FORTY VOICES

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Abstract

What does it mean to have a voice? For twenty-one year-old Linnet, her voice is all she has. Since she was young, singing has been the lens through which she interprets the world. But at the beginning of her third year of university, her voice fails her and she has to learn what it might be like to live without it.

Through her relationships with the women in her life, Linnet tries to come to terms with what the loss of her voice means for her future. Set over the course of one week, with flashbacks to earlier in her life, Linnet deals with the immediate aftermath of losing her voice and tries to decide whether to remain in Ottawa with her girlfriend or return home to Prince Edward Island.

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“I shall remember you standing in your blue apron and waving.”

-Letter from Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf, January 28th, 1927

“Though all we have known is only a beginning.”

-Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*

1.

On Wednesday, I lose my voice. The doctor looks like an angler fish from the deep sea, the one with its own light dangling over the top of its head. He examines my vocal cords through a tube up my nose, making it numb. My nose bleeds after and I sit with a cloth pressed to it while the doctor scribbles something in my file.

It's as I suspected, he says as he continues to write. Vocal cord nodules. You'll have to rest for three months, no singing and only speak when absolutely necessary. Marcia will book a follow-up appointment.

I had convinced myself, in the few weeks between the initial scratchy feeling in my throat and the increasing hoarseness of my voice, that I was coming down with a cold or maybe laryngitis. I had acute vocal fatigue a couple of years ago during the winter, but after a bit of rest my voice felt strong again. But this time I had pushed my voice too far.

Then what? I say, holding my free hand to my throat.

Well, we might have to consider surgery, the doctor says. He hands me a pad of paper and a pencil. But that's worse-case scenario, so don't worry too much. No more talking now.

He removes his head mirror and turns off the light. When he spins around on his chair to face me, I notice his large eyes and how his ears stick out like gills. He doesn't look much older than me, although he must be, and I wonder when in his life he decided to become a doctor or if it was decided for him.

Everything will be fine, he says, patting my knee. No, it won't, I want to say. If I can't sing, there's no reason for me to stay. But I nod, still holding the cloth to my nose, and stand as he opens the door for me. I walk past Marcia sitting behind her mahogany desk with a pink

cardigan draped over her shoulders. Why is not putting your arms through sleeves a universal indication of sophistication? I avoid eye contact with Marcia and rush down the stairs back out into the grey November light.

Rushing to the bus stop, I shove my bare hands into my coat pockets. I hear Mom's voice in my head chastising me for forgetting my mittens. All I want to do is sleep the rest of the day away, but the bed I picture isn't at the apartment in Gatineau but my childhood bed in the loft at my dad's cottage on Prince Edward Island. I'm learning the difference between a home and home; one is the place you return to most nights, the other is the place to which you feel an obligation. The apartment in Gatineau is where I keep my clothes, a temporary shell until I become another version of myself.

The bus arrives in a rush of warm, stale air and I climb aboard and tap my bus pass. I find an empty seat and hug my backpack on my lap. Steel trusses flash by as the bus crosses the bridge between Ottawa and Gatineau and I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the glass. Scared and pale, an opaque face without a voice, a version of myself I don't know.

2.

Lilah and I ate hard boiled eggs on the beach because that was the only thing Dad knew how to cook. He was the kind of person to whom boiling eggs counted as cooking. In the summer we swam from dawn until dusk, until the skin on our fingers and toes wrinkled and our eyes stung from the salt. When we got hungry, we sat on our towels and peeled the boiled eggs. Lilah carried them to the beach in her backpack along with our books and towels. I ate mine in two bites and tucked the halves into the sides of my mouth so my cheeks bulged. I made faces at

Lilah to make her laugh. Sand always ended up on the eggs but we discovered it made them taste salty so we didn't mind the crunch between our teeth.

Dad built the cottage when he was eighteen. We lived in it too for a little while, the four of us, until Lilah and I started school and Mom decided we should live closer to Charlottetown. I didn't realize at the time that this move to the apartment above Mom's parent's bakery was a separation -- to me it seemed exciting to have two bedrooms. At Mom's, we woke every day at four to help downstairs, so our time with Dad felt like a tropical vacation. The cottage sat in the middle of a hay field and was so small we could always hear the hum of the refrigerator. Lilah and I slept on the same mattress in the loft, which we reached by climbing a ladder beside the shower stall in the bathroom. Dad made soap out of seaweed and sold the cakes at local craft fairs and the weekend market. He made beeswax candles too, which he only sold at Christmas. In the fall he picked apples, in the spring he tended the local cemetery and in the winter he cleaned out the cow barns. He didn't believe in signing his name on anything and kept his money in a Maxwell House coffee can on top of the fridge.

Even though Lilah was two years older than me, she rarely acted like an older sister. We didn't even look alike; Lilah was a carbon copy of Mom, all knees and elbows and eyes, while I inherited Dad's strong jaw and height. Since Lilah was so small and shy, Mom decided to keep her out of school until I was old enough to go, so we started grade primary together. The other kids didn't know we were sisters and they didn't know Lilah was seven. We pretended we were really close friends, which protected Lilah for a little while.

We had a globe on the table between our beds at the apartment and a second one in the loft. The game we played, *Around the World*, involved closing your eyes and resting one finger

lightly on the globe while you sent it spinning with your other hand. When it stopped, the place where your finger landed was where you were supposed to go. Lilah kept a list of our destinations in a notebook, even when we ended up in the middle of the ocean. Landing there was a sign we were supposed to swim in that ocean, so we could have the pick of coastlines. She went to the library and took out books about Athens, Budapest, and Ireland. We became obsessed with the places where oceans meet, such as Cape Agulhas and Cape Horn, and were determined to swim in all of them.

Lilah was prone to night terrors and sleepwalking and I often found her holding the fridge door open, the white light spilling over her bare feet. A few times she went downstairs and I found her behind the counter at the bakery, ringing through imaginary customers like a child playing *Store*. It was easy to steer her by the elbow back to bed, but it was eerie seeing her like that with eyes open and unseeing. She was somewhere else entirely, lost in the ghostly world between waking and dreaming.

Lilah also had a recurring nightmare she was drowning. She woke gasping for breath, eyes wide, sheets and blankets kicked on the floor. On those nights, if we were at the apartment, she climbed into bed with me and clutched my hand in her sweaty palm until she fell asleep and her grip loosened. In the mornings Lilah recounted her dreams and nightmares to me in vivid detail, whispering them across the space between our beds. Sometimes she dreamt about a chestnut horse with one white sock and a large white upside-down teardrop on his forehead. The horse had dainty curved ears and a grey velvet nose and loved to run. In the dream, Lilah rode across the field at the cottage, galloping full speed toward the edge of the cliff. And when they reached the edge, the horse leapt off and she woke up.

When we were at the cottage, Lilah was more relaxed. During the school year, we lived with Mom during the week and Dad on the weekends. Summer was when Lilah seemed most like herself because we stayed at the cottage for two whole months. Most days we were on the beach from dawn until dusk, even when it was raining. The rain kept everyone else away, so we often had the beach all to ourselves. We sang songs from musicals we did at school like *Clowns*, *Cats*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. Sometimes we practiced songs for church choir. We were the youngest members by decades and got to wear our own clothes because the robes covered us like bedsheets. Lilah didn't like singing in front of people even though she had the stronger voice. We stood together by the microphone and I linked my arm through hers while we sang. By the end of each song, it felt like I was supporting her entire weight and if I let go, she would fall.

As we got older it was obvious Lilah had the superior voice and the pastor asked her to sing a solo at the end of every service. The first time she was ten or eleven and when she stepped up to the microphone and the piano music began, she froze. I was sitting in the front pew looking up at her and I saw her throat move as she swallowed, the fear rising in her eyes as she looked out at the congregation. The pianist stopped playing and waited for Lilah to give some sort of signal. Pews squeaked as people shifted and shuffled their feet. Slowly, Lilah lifted the microphone off its stand and turned around so she was facing away from everyone. The music started again and she began to sing.

After that, I stood on stage with Lilah while she sang her solos but she still insisted on facing backwards. So, we stood with linked arms, me smiling, facing the congregation, Lilah standing backwards singing. I think that was when Dad first came up with the idea to try to find us additional singing gigs. Our harmonies, combined with Lilah's insistence on never facing the

crowd got people talking and soon we were hired for weddings, funerals, and birthday parties. We sang all the time, at church every weekend and at school during music class and while riding our bikes and playing on the beach. Dad became our self-appointed manager and decided what we should sing, depending on the occasion.

It was around that time, when I was nine and Lilah was eleven, that we became obsessed with Julie Andrews. We watched *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music* and learned all the songs by heart. We used to play another game where I pretended to be Maria and Lilah was the Mother Superior. She draped a dark blue towel over her head, covered her hair with Mom's winter balaclava, and wore her white nightgown. I wore a towel over my head too and a black dress Mom bought for me to wear to church. Lilah insisted I wear wool tights underneath because the dress only reached my knees and Maria would never be allowed to show her legs.

I didn't like my real name and wanted everyone to call me Maria. I was jealous of Lilah, with her soft, pretty name. In our class at school, girls had beautiful names like Sarah and Emily and Rebecca, names which rolled off the tongue and were inscribed on keychains and bracelets in the toy machines at the mall. My name, Linnet, was unusual and harsh, impossible to find written on a coffee mug or beaded bracelet. I was told I would like it one day, but when I was young I didn't want to be unique; I wanted to be a Sarah or Maria.

Dad bought us a CD player to share and copies of all of Julie Andrews' music, including the soundtracks and her earliest recordings. We didn't understand the concept of putting our own mark on a song, so we tried to hit every note just like Julie did. Lilah succeeded, even hitting the highest notes, while my voice threatened to break. I got angry with myself and took it out on

Lilah, complaining she was singing too fast and showing off. Although our Julie Andrews education was beneficial, Dad decided we needed real lessons.

Our teacher, Ms. Lynne, lived in a drafty apartment in an old brick building in downtown Charlottetown. She had long frizzy grey hair, intense green eyes, and always had a chiffon lilac shawl draped around her shoulders. Her apartment was one large room with high ceilings and tall windows overlooking the street. A baby grand sat in the middle of the room like a beached whale. Every week, Mom sent two loaves of bread with us for Ms. Lynne. After our lessons, Lilah and I stayed for an extra hour to clean Ms. Lynne's apartment. It wasn't until I was older that I realized the bread and our chores were in exchange for the lessons. The large windows had wide sills with clunky radiators underneath and I liked to sit on the sill and warm my feet on the radiator while Lilah sang. We warmed up together, doing our scales and a few bars from simple songs in harmony. Then Ms. Lynne had Lilah choose what she wanted to sing. Ms. Lynne knew Lilah was more talented and didn't try to hide her opinions. When I sang, I could feel Ms. Lynne's eyes on me as she played the piano, her bare feet on the pedals, waiting for me to make a mistake.

Always looking to make a few dollars, Dad started signing us up for gigs at other country churches and local pubs. On the weekends Dad drove us to wherever we were scheduled to play. We did two or even three shows in a day -- a morning gig at a church, accompanied by a piano, an afternoon set at a pub where we were sometimes accompanied by a fiddle, and sometimes in the evening we sang at a wedding or funeral or birthday party. Lilah still sang standing backwards, which audiences found endearing, and since I was taller than her, by the time I turned eleven, they assumed she was younger and we didn't correct them. When we didn't have micro

phones available, Lilah really had to project her voice in order to be heard and I had to adjust mine to ensure it didn't overpower hers. The profits from these outings were split three ways and made me feel rich even though Dad always took more than he gave us. Lilah and I kept our earnings in coffee cans next to our bed at the cottage.

I loved those Saturday gigs even though we returned home exhausted and still had to wake up early the next morning to go to church. In between our performances, we went to roadside diners and ate tomato soup with saltines or grilled cheese sandwiches. It felt special to eat off plates I didn't see every day and drink out of a glass with a straw. If there wasn't a nearby diner, we got snacks at the gas station. The sandwiches wrapped in Saran didn't taste as good but were cheaper, which meant we could buy candy too. During those lunches, Dad talked about his big plans to make us into singing superstars. We were under strict instructions to never drink caffeine or smoke because it would ruin our voices, and on Saturday nights we had to sleep propped up on pillows so the blood wouldn't rush to our vocal cords. When we got up in the morning, we had to speak quietly for the first hour to allow our voices to warm up again.

3.

