

FULL BODY EXPERIENCE AND OTHER STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

“Full Body Experience and Other Stories,” explores the lives of Newfoundlanders who are struggling to navigate tensions in the workplace brought about by the new climate of economic austerity. This collection of short stories looks at how these pressures rupture relationships between co-workers, families, romantic partners and friends. The plots of these stories are usually interior and the stylistic choice to render them in a spare realism is meant to convey the relationship between desire and a harsh social environment.

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Serving

My Intestines

They give you four litres to drink and they say to chill it to make it go down easier. It's like milk. The way milk sticks to the inside of your mouth. It just coats your tongue. You unscrew the top and it glug, glugs out like windshield wash. It doesn't go down your throat easy. Then it sits in your belly like a four-pound ice cube.

There was an MRI and I don't do well with enclosed spaces, ever since I was a child. My older brother locked me in a trunk when we were playing hide and seek on Easter Sunday. I could hear all the adults gathering around the trunk. I could see through the slats in the trunk, tan pants and black tights. They were saying, "Jesus Christ, how are we going to get him out of there?"

And when they open you up from that end the air rushes in and then it's got to come back out. The pain and the stink. I spent an entire day locked in the bathroom, sweating. Everything inside me coming out.

The only person I told was Carl because I needed to get the shifts off but Marlene knew. We were splitting a table of fifteen. The two of us hip to hip by the garbage, scrapping plates at an ungodly pace. Marlene reaches behind me to grab a dishpan, I drop a scraped plate into it. We anticipate the twist and turn of each other's body like a figure skating team.

"Dave, you look gray," Marlene said.

"Yeah, Marlene, I know I'm gray."

"Your face is gray. You're not well."

“No, Marlene, I’m not well. This place has crawled up my hole and it’s poisoning me from the inside out. ”

“I’ll get the bills and the chocolates, you get the hot towels.”

Ritual

In high school my mother started having me pick dad up from work because she couldn’t face it anymore.

Every night he stormed out of the restaurant, leather shoes and dress pants swishing down the steps and over to the car. His shoes had wrinkles in them, a huge crease near the laces with thinner wrinkles growing out of it.

“Every single one of them is a fucking imbecile. I’m not doing it anymore. I’m not. They can find someone else because I’m done. I’m done working for a bunch of literally, I mean like, actually *retarded* assholes.” He reeled out a variation of that speech every night. It was a mantra, part of a ritual that we performed each time I picked him up.

Next he would stare out the windshield and put his hands on his forehead. He moved his fingers up over his forehead into his hairline.

When his hair went gray it also went slack. When he was young he had dirty blond curls - coarse, tight curls close to his head. He liked pointing his hair out in photographs. Into the mid nineties he wore it as a shaggy halo. On nights that I picked him up, we would sit in the car with the smell of cooked food hanging on him, filling the car. For maybe fifteen minutes he would massage his scalp while looking at the bumper of the car parked in front of us. Then he would say, “Just give me a minute.”

He would undo a button and reach inside his shirt to unbuckle his name tag. There was a metal rectangle with a magnetic strip that went inside the shirt and held the plate with his name etched on it. After he put the name tag in his breast pocket I turned the key and we pulled away from the front of the restaurant.

“These are the times that I really miss having a cigarette,” he’d say.

Some nights Marlene got a ride home with us. Those nights were easier. We would stop at the McDonald’s or Tim Hortons drive through. While I drove, Dad would twist around in the passenger seat to nod emphatically along with Marlene’s complaints about the evening.

“I don’t care who you are, what kind of a restaurant it is, you don’t show up to waitress in hooker boots.” This is the type of thing Marlene would be saying in the back seat as we crawled through a drive-through. Dad agreed with those types of sentiments. Marlene would uncrank the back window a little and light a cigarette.

“And just in general,” Marlene added. “Regardless of your employment, you shouldn’t bleach the shit out of your hair like that. I mean, she’s ruined it. It’ll take years to grow that out.”

“Unless she cut it off short?” my dad asked.

“She couldn’t, she doesn’t have the jaw line for it, you have to have a jaw line for that kind of a hair cut, Dave.”

“What do you guys want?” I asked as we approached the little speaker where they take your order.

“That’s something we don’t hear everyday, now isn’t Marlene?” my dad answered.

Technique

Be approachable but don’t fawn. Create an atmosphere where they are your superiors. Make them feel it.

“Can I take that out of your way?”

Some people crave that. They enjoy the theatre of it, they take pride in knowing their lines.

“We’ll have a bottle of that Merlot, let my wife taste it though, she’s got the palate between us.”

Other people get uncomfortable. They keep trying to subtly let you know that they’re just like you. But that works too, guilt is a powerful incentive to tip. Go with it.

“Sorry to reach across.”

“I waitressed all through college.”

It gets to be that you know every part of it. You know you can lay the lid of the towel steamer on the little ledge above it if you need to get towels and only have one free hand. When you close your eyes at night you see the carpet. Navy blue with a pattern of burgundy diamonds, staple-gunned to the inside of your eyelids. You know the choreography of sliding a large tin of tomatoes in front of the door to the laundry room with your shoe when your arms are full of tablecloths. Your knees and ankles and wrists and lower back ache all day everyday from carrying heavy dishes. Lifting plates up and down from the table to the tray and back again, all that standing. Each pang of pain, your

wrist when you flick the paper open, your knee when you take the garbage out, lower back as you bend down to undo your shoes, means the routine has crept right into your joints. There's a smell on your hands and in your hair at the end of the night. It thins your hair out. Your body becomes like a mop head that's been dragged across the floor too many times, all the stringy extremities bloated with the grime of the place.

Shimmying

I had a girlfriend when I started driving my dad. We spent all our time in her basement. Her parents were renovating, turning the basement into an apartment they could rent out. There was a stove and a fridge and a living room with a couch. There was a small room with a single bed in it. We weren't allowed to close the door to that room but we did. Her parents came home around twenty to six. They brought us home sub sandwiches, twisted in wax paper and knotted in individual tube-shaped plastic bags. Or they made macaroni with breadcrumbs on top. Or Shake n' Bake chicken legs. Sometimes they ordered pizza.

In the room her electric guitar was propped on a stand in the corner and there was a dartboard. There was a small rectangular window high up in the wall. It was half filled with grass and half filled with sky. We would lie on the narrow bed with our sneakers on, ready to hop up and open the door if we heard feet on the stairs. I rubbed inside her jeans, over her underwear, sometimes for an hour. She put her mouth around my cock over my underwear and breathed, making the material damp with her breath. We shimmed our pants down to mid-thigh and rubbed against each other. We were very careful not to make

the bed whine. We knew which rooms her parents were in by tracking their footsteps above us. My boxers got ground into my balls. We could almost feel how everything would fit together without the fabric. If it were a real apartment, we would have just glided together.

* * *

Deep Purple

There are bands that I love. I like a coke as much as the next guy. I love Deep Purple. I love sitting in my chair listening to Deep Purple. Smoke a joint and listen to Deep Purple, that's a Sunday afternoon for me. I never thought they would come here. Then a couple of the roadies are here and Marlene's serving them and telling them about how I love Deep Purple and all this and she calls me over. They say, come down with an ID, we'll put your name on the door. So me and Sharon go down, have to park all the way up by the restaurant because downtown is just blocked. When we get in there, the audience is all men. All these gray heads. Guys like me. Some fat fuck in front with his shirt off waving it around. Maybe like twenty girls or women or whatever. Twenty total, I mean. And they're all sitting on their hands, looking around at these old gray assholes, that idiot in the front waving his t-shirt around. They're disappointed too. And then the band comes out. I'm like, who the fuck is this? I recognize the drummer and the guy on bass. Instead of two guitars they got one young guy. He looks like, maybe twenty and he's just doing his own interpretation. Wanking off his own interpretation. And the singer, I don't know who the fuck they had, he was wearing this big boot like he had a broken foot. Wandering around the stage clunking the foot. Couldn't hit a high note. I was like, just stand still and sing the fucking song. You couldn't recognize the songs. I

was listening to the words trying to figure out what song it was. Couldn't tell you. Then they do the chorus of "Smoke on the Water" and the place goes up. I said to Sharon, let's just get out of here. I just left. I'm not cheering for a fouled up version of the song.

My Mother

My mother worked at Pipers. She had two orange aprons that fastened on the sides with Velcro. She washed them with the regular laundry. She had a white plastic rectangle with "Sharon" on it. She left it on a shelf above the washer when she did laundry. Sometimes she had to wear pins that advertised a sale. She kept them in a little stack next to her name tag. The women she worked with were her friends. They had a card night once a week and did Secret Santa at Christmas and sent emails with dirty jokes in them. There were a few that my mother called on the phone just to talk.

"I can't take your father tonight. It's too much after I've worked all day." My mother was scraping cooked on scalloped potatoes out of the bottom of a roasting pot with a wooden spoon. The pot had been soaking and sudsy bubbles rose up out of the white mush. She had done up a plate for my father and covered it in tinfoil. She laid the plate under the microwave.

"The keys are on the coffee table. Can you do that for me? Is that too much to ask?"

"Sure."

"It's not too much to ask? Do you have a test or anything tomorrow? You're just in there watching tv?" My mother was reaching for the cordless phone with a hand that

glistened with dish soap. A slick chemical whirl of iridescent blue and purple with streaks of burgundy, lit up by the light on the stove.

“I can do it,” I told her.

I heard the seven beeps of a phone number being dialled as I walked down the hall.

“Margie, I sent Patrick to pick Dave up. I can’t look at him right now.” I heard her saying as I laced up my sneakers.

Marlene

Sharon is a saint. And I don’t mean she puts up with bullshit. She’s not like that. And if you want to talk about fucking, she knows what she’s doing. I got no complaints that way. Zero complaints in that department.

It wasn’t that kind of a thing. I’ll be happy with Sharon for the rest of my natural born life if she’ll have me. I don’t think I’m the best thing since sliced ham either, just to be clear. I know about my various different flaws, I know I have flaws I don’t even know about.

See, the thing with me and Marlene. With me and Marlene, when the dining room is full, we just forget about the sections chart. We just run appetizers and set tables and take drink orders and split the tips down the middle at the end of the night. And whatever new airhead they’ve got blathering on to Dennis at the front end, saying, “How do you make a margarita?” or “Do I bring the towels now or after the bill?” — we just ignore them, let them drown out there. If they’re any good they’ll get the hang of it and if not they’ll have a good cry and quit.

Marlene zips around flicking new tablecloths out and I follow her with cutlery and side plates. We don't have to say a word to each other. We get into a rhyme. Whole nights just blur on by, all the little routines click together like Lego and then the evening is done.

When I have to work with those other ejits all I think about is how much easier the night would be with Marlene. The worst of it is they talk and talk and talk. Nonstop blathering. If I've got five seconds I like to just watch my tables and enjoy a bit of silence. That is one of the things Marlene understands.

Dinner

I was invited to dinner with Kathy's family for her mother's birthday. Our waitress was a few years older than Kathy and I. She had a tiny gold heart on a chain that dangled in the open v of her synthetic polo shirt. "Rib and Reef Steak House" and her name were embroidered above her left breast in navy-coloured thread. When she bent down to swipe some crumbs off the plastic table mat with a wet cloth I could see her breasts were mashed against each other in a sports bra. Thinking about whether I found this sexy or not made my dick go half hard.

My parents didn't eat out. We ate Sunday dinner in the dining room instead of the kitchen. That was how we celebrated birthdays.

"Are you going to have dessert, Patrick?" Kathy's mother asked me when I came back from the bathroom.

Kathy plucked the laminated dessert menu out of a chrome holder in the center of the table. There were photographs of different desserts topped with textured mounds of whipped cream and zig zagging drizzles of chocolate syrup.

“Let’s share this. Want to share?” Kathy pointed at a chocolate mousse with sculpture of whipped cream sitting on it.

Kathy’s mother waved at our waitress, who was passing our table with a jug of water. She paused holding the jug to her chest and looking earnestly at Kathy’s mother. Her cheeks were flushed.

“You’re run off your feet, when you get a chance, we’re ready for dessert over here, my husband and I are going to have the cheesecake and Kathy, you guys are splitting the chocolate mousse?”

The girl nodded.

“Two cheese cakes and a chocolate mousse? Ok, I’ll have that for you in a few moments.”

Kathy’s father clamped a hand over my wrist.

“It’s not an easy job your father’s got,” he said.

A Draw

And there’s me and Marlene sharing a draw out back at the end of the night. It’s not something we do every night. Just on those nights when we’re sharing a bunch of big tables. One person takes the drinks, one person clears the table, we water each other’s single and doubles, split the bills up. Bits of Marlene’s hair are always getting caught in her lipstick. She’s got this little case, just big enough for a lipstick, you flip the lid and

there's a rectangular mirror in there. She keeps it behind the bar and checks her lipstick all night long. Takes her all of three seconds to fix her lipstick. The case has a magnetic flap and it snaps shut.

The Phone

Sharon was lying across the couch with her feet in my lap. I got a DVD collection like you wouldn't believe. I pick them up all over the place, you can get them really cheap now. Sharon picks them up at her work too, sometimes they'll be three dollars in there, dirt cheap. Sundays we usually both have the afternoon off and sometimes we'll watch a movie.

When Patrick got home I called out to him and had him come into the living room.

He came in and took off his book bag and jacket.

"We picked out a Halloween one." I gestured at the tv.

"I find it a bit much," Sharon said.

"You know what, Sharon? I agree with you. What did you call it?"

"A bit much?" Sharon offered.

"Unnecessary, I'd call it."

The phone on the table near Sharon's side of the couch rang. She swung her feet off my lap and stood up.

"I'll take it in the kitchen."

I lowered the volume as she walked down the hall because I wanted to know who she's talking to all the time. Not because I'm suspicious, because I'm interested.

“Your mother can do whatever she wants, it doesn’t make a difference to me,” I told Patrick.

Buttons

Kathy’s parents attended a funeral. Before they left, her mother stood in front of the open fridge in the outfit she had picked out for the funeral. She was wearing a tight, knee-length skirt and a blazer. She had her hair twisted into a knot on the back of her head. The hairs growing on her neck were tugged tight by the bun, lifting little buds of flesh at the base of each hair. My mother didn’t dress up in that way. Not to be sexy. For a funeral she wore slacks and a cardigan with two rows of gold buttons on the front.

“There’s lots of food here. You can make sandwiches for lunch. There’s mayonnaise and ham there. I just bought a fresh loaf of bread yesterday.” Kathy’s mother spoke into the fridge. She had a black leather purse hung over her shoulder.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said.

“That’s sweet of you Pat,” Kathy’s mother said into the fridge.

We listened to the car pull out of the driveway and to be safe we made sandwiches and left them sitting out on the counter on side plates. We left the mayonnaise open with a butter knife sticking up out of the thick sauce and the bread slouching out of the mouth of the open bag.

Kathy had a spongy foam under her sheet and four pillows. We got under her duvet with our jeans and socks on. Kathy lay on top of me. She smelled like her house. I slid my hand between her jeans and her underwear and squeezed her butt. It was hot

under the duvet and Kathy pulled her sweater off. As the sweatshirt came over her head a tug of static electricity swept her eyebrows upwards. When she settled back into the mattress I undid her jeans. The bedroom was filled with middle of the day light. I ground my elbows into the bed on either side of her hips. I didn't have clear sense of exactly what I was supposed to do. Her knees towered over me. I tried to imagine my tongue was a hand.

“Slower.”

“What?” I lifted my head but I couldn't look her in the eyes.

“Can you do it slower?”

She started breathing short, quick breaths out of her nose. My hard-on was pressing into the bed. I undid my pants and kicked them down into the blankets and then leaned back into her.

“Katherine?” Kathy's mother said, we heard the door slam shut behind her.

Kathy shimmied up the bed and sat up straight; she still had her t-shirt on. I reached back and forth under the blankets for my pants.

“Yeah?” Kathy was fumbling her way into her underwear.

Kathy's mother pushed the door open. She saw us and spun around. She stood in the doorway with her back to us for a moment before walking away.

“Katherine I want to talk to you.” She said from the end of the hall.

“Okay.” Kathy jumped out of bed and pulled her jeans on, they were tight and she had to bend her knees and wiggle her hips and suck her tummy in to get them on.

I couldn't get the button on my pants done up because my hands were shaking. There was a plate glass mirror on the wall in the hallway and I could see their reflection, standing close together.

"I am going to have to phone his mother," Kathy's mother was saying.

Tips in February

- Gas
- Chicken, ground beef, liver, sandwich meat, bread, milk, a package of Fudgeos
- Rum for Sharon's card night
- New socks and underwear for myself
- Half the heat bill

The Phone

My parents had a telephone set up on a little side table by their bed. It had a thick curly cord connecting the receiver to the body of the phone and was anchored to the wall by a thin gray cord. One night I picked up the phone to call Kathy. I heard that the line was engaged and I didn't hang up. I rested the mouthpiece against my neck just below my ear.

"Margie? Hi." My mother was calling her friend.

"Oh, Sharon?"

"Yeah, hi. What're you doing?"

If I hung up they would hear the tiny rectangle of plastic in the receiver side of the phone depressing. They would notice the absence of the white noise when the third line disengaged. I got down on the floor beside the bed. I lay on my stomach and lifted the bed skirt. Under their bed was a cool dark expanse. My parents were very clean.

“Oh, this and that, Frank’s got the barbecue going, I’m making some drinks. The girls are gone to the mall, ” my mother’s friend said.

“Oh my, I’ll let you get on with it then,” my mother said. I lay on my stomach and looked up into box spring. There was a loop of phone cord resting on my stomach. I watched it rise and fall with my breath.

“No, no I’ve got a minute he’s just getting it all fired up. How was the concert?”

“Margie, the concert was a disaster. I didn’t want to go to the stupid fucking concert in the first place. He drags me down there and then half way through it we have to leave because the band isn’t doing the songs the way he likes them.”

“You know what, Sharon, I hate to say it but you’ve got yourself tangled up with a difficult man. ”

“He’s difficult.” My mother sighed into the receiver.

I heard the door to the bedroom open. I banged my head against the box spring and my neck met with the cold metal of the bed frame. I had to slide out with my shoulders against the floor. I stood up quickly with the receiver in a fist at my waist.

“Were you listening to your mother’s phone call?” My father was holding a load of laundry against his chest. He dropped the laundry and it sprawled itself across the bedspread.

“Who is she talking to? A woman?”

I dropped the receiver into the space moulded to accommodate it.

“Get out, I’m getting dressed.” My father picked a pair of dress pants out of the laundry and shook the wrinkles out of them.

Never Meant To

I didn’t throw it at her. I threw it over her head on purpose. I’m not saying that’s an excuse. My best friend showed up at a party a few years ago and his girlfriend had make-up caked all over her eye and I took him out on the deck and told him it wasn’t alright. You can tell when that kind of thing is going on. You can tell by the way they tug on their girlfriend’s sleeve or they give their wife a dirty look because she’s laughing at some other guy’s joke. I’m not that kind of guy. It was only a butter knife and it was purposely aimed away from her, over her head. This new girl with boots halfway up her thigh managed to completely screw up the bill for a table of thirty we were sharing. I don’t like fistfights between guys even. In the work place it’s totally inappropriate. I would never lay a hand on a woman. This is just an anger management, stress kind of a thing. Nothing came of it because everyone knows I’m not a violent guy. They shouldn’t have hired her in the first place because she had no serving experience.

Hospital

When my father was hospitalized my mother sent me in with plates covered in tinfoil.

“If you bring this dinner in to your father I’ll drop you off at Kathy’s afterwards,” she’d say.

She sat in the car with the radio going waited in parking lot. My father watched the news on the tiny tv that swung out over his bed. His skin had a green tint. He lay with the sheet over his face and listened to the T.V, through a set of white ear buds. There was a fat paperback with bold letters on the spine on the windowsill. My father only read books on the back deck in the summertime.

“You know, this isn’t genetic. This is something that can be avoided. This is the result of wringing my guts out over whether some missus’ appetizer came out on time for eight hours, five days a week. The adrenaline from being in that place rotted me from the inside out. Corroded me, ask your mother. I used to have hair like yours.”

I didn’t unzip my jacket or sit down.

“ This is cod au gratin. Mom’s waiting in the car she couldn’t find a parking place.”

“Your mother doesn’t like hospitals.”

“She’s out in the car.”

“You’d better go.”

Spill

My nan gave me forty dollars inside a card with a cartoon of a boy leaning against a skateboard. I used the money to take Kathy on a date to the movies. Kathy painted her nails in the front seat on the way there. The smell of polish flooded the car and I knew it would annoy my mother.

“What if we hit a pothole?” I asked. Kathy squeezed the bottle of polish between her bare knees. She wiped the excess paint off the brush on the inside lip of the bottle.

“I don’t mind if it’s a little bit messy.” She held her hand up for me to see.

“They’re already purple, I’m just putting a coat of glitter over it.”

I put the window down. The polish looked womanly to me. I pictured her hand gliding up my thigh with all the flecks of glitter catching the light. I slipped my hand into my pocket and made sure the money was still there. The five was folded inside the twenty and I rubbed the two bills together with the hand that wasn’t on the wheel.

“I start my job next week and two weeks after that I get paid and then we can go out all the time. I’ll take you to Menchies. Have you been there yet?”

“No but I really want to go.” She waved a glittery hand back and forth in the air, drying the paint. It felt very grown up having my girlfriend do her nails beside me in the front seat, both of us engulfed in the chemical stink of the polish.

In the line up to get doughy pretzels Kathy’s phone started buzzing in her purse. She undid the buckles on the front carefully, trying not to smudge her nails. She looked at the text and turned her shoulders away from me to answer it.

“Who’s that?”

“Melissa. Ryan just broke up with her.”

We were getting closer to the front of the line.

“What kind of pretzel are you getting?” I was doing the math in my head, trying to work out the price of the pretzels and the tickets.

“I don’t know yet.” She was still looking at her phone.

“We’re almost at the front of the line.”

“She’s really upset. She says she hasn’t eaten anything in like three days.”

“You better figure out what kind of pretzel you’re getting. Or don’t. Whatever. I don’t care what you do.” A familiar nastiness sloshed over my words on their way out of my mouth. Until that moment I didn’t know there was a spring of meanness gurgling inside me.

Lotto 649

Carl’s wife sent along flowers with a little square of cardboard with “Get Well,” in pen sticking up out of it. The whole problem, the whole thing that got my guts in this knot in the first place is that I’m stressed. The job makes me stressed and not working makes me stressed. The only thing close to a solution is winning Lotto 649. Or Set For Life. Or Ultimate Dream Home. I never buy a ticket, I mean I buy a few scratch tickets here and there and Sharon does the crosswords but I don’t play the lotto like that. I know people pouring half their income into Set For Life. Thinking they’re going to be drinking out of coconuts on the resort while someone’s remodelling their kitchen. I’m not retarded. I buy a scratch ticket here or there and sometimes I win enough for a half-case. But I know what they’re doing, they’re making money. If it wasn’t a scam they wouldn’t be doing it, it’s not a fucking charity.

The whole time I was in there I was hyperventilating with my knees tucked into my chest. My aunt was screaming about the trunk getting beat up. I started trying to slow my breathing down, trying to inch my knees out of my throat, trying to make enough room that I didn’t suffocate myself. In the end they had to take the lock off the front with a crow bar to get me out.

The Lodge

“Your mother thought you might like to have these for your new place.” Walt’s father had arrived unannounced, holding a set of pressed curtains in a Sobeys’ bag.

“You’re cooking,” his father said. Walt realized he’d brought the spatula to the door with him.

“Just breakfast.” The shower shut off. The water stopped running and the pipes stuttered in the wall.

“There’s someone here?”

“A friend. He’s helping me move.”

His father passed him the package. There were little beads of rain on the Sobeys’ bag. Walt’s father edged into the apartment and Walt had to step backwards to make room for him.

“New windows?” His father looked into the living room.

“It’s renovated.” Walt skimmed a hand along the sharp hairs growing on his jawbone. He was aware of the heat spreading across his face.

“Good, it’s easier to keep a new place clean. We drove by and saw you didn’t have any curtains up and your mother thought you might like to have these.”

The door to the bathroom opened. The hall flooded with warm damp air and the smell of shampoo. Trent was wearing jeans and a t-shirt but his feet were bare. His hair was dripping, making dark circles on his shirt.

“This is my Dad.”

Trent took three steps down the hall and held out his hand. His feet left wet smudges on the floor. Walt's back was against the closet door. The door was made of thin strips of wood held together with a rubbery plastic. One of those ones that folds in on itself until it's gathered together like the centre of an accordion. He leaned into it and it creaked.

"I'm Trent." Trent was taller and broader than Walt's father.

The apartment filled with a high-pitched bleating. At first it sounded like a bird but the louder it got the more mechanical it sounded. For a moment the three men were paralyzed by it. Trent had dropped Walt's father's hand but they were still standing close enough to be touching. Walt held the curtains against his chest. Trent's dog barked on the back deck.

"It's a fire alarm," Trent said. "There's something burning. Do you smell something burning?"

"It's toast. I was making toast under the broiler."

* * *

Trent's truck had red velveteen on the ceiling. The doors and the dash were covered in hard red plastic. The tape deck was broken but he had a boom box lying face up on the floor by the gearshift. It ran off a cord plugged into the cigarette lighter.

The boy standing in the drive-thru window crouched to pass them their muffins, each snug in its own little paper bag. He had tattoos down both his arms. One sleeve was outer space with an astronaut's dome-shaped helmet gliding out from under his t-shirt and

the other arm was covered in a deep-sea scene. Walt saw Trent's eyes move up and down each arm.

