

NO ONE KNOWS ABOUT US

By Bridget Canning. A Creative Writing Thesis submitted

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Abstract:

No One Knows about Us is a collection of twelve contemporary short stories. As the title suggests, the characters in each story deal with secrets: relationships, longings, grudges, addictions, and trickery. For them, these secrets are simultaneously overwhelming and futile; their importance within their small worlds reflect a deeper feeling of insignificance in the greater scheme of life in a small city in a northern province hemmed on to the side of a continent. Here are a range of characters and situations set in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. The stories are mapped out in different areas of the city and move chronologically over a year, starting in fall and ending in late summer. They work together to create a small sample of life in modern-day St. John's – one that is informed by the influences of history, economy, and weather.

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1. Seen

To: Irene Hogan

From: Dennis Power

Date: January 13/2018. Active 1 hour 13 minutes ago

Irene,

This sounds crazy, but I'm in Hawaii and they've announced a ballistic missile is headed towards us. We have been told to seek immediate shelter. It isn't a drill.

You and I haven't talked for a long time. I want you to know I never stopped thinking about you. Every day I'm sorry I didn't do things differently. It has been my life's regret.

I love you, Irene. I've missed you.

Yours.

Dennis

Irene is in her kitchen. She makes a cup of tea while the radio blares coverage of the false alarm in Hawaii. Reports say it was a button pushed in error during an employee changeover. She listens to a woman's voice, tearful, full of cloying vibrato: We came here for our honeymoon. At first, we thought it was a hoax, an Orson Welles thing. Then everyone was panicking. We didn't know what to do. We stayed in our hotel room. We called everyone we loved.

How do you feel now, the reporter asks, knowing it was all a mistake?

Right now, I just feel happy, the woman says. I'm with my husband and everyone knows we're safe.

Irene gazes at her phone. There is a notification that Dennis's message has been seen. Her name and tiny profile avatar sit below it like a punctuation mark. The radio commentator remarks how tensions between North Korea and the US translate into fearful governments. Hawaii is no exception. Everyone exists in a heightened state of readiness.

Irene moves into the living room and settles on the sofa. She turns off her phone and puts on Netflix.

That evening, Irene accidentally watches a bad film. She'd only wanted to read the description, but her finger slips and hits play. Shag it, she figures.

The movie is chock-full of the kind of tropes discussed in the Film Studies class she took last year. The male lead returns home after running away from his emotions. He hungers to reconnect with the woman he mistreated. But when he approaches her at a party, she tells him to go to hell and storms off. He grabs her arm and peers into her gorgeous enraged expression with absolute sincerity. Irene imagines her classmates' responses: oh look, woman says no, buddy won't stop, woman rewards his persistence. What tripe. No wonder no one understands consent.

But Irene tries not to get frustrated with bad writing anymore. These types of films are just suspension of disbelief for cheap escapism. In real life, actual drama is rare, even when things end abruptly. Back when she decided not to forgive Dennis, the last time, she simply pretended he was dead. If she saw him around, it was an apparition. She wasn't about to start talking to ghosts.

At that point, they weren't talking anyway, so it was a straightforward matter of no greetings or eye contact. When she explained the theory to her roommate and her

friends, they all played along. There were many satisfying moments of bitchy aloofness: Don't look now. Phantom Dennis at three o'clock. Alert the Ghost Guard.

And years later, when he was elected to City Council, she was so accustomed to considering him gone, she hardly recognized his new image. Goateed, got-what-you-need, hemp-ware Dennis really was dead. Councillor Dennis Power was sanitized with hair products and glossy slogans: Put Power in Ward Four. Vote Power for Change. Name like that, people think you're born to it.

Irene knows for a movie to reflect reality, the man and woman would be filmed from opposite sides of the room. They'd stay close to their friends. If the woman became separated from her clique, the man may approach or wave. A stiff conversational exchange would inform him she's not interested. He would then retreat to his friends with ego safely bubble-wrapped. No high jinks, no tears. No oracle-like supporting character that sees through their walls to recognize two matched souls and speak a truth that pierces their bruised pride. No perfect storm of coincidence – a broken elevator, a random blizzard – to trap the couple so they squabble it out until finally succumbing to exasperated, angst-oiled, long-overdue humping.

When the movie ends, she scores it thumbs down. It is satisfying to tell the algorithm how she feels.

The next day, at the centre, Irene does a quick survey of the activity areas. The newest ECE, Ashley, plays a Raffi CD for the preschool group while Nyana gets the snack ready. The smell of sliced apple lingers in the hallway. Irene inspects Room 2. She makes sure the dates are clear in the cleaning schedule and the art supplies look tidy. These are items which attract parental scrutiny.

In the staff room, Ed and Mackenzie discuss the news. It was the second time buddy made that mistake, Ed says. Staff was told it was a drill, but he just didn't get it. Must have been worse than Pearl Harbour there.

Reminds me of when I worked at Tim's, Mackenzie says. If you ordered your coffee black from this one girl, she'd still give you a double double. Just try it, she'd say. It tastes really good.

Irene listens as they segue into more dummies from past jobs. She clears her throat and sips her tea with deliberation. They are getting back to work as she enters her office.

Irene sorts through her day timer and inputs calendar reminders into her phone. Parents will soon be making plans for their kids' spring activities. She needs to send out ads for Gotta Have Art! Winter Programming: indoor painting sessions, workshops with visiting artists, all the free city-sponsored events. She scans her inbox: messages from parents, enquiries on new admissions. Her eyes catch on an email from Carla Warren at the Department of Arts and Tourism. Message sent yesterday at 4:58pm.

Dear Gotta Have Art! Administration:

The Department of Arts and Tourism is dedicated to supporting the vitality of the arts and art-related organizations in the province. We have recently processed over one hundred applications and reports for sustainable funding from a wide range of not-for-profit programs in communities all over Newfoundland and Labrador.

Due to inaccuracies in reporting data, we have revoked the 2018/19 funding for Gotta Have Art.

Carla Warren has supplied a screenshot of the offending form. There is Ed's tight scrawl highlighted in neon yellow: \$3685.77. It is in the profit column when it should be one grid over in discrepancies. In the actual accounting spreadsheet, the totals boxes at the bottom of the page contain the correct amounts. But here, Ed's eyes slipped.

On the phone, Irene hears her own voice tighten as she fights the urge to curse: what does the mistake matter if the totals add up? Oh my, no, the secretary says. The provincial auditors hold us responsible for any discrepancies in the paperwork. They take

the allocation of tax dollars very seriously. Also, it's unfair to the non-profits who did report their finances accurately.

When Irene asks why the government is treating community groups like they're competing parties, she is directed to contact her MP. Carla Warren's auto-reply boomerangs back announcing she's on leave for the next three weeks.

The current Gotta Have Art! funding comes from three different sources. It allows for Irene's Coordinator salary, one Assistant, four part-time teachers, rent, and whatever supplies they can't gather via donation. Their current capacity is forty-five and as they run on an income-based tuition, the waitlist is always over a hundred names long. This was the year Irene hoped to expand – the grant proposal was peppered with accolades from student and parents. In a bigger location, they could double their size, become a community centre. They could provide night classes: crafts, home repairs, film studies, ABE. There could be a kind of barter system of shared knowledge and needs. Students could collaborate on murals, a jam space, a community garden.

The loss of funding will mean at least one immediate layoff. The staff currently consists of young music and visual art teachers who haven't found formal positions and are filling the blanks on their resumes with non-profit experience. Last month, the centre received a nice write-up in The Telegram about their dedication to income-based tuition and using art education to build self-esteem in at-risk children. She posted it on their Facebook page. It was shared 21 times. She keeps lists of ideas in a notebook by her bed: ESL classes or language exchange meetings. Collaboration with local art galleries and the Native Friendship Centre.

With Ed, her frustration melts when his voice cracks. Oh Jesus Irene, he says. I'm so sorry.

It's okay, she says. An honest mistake. You're doing the work of three people. We'll get this fixed, don't worry. The whole thing is ridiculous.

Ed's fists clench: this is some sadistic bureaucratic horseshit, he says. He shuts the door when he leaves. She stares at the spreadsheet until her eyes invent patterns with its formatted squares. A cat face. A heart shape. A stairway to Heaven.

Twitter and CBC NL reveal two other arts and cultural organizations have also lost their funding. *This is loss of jobs over mistakes made by busy volunteers. The government is treating allocated arts funding like the artists are threatening them with guns and knives. This attacks what is vital to the economy in this province. Yeah, well, lazy welfare artists leeching tax dollars should be accountable to the penny.*

Irene scrolls other headlines. Local news has collected the scattered Newfoundlanders in Hawaii. This includes St. John's Deputy Mayor, Dennis Power. A photo from his Twitter account shows him and his sun-kissed family, smiling on a beach. Both Dennis and his wife wear pressed white linen, her tidy yoga legs silhouetted against the sand. The twins grin up from a sandcastle. A tiny Newfoundland flag impales the top. Dennis's caption: *Hug your loved ones today. An experience like this makes you realize what's most important.*

Irene cannot recall the twins' names, but remembers her initial feeling when she first learned of them, respectful relief they hadn't gone the alliteration route. She can't imagine a Dennis Power naming his children Johnny and Jenny or something. Not even this corporate changeling version of him would do that.

After supper, she does the trail around Quidi Vidi Lake because it's mostly flat and good for a circle of brooding. The funding decision could have been fixed with a courtesy call. Basic communication, a little tolerance for human error. Now, even if the decision is changed, how is she ever supposed to trust them.

She yanks her toque over her ears. No one wants to spend money in winter. She thinks about how in the spring, Queen Anne's Lace sprouts along the wooden walkways. Dennis used to call them Cat Piss Blooms. Sometimes, they would make their way to his

place in Pleasantville this way. They did it in the gazebos a couple of times. She remembers wiping old cigarette butts off her pants when she pulled them back up. And there was one time on the leg extension machine in the outdoor gym, the metal legs digging into her shin, the creaking of the hinges echoing around them and cracking them up. That was fucking dirty, he said afterwards. I hope you liked it.

The last time they were together was at that apartment. He had just returned from Halifax with an assortment of his regular party favours. He hadn't called her, but when he walked into the bar, he came straight over, all swagger and c'mon, we goes. Now she sat on the kitchen counter as he lifted his house key to her nostril.

Why are we still doing us like this? he said. I didn't know if I'd see you tonight.

You tell me. You're the one who doesn't call.

Well, I never heard from you either. Why are we still just carrying on? We should just be together already.

She stayed composed, but her legs swung back and forth off the counter edge. You're the one who plays games, she said.

That's true, he said. But you like it.

What's changed then?

I don't want to play anymore, he said.

Then his roommate came in, Joel or Jake or something, some massive guy who looked like his ancestors wrestled bears for pocket change. Dennis pointed at Irene and said, have you met my new girlfriend? And Joel or Jake said, 'bout fucking time. And later in bed, when they were coming down, she asked if he still meant it and he held her so tight when she closed her eyes it was as if their bodies merged into a single line.

Forty-eight hours later, Dennis Power and Bianca Feehan were on the edge of George Street. Him helping her on with her coat, shrugging into her, something muttered

under his tongue making her eyes glitter. Irene was about to say his name when he spotted her. His face gave nothing, not even surprise. She watched Dennis and Bianca get into a cab.

It was the next day Irene killed him in her mind. She lay on the living room floor while her roommate Andie handed her cigarettes and brushed her hair. She cried and laughed while Andie invented causes of death: accidentally snorted Ajax. Drowned by the East End mafia. Tried to fuck a mirror. And fifteen years later, at 41, Dennis Power is an occasional twinge: his voice on TV or radio crackling in its fresh coating of polished urgency, a flash of disdain over his new townie brogue. Changing the channel and feeling the satisfaction in that – pressing a button on him. A gesture he'd appreciate.

Back home, she rereads the message. She takes a screenshot and sends it to her Dropbox. She polishes her fingerprints off the screen until it shines like an offering.

That night, Irene lies naked on her bedspread. She takes three selfies. She hasn't really looked at her body for some time besides a passing wince at a ripple of cellulite. Lying on her back, her breasts stand up nicely, hips slimmer than she'd imagined. In her early 30s, she welcomed finally liking her body, but that feeling has slipped as work has taken over good habits. But she still looks smooth and firm. Crush-worthy. Touchable and untouchable at the same time.

On Friday, Irene prepares for the airport. A strong silhouette is important. She wears her long navy coat that cinches in at the waist. It takes an hour to do her hair and face.

Dennis and his family descend the Arrivals escalator to a media flutter. It's hard not to check out the wife, vacation-tan immaculate in white slacks and a crisp blouse. Irene wonders how she packs for travel – she must possess in-depth knowledge of fabrics

which don't shrivel with ten hours of flying and how to pack just the right amount of the best facial rejuvenation potion to get it through security.

Dennis carries his daughter and pauses at a reporter's microphone: "she's all tuckered out." There are chuckles and handshakes. When he spots her, his gaze bounces immediately to someone else: oh hello, great to see you. They shift on to the luggage carousel. Irene watches his back, two horizontal creases through his navy blazer, his posture set in focused neutrality.

She leaves in the midst of an exiting crowd. In the parking lot, she scrambles getting into her car. She should avoid being noticed as the sole occupant of the vehicle. She catches a glimpse of her face in the rear-view mirror and she should really do something about her eyebrows and what the fuck, this is some lunatic shit. Dennis didn't skip a beat back there. Everything with her was always a joke to him. Maybe he is the kind of bastard who sends one last poke in his final hour. Maybe the message was copied and pasted to a list of women. She pictures Bianca Feehan tearful over an iPhone. Christ almighty.

Irene sends the email on Tuesday. It is mostly formal and to the point. *Gotta Have Art! is an organization which deserves expansion. Meanwhile, there are so many vacant spaces in the city which should become useful and appreciated in the ways they deserve. What's the point of having a warm safe place and not using it? Attached is information on Gotta Have Art! Perhaps we can meet to discuss potential vacant properties. If you or any other city official requires more, please feel free to ask.*

Dennis responds by the end of the day with an invitation for coffee. He says they can talk and possibly go see a property which may fit her organization's needs. *Wear your walking boots. See you soon.*

The cafe is busy and the bustle of getting their drinks prolongs their mutual silence. Dennis nods as Irene goes over the centre's funding predicament. Whatever

product he uses in his hair dampens the front and makes it transparent. Otherwise he is immaculate: pressed grey suit jacket, smooth hands, the scent of something subtle and expensive. She wore all black hoping to look chic and bohemian, but now the variations between shades stand out; the leggings are faded, the sweater is pilly. None of her blacks match. She has non-profit written all over her.

She arranges the paperwork on the centre on the table. Dennis alternates between sipping coffee and making notes. Eye contact is purposeful and fleeting.

I've heard good things about your organization, he says. I didn't realize you were involved.

He pulls a folder from his briefcase and opens it. Her email and enclosed articles have been printed and tagged with neon sticky notes. Of course he has a secretary. Probably an assistant too.

It's too bad about the province's decision to get nit-picky, he says. It reeks, actually.

Reeks of what?

Something higher up. Decisions to put the money somewhere else. Art's an easy target. I've been doing this for over ten years now and Irene, you wouldn't believe the pork-barrel, back-scratching, nepotistic disgrace – I mean, I imagine you do know, I'm not trying to mansplain anything to you. But there are so many in all levels of government who are little more than loan sharks and frauds. I spend too much time in furious heartbreak over this place.

He blows a slow ripple over his coffee. Her skin involuntarily crawls. She is reminded of being in a coffee shop with Andie, back when Dennis was newly dead. Andie spotted him across the room and drew a little cartoon ghost on a napkin, a tiny zero for a mouth with a speech balloon: *Boo! My asshole-shaped mouth makes me extra spooky!*

We may be able to scrape by without the grant, she says. But we'd definitely be better off in a larger space. There are families on the waiting list that can pay.

Yes, I'd love to get more groups into vacant public properties. We can put together a proposal.

Thank you, Dennis. This has been a scary experience.

I can imagine.

I bet you can.

He swallows the last of his coffee. Suddenly everything is final. He speaks into his lap as he shuffles the folder back into his case. The building I'm thinking of used to be an old elementary school, he says. It's a short drive if you want to follow me.

Irene leans over the steering wheel as she drives. This would be a terrible time for a fender bender or a careless pedestrian. She pulls in three parking spots away from his car. The only sounds as they cross the parking lot are the remote beeps of their cars locking.

The old school is one storey, a long faded building with dated forest-green trim on the windows. Graffiti tags and cigarette butts. One storey means accessibility. Students could paint murals outside, images of colour and whimsy to draw the eyes of passersby. The street is busy; she passes here regularly and had forgotten about this place. It would get noticed if refreshed and reused.

There's a new condo nearby, Dennis says. Lots of bus stops.

Maybe we can see in through the windows.

One of the councillors knows the owners, he says.

Keys jingle in his hand. She watches as the lock opens easily, like it's been oiled with use. He enters without looking back at her.

The entrance foyer is cold air and sawdust. Dennis's footprints uncover white tile under the layer of grim. She follows the shape of his shoulders. He moves into a small auditorium. Good for games and small concerts, he says. The first thing visitors see.

The hardwood creaks under their feet. There is a small makeshift stage at the end of the room. Irene walks towards it with purpose; she is grateful to have something to focus on.

I hope you don't mind me showing you this place right away, he says. It came to mind when I read your email. But the guy who loaned me the keys said the CNIB have also shown interest.

So art education versus the blind. Not sure about those odds.

It doesn't have to be odds. We just need a strong proposal. I've had luck with a number of projects so far. There was a lot of pushback on the roundabout, but I managed to change minds.

The stage is ancient plywood. Irene runs her hand along the edge; worn to a shine from a thousand bums of the past. She leans against it and surveys the space. The place is dirty, but there are no signs of water damage. Funding for repairs is a whole other process and committee. It would work. It could work really well.

She averts her eyes as he approaches the stage. He is a pendulum sway of coattails. He takes the steps and examines the room from centre stage. From behind her, he clears his throat, but his voice is still tight and careful.

I realize my message must have taken you off guard, he says. I've been feeling embarrassed about it. Which is terrible, isn't it?

It's okay. People do things out of character when they're afraid.

He steps closer. Is he going to touch her? But you see, he says. It's actually the most in-my-own-character thing – most true thing I've done for a while.

She looks back. He stands about six feet away. How many other grand speeches were made on this stage? It is the east and Juliet is the sun.

Am I the only one who got a message?

What? Of course. Seriously, you think that?

Can you blame me?

I know. He steps forward. I'm sorry. I was very prideful back then. It was foolish.

There is a loud crack and a high pitched sound. An animal, some kind of rodent under his foot. Then her mind recalibrates; it is Dennis who makes the sound, pulling his foot from a fresh hole in the stage floor. The cuff of his trousers is shredded and red. Ow, ow, ow, ow, fuck.

Oh shit, Irene says.

She clasps a hand over her mouth. Dennis's lips form a perfect "o." Andie's voice: *look at his arsehole shaped mouth*. A giggle emerges and hiccups from her.

Dennis angles his ankle to see the damage. His face is grape-rage. And she laughs, he says. Of course, Irene finds it funny.

She guffaws, her nerves are an avalanche. *Finds it*. Dennis Power's natural-tongue bleeding back to life. I'm sorry, she says. It just scared me. The floor must be rotten. She pulls a packet of tissues from her purse.

Don't bother.

Don't be cross.

I'm not cross, he says. I'm disappointed.

About what?

Dennis paws the wall as he backs down the steps. She's standing before him. He won't take her hand. It was always a job to get any genuine kindness from you, he says.

You're in pain. Let me help you.

Why? We both know what this is about.

He limps towards the foyer. Oh look, she says, Dennis suddenly changes his mind. As soon as it's not fun, off he goes.

Give me a break, Irene. You think I don't already feel like shit? I wrote you that message when I thought I was going to die. You didn't even respond.

I knew you were safe when I saw it.

Oh well. Fuck it. Fuck answering.

You're married. With kids.

He opens the door and fumbles with the keys. Outside, a fresh dusting of snow covers their cars.

What happens now?

Send me what you need. I'll get my team on it.

Thank you. Thank you, Dennis, you didn't have to do this.

Sure. Sure I didn't.

She waits until he is gone to get into her own car. The snow starts to cover his trickles of blood.

She submits the proposal later in the week. He responds, cc'ing another councillor and a Lena Hartery she assumes must be the assistant. She adds Ed to the exchange on her end. The neighbourhood is notified and overall supportive: no NIMBY reactions. Now,

everything is transparent: here are our quarterly expenses; here is our payroll, current rent, tuition scale, our long-term business plan. Here is how we match provincial curriculum standards, here is a comparison with a similar project in a similar place. Here are our hands, our bodies, our eager mouths.

Then the CNIB get an opportunity to access a space at the university and Gotta Have Art charges ahead. Irene and Ed sit in the back of City Hall and pump their fists silently as the vote passes. I am pleased to support such a progressive project, the mayor says. It is a triumph for both the arts and for revitalizing local properties with history and character.

The move is planned for early summer. Irene consults with the Gotta Have Art staff and they agree to celebrate at the Jungle Jim's on Torbay Road. It's close to where Nyana and Ashley live and fits their student-sized salaries. Irene orders appetizers and a jug of strawberry peach sangria. Ashley snaps photos and asks Irene if she wants pics for the Facebook page. She takes ones of everyone and group selfies – everyone wants one, phones lined up on the table. They smile for all the cameras, faces luminous with hope and Pinot Grigio. Irene tells herself to wait for tomorrow to post them, if at all – you never know what could make a parent uptight. And as warm and happy as she feels, she leaves with Nyana who needs to relieve her babysitter. No one really wants to party with their supervisor and Mackenzie's getting loud. Ed's eyes are growing playful.

The next morning her phone isn't in her purse. The zipper on the pocket is open, maybe it fell out? She retraces her steps. At Jungle Jim's, the waitress retrieves it from behind the bar; someone found it on the bathroom floor. Irene thanks her and leaves. The smell of brunch eggs pings her stomach.

No new messages. She begins a text to Ed, might be to check to see if everyone got home okay. At the top of the list is a message sent at 12:17am. Unknown number.

Picture.

It takes Irene about twenty seconds of staring to recognize her faded bedspread and then, her own flesh. Breasts arching towards the camera, lipsticked-lips parted in a cliché.

Her hands shake so much it takes multiple attempts to tap-open her social media applications. Facebook – no new posts. No notifications besides birthdays. Instagram – no new posts since a snap of Thursday’s sunset. Twitter – nothing. No new emails sent. No cryptic notes from revenge-porn blackmailers. Nothing sent from Facebook Messenger.

She had already deleted Dennis’s goodbye message and the screenshot. They’re saved to her cloud and two different USBs. They checked everywhere though. That’s how they found her selfies. She put in her code repeatedly for Ashley to take photos last night. Swipe, swipe, zig-zag. It kept locking up. She changed the setting so the touch screen was available longer. Otherwise, it keeps needing to be touched.

What else has she taken photos of they could use? She goes through all the albums. Nothing else seems to have been tampered with. Most of the time, she just takes pictures of work stuff for the Facebook page. Fuck fuck fuck.

She can’t call the number from her phone. They can’t have the sound of her voice too. If she can find a phone booth, she can sort it out now. She circles the Torbay plaza parking lot, she can’t see anything. She drives to the Tim Horton’s on Major’s Path. Inside, she buys a donut to break a five and asks for more quarters and realizes she doesn’t know how much a payphone call costs anymore. The guy at the cash has three inflamed pimples on ridge of his chin and doesn’t close his mouth when he’s not talking and he doesn’t know where a phone booth might be. Everyone has cell phones now, he tells her. Thanks, she says.

She tracks one down by the library, an actual phone booth. Inside, it smells like something just finished smoking. She dials and it rings twice. Then a man’s voice: Hello? Small children in the background. Hello? Hello?

If you're there, I can't hear you, he says. This is a private mobile number. Who are you looking for?

She hangs up. The receiver is sticky. It's starting to snow again.

In her car, she starts the engine and lets it warm up. Snow collects on the windshield, filling up the blanks. There is something calming about the evenness of the light. A fresh snowfall brings equilibrium. She goes through the events of the previous night. There is enough data on her phone to check her work email.

Ashley's message is as predicted: *sorry for the last minute notice – we were having so much fun, I couldn't bring it up last night! I'm starting a new position on Monday. It needed to be filled immediately. Thank you for everything, Irene. I've learned so much at GHA.*

Irene replies: *I understand, Ashley. Everybody has to do what they have to these days. You're a hard worker, I'm sure your new employer will appreciate that. Good luck.*

She sets a reminder to call a sub for Monday and pulls out of the parking lot. She keeps the radio off to better focus on the road. She'll get home before the snow gets too bad. The beat of the windshield wipers is slow and steady and she uses their rhythm to pace her breathing. Everyone has to do what they can. She did what she could. He thinks he's doing the same.

