Miranda had slept with Dominic when she was eighteen. She had just moved to the city and he was cute and normal in a way that she didn't find threatening. He had really nice blue eyes and the rest of his face was hard. He was smart in his honesty, like he wasn't trying to be difficult or critical, and he was in love with the fact that Miranda was those things. He was from Vancouver and he seemed constitutionally more relaxed than her, which she found people from Vancouver always were. Miranda thought this was probably because the weather was never too severe, so they didn't have to be either. Miranda used to love having sex with Dominic. He kissed her ears and ran his hands over her hips over and over again like she was a cat. When Miranda started dating women, Dominic had cried over a burger at A&W.

“It doesn't mean I'm gay, I just don't believe in limiting myself to one thing.”

“I don't understand, but I'll try,” he said.

Miranda understood then and many more times after that, that Dominic was pretty fundamentally sexist. He mostly believed women were one thing. It didn't make her angry because she didn't think he really knew this about himself, it was just the way he had always thought about things.

“You know, I've always felt safe with Sasha,” Miranda said to him over lunch. Dominic was dating a new girl named Jen. She was blonde and pretty and didn't challenge his way of thinking, which Miranda had learned was absolutely essential in his relationships. “But, since she's been getting all this attention, I feel like something's changed. The power dynamic or something.”

Dominic drank an eighteen dollar cocktail and nodded his head. Miranda could see he was uncomfortable with the conversation. He never knew how to talk to her about Sasha and sometimes this didn't bother her but other times she wanted to pull his hair and say, *get over yourself*.

“You know, she's showing at the MoMa.”

“Well aren't you proud of her?”

“Yeah, I am. I’m just like jealous in this like really primal way. And I wonder if I’m feeling so competitive with her because I’ve like judged myself against other women my entire life. I feel like that’s how women are raised: to compete with other women.” Miranda stuck a scallop in her mouth and sucked on it until it began to remind her of an elbow. “You know, you see all these women in comedy and they’re all just like funny and interesting and every profile of them is like, who’s funnier, who’s smarter, who’s prettier. It’s fucking crazy.”

Dominic nodded his head like he was interested and Miranda loved him for that.

Sasha’s piece for C Mag was insightful and funny and she talked about how live sports allow you to return to a time of communal excitement that you become alienated from when you’re older. She talked about her art practice and how most of her work was solitary but how she wanted to open herself to group projects and communal thinking. Miranda read it and ripped it out of the subscribed magazine she got on the first of every month. There was a photo of Sasha in the bottom corner, and she looked impossibly cool. Her hair was cut in a triangle and she was wearing a white shirt with lots of strings. She had hot pink eye shadow on and her bio said, “Sasha Davis identifies as female and works and lives in Toronto.”

Miranda began using the page as a bookmark and it reminded her of where she left off.

Sasha and Miranda went for drinks at a snack bar on Dundas and Sasha talked about New York. She explained that they would leave Sunday and install the show during the week and the opening would be the following Friday.

“I don’t know if I should come. I have to like, write and stuff and Dominic is having this thing at our place and he wants me to be there.”

“What’s wrong with you.”

“Nothing is wrong with me. I just—I,”

“What?”

“Everything feels different.”

“Everything is different because you’re acting weird,” Sasha often made things more simple and it infuriated Miranda and left her feeling stupid.

Miranda ate the olive out of her martini and said, “I thought your piece in C was really good.”

“Thank you,” Sasha said. She had a tattoo of a knife near her collarbone and Miranda wanted to kiss it.

“Okay, well I’m not going to take anyone else to New York. I’d really like you to be there. I feel confused and uneven or something when you’re not around.”

Miranda wanted to tell Sasha that she was jealous and that she felt insecure and scared but instead she kissed the knife.

When Miranda got home, Dominic was reading her copy of *East of Eden*. Miranda stood in the doorway and thought there was something she was attracted to in him, his curiosity maybe.

“You look nice,” he told her.

Miranda was wearing a black dress with Stan Smiths and her hair was getting long. “Thank you.” She got two beers from the fridge and handed one to Dominic as she sat down beside him on the orange couch he had inherited from Koodo headquarters.

“I like the Kate character in this book.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, I think she’s interesting. I feel like everyone really depends on her to make them happy but then she ruins their lives.”

Miranda smiled and put her arm on the back of the sofa and leaned her cheek in her palm. She thought that Dominic was normal and uncritical, but he saw things in a way that was important. He never acknowledged the easy or the pretentious opinion.

Miranda leaned in and kissed him on the lips. His facial hair itched her chin and she thought about Sasha and how she shouldn't do this to her. Dominic kissed her cheek and then her neck and Miranda felt absolutely consumed with something she couldn't figure out.

“I have herpes.”

“I know, I remember.”

“I just want you to protect yourself.”

“I want anything that you'll give me, Miranda.”

Miranda realized then—as Dominic pulled off her dress and kissed her belly button—that he was in love with her. She wondered how long he hadn't been honest with her and she thought about Jen, the girl he was dating. She thought about Sasha and how she couldn't keep not telling her the full truth. She needed to tell her that she didn't always understand her art or think it was important. She thought that Sasha was weird but she often wasn't thoughtful and she got credit for things that were easy and uninspired. But Miranda wanted to tell her that she loved her anyway.

Dominic went down on her and afterwards Miranda told him she didn't want to have sex. “I'm sorry. I'm just confused and I don't want things to change between us.” She didn't want Dominic to have all the power, it would be too predictable and that felt sad. She didn't want Dominic to keep thinking she was perfect and she didn't want to hurt Sasha and have it be made into art. She knew Sasha would have a field day portraying all the conflicting parts of Miranda's personality and she would probably get funding to do it.

Miranda went to New York with Sasha and she didn't tell her about hooking up with Dominic. MoMa flew them business class and Miranda put a hot towel on her face until it was cold. They drank wine and Sasha held Miranda's hand and thanked her for coming. She found a green sweater from Uniqlo that reminded Miranda of one she had borrowed from Sasha and ripped in the sleeve. She

bought her the sweater with money her dad had loaned her for the month and thought that material things were all she could provide for Sasha right now. Sasha had gone straight to the gallery to meet the curator, a woman named Denver Rose. After getting lost on the grey line, Miranda met them at Denver's apartment and wore eyeliner. Apparently Denver's parents conceived her in Denver, hence the name. Miranda thought the whole thing was incredibly tacky so she went to Denver's balcony and looked over the park.

After leaving the party, Sasha convinced Miranda to go to the Empire State Building. When they got to the top, Miranda said, "I hooked up with Dominic."

The wind was blowing Sasha's hair sideways and the city looked like a postcard beneath her.

Sasha didn't respond for a while and it looked like she was occupied with everything they were standing over. "Why?" She didn't look upset and Miranda thought it was because she was too sensible to feel emotional about things she couldn't control. "Cause he can give you something I can't." Sasha said.

Miranda wondered what Sasha meant and then she decided Sasha was talking about things she couldn't give her physically. "No, we didn't even sleep together," Miranda said. A family shoved between them for a better view of Times Square. "I just have been feeling like we're not the same anymore."

"We're not supposed to be the same just because we're women dating each other."

"I know, I just—I," a man bumped Miranda and knocked her off balance. "I just had this idea that things would be more equal between us or something, and you're doing so well and I'm proud of you for that. But you have all the power."

"Dating men is not a great alternative if you want to feel powerful, Miranda," Sasha chuckled like she couldn't believe Miranda didn't know this.

"Dominic doesn't make me feel stupid. He doesn't make me feel like he has more important things to say. He makes it seem like everything he thinks, he thinks for the first time."

“That’s a privilege that you would never give a woman though.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Miranda said.

Sasha walked toward Miranda and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. She very lovingly told her in what was almost a whisper, that she needed to undo what she knew about gender and power and love. She needed to find new ways to think. She made an eloquent and structured speech about how things weren’t one way, and relationships were hard and complicated if you wanted them to work. She said that her art practice was a way for her to understand these things and it helped her approach nuance in new and important ways. Miranda felt a lump in her throat building in size, until it felt like an after dinner mint. She thought that Sasha was making her understand things in a new way. Sasha was trying to subvert ways people thought about the most primal things: food, sex, money, power, jealousy. She wanted to change people’s minds. She wanted to change her own mind. The whole moment was noisy and fleeting. There were sirens and screams and there were lights behind Sasha’s head, making her kind of glow, like an angel.

Denver Rose flew Miranda home for free and when she got home she saw that Dominic had moved his Koodo couch out of the living room. When she asked him what was going on, he said he got a place closer to Lakeshore and closer to work, where people needed him if things went wrong. He told Miranda that he thought she was smart but she needed to look at her life closer than before. She told him that Sasha said that too and he laughed. He broke another mug, but this time he did it on purpose. Miranda told him before he left that she liked his way of thinking and she thought it was refreshing. He acted surprised and happy that she said that.

A week later The New York Times profiled Sasha in their Arts and Culture section. They called her subversive and brilliant and innovative and powerful. There was a picture of Sasha eating a cinnamon roll on the front and the frosting dripped down onto her silk, collared shirt. Sasha had titled the show, Eat Me.

Miranda tore the profile out of the Times and looked at it as often as she learned to unlearn.

## TINDER DAVE

When Julianne's father slapped her across the face she deleted her Facebook. Julianne's father was a judge. He was retiring the year after next and she wondered what that would mean for his character: his lifetime of judging. Every Monday morning he warned her against Facebook and being online and she always told him that didn't make sense. She wondered what face she was presenting online and then she thought about the handprint on her left cheek and she wondered what face she really cared about, or what a face was really. She thought it was probably what sat on her neck but she couldn't say for certain.

Her best friend Mary took Julianne out for a Bloody Mary and Julianne told her it was called a Caesar. The drink came with a tall green bean that grazed her nose as she drank.

"I think my dad is nervous."

"About what?" Mary asked.

"I don't know." She paused and slurped, "Existing outside of a profession that is a verb, probably."

Mary laughed and tomato juice dripped out of her nose like blood.

"Your nose is bleeding," Julianne said.

Julianne met a boy on Tinder named Dave. He said his father was dead and Julianne typed, *i'm sry*.

He said, *y?*

She said, *there's two letters before that one*.

He typed, *lol*, and she smiled.

Dave said, *i want to go get tacos, but i'm veg*.

Julianne said, *stop trying to make everything shorter*.

Dave said, *life is short*.

Julianne exited her Tinder by double clicking and swiping upwards. She went to the washroom and rubbed cream on her face, swiping underneath her eyes and upwards, around her forehead.

She wrote to Mary, *What face am I trying to maintain?*

Mary sent her back emoji eyes. Julianne laughed and typed, *Thank you.*

Julianne's mother watched soap operas every day at four, like clockwork. She watched *All my Children* and *The Young and the Restless* and *Passions* and Julianne thought, where's all the passion?

When Julianne's mother was pregnant her father asked her mother to julienne some carrots. That day, her mom sliced her left thumb with a dull blade and swore, which was something she hardly ever did. Her father took her mother to the hospital in a sedan the colour of blood and told everyone she was pregnant. When her mother told him to calm down, her father said he would be the judge of that. Or at least that's how her dad told the story. She always doubted he said the judge thing though.

Tinder Dave sent Julianne a picture of his lower abdomen and Julianne responded with *LOL*.

He said, *are you really laughing out loud?*

*yes. i can't stop. my hand is over my mouth. really.*

*now you,* Dave typed.

Julianne sent him a picture of the mole on her shoulder and said, *i don't know how this works.*

Dave sent her a picture of his hairline which he complained was low. Julianne thought that was better than the alternative but she didn't say anything because she could tell he was insecure. Instead, she sent back a picture of her second toe and told him it was longer than the first. She typed, *my dad's feet are the same way.*

Dave said, *that's nice. are you close with your dad?*

*i think so, most of the time.*

Dave sent her a picture of his face. He looked nothing like she imagined. He looked tired and sad and his bedsheets were plaid, which she hated.

She said, *ur cute.*

He sent back a smiley face emoji with red cheeks. She turned off her phone and lay down wondering if Dave's bed was a single or a double.

Dave sent her a message the next day and said, *u didn't send me a pic of u! this is how it works. I give you something and I get something.*

She didn't respond right away and she knew he could see that she had read his message. She wondered if he was nervous and if his left leg was bopping up and down like her father's did sometimes when he was nervous.

*i think that's a flawed way to look at the world. ur never always going to get something when u give something.*

He said, *maybe I will.*

*no, you won't.*

Dave said, *what are u doing this afternoon?*

*i am watching all my children with my mom at 4.*

*do your parents have any other children?*

Julianne typed, *ur smart*, then she said, *no.*

Julianne wondered what her mother got from watching soaps. She thought it was some form of seduction and then she wondered if her father seduced her mother anymore. She had such a vision of her father taking her mother to the hospital in the red sedan. She thought about her mother's thumb hanging out the window, dripping onto the red paint. She wondered if her mother liked Bloody Marys and if she even liked sex.