"Thanks, my buddy." Trent nodded at the boy and handed Walt a cardboard tray, each side sinking under the weight of a heavy paper cup.

The boy nodded. He had a streak of green running through a long side bang. The hair swished over his eye when he nodded.

Trent's truck had hips. The seats shook when it moved and there was a constant growling coming from deep inside it.

"He was cute. He was all skinny like you," Trent said and put a hand down on Walt's leg. He squeezed right above Walt's knee.

"I thought he looked like a douchebag. His hair was stupid."

They were waiting at the mouth of the Tim Hortons driveway for a break in the traffic. Trent's dog was panting in the back seat, its tongue hanging slack out of the corner of its mouth.

Trent grabbed Walt's chin.

"Do you know how fucking pretty you are?" Trent asked. Walt didn't meet his eyes but Trent's hand kept his face turned towards him.

A hard lump of muscle the size of a Kaiser roll rose in the arm Trent was using to wrench the steering wheel. He glanced at the road and let go of Walt's face. As they pulled into the traffic, a cloud of dried leaves swirled up out of the bed of the truck.

* * *

Walt lifted three plates and a freezer bag of cutlery out of a cardboard box on the floor. He'd cooked scrambled eggs in the cast iron frying pan and the soggy mass seemed

to be tinted a coppery green. He lifted up a little pile of egg with the spatula and tilted it from side to side in the light. He decided not to say anything.

There were no chairs. They ate standing up. Trent's hair was dripping on the linoleum. Walt held a plate on his flat palm and divided his food up with the edge of his fork.

"I was just heading out of town and I thought I'd stop in and drop off the drapes."

His father seemed lost, holding his fork and knife in a fist and the plate in the other hand, both in front of his chest.

"Thanks," Walt said.

"I have this beaver problem at my cabin." His father was still holding his meal out in front of him. He'd snapped his wrists lifting weights in high school and they shook. The plate wobbled in his fingers.

"They're flooding the land?" Trent laid his plate on the counter and bent over it.

"Yes. And their shit is contaminating the pond. It's very toxic shit."

"Beaver fever," Trent said.

"I don't know what do. They're taking over. It's a problem."

"I've taken care of beaver problems before. My buddy had a beaver problem a few years ago. Another guy I knew had a beaver problem last summer."

"Really?" His father was excited. He moved over by Trent and laid his plate on the counter too. His father's plate was centimeters from Trent's. The two men's hips were practically touching, their elbows almost brushing together as they moved their utensils.

* * *

The dog understood Trent. It could sense what he wanted. Trent just had to look at it and it hopped into the backseat or off the couch. Trent would point at the cement steps outside a convenience store or gas station and the dog would sit and wait for Trent to come out. Trent would walk out of the store without pausing or even looking at the dog and it would get up and trot behind him.

* * *

“You have to shoot them. It’s legal if they’re on your property. There’s no other solution. Destroy the nest and shoot them. I’ve had beaver fever. Giardia, it’s called. I spent a week in bed, just shaking.” Trent took a big bite of toast and looked Walt’s father in the face. Walt’s father was nodding, the egg on his fork jiggling.

“Just shoot them.” Walt’s father waved the fork in a shaky circle.

“With a registered fire arm. I’m not saying I like to do it, I love animals.” Trent looked over at Walt. “But there’s just not another solution. Tear up the lodge and shoot them. Right in the head, be humane about it.”

* * *

Walt had his face in the pillow, a thin fold of pillowcase between his front teeth. His feet were moving without him telling them to, beating against the futon. One lifting as the other was coming down, like he was swimming.

He had glanced over his shoulder and seen Trent on his knees pouring lube into his palm.

The dog was asleep, curled up next to Walt. Its tail was resting against his front legs. Trent was holding Walt by his hipbones. His fingers were between Walt and the

mattress. Walt held on to the edge of the futon frame, he gritted the pillowcase between his teeth. It didn't hurt but his eyes were watering. It wasn't pain he was feeling but something equally vivid. The bed was moving beneath him and Trent was moving on top of him and he was very still in the middle. He felt the rhythm building and he felt safe inside the steady crescendo. The dog's eyes were squinted shut, a clear drop of drool hanging in the leathery corner of its mouth.

* * *

Walt was doing a Russian degree. His mother thought he could not have chosen a more useless degree. Every time she called she asked if he'd think about switching to engineering like his brothers. He'd gone to Russia to study the language and he was placing some of his souvenirs around the living room when his father called.

"I'm calling about your friend."

"Trent?"

"Do you think he'd come out to the cabin and deal with the beaver problem? I'd give him a hand and I'd pay him. "

Walt was lining up a set of babushka dolls on the edge of the bookcase.

"You wouldn't have to pay him, he was saying he'd like to take a run up to the cabin anyway, to check it out."

"I wouldn't want him doing it for free. For one thing there's the gas to get out there and the ammo."

"He wouldn't take your money. He'd be happy to do it for the family."

"Because he's your friend?"

"Yes."

“See, I don’t want to make your mother uncomfortable. I don’t have a problem with him. I just don’t know how your mother will feel.”

Walt inched every doll over to the left a couple centimeters and stepped back to see if they were centered on the shelf.

“He won’t accept your money.”

* * *

He had gone with Trent to East Coast Marine to look at the gun. The dog was waiting for them in the backseat of the truck. Before they got out of the truck, Trent reached around and grabbed the dog by the snout. He kissed the dog between the eyes.

“You wait here, my handsome prince,” Trent whispered to the dog.

People thought they were brothers or that Trent was his father. There was a glass display case filled with handguns. Trent was asking the clerk questions. Walt dragged his hand along a rack of camo polar fleeces.

The clerk was wearing a t-shirt that came free in a beer box, oversized and made of heavy cotton. He held up what looked like a sugar cube box, filled with bullets. Trent picked a bullet out of the tightly-packed box and held it between his thumb and index finger. Walt saw the sharp tip dimple the pad of Trent’s finger.

The clerk unlocked the case and Trent flipped open his wallet. They zipped the gun into a guitar case and put it in the long silver toolbox fixed to the pan of Trent’s truck. The case glittered in the sun and made Walt’s head hurt.

A man walked through the parking lot with his daughter. She looked about thirteen. She was wearing tiny white shorts with buttons on the back pockets and she had stiff plastic hair extensions running down the length of her back. Walt could see the goose

bumps on her legs. She and her dad were running an errand at East Coast Marine. Maybe going fishing together. Or he was just picking her up from the mall. They were both holding slushies in big Styrofoam cups with plastic domes on the top and they were laughing. They had stood in line together somewhere to get those drinks.

Trent stood on tiptoe and leaned across the pan to snap the latches on the toolbox shut. He and the father exchanged a manly nod while Trent arched over the side of the truck. Walt didn't get a nod.

* * *

Walt called his father the morning before they left. He got out of bed and shut the door behind him. Trent was deeply asleep and the alarm wouldn't go off for another fifteen minutes.

"Did you talk to mom?"

"I talked to your mother."

"What did she say?"

"She wants the beavers gone."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing else. I told her he's a nice young man."

After he hung up, Walt smoked a cigarette on the back deck. Sometimes smoking that early in the morning gave him the kind of head rush he got when he first started smoking.

* * *

The leaves on the ground were wet. They were slick, disintegrating into the mud. Trent and his father were wearing boots. They stepped right in the little stream they were

following to the beaver pool. Walt walked on the marshy edges. There was a crust of dead white moss on top of fresh lime green moss that was thriving beneath it. Walt's sneakers crunched through the delicate scab and filled with shockingly cold water again and again. His socks felt tight, like they were shrink -wrapping the cold against his skin.

Trent carried the gun and Walt's father carried a chainsaw. Walt was in the back with a potato picker and a rake over one shoulder. The teeth of the rake kept catching in brittle branches and yanking a muscle in his shoulder. The distance between him and his father was widening.

"The pool is just up here, hey Earl?" Trent called to Walt's father. The dog was bouncing through the woods just ahead of them, turning its head every few strides to make sure Trent was following. It would sometimes slow, drop its head down and sniff close to the earth and then bound forward again.

"You're headed in the right direction," Walt's father called.

Walt could feel the armpits of his t-shirt dampening under layers of sweaters. He hauled the neck of his t-shirt away from him with his free hand. His fingers were so cold they felt hot against the skin of his neck. He smelled his own sweat. And then they were at the edge of the beaver pool.

* * *

The water was flat and brown. Clumps of gray plant life floated on the surface with tendrils of translucent slime sashaying beneath them. Water doctors leaped across the surface like it was a trampoline. The little pool was surrounded by a carefully woven barrier of sticks. And, there in the centre, a huge mound of dead branches. The bottoms sheared into spears.

Trent set the gun down across a boulder at the edge of the pool. He patted each side of his chest with flat palms, unbuttoned his breast pocket and took out a granola bar. All three of them stood at the edge of the pond and listened.

* * *

When they finished Trent lay down beside him.

“Put your head right here.” He tapped a knuckle against his sternum. “Listen to my chest.”

Walt put his ear over Trent’s lungs. He felt the soft curls of chest hair on his cheek. Trent breathed in deeply and his chest sank. When he exhaled Walt heard whistling inside Trent’s chest. It was like wind in an old house.

“Do you hear that?” Trent moved his finger down Walt’s nose, over his lips, tracing his profile.

“Yeah.” Walt spoke into his chest.

“That’s my asthma. It depresses the fuck out of me. I’m falling apart.”

* * *

On the far side of the water the trees gave way and there was just marsh stretching into the horizon. Trent walked along the border of woven sticks that ringed the pool and out onto the lodge. He was carrying the chainsaw in one hand and the gun in the other. Walt and his father stood at the edge of the pool. The dog was lying on a mossy stretch of ground, panting and squinting against the sun.

Trent walked up the mound of the nest and laid the gun down. Walt could tell from the movement of Trent’s chest that he was having trouble breathing. It sounded like

someone was pumping a miniature bellows in his chest when Trent couldn't breathe properly.

Walt and his father watched Trent lift the chainsaw into the air and rev the engine. He bounced the saw in the air three times, like a drummer counting into a song. And then he dug the churning chain into the nest. Bits of twig and dirt flew into the air. A damp piece of earth came down on Walt's face. He wiped at it and felt the grime spread across his cheek. Trent lifted the saw and stood still on the nest. Again they all listened.

"I don't think they're in there." Trent kicked at the sticks he'd disturbed with his steel toe work boot.

The branches moved beneath him and both his arms shot up. A beaver swam out from under the hutch. Its bulky body glided around the bottom of the pool. The dog began a long hoarse howl with a tremble in it. Trent was swaying between the murky water and the spiked sticks with his arms in the air, trying to find his balance. His body was like a tuning fork moving with the quiver in the dog's voice.

Dealing with Infestation

There was a semi-finished apartment below the place Francis was renting and it sucked all the warmth out of his home. The cold made his sheets and pillowcases feel wet. Each night he clenched his teeth as he slid his hand into the frigid place beneath his pillow. The toilet seat was freezing. When he used the dryer the downstairs porch filled with steam that froze on the walls. His house had been attached on both sides but the summer before he moved in, the house to the right got torn down. Now there was only Tyvek separating the side of his house from the elements.

He took the apartment because he loved the high ceilings and the thick, murky glass in the old windows. It turned out the high ceilings meant that even when the radiators were up all the way you had to wear a heavy sweater to be comfortable.

The teaching job was a step in the direction of paying off his student loans and he rewarded himself by living alone. Before he moved he was living in a basement apartment on Cornwall Avenue with a guy he barely interacted with. If one of them was getting in the shower they'd ask if the other needed to use the bathroom first. That was their whole relationship. The basement apartment had been furnished and warm and affordable and depressing as fuck.

The night he moved into the new place he corrected a stack of tests on the photosynthesis unit with fingerless gloves and three pairs of socks on. He drew check marks next to sloppy arrows traveling from suns with John Lennon glasses to floppy daisies or miniature trees, pairs of outturned legs with a cotton ball growing on top of them. That first night he believed the chill was because the place had been empty for six

months. He turned the heat on low in every room and was reassured by the smell of dust burning on the radiators.

The itching started on his third night in the apartment. He was in his bedroom, dragging his bed away from the draft coming through the wall on the Tyvek side of the house. He noticed a feeling like needles were being poked into the crook of his elbow and tugged out again. The next night he noticed the itch behind his knees. Being in the shower was a fleeting relief from the cold but getting out ruined it. Standing on the bathmat, water cooling as it slid through his chest hair, he scratched hard behind one knee and then the other. Mushy dead skin got caught beneath his fingernails.

By the time he went to the doctor there were swollen scratch marks in the soft skin behind his knees, in his armpits and between his fingers. Clusters of skinny, brown, zig-zag shaped scabs. The doctor gave Francis a cream to smear on the affected areas. Anti-fungal on the first visit, Cortisol when that didn't work. The coolness of the cream was soothing when he applied it but as soon as it dried the itch reared again. Between the itching and the cold, he was barely sleeping. The doctor asked him to think harder about if he was using a new laundry detergent or moisturizer.

He looked forward to work because it was a break from the cold. There was coffee. He felt that his students were beginning to like him. He told one group about how he and a friend got drunk and accidentally floated downriver and out to sea on an inflatable mattress. He sometimes showed a funny YouTube video at the beginning of class: a bewildered child babbling after dental surgery, a sleeping dog yelping with its legs jogging while it lay flat on its side. Or if he came across an interesting tidbit about a

new development in science he tried sharing that with them. He was surprised by how receptive they were. They loved hearing about the Hadron Collider.

He was the youngest male teacher on staff. There were a few women close to his age but he was the only man under forty. He assumed that made him more relatable. He never yelled because he was afraid of looking foolish.

Once he looked in the small window in the door of Gordon French's math class and saw Gordon stamping a foot in front of the class. In the back corner a few students were hunched with the neck of their sweaters resting on their noses. Sniggering. Francis desperately did not want to be the subject of sniggering. He never said anything about texting if it was happening discreetly under a desk. He never refused anyone a trip to the bathroom, even during a test.

His younger sister, Catherine, had just moved to Montreal to start university. He had told her to stay in Newfoundland, live with their mother and avoid burying herself in debt. But she wanted to leave and her grades were good enough that she got a couple of bursaries. When she first moved up she called Francis to ask if she should sign a six-month or year-long lease. She called a few days later to ask if he thought she should set up an equalized payment plan for her electric bill.

"Did you set up the payment plan for your heat yet? I've been thinking I should do that. It's fucking freezing in this apartment." When she called he was writing multiple-choice questions on cell structure.

"I have to get my roommates' social insurance numbers and Amery isn't speaking to me because I made her get rid of this recliner she dragged in off the sidewalk. It was definitely crawling with bedbugs."

“You have bedbugs?”

“No, but we will if Amery keeps dragging stuff in off the sidewalk. I know three people who’ve had them. They had to throw out everything.”

“How do you know if you have them? Can you see them?”

“Itching, they bite you in your sleep. They come out of the walls and crawl into your bed and bite you.”

“Have you been talking to mom recently?” Francis opened his laptop and started looking up extermination companies in his area.

“I talked to her yesterday. You should call her.”

They’d been introduced at staff meetings. Patricia taught gym on the first floor and his science class was on the third but sometimes they crossed paths in the morning.

Today they were in the teachers’ lounge for lunch at the same time. Patricia had a mason jar with a layered salad. The dressing was in the bottom; she flipped the jar and shook it before dumping it into a shallow bowl from the cupboard.

Francis sometimes brought pasta with pesto and broccoli in a Tupperware container or a nice sandwich with Dijon mustard and ham wrapped in tinfoil. But today he had a pizza pocket. The plate was already doing its last slow rotation in the lit-up window of the microwave when she came in with her mason jar.

“I usually pack myself a nice lunch but I was feeling lazy today,” he said when the microwave beeped. He pressed the button and the door sprang open.

“Pizza pocket, classic.” Patricia was wearing calf-length basketball shorts and a hoody with the school’s logo on it. Francis noticed a scar in her eyebrow and a pinprick

below her lip where she'd had piercings. She had a tomboyish, surfer-girl vibe and Francis wondered if she might be a lesbian.

"I usually have pasta or I like, bring some soup to heat up," he said.

"No shame." Patricia leaned against the counter eating her salad. It was impossible to eat the pizza pocket in a way that didn't let the sleeves of his shirt flop half way down his forearm and show his rash from scratching in his sleep. It had been raw and red for almost three weeks. He was self-conscious about it and had started holding his cuffs over his knuckles in public. It was something he would catch himself doing.

They heard the smack of a person being shoved into a locker. Patricia opened the door and took a wide stance in the hallway. This was the type of incident Francis avoided if he wasn't on lunch duty.

"What's going on here?" She was still holding the bowl of salad. The hallway froze. "Someone want to tell me what's going on here?"

Francis stood behind her in the doorway. He was holding his pizza pocket wrapped in a cocktail napkin from a stack he'd found next to the coffee maker.

"I dropped some stuff." A girl was on her knees stuffing a mess of papers into her knapsack. A crowd of girls had paused just behind her when Patricia first burst out of the teachers' lounge and now they quickly shuffled past the crouched girl.

"Nobody is going anywhere, I want to know what that noise was." Patricia lifted a forkful of leaves that glistened with salad dressing.

The girls slumped and sighed. They wore tight jeans with baggy sweatshirts and high ponytails.

“I’ve got another forty minutes before I need to be back in the gym. We can stand here for your whole lunch break if you want.” Patricia took a bite of her salad.

Francis could see this was making the crouched girl uncomfortable.

“I tripped,” the girl said from the floor. She had intensely curly hair; it was pulled tight against her scalp and slicked with gel but it puffed in a bushy ponytail on the back of her head. Teenagers did not use moderation when it came to gels and sprays. Francis had wondered if the itching might be a response to the fugue of cologne and hair spray in the junior high hallways. But the itch always prickled to life when he was home, usually after he’d gotten into his freezing bed.

“Alright, move along all of you, get where you’re going.” Patricia stepped back into the teachers’ lounge and shut the door. “Thanks for backing me up there.”

“Sorry.” A drip of pizza pocket sauce was making its way down the back of Francis’s hand. He had to lick the sauce off his wrist.

“What’s that on your arm? Eczema? I’m just asking because I’ve had it. I had it on my eyelids and it nearly drove me crazy but I know the name of a great cream.”

“The doctor doesn’t think it’s eczema. I don’t know what it is. They said it’s not contagious though.” The doctor had actually said she didn’t know if it was contagious.

“Is it itchy?”

“Very itchy.” Francis stuck the last of his pizza pocket in his mouth. It was too much food. He couldn’t chew without opening his mouth so he had to hold a hand in front of his face, putting the rash on display.

Francis found a company that fumigated for a hundred dollars less than most companies and hired them over the phone. A woman arrived that evening to check for the

bugs. An appraisal fee was included in the cost of fumigation. She had strawberry blond hair pulled into a high ponytail. She barely had eyebrows. She was wearing a white plastic jumpsuit that tucked into her boots.

“I’m going to leave these on,” she said about her boots. She took a pair of yellow rubber gloves out of the pocket of her jumpsuit and hauled them on, snapping them at the wrist. “I can’t risk infecting my next apartment. I have a full roster tonight, four apartments after yours.”

“Okay,” Francis said.

“What makes you think you have bedbugs?”

“I’ve been itching ever since I moved in here.”

“Okay, the last tenants probably left you an infestation and the landlord didn’t bother to mention it. If you play your cards right you might be able to get yourself reimbursed for the fumigation. How long’ve you been here?” The fumigator ran a finger along the window ledge.

“A month and a half.”

“That’s a little long, they’ll say you brought them in, worth a try though. Pretty sure I just saw one.” She dropped onto her hands and knees and bent her elbows to get a good look at the baseboard.

Francis leaned in to see the bug. He was rubbing the rash between his thumb and the outside of his index finger. He stopped himself and held the sleeves of his hoody against his palm.

“You just missed it.” Francis was impressed by how agile she was. “The bedroom’s in here?”

He pushed the bedroom door open for her. She lifted his comforter and reached under the mattress to get the sheet off.

“Definitely seeing a lot of evidence here.” She snuggled the sheet back over the corner of the mattress. “The great thing about fumigation is that you don’t have to dry-clean everything. You just leave everything as is, seal her up and I’ll fumigate, furniture and all.”

“Thank you for fitting me into your schedule,” Francis said.

“Not a problem.” She held out a gloved hand to him. When they shook the latex rubbed his rash in an unpleasant way but her hands were bony and warm and feminine and he enjoyed it.

Francis stayed with his friend Dave during the fumigation. He washed all his clothes at the laundromat. He put them through two dryer cycles. A pocket’s worth of quarters. He changed into clothes that were still warm from the dryer in a Pizza Pizza bathroom before going over to Dave’s. He stuffed the possibly contaminated clothes he wore while the laundry was going through into a tall garbage bin with a flapping lid.

He slept on the couch in Dave’s living room. He’d left the fumigator a key under the mat in front of his door.

When the alarm on his cell phone went off he had a kink in his neck. The throw pillow that had been under his cheek had a dark mark of drool on it. He’d slept more deeply than he had in months because of the heat in Dave’s living room.

When he arrived at school he saw Patricia standing in front of a group of boys.

“Not on school property,” Patricia said to a boy with a cigarette.

“Two more puffs,” the boy said and exhaled through his nose. His hair was buzzed close to his scalp. He had a small frame, the seam where the sleeves of his hoody were attached to the shoulders was halfway down his skinny bicep.

“Put it out immediately or get off school property,” Patricia said. Francis walked slowly, willing the situation to diffuse itself before he arrived.

“Suck my dick.” The boy dropped the cigarette on the asphalt and stepped on it.

“What did you say?” Patricia clenched her teeth and Francis saw her jawbone bulge in her cheeks.

Francis could see there was no way the small boy would back down from the dare to repeat himself. There were snowflakes swirling around the small crowd of boys in flat-brim baseball caps and Patricia.

“I said suck my dick, bitch.” The boy shrugged his shoulders and walked away from the school. Out into the cold parking lot in his hoody.

“You’re going to regret this,” Patricia said to his back. She wrenched the gym entrance door open.

“You’re a cunt,” the boy yelled into the parking lot.

“Okay, move along, get to class,” Francis said to the boys who were left in the alcove by the gym door. He followed Patricia in.

Patricia had a small cinderblock office in the back corner of the gym. She sat on a plastic chair in her puffy coat and laid her travel mug on the ground. Francis wasn’t sure he should have followed her into the tight space. There was rack of basketballs and a milk crate of skipping ropes crowding the room, forcing him to stand with his shins almost touching her knees.

“That was overwhelming.” She laid her elbows on her thighs and put her face in her hands.

“You were great.” Francis rolled his neck in a wide loop, clockwise then counter-clockwise. His neck was tight from sleeping on the couch. The weight of his head tugged the clump of seized muscles and he arched into the pain.

“I let that little shit walk all over me.” Patricia straightened up with her palms hiding her face so her elbows hovered parallel to her chest. “No one has ever called me a cunt before. Never like that.”

“He was trying to get you to flip out and you wouldn’t take the bait. Stop covering your face.”

She took her hands down.

“I’m just embarrassed.”

When Francis got home from school he cracked the windows. He couldn’t tell if he was imagining a chemical smell lingering in the apartment or if it was really there. He made gnocchi from a package with his winter coat on. As the miniature dumplings bobbed to surface he felt immense relief at the thought of being free from the itch.

He looked her up on Facebook and found her. A lot of teachers didn’t have Facebook accounts because they didn’t want students looking them up. Her page was private but he could see her profile picture. It showed her standing on the edge of a cliff in the summer. She was wearing hiking gear and her hair was blowing behind her in a wild tangle. He moved the mouse over the ‘add’ button and his finger seemed to jerk down on of its own accord. And then because he’d already added her and he’d had three beers in an attempt to numb himself to the cold, he sent a message.

Hey,

I was wondering if you wanted to grab something to eat after school some day this week. It would be great to have a work buddy ☺

Then he went around slamming the windows shut. The fresh air had changed the smell of his apartment. It had been two years since he'd had sex. The longest he'd gone without having sex since he was seventeen. He always jacked off in the shower in the morning and when he got home from work in the late afternoon. Sometimes again as he was falling asleep. Those were the best orgasms, when he was almost dreaming. They built more slowly than the ones in the early morning or late afternoon. Sometimes he woke up with the bottom of his t-shirt crusted with cum. That night he spat on his hand and jerked it until he was sore. He was imagining what her breasts might be like, what kissing her might be like. What fucking her standing up against the wall in the teachers' lounge might be like. He pictured Patricia and the fumigator making out in his bed, beckoning him to join them by slowly curling their index fingers at him. He was very hard but the nervousness of waiting for her to message him back made it impossible to cum.

Just as he was falling asleep, the itch prickled to life again. The feeling of something touching him. Maybe something that was once part of him cleaving so slowly it was irking. The feeling of a slow-moving trail of sweat, a flaking piece of dry skin, a glob of phlegm ungluing itself from his throat. Or bugs. It was in so many places at once. All the warm alcoves of his body were colonized.

He hired a man named Gary with a dog named The Muscle. Francis saw Gary pull up and let The Muscle out of the front seat of his Toyota Corolla. Gary had a tan bomber jacket with a corduroy collar. The Muscle was a beagle. He peed on the corner of Francis' building on the way in.

The Muscle sniffed along the baseboards. His ears flopped as he made his way through the living room to the bedroom.