At home, she busies herself around the house. She sets an assortment of simultaneous tasks to keep her on a rotation of occupation: laundry, dishwasher, soaking the pots, putting the kettle on. In the kitchen, she tunes the radio to local news. Two masked men held up a bank outside town and escaped on skidoos. The mayor has announced a ceremony for the new daycare centre opening at City Hall. NDP demand inquiry into the new provincial budget.

In weather, the forecast calls for mild temperatures, a break in the cloud cover. Irene finds herself smiling about the possibility of an early spring thaw. She turns off the kettle right before it whistles.

2. With Glowing Hearts

Roy had Caroline at him all week to clean the bathroom. The Post-it notes on the fridge screeched in red Sharpie: DO IT ROY, IT'S NOT FAIR. NEVER ONCE IN EIGHT YEARS, WTF!

He got it done Saturday, every little bit according to her instructions, circles of Comet bleeding away the soap scum in the bathtub. Look Caroline, he said, you could eat off that porcelain. Oh my God, she said. Doing a drop of housework doesn't make you some kind of Renaissance man, you know.

Then that was a racket and she pointed out how she's cleaned the bathroom every other time throughout their entire marriage and she doesn't make an announcement afterwards because he takes it all for granted, like the way he seems to believe clean underwear magically walks itself into his dresser drawers and he shouldn't be bragging about having to be told and taught how to do a single goddamn household chore. And all Roy could say was Fine Caroline, you're right. Fine.

When he woke up on Sunday, the residual guilt and annoyance was still potent, like a damp stain in his chest. He looked at the clock and it was before seven, twenty-four hours until up and out and back to the stack of invoices on his desk and fake Monday pleasantries and Kerry Osgood's staff meeting on this month's promotions. He got up and slunk around the house in his bathrobe. He checked his Hotmail account. A Groupon message in the Junk folder said, These Deals Want to Meet You, and he thought, like fuck they do.

He dressed and drove to Bowring Park. It had been RDF all week in the shrinking daylight of November. Surfaces were dewy with frosty ambitions. The park was full of families and couples with dogs; everyone seemed to be trying to move as much as possible without getting wet.

He considered the long dormant idea that maybe he and Caroline should have had children. They agreed long ago they didn't want them, but now it feels like at least there'd

be something to collaborate on. Something to blame for weight gain and bad backs and diminishing *cool*. Something to force a stop to Caroline's seeking out of potential middle-aged kindred souls. Like last week's supper at her friend Wendy's house. Wendy and her husband, Larry, are also childless. Caroline had talked about how nice it could be to socialize with adults who don't constantly refer to their offspring.

Back in the 90s, Larry was in one of the more popular local grunge bands, some one-word name synonymous with downtrodden. Now he was in IT and only played reunion shows here and there. Roy listened as Larry drank brandy out of a snifter and complained about hipsters, millennials, and today's music: the auto-tune and bouncing asses. He was all pursed sips and reddening face, his faded punk now a kind of rock-and-roll petulance. And everything Wendy and Larry had was quality, the charcuterie and booze, but the conversation was so much work. Caroline and Wendy talked about work and Larry asked Roy about hockey, because doing the books for Osgood's Athletics Supply suggests he would know about sports. Since then, Caroline had mentioned upcoming Christmas get-togethers. Roy might be a jerk for already designing excuses.

He edged around a puddle in the park's main walkway. He sighed and it came out as a bellow so loud, the black couple in front turned and the man said something in another language that sounded like swearing. Here is Roy, some white middle-aged fop, flopping around by himself on a Sunday. How is it that even at his age, it is still so difficult to ignore what others might think? He headed towards the duck pond, crunching leaves underfoot, trying to blink away a sudden stinging flood of memories: *Here's the time in grade ten you called Jean Dobbin and hung up when she answered and she star-69ed you. Here's the time you printed off that poem for Caroline at work and someone got to it first and pinned it to the bulletin board. Here's a list of words and names you've mispronounced in conversation: potpourri, psoriasis, Sade, Bruce Cockburn.* A knot started along the left side of his neck and shoulder blade, right on his cringe nerve.

When the path opened up to the duck pond, Roy spotted Doug Cluett. He stood by the pond, back on, contemplating the water. Roy regarded Doug and thought about how

Kerry Osgood goes on about positivity and feeling grateful. Roy felt grateful he could recognize Douglas Cluett's arse a mile away and had an opportunity to plan a route around him. Gratitude into the universe, like a kind puff of smoke.

It's not always easy, working with Doug. Kerry Osgood occasionally said something in this vein when the guys were on a Doug Rant, usually on a day when his B.O was particularly potent. Doug's stench was a purely sweat-like smelling stink, like perspiration collected in a bowl. He was fat and getting fatter, but lived in cheap tracksuits, the kind with reflector stripes and vinyl swish. Whenever they ended up on the sales rack at Osgood's, Doug liked to snatch them up with his employee discount. Sometimes, when Doug was stinking up the stockroom and Roy had to do inventory, he imagined pools and eddies of sweat in the crevices of Doug's body, sealed under the polyester veneer like when Caroline covered bowls of leftover soup with Saran Wrap.

Roy adjusted his sunglasses and cap. He took the wide path around the duck pond where there are enough trees to stay out of sight. Doug stared at the ducks and kind of hopped from one foot to the other, like he was getting ready to kick a swan.

What a sin for you. Caroline would say you're being judgemental. But Doug was difficult. A day at Osgood's without Doug was like a catchy song you hadn't heard in a long time. Everyone spoke easily, openly. They smiled more. When Doug was absent, no one had to smell his stink or hear him think, hear his two-cents clatter on every comment made. You couldn't say TGIF without his personal declaration of laziness: *Know whadda shoulda done? Stayed home in Botwood and gone on the pogeey. That's the Newfie dream my son.* And Kerry's calm firmness: *now Doug, a lot of people don't like that term,* and Doug nodding until she's out of sight: *Fuck 'er if she can't take a joke.*

Doug spat on the ground. He removed something white and soft from his pocket, face tightening as he regarded it in his hands. Roy thought about kidnapers and bottles of chloroform. *Sure why would you need a life of crime?* That was last week, Doug's interjection on a conversation on a robbery reported near the store. *If I got on the welfare, I'd have enough for rum and smokes and I already makes home brew. Only crowd you*

need to rob is the government. Then he hitched into laughing, loud enough in the stockroom for customers to overhear.

Doug pulled the white object onto his head. It was a bright white headband with a blue and green insignia. Roy pulled out his phone and filled the camera zoom with Doug's big sour head. The headband bore the Winter Olympics 2010 torch bearers logo. He recognized it as the special custom-made one for those chosen to carry the torch.

Special like the essay Kerry Osgood's daughter Bethany wrote, back when she was in grade ten. There was a contest. Students had to choose a line from the Canadian National Anthem and write about its significance or something like that. Bethany's essay was so good, it won her a chance to carry the torch for a symbolic section of its starting journey across Canada. She also received a pile of Olympic swag, mugs and badges and a bright white Olympic track suit, covered in symbols and corporate logos. After Bethany showed it off in school, Kerry coaxed her into displaying it on one of the store mannequins. When customers walked into Osgood's Athletics Supply, they were greeted with the official Olympic torch bearer outfit and a mini-shrine to young Bethany, her photo for The Telegram, a copy of her winning essay. Roy remembers how Doug was unimpressed: *I'd be rotted if the Olympics came here,* he said. *Too many people from countries you can't trust, walking around like they own the place.* Everyone told him to shut up. Shut up Doug, for Jesus' sake.

Later, between spring cleanup and inventory intake and stock switchover, the outfit disappeared. New spring running gear was put on the mannequin. Bethany's things were supposed to be put aside. There was a lot of discount Olympic gear that month. Kerry fumed over the possibility it may have ended up in the bargain bin.

Roy watched Doug smooth the headband against his forehead. He took one, two, three photos. If he talked to Kerry first, she won't let on that it was him. Submitted to her anonymously, she could say. *There is a zero tolerance policy on staff theft, Doug. This is hard not to take personally. This belonged to a child, Doug. This was something my daughter worked for.*

Doug tugged his track jacket down and exhaled. He started running. Pigeons scattered. Ripples ran through his body with each step. Two teenage girls jolted out of his way. One whispered something and the other barked in laughter. Doug's face reddened. He forced his shoulders back. His track jacket rode up, exposing the pale curve of his underbelly, swaying and vulnerable. He kept going.

Roy put his phone away. He took the path by the river back to the parking lot, stopping twice to wipe his eyes under his sunglasses. All the recent rain made the river wild and heavy and deafening. He stood on the bank and tried to listen for other sounds, but it was hard to hear anything around the relentless pounding of the current. Two ducks swam along the edge from eddy to eddy, beating their feet to gain momentum. He stood and watched them until he realized he was cold. It was like the river had put him in a trance. He took out his phone and sent a text message to Caroline: *I'm out and about. We need anything at the store?*

He returned to the car. Somehow, the overcast sky had managed to warm up the front seats. Roy let the heat replace the chill in his spine. His phone pinged with Caroline's response: *We need milk and eggs for the week. Hurry up and come home. I made pancakes.*

3. Gutless Bravado, Part One

The church has one of those billboards with the changeable letters for posting platitudes. I read it out to Jerry as we pass.

You know that little voice inside, that gut feeling? Listen to it. God finds ways to speak.

Interesting thought, I say. Kind of misguided, though.

I turn down the volume a touch so I can focus on what I mean. Sometimes, I do the same thing when I'm trying to park. Makes me feel like a chump.

The stomach is a bag of nerves, I say. More so than the brain. I read an article about it. Gut feelings are caused by these microbes which give emotional cues that structure the brain. These scientists did MRI scans comparing gut bacteria to brain behaviour. When they switched the gut bacteria of anxious mice and fearless mice, their behaviour changed. Pretty cool.

I hit the indicator. Across town to the overpass to the Trans Canada Highway, the bypass road is the first exit. The turn signal sounds like a thumb popping a jar lid. Jerry stares straight ahead in the passenger seat.

The ancient Egyptians were in touch with that. When they mummified a body, they would take out the internal organs and put them in clay jars, for the dead person to have in the next life. But the brain, they hooked that out through the nose. They thought the brain was just for balance. Thinking and understanding, that happened in the belly.

Jerry inspects the weather. It will be dark soon. We've had three straight days of monochrome, overcast sky. At the end of each day, it fades straight from grey to black, like it gathers dust during the day and with evening, it's a clean slate.

Might rain soon.

We've been driving all day. I can drive for five hours without stopping, but today I take a break every two hours. Too much to do and I need to have my wits about me.

I used to get nervous about driving in the rain, I say. Especially when it was foggy. The fog blankets surfaces. You can't see how slippery the road is. When it rained, every hydroplaning story I knew would come to mind. I'd check the forecast; if I saw that grey cloud icon, my tummy would curdle.

We cross the overpass. Not many cars on the road. Grey days mean stay inside and get things done. Or do nothing without feeling guilty 'cause you didn't get off the couch and make the most of nice weather.

One time, I called in sick for work because I didn't want to drive in the freezing rain, I say. That was back when I was driving back and forth to Bull Arm. I felt guilty about it. Using up a sick day.

The GPS tells me to take the next exit to the bypass road. It will be a half hour drive from there. Things are on schedule.

That job was stressful, I say. And Max made everything worse.

Jerry's lips jut out, parallel to the brim of his cap. His profile is like the edge of a cliff, a place to ponder the situation with his own tumultuous innards.

Max. What a little brute. One of those guys who love to make you uncomfortable. Like, he would fart just to gross you out. You'd be in an elevator with him and see his face screw up, like he was concentrating. That was him, trying to fart. People made excuses for him, said he was trying to be funny. But I saw he got off on causing discomfort. The way he'd stare and not look away. How he'd rumble phlegm in his throat and spit whenever one of the foreign workers were around.

I shift in my seat at the thought of Max. The seatbelt against my scar makes it itch. I work my hand under my sweater and rub the puckered flesh. I don't like to scratch it directly. The skin feels too new.

He gave me a bad vibe from the start. On my first shift with him, I had on a t-shirt from a concert: The Shins. He had never heard of them. *What's that?* he said. *Besides a*

good place to hit you. He mimed cracking me in the shin. He did the same thing every time I walked passed him; he'd swing at my legs with his welding gun: *Here comes the shins.* I joked that it was a good thing I didn't wear a Hole t-shirt. He didn't get that. Guess he never heard of that band.

If the boss wasn't around, Max told stories. He wore camouflage gear a lot; he said it was so he could sneak up on pussy. He joked that when he lived in the trade school residence, he threw a woman out in the hallway after he was done with her. Didn't even give her time to dress, just tossed her clothes out after her and locked the door.

The bypass road has been groomed for spring and summer; the foliage is cut back along the sides of the pavement. Ravaged dirt and tree stumps pepper the arch of the ditch leading to the trees. Makes me think of my scar, the torn up strip. Mostly healed, but I still get tingles from time to time, the invisible openings and closings, the settling cellular connections.

Max bragged about nights downtown with his buddies. The time they got thrown out of this bar. The time they ran out of that bar without paying the tab. The times they found a solitary guy and chased him. *Herding faggots*, he called it. First, I thought he was bullshitting, but I heard things over time. Like that he got kicked out of residence 'cause he shaved a cat and fed it LSD. And later, he stalked an ex-girlfriend and she had to get a restraining order. He messed up the car of a guy she was friends with by burning thermite through the hood of his car. Used a magnesium ribbon and a blow torch from the site.

A car approaches in the opposite lane; its headlights flashes, once, twice, three times. Warning signals. Maybe cops or a moose. I tap the brake lightly. It's nice when other drivers give you a heads-up. But there's the awareness of being seen.

Then he brought Julia to the staff Christmas party. I remember feeling sorry for her. She had this hair hung in these long thin wisps down her shoulders. Just the ghost of hair, really. And she had a bug-eyed look about her, like she was on the alert.

At the bar, I noticed her earrings, little dangly things with pink crystals attached to square nuts. I made them myself, she said. I like working with metal.

You should get into welding, I said and then she started to say something, but Max came over. She stood still, like a statue. Like any movement from her would mean something.

That summer, she almost burned their house down because of Max's hockey card collection. He was drinking outside with his buddies, beers out of a cooler. He dragged out his collection to show off: his signed Guy Lafleur and Brett Hull. The next morning, Julia went out to clean up and the hockey cards were at the bottom of the cooler, soaked in the melted ice water.

She knew he'd get angry and find a way to make it about her. She took the cards into the house and lay them out to dry them. But they started to curl on the edges. She took heavy books off the shelf and put the cards inside, so they would stay flat. Then she turned on the oven and put the books on the racks. In her mind, this would dry them out.

Something large and dark stirs in the ditch. I pump the brake; Jerry jerks forward and resettles. The large bulbous head of a cow moose lifts and stares at us. She stands about three feet from the road. Cutting the underbrush back was a good idea on the Department of Highways' part.

We glide by. A brown flicker on the left. The calf bounds onto the road, heading for Mom. I watch him in the rear view mirror; he stops at the yellow line, the mother clamours up to meet him. They nuzzle each other, brown silhouettes against grey.

Max complained about Julia afterwards. *That bitch is a real dummy*, he said. But I understand why she did it. That's what happens when you're scared. You can't think straight. You'll do anything to not feel scared. I started feeling that way about Max. It got to a point that if I knew he was on my shift that day, I could hardly eat my breakfast. Belly seized up at the thought of him; I'd choke trying to get cereal down. He drove a silver Dodge Ram with oversized tires. The bumper stick read *let's play carpenter. First*

we get hammered, then I nail you. The sight of it in the parking lot gave me instant gut rot.

But this is what I mean. These physical triggers, their purpose is to reinforce the reality of fear and shame. Love pangs and anxiety flutters. Nervous diarrhea even, we've evolved so that they serve a purpose. You might wonder what happens when they go away.

The light is fading. I press the gas. The brown shapes shrink behind us. Ten minutes, the GPS says. Lots of time.

And then it started. Twinges of discomfort while swallowing. At first I blamed it on stress. But Dad had the cancer. Uncle Rob had the cancer. The endoscope was hell; doctor had to knock me out with drugs to get it down my throat. The whole stomach has to come out, he said. Full gastrectomy. And when they took my stomach out and studied it, they found sixty-one precancerous lesions. A hidden ambush, right there.

It's still hard to eat. Gotta do tiny bites and if I swallow too fast, it comes up. No stomach means there's limited space for food to go. And there's little processing before stuff hits your bloodstream. My first bite of cake gave me instant queasiness all over.

And disability paid shit. When I went back to work, they had to find something for me to do. They got me to do presentations: Occupational Health and Safety for new hires. I told myself public speaking would be scary. But the fear didn't happen. When my stomach was present, I would have hid in the bathroom, taking deep breaths and releasing all that bubbles up with nerves. But no stomach meant no feelings. First time I ever spoke in public with dry hands.

A car approaches: a red hatchback. I glance at Jerry. The fringe of his hair curl up a little, like shiny black spider legs. Looks itchy.

When I accidentally shoplifted the first time, I realized the possibilities. A pack of gum at the bottom of the basket; I forgot to put it on the counter. I shoved it in my back pocket and left. The gutful version of myself would have gone back, paid, apologized.

It's dark enough now for headlights. Best to keep them on until the turnoff. It's a bit of a gamble, but where there are two moose, there are many.

I was on a budget. It was hard to go from a solid paycheque to the sixty percent disability threw at me. And no stomach meant a new approach to eating. Big meals became such a waste; I'd eat three bites and be full. I'd reheat the plate over and over, eating the same supper all night. Drinking plain water made me feel raw and chafed inside. The nutritionist said it wasn't a good idea anyway to fill up on no calories. And I had to maintain my weight. Thirty-five pounds gone in the first four months. I needed new clothes. I needed to find ways to eat more. I stood in an aisle at Sobey's with a different protein drink in each hand, trying to decide which one to buy and I just slipped them into my pockets. I paid for my other items: deodorant, raw almonds, yogurt. No one noticed. I waited for those fingers of worry to poke me from inside, but nothing. A couple of ghostly sensations. Nerve endings were cobwebs. I thanked the cashier. She put the change right into my hand.

The first raindrops hit the windshield. We'll be there in five minutes. If it rains all night, it may prove complicated. But I have enough supplies.

At first, the stealing happened in pairs like that. I'd be trying to decide between two types of products: rechargeable batteries, light bulbs, vitamin pills. The thought of returning one – remembering to keep the receipt, driving back to the store, finding a parking spot – shag that. I just took them both. Then I always had extra stuff, so I gave it away. Dean caught on pretty fast to what I was doing. He usually came by once a week to play cards, so I'd offer things to him. I'd try to trade it for weed.

Dean knew a guy ran one of those 'outlet' markets which was supplemented with stolen stuff. He showed me how to make those bags with the foil lining that could fool the

scanner. It was great for razor refills. Those things are marked up at least 200%. I'd go to a drug store and fill the bag when the aisle was empty.

We're getting close. I won't be able to stretch or piss once we turn off the road. Best to pull over for a minute. The grey of the sky deepens in its last attempts at light. Rain spits on the pavement. I relieve myself in the woods and do a few lunges. Jerry's stillness rings with anticipation. I get back in the car.

Where was I? I say. Oh yes. The stealing. It went on for months before I got caught. I was real cocky that day; I left the store and went to another part of the mall to go to the bathroom. Julia was there when I came out of the toilet. I had no idea she was store manager. Waiting with her arms folded. She wasn't a rigid ghost anymore, she was this fierce little woman with a crew cut and a Wal-Mart jersey.

But I was lucky with her. She pulled out her cell phone to call the cops. And I asked her to let me have a cup of coffee first. That's another thing; I wouldn't be that bold if my stomach was full of fear. We sat in the Tim Horton's and I sipped my double-double slow. Figured I'd talk to her until I got an idea.

I smile at Jerry. It's amazing when you just meet someone and you realize you have so much in common, I say. And she manages the whole store. Access to all the supplies.

The turnoff is hard to see in the dark. Good thing the GPS gives us lots of notice. I mute it and turn off the headlights as we creep up the drive. The silver Dodge Ram is parked in front, just like Julia said it would be. Nasal twangs of new country music reverberate from the house. I let the car glide past and park by some trees.

Julia knew where to get the ingredients for termite. We googled how it worked. There are videos for everything now. And Julia's really quite creative. Why not? I said to her. Why not indeed?

The rain ends quickly. When the music stops and the lights go out, I haul Jerry out of the car. Dealing with Jerry is pretty awkward. With everything inside him, he's top heavy while his legs swing like a ragdoll. But I get him over the fence. The wet grass softens my footsteps. I lay Jerry on the hood of the Dodge Ram and prop up his back on the windshield. I arrange his nylon legs straight out from his torso. He's weighted at the feet and knees so he won't slip. I apply the lighter fluid in strategic places; the front of his shirt, the top of his camouflage pants. It's important that he doesn't flame up, but that everything simmers enough to get to his innards.

I lay one finger on the tip of Jerry's plastic chin. His synthetic eyes stare back into mine. I light his shirttail and cross the lawn in loping steps. I start the car. Jerry is smoking up. Julia said with Jerry's bum right over the centre of the hood, the thermite will heat up and become molten iron. She said it will pour into the engine block. His head and chest will melt gradually. I don't put on the headlights until I am past the house and speed up on my way to the pavement.

It's quiet back on the bypass road. I don't pass anyone else. It occurs to me that I should feel bad. I didn't flash my headlights at that red hatchback after seeing the moose. That would have been the courteous thing to do.

4. The Mummers' Parade

Sasha

Clyde says the parade takes about an hour from Bishop's Feild around Georgetown to Bannerman Park and back. I can smell my own breath inside the horse head mask and my hips are sweating under all this padding. But Judith's pink lips shine bright through her face-doily and she's so excited to see the other mummer-fied kids her size.

Wow Mommy, she says. Everyone looks magic!

I could friggin' squish her.

Maybe I should have worn pajama pants, like Clyde. He jokes his sleeping attire will give away his identity, as in some old hook-up could recognize him. He's probably right. St. John's knows way too much about each others' inside clothes.

Lauren

Extra socks are first on the list of What I've Neglected Today. Already, the pavement cold is seeping into my foot bones. Billy reaches for my hand and slips the flask from his sleeve into mine. That's better.

There must be at least three hundred masked strangers. We are a mass representation of a smaller time when it was acceptable to grab an opportunity for a little leverage on your neighbour, especially if they were well off. Get a little gawk at their properties and guzzle their winter stores of rum. Because in the haze of alcoholic groupthink, it's their problem if they can't see through your disguise. Surely your own neighbour should be able to recognize the glint in your eye.

But I do love a tradition of skullduggery and numbskullery, even when it's purely symbolic.

Sasha

The Mummers' Parade contains a feeling of some ancient mischief, like if I don't pay attention, Judith might wander off and be replaced with a changeling. Last year she wasn't big enough and the weather was shit. Maybe this can become our tradition, something she can anticipate more than the Santa Claus Parade. We'll say we're avoiding raising another outright consumer and be right smug about it: *Oh, Judith dies for the Mummers' Parade. Somehow, it's less creepy than a strange man in the chimney.*

Bells jangle and people whoop and sing. We wave at photographers and strangers. This is weird and fun, Judith says. I keep my balance with my new long neck and head. My legs pump under their saddlebag pillows. It's a pretty good workout when you think about it.

Lauren

Five minutes into the parade and all I can think of is if Sasha wants to be a good mummer, she needs to suck in that voice. There it is, Sasha's rat-a-tat-tat giggle. My heart turns to eggshell.

There's a mummer behind me who could be her. Sasha's height, in an overstuffed costume with a horse's head. It's been twelve years, but I am 95% sure it's her. High stats for me since I'm never 100% sure on anything. Really, no one should ever be 100% sure.

Sasha

My eyes return to the mummer with the lampshade hat and crazy quilt. It's Lauren's quilt with those mint green and fuchsia patches on the back. If I get close, I bet I'll see the cross-stitch sampler her grandmother added, the "Families are Forever," bit.

I kept my hand steady on that patch as I wrapped her up and placed her in the back seat of the taxi. Laren's back soaked and frozen and on fire. My face wet as we turned onto the parkway. Heat jacked to bust.

