

NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT

by © Paul Warford A Thesis submitted

to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of

Masters of Creative Writing English

Memorial University of Newfoundland

October 2018

St. John's Newfoundland and Labrador

Abstract:

“Now That I Think About It” is a hybrid of memoir and fiction that employs magic realism to explore the shifts between childhood, adolescence and a very reluctant acceptance of adulthood. The narrator, who bears the same name as the author, details the current state of his life. Paul Warford is living a hermit-like existence dominated by sadness, marijuana and videogames. The narrator laments who he is versus who he was and tries to explain the juxtaposition between his past and current self. Recounting earliest childhood memories and the events leading up to the death of his best friend, Paul Warford seeks, if not necessarily happiness, a sense of wholeness or completion, which he hopes to find during the sometimes funny, sometimes difficult struggles to become a comedian and writer. Paul Warford seeks a reconciliation with his former selves, and the self he has become through the writing, by the memoir’s end, offering reflections on the mistakes he’s made and the insights and discoveries that surround him in the present.

Acknowledgements:

The author would like to acknowledge the support of the following individuals who made the completion of this thesis material possible: Lisa Moore, for acting as supervisor during this process. I thank her for her patience, expertise, and encouragement—turns out I needed all three. Dr. Robert Ormsby, acting Graduate Advisor of the English department, for listening to my concerns and fielding their answers as needed. Dr. Danine Farquharson, *former* Graduate Advisor of the English department, for her assistance with final submission, and her assistance during my application procedures to enter the program. Bridget Canning, Terry Doyle, Matthew Hollett, and Heidi Wicks for their listening ears and apt suggestions. The staff of Coffee Matters on Military Road in St. John's, for their excellent service and kind words during my time there writing a large portion of this work. My mother, Linda Warford, for acting as my family's Archivist since the days before my birth. Joshua White, an old friend who helped to fill in some blanks. Donna Bennet, for speaking so frankly to me so long ago. Finally and most obvious, I would like to thank my wife—love in my life—Amanda Dorothy Jean Bulman, for acting as the constant propulsion of my days and accomplishments. Also, I *would* like to thank my dear friend, Sarah Turpin, for dying in the first place and giving me something to write about, but that would hardly be appropriate.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
AHEM: An Introduction	1
Part One: Growing Pain Prescriptions	13
Part Two: No Sex 'til Our Twenties	70
Part Three: Reflections	140

AHEM:
An Introduction

“Is this thing on? I made a chronal accelerator, I’m sure I can handle this.”

Winston’s opening lines of the *Overwatch* intro. I’ve heard it so many times I can recite the dialogue with him.

I enter Quickplay and select Tracer before any of my five teammates can pick her. I keep smoking my joint while I wait to join a match.

You should be writing or working on something right now.

I’m with my teammate strangers in the start room.

The robot woman’s voice counts down the final seconds:

“Five

Four

Three

Two

One.”

Tracer can ‘blink’ three times, which shoots her a few feet in the direction I choose. She can ‘recall,’ which returns her to the position she occupied three seconds ago with the health she had three seconds ago. If you use ‘recall’ properly, you can flank the enemy, assault them, and relocate before they overwhelm you, restoring your health in the process. Tracer has dual plasma pistols that put out good damage—especially at close range. Her ultimate ability is the ‘pulse bomb,’ a thrown explosive that sticks to enemies if you aim it right. The pulse bomb does three hundred damage in a concentrated area, which fucks most smaller targets and can decimate groups in close quarters.

I steer Tracer left as my teammates charge up the middle. We have to take point A, and if we manage that, point B. The map is Horizon Lunar Colony.

I blink once, keep walking while I wait five seconds for the ‘cooldown’ so I can blink again. I can cover more ground by blinking three in a row, but it’ll put me out of position with the rest of my team. Besides, I’d need to wait fifteen seconds for the cooldowns before having all three again, and I may need my blinks sooner than that.

I reach the round door and enter the small room. I’m the closest to the point among us. I crouch and count to three so they can catch up. If an enemy Hanzo has shot a ‘sonar arrow’ anywhere nearby, the opposing team can see my outline through the wall, but I doubt this has happened.

An enemy Roadhog wanders into the room—idiot. He’s on his own. I unload on his head (headshots multiply damage). I hit him with all forty shots. I blink right, back through the door I entered. I hear Roadhog’s chain as it barely misses me. If it connected, it’d immobilize me and pull me close to him (exactly like Scorpion’s hook in *Mortal Kombat*). I circle the room’s exterior on the right. Roadhog has been backing away from me and now he’s in my view again. I unload as I sidestep right towards my team, connecting with most shots. Roadhog turns to face me and I blink past his right side, into the small room opposite the first room I’d entered. I take a little damage from his teammates in the process, but nothing I need to pay attention to. The rest of my group has been putting damage on Roadhog and he’s retreating to point A on the left. I blink twice and am immediately behind him. He used his personal health ability while running, which has an eight second cooldown. He won’t last that long. I unload into his back. He turns to face me, but I’ve already blinked past him and am now moving through the left hallway nearing the point. I take cover from his shots as they follow me, circle out on the right, unload into his face, blink left so his hook misses me again, reload, unload into his face as

he turns to me, and now he's panicking. He ignores me and makes for his teammates on the point, but he's too late. I face him and blink left once to stay astride and unload on his head and he's down. Didn't even have to use 'recall.' Tracer easily outmaneuvers Roadhog.

During the pause I take my right hand off the controller and bend my thumb to my palm, my joint cracking its approval.

My ultimate (the pulse bomb) has charged to 43%.

“Then, instead of me in the coffin, I want Jennie to pop out of it and start throwing candy to all the mourners.”

The funeral she wanted.

I can smell the flowers and hear the sniffles as I try not to knock anything over—a vase or the guest book. Spongebob Squarepants's torso is much wider than my own.

I spot the casket through the costume's fly-mesh, but I can tell there's no candy in there—just Sarah.

Let me tell you the things I've failed to learn.

Lately, I haven't been myself—for several years now, in fact. Do you ever look back on your life—the things you said, the moves you made—and say to yourself, “Who was that? Where are they now? Where has all the sex gone?” These questions have haunted me for nearly a decade. What happened to me? Where did I go? Am I a shittier person because I'm an adult? I'm not an adult. I'm an adult poser. I'm an adult's

cardboard cut-out. Now, some of you—the mathematical types, mostly—will be asking, “Yes, but what makes someone an adult?” Three answers to that. You’re an adult if and when:

1. You clean something and as it becomes filthy again you utter with irritation, “I just cleaned that!”
2. Your conversation revolves around what you own rather than what you do. (You also assume “What you do” refers to your job rather than What You Do.)
3. You have an Air Miles card in your wallet at this moment.

I’m no adult. I’m an adult’s pantomime.

Somewhere in my life I stopped caring about other people. It wasn’t intentional, man, it wasn’t orchestrated. It happened, though—happens. As it happens.

I had this substitute/supply teacher, okay? This was in grade eleven—maybe twelve. Her name was something else, but we’re calling her Ms. Miller. She was a long-time fill-in for my English teacher that year. My parents are retired teachers—Dad taught at the same high school—so they knew everyone instructing me, but they didn’t know Ms. Miller.

They sat with her for parent-teacher interviews.

My mother said, “We’re here to talk about Paul Warford.”

Ms. Miller said, “I can talk about Paul Warford. He enjoys my class, he enjoys school, he enjoys life. He doesn’t need drugs because he’s high on life.” Her exact words.

See? I used to be a happy guy, and now I’m not.

...

Now I'm not.

However, this is not to say I'm necessarily *unhappy*, either. There are smatterings of contentment. Of course there are. There's lasagna. There's Christmas Eve and the eyes of my wife. Sure, I'm happy sometimes. But I'm not a happy person as I live and breathe. I'm not whole, not complete. This doesn't make me special.

'Complete' is a big word. You may be pleased with your day-to-day without ever being 'complete'—without ever needing to be. I've convinced myself that Zen Buddhists are 'complete.' They dedicate their lives to enlightenment and they know the entire universe is in their steaming cup of tea. Admirable, sure, but who has the time for enlightenment these days? Rather than balance, I seek retribution. I salivate for redemption, and I intend to unearth it to my bloody quicks. I plan to be a content man, as I was once a content Good Boy. That doesn't make me special, either. Telling you this is no different than resolving to eat more blueberries. What makes me special, between you and me, is that I'm choosing to redeem myself by writing this.

Some stuff is harder to put into words. Describing my Worst Days is embarrassing, but necessary. I need to show you what it means to live only for yourself.

I tend to get out of bed in the afternoon—usually between noon and one-thirty. By this time, my wife has already been working a minimum of five hours.

The world comes to me slowly and I fight against waking. When I'm too awake to doze any more, I begin stretching beneath the covers. I circle my wrists and bend the

knuckles of my thumbs. Then, I tent my fingers and push them away from my body. All these motions cause my bones and joints to pop as loud as campfire birch.

I talk sweet to the dog, who is usually harrumphing waking sighs nearby on the bed. Like many dogs, her schedule is tuned to her owner's, but this isn't the case every day. Sometimes I find her snoozing in the living room and I've slept so late she's already pissed on the carpet out of necessity. If this is the case, I start my day with finding a dry rag, pouring hot water into the sky-blue wastebasket with the smiley face from the corner of our bathroom, and kneeling in front of the stain. I mix the water with a pet-friendly carpet solution we always seem to have on-hand (we rent a steam cleaner approximately every two months). I rub the urine dry first, soaking up what I can before dipping the frayed cloth into the hot soup, wringing, and scrubbing in earnest. Gabby's housebroken, but she can't open doors.

I boil water and pour it onto a tea bag, leaving the mug on our stove's warming element. I rouse the dog and take her outside. I walk her as minimally as I can, but this is largely due to the barbaric severity of Newfoundland weather. In the summertime, Gabby and I often walk to Bannerman Park, where we look for women in bikinis. She sniffs around and endears herself while I ogle and pretend I'm making chit chat.

Now we're home again and it's about two 'o clock. I saw a bagel in half and drop it into the toaster. I shake kibble into the dog's bowl and check her water. I slice two strips of marble cheese, lay them on a plate, remove the bagel, butter it. I stir milk and sugar into my tea and sit to eat my breakfast. This is one of the best parts of my day. While I consume, I watch a program on my laptop—usually re-runs of BBC's *Top Gear* or eSports footage of Blizzard's 2016 hit shooter *Overwatch*.

I take my time with breakfast, so it's approaching three when I finish. I talk sweet to the dog some more and then think about showering. I gather clothes—maybe I should play a round of *Overwatch* real quick, before I bathe. Just one. Shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes.

Excuse me.

I gather clothes, shower, shave if I need to. Then I begin packing up my laptop, and after one more session with the dog, I make for the door so I can start my day. I arrive at a coffee shop—the specific café varies depending on mood—order a small dark roast, sit, unpack, put on headphones, and dick around on the Internet for half an hour. It's now past four, so my work day will be concluding soon. I chat electronically with my wife because by now she's likely checking in. She may have an errand for me, or she may just want to know how I'm doing.

“Are you having a good day?” She loves me so much. She believes in me.

“Yeah, baby. Good day.”

When we finish, I find a music playlist that I think will nail down my psyche for the next hour or two, and I begin writing.

After five hundred words (about two pages), I dick around on the Internet again. I'll scroll through my Facebook feed, feeling disgusted at myself each time I do so. I'll check Twitter (no new followers) and then I'll head over to YouTube to tweak the playlist I'm still listening to. Then it's back to work.

This Internet/writing cycle will continue until Andie is home and wants to see me. I return to our apartment, bringing all the love for her I can manage, which is a lot, but it never feels like quite enough. Am I wasting her time as much as my own? Sometimes I

tell myself the answer is “definitely.” Then again, she’ll be fine with me and fine without me because we’re enjoying the most ironic marriage in Canada. Here’s a woman who gives one hundred (and ten) percent every day because only absolute effort makes sense to her, and I’m the guy she’s married to. I tell myself I help her despite my abject laziness; because of it, in fact. I encourage her to relax while she helps me achieve, which she does, but it’s an uphill battle for her. I worry she’ll never have the energy required to reach the top. I think of the hundreds of thousands of women throughout history—millions, probably—who died in squalor because they put their faith in the wrong guy.

Andie and I while away the evening. Maybe we go to a movie, maybe we have a meal out. We stay in and watch Star Trek because she loves it, the idea of all races getting along and exploring together (except the Romulans). I make her tea or pour wine and bring it to her hand. I tell her I love her and stroke her forehead. Her eyes are weary, her lids heavy. I can see this and I feel sad.

She begins drifting off around ten. I’ll put on a show of some kind and we’ll watch it together, but already she’s falling asleep. So is the dog.

Now my day can begin. I roll a joint beside her, moistening my lips in concentration as I fumble with the wispy paper. My hands are always cold and clammy, so the glue sticks to my fingers before I’m ready to lick it. I light up and breathe in deeply.

In my earliest days of smoking marijuana, I would cough and sputter after inhaling hashish smog from the lip of a plastic coke bottle, crowded with my buddies behind Lloyd’s shed. However, those days are long behind me. Now my lungs are black, sticky, and strong. They grip the smoke and pluck out molecules of THC, then they hold,

hold, hold. I am a saxophone player. I never cough when I exhale now. Instead, I cough in the mornings. The coughing is a scary bark. Sometimes I double over. Spit will even come from my mouth in strands at its very worst. This generally happens in private, which is fortunate because I can pretend it's not happening at all. My spit is generally thicker now, and after these flourishes of hacking, I'll ooze thick globs of it into the bathroom sink, viscous and accusatory. Hanging there on the porcelain, oscillating slightly as it comes to rest, my saliva looks like a clutch of fresh-lain spider eggs.

My health has been in steady decline because of my refusal to live. I eat entire frozen pizzas at three in the morning and then go to bed. I never exercise. I have bruise-brown bags beneath my eyes that never go away. I always feel exhausted. While I hide in my home, an organ will suddenly twitch or jolt—I can *feel* it—and I'll ask myself, "Is something fucked in there?" Thirty-six years' old and I still can't believe I'm a skeleton under my skin.

In the living room, my head will slowly begin to stretch and tread water as I smoke a little more. I douse the joint then, saving the rest to enjoy in an hour or so. I look over at the dog and my wife, both sleeping contentedly, and feel a rush of absolute love. Maybe I don't deserve them. Maybe I'm being too hard on myself.

Andie knows I do this each night. Sometimes we smoke together and laugh and have so much fun, passing popcorn back and forth.

Now, play can begin. I have a PlayStation 4, an Xbox One, and a Nintendo Switch at the ready. These are the newest video game systems available, what are known as "current-gen."

I'm usually heavily invested in two titles (games). I will spend half my night playing one, half playing the other. After an hour or so, Andie will rise from the couch, so tired she seems drunk, and I'll lead her to bed. I'll stroke her forehead some more and tell her I love her and I'll tuck her in. I want to stay with her. I want to be different; a guy who sleeps when his world sleeps. I want to know how to moderate my life as everyone else seems to, but I'm too stubborn or I'm too afraid. I go back downstairs and finish my joint.

My best friend died three years, five months and five days ago, and it's so easy to blame my behaviour on the tragedy (on her), but I was like this before. Now, things are just worse. I think about her seeing me like this. I think about that afternoon—we were twenty-six—when I complained about being single while sitting in front of my gaming computer, and her wrinkling her nose, saying, "Maybe you just need to get out more." I think about that all the time. The sun was shining that day. She knew my fears, so she sympathized, but only a little. Now, steeped in the unfortunate knowledge of death, if she were to read this, I assume she'd just roll her eyes.

Some days, I eat my bagel and wish I were born in a different era. Just twenty years earlier and I'd be a proper touring comedian, none of this Internet-desperation shit, but I know this isn't true. I'd be the same; a talented, intelligent, occasionally charming guy who cannot motivate himself to do much of anything at all.

Old university friends come to town for one-night-only and I make up excuses so I can stay home, smoke, and play. A comedian has a birthday, or an out-of-towner is here for the weekend to headline, and I don't drop down to watch their act or do time myself.

Instead, I stay home, smoke, and play. About ten years ago, when this terrible monotony was still in its infancy, I once startled myself with a simple epiphany: happiness is people. So why am I always staying in?

I have better days when I get up at ten and am at the coffee shop by noon. Sometimes I send an e-mail and book a show, or I write in a flourish through most of the day. However, these are too sparse to applaud.

More often, I *do* play a round of *Overwatch* before I shower, and one turns into twenty.

Sometimes I'll play a game I purchased months or years ago, instead of a recent title I picked up last week (new releases run around \$80+tax). I think of the money spent compared to what I'm earning, and I'll chastise myself for not playing the game I just bought. But then I recite the gaming mantra I came up with a few years back to combat the countless choices at my disposal: "Play what you feel like." Life, after all, is short.

Part One:
Growing Pain Prescriptions

I am three years old and it is summer. My brothers stand tall above me and I know I can trust them—even though Brian is mean sometimes. My Mommy says we're a family and I like this because it makes me feel warm.

The walls are brown like my overalls and the carpet is brown like Nan's dress with the butterflies. Mommy vacuums the carpet when it gets dusty. It is not thick, but it makes my toes and feet want to step and walk. The walls are brown like the brown spot in Daddy's eye. The spot is only little and the rest of his eye is blue. Everyone says I have a brown spot in my eye too, but mine is bigger than Daddy's! Grownups tell me the spot is like a "birth mark" and I don't know what that means, but I know the spot won't hurt me or Daddy. I can't remember what my spot looks like and I can't reach any mirrors on my own. Whenever Mommy and Daddy's friends come to our house to visit, they will look down at me and take their coats off, and they will say, "You're just like your dad!" I am just like my dad and I am proud. When friends say this I smile, and then they go look at Brian and Colin and say different things to them. I look like Daddy best. When friends visit, I know Mom will shake shake shake chips and cheezies into bowls, and when she lays the bowls down I can reach them. I like it when Mommy and Daddy's friends come over because they are my friends, too. They are nice and that is why it is nice to have friends.

We have a bathroom and a stove and this is our home but it is not our big home; this is our motorhome. Daddy drives and Mommy sits next to him and they look through the big window in front of them. The window is real big—even if my dad stretched his arms wide from his sides he couldn't touch the ends of it. When it rains, the wipers go *swish swish swish* across the big window, like eyelashes that are alive, and they make the

rain go away and come back, go away and come back. When Daddy drives, Brian reads and sometimes he picks his nose, and Colin sleeps in the back on the big bed. Colin picks his nose sometimes too, but not when he is asleep.

The motorhome walls have stripes that go: orange, brown, yellow, brown. Mommy's top has stripes that go: blue, red, orange, green. Mommy's shoulders get pink because of the sun; they burn. Mommy says that it's okay, and she rubs slippery cream on them and it is white and smells nice. I do not know the smell, I have not tasted it. Mommy says "coconut" and I understand. I learn.

My bum is itchy and I walk with my feet and hands. My feet go one, two, one, two, and my hands touch things that are close so I do not fall. I walk just like everyone big around me and I am getting better.

Daddy has his hat on and he is outside, cooking. The picnic table is red like our big home where the bricks are. Daddy's hat is white and his friends say it makes him look like Gilligan, but I do not know Gilligan because he has not visited our big house, or said, "You're just like your dad!"

Daddy stands in front of a pot and the pot is on the picnic table and smoke is coming out its top. The smoke is white and grey and looks like our TV screen when the channel won't work. The pot has a hat on top, and the smoke makes the hat bounce up and down and little bits of water dribble out of the pot and I think this is funny. I know Daddy has food in the pot and that is why he is cooking. Even though Daddy is outside and I am inside, I can smell the food and it smells like eating at Nan's house. Nan isn't with us now, though; she doesn't come with us in the motorhome.

I can hear Daddy, too. He is talking to Mr. Bradbury and Mr. Bradbury has no shirt on (like me!), but he has hair on his tummy and he has a big, gold chain around his neck. The chain has a circle on the end, and inside the circle is a snake around a stick. The snake isn't scary because I know it's not a real one. Daddy and Mr. Bradbury are always nice and I want to be with them and I want to cook with them. I decide I will go outside because I can walk like everyone big around me and they are not far away.

The motorhome has a big door like our big home, but it has another door and this door has millions of tiny holes in it. The door with the holes is closed and the big, heavy door is open. The tiny hole door lets things through and I know this is why I can hear Daddy and smell the cooking food. I think I can push this door open, so I won't ask Mommy for help. I can! I can push it on my own!

The sky is blue and there are one, two, three clouds but they go away and then I can see the black steps—one, two—that go from the motorhome to the ground, and the steps have holes in them too, but then they go away, and then I see the sky and the one, two, three clouds again but they go away and then I am still and I am dizzy, but I am okay.

“Jesus, he's killed!” Daddy says and these are bad words and he sounds scared and Daddy leaves the pot and the picnic table and smoke and he comes to me fast. I am confused now because “killed” means going away and not coming back, but I am here and I am crying now. Daddy holds me and says I'm okay and he moves my hair away from my forehead and looks at my face and I see the special brown spot in his eye, just like mine, and he's looking for something and I am scared now because Daddy sounds

scared and maybe I'm going away and I'm not coming back. I cry because I cry when I get scared.

“Just a little fall,” the adults are saying, and Mom is there and Dad and Mr. Bradbury and everyone is telling me that I am okay, and I feel hungry now. Brian and Colin were looking at me too, from their motorhome chairs, but now they look bored and they stop watching. The pot keeps cooking even though the grownups aren't near it and the hat goes *clop clop clop* while the smoke pours out.

The hardest meal you'll ever eat is the first you take after your best friend dies.

Sarah had been a staunch vegetarian since high school, and in her dying days she couldn't take food or water. One of her last texts to me said something like, “If I get out of here, I think I want to try some meat. I might not swallow it, but I'd like to chew it.” My experience in restaurant kitchens was limited, but I felt more than capable of preparing a menu, and I immediately considered shrimp in pad Thai (*too rubbery, she won't like it*). Sirloin dusted with salt and pepper, a spill of red wine. That felt right. In my mind I was already trimming the fat, heating the butter.

(We're all omnivores, by the way. I'm not eager to offend anyone, but it's a matter of digestive tract, not morality. You may *choose* a vegetarian diet, but biologically, we're all omnivores.)

Hours after I learned Sarah was dead, I slept.

I dreamt I was entering her family's porch, as I had a thousand times, but seated on the pew, usually covered with jackets and unmarked boxes and maybe a pair of ski

boots, was her mother and grandmother. They were making an effort to be quiet, which I could somehow discern, and I felt like I was entering a hospital room on the maternity ward, where a newborn lay sleeping. That's when I noticed Sarah was stretched across the bench, her back turned to me. Now I knew why they were quiet. She had risen. She was okay. She turned to me then and she said, "I'm done with you," but it was a joke. I always knew when she was joking.

I woke up in Colin's bedroom in the dark. Everyone in the house knew to leave me alone and I only wanted solitude for the rest of my life. I never wanted to see another person. Clichés pile up quickly during those first twenty-four hours.

My girlfriend came in and asked if I was hungry. I should eat something. Suddenly I was someone who should eat something and I was disgusted with every little molecule that would continue to exist without her. Disband the government and tell the clowns to wash their faces, Sarah Turpin was dead.

I thumped downstairs and entered our kitchen. Mom and Dad looked from their laps to my face, searching. Mom had a porkchop laid out for me, some mashed potato. I sat and looked at it and felt like burning the house down.

She didn't get to eat by the end. She must have been so hungry. If she couldn't eat, then neither will I.