"Bedroom's in here?" Gary pushed the door open himself. Francis heard Gary's knees crunch as bent to lift the sheet.

"You've been had." Gary did not tuck the sheet back into place. "Go ahead Muscle, I'm going to let the dog check it out to be safe but if you had bugs in here there'd be excrement and specks of blood on your mattress. "

"No bedbugs?"

"There's no sign of them, you never had bedbugs. Unless this is a new mattress?"

"Same mattress."

"You've been had."

"I've been itching every night," Francis said.

"There'd be tiny blood stains here if you had an infestation. You should have called us before you had the fumigator in. See they have to pay off their equipment, you can't trust them."

Francis wondered about an appropriate amount to tip Gary and The Muscle. They had been there maybe ten minutes. He ended up tipping fifty-dollars. He liked Gary and The Muscle. He liked that they got to drive around all day doing tours of people's

apartments. He pictured Gary giving Muscle the last bite of his cheeseburger as they drove home at the end of the day.

“What does Muscle do if there are bedbugs?”

“A little yap.” Gary was folding the money up and sliding it into his wallet.

“And he only does it if there’s bedbugs?”

“Yup. You’ve got some draft coming in here.” Gary slapped a hand against the Tyvek wall.

He phoned his sister the night after Gary and The Muscle came by. He hopped up and down in his boxers as the phone rang into her answering machine three times in a row. The floor was saturated with cold from the empty apartment and it hurt his feet if he stood in one place without socks. For a moment he dwelled on the memory of the thick, dusty rose carpet in his old basement apartment.

“I fumigated for bedbugs and I’m still itching,” he said when Catherine picked up.

“I didn’t know you had bedbugs. Did you tell mom?” There were lots of voices in the background.

“I don’t know if I had them. I was itching, I had the place fumigated and I’m still itching. I hired a guy with a dog who sniffs them out and he said I never had them.”

Francis had been afraid he was waking her up but when he passed the clock on the oven he saw it was only eleven thirty.

“My roommate had them before,” his sister said. “At her old place. Her boyfriend’s dad owns a company with a dog that sniffs out bedbugs. He brought it over and it gave a signal.”

“What was the signal?”

“I think wagging its tail, or maybe it barked. I don’t know.”

“What did they do about it?”

“They washed everything.”

“No fumigator?”

“I think they just washed everything.”

“That worked?”

“No, they had to move out. Do you think it’s an allergy, or like scabies?”

“What’s scabies?”

“Google it. I have to go, there’s a bunch of people here. We’re making tacos.”

Francis made a doctor’s appointment in the car on the way to school.

Patricia lived by herself with a German shepherd. When they got to her house they had to take it for a walk around the block before they took off their boots and coats. It tugged at her but she didn’t let it drag her around. He could tell that he would quickly fall in love with her gangly strength. They walked to a small park and she unclipped the dog’s leash to let him wander around and pee on whatever interested him.

“I am deeply pissed off with that kid from this morning,” Patricia said.

“I haven’t had to deal with a lot of disobedience yet.”

“I’m trying to forget about it. I was thinking we could get burritos at this place down the street and eat them at my house. You can order them and I’ll wait outside with the dog.”

The burritos came wrapped in silver foil. They ate them on a futon in her living room while they browsed Netflix. Francis found himself hoping that someday soon (tonight was too much to hope for) she would invite him to sleep over and he could sleep the deep sleep he knew would come from being in a warm bed. Maybe it would be dark and he could take off his shirt without her noticing the scratch marks and rashes.

“I called his parents this afternoon. The father asked me what I did to provoke his son, he just kept insisting his son wouldn’t behave that way unprovoked.” Patricia made air quotation marks as she said “unprovoked.” She tugged a piece of chicken out of her burrito and fed it to the dog.

“What an asshole.” Francis couldn’t stop thinking about how visible the flakey red bumps on his hands were. It was actually dim in the living room but the lamp was on his side of the couch. He began casually sliding away from the light shining out of the bottom of the shade.

“He should have apologized to me. Can you imagine if your son’s teacher called to say he told her to suck his dick. I would be fucking mortified. I’d be apologizing ‘til my face turned blue.” The dog was staring up at Patricia with its tongue flopped out. “Was that too spicy for you, Moira? I’m sorry, puppy.”

Francis gradually inched his way out of the lamplight over the course of the pilot episode of *The Good Wife*. Patricia interpreted this as him sidling up to her. Francis could tell by the way their arms were touching; her hand was flat on the cushions, waiting for him to put his hand over it. When the final credits rolled she turned and kissed him on the lips. She lay back on the couch and he crawled on top of her and slid his hands up the back of her shirt.

There were two sagging nets strung across the gym and the kids were playing doubles badminton. Francis had started bringing a coffee to Patricia in the gym every morning. He didn't have a class until ten. Rap was thumping through the echo-y room. He saw Patricia standing by a boom box on a trolley with an iPod plugged into it.

"I let them play their music as long as they behave. I'm trying to make sure it isn't anything overly offensive. I tell them it all has to be the radio versions, the censored version." Patricia took her coffee from him.

One of the kids jogged over to a dry erase board set up on a metal easel next to them. She erased a name with the side of her fist and marked another in its place. Francis took in the intricate diagram of the badminton competition.

"Did you come up with this system?" he asked with admiration.

"I had him hauled off the hockey team."

"The kid with the cigarette? How do you feel about that?"

"He refused to apologize. I wasn't getting anywhere with the parents. I spoke with Shortall. He thought it was a good choice. There's a tournament and I don't want to be on a bus all the way to Grand Falls with that little fucker." She was talking quietly as the music blared out of the boom box beside them.

"They're not participating." Patricia waved discreetly. The gym doubled as an auditorium and there was a stage in the back. Boys in winter coats were sitting in a row on the edge of the stage, swinging their sneakers. "In protest. I told them I'm going to be calling home."

“What did they say?” Just as Francis asked, a girl laid her racket on the floor and ran over to the stage to talk to one of the boys.

“Veronica! Veronica, is your set finished?” Patricia yelled at the girl. Francis was startled by how she made her voice carry across the huge room. “If you’re finished, you sit on the bleachers. I don’t want to have to call your house too.”

The girl walked slowly over to the whiteboard to mark herself into the championship tree.

“I was just talking to them. “ She had smears of gooey purple eye shadow on her eyelids.

“This isn’t socializing class, this is gym class.”

“You’re such a hard-ass,” Francis said teasingly, when the girl walked away.

“You need to grow a pair.”

“I hate that expression.”

Francis lay naked on his bare mattress with the scabies cream smeared all over his body. He’d stripped the bed and brought his sheets to the laundromat before applying it. The cream came in a toothpaste-shaped tube. He’d squeezed it into the palm of his hand and the paste spiralled on top of itself like soft-serve ice cream. He had flattened his palm against his chest in the skinny mirror he’d hung on the back of the bathroom door. The doctor said to make sure to work the cream into all the nooks and crannies: the creases of his groin, his armpits, between his toes. He told Francis the bugs like moist, warm places. Hairs were sticking straight up out of goose-bumps all over his body but he waited ten

minutes for the cream to seep into his skin before getting dressed. When the cream dried he got dressed and went for a walk around the block.

“Hi Patricia, I saw the doctor about my itching again.” It was the first time they’d ever spoken on the phone. “She’s pretty sure it’s scabies.”

“I thought that was something dogs got, like ticks.”

“It’s contagious, you get it from skin to skin contact or from clothes.” He was anxious to get all the information out before he lost his nerve. “There’s a chance I passed it on to you. You should wash your clothes and bedding.”

“Fuck, okay, what is it? It’s some kind of rash?”

“It’s insects that burrow into your skin. They’re mostly active in the night so if you’ve scratching at night...”

“How did you catch it?”

“I don’t know, maybe the school, the doctor said it’s common for it to get passed around schools. Teenagers and children get it, it’s like lice.”

“I’ve never had lice.” She was beginning to sound pissed off.

“I’m really sorry, I went to a doctor and she insisted it was an allergy. I thought it was bedbugs, I had a fumigator in and everything. There’s a cream you should probably get.”

“I haven’t been itching.”

“It takes four to six weeks to become symptomatic.”

“Oh for fucksakes.”

“I thought I should tell you.” He was pacing in front of PizzaPizza. He could see they had three slices left in the case by the cash. The pepperoni was curling into tiny bowls under the lamp.

“Good for you, you deserve a medal. What’s the cream called? Do I need a prescription?”

“I’m sorry. Permethrin. You put it all over your body, from the neck down and leave it on for twenty-four hours. I have it on right now.” A man in a jaundice colored Carhart jacket tugged open the PizzaPizza door. Francis watched as the cashier slowly looked up from a cell phone on the counter and the man pointed to the case.

“Insects? How big are they?”

“I know, it’s disgusting. You might not even have it but you should probably get the cream, to be safe. There’s still lots left in my tube if you want or I can get you your own.”

When he opened the door for Patricia he saw her sky blue Ford Festiva parked at the bottom of the steps up to his apartment. The backseat was folded down and the dog was sleeping in the hatch back.

“You’re not coming in?” He had just washed the cream off in the shower. She arrived quicker than he had expected. He was just plugging the hair dryer in when he heard the doorbell.

“I’ve got the dog.”

“You can bring Moira in.” He stepped back to show her how big the living room was, all the space Moira could stretch out in.

“She really needs to go for a walk.”

“I didn’t know it was contagious. I’ll get the cream.”

Patricia stepped inside and shut the door behind her. He went to the bathroom and took the cream out of the mirrored medicine cabinet.

“Shortall isn’t backing my decision to take Patrick Kennedy off the hockey team anymore,” Patricia called to him from the porch. In the bathroom he wiped some crusted cream away from the seam where the cap met the tube.

“Does he know it was about smoking? That you were enforcing the no smoking policy?” He slid the tube into its cardboard sleeve and re-entered the living room. She was still standing in the porch but she had unzipped her jacket. “Why don’t you bring the dog in? I’ll make some coffee, I have a visitor’s permit for the car.”

He took the parking permit off the mantel behind him and held it out to her.

“Fine.” She took the laminated card.

They sat at the kitchen table, which was empty except for their mugs and the scabies cream. The dog sat next to Patricia with his head in her lap.

“He says the kid is willing to apologize and the father won’t back down and the kid is a talented hockey player who shouldn’t be stifled because of this incident. Stan, the new guidance counselor, is siding with them.”

“What do you think about that? I mean if he apologizes sincerely, you wouldn’t be happy with that?”

“I’m not taking him. I’m not spending four hours on a bus with a child who called me a cunt. I’ll quit my job. He needs to learn that some things can’t be forgiven. I’ll go back to school and do something else.”

“That’s letting him win, don’t you think? Letting him run you out of a job?”

“I need you to back me up on this. I’m going to need you to back me up in the staff meeting. Say you think I’m right.” She took the cream off the table and put it in her pocket.

On the day of the staff meeting he met Patricia in the gym with a coffee. Three nights had gone by without itching. It was still cold in his apartment but he had started allowing himself to fantasize about spring. About drinking a coffee in shorts on the fire escape, sleeping with only one blanket covering him and the window open a crack.

The kids were playing soccer-baseball. One at a time they approached the center of the room and punted a ball at the ceiling. Francis noticed that some girls had joined the contingent of boys sitting on the stage at the back of the room, refusing to participate.

“I’m going to be calling all their parents this afternoon.” Patricia said about the kids on the stage.

“Have you been itching?”

“No, I used the cream to be safe, though. There’s half a tube left if you need it.”

“I think I’m in the clear.” A boy in skinny jeans kicked the ball and it flew backwards over his head. It hit the floor in front of Francis and bounced about eight feet in the air. Francis caught it on the way down and tossed it back to the boy.

“I’ll see you in the meeting,” Patricia said.

All day he was distracted by the thought of the staff meeting. He assigned group work, got them to correct each other’s quizzes. His rashes were clearing up; the areas they occupied were receding, the redness was paling to pink. All he had to do was agree. She would formulate the argument and he just had to endorse it.

He got to the meeting before Patricia. He wanted to sit next to her, but other teachers arrived and sat on either side of him. They talked about permission slips and hall passes and a spike in tardiness. There was a heated argument about policy on hats in class and the fact that the newspaper club and the robotics club had to share the multi-purpose room on Thursdays. He said nothing about these topics.

“Okay, I think that wraps things up, any closing remarks?” Shortall asked, shuffling his papers together.

“I’d like to talk about Patrick Kennedy and the hockey trip,” Patricia said.

“We discussed this, Patricia. He’s going to apologize.” The principal lifted his bag into his lap and put his folder in it.

“I’m not happy with that solution. He was incredibly rude to me. I don’t think he should be allowed to go on the trip.”

The other teachers were getting their things together.

“Patricia don’t you think that apologizing will be a positive learning experience?” Stan asked.

“He called me a cunt, I’ve never been called a cunt by anyone. I don’t do favours for people who call me a cunt.” Patricia raised her voice. The other teachers stopped moving.

“I have to agree with Patricia,” Valerie, the art teacher said. “Cunt is a hateful word. I can barely say it, there needs to be a severe punishment for that.”

“Look, they’re teenagers, you can’t get your back up every time one of them curses at you. You need a thick skin in this job,” Gordon French said, zipping up his coat.

“Cunt is different,” Valerie said.

“Thank you, Valerie.” Patricia looked at Francis with her jawbone bulging in her cheek.

“I agree with Patricia.” His voice came out more quietly than he meant it to and he could feel a blush spreading across his cheeks.

“This matter is decided, I don’t want to waste any more time on it,” the principal said.

“Then find a new gym teacher.” Patricia stood up and yanked her jacket off the back of her chair. She slammed the door behind her on the way out.

“All very dramatic,” Gordon French said.

Francis shuffled out of the room with everyone else. When he got out to the parking lot her car was already gone.

He called her that night. He was making packaged gnocchi again, for the third time that week.

“You didn’t speak up. I have nothing to say to you. You knew it was important to me.”

“I did, I said I agree.” He clenched the phone between his ear and his shoulder as he dumped the pot into a strainer in the sink.

“You didn’t say it loud enough, you didn’t say it until it was too late.”

“Please, Patricia, give me another chance, I’ll go speak to Shortall. I really do think you’re right.” The steam from the strained dumplings was making his face wet. His eyes filmed over with tears.

“I gave you a heads up and everything. That was your chance.”

After dinner he rubbed moisturizer into his fading rashes. The skin became shiny and soft. It seemed to glow rosy pink in the places where the bugs had congregated.

Barrelling Forward

“You ok?” her brother asked her. They were at the ferry terminal, in a line of idling cars.

“I’m ok.”

“Maybe you’re hungry.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t use the money, Kyle,” Shawna said.

“You want me to pull the car out of the line? It’s not too late.”

“I’m just saying maybe we shouldn’t.”

“I’m going to get a job, you can get a job if you want. We’re only using a little bit.”

They walked the dog around the terminal so he could pee before boarding, leaving the car empty in the line.

Kyle twisted around in his seat. He lifted a sandwich out of the tray he’d taken from the funeral parlour. The triangles of sandwich had been squeezed into a tight ring along the perimeter of the tray, but at some point the dog had stepped on the clear plastic lid and mashed half of them into a gooey mess. Kyle took a stack of curried chicken salad out of the intact side. He tilted the tray toward his sister.

“There’s going to be nothing to eat on the boat.”

“Yes there will.”

“These will go bad if we don’t eat them.”

There was greenish chicken salad all over his hand.

* * *

The ferry lurched in the windstorm.

She and Kyle were sleeping on a bench below a sign saying to please not sleep on the benches. There was a safety video on a loop on the TV bolted to the wall of the lounge and it crackled in and out of her dreams. *In the event of, arms folded over your chest, equipped with a whistle, inflatable slide.* Dishes crashed in the kitchen.

A man in a chef's coat walked carefully through the lounge holding a stainless steel restaurant tub. She smelled boiled hot dogs. The boat nosed its way over the peak of a wave and yellow water sloshed out of the hot dog tub. It darkened the front of his uniform and splattered on the floor.

The chef saw her open her eyes and said, "That's it for the dogs, too messy out there."

She and Kyle took turns with the sleeping bag. She unzipped it and held the corners against her chest. Rolled over and pulled it over her face. No matter how she lay, the blanket kept flopping off her. Her friends were studying for their final exams. They were eating popcorn and scrolling through FaceBook and making up mnemonics of the parts of the somatic nervous system.

People were lined up at the bathroom door. The staff were handing out white paper bags that had a sawtooth lip along the top and were lined with shiny foil. A woman stepped away from the bathroom line and vomited into her bag. She coughed and straightened up. The bottom of the bag sagged; she held it away from her with a stiff arm. Then she bent over and pulled it open again.

"Why won't she go away?" Shawna said. The retching noise was making her sick. Kyle scratched her scalp, something they'd done for each other since they were small.

“She can hear you,” he said quietly to her.

Later they waited in the belly of the ferry for the drawbridge to come down. Their tiny car with transport trucks on either side of it. She turned around in her seat and fed the dog goldfish crackers from the glove box. He licked the little salt crystals off her fingers. His big thick tongue was the pink of a pencil eraser.

“You’re going to finish school, you can go to university and everything if you want. This is a little break,” Kyle said. The car juddered along the metal drawbridge that stretched between the edge of the boat and solid land.

* * *

Kyle’s friend, Lonnie, led them behind the house into a little garden. There was a mirror with a curved slice missing from the top corner, leaning against the back fence. There were white plastic deck chairs with bunches of empties gathered around their legs. Shawna’s duffle bag was chafing his shoulder.

Lonnie opened the door to an enclosed staircase that acted as a fire escape for his second floor balcony. Someone had built a little loft above the staircase; you had to stoop on the top step because of it.

“It’s just up there.”

Kyle climbed a ladder up to the loft. There were a few sheets of plywood supported by two-by-fours, a mattress made up with sheets and a sleeping bag, a little shelf built into the wall with candles melted on to it and a flashlight with a rubber loop for your wrist. He stood at the top of the ladder and looked down at Lonnie and Shawna.

“You think this can handle both of us?” Kyle noticed how the floor bowed under his feet. His sister was leaning a hip against the doorframe looking up at him. He saw Lonnie’s eyes skim down over her ass.

“Oh, totally. Me and Patty sleep up there all the time,” Lonnie said.

“We’re going to get our own place soon,” Kyle said.

“Stay as long as you want, man. Also there’s a trap door you can open up for light. You can go up on the roof.”

There were places where Kyle could see streaks of blue sky between the boards. Drips of tar had slid through the ceiling and stiffened before they could drop to the platform. They were frozen mid-drip, covered in gray dust.

“One of you could sleep on the couch too,” Lonnie said.

“I think this is good.”

Kyle glanced down the spiral stairs that ended in a little concrete platform. He thought of the ferry crashing down from the peak of a wave. He’d seen a woman on the boat hurrying her little girl to the washroom. The floor came up and she had to drop the girl’s hand to brace herself against a carpeted wall. Her knee jutted forward and Kyle saw the outline of her kneecap through her polyester skirt. He heaved Shawna’s duffle bag up into the bunk.

The dog was whimpering at the bottom of the ladder.

* * *

At first Shawna spent a lot of time walking around with the dog. She got sunburnt and didn’t eat. She ached with an anxiety that felt like a wet gym sock full of tennis balls twirling in her chest.

There were students protesting tuition hikes and a new unconstitutional law. She'd heard they were students but there were also gray-haired women in MEC hiking gear and yoga pants. Young fathers with little boys on their shoulders. The boys beat their fathers' chests with their sandals.

The wave of people blocked the traffic. Drivers smoked cigarettes through cracked windows and sent text messages. Some honked and made a show of smiling, or held felt squares out the windows in support. Others tried not to make eye contact; they looked neutrally into their laps as people trailed their fingers and banners over the windshield.

Her mother had looked bloated in the coffin. Her cheeks were puffed like she'd just had dental work done. Someone had straightened her hair and sprayed it into stiff wisps. Kyle had put an arm around Shawna's shoulders and steered her away. It was only afterward that she became aware of a moaning coming from inside her body. It felt like when you're talking to someone as you fall asleep and you slowly realize that you're not making sense. You're stranded somewhere between being awake and asleep; the two worlds are rubbing together and what you're saying is a kind of static electricity. She couldn't keep the moan from coming out, and it turned into a high coyote whine.

She walked along with the crowd because it felt nice for her feet to be in tandem with a huge rhythm. The lonely feeling pulsed in her forehead like a headache, a separate, private beat.

It got dark but it stayed warm. Riot police stood elbow to elbow in every alley. They had straight faces and shields made of scratched Plexiglas. People turned and smiled at each other and raised their eyebrows and she did the same. There was a whisper about

tear gas lapping through the crowd. People were tying bandanas and t-shirts over their mouths and noses. She felt her eyeballs sting, and all at once tears blurred everything around her. She tightened her grip on the dog's leash and tried to shoulder her way out of the crowd. There were tears in her ears and on her neck; they were making the collar of her t-shirt damp.

In the loft her calves ached and her stomach felt like it had a high vaulted ceiling.

* * *

Lonnie got Kyle a job with him at Composte Montréal. The nights were hot and Kyle borrowed one of Lonnie's sweatshirts with the sleeves cut out to wear to work. Sometimes the shirt would shift so far to one side that you could see a nipple. They came back at six in the morning with the stink of compost on them, full of rambunctious energy from the endorphins set free by the exertion of lifting the compost bins over their heads again and again, and from riding through the city at night on the back of a dumptruck. Shawna was always woken up by the bustle, their knapsacks hitting the kitchen floor. Then the snap of beer cans opening on the balcony below the loft as it was beginning to get light out. She would bend her knees and shift her hips until she could close the lip of her sleeping bag over her head. She would stay cocooned until she ran out of air in the suffocating, pitch black heat and had to stick her head back out into the noise.

* * *

A sinkhole opened in the middle of Ste. Catherine after a demo passed. Shawna saw footage of it on a plasma screen in the convenience store.

She had an empty margarine container in her knapsack that she'd found under Lonnie's sink. She filled it with water from the store bathroom. It couldn't hold its shape

with the water in it. She had to set it on the palm of one hand and pinch the rim. Even then water slopped over the side. She tilted her head towards the glass doors where the dog was sitting, waiting for her.

The guy behind the counter ran around and held the door open for her with an outstretched arm. He was a Filipino man with slicked black hair and a little spray of freckles near the corner of his eye. She had to pass close to his chest to get through the door and she breathed in the smell of his cologne and his sweat.

He smelled like a man. The way her uncles, her mother's brothers, smelled. They had each hugged her in front of the cork board of photographs of her mother. Someone had tied a purple bow around the corner of the cork board and propped it on an easel. Her mother's graduation photo, her mother and brother in the hospital just after she'd been born, the three of them in the backyard the day they got Nanaimo. The Filipino man smelled nothing like her brother.

She sat on the step of the gas station and watched the dog lap up the water.

Somatic Nervous System Components: Spinal Nerves, Cranial Nerves, Association Nerves. Sometimes Cold & Alone, Sloppy Coors Light *Again*, Spattered Car Autopsy, Selfish Cunt Suicide.

She walked to the sinkhole. She and Nanaimo stood at the edge of the chain link. The road had crumbled into itself and left a muddy mouth in the middle of a main thoroughfare.

* * *

Shawna woke up thirsty and needing to pee. She and Kyle slept side by side with their clothes on in the loft. She had to crawl, feeling for the edge of the floor and then the

top of the ladder. During the day, light came in between the boards of the walls but at night it was completely black in the tight space. A dense, still heat got trapped between the mattress and ceiling. Making her way down the ladder, she remembered Chris Kennedy, a little kid she had been tutoring in math before they left Newfoundland. She breathed in deeply when she got out of the claustrophobic space. The sky was navy, with long clouds rushing across it. Chris Kennedy had blond hair shaved almost clean to the scalp and big blue eyes. Sometimes he would grind his teeth together and threaten to crack his pencil in two when he was frustrated. He would put his thumbs together on the center of the pencil and push upwards until she said his name sharply and then he would lay the pencil down. He had short pudgy limbs and sometimes Shawna wanted to hug him into her chest and put her cheek on his prickly scalp but he was a tiny bit too grown-up for that. Shawna couldn't remember what day of the month it was but probably he'd done his math final already.

Kyle had met with her principal and a grief counsellor while she sat out in the hall. They postponed her exams until the fall. When Kyle told her the tests were moved, she felt everything she knew begin to seep out of her. Stuff about math formulas, the names of parts of the body and facts about leaders of different countries all started slipping away like a nosebleed. She left her school books in Newfoundland.

* * *

One night she and Kyle took Nanaimo out together. He and Lonnie had been drinking in the backyard.

"Take the dog out with me," Shawna said.

"Let me finish this beer."

“I’m leaving now.”

Her brother put the can down. Lonnie shrugged at him. People were coming out on their balconies and beating pots with wooden spoons. It made a tinkling noise somewhere between wind chimes and the sound of a waitress dropping a dishpan. There was a girl with a thick blond braid and a set of crutches leaning in a doorway. She was wearing sweat pants with the band rolled down so you could see the hot pink elastic of her underwear against her tanned pelvic bones. She tapped a pot lid against a wooden crutch.

They came across some people singing from sheet music in front of a café. The wind hit their photocopies. The papers billowed between people’s hands till they were about to rip down the centre. The song was in French. The wind relented for a moment and the sheets shivered. They stood at the edge of the group and she leaned against her brother. He put an arm around her and rubbed her back.

“I can’t get warm, ” she told him.

“It was so hot in the day, maybe you have sunstroke. ”

“We could inherit it.”