She's not on Facebook. I checked back in 2006 or so, when everyone else first joined. For a while, I thought maybe she got married or chose an alias. Then the site stopped letting people do that, so I tried again a couple of years ago. Fucking Scott is there though, with regular posts of his BC life. He has a baby with a striking Asian woman. She is lean and elegant and looks too sophisticated for him. He lost his hair, or enough of it to legitimize the tough guy shaved head thing. I wondered how his profile would make Lauren feel. If she was around. If she looked at it.

Underneath the lampshade, the mummer wears a veil, black or navy blue, a slate of a face. Lauren's blanket and facelessness. I used to worry she'd end up some kind of ghost.

Lauren

Billy holds my arm and laughs at the guy in front. Buddy's putting on a real show. He wears a pink tutu and shakes a tambourine: When I say mummers, you say lawd'in.

Mummers!

Lawd'in!

Mummers!

Lawd'in!

No one can tell if you don't sing or yell when your face is covered. No one can tell if you're smiling or your toes are froze or you're half cut at teatime.

If it's Sasha, that's her kid. I spotted her in Sobeys around five years ago, the baby tucked in a carrier on her chest like a rosebud. I hid in the pet supply section, praying she still

didn't have Trixie and needs dog food. Then she didn't enter the aisle and I thought, of course, Trixie would be over fifteen now. Trixie's probably long gone.

And suddenly I was angry all over again. Fuckin' Sasha, too chicken for a confrontation, taking off in the middle of the night with a note, the most cowardly of communication or at least it was before we all started texting. *We both know it's not working. It's just easier this way. You already know my concerns.* Couldn't even allow Trixie and me a goodbye, like I was too much of a shit show to be around a dog. Getting up that morning, padding around the apartment, all the empty shelves. The confusing silence, then skidding halt of trust.

Sasha

In Georgetown, people wave from their homes. Clyde and Judith do a little dance in front of Lorraine Maddigan in her doorway. She laughs and pretends she doesn't know who Judith is. It's friggin' darling.

The mummer who might be Lauren claps and moves slowly. We're about to pass Mullock and Hayward. If it's her, I wonder if she remembers calling me from that house party: *He says he doesn't want to be with me anymore. I can't take it. It hurts so much.* And the next day, her bedroom door didn't open. Hard night, hungover, okay. Deciding to make her lunch, laying out the bread and condiments and opening the cutlery drawer and the slot for kitchen knives was empty. When she finally got up to go to the bathroom, I found them in a bird's nest pile under her bed, like she wanted to have a variety of varying length and sharpness, like she was doing a survey.

Judith tucks her hand into mine. She hasn't asked to be carried yet. Maybe we can all get naps this afternoon. This exhaustion didn't exist when it was Lauren, Trixie and I in our little Lime Street house. I'd come home tired, but be welcomed by them and feel alive all over again. Vitamin L and T. I thought it would be the same with Judith and Clyde. Instead, it's tired, so many layers and textures and flavours of tired. Always something to

be done that isn't done and needs to be done now, can't you see, it's garbage day, we're out of milk, we're out of so many things. No, it is not my turn. Always a pause and reminder to be patient, to wait before speaking. I could let it all out with Lauren and she'd hand me a glass, a candy, a morsel of something. She would make herself so fully a friend of mine.

Lauren

I love the safety in incognito, Billy says. I nod. How many in this parade are taking long looks at former secret spaces? There's the place Scott broke up with me, right out of the blue: *I love you, but not as much as I've loved others. So, it's not really fair to you.* And we were so, so loaded and I was crying and it felt like everything was coming out of me until I could taste nothing but booze and grief. Staggering out in a t-shirt, the winter snow cold enough to burn.

And then Scott came back and for a day everything was apologies and tears. I got out of the Waterford and we pretended everything was okay, like it made us closer. And then there was this new knowledge branded with permanent status: I did something serious and he's taking it seriously. It must be love.

Sasha wouldn't have none of it: *What is it about this guy? I don't get how he can have this kind of hold on you. This makes me nervous.* Me sitting up in bed, shaking my head at her: *You don't get it. You wouldn't understand.*

And I get why she wanted to run away from me. Because you can't just do that and not have everyone know you can do it. And we still know what I did is something I can do. How I hated it. How I hate it.

Sasha

Fucking Scott. *Just stay away*, I said. *Let her get over you*. Off to the Waterford he goes, all apologies and caresses. *How dare you tell the doctors not to let me in?* Who actually says the words I dare you?

How are you going to look out for her? I asked him. And he was all, *we love each other, we're all each other needs*. Then he can't even take Trixie out for walk when he knew Lauren was with doctors all day and I had work and class. *I've got a lot on my mind*, he said as I laid paper towels on the dogshit trail from the kitchen to her bedroom. *It's not like the dog is mine*.

Maybe it's not her quilt. Maybe my eyeballs are trained to see her in bits of other people. Like the shade she dyed her hair, that birch-bark blond. One of the moms in Judith's class has the same shade, plus Lauren's complexion, like icing sugar on strawberry mousse. She introduced herself, Melissa or Melanie, asked if Judith was in swimming. We talked about the Aquarena and the new community centre in the East End.

Later, I remembered how Lauren would paint a perfect swoop of waterproof black eyeliner on her top eyelids, everyday. And that guy, whatshisface, Robert Mahon, we'd been on and off, he said that eyeliner swoop proved she was *batshit* with her *crazy eyes*. And I agreed and now I resent him and myself, because *batshit* and *crazy* validated dissolving the situation into something I could stomp around with: *well, if Lauren wants to be this weak and clichéd over some asshole, she's not as sharp as I thought she was*. I didn't know better. No one ever talked about what it meant to want to kill yourself back then.

Lauren

Billy staggers when we get to Bishop's Feild. I thread my arm under his pits. What do you need, b'y, what do you need. We're back now, we can stop. His eyes find mine through our disguises. I'm so froze, girl. Water, please.

The volunteers should have some.

I'll be good here, he says. I'll wait.

Water for Billy. If Sasha's here with her family when I come back, I'll say hello. Ugh no. I'll lift my doily. She's with her kid, she may not want to. But I want to give her that, I don't know, an offering. Here, see. Here I am.

Sasha

Back at Bishop's Feild, mad mummers are organized. They play trad music and carry trays of refreshments. Everyone scuffs and hops to stay warm. The crazy quilt mummer stands alone. It will not hurt to guess. I can even guess she's someone else, someone other than Lauren. Either way, it's an excuse to get up close.

The mummer who could be Lauren freezes as I approach. The lampshade head lowers in fixation, like a bull about to charge. Within three feet, I spot the bristles on his chin through the veil. I keep moving. My heartbeat is a cold trickle in my chest.

Judith pulls my dress. She wants a cookie. Volunteers offer trays of jam-jams and sweet drinks. Clyde says his feet hurt. Fine then, fine. A cookie, a look around and home, I say.

Judith nods. I love the Mummers' Parade, she says. It's the best. Like Halloween and Christmas, all wrapped up together.

5. The Lobster

On the Day One of Christmas vacation, Uncle Walter says the only shows he likes are The Classics. When he's in the living room, the TV stays on the Retro Channel with its reruns of series like *All in the Family* and *Happy Days*. Most of the time, he's seen the episodes before and talks over them to Aunt Zoe and me.

Those reality TV shows melt your brain, Gaby, girl, he says. They don't make TV like this anymore.

I hate *The Honeymooners* and *Maude*, Aunt Zoe says. It's just Americans, yelling at each other.

I don't mind the Retro Channel — when you're a guest in someone's home, their belongings are a novelty. But when they announce *this show was filmed before a live studio audience*, all I can think of is how all those people are probably dead now and how it's a no longer live audience laughing at Archie and Edith Bunker (also no longer alive). If I was in my own space and still with Julian, he would nod in agreement. But I'm only here 'til Boxing Day so I keep that morbid shit to myself.

Uncle Walter and Aunt Zoe's house is as I remember: impeccably clean from crown moldings to full-body shag carpeting, lots of safe shades of brown. I have been instructed to relax. I conduct a regular triangular orbit of the main spaces: the kitchen, where Aunt Zoe prepares food and entertains visitors; the basement, where Cousin Melanie's kids play video games and watch Netflix; and the living room, where Uncle Walter laughs along with the dead. Each area is decorated with white lights and Christmas centerpieces. Each contains what seems to be a mandatory box of Ganong Delecto or Pot of Gold. I have all the cream centres memorized.

Get Walter to tell you about the eagle was Mom's last piece of advice before she left for Jamaica. In November, when everything with Julian and I happened, every conversation she and I had came with suggestions for this visit. Mom has left every Christmas since Dad died, but now with the no-refunds on Julian's and I's flights, she

feels bad about not being in the province while I'm here. Aunt Zoe's invitation is definitely a pity present; *poor Gaby, stuck in St. John's while her ex goes off to Central. Then she's back to her teeny Toronto apartment. What a sin.* So I am prepared with Mom's tidbits: Ask Melanie about rowing, her team did well in the Regatta. Aunt Zoe is a baking fiend, you can help her out. Melanie's kids are really into Minecraft. Make sure you take it easy. It's a difficult time of year. Hardships shine brighter at Christmas.

Helping Aunt Zoe in the kitchen proves difficult as there is a gadget and a system for everything. Zesting a lemon doesn't happen with a grater; there's a zester on a hook over the sink. She cooks eggs with the antique egg coddlers on display in the glass cabinet. She has to show me how to use the lemon zester because it's shaped like an angel fish and I can't figure out how to grip it. I've never heard of egg coddling. Sweat perks on her hairline. Now, what did I do with the egg beater? she says. Sorry, Gaby, I get into a real pattering rhythm and lose track. Can't chew gum and walk at the same time, ha-ha.

In the basement, I watch the kids play games. Reese is six and wants me to play Mario Kart, but is disappointed when he's way better at it than me. His sister Sabrina is nine. We watch cartoons until Sabrina says, there's a boy in my class named Cody. He told everyone he saw his mom give his dad a blow job. Do you know what a blow job is?

I do, I say. But you're too young for me to discuss words like that with you.

I know what it is, Sabrina says. The proper name is fellatio.

What's fell a-sheet-oh? Reese says.

I stare at the door. Any second, an adult member of my extended family will enter to find me discussing oral sex with two children. I have to go to the bathroom, I say.

The spare bedroom is mine for sleeping, but it doubles as an office and Cousin Melanie needs to work from home until Christmas Eve. Her employer runs a chain of luxury hotels and this is a busy season. In the mornings, I try to vacate by nine so she can get in and do her work. She says I can sleep in, it's no big deal, but every morning, she's

downstairs, dressed and prepared. She wears a lot of fuchsia and plucks her eyebrows into sharp, clean arches. I still dress for the office even when I'm home, she tells me. There are a lot of Skype meetings.

When I ask about these meetings, she discusses certain clients they've accommodated. She drops names I think I'm supposed to know. She asks about my work. As I explain what goes into auditing pension information, she swallows a yawn and Jesus, how can I blame her. She points at the book I'm reading, *Us Conductors*, and I tell her it's a fictional account of a non-fiction character, about the man who invented the theremin. The story follows his journey from Russian to the USA and how he becomes a bit of celebrity and when he meets the love of his life, suddenly the point of view of the story changes – he starts talking to her as *you* and the reader realizes they aren't really the audience, everything is about this person he can't be with.

Melanie sways in sturdy understanding, like she's withstanding a stiff breeze. Talking to her is like trying to open a pill bottle with one of those tricky childproof caps: push down and turn, spin and click, nothing. Julian would always open those for me.

It must be busy being an Executive Assistant, I say.

I'm the Personal Assistant," she says. The Executive Assistant has to deal with everyone. The PA goes between the CEO and the clients.

Maybe she told me this previously and I forgot. I excuse myself to go the bathroom.

I take a bathroom break every ninety minutes or so, just to sit on the edge of the tub and not be seen. I flip through Aunt Zoe's collection of *Canadian House and Home* and consider words like palette and aesthetic, phrases like adding pattern and texture, this space features a fresh mix of blue and white. Stuff I would grab onto and play-say, create a special voice for. Like with yesterday's slippery sidewalks: *Notice how the pavement surprises the eye with a matte appearance but is actually polished with a delicate layer of*

ice. Details like this make a memorable impact. I would play the clown until Julian said knock it off.

I will remember from now on that Melanie is a PA. That was the abbreviation Julian used when he thought I was being passive aggressive. Why is PA always your knee-jerk reaction? he said when I presented him with the blank Loblaws birthday cake.

It's not PA, I said. I heard you complain to Kevin that I ate the last piece of your promotion cake. So, here you go.

Oh my God, Gaby. If you're so pissed, why don't you just say it?

Why would you say those things if you weren't mad about the cake? You said it; I heard it and now, you've got another cake. I'm trying to fix the situation.

Jesus suffering Christ. Just call me an asshole already.

In Uncle Walter and Aunt Zoe's house, I am smiling and ready to engage. The past three days have been a flow of offerings: tea, chocolates, drinks, observations, and apologies: *oh, you're so quiet. Sorry we're not more entertaining. Carroll O'Connor was a big anti-drug activist. I wish Melanie's kids read more, like you. More snow on the way.* Each time I settle down with my book, I wonder how long the stillness will last, like a penned animal bracing itself for the inevitable cage rattle.

I get outside even though, as Melanie says, everything is rotten with ice. I take two strolls a day. I pretend to admire the neighbour's outdoor lights reflecting in the icicles dangling from their roof. *Lengthy icicles are a bold finish for window frames and unsightly roof gutters. Paired with a lingering anxiety over possible lack of proper home insulation, it evokes a daring 'je ne sais quoi'.*

The neighbourhood houses are reruns of each other. There are parks nearby. There's a coffee shop on Commonwealth Avenue. I feel the area has character, but maybe I'm seeing it with Greater Toronto Area eyes; all the brown brick houses we looked at,

further and deeper into the suburbs. This neighbourhood would score Good Walkability on the Realtor.ca app we used. I don't want to live in a place where we have to drive to walk, I said. We should make that a priority.

We need space for two cars, he said. And a low mortgage.

So we're going to purchase based on our current commutes? That can change.

Until you find a job you like, what choice do we have?

Julian said he has his own copy of *Us Conductors* and I can keep this one. And when I was packing, he said I could take whatever I wanted. But I might write him when I'm finished to let him know my impressions. It could be part of a Happy New Year message.

On Tibb's Eve, Uncle Walter drinks Crown Royal and tells the eagle story. I remember Mom saying to bring it up and guilt nudges me for not remembering.

When I was a kid, my dad and I would go duck hunting. We built up an isthmus on the river leading into the bay, so we could walk out close to the middle. When the bay and the river froze over, the isthmus made this kind of eddy where the water didn't freeze. It was kind of a barachois, where the salt water meets fresh.

I nod and sip my wine. Isthmus, eddy and barachois? Uncle Walter is the kind of man who takes his knowledge for granted. Melanie likely gets it from him.

So one day in February, I'm out walking and I see this eagle dive into that patch of water. It flies out with something large in its talons and flies up and up and up....and then it drops. Like a propeller.

Uncle Walter twirls his index finger down through the air. So I go over to where it landed, he says. And there's a lobster on the ground. And there's the eagle's body. No head. Completely decapitated.

Uncle Walter slaps the arm rest: What are the chances of that? He munches a Ganong Delecto as a reward.

So, the lobster...chop-chop?

Yep. Got him in midair.

That's wild, I say.

I tell him he should have bought a lottery ticket that day, Aunt Zoe says.

Melanie rolls her eyes. He tells this story every time he drinks, she says. We hear it a thousand times a Christmas.

So what? Uncle Walter says. It's a good story. I like that lobster. Giving the ol' fuck-you to its hunter.

Language, Aunt Zoe says.

Great story, I say. The wine warms my belly and I like that the TV is off and we're talking. It's really poetic, actually, I say.

Animals strike out when they're panicked, Melanie says. Everyone knows that.

The next day is Christmas Eve and Coffee Matters will close early. I have ten pages left in *Us Conductors*. I decide to walk the neighbourhood and finish the book with a latte.

I catch Melanie's comment as I pull on my boots. It's a quiet aside to Aunt Zoe: House guests are like fish.

Shhh, girl, Aunt Zoe says. Be nice.

I know how the saying ends. *After three days, they stink*. I tighten my laces. You people invited me. I didn't ask for this.

Outside, a neighbour's trash bag is ripped and it looks like something's gotten into it. *One can enjoy subtle winter shades on their own or pep them up with splashes of colour. Like a bouquet of intense hues from a torn bag of garbage, frozen to the ground.* Someone else's garbage tucked under Melanie's bed would be a lesson in stink. I step around take-out containers and brown lettuce. How can I be that annoying? I'm staying clear of everyone. What a bitch.

It has snowed, but the sidewalks are mostly cleared. The roads are built wide to accommodate multiple vehicle ownership. Julian and I saw communities like this, newly-built houses with designated parks. We can't afford it now, he said. Maybe for house number two. Maybe after kids.

But, we've moved so many times, I said. And I loved the bungalow, the one with the finished basement and secluded yard.

We'll have to budget hard to make a down payment, he said. No restaurants for a long time.

The air is calm around the house with the hum of businesses a few streets over. Cousin Melanie had all these things growing up, her own room, a clean house, places to go. Maybe she's never had to share them. Maybe for her, I am monopolizing the holiday resources, the attention, the space, the cream-centred chocolates. People get territorial. Julian got that way with the thermostats: If you want your dream house, put on a sweater. Turn it down and layer up.

I am walking fast. I'll get to Coffee Matters in no time. After I finish the last ten pages of *Us Conductors*, I'll want to dawdle, stay absent longer. Fucking Melanie, fucking extended family, making me toss my time in the trash. When I get to the cafe, I should see if they sell any trinkets or something. Maybe they have scented candles. Here you go, Melanie, to mask my houseguest stench. Or I could clean the spare bedroom so it's way better than I found it. They taught us to do that in Girl Guides, I'll say. Make sure you aren't left with my visitor hum.

The sidewalk is covered with thick snow. A stamped line of footprints weave their way into someone's lawn from the sidewalk. *Rather than stick to convention, this winter day isn't afraid to mix it up a little. Here, we've stamped random trails through snow banks, possibly through old dogshit for a cohesive, yet unexpected, design.* Maybe the municipal workers are disgruntled and gave up the snow clearing. The hell with this, they said. We need a raise.

On Julian's birthday, he wanted a wine and cheese. He picked up good stuff, not the no-name brands and coupon products we'd purchased for months. The price tag on the wine was \$66.50. Chateau Neuf de Pap. I wasn't consulted.

Once all the birthday party guests arrived and I had drunk myself bold, I turned all the thermostats down. I left a folded stack of sweaters on a chair. Put them on if you're cold, I said. We have to keep things tight these days. Kevin's wife shivered in her black mini-dress. I handed her a Costco-brand fleece.

The next day, Julian talked continuously while picking up empties. My head throbbed. I grew up in a house where people yelled when they were mad, he said. We got it all out at once. It wasn't a big deal.

I don't want to yell and scream every time I'm frustrated.

All couples need to learn how to disagree. We should know how to do this by now. It always has to be death by a thousand cuts with you.

There is one set of footprints before mine in the park. They leave the walkway and arch around out into the grounds. Snowflakes fall in a hovering, encircling pattern. Disco-ball snow is what Julian called it. I wipe one from my eye. A figure stands about twenty metres away. They have walked out into the clearing. They are just standing there.

I wave. No response. They are dressed all in yellow. I take out my phone like I have many times before in Toronto, pretending I'm texting or talking so I can let the man

pass me or be ready to call for help, take a picture. I cannot tell if the person sees me. Maybe they are an apparition. This is the moment I see a ghost, this is when my whole belief system does a nosedive. I wave again. Nothing. Are you okay? I ask. My voice emerges chipped on the edges.

The person's hands are clasped before them, their head raised, looking ahead, not quite at me, but at something beyond. It's a man with a beard. Snow is collecting all over his body. He is doing nothing about it.

A dog barks and I almost fucking die of fright. It bumbles into view, some kind of terrier. It circles the man, sniff, and lifts its leg. The man is a statue now, a plastic figure. One of the wise men from a nativity scene, stolen and abandoned. Some wise-ass took a wise man.

The owner calls the dog. My legs are triggered back into action. It could be a neighbour of Walter and Zoe. Later, they'll pop in and recognize my coat in the porch, oh, were you out earlier trying to talk to the Wise Man? Melanie's eyes rolling. People rolling their eyes really is the worst facial expression. It should be illegal.

I make new footprints through the walkway. The dog and its owner move into the grounds. They don't look at me. I am alone here, making a big deal over nothing.

I return to the start of the path and go to the coffee shop. The last ten pages of the novel are perfect. I stare out the window and watch disco-snow dance and imagine theremins playing. Today was the first day I felt anger and fear since I put the book in my bag and left. When Julian became irritated, I was overcome with a wariness, like walking alone through a parking lot, checking the parked cars. Are the engines running? Can drivers see me? How alone am I? The lobster wasn't brave. It was pulled out of everything it knew. It reacted out of the biggest fear it had ever known.

Back in the house, Melanie's down in the basement with the kids. Uncle Walter pours me a glass of wine. The Retro Channel is on. *All in the Family* was filmed before a live studio audience, the announcer says.

I bet that live studio audience is dead now, I say.

Oh, indeed, Uncle Walter says. A totally dead studio audience.

Shhh, you two, Aunt Zoe says. That's so dark.

Uncle Walter slurps his drink. I don't see it like that, he says. I like knowing I'm still alive to do the laughing.

6. Gutless Bravado, Part Two

Sandwiches are a job to eat. So many simultaneous categories of food. Digesting a sandwich makes my post-gastrectomy body feel like Windows 10 with too many applications open.

But the gastro doctor says this is normal. After they removed my stomach, they made a kind of bag from the bottom of my esophagus and the top of my intestine. Gradually, it will stretch and be able to hold more food. Until then, I get full fast and digestion steals my energy. The doctor said I have to keep challenging myself with more food, more variety. He makes eating sound like preparing for a math exam. But I'm still on disability and have lots of time. Every day I eat a sandwich and a salad, no matter how long it takes. A lettuce leaf is a crumpled sheet of paper, snagged in my core.

Dean picked up a ticket to Dublin on a seat sale and I get to stay in his house while he's gone. I am lucky for homeowner friends like Dean who know I crave solitude. I am lucky to live in this present, when my DNA can be tested for prickish little demise-plotting genes. I am lucky to live in a country where expensive surgical procedures don't bankrupt me. These are things I tell myself. I make my hand write them down. Maybe if I write them down, I'll eventually feel too fulfilled to pour a drink or light up a smoke.

I think when Dean bought the house in Mount Pearl, he believed he was doing what he thought he was supposed to be doing. His permanent job with Schlumberger means good pay and benefits. His Mount Pearl house has a garage and basement, a back deck and a freshly paved driveway, on a freshly paved street. His house sits with a fringe of similar houses with spotless vinyl siding in comfortable colours, diplomatically alike with their allotments of land and sunlight access, in a new housing division named after a local athlete who placed in the Olympics.

But I am five days in and the sterility is fading. Neighbourhood rhythms surface: winter barbeques, shed parties, beers in garages, smokes in driveways. It is a community of drinking buddies and play dates. Women pad across wide streets carrying cellophane-

wrapped trays for their book clubs/wine tastings/ladies' nights. Men stand together outside drinking beers, examining each other's parked equipment: trucks, skidoos, campers. The women have arduous, processed hairstyles. The men wear ball caps and mustaches. This is the dream they all wanted, everyone in their own nest. And Dean believed if he made the nest, the woman would come. But it's still no ladybird for Dean.

He hasn't done much decorating with the house. A few family photos: one with Dean in his 20's, his hair long but already thinning. Some Chinese trinkets he picked up on a work trip to Beijing: a leathery map in a frame; a statue of Guan Yu, God of War and Business. The kitchen feels unused, but ready for action. Cupboards lined with patterned paper, a spotless stove. I have never known Dean to cook. The few dishes I dirty for sandwiches and salads seem odd and sparse in the dishwasher, so I wash them by hand. This limbo kitchen makes me a little sad.

The living room is spacious with wide windows facing the street. While I digest, I lie on the couch with the side window cracked to let in fresh air and neighbourhood sounds. Dean's coffee table bursts with magazines, mostly Time and Sports Illustrated. I root through them for something to read and discover a coil bound, three-subject notebook. Dean has filled the first section with hand-drawn graphs. Each graph is six rows of six squares and each square has one or two check marks or an X and he has tabulated a score at the bottom: \$10,550. \$5000. \$12,750. Some boxes contain dollar amounts in them. I am confused about the game, but it looks familiar.