The apartment in Gatineau is in my friend Ivy's name but I sleep on a mattress in the living room and pay half the rent. It's an industrial concrete building with a convenience store on the main floor and laundry machines in the basement. Ivy chose the place because it's cheap and has a pool. She had been listening to that Lorde song where the lyrics say something about a pool and took it as a sign. When Ivy signed the lease on a cold October afternoon four years ago, what

she wasn't aware of was the pool hadn't seen clean water in over two years. A sagging black tarp filled with rotting leaves and rainwater covers it year-round.

I step off the elevator and discover all my worldly possessions strewn along the hallway. Piles of clothes and books and the pillows off my bed are lying on the dirty carpet. I jam my key into the lock and turn the handle but Ivy has the chain across and I can only open the door a few inches.

Ivy! I try to yell, but my voice comes out low and hoarse. I clear my throat, wince, and try again. What the hell!

She appears on the other side of the door, glaring at me through red-rimmed eyes. How could you? she says. Stephen fired me this morning.

Stephen is the owner of Mom's Kitchen, the 24-hour diner in Ottawa, where we both work. He's obsessed with Ivy, always trying to get her to have a drink with him, complimenting her hair. For a few weeks now, Ivy has been taking money from the till for her boyfriend Derrick. The first time I saw her do it, she told me it was to help him pay rent. But then I saw her do it a few more times and became less convinced. I don't like Derrick. He's twenty-five but seems perpetually teenage in baggy jeans. He works for a software developing company and spends most of his day sitting in a desk chair. When Stephen asked me why the cash register was off, I told him Derrick took the money. I never thought he would fire Ivy, but as usual I read the situation all wrong.

Ivy slams the door in my face. I take my phone out of my pocket and text her, explaining about my voice and how I'm not supposed to speak. I sit down on the floor and lean against the wall amongst piles of clothes and books and wait for her to text back or open the door. After five

minutes, my phone lights up with a message. *I don't want to see your face ever again. Take your shit and get lost.* I groan, want to scream. But if I do that, I will probably never sing again, so instead I stand and shove as much stuff as I can into my backpack and leave.

I board the bus back into Ottawa, guilt rising as I find a seat. Ivy was the first person who was kind to me in the city, my only true friend. The city doesn't suit me, or maybe I don't suit the city. My head feels foggy when I'm surrounded by buildings, like the feeling when I don't drink enough coffee. When I moved away three years ago, I lied to Mom and told her I was staying in a university dorm, but I had waited too long to apply and there weren't any rooms left. I stayed at a hostel and spent my days in air-conditioned coffee shops searching online for people looking for roommates. The heat in the city that summer was unlike anything I had ever experienced, heavy with humidity. On PEI there is always a breeze off the water and the ocean is never more than ten minutes away. Being surrounded by concrete and pavement was a new reality which left me drenched in sweat, seeking shade in doorways and under awnings outside stores selling fruit and flowers.

A few days before classes started, I found Ivy's ad and met up with her at Mom's Kitchen. When I entered the diner and sat in a booth by the window, I studied the two waitresses on the floor, trying to figure out which one was Ivy. Then a girl with a long dark braid flew through the swinging doors from the kitchen with four plates precariously balanced on her arms. As she moved across the restaurant, I tensed in anticipation of platefuls of eggs hitting the floor. But she moved gracefully and delivered the plates to a nearby table with a flourish.

After only a couple weeks of being roommates, Ivy got me a job at Mom's Kitchen. She worked full-time while I was only there three days a week. Ivy, with her pre-Raphaelite hair and

inability to be on time for anything, wasn't the ideal employee. She refused to wear a watch because she didn't like the sound of time ticking away. All of her clothes were a touch too small, pants hovering a few inches above her ankle and the sleeves of her shirt shrunk to three-quarters because she put them in the dryer on high heat. The fact she was five-foot-ten didn't help matters. If we didn't work the same shift, Ivy was always late but got away with it because of Stephen. Her goal was to teach elementary school and she took night classes three times a week.

The idea of losing Ivy scares me, the long winter stretching on without her. Days tinged blue, the sky grey and heavy. I don't like the image of her alone in the drafty apartment, rolling towels to place around the doors and windows to keep the cold out. We keep the heat low and in the mornings when I get up I turn on the oven, leave the door open while I make coffee. When Ivy stumbles into the kitchen with a blanket around her shoulders she sits on the floor in front of the open oven door. I pour the coffee and sit next to her and we lean against the counter for half an hour, sometimes longer, sipping our hot drinks and trying to ease the transition from bed to real world. It's the quality of that quiet I'll miss the most, the comfort of sitting next to someone and not feeling the need to speak.

I'll miss the summers too, although I hope Ivy will have forgiven me by then. On humid afternoons we sit by Ivy's open bedroom window and watch our fellow tenants set up their lawn chairs by the pool, a place which more closely resembles a mosquito breeding ground than a place to sunbathe. We take turns running downstairs to the store to buy popsicles from Mr. Johnson, who yells at us for not wearing shoes. When we finish the popsicles, we line the sticks up on the windowsill. The pool-goers are a predictable group. A woman in a bright yellow bikini drinks Coors Light and yells up to her husband to throw down her cigarettes. A group of teenage boys in

baseball caps hang around and take turns running up to shake the chain link fence around the pool to get a rise out of the yellow bikini lady. And a group of girls somewhere between high school and university lie out on towels on the concrete and take pictures of themselves on their phones before going back inside.

I'll miss evenings wandering the Byward Market buying peaches and plums in orange mesh bags and nights spent watching multiple movies on my laptop because sleep during the height of humidity is impossible. But Ivy won't have to complain about my singing in the shower anymore and I won't have to clean up her crusty dishes. Those seem like small inconveniences though, in the grand scheme of a friendship.

I get off the bus near a cafe and order a hot chocolate by pointing at someone else's order. I sit at a round table by the window. When stuff like this happens I still want to call Lilah but something always stops me from picking up the phone. I picture her in our childhood bedroom reading before bed and Mom in the next room doing the same. I haven't been home in three summers and I think they've resigned themselves to the reality of only seeing me for two weeks at Christmas. I want to explain to Lilah how summer makes everything more difficult, how when I returned to Gatineau during my first year with my clothes smelling like fabric softener and grains of red sand between the pages of my books it was impossible to keep the homesickness at bay.

The hot chocolate makes me hungry and I realize it's only nine a.m.. It seems like the events of the past couple of hours should have taken much longer. I know where I want to go, who I really want to see, so I stand and let my legs take me there.

4.

Vera is sitting at her kitchen table eating half a grapefruit when I let myself in through the back door. She's still in her pajamas.

Morning, she says. Sit with me. She's reading the newspaper, a pen lying on the table. I haven't done the crossword yet.

I hover by the sink with my backpack slung over one shoulder. It's heavy but I don't want to set it down. The notepad the doctor gave me is buried in there. On the first page I wrote in large block letters CAN'T TALK - VOCAL NODES. Vera didn't glance up when I came in, but she looks up at me now. When she sees my face, three vertical lines appear between her eyes.

What happened? she says, and I start to cry.

Crying, it turns out, is excruciatingly painful. My nose starts to bleed again and Vera stands and grabs a few tissues. I press the tissues against my nose and she rubs my back slowly. My backpack slides off my shoulder and hits the floor.

When I manage to pull myself together, we sit at the table. I mime writing and Vera slides the pen and a napkin toward me. I start to write and Vera leans back in her chair, watching me, the three lines still firmly etched between her eyes. In the six months we've known each other I've been trying to figure out how to inhabit her world. I admire everything about her, how dedicated she is to her job at the gallery, her impeccable sense of style, her ability to go with the flow. She owns a full set of pots and pans and dusts the apartment every weekend.

I slide the napkin across the table toward her. Some of the words are smudged and I watch Vera's eyes move back and forth as she reads. In the morning is when I love her most, when her curly dark hair sticks up.

You can stay here, Vera says. We'll take my car and go get the rest of your stuff as soon as I get dressed.

I take the napkin again and write: work?

Vera reaches across the table and takes my hand, her fingertips grey from the newspaper ink.

I'll go in at noon, she says. No big deal. As for the voice, it will come back. And I'll finally get some peace and quiet around here again.

I look up and see her smiling, teasing me, and I smile back and sigh, the crumpled, bloody kleenex still in my hand.

Vera changes into a green wool sweater and jeans and we drive across the bridge. It seems I'm destined to spend the entire day traveling back and forth. Vera has never been to my place and I'm embarrassed for this to be the first time. With the dim lighting and the hideous orange paisley carpet in the hallway, my books and clothes look like rejects from a thrift store. We stuff everything into black garbage bags and Vera's two wheeled suitcases. I'm not even enough of an adult to have my own set of luggage.

Half an hour and two trips up and down the elevator later, all my stuff is in Vera's trunk. I go into the convenience store and buy two coffees. Mr. Johnson stares at me over the counter as I count out exact change, as if he knows what's happening. I get into the passenger seat and put the coffees in the cupholders. I don't know why I bought them -- the bitterness of Mr. Johnson's coffee is a well-known fact -- but I need something warm to hold on the drive. Vera looks over at me.

All set? she says, and I nod.

5.

On Monday mornings, the bakery was closed but Mom, Lilah, and I still woke up early and went for a drive. Waking at six instead of four felt like sleeping in, like we were late for something. I was groggy but loved seeing the sunrise, the feeling of warmth as the golden light climbed into the truck with us.

Mom drove, I sat on the passenger side, and Lilah was in the middle. We sang along to Billie Holiday, Joni Mitchell, and Patsy Cline. Mom set up appointments with real estate agents and we drove to large houses in the country and pretended to be potential buyers. One summer we drove out to see an historic inn on the water. We ate jam sandwiches in the car and Mom brushed the crumbs off our laps.

The inn had three floors and twenty-five guest rooms. When we walked into the lobby with its huge stone fireplace and wood-paneled walls, I stopped and stared. There was a grand wooden staircase which split in two like the staircases in mansions in the movies. I looked down at my dirty sneakers against the floral carpet runner. Lilah and Mom followed the real estate agent into the dining room. We knew we could never afford to purchase any of the properties we went to see, but the agent didn't know that, and it was fun to pretend.

We were the only people in the place; it was the off season and the owners hoped to sell it before tourists started arriving again. Instead of following Lilah and Mom, I took off up the stairs to explore on my own. I followed the floral carpet to the third floor and entered the room at the end of the hallway. The biggest bed I had ever seen was pushed against the wall opposite the window, through which I could see the ocean. A pristine white duvet and half a dozen plush pillows covered the bed. Floral wallpaper, soft green carpet, wingback chairs, and an antique desk

completed the room. The windows opened onto a small balcony and I stepped out into the salty air. The balcony had stairs which led three stories down to the ground. I leaned against the railing and looked out over the water and wished I could live in that room.

I went back downstairs, resisting the urge to slide down the wooden banister, and found Lilah and Mom still in the dining room with the real estate agent. The room felt like the inside of a ship with its wooden ceiling and curved walls and creaky floors. More than any other place we had seen on our Monday drives I wanted us to be able to buy the inn. Lilah and I could sing for the guests in the evening while they ate. And maybe, in a place with so many rooms, the four of us could live under one roof again.

6.

Two weeks before I lost my voice, I auditioned for a choir run by Griff Jones. As choir director, he was responsible for recruiting singers to be part of ensemble choirs around the world. I wanted the chance to travel, to sing in historic churches, to prove to myself and my family that my voice was good enough.

When I arrived at the church, I saw the signs directing singers to a room in the basement. Instead of going down right away, I went into the nave and walked slowly down the dim aisle. The church was impressive -- ornate woodwork and a rose window -- and my shoes clicked on the hardwood floor. The earthy, familiar smell of wood and dust and candles. I knew the routine; the director would take my resume and sit behind the piano, play a few scales to warm up my voice, then he would ask what I wanted to sing.

I sat in a pew in the front row and looked up at the rose window. Churches always made me homesick even though as a family we had never been particularly religious. For us, the church was a place to sing. It had something to do with the quality of the silence, how absolute it was. A silence only able to be shattered deliberately by the deep rumble of the organ or dozens of voices. Silence like that made me feel alone and small; it made me want to scream or sing to destroy the moment.

The heavy door to the church swung open and I turned, the pew creaking.

Are you here for the auditions? a man said, his voice echoing down the aisle. He was a silhouette with a briefcase in the light of the door.

Yes, I said. I'm early.

Well, I'm the director. Griff Jones. You may as well come downstairs. The earlier we start this the better.