Then I thought, "Don't be stupid," and picked up my knife and fork, started cutting.

The chop was reheated and dry.

I am six years old (going on seven). My brothers are playing *Double Dragon* (Tradewest, 1988) and I am crying. We are in the rec room and supper isn't ready yet.

I can't sit too close to Brian because it makes him mad, so I sit further back, closer to Colin—always closer to Colin. Brian is in the black rocking chair. It's not like Nan's rocking chairs, though: this one is soft. It's got big squares on it and these remind me of the floors I see in bathrooms when we're visiting other houses, like Mrs. French's or Uncle Bill's. The squares all have snaky lines in them and they look like smiling faces. Some are gold like Dad's dress-up rings, some are green like the peppers mom puts in chili. Sometimes, I trace the lines with my finger while humming songs, but only if I'm by myself. Colin is in the corner chair, in front of the TV. See, our couch is special and we can turn it into other stuff. Dad says it's called a "sectional." If you put all the seats together, the way they're supposed to go, the pieces make an L shape. You can make an L with your fingers—just pretend you're pointing at something and then stretch your thumb out. The pieces move around by themselves, so you can make whatever shape you want! Colin likes to put the corner chair right in front of the TV cause he can lean back against it, and it's easier for him to reach his Coke on the coffee table. I love the sectional because it's like a bunch of couches instead of just one, and I can squeeze two chairs together to make a little bed to nap on, and this makes me feel cozy and safe. If Brian or Colin have friends over, sometimes they turn the pieces upside down and make a fort using blankets. We all love the sectional sofa and sometimes I brag about it at school.

We have a pull-out couch, too, but that one is too heavy to move, so it stays against the wall. The pull-out couch is the same colour as dirt, but it has thin lines on it and these are nicer colours; pink and blue. The pull-out is special because you can take

the cushions off and then there's a thick handle and if Dad or Mom pulls it, a bed comes out. Sometimes, Colin's best friend Russell will stay for a sleepover and when this happens they both get to go to bed on the pull-out, under the white fuzzy blanket with the big tiger face on it.

Colin and Russell play a game called *Jackal* (Konami, 1986). They can play two players "simultaneous," and that means they're both on the screen at the same time. Simultaneous is the biggest word I know.

Jackal is an army jeep game where you have to shoot all the bad soldiers and helicopters and beat the bosses at the end of the levels. I don't know how many levels there are because Colin and Russell haven't finished it yet, but they've gotten close. I get so excited when they play because I want them to win the game. I'll stand behind them and keep real quiet and I'll pretend I'm driving the jeeps, too.

Russell used to go, "Who's breathing on my neck!?" Then Colin would pause the game and they'd yell at me because I was breathing on Russell's neck (by accident) and I was making him not play the game as good. I sit on the black rocking chair when I watch them now.

Other times, I'll watch them play and I'll have to use the bathroom, but I wait and wait because I want to make sure they beat the level first, and Russell will say, "Paul, go piss!" Then I go to the bathroom because I want Russell to like me—and I really have to go. Sometimes they pause the game while I pee, other times they just keep going.

Brian's best friend is Glenn, and Glenn sleeps over, too. When this happens I usually have to stay upstairs, but I don't mind because Mom will order pizza, and even though it's their special night, I still get to have a piece. One time, Glenn and Brian tied

me up with a cord you plug into the wall and left me under a blanket while they ate pizza upstairs. They said I was at Robert's, and by the time Mom let me out the pizza was all gone. Brian and Glenn got yelled at and Dad drove me to McDonald's because Brian was mean and didn't share the pizza.

My big brothers and I love the rec room because it's our special space where Mom and Dad come in, but only for little bits, to get an important piece of paper from the den, or maybe when Dad is checking the fire.

Oh, I forgot that part! There's a stove and Dad will bring in logs on his arm (he calls them "junks"). He'll carry six or seven because Dad is strong, and he'll drop them into the wood box. The junks make a big *thunk* sound, and if I don't see him carrying the wood, it scares me and I'll get mad at him for not telling me the crash sound is coming, but not too mad because Dad just forgets to say. He doesn't scare me on purpose. The stove makes the whole room feel like a thick sweater when it eats the wood, and in the winter it makes me feel like I'm in a special cave where I can be warm even though it's cold and snowy outside.

Double Dragon is the neatest game on the Nintendo Entertainment System. Oh yeah, we have one of those. We got ours in the States because we go there in our motorhome in the summer.

This year we went to Bangor, Maine. When we go traveling, Nan gives us each \$50 of our own money that we can use to buy whatever we want. I get so excited when Nan gives me my money because it's bright red even from far away you can tell it's special. Mom and Dad hold mine for me, but Brian and Colin get to keep theirs because they're bigger. Brian and Colin saw a Nintendo in the Bangor Mall and they wanted it.

So, what they did was put their money together and then they could buy it. I didn't have any money to share for the Nintendo because I'd already bought something else.

We were in PEI before Bangor, and I saw my brown teddy bear with the bowtie and I really wanted it. I told Mom and Dad I was going to buy the teddy bear with the bowtie, but Mom said "no" because it cost the whole \$50. She said if I got the bear with Nan's special red money, I couldn't get anything else on our trip.

I knew what she meant—she thought I didn't, but I knew. I just really wanted the bear, so I told Mom and Dad that I didn't care if I couldn't get anything else because I knew I really wanted him, and he wanted me, too. Mom still said "no" and I knew she was just trying to be nice because she wanted me to have more special money for our trip, but I cried anyway because I couldn't help it. Then, I heard Dad say quiet, just to Mom, "let him have his bear," and then I was crying but I was smiling too because I knew I'd be allowed to get the teddy bear and it would be mine. I hugged Mom and Dad tight and told the lady I didn't need the bear in a bag because he was my friend and he was going to come with me in my arms. I was glad I got my bear and I didn't feel bad I got something I might not want later. When that happens, grownups call it "regret," but I didn't regret him because he was my best friend and he's softer than any other teddy bear in our house.

Double Dragon looks really fun, though, and I never get to try because Brian and Colin always play and then it's time for bed. That's why I'm crying.

I tell Mom and Dad I want to play and they say I have to ask Brian and Colin because it's their machine and I know that's true but it makes me sad because Colin and Brian always say no. I cry and I can't help it and I tell Mom but she just tells me the same thing and I understand this is only fair, but I cry and cry and still can't help it. The

Nintendo is really special and it's hard to watch all the time and not play. So, if Colin and Brian have homework or they're gone to piano lessons, I play *Double Dragon* and I love it so much it makes me excited in my seat, and my leg twitches when I play sometimes and I don't even notice right away. When I was littler I used to play the Atari, but the Nintendo is way better.

In *Double Dragon* you play as a guy named Billy and he has cool hair. The bad guys take Billy's girlfriend away, and he has to beat them all up so he can get her back. I think rescuing the girl from the bad men is good, but it's really hard to beat them all because there are so many, and I can't play for long before Brian or Colin is home again and it's time for me to get off.

Sometimes even Brian and Colin fight about who gets to play. They'll say, "It's my turn!" "No, it's my turn!" and I'll keep real quiet because sometimes Colin will hit Brian when they shout and then Brian might hit me. When Brian and Colin yell at each other about the game, it makes Mom and Dad mad because loud noises can make people mad.

Mom will say they have to share the Nintendo or she will take it away.

Other times, Dad will say something he only says when we yell about sharing—"Be happy with what ya got!" Dad says this because some boys and girls don't have Nintendos in their homes and they don't get to play at all, not even a little bit like I do. It feels not fair that some of the kids at school don't have Nintendos, but I can't let them play ours because it's Brian and Colin's machine.

Even if it was my Nintendo, I'd be afraid the other kids might break it or take it from me and not give it back.

If you've never played a video game, you don't know how frustrating they can be. Let me try and explain the phenomenon, which has splintered millions of controllers into disfigured, impotent hunks of wiring.

At their best, a video game is like a book—a page-turner you can't put down. The thing is, the action can't unfold without your protagonist's progression. What happens if you reach a plot point in the story that you and your character can't get past? Mega Man has to time a jump onto a moving platform no wider than himself while dodging incoming fire from the wasp robots, and he has to *return* fire and destroy the robots in mid-air. Otherwise, they'll block his next jump's trajectory. If Mega Man is struck by fire from the wasps, or the wasps themselves, he'll fall to the floor below, and you'll both be forced to try, try again. If Mega Man can't jump, dodge, and destroy the robots before his next jump, then he doesn't get to find out what's past the wasp robots, and neither do you. Imagine being engrossed in a book, but you can't turn the page until you complete a series of difficult hand-eye movements. It doesn't matter how often you "Uh! Almost got it that time!" It doesn't matter if you *really want to keep going*. It doesn't matter if you've already tried to make the fucking jump and shoot the fucking wasps thirty goddamn times. There's only one way you'll be allowed to turn the page.

The earliest controller abuse I can remember happened when I was about six years' old. I was playing something on the Nintendo (Brian and Colin must've been out), and I just couldn't turn that page. In a fit of absolute impatience, I took the controller by its end and slammed the other end into the floor. My after-school babysitter, Mrs. Jones, came into the rec room and asked if I was okay, and "What was that noise?" Like any

child, I pretended I didn't know what she was talking about, despite the evidence of my shaking shoulders and reddened face, my just-wiped tears.

“Surely you grow out of this,” you might be musing. I'd love to say this is the case, but after thirty years I still have to restrain myself sometimes.

I'm eleven years' old and I'm already in the middle seat. Krista's driving us to swimming. She's in the front and so is Glenn because they're brother and sister and it's their parents' car. Colin and Brian and I have to sit in the back seat, and whenever we go in the back my brothers make me sit in the middle—like with Mom and Dad. When it's just me I still sit in the back, but never in the middle.

Colin gets in beside me on the left (I'm right-handed). The red car is chugging while we wait and it shakes us a little, makes the zipper on Colin's jacket jump. Nobody's talking. Brian can't find his goggles, so he's still inside looking for them. We have to get going or we'll be late. Colin hates being late. If we're going somewhere together, Colin's always telling me to “come on!” He says I move too slow.

Glenn gets out to scrape ice off the mirrors on the sides of the car; right, then left. Krista asked him to. She's so sweet and tall. She's always smiling and she never uses swear words. She's even older than Colin. I think she might be the oldest person I know (who isn't an adult). She smiles really big and her skin is dark, like Mrs. Bowering's—that's her mom. Mrs. Bowering taught me in grade two and she taught Brian. She did a thing with dinosaurs I really liked, and one time we got to make and eat tacos in class, so Mrs. Bowering was a real good teacher.

“Paul, open the door,” Colin tells me.

“Huh?”

“Open the door on your side, will ya?”

I do what Colin tells me and now I can feel the snowy cold push into the car like a bully, making me squint and tuck into myself. Colin likes being cold. He leans over me.

“Brian, come on!” Like I said, Colin hates being late.

Our home’s storm door opens towards us, squeaking like it always does. Brian’s there in his jacket with the bright green stripe across the middle. The rest of the jacket is black and I think it’s super cool and I hope Brian will get sick of it and then I can wear it, if it fits. Sometimes Brian and Colin’s stuff doesn’t fit me, even when they’re done wearing it.

“I’m comin’!” Brian yells back at Colin as he walks to the car. He has his white swim bag with the red stripes on his shoulder, and he leans over so the strap falls off him and the bag huffs to the ground in front of the trunk. I look through the back window at Brian’s waist and hands while he pushes his bag in with the others. He slams the trunk shut. He gets in the car like he always does, where he leans in really hard on purpose so he shoves me while putting his bum in his seat. I’m used to it now—he does it every single time.

We’re all in the car now and Krista says, “Okay guys, let’s roll!” She’s always saying neat stuff like that.

See, we’re driving to swim team, which is in Carbonear. That’s a few towns away, and the drive takes a half hour—that’s as long as a whole episode of *The Simpsons*.

I liked swimming at first because Brian and Colin used to do it when I was too small, and I wanted to go but I couldn’t. When I was allowed to go with them I liked it

because it made me feel older. Now I go all the time, but it's too much! I always miss whatever's going on after school because we have to leave for Carbonear as soon as we get home. By the time we get back from swimming it's supertime, and then it's homework, so I don't get to go out or do anything else on swim days unless it's a Friday and someone is having a sleepover. On nice days I might shoot the basketball by myself after supper, but it's not going to be nice tonight because it's February. That's another thing that stinks about swimming; most kids my age swim in the summer—not in the winter. We go swimming when there's lots of snow on the ground (like today), and when practice is over my wet hair can freeze if I don't get in the car quick enough.

The drive there isn't all bad because I get to read on the way (it'll be too dark to read on the way home). I'm reading a *Fear Street* by R.L. Stine. I own a bunch of them and I'm pretty grown up because a lot of kids in my class aren't reading books as big yet. Glenn is reading *Pet Cemetery* by Stephen King. Stephen King writes really scary books for grownups, but Glenn's reading it anyway. I don't know if Mrs. Bowering knows, but I won't tell on him. Maybe he'll let me borrow it when I'm older like he is.

The road is really bumpy. Colin says the road is “shitty,” but I can't say words like that because I'm not old enough. The bumping makes me brush against Brian, but he hates that, so I try to scrunch up so he doesn't get mad. He's already in a bad mood because he didn't find his goggles and Colin yelled at him to hurry up.

Colin looks out his window. Colin's almost done school; he's in grade eleven.

We get to the pool and grab our bags from the trunk. The cold air feels like chewing a brand-new piece of gum because it makes me gasp, and it makes my throat feel thin. I stand beside the car and blow on my hands cause I forgot my gloves.

“Where’s your gloves?” Colin asks and I just shrug. He blows out a bunch of air and shakes his head, and then he shoves my swim bag into my chest and I take a step back so I don’t fall down, even though he didn’t do it hard. I hold my bag by the strap. My bag is light blue with white letters that say ADIDAS. I’ve had the bag a long time and I want to get a new one because one time—okay, don’t laugh—but one time, when I was *really* young, I went to a swim lesson in St. John’s at the Aquarena and got carsick on the way. When we were getting our bags to go inside, just like now, I threw up all over mine. Mom washed it, but Brian and Colin still tease me about it, and parts of the bag have brown stains.

“Get changed quick now. We’ve only got a few minutes,” Colin says as we walk inside, and then he goes to the locker room and holds the door for me. Most of the guys must be on the pool deck already because there’s no one here except Ben Shale. He’s putting his watch in his locker—he must’ve forgotten to take it off earlier. Colin and Brian and I get changed without saying anything. I don’t like changing with all the boys at the same time because I don’t want anyone to see my bird, so I always wear my trunks under my pants. Brian and Colin don’t, though. They use towels, but I don’t look. Some of the older boys just take their underwear off and you can see their dicks and they don’t even care. The thing I hate most about the changeroom is Chris Plotter because whenever we get there with extra time, Chris Plotter will sit on one of the benches and he’ll pick the bottoms of his feet. He’s really tall, so he takes up the whole bench, and he just picks at the dry skin—looks like cobwebs—and it makes me want to puke. I’d tell him to stop, but I’m way too small for that. Of course, if Chris Plotter tried to do anything to me I know

Colin would beat him up, but I don't want to get Colin in trouble just because of Chris Plotter's stupid feet, so I try my very best to ignore him.

Dad always says to ignore people I don't like, and to never get in fights.

"Just walk away," Dad says, and I think that's really smart.

I'm ready first because my trunks are already on, so I start walking towards the deck door. I hate the changeroom floor because it feels like slime on my feet. The little bathroom in here is even grosser and there's always clumps of toilet paper stuck to the tiles.

I'm about to open the door for the deck when I hear Colin go, "Paul, rinse." He means the showers just behind me. You're supposed to get wet under the shower before you go on deck, for "cleanliness," which makes no sense cause the pool's going to make me wet anyway. But Colin said, so I step under the nearest faucet and grit my teeth and press my palm into the button and the water shoots out cold—it's always cold. I get a little in my hair so Cord knows I rinsed.

Oh, that's Cordelia. She coaches the younger kids like me. Jack coaches the older kids. Cordelia tells us to call her Cord because I think some of the really young swimmers can't say her whole name. I like the way her name sounds. I like her, too, but only sometimes. She's always yelling at me to get out of the pool which is funny because most days I don't want to get *in* the pool. See, I really hate being cold, and the pool is way colder than the water at home when I get a bath. I don't know why they can't make the water really warm. Cord says the water *is* warm, but it's not—not even close. She doesn't know anyway cause she stays on the deck.

She'll say, "Paul, get out of the wahtah!" Cord is British and that's what it sounds like when she says "water."

She has gross feet and she always wears flip flops, and when I lean on the side of the pool to listen to her I have to look at them. Her toenails are a little bit yellow, like Nan's teeth, and her foot skin is really cracked. I hate feet. At least she doesn't pick them like stupid Chris Plotter.

I'm on deck now and it's echoey from everyone swimming and yelling. You have to shout to be heard because all of us swimming at the same time actually makes a lot of noise.

Jack yells at the older kids as they swim past him, and he's moving his arms for front crawl, showing them how they should move as they do it. He's in a red shirt and it has a few dots of water on it from all the splashing. Jack and Cord always wear t-shirts and shorts. I don't see many adults dress like that, except during summer vacation.

Cord sees me and she looks like Mom when I forget to bring home a school permission slip I left in my desk.

"Paul, you're late! Get in the wahtah!" All of it sounds British, not just "wahtah," but I'm not very good at accents so you'll have to use your imagination.

I head to the shallow end steps and dip my toe—cold!—and then my ankle. I'm trying to look like I'm getting in quicker than usual, but I know Cord's going to say—

"Paul, get in the wahtah! Jump in! We're doing four laps front crawl. Try to catch up!" Cord's not mean—I'm not trying to make her seem that way. She's actually real nice, but I always feel like I'm behind everyone at the pool, so she always has to tell me

to hurry or work harder. It's funny, y'know...I'm always really good at school, but when I go swimming it's like I'm the bad kid.

I jump in and I *hate* jumping in—it's my absolute least favourite thing about swimming. The water gulps me up and I feel like an ice cube in a drink. I figure my lips must be blue, but I can't see them because there's no mirrors.

The pool is pretty big—Dad says it's fifty meters long. The walls are a greenish blue and they make me think of mermaid tails. They have paintings of the Tasmanian Devil and other cartoon characters on them.

The lane ropes have to be brought out and put away each practice, but I never have to help because that's a chore for the bigger kids. The ropes are actually made of plastic—they're really heavy—and they're red like bricks, but the ends go yellow, then white, then red again. The other colours let swimmers know they have to turn soon or they'll hit their head. The lane ropes cut the pool into sections, and there are six lanes all together. To get to a different lane, you have to duck under the ropes and then bob up again. You can't climb over the tops of the lane ropes because it drives Jack and Cord crazy. They blow their whistle if they see anyone climbing over the lane ropes.

I get behind one of the Farley brothers (I think it's Blair) and start my front crawl. My goggles feel real tight on the back of my head. I got Colin to adjust them before he started getting changed, and he always pulls them too tight. He says the water will stay out that way, but he's wrong cause water is already in my eyes. I close them, even with the goggles on, and try not to hit the lane ropes with my arms because it hurts, and usually it makes Cord yell "Paul, open your eyes!"

After our laps (I only finish two), Cord gets us to check our pulse. This part is neat. There's this big clock over the changeroom doors. It's just like a normal clock; it's white with black dashes for the minutes and hours, and it has black lines for telling time, but it also has special arrows. There's a red, green, yellow and blue arrow, and they fit together to make a plus sign. These count the seconds, so they're constantly spinning around and I think they look pretty. When we check our pulse, we take our middle finger and pointer finger and hold them together, and then we touch our necks in a special spot, and then I can feel my pulse, just like doctors on TV! TV doctors will sometimes say, "Find a pulse," and now I know how to do it. Your pulse feels like your heartbeat. So, I find my pulse and then I pick one of the coloured arrows and count the beats while the arrow turns for fifteen seconds. I don't know why we do this, but I like finding my pulse and I like watching the coloured arrows, and I like how we do it together. We all have to stand still in the shallow end when we find our pulse—no one swims. We look at each other and touch our necks and the older swimmers breathe heavy because they swim so fast it makes them tired. Finding our pulse is special (even if we're not allowed to talk) because usually we just swim and I don't get to look at anyone or feel like I'm on the team. We're a team when we watch the coloured arrows.

I like a lot of the other swimmers. They're different friends because a lot of them are from Carbonear, so they go to other schools. I guess that part of swimming is okay, too, because I wouldn't get to meet these guys if I wasn't on the swim team.

Tyler and Shawn are about my age and Cord has to yell at them to get out of the pool sometimes, like me. They do stuff like spit water at each other between practice laps, or they'll push a flutter board under. That doesn't sound so bad, but the flutter boards are

really good at floating, so when you push them under the water, they push back! If you do it right, they shoot out when they get to the surface. I hate it. I worry one will shoot up and hit me in the face, or the nuts.

There are lots of girls my own age, too. They're taller than me, but adults always say, "Girls mature faster than boys," and they say, "your bodies will start changing," so maybe that's the change the adults mean. Maybe they mean taller. This one girl is named Aoife. I asked her how you spell it and those are the letters she told me, but I thought maybe she was playing a joke because you're supposed to say it like this: "Eee-fa." I asked Mom about it and Mom said Aoife was telling the truth, and the name is spelled different because it's Irish. Her parents are from Ireland and I think that's really cool. Aoife always stands with Anna, and Anna is *really* tall. They both have brothers and sisters on the swim team, but they're older and younger than me, so I don't talk to them much. Aoife and Anna are better swimmers than I am, and Cord never has to yell "get out of the wahtah!" at them. They always hang around with the Turpin sisters. I heard there's three of them, but I only ever see Sarah and Olive. The other sister must be too young or in a wheelchair or something. Sarah is the oldest and she's my age.

After swim meets the whole team will stand in the next-door room with the tables and chairs—Mom calls it "the auxiliary"—to receive our medals. Swim meets are like tournaments. I'd get excited about the medals and ribbons, but I hardly ever win any. Sometimes I'll get a ribbon for fourth place or sixth place or something. Those are always weird colours, like pink or brown, but at least they're ribbons. After some meets, I don't win anything at all. Colin and Brian get medals, and I'll watch Jack lower them around their necks and I'll get a little jealous, but only a little. I don't really care about the

medals, but I wish everyone looked at me and clapped their hands in the auxiliary room. I wish Jack would give me prizes and tell me, “Good job.”

I lose so many races because I can't dive right. I don't like talking about my dive, but I don't want to keep it secret, either, so here goes: I can't dive right. When you're in a race, you start on the swim block in your lane. You crouch down and grab the edge, near your toes, and they say “Ready, set...go!” Then, the good swimmers dive off the block into the water. You're supposed to keep yourself straight, like the clock arrows, but I can't make my body do it. Sometimes Cord will get me to lie face down on the deck and she'll show me how to point my arms and legs, but I just can't make myself move that way when it really counts. When I'm racing, the other swimmers get a head start every time. Some of my teammates tease me about my dive (*everybody* knows about it). Others are nicer and they try to help me get better, but it's no use. Even the smaller kids do it better than me. I...I don't want to talk about my dive anymore, okay?