I am sorry for whatever it is I am doing wrong. This is what the woman from the house on the right says as she crunches her way to her door. The man with her has been talking since they were in the car, the tumble-dry reverberation of his voice at a steady idling of frustration: *every goddamn time we go to see your friends. Every time.*

Then voices of kids outside, the shush of snow pants, one of them singing a jingle from somewhere. Do-DO-do-do, do-DO-do. The Jeopardy theme song. This is what Dean is doing in the notebook; keeping score to see how well he does at Jeopardy. And this also makes me a little sad for Dean. But I check the graphs again. The two checks in each

square must mean he got the answer before the contestant rung in. There are lots of double checks. Good job, Dean.

The last subject section in the notebook does not contain Jeopardy scores and after staring at the scrawls for minute, I realize it is a journal of sorts. I make a mental note to remember where I found the notebook in the coffee table.

And then I read it. Fuck it, like he wouldn't go through my stuff. The guy found out about my surgery by poking through my papers. *What's this?* he said, holding up the stool specimen requisition. *What do you have to turn in your shit for?*

Most of Dean's entries are about women. The first entry's about a woman named Molly: *She's a hot mess that's been reheated too many times.* This makes me laugh because I can hear Dean saying it. Other entries have dates and times and he mentions POF and it takes me a while to realize it stands for Plenty of Fish:

Jan 15th, POF date, Lana, real estate agent, 42. Nice, but no spark. Into running and when I said it was bad for her knees she got a bit uptight.

Feb. 9th. Joyce from across the street had a party. Met Kara there. She lives in the neighbourhood. Very shy with angelic face. Met Shelly too. Cute, blond, big tits. Reads tarot cards. I don't go in for that shit, but I might let her read mine just to see what she says about me.

Feb. 16th. Asked out a missus from POF, Debbie. I'd been talking to her for a week or so. She said no cause it was obvious I was waiting for Valentine's Day to be over. Fucking crazy.

Feb. 25th. Joyce says I should go out with Kara. Says she's a single mom, two kids, she needs to meet more nice guys. I said I wasn't sure about kids, but I thought she was very pretty.

Feb. 27th. Hooked up with Shelly after 2 weeks of texting. When I got her bra off, her tits popped out twice as big as I expected. It was like opening a can of surprise snakes.

I laugh out loud at that, which sounds weird by itself in the living room. Maybe the neighbours can hear me. How aware are they of my presence? I lie and listen. The voice of the father of the family on the left says *you kids are ridiculous. You could heat the house with the number of computer screens on.* I close the window before I hear what the kids have to say, although I doubt they have much of a response. There is a naked intimacy in the suburbs that leaves me dark inside. From now on, I'll close the curtains. I'll park Dean's car in the garage when I return from errands.

When the sun goes down, I'm idle. Maybe a glass of wine. Dean told me I could help myself to whatever food and drink is in the house, but I plan on replacing the bottles I've gone through. Like everything else, his wine collection is ready to present. Wine is instant warm euphoria from my mouth right into my bloodstream. I keep the empties so I can remember the brands and dates I've consumed.

I read more entries as I polish off the Malbec. They make me feel less sad for Dean—at least he's getting some action. I wonder when this need will return for myself. Companionship. A bit of touch. My libido departed along with my stomach. I don't miss it yet.

March 3rd. Joyce still wants me to ask out Kara. She told me a story about some asshole who hangs around her. The guy shows up once or twice a week with groceries and doesn't leave until she cooks him dinner. He always comes when he knows she's alone with her kids and can't go anywhere. He acts like he's doing her a favour cause he's bringing food, but he makes her cook it all for him. I told Joyce that sounded really sketchy.

March 4th. Shelly wants to get together again. Her place smells like eggs and patchouli, kind of grosses me out.

March 10th. Bumped into Kara at Sobey's. She had taken a cab there and I offered her a ride home. Back at her place, there was a black car parked in front and when she saw it, she got quiet. I offered to help her take her groceries in, but she grabbed all five bags in a lazy man's load and took off. It's too bad because she's very sweet and we had a nice conversation about traveling in Asia as she lived in Korea for a bit. I like her laugh.

March 13th. Hooked up with Shelly again. The sex was pretty good, but then she wanted to loan me all these books on homeopathy and when I said I didn't believe in it, she got pissed.

I wake up on the couch. I have to stop doing this. Or at least fall asleep on my side, although having no stomach means I don't puke often or very much at once. Maybe I should ask my doctor about the risk of choking on vomit.

If I was more comfortable in the neighbourhood, I'd go for a walk. But I don't like the idea of trotting by people's houses looking at their vehicles and the wide windows into their lives. I don't want to be watched from living rooms and kitchen dinettes. But I want to go out. I'll go to the liquor store and replace the wine I've drank.

At the NLC, I buy five bottles to replace Dean's and it costs almost a hundred and twenty fucking dollars. No more drinking Dean's wine. I get a box of pinot grigio for myself even though white wine fucks me up. I'd better be careful.

When I come out of Sobey's, there is a woman standing by the car. She holds two cloth bags of groceries and makes small nervous steps back and forth. She looks like she wants to smoke. Or I think this because I'm trying not to smoke. She jumps when I remote unlock the car.

Oh. You're not Dean.

No, I'm just using his car. Dean's in Ireland.

Oh yes. He told me that. You're the housesitter. Sorry. I was waiting for the bus and recognized his car.

Do you want a ride home?

It's okay. She hauls the bags up and winces slightly. Well, if you don't mind. The bus is taking forever.

It's no problem.

And I'm Kara.

Hi.

Kara gnaws her cuticles for most of the drive. She asks a lot of questions and nibbles while I talk. Most of her questions are about Dean: how long have I known him, how did we meet, how do I like the house, what was he like when he was younger. I mention the picture of him with his long hair and she giggles and she really is very cute. When she notices the box of wine, she says it's her favourite. I like the cheap stuff, she says. Then she immediately apologizes and I laugh and tell her the cheap stuff is great. She tells me where her house is and when we get close to her place, she says oh fuck.

What's wrong?

Nothing, she says. Some company I'd rather not have.

A black Pontiac Sunfire is parked in front of her house. The snow on the lawn has thawed in patches and is peppered with kids' toys. Someone is sitting in the car, I can see the outline of a ball cap and the crook of an elbow on the window's edge. I pull over and Kara thanks me quick and scurries up the walk with her cloth bags. The Sunfire driver doesn't move.

I feel like doing something to be a brat, like strolling up to the car, talking at him like a nosey neighbour. I loop around, re-enter the street, and park a few houses from Kara's. The Sunfire driver is out of the car now, crossing the lawn. He's gangly and walks cocky, wide steps with his hands in his pockets. I can't see his face, just a Bulls ball cap. Jeans and a jean jacket. What's that called? The Canadian tuxedo. A white haired woman stands in front of him, shaking her head. She holds up her hands and he sidesteps around her. She yells at his back: we don't need this. He walks into the house and shuts the door. I use my phone to take a photo of his licence plate. Not that I know what to do with it, but I feel like his presence should be recorded.

Instead of going home, I stop at the McDonald's. It takes forever to eat a hamburger, but I figure I can take small bites while I wait. I park across the street and a few doors down from Kara's house. Dean's car is one of those silver Hyundais everyone has. Hopefully I won't be too conspicuous.

The sun is down when he leaves Kara's. His shoulders are stiff in his jean jacket and he makes a point of stomping the purple My Little Pony castle on his way up the walk which makes me laugh. I want to be a nuisance to him real bad. I've probably been too bored lately. I want to find out where he lives. Maybe some kind of prank is in order: a bag of flaming dogshit, random COD deliveries. Something will come to mind if I follow him. I set up my smart phone on the dashboard; filming him is a good idea if he has a tricky route.

I try to keep a car or two between us. He enters the Tim Horton's drive through on Merchant Drive and I wait in the parking lot for him. But when he indicates to go left, he turns right instead. Bastard. Then a couple more tricks like that, signalling to turn into Smitty's, but going straight, then left instead of right on Old Placentia Road.

He starts speeding up on Southland Boulevard and I don't want to follow him 'til the end cause there's nothing really down there. But he takes the exit onto the highway towards St. John's. If he goes into town, I'll probably lose him. He might drive around all night. He might lead me to a dead end and confront me. He might keep a weapon in his car. He speeds up and I do too. At least he can't do a u-turn on the divided highway. I'll turn off at Kilbride if he goes past.

The Sunfire does at least a hundred on the ramp and doesn't slow for the yield/merge sign. He flies along the shoulder of the highway. There is another vehicle, a blue Volvo, in the right lane. The Sunfire speeds past it, passing on the right. The Volvo swerves into the left lane too fast. It tips into the barrier between the divided highways and rolls, once, twice, once more. The Sunfire doesn't stop, its red back lights like cat eyes shrinking. I pull over. The Volvo has landed right side up, right before the opposite highway. I get my phone. Stop goddamn filming. 911 ready to press. The driver's door opens and a man steps out. His face is shock white, but he stands straight and unharmed. He takes three precise steps and regards his car, his own hands. There are no other passengers. An oncoming car on the other side slows and stops. People come towards

him. You okay? You okay, buddy? I put Dean's car back in drive and pull back on to the road.

Back in Dean's area, music vibrates from the neighbours' house. Vehicles line the street, gleaming with industry. The streets here are wide and accommodating. I imagine they planned to contrast the narrow pathways downtown. I fiddle with the keys and let their voices bounce around me. Does Dean receive invitations to local get-togethers? Did he get the code to click open the cliques? He's made the investment. He should be part of this world.

Inside, I pop the box of wine in the fridge. My guts contain discomfort from the hamburger. I chew gum to get things moving inside me, grinding the gears for intestinal momentum. Christ, eating is so much effort, I have to practice for it. But if it's one thing that makes life easier in the long run, it's worth it.

The Sunfire is back at Kara's two days later. I borrow Julie's car to use to wait for him. When he's inside, I leave the note under his windshield wiper. Just one sheet of paper with a still from the little film I made that shows the Sunfire slipping past the blue Volvo. One sentence: Stay away or this goes to the cops.

I do a little drive by every day before Dean comes back. Six days, no sign. I vacuum and clean the bathrooms before his flight comes in. I leave the rest of the box of wine in the fridge. Not all ladies like the pricey stuff, I'll tell him. He should keep it to drink with someone he likes.

7. Looking Like a Beginner

I can't wait to tell Craig about Miksang. I describe how Bjorn took the photography class to Bannerman Park. He made us stand in a circle and close our eyes. It was cold, but there was no wind. He guided us through the meditation.

Focus on your breathing, Bjorn said. What do you hear, what you feel? When you open your eyes, mark what captures your attention. We practiced before using our cameras. Take a picture of whatever stands out to you, he said. You will take a lot of photos. And that's okay.

Yoga and photography, Craig says. You're some bunch.

It's a practice in looking, see. It makes you slow down and really see things. Miksang means 'good eye' in Tibetan.

Then you go home, sit in front of a computer, and try to find something decent in four hundred shots of treetops and snow banks. Namaste.

But when I show him the shadow photo, the way the light hits the line of tree trunks, the way they stand like tired soldiers, he nods and touches my shoulder. It's a great shot, he says.

Craig tickles me a lot. Today, he straddles my chest and pins my elbows to the bed with his knees. He grips both my wrists over my head with one hand and lets the other wander. I can't stop screeching. Stopitstopitstopit.

You're laughing, he says. You love it. He makes small circles in my armpits, like he's stirring his tea.

I don't mean to hit him, but I have to move. I jostle my hips trying to buck him off, I bicycle my legs. Knee connects with scrotum. His face puckers and he retracts into a coil of himself: Jesus, Faye. Whatcha do that for?

I'm sorry. It was an accident.

I was only joking around. Not very Zen of you.

I can't help it. It's a reflex.

That really hurt. You knew that would hurt.

He lies fetal, facing the wall. Right sooky now, refusing to look at me. I will not sigh or roll my eyes. With Craig, it's like he can hear pupils rotate in their sockets.

I smooth his hair and imagine it is the fur of some endangered species. This rare prickly beast. It's good to imagine things differently. Like in the article Bjorn gave out: *Provoked by Astonishment: Seeing and Understanding in Inquiry*. The author encourages us as artists to look at everything and see it new. He broke down Miksang into three parts:

1. Flash of perception. You see something. It stops you. It takes all your attention.
2. Visual analysis. What exactly has grabbed you so? What is so special about it?
3. Forming the equivalent. What is needed to capture the picture? What techniques can you apply?

Craig angles his head down. He's a cat that doesn't want to be pet, but likes it too much. My hand on the nape of his neck, like when Dad and I tapped maple trees, the tiny spout foreign in the thick tree trunk. If I can become more observant, my photographs will only improve. Everything could get better. Listen to hear. Look to see.

But I don't bring this up with Craig. I can already see what he'll say.

I meet Pam for happy hour. I make sure to listen more than speak. Pam adjusts her sweater over her waist and mutters about muffin top. She orders vodka and water because she's off fizzy drinks.

I start with the trainer on Tuesday, Pam says. My Christmas ass is still crawling up my back. Never fails, get in a relationship, gain ten pounds.

Maybe you two can work out together.

I guess.

I think you look great though.

Thanks. Craig is pretty active, right? He's a smart guy. He wouldn't need convincing if you wanted to exercise with him. I can't even get Jeremy to go for a walk with me.

I don't reply. I could tell Pam how even though Craig has an overall average of ninety-two percent in his chemical engineering program, he thought it was clever to bring up the number of people I've slept with during our last argument. Which was ridiculous because it was about food. He comes over and eats all the healthy groceries. He had polished off half a loaf of multigrain bread and all the fruit, then bought Cadbury's Cream Eggs and Kettle Chips to make up for it.

But I don't want this, I said. I want my bread and fruit replaced.

You always eat the chips though.

Yeah, because it's there. I don't buy that stuff.

Maybe I'm trying to fatten you up so no one else will look at you, he said. After all, you did bang eight guys in your first year of university.

Wow. I say please don't clean out my fridge and you call me a slut.

Jesus, Faye. I never said you were a slut. I'm only bringing up what you told me.

No, you're using it in an argument. You think you're playing a card.

The next day, he sent a fruit bouquet from Edible Arrangements. The card read Sorry I was a crabapple. I didn't really feel ready to talk to him so I just texted smiley face emojis. I ate all the mango bits before he came over.

But it's not about Craig right now. A melting snowflake glistens on a strand of Pam's hair, like a crystal. She works hard in everything she does: a master's degree on top of teaching, weekends volunteering with the Cancer Society. She doesn't see how capable she is.

I'll work out with you if you want, I say.

Thanks. You're a doll.

My camera and I go on hikes. Together, we traipse through Pippy Park, Cuckold's Cove, and around the Battery. They're all places I've been many times before, but if I can find my Beginner's Eye, they could become different and new, separate from any Department of Tourism influence. Miksang can make *ordinary things startlingly exotic*. *Door knobs, jet streams, bicycle locks, awnings, shadows, corners and edges*.

I take a photo of snow on a cluster of dogberries. In the screen, it looks like dessert. Like so many other images I've seen. #dogberries. #pretty. I will not give up; I will not convince myself this is bullshit, no matter what Craig says. Yesterday, I was telling him more about Miksang — I wanted to say it out loud for my own clarity: It can be applied everywhere. Conventions in everyday life become orthodoxies. They lead us to think about how things *should* be and we form discriminatory thinking. If we can get past it through the Beginner's eye, we can develop higher understanding.

Or, you know, it's the latest fad, Craig said. Like that book you and Pam were into this fall. The Secret or whatever the fuck. First, it's all intentions, now it's no conventions.

What does one have to do with the other?

I'm just saying. You tend to look for one big answer.

At Cuckold's Cove, I close my eyes and remember to breathe. I have a tendency to hold my breath. It's stupid, as if seeing something great will occur like a hiccup cure. I breathe deep and let the wind make echoes in my ears. I open my eyes and look down into the waves. A lobster trap on the ocean floor beckons to me through the water. I capture its image and feel grateful.

Craig comes over and gets on the tickle-monster machine. I try not to raise my knee, but eventually the survival impulse kicks in. Again, he folds up and faces the wall. His face is red over the boulder of his back.

Fuck, motherfuck, fuck. That's a dirty move. Can't even play-wrestle with you.

We're wrestling? You're 240 pounds. We wouldn't be in the same weight class.

He turns and glares at me. His mouth is a rupture of teeth and disdain.

Flash of perception.

I cannot unsee the dark potential in his eyes. He hops up and stomps out of the bedroom. The scrape of his keys as he snatches them off the kitchen counter. Bang, gone.

My phone dings. No. I close my eyes and breathe. I scan the seafloor of my emotions. No stirrings, no secret treasures. I put my hand on the spot where he lay. The comforter is already cooling.

I open my eyes. I do not love Craig. I know now I have known this for some time, but put it away somewhere. At the beginning, I liked how he was right saucy: spoke his mind, didn't care what people thought. His confidence was sexy, he smelled great. We had fun in bed.

I will end it after his finals. He's already stressed about all his exams. He's talked shit about an ex who broke up with him on his birthday. He might blame me for a slip in his marks. For now, we can keep each other warm until spring is technically here. I'll be finished my projects at the college; he'll be looking into work terms.

My phone dings again. If I start texting him back, I could lose this flow. I need to write it down.

I open my desk drawer. I immediately see two things are different.

1. My diary is upside down.
2. The lid on the box of condoms has been stuffed in.

Craig joke-counted the condoms once: *Making sure no other guys are using these*. It was around Christmas break — he asked if I knew anyone named Evan. You said the name Evan in your sleep, he said. Who's that? No idea, I said. He nodded. A ripple passed through his cheek. Fuckin' whatever, I thought at the time. As if I'm liable for my dreams.

But I remember now. There is an old high school journal on my shelf. I open it to the last page. *Faye n' Evan* scrawled on the inside cover. Oh, *that* Evan. We kissed at a party in grade eleven. He tasted like cheezies.

Well, if he's going to be like that. I take a condom from the box and tuck it in an old handbag. See, I put it there for going to your house. I google *tickling as a form of torture* and list the details in my diary: *Maybe Craig is too thick to understand*. I need a bookmark, something visible to only me and easily moved. I place a single strand of hair across the page. Craig won't see that. He doesn't see anything.

Three weeks until finals and the tickling has ceased. When I go to photography class, Craig says things like have fun with Bjork, and makes prancing gestures. I make sure to note it in my diary: *Would Craig be jealous if my photography instructor was a woman? Is it art or male artists that make him uncomfortable? Is he a homophobe? Does Craig think he's better than me because he's studying engineering?*

Two days later Craig comes over and somehow, we end up talking about art and artists. Society goes on about the importance of art all the time, he says. But when it boils down to it, if artists can pay their bills, they're lucky. It's a sad reality. He pulls a paper bag from his backpack. Macintosh apples and trail mix.

On Friday, he has a poker game. That's cool, I say. I'll go out with Pam. He nods. I search his face for decisions. Since February, there's been three nights he has planned a guys' night, then suddenly showed at the bar alone. Last time, he found me on the dance floor. His hand an anchor on the small of my back: You ready to leave?

Friday night, Pam's old boss is at the bar and feeling generous. We cheers and down Jaeger bombs and there is Craig, watching with his coat on. After, *don't text me, I'll be concentrating*, and *we'll be playing most of the night*, here he is, flustered and alert. He looks so ready to be mad at me.

You didn't text, I say. I thought you were in for the big game.

Got sick of it.

Pam's boss introduces himself. Craig shakes his hand. It is clear by their faces that Craig squeezes extra hard.

In my diary, I make calendar pages. I title each page Times with Craig, Good vs. Bad. I use asterisks and colour-coding. A frowny-face for mean comments or argument instigation. Green for jealous displays. Arrows to show the times he has changed his plans

to go looking for me. Red question marks for the interrogations: *Where did you go last night? Meet any new guys? Ha, I'm only kidding.* And the worst, *how many guys has Pam been with?*

Why do you want to know? I asked.

I know you girls talk about stuff like that.

But why do you want to know about her?

I'm nosy.

If I lay it out like this, with repetition and explanation, I can show him what he's doing. I go to the gym in the mornings and leave him alone in my room, his sleeping form in the bed like a cocoon. Maybe he could mend and grow if he sees himself from a different perspective. When I return, the diary marker-hairs have shifted or vanished every time.

Pam's boyfriend Jeremy reminds me of this dick I knew in high school, Craig says. He stole a girl I liked.

Like shoplifting? He took her off a shelf in a store?

You know what I mean.

Like break and entry? Or grand theft auto? Did he hotwire her ignition?

Yes girl. Can't even pour a little gas on your fire.

He wiggles his finger into my hip. My expression gives it away. His hand slides to his side: You seem annoyed with me lately.

I'm glad you can see that.

It makes me wonder why you're with me. If you're so annoyed.

I know you've been reading my diary.

Yeah. But only so I can figure out what's bothering you.

How so?

Well, you're obviously annoyed with me all the time, so I figured the best way was to read your venting journal.

It's not a venting journal.

I thought that's how you worked at staying positive. Like, it's how you purge your negative feelings.

I've known you were reading it for a while, I say. I take the diary from the drawer and open to a calendar page: These are things you do. It's not good, Craig.

I wouldn't do stuff like that if you were more up front. You don't give me any choice. We've been going out since the summer and you never talk about the future. His bottom lip quivers.

How can there be a future when you try to control me like this?

Well, you should have said something. If you don't want to be with me, you should have said something instead of writing shitty things in your book.

But, the fact that you go through my things? The fact you think it's okay?

My voice cracks. Craig's face is red refusal, a do-not-enter sign. Don't you see, Craig? Don't you see that it's not okay?

I wouldn't have to do that if you were truthful, he says. And now I see you've led me on. I've loved you and you've been playing a game.

He is moving now. His sweater and textbooks into the backpack. He grabs the chips on his way out the door.

I do well in my college projects. Bjorn says my photography portfolio is exceptional. Craig makes the Dean's List. Jeremy tells Pam that Craig has been posting vague Facebook statuses. Memes about manipulative women, about hypocrisy. Twice I see him at bars and there is no acknowledgment.

It's Sunday when I spot Craig and the new girlfriend. They hold hands through Bannerman Park. They don't see me see them. The girlfriend is taller, but her hair is like mine. I watch them in their present moment as he points, grumbles, and shows her what he doesn't like. Her eyes shine with desire to learn. She is forming the equivalent. She is figuring out what she needs to know.

8. Losing Marsha Zane

Three days after Mom's diagnosis, Brenda comes up with Family Game Night. She brings it up as we're cleaning the house for Mom's return, watering plants, wiping down shelves. She's out of the hospital Friday, Brenda says. We can do it Sunday nights. Charlene and I agree. Now is the time. We will be more family than ever.

What kind of board games does everyone have? Brenda asks. Charlene, you have Trouble, right? David, what do you have?

I don't think I own any, I say.

David doesn't do games, remember? Charlene says. He calls them bored games.

I was joking, I say. And we only played them when the power went out.

Whatever, Brenda says. There's no point in negativity.

Afterwards, in the car, Charlene shakes her head: For Brenda, anything that isn't 100% positive is negative. Like she can keep Mom alive through stubborn enthusiasm.

On Sunday, I conduct an honest search for a contribution, but all I find are playing cards with naked men on them, a stocking stuffer from Roger last Christmas. If the kids weren't present, I think Mom would get a kick out of them. I bring chips instead.

For the first game night, we play Monopoly. Brenda's twin boys are on their best behaviour and rub the dice between their palms with the same solemn motion. If it wasn't for Charlene going to the bathroom every few minutes to blow her nose, the atmosphere would be serene. Sorry, Charlene says. I have a cold. She presses down her grief with steady breaths. I am so fucking glad I smoked up before I came over.

Mom is benevolent in her chair. Charlene took her to get her hair done and it is composed in smooth, walnut curls. She wears the maroon sweater-tunic I gave her last Christmas, the one she admired in the shop, but wouldn't buy for herself. A nice step

from her regular wardrobe of elastic-waist jeans and fleece tops. Or, most distressing to me, one of Dad's old shirts he left behind. You know Mom, the shop is full of great men's shirts, I once told her. Oh no, she said. Those won't be broken in.

I didn't expect her to look so good. If you weren't aware malignant tumors are burrowing their reach into the tissues around her heart and liver, you'd think she just got back from a cruise. Marsha Zane, you're looking good, might be the words of a casual acquaintance or a Facebook comment. Looking younger every day, Marsha.

I roll the dice and move the silver shoe to Community Chest. Roger told me when his father was sick, the *waiting point* happened fast. Suddenly he was skeletal. *There had to be an oxygen tank in reach all the time. I'm sure he would have gone in for assisted suicide if it was an option*, Roger said. I pass go and collect two hundred dollars. What Mom will want when the time comes?