“It’s not like that, it’s a combination of things. A shitty life wears you down.

That’s why we’re here. In a city where there’s stuff going on. Let’s not get bogged down in that stuff.”

“And maybe we’re more susceptible.”

There were about twenty people walking in twos down the road, banging pots over their heads. A young man was in front, marching backwards facing the parade and

chanting through a megaphone at the small crowd. He had dreads tied in a ponytail with a red rag; he waved at Shawna and Kyle as he passed them and they each lifted a hand. The crowd whooped and banged their pots furiously in response.

“Shawna, come on. We’ll take the metro downtown. Do you still want to buy a bike? Want to look at bikes? ”

“I have tests to write.”

“We’re going to figure that stuff out. All the school stuff will work itself out.”

* * *

They took Lonnie’s camping stuff and went to New Hampshire. She and Kyle and Lonnie and a girl from Kyle’s work named Wendy. They left Lonnie’s at six in the morning to pick her up. Wendy was standing in front of her apartment with a plastic bag of food and a sleeping bag at her ankles.

Wendy got in the back seat and opened the chips even though it wasn’t even eight in the morning yet. The sky still had a hint of pink. They were All Dressed Ripple chips and everyone’s fingers got covered in rust coloured dust. The dog slept with its head in Shawna’s lap. It drooled on her cutoffs.

They spent the day looping around on small highways, driving through little towns and farmland. They stopped at gas stations that sold fully automatic rifles and had taxidermied animals mounted on the walls. Lonnie was talking about the protests.

“They corral people like cattle. They close in on a chunk of the crowd with their shields and just arrest them all. You know Timmy? Who was over the other night? He got knocked out with a billy club. He was completely unconscious in the road.”

Kyle was nodding,

“Have you seen that video of the cops tipping over all the tables on that bar patio? Just going nuts with pepper spray on people, who are like sitting down drinking beer?”

“Oh yeah, that was fucked,” Lonnie said. “Margaret - the girl who was in the yard with me and Kelly the other day? She was there for that. She said it was fucked.”

“Do they sell beer in convenience stores here?” Kyle asked.

The campsite was in a valley between two mountains. The seasons rolled back on themselves as they drove down into it. The air cooled and there were fewer and fewer leaves on the trees. Kyle put the windows up. A navy blue shadow slipped down the snowcapped mountains as the sun set.

It was dark when they got the tents unraveled. They’d spent too long in the supermarket. You could get thirty beer for sixteen bucks. Jell-O trays in the shape of the American flag. Marshmallows as big as your fist. The Mountain Dew was caffeinated. They stood in the chill of the beer cooler and Lonnie said, “Live free or die, baby.”

On the highway they’d seen apple trees in blossom but here the ground was covered in crunchy leaves. She and Wendy set up the tent in the headlights while Lonnie made a fire. Her brother sat by himself at a picnic table drinking a beer.

“Getting started are ya, Kyle?” Wendy called out. She turned towards Shawna but her headlamp shone right in Shawna’s eyes and she had to look away.

“This beer is like water,” Kyle answered from the dark.

“That’s why it’s so cheap, it’s like two percent, I bet,” Lonnie said, tucking a twisted knot of newspaper in under a pile of sticks.

* * *

Their mother took the car like that all the time. She had run the side of it along a signpost just outside their house. It was hot and they had the windows in the front of the house open. Shawna and Kyle heard the screeching grind of metal on metal and ran out on to the front step. Their mother had the car door flung open and was untangling herself from the seatbelt holding a little purse against her breasts.

“I’m shook up, Kyle. You’re going to have to park for me,” she called into the road.

She twisted the keys out of the ignition and held them out to him, but she sat in the driver’s seat with her legs in the street until he came around and helped her out. When Kyle brought her inside the smell of beer on her was like the stink of a wet dog.

* * *

The ground around the fire glittered with crunched beer cans. Wendy and Kyle had been inching toward each other and now their shoulders were touching. There was no wind in Franconia Notch. Lonnie rolled a joint in his lap. He shredded the weed on some cardboard from the wiener package. Even in the dark the mountains were blue. Shawna could feel the heat of the fire through the rubber soles of her sneakers.

“You’re going to burn your shoes, Shawna,” her brother said. Wendy had her hand on her brother’s thigh and his hand was covering hers.

“I’m going to pee.” Shawna got up. The woods were sparse. She had to walk a ways to find a tree big enough to hide her. She took her shorts down and swivelled them around an ankle. She rocked and had to put a palm against the ground to steady herself. It felt very firm and very cold. She leapt up and pee trickled down her leg and on to her

sock. She tried to pull her shorts up but her hands were shaking. Her sock was warm and wet.

Lonnie was by himself at the fire, gently poking a stick up through a piece of white bread. He was holding the open bread bag between his skinny knees. He paused with the bread halfway impaled to take a sip of beer.

“They went for a walk. I’m making toast.”

She sat down and Lonnie slapped a hand on her knee.

“Will I roll another joint?”

“I’m going to sleep.” She jerked her leg out from under his heavy fingers. She felt completely sober.

She flung her wet socks out of the tent. She could feel all the pebbles and sticks and the cold damp of the ground through her sleeping bag. She thought about her bed at home. She and Kyle had stripped their beds and thrown all their blankets in the back of the car for the dog when they left. She thought about her schoolbooks, locked in the empty house.

In the morning she woke up stiff and unzipped the tent. The smell of wood smoke was caught in her hair. No one else was up. She sat at the picnic table and watched the sun inch its way down the sides of the two strange mountains that cradled her.

The Hypnotist

Ashley was twenty-six and living in her mother's basement when her uncle Rob got her an interview for a pharmaceutical representative job. She wasn't qualified for it but he'd pulled strings. The interview was at a restaurant with wine glasses and cloth napkins. The man who interviewed her was already there when she arrived. A hostess showed her to his table by the window. He was probably in his early thirties. He was wearing a white shirt with thin blue lines and a tie. His hair was gelled.

"Ashley, hi. I'm Martin Dove, nice to meet you." He held out his hand and she could tell that this was the kind of job where they expected you to be well-manicured and charming.

Her uncle Rob had given her a package of pamphlets to review for the meeting. The drug was an early treatment for uterine fibrosis. She had googled uterine fibrosis. She looked at pictures of hard white keloids on the soft red of the uterine wall. She read most of the Wikipedia page on uterine fibrosis and skimmed the pamphlets. It wasn't clear how much she was expected to know for the interview.

The waitress came over with menus. Martin Dove asked for a coffee, so Ashley ordered one too.

"I'm going to be up front with you, you're not really qualified for this job. I'm doing this as a favour to your uncle who helped me out when I was starting. If you blow my socks off the job is yours but you're up against people with experience in the field."

"Okay," Ashley said.

"Let's take a minute to look at the menu before we begin," Martin Dove said.

Everything on the menu was forty or fifty dollars.

“I’m definitely going to try an appetizer,” he said. “What about you?”

She wondered if he’d had his teeth bleached.

“It all looks pretty heavy, I think I’ll skip it.” She tried to sound upbeat.

“So you approach the doctor and ask him or her if they have a moment, if they say yes, you do a seven minute pitch, if they say they’re too busy offer to walk with them, take the elevator with them, if they agree to that you do a two and half minute pitch. I’m going to do both for you and then I’ll let you give it a try. Your uncle said he passed along the pamphlets?”

Ashley took the pamphlets out of her purse and laid them on the table. Martin Dove took out his cell phone and turned on the timer.

They were there for three hours. The only other customer was an old man who ordered a steak and read a woodworking magazine. He sat behind the man interviewing her and she could tell he was eavesdropping.

Ashley couldn’t get the spiel out fast enough. When she did finish before the timer she missed information or got the facts wrong. The more she stumbled over her words the more flustered she became. The steak man had left and the waitress had taken their dishes and kept passive aggressively offering them more coffee. It reminded her of when her father tried to teach her to drive a standard. She got stuck at the top of a gentle hill with a car behind her. The clutch screamed every time she tried to change into second gear and the car slid a little closer to the vehicle behind her while the driver laid on the horn. Eventually her father wrenched the handbrake up and they ran around outside the car,

switching seats. When he got behind the wheel, the car flew silently up the hill and she hated herself.

“It’s not easy,” Martin Dove told her. She had the feeling he was hitting on her but he smiled so warmly at the waitress that it was hard to tell. “Okay, the two things you need to work on are being confident and being concise. I’m just going to run to the washroom, you read through the material and you can give it another go when I get back.”

Ashley was tempted to leave before he got back. The waitress dumped the ice tray into the sink at the end of the bar. The two young women made eye contact as the sound of the ice cubes crashing into stainless steel bounced around the almost empty room. Martin Dove came back from the washroom and waited at the bar for the waitress to turn around. She was startled by him and dropped the empty tray on the floor.

“We’re not keeping you are we?” Martin stooped and picked up the tray.

“Take your time.”

“Do you close before dinner?” He had his elbow on the counter and he was leaning towards her.

“Take your time,” the girl said, settling the ice tray back into the top of the cooler.

“You’re lucky you didn’t get that job,” her mother said. “It would be lots of money but it’s not right, those drug companies just want to make money.”

“Everyone just wants to make money. Any job I have is going to be to make money,” Ashley said.

“What about going to CONA for cooking, remember when you were talking about that?”

“That was like two years ago.”

“What’s for dinner?” Ashley’s sister, Becky had come up from the basement.

Ashley’s phone buzzed on the kitchen table. It was an email from Martin Dove.

“I got an email from the pharmaceutical company,” Ashley said.

“They want you now?” her mother asked.

Becky opened the fridge.

Hi Ashley,

I hope this isn’t too forward.

I’d like to take you to a non-work related dinner.

Best,

Martin

“He’s asking me out.”

“Who?” her mother asked. “I’m not making dinner, your father’s going to be at work late tonight. There’s a can of chicken noodle soup there if you want.”

“The man who interviewed me, he was really handsome.”

“Oh, for Jesus sake. No. Do you see what happened? He wanted to ask you out so he gave the job to someone else.”

“No, he was really nice, I did a terrible job, seriously, I was tripping all over my words.”

“Don’t date that man Ashley, do you hear me? He fucked you over,” their mother said.

“Mom, he didn’t. I was bad at it and I wasn’t qualified. There were more qualified candidates.”

“According to who, Ashley?”

“He sounds like a sleazebag to me,” Becky said.

“Nobody asked your opinion, it’s none of your business.”

“Where’s the can opener?” Becky asked, holding up the tin of soup. “Is this the add water kind?”

“Read the label, you moron,” Ashley said.

“I thought you were smarter than this, Ashley,” their mother said.

“Also the rabbit stinks, you need to clean the cage.” Ashley put her mug in the dishwasher.

Kevin, one of Becky’s ex-boyfriends, had bought her a rabbit for Valentine’s Day. It had been living in a cage in the furnace room for a year and half. The furnace room didn’t have a door and you could smell the rabbit’s piss and shit in the downstairs hallway. It was mean, it bared its big teeth if you put your hand out. If Becky forgot to clean the cage, you could smell it through the whole house.

They went to a different restaurant downtown. Martin ordered white wine and the waitress brought a vase filled with ice for the bottle to sit in.

“I bought us tickets to a show after dinner. But we don’t have to go, only if you feel like it.” He lifted the wine out of the vase and topped up her glass even though she’d

only had single mouthful. The sides of the bottle glistened with melted ice. “It’s Reveen, have you heard of him?”

“He’s a singer?” Ashley took a breadstick out of a bowl in the center of the table and swirled it in a little dish of vinegar.

“He’s a hypnotist, it’s a little hokey but I thought it’d be fun. No pressure, honestly.”

“I’ll go.”

“This guy is world famous. He’s on a world tour right now but he loves Newfoundland. This is actually the son of the original Reveen, the original Reveen died. I’ve never seen his son but I’ve heard he’s good. Do you know what you want?” Martin closed his leather-bound menu and laid on the edge of the table.

“Do you have to be hypnotized?” She laid her menu on top of his.

“He chooses volunteers from the audience. People volunteer, you don’t have to do it if you don’t want to. I’ve been twice and both times I said I was going to do it and chickened out at the last minute.”

“What does he make people do?”

“Oh you’ll see, it’s very funny.”

Halfway through her shellfish pasta, she went to the bathroom. Partly just to see what the bathroom was like. She texted Becky and told her about the hypnotist while she was peeing.

Omg lame, he sounds so weird!

Ashley pressed the button on top of her phone and made the screen turn black. Becky hadn't dated anyone in almost a year. A couple of weeks ago Kevin showed up at four in the morning on Wednesday, drunk out of his mind and fucked on coke. He and Becky had broken up months before. He rang the doorbell three times, then went around back and punched a hole in the low, little window to Becky's basement bedroom. Their father called the cops. The red and blue lights swung around, drenching the white house in colour and then swooping away. The whole family watched through the living room window as the cop led Kevin away from the side of the house with blood running down his sleeve. When the cop left, their father went to bed and their mother made a pot of Sleepytime tea.

"What a fucking moron," Ashley said when they were all gathered at one end of the kitchen table with their mugs.

"Maybe we shouldn't have called the cops. Now he has a record." Becky's eyes were swollen.

"We had to call the police, Becky, he could have been trying to hurt you for all we know," their mother said. "You know what else, that fucking rabbit has to go. I'm not having it in my house. It can go to the SPCA."

"I'm going to clean the cage tomorrow, dad took me to get hay yesterday," Becky said.

"You should sleep on the couch, your bedroom will be freezing with the window busted."

They got a cab to the Arts and Culture Center and Martin paid for it. After he got his change he handed the cabby a five-dollar bill as a tip. Ashley hadn't been to the Arts

and Culture Center since the sixth grade when her whole school had gone to see “Alice in Wonderland: The Musical.” She had fallen asleep before the end of the play but she loved the costumes. The girl who played Alice had yellow blonde hair that went all the way to her ankles. Remembering the play on the night she went to see the hypnotist, Ashley realized for the first time that it must have been a wig.

The lobby was packed. They waited in a long line to get to a counter where Martin said his name and a middle-aged woman handed him two tickets.

“Thank you so much. I have to say that’s a beautiful brooch,” Martin told the woman.

“You like it?” The woman looked down at the brooch, smiling so that her teeth were showing. “My daughter gave me that four years ago.”

“It’s beautiful.” Martin waved the tickets at her. “Thank you, very crowded here tonight, you’re doing a great job.”

Ashley felt a hand on her arm. It was her aunt Tracey and Uncle Gord. They were both holding pamphlets with “Reveen, The New Generation” printed above the face of a man in a black suit with sequins sewn on the lapels.

“Ashley, who’s this handsome young man you’re with? I don’t think we’ve been introduced.”

Martin smiled as though Ashley’s aunt was being very funny.

“This is Martin,” Ashley told her relatives. She found she was proud to introduce him, to be seen with him.

“So you’re fans of Reveen?” her uncle asked. “Myself and Tracey go see him every time he’s here.”

“I’ve been three times, my father loves the show,” Martin said.

“Now, I don’t know if he’s going to be able to do what his father did, his father knew how to work a crowd, he was a very funny man.” Uncle Gord was talking and Aunt Tracy was nodding.

“That’s what everyone’s here to find out,” Martin said. Tracey found herself nodding.

They faced the stage, side-stepping along the aisle to their seats. When they were settled in the dark with their pamphlets on their laps, Martin leaned close to her ear.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you, you look very pretty tonight.” His lips were touching her hair. She could see the bald spot on the back of Uncle Gord’s head two rows in front of them.

“Thank you.” She could count on one hand the number of times she’d been called pretty since puberty. Men were always telling her she had a great ass and her friends always complimented her hair but Becky was prettier. Becky had a nose so tiny and delicate it looked like it had been sculpted out of marzipan. Becky had a job at Sport Check where she made commission. Ashley hadn’t worked since she got fired from Jungle Jim’s two months ago for missing a lunch shift. She’d been exhausted from working the night before and she slept in. The manager was this new, young guy. Her friend Lorraine still worked there. Lorraine said he hired his girlfriend as a server that same week.

When the lights went down she laid her hand on the armrest, hoping he would take it. The hypnotist stood on a stage lined with chairs. He explained that not everyone was susceptible to hypnosis.

“This is an opportunity to find your inner performer, to showcase talents you may not even know you have,” the hypnotist told the audience, gesturing to the empty chairs.

“Do you want to go? You should go if you want to,” she whispered to Martin.

“I want to be with you.” He took her hand and a jolt traveled through it straight to her crotch. A man next to them jumped up and they had to stand to let him pass on his way to the stage.

“No one will be humiliated in this show. This is clean, family entertainment.” The hypnotist waved people up with wide sweeps of his arm.

“You are now entering a state of deep relaxation. I want you to imagine there is a helium balloon tied to your finger, gently tugging on your index finger.” The son of Reveen was speaking into a microphone. Fifteen volunteers were seated in a semi-circle with their eyes closed.

“Here we go.” Martin squeezed her hand.

Ashley watched as the volunteers’ index fingers wiggled, then rose slowly until they were pointing at the ceiling. Their faces were expressionless. Their arms were completely straightened out. Martin was leaning forward in his seat at an awkward angle to see over the shoulder of a tall man in front of him. Ashley looked to the right to see how the woman next to her was reacting and saw her own finger pointed straight up, level with her ear. She took her hand down and stuck it in her pocket. Everyone around her was watching the stage; no one had seen.

The hypnotist had the volunteers do a conga line around the stage. People were laughing hysterically all around her. She angled her phone so the light mostly shone into the seat to check the time with one hand. They had already been there for almost two hours. Martin was completely engrossed. Her other hand was sweating inside of his but she didn't move it. She could make out Uncle Gord's outline ahead of them; he was shaking with laughter. She shifted her hips back and forth, working the stiffness out of her lower back.

In the lobby after the show, the wine buzz had worn off and left her tired. They waited for their cab in the concrete tunnel that enclosed the doors to the lobby. People were pouring down the steps around them. A man with a camera and a large microphone was interviewing members of the audience for an ad that would be posted on the Reveen website. Uncle Gord was gesticulating into the camera and Aunt Tracy was nodding along.

"Does Danazil work?" Ashley asked Martin.

"You saw the numbers." He said it curtly. She had never seen him be cold before but found she wasn't surprised by it.

"I mean, do you think it's better than other drugs? Do you think it's the best choice?" If there was a nasty side of him she wanted it to worm its way to the surface.

"Everything has side effects. I think that's our cab." Just as he said it a teenager in a bubble gum pink rain jacket ran out of the lobby. The girl held the cab door open for her slow-moving mother.

"Would you take it? If you weren't a guy? Would you have your mom take it?"

“I don’t want to talk about my work right now.” He sounded like a teacher telling his class to be quiet.

She looked at her house as the cab pulled up to it. Her parents would be in bed. Her sister was probably watching TV in the living room wrapped in a comforter. The rabbit would be grunting and snuffling its way around the cage in the lonely furnace room.

She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek.

“We’ll go for dinner again?” She was already half out of the cab.

“Sure,” she said in a way that let him know she didn’t mean it.

A couple of nights later, her mother called her into the living room. Becky was curled on the couch next to her with a mug of Pepsi and a side plate with chicken fingers. There was a bright splotch of ketchup on the plate.

“That’s the one you went to see isn’t it?”

The hypnotist was standing behind a woman in a furry leopard print jacket and leopard print hat. She wore Elton John sunglasses with see-through rims.

“That’s the wife, see they’re donating his suit.” Her mother pointed at the TV.

“He loved Newfoundland, we have so many great memories of our time here,” Reveen’s wife was saying. Ashley was surprised that she had a British accent. Reveen’s wife put a hand under one of the wide lenses to wipe a tear away.

“That’s the mother of the guy I saw, “ Ashley said, “the guy behind her, the son of Reveen.”

She didn’t remember the hypnotist having an accent. He was standing behind his mother nodding along to her speech. When his mother finished talking, the hypnotist

pulled a black sheet off a glass case. The torso of a mannequin filled the chest of the red tuxedo but the legs and arms hung empty. This suit was much more elegant than what the hypnotist had been wearing when she saw him perform.

“We should go see the suit,” Ashley said. “It’s free to go see it, it’s just there in the lobby.”

The news moved on to a story about drug dogs finding marijuana in a locker at Brother Rice Junior High.

“We just saw it,” her mother said.

Meeting Mallory

Melissa's first modelling job was with Emerald Basics, a chain store that did window advertisements featuring local girls for each of their locations. Melissa was sixteen. She modelled a back-to-school look. She had a knapsack slung over one shoulder in the photograph; it was blown up larger than life. All her relatives called to tell her they'd seen it at the mall and she looked beautiful. When the company asked if she'd be interested in doing a national campaign, her mother hosted a barbecue for her family to celebrate. After she'd written her final high school exams, the company flew her to Montreal and rented her a hotel room for two weeks.

The hotel was surrounded by box stores. She drew back the screechy blinds to reveal a view of skinny sidewalks and massive parking lots. Her mother told her to get taxis to the photo shoots, but she crossed the highway and bought a toothbrush at Walmart so she could ask the cashier how to get the bus to the subway.

She met Mallory at the photo shoot. Mallory's hair and eyebrows were bleached white. She was three years older than Melissa. Her eyes were very green.

"That was a hard shoot," Melissa said. "Do you think?"

"Worth it, though. Emerald Basics pays pretty well and if they like you they'll ask you back," Mallory said. "What're you doing now?"

When the girls got outside it was nighttime. Melissa felt like she had just come out of an afternoon movie to find it dark outside. Mallory bought them each a flask of vodka; she got ID'd at the cash. Melissa stood sheepishly at her side.

“I know a party we can go to but it won’t start for a while,” Mallory said. “Do you want to drink in the park for a bit?”

They sat at a picnic table and watched people jog around a man-made lake. A few feet away from them a group of boys in denim vests were drinking from tall cans. They kept calling to the girls, inviting them over.

“Should we sit with them? They might give us beer,” Mallory said.

“No.” Melissa felt embarrassed by how quickly and vehemently she answered.

“Unless you want to.”

“Nah. ” Mallory dropped her empty flask into a metal garbage bin nestled against the picnic table. “Let’s go to the party.”

Mallory took her to an apartment people rented for after-parties. A guy in a grey hoody and skinny jeans with a cashbox sat inside the front door.

“Twenty bucks. If you leave you probably won’t get back in.” Even in the porch the music was deafening. Melissa had sixty dollars in cash in her small hemp wallet. Mallory’s was made of shiny black pleather; it looked more grown up.

There was no furniture except for a kitchen table where the DJ was set up. The windows had garbage bags duct-taped over them. Mallory was still wearing her make-up from the shoot, bright pink lipstick and shimmering blush. Jackets were piled in a room in the front of the apartment. People were passed out on them.

“That’s my friend Laura.” Mallory dropped her coat on a girl in a bikini top and acid-washed jean shorts. “Keep your wallet on you.”

People were doing coke off the kitchen counter. Everyone knew Mallory. They touched her hair and praised her lipstick. As soon as she introduced Melissa to anyone,

they hugged her and offered her a drink. Melissa felt her phone vibrating in her pocket.

She knew her mother was calling to ask about the shoot, but she ignored it.

“Let’s pee before it’s too late.” Mallory took her hand and led her into a hallway. They both swallowed a pinch of MDMA inside a scrap of twisted up toilet paper. It was only the third time she’d done it but she didn’t hesitate when Mallory lifted the little white bundle to her lips. Waves of people kept arriving and space was shrinking. To move through a room you had to wriggle through the crowd.

The next morning she woke up on a mattress on the floor in Mallory’s apartment. She was still dressed. Her book bag was on the floor next to her and when she unzipped the front pouch she saw her wallet was there.

She went to the kitchen and drank from the tap. There were thirteen texts from her mother but she was too hungover to answer. The door to Mallory’s bedroom was open.

“Mallory?” She leaned in close and spoke quietly. “Mallory? I’m going to go.”

Mallory opened her eyes but kept her head flat on the pillow. Pink lipstick was smeared across her cheek.

“What time is it?”

“It’s really early, thanks for having me.”

“Don’t go, I hate being alone when I’m hungover. I’ll get up.” Mallory lifted the blanket. She was wearing a baggy t-shirt and underwear. “Let’s just lie down for another minute.”

“He’s a performance artist, but he makes money as a cam boy and he does some domination stuff for like lawyers and business men. He gets up early.” They were going to visit a friend of Mallory’s to get pot to numb their hangovers.

“Like what?” Melissa asked. They were on the platform waiting for the metro to pull up.

“He has one client who pretends to be his footstool. Ken just gets naked and puts his feet up on the guy for an hour and watches movies on his laptop.”

This seemed unbelievable to Melissa, but she didn’t say anything.

“Ken is like the sweetest person ever. When I had the flu he made me chicken soup, like from scratch. He used the broth of a chicken he cooked himself. He’s so well rounded.”

“I don’t eat meat,” Melissa said.

“I don’t either anymore actually.”

Ken had a loft in an office building.

“He’s not really allowed to be living here, it’s technically his studio,” Mallory told Melissa in the elevator up to Ken’s apartment.

When they got inside, Mallory said “Melissa was just asking me what kind of domination stuff you do.” Melissa blushed and felt betrayed.

Ken held his hand for her to shake. One wall was a floor-to-ceiling window looking at the parking lot of a chandelier warehouse. The walls were all bare and white, the room full of natural light. There was a clothing rack and a stand with dumbbells, and a bed with a video camera on a short tripod in one corner. There was a kitchen area in the center.