Anyway, I wanted to tell you about medals in the auxiliary room because that's when the swimmers get to be friends, we're not doing laps or checking our pulses. Sometimes Sarah Turpin says funny things in the auxiliary room and it makes me think of me at school. I don't say funny things at swimming because I'm usually wet and cold and don't feel like it, but I'm *always* funny at school. Sarah and the other girls seem really silly and I'd like to play with them outside, but I only ever see them at swim team and no one's allowed to have fun here. I do lots of cool stuff when I'm not at swim team, like playing ball hockey in Robert's back yard, or shooting Pepsi cans with Dennis's BB gun. Today, Dennis showed me a lighter he found in one of his dad's old tool boxes, and he

said he was going to throw it against a rock after school to see it explode. I have to miss it cause I'm here at swim—

“Paul, get out of the wahtah! We're all waiting on you!”

Oh. I look at the deck and everyone is standing there, looking back at me. I hadn't noticed. Their trunks and suits are wet and they have drops falling from their hair. Some of them are smiling because I'm getting in trouble. Tyler is sticking his tongue out at me. Shawn notices and sticks his tongue out, too. Cord's face is pink from raising her voice.

I try to be cool when I get out because everyone is watching me, so I put my hands on the pool ledge and try to shove myself straight up and then hop on-deck with both feet—the older boys do it like that. I don't get my legs up enough, so I fall back into the shallow end. The other kids laugh—they think I did it on purpose.

“Paul!” Cord's getting pretty mad now. I get out regular this time, putting one leg up and climbing onto the scratchy floor.

“Finally,” Cord says, and then she starts talking about how to kick our legs for breaststroke. She gets a bench and asks Lisa to lie on her stomach and demonstrate for us. Cord will get swimmers to do demonstrations like this, but she never asks me. I stand and shiver and watch.

We're done now and it's time to change back into our clothes. I like this part because I get to feel warmer. I don't like being in the locker room with all the boys at once because sometimes the older guys will do wedgies even if you're in your regular clothes. Besides, it gets really loud with all the boys in here, and they yell and say strange things, and they'll laugh and I don't know what they're laughing at. Sometimes, Brian

will give me a charlie horse—that’s a hard punch on the leg—just to show off. The guys all have wet, spikey hair when swimming is done, and I wish I could get spikes in my hair, but it’s too curly.

I’m late getting to the changeroom because Cord kept me on deck after we finished. She said I need to listen better. She used her soft voice instead of her yelling voice.

“I know it can be hard to concentrate sometimes because there’s so much going on, but you have to try and follow the others.” I’m glad Cord said it like that because I *do* find it tough to concentrate sometimes. When she shows us techniques I’ll be thinking of other things, like homework I forgot at school, or what Mom’s making for supper, or even Lisa’s boobs. I don’t say any of this. I just look at my feet and nod like I’m ashamed—that’s the best thing to do when you’re in trouble. I learned that in school. I tell her I’ll try harder, and I really mean it, but I know she’ll have to talk to me like this again.

My cheeks feel hot as I turn away from Cord. She’s trying to reach a flutter board in the shallow end so she can put it on the metal shelf with the others.

I walk into the changeroom and there’s just Tyler and Shawn and Colin. Colin’s been waiting for me, he already has his jeans and jacket on.

“Hurry up and get changed now. We’re all outside,” Colin says, and then he walks through the door and I can hear other swimmers laughing and talking in the lobby.

I start getting changed (I cover my privates with a towel). Tyler and Shawn are talking about Ninja Turtles. Tyler and Shawn are okay. I can tell they’re bad kids at school because they talk back to Cord and Frank, and Shawn has an earring (a little gold cross), and only bad boys my age have an earring. We talk and stuff and they’re never

mean or anything, but I wouldn't go play at their house if they asked, and I don't think we'd be friends in school.

I pull my bag out of my locker by the strap, and when I turn around Shawn is right in front of me.

"Tyler dared me to punch you in the face, so I'm gonna do that now," Shawn says, and I look at him and don't understand. Punch me? What for?

Then Shawn punches me! Once, really fast, with his right fist. My head goes back a little and then it's done, just like that. I've never been punched in the face—even Brian wouldn't do that, no matter how mad I made him. *Just walk away.* We *never* hit in the face, and if we did we'd be in big trouble. Only bad boys punch each other, and I'm not bad. I didn't do anything to Shawn *or* Tyler.

"There ya go," Shawn says, and then Tyler laughs and they walk past me, out the door.

I stand in the locker room by myself and it smells a little like the pool, but it mostly smells like a bathroom at school and it's quiet now except for the urinal making glug sounds. I realize I'm still standing in the same spot. *Why did that happen?* What surprises me most is that it didn't even hurt. It didn't! Not even a little bit. The punch was really fast, and I know it hit me cause it made my head move, but my face doesn't feel sore. When Brian punches me in the leg it hurts *way* more.

I walk to the bathroom sink and look in the mirror and I see my stupid curls and my blue eyes with the brown spot, but there's no bruise and my nose isn't bleeding like it would on TV. I'm okay.

"I'm okay," I say out loud.

I pull on my black winter boots with the orange stripe and zip up my coat.

I don't know if I should tell on Shawn or not. I mean, I know he was bad, but it didn't hurt, and Tyler dared him to, so maybe it's Tyler's fault. I think about telling Colin, but I'm afraid of what might happen. Colin could beat them up, but maybe Shawn has a big brother who'd chase Colin with a knife. I could tell Mom and Dad, but then everyone at the pool would find out, and *it didn't hurt*.

I leave the changeroom. Brian is in the lobby. A girl named Lori must be waiting to get picked up because she's by the glass case, looking at old trophies.

"Come on!" Brian says, but he's not too mean about it. He turns around and walks outside.

A really fun thing to do after swimming is buying candy from the machines by the entrance. I like getting Runtts because I hate jelly beans and if I get Reese's Pieces I have to share with Brian and Colin cause they make me. They don't like Runtts, so I get to keep them all to myself. You need a quarter to buy the candies, so I can only get them sometimes. Another thing you can do, if you don't have any money, is you can put your finger up inside the machine, where the candies shoot out, and poke the plastic thingies inside. They feel like drinking straws, but they're thinner and shorter and harder. Sometimes, if you dig your finger around, you can make a few candies fall out. Usually another kid has already poked out the free candies first, but I like trying anyway. I think about searching with my fingers today, but I don't feel like it. Besides, everyone's waiting in the car.

The years passed with blown-out birthday candles, and by the time I finally quit swimming in grade eight, I was a certified “drama nerd,” starring in school plays alongside outgoing buffoons and outcasts who made me feel at-home with myself. Sarah was doing the same in Carbonear, so we managed to reconnect each spring during the annual drama festival, when lupins sprouted pink and purple, and grade eights were at their smelliest in the burgeoning heat.

In grade nine, Sarah attended my school because it offered a better French immersion program.

During the summer before grade eleven, she e-mailed to tell me her family was moving to Bay Roberts.

“We have a new house on Finn Street.”

Finn Street is a dead-end lane tailoring four bungalows, just past the fence my father built to surround our home.

I’m sixteen and I’m in grade eleven. It’s springtime. English class just finished and the day is done. Everyone’s filing out, talking about the weekend they just had or the weekend they’re about to have. The air is stuffy, like the sleeves of a plump cardigan, and it is tinged with aftershave applied too liberally. This is high school, baby!

The classroom walls are non-white, pockmarked here and there by posters featuring athletes below whom are motivational sayings they have probably never said, or even thought:

DISCIPLINE: The small steps needed to take your biggest leaps!

School system propaganda delivered by rowers and triathletes who could be dead now for all we know.

English is my favourite class—"Language Arts," they call it. Though my grades are strong in all of my classes (achieved through the least possible effort), Language Arts is where I get to feel like the smart kid. This is because the dweebs determined to place top ten of our graduating class foster about as much creativity as a parking lot attendant. I revel in this imbalance, delighted by their furrowed brows as they examine their own graded papers against my own.

"How could this be? Was this tabulated properly?"

I despise them, their need to follow the rules and "be the best" aboard a sinking ship we'll all be jumping from in about three months. More accurately, I pity them. They're intelligent, but not perceptive; they can't figure out that all of this—by which I mean high school—is meaningless. Of course, try telling them that.

Our L.A. teacher had to miss the last of this year. Ms. Miller is our long-term substitute, an on-again, off-again fill-in who lacks authority but makes up for it in character as she explains, in complete earnest, that she sees all numbers and letters in a certain hue or colour. Hs are purple, 2s are a bright red, and so on. Maybe she's not a parent and that's why she doesn't realize these shades won't earn any respect from the bewildered, onlooking students I share the room with, who cannot believe she's willing to admit any of this. She tells us we are coloured as well, shimmering with auras that she can see now, at this very moment.

"Jennifer has a cream colour around her just here," Ms. Miller explains while gesturing vaguely above Jennifer's head. This is just too much for my classmates to

handle. They titter and giggle nervously, looking to one another for silent affirmation:

"Are you hearing this? What a dingbat!"

I can almost watch their thoughts whorl around them as I sit in my seat and wait for her to tell me what colour I am. The bad students mock her (sometimes to her face) while the behaved, considerate students write her off as being a bit too "out there" to be taken seriously.

I love Ms. Miller because she thinks I'm special, and at this age I want everyone to think I'm special. She's a devotee, then—a fan on my side. Ms. Miller grants leeway if I want to ditch class and wander the hallways for fifteen minutes because she knows I don't always need to be here. Paul will be okay, she figures, and this is something else I want everyone to believe—particularly adults.

Ms. Miller wears long sweaters of tan and mauve, fluffy and thick as animal fur. They have large, accepting pockets which seem to exclusively contain tissues and wayward pieces of chalk. Her hair is straggly and the same greyish brown as a mouse pelt. She wears glasses that seem like they must be glued to her face, like she keeps them on even while sleeping or showering. Her nose is bulbous and has those little hairline veins that run from her cheeks to the base of her nostrils. Her eyes often look wet behind her epoxied frames, not like she's been crying, but as if she were contemplating onions moments ago. She is kind and in her forties. I sometimes wonder if she is lonely. During class, I try to imagine a man in her life because she deserves one. I picture some guy who used to work in refrigeration but is now retired and spends his time making decoy ducks in his modest woodshop off their laundry room. I hope she comes home to find him

smiling there, hunched over 1/4 inch chisel heads while he radiates a pale blue only she can see.

She might be married. She might even have kids. Ms. Miller is a bit of a question mark—no one seems to know her story.

She's passing us graded papers as we file out. I'm waiting 'til everyone has left because I like speaking with Ms. Miller after class. Besides, she seems eager to discuss this assignment with me.

While going over the strengths of my essay she says, "This is good, Paul, but you have to cut the bullshit." While she says this, she places her hand on the paper, lifting it off and placing it there again for emphasis, and the movement tells me she cares.

I give a solemn nod, adding, "Right. I know."

I say this to seem mature. In fact, I don't know. It's hard to figure out what she means because my life is layered with so many sorts of bullshit, I can't determine which she might be referring to. Like, I have to cut the bullshit I pull in class? I'm always interrupting with quips, cracking jokes and stuff, but I consider this a service I'm providing my teachers, free of charge. I've always assumed the smart educators understood this. I mean, Christ, we're all here with one another day after day. Someone has to break up the tedium, and I'm more than capable. Ms. Miller must know this, so maybe she doesn't mean bullshit in class. Does she mean bullshit in the writing? Do I need to sound more adult? Should I be using more swear words, or detailing the use of drugs I've never tried? That's probably not it, either. Maybe she wants more depth in the writing, more metaphor. I don't ask her to clarify, but I take what she's saying to heart

because no other teacher has ever used the word "bullshit" in one-on-one conversation with me.

The word choice feels important. She's really trying to tell me something.

Twenty years later and I still wonder which bullshit I need to cut, according to Ms. Miller. Even now, it feels like I would benefit from understanding.

I lift my paper from the desk we'd been standing over and stuff it into my backpack.

Ms. Miller offers an, "Okay, well, we'll see you Monday."

In the hallway, seven hundred students shuffle and shunt, shouting over one another's heads to be heard as they carve paths to nearby exits. I scan the gaggle for Sarah—her height tends to make her easy to spot, but she's not in sight.

I finish at my locker and push through the door below the eastern stairwell, ignoring the daily panorama of the school's parking lot bustling with dismissal. Buses are lined outside, revving and panting and waiting, like they're queuing for Aerosmith tickets. Students are still shouting to one another as they poke heads through bus windows or meander across the tarmac crowded with vehicles owned by parents and older siblings. I sigh contentment knowing I get to ignore this cramped chaos. My house is just beyond the Penny's ditch and through their backyard, crossing Finn Street before reaching the rusted barrel Dad stores the weekly garbage in. The entire walk takes about four minutes. Despite the proximity, I'm late for homeroom most mornings.

Still turning over Ms. Miller's "bullshit" talk in my head, I decide to wander before returning home to hear Dad, two years' retired, describe the yard work he completed during the day.

Just before reaching the ditch, littered with Hostess potato chip bags, I wheel around and cross the parking lot in the opposite direction, weaving among the inching and idling cars.

The sun is out and the wind is minimal. I can smell hot tar.

I round the school's far corner and am now facing the smoking kids who stand here each day. Some of them glance at me before returning to their stories and inhalations. The school's swimming pool, which isn't used for any academic purpose, hides inside the detached building just there in front of me and the others. After graduation, it functions as any other public pool would, and the most qualified students acquire cushy summer jobs here as lifeguards—Brian and Colin both worked here, but I never will.

I notice the iron gate blocking the pool's entrance, usually padlocked 'til late June, now stands ajar. The smokers either don't notice or don't care. I look to them for acknowledgement of this security breach, but they're disregarding me as they would inside the school. I shuffle past the heavy metal to face the pool's actual door.

It's gotta be locked.

No one will be in here for weeks, at least. When do they start chemical treatments? Maybe now.

I try the handle, which I assume will resist, but it moves easily and suddenly I'm inside, facing the vending machine. Kit Kats peer out at me, as if to ask what I'm doing here.

"Registration starts June 28th, my man. You better come back then." I imagine the chocolate bars saying this. "You'd better just turn back for now."

I fumble in my empty pockets for change as I continue inside, now smelling the chlorine. The wicket for the registration counter is closed. I notice someone has written *Tracey's Tits!* in black ink at the bottom of the shutter, near its keyhole. I give the metal a rap and call "hello?" although I know no one will answer.

"Enter," sounds in Paul's ears, seemingly from nowhere. He crouches into a defensive posture from the shock, uttering "Jesus!" in surprise.

"Hello?" Paul calls again. Nothing this time.

He takes the few steps along the narrow cinderblock hallway to the change rooms. He tries the men's door and falls backward to the wall as it easily yields and opens. Paul collects himself before hefting the handle again, this time stepping through.

He smells piss. The changeroom always smells of piss; piss and damp. The tile is dirty grey and slick beneath his sneakers. No one is in here. Paul passes the showers on the left before reaching for the door leading to the pool deck. This time, he's confident the door will be unlocked. It whooshes open, and now the loud echo of swimming pool silence is in his ears. He begins to walk onto the deck before he catches himself and stoops to remove his shoes, placing them against the wall inside the change room, followed by his socks, which he nestles beneath his sneaker tongues. He opens the door again and walks out in his bare feet.

"Hello?" He calls once again, tentatively, wary of answer.

"Here," a voice responds. It's a woman. Where is she?

Paul notices the colours in the room are all wrong. It should be semi-bright, illuminated by the tired fluorescent bulbs that won't be replaced until they burn out or pop. The ambience should be like fly paper draped over the sun. Instead, the clingy space resembles a massage parlour featuring optional handjobs. The expansive room is bathed in lazy orange, like dying leaves, like a persistent headache.

"What the fuck?" He finally notices the candles, which are distributed about the room, oozing wax onto the concrete deck, flicking and teasing light off the pool's surface, off the blue, macaroni-shaped water slide. He feels like it's time to go. This pool-as-opium-den is odd enough to report to someone employed by the school, a secretary or custodian.

"You're not going to leave just yet."

Paul stiffens and looks toward the diving board, hanging like a last tooth over the lip of the deep end. He can see a woman sitting, cross-legged, on the board, just at its edge, where trampolining toes are supposed to touch before straightening into the deep. Squinting, Paul can see that the woman is, in fact, Ms. Miller, whom he left in the classroom, one building and two floors above his current position, just five minutes ago.

When did she have time to light all these candles?

Faced with the unexplainable, Paul assumes a logical conclusion: *I've been hit in the head with something. Some dick who just got his learner's permit has run me over in the parking lot and I am in a coma and this is what a coma dream is like.*

"You are healthy, you are real," Ms. Miller speaks clearly, with confidence, her words bouncing around the cavernous room. "Come. Sit." She sweeps her left hand from

her side, gesturing toward a diving block beside her. The block has the number 4 painted on it in chipped black.

“Nah, I’m good over here. Actually, I’m gonna take off because this is all making me very uncomfortable.” He begins to turn as she speaks again.

“You’re not going to leave just yet. You will sit before we finish. You will also forget your shoes.”

“Finish what?”

“You will hear your fortune. Ask.”

“My fortune? Is that something you know about?”

“Ask.”

“I just *did* ask. I asked if this is something you think you know about.”

“I know much, but not all. Ask, so we might begin.”

He pauses and considers leaving again. However, under the circumstances, he can’t resist posing *something*.

“Okay,” he says, exhaling. “Who are you?”

“I am not part of your future. Ask.”

“Ask what, goddamn it?!” Though he would never admit it, Paul feels vindicated this is happening. If any student should be visited by a supernatural fortune teller of some kind, he sees no reason why it shouldn’t be him. However, he’s confused, alone, and frightened.

“What you wish to know.”

“I wish to know—” She holds up her hand to silence him before he can repeat himself.

“I am not part of your future. Ask me of your future.”

“Fine. When do I lose my virginity? You must get that one a lot, so let’s start there.”

“Two years hence. In the month of April.”

“Will this be with a human?”

She chuckles, saying to herself, “Yes, I forgot about the humour.” She looks to Paul across the pool deck as she answers. “To a woman, certainly, though not your first choice.”

“Great. Who is she? Where’s she from?”

“You’ll have to wait until you meet her. She lives beyond these shores.”

“Why don’t I lose my virginity to my first choice?”

With a sudden, abrupt sadness, Ms. Miller says, “You do not ask.”

“Well, you’re telling me now, right? So, once I figure out who my first choice is, I *will* ask.”

“You do not ask,” she repeats, as glum as before.

“Will I be rich?”

“Wealth has endless measures.”

“Well, I’m talking about the kind of wealth you buy Porsches with. Will I be able to buy stuff in my future?”

“Yes, but you will never have enough.”

“Why?”

“Few do,” she says with a sigh, looking from Paul to the banana-yellow spinal board fastened to the opposite wall.

“Well, will I have a job I enjoy?”

“You will have a bunch of jobs. You will enjoy some of them.”

“Will I be famous?”

“Fame has endless measures.”

“Okay, will people recognize me when I walk around?”

“Sure, sometimes. You will entertain.”

“I entertain now and no one seems to give a shit.”

“That will change. Your pessimism, however, will remain.”

“Whadya mean?”

“What indeed?”

He huffs a sigh and takes several steps towards the deep end, mindful of the candles as he does so.

“Y’know, your fortune telling is pretty shitty. You’re not giving me a lot to go on.

“Then ask,” she replies, looking to his face once again.

“Okay, well, will I be a comedian?”

“You will.”

“Holy shit, I’m going to be a comedian?”

“Yup.”

“Will I be famous?”

“Fame has endless measures.”

“Christ, give me a straight answer!”

“Yes and no!” The woman mockingly bellows so loud Paul has to cover his ears.

The candles all extinguish simultaneously and now he’s terrified. He takes a step back in

the darkness before planting himself. He doesn't want to trip over anything. Two candles, on either side of the teller, re-ignite on their own. She sits and breathes and waits.

“You will entertain. You will be a comedian. You will improve the moods of strangers, nightly. They will recognize you as they shop, as they stroll. They will tell you, ‘Ah dude,’” a man’s voice, enthusiastic and cigarette-scratchy, suddenly spills from Ms. Miller’s mouth, “‘We saw you do comedy back in the fall, man. You were fuckin’ deadly!’” She intones all of this without moving her body whatsoever. Her eyes have been closed since the candles re-ignited, and Paul could swear she’s crying. In her own voice: “Fame has many measures. You will make people happy. In time, however, you will no longer care.”

“Why not?” When he speaks, every candle begins burning again.

“You will forget yourself. You will forget why you began. Jealousy and arrogance will tarnish the process you love.”

“Oh.” He doesn’t know what else to say.

“Is that all, then?”

“I’m not sure.” He has taken several short steps toward the fortune teller without noticing.

“You’re not sure?”

“Will I be married?”

“Yes.”

“Do I know who she is? It’s not Sarah, is it?”

A chuckle. “No, Sarah will find another. So will you. A lot of time will pass before you meet your betrothed. She is beyond these shores.”

“Who does Sarah marry?”

“A friend.”

“Who?”

“A friend.”

“Will she be happy?”

“Yes.” A pause. “For a time.”

“Whadya mean?”

“Her time must end.”

“Sarah’s?”

“Everyone’s time must end, no?” She has opened her eyes and is looking at him again.

“But she’s only happy for a while?”

“As long as she can be.”

“Whadya mean?” He has been moving towards her. The fortune teller could now reach out and touch him, if she were quick enough.

“What do you think?”

“Well, ‘she’s happy as long as she can be.’ I mean, what is that? Does she get divorced or something?”

“No.”

“Well, does she—”

“No.”

“What then!?” He is now sitting on the number 4 swimming block. He is leaning close to her, so close his chin nearly brushes the hood of her corduroy robe.

“She will die, as we all do.”

“When?”

“Before she is ready. Before you are ready.”

“When? Tell me when!”

“Thirty-two years of age.”

“You’re lying.”

“Why would I?”

“How?”

“A disease.”

“What one?”

“It will not matter.”

Paul is suddenly too hot. When he was younger, he would sometimes get nosebleeds when he was too warm. He subconsciously rubs his index finger along his nostrils and checks it for blood.

“I don’t want to talk to you anymore. You don’t know anything. You’re not even real!” Paul sounds infantile to himself. He’s standing again. He is over her and his fists are clenched and he wants to push her into the pool and follow her body with his own, hold her under and wait. He wants to undo what he has been told.

No one else is in here.

“Maybe you should drown both of us. Maybe you’re right. Maybe you’re always right. Doesn’t it feel that way sometimes?”

“Fuck you.” He’s past the water slide and in the flickering light he can see the distance marker painted on the floor: 25 METERS.

“What do I know, anyway? Maybe you really will live forever!” Her voice is rising now. It echoes from every angle—he’s surrounded.

“Fuck you!” His chest heaves as he stumbles toward the change room door. He inadvertently kicks a candle into the pool, ignores its serpentine hiss as he keeps moving.

Keep moving keep moving.

The changeroom door is closed, but light struggles through its cracks.

“Maybe you’ll show us all!” The teller shouts this even louder, and she sustains the final word so it sounds like “Aaaahhhhhlllll,” as if opening her mouth wide for a dentist.

He blubbers a sob and chokes it inside as he pushes through the change room door. Piss stink. A pair of children’s briefs, dirty-white, dangle from one of the shower heads, likely hung there by a bully. He notices the undies and nothing else as he enters the corridor, now passing the vending machine. Paul can hear the Kit Kats call after him, and they are taunting now: “We told you to turn back! We told you!” The chocolate bars chitter laughter like rats.

He bursts past the front door and the treacherous iron gate. He doubles over, gasping large breaths as tears spill from his eyes. He wipes at them without noticing, sobbing louder as he does so.

“It’s not true,” he echoes this to himself again and again before gasping so desperately he arches his back. He bends at the waist and continues.