After the game, the boys hug Mom with dutiful affection. Charlene shoves on her coat and exits to cry in peace.

I'll call in the morning, Mom, Brenda says. David, you want a ride home?

David, why don't you stay a while? Mom says. She licks her finger and runs it along the bottom of the chip bowl for crumbs.

So you'll take a taxi? Brenda says. I have to get the kids to bed.

I have cash for a cab if you need it," Mom says.

I bet Brenda's wheels are churning. *Aw, luh, Mommy's got money for no-car, baby-boy David*. They all take debit now, I say. I'll put the kettle on.

Brenda says something soft before the door shuts, something like call if you need anything. Mom doesn't answer. Goddamn it. Whatever she's doing, she'd better be diplomatic and do it with all of us. All I need is for her to establish regular tete-a-tetes with me and leave Brenda and Charlene feeling denied.

I'm going to have a sherry, Mom says. Want one?

Sure.

She selects two tiny glasses from the hutch. These belonged to your great-grandmother, she says. Do you think you'd like to have them?

Mom, don't worry about that.

No-no, the three of you should decide what you want. Make lists. Avoid a fight later.

She sets great-grandmother's glasses down and fetches her sherry. The glasses are like tiny tulips. Perhaps she thinks I'll get more use out of them than Brenda with the kids, or Charlene, who keeps moving.

Roger said his father went through a phase of giving belongings. And later, he starting sitting everyone down to give them advice. *Save at least ten percent of your salary. Stay connected with who you are.* And as he got worse, he wanted to make apologies, amends. *I'm sorry you never got to know your grandmother. I'm sorry I didn't teach you Japanese.* Maybe it was fear, Roger said. Or we weren't as receptive to his advice as he wanted us to be and he regretted his approach. All his old rigid edges began fencing him in at once.

I don't think Mom owes me any apologies. I know I am one of Dad's reasons for leaving. Sometimes, I suspect she's secretly grateful.

She pours the sherry. I'm not really a sherry or port drinker, I say.

Well, I want you to have them. Maybe you'll grow to enjoy it. Maybe some of your friends do already.

Friends. She has never said *boyfriends* to me. Sometimes, I get *special friend*. Dad once slurred which one will you be, the girlfriend or the boyfriend, and Mom lost her

tolerance: don't speak that way to my son. That's right, he said, he's *your* son. Finally, I said, givin' up the lease.

Mom holds the cup with her pinky extended. These are the kind of glasses designed to look prim. She takes a tiny sip, like a bee. Did you smoke marijuana today? she asks.

Oh, Jesus. I had a little earlier today, I say.

I keep reading how it can be good for pain relief. Especially with cancer patients.

Yes. It's one of the reasons it's legal now.

She regards the sherry glass. It's like a doll's toy in her hand. I was thinking maybe it would be good to try it, she says. Before I get to that point. Of too much pain I mean.

It might help, yes.

you have any on you?

Yes.

She folds her hands in her lap. Well then. I go to my coat and remove my Pax and the baggie. I feel her eyes on me. Yes, I am the son with drugs in his pocket. Ten years ago, she'd flush it in a storm of tears and fear. There'd be threats to call the RNC.

Do you roll it in a cigarette? she says. That always seemed tricky to me.

I have a vapourizer.

I turn it on and pass it to her. The lights circulate on the front to show it's warming up, I say. She smoothes it in her palm. It looks like an Apple product, she says. How much did it cost you?

Um, two hundred and seventy-five dollars.

Her eyebrows make their leap of judgment: That's quite an investment.

Well, I tried one at a party and liked it. When the light turns green, it's ready.

She takes a slow inhale from the lip. Thank fuck she doesn't cough. What a nightmare if she convulsed, spat blood.

It's like roasting an herb, she says.

It is. Much smoother than a joint or bong.

I wouldn't know.

She takes another hit. Should I stop her? Hey Mum, you're a lightweight. I can see how people enjoy this, she says. Especially the ill. It's boring being sick. She exhales a thin line of smoke. Look, she says. I'm a dragon.

We'll start calling you Puff.

She giggles and settles back in the couch, two-fisted with her sherry and the Pax. I enjoyed the game tonight, she says. I never think about playing board games like that. Your father was never interested. It was just poker with his buddies. And wives weren't permitted.

Cause he knew you'd win.

She gets out the cards. We play blackjack. She giggles every time she says Hit me.

I'm having such a nice time, she says. She takes a puff and eyes me: David. What other drugs have you done?

I've experimented.

I thought so. It was something I worried about with you. Especially when your father left. I was scared you'd wash yourself away.

Wash yourself? Like I should clean myself somehow? There was acid before pot, actually, I say. Acid, pot, mushrooms, ecstasy, speed, Special K, and um, coke. But all experimental. Once or twice each.

Oh my. Well, I'm glad it was just a couple of times. Especially the cocaine.

I nod. I can't tell her coke is what happened to Roger and me. How it became our fun centre until it ran him down.

Mom, if you like the pot, I'll leave you some.

I wouldn't know what to do with it.

I'll leave the vapourizer. I'll show you how to refill it.

She lies on the couch and watches while I pop off the bottom and show her the roasted bits. My goodness, she says. It really is an appetite enhancer. I could eat more chips.

Do it, I say. Why not?

I almost say, what do you have to lose. I go to the kitchen and track down a bag of Party Mix. I pour it in a bowl and wipe my eyes before bringing it out. I don't want to ruin her stone.

The stereo in the cab plays "All We Are," by Kim Mitchell on the way down Newfoundland Drive. All we are wishing for are a nice few months. This will be my life now, biting back tears over songs I don't even like. We can do nothing with our old lists of *If Onlies*: if only she'd abandoned her protestant ideas of goodness, if only she'd allowed herself more pleasure, if only she hadn't given up things like driving. Her email to all three of us: I do not wish to drive anymore. It is too stressful these days and I do not require much more than a weekly trip to Sobey's and to Church. There is also the upkeep

of a car and insurance which I can do without. I hope you will not mind giving your old mum a ride here and there. xo

Charlene wanted her to embrace being single. She emailed links to singles-only resorts and dating sites. I don't think so, Mom said. The men my age who become single go out with forty-year olds. And if they've never married, there's a reason why.

Why is all or nothing with her? Charlene said later. I just want her to get laid.

She considers herself so undeserving, she's become an enemy of fun, Brenda said. Like, just spend a little money on yourself. Go down south or something. This martyr shit.

I don't think she's a martyr, I said. I think she's afraid.

Oh, she's totally afraid. That's what happens when you turn fifty and make the executive decision to be old.

Back home, I give myself over to a long, hard cry. Gotta get it out when I can. Here we go, new routine: work, family duties, purging weep. I will not call Roger and ask, was like this for you. Did all your family silences seem extra quiet. I plug in my phone and leave it. I don't check any of his profiles.

On Tuesday, Mom calls. I think it needs to be recharged, she say. And...do you have any more? I put some pot in a baggie and fish out some ancient brownies from the freezer. If she prefers them, I'll email Roger for that cannabutter recipe. Email, that is all.

At her house, she examines the baggie in her hands, pinching the dried buds and sniffing. It's kind of like potpourri.

I can see that.

When you tried...hallucinogens, which was your favourite?

Um, I like – I liked mushrooms.

Did you pick them yourself? Back when we had the cabin in Avondale, a bunch of college students showed up one day. They asked if they could go on our property to look for herbs. Al said they were looking for mushrooms.

I didn't pick them myself, no.

I see. Why did you like them?

They made me feel euphoric.

Interesting. I thought I was euphoric when I smoked marijuana, but from I read on the internet, I'm just very relaxed. And there are different types of euphoria.

She traces the green light on the Pax with her index finger. Your father tried acid once, back when we first started dating, she says. We were at a party with his friends. Boy, was I mad at him. I kept saying, why did you do this? This isn't good for you. And he kept saying I'm sorry, and laughing. The angrier I got, the harder he laughed. Afterwards, he said he had genuinely felt sorry, but there was something about the way my face contorted that he found hilarious. I never understood his reaction.

She takes a slow drag and exhales. So the mushrooms, she says, they didn't make you sick?

No. Maybe a slight tummy ache when they were kicking in.

I'm scared when I go on the strong pain meds, it will interfere with eating. I know fentanyl does. And oxycodone.

She looks down at her lap. If I wanted to try something like mushrooms, she says, I'd have to do it now.

Do you want to try something like that?

Well, why don't you get some and I'll consider it.

It's hardest to avoid crying during the more monotonous chores, like folding sweaters or unpacking merchandise. In the shop, I stretch to reach a box of neckties and Mom's whimper exits my mouth, the one she makes when she lifts heavy things: the end of the couch, bags of groceries, me as a child. I lock myself in one of the change rooms and bite down on a wad of paper towels. I do not contact Roger. When I calm down, I call Charlene and tell her about Mom's hallucinogen curiosity.

Are you going to do them with her? she says.

No. I don't think that's a good idea.

Psychedelics shouldn't be done solo the first time.

She doesn't seem interested in doing them with anyone.

Because she has no idea. What if she gets in a dark place? Oh god, she could get really freaked out by herself.

I don't know. But you know, she's a big girl.

Is she? When Gerald's mother died, Mom was so kind to him. I remember he said, she lived a long life, she was eighty-seven, and Mom said, doesn't matter. When it's your mother, she might as well be sixteen.' God. It hurts so much, David. It physically hurts.

It does. I think she should just be happy now.

I think she should do what she wants. I just wish she wasn't so fucking alone.

Roger says meet at The Duke. He enters in his deliberate manner of straight paces to the bar without looking at anyone. He likes to plow a path of confidence in public places. I once joked he walked with the show-offiness of a much shorter man. He didn't

like that one bit. From my seat, the thinning patch at the back of his head is visible and gives me some relief.

He plants down with two beer and two shots of Jaeger: Good to see you, Davey. We clink and drink. To your Mom, he says. I'm so sorry.

Thank you.

How much time does she have? He sips his beer and winces. Never mind. We don't have to talk about it.

Could be three months, could be a year.

Jesus. You talk to your dad?

He knows. He's in Florida until May.

Fuck sakes.

I know.

How are you holding up?

I shrug. My eyes meet his and regret it immediately. All day I conjured up shitty Roger memories: those times he left in the middle of the night because he was *hungry* and went out for *food*. The text messages to the dealer: *if u bring it 2 the house & leave it under sink, you get another \$50*. But now he is all earthy-eyed comfort. And the new beard is kind of cheesy, but it works, goddamnit.

He pushes over a small paper bag. I made chocolate peanut butter balls with them, he says. I think Marsha will like that.

That's great, thanks.

How is her emotional state?

The same. Infuriatingly the same. My sisters are stressed trying to please her, which Charlene gave up years ago. *If she's not going to say what she wants, I'm not going to guess.*

Friggin' mothers.

It's the first time in ages she's asked for something directly. Well, mostly directly.

I'm surprised she's never tried them before. You know, being a baby boomer and everything.

He signals the waitress for another round: Another? He orders before I will myself to refuse.

So. I'm kind of wondering something, he says. Don't answer if you don't want to.

Shoot.

Why didn't you introduce me?

I never introduced anyone.

Okay.

And I was never sure if you were serious. She's pretty serious.

There was a Christmas party at my work last year. Roger by the potato chips with dilated pupils: I'm so bored. Fuckin' Breeders. Roger examining the family photo on my desk: Well, I never knew your mom was crowned Miss Modesty, Newfoundland and Labrador. And me busting a gut, but still picturing him at Sunday supper, refilling everyone's glasses and frowning because there's only one bottle of wine for five adults. Mom biting her lip whenever she's upwind from his blazing hangover.

I should have, I say. It would have been nice for you to know each other.

You talk like she's already gone.

I don't know how receptive she is to meeting new people.

I understand.

The waitress sets down two beer and two more shots. He asks about the shop. He compliments my new brogues before calling me a fucking dandy. I compliment his new beard before calling him a fucking hipster.

Then my voice cracks on the word *cancer* and his hand is on mine. I fight the urge to interweave my fingers with his. Charlene is worried about the shrooms, I say. She got teary. *Mom shouldn't do it by herself*. But you know Charlene. So emotional.

She doesn't have a friend to join her?

Her friends are mostly from church and high school.

Not really the tripping out kind. Or maybe they are? What do I know?

Even if they are, I can't see her asking.

What about you?

I'm scared I'd get upset and ruin it for her.

Yeah. Oh, shit, that would be bad. It really is something you want a companion for.

He strokes the top of my knuckle. I want to close my eyes. I can be an option, he says. If you want. I mean, if she wants. You can just say I'm your friend.

He lifts his hand to sip his beer and I am immediately forsaken. I wouldn't say that, I say. I'd say who you are.

And then I want it, I want her to know one of my boyfriends. The boyfriend, even if he's not anymore. I'll ask, I say. The alcohol buzzes in my flesh. I want to move my chair next to his so I can talk into his neck. God, I say. I'm stressing out so much.

It can't be helped.

I'll see if she's up for it. And if not, I want you to meet her anyway.

It would be an honour.

We order another round. I remember how sometimes, when he got on a bender, he'd get maudlin about his father. Don't let me cry about chichi, he'd say. We must follow the No Drinking and Talking about Dead People Rule. This also will be me. I'm move on into time, get through the days, get into normal till grief yells Surprise when I'm trying to have a good time. It will be another thing Roger and me will have in common.

I can see the Virgin Mary, Mom says. She points to the glass door connecting the kitchen to the deck. Those smudges are her veil and hands.

Roger blinks. I see it, he says. She's praying.

I pour more wine. Mom invited him for supper. She made beef and mushroom stroganoff – her little joke. He answered her questions; yes, he's done mushrooms many times; no, he's never known anyone to get brain damage; usually he likes to do them outside. Maybe we could go out on the deck, she said. It will be chilly tonight, I said. Bundle up, kids.

Who's she praying for, Roger?

Well, you need it most. But I'm the bigger fuck-up.

We both deserve it then.

We both deserve it then, Roger says. Oh Marsha, you're so sombre. You sound like a prophet.

Maybe I am. I could start now. Go into the prophesising business.

I bet you'd make a profit.

Roger had seconds and asked questions. Why never before, Marsha? Were you ever curious?

No, not at all, Mom said. I thought drugs were for damaged people. Or those ostracized. Those who want to escape their reality.

And you never saw yourself that way?

No. I always prided myself as being comfortable in my own skin.

My fist clenched under the table. It was Dad who wasn't comfortable, I wanted to say. My skin fits fine.

I asked David about what he's tried, she said. And he mentioned cocaine. I was surprised.

Well Marsha, Roger said. Since we're being honest, it was a problem for me. Scratch that. It is a problem for me.

Isn't it disgusting though? Putting something in your nose?

It's the immediacy of it. Inhale and there you are, on that level. And it felt bad. I mean, the shame comes in the long term. But in that moment, it's doing something just for badness, you know what I mean? Badness is my favourite Newfoundland word.

Lately, I think if Al and I had done more—had let ourselves go a bit when we were together, it would have been different. If we'd really travelled. Had experiences. At

least he'd have different memories of me. I wouldn't be his old ball and chain. I'd be his partner. Real partnership is rare. We never had that, Al and I.

Roger winked at me. We used to joke about the word partner and its not-so-gay-in-your-faceness. Friends are friends and pals are pals, but partners? Those people fuck.

But here we are, he said. And we're gonna do some shrooms. So, being comfortable in your own skin isn't your thing now?

How can it be? she said. Would I like to escape my reality for a bit? Yes I would.

We need music, Roger says. He bustles out for the iPod deck. Mom's eyes are fixed on the setting sun. She is wrapped in layers of blankets and clothes topped with a purple pashmina which gives her kind of regal air. I remember Charlene bringing it back from her trip to Europe.

How are you, Mom?

The colours are fabulous, she says. I should enjoy sunsets like this all the time. She reaches for the joint in the ashtray.

Well, within limits, I say. I mean, it's still cold even though the days are longer.

She turns to me. Eyebrow crease set on scold. Don't take this the wrong way, dear, she says, but I can do whatever I want."

I laugh. She stares at me. Her weight loss has intensified her cheekbones and she affects almost old Hollywood glamour. Yes, I say. Yes you can.

Roger appears with the iPod deck. Okay, requests? I bet you're a Fleetwood Mac girl.

Stevie Nicks, Mom says. Rooms on Fire.

I fall asleep on the couch to the rattle of their delirium. Roger wakes me at dawn. We go to the spare bedroom. He slides under my arms and sleeps. Mom remains outside, layered in warm protection, watching the sunrise.

Mom's schedule fills up. Sundays are Family Game Night, Mondays with Roger and I, Movie Tuesdays with Charlene. Brenda brings her to the twins' events. Every day she has a tea or a meal or a time.

Bits and pieces I've given her over the years emerge: a cashmere wrap, the Labradorite pendant. Things she once declared *too good to use*. She pours wine into her Waterford crystal goblets. I know Brenda wants these, she says. And I should be careful. But I've hardly ever used them and they're so lovely.

She wears lipstick and dark coloured tops. She doesn't brush out her curls and Roger compliments her on her hair and she giggles like a teenager. The house is tidy when we visit as a family. But if it's just Roger and I, she leaves bits around, baggies and papers. We wipe the ashtrays and table tops when we leave. She asks us to show her how to clear her browser history. Brenda might be alarmed about her research on microdosing. Charlene would feel left out.

She's doing so well, Charlene says. She's really loosened up.

Is she though? Brenda says. I was over the other day and she was completely exhausted. Super moody.

Who's negative now?

Well, she definitely wasn't herself last week. She'd been all excited about seeing those Irish tenors at Holy Heart, so I got tickets. I reminded her twice during the week and she was keen to go. Then I call to say I'm coming to get her and she says not to bother. I asked if she's okay and she goes, I'm perfect. Then I say, well, Jim has the boys, I'll come over anyway, and she goes, no thanks dear.

So? She's allowed to be an asshole once in a while.

When Brenda leaves, Charlene gets antsy. You should tell her about the pot. Mom probably doesn't want her to know, but she's getting the wrong idea.

Maybe she just didn't feel like Irish tenors.

If Brenda finds out, she'll be offended about not being told. And she'll blame Mom's behaviour on it anyway.

Well, it's Mom's choice to tell her.

Fine, David, be a chickenshit.

I'm not stepping on anyone's toes. You tell if it's so important.

On Sunday, Brenda's boys want to play Trouble, but Mom says the popping sound of the dice in the plastic globe gives her a headache. Charlene deals cards for a game of Knock.

So, the doctor says it hasn't spread," Mom says. She arranges the cards in her hand. "No tumour growth. Everything seems to be hanging tight.

Oh Mom. Oh thank God.

Mom, that's fantastic.

How do you feel?

I feel great.

We need to celebrate, Brenda says. She goes to the kitchen. There's some wine around here somewhere. Here. She hoists up a bottle of cabernet sauvignon. Mom, where are the glasses?

There are lots of glasses in there."

No, the crystal ones.

Hmmm? Mom stares at the cards in her hand.

The crystal goblets, where are they?

Oh, I sold them.

What? They were Waterford Crystal. They cost \$170 a pair online.

Well, I got a good price for them, then.

Why did you sell them? Brenda says. If you need money, why not ask us?

I don't need money. If I feel like selling something to simplify my life, I shouldn't have to discuss it. Pour the wine. Use the mugs even. Who cares?

I can't believe you'd do that without me.

I got a temporary clean bill of health. I got a few more months. And I'm doing whatever I want," Mom says. She places her cards down. And I hate this game. It reminds me of your father and his douchebag friends.

Later, after Brenda sucks her teeth at Mom's d-word drop and Roger changes the subject to what everyone is watching on Netflix, I remember Dad and his smokes. I was nine and he had quit, or so he said. I was using the bathroom sink to make a magic potion of shampoo and Pepto Bismal and whatever might make bubbles. The Alka Seltzer tablets would make a satisfying pop and fizz. Inside the box was the open pack of Du Maurier. And later, Dad and Mom's argument, ricocheting off the kitchen walls.

Mom's medicines stare back at me from the bathroom cabinet. Above them, Oil of Olay, a peach tinted lip gloss, a bottle of Shalimar. A box of shower caps. I've never known her to use one. I've never seen one drying in the shower.

The cap is pale pink and transparent. Two white babies rest inside, little pebbles. The plastic wrap on the powder bound tight into balls.

I take deep breaths before I check the wastebasket. Empty cellophane wrap. Bloody tissue. She went to the bathroom twice during supper and once before.

Roger's hand jerks the stick shift. She was adamant about trying it. I got some and left it with her.

You're an idiot.

Listen, she knows it's an issue for me and she didn't want you to know. I think she put it as, David didn't tell me when he was doing whatever he wanted, so why should I?

You should have fucking told me.

She said she deserves to feel good in whatever way she can. I'm just trying to make everyone happy. And I help her. I make sure she doesn't drink too much when she's high. A girl her age, her condition, she doesn't have the liver function.

We don't speak and when I get out, he doesn't come with me. I call Mom to tell her I'm coming over tomorrow. Yep, yep, yep, she says. It's all good. I think about the ways she sat down tonight, like she didn't want to, like she wanted to strut around the room. Charlene's attempts at conversation, hey Mom, you see that article about literacy levels, you hear that Jerry's daughter is pregnant, you see the forecast? Mom nodding. Pretending not to hear. She shuffled the cards without dealing.

The next day, she asks if I have pot. When I say no, she sighs and smokes her own anyway. When I ask about the coke, she shrugs. I don't think you should be worrying about me. she says. You have your whole life. A bit of stank on the *your*. I used to think if someone knew you worried about them, they'd understand that concern meant love, she says. That maybe there was a reason for concern. But why worry about me now?

Mom, we can't help but worry. And you're not acting like yourself.

You try being yourself when you're full of cancer. Good luck not wanting other feelings to consume you for a bit.

She starts rolling a joint. Her fingers aren't proficient, but she's committed. At least I'm not going around with prescriptions at every pharmacy between here and Whitbourne, she says. Charlene should watch that. Her and her Ativan.

I text Roger: we need to talk about what we're going to do about my mother. When he arrives, I yell at him. I tell him to find a way to fix things.

But it isn't me, Davey, Roger says. It's her. I don't think she's addicted to anything. But she doesn't want to stop.

You're a shit.

But she lied to me. She told me the doctor said she only has a month left. So I figured it wouldn't hurt to help her. And it didn't seem like...like it would be a problem for long? She wanted me to believe that. And I told her I can't. And she said fine, give me your source.

Did you give it to her?

Yes. But he's over in Torbay.

He tries to hold my gaze, but I'm too furious. And I'm not taking her, he says. So she's shit out of luck. She's not addicted anyway, Davey. She just really likes it.

I take deep breaths. She doesn't drive and she's lost her enabler. Unless she gets cabs. Unless the guy will deal with her alone.

We make a plan. Roger will talk to her while I clean the place. I'll dump what she has. We'll talk about how well she's been doing heathwise. We'll talk about conflicts

between her medications and recreational drugs. We'll talk about breaking the law. And if she's difficult, we'll tell Brenda. She loves us, she'll listen to us. When we tell her she's hurting us, she'll stop.

Okay, Davey, Roger says. We'll fix it.

At the house, the door is locked. My key doesn't work. I knock on the window while Roger calls out. All lights are off. Maybe she's with Brenda, I say. Maybe she had an appointment.

We turn at the sound of an engine. The Corolla lights up and moves. And there she is, Marsha Zane, behind the wheel. Her hands clamped on at 10 and 2. Her curls cast a wild silhouette in the dying sun. Her eyes meet mine and she raises her index finger off the steering wheel in the most nonchalant of gestures. She passes us as we wave frantically, Mom, stop. Stop the car. The Corolla creeps onto driveway's edge and turns abruptly. I catch a tinkling from the trunk. The sound of drinking glasses, kissing. Small ones, the right size for sherry.

9. Gutless Bravado Part Three

At Julia's, I enjoy lying down on her couch after eating, but sometimes I end up in a three hour nap. Sometimes the naps turn into all night, but no matter if it's a nap or bedtime, I wake up at the crepuscular times: dusk or dawn. The couch is burgundy and reminds me of a thick slice of organ meat, like liver or tongue. From its living room location, I watch the wedge of sky between the curtain rod and the window frame. Sometimes, the sky appears brown before it makes its decision to go bright or dark and I think about other animals that become active in these transitions: moose, bats, birds, and fish. Bugs rise out of slumber to orbit puddles and ponds. Crepuscular is one of those words that feel good in your mouth, like a quality baguette and sharp cheese. Although it's still hard to eat bread. Gluten products in general, are difficult.