Okay, sure, I said. I stood and swung my tote bag over my shoulder. Griff turned and disappeared through the door without waiting for me.

The rumour in the music department at school was that Griff was searching for a new soloist to take to Europe. The basement of the church smelled like damp carpet and Elmer's glue. Macaroni art from the Sunday school classes hung on the walls of the room where Griff sat behind a piano, digging through his briefcase. I set my bag on a tiny plastic chair and removed my resume.

I'm Linnet, I said, striding across the room and handing Griff the paper. Up close, he was disheveled and tired, dark circles under his eyes. His button-down shirt was wrinkled, sleeves

rolled up. I guessed he was mid-fifties, but it was difficult to tell. He looked more like a soccer dad than the best choir director in the city, but I tried not to judge.

Griff took the paper and glanced at it before looking up at me. He blinked a few times as if trying to bring my face into focus. I wondered if he needed glasses.

Thanks for letting me start early, I said. I appreciate the opportunity.

Oh, no problem, Griff said, now blatantly staring at me.

Is something wrong? I said. Griff snapped his fingers and I flinched.

It's the jaw, he said. Very square. Dark hair pulled back like that doesn't help either. You should dye it lighter.

I knew, at that moment, I should have turned and left. But instead I stood there and let him stare, head tilted to the side.

But that's the good thing about large choirs, Griff said finally, looking down at my resume again. No one will see you up close. But I see here you want to be a soloist. He sighed and rolled his shoulders a few times. Everyone wants to be a soloist. Let's start with some scales.

The audition progressed as usual from there. I stood behind the music stand and sang as Griff played. I had chosen a part from Handel's "Messiah" and sang that next. I sang thirty-two bars, like always, but my voice felt different in my throat.

I expected you to be an alto, Griff said when I stopped singing.

Oh, I said. Would it be better if I was?

Well, depends, Griff said as he handed my sheet music back. It'll be difficult to place you, since you're tall. And decent sopranos are a dime a dozen. I'll be in touch. Send the next one in.

Um, okay, thanks, I said. I took the sheet music and forced myself to walk out of the room. A group had congregated in the hallway to wait their turn. I left the door open, avoided eye contact with all of them, and fled.

7.

Vera breaks pasta into a pot of boiling water while I stand at the counter chopping tomatoes. She's wearing a red Orville Redenbacher apron. The black garbage bags and suitcases of books sit by the kitchen door where we left them, like a pile of forgotten trash.

Can you set the table in the front room? Vera says. We'll eat in there.

I gather the cutlery, napkins, and placemats and go through to the living room where a round wooden table sits in the bay window at the front of the house. I don't like eating there because it makes me feel like we're on display, hovering above street level like mannequins posed in a store window. From there, I see people walking by on their way home from restaurants, carrying leftovers in Styrofoam containers, bumping shoulders and laughing. Going out for dinner and drinking wine is the adult version of going outside to play. Walking home along dark streets, the world a bit fuzzy around the edges, makes it easier to remember being young.

Vera lives on the main floor of a renovated brick Victorian, with another tenant in the apartment upstairs. There's a sealed fireplace in the living room and every wall has a bookshelf. Books line the mantle, balance on end tables, lay open on the kitchen counter.

Returning to the kitchen, I lean against the doorframe and watch Vera stir the pasta. She's so sure of herself and independent in her quiet, steady life. Who am I to try to infiltrate that peace? How can I say I want to know if you use the same cereal bowl every morning, if you go

for walks alone, why you don't like having your picture taken. I want our socks to get mixed up together in the wash. How to explain that despite how terrible the day has been, I'm strangely happy just being in the kitchen watching her cook.

Vera opens a bottle of red wine and pours two glasses, holds one out for me.

I think we both need this, after today, she says.

We clink glasses and both take a sip. I want to tell her how sorry I am about forcing my mess into her calm life, but before I can attempt to speak, she moves closer and kisses me.

It'll be okay, she says, rubbing my arm with her free hand.

My throat tightens again but I will myself not to cry. Vera turns back to the counter and starts dishing up the pasta.

Can you grab the basket of garlic bread? Vera says. I'll bring the plates.

I nod and take the basket from the kitchen table out into the living room. Vera follows with the pasta and her wine. We sit and I grind pepper on to the pasta, take a piece of garlic bread and tear it in half to let the heat escape.

So, I'm overseeing the installation of a new exhibit at the gallery, Vera says as she twirls pasta around her fork. It's a sound piece, Janet Cardiff's *Forty Part Motet.* It's going in the Rideau Chapel.

That's amazing! I whisper.

And I have to go away this weekend, Vera continues. The gallery always want me in three places at once doing all these different project. They want me to pick up a photography collection from an elderly man who lives a couple of hours north of Toronto. You can come, if you want.

I decided during the drive back to Vera's apartment I wouldn't be returning to Mom's Kitchen. I composed an email to Stephen in my head to explain everything, how he has to hire Ivy back because she's an honest person who made a mistake. Stephen is the kind of person who would rather give Ivy her job back than be short staffed. It might not be enough for Ivy to forgive me, but at least she will still be able to pay rent.

On the topic of rent, I have enough money saved to be unemployed for two weeks maximum, hardly enough time to decide what to do with my life. If I was smart, I would stay in the city and look for a new job, a cheap room to rent, and consider my options. But the idea of a road trip with Vera, even to a middle-of-nowhere rural Ontario town, is too appealing to resist.

I'd love to, I say.

Great, it's settled, Vera says. A couple of days away will be good for both of us.

8.

As Lilah and I got older, Dad became even more determined to make us into famous singers. He said he had a friend in Montreal who worked at a recording studio and when Lilah turned sixteen, we would go there and make an album. We were pretty well-known on the island, but Lilah's insistence on facing away from the crowd started to seem more strange than endearing. Around the same time, I went through a phase of fighting my voice, trying to hit the same high notes as Lilah. Sometimes I reached them, and on those occasions, Dad took us out for ice cream after our gigs. But more often than not, my voice broke or sounded whiny and I received a lecture about showing off on the drive home.

The spring she turned sixteen, Lilah refused to sing. During our lessons with Ms. Lynne she sat on the windowsill while I practiced. My voice had strengthened over the years because of my determination to be better than Lilah, so part of me was pleased she was taking a break. I was convinced it was only a matter of time before my dedication surpassed her natural talent. But spring drifted into summer and still she refused to sing a note. I started going to Ms. Lynne by myself and felt like part of my voice was missing.

I got my first official job as a member of a song and dance troupe who performed for tourists at the waterfront. Dad encouraged me and Lilah to try out but Lilah said no, so I went by myself. He told me I needed to branch out and meet new people; stock phrases like those were Dad's method of parenting. I was fourteen and had frizzy hair and was six inches taller than everyone else my age. I didn't want to meet new people, I only wanted Lilah to sing with me again.

Mom hired students from the culinary school to work at the bakery during the summer, so Lilah and I had two months off, which we usually spent on the beach. But that summer I caught the bus into Charlottetown six days a week to meet up with the rest of the troupe. I had no idea how Lilah spent her days because she was still asleep when I left and reluctant to talk when I returned home in the afternoons. It was the first time our lives had diverged and every time I sang my voice sounded wrong in my ears.

The troupe practiced for a couple of hours in the morning in a dance studio before we made our way to the waterfront for our performance. I sang too loudly in an attempt to make up for my lackluster dance skills and hid behind the rest of the dancers so nobody would me. It was difficult to keep my voice from shaking while I danced. The rest of the kids in the troupe lived

close to downtown and became close friends or already knew each other from school. I was the kid from the country, the one who ran to catch the bus home as soon as our performance was over. It felt like I was an intruder in a world where I didn't belong, and when the summer was over I decided I wouldn't work for the troupe again.

There were a few days after my job ended and before school began when Lilah seemed like her old self again. We were starting high school and I knew Lilah was nervous, so I suggested we go to the beach. We stuffed our backpacks with beach towels and library books and boiled eggs. Unfurling our beach towels by a piece of driftwood, we set chunks of sandstone on the corners of our towels so they wouldn't blow away while we ran down to the water. I dove right in while Lilah hesitated, swishing her hands back and forth. I kept my eyes open underwater even though the salt stung because I liked seeing people's legs, how they looked like birch trees rising from the sand.

Abandoned lobster traps and piles of seaweed and bleached driftwood became obstacle courses. Lilah and I pretended we were riding horses and leapt over everything, making up courses and racing each other. If Mom was there, she would have told us were too old to be playing like that; but being on the beach erased years from everyone. The wind was up on the day we built the course, blowing the sand into the air. When I closed my mouth, I could feel the grit between my teeth.

The day before school started, we found the beach deserted, the high surf warning sign in place, and the sand covered in jellyfish. In some places there were so many of them I couldn't see the sand underneath. We stopped at the end of the path and watched each wave spew more

jellyfish on to the shore. Lilah dropped the backpack and we ran down to the water and started scooping the jellyfish into our arms and throwing them back into the surf.

I think we both knew the rescue mission was futile, but we kept at it for hours, wading into the water up to our waists, waves breaking against our chests, in an attempt to get the jellyfish out far enough so the waves wouldn't throw them back. The water was thick with their globular purple bodies and I could feel the tendrils against my arms and legs. It started to rain, large drops which darkened the sand, but still we kept going. I had learned in school that jellyfish are made almost entirely of water and nerve endings and absorb oxygen through their skin. But I forgot that they can't swim against the current, how they're not significant and strong like whales. They belonged in the ocean, but just barely; at any moment it was willing to spit them out. The water carried them along and they were powerless against the waves, but we kept tossing them into the water anyway and the swells brought them back, depositing their purple bodies at our feet.

9.

Vera wakes at six to get ready for work. It's still dark outside, but through the gauzy curtains I see the glow of holiday lights on the houses across the street. I get out of bed when the shower turns on and tiptoe into the kitchen to make coffee. The green sweater Vera wore yesterday is on the end of the bed and I pull it on over my t shirt.

We're both early risers, but for me it's a habit while for Vera it's a choice. She loves how quiet the city is in the mornings, spends the first hour of the day drinking coffee and reading at the kitchen table. I wake up and wish my body was capable of sleeping in, but having spent so many years rising before the sun my internal clock doesn't allow me to stay in bed past six.

I fill the kettle and measure coffee into the French press. A small wooden crate of clementines sits on the counter and I know Mom will call soon to ask about holiday plans. I dread that discussion even more than I dread telling her about my voice. It's the first time since I moved away that I have a reason to stay in the city over Christmas, but the idea of explaining all that to Mom makes my stomach tighten. I don't even know if Vera wants me to stay and it may be too late to ask. But I can see us driving out to the country to pick out a tree, coming back to the apartment with it tied on the roof. Getting drunk while decorating the tree and the mantle, having sex on the floor or the couch with the decorations half finished. I turn on the light above the stove and get the eggs out of the fridge, crack three into a pan.

Vera appears in the doorway, hair still damp, just as I'm dishing up the eggs and toast. She moves to take her plate but I shake my head, hold it away from her, and nod toward her chair at the table. She sits and I set her plate in front of her, pour the coffee, and lean down to kiss her.

Morning, she says, lightly touching my throat with her fingers. How're you feeling?

I shrug and sit down across from her, want to tell her how much I love making breakfast, watching her sip coffee. She lifts a forkful of eggs. We eat in silence, the radio on so low it's impossible to make out any voices. The refrigerator hums, cars swish by on the street. Vera's hair dries as I watch, dark curls becoming more buoyant, one piece drooping over her eyebrow. I wish our coffee cups were bottomless so we would never have to get up from the table.

10.

When Vera leaves for work, I go back to the bedroom and slide under the covers again, pull the white duvet up to my chin. Sleeping in Vera's bed feels like staying in a luxury hotel in

comparison to my sleeping arrangements at Ivy's apartment. I doze for an hour or so, but the coffee works its magic and I can't fall asleep so I finally get up and take a shower. Wrapping my hair in a towel, I put Vera's sweater back on and wander into the kitchen to make more coffee. While the water boils, I go into the living room. It's my first time alone in Vera's space and I want to look at everything. I'm already familiar with the contents of the bookshelves, books being a safe conversation initiator at the beginning of a relationship. But we didn't really need help beginning conversations.