“I’m going to make you guys espressos.” Ken was wearing tight jeans and a loose silky shirt with images of lassos and belt buckles on it. “I had to sneak the stove up here at three in the morning. Luckily the elevator is really wide. The only downside is no shower.”

“What will happen if they find out you’re living here?” Melissa asked.

“I guess I’ll get evicted. I don’t know, maybe they’ll charge me. I feel like they’ll never find out.”

“They could be watching the security cameras,” Mallory said. “I mean someone probably watches the cameras.”

“Maybe they don’t care as long as I’m paying rent. I mean the location isn’t great. There are definitely empty spaces in this building.”

“Maybe they only look at the tapes if they have a reason to. Like a break-in or something,” Melissa said.

“When did you get an espresso machine?” Mallory sat on the edge of the bed.

“It was a gift.”

Melissa and Mallory walked to the metro station. Melissa could feel the tightness of sunburn surfacing on her cheeks.

“I need to figure out how to get back to the motel from here,” Melissa said when they arrived.

“Why don’t you just come stay at my place? There’s a mattress in the spare room.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Stay with me. We’ll get coffees in the morning.”

When they went through the turnstiles, they bought two-dollar slices of cheese pizza.

“I don’t want to go home,” Melissa said. She was holding the greasy paper plate in her lap.

“Don’t. Move in with me. You can live in my closet room for like a hundred and fifty bucks a month. Ken did for a while.”

A woman’s voice said the name of each metro station over a loudspeaker as they pulled into it. Melissa used the names to trace the path they were making across the backlit map on the wall of the train. She tried to memorize the pronunciation of each one.

Mallory set her up in the closet room before going to bed. The room was just wide enough for a mattress. The only other furniture was a lamp with fat plastic jewels and brass flowers. Melissa plugged the brown cord into the wall and clicked the lamp on. There was no shade and the light from the bare bulb made her reflection appear in the window.

Melissa’s parents picked her up at the airport.

“I want to move to Montreal,” Melissa said to her mother as they stood waiting for her bags to pass by on the conveyor belt.

“That’s something to think about.”

“I already thought about it.” Melissa saw her bag coming and lifted it off the belt.

Her brother, Ethan, was fourteen. His cheeks were still pudgy and babyish, but the bones beneath them were rearranging themselves. You could tell his adult face was about to be revealed. Melissa knew Ethan had the thing people found beautiful about her. Sharp cheekbones and full lips.

Ethan's friend's cat had kittens and he wanted one. Their parents had said no but he came home on the bus with two kittens in his jacket the night Melissa got back from Montreal.

"You know they'll have to be neutered. It's going to cost at least two hundred bucks each," Melissa said at the dinner table.

"I don't like you eating like that, you're too thin," her mother said. Melissa had made herself a smoothie with hemp hearts and powdered protein; she was eating it out of a glass with a spoon. Everyone else was having Shake n' Bake chicken and roasted potatoes that her mother had prepared.

"This is healthy. It has protein. It's a balanced meal."

"Ethan, you're going to be paying to have those cats neutered," their father said. The cats were sleeping on dishtowels in a shoebox on the kitchen floor.

"There's such a thing as too thin," their mother said. "We'll pay to have one of them done. Bring the other one back or get two hundred dollars together."

"I think what Melissa needs to be thinking about right now is university," their father said. He was at the stove lifting another chicken thigh onto his plate with the spatula. "You need a long-term plan, this modelling stuff isn't going to be an option in five or ten years."

"I know." Melissa got up and lifted a kitten out of the shoebox. "Was this cat old enough to be taken from its mother? If they're too young when you take them they won't be litter-trained."

The kitten swung its paw and hooked a tiny claw into her lip. When it pulled its

paw away a fat drop of blood sprang from the pinprick and rolled down her chin. She held her cuff against her lip.

“Just think about what your interests are is all your father is saying, the modelling is fine for now.” Her mother squeezed a puddle of ketchup on to her plate. “Why don’t you at least have a few potatoes?”

“I’m moving up there, I have enough money.”

That summer there were bursts of money when one of them got a modelling gig and they lived extravagantly until they were suddenly broke. They all but shared a bank account. They bought each other’s weed and groceries and drinks at the bar. When they were out of money, they worked, but as little as possible. Mallory did three-hour shifts handing out samples at the liquor store. Melissa worked two days a week at the dollar store around the corner from their house.

It was hot. They smoked weed and went swimming. When they had money, they went to a hotel on Ste. Catherine. They rode the air-conditioned elevator to the pool on the roof. Pool attendants sweating in suit jackets would drape clean towels over lounge chairs that overlooked the city when they stepped out of the pool.

When they didn’t have money they spent their afternoons in the shallow end of Jarry Parc pool. They watched people hula-hooping in the scabby grass outside the chain-link fence. They could see the picnic bench where they got drunk together for the first time. Melissa was always pointing this out to Mallory.

They held the edge of the pool, their backs facing the sun, feet lightly splashing on the surface. Mallory told Melissa about the sex she’d had the night before. Mallory and

Ken always stayed out later than Melissa. They brought guys home. The rhythmic knocking and moaning would wake her up and she felt like she'd never known anyone so well in her life.

Sometimes Melissa and Mallory got drunk in the morning.

"Hair of the dog," Mallory announced, pouring Jameson out of a twenty-sixer into matching Jungle Jim's mugs Melissa had found in a box of dishes on the sidewalk. They drank the liquor with flat ginger ale on the balcony. They watched their Greek neighbours pruning the lemon tree they'd planted in the small square lawn in front of their door.

There was a sale on frozen shrimp rings and they bought ten. When they got to the checkout, two stacks of shrimp rings and a miniature rosebush from the gardening section were the only things in their cart. It was eleven in the morning, and the cashier scrunched her face up when she smelled the alcohol on Melissa's breath.

"What a bitch," Mallory said, walking through the sliding doors into the morning with the rose bush in her arms. The tiny blossoms were getting tangled in her hair.

"I guess." Melissa was following her with a plastic bag of shrimp rings in each hand.

There were at least ten days that summer when the only thing they ate was a shrimp ring defrosted and shared on the balcony. There was a cup of marinara sauce in the center of each ring. They piled the slippery, shucked shells in a teacup.

Friends of Mallory's were always showing up in the middle of the night fucked out of their minds and looking for a place to sleep. Ken slept on their couch almost every night or the three of them shared the king size mattress on the floor of his loft.

Melissa had started going to free yoga classes in the basement of a church around the corner from the apartment. One morning she came back to Ken and Mallory doing lines of coke off the coffee table in the living room.

“Melissa!” Mallory jumped up off the living room floor, “We’ve been waiting for you. Do a line with us.”

“I’m all relaxed from yoga, I don’t want to do a line.” Melissa propped her yoga mat up in the corner of the living room.

“Miss Yogi over there.” The mirror from the bathroom was resting on the couch and Ken was parting his hair in it. “I wonder what Miss Yogi is going to do with twenty-five thousand dollars. Life time hot yoga membership?”

“We have something to tell you.” Mallory was giggling on her back on the living room floor kicking her legs in the air.

“You two are fucked.”

Ken was sleeping with a casting director who sometimes worked for *Vogue Italia* and he’d got the three of them a very big gig.

Melissa Skyped her parents.

“Melissa, you could buy a house with that money,” her mother said. One of the kittens was walking along the back of the couch behind her mother’s head. Its hips waggled from side to side.

“Which kitten is that?”

Her mother tilted her head to look at the cat.

“Pop-Tart. You need to think very seriously about what you’re going to do with that money. You should talk to your father. He’s at bowling. He’ll have good advice for you.”

Melissa could hear her brother trying to rap along to music in the background.

“Mallory and I are going on a trip.”

Melissa’s dress had a hard plastic shell sewn to its back. The shell was see-through with orange satin curled inside it. A stylist pulled a hood out of the shell where it met Melissa’s neck and snuggled it over the top of her head. The hairdresser stuck a cool metal comb into the hood and coaxed Melissa’s curls out around the edges of it.

“What do you think?” Both women stepped back to look at her. The hairdresser lifted her coffee off the work station behind her.

“I fucking love that hood. I want hooded everything now,” the hairdresser said.

“It’s working, what you did with the curls is really working,” the stylist said.

“Don’t tilt your head too much, the hood will slide down very easily and then we’ll have to get your hair done again.”

The set was framed by two glass walls that met to make a corner. They were slicked with emerald-green goo. Lights were playing on the walls to make it look like the set was underwater. The floor was covered in pink and baby blue gravel. There were eight-foot replicas of plastic aquarium plants in bright pink and light blue with silver sparkles.

“You’re captured sea goddesses,” the director told the girls as they walked on set.

“The designer was inspired by learning that ninety percent of the fish in tropical tanks are

not bred in captivity. You used to live in the wild and now you're cramped in this tank, you're depressed, lethargic, yearning for the ocean. Can you give me that?"

Melissa nodded gently, careful not to dislodge the hood. The other girls' dresses were meant to evoke fish; metal fins were attached to the curves of their waists and asses. They had pale blue lipstick and iridescent blush on their cheeks.

The girls couldn't cross the gravel in their heels so they were carried across in the arms of set managers and lighting techs. Melissa was last to go. The other six girls had to be locked into harnesses and lifted into the air.

She waited at the edge of the set. The shell was heavy; her back was aching from it. There were rough edges that chafed her bare shoulders. She thought about the money.

Mallory was the first fish to be jerked into the air.

"Bring her down a couple inches, I want her to interact with the plant," the photographer called from behind the camera. Mallory was lowered into the branches of a hot pink fern. She laid her cheek on a plastic leaf and relaxed her face. There were silver streaks in Mallory's dress that reflected the pink of the fern.

"I love that, perfect, disaffected, you've been wrenched from your wild, exciting life in the sea, I'm feeling it, arch your back a little to emphasize the fin," the director called to Mallory. Melissa felt herself flood with jealousy. Mallory twisted her body and the plastic fern shivered as though it was moving in a current of water.

"This is why I fought for real plants, we couldn't get this kind of interaction if we photoshopped them in afterwards." The photographer leaned into the director to tell him and then said to the room, "Okay let's get everyone else up there."

Once the other girls were all in the air the director told a lighting tech to carry Melissa to a rock at the edge of the tank. The lighting tech was a muscular Cuban man, shorter than Melissa. He hooked one arm under her knees and the other cradled her lower back. When he took a step the shell bounced and knocked her in the back of the head.

“Watch the shell,” the director snapped.

The man lowered her onto a three-foot-tall plastic rock with some small neon ferns sticking out of it.

“You need to communicate snail, let your body suction to the rock, make sure you’re selling the shell, I want the side of the shell to the camera for the whole shoot. Just imagine what it’s like to have that suction the whole length of your body.”

Once the girls were in position, a technician walked backwards with a rake, smoothing the stones. They took photographs for six hours. Melissa lay across the rock with her toes touching the gravel and her back arched for four hours; after the first forty-five minutes her calf muscles were quivering.

In the dressing room Mallory showed her two purple stripes across her rib cage where the harness had been digging into it.

When the money came through, Melissa paid off her credit card so she could buy a bus ticket online. She wanted to go on a trip that involved rainforests and swimming in lagoons but Mallory wanted to go to a city. They booked a 70s camper trailer in a junkyard in Brooklyn from Airbnb. It was connected to a warehouse that was some kind of communal artist space. The blurb asked that guests let the owners know if they were uncomfortable with nudity.

“I’m getting a plane ticket,” Mallory said. “First class, this is about living extravagantly. I thought we were pretending to be heiresses. You’re doing a terrible job.”

“Living extravagantly and wasting money aren’t the same thing. The bus will end up being faster if you think of all the time it takes to get to the airport and everything else.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to make me get drunk alone on an airplane.” Mallory threw a crocheted bikini top into her suitcase.

Melissa got stoned with Ken before she got on the bus.

“Do you get homesick?” Ken asked her.

“Not really, but I think about my little brother. The next time I see him he’s going to be a teenager.”

“You miss him?”

“I just want him to stay the same until I get back.”

The bus was cold and she had to point her knees into the aisle at an uncomfortable angle to avoid touching the girl in the window seat. At the border she remembered that the Airbnb guy had messaged her and said not to tell anyone in a position of authority the location of the junkyard. The security guards let muscular dogs with pointy noses run down the center aisle of the bus. She knew “Where will you be staying?” was a question they always asked. A male guard approached all the young, non-white men one by one and asked them to step into a cubicle. The guard had close-cropped blond hair and big muscles. He was gruff and showy about leading the men into the room. Outside the glass wall of the office the guards were hauling bags out of the bottom of the bus and flinging them on to the pavement. Dogs leapt into the underbelly of the bus. It was getting closer

and closer to her turn at the counter. She thought of Mallory drunk on the plane with a hot towel over her eyes. A security guard brought an Asian girl outside and made her stand in front of her duffle bag while a guard unzipped it on the pavement. The girl looked younger than Melissa. She kept her hands by her hips and anxiously curled and uncurled her fists as the dog buried its snout in her clothes. When Melissa was approaching the counter she decided to say she was staying at an Airbnb but couldn't remember the address. Let them send her back to Montreal. But the woman at the counter asked to see her passport and then told her she could get back on the bus.

Melissa had copied instructions off Google Maps on how to get the junkyard. She wrote them in tiny handwriting on the inside cover of the notebook she'd bought for the trip. As her bus pulled into the station, she texted Mallory to let her know she'd arrived. There was a security guard at the top of the escalator in a navy suit and a cap with a brim.

"Grey? Blue? Blue-grey?" he asked her. "I'm trying to figure out what color your eyes are. You're looking for the subway?"

Melissa showed him her tiny notes and he pointed her in the right direction. Before descending into the subway she checked her phone but there were still no messages from Mallory. It was possible her flight had been delayed. It was quarter after six in the morning when she walked out of the subway station into Times Square. It wasn't completely light out. She was nervous at the ATM.

She found Central Park. She bought an enormous coffee and sat in the grass watching very young boys play baseball and listening to the Brooklyn accent of the coach yelling at them. Her back was aching from dragging her duffle bag around; her armpits

were wet with cold sweat. She was there for an hour before Mallory texted her the directions to the junkyard.

When she got there, Mallory was drinking a mojito in the parking lot with a group of men, artists who used the garage as a workspace and a place to crash.

“How successful do you think those guys really are?” Melissa asked Mallory when they were alone in the camper that night. Mallory was on the bed above her. From their tiny window they could see the flare of a blowtorch severing hunks of metal for a sculpture.

“We should Google them when we find Wi-Fi.”

When she woke up Mallory wasn’t in the trailer.

“Mallory?” She could tell she was gone because when Mallory was in the bunk above her it sagged down several inches. The mattress almost touched her forehead if she lay on her back. Mallory had closed the screen door but left the inside one open. Anyone walking by could see Melissa sleeping in her tank top and underwear. She batted the door shut and put on a bra and jean shorts.

Mallory was sitting at a kitchen island in the center of the warehouse. She and a red-haired actor from the day before were both wearing towels and Mallory’s curls were tight and wet. They were hunched together over an Iphone.

“There you are!” Mallory said. As soon as Mallory looked up Melissa could tell she was high. “I was just telling Eric about you wondering if he was legit famous or not. He’s showing me his music video, it’s really great, come see.”

“I never said we were a huge deal or anything,” Eric said.

“I didn’t mean-” Melissa began.

She felt grateful when Mallory interrupted her. “Do you have any more weed? Melissa was on the bus all night yesterday, she needs weed and coffee.”

Eric pushed a small tin across the table at Melissa.

“You have to get a shower, the shower is so beautiful,” Mallory said.

“John built it himself, he knows plumbing and carpentry,” Eric said.

They walked across the junkyard to their trailer so Mallory could get dressed. A man in the street did a long low wolf whistle.

“You shouldn’t be out here in a towel, it’s dangerous, it’s stupid,” Melissa said.

“What are we going to do today?” Mallory asked.

“I want to walk around Chinatown.”

“Eric’s band is playing at a café down the street this afternoon, I kind of think we should go to that.”

“What? They suck. You hate that kind of music.”

“I want to make friends. You can go do lame touristy stuff. “

Melissa got lost in Chinatown when it was getting dark. She had bought a puppet of a dragon with a long paper tongue. It was made of velveteen and faux fur and covered in gems. Each of its legs and the center of its back were tied to a wooden cross that you jerked to make it dance. She bought it for her brother because it was about the size of the kittens. She walked a long block, not sure if she was going in the right direction, holding the dragon up in the breeze. It was much cooler than when she left the trailer, and she wished she hadn’t worn shorts. She recognized the fish market and narrow side street where she’d bought the dragon, but she couldn’t remember the order that she’d

encountered them. She texted Mallory. She was aware of how vulnerable and touristy she looked wandering back and forth with the puppet and not enough clothes on.

She bought a falafel for five dollars in a small restaurant with three tables. She placed her order and the guy working the cash put four falafel balls in the microwave. She laid her cell phone on the table, waiting for Mallory to respond. She ate the falafel as slowly as possible so she wouldn't have to leave. The man at the cash watched sports on a small TV behind the counter. People came to pick up takeout orders. The sun had completely set outside the restaurant but it wasn't a dark night.

She was looking up the street the junk yard was on with Google Maps on her phone when a text came through from an unknown number with a New York area code.

"This is Eric. Mallory is having her stomach pumped at New York Methodist Hospital, Prospect Park. I'm with her, but I have to go work."

The man at the counter wrote directions for Melissa on the cover of a takeout menu. When she got into the dark street and looked at the list of subway stations and street names she decided to take a cab. She stepped off the curb and lifted an arm; it was the first time she'd ever hailed a cab. She sat in the back with the dragon stretched out on its belly in her lap like a cat. The traffic made the ride painfully slow. People on bikes were passing them. She held her cell phone face-up in her palm in case Mallory texted.

"That fucking idiot, I didn't need my stomach pumped." Mallory was wearing a white paper gown. She looked pale and skinny and there was an IV in her arm.

"The nurse said you did. What happened? You were passed out and they brought you here?"

“The nurse said my pulse was critically slow. I feel fine, I would have been fine. How the fuck am I going to pay for this? I want to leave.” Mallory pinched the IV tube.

“Don’t. Jesus, get your money’s worth. Look what I got my brother.” She held up the dragon.

“We need to get out of here. The longer I’m here the more this will cost us,” Mallory said.

“Did they tell you how much it’s going to be? We can probably cover it between us.”

“I want to get out of here.”

Melissa waved a nurse into the room.

“My friend wants to be discharged.”

Melissa went out front to bum a cigarette while Mallory filled out some paperwork at the front desk. After the fluorescent lighting in the hospital, it seemed very dark outside. She moved down the street a little to stand under a streetlight.

A man left the hospital and walked towards her.

“Do you have a cigarette?” He had already passed her by the time she said it.

Melissa put her hands in her shorts pockets; she had goose bumps on her thighs. Someone was approaching from further down the street. As they got closer to the light she saw it was a short, chubby woman in a skirt.

“Do you have a cigarette?” Melissa asked quickly.

“I could use a cigarette myself.” The woman stopped and undid her satchel.

Melissa saw the woman had on a pair of kitten heels with a square toe meaning she was

even shorter than she seemed. When the woman found the cigarettes she stared into Melissa's face with a strange intensity.

"You're Melissa Coombs," the woman said. "Holy shit, I recognized you from the Emerald Basics ads at home. We went to elementary school together. My sister goes to school with your brother."

The woman's face was familiar but Melissa couldn't place her.

"Emily Furlong. It's okay, we haven't seen each other in ages. I recognized you from the ads at the mall." The woman held a cigarette out to her. Melissa could see eight-year-old Emily in the woman's face.

Melissa lit her cigarette and handed Emily her lighter. It was one Mallory had painted with nail polish on a lazy day on the balcony. The lighter made Melissa wish they had never left Montreal.

"I'm here with my boyfriend, my fiancé, we just got engaged. Are you living here?"

"I'm just visiting." Melissa willed the interaction to end; she didn't want to explain about Mallory having her stomach pumped.

"I'm going to be late if I don't get going, I'm meeting people for drinks. Are you here for a few days? I'll message you on Facebook. I'm pretty sure we're friends on Facebook."

"Great," Melissa answered.

That night she and Mallory slept together in the bottom bunk of the trailer. Mallory was behind Melissa with an arm wrapped around her stomach. Their legs were touching and a slick of their mixed sweat made their skin slippery. They spent the last

days of the trip together. They avoided the artists from the warehouse. Eric knocked on the door of the trailer one morning when they were getting dressed and they froze. Mallory put a finger over her lips and they waited for him to walk away. The hospital bill had eaten up more than half of Mallory's money, but there was lots left.

"Ken just texted me about a job in South Korea," Mallory told her.

"He's taking it? How long will he be gone?"

"He said he could probably get at least one of us in on it," Mallory said. "He's passing both our head shots along. "

"Holy shit. How long do you think that flight is?"

"He says he'll text us if he hears anything."

They ate in expensive restaurants and bought beautiful vintage dresses. They rode the sky train just to see Brooklyn from above. They Googled "trendy bars in Manhattan" and wore their new dresses to them. Emily never messaged her, but Melissa was afraid of running into her everywhere they went.

When Melissa got back to Montreal she dropped her bag off at the apartment and went to the Gadbois Community Center pool by herself. She watched a gangly Puerto Rican boy climb the ladder to the diving board. Outside the plate glass windows two highways looped around each other in the air carrying a steady stream of transport trucks through blue sky. A remixed reggae song was humming from the speakers. Two wet eyebrows raised up into a high forehead. One foot then the other on the mint-ice-cream-coloured plank. Two skinny elbows jerking in time to the music. 9 a.m. Summer light was splashing all over his wet curls and the surface of the pool. She decided to book a plane

ticket home. Two skinny shoulders swinging, head bobbing all along the length of the board. Then a graceful flop into the air between beats.

Her mother came to get her at the airport at four in the morning. Melissa unzipped her suitcase on the living room floor and took out a t-shirt to wear to bed. On her way to her bedroom she pushed her brother's door open. The kittens were curled together at the bottom of her brother's bed. They weren't really kittens anymore. Their middles had elongated but their legs were short and their heads were still tiny. She felt she'd made it home just in time.

Star of the Sea

Since they tore the Hall down, light poured through the back of the house in the morning. David could tell the time of day by where shadows fell on his walls and furniture. Looking out his window, he could see across the harbour to the Southside Hills. He could see a band of sky above them. He could see into the lot where the Star of the Sea had been. It was a pit probably twelve feet deep with a chain link fence around it. There were three bright yellow excavators in the pit.

His back windows had always been filled by the forest green clapboard. There had been a narrow strip between the Hall and his house where a few scrawny trees and a thicket of mile-a-minute grew. During events at the hall men wandered back there to piss. In the afternoon groups of teenagers with their knapsacks on the ground smoked in circles in the space between his house and the hall.

David managed a furniture store. His son Gavin worked three days a week and a muscular young man named Ron worked full time. Gavin and Ron did all the lifting. David organized the showroom and kept track of inventory; he did all the paperwork.

He'd been doing it for twenty-six years but it was still hard to predict what would draw people in, what would sell and what wouldn't. He found it was worth it to have one outrageous piece in the window, not because someone would buy it, because it would bring in the people who wanted something unique. Unique things were expensive. So he'd usually go with something very distinct and modern, some kind of futuristic recliner and some ol' standbys: a solid coloured sectional in a stylish colour and a floral couch. There were always people looking for light blue floral sofas.

A wrecking ball had taken the roof off. He'd watched them unfurling the chain link fence and fixing the bright plastic signs warning that the hall had become a construction site. They had hauled a lot of the inside out first and carted it away. The broken ceiling fell down through the floors and took the top of the walls with it. He hadn't seen the wrecking ball in action; he was at work when they knocked the roof in. He came home and saw through the window that the walls of the hall were jagged at the top and the roof was gone.

It was Gavin who told him Brenda was seeing another man. Brenda was a make up artist. Her friends were movie people and theatre people. They went out for drinks and to events where the men were expected to wear funky, collared shirts under nice sweaters. There were a lot of dinners and David hated eating out. It hadn't occurred to him that she might be seeing someone else.

"Mom's seeing this guy, Derek." Gavin paused, gauging his father's reaction. David tried to keep his face as neutral as possible. Gavin had come over for dinner after work. David made them tuna melts and they were eating them with knives and forks on the couch, watching CSI. The clock was ticking on the mantle above the couch.

"Me and Meghan might go skiing with him and Mom at White Hills this weekend." Gavin pressed on. "And I was wondering if you might be able to take care of Meghan's cat because her roommates are out of town."

"She'll bring over the litter box and everything? I mean, yes, I can do it." Up until this dinner he had believed that he and Brenda would get back together.

“Great, thanks.” Gavin cut a square off his soggy tuna melt. They had completely lost track of what was happening in CSI. DNA evidence was found on a plaid shirt and the significance of it was lost on the both them.

The light shining through the space where Star of the Sea used to be was bouncing off the white wall behind the television. It made their outlines appear on the screen, on top of the man holding the baggie with the shirt in it.

“Should I pull down the blind?” David asked.

“It’s not bothering me.”

He threw out the clock his mother had given them for a wedding present. It sat under a glass dome and had three gold balls that rotated with the ticking of the seconds.

The clock’s glass dome smashed against the floor when he dropped it in the empty garbage bag. Catherine’s cat was sleeping in the sun on the windowsill and sound of breaking glass startled it awake. He had to go looking for a box to put the sharp pieces in so the garbage man wouldn’t cut himself.

There were pictures of the ski trip on Facebook. Every member of David’s family was tagged in the album along with Derek Adams. Derek was young. He had all of his hair and it was dark and shiny. He had one of those angular, big-eyed, actor-faces. He was wearing some kind of government issued parka from the 70s in all the outdoor pictures.