Julia finally got a machinist apprenticeship and is off to Fort Mac, so I get another free place to stay. It reassures her to have a presence in her house: lights and movement and a regular gutting of the mailbox. And I feed her cat and keep things less dusty. Once my weight goes back up and stays stable for a couple of months, I can look at getting work. For now, I take supplements and short walks. I drink herbal tea and eat slowly. I watch crap TV shows. Recovery takes resigned boredom. Days are still chopped up into eating and sleeping off the energy spent on digestion. At least the cat is content. I'm a warm mattress and source of scraps.

Julia has no backyard or deck, but there's a public green space behind her house, a small parking area edged by a lawn. It's poorly maintained. The lawn slopes down and ends at a fence lined with clusters of used coffee cups and empty cigarette packs. There is a park bench with an overflowing bucket of cigarette butts. There is one garbage can, usually packed with dog poop bags. But there are trees, and they are all tall and leafy and calming.

Sheila, the neighbour on the right, likes to smoke her joints on the park bench and complain about city council. She has skinny arms and legs that project off her barrel belly and big boobs. She dyes her short hair a strawberry blond verging on brassy and she dies

for a tanning bed. She is an overall compact and kind of orange, a nectarine of a woman. If I see her outside, I might join her with one of my own joints. It's good for me to talk to people.

Sheila says she leaves weekly messages about the state of the green space on the 311 service. Empty the garbage, mow the grass, would it kill them to plant a few flowers? Can we get a cleanup crew for the spring litter? Nothing happens. It's so over-unionized down at city hall, Sheila says, that everyone has to wait for the person assigned to each individual job to do it even though you could get the whole place cleaned up in less than a day. We smoke our joints and shake our heads. What a bunch.

I get the idea when I see the push-mower on kijiji. No one can complain about the grass being cut late or early if there's no noise. It would give me something to do when I wake up at dawn. I could mow the grass, put in some plants. I like the idea of people waking up and finding things transformed, like Christmas morning or controlled demolition. One day the grass will be cut, the next a row of pansies. Would anyone ask questions? Would they assume the city did it? Maybe the neighbours would joke about a magic gardener elf.

Dean told me when he planted trees up in northern BC, they would trim their shovel blades along on the sides for digging and flipping the soil quickly. Dean also says he knows a guy who works at the botanical gardens who has piles of hostas he can't use. There is space for at least thirty or forty hostas down the slope and along the fence, if I clean up the garbage. Julia has about four snow shovels in her basement and I take the rustiest one to get cut down. I get gardening gloves, two bags of Miracle Grow planting soil. The push-mower is really cheap.

I wake up just after six o'clock in the evening. The shadows lengthen outside. My belly feels tight with the pasta I had for supper. I turn on the news to distract myself. The NTV news anchor says a coyote has been spotted downtown. There is a cell phone video of it, lanky and grey-brown. It trots casually down King's Road and sniffs around the ice cream store.

When I go outside for a toke with Sheila, she says she's keeping her cat inside from now on. That's what they go for, she says. Her sister in Alberta told her coyotes killed a whole colony of feral cats in her community. Lived off them for months. Sheila licks her fingertip and lays it on the canoeing ember of her joint.

Weird that it's by itself, I say. Maybe its pack was killed off.

It's too bad it's not out in Airport Heights, she says. It might do something about the rat problem out there.

On a Tuesday evening, I make a spinach salad, but can only get half of it down. I'm so tired afterwards, I drop off on the couch with my arms folded behind my head and they lose circulation and my brain thinks it's armless and screams itself awake. I have to bring my arms down slowly, they are empty and aching. When they thaw out, I take up my newly sharpened shovel for this night's plantings. There is only one light post in the space. I figure I can pick up the litter and get the bottom of the slope done tonight without being noticed. The shovel goes in quickly and I get a nice rhythm going, plunge, dig, drop, pat. The sod separates like tangled hair between fingers. It's quiet enough in the green space to focus on the ripping sounds, the cool air on my arms, the scent of uncovered earth and moisture.

I don't see the coyote until I'm finished. It creeps by the side of the fence. Its face is grey-brown and mottled and its eyes are yellow. It freezes when it sees me looking, then takes two steps and slinks away. I follow it from a distance. It disappears in the alley across the street and slips under a house. There's a For Sale sign in front and all the windows are dark and musty. I peek around the space where it went under the house – it looks like an unfinished basement. Probably makes a nice burrow.

When I go to bed, I think about the coyote. People walk dogs in the green space all the time. There are cats about. Compost piles in backyards, early morning garbage. Coyotes are scavengers. There's an elementary school nearby. How many daycare centres

are around, formal establishments and private ones, run out of people's homes. There's a dance school down the street. There's a rotation of sex workers standing at the bottom of Long's Hill every night, all of them thin and tired looking.

Dominion has Purina on for half price. I get a big sack and bring over a few handfuls. I leave a little pile just inside the space between the boards. What am I thinking? Curiosity with elements of greed and boredom. I don't want to tame the coyote, but I want its presence. I want it to mistrust everyone but me. I'll be the only one it allows within a six foot radius and it will follow me from a distance. I'll reward it with scraps. Because of me, it won't bother local cats and small dogs. Our relationship will have a greater benefit for the community and help the animal itself—if it's well fed and non-destructive, there is less of a chance it will become a target of knee-jerk panic and trophy hunters. I know I am rationalizing this, but I also know when it comes to the morality of it, I really don't care that much.

Every night, I leave smalls piles of the dry dog food by the basement entrance and at the edge of the fence. In the daytime, I check the piles. They are always gone, but I don't know if it's the coyote or dogs. On the fifth night, I see the coyote a second time. It is early dawn and the light is turning mauve. As I place a handful of dog food on the ground, I see its eyes shining about twenty feet away. It sits on its haunches, watching me. It doesn't move as I straighten up, but when I take a small step closer, it hops to its feet, ready to flee. I turn and walk away, hoping to give off signals of peace and trust. I wish I'd had a good look at it. I wonder if it has gained weight.

Sheila doesn't mention the changes to the green space, but she points out a knapsack left by the park bench. Probably someone stopped for a smoke and forgot it, I say. Oh no, she says. This has been gutted. It's the third bag she's found this year. Thieves break into cars by the Masonic Temple and go through what they find here. She opens the knapsack; there are bound manuals inside. Somebody's school notes. Shitty for a student to lose all their notes.

The police should put up a security camera here, I say. Cops are worse than city council, Sheila says. They don't investigate car break-ins. Even though, I guarantee, it's the same group of skeets every night. I don't understand the police. It's like if they fix the problem, it will raise the bar and they'll be expected to actually do things.

I spot the thief that night. I am crouched by the back fence, low to the soil, pushing a hosta into the ground with my fingertips. The thief wears a jacket and cargo pants that look grey in the darkness. His head is shaved and his pale face is creased and sunken from a life of chemicals. He carries two backpacks. I keep my breath light and maintain my pose; I'm just doing some gardening. It would be counterproductive to make me an issue.

The thief lays the backpacks on the park bench. He yanks out papers and books and lets them slide to the ground. He takes something small and white from a side pocket, an iPod maybe. He finds some change at the bottom and stuffs it all into his jacket pocket. It's casual now when he walks away.

I rub soil between my fingers and wonder about his potential for aggression. How far will he go to get what he needs? Breaking into cars is pretty easy, really. Like Sheila says, the cops shrug it off. I could do it too, if I wanted. People park overnight on downtown streets, show up hungover on Sunday mornings to get their vehicles. How much can you really get from the average car? I'd have to know what to look for and be quick with tools; how fast could I remove a car stereo? I'd need to be able to jiggle a door handle with nonchalance, bust a windshield into blue bits with one bang. Sounds like a lot of effort for little payoff. Better to leave it for the desperate.

It's after four AM on a Saturday morning when I see the thief and his girlfriend get in a fight. I am taking a break with a joint on the bench. I have a clear view of the street through the lane leading out and I see her pass. She walks with arms folded, taking furious scissor steps. She has bright blond hair with roots so dark, they make a bulls-eye of the top of her head as she concentrates on the ground. Wait, he calls. Stop. She doesn't stop, but waves back one outstretched hand, middle finger up. He follows her, moving in

a slow, exaggerated swagger, pausing to glance up at the darkened windows of Julia's neighbours. His chance to get a good look. He passes my view and half a minute later, I hear their voices ping off the pavement, like small yapping dogs. C'mon. Fuck you. Don't talk to me. C'mon, Lacey. I think he says Lacey. Maybe Lucy or Lily.

On Monday afternoon, Sheila comes over to tell me the house across the street from hers was broken into, right in the middle of the day. The owner was in the backyard setting up for a barbeque and the front door was unlocked for his expected guests. The thief or thieves walked right in and took the laptop off the kitchen table. When is Julia coming back, she asks me. Thursday, I say. She's lucky she has you, Sheila says. Obviously some asshole is around, looking for vulnerable spots. She gives me a hard look. She's probably seen me outside at night.

I have three nights to finish up the green space. The grass is mowed and a row of hostas line the back fence and along the sloping back of the lawn. There's a bare patch of dirt behind the park bench, and I have time to put in a newspaper garden bed there, some flowers, a little surprise for the eyes. I pick up a bag of mulch and the flyers from Julia's recycling bin. I eat an exhausting meal of steak and broccoli which renders me fetal on the couch, balled up like a cyst on a piece of kidney.

On the last night, I put the finishing touches on the flower bed. It's a neat rectangle surrounded by beach rocks. Marigolds peek up from the mulch. I pat down the sides with the edge of my shovel. I open the side door and put in the unused flyers and I see the girl, Lacey/Lucy/Lily, standing on the other side of the street. She stares at her phone, texting. I can't tell her expression, but there's something about her shoulders that suggests the verge of tears. I pretend I'm examining the shovel for cleanliness or something while keeping my eyes on her. She is a stereotype of vulnerable. Maybe she's not okay. Maybe I should call someone.

There is a clicking sound around the corner, where Sheila's front door is. I pull the hood of my sweatshirt up over my head and walk out to take a look. The thief is turning

the knob on Sheila's door and opening it, his jagged profile leaning into the line of darkness between the door and the frame.

What are you doing, I say.

Jesus, he says.

He jumps back from the door. He glares across the street at Lacey/Lucy/Lily. She was supposed to be watching out. I'm going into my house, he says.

That's not your house.

It isn't? He leans back and looks up and the windows. Oh, you're right, it's not. My bad.

I think you better get out of here, I say.

The thief points at the shovel in my hand. What are you, he says. The midnight gardener?

It's way past midnight.

Lacey/Lucy/Lily crosses over to us. Jordan, she says. Let's get out of here. He winces and looks at her: Holy fuck, girl. You are such an idiot.

Let's go, please, she says. She passes her hand through her two-toned hair. She is trying not to look at me.

What do you do with stupid girls, Jordan the Thief says to me. You look like you're ready to bury them.

Come on Jordan, for fuck sakes, she says.

She pulls on his sleeve. Stop saying my fucking name, he says. He pushes her away. She falls down hard on her butt. Owowowow. Jesus Christ, he says. Useless. He stomps his foot close to her, making her skooch away.

You shouldn't do that.

You need to mind your own business, Gardener, he says. He stamps at Lacey/Lucy/Lily once more and I step forward.

You're making her scared.

I think I should make you scared, he says. His pupils are dilated in the dim light like glass buttons in his white face. What scares you? he says. He reaches out two fingers to poke me in the belly, right where my incision scar meets my navel.

I bring the shovel down in front of me to shield myself as his hand comes forward. But the reflex is much faster than I imagine. There is a clipping sound and a flash of red and two splats on the sidewalk. Jordan the Thief wails. I look down and there are the fingertips of his index and middle fingers, two white and red blobs on the pavement. The physics is really quite astounding; of course the shovel would be extra sharp, cut down as it is.

Lacey/Lucy/Lily says Oh my god oh my god oh my god. Jordan clutches his bleeding hand, moaning and panting. I dash into the green space, down the slope, by the fence. I can't have them see me go into Julia's house. Jordan and Lacey/Lucy/Lily's voices are urgent, but getting distant. I sneak up behind the park bench. I can see their crouched backs retreating down the street, she is helping him walk. How many witnesses are there? I should call the cops. I should save the fingertips. I'll go to the house, grab a tea towel and ice.

A low, greyish shape emerges from the shadows close to where Lacey/Lucy/Lily was standing. The coyote trots across the street. It gobbles up Jordan's fingertips in two quick chomps and keeps moving. When I reach Julia's door, it is already gone.

Inside, I check all the locks twice and sit on the couch with the curtains drawn. Julia's cat purrs in my lap. Julia herself will be home in the afternoon. I can occupy myself indoors, making sure the place is clean. I'll call my sister, tell her I'll be over by

supper. Next week, I may start looking at job listings. It's probably about time I did. All this gardening and fresh air — perhaps I am stronger than I thought.

10. The Neal Continuum

Neal Warren isn't one for flakiness unless it's a nice pastry. But he keeps one inspirational quote stuck to the fridge: *Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving* – Albert Einstein.

Neal has not checked if this quote was actually coined by Albert Einstein and the fact he doesn't care about its accuracy reflects how he has established Balance in his life. Some people would care and believe he should care. But Neal keeps himself busy and thus avoids contact with those kinds of people.

Routine is the most important factor in keeping busy. Five days a week, he rises at four A.M to go to the bakery. Most recipes are his versions and he doesn't have to think about them. Tuesdays: Rosemary Garlic Potato Focaccia. Wednesdays: Molasses and Ginger Marble bread. Thursdays: Multigrain Date. Fridays: Cheese Baguettes. Saturday: Classic Dinner Rolls. Sundays and Mondays off. Sifting, mixing, kneading, cleaning—calming, predictable work. Too busy for much more than a quick conversation with Sophia or Ryan. Sophia talks about what she did on the weekend and what she'll do the coming weekend. Ryan obsesses about his record collection. Neal nods here and there without prompt for more info.

Afterwards, it's deliveries to coffee shops and convenience stores. When he gets into a rhythm, he's home by 8:45 a.m with a third cup of coffee, savouring the pleasure of being flour-dusty and done, a morning spent with few words and full hands, oven heat exuding from his skin. He watches the start of rush hour traffic from his front window. See ya, suckers.

But sometimes, there are variations, like special orders of Saturday's Classic Dinner Rolls for group lunches and suppers; soup and rolls are easy to distribute. Usually it's fine, but last week, the rolls were for a baby shower at a legion hall. Neal entered the main room in error—made sense at the time, that's where the platters of cookies and dessert squares were laid out. But he was chased off by the grandmother-to-be. She half-

ran towards him, all determined swishes of electric polyester, her head compact with white curls: *No men! No men allowed!* He did an about turn, balancing the trays. A nearby table exploded with old lady laughter, bouncing off the legion walls like a chorus of rusty sirens: *What a sin for you, Marion.* Was it really that funny? He left the rolls in the kitchen next to some Styrofoam plates.

On the return drive, he fought to keep his mind in order. These gender segregated events, planned to a tee, an opportunity to serve themselves and not men, their laughter so shrill, silly, and desperate. No booze, no drugs, just stuffing their mouths with sweets all day in safe, ritual indulgences.

This kind of thinking always stirs a dark disgust in his core, something leftover from junior high, the fierce, unnameable resentment towards female teachers close to retirement, like Mrs. Metcath, the English teacher and Sister Sheila, for Religion. Doling out punishments if he didn't look and listen to what they were doing, the creak of their voices and flash of dusty rose bra straps as they aged before his eyes.

But what was worse were certain classmates, like Blair Ingram, with his over-combed black hair and huge Adam's apple that wiggled suggestively when he spoke. People like Blair enjoyed switching Neal's first and last name to make it a command: *Kneel, Warren!* And then a bent knee in the back of his own knee so he couldn't help but crumple forward. Or someone standing over him with raised, demanding arms: *Kneel, Warren!* Always the pause. Yes, you recognize how a grammatical pause gives new meaning. Good job, asshole.

Blair called Mrs. Metcath and Sister Sheila dried up cunts and sloppy old sluts and wrote nasty things about them on the bathroom walls. Once, Neal told him, as quietly and directly as felt safe, that he should knock it off. Blair's shiny Adam's apple all up in Neal's face. *Fuck off, Warren,* it said. *You fucking fag.*

When Neal returned home after the baby shower, he reorganized the Tupperware drawer and the dry goods cupboard. He aligned can labels until the darkness faded into

Balanced grey. On Sunday, he woke early and drove to the old apple orchard in Torbay. He filled three Sobeys bags with apples and as he rinsed and dried them, he felt confidence resort itself with the sight of their firm green skin. Such great candidates for chutney and applesauce.

This labour of obtaining his own food is part of Balance, but involves connections with the right people. There is Neal's neighbour, Richard, who enjoys anything homemade and will trade for it: some moose meat, the occasional cod, some homegrown pot. There is walking Mrs. Freeman's dog in exchange for fresh chicken eggs. There are people who like his baked goods and know where the best chanterelle locations are or grow their own vegetables or snare rabbits. Knowing he can forage nutrients by his own hands and cashless barter is soothing. He can survive without being shaped to fit some consumerist box. He can distance himself from the pressure to be impressive on paper. He can rest easy in the knowledge he is capable and resourceful and not some worry or project or obligation.

But all interactions require management. Neal maintains a few batches of homebrew and wine for when he's invited to house parties. Richard has a shed full of tools which Neal is welcome to borrow, so he makes sure to show thanks with a few bottles. But, with this much booze around, plus pot and the small collection of pills from East End Mark, one needs control. Pre-Balance, before the accident, involved too many benders and frustration. Meeting a girl in a bar and trying to get her in bed by nodding and expressing concern with eye contact and buying drinks. And late, unsatisfying nights, occasionally with someone only tolerable because they had cocaine. And hangovers, and gritty feelings sparkling like new asphalt in the bright sunshine.

And even with control, things happen. Neal recently brought over blueberry jam to Richard's and was asked to stay. They smoked up to Grateful Dead records. Which started fine, but then the combination of Richard's baritone voice and grey beard and the Grateful Dead lyrics with their undertones of hippy-dippy melancholy: *come on all you pretty women with your hair hanging down* made Neal crave other focus. He got way too

high and paced his house for hours, shaking out thoughts of mistakes with women and the accident last year; the black Pontiac Sunfire sliding into view on the right, his hands on the steering wheel jerking the Volvo into the left lane, the slow-slow-fast spin towards the opposite ditch. And falling and turning and falling and turning. Except, in his dreams, the calmness doesn't fill him as it did that night, when the car stopped rolling and he realized he was unharmed and, in that moment, accepted death without fear. Instead, he opens his mouth and a thousand sounds escape and he wakes glazed in hot panic.

The next time Richard pulls out the pot, he'll make sure he has an excuse to leave early. Gotta work tomorrow. Gotta wicked headache.

It is Tuesday. Neal is dropping off an order of focaccia to some hipster café downtown. Which wouldn't be so bad, but there's no back entrance and he has wait at the counter. The place is all trendy aqua and wood panelling. The patrons are the kinds who wear winter hats all year long and speak with an affected fry like their sinuses are congested with apathy. Everyone's faces are in their phones. Neal wonders what today's generations will be like as old people. Backs stooped from hand-held devices, Alzheimer's patients picking up small things and making texting gestures. *My son never retweets me, WTF?* Fights erupting in retirement homes when Nickelback is played or someone denies the value of craft beer.

As he waits for the bearded barista to sign the invoice, he spots Jenny Tilley. She sits near the window with a book. Jenny always enjoyed cafés like this, places where she can sit and read intellectual-looking things. She also enjoyed Instagramming random, boring items: her five-dollar latte, her new shoes. Adding a filter to a photo of clouds to *make them more vibrant*. Seeing her reassures him it wouldn't have worked out. He is glad to see her here and not in a place where this reassurance may not come so easily.

It was in a coffee shop like this when he told her to go fill her boots. Their table had an uneven leg. A man and woman sat at the next table and the woman talked and the

man nodded without looking up from his phone. But nothing she said was that interesting: *I'm dreading having Sunday blues tomorrow. Cindy says she's joining the roller derby.*

So, Jenny said. We've been together a couple of months now.

Six weeks, Neal said.

Okay. And I'm not really sure what's going on. But I got asked out by someone.

Yeah?

Yeah. I wasn't sure what to say. I mean, I don't know if you want to be exclusive or not.

By all means, say yes, Neal said. He took a swig of his coffee. It burned the top of his mouth. He wished it was something stronger. He should have made it Irish.

Really?

Yeah. Fill yer boots.

Jenny stared at him. There was a little leaf pattern on her latte foam. The woman at the next table looked at her fingers: *My lips taste like hand sanitizer.*

They finished their beverages. Jenny left right away. Later, he learned it was Shane Summers who asked her out. Shithead Shane fucking Summers, bass player and downtown douche, always getting laid even though he never has money and still wears those low-crotch, saggy jeans that look like sweaters worn as pants. For months, Neal left rooms Shane entered, once walking out of a show when he realized Shane was playing with the main act.

Neal senses movement from Jenny. He prepares to be friendly, but neutral.

Hey Neal, Jenny says. She still wears her hair long to her shoulders, straight and marshy brown. She has new glasses with black, squarish frames.

How you doin', Jenny?

Pretty good these days. Finished my thesis.

That's great. Finally put that bastard to bed.

You still at the bakery?

Yeah, just dropped these off.

He gestures to his tray of wrapped focaccia loaves. She leans over them. They smell amazing, she says. I'm getting one. Her head hovers under his nose and her hair exudes something tingly warm, like cloves or allspice. Her hair smelled like that back then too, in bed, spilling over his collarbone as she leaned over him.

Don't bother buying one, he says. I'll get you one from the car. No charge.

Really?

Yeah, I'm just doing deliveries.

My lucky day.

She follows him to the car talking the whole time: her master's advisor is recommending her thesis on local sustainable agriculture for some lofty sounding publication, she's planting sunflowers in her backyard to try and remove the lead from the soil. He nods and nods and when he turns to her from the trunk of the car, she peers at him over her trendy glasses.

So, how are you, Neal? I never see you around anymore.

Best kind. Keeping busy.

I sent you an email. When I heard about the car accident.

Yes, I got it. Sorry I didn't write back.

Did they ever find who ran you off the road?

Nope. Some random asshole. This city is full of bad drivers.

He puts a loaf in an empty Sobeys bag and hands it to her: We make this kind every Tuesday. So you know.

Thanks so much. You should come over some time. My boyfriend Paul and I live on Young Street.

Oh yeah? Paul, huh?

Yeah, we just moved in together.

Didn't work out with Shane I guess.

He says this with a little laugh which is supposed to be light, but comes out like a cough. Jenny stares at him.

Shane? Shane who?

Shane Summers. You know, he asked you out.

Oh that. Jesus. I never went out with him. She crosses her arms at him: Where'd you hear that?

Well. You said, back then, someone asked you out.

Oh yeah, he asked me out, but I wasn't interested.

Oh.

Yeah, I guess when I brought it up, I basically wanted to know if things were getting serious. She shrugs. The Sobey's bag bounces lightly on her thigh.

Oh.

Everything is timing, I suppose. You seeing anyone now?

No.

You should come over some time. Paul and I throw the occasional dinner party. My God, the food you make? You'd be the potluck star. You on Facebook?

No.

Well, I still have your email. I'll drop you a line.

Okay.

Or you know, write me sometime. Don't be a stranger.

Sure. Will do.

Talk to you later.

Neal gets in the car. In the rear view mirror, Jenny unlocks her bike and brings it to the street. She mounts and is instantly full of grace and speed. She pedals off standing over the seat, the silhouette of her ass shifting side to side. He remembers how, when she would get on top of him, she would rise up on the balls of her feet to slide up and down, her ass cheeks slapping his thighs. He closes his eyes and lowers his forehead on the top of the steering wheel.

Going out for one drink is fine and the house doesn't hold enough distractions. He changes his shirt and places three five-dollar bills in his front jeans pocket. It's a Tuesday, there won't be much on. Some places promise live music every night, but it usually translates to one guy with a guitar who knows the full repertoire of Tom Petty.

The Rose is empty except for two people at the VLTs and the regular bartender, Gary Something. Neal knew his surname a long time ago. He orders a Guinness. Stout is something he's never tried to make, so it's a treat. Plus, it's easy to sip slowly and The Rose has a good draft pour. When he and Jenny were together, she liked Guinness too, said it was full of iron. She insisted it tasted different when she was in Dublin; she drank it every night there and never got a hangover. *Because of the iron and fish oil and stuff*, she said.

Why is he thinking about her? It lasted maybe six weeks. It was before the accident even. She talked too much, her friends even more, stupid topics — reality TV and Etsy and who was at what show downtown over the weekend. Jenny, so smart and educated, embroiled in insipid conversations about cake decorating or award shows.