“It’s not true!” he screams, and he realizes he’s never been so loud. His palms stay at his knees as he gasps more air. He stands up straight. He gulps and swallows. He blinks. Finally, he notices a collection of smokers—fewer than before—staring at him.

None of them say anything, and the cherries of their cigarettes burn to ash on the evening breeze.

Paul coughs a laugh at the sight of them. He swallows again and stares back, breathing heavily before he says, “Goddamn swim lessons are already full for the summer.”

The smokers regard him blankly. He can hear one of them say, “You’re fucked, man,” but he doesn’t care. They shake their heads and continue talking about which rolling papers to buy, and the stores that will sell them without asking too many questions.

Paul notices he feels cold. The ground is cold. He looks down to see his feet are still bare and now coloured cardiac-red. With a sigh he goes back inside, past the gate, the door, the vending machine, the corridor. All is quiet now. He removes his socks from his shoes and shoves them in his pants’ pockets, slips the shoes on. He refuses to check the pool deck, refuses to verify if the woman is still out there, was *ever* out there. He leaves. His sneakers squelch as he moves.

Back on the parking lot, students holding encased band instruments are lining up to board an idling bus.

Paul looks only at his feet. The parking lot is nearly vacant now, and he grinds his teeth as he hurries to cross the ditch between his school and the Penney’s yard.

The pool’s iron gate stands firmly shut and padlocked.

Sarah and I were the youngest among our one-gender siblings. Brian is three years older than myself. Colin is six. Olive was three years younger than Sarah. Maury was a

few years younger than Olive, but Sarah somehow managed to be the youngest. The way she fit into her family's dynamic was identical to how I fit into mine; the whacky moderator who was fun to be around, easily controlled and instructed, never to be trusted with any hands-on tasks, always eager to make everyone else happy. Her sisters dismissed her as my brothers did me, with a loving understanding of our practical shortcomings.

Since I was constantly on the receiving end of noogies, wedgies, farts in the face, and the occasional hog-tying, I felt it was important Sarah experience some of these discomforts to better understand the male household, and to get on her nerves. While our families milled about the Turpin house at Christmas, snacking in the kitchen, sipping beer in the living room, I might do something like haul Sarah's socks off her feet, fling open the front door, and toss them onto her snow-covered lawn. I'd give her charlie horses when I felt they were warranted, or I'd put on her glasses and imitate her, saying how much I enjoyed recycling and burning incense. She'd protest all of this while laughing.

Driving to St. John's together, I'd sometimes lower my window a quarter-inch, knowing the high-toned whistle of wind passing us at 100 km/h annoyed her. I'd continue staring straight ahead, acting as though I didn't hear it. I knew it was just a matter of time before she'd ask.

“Could you put your window up?”

“Huh? Oh, sure,” I'd say, and then I'd lower her window the same amount and lock them in place.

During a friend's wedding, I took off one of her pale red flats, poured wine into it from the supplied bottles on each table, and drank to her health. There are pictures of this somewhere.

I'm seventeen, in grade twelve. Cards are being dealt to me. Their backs advertise Labatt's Blue. The cards came from the open case of beer sitting on the counter. I am in the swimming pool lifeguard office, a room meant for two teenagers who have earned Bronze Medallions. However, there are at least five or six of us in the small space, and more are arriving. Chlorine is in our noses, arguing with the scents we have applied under our arms, on our necks. Maroon shelving can be found beneath the counters, out of sight from damp children and their doting parents. The low ledges are littered with spare tangerine-orange whistles, a couple of first-aid kits, a phone book. Initials are etched here and there; youthful employees carving out their boredom:

A.B. + J.F. = ♥

N.I. STINKS!

However, now is a time of excitement. We're all underage and drinking in a building that parents come in and out of *all the time*.

The cards are worrisome, though. These are playing cards *and* "party cards," which have fun directions (demands; expectations) on them. The cards shout these instructions at the holder, things like chugging beers and imitating celebrities. I am concerned because some of the cards contain directions to remove articles of clothing, and I know I'm not up to the task. I have never removed clothing for anyone, but I know my body is frail and hairless compared to these lifeguard guys. David Actons is here (in

fact, he's shuffling) and all the girls think he looks good—even I'd admit he's cute. Like most of the partiers, David is more an acquaintance than a friend. I have no qualms with any of them, but Turpin is the only one I trust here, the only confidante.

Hours of laps in the pool have no doubt chiseled David's torso into something lean; imposing. Meanwhile, I weigh less than a hundred pounds, and whenever I'm shirtless around other guys, they erupt laughter at the size of my nipples, or areoles to be specific—apparently, they're much too large.

I try to downplay my anxiety by cracking jokes and sipping beer I can't stand the taste of. After a rough night of vomiting following three Maximum Ice in grade nine, I've hated the taste of beer, but I have to get over it. When I go to parties and bring Mike's Hard Lemonade, guys tend to laugh and call me a pussy. Imagine if I showed up shirtless with Mike's Hard Lemonade.

What if the card tells me to take something off? Do I remove my socks and joke my way through it? We're all going to be swimming tonight anyway, right? Who gives a shit? Somehow, this is more intimidating than removing clothing to swim. There's a spotlight on you during a drinking game, hot and revealing.

Someone is telling a joke (the playing card has demanded it) and I'm not listening. Instead, I'm studying the cards in my hand, measuring them against the number of turns to be taken before the circle reaches me. I feel like I'm waiting to read aloud in class, counting the paragraphs, trying to determine which will be mine to perform. I need practice at this sort of thing; experience.

I constantly worry word of my penis size will get out among the youth of our town, that my peers and enemies are collectively conspiring to get the scoop on my

genitalia. I carry an irrational fear that students will burst into change rooms when I believe I am alone, mocking and pointing and wielding Polaroid cameras.

Three more party people, and then it's my turn. I hope I will have to tell a joke as well. I already have a dependable classic prepped, the one about the couple who's supposed to practice one week of abstinence as prerequisite to joining a church denomination, but the husband is overcome with lust mere hours before the week is up, when the wife stoops to pick up a bag of potatoes: "I'm sorry, you are banned from our church." "That's okay, we're banned from Sobey's, too!" *Har har! Good one, Paul!* In high school, we're all playing to our strengths.

This is Turpin's gig, so I'm following her lead. She's the employee here. I just happen to know everyone. She is still dressed from work, wearing khaki shorts and a corn-yellow t-shirt with her name on the sleeve. Her hair is wet and tied. Always haunted by her height, Turpin's stretched legs take up space in the tiny office. Sarah is a bit disproportionate, taller than a lot of guys at our school, and she has reaching, clumsy limbs. Her face is long and still growing, but she tans well, providing a background for her year-round freckles. She has lots of freckles and moles—I assume she hates them. Her laugh is deep and rolling, and these days she holds a hand to her mouth when she does so, to hide her braces. The dentist told her they'll be off before prom. She knows her features aren't delicate, but she doesn't let it bother her enough to elicit pity from anyone. Instead, she jokes through it. She references *Sarah, Plain and Tall* when talking about her looks, or Amelia Bedelia. She educates herself on sex even though she's not having it, and she offsets her average appearance with a powerful, present personality. Her wit can tangle

with anyone's in our graduating class, and most people like her immediately. Her eyes are a measured green and her brain is unstoppable.

I'm trying to telepathically whisper to her, "I hope I get a joke card and not a nudity card." We often try to communicate telepathically. In fact, we practice sometimes. No information between us has been mentally transported yet, but we feel like we're on the verge of a breakthrough. Barring an actual response from her, I imagine one on her behalf: "Tell me about it. I don't want to see any of your nudity."

"Alright, Turpin, it's your turn," David says, and he's so goddamn confident; those straight, white teeth. She reads the card's particulars aloud.

"Sing happy birthday or chug a beer." Frowning, she adds, "But it's nobody's birthday today—well, no one in here. People are having birthdays somewhere, surely." Some laugh as she twists the crown from a full brew and upends it. She does this thing when she's drinking from a bottle where she sticks her tongue through the opening until she finishes. I've spoken to her about it, knowing that if she realized how slutty it looked, she'd want to be made aware of it. I was right, but she still forgets she's doing it sometimes. While chugging, she begins humming the happy birthday song—I knew she would. The others clap as the remaining brew hurries through the bottle, eager for her throat. She *would* get an easy one.

"Nice one, Sarah," someone offers.

"I'm practicing to be a ventriloquist," she responds, lightning-quick.

I consider adding a line about me being the dummy: "The act is almost ready, we just can't find a suitcase big enough to fit me," but I leave it alone.

“Warford, it’s your turn.” Usually I yearn for all eyes on me, but now I could do without the sensation. *Do shy people feel like this all the time?* Everyone is smiling and waiting. I clear my throat.

I study the card—*fuck, I hate this one*—and then relate it aloud, “Waterfall.”

This is met with “oh, shit!” and “uh oh!” and so on. Waterfall involves all of us. I start chugging and everyone joins in. Leanne is next to me, and she’s not allowed to stop chugging before me. I act as her benchmark, she acts as Jonny Smith’s, and so on; you can’t stop drinking ‘til the person in front of you stops.

“Alright, Paul, let’s go buddy! Start us off!” David is like a conductor, dictating who acts and when.

Why can’t we all drink at a pace we find comfortable and make fun of shitty teachers instead? I consider suggesting this before realizing how transparent it is. I grab a beer from the box with a goofy flourish and use the bottom of my t-shirt for grip to twist off its cap.

“You need a hand gettin’ it open, buddy?”

Shove it up your ass.

I give a weak laugh, saying, “That’s okay, I got it.”

“Okay, when Paul starts we all start. Leanne, you can’t stop drinking before Paul, and I can’t stop drinking ‘til Leanne does and it goes all around the circle. Got it?”

Everyone gets it. “Okay...go!”

I tip my beer back until it’s perpendicular to the floor and try to breathe through my nose. I’m terrible at chugging and usually need to pause a dozen times to get to the

end of one drink. My buddies make fun of me for this, but it's okay when they do it—almost comforting. Here and now, it's different.

I take in a little beer and hold it in my mouth while the bottle is still upended, pretending I'm consuming more than I actually am. This works well because everyone is concentrating on their own beers. All are looking straight up, except for Leanne, who is watching me with a sidelong glance, giggling, spilling brew from her lip. I look from her to the ceiling again and notice the gypsum tiles are somehow dotted with dozens of black permanent marker ink splotches. While wondering how they got there, I accidentally ingest more than I can handle, and now I'm doubled forward, sputtering and coughing. Everyone else stops drinking to laugh, which spoils the game. I meet Sarah's eye and imagine her saying, "You'll get 'em next time, tiger."

"So much for that round! Paul buddy, you'd better stick to sips for the rest of the night."

I murmur something while the others chuckle and wipe their mouths. I lay my beer to one side, relieved that no one notices how much is left in my bottle compared to everyone else's.

David's a nice guy; he's just trying to be funny. Hanging out is just like this all the time now, no matter who's around. Everything has to be a competition. You gotta jump higher and last longer, and I'm shit at both.

Now we are moving, shuffling, grabbing unfinished beers. It's time to swim.

I amble into the changeroom and offer chit chat to the fellas while we undress. As a penis-protecting precaution, I've been wearing my swim trunks under my pants all evening. I laugh and joke with the others while looking above and beyond their shoulders

and jaws, careful not to see anyone's exposed swimsuit area. I also try not to look at tan haunches or muscular backs, the body parts I envy. I stifle a beer burp and slide off my pants, shoes, socks. I stuff everything into an open locker, move to the shower stalls, stand underneath a spigot, rinse. The voices of the other guys follow me onto the deck.

Standing in front of the pool, I feel the stippled floor beneath my feet that is eager to scuff the knees of any children foolish enough to run.

I cast a bashful eye to the girls in their bathing suits, their exposed thighs and restrained breasts, the body parts I covet. They probably notice.

I begin to lower myself gingerly into the pool. However, I quickly flop face first from the submerged concrete steps when I remember I'm nearly drunk, and therefore tougher. The water surrounds me and it's not so bad. Women are shouting in my flooded ears. Who is that?

Why can't you just tell the truth?

If somebody's there, then tell me who-oo-oo

Say my name, say my name

When no one is around you...

Sirens! A chorus of them, calling to me through the skin cells and air bubbles. Destiny's Child! The beer and water undo me, and it takes a moment to realize the staff have set up underwater speakers, which are pumping music below the pool's surface. The effect is mesmerizing and delightful, the sound waves and water waves oscillating and rubbing against one another, becoming familiar.

I sing along in my head as my hands search the water. I close my eyes beneath the surface out of habit. I must maneuver with my ears and fingers, which are deadened by

intoxication. I worry I'll collide with a breast or dick and won't be able to effectively explain myself. During my time with the Carbonear swim team, I often meandered into lane ropes during races I was supposed to be taking seriously. Cord and Jack would express their frustration once the heat was over, after I had inevitably placed in the bottom half of the competitors. I'd stand there dripping, offering excuses about my goggles, hand-me-downs that flooded with water the moment I went under. I'd try my best not to laugh at the image of myself, making windmill turns with my arms, loping and ungraceful, while my teammates watched me slowly veer left, then right. I always tried to stay as straight as possible, but I'm not a goddamn pigeon. I can't show you magnetic north. I consider this now as I hum along, then I realize the song's changed.

I transition to a breaststroke so I can see more of the room between breaths. Besides, the breaststroke is probably my most accomplished, and I want to look like I know what I'm doing among all these strong swimmers. They know the difference, of course.

Sarah hasn't emerged from the changeroom yet, so I make for the pool's side, near the shallow end, to hang there and let the lapping water and my climbing drunkenness strike an equilibrium.

I see a pair of feet with hairy ankles before Johnny Smith stoops forward and places a tequila shot between them. Everyone calls him "John, John Smith."

"Drink up, Warford!" The big toenail on his right foot is black.

"Fuckin' tequila. Thanks a lot John John," I say with a bit of sarcasm. We all find tequila gross at this age, but we all know the drink makes a statement, and it is: "This night is ours. We are not afraid."

Clearly satisfied, John John makes his way along the pool deck towards the deep end, finding other recipients for the tray of plastic cups he's balancing.

I have a mantra I rely on when drinking something I can't stand the taste of, and I push it through my cloudy brain as I bring the tequila near my mouth—God, that smell! I say to myself, "It's good for ya" while swallowing. I know it sounds like bullshit, but this actually helps me keep these dark things down. I've been using it all year. I tip the cup, feel the burn, taste the sour, and slowly amble out of the pool. I keep my eyes down, walking deliberately back to the bathroom, as if I'm a Shakespeare audience member who has been asked to leave the theater for talking too loudly. I don't want anyone to notice I'm about to vomit because, if they do, it will happen on the pool deck instead of in the dignified locker room stretching out before me, too far. It's too far. No, it's not! I fall into the door, pushing it open. My stomach protests the movement. The air is several degrees cooler and I quickly tell myself this is soothing—refreshing, even. I take drunk toddler steps, reach the nearest urinal, and stand before it, willing myself to keep the angry liquid inside.

"My stomach acid beats your hatred, tequila!" I realize I have blurted this aloud when it echoes back to me off the ever-wet walls. I'm dizzy but I'm okay. *I'm okay*. The wave of nausea is passing, passing. *Breathe*. The sickness is gone. This is a rarity, given my track record, and I pee while grinning before returning to the deck.

More are in the water now and I think the lights have been lowered. Some of the guys are vaulting off of block number two, gripping and swinging from the suede-brown rope that has been tied to the roof rafters for years. It is as thick as my forearm and interrupted by fist-sized knots along its lowest five feet. The strongest monkeys in the

room play on it as though this is second nature—perhaps it is. During public swims, I sometimes see unknown guys invert themselves, gripping the braids by their feet before releasing to dive seamlessly into the pool. Assholes. I have only ever tried to swing from it twice, and I’ve never had the strength to do so properly, with any sense of style. Instead, my hands will collide with the rope while I try to get my fingers around it before I simply plop into the water, leaving it to slowly sway back and forth, like a kid on a swing with no adult to push them.

I watch the other guys and their acrobatics, then I sigh and hop into the shallow end, duck below the surface. Music continues to issue from the submerged speakers, and the warbly quality makes it sound like a dream, or a distant memory.

The girls are all wearing the same one-piece swimsuits they work in, resilient fabrics dyed black and sensible navy. Though these are not particularly cheeky, they reveal more than I’m accustomed to, and the alcohol forces me to look; my eyes linger. My trunks are safe and puffy, a teal horizontal line below a black line of the same width. No way I was wearing one of my old swim team Speedos here.

Sarah is to my left, chatting with some of her co-workers beneath the rescue stick that is fastened to the wall. The fiberglass pole is pearlescent white, while the noose at its end is an urgent red. This device is used to skim wayward children from the pool when they get in over their heads. Her group makes for the water.

“I didn’t puke! I did the tequilla shot and I kept it down!” I think this in her direction, but she misses it.

I splish and splash and try to fit in. A game of chicken has begun, and I watch with the others as I picture my brother Colin during summers past, laughing and pushing

and seeming so big while standing waist-deep in the outdoor campground pools of our childhoods. Not to be confused with automobile chicken, where two daredevils speed head-on towards each other, swimming pool chicken works differently, though it's still foolhardy. A team is comprised of two people, one on the other's shoulders, and this fused pair faces off against another conjoined team. The bottoms navigate the water while the tops shove each other until one team is broken, becoming the losers.

After a round or two has transpired (laughing, gulping water, clumsy hands slapping shoulders and stomachs), someone suggests Sarah and I square off. This is a fine opportunity for us to steal the show, and we're already being lifted. I waver and try to steady myself by gripping the skull of whoever's just hoisted me (a guest someone else brought, some guy named Keith). Sarah is wearing a look of mock savagery, her stature a little steadier than mine. We trade taunts and start swinging and gripping at one another. This is when we're at our best; everyone watching us, waiting for whatever we'll say or do next.

"Brigand!" I yell, not entirely sure what it means. Sarah giggles and squeals and now we're both underwater. I realize my limbs are tangled with my teammate's, and this is all so funny. I'm holding my breath, but I know I have oxygen to spare and I'm in no great hurry as I break my rule and open my eyes. I see blurry Sarah float in the stinging space, and she also seems entangled. "So, this is how we die," I quip to myself, content and smiling. "Shoulda known," my head adds. I wonder if she's picking up my thought waves through the conducive water. The speakers chime in with a song by U2. With arms that feel detached and above me, I push away from Keith and rise to live on. Sarah has done the same, and she's grinning. She's telling the crowd her team won.

“We’re obviously both winners, Sarah,” I say with fake scolding. I take in her laugh and it filters through me, becoming serotonin.

We excitedly recount the bout that’s just occurred—it couldn’t have taken more than a minute. Through the retellings Sarah and I realize we both had the same thought under the water, “So, this is how it ends.” We laugh at this, and I know it will be my favourite part of the night—all ours, like so many others.

In time I grew into my penis, as Sarah did her nose.

In the funeral home’s kitchenette, between their bites of ham sandwiches, mourners kept commenting on how good Sarah’s corpse looked.

“They did a good job,” someone would remark in that whisper reserved for churches and funeral homes. “She looks good.”

Among her relatives and old friends, I wanted to blurt out, “Are you kidding me? She looks *awful*. I knew her before she got her braces off, and this is the worst she’s looked by far.” I didn’t care about anyone’s sense of “good taste”—Sarah would’ve found it funny and she’s the one they were talking about. Besides, I was right. She looked dead.

I stayed quiet.

I began to understand how lonely things were going to get. The dark stuff I said, the limits I pushed, those thoughts Sarah always saw and understood (and matched), would now have to be kept inside. It didn’t matter Sarah would find it funny because she wasn’t here. She was the only one I could depend on to get this stuff. Now what?

Finn Street

Stoned. Sneak in through the basement

Are we doing this again?

We thrive on the encasement

Joke about our kin

Make some plans - forget them

No need for what or when

Laugh at this goddamn town

Pigs roosting in a pen

You walked out on a Friday

What day is it again?

Remember when we tango'd

And used to play pretend?

We'd dress up - wig is itchy

Let's go out, buck the trend

Laugh at this goddamn town

And everyone within

We used to gape the jaws

Can we please do that again?

Ain't fun now, all alone

Some hipster with no friend

*I'd shave my weary head
To hear "it's not the end"
Laugh at this goddamn town
Now I am one of them*

Part Two:
No Sex 'til Our Twenties

I can hear my team tangling with our opponents, so I leave my hiding place through the doorway beside me and immediately engage an approaching Junkrat. Just one shot from his grenade launcher can drop Tracer, so I blink back through the doorway to create space. His grenades follow me. One narrowly misses me on the left so I blink to my right, almost directly into his second shot. He has three grenades remaining before he has to reload. He banks a third grenade off the cover in front of me and hits me with it, reducing my hit points to a third. I hit my recall just as he rounds the corner and fires his fourth at me. I get repositioned just behind him. I unload my clips into his back and he turns to fire his last grenade, but it's over my head. I blink through the doorway again—

“Fuck!”

I've hit Junkrat's steel trap—one of his abilities—he must've thrown it to the floor while I was blinking out of his path. He detonates the remote mine (his other ability) placed on top of the trap, killing me and sending me back to the start room.

I respawn and blink three times in a row to cover ground and catch up to my team who are still on point A, but a persistent beeping tells me it's being contested by opponents also still on the point. I walk Tracer at her normal pace while I wait for my blink cooldowns to finish. I'm almost in view of the point and I blink once to speed up.

“Fuck! Goddamn it!”

The same Junkrat has wiped me out with two consecutive grenades that came out of nowhere. He must've been launching them blindly towards our start room, hoping to hit me—a tactic called “spamming.” I wait to respawn again.

He's not as good as you.

I respawn and blink three in a row. I re-enter the room I'd met Roadhog in earlier, blink across to the opposite room, move through it, blink again to reach the stairwell, crouch, and creep up to avoid being detected. The point has been contested the entire time; our team hasn't taken it yet. I see an enemy Mercy at the top of the stairs, so I stand and unload on her. Mercy is a healer. She uses her glide ability to soar to her nearest teammate—a Torbjorn—hoping to put him between us. I blink once to follow, but Torbjorn can set up turrets that put out good damage at a healthy rate of fire, and this guy has placed one at the edge of his point. This is why my team's having trouble; none of the others have tried destroying it. The turret is damaging me as I struggle to finish Mercy, who is a lynchpin character; drop her and the other dominos should fall. She's slippery and she uses her glide again to soar across the point, joining her other teammates. My own group is dwindled down to myself and a Winston. Everyone else is dead.

“Idiots!”

I blink backwards up the stairs, out of the turret's range. I put damage on it from a distance, but it fires back and I have to take cover. I blink once towards it, put damage on Torbjorn, and blink backward twice, again out of range. I recall to position at Torb's back and catch him off guard.

“Fuck!”

He's turned and nailed me with a headshot using a short-range blast from his flak cannon—a lucky shot.

I respawn. I'm back in the start room.

My pulse bomb ultimate still isn't charged, but it's at 98%.

It's 2018 and I'm shaving my upper arm. I'm standing in the shower and the spray accumulates on the tartar-yellow tiles. They have a thin sheen of pink bacteria on them. You can see it if you look closely. I examine the scum and think of Banff, the huge dishwasher that would hold me in place for hours on end. I used to open the device's stainless-steel shutters, like breaking into a mollusk, to hose out its innards. The Hobart had to be rinsed after every four hours of continual use, and in the hotel business, continual use was all the machine knew. Inside were dozens of sky-blue plastic flaps suspended along the path of the conveyor belt, designed to collect additional food waste. Their texture was rough to the touch, like a cat's tongue. These would dance and gyrate when blasted with the stream of water, as if they'd been eagerly awaiting refreshment.