Her father came home and said, "Turn that off."

Julianne knew he was judging them and she wondered if he was still wearing his robes.

“I really think this girl is beautiful,” her mother said to Julianne, pointing to the screen like it was a landmark.

Julianne thought her mother was beautiful. She had long brown hair that she parted in the middle. She would French braid it and say she didn’t want anything in her face. Her mother had a tiny mouth and a loud laugh. She had no patience for laziness and not much patience for anything, really.

“Why do you watch these, mom?”

Her mother didn’t answer and picked up the remote control, turning the TV louder.

Her father screamed from upstairs, “Turn that down, please!”

A tear rolled down Julianne’s face and she wiped it with the sleeve of her shirt before her mother could see. Her mother turned the power off and the room turned dark. There was a pink shadow on the hardwood and Julianne thought about Instagramming it. Her mother didn’t speak for what Julianne assumed was close to a minute and then she pushed her recliner so the foot rest snapped loud like a whip.

“There’s something soothing about completely immersing yourself in something you know is far away. Does that make sense?”

“No, not really.” Julianne realized her mom was answering her question about the soaps and she wondered if her father was listening from the top of the stairs. His Monday morning warnings about the dangers of the internet were creeping into Julianne’s ear like a worm.

“It’s like opening a box inside yourself that stretches the length of your entire chest. You can stuff all this fake and emotional information in there and then it’s all you feel or think about, and it makes it easier to ignore the other stuff that’s been pushed down or up or somewhere else.”

Julianne could now feel her cheeks getting wet and she knew she was crying but usually when she cried it was a bodily experience where her shoulders would shake and her nose would leak. She thought of her mother’s heart in a little

box, the size of the one where she stores her nice jewelry, and she suddenly felt extremely sad for both her mother and her father and also Mary and probably Tinder Dave.

“Baby, are you crying?” her mother whispered.

“No. I’m not.”

Her mother pressed the power button and the TV turned back on. The shadow disappeared from the floor as the sun set. Her mother pointed at the television and said, “I really do think this girl is beautiful.”

Mary picked Julianne up in her father’s convertible that he’d purchased eight months before.

“I still can’t believe your dad bought this.”

Mary laughed and said, “I think it’s a mid-life crisis.” She paused, “But he’s only thirty-eight, so it’s weird.”

Mary’s parents had gotten pregnant when they were eighteen. Sweethearts.

“Dave’s dad is dead.”

Mary shook her head and said, “How did he die?”

“I didn’t ask.”

Mary looked at her and then brought a McDonald’s diet Coke to her lips. The straw missed her mouth and hit her cheek. “Really?”

“Should I have?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not. What’s he like?”

Julianne told Mary that he looked sad and his bed sheets were plaid.

When she got home, Julianne wrote a blog post about what she thought constituted a mid-life crisis. She wrote about her mother and how she felt her mother was happiest when she was watching something fake. She wrote that when Mary had ordered McDonald’s, she had ordered twelve nuggets instead of six. She thought Mary was having a weird week and so she was stuffing herself with more food and then Julianne talked about her mother’s inner box and how

she wondered if Mary's inner box was filled with nuggets. Julianne wrote about her mother being able to avoid reality by sinking herself in the absolute unreal. She thought about the ridiculousness of soap operas and if their inauthenticity was comforting. She signed off her blog by saying she was eating a carrot and how it was making her think of her name, and herself, and Dave, and what was even real at all.

*I read ur blog, Dave typed to her that night.*

*how?*

*computer.*

*we should hang out, Julianne typed.*

*I can pick u up? 9:15?*

She sent him a thumbs up with a lollipop beside it to be cute. Her tinder said he was ten miles away.

When Dave pulled up, he was driving a red sedan. Julianne said, "My dad used to own this car. He drove my mother to the hospital in it while she was pregnant."

Dave smiled and kissed her on the cheek. It was awkward because he had to stretch over the emergency brake. Julianne thought about his lower abdomen and how the picture of it was saved to her external hard drive. Julianne thought about how her parents decided to name her Julianne in a car like this. She thought it was funny and her parents were hardly ever funny.

"What are you thinking about?" Dave asked.

"I don't know. This car and myself or something."

Dave smiled and backed out of the driveway. "You're taller than I thought you were."

"How would you know my height?"

"I just imagined," he said. "You're really honest on the internet. It's refreshing."

"I think I would lose myself if I wasn't," Julianne responded.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. It feels like all I do. It’s like a mirror or something. And I’ve been thinking that’s what the television is for my mom. She can feel like she understands something about herself when she’s watching it.”

Dave laughed and said, “Yeah, I don’t understand anything about myself.” He drove to the Wal-Mart and they sat in the parking lot. A Home Depot was bathed in almost darkness across the street.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yeah,” she said. They walked through the parking lot with Dave a few feet behind her. The Wal-Mart closed at ten and there were rushed and frantic bodies pushing carts full of clothes and plants and candy through aisles.

“I hate it here,” Dave said.

“Really? I love it. It’s so weird.” Julianne spun around in the card aisle and thought about how it was almost father’s day.

“Why is it weird?”

Dave grabbed her hand but she just gave him her pinky. She had painted the nail pink that morning. He took her to the furniture aisle and they sat in lawn chairs coloured like rainbows that were placed on top of fake grass. The grass didn’t move and Julianne realized it was taped to the sad and white tiled floor. There was a table between them with an umbrella that kept them in the shade. There were tropical cups on the table and Julianne opened a Pepsi she had grabbed from aisle one and poured it into the empty display cup. She slurped the Pepsi through the twirly straw.

“You’re not supposed to do that,” Dave said.

“Don’t judge me,” Julianne said and she laughed loud and hard.

After they got up, they went to the McDonald’s built into the front of the Wal-Mart. They walked through huge yellow arches and Dave ordered a McChicken.

“I thought you were veg,” Julianne asked.

“My doctor said I need protein.”

Julianne thought about how she hated when people didn't commit to things all the way, but she let it slide. She ordered a Happy Meal and she thought about how she really did feel happy. She wiped sour sauce off of Dave's mouth with her napkin and they shared a medium root beer. They left Wal-Mart holding hands and when they got to the parking lot, Julianne kissed Dave against the structure where customers leave their carts.

“I don't understand this system. What is this hut protecting the carts from? Rain?” she said against Dave's neck.

“It's all about organization. It allows people to feel communal or something.” Dave kissed the side of her mouth.

“Okay, it's comforting, I get it.” She popped a skittle from her pocket into her mouth and got into the Dave's sedan. When they pulled into her driveway, Julianne could see the TV on, casting a colourful glow against the lace curtains her mom bought last winter from Pottery Barn.

“This was nice,” Dave said squeezing her leg.

“It was.”

“We should do it again. I live close.”

Julianne said, “I know, the internet told me.”

## IT'S GETTING DARK OUT

This was the week that Donald Trump won the presidency. It was the same week that Lucy broke up with Mitch.

He asked her why and she said, "I just can't stay optimistic anymore."

When Lucy went home that night, her father was wearing a red ball cap. On the front in white, Times New Roman font it said, MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN. She thought that now was a new, white and capital time. Her father was watching CNN with his feet up. The chair had a wooden handle on the side that controlled his position.

"Hi Dad."

"Hey honey. You hungry? Want a drink? I'm feeling celebratory."

"I'm fine, thank you."

Lucy went to her room and cried. When she got up, there was a wet face mark on the pillow and she turned it over remembering how easy it used to be to solve a problem. When you can't sleep, turn the pillow over.

Lucy called Mitch and said, "I can't stop crying."

"Maybe it's good."

"What do you mean. How could it be good?"

"Maybe everyone will stop pretending now."

Lucy said she didn't want that. She thought pretending was how people kept going. She told herself pretending was different from lying but sometimes she didn't know.

"Don't you think there's something admirable about your dad not pretending. He likes Donald Trump, and it would be a lot easier for a lot of people if he didn't. But he's not pretending he doesn't like him. He wants you to know. He's wearing the hat for God's sake."

"But anyone who likes Donald Trump is pretending because the whole platform of his appeal is fake. He doesn't know anything. He's lying."

“But people like that. Because he’s not lying to himself. Maybe anyone who knows anything is just lying to themselves and to everyone else.”

“I don’t think that makes sense,” Lucy said.

Mitch said, “I know you don’t.”

The next day Lucy and Mitch went to the Dollarama. The sky was pink overhead and Lucy thought about how everything inside wasn’t just a dollar. They sat in the parking lot and she said to Mitch that the dollar store was breaking its promise.

“Everyone breaks their promises,” he promised.

Lucy grabbed his hand and they stared at the moms entering Dollarama in puffy black coats to their knees.

“I’m sorry I broke up with you,” Lucy whispered.

Mitch didn’t respond and turned on the radio to NPR. NPR had started talking about Hillary Clinton’s popular vote lead.

Mitch started nodding his head and talking about the electoral college. “It’s insane. The winner is the one who loses.”

Suddenly there was a crash. A black SUV ran into Mitch’s tail light. Mitch said, “What the fuck,” really loudly and Lucy wondered if he was responding to her. He stepped out and talked to the man in the SUV. They were just two dark shadows against the pink sky and for a second Lucy thought it was beautiful. When she got out of the car and looked at the sky, she could see it was getting dark out.

“He asked me about the election,” Mitch said, while he lit a cigarette with shaky hands.

“Who did?”

“The man who ran into my tail light!”

“What did he say about it?”

“He said he doesn’t know how to exist now.”

She looked to her left and she could see the CN tower. There were people balancing near the top, their bodies hanging over the city, their arms up. This was Toronto's newest adventure: The Edge Walk.

Mitch looked at Lucy looking at the CN tower.

"Why do people do this?" Lucy asked.

"They want to feel the thrill, I guess. Or the freedom, or something," Mitch said. Lucy told him she always felt like she was walking on the edge of something and she would never dream of doing the Edge Walk. She didn't understand why people wanted to feel out of control. She didn't understand why people wanted revolution. She didn't want things to feel threatened.

It was Saturday night and they were in Mitch's bed at his new apartment in the junction. They hadn't had sex since before the election and that's how Lucy was thinking about it: Before and After. Lucy handed Mitch a condom and he said, "We haven't used a condom in months."

"I'm not taking any chances," Lucy said.

"But you have an IUD."

"I got it removed yesterday."

"Why?"

"Because everything felt like it was unraveling and I was just thinking about how I have this like metal thing in my vagina and how I haven't had a period in years and I guess I just wanted to bleed, or something."

"But I don't want to use a condom."

Lucy looked at Mitch and for a second she almost felt bad for him. She felt bad that he didn't bleed. That he never thought about going on a diet. She felt bad that he never cried and he didn't think about it. It was all just so easy. For a second she thought she would never understand this person because they weren't the same.

Lucy rolled off him and said, “I don’t feel like having sex right now.” She didn’t want anyone inside of her when she was this uncertain.

Mitch didn’t respond and just sat up in bed, against a white wall with nothing on it, and called his insurance company. They explained that his insurance would go up and he said, “But I didn’t do anything.” The insurance company said that because he was a man, his insurance was already higher than if he was a woman. Lucy could hear them explaining this through the phone and she saw Mitch roll his eyes like he didn’t understand why he had it so hard.

Lucy put her feet on the ground, a chill running through her because Mitch refused to pay the heat bill. She put her pants on and then realized she hadn’t eaten in days, since before the election, but she wasn’t hungry. She considered emptiness and fullness and the pizza box on the floor. She thought about ordering something, about being ordered, and she thought about Hillary Clinton. She thought about people expecting total purity from a woman candidate and she wondered if Bill had ruined purity for Hillary forever. Lucy remembered learning what a blow job was because of Bill Clinton and then wondered if Bill ruined purity for her too. Mitch didn’t care about purity, but wondered if he cared about it in her.

Lucy called an Uber and when she got in her Uber driver handed her a zip lock bag of white powder and she said, “I just wanted you to take me home.”

The Uber driver explained that he was a drug dealer and not an Uber driver so Lucy switched cars.

Mitch texted her and said, “I could have driven you home.”

Lucy sent him a heart emoji and said, “Your tail light is smashed.” Tail light autocorrected to twilight and Mitch sent her back a question mark to which Lucy didn’t respond.

Lucy’s best friend, Emily, came over the next morning and said she was going to try acting. Emily went to the University of Toronto for sociology and lived with

five strangers in the West End. Emily had just painted her room all white and hung a picture of Lucy in the middle of the wall. Emily was strict and sad and God, she was pretty.

“Do you really want to do this?” Lucy said.

Emily flopped on Lucy’s bed like she was doing a trust fall. She propped her head on her hand and stared at Lucy.

“I think this is a new time for entertainment.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“America just elected an entertainer! They want to be entertained! And why can’t I entertain them. I feel like everyone is going to start acting now, right?”

Lucy heard CNN downstairs and she thought about pretending. She thought about how Mitch said people were tired of pretending and that’s why Donald Trump was president. She thought about things being more than a dollar in Dollarama and she said, “Emily, you want to be a professional pretender?” Lucy crawled into bed with Emily and pulled the comforter over them.