Vera's place is full of artistic clutter - books and postcards and knick-knacks and art prints. She often jokes about her lack of artistic taste because she loves everything from Art Nouveau prints to Edward Hopper paintings. The wall above the couch features framed prints hanging salon style. But the mantles are reserved for family photographs. There's a picture of Vera and her parents on the mantle in the living room. It was taken on a family vacation to Niagara Falls, the last trip they took before Vera's mom died of cancer. In the photo, Vera is thirteen, standing between her parents. Her dad has his hand on her shoulder and the three of them are smiling, their eyes squinted against the sun, the water behind them. Vera is wearing a bucket hat, her hair long and unruly, hands on her hips. Vera's mom holds tight to her husband's arm. They're wearing blue ponchos over their clothes and Vera is smiling. The photo was taken before Vera knew her mom was sick. When I look at Vera's face in the photo, her animated smile and confident pose, I want to press pause for that younger Vera, let her be a kid for a bit longer.

There's a photo strip of me and Vera on the mantle in the bedroom. We took the photos in a booth at the mall shortly after we started dating. My hair is shorter, partially hiding my face. In

the first photo, Vera's eyes are closed but she's smiling. In the final shot, she's kissing my cheek and I'm laughing. I have the same strip of photos in my day planner, taped inside the front cover.

The kettle clicks off and I return to the kitchen and pour the water over the coffee grounds. I carry the French press and my mug back into the living room and sit on the couch. Vera has been reading Elizabeth Bishop's collected letters for months now, the book making the rounds of the apartment from bedroom to kitchen to living room. It's sitting on the end table by the couch and I pick it up, open to Vera's bookmark. She underlines phrases with blue pen while she reads. The book is so large I have to prop it open on my knees. I read the last thing Vera underlined, *"But the world is in such a state I don't know whether it's a good idea to go to Europe or not. I've always promised myself I'm going to spend my declining years just taking walks in Rome -- nothing could be more profitable, I think, for the last twenty years of one's life."*

11.

On the morning Lilah and I were supposed to start high school, I woke up alone in our bedroom at the apartment. Lilah's bed was neatly made, her journal missing from her bedside table. The alarm hadn't gone off, so I slept in -- it was nearly seven and the apartment was eerily quiet. I got out of bed slowly and went to Lilah's side of the room. Her slippers weren't under her bed, her favourite clothes were no longer in the closet, her backpack wasn't on its hook behind the door. I ran out of the room and into the kitchen, heart pounding. Mom was sitting at the table, still wearing her pajamas. I asked her why she wasn't in the bakery and why she hadn't woken me up and where was Lilah? And she told me to sit down and she would explain everything.

I remember sitting down and glaring at her across the table, convinced whatever she was about to tell me would ruin my life. She explained how Dad and Lilah were on their way to Montreal, how Lilah wouldn't be returning to school for a little while. She was going to record an album with the man Dad knew. Mom had decided I was too young to go with them, that it would be better for me to stay and work in the bakery and finish school. She said I was stronger academically than I was musically and I should focus on my strengths. She said she needed me to help her in the bakery. She said a lot of other things about how important I was and how much Lilah and I meant to her, but at the time I tuned those things out. I was angrier than I had ever been in my life at that moment, sitting across from her at the kitchen table, having my life presented to me.

I thought about the books about Montreal I had taken out from the library. I had learned the names of all the different neighborhoods and the main streets. The houses looked like they were made out of candy with their ornate cornices and dormer windows. I learned the words cornice and dormer. I loved the steep front steps with wrought iron railings and the narrow brick houses with ivy growing wild up the facades. I pictured Lilah and me living in a house like that, locking our bikes to the iron railing, warming our socks on top of the radiator. I never imagined it was a place she would go without me. Right at that moment, Lilah was on a bus traveling across the Confederation Bridge, staring out the window at the bright blue water below rather than looking over her shoulder at the red shore. I realized I only knew the version of Lilah she let me see and maybe that wasn't who she really was at all.

12.

I spend the morning reading and leave the apartment shortly before noon. At a nearby deli, I buy two sandwiches and two cans of Coke and walk to the gallery to meet Vera for lunch. We sit in her tiny office eating the sandwiches, which are soggy from being wrapped in plastic. Making a face, I poke at the bread and Vera laughs. Her office is dimly lit by two small desk lamps and she has a stronger light on an arm which she uses to look more closely at photographs. She wears glasses to read and puts them on top of her head when she's not using them. Every time I visit her at work, I'm envious of how well suited she is to her job, how comfortable she seems in her role.

When we finish eating, I wander the galleries while Vera gets back to work. I make my way to the water courtyard and sit on a bench next to the square pond. Dozens, maybe hundreds, of coins glitter under the surface, distorted by the rippling water. This courtyard, this exact bench, is where I first met Vera six months ago. I bought a membership to the gallery even though I couldn't really afford it and got into the habit of going there after class. One afternoon in June, Vera sat down on the bench across the pond and took a thermos out of her bag. It was difficult to guess her age because her tailored blazer and short hair were sophisticated, but her face looked young. She reminded me of a woman from another time, as if she had emerged from one of the paintings of an English foxhunt and decided to explore the gallery before returning to her own world.

Food and drink weren't permitted in that part of the gallery, and based on Vera's furtive glances over her shoulder, she knew the rules. A lanyard hung around her neck, but I was too far away to see in which area of the gallery she worked. I stared at her while trying not to stare, and after a few minutes she caught me. But instead of breaking eye contact and ignoring me, she

stood and walked over, her shoes clicking on the floor. They were brogues with velvet laces and an elaborate floral pattern.

Vera sat on the bench next to me and I apologized for staring, complimented her shoes. She had dark eyes and I could smell the coffee in her thermos. We talked for almost an hour about everything from books to the exhibits currently on display to our favourite lunch snacks. When Vera's lunch break was almost over, she gave me her business card and asked me to meet her at a nearby bar the next evening.

The place we went was the speakeasy in the basement of the pub. The hostess led us down a narrow hallway past the bathrooms and I followed Vera down a dark staircase into a room which resembled a wine cellar. It had stone walls, thick wooden beams, and was lit entirely by candlelight. An Ella Fitzgerald song played as we sat down at our table. A tea light in the middle of the table cast shadows on Vera's face. She rested her chin in her hand, looked at me across the table, and ordered two gin and tonic.

She wore an oversized black blazer, plaid trousers, and a sheer white blouse. I could see the outline of her white bra underneath. She had on the same shoes as the day before, the upholstery brogues, and I wondered if she had worn them for me. We ordered a pizza to share and drank three gin and tonic each, leaning closer across the table. I wish I had written down everything she said. But I remember the shoes and how soft her face looked in the candlelight and how she put her hand on my arm and left it there.

After supper, I had to catch the bus back across the bridge. Vera waited with me and we stood in the harsh fluorescent light of the bus shelter. Compared to the cultivated world in the speakeasy, the street felt like a different era. When the bus appeared around the corner, Vera put

her hand on my cheek and her palm was shockingly cold. My lips were sunburnt even though it was only June; I still wasn't used to how quickly summer arrived in the city. But she kissed me anyway and it felt like everything around us started spinning and I realized she was what I had been missing out on all along.

I got on the bus and sat next to the window. Vera waved as the bus pulled away from the curb and I waved back, watching her until the bus turned a corner and she disappeared. I fell asleep with my forehead against the window and didn't wake up until the bus rumbled to a stop at the depot, the end of the line, and the driver shook me awake. I had to call a cab to get back to the apartment, but it didn't matter.

For the few days following that first date, I went to the gallery every day at lunch and met with Vera. We went to the speakeasy again three nights later and I walked home with her, the sky still tinged pink at nine p.m. I made up stories about the people in the houses we passed and Vera linked her arm through mine. After that, we saw each other as often as possible. And now all of my belongings are in garbage bags in her kitchen.

13.

I walk the few blocks to my favourite cafe, order a hot chocolate, and sit at a table in the back to check my emails. There's one from Griff, the choir director, and I open it. Part of me hopes I haven't been accepted because it would make everything easier, but the first word of the email is Congratulations! They want me as a soprano soloist. I close the email without reading any more. I'll have to go explain to Griff about my voice, beg him to hold my spot until I can sing again. The list of conversations I want to avoid continues to grow.

I hit the ‘compose’ button with my thumb and type Stephen’s email address. I type quickly, give my notice and lie about the missing money. I tell Stephen it was me who stole the money, not Ivy, and that he should hire her back as soon as possible. I type some more nonsense, apologize for my actions, say I understand if he wants to press charges but that my final paycheck should cover the amount taken. I hit send before I have time to change my mind.

I sit in the cafe all afternoon, mindlessly scrolling through my phone. I buy another hot chocolate and read the newspaper without absorbing any of the words. People come and go and at five o’clock I think of Vera walking home from work, expecting to find me waiting. I want to be there but instead I leave the cafe and wander until my hands and feet go numb from the cold and it feels like nothing connects me to the ground. That’s how it feels when I sing really well, like I’m floating above everything and my real self is my voice and I don’t need a body anymore. Nothing else gives me that feeling and I’m terrified of what might happen if I can never have it again.

Lilah is the only one who would understand what it means for me to lose my voice and I wish I could talk to her. But we don’t have that kind of relationship anymore. The things I said to her after she left were terrible, and I still carry the guilt of those words even though the person who said them is a version of myself who doesn’t exist anymore. I’m surprised Lilah even speaks to me at all. As I walk past restaurants and coffee shops, I look in the windows at the people. Their lips move but I can’t hear what they’re saying and it seems as if everyone in the world has lost their voice.

A bus pulls over up ahead and I get on without checking to see where it’s going. I sit in the seat at the back where the heater blows warm air against my calves. I ride to the end of the

line and get off at the final stop, cross the street to catch the next bus in the opposite direction. There's something about being in motion that calms me, helps me think. I ride the bus in circles until I don't know where I am anymore.

By the time I return to Vera's, it's nearly ten p.m. The outside light is on, a beam to guide me down the street. I walk through the golden pools from the streetlights and let myself in through the back door. The light above the stove is on as well and I turn it off. Vera's bedroom door is closed, no light escaping from the gap underneath the door. I fall asleep on the couch without taking off my coat or shoes.

14.

After Lilah and Dad left, Mom and I stopped speaking and I went to stay at the cottage by myself. On the first day of school, I rode my bike past the bakery and saw the sign in the window: CLOSED TEMPORARILY. I felt betrayed and abandoned. Nothing made sense. Lilah didn't even enjoy singing as much as I did and there was no way Dad would be able to get her to stand in front of a crowd without me by her side. I was the bubble wrap between her and the world.

A few days after I noticed the sign, Mom took it down and the bakery reopened. I went in one day after school when I knew she would be the only one there and I asked her why she let them go.

I didn't *let* them do anything, Mom said. She spoke without turning to face me and continued to put bread pans on the oven rack where they would sit until the overnight baker arrived.

Yes you did! I shouted. It's not fair.

Before I knew what I was doing, I stepped forward and tipped the rack so the loaves of bread clattered across the floor. Dough hit the lineoleum with a splat and pans skittered everywhere.

When did you become the mother? Mom said.

When you stopped! I yelled before I turned and fled.

15.

I wake up on Vera's couch in my sock feet with a blanket draped over me and a note propped up against the stack of books on the coffee table: *Meet me for lunch.*

I groan, then wince, and rub my hands over my face. The note is normal, but I know Vera's annoyed. What kind of person rides the bus on a cold November night when they could be somewhere warm with the person they love? I get up, take a quick shower, and get dressed. By the time I'm ready to go, it's nearly noon. I decide to forgo the soggy sandwiches of yesterday and opt for pizza instead. The grease from the pizza soaks through the flimsy cardboard box as I walk to the gallery and make my way to Vera's office.

Her door is closed, a blue sticky note above the knob reads *Meet me in the water courtyard.*

She's sitting on the bench, our bench, staring into the water. I set the pizza box down beside her. She looks up, eyebrows furrowed.

I was worried last night, she says. She pats the bench. Sit down.

I sit and stare at my hands clenched together in my lap. Sorry, I whisper.

I feel like I don't really know you at all, Vera says. You have to learn how to let me in if this relationship is going to work.

I know, I say. I'll try.

Vera sighs and runs a hand through her hair, fluffing up her curls.

I know you'll try, she says. And when you feel lost like that again, just call me, okay?

I nod and lean my head against her shoulder. We sit like that for a few moments and I listen to the silence of the room, try to appreciate the absence of sound.

We're going to get in trouble if we eat this in here, Vera says. Let's go under the water.

I lift my head and look at her in confusion.

There's a room below the pond, Vera explains. They hold functions there sometimes. No one will know we're there.