Graham (the hotel's Chief Steward and my boss) shut the machine down one day and led me to the sliding steel shutters. He was concerned "the guys" weren't cleaning inside thoroughly enough during the prescribed rinses, and, as a consequence, bacteria was building.

The dishwasher seemed clean to me as he opened it, but, to illustrate his point, Graham reached inside and moved his hand along its interior wall. When he brought it back into the light, a small turd of pink detritus now sat on his palm, and I was so disgusted I was surprised to feel a kiss of nausea.

"That's basically solid food poisoning," he said before hucking the goo into a nearby garbage can with a flick of his wrist. I never forgot the image, and now I'm aware of what pink buildup means when I see it on damp surfaces.

I should clean my bathroom.

When I was in high school, I used to fantasize about meeting every person on the planet. Nothing complicated, just a quick handshake or bow (whatever's customary) before moving on to the next individual. These days, I have a better sense of just how many people six billion is, so I dwell on it less.

I'm eighteen and it's September of 2000. Athletic guys in shades stand next to slim girls wearing t-shirts tied at their bellybuttons. The group cracking up around me while I try to keep the soap out of my eyes. I have never met my opponent, but "They're going down!" I yell and everyone laughs and cheers. Did I mention my opponent is a woman? Her t-shirt's a duck bill orange, so I know she's from Tower. That's the tallest residence—you can see it from everywhere. A bunch of Tower occupants are here now. Everyone is drinking and they're surrounding us, whooping and shouting, like they're watching a cock fight. My own t-shirt is white, but I am pleased to notice it's accumulating grass stains. The t-shirt's front is decorated with a large, pine-green E. My brothers had big E shirts of their own, before me. Mom never did get those shirts clean, and she tried. Colin's was in his childhood closet when I left home about a week ago. Six years and it's still a pale, pukey brown colour, like steamed rice doused in soy sauce.

I can feel the sun on my back and it's shining on the lawns of Acadia University, and the rays tell me I'm fulfilling a destiny of some kind. After years of listening, in awe, to stories from Brian and Colin about Eaton House and the drunken debauchery of frosh week, I am here, right in the middle of everything.

My brand-new friends are cheering “Screech!” while I try to get a grip on Tower’s slippery forearm. There was a Screech in Eaton last year, and now he’s one of my frosh bosses. He’s since passed the name on to me.

I’m slightly drunk and it’s probably just past noon. I taste acrid flowers and realize suds are getting in my mouth.

C’mon Screech, concentrate!

I winced at the nickname for the first day because the only time I’d heard it before now was when the idiots who hung out in front of Mrs. George’s classroom shouted it at my back; dumbass students with shaved heads covered in razor nicks and pimples. The same guys who could tease in a group but couldn’t write a sentence or do a sum on their own. I hated them, and I always ignored them when they’d yell at me.

Just walk away.

The name comes from the television show *Saved By The Bell*—it was really popular when I was a kid. Screech is the geeky character on the show, and I’m the geeky character in real life. He had brown curly hair, I have brown curly hair, he was skinny, I’m skinny, so the dots are there to connect.

However, I’m not in high school anymore, and come to think of it, I probably won’t see those assholes again.

Brian and Colin (AKA Sloan and Worf) taught me that nicknames are common during frosh week, and getting one means the bosses like you. I’m more interested in everyone liking me than grades or \$200 psychology textbooks shrink-wrapped in plastic, so I pretend I dig the name right away.

I have no idea what I'm doing right now, by the way. My frosh bosses needed a volunteer and for the next week that'll be me—no one else can raise their hand quicker. After I recruited myself, they doused me with soapy water and led me to a tarp, where my adversary was already lathered and waiting. Since then, we've been shoving each another and I've been falling down a lot. The crowd is loving it and the day is young. I have arrived!

I think Tower girl and I might be playing one-on-one musical chairs, but the 'chair' is a steel garbage can flipped upside-down. Realizing this, I hop to my feet, teeter to one side, correct my keel with a dramatic flapping of my arms, and make for the can. Tower is to my left, but I juke out of her reach and sprawl for my throne. My fingers touch the rim of its bottom and I curl them tightly, hauling the can towards me while twisting my hips, hoping to get my ass in position to sit before Tower has regained herself. I pull with too much vigor and the can lists onto its side as I try to hop on, causing it to squirt away as I land hard on my ass. Tower is righting the 'seat' as I roll to one side and try to get up. I think I'm losing. I'm soaked and I feel like a wet sock. Standing, I rush straight for Tower just as she's about to sit. She crouches at the ready and grips each of my outstretched arms in her hands. She then rotates at the waist and, using my own momentum, flings me to one side. Tower does this easily, and I tell myself she must play rugby or field hockey. Everyone is still cheering and I refuse to back down. This match could last my entire first term and I'd be happy about it. As soon as I get to my feet, Tower shoves me flat again. The tarp slaps and I can hear it flutter beneath me and look! There's a plane in the sky! I don't know where it's headed, but the passengers should be here, having fun with us. Everyone should be here with us.

A day or two after Sarah died, I found myself in Colin's old bedroom, looking through its window onto my hometown's main road. The funeral hadn't happened yet.

I was on the phone, trying to contact the only tattoo shop in Bay Roberts that didn't operate out of a basement. With Sarah dead, I just wanted to sit through something painful that would result in something permanent.

My new room at Acadia contains one bed, one desk, one phone, one closet with a top shelf that can lodge a small TV, one toaster oven, one Blink-182 poster, one mini-fridge Brian and Colin also used in Eaton, and one extroverted virgin grinning ear-to-ear. This is paradise, right? It must be. I keep forgetting there are classes in a week's time. Meanwhile, the atmosphere here is like summer camp, with frisbee and strange new girls and people singing acoustic renditions of *Santaria* by Sublime.

My parents and I packed the motorhome full—the mini-fridge, some of my favourite Stephen Kings. I got some of Brian's clothes—the stuff he'd discarded—and even though none of them fit right, they're still cooler than what I'd been wearing last year.

Dad talked to me about condoms before we left. We were sitting in the motorhome, which was parked in our driveway. For the past few days we'd been removing my belongings from our house, carrying them the five steps to the motorhome's retractable step, and then huffing them inside for storage. This is repeated as often as necessary—dozens of times in total. As kids, this system was a normal summertime

activity for us; you can't drive off with the family motorhome until some of the family's stuff is in it. Of course, neither I nor the belongings would be coming back with Mom and Dad, so there's an air of duty to the transplanting this year. We *have* to do this. My parents are going to miss me, I know, but I'm too excited to really care or dwell on it.

Anyway, Dad and I were grabbing some air at the motorhome's dining table while Mom was inside loading up a laundry basket with frozen steaks and pot roasts. While we were alone, dad said—what was it?

“You knows to use condoms, don't ya?” I think that was it. Jesus, what could I say to that?

“No Dad, what are those? Oh, the expensive water balloons? Yeah, I know about those. My wrists are thinner than those of every woman I meet, so you don't need to worry about condoms.”

After he spoke, he looked at his hands, fumbled with his rings.

I said, “Yes, Dad!” I probably sounded impatient, but I didn't mean to. This was hard for him and I understood that.

“I know you do, son. We knows you'll take care of yourself.” I wanted to respond with something that would make him feel better about my leaving, but I couldn't come up with anything.

Now it was too quiet and neither of us were saying anything. I guess we were waiting for Mom to return so she could tell us to get up and help her. I realized I was looking at my hands, too. The neighbor's dog barked. Dad looked towards the noise, past my shoulder, through the motorhome's windshield to the fence he'd erected when I was a toddler. It was painted a tired brick red and the wood had begun to sag in places, but I

knew Dad would mend it before the fence looked too shitty. Dad regularly limbed the pines on either side of the gate, so Sarah and I could pass by them easily. He cleared his throat and made some comment about the afternoon sun, but I stayed quiet. I felt bad for being snappy with him, for not asking questions I already knew the answers to, just to make him feel like he was helping. I'm sure he didn't want to bring it up, but it's what caring parents are supposed to do. He probably figured Colin and Brian went over sex with me, and so he could keep his own advice brief. Turns out Dad and I were banking on the same thing.

That said, Colin and Brian haven't told me shit yet. They never have.

I haven't had any girlfriends. I made out with Sasha Jones a couple of times before leaving, but she's not here at Acadia, so I doubt I'll be seeing her anytime soon. I told my friends I felt her tits even though I didn't. My closest buddies (Peter and Robert) have had no trouble with girls because their hair is normal and they can play sports without looking ridiculous. They got to do all this sex stuff before me, and I was tired of not being included, so I said the thing about Sasha. I feel bad about it now, more for Sasha because I really liked her and I didn't want to make up some bullshit, but it'll never get back to her. Maybe I'll tell the guys the difference some day.

Frosh week has been rolling along nicely, but it's cluing up. We do stupid activities and have meetings where the hundred or so participating first-years sit on the haggard carpeting of the ground floor's expansive lounge. The bosses sit in chairs and face us, exaggerating the comfort of their privileged seats. They wake us with pounding fists and get us to do their bidding, but they're also becoming friends, or acquaintances at

the very least. Though most of them are only a year our senior, they appear like giants and adults to me.

In 2007, Sarah was working in British Columbia—something to do with youths and educating them to be more productive. I was attending history classes in St. John’s, prerequisites for an education degree I didn’t really want to do.

Following my morning lectures, I’d sometimes call her from the ignored pay phone of the Arts building lobby, using the time zone difference between us to be the first out of bed for once—she the early bird, I the night owl. She’d answer the phone at dawn in B.C., groggy but unbothered. In fact, she was usually impressed I was awake for class. I’d try to imagine her pink and purple skies, the mountains. Her voice always made everything okay, and I’d tell her about peers I had crushes on, mindful that they might walk past as I was discussing them.

Sarah was in Port Alberni, a place she hated. Years later, if she heard the town’s name, she’d say, “I called nine-one-one so many times when I lived there.” She once took her wards for a walk through the town to demonstrate the place “wasn’t so bad.” During their excursion, a flaming tire rolled past the group. They couldn’t figure out where it came from. Hilarity tended to follow Sarah wherever she went.

Her living at the opposite end of Canada reinvigorated my passion for posting mail. Like this one time, at Memorial University’s student center, I bought an envelope from the mail kiosk, walked outside, stooped, and knocked a discarded cigarette butt into it with my pen. Turning over the paper and clicking the biro to life, I wrote: AVOID

PHYSICAL AND EYE CONTACT WITH RECIPIENT! I then went back inside and dropped the sealed envelope into the nearest mailbox.

My best pal at Acadia is Josh and already he has a girlfriend. Rosie is a brown-eyed charmer from Cutten House. He's as ecstatic as I want to be, but I celebrate his new sexual experiences, believing similar joys will find me through proxy. He's in love within two weeks and can't believe his fortune. Both of us are hopeless romantics.

Through Rosie I meet friends, and our little circle expands. Everyone likes everyone and some of the girls don't have boyfriends. Meeting them is exciting since my previous relationship with Cutten amounted to looking at its windows through my own, hoping to squint the distant image of someone getting changed.

One of these friends is Suzanne. Suzanne has big bushy eyebrows that accentuate the sharp features of her face, the definite lines around her nose and mouth. She wears thin gold hoops in her ears—barely noticeable—and her teeth are big and white. She's funny and says funny things. In a group she'll blurt out something to make everyone cackle, just like I tend to do. I'm enthralled by this, am immediately into her.

I tell Sarah all about her during a phone call, admitting that I think Suzanne may even be funnier than Sarah herself. Sarah says that's impossible, and I realize I've accidentally insulted her.

Suzanne and I chat whenever I can steer us to one side, apart from everyone else. Sometimes I visit her room after she's buzzed me past the Cutten foyer, but I feel like she's humoring me. I try to ignore my intuition since I don't really have any.

We talk about the campus corner store, where students can use their ID cards to purchase items. The balance is topped at \$250 each semester, money surrendered by our parents—just another line on the bill. Mine is exhausted by mid-October. Suzanne likes to grab treats from there, but she mentions she misses Lucky Charms—the store doesn't carry them. She likes to eat the coloured marshmallows dry, out of the box, ignoring the grain bits that make up the bulk of the cereal.

Days later, sitting cross-legged with Rosie and Josh, we empty the boxes of Lucky Charms I bought downtown, shaking their contents into stainless-steel bowls. Wearing latex gloves, we sift through the bits, picking out the marshmallows, depositing them into one of the emptied bags.

The next day, I call up to Suzanne's room, hearing my echo in the lobby, and she tells me she'll come down. A random student lets herself in and holds the door. I tell Suzanne I'm okay, I'll be right up. The cereal is with me. Surely, she'll be impressed by this. She'll get a kick out of it.

She opens her door to find me thrusting the box at her, grinning.

“What's this?” she asks with a cautious smile.

I explain that I wanted her to be able to enjoy some Lucky Charms, so I customized an all-marshmallow box for her. I can't tell if she's enamored—she's not inviting me in.

“Oh...wow. You did that for me?” She sounds surprised, but not flattered. I want to leave now, pretend I hadn't come.

“Well, y'know, I skip a lot of classes, so I have plenty of free time.”

“That’s really nice, Screech, thank you.” Then she tells me she has a bio midterm tomorrow and she has to get back to studying.

I call her room a couple of days later and ask if she wants to get coffee, knowing her response before she gives it. She’d rather stay friends, and I tell her I understand, though I don’t. I don’t know how to be something besides a friend with a woman. I assumed grand gestures would be the best way to stand out from all these other guys. Why aren’t they working?

Remember that cigarette butt I sent Sarah in 2007? She wrote back.

I received an envelope at my St. John’s apartment from her B.C. address, written with her boyish scrawl. I cut into it and sat with the contents and my excitement. It was a greeting card. The floral cover read *Thinking Of You*. When I opened it, a small, sealed baggie, the size of a Fig Newton, fell onto my desk. Inside this was a stainless-steel earring, the sort people used to wear as body jewelry in the early 2000s, a simple hoop that claps together onto a little metal ball. It looked familiar. Returning to the card, I read what she had written below the included verse:

that earring was in my ear for a long time

-you were there

♥ *Sarah*

She was right, it was the same ring that had been inserted into the upper cartilage of her ear when we got “work done” by those bikers—when I got my first tattoo.

Holding the clear plastic sleeve to the light, I felt a lump in my throat and said “alright” to the empty room. I immediately decided to get the same metal pierced into my

own ear. I made an appointment the following day and had it in my body by the end of the week.

My Acadia network password isn't working.

I go to the info desk at the student center because I don't know who is supposed to fix the problem for me. A slight girl is behind the counter. Her hair is short, a medium brown, parted slightly off-center. Her cheek bones are high and sharp, her brows are thin and spell surprise. She looks fragile—almost brittle—but her eyes are keen; aware. She has a little nose. I recognize she's one of the Eaton House education students at the end of my hall. I've seen her leaning against that far wall, chatting with the others in her program while they prepare for bed or morning classes, brushing their teeth with their hair in towels. She's less forthcoming with the frosh compared to some of her education buddies. Everyone in that group is way older—in their twenties—and the few times I've noticed her I've thought her way too mature for all the nonsense we frosh have been getting up to.

We must seem so loud to her. I now remember thinking this when she gave me a polite wave that time I saw her sitting on her neighbor's bed while I was on one of my visiting rounds. Perhaps because of her otherness, or her age, I've never noticed how beautiful she is. Her pale skin is fair and her eyes can't decide between blue and green, and here at the desk I caution myself to stop staring.

She tells me to go to user support to get a new password, so I do.

In my single Acadia bed in my single Acadia room I imagine myself in scenes pulled from favourite romantic comedy movies, like *Can't Hardly Wait* and *Empire Records*. I picture myself admitting my feelings before kisses with a bent neck administered to the women who surround me in the daylight. I never touch myself when I do so; I try to be respectful, saving my dirty habits for pornography, which I consider the gentleman's approach to such necessities. When I was in high school, I developed feelings for dozens of girls, as I did in junior high, as I have since Kindergarten, when I would stare, chin on hand, at my hometown neighbor Stephanie, sighing dramatically whenever she looked my way. However, only once have I been able to say, "She stumbled into my life..."

I am one of Eaton's known night owls.

At any childhood sleepover, I was always the last to nod off, nestled between Adams and Matthews stuffed in sleeping bags. You could call it an urge, almost, to stay awake the longest.

We Eaton night owls easily distinguish one another as we pass and chat in the halls while actual owls stalk prey all along the Annapolis Valley.

With crispy frost outside I'm at my desk, fiddling with my laptop. It's probably nearing one in the morning.

My door is open, as always, and I can hear someone climbing the stairs just outside my room. Their steps are purposeful; *one...two...three*. Whoever it is, they're dragging themselves. I look back to my laptop until I realize the steps are approaching. I

glance up again to see a lone arm stretch across the length of my doorway, slapping against its frame. This is followed by the girl from the info desk, who slumps into view. She is clearly hammered. She's in tight denim and her top has a rectangular sticker on it, the sort you adhere to your chest on the first day of summer camp. It says: HELLO MY NAME IS... and beneath this, in black ink, someone has written **22!**

"Hello," she chimes matter-of-fact, and I'm completely smitten. Who *is* this person?

"Well, hi there. Nice nametag."

"It's my birthday," she tells me. *November 20th, November 20th*, I tell myself, convinced it's a date I'll need to remember. "You're Screech, right? You're the funny guy."

I assure her she's right. Her name is Felicity. I've never met a Felicity, and I consider saying this.

"I never did any of the frosh stuff. You guys must think we're all bitches."

"No way. I figure you guys just have better things to do," and I mean it. I really do think the education girls are pretty cool. They're level-headed and easy to talk to. They have out-of-sync names, like Lana and Justine. They take care of themselves and take their time; there's no calamity about them, no drama. I don't tell her that others on our floor probably have the exact opinion of them that she suspects.

"We're boring! We're old! I'm twenty-two! It's my birthday today."

"You mentioned that. Happy birthday."

She's chatty and enthusiastic—I've never seen her like this. She studied English at another university, graduated with her degree before coming here. I say I'm studying

English too, but I feel as though she already knows. I tell her I only chose English because I like reading and didn't know what else to pick. She tells me that's why everyone chooses English. She asks if I've read John Irving and I tell her I've never heard of him, though I'm tempted to lie. *Never lie to her. Never!* She tells me her favourite book is *The World According to Garp* and I promise to read it. I'm trying to figure out where to find a copy even as she's speaking.

“Come visit us more. Nobody visits us. We're not so bad.”

I tell her I will, and I'm ecstatic to now have an excuse to see her again. I can't wait to tell Josh about this.

Felicity has a boyfriend, of course. He's back in their Nova Scotian hometown, or he's attending Dalhousie or something. I can't retain details I learn of him because my subconscious is struggling daily to will him from existence. He has a K name—Kole or Klyde. I try to learn his faults as best I can, though I assume he can't possibly have any.

Felicity and I talk about books and I show her some things I've written, watery stories and poems. She loves them all and asks to read more. I soon run out of material, so I start creating content for her. I realize within a week that she's my muse—always has been—it just took me this long to meet her. I imagine publishing a book and dedicating it to her. Now, when I go to bed each night, I picture romantic movie scenarios with her. No one else matters anymore.

I write e-mails to Sarah, filling her in on Felicity.

Did I tell you about the day I left home for Acadia, once the motorhome was packed and the reservoir beneath the vehicle's dining table was brimmed with water? Sarah stayed on our back lawn, in a tent. She would've been awake before we left, but that's where she slept—her sister Olive, too. It was Sarah's way of saying she didn't want me to go, but I already knew that. Really, what we both wanted most was for her to come with me. We were too big for this town. Her reasons went unsaid, as did my promises (*I can't come with you; I'll be back*), but we knew what they were. Our telepathy was getting stronger.

We hugged as we always do, leaning into each other without using our arms at all. We weren't worried about anything permanent because we knew who we were to each other. I think we were just worried about operating again as individuals. I know I was.

K-name visits Felicity and I don't want him here, on my property, stinking up my turf with his private knowledge of her. I hate him and can't help it. I meet him and he seems unimpressed, looks over me. He's tall and has dark facial hair and doesn't seem funny at all and I doubt he reads for pleasure. In a glance I can tell he doesn't appreciate her—not like I do (I would)—and he's immediately offensive.

I make myself scarce, observe from a distance.

Their shared maturity makes me feel even younger than I am, insignificant and spineless in my brother's flowing hand-me-downs.

He follows Felicity into her room at night and they close the door, leaving me to feel sorry for myself. I know they're having sex back there, while I can only be outside, like the kid too short to ride the roller coaster. I think I love her, but I know I'm too

inexperienced to tell. I cry in bed, slow tears that track my cheeks to my pillow. I don't bother to wipe them away.

Soon, he's gone. I continue to visit the education dames, continue to spend time with Felicity. I refuse to let K-name shake the little confidence I have. As time goes on, I really begin to believe he doesn't deserve her, knowing there's more to the notion than my own jealousy. I'm not giving up on her yet.

I sit on her bed and we eat popcorn she's made, watch movies. I always bring whatever writing samples I can, sharing them with her alone. She tells me I could "write a book" on how to treat women, and I try not to preen when she says it. I imagine meeting her family. I imagine her and I watching sunrises after chatting all night. I actually *do* start a book, a novel about an orphan of above-average height who befriends a blind, loner classmate. I call it *Above the Rest* and inherently write it for her, hoping she'll realize how much she inspires me. I think I'm ripping off *Catcher in the Rye* but tell myself it's okay.

I work on my silly book in her room while she completes course materials and prepares group projects. One time she had to make a thermometer out of Bristol board.

She tells me popcorn makes her farty. I say and do whatever I can think of to make her laugh, inspire her, make her feel special. I know what this will sound like, but she has one of the best laughs, a melodic lilt I float on.

She and I hug each night before I leave her to sleep. The act is a tad pitiful and transparent, but I can't help but spread my arms, display my vulnerability. She obliges each time and then I start the long walk along North's hallway. I joke with her and say I

wish I could “Pac-Man it” from her end of the hall to my door. If you guide Pac-Man to the edge of the screen, he comes out the opposite side.

I tell her I’m sick of being single, sick of being in the Friend Zone. I tell her I can’t understand how I end up there all the time, and I don’t get the logistics to begin with; how can you begin a relationship with someone who isn’t a friend first? She agrees, telling me people who say “we’re too good as friends” use the phrase as an excuse for other reasons they’re not willing to mention. In spite of K-name, I’m glad she gets it. She gets every goddamn thing I say.

I finish *The World According to Garp* and tell her so.

“Did you love it?”

“I did,” I say.

I did.

Summer.

I fly back to Bay Roberts and the town feels like a straight jacket. How did I ever live here?

While home, Sarah listens as I tell her about the days I’ve spent without her. I’ve missed her, but there’s no need to say so now that we’re together. Our thoughts waft back and forth like a breeze.

I’m embarrassed to still be a virgin, but I’m relieved she still is too. The roads between Bay Roberts and Carbonear failed to present her with any prospects while she

completed college courses. She's embarrassed to admit she likes my new eyebrow ring, so she doesn't—but I can tell by the way she looks at it, asks questions. This makes me feel traveled and mature, which she can probably detect. We feed each other's fires sometimes, desperate as we are.

We talk more about the sex we're not having and then the *Moulin Rouge* song comes on the radio and Sarah wrenches the volume knob. We sing along and pretend we're in control of our trajectories.