But she was funny. She got what she called over-packaging rage and broke brand new things trying to release them from their *finicky-ass-plastic-bullshit casings*. Wrestling with a package of scissors in her tiny hands: *Fuck this irony*, throwing it across the table. She admired Neal's tactile patience, his ability to tie proper knots, the details he put on loaves of bread and pastries. Her legs, so skinny with knobby knees, but holding up that lovely, round bum. How she tanned dark that summer so her hazel eyes stood out like new pennies.

Whadderyaat, buddy?

Shane Fucking Summers is by Neal's elbow. Since Neal last saw him, he's grown his hair long and aquired a squirrely moustache. He punches Neal's shoulder: Dude, I haven't seen you in ages. How've you been?

Keeping busy. Baking and making stuff.

Busy, huh? You were always like that. Shane presses his hands together and wiggles them back and forth: Forever on the move. Like a shark.

That's me.

Check this out, man.

Shane opens his wallet and slides out a photograph of a baby in a pink onesie. Black ringlets encircle her head and her chin shines with drool. Shane taps the photo: This is what I've been busy making.

Neal holds it and nods. Shane could have wiped the youngster's face before taking the photo. Beautiful, he says.

Her name is Nevaeh. Know what that means?

Sounds Gaelic.

It's heaven spelled backwards. And she's made my life heaven, man. I was against it at first, you know. Me and her mom were just hooking up and she got pregnant. My first impulse was to have nothing to do with it. But we're a family now.

Congrats.

If Nevaeh is heaven backwards, wouldn't that translate as the opposite of heaven? But Shane's eyes are extra shiny and it makes him somewhat tolerable.

What about you, man? You with anyone?

Nope.

Neal sips his pint and realizes it is half gone. Since Shane appeared, he's taken big gulps. This guy's presence makes him drink faster so he can leave the bar and go home. Shane Summers, making people drink, making people pregnant. Making people break up with their girlfriends when they don't want to.

A stream of people enter the bar. They wear matching t-shirts, white with the German flag. Some have their legs tied together three-legged race style.

Must be a pub crawl, Shane says.

MUN German society, Gary the bartender says. They order the same shirts every year.

Let me get the next one, Shane says.

No, I should go.

Dude, I never see you. Gary's already pouring it up.

The students surround them now. They are impossibly young. Does Gary bother to ID? One of them jostles Neal's arm and the photo of Nevaeh flutters to the floor. He retrieves it and when he sits back up, the fresh pint is ready.

Cheers, man, Shane says.

He grins. Neal glimpses the bottom row of his teeth under his hipster ‘stache. Like road pylons. How has this clown managed to get so much pussy? Neal clinks his pint glass against Shane’s bottle: Cheers.

The bed is hard and cold. Neal shifts and his face peels off the sheet like a sticker. Something is different. He opens his eyes. The bed is made of white square tiles. Above his head is the base of a toilet. What the fuck.

Neal sits up. He is on a bathroom floor. Someone has covered him with a grey army blanket. His mouth tastes like metal.

He rubs his face. There is a patch of some kind of grit on his left cheek. He rubs his hand on his jeans. His jeans are caked with dried mud. He stands. Dirt falls off him in flakes. His hands are filthy. He goes to the mirror over the sink. Streaks of mud line his face. There is a cut on his chin. Blood on his shirt and what looks like puke. Holy fuck.

The bathroom is familiar. A plaque over the towel rack. Royal Canadian Legion Regional Darts, 2013. Richard Puddicombe. Richard’s house. Did he see Richard yesterday? Was he at the bar?

Downstairs, Richard butters toast at the kitchen table. He sees Neal, purses his lips and gives a low whistle.

How you doing, soldier? Richard says. Breakfast?

The smell of scrambled eggs buckles Neal’s stomach. No thanks, he says. What happened?

You were in the alley off McMurdo’s Lane. Gus and I came out of The Duke and he goes, Look at that poor fucker. And there you were on the ground. You were the poor fucker.

On the ground?

Yeah, we brought you here. Your legs didn't work. We kept you from falling down, but it looks like you were falling down all night. Richard points to Neal's mud-caked jeans.

I don't remember anything.

Some bender you were on.

I had two pints, I think.

You had more than that.

That's all I remember.

C'mon, b'y. It's okay, we all tie one on once in a while.

I don't remember finishing the second pint.

Maybe you got date-rape drugged or something. Richard laughs and chomps into his toast.

Neal regards his right hand. The fingernails are edged in black: Maybe.

Richards slurps his tea. What kind of bars are you hanging out in? he says. He smiles so hard tea dribbles down his chin.

I was at The Rose, Neal says. He pats his pockets. Keys are still there. No wallet. But he didn't bring his wallet; he brought fifteen dollars in cash. He checks. Cash is gone. But the first pint was eight dollars anyway.

You want to clean up? Richard says. Take a shower if you want.

No, I need to get home and call work.

You sure you don't want something to eat?

I don't think I can eat anything.

Well, hope nobody dosed you. Fucking epidemic. Oil money has ruined this town. All these girls getting roofied. Why would anyone want to fuck a woman when she's passed out? Necrophilia.

Richard chuckles and munches into a piece of toast. Neal eyes the crumbs dusting Richard's bearded chin. He could reach out slow – *ya got something right there, Richard* — and clout him good on the lips. Hard enough to send him backwards. Let him fall on the floor like a fat, smug, grey fish.

Outside, the sun pounds him. His legs sweat in his stiff filth-caked jeans. Three teenage boys with backward ball caps and skateboards move out of the way as he passes them. Pig-Pen's off to see Charlie Brown, one says. They explode with laughter. He keeps going.

Back home, Neal undresses in front of the bathroom mirror. There are brown smudges on his underwear and streaks on his thighs, three long ones, like fingers. His fingers? Fuck. Maybe he should go to the cops. If he's going to the cops, he should take pictures. He opens his flip phone and snaps a photo of his thighs. What could this prove? These could be anyone's thighs.

He examines his face and head. His cropped hair is matted behind his ears. He didn't think it could collect so much dirt at its short length. The filth on his face makes his eyes greyer than usual. Pig-Pen indeed. Is he really going to take pictures of his smeared body with his pants down? Will they need to see his dick too? He pulls back the elastic on his underwear and looks. The fabric is clean inside. Nothing in his pubic hair. He cups his balls. Nothing there. Nothing on the shaft or foreskin. Oh good, no dick tampering happened. Jesus Christ.

Make a decision. The police station means questions and tests. Questions like what are his habits and does he drink often or do drugs. Tests like inspections and swabs.

It will be a long day. He won't be able to shower until later. And if he hasn't been drugged? *Don't drink so much, Buddy.*

And if he's been drugged, the cops will go to The Rose and question Gary. Ask about security cameras. Most bars have security cameras, yes? And fucking Shane, they'd have questions for him. What are Gary and Shane like, really?

The blur of students, their matching clothes. There were girls with them. Maybe this was someone's dirty little plan. Maybe he did someone a favour, some girl who might have been harmed. But fuckers like that carry more than one dose. They'd be slick about it. They stay sober while others drink, wait for opportunity—someone makes a joke and everyone turns and laughs or the band starts playing and everyone looks to the stage or someone puts their glass down while they're in the bathroom.

The phone squishes out of his sweaty hand and clatters on the floor. He has to remove this slime of fear and shame and strange interference. This is his decision.

In the shower, he blasts hot water and frisks the soap into a thick, coating lather. His fingers discover collections of dried crud in his right ear, left armpit, ass crack and behind his knees. He lathers and rinses three times. He lists what he'll do when he's clean: call the bakery, tell Sophia he had food poisoning, sorry Sophie, sorry. Put on soft clean clothes, order a pizza. Watch movies he's seen before – distractions without surprises. Go to sleep, sleep as much as possible. Maybe take something to knock him out. What if it messes with something leftover in his blood? Jesus.

He leaves the shower and wraps up in a towel. He sits on the toilet and focuses on the word breathe. Breathe for Balance, breathe. When his breathing is regular, he notices the shower is still running. He listens to the constant fuzz of water, keeping on without him.

Sophia's says Oh no, with high raw concern and he says It's okay. Then he says one of his friends brought him soup and pain killers and she doesn't have to come over.

When he hangs up, he is relieved but also maybe he should have said yes to soup and ginger ale and kindness.

When the pizza arrives, he puts on Star Wars. He has all day to watch the original trilogy. He dozes off at the start of *Empire Strikes Back* and wakes to a pounding at the door. Jenny Tilley is on his step.

So. You are home.

Hey Jenny. Um, sorry, I wasn't expecting anyone.

I guess you didn't read my emails. I tried calling you, but your number's different now.

Yeah, haven't been on the computer.

Yeah, well. She purses her lips. Christ, Neal. You were out of your mind last night.

Yeah, I know.

I wrote to see how you were and you didn't respond. I needed to see if you were okay.

Sorry. Didn't mean to make you worry.

She stares up at him, biting her lip. Can I use your bathroom? I forgot to pee when I decided to come over.

Sure.

In the living room, she eyes the sweaty pizza box and Gatorade.

Want some pizza?

No thanks.

She perches on the edge of the couch so her knees don't touch the blanket. Paul and I were out for dinner and we saw you on Water Street with Shane, she says. You were babbling. Shane was holding you up. I told him to get you a cab. When I texted him later, he said you told him to fuck off and ran away.

Oh, Neal says. Of course, she has Shane's number.

Yeah. I think he could have tried a bit harder. But he was pretty drunk himself.

She draws her legs in, like she's trying not to put too much of herself on the couch. They had sex on that couch once, him sitting, her straddling. She said it was her favourite way because she could stick her tits in his face and he said it was his favourite too.

A good friend of mine had her drink drugged a couple of weeks ago, she says. She was messed up, like you. We had to carry her home. She's going back and forth with the cops and the bar now. I just – I'm really scared for everyone these days. For this town.

Something clusters and rises in Neal's throat. He should tell her to leave, go on home to your boyfriend, whathisname, Peter or Paul. Her eyes are dark and gentle behind her square lens. I think that's what happened to me, he says.

Jenny is on his computer. Search results for Men being roofied and Men on date rape drugs bring up mostly blog posts and forums: *How can I tell if I've been roofied? What to do if you see someone drug a woman's drink. Symptoms of date rape drugs.* She reads the list: Drunkenness, confusion, nausea, passing out, memory loss. There's an article focuses on rich guys in New York City getting roofied and having their Rolexes and credit cards stolen.

I had less than ten dollars on me.

Have you thought of going to the police? she says. Might not be too late to do a blood test. Not that it's what you should do. No pressure.

I know.

Although, if you were a woman, I'd encourage you to come forward. And there would be an investigation.

No doubt.

It's not a women's issue, you know that, right? I mean, this happens to everyone. There's not a lot online 'cause men don't come forward. But if men did, it'd be a social issue, not a women's issue.

Yeah, I see that.

Like the 'Question of the Day' that radio station did: *What should women do to protect themselves against date rape drugs?* Why not say, what should we all do? It's infuriating.

He nods. He kind of remembers the news item. More of Richard complaining about how people pick at the question's wording rather than answer it. He might have agreed at the time.

I'm so sorry, Neal.

It's okay.

No. It's horrible this happened to you.

Well, it should never happen to anyone.

See, that's what I mean. You get it. You're a great guy.

Her phone jingles. It's Paul, she says. I gotta make a move. She stands an arm's length away. He could touch her. In a neutral way, hand on her shoulder.

My number's on your desk. Call if you need anything. She hugs him, a quick squeeze. I'll email you tomorrow.

And she's gone. He sits in his computer chair. It's still warm from her presence.

At bedtime, Neal takes one of the East End Mark's Ambien. He needs sleep, but laying around all day means it will take time for his body to get tired. And there will be thoughts. Tonight, a sleeping aid, tomorrow, back to Balance.

The pill is a good idea because his mind starts up immediately. Someone else out there joins the Getting Away With It Club. People run you off the road or poison you, leave you to die in the street as they go home and watch TV and masturbate over their mischievousness. He remember his sister on the phone after the accident: *So, the cops can't find the driver?* She paused, getting her words ready like she's preparing to spit. *It's just, I don't know. This town ain't that small. Are you sure you were straight that night?* And then his voice on pins: *Why would I fake it? You know what, Carla? Go fuck yourself.* He hung up. The residual anger bubbles, but the pill kicks in and everything is warm and dull.

The next morning at the bakery, he gets right on the dough maker. He makes extra and bakes a large batch of cinnamon buns, makes cream cheese icing with a zap of orange zest. He gives some to Sophia and Ryan and there is still a dozen left over. An offering to Jenny wouldn't be out of line. For her and Whatshisnuts. She's been kind while he's been a zero communication goof. Giving back is good for Balance.

Jenny's place is a narrow downtown house painted apple green. You're so thoughtful, she says at the door. Come in. Paul's at work. I'll make tea. They sit in her small kitchen. An herb garden flourishes on the windowsill, the refrigerator door explodes with colourful magnets.

I bought a coffee this morning, she says. They left it on the counter so I could add sugar or whatever. I thought, who's to stop someone from putting something in that? Like that Detroit girl who died when her Mountain Dew was drugged.

I never think about stuff like that.

The RCMP did a drug presentation at Paul's work last year. The cop said people will just drop something in your drink for shits and giggles.

Of course she told Paul. He was there when Neal was messed up on Water Street. He met Jenny's boyfriend and doesn't remember. Nice first impression, Warren.

How do you think they do it? she says.

A bowl of candy sits on the table, retro stuff, probably from the over-priced kitsch store on Water Street. He unwraps a package of Rockets and takes out one sugar pill: How would you slip this into a drink?

Try to drop one in my tea, she says.

There's something on your shirt, Neal says. He reaches across the table and points at her collar. One pill falls from his palm into her tea with a plop.

Real subtle, she says. Let me try. Hey, what's that? She points behind him. He glances back quickly.

Did you do it?

Yup.

Wow. You're smooth.

They make a game of it, divvying up the candy. Jenny wins, 7 – 4, undetected. He is about to challenge her to a rematch when Paul arrives. He is tall, dark, and business casual. Great hair. They shake hands and there is a spark of recognition in Paul's eyes: Yeah, nice to meet you. Neal's face flushes: Well, I better be moving on. Enjoy the cinnamon buns. He takes a slurp of his cold tea. Ugh, the Rockets. He keeps it in his mouth until he's outside and spits it on the sidewalk.

He takes another Ambien that night. He doesn't expect to dream, but one lingers when he rattles awake with the four a.m. alarm. In the dream, he stands at the counter in the trendy coffee shop. There is a shelf lined with things he needs: keys, phone, a pile of coins. He reaches and small white pills rain from his sleeves. They plop into a row of prepared lattes set up below on the counter. Someone screams. He looks to the window. The black Pontiac Sunfire is parked outside.

On Friday, it's Cheese Baguettes. Ryan rants about how he was a member of some vinyl collectors' group on Facebook, but the administrator asked him to leave because of his comments. Thin-skinned pussies, he says. It's everyone's business to get offended these days.

Maybe, Sophia says, if you didn't refer to people as pussies, they wouldn't ask you to leave. They are still arguing when Neal goes to make deliveries. Why do they have to fill the bakery with drama? Everyone is an asshole.

Traffic is backed up on Military Road and he finds himself gazing into car windows. Drivers, passengers. How many are thieves? How many are violent? Maybe the person who drugged him is there, some upstanding citizen who gets their dark jollies on the weekends. Someone cuts him off at the Basilica intersection. He flips them off.

At home, he thaws Richard's moose meat and opens a bottle of wine. Just for today. He can take the edge off and still have Balance. The red is quite good and he chills a bottle of white for later. He should see how it aged, how it tastes cold. He'll allow himself some alcoholic euphoria. Things will be fine again soon.

He pours a glass and checks his email. One new message from Jenny:

Hey all. I've officially completed my masters degree! Please join me at The Martini Bar tomorrow night for celebratory beverages. Can't wait to see you!

Xoxo

Jenny

She's a friend now. He should also be a friend and go to her important things. And maybe, someday, who knows. She hasn't been with Paul long. Who knows what will happen. He'll go, have a couple of drinks and leave early. He'll congratulate her. They'll hug.

On Saturday, Neal drinks some homebrew to warm up for socializing. He drinks one before supper, then two more, but instead of mellowing him, he finds himself staring out the window at passing cars and faces. He is glad he doesn't live in a larger city, no views of skyscrapers and teeming humanity. Before he leaves, he pops one of East End Mark's Percocet and takes along another for later.

When he arrives at The Martini Bar, he's buzzed enough that it doesn't bug him that Shane Summers is there. He stands by Paul, showing him what Neal assumes is Nevaeh's photo. For a new dad, he goes out often. He probably brags about changing diapers when he's only done it twice.

Shane claps him on the shoulder. Neal, buddy, how's it going? he says. Sure did tie one on the other night.

Something like that, Neal says.

Yeah, little Jen Tilley was worried about you. She's a good egg like that, eh Paul?

Shane clicks his glass against Paul's. Paul gives a benevolent nod. He wears a button-up shirt with a neat blue tie. He's a classy motherfucker.

You guys know each other? Shane says. Paul do you know...KNEEL, Warren!

Oh wow, that didn't occur to me, Paul says. He high-fives Shane. Neal stares at Paul's tie. He could yank down it real hard. Imagine, Paul's face gasping open like a drowning fish.

Kneel, oh baker of the sweetest breads! Shane raises his arms above Neal.

I don't think so, Neal says.

No, do it, humour me for a second.

Humour yourself.

No, I'm going to knight you, Shane says. He makes gestures with an imaginary sword.

Getting a drink.

Neal pushes past them to the bar. He glimpses his reflection as he waits for his pint. Face stony, eyes like piss holes in the snow. C'mon Warren, compose yourself. Jenny's not even here yet and you have to look like an ol' sport. He glances back. Shane does some kind of staggering walk. Paul laughs.

There is no one else around who Neal knows. When his pint is ready, Shane waves him back over. He goes to them and lays his pint down. Maybe he should take another Perk.

Anyone call you that before? Shane says. I just thought of it.

In high school, yeah.

Oh man, I remember this guy back in Gonzaga. Rick Bentley, Shane says. We used to call him Dick Bent. And then some chick said he actually had a crooked dick. Poor fucker never lived it down.

There was a Jack Hoff in my sister's class, Paul said.

Oh man. That's child abuse.

Neal shoves his hands into his jacket pockets. There is something small and tubular at the bottom. A row of wrapped Rocket candy from Jenny's. He loosens the cellophane with his fingertips and a single, smooth tablet is there. If it was a real pill, how easy would it be to dose one of them? Would they notice? It might be nice to know that they're as dull and vulnerable as he is.

Here's the girl of the hour, Shane says. The bar rings in enthusiasm as Jenny enters. Shane and Paul step forward. Neal's pint is next to Shane's. He reaches over Shane's glass and the single candy pill falls into the brown stout. The slightest of ripples. His fingers find his own glass and he brings it to his lips. The carbonation has settled nicely now. He allows himself a long, indulgent sip.

What did you just do?

A short woman with cropped dark hair is up in his face. Her chin juts out. Breath is gin and something sticky sweet, like pineapple. Behind her is a shaggy-haired person in a black hoodie. The face is gaunt and smooth.

Nothing, Neal says.

We saw you put something in that drink.

The woman pitches her voice so people turn around and stare. Jenny is in mid-hug with Shane and they both look over.

I didn't do anything.

Here, the woman holds up Shane's pint. This fucking guy dropped something in this drink.

Warren's my buddy, Shane says. He wouldn't do that.

It's just candy, Neal says.

It looked like a pill, the hoodie person says.

Yeah, a candy pill.

Why would you put candy in Shane's drink? Paul says. Jenny is by him now, biting her lip.

I was just fucking around, he says. It's only candy.

Prove it, the woman says. Empty your pockets.

Look, Neal says. He pulls out the open packet of Rockets: Candy, see?

Now the other pockets.

Neal swallows hard. This isn't fair. He pulls out his wallet, keys, phone. The pill canister of Percocet.

What are these? the woman says. She brandishes the Percocet for the bar to witness. There is a deep collective inhale and murmurs.

Those are mine.

Yeah? Yours for what? the woman says. Destroying people's lives? I'm so sick of the goddamn dirtbags in this town.

They're Perks. They're mine.

The hoodie person steps forward. Neal is suddenly reminded of some old cartoon, a wizard about to demand the answer to a riddle. Their voice is low and even. Listen, they say, We saw you put a pill in someone's drink. We see you have pills. You can say they're for you, but we don't know that. You can say they're Percocet, but we don't know that either. The person's eyes are hard and calm. They aren't fucking around.

Dude, is this for real? Paul says.

Everyone in the bar is watching. Angry mouths. Jenny's face is open and scared. Neal takes his wallet, phone and keys from the table. Casual, now. Hot and damp all over.

Take a look at Shane's drink, he says. It's just a bit of extra sugar.

But why would you do that? Shane says.

What odds? Neal says. His voice is high and unpracticed. There's nothing in that drink to hurt you.

Maybe not this time, the woman says. Maybe we caught you rehearsing. The hoodie person's hands shift in their pockets.

Someone call the cops, someone says.

Neal walks to the door. Get back here, the woman yells. A bouncer, tall and solid, comes around the bar. Neal runs out. The air is cold and stabs into his cheeks and neck. Voices, more yelling: Get that fucker! His boots smack the sidewalk. Clusters of people smoking outside the bar turn and stare. More yelling. Footsteps.

Neal makes it to Water Street and runs as hard as he can. How long has it been since he ran? How long has it been since he's been chased? Games of tag, games of softball. Run, Warren, run.

At the courthouse, he allows himself a look back. He's alone. He slows and his stomach lurches. He spits up. Half the bar knows him. Would they send the cops to his house?

He'll go to Richard's. Say there's a problem in his house, plumbing issues. He'll go home now, grab a few things. A cab appears and actually stops when he waves, a blessed, glowing, empty cab.

He takes long, steady breaths. Thighs on fire. Tomorrow, he'll email Jenny, give an excuse and an apology. Blame the booze and pills. He'll think of something to say to Shane the next time he sees him. He'll stay occupied and try not to shrivel up every time he thinks of what a goddamn idiot he is. His sister was right about him being fucked up. He is fucked up and should talk to somebody, see a doctor. If he wants Balance, he must be able to ask for help.

In the house, he fills a backpack with T-shirts, socks and underwear. When he calls, Richard says no problem. I'll see you soon, Neal says. My phone is about to die.

He opens the door. The short-haired woman and the hoodie person are there.

No one would tell us your last name, the woman says. But I remembered someone yelling Neal Warren and there you are in the phone book.

What do you want?

I don't want much, the hoodie person says. But Julia here dealt with people like you before. She's at the point she can't try to forget it anymore.

Julia is her name. Her eyes are beer-bottle brown and the bags underneath them hold all the sad feelings in the world. She holds something hard and metal that moves too fast to recognize and when it hits Neal's head, the pain is white and shining.

As Neal falls, he realizes he is without fear. Julia mouths things at him, her arm raised. Once again, he thinks, I am a target for strangers. But I am a stranger too, to them. They are strangers who believe I am bad and they stop bad strangers.

Good for them.

He might die now. Or he might lie here and recover. And if he recovers, he will find Balance again. He closes his eyes against the figures above him. When he finds Balance again, it will be with healthy ways, ways that involve people. He'll eat right, get some therapy. He'll go out in the world. And when he's ready, he'll call old friends, invite them over. With the food he makes, he could have a spectacular dinner party.

11. Gutless Bravado, Part Four

Julia needs to feel ready. She's home now, between jobs and letting me stay with her. She sleeps on the top floor and keeps a rope by her bed with climbing knots spaced out on them. She carries things: a Swiss army knife, brass knuckles she made in the machinist shop. I wonder if she is like this because of Max or if it's always been part of her personality. Or it's a phase. She was scared for a long time and now she craves control. But living together is nice. She likes to cook and doesn't mind my bit of clutter.

She also wants to be on the go all the time. You've been cooped up too long, she says. C'mon, we goes. She likes happy hours and live music shows where we dance in front of the stage like sweaty marionettes. But her guard never goes down. Do you know the US military issue safety warnings when their soldiers are here? she says. George Street is asshole territory There is a fresh ferocity about her since she returned from Fort Mac. I want a fuck-it list instead of a bucketlist, she says. I want to throw a drink in someone's face. Flip over a table. When she talks like this, I imagine her eyes changing like the cat's when it wants to pounce: all pupil, no iris.