I follow her downstairs and through a door she opens with her keycard. Stepping into the room feels like going under water. The bottom of the pond in the water courtyard is made of glass so the ceiling of the secret room is the floor of the room above. Light filters through the glass, creating rippling waves on the checkerboard floor. Vera takes my hand and we move to the center of the room. I look up at the water and glass, close my eyes, and pretend I'm home. The water dances across my eyelids and I think about swimming with Lilah, how we floated on our backs just under the surface so we could see our world how the whales saw it. I want to go back to those summers before I knew anything. Being young feels like being adrift at sea, so far from shore you don't know what land looks like, but with each year the waves pull you closer and closer to the sand.

16.

Mom didn't notice when I missed the first few days of high school because she didn't check in on me. I knew she knew I was at the cottage, but she was too mad or afraid or proud to stop by. I wondered what would happen if I stopped going to school entirely, but I soon realized school was the only way to guarantee my escape. Lilah and I had always been in the same class and the thought of going without her was terrifying. I hoped Dad wouldn't make her start a new school in Montreal and they would realize the city wasn't the place for them and they'd return home.

The surf had been churning for three days, tossing up mounds of kelp which sat in stinking piles on the red sand. I went for a walk along the shore every morning, my bare feet squelching through the kelp. I ran through it, sinking up to my calves, until I reached clean sand. I wanted to dive into the water and swim out as far as I could until the shore disappeared and it was too late to turn back. The water was warm but when it reached my waist I stopped. I looked back at the shore and saw a tiny black and white cat walking along the sand. She stopped a safe distance away from the waves and stared at me. Slowly, the waves pushed me back in and the cat didn't move. When I reached the shore and started walking back toward the cottage, the cat followed. She didn't have a collar. Her paws were white and she looked like she was wearing a tuxedo. If she followed me all the way back, I would keep her.

I walked quickly along the lane to the cottage, the cat trotting behind me. When I reached the door and went inside, she followed and jumped up on the couch as if she had lived there all along. I sat down next to her and she curled up and fell asleep with her paws curled up under her body. I decided to name her Tofu.

In the months that followed, I tried to pretend Lilah and Dad hadn't left. I decided time had stopped and one day when I woke up they would be there again. I went through the motions of mornings at the bakery, still not speaking to Mom, and spent my free time at school in the library. The afternoons and evenings were my favourite part of the day because I got to be at the cottage alone with only Tofu for company. She always met me at the door like a dog and we sat together on the couch while I ate crackers and cheese. I lived as if I was a statue, letting people look at me while I waited for life to begin again.

17.

Vera leaves the underwater room to go back to her office and I stay for a while, reluctant to move. I sit down in the middle of the checkered floor, lean back on my hands, and close my eyes, pretending it's summer and I'm swimming with Lilah. I don't want to open my eyes and have everything disappear again.

I remain submerged until my joints begin to ache from sitting on the floor. I open my eyes and stand, stretch my limbs. It's nearly two p.m., still a few hours until Vera is off the clock. I decide to go for a walk and see where my feet lead me.

Ivy and I used to work together on Friday afternoons from one to nine, so out of habit or curiosity, I find myself standing on the sidewalk outside Mom's Kitchen. Music plays on the speakers above the door, hits from the 50s and 60s echoing between the brick buildings. I feel hollow and lonely in a way I haven't felt since I was fourteen. I stand outside and look through the window for Ivy, hoping to see her and have confirmation Stephen received my email and hired her back.

And there she is, moving at her usual brisk pace across the floor, balancing a tray of drinks. I can't go in because I don't want Stephen to see me, but I need to apologize to Ivy again. I check the time and decide to wait in the alley out back where Ivy takes her smoke break. The alley smells like rotting food and cigarettes, large dumpsters line the walls. There are two over-turned milk crates beside the door to Mom's Kitchen and I sit on one, rest my elbows on my knees, and wait.

After fifteen minutes or so, the door swings open and Ivy emerges with her coat on but unzipped. She already has a cigarette between her lips and is digging in her pocket for a lighter, so she doesn't notice me right away. When she does, she turns to go back inside, rolling her eyes, but I grab her arm and she stops.

What do you want, she says, and I notice how she looks tired and pale.

I'm sorry, I whisper, my eyes filling.

Ivy looks down at me, sighs, and sits on the empty milk crate. She leans her head back against the brick wall and lights her cigarette, politely blowing the smoke into the air away from me.

Stephen told me about the email you sent, Ivy says. You didn't have to do that.

I know, I say, and wonder if it's possible to have a productive conversation using only two-word sentences. It's all I can manage.

I'm sorry, too, Ivy says. About your voice. I thought you were just making it up. I feel like such a shitty person for kicking you out.

I shake my head and stare at my hands in my lap.

You'll be okay, she says. I know you will. Where are you staying?

Vera's, I say, feeling the strain in my voice with every word. By the end of this conversation I'll have reached my word quota for the day.

Oh, that's good, Ivy says. You two are great together.

Thanks, I say. I want to tell her about the weekend road trip and how her kicking me out might have been a good thing, but I can't say anything else. Ivy finishes her cigarette and squishes it with the toe of her shoe.

Don't be a stranger, okay? She says, patting my knee before she stands. We can figure this out.

I nod and smile as Ivy steps back inside, waving as she disappears. I knock the toes of my boots together in an attempt to warm up my feet. Ivy's cigarette is still smoldering, the tendrils of smoke rising into the air.

18.

Dad and Lilah returned to the island for Christmas and I moved back into the apartment with Mom while they stayed in the cottage. I wasn't interested in sharing my space with them and fully intended on not speaking to them at all. I had turned fifteen in October and received a card from Dad and Lilah in the mail. They called me too, but I didn't answer. I knew they were in touch with Mom because every morning at the bakery she tried to tell me news about them but I turned the radio up loud so I didn't have to listen. I was a petty, passive-aggressive teenager and I grew to regret those years. I learned how to cut myself off from people and I was paying for it now.

I didn't want to be back in my room at the apartment. It smelled dusty and forgotten, so I opened the window wide and let the room fill with cold air. I tried not to look at Lilah's bed, but

Tofu took a liking to it and curled up there to sleep. I sat on the edge of my bed and breathed in the icy air until my lungs ached.

I hadn't sung a note since they left, had stopped going to lessons with Mrs. Lynne and didn't show up for choir practice. Not singing was part of the reason I felt so empty and lost, but I didn't realize that at the time. I was humiliated by Dad's lack of confidence in my singing and Lilah's unwillingness to fight for my ability. My whole life felt like a lie and I let myself wallow.

Lilah and Dad were home for a week and a half. Every morning, Lilah arrived at the bakery and started working as if she had never left. She looked older even though only three and a half months had passed. Her blonde hair was cut short and framed her face, made it look rounder. We didn't speak as we rolled out dough for sugar cookies and lined trays with parchment paper. But I knew Lilah was biding her time, waiting for the perfect moment. Everyone knew her as a quiet and shy person but when we were together it used to be all noise and laughter. The silence felt wrong and awkward but I wasn't going to be the one to break it.

On Christmas Eve the four of us convened at the apartment for dinner. Mom cooked a turkey, put on a Dean Martin Christmas CD. I sliced carrots and potatoes, wore a red velvet dress. Mom bought holiday crackers with prizes inside and set one by each dinner plate. When Dad and Lilah arrived they rang the doorbell and I had to go let them in even though the door was unlocked. I don't remember what I said to them, but I remember Lilah was wearing a plaid skirt I had never seen before. She had a bottle of red wine cradled in her arms and was wearing high-heel ankle boots. She looked like a grown-up and I felt childish in my dress and tights. I was still wearing my fuzzy slippers and kicked them off as Lilah and Dad came inside.

That was the first time I realized we had become two distinct family units. There were three lit candles on the table and a poinsettia in the middle. Mom and Dad acted like polite strangers while I glared at Lilah across the table. Tofu sat by my chair, waiting for scraps of food, and I fed her tiny pieces of turkey. Dad poured Lilah a bit of wine and I saw Mom's eyes widen but she said nothing. Dean Martin sang about silver bells and I watched droplets of wax slide down the sides of the candles. The shadows under Lilah's eyes looked cavernous in the candlelight.

Are you happy? I asked Lilah.

Of course she is! Dad said, grinning at me across the table. What a silly question.

It's not silly, Mom said. Happiness is important.

Dad threw his napkin on the table and the candle flames jumped.

Oh, here we go! he said. I knew we couldn't get through this dinner without the third degree.

Lilah was staring down at her plate, her food barely touched. She took a sip of wine and I noticed her hand was shaking.

Don't be so dramatic, John, Mom said. Linnet and I are just curious about how the record is coming along. You two don't talk about it.

Well, there's nothing to be curious about, Dad said. Lilah is doing well, she's singing well. It's just taking a bit longer than we thought it would. Studio conflicts and what not.

I see, Mom said.

You're so passive-aggressive, Dad said. This is what's best for Lilah, remember? We should be done the record by the spring and then Lilah can come home.

I'll look forward to that, Mom said.

We finished eating in heavy silence. As soon as my plate was empty, I stood and took it into the kitchen without asking to be excused. I went into my bedroom and sat on the edge of my bed again. After a few moments, Lilah appeared with our holiday crackers in her hands.

Want to help me crack them? she said, holding them up.

I nodded and she sat on the edge of her bed so our knees were almost touching. I grabbed the end of each cracker with my hands.

Three, two, one, I said, and we pulled. Two loud pops and the prizes flew into the air. I took the paper crown out of the wrapper and placed it on my head while Lilah searched under her bed for the prizes.

A deck of cards! she said, holding up the small box. And a measuring tape. Strange.

I wanted Lilah to tell me everything about Montreal. I wanted to know where she lived, if she drank take-out coffee, if she had a bicycle and if it was better than the one she had here. I wanted her to stay but I also wanted to never see her again.

You take the cards, I said. I already have some.

19.

On Saturday morning, I dig through my garbage bags and shove some clothes into my backpack for the road trip. Vera decided we're going to stay overnight at a hotel rather than drive there and back in one day. I leave my bag by the door and return to the bedroom where Vera is packing her small suitcase. I sit cross-legged on the bed and watch her pick out three outfits even

though we will be gone less than forty-eight hours. She carefully rolls each item. I admire how neat and put together she always is and strive to be more like her.

As I watch her pack, I consider saying something about my conversation with Ivy. Vera and I haven't talked about how long I'll be staying with her and I don't know if I should bring it up. I might be able to work things out with Ivy and move back in, but I don't know if I can afford to do that if I can't sing. But at the same time, I don't want Vera to feel like I'm imposing. I've been without a voice for three days and already the list of conversations I need to have is endless.

Vera continues to roll clothes and I stand up from the bed and move into the living room. I sit on the couch and take out my phone to call Griff to beg him to hold my position in the choir. I plan on leaving a voicemail, since it's so early, so I'm unprepared when Griff answers with a gruff hello.

Oh, um, hi, I stammer, my voice quiet. Can you hear me?

Barely, who is this?

It's Linnet, I auditioned for the choir? I received an email saying I've been accepted as a soprano soloist, but I'm calling to ask if I can defer the position for a few months.

Defer? This isn't university.

I know. But I've just been to the doctor and I need to rest my voice for a bit.

Nothing serious I hope? Griff says.

Oh, um, no, nothing too bad, I lie, hoping my hoarse voice isn't giving me away.

I'll get back to you. I need people who are dedicated to the choir, willing to travel.

I'm dedicated! Really, I am. I just need a bit of a break before I can start. I really need this opportunity.

You and every other soprano in town. I'll get back to you.

The line goes dead and I listen to the silence for a moment before I hang up.

We leave at eight a.m. for the four-hour drive to Lindsay. I made a playlist with all our favourite songs -- Billie Holiday, Joni Mitchell, Kate Bush, Florence + The Machine. I turn it up loud as we leave the city. Vera gets on the number seven highway and I wish we could keep driving until we reached the Pacific Ocean with its purple starfish and warm water. We could stop at roadside motels along the way, the ones with restaurants that haven't been renovated since 1960. In places like those I feel like a previous version of myself. Coffee mugs with chipped saucers, a radio instead of a television in the room, heavy furniture worn from so many people passing through. It's so easy to disappear along the highway.

At a gas station outside the city, we stop to refuel. I go inside for coffee while Vera fills the tank. The coffeemaker is at the back of the store next to the slushie machine and baskets of Saran-wrapped muffins. I pour two large coffees and grab two blueberry muffins. The teenager behind the counter is wearing a backwards baseball cap and a blue t-shirt with the gas station logo on the pocket. He tallies up my items without a word. There's a small television mounted on the wall behind the counter, tuned to the hockey game. The picture is fuzzy, volume turned up loud.