“What about school?”

“Ugh. I’m just tired of trying to understand people.”

Emily was working on a project where she studied people at airport checkpoints. She went to Pearson every day and sat outside security by the Starbucks, and wrote about how people acted at these places of transition. Lucy thought it sounded really cool and sometimes she would go along too, in Emily’s father’s Jetta. They would drink Caramel Macchiatos and sit cross-legged on the tiled floor until they were told to leave. Emily would tell the security people she was writing a thesis which sometimes worked. Lucy thought this was because Emily was beautiful and most people had a hard time saying no to beautiful people.

“We should go to the airport,” Lucy said as she started playing with a loose thread on the duvet her mother left behind.

“Lucy, are you listening to me? I said I don’t want to do that anymore. I want to act.”

Emily was being irrational and Lucy wondered if it was the first time she had lost her head.

“I broke up with Mitch.”

“What? Why?”

“I was feeling sad about the world.” Emily lay her head down on the pillow and for a second Lucy thought she looked like an angel.

“Fine. Let’s go to the airport.”

Lucy drove Emily’s dad’s car and took the Gardiner, but there was construction. She thought about how she felt good when she was driving. She got her license after her father had moved to an apartment in the Beaches. This was after her mother admitted she was done pretending. Lucy wanted to tell her that pretending was how people kept going but she knew that wouldn’t have made her stay.

“They must be widening the highway,” Emily said.

“They’ve been widening the highway for six years. They want to build express lanes.”

Emily laughed at the irony before she slurped a grape slushy out of a huge 7/11 cup they stopped for back on Queen. Emily always got grape and it made her teeth purple and also her tongue.

“Did you bring the lawn chairs?” Emily asked.

“Yeah, I think they’re still in the back.”

Lucy thought about the lawn chairs that were green like the grass that her parents used to sit on as the girls played t-ball. Their helmets were always too big and would fall over their eyes like a blindfold. Lucy’s father would laugh and he would pick Lucy up and throw her over his shoulder until she was dizzy. She wondered when her father stopped being happy. Or maybe he was still happy but just in a different way. She wondered if supporting a politician she believed was

bad made her father bad and if he became different after her mother left. Did he start thinking about himself more? Did he become more honest? She didn't know and it bothered her that she didn't know.

“Do you think you know your parents?” Lucy asked.

Emily slurped the last sip of her slushy until everything felt empty.

“Yeah. I mean, I've been studying them for years.”

Lucy suddenly wondered if Emily's inclination to study people for school was what would make her a good actor.

“I remember always thinking they were going to get divorced. When I was growing up. I remember they would fight and they would do things like turn on the blender so I wouldn't hear. But I think they were always still happy even when they weren't happy with each other.”

Lucy said, “I think that's amazing.”

Emily nodded her head and turned on the radio. Every station was talking about Trump's win so Emily turned it off.

“I never remember my parents fighting,” Lucy said. “Or maybe I just wasn't listening.”

“I think you avoid looking at certain things if those things aren't what you want to see.”

Lucy looked at Emily and bit the inside of her cheeks until her face looked hollow.

“I think you're right.”

Lucy set up the two green lawn chairs outside security by the elevator. She sat down and crossed her legs and she felt better.

“I like doing this. It's comforting,” Lucy said.

“I know. But why?”

“I don't know, I guess it's nice to see people like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like scared or something. People have to like prove their identities and then show all their things to someone else and convince them they’re safe and trustworthy.”

“Yeah,” Emily wrapped her legs like a pretzel underneath her and pulled out a notebook, purple like her mouth. You’re seeing someone go somewhere and leave somewhere at the same time or something.”

Lucy smiled and thought that was exactly right.

The woman working security came up to them and said, “Ladies, can I ask what you’re doing?”

“Just trying to observe something.”

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?”

Lucy looked up at the woman and said, “I don’t know yet, exactly. Can you just pretend we’re not here.” The woman rolled her eyes and turned around.

“I can,” she said when she was far away.

Lucy thought about how everyone acted a certain way when they got to security. It was comforting to watch because there were almost never surprises. She wondered how many places were like that. She wanted to stay there forever, watching people whose behaviour she could predict. She looked beside her and Emily was taking bullet point notes in cursive writing and she wondered if Emily was the last person on earth who wrote in cursive. In a place where everyone was proving their identity, Lucy grabbed Emily’s hand. Their hands linked above the arm of the lawn chair, where there was a cup holder.

“I think you should act,” Lucy said.

Lucy booked an appointment at Planned Parenthood for the following week and got her IUD reinserted. She texted Mitch saying, “got IUD back in” and he texted back, “cool.”

He drove to her father’s house in his car with the smashed tail light and her dad said, “Mitch, you should follow the law. Law and order, you know.”

Mitch nodded and said, "I know, sir."

It was always strange to watch them interact. Lucy thought they were a lot alike and wondered if that's why she resisted needing Mitch.

"How bout that election, hey son," her father said, offering Mitch a Coors Light from the fridge like he would a handshake.

"It's pretty unbelievable."

Lucy left the room so they wouldn't know she was crying and began cutting an onion with her father's Jamie Oliver knife he won with stamps. This made her cry more.

"Do you even like Donald Trump, Dad?" Lucy yelled from the kitchen.

"Well, obviously I don't think he's a great man but that doesn't have anything to do with his platform. He's completely unqualified but look how he won. He just told the truth."

Lucy cut her thumb with the knife and swore.

Her father said, "What honey? You don't agree?"

"No, I just cut myself." Blood was dripping onto the salmon-coloured linoleum. Mitch jumped up and said, "Shit." He wrapped Lucy's hand with his own and said, "You have to apply pressure or it won't stop."

"What won't?" Lucy asked.

Mitch stared at her and squinted his eyes like he didn't understand her anymore. "The bleeding."

Emily called that night and asked if she could stay over at Lucy's. "My roommate is having a house show and he asked if I could remove my boots before entering."

Lucy laughed and agreed so Emily said, "I'll take the subway."

Lucy picked Emily up from Main Station and Emily said, "Jesus, what happened to your hand?"

"Oh, I cut it with my dad's Jamie Oliver knife."

"Did you go to the hospital?"

“No. Mitch just wrapped it in a napkin and held my hand for a few hours.”

“That sounds...nice.”

Lucy thought about grabbing Emily’s hand the other day in the airport and how it made her feel warm inside. They drove the rest of the way in silence before Emily said, “Does Mitch make you happy?”

She didn’t know how to respond because she didn’t know, so instead she put the car in park and shrugged her shoulders.

The room was dark and Lucy felt Emily turn over toward the wall. “I miss when we were kids,” Lucy said.

“I know, and your mom would wake us up and make us smoothies with yogurt.”

“I wonder what she’s doing now.”

“I don’t know. Hopefully she’s happy.” The room went quiet except for the heater that rattled in the corner.

“I hope she’s not happy,” Lucy said, and hearing the words out loud made her sad.

“Think about how much better it would have been if she had just told you the truth.”

Lucy reached backwards and turned on the lamp beside the bed. She kissed Emily on her perfect purple mouth and she turned the light off.

The next day when Mitch took her out to The Beecher for breakfast, Lucy ate a sausage and told him they should stop seeing each other.

“What?”

“I don’t think we should be together.”

“But what about last night?”

“You held my hand to stop my thumb from bleeding.”

“Yeah, but it stopped right?”

Mitch looked young to her now, like a boy or like a baby. His hair was pushed to the side like he had forced it that way and his eyes were red. Lucy thought he was going to cry and she was surprised by that.

“Everything is just going to shit,” he said.

“You’re right,” Lucy agreed.

She stuck a hash brown in her mouth and thought about getting really fat. Her thumb hurt and so did her uterus. She wondered if she was going crazy and why she had kissed Emily. Was she pretending this whole time that her sexuality was one thing and moved in one way? Was she pretending that history or politics or family had a way of moving forward in a line that made sense. Because she now mostly understood that these things didn’t ever make sense, because not everyone was telling the truth. Her thumb can bleed and her uterus can’t. Her father can support Donald Trump and still be good. Her mother can leave and still be sad. Mitch’s tail light can smash and he can still drive. Donald Trump can be awful and still be president. Everyone can pretend and nothing can change.

Emily didn’t speak to Lucy for a week and when Lucy asked her to go for sushi, Emily said, “I have an audition.”

Her father passed her room and asked her where Emily was.

“She’s acting.”

For her birthday, after she blew out candles, her father gave her a card. He had showered and his hair was combed back with what Lucy thought was gel. He was wearing a brown and red checkered shirt and she asked him if he’d shaved.

“Yeah! I guess I did.”

Lucy hugged him and said, “You smell like you did when I was young.”

Her father’s card had big bubbly cursive writing on the front which made her think about Emily. Inside was a gift certificate to Toronto’s Edge Walk.

“I thought we could do it together. I hear it’s amazing. You can see the whole city!”

Lucy looked at her father and wondered if he knew her at all or if he just pretended and treated her like a father is supposed to treat a daughter. She had been alive for 25 years and she was sad because that was a quarter of a century and he still hadn't figured her out.

That weekend Lucy hung above the city from a harness. She wore a helmet and thought, *God I hate this*. Her father was beside her and he reached out and grabbed her hand. It made her thumb hurt where it was still healing but she smiled at him anyway.

“Happy birthday!” he yelled. “Look down, honey! You can see everything!”

Lucy looked down and only wished she could see her mother.

“Isn't this fun?”

“Yeah, dad. It is.”

## SHALLOW WATER

When Gerald met Deborah, he thought about starting over. The university had sent him to Toronto to present a paper on female Canadian poets. He got money from the President's travel fund so his flight was free and so was a beer. The Sheraton was a bit expensive, but he thought, *Hey, when in Rome*. His house in Newfoundland was being renovated and he had paid a man named Al a pretty penny to redo the floors, but Al was charming and smart in a way that made Gerald believe him, so Al was redoing the roof too.

Gerald was wearing orange bathing suit bottoms with Hawaiian print that Marilyn had bought him back in 2008 when he'd told her he was taking her somewhere tropical. Their flight had been cancelled because of the weather so they went to Jungle Jim's on Torbay Road instead. When their flight was cancelled a second and a third time, Marilyn told him to forget it.

Now, Gerald was walking through the hotel lobby in his Hawaiian bathing suit, on a baby blue carpet that reminded him of kids. An Ottawa Senators' towel was hanging from his neck and he thought he wouldn't see a soul. It was eleven at night and he couldn't sleep. But a woman was sitting by the shallow end of the pool, leaning against the silver bar that was there to hold you steady. On the wall behind her it said, SHALLOW WATER, in big black letters. Her right foot was dangling in the water and he could see her toes were painted pink. She was wearing a black bathing suit, the top long enough to cover her stomach. The tile underneath her hand was pink and it matched her toes in the water. He wondered if Marilyn painted her toenails and it made him sad that he didn't know.

"Can't sleep either?" she asked, and Gerald watched the water turn to spirals around where her right foot moved back and forth like a paddle.

"Afraid not. I have a conference in the morning and I'm nervous, but swimming usually makes me tired." Gerald reached a wet hand out to her and said, "My name's Gerald."

Her name was Deborah but she told him to call her Deb. She was an artist and also a waitress. She was married to a man named Rich and they had gotten in a fight about the cable bill, so she had left their house in Leslieville and walked all the way down Queen until she found a room for the night.

“You know, I always wanted a pool growing up,” Deb said like it was a secret and Gerald said, “Me too.” He had admitted that he felt ashamed about the Sens towel and Deborah told him she was short-sighted so he shouldn’t worry.

He said, “You remind me of someone.” It wasn’t until after midnight that he realized it was his mother. She was beautiful and honest and he didn’t feel like he really knew her.

“So you’re a poet?” Deb asked.

“No. I mean, I write poetry. But really I just study it and teach it.” He thought that Marilyn would laugh if she were here now. She would throw her head back and show her teeth. She would say that they never got what they wanted from each other.

Deborah asked where his conference was and he told her it was in the lobby and ham sandwiches were promised at noon.

“Maybe I’ll come watch you speak,” Deb said and he noticed her rub her arms with her hands.

He got out of the pool and grabbed his Senators towel. He wrapped it around her, swaddling her like a baby, and she said, “My husband’s a Leafs fan.”

The next day, Deborah met him in the lobby at noon and she even had a ham sandwich. He watched her eat it and thought he had never seen someone eat finger food so beautifully. She told him that her mother used to pack her ham sandwiches every day when she was a kid. “You look sharp,” she said, looking him up and down and Gerald blushed. He remembered she was short-sighted and this brought him some comfort. She was wearing a red dress with an intentional triangle cut out of the back. He wondered for a second if she was trying to seduce

him. He read his paper last and talked mostly about Phyllis Webb. He talked about the CBC and how she created *Ideas*. He explained to Deborah later, over a lemon drop martini, that *Ideas* was a radio program on the CBC.