There was a photo that Brenda must have taken of Derek and Gavin and Meghan drinking hot chocolate in the ski lodge. They all had red cheeks and damp hair. Derek was wearing an 80s sweatshirt with a design of three large pastel triangles on the chest.

Meghan was leaning in to hear what Derek was saying. David had lived through the eighties and that kind of sweater had been very unhip.

David thought about the day last summer that he and Gavin spent helping Meghan move house. David got one day a week off in the summer and it had been a rare hot day in a mostly grey, rainy month.

There was a set of crooked stairs leading up to Meghan's new place. David and Gavin had to stand the couch up on its arm and flip it completely over three times to get it to the top. Their T-shirts were wet under the armpits and down the center of their backs and chests. The couch was covered in matted cat hair, probably five cats' worth of hair. When they were taking the furniture out of the old apartment, girls in cut-off jean shorts kept walking by saying, "Don't let the cats out, the cats will try to get out." Nobody had leaned in to hear what he had to say with sweaty haired exuberance. Apparently he didn't inspire that the way Derek did.

For a whole weekend after the ceiling had been knocked down, a balcony remained attached to the back wall, reaching out over sea of rubble. One night some teenagers broke in, crawled through the rubble and set fireworks off on the balcony. The noise woke David up. He went downstairs and saw the roman candles spitting up over the ragged edges of the hall and sinking back into the remains. A final celebration. It occurred to him that he should call the fire department or the police. Instead he wore an afghan from the couch around his shoulders and drank a beer.

There were many fronts he'd failed on. He could have cleaned the place where the toilet met the floor more often. He could have made a bigger deal of her birthday. He could have gone to more things; the plays she worked on and the parties for them. He

could have responded more graciously when she sent him the video of a sixty-year old porn star explaining the ins and outs of orally pleasuring a woman.

Brenda was a friend of David's brother and he'd seen her around since they were teenagers. They didn't get to know each other until they were in their early thirties. A man had been walking through a parking lot with two dogs on leashes. A car swung into the parking lot and sped towards the dogs. The owner froze and screamed. Brenda stepped out in front of the car to save the dogs. The car slowed but not quickly enough and it rolled over her foot. The tire snapped two of her bones. David saw all this happen from the drive-thru line-up. A crowd gathered, coffee was slopped on the parking lot. He pulled into a parking place and offered her a ride to the Health Sciences even though he hardly knew her.

Brenda had to wear a cast for seven weeks and couldn't work. Two toes stuck out of the cast and she painted their nails to match the nails of the healthy foot. They had very careful sex two and three times a day while her foot was healing. He came over on his way to the furniture store and on his way home. She elevated the foot in the cast on the arm of the sofa and rested the other foot on the floor. He kneeled between her open thighs, held her in place by the hips and lapped until she dripped on the couch cushions. He'd never been with a woman who came all over the place like that before (this was partly why the video upset him, he'd always felt they were doing exceptionally well in that department). After they had sex in the evening he'd make her dinner and wash the dishes. When the cast came off her foot was small and shrivelled. She climbed on top of him for the first time and they got pregnant.

Gavin didn't bring Derek up again until months after the ski trip. It had been a slow day at the furniture store. Gavin sat in a recliner at the back of store looking at his phone all afternoon. David had called him in because there was supposed to be a dining room set coming in that needed to be assembled, but it hadn't showed up. At lunchtime he sent Gavin down the street to buy them each a sandwich and a drink.

Gavin laid his father's sandwich on the counter and walked to the back of the showroom.

"You don't want to eat up here?" David asked.

"I like to be back here where I can't see the sky, it's too depressing seeing how nice it is out when you're stuck in here." Gavin was calling from the back of the room. It was meant to sound like a joke.

"Well, actually I'd rather you didn't eat on the furniture."

Gavin came up and unwrapped his sandwich on the counter. He laid his phone next to the crumpled Saran wrap.

"This is Derek's band." Gavin pushed the phone towards David, "That's their music video. Mom did all the make-up."

There was a woman on the tiny screen dancing on the hood of a car in an empty parking lot. The cart corral glinted in the moonlight behind her; the camera shook. David picked up the phone and held it close to his face.

"Derek is in this band?"

"Well, it's really Clairissa's band. He just plays bass, someone else used to play bass but his girlfriend just had a baby so now Derek's doing it."

“That’s Clairissa? You’ve met her?” David asked. The video cut to a shot of Clarissa lip-synching on a cliff above Middle Cove beach.

“Yeah, she’s really cool, she’s from Slovenia,” Gavin said. The phone rang and David turned to answer it. Gavin dropped the Saran wrap from his sandwich in the garbage and headed to the back of the store.

A couch arrived fifteen minutes before they were about to close and they didn’t get out until an hour later than usual. The car was full of stale, hot air. David’s Winters Furniture Emporium t-shirt rode up a little bit as he leaned over to plug his seatbelt in and the metal burnt his side. He jolted in his seat and Gavin laughed at him.

“Do you want to swing by McDonald’s before I drop you home?” David asked.

“Sure.” Gavin put down his window. “I wanted to talk to you about something. Derek said he might be able to get me a job doing roadie stuff for his band this summer. They’re touring around Atlantic Canada, going to festivals and stuff.”

“Well, that sounds exciting.” Warm wind rushed through the car.

“I just wanted to let you know because of the store and stuff. It’d be for July and part of August.”

David hadn’t planned to say anything to Brenda. He saw her in the section of the supermarket with the home appliances. He needed new glasses; he was holding a box of four stemless wineglasses. He saw her a few feet ahead reading the box of a hand blender. It was always terrible to see her unexpectedly. She’d had her hair cut since the last time he saw her. It was in tight curls up around her ears. She was wearing a spring jacket she had bought for herself while they were Christmas shopping for Gavin a few years ago.

She'd almost given the jacket to the Sally Anne when she was cleaning out her closet and he begged her not to because he loved what the colour did to her eyes.

"David." She left her cart and walked toward him with the hand blender.

"Derek asked Gavin to go on tour," he said.

"It's a job, it can get him other jobs, and it's a chance to travel." The jacket had been light purple, faded almost to grey. He knew she was keeping it because of what he'd said.

"He told me he'd be helping out at the store this summer. He made a commitment." These were things he had decided not to say.

"David, please don't take this personally, it's a chance for Gavin to see the country and to be involved in the music scene. That's exciting for him."

"I can't hold the job is all. I'll have to hire someone else. The job won't be there when he gets back."

"I'm sure he'll understand."

Before The Star of the Sea Hall was torn down, it had been rented out for weddings, almost every weekend in the summer. The music from the wedding receptions would flood his house whenever someone pushed their way out of the heavy double doors on the side of building. People were always pouring out of the emergency exits to smoke.

When Brenda lived with him they had the dining room table in the back room. Brenda liked sitting there with the window open listening to the bits of drunken conversation that sailed into the house.

She would angle her chair so she could see the girls' outfits in the sliver of the street that was visible from the back of the house. She'd put her feet up on the table and lean back so the chair stood on its hind legs.

The receptions went late into the night. Each gush of music was book ended by the bang of the steel doors meeting in their frame. He remembered being woken up by bursts of "Girls Just Want To Have Fun" and lying awake with Brenda's cheek resting on his bare chest. They'd kicked the blankets to the end of the bed; her bare ass on the flowery sheets, a hoarse chorus of wedding guests wailing "they just wanna." He had that memory every time he was woken up alone by a wedding reception. Now there was never music in the night on his street. In the morning there was construction site noise. The shrill beeping of large vehicles reversing, rubble raining into the back of a dump truck.

"Do you still have that backpack we took camping in Gros Morne when I was a kid?" Gavin asked him one afternoon at the store. They were on their hands and knees screwing the legs into a mahogany table that could seat twelve.

"What backpack?" David stood up for a moment to try to stretch stiffness out of his lower back.

"It was light blue with an aluminum frame. I was wondering if I could take it on tour."

"I think it's in the basement. You can take it if you can find it." David realized things had been decided. He would have to look for a new guy to help Ron with deliveries.

Meghan came for the drive to the airport and David was dreading having to make conversation with her on the way back. It had been so bright outside that when he first came through the doors of the terminal it took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness.

Brenda was there. Because of the light and his eyes, he was only two feet away when he finally recognized her. She'd dropped Derek off and waited to give Gavin a hug goodbye. Derek and the rest of the band were already halfway through the check-in line. The woman from the video was wearing sunglasses and leather boots that came up over her knees. David thought of a shot from the video where she was squirming on white sheets. He wondered how Brenda felt about Derek going off with the woman. But then Gavin would be there.

David and Brenda went to get coffees to give Meghan and Gavin privacy while they hugged goodbye.

"They're tearing down Star of the Sea," Brenda said in the line.

"It's gone, it's been gone for two months," Gavin told her.

"It's torn down?"

"Haven't you driven past?"

"I guess I haven't. What are they putting there?"

"Something hideous. A parking garage. But right now the house is full of light. I can see the Southside Hills."

Brenda and David and Meghan all walked out of the terminal together. When they got to the curb, Brenda headed off towards her own car. Before Gavin got his own place, Brenda would sometimes stop in when she was picking him up or dropping him off.

David wished there were a reason for her to stop in now, so he could show her how the absence of the hall changed the house.

He missed her things. From the outside the make-up cases looked like toolboxes. They were designed the same way on the inside, too: a shallow top shelf divided into small compartments that reached halfway out over the deeper, bottom compartment. The wide bottom held fat tubs of concealer, brushes tucked into clear-plastic protective sleeves, lipsticks in metal tubes. The smaller compartments held the delicate, glittery things: the false eye lashes, and adhesive gems. She made old people young for interviews and young people old for movies and plays. When Gavin was in junior high he'd dressed up as Ace Frehley from KISS for Halloween. When he wiped the make-up off his face that night David noticed that he was beginning to look like a teenager for the first time.

Before David left for work he watched them pour the foundation of the parking garage. The wet concrete had the thick, gluey consistency of oatmeal.

Full Body Experience

Okay, ladies, let's go! March it, warm it up, feel that blood pumping, feel it in your muscles, we're marching, the blood is pumping, we're just getting warmed up here, ladies, are you getting warm? Okay now, side step!

She didn't know he was dead, but she wanted to get out of the car. The car had flipped, there was mud and brush flattened under the passenger side windows. She had to climb into the backseat and pull herself up and out through the driver's side window. She knew the dog was dead. When the car was spinning the dog flew over the headrest and hit the windshield. The spinning took forever. When it stopped, the driver's side windows were full of still, grey winter sky. His head was inches from hers. He was hanging over her at an odd angle in the space between the seats; the seatbelt held his chest and hips but he was sagging into the gearshift area.

She had squirmed around him with the handbrake digging into her. His hair brushed her neck and then her side when her t-shirt rode up. She crouched on the passenger side door in the backseat and reached overhead to unroll the driver's side window. The slow, awkward wrenching of the handle making the sheet of glass inch its way back into the door.

Let's get those knees pumping. That's it. Elbow, elbow, to the left, to the right. Lift and lift and lift. Okay now, get ready to crank it up a notch. I hope you ladies came here today to SWEAT. Let's jog. Faster, faster. We're jogging. Keep it up. This is your Serious Sweat Class, it's what you make of it. Faster, faster.

She got claustrophobic, even before that. On airplanes it was never that she was afraid they were going to crash. It was the tight space, the stale air, all those people, crossing and uncrossing their legs, shifting in their chairs, keeping their arms close to their bodies.

The dog rolled off the dash, it had blood in its nostrils. She could see it wasn't breathing because the blood didn't ripple or bubble. That was after the car had stopped moving, after she had wriggled against the smothering warm weight of her boyfriend to get into backseat. She didn't look at Chris's face. She didn't listen to his chest. Or do CPR. She didn't look at his face.

You're really letting me down, ladies! Next time I say high kick I want to see a high kick. Okay here it comes - high kick. Oh yeah there you go, left hook, right hook, high kick, that's what I was waiting for, that's what I call a high kick, okay here we go again, give it to me again ladies, one hundred and ten percent, one hundred and ten percent of the time, right hook, left hook - last time - high kick, tricked you last time for real, let's see it - high kick. When I say high kick I mean, HIGH KICK.

She stood up on the side of the overturned car in the January air, panting. She had put her hands on either side of the driver's side window and lifted her body up out of the car, the way you haul yourself out of the deep end onto the pool deck. There was a crust of snow with brush poking through on one side of the car and highway above a steep slide of ditch on the other. She'd taken her sneakers off before the accident. They had been listening to the Quebec election results, heat pouring out of the dash. She had crossed her legs on the seat and unzipped her hoody and said something like, "Do you think Alicia was annoyed when Carl said she misunderstood the end of *Inception*?" or "Do you think

that storm is really going to come? I hope the supermarkets don't close, there's nothing to eat at the house."

Let's cool it down, let's get ready to stretch it out. Okay, inhale as you enter the twist exhale as you release. A little deeper. And again. See if you can go a little deeper this time.

After the funeral she went lane swimming all the time; underwater was a private realm. She was constantly afraid that she'd left the burner on or the bathtub running or the front door unlocked. Every night she'd lie in bed trying to visualize herself turning the knob above the burners, and she wouldn't be able to, so she would run down the stairs in a floppy t-shirt and double-check.

Alana was compact, teeny tiny but lumpy with muscles. She was from Nova Scotia. Her hair was dyed white and she wore it in a high ponytail with a little bump in the front where her bangs were pinned up. The gym director introduced them in the lobby.

"Alana is our new Buff Bar instructor." The director's hand flew up and touched a red light flashing in his headset. "That's my wife. I'll let you finish up the introductions -- yes hi, I'm here."

He walked away from the two women, pressing the earpiece into his head with two fingers.

"I'm Regina, I do Pilates and Serious Sweat."

"That's great, I'm hoping they'll let me have a few more classes once I've been here for a while. I taught a lot of dance classes at the Y in Halifax; they said they're not

interested in that in my interview but maybe I can change their mind.” Alana was drinking a smoothie out of a reusable cup. “I’d love to get a drink sometime.”

Her ponytail swished back and forth as she walked down the hall towards the dressing rooms.

Regina sat in the parking lot and called Viv; Viv had become the person she told about her day. Viv was who she texted to say that she was hungry but didn’t know what to eat.

“Viv, they hired someone new at the gym and she sucks.”

“Oh no, why does she suck?” Viv was dependable like that.

“She’s so primed. She’s the kind of person who thinks an exercise class should look like a music video. I can’t stand that.”

“Regina you should try to make friends, fill your life with people. Don’t shut them out,” Viv said.

Before the accident she and Viv went to parties with Emilio, another instructor at Regina’s gym. He wore baggy grey sweat pants that tapered into a cuffed ankle and a matching jacket.

If Regina could have anyone else’s body it would be Emilio’s. She often watched him practising dance routines in unbooked studios at the gym. Sometimes the elasticity of his body was disturbing, it seemed like there was nothing beneath his skin but muscle. As if he didn’t have bones to keep him from transforming into a slippery puddle if he willed it. His sister was a contortionist. Emilio had shown Regina videos of his sister, in a beaded bikini walking on her hands with her ankles dangling over her shoulders.

At parties they'd hang around the smokers. She and Emilio with their cuffs pulled over their knuckles and collars zipped up to their chins on the back deck, waiting to be offered cigarettes.

Emilio had a French accent and striking cheek bones. He flirted with everyone, lied easily, was a master shoplifter. One New Year's Eve, before she and Chris got together, she'd been in a bathroom with Emilio and Timothy Argueta, a dancer who'd come from Vancouver to visit Emilio. The three of them were smoking two cigarettes, passing them back and forth, watching their reflections in the mirror. She and Emilio had kissed. Then she and Tony Argueta kissed. Then she sank into a wide squat and nuzzled their hard cocks through their jeans with her face while they made out with each other. Even though they were both very uninterested in her, it was the sexiest thing that had ever happened to her. Emilio didn't come to the funeral, but he left a voice mail saying how sorry he was.

And she used to go jogging almost everyday with Lucy, who taught Cycle Class and Women's KickBoxing. Lucy had lived through feminism in the eighties. For her, exercise was about strength and self-defence and shovelling snow without hurting your back, about being okay with growing old by yourself. She texted Regina after the accident and invited her out for coffee and over for dinner, but Regina never responded. She couldn't imagine talking to Lucy without the rhythm of their sneakers beating gravel.

She and Viv and Amelia, the Kundalini yoga instructor, had a feminist movie night in the months before the accident. They watched all of *Daria*, and *Thelma and Louise* and sprinkled nutritional yeast on popcorn. The movie night had been at Regina's

house and she didn't want to have people there anymore. Viv would arrive whether Regina wanted her there or not.

Viv drove her home from the hospital after the accident. The doctors had put on a fibreglass cast that turned her hand into an unusable claw. Viv made her a pasta salad from what was in the fridge. She opened the child-proofed plastic lid of Regina's painkillers for her because Regina couldn't grip the bottle and the lid at the same time.

Viv came by every day the week of the accident. She bought Regina a new cover for her futon. It was light pink with ripples of purple tie-dye and Regina hated it. She sat in the armchair as Viv zipped her couch into the new cover.

"You don't need to spend money on me, I appreciate you coming over but don't waste your money," Regina told her.

"You need to change things up," Viv said.

The painkillers hurt Regina's stomach and made her exhausted.

Viv arrived with a new shower curtain, see-through with multi-coloured polka dots.

"Let's have a dinner here, I'll cook." Viv was stuffing a pizza box Regina had left in the living room into a see-through recycling bag.

"Maybe when the cast comes off," Regina told her.

The week the cast came off she got dressed up because Viv said she should. Viv had just gotten a job at a spa that opened downtown and she wanted Regina at the party. She didn't say "if you're ready." She laid her crushed velvet mini-dress on the bed and thought about whether to wear her hair up or down. The skin on her hand felt raw after

having been wrapped in gauze for five and a half weeks. Looking in the mirror she was surprised by how proud she felt of the way her clothes hung on her body.

At the party people kept coming up to her asking her how she knew Viv and if she'd gone to massage therapy school. She was thinking about the stove. She made herself rum and Cokes at a little table pushed against the wall covered with twenty-sixers and two litre bottles of pop. People were dancing and the lights were low. A man was tossing his head back and forth while unbuttoning his shirt.

"This is my friend Regina, she teaches aerobics," Viv said again and again.

Regina shook their hands but she was thinking about a red coil burning in a dark kitchen.

She would find herself shivering and distracted in the supermarket. She would stare at the beans so that no one could tell she was being swept away.

The place she got swept to was vast. It could fit a lot of, "We weren't really in love anymore" and "I never got to tell him what a piece of shit he was for pressuring me into having anal sex" and "I will never meet another man romantic enough to haul the car off the road every time he saw a glimmering hunk of calcium in a cliff and chip me down a crystal with the screwdriver and mallet he kept in the trunk" and "A man who insisted on meeting my grandmother" and "I don't remember locking the front door" and "I don't remember unplugging the kettle" and "How do you know if the batteries in the smoke detector are worn out?" Big enough to get very lost in.

She brought a cat home from Heavenly Creatures and filled the apartment with plants. Viv noted this and took it as a sign that Regina was recovering, that she was embracing life in its various forms again. Partly she was and partly she was building a

sarcophagus. Regina picked ropey plants, plants with vines and tendrils, the better to wrap around her limbs and cocoon her body. The better to worm themselves through her nostrils and between her lips and into her ear canals, the better to unfurl their leaves in her anal cavity. She pictured the cat lovingly chewing through her fingers.

At first the cat ran from noise; it sprayed the couch and her shoes and coats. She read about training cats. If a cat pees on your bed, it's because he trusts you, he is seeking out the smell of you. The second time it happened she didn't have the energy to strip the bed and wait for the sheets to go through the washer and dryer. It was freezing and she was alone and it was down in the bottom corner. So she slept there with their smells mingling and making a new smell. His pee mixing with the smell of her armpits.

"This reminds me of when I lived with my ex-boyfriend, Brian. There was a heat wave and the garbage collectors were on strike, the whole city stank. We just moved there and neither of us had jobs yet, we hardly had any furniture but we had a futon and a blender and we used to make margaritas and sit naked under the ceiling fan in the living room." Alana was twirling her empty wine glass by the stem.

"How does this remind you of that?" Regina lifted the wine bottle at Alana, who put her glass down on the table to be filled.

"Being drunk in the heat. A new city. Getting to know someone."

"You didn't know him?"

Alanna filled her own glass.

"I knew him better than I know you but I didn't know him inside out. I was still surprised he moved there for me. The room didn't have an overhead light and we didn't have any lamps and we would just sit there while it got dark. In the summer

it takes a long time to get dark. In winter it happens without you noticing but in summer it takes forever.”

Regina had a pinky’s width of wine left in the glass she had just poured.

“We could get naked now, it’s hot enough.” Regina tipped the last sip into her mouth and stuck her tongue out after swallowing. The music had stopped so she got up to put on a new song.

“How drunk are you?” Alana asked.

“I’m a lightweight.” Regina leaned into the iPod, squinted and brought her face close to it.

“Good, because I’m really drunk.”

Regina couldn’t pick a song because every song was from before the accident. The wine had sucked all the moisture out of her mouth.

“Let’s put on your iPod,” Regina said.

“Are we going to get naked?” Alana asked. “I was kind of into getting naked.”

“Put on your iPod and then we’ll get naked.”

Alana took her phone out of her purse. She jostled the speaker cord into the phone and there was a burst of static that sounded like a wave crashing but then the cord clicked in and a pop song came blaring out of the speaker louder than either of them expected. They opened another bottle of wine and left their jeans on the kitchen floor.

“You don’t shave,” Alana said.

“Does that gross you out?”

“It’s just weird to me, I’ve always done it, since I was like twelve. I can’t imagine.”

Alana banged her head against a potted plant hung from the ceiling of the bedroom. Some crumbled soil fell on the carpet and the plant swung like a pendulum for a moment, the leaves waving on their stalks. Alana pressed a palm into her forehead and the girls laughed.

Regina could tell that Alana had been wearing a tube-top bikini when she got her fake tan. Her breasts and a narrow strip on her back were bright white. The bottoms had left her ass and crotch and hips almost glowing against the orange sheen on the rest of her skin. They danced and drank out of the bottle. Regina knocked the lip of the bottle against her front teeth. They jumped and hit the ceiling with their palms.

Regina fell back on to the couch and splashed it with wine. Alana shuffled toward the couch until Regina's lips were pressed against a muscle that bulged on Alana's hipbone. Alana put her fingernails in Regina's hair, dragged it up into a ponytail and gave it a tug. She and Alana were making out in the bed, Alana's crotch was wet against her thigh. A wind was trapped in the closet, she could hear the empty coat hangers knocking elbows. Alana's strange white hair swished across the pillows and for a second it looked like the foamy aftermath of a winter wave sliding over wet sand.

When she woke up it felt as if her mouth was full of napkins. Alana was curled into herself, her spine facing Regina. The cat was a sloppy Kaiser bun on Alana's pillow. Regina's pulse was loud inside her head. The smell of alcohol was leaking out of her skin. She had let the whole night happen without mentioning Chris. She threw up in the toilet and showered while Alana slept.

She had jumped off the car into the snow and pain vibrated in her knees and heels with the force of hitting the ground. She got tangled in the brush. She had to lift her knees

high over and over again to make it to the ditch. The crust of ice on top of the snow was sharp and it hurt her through her jeans. She couldn't go back for her sneakers.

Regina put on her winter coat and went out on the back deck to call Viv. Her hair was wet from the shower and when the cold air hit it froze a little. There was no answer so she left a message.

"So, there are things that me and Alana have in common. We're both fucked over by the gym in the same way, no job stability, no long-term contracts. We both know that there's a strong link between mental and physical health. She understands the pressure to keep people coming back, the fine balance of making a class hard but not too hard. How delicate it is to negotiate forcing your students to exert themselves while simultaneously charming them. Okay, I'll call you later." She had prepared this speech in the shower. The cat was watching her through the kitchen window.

Regina heard Alana waking up and she put coffee on. Alana came out of the bedroom carrying a pair of boxer shorts.

"Who do these belong to?"

Regina flicked open the stovetop espresso maker. The heat stung her eyes, that dizzy moment on top of the car, feeling the cold metal through her socks, the smell of burnt rubber in the freezing air.

Alana was swinging the underwear on one finger, teasing. She flicked it across the room. Regina let the lid fall shut.

"I don't care. I'm just surprised you didn't mention." Alana was startled by the snap of metal on metal. "There are worse things, you could be a blabber mouth."

Alana normally wore her metallic hair straightened but it had plumped overnight.

“I made coffee,” Regina said.

After Alana left, Regina folded up the underwear and dropped it in the garbage. She tugged a microwave popcorn bag out from under some coffee grounds and covered the boxers with it. She fed the cat.

Things bubbled up from the depths of the house. A coat that belonged to Chris was hung inside her winter parka. They never lived together, but his things kept turning up. An energy drink in the very back of the fridge, something she never would have bought. The coat, she remembered the day he left the coat, it was the beginning of winter and he’d worn it over to her place and left it because suddenly it smelled like spring. The seasons were stuttering, trying to sprawl into winter but jolting back to fall again and again. What else was the house going to spit up at her.