Seven fifteen, the teenager says and I put a ten dollar bill on the counter. Vera comes in to pay for the gas and the boy looks up when he hears the door open, does a double-take when he sees Vera. She steps up to the counter and puts her arm around my waist, takes her credit card out of her pocket. The teenager looks from Vera to me and back to Vera, trying to figure us out. He lets my change clatter on the plastic cover over the lottery tickets. As he puts Vera's card through

the machine, I watch his face. Most people in the city ignore us when we walk down the sidewalk holding hands because we don't really stand out. But in a small place, Vera makes an impression. I'm tall and used to being noticed because of that, but people notice Vera because she makes it impossible to look away. There's something magnetic about the way she carries herself, a strength which attracts the eye but also makes people wary. People stare but rarely speak and it gives me the strange impression of living in a world separate from everyone else.

The teenager hands Vera's card back and glances down at her arm around my waist. He smirks, but I notice his neck is pink and I think there may be hope for him yet.

Thanks, Vera says. She takes her coffee from the counter while I grab mine and the muffins and follow her out of the store. I feel the boy's gaze on our backs as the door swings shut.

Back on the road, I lean against the car door and resist the urge to sing along. Vera drives with one hand, her other arm resting on my leg. After three full days of barely speaking, I'm starting to get used to it. Silence takes a certain amount of pressure off and makes it easier to just exist.

20.

I fall asleep with my head against the car window and wake with a crick in my neck when the car turns off the highway into Lindsay.

You can stay in the car while I get the photos, if you want, Vera says when she notices I'm awake. I shake my head. I love seeing the inside of people's houses, especially their

kitchens. You can learn a lot about a person from their houseplants, their mugs, how many chairs are around their dining room table.

Oh right, I forgot how nosey you are, Vera says. I'll explain why you can't talk.

The elderly man lives in an apartment behind the Cash & Carry. He buzzes us in and answers the door in dress pants and an argyle sweater vest over a button-down.

Hello, Mr. Roberts. I'm Vera, from the gallery. It's lovely to meet you.

Oh yes, lovely to meet you as well my dear, come in, Mr. Roberts says, opening the door wide. Please, call me Cecil.

This is my friend, Linnet, Vera says. She has vocal nodes so she isn't supposed to speak.

I smile and shake Cecil's hand.

I'm sorry, I hope you feel better soon, Cecil says.

Thank you, I whisper, smiling. Cecil's voice is calm and low, the type of voice kind people have.

Come in, sit wherever you'd like in the living room. I made some tea, help yourself while I get the photographs. I'll only be a moment.

Vera and I sit on the plaid sofa, leaving the green wingback chair for Cecil when he returns. A tray with a full China tea service sits on the coffee table, the teapot covered in a knit cozy. Vera pours a bit of milk and tea into two mugs and hands one to me.

Cecil reappears with a large shoebox and sits, pleased to see us drinking the tea.

Do you take milk? Vera asks, and Cecil nods as she pours his tea.

I found these photos in Doris' things, after she passed, Cecil says, placing his hand on top of the shoebox. I thought they'd be better in a collection than at a flea market.

We're very glad you're donating them to us, Vera says, holding the teacup towards Cecil. Trade you?

Cecil takes the teacup and gives Vera the shoebox, which she sets on the coffee table. She lifts the top to reveal stacks of sepia-tone photographs of weddings. I lean forward to have a closer look and realize both bride and groom are women.

Doris taught at a women's college in the late 1920s. She wasn't much older than the women there, and they loved her for that. She got involved in all of their schemes, one of which was these weddings.

Cecil pauses, takes a sip of tea. Vera hands a stack of photos to me and I set my teacup down on the table so I can have a closer look.

These are beautiful, Vera says. A wonderful addition to our collection.

Oh, I'm so happy to hear you say that, Cecil says. Doris loved these photos. She thought the women were so brave, especially the ones wearing suits. Some of them even wore suits to class afterwards! Doris always made sure her classroom was a safe place. Cecil smiles, glances up at Vera and me.

This practice of the pretend wedding was quite common in the States in the early 1900s, Cecil continues. Word must have got to Canada at some point. They're wonderful photos, I'm glad they'll be where they belong.

I look at the smiling face of a young woman in tails and a top hat with flowers in her lapel. She has her arm linked with another young woman in a long wedding dress and veil, holding a bouquet of flowers. The woman in the top hat has her hair tucked up underneath so the hat sits jauntily on her head. The detail I love most is her perfect black bow tie. While the bride's

expression is calm, an easygoing smile on her face, the woman in the top hat is absolutely beaming. She doesn't look much older than eighteen, her features still round and young. She understood what they were doing and she was having a blast.

Vera and I shake hands with Cecil when we leave an hour or so later. I have the shoebox tucked safely under my arm and I place it carefully in the trunk of the car. Cecil waves as we leave the driveway and I watch in the side mirror as he steps back inside his apartment and shuts the door.

Do you think he's lonely? Vera asks.

I think for a moment, then shake my head.

21.

We decide to stay at the Howard Johnson, one of the few hotels in Lindsay, because it's on the number seven highway. The building, with its sixties' shade of orange, reminds me of a gas station postcard. The bar in the breakfast room is wood panelled and each table holds a tiny vase of yellow and orange flowers. Our room is plain but comfortable with a queen-size bed, a large wooden desk, and a green armchair in the corner. A television and a single-cup coffee maker and a painting of flowers hanging above the bed. I set my backpack in the armchair and Vera lifts her suitcase on to the bed. She flops onto the bed on her back and sighs, stretching her arms above her head.

That phone looks circa 1966, Vera says, staring at the bulky rotary dial on the bedside table. I sit down at the desk chair and pick up a pen, twirl it between my fingers. I know soon I'll have to send an email to Mom and tell her about my voice. But I don't know how she'll react and

I don't know how to answer her when she tells me to come home. I grab the pad of hotel stationary and write in large letters *let's stay here forever.* I toss the paper onto the bed next to Vera and she picks it up, holds it in front of her face, and laughs.

Okay, she says.

We get into bed early and lie facing each other, not speaking. Vera's eyes are dark but flecked with a lighter shade, almost hazel. She has fine lines at the corners and parentheses around her mouth when she smiles. Small nose, strong eyebrows. We've never done this before, just stared at each other without speaking. She's the only person I've slept with, so in the beginning I asked a lot of questions, maybe too many questions.

The world likes to put people into boxes with clear labels, Vera told me once. But you don't have to let them put you in one. Labels can be helpful, but only if you choose them yourself.

As the light fades behind the curtains, the room gets darker until we can barely see each other. I lose track of how long we lay there and I start to slip into the languid state before sleep but I don't want to go there yet. I move closer to Vera and slowly slide my hand over her stomach, between her legs. She breathes in sharply, kisses my collarbone, my ear, my throat.

22.

I wake up at three in the morning and can't get back to sleep. The room is dark, Vera sound asleep with her arm above her head. I slip out of bed and wrap myself in Vera's bathrobe. I sit in the armchair and open my laptop, turning the brightness down so it doesn't wake Vera. I

plug in my headphones and go on the internet, planning to watch music videos until my eyes get tired.

After watching a few videos, one of the suggested options is a performance by Julie Andrews in 1995. Lilah and I used to watch that concert, which was in New York, over and over. Julie Andrews wore two different gowns during the concert, a floor-length dress that looked like it was made out of gold leaf, complete with long puffed sleeves, and a long black velvet dress with a drop waist and white tulle on the shoulders. The dresses are elaborate and out of fashion now, a nineties time capsule, but it doesn't take away how stunning Julie Andrews looked. Lilah and I taught ourselves all the songs from that performance, even the medleys, and pretended we were on stage in elaborate ball gowns when we sang them. In reality, we were standing on our bed at the apartment or on the sandstone rocks down by the beach, singing to the waves. Those were the only places Lilah sang facing forward, the only time I saw her happy while singing.

I watch the entire concert, which is nearly an hour long, and then look at the other suggested videos. There's an interview with Julie from 1997 in which she talks about the loss of her voice. I knew she had had vocal surgery and her voice was never the same, but I have never seen the interview. As I listen to her speak about her loss, my throat tightens. She talks about how disappointed she was to let everyone down, how she would be devastated if she could no longer bring joy to people with her singing. And it's those words which make me realize the difference between me and Lilah, how selfish I am when it comes to my voice. Lilah must have felt so much pressure to be great and always sing her best because she was singing for other people, never herself. She knew how talented she was and felt she owed people her voice even though

she was terrified every time she stood up to sing. My loss isn't a tragedy. I'm not Lilah and I'm certainly not Julie. If I never sing again, no one will care but me.

23.

When Dad and Lilah went back to Montreal after Christmas, it felt more permanent than when they left originally. Mom and I drove them to the airport and I hugged them both reluctantly at the departure gate. As I watched Lilah disappear into the security area, I felt like I was being left behind for real. I think I was afraid Lilah would forget about me, forget about home.

In the new year, I got a job at the department store in town. I convinced the manager I was sixteen because of my height. Business was slow at the bakery, so Mom decided to close for the winter. She pulled down the blinds in the windows, put up the closed sign, and put her name back on the substitute teacher list. We needed the money, even though Mom would never say so. I worked in the fitting room three days a week after school. The air-conditioned store, with shiny white linoleum floors and soft jazz soundtrack, made me feel weightless and unlike myself. Without the responsibility of the bakery, I started sleeping later in the morning, getting up at the last possible minute to throw on clothes and catch the bus. At work, I hid novels under the counter in the fitting room and read when there weren't any customers.

I started singing again, channeling the anger I felt toward Dad and Lilah into hitting every note perfectly. It was up to me to prove myself, regardless of whether they believed in me or not. Ms. Lynne agreed to continue our weekly lessons and I stayed after to clean her apartment and have tea. I could tell by the way she looked at me, and how she wasn't as critical of my pitch as she used to be, that she felt sorry for favouring Lilah.

The winter was foggy and cold and it stands out in my memory as the year I stopped being a kid. I lived in the cottage alone and started the woodstove every morning and restarted it every evening when I got home. Mom and I went to the grocery store together once a week but that was the only time we spoke. Sometimes, I saw her browsing through the racks of clothing at the department store and I knew she was checking in on me, making sure I hadn't burned the cottage down.

In the spring, Mom reopened the bakery and I returned for my morning shifts under the agreement that I could keep the department store job. Mom stopped trying to talk to me about Dad and Lilah and I became convinced they had left us for good. At school, I kept to myself and ate lunch alone in the library. Lilah was the only friend I needed or wanted and without her I was completely alone.

On a rainy evening, almost a year after they left, the phone rang at the cottage. I was watching TV with Tofu curled up next to me on the couch and I answered with a distracted hello. It was Lilah, her voice like an echo. She was on a payphone. I used to be obsessed with echoes. Whenever I entered a large room, like church or the gym at school, I yelled to see if my voice would come back to me. I liked how sound bounced off the walls and became something new, as if my voice was a creature who wanted to escape. But hearing Lilah's voice as an echo made me realize how far away she was. I cradled the phone in both hands, pressed it hard against my ear as if to bring her closer, bring her back.

I'm sorry, Lilah said, and I could hear the fullness in her voice. I shouldn't have left.

No, you shouldn't have, I said. This is all your fault.

I'm not happy here, Lilah said. You were right.

I didn't like hearing her cry over the phone, so I rattled on about Tofu and my lessons with Ms. Lynne and living at the cottage. I talked fast about everything and nothing until Lilah stopped me.

Linnet, listen to me, she said. Tell me what to do.

I should have told her to come home right away, that everything could return to normal if she came back. But instead I said the three most hurtful words.

I don't care.

I waited for Lilah's reply but the line went dead; she had run out of quarters and we were disconnected.

24.

Vera is still asleep when I go down the hall in my pajamas to get food from the continental breakfast. I put my bare feet in my boots and tuck the laces down the sides instead of tying them. I sneak out of the room with my empty tote bag over my shoulder. If being a student prepares you for anything, it's making the most out of places where food is supplied or included.

The breakfast room, which I glimpsed yesterday when we arrived, has a wall of windows overlooking the parking lot and the cemetery across the road. There are three other people in the room when I enter, a man in a suit reading the newspaper, a teenager slumped at another table scrolling through his phone, and the hotel employee behind the counter. It's a scene being replicated in hotels around the world at the very same moment, people waking up in identically furnished rooms eating identical breakfasts.