“I wish I had ideas,” Deborah said.

“You do. I find you fascinating.”

Deborah asked if he thought there were leftover ham sandwiches. They went to the lobby and a lady in a red jacket gave them a full sandwich cut into quarters in a zip lock bag.

They went to the roof of the Sheraton through the fire escape. A man in a long sleeved polo shirt told them that he would prefer if they didn't go on the roof, but once he left they did it anyways. Deb laughed with her hand over her mouth and the ziplock bag of ham sandwiches swung from her right hand like a purse. Gerald thought about how he missed out on being rebellious. When he was younger and everyone was doing hard drugs and having sex and getting experienced, he stayed home. He always wondered about that idea of getting experience. He was experiencing things; they just weren't those things. He touched Deb on her back as she climbed a small ladder to the roof and told her she was beautiful. Deb giggled as they looked down at the city.

“Rich is probably down there,” she said, and pointed to the East end. “He's probably watching a Leafs game or something.”

He wished she wouldn't talk about Rich. He wanted this experience to be his. He lay down on his back with his hands behind his head and Deb did the same.

“I feel like I'm twenty-five again, but my hip hurts more than it did then.”

“I loved being twenty-five. I had so many ideas, or dreams or something,” she whispered.

Gerald thought about the difference between his wife and Deborah. He always thought he would be with someone like Deb when he was younger.

Someone that didn't challenge him and lie to him and infuriate him. Someone who didn't throw her ideas at him like dodge balls for him to catch.

"My house is under construction."

"What does that mean?"

"It means a guy named Al is pulling the shingles off my roof." He paused and thought he saw a constellation. "And it means I'm married to a woman I don't understand. Or I guess I only understood her after it was too late."

Deborah kissed him and for once, Gerald felt free. He wondered if this was a good thing.

In August, Gerald asked Marilyn for a divorce. They were standing in their kitchen that was coming down around them. Gerald told Marilyn that he was sleeping with a woman named Deborah and she was only in town until Friday.

"Why would you even say something?" Marilyn asked him, thinking that today was Wednesday and so Friday was, therefore, soon. Marilyn looked around. There were men with no shirts on, wearing Levi's they had cut at the knee with her kitchen scissors. "Our house is still under construction."

"Exactly," Gerald said. "I don't always want things to be under construction."

"I don't know what you're even talking about now."

"I don't know either."

Marilyn noticed Al, their carpenter, take a hammer to what she was sure was a load-bearing wall.

"Al, that wall holds up the rest of the house," Marilyn yelled.

Al shrugged his shoulders with an indifference that now reminded her of her marriage. Marilyn pointed to the load-bearing wall and said, "See that Gerald. That could be my heart!"

"What could?"

"That wall! With the hole in it!"

Gerald rolled his eyes and said, “Oh Marilyn, stop it.”

That night Gerald went to the Sheraton in St. John’s to meet with Deb. She told him Rich got a deal through his work so she always stayed at the Sheraton. Her room had a view of Signal Hill and she said, “It’s really cute here. Like you’re in a snow globe or something.”

Gerald resented when anyone talked about Newfoundland that way but he just nodded and grabbed a small spiced rum from the fridge. He mixed it with Coke and thought it tasted awful. He looked out Deb’s window and thought about his wedding and how he convinced Marilyn to climb Signal Hill in her wedding dress. They had never made it to the top but he remembered pulling her hand all the way down Duckworth. Her palm had felt big in his, like he was holding his own hand, and he remembered thinking they would be strong and good together, like real partners.

“I told Marilyn about you today,” he said to Deb. Deb stepped toward him and started to undo his tie. He had always seen women do this in movies and sometimes when he watched porn, although that was almost never. It just always felt wrong.

“I can just take the tie off myself,” he said to Deb as he felt himself start to sweat.

“What’s wrong, Gerald?” Deb sat down on the king sized bed and looked up at him. The fitted sheet on the top right corner sprung off the top corner of the mattress and there was a brown stain there that made Gerald shiver. He put his hand over his mouth so Deb couldn’t hear his answer. He ran to the bathroom and knocked a miniature sized shampoo and conditioner from the side of the bath as he fell on his knees and vomited into the toilet. He could taste the spiced rum in his throat and thought, finally, *I’m experienced*. Gerald crossed his arms on the toilet seat and for a second he thought about praying even though he hadn’t gone to church since he was a kid. He got up and walked back to the room. Deb was

under the sheets on the bed. *This is what you've always wanted*, Gerald reminded himself. He climbed under the sheets and said, "I just threw up."

"Oh that's okay," Deb said and stroked his head like he was a child. Like he would do better next time.

Deb was confusing in bed. She made sounds that Gerald thought happened at the wrong moments. She moved a lot and changed positions and he couldn't hold onto her. She kept asking him what he wanted and he thought about Marilyn and how she made things hard for him, especially when they had sex. She was big and substantial and difficult. With Deborah, he didn't know what to do with his hands. He felt distracted and confused by being able to please her so easily and by being able to give her what she wanted. He rolled off of her and realized that all the corners of the fitted sheets had come off the mattress, in toward their bodies like a trap.

Marilyn had been lying down, mostly on her back, since that Wednesday. Gerald would check in on her every afternoon when he got home from the gym, and say, "This isn't normal, Marilyn!"

Marilyn didn't respond when Gerald said this because she blamed the dissolution of her marriage on her desire for the normal things almost as much as she blamed him. She wondered if Gerald took Deborah to the airport on Friday and if he had kissed her on the mouth outside Tim Hortons. She wondered if they kissed with tongue. And if he got a honey cruller on the way out—his favourite. Marilyn never let Gerald eat honey crullers which she cursed herself for now. Gerald hadn't slept in the bed since he had told her about Deborah. She wondered where he was sleeping because their couch was wrapped in plastic, the thick kind that protects things from getting damaged.

Sometimes the dog, Anne (named after Carson) would lie beside her under the covers, on it's back. *This dog is my real partner*, she would think. Then she would yell, "You hear that Gerald! The dog is my real partner!" Anne wouldn't

move for such long periods that Marilyn would have to put her hand on the dog's heart just to make sure it wasn't dead. She wondered if Gerald ever thought about putting his hand on her heart.

Gerald had grown up in Mount Pearl and done all his degrees at Memorial. He always felt best when he knew everything about something and he never wanted to leave Newfoundland. He left the house every morning at seven and went to the gym on campus everyday at five. Marilyn wondered if he had met Deborah at school. She couldn't ask, though, because that would require her getting up and acknowledging that things weren't normal.

Since Monday, Marilyn had spent a considerable amount of time staring at the ceiling thinking about ways to avoid seeing her husband ever again. But now, with fear, she yelled Gerald's name like she needed him. Instead of Gerald, Al rushed into the bedroom.

"There's a wet spot spreading across the ceiling!"

"Yes, well I has to redo the roof. The water's gettin' in cause the foundation's weak."

"You wouldn't say." Marilyn started shaking and thought there was something so fundamentally threatening about the roof coming down. The wet patch was spreading across the ceiling like a tumour across a stomach. She suddenly felt vulnerable and she hated that it was Al who was here to see it. She should have been more vulnerable for Gerald, she should have tried harder to be what he needed her to be.

Al wrapped his arms around Marilyn and told her to breathe. She wanted to push him off and accuse him of dismantling her home but she knew that was Gerald's doing.

"Do you like your job? Renovating?" Marilyn asked.

"Nice being able to change what people are unhappy with."

When people asked how she and Gerald met, Marilyn always said with the ease of someone who lied often, "Oh we met in college." When this happened,

Gerald never dared to correct her but she always knew he wanted to. They actually met online, which is something Marilyn would never admit. It was the same mentality as when people asked if they had kids. Marilyn would say, “One day,” and Gerald would think, *I like you better when you tell the truth*. But most things about Marilyn were not honest. She wanted two kids with blonde hair and probably freckles too. And her body wouldn’t let her have that, so she lied. She constructed stories and ideas that would allow people to believe those things were coming. And everyone was nice and they would take a sip of their wine and say, “I’m excited for you Marilyn.”

Marilyn felt now as if she and Gerald made a deal years ago to use each other to get what they wanted out of the rest of their lives. She realized somewhere along the way that she married Gerald so she could show people her life had really started. It was like they’d connected their pinkies and promised that they would help each other get by in the way people were supposed to.

Gerald had gotten tenure in 2005, the same year he had met Marilyn online. She had been living at her mother’s house in Ottawa after she was let go from her public relations job at Parliament. She had just turned thirty-five when she had met Gerald on Plenty of Fish. She had made a mistake with the website’s settings and didn’t specify how far away a desired partner would live. So after five phone calls on her mother’s land line, Marilyn visited Newfoundland and Gerald picked her up from the airport. He had a receding hair line that was more severe than his picture and he was eating a honey cruller.

She moved in with Gerald right away which felt terribly wrong but she was committed to being more risky and living her life on the edge. Newfoundland made her feel on the edge of something, she just didn’t know what. When Gerald would go to work during the day, Marilyn would go to the Good Life on Water Street where they promised her a better body, fast. She would go with her new friend Rachel who she had met on Tetley Tuesday at Rocket Bakery. Rachel worked reception at a dentist’s office in the Goulds and would drive in and pick

Marilyn up for spin class at six. They would sweat and breathe heavy and the whole thing made Marilyn want new gym clothes. She wondered how much of gym culture existed for capitalist reasons and it kind of made her sad. But she liked Rachel.

Marilyn and Gerald spent the first three months tip toeing around each other. Marilyn realized that Gerald liked late night snacks and he hated when anyone's toothbrush touched his. He had sparse hairs on his chest that were like little islands and they made Marilyn think of Newfoundland. Marilyn told Gerald that when she was younger everyone told her she could do anything she wanted, so she never narrowed her thinking. This made her constantly unsure of what she was really passionate about.

Marilyn liked being in Gerald's house. She spread her stuff around so he wouldn't ever forget she was there. She put her toothbrush in the holder beside his, close but not touching. One night, over a rotisserie chicken Gerald had picked up after work, he asked her to marry him. They had a balcony that faced The Narrows and the sky was a cotton-candy pink. She had smiled and put her hand on his shoulder, which she felt was bigger since he had started working out. He opened a bottle of red wine that had been on sale and it tasted too sour for the moment but they pretended it was great. Marilyn's face got pink when she drank the wine and Gerald told her she matched the sky.

---

When Gerald got home and saw the leaky roof, he swore and then convinced Marilyn to take a room at the Holiday Inn. Gerald drove them to Portugal Cove Road in his blue Ford Edge that he had purchased after tenure. Marilyn remembered when he got tenure. She bought two party hats and she wore hers tilted to the left, the string sinking into her chin and holding it in place. She had

kissed Gerald on the cheek and told him she was proud that he got what he always wanted, stability.

“Are you hungry? They have an East Side Mario’s! Bottomless soup and bread is what I hear,” Gerald said as they passed the Sheraton.

Marilyn was staring out the window and thinking about their wedding. Gerald had bought her a corsage like a high school prom and it flew around on her wrist, orange petals flying into the high North East winds as they climbed Signal Hill. Gerald thought it would be romantic to get to the top, but Marilyn said halfway up, “Gerald, I need my puffer.”

So there was Marilyn, thirty-six and already grey by the ears, sucking on a puffer in her wedding dress from the Avalon Mall Sears. Gerald took a photo of her with a disposable camera that they got developed two Septembers later. Marilyn’s hair was all over the place, her veil almost horizontal in the wind.

“Well that’s a sight for sore eyes. Did we even make it to the top? I don’t remember,” Marilyn said when they got the photos back from Shoppers.

“No, we never made it to the top, Marilyn.”

---

East Side Mario’s was themed like New York City and Marilyn said, “I hate it when they do this. Try to convince me that I’m not on an island in the middle of nowhere but actually in the middle of Times Square. Why do people even like this?”

“I think they find it exciting,” Gerald said. “Not everyone can afford a vacation.” He then thought of Hawaii and the trip they never took.

After eating cheese cappelletti and four bowls of Italian wedding soup, Marilyn said, “You know I was just thinking about our wedding.”

Gerald swallowed and said, "I'm sorry about all this." Again, Marilyn wondered if he meant the roof or their marriage, both of which were damaged now.

"You know what I did today? I looked up renovation on thesaurus.com."

Gerald stared into his soup bowl like it was a mirror.

"You know what the results were, Gerald? Improvement, Renewal, Upgrade."

"Marilyn, I'm sorry."

"You know what the antonyms were?"

"I don't want to know."

Marilyn rolled up the sleeve of her cardigan and said, "Look, I wrote them on my arm so I wouldn't forget."

Across her pale arm, it said, DAMAGE, DESTRUCTION, HARM, HURT, INJURY, NEGLECT, in Marilyn's large and bold writing. She always had the writing of a confident person.