Felicity's working as a counselor at a rich kid camp in Pennsylvania. I write her letters and she writes back. On our kitchen table her addressed envelopes burn like phosphorus among my parents' phone bills and grocery flyers. She's having fun. She misses me, says so at the end of each letter, and I don't doubt a word. I tell myself I can smell something of her on the letters she writes, but I know I'm just smelling paper. I think of us and wonder if she does the same. Sometimes I tell myself she must, but I can't believe it, no matter how hard I try.

She describes the value of our friendship, more lustrous now that we're apart. I feel the same way, but wish she'd used a more promising word, like 'relationship.' I look for more promising words in her manicured hand, like 'desire' or 'longing,' but they're not included. She appends the letters with quotations from love songs, contrasting all the friend talk. I pore over the phrases like a forensics detective searching for dander and stray eyelashes.

Her final letter of the summer tells me herself and K-name are on a break as the dandelions break soil on the Warford's front lawn.

I'm nineteen and it's September of 2001. I'm back in Wolfville to begin my second year. The motorhome's already unloaded and Mom and Dad have moved on to Aunt Barb's in Chezzetcook.

Old friends materialize like lovers lost at sea, and I give and receive big hugs, one after another.

Both Eaton buildings are still incomplete, despite the school's summertime promise of a renovation. I mean, they're *almost* done. The carpeting is laid, and I marvel at the audacity of the choice even as I walk across it. How many people will puke on this? Spill cups of coffee on it? Carpeting traps stink, after all. The room furniture is made from real wood—not maple, but a close substitute. A born carpenter, my father opens and closes my new armoire doors, leans this way and that to check their plumbness, shutting one eye like a sniper.

I must admit, the residence now has an undeniable freshness to it, but a juvenile part of me feels like this is something that must be undone, like the whiteness of last year's frosh shirt. The building's interior is reminiscent of a brand-new public library; an inviting, maintained space not meant to be lived in.

The new "courtyard" is a slab of mud covered by wooden gangplanks, as if Eaton's at the perimeter of a freshly-blasted mine entrance. The soapy wrestling match from last year took place on this lawn, and now the lawn is dried clay with embedded tire tracks. Massive floodlights cling to ten-foot tall tripod stands, and these blind the evenings so no students or parents trip over anything.

Felicity lives off-campus for this, her final year. We did a hello at the info desk. She let herself out from behind the counter to embrace me, and I felt like everything else could wait. Wait and wait and wait. She told me to come up and see her new place after writing down the address.

The festivities of my second frosh week are over before I want them to be, but it's all worth it. Between the nightly parties and shared accommodations, new frosh become friends even faster than last year—some are already dating each other. Classes have begun, but we're still getting drunk a few nights a week.

I stop by the student center because I hope to catch Felicity working. We catch up, interrupted by the occasional student wondering where the campus bookstore is. Her hair is slightly longer and it does a flippy thing at the ends.

On the eleventh I find her at the info desk and she tells me someone crashed planes into the World Trade Center. Both towers have collapsed.

“It's really scary,” she tells me. She's still smarter and older than I am, so I get frightened when she says this. *Are we next?* I watch the chaos on the large TVs in the student bar one floor below. I make trips back and forth to give her updates. I wish we could watch the coverage alone, standing side-by-side, hand-in-hand, trying to figure it out together.

I got my first stupid tattoo that year in a town just past the university.

Josh and I had made an event of it because he was getting his second that same day. Sarah was now enrolled at Acadia, so we took her along. She'd only stay for this year. I was flourishing in Wolfville, but it just wasn't the right fit for her.

Anyway, in the spirit of the occasion, she'd decided to go under the needle with us. She arranged to have the upper cartilage of her ear pierced once Josh and I were finished. This body part was a popular selection among the new breed of unsupervised teens, a safe choice that didn't involve tongues or nipples.

Today's tattooist was a towering Harley biker type named Sammy, standing well over six feet. I had only ever seen him in patch-covered denim, and he looked like the sort of guy who'd get a pool cue cracked over his head in an action movie. He was a real sweetheart, and so was his wife, a slender woman of about forty-five, always dressed in stonewashed blue. She did the piercings. They worked side by side, and I think we envied them.

The studio itself was like the wood-paneled basement of a high school dropout. It had a puffy leather couch for guests, and the walls were covered in Iron Maiden posters and intricate sketches of lurking panthers and menacing halberds with skulls on the pommel. Like all tattoo parlors, it smelled like a cleaner you couldn't quite place—bleach or peroxide. The odor was strong, and it gave the impression Sammy and his old lady worked hard.

Sarah was such a baby about her piercing, which I pointed out as soon as we left, while the three of us nursed our new soreness. She made us look like wieners.

"Have you been piercing people for a long time?" Sarah posed rapid-fire queries to the woman who was about to scar and tag her. Meanwhile, the artist was busy washing

her hands, donning purple latex gloves, unpacking her next unused, sterile needle. She wore a breathing mask and gave Sarah curt answers.

“Do people ever cry when you do this?” I was telling Sarah to stop, she was being annoying, but it wasn’t registering. She was nervous.

“How painful is it, exactly? Can you compare it to like, a bee sting? Is it worse than that?”

By then, my own fresh needlework was complete and bandaged, and I was delighting in Sarah’s squirming while she fidgeted in the teal, converted dentist’s chair. I think Josh was enjoying it, too. Sarah had, after all, jeopardized our chances of seeming cool in front of these aging metalheads. As if these outcasts with knotted hair would ever invite us middle-class dweebs to their beer keg cookout after closing up shop that evening.

I finally get to see Felicity’s place off campus. There’s a couch and one of those wicker chairs that’s like a bowl you sit in, as if you’re part of a noodle dish.

With time to ourselves, I lay in her lap and tell her more about my summer while she plays with my hair. My curls are much longer now and I wear them in an afro, though I’m not crazy about the style. After an hour of Felicity’s teasing, I rise to see she has fluffed it out in all directions, making an imposing puffy ball that stretches past my shoulders. I slip into my skateboard sneakers and wonder why I have to leave. Everything makes sense here. Can’t I stay?

Some evenings, past midnight, while the crickets chirp their love letters, I mount the incline of Highland Avenue. I scrutinize the progress of the maple leaves clinging branches above the street. Some of the grass-like greens are paling to yellow and orange, but only a few. Josh always points out the Little Dipper and I spot it now, its handle guiding me—not that I’ve ever been one for astrology. We’re all in control of our own destinies.

I’m not used to crickets; we don’t have them in Newfoundland.

I take these walks to leave notes and poems on Felicity’s doorstep, weighted against the wind by a yogurt for her breakfast—usually peach. I intentionally do this while she’s sleeping because the items are meant to be a morning greeting, my contribution to her day. Once they’re deposited, I’m satisfied to return to Eaton. Retreating down the hill, I look over Main Street, watching the occasional RCMP squad car roll through the emptiness, or some wayward student walking home from the library, already burning both ends in September.

Late September now and the education students are holding a formal event upstairs while my friends and I drink at The Axe two floors below.

Felicity comes down to see me, and we convene on the dance floor. Dave Matthews sings above our heads and all around us, a bastion of hope serving the youth of the room:

Celebrate we will

Because life is short but sweet for certain

She's in a thin-strapped lavender dress. She has a flower in her hair and I can't tell if it's plastic. She raises one arm above her head, closes her eyes, and sings along. The blacklights cause her teeth to glow an unearthly green, as if she's made of radium or some other scarce element. I bounce with her to the music, and she's the most beautiful woman I've ever known, the pinprick of light through which I see everything.

During my first year at Acadia I had this great English professor. He was a TV rendition of a university lecturer: a Welshman approaching retirement with a Santa Claus beard and kind, blue eyes. I'd refer to him as 'doctor' and I was in awe of him, this living, breathing morsel of academia.

I've always been a slow reader and a lazy student. I couldn't finish all of the books for all of last year's courses in the allotted time—even if I'd wanted to—but I definitely could've tried harder than I did. I scrambled to finish an entire novel—I think it was *The Vicar Of Wakefield*—the day before my final exam. Despite this last flourish of effort, two months too late, I had to write the exam without having read another of the required books (I forget which). The Internet offered no synopsis for the novel, so I only had my own class notes and recollections to go on. Despite shooting myself in the foot, I managed a good grade.

I dropped by the English department early in my second year. Though I wasn't in class with him anymore, I wanted to visit the Welshman and say hello. During the exchange, he mentioned my exam from the year before, how it stood out. I couldn't tell you why, but I told him then that I hadn't read one of the required books, that I'd essentially faked my way through one of the exam's essays. I thought he'd be impressed.

Instead, he seemed confused. He said “whoa” a lot during his reaction, and he used the expression “pulled the wool over my eyes” a couple of times. He seemed hurt and I wished I hadn’t said anything.

I didn’t realize my fatal flaw back then, but I know it now: I was too honest while being full of shit.

October.

I look out over Eaton’s ruined front yard. I’m standing outside, near a fire exit, and everything’s ready—except maybe me. I’m in Brian’s olive-green suit because it’s the best one I own—the only suit I have here. The night’s air is warm and our bastardized courtyard is beneath beams of the foreman’s electric lights; they’re still hanging from their big tripods like brown bats who don’t need to feed. Three floors above me, Michelle and a few others are in my room, chatting excitedly.

“She’s going to love it, Screech,” Michelle told me about twenty minutes ago. Michelle’s right, she will, but was I doing the right thing? I’d directed my friends to hit ‘play’ on my stereo once I walked into view. The speakers are pressed against my window’s flyscreen. The new Eaton windows treat us like we’re kids in the backseats of Corollas; a lock prevents any from being raised more than a few inches. I assume this is to deter distressed first years from trying to commit suicide (on school grounds). The song is cued up, of course. It’s her favourite. And man, my heart is beating. I’m trying not to sweat, but I think I’m sweaty. My *mind* feels sweaty, like it needs air outside my head.

Oh shit, there she is. Felicity’s cresting the pirate gangplank nestled into the mud. She’s wearing a thin black cardigan over a shirt of red plaid. Her capri pants cut

themselves short above her cool sneakers—“joggers” my dad would call them. God, what am I doing? *Abort! Abort! Don't do this!* I begin walking. Behind my shoulder, the music starts. She stops walking. I think I see a smile.

I can't stand to fly

I'm not that naïve

This is the best I can think of, the best I can manage. Felicity spots me and starts laughing. No, she's crying. She's laughing and crying.

“Shall we?” I gesture to my side, arm extended. She can't respond, but she follows my lead.

We're turning now as we dance in the courtyard and a bunch of my housemates are watching. Felicity can't believe I did this. I think I can spot curious people at their windows in nearby Chipman House. Her backpack is a massive mutated hump—what's she got in there?

Even heroes have the right to dream

I want to tell her to take the goddamn backpack off because it's jamming up my arms, but I also don't want to disturb the moment. She hasn't stopped her lilting laugh. I wish she liked a longer song, like “November Rain” or something. I haven't planned anything past this. I'd intended to tell her how much I thought of her over the summer, how much I tend to think of her all the time. *Do you think of me?* I'd planned on saying something dramatic, make this my big moment, the part of the film where the geek gets the prom queen, but now I don't know where or how to start and I can't believe we're here and this is happening.

The song finishes and she takes the opportunity to wipe her eyes. I walk her into the building and lead her to my room. Michelle and the others are hanging around outside my door, acting like they don't know what's going on. They're staring. One of them offers Felicity a "hi." Someone must've shut the stereo off before it could play the next song. I close my door and Felicity's *still* crying and laughing, but softer now. She wasn't expecting this and I feel proud. She seems happy—I was worried she'd feel scrutinized; she must know they were all watching us.

I want to tell her now—tell her *something* real, but I can't shake the fear that's nested in my head since last year: she'll tell me "we're too good as friends" to be anything else. I'm worried she'll contradict herself and give me an excuse for other reasons she's not willing to say. I don't want to make her do that.

She sits on my bed and grins while we talk and then she leaves to walk home, and that's that.

Back in my brother's old room, days after Sarah's death, I was trying to suppress the fresh memories of the funeral. I'd bludgeon myself in the relevant part of my brain to forget if I only knew which section to target. I'm not going to talk about the funeral; the tinny keyboard playing hymns that meant nothing to her, the distant relatives she couldn't stand, the sexual tension I felt while introducing my girlfriend to old high school crushes, their own faces flushed from crying. Sarah and I used to talk about our ideal funerals, and this wasn't what we had in mind. There was no spirit of fun—no colour—and there could've been.

Sooky and sick at the sight of it, I'd circled the building and sat on the grass of the funeral home's back lawn. A small brook ran along the land's far bank. I watched it flow and felt nothing.

Peter found me, and after a moment's silence I said through tears, "This isn't the funeral she wanted." As if that mattered now. I felt ridiculous even as I said it—what was I going to do? Sit out here while everyone inside went through the motions? Maybe. The move was enticing, a show of solidarity on behalf of a counterpart. I had been acting dramatic for days, both for her ego and my own, maybe. Peter was being rational, and he was the one who'd been married to her, the one left with three motherless children not yet in school. I followed him back inside.

I sat in the folding chair row that included my parents, and felt anger instead of sadness. The past few days had taught me: in grief, they're both the same emotion, one is just a hungrier version of the other.

We're not talking about the funeral.

The month after my gangplank dance with Felicity, I convince myself I've fallen for a frosh living on fourth and put all of my effort into making her The One. I tell myself whatever I have to. The tactic works and we make love for the first time at a bed and breakfast in the spring, right around 5am. I watch the sunrise through the room's ornate window and feel myself in love.

Not long after this, when it seems safe, I tell Felicity how I'd felt about her and she cries on my bed. My girlfriend Katherine knows about her, knows to keep an eye on her.

"I thought..." is all she gets out before trailing into tears. I wonder if she's crying because my friendship came with a hidden agenda, or because she felt the same way and now it's too late. Of course, I don't ask for clarification, so I just sit there, wondering how to comfort her with my hands in my lap.

I had four tattoos before Sarah died. I still have them. Chronologically, they are:

writer? located below my neck's nape, centered on my spine, done in a typewriter font. You can see it if I'm wearing a t-shirt with a stretched collar.

Mr. Burns of *The Simpsons*, dead-center of my back. He is wearing a one-time baseball outfit featured in the season three episode "Homer At The Bat" (Fox Interactive, 1992).

The black mage character from the video game *Final Fantasy* (Square, 1987), located just below my left ribcage.

A billiard's 9-ball rack, just below my right ribcage

I have never been embarrassed by any of these, despite Sarah's best efforts.

"Oh, you just got a tattoo? Paul has a bunch of stupid tattoos. Show them! Show them the one on your back!" Sarah would say this sort of thing to unattached women at parties, urging them and anyone nearby to gather and look at my torso while I hesitantly lifted my shirt. This was not to sabotage any potential sex I might have, she was just

keeping me on my toes. Also, she may have thought this would endear me to women and make them curious about seeing more of my body. Of course, the tactic didn't really work.

“Just know that if you're going to see Paul with his shirt off, you have to get used to stupid tattoos.” I never cared that she did this, I suppose because it was true. I think she was trying to deaden some of the shock a woman might experience if they did in fact come home with me. Again, this never happened, probably because Sarah and I kept arriving at parties together, and we always seemed more interested in each other than the guests—also true.

Sarah often presented me to strange women with a blunt subtlety. We'd sit for lunch at a diner's booth, and if our waitress looked innocent, cute, and frail (my type), Sarah would make a point of mentioning that she and I weren't dating—a daily assumption people made about us. “We're eating lunch together, but we're not dating or anything. I have no interest in seeing him naked.” She'd say this to strangers.

“I actually *am* trying to date her, but she's a tough nut to crack!” This would cause both women to laugh, and a keen eye would notice that Sarah had broken my ice for me, and then everything was ha ha, so what're you having?

I performed the same service for her, but she didn't really need my help. Guys found themselves inexplicably attracted to her, probably because they weren't used to meeting women so...let's say “sardonic.” Her braces were off by the time she left high school, and once household teeth-whitening became common in our twenties, she was getting “so much ass” (her words). By adulthood, her cynicism gave her more confidence than mine did for myself. I don't know why.

With Sarah dead and everyone bawling, it felt important to stand out however I could—an urge we'd always felt together.

After years of fun with every member of her family, and decades of the same with her husband, I now no longer understood my involvement in the grieving economy.

Everyone involved knew Sarah and I had a “special relationship”—a real pair—but with Sarah dead and divided, I suddenly didn't know who I was to the remainders. They asked me to write the eulogy, and I was glad. Did the funeral need a host? Surely that'd be me, wouldn't it? A priest! What did we need one of those for? Would the funeral have readings? Was someone singing “Danny Boy”? Who was tearing tickets?

Although I felt as worthy of input as anyone else, I had no grounds, no recourse. I was a mirage representative, a severed appendage. Our relationship had been one-of-a-kind, but now I was just one, and I realized just how tertiary I was to all of this. The understanding made me very uncomfortable—even scared. I'd been walking unannounced through the Turpin's front door these past fifteen years, but now I felt I should be knocking.

But no! I was the person who listened to Sarah complain about these loved ones. I was still somebody. I still held membership. I'd been trying to figure out how to mourn alongside these people, how to gel and be included. Maybe that was the wrong approach.

I called Byron Barrows, our town's solver of problems. Byron was a childhood friend of Colin's and he was still welcome in any Warford home, day or night. Byron was a spoke of the town council—he'd probably be mayor before it was all said and done. (He had my vote.) Byron knew Sarah in his own way, acting as the Bay Roberts recreation

manager while she was employed at the pool. I called and explained the favour I needed, and he instructed me to drop by his beautiful house of bricks.

Byron's daughters thumped and giggled above our heads while he walked me through his basement—dart board, concrete floors, wall studs awaiting drywall. I could smell the cement as though it had been poured yesterday.

He poked a light switch on the wall. Plain wooden shelving appeared, lined with boxes that could each accommodate a human torso, which was reminiscent of their actual contents.

“So you rent these out?”

“Oh yeah, people are after me all the time for them. Carbonear got the whole lot booked for their Santa Claus parade. I got Cat in the Hat, Spider-Man, Dora...have at it. You can take what ya wants.”

I started peering into boxes, each containing a mascot-style costume of popular cartoon characters. The first was a Ninja Turtle, then Elmo, one of the Frozen princesses...ah ha! This could work.

“I think I'm gonna go with this one.”

“Goin' with Spongebob, are ya?”

I told him yes. Though the character had no relevance for Sarah or me—we were too old for the cartoon—he seemed like the right choice.

“I'll be careful with it,” I told him as I estimated how much one of these outfits might cost.

“Take it as long as you want.”

I stuffed Spongebob into the passenger seat of my father's truck, leaving the sand-brown pants and oversized felt shoes on the floor mat. Catching myself before shutting the door, I put Spongebob's seatbelt on. Then I drove back to Mom and Dad's.

I sometimes catch myself looking straight ahead, not seeing anything, hardly thinking. Some time will pass before I realize I've been staring for minutes. This has been the most concerning development in the aftermath of Sarah's demise. As weeks go by, I'm haunted by thoughts of violence, anger—even lust. I'll sob by myself, I'll scream, but this staring-straight-ahead business is the only thing that really makes me wonder if I'm going crazy.

I walk the dog and Sarah is all I think about, but the thoughts themselves are nonsense—not recollections of experiences, but an aimless chatter I can only listen to: *I never did see her play soccer. She was definitely terrible at it.* Then an image of us walking out of our high school, side by side, our jeans tight on our legs. Then the colour she liked to paint her toenails, a grayish stone-blue. Then her actual feet, always purple and gross to look at because she had poor circulation like me. *“Are your hands clammy today?”* The way she would ask and tentatively pat my palms because they were always cold, always damp. Her kneecaps. That time she and I were driving to St. John's in my parents' car, when she asked me to fast-forward the song, so I ejected the cassette tape, lowered my window, and threw it into the night. She laughed, and I caused it. The sound of it louder now, remembering when I tried to get into my parents' locked shed to access the spare housekey, Sarah looking on, the door's window sliding upwards at my push

before simply falling forward to shatter on the shed's concrete floor, like some prop from a silent film. She laughed so hard when that happened. Then her singing harmony to Imogen Heap, getting the words wrong. That freckle on her index finger, was that the left hand, or the right?

The chatter passes like this, quick and unending, while the dog slows, squats, and grunts.

Every song is sad and written about her. I drove to St. John's from my parent's place, perhaps two weeks after her death, playing the ABBA greatest hits CD I'd earlier abandoned to Mom's van. I marveled at the tracks as they played, realized for the first time that most of ABBA's popular songs were written about Sarah *before she was even born*. She *was* the dancing queen. I sobbed through the entire album, remembering the picture of herself that she loved, the one where she's dressed in leotard and tutu, perhaps five years' old, arms wide.

A regular gag she liked to do in high school was to say, "I was meant to be a dancer. *Look at my wrists!*" She'd command the second part, then she'd turn her head until it was in profile, stretch her arms from her center, and gracefully flap them a little.

I parked Dad's truck in the lot outside the mortuary, killed the ignition, and opened my door. I side-saddled and started removing my jeans. I hauled on the soft leggings, which felt like jogging pants too small and too frayed to be kept. I took off my boots and slipped into the rounded shoes. They had a simple rubber tap on their bottoms, and the glue was letting go on the right "foot," so I had to be careful not to catch the fabric on anything, tearing it further. I stood, closed my door, circled the vehicle,

removed Spongebob's upper body, and lowered it over my own—the thing must've been four feet wide. My vision was now filtered through gauze. The smell reminded me of fresh-lain carpeting. Time to make my entrance.

I pulled open the door and scuttled through it sideways. I could hear gasps and snickers as I continued, but I was unsure who was producing them. I saw the black sign on its stand with her name in white letters, the same sort you'd see at a place selling chicken nuggets and cheeseburgers.

“Add ‘The Works’ for \$1” I thought as I took the five or six steps to Sarah's new home.

More gasps inside, but these were comparatively hushed. Some chuckles. I could make out Sarah's sisters, and here was her mother. They were laughing more now, and I felt satisfied they knew it was me. I got close to Sarah's mom and whispered, “Not too far?”

She told me “no” as we embraced. I was grateful. My own mother was as devout as Christians get these days, and if the toe tag were on the other roast beef, and Sarah pulled a stunt like this, I'm not sure Mom would've been as patient.

I turned to face Sarah's coffin, annoyed I had to see her at all. Why burn this visage if she was going to be cremated?

I saw her pale and still through bumblebee eyes and wished I'd died instead of her.

I once followed a woman to a tourist town. I was twenty-three.

Katherine and I had been doing long distance while “casually dating” others. She’d fallen for a man in the interim—an old pal, a mutual friend—and I knew this.

She’d landed a job at a swank hotel in Banff for the summer, convinced me I should tag along. I managed a successful phone interview with the French HR woman, and now I was going too.

When young love fades there can be costly disorientation, like spelunking down a wrong tunnel when your O₂’s already low.

They loved each other, for sure. I could see it in their whispered goodbye, tears in the nooks of their noses, in each other’s eyes. This was at the Halifax airport, just a few hundred feet from the fresh lobster tank. Katherine and I lost our virginities together, had spent three happy years at Acadia together, and we didn’t know how to punch our time cards with any sort of dignity. Just because something still works doesn’t mean you need to keep using it. Your toaster might brown your bread, but if its wires are frayed and spitting sparks, perhaps it’s time to browse the new Black & Deckers.