I slot two bagels in the toaster while discreetly putting packets of jam and butter into my tote. I take four saran-wrapped muffins, two apples, and two bananas. I pour two mugs of coffee

and when the toaster pops, I put the bagels on a plate and sit at a table by the window. The coffee burns my lips when I take a sip and my eyes well up. I eat one bagel and wrap the second one in a napkin. When the hotel employee turns to make more coffee, I stand and take a bowl of cubed watermelon from the counter and return to the room.

Vera is awake when I get back, sitting up in bed with the newspaper open on the duvet. The curtains are still closed. She laughs when she sees the bowl of watermelon.

You brought breakfast! she says as I climb on to the bed and dump out my tote bag, handing her one of the steaming mugs of coffee. I take the arts section of the newspaper and start to read while she unwraps her bagel. We spend the morning that way, reading and eating watermelon, complaining about the coffee. Shortly before eleven, while Vera is in the shower, I go down to the reception desk with a handwritten note. The woman behind the counter smiles when I hand it to her.

That's no problem, dear, this is a quiet time of year for us. We can certainly extend your stay until Tuesday. We're happy to have you.

I whisper a hoarse thank you and return to the room.

25.

Vera agrees to stay until Tuesday, says she'll work through the weekend to make up for it. Her laptop sits unopened on the desk next to the shoebox of photographs. I want to look through the photos again to study the women's faces, but Vera wants to better preserve them first.

There isn't much to do in Lindsay in November except drive. Around noon, we go out in search of food. We drive through the main part of town, past boutique stores and the library, and

keep going. Vera doesn't want fast food and I want to avoid pubs, so our options are limited. We drive for ten minutes or so, making random turns, passing fields of cows and cars on blocks.

Vera slows as we come across a roadside restaurant called *Annie's.* It looks like it hasn't seen a customer since 1962, but Vera pulls into the empty parking lot. We sit in the car for a moment, staring at the long, rounded window which reminds me of that Edward Hopper painting where the people can't leave. The window is covered in yellowed newspapers and old grocery store flyers.

Well, I don't think there's anyone here, Vera says. But let's have a look anyway.

We get out of the car and I step up to the window. There are places where the paper has ripped away and I cup my hands against the glass to look inside. The booths, the coffee machines, and the stools along the counter are covered in a layer of dust. Vera finds another gap in the paper and mirrors my pose.

Wow, she says, that's really eerie.

I move away from the window and make my way to the door. I shake the handle, not expecting it to be open, but the knob breaks off in my fingers. The wood is rotted through, the door loose on its hinges. I push it open just wide enough and slip inside.

The air smells stale like dust and deep fryer oil, the linoleum floor covered in a layer of mouse droppings. It's dim inside, the light diffused through the old paper on the windows. I take a few steps and glance back toward the door, my shoe prints visible in the dust. Vera steps inside and pulls the door closed again.

Just in case someone drives by, she says. They'll see the car, but maybe they'll think it broke down.

I walk behind the counter, careful to not touch anything. A stack of flip notepads sit next to the cash register and a sandwich board propped underneath the coffee maker lists the daily pie special, one dollar for a slice of apple, cherry, rhubarb, or blueberry. I can see the kitchen through the order window, fridges and ovens huddled against the walls.

Vera is inspecting the small tabletop jukeboxes.

Ten cents for three songs, she says. Dolly Parton, Patsy Cline, Billie Holiday! Too bad they don't work.

She pulls the sleeve of her coat down over her hand and wipes some dust off the red vinyl seat so she can sit. I step out from behind the counter and sit next to her. In the dust on the table, I write our initials inside of a heart and Vera laughs.

We're lucky, she says. I know you think by staying here for a few days you can avoid everything back home, but everything will be the same when we get back.

I stay silent, rest my head on her shoulder. We stay like that for a little while, the yellow light filtering through the gaps in the newspapers illuminating the dust motes in the air. Like the man and the woman standing at the counter in *Nighthawks,* seemingly unconcerned about the fact they can't get out. Maybe they don't want to leave because it's safe in the world of the diner with its gleaming wooden bar and large silver carafes full of hot coffee. They might stay there all night and into the morning. The street outside in the painting looks blue and cold and empty. It makes me wonder why anyone would ever want to leave.

26.

Lilah and I didn't speak to each other for nearly three years. After that first Christmas, they stopped coming home for the holidays because they couldn't afford bus tickets. They sent a card with an image of a horse-drawn sleigh at Christmas and I knew Lilah was the one responsible for sending it because both names were signed in her hand. Mom put the card on the fridge. It was mostly for her benefit, anyway. After what I said to Lilah, I was convinced she would never speak to me again.

Ever since that phone call, I tried to be a better daughter. I still lived at the cottage, but I had supper with Mom sometimes. She started reading magazines about fashion and home design and gardening. They piled up on the kitchen counter and on the floor next to the couch. When she wasn't working, she was flipping through a magazine. She discovered strange house cleaning remedies like using mayonnaise to polish wooden furniture. The apartment reeked of eggs and oil for weeks.

Mom also adopted the strange habit of making countless cups of tea but never drinking them. When I arrived at the apartment for supper, the kettle was always screaming on the stove and there were nearly full mugs of tea on the counter and next to the couch in various stages of cooling. She kept the bakery spotless but the apartment was a mess. I started cleaning up after her, collecting the abandoned mugs and pouring the tea down the sink, washing the dishes and setting them in the rack to dry. I swept the floor, wiped the counters, cleaned the rotting vegetables out of the fridge. And as I cleaned, I felt bad for distancing myself from her, guilty for making myself a stranger.

The second summer without Lilah, Mom hired a new baker. His name was Gordon and he was twenty years old and attended the culinary institute. He took over the morning baking

shift so I didn't have to go in so early anymore and could focus more on school. With his short brown hair and band t-shirts, I thought he seemed young. When I arrived in the mornings to open the store, there was always a plain bagel still warm from the oven sitting next to the cash register.

I knew he was trying to be friendly because he wanted to get to know me; but dating boys felt like something I needed to check off a list, like a task required of high school girls before they could enter the real world. The only date I went on in high school was shortly after Lilah and Dad left. I went to the movies with a boy from my class named Mark who had sweaty hands and smelled like socks. He tried to hold my hand in the dark and I pulled mine away, scrunched myself against the armrest. I wanted to ask Lilah why all the other girls were so concerned with securing dates. I didn't know what I wanted, but I knew it wasn't that. At the bakery, I made small talk with Gordon, and at school I sat as far away from Mark as possible so we didn't have to speak at all. After a little while, they both lost interest and I was free.

27.

In search of a restaurant which actually serves food, we leave the abandoned diner and continue driving. Even though I'm hungry, I wish the road could go on forever. I want to remain in the bubble of Vera's car, always moving but never arriving. I don't want to make decisions, weigh pros and cons, I want to exist on the long stretch of road with the winter sun reflecting off the rearview.

But the road leads to a small town with a strip of old brick buildings and a Foodland grocery store. It's the kind of place that reminds me of Alice Munro short stories, a small rural On-

tario town with drama brewing somewhere. Vera notices a small cafe advertising all-day breakfast and parks on the street in front.

I could go for a second breakfast, Vera says as we step out of the car. The streets are quiet, everyone already at work and school. Vera chooses an empty table by the window and we sit across from each other. The table is bathed in sunlight and I try to enjoy the warmth and copy Vera's nonchalance. She picks up the menu, a piece of laminated paper printed on both sides, seemingly unaware of the men in plaid coats and orange hunting toques staring at us from across the room. I'm constantly torn between wanting everyone to know we're together and wishing no one knew. I hate the feeling and don't know how to ask Vera if she ever felt the same when she was younger. Wanting to exist in the safety or our own world is no way to live.

A waitress places two steaming mugs of coffee in front of us and a small bowl of creamers and milk.

Lovely to see the sun, isn't it? the waitress says. Have you had enough time with the menus?

I think so, Vera says. We'll both have the two-egg breakfast, over medium, with hashbrowns.

The waitress heads into the kitchen to place the order and I take a pen out of my bag and start writing on a napkin. Vera stares out the window, her chin resting in her hand. She looks tired in the sun, the skin under her eyes almost translucent. When I finish writing, I slide the napkin across the table and nudge her leg with my foot.

Can I stay with you for the holidays? I promise I'll find an apartment in the new year, I just need a bit more time to figure things out.

Of course you can stay, Vera says. I thought you knew that.

I nod, although I didn't know. Vera and I don't fully know each other yet, despite how happy I am when I'm with her. That old cliche about how it's impossible to truly know someone runs through my head. Even if it's impossible, isn't it important to try to get as close as you can?

28.

During my final year of high school, I applied to universities without telling Mom. All I wanted to do was sing. I applied to McGill and the University of Ottawa, kept the brochures hidden in a shoebox under the couch at the cottage. I liked the idea of myself as a college student in a big city, the chance to start over in a new place, become someone entirely new.

Shortly before the holiday break, Lilah called the apartment and Mom picked up. She was one of the few people who still had a landline, a fact I teased her about. The phone was mounted on the wall next to the door in the kitchen and had a long cord which reached all the way across the room. I was washing dishes when Mom picked up the phone and I knew immediately it was Lilah on the other end. Mom's voice became softer when she spoke to Lilah. She kept saying, It's okay, everything will be okay, over and over. I turned off the water and wiped my hands dry on my jeans.

Mom turned and held the phone out to me.

She wants to talk to you, Mom said.

No, she doesn't, I said.

Talk to your sister.

I sighed but stepped forward and took the phone. As soon as I put the receiver to my ear, I could tell Lilah was crying. All in a rush she told me Dad had left a few weeks before for a job in British Columbia and wasn't coming back. The recording of the CD never actually happened -- the guy Dad knew got fired from the record label -- and Lilah was working full-time at a restaurant. There were cockroaches in her apartment and sometimes the landlord shut the water off for no reason. I tried to tell her it was okay, but she kept saying no, no it's not.

I'm sorry, I said.

I know, Lilah said. I could hear cars in the background and people's voices. I tried to picture Lilah huddled by a pay phone on a busy Montreal street, but the image remained out of focus in my mind, fuzzy around the edges. Maybe the city allowed her to be silent, to disappear in a way she never could at home. But it still wasn't the place for her.

Come home, I said.

A week later, Mom and I drove to the bus stop in town to pick her up. After twenty-eight hours on the road, Lilah appeared looking exhausted and thin. Her hair was long again and greasy and she looked much older than nineteen. Mom and I hugged her and Lilah closed her eyes like she was in pain. She didn't have any bags, just a tattered backpack slung over her shoulder.

I left most of my stuff, she said. I didn't have much anyway.

The backpack, I soon discovered, was mostly full of books. While Dad had spent most of his time drinking at pubs and trying to sign Lilah up for gigs, Lilah spent her time at the library. She hadn't gone back to school because she had started working at the restaurant almost

immediately after they arrived in Montreal in order to pay half the rent on their terrible apartment.

I learned all this in bits and pieces over the winter and spring of my senior year. Lilah stayed with me at the cottage. She slept a lot and looked after Tofu, who started following Lilah around and ignored me completely. Mom came over in the evenings and we had supper together. I knew Mom wanted Lilah to start working at the bakery again but didn't want to push things. It was just nice to have her back. We had the chance to start over again as sisters and I had the opportunity to be a better person.

One night, before we fell asleep, I told Lilah I had applied to McGill and Ottawa. She was quiet for a moment.

The city isn't what we thought it would be, she said finally. But you'll probably do better there than I did.

29.

On Monday, we go out to collect sounds. Vera has handheld microphones with sound mufflers and small recorders with headphones attached. She keeps them in the trunk of her car and creates sound diaries, capturing sounds on days she wants to remember. The files are dated and saved on her computer in a folder and every once in a while she'll play one for me and I try to figure out the individual sounds.

We drive down narrow concession roads, past farmhouses and converted school houses. Vera pulls over in front of a schoolhouse in a grove of trees. A three-board fence encloses the yard; the grass is overgrown and there isn't a car in the driveway. I clip the sound recorder on the

belt loop of my jeans and step out of the car. The schoolhouse is brick, the original bell still in place on the roof. Stone stairs lead up to the door and the windows are tall and arched at the top. The sun is out again, the sky an opaque November blue. I turn my recorder on, hoping it picks up the swish of Vera's jacket as she walks through the grass. Even with the muffler on the microphones, they will still pick up the sound of the wind.