Gerald ate a piece of garlic bread and the crumbs fell on his dress shirt and stayed there. This was the side of his wife he didn't understand, the challenging and dramatic side of her that was so opposite of who he believed he was. "I didn't mean to hurt you, or damage you, or neglect you. I wouldn't have, if it didn't feel good, with Deb."

The short form of his lover's name left his mouth and hit her like a high school spitball. Marilyn tilted her head to the side like she did in pictures, and began to understand that Gerald was with this woman because it was easier than being with her. She wanted to tell him to grow up and realize that most things were never easy and that he had made commitments.

"I feel so far from you," Marilyn said instead. "Like I'm in New York City."

Gerald only got one room, with two twin beds and told her it was a hell-of-a-lot cheaper. Marilyn got Cheesies from the vending machine and ate them so fast the

corners of her mouth turned orange. They took the elevator up to the fourth floor and she could see all angles of her and Gerald in the mirrored walls of the elevator.

When they got to the room, Marilyn said, "We have a room facing the pool."

Gerald thought about the night he met Deborah and it made him feel dirty. Like he was hiding the truth from Marilyn, even though she hid the truth from him all the time. The bedspreads were pink and floral and Gerald thought about his mother telling him to never sit on a bed without turning the bedspread down.

Marilyn fell back on the bedspread with her hands open like a star. "It's nice to stare at a new ceiling."

"See, this is kind of like a holiday."

"You can't say that because the hotel says holiday in the name." Marilyn turned on her side and her dark hair fell behind her.

"We never took a proper holiday, Gerald."

"You called it off, remember?"

"No. That's not how I remember it." Marilyn got up and grabbed a white hand towel from the chair. "I'm going for a swim."

Gerald turned down the bedspread and sat down with his book. It was short stories by Mary Gaitskill, *Bad Behaviour*. He used to hate Gaitskill but she was Deborah's favourite author. She told him there was something liberating about Gaitskill and it was seductive. She couldn't believe it didn't seduce him. Gerald told Deb that he liked rules and structure and poetry. He told her he always played it safe. And it felt good to not follow the rules with her, like his whole body was on fire or something. Or like he was playing with fire. He didn't know really.

"I stopped reading male authors in 2010," he said.

"Why?"

“I don’t know, maybe I thought it would help me understand my wife if I only read women for a while. But I think I just didn’t want to be another man teaching writing by men.”

Deborah said that was admirable. He started walking toward the fire escape to head back to his room. He felt the night getting cold.

“You coming?”

“I can barely see you,” Deborah said.

“What?”

“I’m short sighted. You’re blurry to me.”

---

Now, he sat with *Bad Behaviour* and he thought about his own bad behaviour. He felt guilty and it felt like a stomach ache. He thought this was maybe what he had always been trying to avoid growing up. Feeling guilty about doing the wrong thing. Lying felt like a burden he couldn’t bear. Like it would disrupt the foundation.

He got up and looked through the window and over the pool. Marilyn was in a floral one-piece bathing suit and she was doing the butterfly. Marilyn’s body was never what she wanted it to be. She had a birth mark on her neck and she had asthma. She had an inhospitable uterus and big shoulders. Gerald always told her these things weren’t true but mostly they were just facts, so he stopped lying to her at some point. She looked elegant to him now though. She would throw her arms in circles and her back would arch before she would be underwater and blurry again. Something he couldn’t see clearly. He watched her hoist her body out of the water and grab her towel. She leaned against the metal pole that was there to hold people steady and she stuck her right foot in the water. There was lettering that stretched across the wall behind her that said, SHALLOW WATER. He leaned forward until his breath fogged on the bedroom window. He could

have sworn that his wife was crying. His chest felt tight and he thought, it's okay, it's probably just water from the pool, and then he saw her big shoulders shake. He wanted to be home with her, holding her under the leaky roof. He wanted her to lie to him and say she was okay so things could just keep being normal. He wanted to never tell her that when Deb visited Newfoundland last week she had told him she was getting sick in the mornings.

He looked back at his book, open at the spine. He realized he didn't want this, this bad behaviour, the spontaneity of not knowing what was next. He wanted to feel the boredom of the life he had built with Marilyn. He wanted to watch his wife be a butterfly. He didn't care that she couldn't give him children, but she cared. She wanted her uterus to be a home for their baby. And now he had torn down that home and also their home on Gower. He had wanted renovation but instead he had done the opposite, which were the things listed on Marilyn's arm: damage, hurt, destruction. He wanted to be ordinary and he didn't know why he had gotten mad at Marilyn for wanting that too and giving it to him.

The lights were off when Marilyn returned to the room. She went to the washroom and left the door open. When she stepped out, Gerald was lying on his back with his eyes closed. His arms were crossed over the bedspread.

"I miss Anne Carson," he said.

"Mmmm me too," Marilyn replied as she got into her own bed. She lay the same way as Gerald and said, "Did you notice Anne Carson is losing her hair?"

"She's stressed."

The room fell silent and they could only hear the fan from the bathroom. "I forgot to turn it off."

"I'll get it," Gerald said as the bed springs screamed underneath him. He was wearing blue checkered boxers that Marilyn could make out in the dark. She bought them with their Costco membership for his fiftieth birthday. Gerald stubbed his toe and swore under his breath.

“This all feels normal,” he said as he returned to bed and it made Marilyn smile. When he was lying on his back, the way he was before, and Marilyn could hear his breathing turn steady, she said, “The words on my arm, they washed off in the water.”

## THE AMAZING RACE

*The Amazing Race* is starting its twenty-seventh season. Twenty-seven years of sisters and brothers and married couples and parents and children and strangers and lovers all racing around the world. They need to know who is the most American; who can complete x, y and z and become a winner. Who can become amazing. They want to know how people can become winners and stay winners, instead of returning to a job that pays thirty thousand dollars a year but only twenty-two after taxes. Where the winners don't have to return to their losing marriage that can only survive if they're competing with other losing couples to see who the losers really are. Where they don't have to return to their gym where the towel service runs out and their biceps don't grow. Where their trainer's abs distract them from the sex they haven't had in forty three days and the thirty-two dollars they're paying biweekly for a membership with a picture on it that makes them look fat. The winners don't have to return to their golden retriever who needs to be put down and who seems to represent that the golden days are behind them. Where they can stay away from the country where Donald Trump is running for president and says global warming has to be a hoax. A country where people throw their Twinkie's package out the window of their SUV with a flabby arm and an underhand throw. A place where their kids have purple hair and sad things to say. And where people are stuck in the literal tube that is the tube and watch shows where people have all their same problems but also a smile and have a sex life. The winners of *The Amazing Race* have a chance to escape their lives where things keep not working and where they are always losers.

Henry was watching the last season of *American Horror Story* and thinking about how maybe he would like to write television, when his Dad knocked on his door so delicately he wondered if he was scared of him.

“Your mother and I have news,” his dad said while sitting on Henry’s fitted sheet. His sheets had seventy-two of the same Superman with his fist in the air, which was a number Henry had counted years ago while he was bored. “Your mother and I have just won the Powerball.”

Henry paused the show which he had torrented illegally on his fifteen inch Mac. He stared at the Supermen on his bed spread and said, “Wow. Well with great Powerball comes great responsibility.” He thought his dad would laugh.

“Batman says that, not Superman, son.”

Henry nodded because sometimes his Dad just needed to feel like he was right, like he was a winner. His father was a slight man with thick framed glasses that made him look smaller. He had dark hair like Henry, and it was getting long which made him look younger. Henry spun around on his chair that allowed him to see all angles of everything. “So you’re saying you can fix the leak in the shower now?”

“Henry we won four hundred and forty-eight million dollars,” his father said while using his index finger to push his big glasses up his nose.

Henry laughed. “Dad,” he pointed to his computer. “This is an American Horror Story.”

Henry’s Dad was from Duluth and travelled there on the first of every month to check on Henry’s grandmother who was in a home and refused to leave Minnesota. His father bought Powerball tickets every time he crossed the border. “It’s America’s Game,” he would say repeatedly while the white and red balls would spin, never in his favour.

“Dad, if you were to win, we couldn’t collect the money, we live in Canada.”

“Henry, I am American. This is the American dream.”

Henry would invite his girlfriend Lydia over and Lydia would laugh behind her hand every time Henry’s dad would swear under his breath. Henry’s sister Jane was attending Columbia for her Master’s in Creative Writing and just took a

sixty thousand dollar loan out of their small little bank so she could write long form poetry and short fiction in the city she insisted never slept.

“It has to sleep sometimes,” Henry said before she moved, and she said, “No, it never does.”

Lydia and Henry would go up to Henry’s room after his dad would change the channel from *Powerball* to *America’s Got Talent* and his father’s mood would improve as he watched young girls in sparkly shorts throw flaming batons into the air.

“See look at them overcoming the fear. I can do it too, I know it.”

Lydia would pet Henry’s ears like he was a basset hound and they would link their teenage feet on his Superman sheets. He would stare at her and wonder how she always looked so nice. “I wish my dad was a super man.”

“We’re going to move to Manhattan,” Henry’s father told him Tuesday night over a stiff tenderloin. “We have the money for a place in the Meatpacking District, and the Bank of America promises fair and dependable release of our power money.”

“I think it’s just regular money,” Henry said.

Henry’s mother sat across from him and moved her knife back and forth over the tenderloin like she was cutting rubber. His mother was quiet and polite and she had learned these traits early in her life. Her legs were always crossed and she always spoke softly. Sometimes he worried that she wasn’t happy and she just wasn’t saying anything. He knew she missed Jane and she liked having Lydia around for that reason.

“Mom, is this what you want?” Henry asked.

His mother grew up in Rosedale with a credit card. She knew power before she won the Powerball. She had a smart brown bob that she had gotten layered last week and now she moved her hair behind her ear and said, “Yes, sweetie. We can be close to Jane, and we can be winners.”

Henry told Lydia that night over coffee that his family was moving to Manhattan. She laughed for ten minutes and told him it was ridiculous. Henry explained it was the only way they could collect their money and Lydia said, “America is so fucked though.” She finished her first cup of coffee and was now drinking a cappuccino and a pour over simultaneously when Henry reminded her it was ten at night.

She said, “I can’t sleep, I have work to do.”

Henry admired Lydia’s ability to work hard. He often felt so lost in his own ideas but he was too cautious to try things that he couldn’t fully commit to. He liked that Lydia was sure. He liked that she drank eight cups of coffee a day and therefore shook steadily like she was cold. She wasn’t yet done high school but was taking a comedy writing class at Ryerson and a cooking class at George Brown and an astrology class at U of T. She was small with brown hair and big cheeks that looked like apples. She made him believe in all the things his parents kept him from believing. She made him believe that hard work would result in success and that he could be happy, probably.

Lydia said, “I thought we were going to move to Newfoundland and live in a pink house by the water.” This had been a dream of Lydia’s after she had seen a Tourism Newfoundland commercial one night after *Survivor* aired. Her father had taken her to St. John’s as a kid and she remembered the feeling of it in her gut. They had walked through the Battery and there was a picture of her in front of a blue house that jutted off the side of a cliff until it looked dangerous. Her father had been working a lot around then and she remembered them having to move to a smaller hotel room the second night, but she didn’t care.

Henry said, “We can still go to Newfoundland, I’ll just have a trust fund now.”

Lydia told him that was not what she wanted. She wanted to experience the anxiety of having to work for money and having to earn happiness. She wanted to believe in small pleasures and the good and honest things. Lydia was an only

child and she was very close with her parents. Her father had always told her that hard work would get her places and she believed him with all her heart.

“Do you really though? Or will that just make us sad and empty and unable to move on from the sadness and the emptiness?” Henry said.

“What’s happened to you? You’re not even American yet.”

Henry drank an espresso and went home and turned on the television. He called Jane and she told him again that the city really never slept.

“Why is television so great?” he asked.

Jane said, “It’s the way we all want to be. We see these relationships and we think, wow, my life will be like that and then when it’s not, we realize that television has been lying to us all this time because it’s not real. The pain in your stomach is what’s real. But the only way the pain can go away is by watching more television. The only way television works well is if we can sympathize with what’s happening on the screen. If we can really believe we’re all in this together. We laugh at *America’s Funniest Home Videos* and we think wow look at all my friends who also trip over their inflatable pools. We think, okay, someone understands me and the pain in my stomach, so maybe the pain isn’t real if everyone else’s stomach hurts too.”

Henry hummed like he agreed and then asked her about class.

“I haven’t written anything good in weeks,” she said.

Henry laughed and thought about how he and Jane were overthinkers. They analyzed every little thing they did until the moment to do the thing passed. But they still wanted points for trying, for thinking harder than anyone else.

Henry met Lydia at Trinity Bellwoods on the weekend and Lydia told him she didn’t have a lot of time because she had to be in class. “It’s actually a rock climbing class at my gym. It’s pretty scary, but so is writing comedy, I guess.” She picked a piece of grass and started moving it in between her teeth.

“I don’t know how clean that is,” Henry reminded her.