I tried to ignore them near the security checkpoint. If you think *I* felt awkward, imagine Katherine’s mother, forced to stand and watch this juvenile disaster unfold. To her, the three of us must’ve looked like tourists who’d wandered into the La Brea tar pits while studying a map, and now we were struggling and sinking and she could only watch; no branches or ropes in sight.

Katherine was still crying as we dug out loose change and removed our shoes, but it was subsiding to sniffles.

The flight was oversold; we weren’t seated together, which was just as well.

I can't remember how we got from the Calgary airport to Banff itself. I guess we took the bus.

Spongebob was encouraged to make one more appearance that day. Mom watched with a chuckle as I lowered the costume over my head in the Warford laundry room. My girlfriend laughed, too. The getup was too preposterous to take seriously, even in these circumstances, which told me I had done the right thing. I donned the fake feet and cautiously made my way to the front door. More laughter as Mom guided me around the removed shoes in our porch. She held the storm door open as I passed through (sideways).

The pants gave no resistance to the wind already turning cool this year. Since the right shoe's bottom was catching on the asphalt as I walked, I had to take elongated, spaghetti western steps to avoid tripping or damaging the material. I got to the gate of the fence and shoved myself through. As I plodded up Finn Street, a Turpin aunt saw me and called for Sarah's kids to "come see!"

All three of them were very excited, and they wanted to give Spongebob hugs. Bob didn't do much; he just waved his hands and tried to seem theatrical. Another aunt suggested he do some dancing, so Spongebob tried his best. After some pictures, he waved goodbye and headed for home, never to return.

Katherine's dozing and I'm thinking of waking her as we roll along the Trans-Canada. The mountains are more visible than they were half an hour ago—I can't believe how flat everything is in Alberta compared to the blind hills and hairpin turns of

Newfoundland's snakeskin highways. We pass a field of horses on the right and their playpen stretches into the horizon until the earth meets the clouds. Meanwhile, the mountains grow as we drive towards them, monster teeth breaking a green gumline of elm and Ohio buckeye.

After the funeral, the days and porkchops pass by and I sleep a lot. I get high and play games at night because we all have to "move on," which my parents keep repeating because they don't know any better, have never understood Sarah or myself, and so their interjections are disregarded.

Some days I consider breaking up with my girlfriend, others, proposing to her.

With a perceived clarity, I understand religions exist because humans, as a species, are too intelligent to discount death, unlike the mother duck who turns away from her smooshed baby twitching lifeless on the highway's tarmac. What else can she do? Humans, on the other hand, can't herd the ducklings still living and trudge on—oh, we "move on," and all of that, but our dead never leave our conscience. Our relationships are too strong, and, clever as we are, we can't accept the path of the turning wheels. Those we love aren't permitted to *just* be dead, they must be dead *but* they're something else.

"Granny's gone, but she's looking down on the tops of our heads."

"He died, but not in vain."

Gone, but not forgotten. Not yet! Christianity's "no suicide or you go to hell" rule makes perfect sense now, so obvious it's laughable. If there was/is a heaven, and the dead were/are up there, playing electric guitar and going to drive-in movies, mourning believers would be offing themselves by the millions, eager to join the party. I know and

understand this because if I believed killing myself would pair me with Sarah and we could raconteur like the old days, I'd be dead already—probably would've offed myself after that funeral. However, I don't believe any of that, no matter how much I want to. Besides, if I killed myself and Sarah *was* looking down, she'd be furious to find me next to her.

“What are you doing here! I had to go, but you could've stayed. *What are you doing here!*”

Even with an eternity, she might never forgive me. So, whenever the idea comes to mind, I tell myself to grow up, stop being such a baby.

Katherine's awake and stretching as the bus crosses a metal bridge that looks like an upturned cheese grater. I can see the town's sign.

BIENVENUE à BANFF!
WELCOME to BANFF!

The marker is made of what looks like lacquered logs, with a façade roof above the lettering to make it resemble a cabin. Cute.

Katherine and I rent a cheap hotel room and argue about what we want. She won't have sex with me, so now that's all I care about. We're due at our new jobs tomorrow for orientation and uniform fittings. I can't believe I did this, can't believe I'm here. What was I thinking?

The Rimrock Resort Hotel is situated—embedded, really—on Sulfur Mountain. During orientation, we learn that prospectors in wide-brimmed hats discovered natural hot springs a little further up the slope, and decided to build Canada’s first-ever national park below the bubbling pools. Almost one hundred years later, and rich families still bring their kids here for ski weekends. That’s where we come in.

The Rimrock staffs a few hundred people. The hotel’s elevation is five thousand feet above sea level—a tall order compared to the shorelines I spawned from.

We new recruits are in a conference room. Branded stationary has been laid on the banquet tables we’re seated at, ritualistically placed alongside glasses of water and Rimrock ballpoints. I jot factoids on the white pad in case we’re quizzed later. The elongated tables have fine, cream-coloured tablecloths, and our chairs are plush with floral patterns of forest green and rose. Floor-to-ceiling double-pane windows line the far wall, teasing a portion of the spa’s surrounding lawn like panties beneath a skirt. Some of the new employees are from Ontario, some are from Australia. One loud guy is from Montreal. I’m the only person from Newfoundland, and Katherine is the only one from Nova Scotia. The orientation is led by the French HR woman who interviewed me last week. Her name is Muriel. A co-worker named Janice looks on and hands out leaflets and information packets.

They have us introduce ourselves (“Where are you from? What are your hobbies?”). They divide us into teams and make us run a relay race while balancing glasses of water on a serving tray (several are broken). These sugary activities are interspersed with protocols relative to our new surroundings: what to do if you encounter a grizzly sow with her cubs; how to fend off a cougar attack. Of course, I assume these

are dramatizations meant to highlight the mysticism of the place, in case we want to encourage friends and family to visit and stay in the guest rooms (at a discounted rate). We learn that Banff is the STI capital of Canada—I didn't even know there was a title for that. They encourage us to be mindful of this, that there are condoms for sale in the staff accommodation vending machines. They assure us that if they learn we've fucked a guest—either in their room or our own—we'll be working at the Subway on Main Street, out by the town's lone gas station.

“Next, we will discuss some of the necessary precautions during a fire alarm...”

Muriel seems sweet, but I'm getting bored and hungry. I begin daydreaming while I doodle squiggles on my Rimrock pad. Muriel continues, but then...

Wait a sec.

I notice no one is addressing us. I look up to see the HR women speaking quietly with a Rimrock guy dressed in olive and khaki. I overhear Muriel say, “Oh, my. We'll have to tell them.”

There's a grizzly bear on the property—right now, at this minute. Guests have been told to move inside, and forest rangers have been dispatched. This is bullshit, right? I look at my new co-workers to gauge reactions, but they're all doing what I'm doing.

“The bear is an adolescent. The most dangerous are mothers with cubs, but meeting any grizzly can be fatal,” Muriel is telling us this with a morose air that seems practiced.

Are you buying this? I scratch on Katherine's pad.

Dunno is all she writes back. She's staring straight ahead, trying to pay attention.

“Well, let’s continue.” Muriel goes back to her spiel and I start tuning her out again.

...

I sit upright when I see a man in camouflage run past our window, a rifle in hand. Did anyone else just see that? I look around the room. One guy from Toronto noticed and I think he’s chuckling to himself.

Christ! There’s another one! He has a gun, too!

The bear has wandered towards the spa in the past half hour. The armed combatants are the wildlife guys Muriel mentioned.

“You can try to see him through the window,” Muriel permits. “He may not be visible from this angle, though.”

Now I’m pressed against the pane with Katherine and a dozen strangers, craning our necks, peering over each other’s heads as if we’re waiting up for Santa.

The best we could make out was a brown tuft about two hundred feet away. Actually, it was easier to catch a glimpse of the tourists on the spa’s patio (third floor), pointing and snapping pictures.

Jesus, maybe this place is as lively as they say it is.

We later heard that the rangers tranquilized the wayward Bruno, then they bundled him into a sack and dumped him at the edge of town, like mafia enforcers delivering a message.

Before starting my new job in my new town with my old girlfriend, I meet Don. Don is my stewarding supervisor, an average height, average build thirty-something from

Labrador. He has mahogany eyes any woman could trust, and a tiny hairline gap in his teeth. Don walks me past the banquet halls and offices, the room service dispatcher, the tiers of plastic racks holding rock glasses and champagne flutes.

We're a few feet from the kitchen, and it distracts from whatever Don is telling me. I see prim-looking cooks wearing white jackets, white-and-black checked pants, and white caps. The caps are perfectly round and they look like two-storey yarmulkes. Every cook looks very determined and busy—purposeful, even. None of them so much as glance at me.

Don walks me to the dish room and introduces me to Hank, a grinning guy in his forties with accepting eyes and a broad, pointed nose. Hank's wearing round glasses, but I'm not sure he can see through them because they're dotted with a thousand pinprick drops of water.

“Hank, this is Paul. He's starting with us today.” Hank smiles at me, muttering hellos and good-to-meet-yous in rapid, alternating succession. He peels a yellow rubber glove from his hand to reveal bone-white, waxen skin. I shake it and say hello. I'm too tired to be conversational. He's wearing scrubs like myself, but they're covered by a large, yellow apron tied behind his neck. The plastic looks cumbersome, resembling one-quarter of a Slip 'N Slide. The apron, gloves, and visible portions of Hank's scrubs are all speckled by a sheen of food waste, bits of this and that. Trying not to stare, I think I see additional scraps on his face and lips. The coating is disgusting to look at, and I pretend I'm not noticing it.

Does he notice it?

Without another word, Hank turns about-face and returns to his sink.

“You’ll be on the dish machine this morning. We usually have at least three guys working at one time: one on pots, one on the dish machine, another in the garbage room.” Considering how charming the “dish room” is, I’m in no rush to see the garbage version.

Don leads me to the nearest end of the metal monstrosity, presses an inviting green button on its side. HOBART is embossed near the button in foot-high letters. The machine sneezes to life, churning and hissing, and the large plastic nubs in front of us begin to recede into it. They’re on a conveyor belt. Don reaches to his right, where a waist-high plastic bin on wheels has been sitting. The bin is divided into sections designed to stack columns of plates. This one has four separate recesses of equal size, and they’re fitted to the brim with dinner plates, about a hundred in each. Don leans two plates against the plastic nubs so they rest upright. In an instant, I realize this is my job.

Christ. How long can I keep this up?

Don keeps loading, increasing his speed—he’s pretty fast, actually, and in a few minutes he’s through most of the first stack. The belt has stopped, but the machine still spits and protests like a badger in a trap. Don leads me to the far side of the device and shows me the first plates he’d inserted.

“The belt stops when anything reaches this bar,” he explains. No longer covered with purees or vinaigrettes, the plates look like babies out of the bath. They look perfect. I remove one—hot to the touch—and lay it among the clean dishes. I grab the next and turn to deposit it as the machine chugs back to life.

“At busy times you’ll have one guy loading, one unloading,” Don says over the din before the machine halts again. “Any questions?”

I have dozens of questions, but I shake my head.

“Why don’t you get started?”

Because I don’t want to.

“You got it,” I say. I take my place in front of the machine’s wide mouth, look over my shoulder to study Hank’s hunched back, and then I get started.

Alone in my own room eight hours later, I’m forced to browse nude pictures Katherine has shared with me over the years. Fifty feet down the hall, and we’re still in a long-distance relationship.

She’s talking to him on the communal phone outside the HR office. I noticed her buying a calling card yesterday from the hotel giftshop during a break in our orientation.

I’m not heartbroken, just lonely.

The kitchen’s head chef is a Japanese man who looks like the host of a children’s programme; attentive, patient eyes, a warm smile. I haven’t seen him stand on tiles beyond those within five feet of his office. His eyes and ears (and hands and voice) are represented by four sous-chefs; men in their forties with sharp, faraway eyes—almost stoic—as if their consciences are lounging on a tropical island just beyond this hot, cold, loud, reeling, dangerous environment their bodies currently occupy. For all their Zen, I’ve never seen any of them smile—they all look like pricks to me. The cooks report to these four guys. Don instructs me to do whatever they tell me, and otherwise stay out of their way.

During my second shift, I find myself roaming with a mixing bowl large enough to dredge a Welsh Corgi. The chefs rely on hundreds of bizarre items, each with its

specific place, and the sous have no tolerance for somewhere nearby. I'm tired and pissed I'm here, doing this. I find stacks of mixing bowls under a prep table, so I try to slide the one I'm carrying beneath the others. Won't fit. I heft the whole stack onto the floor and try to wedge mine at the bottom, but the lowest bowls are somehow wider.

“You have to fit them in order, like Kindergarten.”

I look at the speaker's back as they pass, and recognize it as Guy's, the executive sous-chef. Guy's from Quebec, so his French name is pronounced “gi,” like the word for a karate uniform. I had a feeling I disliked him, but I fuckin' hate him now. I fit my bowl with the others, shove them beneath the table, and mope to the dish room. Kitchen staff call it the “dish pit” and that's exactly what it resembles, a cavern I need to climb out of.

The servant lodgings span four floors, the hotel's lowest. Each room contains a bathroom, a large window, and a couple of armoires. New employees are housed three to a room (three!), which have no dividing walls or privacy to speak of. My co-worker roommates are an eighteen-year old gentleman named Craig from Camborough, Australia, and a thirty-something string bean named Maxime from Old Quebec. Craig is quiet and polite and enjoys The Beatles. Last night, Maxime wore extremely tight, striped denim pants with a ribbed muscle shirt and talked about his shit housekeeping job in broken English. I can manage their proximity for a couple of months.

Our room's on the first floor, skirted by several others—all occupied by employee tenants, most of whom are just out of high school. They live in a state of constant reverie, like extras in an American beer commercial. They shoot Sour Puss while waiting for their

curling irons to glow red, or they roll their skateboards along the hallway and stumble its length after failed kickflips and pop shove-its.

Two weeks after our arrival, the hotel hosts a staff appreciation night at Wild Bill's. Wild Bill's is a restaurant and concert venue along Banff Avenue. We start with a buffet, then the second half of the evening is an employee talent show. Katherine and I have both signed up to perform.

Katherine does a quick skipping routine onstage, dumbfounding the audience because they didn't realize the sport existed.

I've written some material on our time in Banff so far, and I deliver it in a comedy set totalling about six minutes.

"I've never had a job orientation where I learn how to avoid a bear attack. Apparently, if you run into a bear, you're supposed to back away slowly, avoiding eye contact, while speaking in a slow, firm voice. I'm glad they told me, because I assumed you were supposed to run away going, 'Shit, I'm dead! Shit, I'm dead!'

"They're telling me Banff is the STI capital of Canada. The town has several sexual health programs available free of charge for residents. The Rimrock has its own STI prevention program: three to a room! Good luck catching a disease with a setup like that.

"I'll be the guy who goes to buy a condom from the vending machine just to watch it get stuck in those coils like it's a bag of cashews."

The act kills, but I don't place in the competition (Katherine takes third).

A few days later, I notice the Durex Ultra-Glides in the staff vending machines now have cardboard backings stuck to them, and I'd like to think it's because of me.

I'm wet and alone in front of the HOBART. Towers of plates surround me and they all rise to the ceiling. The machine's so loud my ears hurt. Although the dishes are several feet above my head, my arm stretches to remove one after another, and I load and load and load.

I—wait. Huh.

I look around to see Craig tucked into his bed, his sleeping face towards me. His lips are pursed. Maxime is stretched face down across his own bed, his mouth open. Two empty beer cans are on the floor just below him. An unopened third is on his nightstand. It's dawn.

My alarm chimes and I jump. I hit it and sigh. I'd been dreaming. I haul on my scrubs, still damp on my floor, and realize the dream will become a passable reality minutes from now. An arts degree, no sex, and this is my morning.

After a month, Katherine finally tells me she's leaving town. She's already booked a flight to ensure I don't talk her out of it. She tells me in 'Robistro,' the staff cafeteria. It's late in the afternoon, so there aren't many in here—just the Robo steward, chef and cashier, and an Australian girl with blue hair using one of the communal computers; you have to buy special cards from HR to gain access to Internet time.

My reaction is anger, but only because I expect it of myself. Really, I'm relieved—as relieved as she must be. I berate her in hissed whispers and storm out of there, past the juice fountains and framed photos of the hotel's owners.

I watch her bus as it pulls away. I assume it's the same one we rode in on. She's crying at her window, holding up her hand. I'm crying, too, but I no longer know why. I wave back to be charitable. The bus slows at the end of the street, signals, turns. She's gone.

The summer heat shelters in my crevices, my armpits and the backs of my knees. There's a stillness here I'm not used to. My home, the Avalon Peninsula, is always windy, even on the hottest days when pasty, beautiful Newfoundland girls will lay out on back patios in bikinis that still smell of the dressers and cupboards they're kept in—sun shines sporadic in Newfoundland. So, even on nice days, gusts of 20km/h will force deck parasols to twirl their fabric as if dancing the salsa. Here in Banff, the mountains block the wind.

I'm not slinging dishes tomorrow, and with no broken relationship to distract me, I realize I don't know what to do with myself. I go into a nearby electronics store and splurge on a minidisk player.

Back in staff accomm., I satisfy myself with the operational whirs and clicks of my new thingy. I don headphones, thumb up the volume, and step out of my room. I examine the smoker's lounge at the hall as if for the first time.

Employees can only smoke in this lounge, or the smoker's section of Robo, five floors above us. The smoker's lounge on first has always been occupied by at least one person since I got here—no matter the hour—a 'round-the-clock speakeasy. I turn towards it and decide to visit.

In Colin's room following Sarah's death I was now an older and defeated version of myself. It was time to hunt—for notes, gifts, forgotten coffee mugs—for anything Sarah had ever touched or given me. I tended to occupy a new province every few years, so my keepsakes got dumped at Mom and Dad's. Our family's home was now bloated with our individual pasts. This was obvious as I looked through drawers and closets, finding defunct high school physics textbooks, graphic calculators with dead batteries, a red rubber coin purse none of us had ever used.

I began opening drawers. The interiors leaked a smell of cedar as I pulled them into the light. Mom's auxiliary sweaters, more old textbooks. Jackpot! The second drawer was stuffed and gagging on my old journals and mementos from Acadia, my artist passes from Just For Laughs, stacks of photos stuffed into Kodak envelopes. I began removing everything, placing any items that seemed promising on the bed while dropping any needless stuff to my feet. I had some things I could work with here, scraps of spun gold that now meant more to me than my own fingers. I started to gingerly place items to one side, pieces of paper smattered with her messy hand.

I left the room to get a Ziploc baggie, and then returned to my work. I stuffed the sheets and scraps into the bag, comforted it had a sliding lock to protect them from unnecessary oxygen. I quickly realized these items couldn't possibly survive long

enough—they'd be lost in a fire caused by a malfunctioning coffee perk, or they'd be devoured by a pack of silverfish I'd never be able to catch, question, and inevitably squash. No. I'd get them tattooed on myself.

These days, most people my age had a “half-sleeve” of tattoos spanning their shoulders to their elbows, but instead of marine life or silly Sailor Moon bullshit, I'd use what I had here. My half-sleeve would be the best, it'd keep her with me, and it would force people to see and understand. I'd never lose what I found today, or whatever I found in the future. I'd get the artists with the needles to inscribe it all, and if you wanted to divide me from what I had of her, you'd have to cut off my fucking arm. Just try and do it. Try and remove my stupid tattoos. I gritted my teeth and then started crying.

I found a purple post-it note decorated with horizontal lines, alternating mauve and violet. A cat's silhouette was in its lower corner. I couldn't remember when Sarah sent this to me, couldn't remember it at all, in fact. On it, in chubby Magic Marker, she'd written:

Keep on keeping on

♥ **SARAH**

I was transfixed with it as I thought, “Perfect. I'll start with this one.”

A year after Katherine's departure and I'm twenty-four, my tie resting near my clavicle.

I always flip my tie over my shoulder when I'm checking plates—a necessary trick. The tie is part of my supervisor's uniform, but the formality can be impeding. The damn thing is always dipping itself into my steaming polishing water, or Hank's dirty sink when I have to reach inside for a requested pot. Besides, who's to say the goddamn garment won't snake itself around the HOBART's conveyor one day and drag me into its depths, disrupting service? I'm too important, so I flick the tie over my shoulder. Checking plates is easy, but it still requires unobstructed vision.

Guy put in a requisition for three hundred and fifty saucers, salads, and mains, and I'll have them ready before four o' clock. That way, I'll have plenty of time to do a round before plate-up. I'll see if the guys need chemicals, and I can verify if Pierre is actually handling the fucking garbage today; he's a cokehead and a lonely one—the most unproductive kind.

Filling the requisition means I'll check each of the thousand-plus plates by hand. If I spot an imperfection of any kind—a chip, a crack, a thin grey line of exposed veneer—that dish is removed, flagged, and likely absconded to Don's kitchen cupboard.

I've already topped the hotline with plates and bullion spoons, and I sent one of the dish guys to rinse out the steam kettle before Randall uses it to make beef stock, a mixture of rough-cut vegetables, like carrot and celery, simmering alongside knotty cow femurs. Months ago, I was taking a garbage bag stuffed with discarded stock ingredients to the large steel dumpsters outside, but I didn't let the steaming scraps cool, so they melted through the bag as I was trying to heft it, two-handed, into the receptacle. What a goddamn mess. I had to clean it up immediately. No food waste can be left outside

because it will attract wildlife. If rangers happened by the unattended morsels, they'd fine the hotel.

"All good for tonight, Paulie?" Guy asks this as he ambles by my stewarding station (a small metal table with a window facing the dish pit). His black hat, pants, and clogs are always immaculate. A clean, yellow rag hangs at his back, over his apron string.

"You bet your ass," I call after him.

"That's what I like to hear," he says without turning.

I should be able to finish up by 10:30, time enough to catch the last bus down the mountain so I can meet my friends and get drunk.

I check the stewarding inbox after the banquet plate-up. I'm killing time.

I skim through the e-mail I'd heard the sous discussing earlier. Representatives from the nearby Banff Springs contacted us to let us know a cougar had been witnessed ("moreso heard" the e-mail says) ravaging an elk calf on the walking trail between the two resorts, and to alert our staff not to use the route until further notice.

My shift's done, and I'm walking along the hallway of first floor on the way to my room. I remove my tie, unbutton my shirt, remove that too. I like to show off my new tattoos, especially Mr. Burns. People always laugh when they see him for the first time.

I peer into Carrie's room to find her straightening Alex's hair. Their makeup is already on.

“Paulie! Are you coming with us? We’re getting the bus in fifteen minutes! Get cracking!” Carrie is bigger, but her face is unblemished and her green eyes are deep enough to wade in. She’s gorgeous like a Maybelline ad.

“Yeah, I just need to shower my sexy body.”

Carrie (Caz; Cazzah) rolls her eyes. Alex snorts. Caz is from New South Wales, Alex, Melbourne. They’re my best friends here.

Now on the town’s metro bus, the girls and I discretely pass Fireball whiskey back and forth. The bus is a crucial vehicle for all Rimrock employees because the steep walk up Sulfur Mountain would take half an hour, at least. The street is a winding dragon’s tail with no lights of any kind. Pedestrians are never on it.

We’re at a table in Tommy’s Lounge, a popular spot for Banff employees. Sunday is the night to go out, when weekend guests have left or are preparing to leave, and next week’s guests are still unpacking or checking in. As a resident here, you live *around* the tourists because there’s no way to avoid them. They’re everywhere.

I’ve had a few gin and tonics.

A scruffy young fellow with a British accent is leaning backward against the bar. It must be his birthday. Yup, it’s his birthday.