Regina learned that plants have personalities. If you put them in the direct sunlight and it’s not what they crave, they curl in on themselves and become droopy or brittle. Lots of them were sulky and sensitive; they would play dead but the moment she paid attention to them they birthed a lime green shoot, a nub of pure life. When they were most comfortable they performed magic tricks; they changed colour and let soft flowers flop out of their bristly stalks. She shifted them in and out of the light and watched their reactions. After Serious Sweat she trailed around her apartment with a plastic watering can appreciating how her creatures had willed suppleness for themselves.

She ordered a batch of macramé plant hangers from a woman in Arizona over the Internet. They were synthetic blue ropes elaborately knotted around keychain loops. She hung plants with heavy vines that uncurled their way towards the floor as they grew and

ones that slowly scaled towards the ceiling by wrapping around the plant hangers. This way she could see a breeze from November coming for her in their rustling leaves. It would perk the cat's ears, she would be ready for it.

Alana had her foot up on the bench tying her sneakers when Regina came into the change room after Serious Sweat.

"Come to my house for dinner tonight. I'm going to roast a chicken and we can get a baguette and some wine," Alana said.

"I have to feed the cat."

"Come over after you feed the cat."

Alana hadn't finished moving into her apartment. One cupboard was completely empty except for three water glasses crowded together and pushed up against the wall.

"I'm so lonely it's getting to the point where I dread interacting with people. I try on every piece of clothing I own before I go out." Regina was stirring gravy.

Alana was wearing a pair of pleather leggings and a baggy t-shirt. Her hair was in a bun on top of her head.

They got drunk again. On the way to the bathroom Regina passed Alana's bedroom. The only furniture was the futon bed. Four duffle bags were slung around the room with tangles of clothes slouching out of them. Alana's exercise sneakers were carefully lined up at the end of the bed and her headset was resting on top of them.

"Your house is so empty. You should get some stuff for the walls." Regina settled back into her seat.

"Brad told me about your boyfriend. I mean he only told me yesterday. I didn't know that night we had dinner."

There was a little dent in Regina's chest where one of her ribs had crumpled in on itself. She'd snapped a bone in her hand trying to brace herself against the dash.

It was bright in the operating room and "Back in The New York Groove" was playing on the radio. The drugs didn't knock her out, but she couldn't lift her head and tears streamed out of the corners of her eyes. The outside fold of her ear filled with tears and overflowed. She was only now beginning to be able to do a full push up on that hand.

"We weren't even happy." Regina stroked the dent in her side without realizing she was doing it.

"You have to move out of that house. Just move out. You'll feel better immediately."

When her things were gone, she went for the final walkthrough. Like reading through your exam to make sure you haven't made any slip-ups. It could have been anyone's apartment. The cat had scratched up part of the patio rail. The windows were open and the noise of leaves shivering against each other had the hint of a wave sucking out into the bay but there was also the smell of hot pavement and the feeling of taking off a heavy backpack.

Most of the people in Regina's classes were women between forty and sixty. They came for Pilates on their lunch break or aerobics when they finished work for the day. They worked for the government or the university or they were retired teachers. They were there because they wanted to ease the transition into old age, they wanted to protect their knees and hips by encasing them in muscle, they wanted to stay mobile, they wanted to counteract years of sitting.

Boxes were stacked in the hallway and kitchen. Viv had helped her carry her mattress up the stairs. Regina's pots and pans were packed up but she bought groceries and made a cheese melt by laying the bread right on the oven rack.

Regina unrolled her mat on the floor of her new living room. She dragged a lamp into the room and looked around for an outlet. She slapped a notepad on the floor and put her headphones in and started drafting a new class.

This class is about flow, every transition is going to be graceful. Okay, palms on your mat, bend your knees. Everyone should be on all fours. Slide your left arm under you, put your shoulder and cheek on the mat. Flip onto to your back, gentle, smooth transitions, ladies. Sink your shoulders into the floor, stretch your arms above your head, point your toes.

There were injuries she didn't learn she had until later. No one can tell the long-term effects, the doctor told her. Embedded in her forearm were five chunks of windshield glass that would never come out. A string of raised lumps going up her arm, an island chain caught between muscle and skin.

Auditioning

When they were teenagers lots of people told them they could be movie stars. Their mother sometimes mistook one for the other at a glance but never when she was looking them in the face. They were slim but not scrawny and they had thick hair. Their teeth were straight and white. But what it really was, was that there were two of them. Not quite exactly alike. Sandra had a freckle on her cheekbone that appeared on Alana's chin. Alana was taller. But the more substantial difference was harder to pin down, all the same parts put together slightly differently.

Their mother got them an agent. He was excited about taking on twins. He told them there was a narrow market open to them but they had an excellent chance of getting every job in that market.

The agent suggested they join a gym.

"You look great right now, you're exactly what people are looking for but you're at an age where bodies fluctuate and it's a good idea to get used to keeping control of it, if you're planning for a life in the industry." He was saying this to their mother, gauging her reaction. "Don't overdo it, just get comfortable with having a fitness routine. I say this to all my teenage clients and I think it's good life advice, get started on taking care of yourselves at a young age and you'll be ahead of the game."

"I completely agree with you. I think fitness is important, there's diabetes in our family." Their mother was holding her purse in her lap with both hands.

"What kind of parts is he talking about anyway?" Sandra asked in the car on the way home.

"We don't know yet, Sandy. I think this is very exciting," their mother said.

"Beer commercials," Sandra said.

"It's not going to be beer commercials. He didn't say that," Alana said from the back seat. "Anyway I'd do a beer commercial."

"It's going to be all slutty beer commercials, you know that, right, mom?" Sandra made eye contact with her sister in the mirror.

"Take your feet off the dash, Sandra," their mother said.

When they got home their mother's boyfriend, Ian, had made chili. He put rolls from the Marie's Mini Mart down the street in a bowl. He had already made them chili once that week.

"I heated the buns," he told them. It was a braided bun loaf; to take a bun you tugged it off the lumpy golden wreath.

Ian had shaggy hair and was always wearing fisherman's sweaters. Sandra noticed that since he had started staying over, her mother had been wearing a ratty wool pullover around the house. Usually she wore a rotation of Reitman's cardigans and blazers.

"The agent said the girls should start taking an interest in their fitness," their mother told Ian.

"Hmmm." Ian was ladling chili into cereal bowls. The cereal bowls were deeper than the bowls their mother used for soup.

"Well, I think it's good advice, there's diabetes in our family." Their mother accepted a mound of chili slopped into a cereal bowl and made noises as if she was getting ready to enjoy it.

"I'm just wary of some middle aged man telling teenagers to work out, I just don't like the sound of that, it's creepy." Ian dished up more chili.

"Well, I appreciate your input." Their mother tore a bun from the wreath.

Once Ian drove the girls to the mall because their mother had drunk two glasses of wine at a work party. They stopped at his apartment on the way so he could feed his dog. It was four o'clock in early December. The apartment was cold and dark in the early dusk; they all kept their coats on. The dog was asleep with his chin resting on the arm of the couch when they came in. The twins stood in the porch while Ian walked through the kitchen in his boots. He opened the back door and the dog ran out onto the patio.

"I'm just going to let him out for a minute." Ian took a bag of dog food out from under the sink. He filled the dog's water bowl.

"You should leave a light on for him when you go out," Sandra said from the porch.

"You're right, you should always have the lights on when you're not around. Discourages people from breaking in." Ian flicked a switch and a frosted globe in the centre of the living room ceiling filled with cloudy yellow light.

"I'm just going to pee." Alana bent down to undo the slush coated laces on her hiking boots. The apartment was one level; you could see the door to every room from the porch.

"Did you live here with your old girlfriend?" Sandra asked. They could hear Alana peeing through the bathroom door.

"Yup, a long time ago." Ian was taking mugs out of the dish rack and putting them in the cupboard above the sink.

"Did you guys move in here together?"

When there were no mugs left he took a fistful of cutlery and started sorting it into a drawer.

"She took all her stuff, this is my stuff."

The toilet flushed.

"What're you going to do with your stuff if you and mom move in together?"

"I don't know. It's not important. Maybe the couch could go in your mom's rec room. I might have some kitchen stuff you guys could use. You don't have a slow cooker do you?"

Alana came out of the bathroom.

"I don't know what a slow cooker is," Sandra said.

"I do," Alana said.

"Tell your sister." Ian let the dog in and it shook snow onto the kitchen floor.

They flew to Toronto for an interview the agent got them. Their mother was a real estate agent. She had to re-arrange several viewings to make time for the trip. The girls were missing two days of school.

Ian drove them to the airport in their mother's car. He carried their bags up to the check-in desk.

On the plane their mother surprised them by ordering a gin and tonic.

"This is an adventure, girls." She twisted in her seat so she could see Sandra, who was sitting next to an old man in the row behind.

Sandra tried to order a coffee but her mother wouldn't let her, so she and Alana both got 7Up. The cheapest plane tickets were for the day of the audition. They checked into the hotel and got dressed in outfits their mother had picked out.

The agent had emailed her instructions about appropriate attire for the audition. Their mother had read his email aloud to them in the living room.

"This is a guy who knows the industry, we don't know anything about the industry," she told them.

Ian was leading the FibreOp guy around their house during this conversation. Showing him phone jacks and cupboards to run the wires through. Getting FibreOp was Ian's idea.

"Grown women don't dress alike," Sandra said as the Internet guy trailed a cord along the perimeter of the living room.

"Lucky neither of you are grown women. Mr. Andrews suggested navy slacks and a white button down, that'll be nice, very grown up."

The audition was in the basement of a mall under construction; huge spaces were roped off with lengths of caution tape. Every few feet there were signs on printer paper scotch taped to the wall. They read "Major Talent Casting" and had arrows below them. A coffee kiosk at the edge of a stretch of bald concrete was lit up by construction-site lamps. The lamps had wire grills over their headlight-sized bulbs. Their mother stood in a mess of criss-crossed extension cords in front of the counter and bought cinnamon rolls with icing.

They ate them out of wax paper sleeves on the escalator. The rolls were dense and sweet.

A long line of girls were waiting outside the door of the room where the auditions happened. Some were leaning against the cinderblock wall and some were sitting on their winter coats on the cement floor. There were many pairs of matching outfits.

"Why don't you girls call your father while you wait? I'm going to go pee." Their mother handed Alana her phone.

"Are you going to call?" Sandra asked, once their mother was on the escalator with her back to them.

"It would be a distraction. We should focus, " Alana said.

Sandra nodded. The sisters shuffled ahead in the shrinking line.

"He's probably busy anyway. Probably out with his girlfriend," Sandra said.

"I don't care where he is." Alana took a compact out of her pocket and ruffled her hair, tilting the little mirror from side to side.

It was impossible to tell how the audition went. Their mother waited outside the door while they read from a teleprompter projecting on to the back wall of the room. It was a Tupperware commercial. Three men sat at a foldout banquet table with a thick plastic top and metal legs. They took notes on clipboards. They asked the girls to jog across the room like they were trying to catch a bus, one at a time and then together. They asked them to say "Thanks, mom" again and again like they really meant it.

At the end of the interview Alana walked up to the table, smiling like Shirley Temple, before extending her hand to each of the men. Sandra hung back. The new button

up was tight, it puckered open between the buttons. She wondered if the agent had told Alana to shake hands with these people or if she'd come up with that on her own.

"Thank you, we've got a lot of girls to see, we'll call you by the end of the week if we're interested." The guy at the end of the table got up and pushed the door open for them. As they left he waved in the next set of twins.

Their mother was talking to Ian when they left.

"Can you check when snow clearing is? I might need you to move my car. Oh my God, yes, use it whenever you want."

In the hotel Alana and her mother shared a double bed and Sandra slept in a single, closer to the window. At seven in the morning her mother's phone started vibrating on the nightstand between their beds. The vibrations made the empty nightstand shudder and they all woke up confused. Their mother sat up and grabbed the phone.

"Hello, yes this is she, yes, we can definitely make that, let me just get a pen so I can take down the address."

Their mother waved her hand and Alana got up and dangled her mother's purse by the strap. Her mother waved the purse away and pointed a finger at the hotel stationery and pen, her straight arm bouncing urgently in the air. Alana dropped the purse and scrambled for the pen.

"You got a call-back, a second audition tomorrow afternoon."

They spent the day walking around the city; their mother bought them a set of dresses to wear to the call back. She took a picture of them with her phone in front of the dressing room doors and texted it to the agent. They wandered around the big store

stroking cheap sweaters, waiting for the agent to okay the dresses before their mother paid for them.

They walked three abreast on the wide sidewalks. Sandra's hands were freezing. Alana was wearing mittens with the outline of Newfoundland knitted into them; their mother had a pair of hairy pink gloves. Her mother kept offering to give Sandra her gloves but Sandra wouldn't take them.

Sandra stopped in front of a narrow store that sold nothing but cell phone cases. There was no wall separating the front of the store from the sidewalk. It was very bright and the cases were all shimmery-glimmery with holograms and rhinestones. A Japanese girl with baubles in her pigtails stood at an island in the centre of the store wearing a puffy winter coat. Sandra took her hand out of her pocket to touch the lumpy back of a rhinestone case.

Alana loved the plastic replicas of sushi in the windows of restaurants. She bought a key chain for a dollar that was a miniature ramen bowl with hard plastic noodles looping in and out of a gel that was tinted yellow to imitate broth.

"Try and think of something to get your father, girls," their mother told them. They picked out a globe-shaped paper lantern because it was cheap and would fold up and lie flat in a suitcase.

They had supper in a restaurant off the lobby of the hotel. There were squeeze bottles of ketchup on every table and plastic plants on a stubby wall that cut through the dining room. Sandra's hands were still burning from the cold and her fingertips felt as if she had let glue dry on them. The new dresses sat in a bag propped on a chair across the table from her.

In bed that night her hands still hurt from the cold. When Sandra wished for something, she pushed her tongue hard into the roof of her mouth and thought 'please' about what she wanted. She was lying with her hands between her thighs looking out the window. She thought please that they wouldn't get the commercial. It was about a woman who had six children. Tupperware made getting their lunches ready in the morning a breeze. The girls would be the first of a stream of blond children with book bags slung over one shoulder. All the children would snatch a paper bag off a kitchen island on their way out the door.

While Alana was in the shower, Sandra and her mother sat on their beds. Her mother's ankles were sticking out of the legs of her slacks, her feet barely reached the floor.

"I know you're not crazy about this Sandra. A part of my job is to make you do things you don't want to do, you have take advantage of opportunities."

Sandra looked out the window.

"I want to go for a walk."

"I don't know."

"Just around the block, to get a breath of fresh air. I'll be back in ten minutes."

"Meet us in the restaurant."

Sandra zipped the keycard to the hotel room into the pocket of her parka and jogged down the hall. She jumped as the elevator began to descend and was suspended for an unnaturally long time. A small leap for one twin. Then she landed with extra weight on the carpeted floor. She felt it in her stomach and knees. She had almost a hundred dollars in her bank account from her paper route. She had seen a Shoppers Drug

Mart three blocks down from the hotel. She bought a pair of children's scissors with curved blades and chunky plastic handles. On the way back she saw sparks spray off a streetcar cable as metal met metal and she tilted her head back to take in the dizzy height of the buildings. She took a deep breath of cold, exhaust-filled air.

She saw her mother and sister sitting at a table with three menus and three sets of cutlery rolled in paper napkins. She passed by casually, maybe even slower than she normally would. She waited for the elevator with a family barricaded behind a circle of luggage. A mother, father and toddler in a snowsuit. She helped them by heaving a suitcase half her height into the elevator, lifting the leather handle with both hands.

It took her three tries of sticking the card into the slit in the door and retracting it to get the little lump of green plastic to light up and let her in.

In the mirror she grabbed a handful of shoulder length hair and held it above her ear. She took a handful close to her head. It was hard to get the scissors to shut. She did a series of little tiny open and shut motions that made her hand ache. Then she was holding a forearm's length of hair in her fist. She dropped it into the oval-shaped wastebasket by the toilet. She started making little snips, trying to get as close to the scalp as possible. In the end there were places where she could see the white of her scalp and other places where it was nearly half an inch long. It wasn't how she'd envisioned it. She needed a buzzer like her father used to keep his stubble even.

Sandra walked into the restaurant. There was a specials board with "Breakfast for Supper," and "Please Wait to Be Seated" written on it in dry erase marker. Alana saw her before her mother did.

"What did you do?" her mother said.

They had plates with scrambled eggs and buttered toast, and pinky finger sized sausages. Sandra was suddenly hungry.

"I was proud of you." Their mother was calmly furious.

"I hate you," Alana said.

"I can't believe you would do this to your sister. You look like someone with a mental disability."

"Sorry."

"What were you thinking? I want to know. What went through your head?" Their mother dropped her knife and fork onto the table.

"Lots of people have this hair cut, it's just a hair cut. They might not care, I could wear a wig."

"You are a very selfish person. I don't know what to say to you. Go up to the room."

Sandra began to walk away, wishing for the breakfast for supper special.

"I hate you," Alana said again, to her sister's back.

Sandra heard her sister and mother outside the hotel room door and got under the covers and pretended to be asleep. She breathed heavy wet breaths through the comforter while her family watched America's Next Top Model.

"You'll be going to that audition anyway. Who knows, they might be so impressed that they use you anyway," their mother told Alana.

"The other girls auditioning are going to think we're idiots. They obviously don't want a bald girl in the commercial."

"This is what pursuing your dreams is like Alana, it's difficult. There will be obstacles. You know I don't like to speak poorly of your father but he gives up without a fight and I don't want you adopting that attitude."

Sandra heard her mother tug the sealed mouth of a chip bag apart.

"What about Ian?" Alana asked, which was exactly what Sandra wanted to say. Sandra lay on her side, facing away from her family and nosed her face out from under the covers. From their hotel window she could see into an office building across the road. Most of the lights were off, but she could see into a few rooms with cubicles that had carpeted dividers for walls and filing cabinets.

"What about him?"

"Do you want me to be like Ian?" Alana asked.

"I don't want you to be like anyone, leave Ian alone."

"Is he moving in with us?" Sandra couldn't believe Alana was asking this. Did her mother and sister always talk so openly when she wasn't there?

"Did he say something about that?"

"No." Sandra was impressed by how casual her sister's voice sounded.

"Well maybe."

"I think Chantelle will win. It's always the underdog. Someone who took bad pictures for the first few weeks," Alana answered.

"You might be right," their mother said.

The new dresses were burgundy with three-quarter length sleeves and a boat neck. They looked like something an eight year old would wear to a Christmas party. The morning of the second audition Alana stood in front of their mother in the mirror above

the hotel room dresser. Her mother combed her hair into a French braid. Sandra sat cross-legged on the bed with her knees sticking out from the corners of the dress' s long skirt.

"This is stupid. We look like a circus act. I don't even want to go anymore." Alana had been crying and her face was swollen.

"Get me an elastic, Sandra."

Sandra hopped off the bed and took an elastic off the counter in the bathroom. She held it out in her palm as her mother drew the bottom of Alana's braid together.

"Well, we're just going to show up," their mother said. "We're going to suggest your sister could wear a wig and see what happens." She snapped the elastic around the scrawny end of Alana's braid.

"When I was your age I sold sandwiches in my father's store. I made the sandwiches the night before, three kinds: ham and cheese, egg salad and BLT. It was a lot of work, frying the bacon and making the egg salad. I got to keep all the money from the sandwiches. What I learned was that the sandwiches had to be made every night, people would come into the store looking for the sandwiches and they had to be there. Even if I had dance class after school and was tired or my friends were going to a movie, people were expecting the sandwiches. I'm trying to give you girls a lesson like that. Consistency, responsibility."

"I'm responsible, " Alana said, patting down the top of her hair.

"Yes you are," their mother said.

Sandra bent down and laced up her boots so she wouldn't have to look at either of them.

Their mother gave them thirty dollars to get breakfast in the restaurant while she phoned the agent.

"I don't want to sit with her," Alana said.

"Alana, I don't have time for that. Order me a club with a side of Caesar salad, I'll be down shortly." Their mother was squinting into her phone, rolling through her list of contacts. "Sandra, I hope you know that it's humiliating for me to have to tell Mr. Andrews what you've done."

"I said sorry," Sandra said when she was alone with her sister in the elevator. Alana was staring straight ahead into the reflective metal door.

"I'm still mad. I'm going to be mad for a long time, maybe forever, maybe we aren't sisters anymore." Their matching reflections were side by side in the door. One with shoulder-length dirty blond curls and one with the striking absence of them.

"Because of a haircut?"

"I don't think Ian has any kind of a job," Alana said.

"I've never heard him talk about a job. He's always around in the daytime."

"He's a loser."

"He's nice."

"He's nice but he's a loser. He's going to suck up all her money."

Their mother bought Sandra a knitted cap with sequins sewed on it that she got from a plastic basket on a plywood table outside a convenience store.

"Mr. Andrews said this is the best we can do," their mother told them. Sandra bowed her head in the street. Her mother tugged the rolled up rim down over the tips of her daughter's ears. She plucked the bright orange price tag off the front.

"And here, put these on." She took a pair of matching mittens out of the flimsy plastic bag the hat had been in.

The second casting location was an office building. They got a cab there. Beside the elevators in the front lobby there was a burbling fountain with two heavy-set Koi fish. One was a dull white with thick whiskers that skimmed the surface as it made slow rounds of the pool. The other was smaller and brighter with glinting orange spots. Its whiskers were twitching along the aqua-coloured tiles at the bottom of the small fountain. The thick fleshiness of their whiskers was unsettling.

While they were waiting for the elevator, a set of blond twins came through the revolving door into the lobby. They weren't with their mother. They had suntans. They were dressed in matching beige trench coats and boots with long thin heels.

These twins were women trapped in children's bodies or they were children convincingly disguised as women. Sandra was sure they hadn't been in the lineup in the mall basement.

Their mother asked the new twins if they were auditioning for the Tupperware commercial as well. A light had been shining out of the number five above the elevator doors for a long time. Sandra imagined men in jumpsuits fumbling through with garbage cans on wheels and holding the door open with an outstretched arm for people with briefcases. A small crowd packing themselves into a tight room.

"Yeah," one of them answered. She had snow on her hair, which made her suntan even more beautiful.

"Good for you."

In the elevator the new twins typed on their bejeweled phones. Their hair was styled into hard ringlets as symmetrical as the stripes on a barber's pole. One of them tilted her phone for the other to see and they laughed together.

The other twins were called in first.

"They're going to get it," Alana said.

"Going to this audition is a good experience," their mother said. "You'll know what to expect the next time."

Alana and Sandra sat on either side of their mother in a row of aluminum chairs with cushions that looked like shredded wheat. There was a round table with magazines fanned across it.

The other twins smiled at them as they left the office after their audition. The click of their skinny heels down the hall to the elevator was womanly. It was a warning that they were passing through, they had places to click their way past at an even, determined pace.

There was a man and woman inside the office. They were wearing suit jackets and jeans. The man was sitting in an armchair. There were framed pictures and a big window filled with a brick wall.

"Nice to meet you both." The woman extended her hand. "I'll have you take off the hat please."

Sandra took off the hat and the woman laid her clipboard on the desk.

"I'm guessing you didn't have this hairdo at the previous audition?" She looked at the man even though she was talking to Sandra.

"No."

"Does it have to do with a health condition?" She rested her butt on the front of the desk.

"No." Sandra's voice wobbled.

"Well, we're looking for girls with hair. Not a very smart move for someone pursuing acting. Don't waste people's time. I consider this a waste of my time."

"Thank you girls, that's all," the man told them from the armchair.

Alana left first and Sandra pulled the door shut behind them. Their trip down the long hall to the elevator was almost soundless.

All Set Up

Glen once overheard Margaret on the phone saying Rich Reid gave her the best head she ever had and now she was afraid no one as skilled as Rich would ever eat her out again. She was almost crying.

Margaret was six months pregnant at a Halloween party when Glen walked in on her alone in the living room with Johnny Dawe. Even though there were two long couches they were sitting so close together their legs were touching. Everyone knew she was pregnant. She was dressed in grey leggings and a grey top and she had a fanny pack with a stuffed baby kangaroo sticking out of the zipper. There was a little swell to her tummy. Johnny was drunk and Margaret was completely sober. But Johnny was looking down her shirt and when they saw Glen in the doorway the two of them shifted apart. There was a lamp on in the corner and black and orange streamers drooping from the ceiling. Glen just walked away. It wasn't that he thought anything happened, it was the way they peeled their legs apart when they saw him. Glen turned on the threshold and wandered into the basement. He did three or four shots and got belligerent and she went home without him.

He has a blurry memory of grabbing Audrey Lévesque's butt while they were dancing in the basement after Margaret went home. Audrey was dressed as a ringmaster; she was wearing shorts covered in gold sequins. When Glen squeezed her ass the sequins ruffled and dug into his palm.

* * *

When Margaret left for the breakfast shift, Glen took their daughter over to Fred's. Fred had a two-bedroom apartment. One bedroom was a pen for his chinchillas. Glen left the stroller in the front porch next to a bag of garbage and a bike wheel. He held Lee on his hip on the way up the narrow stairs to the apartment, her short legs kicking gently on either side of his torso, a fist curled against his chest. Glen let himself in.

Susan, a girl Fred was seeing, was eating a bowl of cereal at the kitchen table in shorts and a sports bra. He'd met her before; she looked young to him. Lately everyone his friends were seeing looked young.

"This is your daughter?" She put the cereal down and came to stand next to them. Lee pressed her face into Glen's jacket.

"Fred's in with the chinchillas, I'll get him." Susan picked up her cereal and walked to the chinchilla room. Glen followed. Her shorts were too big for her. There was space between the waistband and her narrow hips.