“Could you just let me be me?” she asked. “What the fuck are you even going to do in New York?”

He shrugged and felt his shoulders touch his ears. “Hopefully I’ll find my way. I talked to Jane last night. She’s not writing anything but she seems like she’s doing well, like she’s really learning.”

“She’s there to write, Henry,” Lydia said. It was so like her to remind him of the reality of which Henry and Jane were easily distracted from.

“I wish you wouldn’t have so many boxes that you feel like you need to check. I wish you would just get rid of the boxes and ask why you feel boxed in,” Henry said.

“You’re an asshole,” Lydia whispered. She started to cry behind her hand so she put on the sunglasses she bought last summer with her savings.

“Lydia, take those off. I want to see your eyes.”

“What if it all doesn’t work out? What if you leave and I get lost.”

“You won’t, you know this city perfectly. There’s a subway every two blocks.”

She laughed and took off her glasses. Her cheeks were now red and he reached out to hold them and said, “Your cheeks always reminded me of big apples.”

That week, Henry’s parents started packing up their bungalow off Queen East. It was small and yellow and Henry loved it. They wanted to have everything on the moving truck by the weekend and it made Henry want to cry.

“You’ll miss the beach, won’t you baby?” his mother asked.

“No, probably not.”

His father picked up his fitted sheet out of the laundry, “You don’t want this anymore right Henry? I think you’ve grown past this.”

Henry said, “No Dad, I haven’t. It’s still nice to see a lot of men being super.”

His father rolled his eyes and rolled the sheet, “Obama is super, you’ll see.”  
“He’s almost out of office,” Henry said.

That night Henry and Lydia and some friends went to a snack bar on Queen West and used fake IDs. Fish tacos were eleven dollars and Lydia’s contact fell into her gin fizz.

“It’s weird,” she said looking up, “I can’t really see you anymore.”

“I’m right here.” Henry said sticking his hand in the air like he had something to say, but he stayed silent instead. Lydia started feeling around in front of her like she couldn’t find him and Henry thought it was funny.

They finished high school that month and Henry and Lydia threw their hats in the air and caught each other’s. Lydia was the valedictorian so she was wearing extra eyeliner and a push up bra. She tripped on her way to the stage and Henry worried about her ankle that could make clicking sounds on demand. She finished her speech by saying, “Here’s to the rest of our lives,” and she looked at Henry just as a black tear fell from her eye.

A month later, Henry, his mother, and his father boarded an American Airlines flight to JFK with backpacks that his father had stitched American flags onto after dinner on Friday.

“Do you feel like we’re in The Amazing Race?” Henry asked, “I feel like this is how it all starts.”

“Isn’t that exciting?” his mother asked him with a smile.

“Think of the possibility ahead!” his father said, knocking his backpack into a small woman holding a Tim Horton’s hot chocolate.

“Dad, you’re not aware of the space you’re taking up. Look before you move.”

Henry met Jane at the new Whitney on his first day in the city. Jane was blonde and tall and her clothes were baggy and mostly black. She was thin and her cheeks sunk in on themselves like ships. Her hair was cut in an angular line

that reminded Henry of how Jane could always see every angle of something. She gave him a hug and his index finger sunk in between her ribs.

“Are you hungry?” he asked her before anything else.

“I’m happy to see you.” She ruffled his hair and things felt like they did in Toronto. The new Whitney was showing an exhibition called *America is Hard to See*. Henry thought that was true so he was excited to go.

“What do you think of New York?” she asked.

“I haven’t seen it yet.”

There were paintings of the American family in a driveway and Montclair Modern Cigarettes. There were prints of freezers full of frozen food and Ronald Reagan’s portrait beside a target. Four vacuum cleaners were stacked on top of each other next to static TVs. Jane stuck her elbow in Henry’s side and they walked onto the patio. The sun was high and reflected on the water so he couldn’t see Brooklyn. It had rained hard and Manhattan was glistening like it was licked. The sun created pink and purple reflections on silver industrial warehouses that sold fourteen dollar slices of blue cheese pizza beside three thousand dollar dresses with no backs: a new aesthetic where an old one had fallen down.

“I can’t stop thinking about Canada,” Henry said.

“You will.”

He wondered how much Jane believed all of this. She was smart and fair and she gave things a chance, but part of him thought she was faking. He knew she didn’t want this money to change them but he didn’t want the city to change her either.

His parents were unpacking their things a block from the Whitney in a loft with an elevator that opened into the living room. They had cable installed on two TVs but hadn’t bought toilet paper yet. Henry told them he wanted to go to a movie at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and his Dad gave him a twenty from his wallet. He went to call Lydia on his way to Brooklyn but he had no service. He saw *The*

*End of the Tour* and cried for David Foster Wallace and how miserable America had made him. He sat on the steps of the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the man working the concession stand came out with a handful of Junior Mints. He offered one to Henry who smiled and said, "Thank you but no thank you."

"Take what you can get here, son."

He called Lydia and cried and told her he was sorry for leaving and that he loved David Foster Wallace. She told him that she had seen *The End of the Tour* last week at the Kingsway on Bloor and afterwards she had walked to Holt Renfrew and watched them set up their Christmas display.

"Remember when we used to do that?" she whispered. "We could never get over the transformation. Everything about the change was so beautiful."

Henry had a very vivid memory from the winter before, holding Lydia's hand so tight he lost the feeling in his fingers. It was late but there were still so many people on Bloor, with rosy cheeks and gloves on. It had just started to snow and there were a bunch of Holt Renfrew employees in black blouses dismantling and moving the display out of the window. He remembered watching one woman who he thought kind of looked like his mother. He thought she was really beautiful in a way that made his heart hurt. "I hate change," Henry whispered and Lydia hung up with a click.

The next day, Henry and his parents had a meeting with the Bank of America. There were red and white and blue signs that said *Today and Everyday*. The teller was a woman named Sylvia and there was red lipstick on her front teeth. She led them to an office with water that was warm and Henry thought, *we won the Powerball and no ice?*

A man in a suit sat at the head of the table. He said, "Whoa, what a debate last night, am I right?"

Henry said, "I'm hoping Harper is done, but who knows, I don't love Justin either."

The teller chuckled and tightened his tie until his neck fell over the collar. Henry found it hard to breathe, like the air was recycled and whatever he exhaled, he inhaled again. His father wore a tie with little American flags on it and Henry wanted to remind him that they had moved two days ago. He wondered how much his father had paid for that tie and thought about tightening it so tight that America would strangle his father and make it hard for him to breathe too. His mother wore big black sunglasses and a red pantsuit and Henry wanted to tell her she wasn't Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, but he knew his mother would only grin at the comparison and thank him. She would say, I was going for Hillary Clinton after Arkansas, and I would tell her Bill and John were both unfaithful. Henry watched the neck of the bank teller and wondered how many hours of TV watching and simultaneous chip eating had resulted in his neck fat. He wondered if he worked out, and if his gym promised him a good life. He wondered if the bank teller jogged on the treadmill while still watching TV but having access to more and better channels.

“Son, how does that sound?”

Henry had no idea what was said and he didn't care so he said, “Fine.”

When they left the meeting they had to walk through Times Square. Henry's father's American tie was flapping in the wind and hitting him in the face every so often like a slap. His father was smiling so big his face looked pained and Henry wondered why he was so happy. There were naked cowboys taking pictures with seventeen year old girls with I HEART NY shirts on.

“Now this is the life!” his father said.

“I don't know what you mean by that. This isn't *our* life. Our life is in Toronto,” he said. His mother squeezed Henry's arm until it hurt and his father loosened his tie and stopped walking.

“Henry, can you please just try to enjoy this for once. New York is where people come to make it. It's a place of opportunity and prosperity!”

Henry inhaled until his chest puffed up and he said, “Okay, I’ll try.” His father shook his hand which felt awfully formal and they kept walking toward their home. Henry thought about how he had never seen so many cameras in his life and it made him want to document all the screens lighting up and taking pictures of other, larger screens. There were tour busses with people hanging over the tops like they were going to jump. He thought that maybe he would start taking pictures of places where people took pictures in New York, and he would see if these places actually made him feel anything. He wondered if people found comfort in these places because they knew what to expect.

Jane came over for dinner and apologized for missing the bank meeting. “I had a workshop and it ran late. She pushed her hair into a pony tail. “Some people just can’t do dialogue.”

“You’re telling me!” Henry said, and looked at his father. He had stopped talking to his parents when they got home from the meeting at The Bank of America. Today and Everyday! Ha! The teller kept saying that Henry would have a trust of a hundred million dollars. He didn’t trust himself with that. Their parents met them in the kitchen and Jane wore a cream coloured dress that ended just above her ankles. Their mother made a comment about how Jane should try showing more leg.

Jane noticed the roast beef and said, “Dad, I don’t eat meat.”

“Well, honey, this is a celebration. We’re not celebrating with tofu.”

So, Jane ordered a cheese pizza and ate one slice. “I just get so full so fast these days. My body can’t sustain what it used to,” she said. “I’m tired all the time and my bike has five gears. I almost got hit on the Brooklyn Bridge the other day and the driver called me a slut, which I thought was kind of weird.”

“Honey, you need to take care of yourself,” their mother said.

“This city really wears you out. It doesn’t sleep, you know?” Jane responded with a small potato in her mouth.

“We know,” Henry said. But he started to wonder if Jane was at all worried about protecting herself. She was small and blonde and she had mentioned that there had been close calls about her safety and walking home at night but she never went into detail about how close. She had started volunteering for Hillary Clinton’s campaign and she would go to the Brooklyn office after class to make contribution phone calls. She would talk about how the election had become a hot bed of toxic masculinity and how it was all so dumb because this definitely was going to be the election of the first woman president. After Jane was done talking she asked Henry for a tour. Henry led Jane upstairs and showed her the balcony that wrapped around their building like a hug. She took a heavy breath and Henry noticed that her collarbone protruded from her shoulder. Henry wanted to hold it like a handle and never let go. “This is really beautiful,” Jane said, and it was the first time Henry was convinced of her complete sincerity.

“I know it is.”

“How’s Lydia?”

“She’s fine. She’s busy. She reads a lot of Camus and Kafka and stuff. You know, *The Outsider* and stuff. She’s also letting her hair grow,” Henry said. “She’s a little bit like you, I think.”

“Do you think she would ever move here?”

“I did said her cheeks looked like big apples.”

Jane tilted her head and said, “When are you going to start being a serious person?”

This made Henry’s chest tighten and he really hoped Jane wasn’t disappointed in him, because he loved her more than anything. “I think she would prefer that I move home, honestly.”

“Why don’t you?”

“I don’t really know,” Henry said. “Probably because of Dad, I guess.” His father was excited about giving Henry everything. He wanted Henry to

understand America in ways that he understood it and Henry wanted to give him a chance.

A month passed and Henry called Lydia every day after dinner. She was taking architecture at the University of Toronto and she always asked him if he had figured out what he wanted.

“I don’t know, America’s hard to see.”

She had found a four-bedroom place in Kensington where they padlocked the door with a pink master lock like the one Lydia used for her locker at North Toronto High School. None of the roommates knew each other but Lydia said, “I’m so close to Spadina. And there’s a taco place down the street that also sells overalls! I feel close to everyone, but I guess I’m not really close to anyone. It’s weird and nice.”

“I feel close to everyone but also far away from everyone.” Henry spilt his glass of milk on his lap and thought, *don’t cry over spilt milk*.

“I don’t know what to say,” Lydia whispered.

“I just wish you were here,” Henry said. “Which is stupid because everyone here is like you. Everyone is ambitious and driven and doing ten things at once. And everyone is beautiful and inspired and nice, except when they’re not. Everyone is skinny but also drinking smoothies and eating McDonald’s but also wearing pants that are silk and shoes that are leather. And the Empire State Building isn’t like the CN tower. There are like lines and security and people who I don’t know patting me down and emptying my pockets. And I have one hundred million dollars and nothing to do with it because I don’t want anything.”

“How are your parents?”

“They’re watching *Lost*.”

“Well tell them it doesn’t end well.”

Henry's mother became a Scientologist the same week he heard his parents having sex. His mother was moaning in a way that sounded like she was in pain and Henry was worried for her. The next morning, over Eggs Benedict with no Hollandaise, so just eggs really, his mother told him she loved Scientology. She mentioned names like Madonna and Tom Cruise.

"You're not Madonna because you're a Scientologist, mom."

"I'm close." She looked in the mirror. "A real material girl."

Henry ate his eggs quickly, cleaning the yolk off the plate with his thumbnail.

"Have you talked to Jane lately?" his mother asked.

"No, she's busy, she's writing a collection of short stories."

His mother laughed. "But what story is short, really?" she asked. "Don't you feel like everything is so long."

"I guess it depends on how you look at it. Jane was always good at finding an angle."

His mother chuckled and sat down beside him. She broke her yolks like a promise and Henry thought she looked unhappy.

"You know, this all feels like it did when I was young. Money is heavy. The weight of it. Can you feel it?" Henry nodded. "I'm trying to let it free me this time though."