Tommy, the owner, has taken the bottle of Ouzo from its special place behind the counter and now he’s upending it a few feet above the Brit’s gob. The booze pours into his mouth, over his chin. He regains himself and high-fives his friends. Tommy gives everyone a free shot of Ouzo on their birthday.

I'm getting drunk and the room feels close and warm. I tilt my glass backward and ice hits my teeth. Time for another drink.

I lean on the bar and wait for Tommy to notice me. I see Aoi a few feet to my left. She's a Japanese housekeeping supervisor. Her eyes always caught mine when she'd bring me her dishes in Robo, back when I was the regular steward there. She's exciting and gorgeous with a round ass and a wide, eager smile. I think of asking her out sometimes, but I'm not sure how her English is, and my Japanese is obviously shit. Then again, if she's a supervisor her English is probably—

—Whoa! Wait a second.

I think Aoi just touched my dick with her hand. She did. Was that on purpose? I check my vicinity, but no friends are nearby to offer observations. I mean, she didn't *clutch* my dick, but she definitely brushed against it.

Buy her a drink, idiot!

“Whatcha want, friend!”

“Wha?”

“Come on buddy, there's lots of thirsty people here.” Tommy's looking at me with his beady business eyes. His mustache is his mouth's awning, a big brush suited for cleaning vinyl records.

“Oh, uh, gin and tonic.”

“Double?”

“Yeah, sure.”

He hands me the tall glass and I look to Aoi, searching her face for seductive, narrowed eyes. Instead, they're wide as she smiles at me. We've never really spoken beyond hellos.

"I think Aoi just touched my dick," I say to Alex at our table, loud enough to be heard but quiet enough to keep it between us as I wrestle my lips around my straw.

"Yeah right! She's not like that."

"Well, she didn't *grab* it or anything, but I think she touched it. Would a girl do that on purpose? To get a guy's attention?"

Caz has joined us and is immediately intrigued. "Go buy her a drink, Paulie! What's wrong with ya?" They're always trying to get me laid.

I voice doubts and continue sipping. The night dissolves into our glasses and I dismiss my close contact with Aoi.

2018 and I am in my shower, shaving my upper arm. The trickiest part is the triceps, which I try to trim evenly without a mirror. The flowing water rushes around the razor's head as I systematically haul it down, inch to one side, haul it down. I can see sprouting hairs when I pivot my neck. They're still back there. I keep swiping and feel as though I'm not getting them. I imagine Sarah laughing at the shitty job I'm doing. The tattoos themselves she would discount as being appropriate, or "good enough," but she'd love the idea of me having to shave my arm every few days for their sake, the unattractive nature of the maintenance.

People ask about them, of course. What can I say?

“I had a friend pass away and these are some notes she wrote to me over the years.” I had prepared a stock line to use, to ease tension for people.

When they say, “Oh, I’m so sorry,” I planned to reply with, “Not as sorry as her insurance guy!”

Sarah would like it, and the only reason I’ve never said this is because I’m not entirely sure how life insurance works. The joke may not make as much sense as I think it does, and I’m embarrassed to ask anyone about it. (She’d find that funny, too.)

Instead, I give standard responses, “Oh, that’s alright, blah blah, people die and the only thing we can do is tattoo ourselves about it, shave our heads, join the nearest cult. Sure, they once seemed nuts, but now the world gapes open in a new, frightening way, and makes me feel like I should just move on, over the side of a goddamn bridge, so I understand strength in numbers. Maybe the practitioners can take me in, wash my brain, and help me forget these goddamn interactions I have to live through—like this one—alone, without her perceptions that always made sense—*made* it, you understand? Out of thin air. Yeah, it sucks, but what can you do?”

Everything feels a bit too routine these days.

The lights of Tommy’s are on. Alex and Cazzah are laying down their empty cups, yelling about pizza. I don’t care. I shoulda bought Aoi a drink.

Guys are shoving each other in front of me—idiots. Fucks. I’d like to beat them to pulps but I’m too goddamn weak.

“Gotta piss,” I say to nobody, and now I’m in the bathroom. Used paper towels erupts from the bin like molten lava that spills onto the floor. A guy is yacking in one of the stalls. Gross. Fuckin’ guys everywhere. Guys are always in my way.

I lean forward. My forehead’s on the tile in front of me, getting cool. The dude in the stall is retching.

Shoulda bought her a drink. Can’t do it now.

“I’m hungry,” I say to the wall.

“Huh?” The guy in the stall. Fuck him.

“Nothin’ buddy.” I pull the urinal lever and nothing happens. I turn and rinse my hands before wiping them in my jeans before returning to the bar.

Where is everybody? The whole group’s gone!

I fall back to the bathrooms and push open the women’s door. I yell, “Caz!” at myself looking back in the mirror.

No Japanese woman. No Australian women. Goddamn waste. Fuck this night.

I feel lonely and I feel like pushing someone down.

“Can’t go in there, bud.” Some big dude wearing a STAFF shirt is talking to me. I’m still half in the girls’ washroom.

“I know, man! I was just looking!” Fuck this guy. Thinks he knows me.

“You’d better get going. We’re closing up.”

“Yeah,” I say. I take steps real slow to the door, up the stairs, breathing heavy on the sidewalk.

Am I gonna puke here? Don’t puke.

I'm fine. I look down Banff Avenue. That building with all the flowers on the lawn is in front of me. Not far. I just want to go to bed.

I'm passing the flowers now and the mountain's in front of me. No buses for hours. Not fucking with a cab because Alex and Caz left me and they're probably going to be in the one I flag down and I don't wanna see them now.

You don't grab a dick by mistake, dummy.

"It wasn't a grab," I say.

It's fuckin' dark. I never noticed how dark the hill is at night. I hold my hand up in front of me, but I can't see it. I bring it to my lips and kiss it instead.

"Muah! I love you! You're my right hand!"

There's trees on the left and right. They go back and back and back. You can't go past the barrier near the top of the hill cause there's endangered snails back there. I heard some tourist asshole stepped on one once and got in trouble.

Didn't you see the posted warning signs?

Gotta piss again.

Done! I'm backing away from the pines; my feet are on the road. I'm ready to start walking again.

"Remember what they said during the lesson on cougar attacks? Remember what you thought?"

"Jesus!" Paul yells out. He spins around so fast his legs buckle and he falls hard on his ass. He's sitting on the road's yellow line. He sees Ms. Miller standing on the shoulder, five feet in front of him.

"Remember?"

He can barely make her out in the black, but she's wearing hiking gear. Her boots are heavy and thick. Her jacket is a sturdy windbreaker. She's in a toque, drab brown shorts. She has a ski pole in each hand.

"What the fuck? What are you *doing* here?"

"They said, 'A full-grown mountain lion is two hundred pounds of muscle, and they *always* attack from behind.'" Ms. Miller speaks this in Muriel's voice, using the exact phrasing the French woman had spoken during orientation last year. Paul's eyes dart up and down the hill. No one else.

"Remember what you said to yourself?" She takes a few steps forward until she's above him in the street, her poles clicking against the asphalt.

"You thought, 'If that's true, doesn't that sum up the lesson?'" She stops short at this and laughs, tilting her head back.

Paul regains his feet. He stands and stares.

"God, you're always so funny—but you were right! An adult lion would break a bone or two before you even knew it was on you. With that pain, with that *fear*, do you think you could fight it off?"

"I'm not doing this again."

"Of course you couldn't! It'd be at your *throat*, Paul, hauling it out! The rugby boys couldn't fight it off, and they've got much more meat than you," she says this with a nod towards him.

"Leave me alone." Paul starts walking again, staring straight ahead between sidelong glances.

“Someone’s gotta watch your back if you’re determined to expose it.” Ms. Miller takes up stride with him, clacking alongside with her poles.

“I don’t want you here. I don’t need you watching my back.”

“How do you know?” She bellows into the night, causing him to freeze and hunker. “You can’t see everything!”

“And you can?” He’s angry now, brave from drink.

“I can see desperation. I can see your refusal to live.”

“What’re you talkin’ about?”

“‘What’re you talkin’ about?’” She mocks, using his own voice to do so.

“I don’t want any goddamn fortune tellings, alright? I just wanna jerk off and go to bed.”

“Ambitious as always. Fine. I’m not here for that anyway. I gave you your fortune years ago and you’re still too stupid to heed it.”

“Heed what?”

She warps to his opposite side in an instant, is by his ear before he notices.

“It’s time to go home,” she whispers.

Paul starts and says, “What makes you say that?”

“Because it’s time, and time is short. Her time is short...” Her voice trails off. She tilts her head to the sky.

“Sarah’s not going to die, alright. Just cut the shit and leave me alone.”

“The cougar’s catching up and *you’re* not watching her back. Shame on you!”

“Hey, fuck y—”

Ms. Miller holds her index to her lips and Paul realizes he can't speak though he wants to; she's physically halting his voice somehow.

"Shhhhhhhhhhh..." She hushes him as she rotates her body in a full circle, looking all around herself. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Another snail just died. That's almost all of them."

Paul breathes deeply so he can shout a response, but she's gone. Rubbing his eyes, he can see the hotel's lights a few feet away.

I jump at a June bug that's crash-landed on my floor and I am thirty-one.

My home is a converted railway station, a minute's walk from the beach. The town is Pasadena, on the western side of Newfoundland. The beach is real, like something meant to be under glass. Newfoundland beaches tend to have a billion smooth stones, great for skimming surf, but a tad uncomfortable for spreading and lying on blankets. My girlfriend Andie is with me and we're happy here. She loves paddle boarding in the twilight while I enjoy the seclusion of the place, only interrupted by the teenage locals popping wheelies on their 150cc dirtbikes along the short road in front of our property. Boys will be boys, except for the girls, who also ride dirtbikes here.

My Playstation 4 is still new. The system released worldwide just a month ago and I've had mine for about five days. Not many launch titles to get worked up about, just the *Thief* remake (Eidos Montreal, 2014), which I'm sure doesn't live up to the old series, and some indie action-RPGs I've no interest in. But today is exciting because I picked up a copy of *Destiny* (Bungie, 2014), the new online-only shooter made by the same studio

behind the famous *Halo* series. Andie's asleep in the carved maple bed included with the furnished apartment.

I fire up the game and light a joint. The opening sequence looks great—presentation has always been a strong suit of Bungie's. My phone buzzes a text. I ignore it and burn down more paper. I start creating my character for the game, adjusting iris colours and chin depths. A second buzz. Weird. It's past midnight and most of my texting friends are asleep near their children's cribs. Who's writing now?

It's Peter. He's telling me Sarah has cancer.

The second text tells me they're on their way to the hospital.

I always thought this would happen; I'd be high when learning terrible news, making the knowledge that much worse in the excitable haze. But my heart's not racing—I'm calm. I re-read the phone's screen several times, thinking about Sarah's texts from a few days ago—something about being in the hospital and the doctor sticking a camera down her throat to look in her stomach, calling it a 'goddamn mess' once he could see inside.

"You're not dying, are you?" I'd written after her description, trying to be light, trying to sound like I always do.

"I don't know what's going on," she'd replied.

Now this.

I wake Andie and tell her. We decide to rent a car and drive across the island tomorrow.

So we do.

Mom and Andie are waiting in the lobby or they're parking the car or they're getting coffee or they're giving me space. I don't know. I can't tell. I can't read the posters on the wall. I can smell what must be benzene. I wait for the elevator. Sarah's in intensive care.

She's been labeled STAGE 4, making her sound like the test-site of an epidemic on the verge of outbreak—as if she'd best be quarantined or shot into space for the good of everyone else.

I'm in front of a speaker, a locked door. Red warning text telling me to keep out, wash my hands, cover myself with thin nylon. Everything else is white.

I push the button and the speaker squawks. I say her name.

"Family only," the parrot responds and I want to throttle it. Who's on the other end? Don't they *know anything*.

"I'm her brother," I hear myself saying.

A click.

A nurse, only eyeballs, greets me and shows me the sink. I scrub to my elbows because I lied to get in here.

Paul, rinse.

Someone is actually dressing me in a pale-yellow paper gown, like I'm a guest arriving late to a bachelorette party.

Then I'm in front of them, Peter and Sarah looking at me blankly.

"What are you doing here," Sarah asks.

Looking from myself to the room, the circumstances, I realize I don't have an answer for her. I feel like their attorney, representing them in a defamation suit only I can

get them out of, but I'm not prepared. I forgot the documents, my briefcase—what *am* I doing here?

No one says anything. They both look sad. I don't want to be here, but I never want to leave. I realize I have to go because no one has a choice in anything and I'm not her husband *or* her brother. I'm just the guy who thinks like her.

Around the age of twenty-two we individually bought new glasses. I guess our prescriptions were finally starting to change, shifting blurry into adulthood. Each of us had bought frames meant for the other's gender, and each of us had been corrected by the optometry people. We traded our stories alone, later, after our new faces had been selected and ordered.

"These are the men's frames," they'd told her as she tried to find hornrims most complimentary to her tall face.

"These are the women's frames," they'd told me.

"Yeah, I know. Thank you." The public always thought we didn't know what we were doing, but we knew.

She looks funny in glasses now, here in the hospital, as if she never ever needed them in the first place, had always just been wearing them For Fun.

I catch her eye.

Finally, I can hear her thoughts loud & clear, as if she's in my head, but I'd rather not repeat them here. It wouldn't be right.

I let them know I'm not in Pasadena anymore. I'm, y'know...around.

I recognize my cameo is up and exit stage left.

I weep in the bathroom across the hall.

I never see her alive again.

I return to my routine of getting stoned each night, playing video games once my girlfriend falls asleep. When Sarah and I had nights to ourselves, I would play and she would watch me, and we'd pass a joint between us—a crippled tube of paper resembling something painted by Dali because neither of us could roll worth a damn. I feel guilty about it now, doing things I enjoy while her soul's hands are tied, but what else is there?

Sometimes, I'll say things aloud to myself. I might murmur, "You're doomed, doomed now," while waiting for my savegame to load, barely noticing.

Know Your Neuroses

I should've kept your brain under my bed

So we could tête-à-tête and hum inside our heads

I'd phren around the gray to find what made you tick

Then poke my matching lobes to see which ones would click

Part Three:
Reflections

My leg twitches as I leave the start room. I blink once, twice, three times—less patient now.

I reach the small left-hand room and look across to the opposite room. Junkrat is spamming grenades across the path between the two. I count the grenades to five and then blink through the gap. I blink again to cross the second room and reach the bottom of the stairwell. I crouch and creep along the stairs again. I can hear Torbjorn ahead. I'm going to stick him with my pulse bomb while he's repairing his turret and take out each of them. The resulting hole should get us all on the point.

Shit.

An enemy Symmetra is at the top of the stairs—where'd she come from? Her beam weapon administers damage quickly and the talentless fucks who play her don't even have to aim. She pursues me and drains my health.

“Talentless fucks. They're all talentless fucks.”

I recall to the bottom of the stairs, restoring most of my hitpoints. I leave the stairwell and instead travel its exterior wall, but there's more action out here. My team is poking around the point but no one is on it.

“This team is fuckin' useless!”

I have to do everything.

Torbjorn's turret is putting damage on me now. My pulse bomb is ready, but I can't get close. I cross the front of the point, head up the left side, and decide to come at Torbjorn directly across the point. Roadhog comes into view again. He grazes me with a shot and I'm on point A now. I blink across the rectangle of space to close distance and now Torbjorn's turret is damaging me. I just need to get close with my last blink, toss the

pulse bomb, and recall. I can't take my eyes away long enough to check my health, but it's low. I blink and press the ultimate button, but I hit another Junkrat trap as I do so and I'm down.

“Fuck! Goddamn cocksucker!”

Not only did I miss the kill on Torbjorn, but I wasted the ultimate by dying in the process of using it.

“Fuck this!”

I stand and whip the controller behind me. It bounces off the arm of my recliner and smacks into the wall.

“Fuckin' bullshit!”

I pace across the room, kick over one of the kitchen chairs.

“Fuuuuuuuck! Fuck!”

I pick up a nearby novel and throw it into the railing leading upstairs, splitting several pages.

I stand and breathe heavy, my eyes darting. The dog slinks away from me, lopes upstairs.

I return to my chair and check the controller. The plastic casing has split on one of the grips—a deep crack, but it still works.

I'll tell you something I learn anew every week: there's no more miserable, fruitless habit than living in the past. The desire to “go back”—as if it would change anything—like doctoring cooked books using Liquid Paper. Nothing good can come of it.

The girlfriend? Andie? In the end, I proposed to her. Turns out it was the better option.

I tell my wife my thumbs hurt from playing *Overwatch*.

“Isn’t that like saying your wrist hurts from jerking off too much?”

I laugh because she has a point, but she doesn’t understand there’s more to it than that: I’ve played games for so long, maybe I’ll have to stop soon; retire, for lack of a better word.

I’m aging too quickly.

I don’t admit to her that the games are all beginning to feel the same, anyway. While my favourites once seemed like a beautiful melange of candy flavours, now they taste like they’re being spooned from the same cauldron of unseasoned porridge.

In my head, I’m at the end already. It’s just a matter of time, right? When I stand and hold drinks at parties, when I wait in traffic, when I cut celery for soup, I already see myself as a memorial photo, smiling my last.

I try to be something besides my own epitaph, but it’s hard.

I just want Sarah to experience something again, beside me.

I remove bedsheets from the dryer and wish she was right there, so I could hand her a pillowcase and she could hold it (so warm) against her cheek.

My Worst Days can be hard on Andie, of course. Luckily, she's too busy to be present for a lot of them.

When the longing and guilt are too much, she'll ask what's wrong between my dry sobs, but I can't tell her because I don't know. I want another shot at it—all of it—I think I can really show 'em this time, given the chance.

The world's palette seems off now, like someone snuck drops of vinegar into your mother's gravy recipe.

I look back on these things that have happened, but most of it's lost to time. I can't recall the specifics and no one else can either, so who's to say they happened?

Did I ever really stand in these spots?

My chest is restricted by the not-going-back of it all, and I sob some more while Andie puts an arm around me and shushes me like an infant.

She holds me close and I can hear her heart beating and it makes me cry harder.

I calm down a little and she urges me to do something with her—our supertime dishes have been washed and there's still some night left. Let's take my mind off it.

Maybe you just need to get out more.

Andie and I go swimming.

I'm thirty-six and my best friend died three years, nine months and seven days ago.

Andie urges me to get in as she turns over onto her back and floats in place.

We're at the Delta Hotel, using her season pass to access the pool.

I dip my toe, submerge my foot, my ankle. I ease into the water slowly.

After short, ten-meter races between us in breast and backstroke, I gloat over my wins. It's not often I beat her at something physical.

By the time we're back on deck and I'm lowering my feet into the hot tub, I feel better—for now.

Romance came, and it was the right woman, just as it was supposed to be.

The Friend Zone's not so bad in the long run, by the way; I've got friends. Sex usually just leads to space.

But you've gotta *stay* friends to *be* friends, and that takes effort. I've never been great with effort.

We leave the hot tub and towel off on the deck. An elderly gentleman has since entered the pool and he's kicking laps, leaning his chest against a flutter board.

I kiss Andie and then we part to enter our changerooms.

Once inside, I find my locker and lift out my sneakers, my jeans and shirt and watch, start reassembling myself. No one else is in here and the damp walls echo my sniffs and sighs.

"Well, I gotta hand it to ya."

"Jesus!" Paul drops his watch and it lands inside his right shoe. He turns around and Ms. Miller is behind him, examining her pores in one of the mirrors. She's nude except for a towel wrapped around her body. Another binds her hair.

“You’ve got a nice little setup here; the sexy wife in her bikini, the retro record player, the downtown apartment...”

“What do you want? This is the *men’s* room,” Paul says while turning back to the lockers and buckling his belt. He fishes his watch out of his shoe and clasps it to his wrist.

“Yes, but times are changing.” She grins wide to check her gleaming teeth in her reflection.

“So why does everything feel the same?”

“Oh, come on now. You’re here, aren’t you? And wasn’t that a nice swim?”

He laces his sneakers, zips his hoodie, and turns to face her, exasperated.

“Well, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was a good swim,” he says, stepping over the bench and moving toward the exit, the fresh air.

“Well, alright then!” She is beaming, enthusiastic. “Just take that fact and hold onto it. Be happy with what ya got.”

He’d been reaching for the door’s handle, but he stops himself, turns.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m trying to do.”

“Well try harder,” her face sags into concern. “I worry about you sometimes.”

“Don’t worry about me—”

“—I’ll be fine,” She finishes in Paul’s own voice. “Maybe,” she adds, taking up a pair of tweezers in her hand as she leans close and scrutinizes her left eyebrow. “But you won’t do it alone. No one does it alone.”

“I’ve got Andie, the family. I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t forget the ones you lost.” Ms. Miller poises the gaping tweezers above a stray hair, pauses, looks at Paul’s reflection. “Both alive and dead.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She sighs and lays the tweezers near the sink, turns to face him.

“It means you have to work to keep what you thought you already had. That’s what adulthood is.”

“And if I don’t feel like it?”

“You will. You enjoy the breeze too much.” Seemingly content with this, she returns to the mirror and picks up her tweezers again.

“But how do I—”

She holds up her free hand, interrupting, looks to his reflection once more, and says, “Discipline is the small steps needed to take your biggest leaps.”

Paul stares at her blankly.

“Now shoo!” She waves her hand towards him as if he’s an odour. “She’s waiting for you.”

He sighs and mutters “whatever” as he pushes into the door. He stops himself.

“Hey, wait a minute!” He turns back as she yanks the hair with a wince. “When you said I needed to ‘cut the bullshit’ from my writing, what did you mean?”

Ms. Miller turns from the mirror in shock.

He doesn’t know.

She composes herself, shrugs, and says, “Magic realism.”

Paul looks to the ceiling in confusion, and when he levels his gaze again she’s gone, two damp towels heaped in the place where she stood.

I'm shaving my arm in the shower and it's nearly finished. A little whisker here, there, okay, all done.

The heat feels good and I don't want to get out, but it's time—

“Paul, get out of the wahtah!”

I can't remember a single day together with Sarah on the deck of that pool.

I have trouble remembering *anything*, and always have. Sarah remembered *everything* from our heydays—who was there, what we did, what was said—she could even tell me who got in which vehicles for weekend drives to Tim Horton's. In our twenties, Sarah would recount stories, describing the funny things I said and did, and I'd listen to her talk about *me*, enraptured, as if hearing them for the first time. Now, I struggle to remember individual conversations between us of the thousands we had. The inability to recollect makes things very hard.

She'll be nothing one day, just some woman in a photograph.

“Shut up.” The water still cascades my back.

Put her in the room, I instruct myself. This is an exercise I've developed: I try to physically picture Sarah standing in front of me. I try to get every detail of her face, her limbs. I try to put her in a familiar outfit, wearing a familiar expression. This is easiest while alone, which is why I often practice in the shower. I should mention that although I'm nude when I shower, I'm not trying to recreate an Enrique Iglesias music video with torrential water and deep kissing. We were platonic in life and remain so in death. Sarah's fully clothed, watching, bemused. She never says anything. She just stands there in her colourful sneakers, waiting.

I practice in the car, too, when I'm driving alone—particularly on highways. I surf the radio, trying to find something to sing along to, and imagine Sarah next to me, seatbelt on, wearing her pea-green khaki shorts and Birkenstock sandals. Her seat is all the way back so she can stretch her legs and put her feet on the dash, like she used to do. I try to imagine her gross toes in my line of sight while I check oncoming traffic before a left turn. She chews her thumb and looks out her window.