Behind the house, three horses stand in the field, watching us with their heads held high. Vera and I approach the fence and the horses walk over to greet us, ears forward. They're wearing leather halters, their chestnut coats growing long to protect them for the winter. Vera laughs as one of the horses breathes into her palm and I move my microphone closer to catch the sound.

I've always wanted to live somewhere like this, Vera says. Middle of nowhere, just sky and fields and horses in the backyard.

I nod, although I'm thinking about the ocean. The scenery out here reminds me a bit of PEI, but flatter, and I can tell the ocean isn't at the edge of the horizon. Fields go on forever, making it too easy to keep running. I want to live by the ocean again.

Vera's headphones are around her neck and she lifts them to cover her ears. She holds her microphone up close to my lips.

Whisper something, she says, and I do.

Through the headphones, everything sounds cinematic. Footsteps on gravel, Vera tapping on the wooden fence, the horseshoe breathing, tree branches clicking together. We walk back toward the house and look in through the back door. The house is one large room, carefully staged with grey furniture and a large wooden dining table. The kitchen is modern - all stainless

steel and granite - and compared to the exterior it seems too austere. I couldn't live there, although I know Vera could.

Back at the hotel, Vera opens her laptop to check her email. She's sitting against the headboard and I'm lying across the end of the bed, my feet dangling.

Listen, she says, here's the recording of the sound installation piece I'm curating. It should be up when we get back.

She presses play and I hear a collective intake of breath, then multiple voices singing. As the piece plays, I try to figure out how many people are singing but the voices are so layered, moving across space to reach each other, that it's impossible. I feel the familiar floating sensation I get when I sing, of being outside of myself. I sit up and move next to her.

It's forty voices, she says when the piece ends.

30.

I graduated high school, quit the department store, and got ready to go to university. Lilah helped me pack my bags, said she would take good care of Tofu while I was gone. I knew Lilah was more sad than jealous; she was happy to stay and help Mom. But I felt guilty for leaving her, like I was skipping out on my responsibility.

The three of us didn't speak about Dad, although I knew we all thought about him. I was furious with him for leaving Lilah the way he did, abandoning her in a place she didn't even want to go in the first place. And I was still angry with him for not taking me instead. With Lilah back, the resentment I felt toward her transferred to Dad. It was easier to be mad at someone when you didn't see them everyday.

That final summer before I left was a mirage of days on the beach, trips to the convenience store to get Pop Rocks and Coca Cola. We ate the candy and then swigged the pop so the pieces of sugar ricocheted off our teeth. On the beach, Lilah sang at the top of her lungs while we ran along the sand, her perfect voice jumping each time her feet hit the ground. We didn't say it out loud, but I knew we both felt like we had to make up for lost time. The day before I left, she swam out so far I lost sight of her, convinced myself she had drowned. Sun sparkled off the water and I held my hand over my eyes, searching. Then I saw her standing on a sandbar, waving with both hands. The tide was going out but she knew where to go so it couldn't sweep her away.

31.

During my first year of university, I got a cold and was convinced I would never sing again. I couldn't sleep because my throat was dry and sore and I kept swallowing over and over again. Ivy was out dancing and returned to the apartment around two a.m. and found me still awake, surrounded by tissues. She was wearing a leather skirt, a sleeveless purple top, and heels.

Ivy stayed up with me watching movies. She made tea with honey and lemon. It would be easy to say I realized it that night, but that would be a lie because it never really happens that way. It was more of an accumulation of events. No singular moment, rather a slow realization.

We went to a small movie theatre a few weeks later to see the film *Carol.* When we got home, Ivy asked me to cut her hair. She wanted it short. I loved her hair, but I took the kitchen scissors and chopped off her braid. Our eyes widened in the mirror and Ivy laughed as I held up the braid. She kept it in a shoebox under her bed and when she wasn't home I took the box out.

The hair changed colour slowly, losing its pigment until it didn't even look like it belonged to her anymore.

Friendship was a different form of love, perhaps a more stable version. Having never truly experienced either when I was younger, I had to make all the mistakes now. I should have known you don't have to physically leave in order to disappear.

I decided to stay in the city for the summer with Ivy rather than returning home. We took the bus out to the suburbs and went to yard sales to find stuff for the apartment. Ivy bought broken radios and tried to fix them. The pieces ended up strewn around our apartment for me to step on in the middle of the night. I bought old picture frames and hung them in the living room. Some of them were empty while others contained prints of flowers or famous paintings. My favourite, and Ivy's least favourite, was a faded cross-stitch image of a sheep that read: *I love ewe.* She teased me for buying it, said it was the tackiest thing she had ever seen. But that was why I loved it.

Lilah and I spoke on the phone sometimes, and I told her all about Ivy and working at Mom's Kitchen and my classes. Once, she asked me if Ivy and I were dating and I laughed and told her no, Ivy had a boyfriend, but I don't think Lilah was convinced. And it was difficult to figure out where the boundaries of our friendship were. Ivy was so fun and kind to me, it was easy to love her.

32.

When we were younger, Lilah and I used to visit Dad in the orchards during the fall. The bus dropped us off after school at the top of the dirt road and we ran along the red soil, our

backpacks jumping. Trees heavy with macintosh and honey crisp apples, some of them as big as our faces. We were only allowed to eat apples off the ground because the ones on the trees were picked and shipped to stores in Ontario. Dad was allowed to take home a plastic bag of fallen apples every week. The honey crisp tasted like something tropical, sweet and tangy at the same time.

Dad climbed down from his ladder when he saw us and we scoured the ground for the best apples. The three of us sat in the grass under a tree and Dad asked about school and what songs we wanted to sing on the weekend. He was always so happy in the orchard that I wished he could pick apples all year.

In the winter he cleaned out cow barns and became quiet and tired. We still went for our weekend gigs, but when we returned to the cottage Dad napped on the couch while Lilah made supper. Grilled cheese sandwiches or toast with scrambled eggs. After we ate, we did our homework and biked back to the apartment. Lilah and I thought we knew Dad, but now I know that's not the truth. We only knew as much of him as he let us see.

When the world woke up again in the spring, he tidied up the local cemetery, raking the leaves into piles and bagging them to take to the dump. He pruned the trees, cleaned up wilted flowers, replaced broken solar lights. The cemetery overlooked the beach where we swam, a row of trees attempting to protect the bank from erosion. But some of the roots were visible in the sandstone and I wondered what would happen when the trees couldn't hold the land together anymore. Would the people buried there tumble down the hill and out to sea? It seemed a better option to me than spending eternity underground. At least in the ocean there were whales.

33.

Why does time always move faster when you do nothing at all? We wake up to rain on Tuesday, a cold, sideways November rain, and stay in bed to watch reruns of *CSI Miami.* Check-out is at eleven and then we'll drive back to the city. No matter what time of day it is or where you are in the world, chances are pretty good you can find a rerun of a crime show. In the version of Miami on TV, everything gleams green and blue. The buildings are painted pastel shades and somehow the women walk on the beach in high heels.

When I was little, I wanted to be the person who named paint colours, Vera says. Like, coming up with better names than "Flamingo Pink" and "Sunshine Yellow".

You'd be good at that, I say quietly.

Next time we go away, let's go somewhere warm, Vera says.

After a couple of hours, we get tired of watching Horatio take his sunglasses off and put them back on. We turn the TV off.

Vera gently shakes my arm as we enter the city limits.

Wake up, sleepyhead, she says. We're almost home.

Home. I don't know what the word means anymore. Calling a place home just because you return to it in the evening to sleep no longer seems like valid reasoning. The apartment in Gatineau always felt more like Ivy's place anyway. Despite living there for over two years, there was a certain impermanence to a mattress on the floor. I have a choice to make: create a new home, or return to one.

34.

We stop at the gallery first to take the photos to the archives. Vera parks in the underground garage and I yawn and stretch my arms above my head, tired of the confines of the passenger seat. The garage is almost empty, and the echoey silence feels absolute. I get out of the car and shut the door. Our footsteps are loud against the pavement. Vera takes the box of photographs out of the trunk and without thinking, I start to sing the first few lines of Fleetwood Mac's *Everywhere.* When I remember, I clamp a hand over my mouth.

It's okay, Vera says, balancing the box of photos on her hip. You stopped yourself, no harm done.

I shake my head, eyes wide, unable to articulate the full extent of the loss. Vera puts her free arm around my shoulders and I follow her into the gallery. My limbs feel shaky, my throat constricting. Without my voice or a place to live or a job, and my place at university up in the air, returning to PEI seemed like the only option. The unopened email from Griff in my inbox with the subject line "Decision" made me break out in a cold sweat every time I looked at it.

Maybe I never had a voice at all. A singing voice isn't like the car keys in the couch cushions or a necklace between the floorboards, it isn't supposed to be so easy to lose. But it turns out a voice is intangible and fleeting, like a bird who visits one year to build its nest and then never returns. Barely enough time to admire its feathers, its perfect speckled eggs, before it flies away

35.

A fallen tree on the beach became our landlocked surfboard. Lilah and I took turns pretending to paddle out into the waves, jumping up to catch one while the other pretended to be the

announcer at the surfing competition. At first, we fell off a lot, scraping our legs on the bark. Sometimes we surfed together and sang things we heard on the radio, learning the words to songs by Shakira and The Spice Girls because people at school liked that music. We pretended we liked it too just in case anyone asked, but no one ever did.

Dad was the one who took pictures of us, so not much evidence of me exists after the age of fourteen. The lanky, happy girl with stringy hair running on the beach was a stranger. I only had an idea of who I was in relation to Lilah: taller than, braver than, louder than. In one photo, the only one I took with me to Ottawa, Lilah and I were holding hands, running toward Dad on the beach. Hair streaming out behind us, wearing matching blue bathing suits with white polka dots. I remember the moment we noticed Dad on the beach and started running. We were singing as we ran, but I can't remember the song. Lilah was in mid-stride, both feet off the ground, mouth wide open. She looked like she was trying to fly away from me.

36.

Eight choirs of five people: Soprano, Alto, Baritone, Tenor, Bass. It only works if everyone knows their part, knows where they belong.

37.

While Vera goes to her office to log the photos, I make my way to the water courtyard to send an email on my phone. I need to tell my professors about my voice. I type out the email to explain everything, plead for them to hold my place until I know whether or not I'll be able to sing again. My finger hovers over Griff's email when I hear a voice.

Hey.

Ivy is standing over by the entrance to the courtyard, leaning against the wall. She walks over and sits beside me on the bench.

I broke up with Derrick, she says. You were right.

Sorry, I say. She takes my hand and squeezes once.

Don't be sorry. I should have known better.

We sit in silence for a few moments. The gallery is closing soon and Ivy will have to go.

Your bed is still there, Ivy says. If you want to come back.

38.

I go down to Vera's office before the gallery closes, but she isn't there. My cell phone rings and I answer in a whisper.

Why are you whispering? Lilah says. I can barely hear you.

I've lost my voice, I say. I'll explain in an email.

Oh, Lilah says. Can I do anything?

Sing something for me, I say.

What do you want me to sing?

Anything.

Lilah is quiet for a moment on the other end of the line. Then she begins "Climb Every Mountain" from *The Sound of Music.* Her voice is as beautiful as always despite the fact she rarely uses it anymore. As she sings, I wander through the gallery, trying to find Vera. I put the phone on speaker and Lilah's voice echoes in the empty halls.

39.

I find Vera in the Rideau Chapel, which will open again tomorrow with the new installation. Although I love the entire gallery, the chapel is my favourite space with its hardwood floors, columns rising to a white and gold ceiling, and the gleaming altar. Something about it reminds me of home.

A circle of speakers are mounted on individual stands around the perimeter of the room and Vera is standing in the middle with her hands on her hips. I hear the sound of people chatting amongst themselves, young and mature voices. Someone clears their throat, a young boy laughs. The voices emanate from the speakers but it sounds like the people are in the room with us. There's a moment of silence, a collective intake of breath, and they begin to sing.

I breathe deeply too and walk toward Vera. I pause in front of each speaker I pass to hear the individual voices. In the center of the room, the choir sings as one. And then Lilah's voice rises above them all. She recognizes the song, slots her voice in with the lead soprano. Her voice is there in my ears and in the room and maybe even in my own throat.

40.

There is a pause in the music about a minute and a half from the end and it seems like the piece is over. But the silence only lasts four seconds, long enough for an intake of breath, before the singing starts again.