Henry thought about his mother growing up in Rosedale in a house with big pillars. He always thought it looked like the White House and his grandfather said, "Well I am the president." Henry's grandfather was the president of a famous brewing company, but Henry could never remember which one. His grandfather got sober in the late 70's though.

"Isn't it hard? Profiting off something you can't have?" Henry asked.

"Money doesn't buy happiness, son."

"Maybe it does," Henry said.

Jane won a poetry competition in February for her poem called MacBook Pro. Her hair had grown long and straight over the winter and her writing had grown better. The prize for winning was three thousand dollars and she was putting every penny toward her student loan.

“Why hasn’t Dad paid off your loan?” Henry asked.

“Because I told him not to.”

Jane explained that she didn’t want anything to do with the power money and that money like that couldn’t make anyone happy. “Because it forces you to think into the future and what is the future anyways? It’s just a present moment that’s going to happen later and we can’t plan for it and we can’t save for it. Dad thinks this money is going to change our lives but I don’t want our lives to change, I want them to stay the same. I don’t want to be comfortable, I want to be uncomfortable.”

“Lydia wants to live in a pink house in Newfoundland, by the water.”

“That sounds nice,” Jane said.

Henry knew that Jane loved Lydia and wanted Henry to be with her but she also knew that Henry liked to take care of Lydia and this stunted his ability to take care of himself. Lydia had always looked up to Jane and when Jane still lived in Toronto they would get their nails done and cut their old jeans into shorts together. Henry felt bad that Lydia had lost not only him, but Jane too.

Lydia visited New York at the end of February during her reading week. She was smaller than Henry remembered and her cheeks had sunken in like Jane’s. When he picked her up from the airport she still had on a neck pillow. Henry asked her if she wore the neck pillow through customs and she laughed. Her smile was bright and made Henry feel happy in his bones, and he said, “Wow, I missed you.” He hugged her until her feet came off the floor and a bag of Air Canada pretzels fell out of her pocket. Henry picked them up and Lydia told him to leave Canada

behind. They caught a cab from Laguardia that played celebrity interviews on a small TV behind the driver's seat.

"Welcome to America," Henry said.

When they got back to the apartment there was a note from Henry's mother saying hi to Lydia with four exclamation marks and also that she had gone to church. They went to Henry's bedroom where they settled on his Superman sheets. Lydia patted Henry's ears like he was a basset hound and Henry thought, *finally*. Lydia moved her hands to his belt and he shifted her underneath him. He took off her sweater and she said, "Be careful that's American Apparel."

"Have you lost weight?"

"What?" She kissed him. "No."

"Are you lying to me?"

"Why would I lie?"

They kissed until their lips felt chapped when Lydia reached inside his jeans and asked him what was wrong.

"I don't know. I don't know." He fell against the Supermen and pushed his hair away from his forehead. "Nothing's wrong. I don't feel like anything is wrong. I feel really happy actually."

Lydia looked concerned and said, "Henry I haven't lost weight. I might look different but it's been seven months since we've seen each other and I'm sorry that you don't want things to change but everything is different now; the weight of everything is different."

They didn't have sex and instead they went to Whole Foods.

"It's sad in here," Lydia said. "Everyone looks so sad to me."

"It's not that sad. I find it relaxing actually."

"Well you would, because you love stuff like this. You love feeling like you're part of some collective struggle." She picked up some tempeh that was sealed in plastic. "I never really think about sadness until I'm in a grocery store,

where people are buying food so they can survive but they actually look like they don't want to survive. Don't you think it's so sad?"

Henry kissed Lydia on the nose and said, "I love you."

That night Henry took Lydia to a show in Bed-Stuy. They took the grey line there and Lydia kept stopping to load her subway card with money. She told him it made her feel safe. Henry began discussing his trust fund and Lydia told him it wasn't the same thing.

"But they both exist as backups!" he said.

They went to a bar called The Palisades and Lydia used her fake ID to ask for a Molson Canadian. The bartender laughed and gave her a Budweiser.

"Look, it says it's the King of Beers!"

The singer in the first band had broken his leg and wore a cast from ankle to hip. He sat down in a brown chair and put on a cowboy hat. There was a woman on the drums whose head was shaved and reflected the blue light from the ceiling. They sang at the same time, their voices deep and together.

"I think they're happy."

Just then, Jane snuck up behind them and put her arms around Henry's neck. She apologized for being late and Lydia smiled and hugged Jane like a friend. They held onto each other for so long that Henry started to think of them as one person who he loved the most out of anyone. When they finally separated he couldn't decide who he loved more.

An hour later, they left the show and got a falafel and Lydia spilt hot sauce on her shirt and swore really loudly. The three of them went back to Jane's apartment a block away and she typed a code to get into the doorway.

"What's the code?" Henry asked.

"It's FREE."

"What? Are you serious?" Henry laughed.

"That seems a little easy," Lydia said.

They climbed to the roof in a stairwell lit with different coloured bulbs. There was expensive lawn furniture on the ceiling and they all sat on a couch with three cushions, facing the city.

“Do you think these are the golden days?” Henry asked.

“The thing about the golden days is you don’t know they’re golden. We won’t know until later if they were golden or even yellow at all.” Lydia paused.

“Right? We can’t get outside the aura to see if what we’re doing is even special.”

“I think they’re probably golden,” Jane said.

The three of them sat in silence until Lydia said, “I’m thinking of applying to Hunter next year, for fine art.”

“But you’re in architecture,” Henry said.

“Well it’s kind of the same thing.” Lydia argued that either way she would be constructing something. She said it was more important for her to be closer to him and doing something that would last.

“Buildings last though.”

“Do you not want me here?”

“I don’t know what I want.” Everyone stopped talking and Jane sneezed.

“Bless you,” Lydia said but looked at Henry instead of Jane.

Henry wanted to be better than he had been; he wanted to follow through with things. He knew he would never feel as much as Lydia but he could try.

The next morning, Henry drove Lydia to the airport. Lydia had her feet on the dashboard of the car and was eating Cool Ranch Doritos when Henry’s father called and told them it was the US Open. His father had purchased box seats for the Serena versus Venus Williams game. He kept calling them the American success story. “Rising up from nothing, working hard, and getting what they deserve. That’s America, son.” Henry thought about how that was what Lydia believed.

“That is not America, dad,” Henry said instead. “I have to go. We’re in traffic.”

When he put the phone down Lydia said, “You should start watching the show *American Dad*.”

That night at dinner Henry asked his dad if he thought Hillary Clinton would win the presidency.

“Americans do return to what they know,” his father said.

His mother told them she was done with Scientology and she needed something easier to believe in.

Henry talked about Lydia’s visit and how she wanted to move here and be an artist. Henry’s father took off his glasses and said, “Well that’s great son.”

“Why would she do that though? There’s something so sure about what she’s doing now, something so stable about architecture.” Henry knew that Lydia was essentially learning how to make things stable and sustain that stability. But that knowledge made her feel too confined, like the answer was a physical thing she could hold onto like a hammer. She didn’t want the answer to be so easy though, she wanted to feel like she earned whatever made her happy. He realized this was probably why they were still together. Because Henry loved her too much to end it and Lydia wanted to work, she wanted to feel challenged in her life. “I think she’s too good for all of this.”

“She may not know yet how good she really is,” Henry’s father said.

His mother’s fork fell on the floor and she bent down to pick it up and said, “Let her figure out what she believes in, Henry.”

Lydia called his house and Henry asked why she didn’t call his cell.

“It seemed too easy. I wanted to see if I could remember your home number, cause you told me when I visited but I didn’t really listen and then I thought, okay well maybe this will challenge me in some way. Maybe us talking so much should be harder.”

Henry stayed silent and so did Lydia and Henry heard her breathing get heavier and he thought maybe she was crying but he didn't want to ask because he felt like she would lie, and he always wanted the truth from her. Lydia said she had to pay the winter semester's tuition and she didn't have the money and Henry said, "I will pay your tuition."

Lydia started crying loudly now and she said, "My tears are making the phone slippery. I can't hold onto it anymore."

"I need you to take the money," Henry said. "I need you to know that if I didn't have you I wouldn't believe in anything. "

"I can't have your trust," Lydia said.

"You already have it."

Henry set up a PayPal account the next day and texted Lydia saying, "See we're pals now."

"Ur sure about this?" Lydia typed, with an ATM emoji beside it.

Henry thought about his relationship with Lydia as he logged onto the Bank of America website and he thought, *I'm sure, today and everyday.*

Henry's mother gained forty pounds right before the summer. She could carry it well, but she was softer now. "I can't stop eating sugar," she said.

"Well it's addictive, which is why you can't stop," his father replied.

His parents had stopped looking at each other entirely and the only thing they still seemed to share was a joint account. Henry wanted his father to be more attentive. He wanted to grab his father by either side of the head and make him look at his mother. He wanted his father to open his eyes and become aware of the things around him that he had changed without asking if it was okay. Henry wondered if there was something bigger going on and remembered his mother asking him if he could feel the weight of the change in their lives, the weight of their money. He wondered if people looked at his mother differently now that she was bigger. If people thought she was less competent or less disciplined and less

ready for what was ahead. He wondered if his mother was trying to replace the weight of so much money with real weight. And if she thought this would help redistribute her life in a way that would make her happy.

Jane came over for dinner with a man she had started dating named Ricardo. Ricardo had long hair and he wore it in a ponytail or a bun with one of Jane's elastics. He wore band t-shirts and Nike running shoes and he loved to cook. When she walked into the kitchen Jane extended her small arms all the way up and said, "I got a book deal."

Jane's mother had red velvet crumbs on her silk blouse and said, "Sweetie, that's big!"

Her father stood up abruptly and his chair fell over like a building. "We have to celebrate!" He turned on the flatscreen in the living room to a setting where streamers fell from the top of the screen to the bottom. "This really is exciting," their father whispered, carrying the remote around the house like he would the hand of a lover. No one could find champagne but they found party hats their mother had packed from Toronto. Their father slid a pink hat onto Ricardo's head and told him it was a party.

Henry smiled at Jane and said, "I'm proud of you."

After dinner Ricardo, Jane and Henry went for a walk. They followed a group of excited parents and kids walking toward Chelsea.

Jane laughed and said, "We can't lose them."

"This is funny," Ricardo said.

Henry didn't think it was that funny but he laughed anyway. The group stopped a block in front of them, all looking up, fingers pointed and jaws open. Ricardo started walking toward the group and then he stopped.

"What is it?" Henry asked with anticipation.

"This is the building where they filmed the TV show *Friends*."

Henry laughed then, hard and heavy. He bent over and puked Jane's celebration dinner onto the steps of a brownstone with linoleum siding.

“I know this stuff makes you sick,” Jane said.

“I just feel like this is all so fake and stupid and I don’t know why I’m here. None of it feels right and how am I supposed to know what to do with myself if nothing makes sense,” Henry asked, looking up at Jane.

“Just because you’re not working toward anything doesn’t mean your thoughts are meaningless,” she said.

“Thank you,” he whispered and hugged her on the steps of the brownstone. “You always know how to make me feel better.” When they started walking back toward the Meatpacking District, Henry asked Jane what her book was about.

“Having power,” Jane said.

“Having Powerball?”

“I guess. How I feel now that I could have everything.”

When Henry got home he called Lydia. “What are you doing right now?”

Lydia said, “I’m at Manic.”

“You’re manic? Sorry, you cut out.”

“No, I’m at Manic Coffee, drinking an espresso.”

“I miss knowing how much coffee you drink,” Henry said and Lydia laughed. “I miss knowing how much you laugh,” he continued. Henry stopped and tied his shoe into a triple knot. “Do you find yourself thinking about what I’m doing?”

Lydia said, “Sometimes. But I usually just hope you’re okay because I think it would make me too sad to think about you actually moving and existing in the world.”

“Sometimes I wonder if we’re thinking the exact same thing at the exact same time.”

“Well I just don’t think that can happen, we’re not the same people,” Lydia said

This disappointed Henry for some reason. Henry wondered if Lydia really trusted him or if she had just been pretending she did for so long that now she

believed it. She believed that everyone was in charge of themselves and that it was up to Henry to get happy and while that was admirable in some ways it was also so lonely. He wanted to depend on her for things like direction. He wanted her to show him the way.

Henry's computer crashed in January and he thought, *new year, new me*. The black screen kept showing a question mark. It flashed over and over again and made him want to scream. He wondered if this was what everyone around him felt like when they looked at him. Like he was a giant question mark wandering around and trying to hold onto them for answers. He changed his sheets from the Supermen to just white sheets from Winners and he thought that he would never be super and it made him red in the face. He called Lydia and she said, "You have everything backed up though, right?"

"No."

"You always need to have a backup."

"I don't have a backup for anything. But I don't really have anything to lose if things crash." He was trying to act like it didn't bother him but his skin felt hot. He hadn't felt anything this intense in years.

Lydia said, "Maybe that's a problem."