Being her going-out pal wouldn't be an issue if I wasn't a lightweight. The way alcohol plays with my new insides makes me nervous. It sneaks up on me and by the time I notice, I'm past the giving-a-fuck line. And I like it too much. I have to pace myself. Beer is easier to sip than mixed drinks or wine. Julia took me to a barbeque at her old journey person's place. I awoke the next morning curled up in the middle of the floor, alone. You were petting the dog and passed out, she said. You gotta slow down on the wine. You're like the desert needs the rain with that stuff. Then she says she envies me: I'd love to be a cheap drunk. I'd just buy really high quality stuff. Two glasses of good wine instead of cheap beer. But I don't believe her. She'd still drink all night.

Tonight, she wants to go to this place with a martini special. I should learn to make a few of those, she says. We could have a tapas night or something. She skips out the door, but gets dark and glowery as we pass a guy waiting for the bus. His t-shirt says *Violence isn't the answer, but it's always an option*. Gross, Julia hisses. Then the guy

falls into a coughing fit and hacks up on the sidewalk. Good, she says. I look over at her. She winks at me.

We get our drinks and a table. I score a pint glass of water to go with my beer. Julia's eyes skim the bar, pausing on individuals. I know she is checking for familiarity, for Max or one his friends. The crease between her eyes makes me want to tuck her into me. I could cuddle the worry out of her. It's okay girl, you have friends. You are loved.

Julia gets the two-for-one lychee martinis. The fruit at the bottom of the glasses look like soft little brains.

It's so nice to have a couple of girly drinks without hearing about it, she says. Jesus, working with men. They can't leave anything alone. I hope I don't get recalled soon.

I nod and sip my beer. The bar is busy. Conversations around us create an impotent riot of complaints and statements. She's neat and twenty-three from the front and a forty-seven year old woman from behind, a man at the next table says to his friend. It's hot.

Julia blinks hard and continues: Up in the camps, it's all about how difficult women are to work with, she says. Always drama or some problem when women are involved. Which I think is true, but only in comparison to men. Men just conform.

I mean, it's not like I want things to be completely open, the woman behind me says. But, like, I think you should, you know, be allowed a few nights a year to do what you want. Three nights. No, four.

Up in camp there's no smoking most places, so they chew tobacco, Julia says. Fuckin' Tim Horton's cups all over the cafeteria full of brown spit. Disgusting. Lots of guys complainin' about it. And then I bring it up during a tailboard meeting and I'm a bitch. But the cafeteria is where we eat. This is public hygiene.

These fries are right moreish, one of the guys says. You sound like my Nan, the other one replies.

And then the prick with the laptop, Julia says. She sips her second martini. Thinks it's funny to show hardcore porn at lunchtime. Him and about six others, sitting around, eatin' chilli, watching redtube or whatever. Not one complaint. And they start giving me these looks, like they could tell it bugged me and they were daring me to say something. Because if there's a complaint, it's got to be one of the girls, right? Never mind that one on one, guys tell me how they don't understand why anyone would want to see porn in the workplace. Why would I want to get hard when I'm trying to focus, they say. But no one speaks up. Together, they are gutless. The cowardice of the Y chromosome. The Roman Catholic Church. The military. All these accusations of harassment and racism coming from police departments all over North America. They all knew and didn't speak up. Groupthink at its finest. That's what happens when it's men together in groups for a long time. They sync up and become the same guy.

She glances at the men next to us. Both stare into their phones. It turns my stomach, she says. How about you?

Last I heard, my stomach is in a lab somewhere.

Smartass.

Could be rotating on a spit for better observation.

Three guys stand by a table close to the bar. Two of them look around, their gazes do jumping jacks around the room. The other looks morose and stares at his pint.

I'm so tired of being scared, Julia says. I thought it would subside. It never leaves.

I won't let anyone hurt you.

I mean, what if Max walked in, right now? He could. This fucking town loves to show you the mistakes you've made.

Warren! One of the guys standing is yelling. His hands straight up in the air. The morose guy looks even sadder. Moroser.

Look at me, look at me, Julia says. Clowns.

A girl walks in and there is a big response from people by the bar. A cluster moves in to greet her. The morose guy reaches for his drink. Something falls from his hand, a distinct splash into the pint glass next to his.

Are you seeing this?

Julia's already on her feet. I'm coming, I say. She is in front of Morose Guy. What did you just do? she says.

Nothing.

We are immediately in cahoots, Julia and I. Good cop, bad cop. Morose Guy sputters and evades: nothing, nothing, I didn't do anything. Julia's voice gets loud: We saw you put something in that drink. People stop and stare. A hot wet patch of anxiety surfaces on the back of my neck. This guy could get angry.

It's just candy, Morose Guy says.

It looked like a pill.

Yeah, a candy pill.

Why would you put candy in Shane's drink? someone asks.

I was just fucking around. It's only candy.

Prove it, Julia says. Empty your pockets.

And then the guy does. Like Julia and I actually possess authority. Look, he says. He shows us a package of those Halloween candy, the kind in a stack that look like little pills.

Now the other pockets, Julia says. And he keeps going. And he has a pill jar. Julia holds it up for everyone to see and start yelling. Goddamn dirtbag, she says. I shake my head at her. She'll get her fingerprints on it.

They're Perks, he says. They're mine.

I want to everyone to calm down while showing him this is serious. He needs to know we have to call the cops. Listen, I say. We saw you put a pill in someone's drink. We see that you have pills. You can say they're for you, but we don't know that. You can say they're Percocet, but we don't know that either.

Take a look at Shane's drink, he says. It's just a bit of extra sugar.

But why would you do that? one of the guys says.

What odds? Morose Guy says. There's nothing in that drink that can hurt you.

Maybe not this time, Julia says. Maybe we caught you practicing for later.

This is getting ridiculous. I take my phone from my pocket. Morose Guy sees my hand move and bolts for the door. Julia yells for someone to stop him. People stare at his back. Everyone holds on to their drinks.

Let's get him, Julia says.

We can't chase him.

Her eyes are black with rage and excitement. Besides, I say. What will we do if we catch him? The bar is calling the cops.

If it's candy, can they do anything?

If it's candy, who cares?

No, it's more than that. He called him Neal, didn't he? The guy with the spiked drink called him Neal.

Okay, so the cops will get Neal.

And he yelled Warren at him, before. She taps her phone.

What do you want to do? I say this as neutrally as I can. I make sure to say what do you want, not what will you do.

Hold on. Here. Neal Warren. Pennywell Road. Let them call the cops. We should pay a visit.

We don't know what he's like.

You didn't know what that guy in Mount Pearl was like and you still followed him around.

It's easier in a vehicle.

I think he should know how easy he is to find. If he thinks it's easy to dose someone, he should know he can be tracked down within minutes.

On the trudge up to Pennywell Road, I try to buy time. I complain about my energy and take small steps: This is a bad idea, Jules. We should leave this for the RNC, Jules. He can have anything in his house, Jules. She steady strides the whole time. I gotta say something to him, she says. Just a warning. We've done that before, it won't go over the top.

Neal Warren's house is tidy with white clapboard. Maybe we should leave a note or something, I say. Send a message. But Julia charges up the path. The guy's lawn is immaculate.

Okay, what do you want to do?

Keep him there. Scare him so he stays.

We should call the cops and say he's here.

Yep. She takes out her phone. I've got the number ready. I want to show him that we'll call if he doesn't talk to us.

Neal Warren's is pasty and damp. Julia starts at him right away: No one would tell us your last name. But I remembered someone calling you Warren and there's a Neal Warren in the phone book. We took a chance.

What do you want? he says. He takes a small step back. He's holding his knapsack high on his back like he could swing it.

I don't want much, I say. But Julia here's been fucked over before. She's at the point she can't try to forget it anymore.

Fuck, I said her name. That was totally stupid. Maybe it will make him scared enough to listen, it shows we're sincere. Julia reaches into her pocket. She's going to show him her phone, show him we want to talk or else.

Something clangs. Her hand is out of her pocket. The brass knuckles have her machinist skill all over it, heavy and effective, small enough to fit in her fist. She hits him hard and fast and he's down.

What are you doing? I say. She hits him again, twice, really fast. Stop it. I step in front of her. Are you okay, Neal? Can you hear me?

Fucking fucker, you're a rapist fucker, Julia says.

Leave him alone, he's bleeding.

He deserves to bleed.

She straightens up and stares at her homemade weapon. She stoops and wipes it on Neal's shirt. Her hand shakes as she slips it back into her pocket. Maybe I shouldn't have hit him the third time, she says.

Fuck. We have to get him to a hospital.

We'll go to jail.

We can say, we can say it was a misunderstanding. I look around the porch. You call an ambulance, I'll see what he has in the house for bandages.

We have to get out of here, now. She grabs my hand. C'mon. We are charging back up the path, we're on the sidewalk. She talks wide paces. This is what we're going to do, she says. We go straight back downtown, back to that bar. Not the front door, up through the basement bar. We go in that way, get a drink and act like we never left. We get a bit loud. Make sure we're seen. We've been gone less than an hour. If we get on like we're drunk, we can say we were drinking on the street all night.

We need to call an ambulance for him.

If the bar really called the cops, they'll be by anyway.

We're half trotting down the hill now. Every step is a relief. I stare at a convenience store. We could check in there for a phone.

We're almost there. We can call in the bar.

The bar below has a side door and no one seems to notice when we duck in. I'll get drinks, Julia says. I duck into the bathroom and call 911 in one of the stalls. I tell the dispatcher I heard sounds and he says they'll send a car around. I hang up before any more questions.

Julia has a tall stemmed glass of white wine for me. It courses through me right away and I make sure I sing too loud to the music. I bump into wait staff collecting bottles. Julia does a little dance.

An American at the bar buys tequila shots for us. We definitely have witnesses. I can't see the girl and the guy who had his drink spiked here. That makes me nervous. They know Neal. What if they saw us leave? They could be the start of the trail that ends at us.

We need to burn our clothes tomorrow, Julia says close to my ear. We need to get rid of everything. She hands me another wine. We'll do it early. It will all be good. No one knows about us.

She is gone when I open my eyes. There is a pounding in my head and a pounding at the door and Julia is gone. And it was my phone. And I know without looking what the lump under my shoulder is, the cold shape of Julia's fear and the fresh notches in Neal Warren's face. The cat is a soft motor in the crook of my knee. I wonder who will take care of her now.

12. The Years the Locusts have Eaten

I remember the smell of burnt dirt and hot metal. We thought the bombs would do in the Germans. We thought it would break their legs from under them. But their shots sang to us as we went over the top. Nigel, the messenger boy, was on the right and Belemy on my left and when I saw the boy go down, I said, "the boy is gone, Belemy." And I looked left and Belemy wasn't there.

The tourism association wants me to headline a "commemorative performance" on July 1st. It'll be a regular feature in the local news, prompts to plump up Newfoundland history for summer crowd. So far, I've refused. But I'm just being contrary. For every go, there has to be a last time and this is my fourth. When it's over, so am I.

It doesn't take much to vanish when you know what you're doing. If it wasn't already done to death, I could write a song about ways to slip away:

Step one, make vices visible. Leave bottles onstage. Trip on them. Flirt with inappropriate people. Mouth off. Later, they will say how sad it was to see me so consumed.

Step two, play out a few scenes. For last Friday's gig, I made sure I was two hours late. Last month, I showed up without the band. Both times, I shrugged off the bar's frustration and drank bourbon. Heads shook and phones flashed. Disappointment moves fast these days.

Step three, pretend to age. For every go, create an image. When the time is right, add age's influence. Dark glasses into bifocals, red spats into orthopedic shoes. Adopting a trend and wearing it out also works. A ripped bowler hat. Greasy bell-bottoms.

When it's close to disappearing time, I let the one hundred lost boys show on my face. They're always just behind my eyelids. Although, nowadays they blur into fresher

betrayals. Like the face of the backup singer in New York City, 1982, the dreams in her dark eyes full and bright as I passed her the needle. Or Sarah, her voice full of tears, “you can make him into a song, but you can’t be there for me.” Or the way all three waved goodbye as they boarded that crappy little plane. Once I let them show, I’m basically done. Everybody knows someone who got old all of a sudden.

This summer makes it a century that I’ve been running this gig. A hundred years of songs about war and loss. Now called upon to sing on the anniversary of my utmost betrayal. Damn you, Littlefair. You love your irony.

Maudsley was the biggest moaner at Grimsby. The war will done before the lot of us are trained,” he said. “The Fifth Lincolns are already up to standard. We don’t even have uniforms yet. Would be just my luck to finally get my hands on a rifle and the action dries up.

Action. There was daily talk of it. How great it must be, how unfair if we don’t get any, how hard it will be to tolerate those who get some. Maudsley believes action will get him everything he wants. “The ladies prefer heroes,” he says. “Walk into a dance with medals on your chest? You can take your pick.”

I grinned and cheered with the rest. I didn’t dare speak the secrets of my guts. Or admit the action I truly desired was time, opportunity, and process.

Lord Kitchener ensured we had no choice. Lady Doughty named us The Chums. “We’re all chums, every bloomin’ one of us!” A quarter million underage volunteers. If Kitchener lived today, he’d be accused of propaganda, or romanticizing violence. Or at least peer pressure. His signs hung on every public wall:

WAKE UP GRIMSBY!

YOUNG MEN, DO YOUR DUTY.

JOIN NOW WITH YOUR PALS.

YOUNG WOMEN, ENCOURAGE THE MEN TO DO THEIR DUTY.

500 MEN FROM ALL CLASSES MUST BE RECRUITED AT ONCE.

DON'T IMAGINE YOU ARE NOT WANTED.

YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU.

MEN CAN ENLIST IN THE NEW ARMY FOR THE DURATION OF THE WAR.

*VOLUNTEERS FOR SERVICE ABROAD URGENTLY WANTED FOR THIS
REGIMENT.*

Not that I considered the alternative. Choices were filmy daydreams I'd get caught drifting in. Ol' Fletcher, off in the clouds. I descended into woolgathering as I watched a band or passed the music store and its window of gleaming instruments. My fingers ached to understand them. My belly burst with hot envy when confronted with those who could create musical magic, who knew more than a few party pieces to make their family dance at Christmas.

And my daydream clouds never dispersed, not even during basic training. Which was all a spot of sport. Gathering at the Brocklesby Cricket Club to dig trenches. Eagerly stabbing sandbags with bayonets. I played along and craved my comrades' other talents: Tommy Ellis's rich tenor voice made everyone's eyes shine when he sang "God Save the Queen." Frank Tefford's easy manner with lyrics and rhymes, his clever poems about the retired NCOs who trained us. Ernst Belemy and his fiddle. Even Maudsley's great whistle, pipping along on his journey to become the heroic soldier who eventually gets laid.

Every start flowed like a new river. I arrived in a new city. I earned enough busking to afford a room, enough saloon-playing to pay for meals. I attracted friends.

They offered couches, spare beds. Women warmed to me. I got gigs collaborating with local musicians. I went on tours. I met more important friends. The music flexed within me, spreading open like a paper fan.

But the songs remained the same. A mining accident in a coal industry town. A factory burns down. A woman escapes a violent man. Refugees sink to the bottom of the sea. I collected a hundred dreary nicknames: The Voice of the Voiceless, The Unveiler, Troubadour of Tragedy. Legends emerged on how I simply “appeared” one day. The bastard son of Johnny Cash and Peggy Lee. Reincarnation of Woody Guthrie. Sold my soul at a crossroads for talent. I don’t like that one.

When I noticed him crouched beside me, I thought, why is he still in blue serge? We were issued khakis long ago. But the crater was dark and his clothes could have been black or blue.

Who are you? I said.

Littlefair, he answered. You?

Fletcher. Norman Fletcher.

You’re in a tight spot, Norman.

I hadn’t heard my first name on another’s lips since we left England. It felt foreign and soothing, like Littlefair himself. When he spoke, there was a lilt and shifting in his dialect, like it was dodging recognition. He was a little everything, British, French, perhaps even German. And calm. I believed he was a hallucination. It seemed natural he was a result of my brain, scrabbling to escape this disaster.

Poor ol’ Maudsley. Littlefair said. All he wanted was a chance to get into Betty Titter’s skirts. The dream really got to him.

What dream? I wanted him to say this dream, this is all a dream.

*His dream of being a certain kind of man. He lit a cigarette and passed it to me.
What kind of man did you dream of being?*

It doesn't matter now, I said. "f it's a living man, I'll be lucky.

Oh Norman. Of course it matters.

A sharp cry from up ahead. Someone's muffled orders. No, it really doesn't, I said.

Ever tell anyone your dreams?

God, no.

Why not?

We're in a war. Dreams are foolish.

You think the Germans don't have dreams?

*Yeah, and look where it's gotten us. I mopped sweat off my face. A groan from
somewhere behind me. Just a matter of time and shrapnel.*

I think you should get them off your chest.

*Littlefair shifted closer. His voice floated into my ear. We all have them, he said.
Maudsley, Belemy. Why not take some time for yourself before it's too late? Like the
Catholics do with confession.*

It works for them, doesn't it?

Oh yes. Everyone needs solace sometimes.

*I only wanted music. My eyes got hot. What if I started weeping, right there? Blind
with tears and shot in the guts. Sobbing over a pipe dream.*

In what way?

Make it and be it. Be a musician.

That sounds lovely.

It's pathetic.

Why? You don't think it's a worthy desire?

It's a dream of pride.

At this, he gestured around, the smoldering, quaking hole, this isn't a dream of pride?

This is war. And bloody fucking duty, I said. I wiped my eyes. Okay. Done with it. Keep quiet about dreams.

Littlefair laughed, a tinny, musical sound. Oh, Norman. We both know this war is the most prideful dream of all.

I shifted away from him. His silvern laugh and fresh grave eyes made me queasy. Maybe I was dying. Maybe he was my mind, unravelling.

Do you know, Norman, Littlefair said, what the priest will say, next week, when the bodies are finally recovered, when scraps of the living stand at attention by ranks of corpses? I will restore onto you the years that the locusts have eaten. That's what he'll say. What do you think it means?

From the bible.

Bien sur. It's from the book of Joel. God sent the locusts to destroy Israel's crops. And they were ruined for years. They wiped out all the seed, that year's, the previous years'. All those grape vines and fruit trees, all the possible abundance and life and pleasure, gone. And God makes the statement how repentant people will be blessed and restored in heaven. These are the words the priest will offer for solace. And it is what the Lincolnshire families will be left with, on that day, when every young man they know is dead.

Why are you telling me this? How is your guesswork supposed to help me?

Is it guesswork?

How else would you know what a priest will say next week?

I think you know how I know, Norman.

And it was there, in his face. Something reptilian and ancient. Like watching a snake open its jaws.

I looked away, to my right. Maudsley crouched with his hands clasped in prayer, lips murmuring the litany.

He knows now, Littlefair said, that he was mistaken.

Our father, who art in heaven, Maudsley said. I turned away from him. I looked into the teeth of Littlefair's gaze.

I remember an image often repeated in the early cartoons. There would be a character like Donald Duck, confronted with temptation. Angel and devil versions of himself would appear, one on each shoulder to whisper options into his ears.

In my experience, the devil on the left doesn't offer new ideas. He simply says it's okay to do what you want. Take the money. Lie to the woman. Pull the trigger.

All Littlefair did was reveal the path and permit indulgence: They're all going to die anyway. Same result in the end.

And there was the path, up and over the pit. I went. My legs churned like watch-wheels. Bullets, blood, and debris slid in a radius around me. I moved past German faces. I could reach out and touch them. If I had a weapon. But that wasn't the deal. I kept on and was unseen. The sounds shrank behind my spine. I realized I was whistling. It was pure and rich, a good whistle. It was Maudsley's whistle. Mine now.

I followed a rail line to the sea, to a farm house lit by lamplight. There was an elderly woman, a bed in the back, a violin. We spoke in broken words. The instrument came to life in my hands. I did some repairs around the property. I played her into peace every night.

One night, there was a boat. I floated across to America, into cities and towns, into a rhythm of steady bits of money. I knew how to make people listen, dance, cry, rise up. It was me and not me. When my inheritance surfaced, like Tommy Ellis's voice on the right chord or Frank Tefford's words marching from my pen, I looked for a drink. Or a smoke. Or whatever was handy.

My military haircut grew out curly. I liked looking different. I formulated how to avoid war and duty. Create an obvious handicap, an eye patch, a slight limp, a lean-in-to-hear-better motion. I received first pity, then praise for my songs about heroes. How kind of me to inspire those with a job to do.

I tried a family once. In Nashville, there was Sarah. She taught folk dance and moved with liquid grace. I have a son, she said. He's ten. Never knew his dad. I found myself in a quieter place than usual. I played smaller gigs and avoided the glory of spots like Exit/In. For Sarah, I was Clancy Robbins, a poet and folk singer. I believed it would be good for me. I'd make sure her son was free to try and learn and explore. I would never tell him what kind of man to be.

But James was such a boy, a running, jumping, sunburned, laughing little boy. He lived for the outdoors and his friends and I let them all be free in our home. I taught Stephan, our neighbour, how to play the harmonica and the music of his practice reached my ears every night. I caught James's best friend, Travis, stealing my guitar picks, his face flushing red to match his ginger hair. I told him he only had to ask.

At eighteen, all they wanted was work and status symbols: trucks, cars, motorcycles. They formed a roofing team, hard work for quick money. Do you really

have no more ambition than this? I said. Find something shiny and go as fast as possible? They shrugged. I shrugged in return.

And three weeks later, their employer attended an all-night bachelor party. He thought he'd be in fine shape to drive them to site the next day. Or I imagine that's what he'd say if he or any of them had survived the collision.

If you'd given James a drop of structure, he would have been a man who questioned what he was asked to do, Sarah said. She screamed at my back as I entered my music room. A Song for James, bled fast from my fingers. Then it was time to leave. The eighties in New York City provided many ways to forget.

Lately, I've been expecting to see Littlefair. He's appeared three times over the years. I look out into the audience and there he is, grinning and swaying with insincere enthusiasm. Each time, our evenings are infuriatingly soothing. What's better in the long run? he said in Haight-Ashbury. He wore a loud shirt with a flared Capri collar with some kind of plaid pants in surreal blues and yellows. His outfits are costumed suggestions to his environment.

If they'd all survived, how many would be good men? They'd return home shell-shocked. Hit the bottle, hit their wives. They'd raise confused, angry children. Isn't it better, overall, to have contributed to the canon of meaningful art? To make something to help and inspire others? He poured shots until all I saw was the glint of his teeth in the tavern lights. If you're worried about goodness, dear Norman, all that stuff weighs itself out at the end.

On July 1st, the Beaumont-Hamel Memorial Concert set-up is predictable: beer tent staggering steps from stage, long stretch of grass littered with take-out containers and

stoned bodies. I will not miss any of this. There are ten songs in the set. I'm throwing it in at number four.

I make a point of cursing between songs two and three: How many of you thought this was for fucking Canada Day? Laughter. A *fuck you*. Littlefair dances in the midst of the crowd before the stage, shaking his rump. He wears what looks like a veteran's uniform.

I decide to forget the lyrics of the second verse. I pause and start again. The band scrambles to catch up. The audience grumbles.

Don't act like you never forget things, I say. I sing off key. I slacken my strumming hand. There's the first boo. Here it comes.

Every time a person boos, an angel gets a venereal disease, I say.

Go home.

Have another drink, b'y.

Maybe I should call them Newfies. Get things hot and bothered. I step forward and let the edge of the guitar smack the microphone stand.

The audience makes faces and exclamations of fear. This was supposed to mean something. They want me to give them something to feel. Not one hundred years of ego and addiction. Suddenly, a personal realization: no one has ever been an addict more than me.

I let the microphone whine too long and I stare at a girl in the front too long and if I do it long enough, Littlefair will let it open and consume me. Like a mouth on a spoon. Like bodies in a pit.

The hands on my waist are strong. Here we go, the voice says. It is the back-up guitarist with the ginger beard. He sings my words into the microphone and his voice is velvet luxury. The audience cheers. The band clicks into harmony and it's rescued, the

song, the atmosphere, the night. Littlefair holds a lighter high in the air. I let myself hang off the hero guitarist's arm. Look at me, the ruined man.

It's okay, Clancy, the guitarist says. His eyes meet mine. They have freckled eyelids and when he blinks, he is young Travis. The beard is new with his modern look, but it is him, looking as he did the day he hopped in next to James, waved goodbye and was driven into oblivion. You did good, Clancy, he says. It's all good. You can still be done.

Littlefair claps and whoops. In the audience, I see them intermingled amongst the high and drunk, the messenger boy, Maudsley, Tommy Ellis, Erst Belemy. They stand at attention with the patience of disciplined soldiers. They wait for me to take a bow.