"Did you know that *America's Most Wanted* was the longest running show on Fox, ever?" Henry asked, changing the subject so he could breathe steadier.

"No Henry, I didn't know that."

"And you can call a hot line! A toll free number to report the country's fugitives!"

"Who are America's Most Wanted?"

"I guess it depends on who you ask."

Henry went downstairs and said, "Dad, I need a new computer, mine crashed."

“You know the market crashed in 2008 and a lot of people didn’t get a fresh start.” His dad was cutting a cucumber and the knife kept hitting the cutting board in perfect time like a metronome.

“Well, Dad, I would argue that you got a fresh start when you won all that money and you forced us all to have a fresh start, even though things seemed perfectly fine and fresh in Toronto.”

“Ugh, I think this cucumber is rotten.”

“Dad.”

Henry’s father spun around and pushed his glasses up from his nose. “Henry, don’t talk to me about a fresh start. I was trying to do what was best for all of us.”

“Do you think this is what’s best for Jane and me? For mom?”

“Well, I’m just not sure.”

“Well that’s just not good enough.”

Henry’s father turned his head sideways and said, “That’s rich.” His father paused like he was considering staying quiet. “Henry, you haven’t made a decision for yourself in years.”

Henry thought about the question mark on his computer and he thought that his father was disappointed in him. “Well, whose fault is that, Dad? If you could make a decision and not be scared and find some courage in it, then maybe I would be able to do the same thing. I feel like I can’t leave and go back to Toronto unless you guys come with me! And I don’t even know why I feel that way. I feel too attached to everything and also attached to nothing.” Henry pushed his chair from the counter with a screech. He stomped to his room and wondered what he was scared of. He knew he was scared of failing and appearing foolish and incompetent but he wondered if he was more scared than other people or if he was just more privileged. As long as his father had all this money, he didn’t have to decide.

That night, Henry sat on Jane's couch with one leg draped over the top. Her apartment cost two thousand dollars a month and he could see mould growing on the ceiling like a cancer. Jane was wearing a floral blazer with jeans and she looked happy. Her hair was twisted with a clip. Ricardo was cutting green onions in the kitchen and said, "These are fresh."

"Mmmmm," Jane said as she reorganized her record collection, which sat in a vintage wine box in the corner.

"I don't understand why you collect records. You don't even have a record player."

"It doesn't matter. It reminds me of a simpler time. I don't even need to listen to them to know that."

"But you're not doing anything with them, it doesn't make sense."

"I don't know, I like to think of them spinning and not stopping unless you let them."

Ricardo chuckled from the kitchen and said, "I think it makes sense."

Henry liked Ricardo. He liked his long hair and his innocence. Ricardo studied at Columbia with Jane and his writing was sarcastic and funny and almost unbearably bad, like he hated having to write anything at all and like he didn't believe anything he was saying. But that was somehow the charm. There was such a frank honesty about him that made Henry believe he was smart and not fooled by the discomfort of everything. Ricardo had moved in with Jane and they now shared Jane's one bedroom in Bed-Stuy where the password on the door was still FREE. Ricardo made Jane feel freer, Henry thought, so he smiled toward the ceiling and wondered if he felt free with Lydia. Jane had painted the apartment white and had an orange couch and a green chair. Henry thought it was a little 70's but Jane seemed to be able to decorate her life with things that seemed wrong.

They sat down for dinner on a clear table with clear chairs. Ricardo had arranged all of their meals into happy faces. Except the green beans—which constituted the mouth—had slipped on Henry’s plate so his was a sad face.

“Sorry dude. Kinda fits though right,” Ricardo said, laughing.

Silence filled the room. Henry wanted to laugh because he liked Ricardo and he thought it was funny but he didn't say anything.

“Should we put on a record?”

Lydia called Henry on Monday and started yelling at him about giving her the power money. She said she felt dirty and undisciplined and like she couldn’t tell her mother. She said she wanted to do things herself, which Henry of course, knew. But she couldn’t do it alone and he thought that was okay so he just listened until she was done. She finished things by saying, “I’m mad at you for giving me that money.”

“Why?”

“Because, I didn’t earn it! I don’t want it.”

“Well, you’re going to need it if you want to stay in school.” Sometimes Henry got mad that Lydia wanted things to be hard even when they could just be easy.

“I know.”

“Listen, think of it as a gift.”

“But gifts are just too easy. You shouldn’t just give something to someone because it’s their birthday or because it’s Christmas or because they had a baby or because they retired or because their mom died. You should give gifts to people when you see something you think they would need or want or like.”

“Okay, well, then don’t think of it as a gift. Think of it as something I thought you needed.”

“I don’t want it to change us,” Lydia said.

“I think having this much money has already changed me. Nothing will ever be hard again.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do, though. And I hate feeling that way. And I hate my father for being half American and being the one who won.”

“One who won. Nice,” Lydia said.

“Thank you.”

Lydia laughed and Henry felt his chest tighten with missing her.

“I miss you,” he told her and she agreed. It was silent after that and Henry said, “I’m so mad at my dad.”

“I know you are. But what was he supposed to do, not take the money? He probably just wanted things to be easier,” Lydia said.

Henry’s mother had joined a bookclub and they were reading *Sense and Sensibility*. She had met the women at the gym where they all did Cardio Bar together. The women all had money and husbands they mostly hated and Henry thought it was all too easy and too predictable.

“It just doesn’t make sense,” his mother said that night at dinner. “The women in this book club are so unhappy, and they read Jane Austen and they think that’s happiness. I have to remind them of how grossly problematic it is to have a man enter the narrative as the only thing they can rely on for happiness.”

Henry’s father coughed and sucked on a green pea like it was a straw. “Non-sensical and sensibility.”

Henry’s mother laughed and smiled at him. The lines around her mouth had grown deeper and Henry wondered when that happened. Was he paying enough attention to what was going on with her? Because he knew his father wasn’t noticing anything and especially not the lines on his mother’s face. Henry thought, *Mom, I love you* and then said it out loud.

Lydia called Jane one Monday morning to talk. Jane was volunteering at Hillary for America, working at a third wave café at night and a second hand bookstore after classes.

“Lydia. How are you, sweetie?” Jane asked in a way that sounded like her mother.

“I’m okay. I didn’t want to have to call you. But I think you’re far enough away to talk to me without being too far.”

“Mhmm,” Jane responded.

“What are you doing right now?”

“I’m walking to Hillary’s campaign office, Lydia, what are you doing right now?”

“I’m lying down. I skipped class today.”

“Is everything okay with Henry?”

“Yes, I think so. But also I don’t know because he seems not good right? He seems like he’s not doing well? Don’t you think? And tell me the truth, because I can handle the truth.”

Jane thought Lydia sounded manic and when she paused, she could hear Lydia’s laboured breathing through the phone. “Henry’s fine, Lydia.”

“Well, see, I took this money from him and I’m mad because it feels wrong, like you wouldn’t have done that right? I don’t think you would have. Which makes me think I shouldn’t have because I respect what you’re doing with not taking the power money and I wanted to be that strong too but it was the only way.”

“Lydia, I think me not taking the money is stupid. Everyday I think it’s stupid but I keep not taking it. The money’s not making anyone happy but I’m not happy without it, either.”

“You really think Henry’s okay?”

“No. But none of us are.”

Lydia stopped eating dairy and she started to model. She started smoking long thin cigarettes that made her fingers look longer. She parted her hair in the middle and cut the rest so it looked like a triangle. She started waking up fifteen minutes earlier to put mascara on her bottom eye lashes. Her agent told her all the good jobs were in New York.

“What did you do today?” Henry asked Lydia that night on the phone.

Lydia said, “I got a gig.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I’m modelling.”

“Modelling what?”

“Myself. Clothes.” She paused, “Bras, watches, purses.”

“Why?” Henry asked.

“I make fifty dollars an hour. It’s crazy.”

“It just doesn’t seem like something you would do, that’s all.”

“Maybe it is something I would do. I can get ahead this way.”

Henry wondered if she was doing this for the money which would make him angry because he could support her, even though he knew she would rather do something she was against than be supported. “This goes against everything you have ever said to me about how you want to live your life.”

“Well my life is different now.”

When he hung up the phone he threw it at the wall and a small crack ran from the top to the bottom of the screen.

Siri said, “Sorry I didn’t catch that.”

Henry thought about how Lydia was a lifter. His mother always told him that in this life, there were leaners and there were lifters. And Lydia was a lifter and he was a leaner. He was okay with being a leaner though because he could watch the lifters and they couldn’t watch anything because they were always lifting. He thought about how Lydia wanted to build something. She literally wanted to build structures so she took architecture. She wanted to build a

relationship so she stayed with Henry even when he moved to another country. And he knew these things about her, so why did he give her the money. He knew she wouldn't be able live with being a leaner while he was lifting. That's not how things worked with them.

Henry didn't talk to Lydia for a month. He started taking theory lectures at NYU and started writing on a computer he bought with his trust fund. He backed it up every day at five and he wondered when Lydia backed up her computer. He felt ridiculous without her, like his indecision was pathetic. Lydia had always made him feel like he was still important even if he wasn't doing anything important, and now he just thought about her working hard and drinking coffee and her hands shaking and he wanted to hold them and never let go.

Lydia called Henry on November 6th and told him she had just had a nightmare about the US election. She told him she could see the map in her head and all the states were turning red. And when she tried to turn them blue they would still turn red until Donald Trump had 270 electoral votes and Hillary didn't have any.

“Lydia, she's going to win.”

“Is your dad voting?”

“Yeah.”

Lydia didn't ask who his father was voting for because she thought Henry would say his father was voting for Trump because he had four hundred million dollars to protect and Hillary wanted higher taxes on the wealthy.

“I think he thinks she's the better candidate, if that's worth anything,” Henry said after a long pause.

“It's not worth anything Henry because what he thinks isn't what's counts. His vote is what's real.” Lydia paused. “Are you scared?”

“I'm scared for Jane,” Henry said. Jane had been spending late nights at Hillary's office and she had stopped eating bread. She had quit her job and was skipping class because she needed Hillary to win. And she felt that if she didn't do

everything she could now, she would surely be kicking herself later. This wasn't just a job for Jane, it felt like more than that, like her life's philosophy was on the line. It was like everything she believed in—women and art and being prepared and being ready and being qualified—was going to be irrelevant if she lost. Jane thought that if these things didn't win, there would be nothing left for her to believe in.

Two days later Donald Trump won the presidency while Henry drank craft beer at his sister's apartment. Jane sobbed into a white pillow in a Clinton Gore hoodie their father had bought at a Clinton rally in Iowa in '96. She was wearing a t-shirt underneath with Hillary's face on it and she said, "I can't do this. I'm with her."

Henry looked out the window and he could see the Javits Centre on the water, made of glass, and he thought about how Hillary didn't break the glass ceiling. Hillary's victory party was being held at the Javits Centre and Henry saw crowds of people outside. The whole thing looked dark and sad. He felt like everything was scary and like the wrong people won, and he thought about how everyone had spent the last two years talking about something that was over now. He didn't know how to comfort Jane and when he turned around Ricardo was holding her like she was a baby. Henry kissed Jane on the forehead and said, "I'm so, so, sorry. I was excited for things to change."

"Me too," Jane said and Henry left because he couldn't stand to see her so upset.

When he got home, Henry found his father in the kitchen, looking into the fridge. One hand was on the handle keeping the door open. His knuckles were white and Henry said, "Dad?" His father closed the door and when he turned around, his face was red, like he had been crying. Henry felt his eyes start to fill and he hated that he couldn't stay mad at his father.

"This country isn't what I thought it was," his father said, his voice shaky.

"You voted for Hillary?"

“Of course I did.”

Henry reached out and held his dad tight under the arms and around his waist. He cried on his shoulder and he felt close to everything he had always felt far from. He wondered if his relationship with his father was what needed to be mended this whole time.

“I think we should leave here. I think I was wrong and the American dream is just a made up idea that I was trying to make real,” his father whispered.

“Dad, you don’t have to say that. It’s okay.”

“I just wanted you to have everything, Henry. I wanted to be able to give you guys everything.” Henry felt his father’s tears on his own face. “But I think things are different now, Henry. I think I’ll never be able to give Jane back what she lost tonight.”

CNN played in the background and Wolf Blitzer looked shocked. His eyes looked empty like they’d been scooped out with a lemon baller.

“She just won New York,” his father whispered against his ear and his voice tapered off because it just didn’t matter.

Henry hated himself for thinking his father was selfish and he hated the world for being selfish. He pulled away from the hug and put his palms on his father’s shoulders as he realized how much taller he was than his dad.

“You know, dad, when I was younger, I always thought we would do *The Amazing Race* together.”

“Really?” His father smiled and he wiped his cheek with his thumb.

“Yeah. I even tried to apply one year but they wouldn’t let me because we didn’t live in the States.”

“You know, we’d be good, as a team,” his father said and Henry was sure for the first time in his life that he looked like his dad.

“I always knew we would win.”