There was a baby gate in the doorway. Fred was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the chinchilla room, rolling a joint on a slim, hardcover National Geographic book with a moon-rover on the cover. The chinchillas were rolling together in the corner, chirping.

"Oh my god, look at you, Dad! Hiya Lee." Fred stood up carefully, holding the book in front of him with two hands. He walked over slowly making sure the little mound of weed didn't shift. He cooed at Lee from the other side of the baby gate. Fall light was pouring through the window behind him.

"Are those chinchillas mating or what?" Glen asked.

“They’re friends, you never cuddle with your friends? Here let me out.” Fred passed Susan the book and lifted his knees high, one at a time to step over the baby gate into the hall.

He wheeled Lee’s stroller out on to the back deck. He’d let Susan hold Lee while he jogged down to the front porch for the stroller. He was surprised that it made him nervous to leave his daughter alone with Fred and his girlfriend.

Fred had an old computer monitor with an elongated back in the corner of the deck with the screen facing the sky. He’d smashed the glass, filled it with soil and planted a thistle in it. Susan had wrapped herself in a flannel jacket with a quilted lining and was sitting on the rail of the deck, her sock feet kicking back and forth in the air. The weed made her giggly.

“And how does mom feel about you smoking weed when you’ve got the baby?” Fred asked.

“Oh Margaret doesn’t care.” It was a topic he and Margaret avoided. As he inhaled, things were coming sharply into focus - the yellow that was creeping over the leaves on a branch that flopped over the rail of the deck. “Did I tell you I have a job interview?” Glen asked.

“You told me, you told me like three times. Oh! I’ve been meaning to tell you, I have an idea for you, about your new job.” Fred was tugging a cigarette out of a full pack. He handed one to Susan and one to Glen.

Susan was waving at Lee through the glass in the screen door but Lee didn’t notice. A dribble of bubbly spit was running over her chin. She needed to have her face wiped.

“Let’s hear it,” Glen said.

“We went to a meet and greet for Susan’s cousin’s graduation and they basically had photo collages with music playing behind them.”

Susan passed Fred the joint and he licked a finger and dragged it around the smouldering edge of the paper.

“Graduation videos?” Glen asked. From the deck he could almost see Margaret’s work. “High school kids have cameras on their phones. They have a million fucking photos of themselves already.”

“Funeral videos.”

The girl burst out laughing. It was before noon and the day was clear and cold.

“That’s very different than a wedding video,” Glen said, “I mean how would you market it?”

“You make pamphlets, you bring them around to the funeral homes, get them to pass it out along with the one on coffins, or even just leave it in the lobby. I think there’s a market for it.” Fred turned to the girl.

“Right now there is, in ten years the people organizing funerals will be able to make the videos but you could cash in on it now. The spouses of people who are dying now don’t know how to work an iPhone.” Glen noted how authoritative she could be.

“It could be your own niche in the company, get yourself promoted. Innovation, upward mobility. That kind of thing.”

“I don’t know that there’s a lot of room for upward mobility at LoveStoryMedia.” Glen was anxious to have the joint passed his way.

“Once you start bringing in that Funeral Video money there will be. I mean, you could do it tastefully is the thing.” Fred ground the joint into the rail of the deck. “That was dead.”

* * *

Glen found LoveStoryMedia on Craigslist. It paid better than minimum wage. When he arrived for the interview, Lydia Ramsey was waiting in the porch of the restaurant. She handed him a glossy business card. It was brown, with the company’s name surrounded by tapioca-coloured bubbles.

“Just so you know I’m not wasting your time,” she said. Lydia was old enough to be his mother. She was wearing a business suit with a rhinestone brooch on the lapel and a pair of running sneakers. They slid their plastic trays along the buffet, making small talk. Lydia Ramsey was a vegetarian. She’d just had her van in to be repaired and felt the mechanic had ripped her off. Glen nodded a lot. He lifted a ladle of wrinkled grey peas onto his tray. They stopped at the drink station and poured fountain drinks into plastic cups. Glen tapped the straw dispenser.

“This lunch is on the company, by the way.”

“Oh, thanks so much,” Glen said.

Lydia Ramsey dipped a chip in a puddle of creamed corn on her tray. “I feel good about this.”

“Thanks.” Glen was sawing through a piece of breaded chicken breast. The fork felt slippery in his hand. He was trying to pin the chicken down but it was skidding back and forth across the cafeteria-style tray.

Lydia Ramsey took a piece of folded up paper out of her purse and opened it beside her tray. She'd printed his resume out in lilac coloured ink.

"Right, you have a film degree from Ryerson, that's wonderful. And you'll be able to wear those pants to the weddings. You'll need dress shoes but this is a wonderful start."

Glen chewed a wet lump of meat. He was aware of the milky-shitty baby smell on his clothes. Lydia Ramsey had her back to the window and he could see cars zipping along on the road behind her shoulder. She dug another chip into the sloppy little hill of corn.

"The whole process is pretty straightforward. I'll get Wendy to give you a little run-through tomorrow. We'll have the Klein rushes then, so she can show you what we're looking for. The essential shots."

* * *

There were nights after Margaret went back to work that she came home sweaty and exhausted. She'd get into bed in just her underwear and curl into him. She would fling her thigh over his stomach and he would nudge her calf off his junk and rub her back.

He could drift off before she got home but he couldn't sleep deeply until she was home.

"They were so mean to me," she'd say and press her damp forehead into him. He'd smell the grease in her hair and grab a handful of her butt.

"Want me to slit their throats?" he'd ask, rubbing up and down her back and then slipping his hand down the back of her underwear.

“Yeah.” She’d clench the muscles in her leg and wiggle her stomach against his side, mashing her breasts into him.

“Cause I’ll do it. I’ll wait for them to leave the restaurant and haul them into an alley.”

“Do it.”

“Just say the word, baby.” He’d reach two fingers up into her.

“I’m saying it.” Her voice would be shallow from him wiggling his finger gently in her.

“As soon as you say it, it’s done. You want me to wrestle them into the alley and slit their throats for you?”

“Yes, definitely.”

And then he’d haul her on top of him and they’d fuck.

“Should I pull out?” he asked her sometimes. Sometimes he just pulled out but sometimes he asked. He didn’t even really know if he wanted another baby but when he’d been waiting for hours and then he heard the front door open and she got in the bed and asked him to untangle an elastic matted in the back of her hair and strip her out of her pencil skirt and nylons and rub her aching arches for a few minutes and they fucked - all of this very quietly - so they didn’t wake Lee up on the other side of their bedroom wall.

Or when she came home and Lee had been crying and he’d brought her into their bed. He’d lie on his side with Lee’s bum pressed into his belly and Margaret’s belly pressed into his back. Then he wanted more daughters. He imagined whispering to Lee about how her mom and new baby sister were sleeping upstairs.

Other nights they'd fight. About the state of the house. About whether the cartoon Lee was watching was too violent. About money, which bills needed to be paid and which could wait, about whether twelve dollars was an outrageous amount to spend on a steak, about whether Margaret should keep her flip phone or upgrade. About whether she would rather be sleeping with Rich Reid.

* * *

Glen parked next to a cart corral in the lot of a strip mall. There was a very early morning dampness that he had forgotten existed. Tiny beads of condensation were shining on the roof of a car that'd been in the parking lot all night. The sun slid down the hood of his car and gathered in a wide dent in the bumper from a time he'd nudged a fire hydrant while parking. Through the back window Glen saw a heap of crumbs resting in the seam of Lee's car seat.

There was a floral shop and a Price Choppers and a used appliance place with bars on the window. When he opened the door of LoveStoryMedia an electronic bell sounded.

There were blown-up wedding photos on the walls. The woman at the front desk was eating from a small container of yogurt. She turned her head slowly away from the screen. Suddenly her attention was focused on him. She waited for him to tell her what he wanted.

"Lydia asked me to come in this morning."

"You're here for a consultation?" She laid her spoon on the desk. He could see a streak of saliva drying on its curved back. She had a name tag with "Wendy" pinned to her sweater. Her fingers hovered just above the keyboard. She was framed on either side

of the reception desk by two cream-coloured ceramic vases with bursts of plastic lilies dusted in glitter.

“No, I had an interview. She told me to come in. ”

Wendy let anger play on her face for just a moment and then she reeled it back in. Glen stood on the bristly acrylic welcome mat just inside the front door waiting for further instructions.

“She should have let me know you were coming for training. Luckily, I’m doing one now. You can watch. Come around here.”

He stood close to the woman’s office chair. She had her legs crossed and was using the foot that was planted on the floor to make the chair sway back and forth. Standing above her he could see deep into her shirt, he could see where her bra met her sternum and a little roll of chub that the bottom of her bra rested in. She was leaning into the screen, an elbow on the computer desk, holding her bottom lip between her thumb and forefinger. Each time she swayed to the left, the padded armrest bumped against his thigh.

“See them breaking the glass? For a Jewish wedding you need that, but Jeff kept screwing around with the zoom. That’s an essential shot, so you just have to work with what the cameraman gives you.”

She had a lazy hand resting on the mouse. She dragged the cursor and moved backward through the footage. She unbroke the glass again and again, shaving seconds off the shot.

“What’re you? Christian?” she asked. There was a mini-fridge nestled under her desk and she tugged it open.

“Nothing, I mean atheist, I guess.”

“I mean what were you raised? Do you want a yogurt? They’re strawberry.”

“I wasn’t raised anything. My mom isn’t religious. We weren’t religious growing up.”

“I’m just trying to ask what type of weddings you’ve been to. Christian ones?”

She bent down and took the cookies out of the case.

“Yeah, Christian ones.”

“Ok, well those videos will be easier. You’ll just sort of instinctually know what shots you need. The Jewish ones will take time to get the hang of.”

* * *

When Glen thought about another baby he thought about just before Lee. There was a baby shower at one of Margaret’s friend’s houses. She took the truck and came back with five garbage bags of clothes. Some for Margaret and some for the baby, elastic waistbands for both of them. There was a stroller with rusted joints that creaked and snapped when they unfolded it in the hallway. Margaret dumped the bags out on the living room floor. He sat on the velveteen humpty his mother had given them. Margaret held up each piece of clothing for him before sorting it - a mound for her and a mound for the baby. A rattle fell out of a rolled-up jumper and bounced on the living room floor.

“We’re going to be getting used to that sound,” Margaret said.

Glen lifted a pair of pants out of Margaret’s pile and held them against his hips. He put his coffee down and took his pants off. Margaret was holding up a tiny coat by the shoulders. She didn’t notice him struggling to get the of his jeans cuff off his heel. He put the maternity pants on to make her laugh. They were spandex printed like acid wash jeans. Margaret dropped the coat in the baby’s pile. She sat on top of the clothes and the

heap spread out beneath her; she was laughing so much that she started choking. He joined her in their bounty. Stained terrycloth bibs with crinkly plastic lining. A monkey with jelly hands and feet for chewing on. They cuddled and burrowed until their shoulders were against the floor and the clothes were dunes around them.

He wore the pants to bed, his ankle hair curled up over the cuff. They left the clothes on the living room floor for two weeks. Partly because they were both working and they hadn't made room for it in the bedroom, but also because it was a shrine to what was to come.

There was also anxiety about money then. Vivid dreams about empty houses and menacing letters. After those dreams he would lie awake, sweating with a roll of comforter between his thighs. There was no undoing what they'd done. The weight of not knowing what you've taken on. Also the thought of the birth disgusted him and he had to keep his face from contorting at the sound of the word.

She got in the bath and he made them peanut butter and chocolate milkshakes in the food processor. They drank them out of beer steins, him sitting on the toilet with his jeans rolled up to the knee and his bare feet submerged in her bath.

"This is giving me an ice cream headache." The steam made her hair curly. Her breasts were huge and her belly was like an upside down mixing bowl; the water made her tight skin glimmer.

"That's how you know you're alive," he told her.

"I wasn't feeling confused about being alive." She kicked a stream of warm water at him, soaking his t-shirt and the crotch of his jeans.

He wanted Lee to experience the pre-baby giddiness. He and Margaret clinging to each other everywhere they went, two sets of hands on the steering bar of the shopping cart at the supermarket.

* * *

He had an office at LoveStoryMedia. There was a small rectangular window near the ceiling that looked out at the parking lot. He had never had an office before. He bought a springy young spider plant at the supermarket.

"I just sent you the rushes from the weddings we did this weekend. We'll go over them together, okay? Just get your email open there." Wendy was dragging her wheelie chair over the carpet into his office. She bent her knees and tugged on the arm to get the chair to bounce over the threshold. When she stood back up her skirt was all bunched up, a centimeter higher and he would have been able to see her ass in her tights.

He had a photo of the day they brought Lee home propped up under his computer screen. Margaret was sitting on the couch in her winter coat and Lee was in her car seat on the sofa next to her.

"Okay, here is a list of shots we always grab from Christian weddings." She held up a wrinkled print out. "I've checked their file and they don't want any extra stuff, a straightforward video like this is going to be about twenty minutes to a half hour. We're gonna start with the bride walking down the aisle. You just drag the clips you want into this file here."

He opened the video and an electric organ played out of the shitty little computer speakers on his desk.

"Okay, actually I like to start with the empty aisle, that's just my style, opening shot of the church. Tom usually does a scan of the crowd. Just select it like this. Sometimes you don't even have to watch the video, you can skim through it." She had pulled her chair up to his. Her arm grazed his chest when she used the mouse. She didn't say anything about the photo. Her arm moved up and down over his nipples and they got hard and he didn't think there was any way she hadn't noticed. He let his knee flop out and rest against her thigh.

* * *

Margaret's family were hippies. There was a naked photo of her mother in the bathroom of her parents' house. Glen secretly believed that was why she didn't know how to keep a house clean. Margaret was never encouraged to wear matching socks. They have a photo of each of them as children stuck on the fridge with magnets. He is standing next to a Christmas tree in a white button down in his photo. She is crouched in the mud with a half eaten Freezie between her front teeth in hers. This might be why she's such a flirt. Why she lets vegetables wilt in the back of the fridge and leaves her clothes on the floor in every room of the house.

Glen laid three chicken breasts slathered in barbecue sauce on the grill. There was the nub of an old joint in the front pocket of his shirt. He'd brought Lee's high chair out on the deck with him. It was getting to be time to switch to a booster seat; the tray of the high chair dug into her little belly. He pinched the roach to his lips.

When Glen was a little high his favourite thing to do was clean. He dragged Lee's playpen out into the hallway and washed the floor of the kitchen. Lee dangled a stuffed unicorn out of the playpen by a thick ankle and dropped it. He left the screen door open

even though it was cold and the smell of barbecue filled the house. He passed the toy back to her again and again. He squashed the mop against the bottom of the stove, spraying the bottom drawer with frothy floor cleaner. He smeared suds back and forth over the dried liquid beneath the fridge door. He thought maybe the fumes from the cleaner were bad for Lee's mushy little undeveloped brain so he pushed the playpen further down the hallway.

When Margaret got home from work she was starving. She ran upstairs to change and he brought the high chair in from the back deck.

"This is a feast," Margaret said. The three of them were eating the dinner he'd made in the clean kitchen. He nodded, moving some cut up pieces of potato from his plate onto Lee's tray.

"Are you high?" she asked.

"No."

"You are." She took her plate upstairs.

"Can we please have dinner together like a family?" Glen stood in the hallway calling up to the second floor. She turned the bath on.

Glen got Lee bundled into her coat.

"I'm taking Lee over to Fred's." He heard the slosh as she sat down in the bath.

Halfway there Lee had fallen asleep in the stroller and he didn't know if Fred was home or who else might be there so he turned around. The deep tiredness of having smoked weed in the daytime was settling into his muscles and the thought of making conversation with people, maybe people he didn't even know, seemed impossible.

When he got back Margaret was asleep in a t-shirt; her hair had made the pillows wet. He curled himself around her and put his cold fingers on her hot belly.

“I love you. I got that job, I cleaned the kitchen,” he said with his cheek on the damp pillow. She was asleep but he could tell he’d been forgiven.

* * *

Glen always answered the phone when Margaret called. No matter where he was or who he was with.

“I think I want to get a turtle,” Margaret said. Glen pictured her pacing back and forth in the kitchen with Lee on her hip.

“Okay.”

“You like the idea? I’ve wanted a turtle ever since I was a little girl, I mean on and off.”

“I used to want a lizard. When I was a teenager I wanted a really big one, like the kind that rides on your shoulder.” Glen has stopped at the lights three intersections from his co-worker’s house.

“Really? We could have plants growing in the tank.”

“Sure, listen I’m in bad traffic.” What he doesn’t want is to be parked in Wendy’s driveway talking to Margaret.

“Okay, I don’t have to work until the afternoon tomorrow, we could go in the morning, what do you think?”

“Okay but I’ve really got to let you go now.” The third intersection was a yellow light and he slowed where he normally would have glided through.

“Okay, I’m excited about this, I love you.”

“Love you too.” Glen pulled into a parking lot down the street from Wendy’s house. It was an older Shoppers Drug Mart, destined to be torn down soon. There was a dark section in the middle of the backlit sign and part of the parking lot was roped off in security tape. He laid some burnt CDs from work under the seat and locked the doors. He walked quickly down the block and rang Wendy’s doorbell.

She was wearing a cream coloured silk housecoat when he arrived and she kissed him in the porch. Her bare feet in the grime from other people’s wet shoes.

“My roommates are gone out.” She had noticed him taking in the sneakers and high-heeled boots that were tossed around in the porch. The house smelled like spaghetti sauce and there was a tinge of orange around her mouth but she tasted like toothpaste.

“Let’s go up to my room.”

Glen bent over and undid his laces. She waited on the steps holding the newel post while he took off his boots.

Her bedroom was almost empty. The gold painted feet of a lamp rested on an overturned milk crate next to a mattress on the floor. There were three overflowing hampers pushed up against the wall. Several reusable supermarket bags filled with stacks of books took up the centre of the room, their stiff handles sticking straight up.

“I don’t have it all set up yet, I need my brother to help me bring over my furniture.”

“You’ve got a nice big window,” he told her. She was working on a PhD so she couldn’t possibly be as young as the surroundings suggested, he thought.

She kneeled on the bed and opened her housecoat. She had on a bra made of some kind of mesh and electric pink underwear. He sat behind her on the bed and ran a finger down her spine before undoing the hooks of her bra.

“Can you turn up the heat? The dial is right there,” she said. “And shut the door, I don’t think anyone will come home but just in case.”

He began taking her underwear off with his teeth but in the end it involved both his hands and some hip-lifting and twisting on her part. When he dropped the underwear on the floor he noticed a mug with an almost dried out tea bag nestled up against the mattress.

* * *

He and Margaret got Lee from preschool on the way to the pet store. The preschool was in a church basement. It was a drizzly morning. Margaret waited in the truck while Glen went down the cool stone steps to the playroom.

In the stairway he thought about Wendy’s nubbly sheets, her plump breasts were very different from Margaret’s. He had sort of forgotten how different breasts could feel, all the variations in shape and firmness.

All the children were crowded around a plastic castle with a set of stairs and a stubby slide. There was a skinny teenage girl in khaki shorts and a baggy t-shirt sitting cross-legged on the small platform between the stairs and the slide. She was stamping each child’s hand at the mouth of the slide. He didn’t see Lee at first. She was carefully building a tower out of Jenga blocks, undistracted by the bustle around the castle.

Lee led him to her cubby and he helped her wriggle into her rain jacket. He used a pen tied to the attendance book with a piece of yarn to sign Lee out.

“It’s raining out there.” He tugged her hood up.

They climbed up out of the playroom and made their way across the wet pavement to where Margaret was waiting for them.

In the truck Margaret showed Lee a video of a baby turtle eating a raspberry on her phone. Its beak was able to nip only a tiny bit of the berry at a time. It slowly made a dent in the center of berry. It stuck its neck out further and further to get at the fruit instead of waddling up to it.

“So lazy,” Lee said, her head pressed against the sleeve of her mother’s rain jacket.

The pet store was in the basement of a mall in Chinatown. A very old man stood at the front desk. His bottom lip rested limply on his gums and his jaw was working in a jerky circle. His hands were in the pockets of a fleece vest. Glen approached the counter. Before he could speak a young man darted out of an office in the back and got between him and the old man.

“We’re looking for a turtle,” Glen told the man. The store was warm and moist and filled with burbling of many fish tanks.

“Baby turtle?”

Glen looked at Margaret who was holding Lee’s hand.

“Sure,” Margaret answered.

“Okay, right this way.” The boy led them through a dim corridor of fish tanks stacked on metal shelving. Glen paused in front of a pink-tailed catfish curling and uncurling himself, opening his fat, human lips for him. Lee tugged on his pants.

The baby turtles were in the back. There were about five of them crowded on a small rock, standing on each other's backs. The price was scribbled in permanent marker on the glass of the tank. \$79.99. Lee pressed her face right up to the glass of the case. The boy was holding a small net and a tank the size of a lunchbox with a plastic lotus flower floating in it. Neither Glen nor Margaret said anything about the price.

"Which one should we get, Lee?" Margaret asked.

The tank was shockingly expensive. The food was expensive. The plastic plants that suction to the bottom of the tank were twenty dollars each. You had to buy an enormous bag of stones to line the tank. They didn't talk about how much it cost.

"How long do these guys live?" Margaret asked as she slid her card out of the bottom of the machine.

The old man rested both hands on the counter while the boy told them how often to clean the tank and feed the turtle.

Their little family rode the elevator together; Glen had the huge glass tank; Margaret was holding the bag of tank liner so the heavy bulk of it rested against her chest and Lee held the small plastic tank with the baby turtle.

Margaret poured water into the tank from a jug they used for mixing up frozen juice. Lee followed her mother back and forth through her house on the many trips between the kitchen and living room.

Once the tank was full Glen placed a dinner plate upside down on the reflective bottom of the tank. He poured the pink and purple stones down on top of it so that they would evenly distribute across the bottom of the tank. It was a trick the man at pet store had described, to them and they marveled at the way the stones glided down the sloped

rim of the plate and into the far corners of the tank. After Glen lifted the plate out Lee reached in up to her armpit to smooth stones into the empty space it had left. Finally, they lowered in the plastic castle that allowed the turtle to spend some time sunning itself under the UV light in the tank. It was a glittery, baby blue castle with an angled turret that would allow the turtle haul itself up out of the water.

“He’s going to like this,” Lee said, staring into the world the three of them had created.

When he came back from tucking Lee in, he found Margaret leaning over the tank.

“I’m so glad we made this happen,” she told him.

“Do you think he’ll miss the other turtles?” Glen asked. “There’s not a lot going on in there.”

“He can watch us.”

The turtle stared out at them from his turret above the fresh new sea.

* * *

It was rare for Lydia Ramsey to be in the office. She was often at lunch with clients, asking them what they wanted the focus of their video to be. She had explained to Glen that some people wanted a video that strictly documented the wedding ritual and some people had a whole slew of other expectations, the bridesmaids getting dressed, the groom nervously smoking outside the hall, an interview with the flower girl.

“This is a business that flourishes through word of mouth, we have to go the extra mile, make an impression, be thought of as friends,” she told Glen as she shuffled through a pile of labeled flash drives with customers’ videos on them.

“Have you ever thought about a funeral video?” Glen asked.

“Is that something people are doing?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I think that could have a negative impact on LoveStory’s image.” Lydia dropped a flash drive into her bag and snapped it shut.

“I think there’s a market for it, think of how people fawn over the photo boards at a wake, it’s a way of remembering communally and we could do interviews, include home videos, it would be tasteful.” Glen’s voice had gotten louder than he meant it to.

“I want you to know I like hearing your ideas,” Lydia said. “I like that you’re thinking outside the box but I don’t think that idea is for us.”

* * *

Glen read that turtles like to chase small fish, it’s good for them, they’re hunters. He took Lee to Walmart and bought a bag of tiny glinting fish, partly just as a way to fill up a Sunday. He let her ride a tricycle back and forth in the Lego aisle for twenty minutes. He put her in the front of the cart and wandered through popcorn makers and irons and tried to think what he would get people for Christmas. Older women stopped them and touched Lee’s hair and talked to her about her dress and her mittens. Glen was glad that they were out being a part of the world.

He held the knot that kept the fish baggie shut in his fist on the streetcar home. Lee stood below him with both her small hands on a smudged pole. She watched the bag jerk above her head. A young guy with a lip piercing offered his seat but Lee shook her

head at him. Glen watched her be overtaken by a sway and a stumble each time the train stopped.

He undid the slippery knot and emptied the fish into the turtle's tank. Lee stood on a chair beside Glen at the sink as he scrubbed the slime off the castle with rubber gloves. He put the turtle in the small tank they'd brought him home in. He was afraid the turtle would drown if it wasn't able to climb up onto the castle.

"Why?" Lee asked when he threw the scrubber and gloves in the garbage.

"Because turtle poo is very dangerous to humans. We can't get it on our dishes."

When he lowered the turtle back into the tank it moved like something that was recovering from being turned to stone. As though moving was new to him. His tiny beak was fierce and when it closed on a fish's spine he snapped it.

* * *

Glen rode in the back of the LoveStory Media van with the equipment. The cameraman was driving. Lydia Ramsey talked to him from the front seat.

"Today you're a roadie. You carry stuff, do anything Jeff might want you to. Don't lean against the door, I hope you're not leaning against the door."

Glen tried to edge away from the door, but they rounded a corner and he slammed against it. The door flew open and for a moment he was halfway out of the van. A slur of blue sky streamed above him. The guy behind them leaned on his horn. Somehow, by wrenching his stomach muscles he was able to pull himself back into the van. For a moment he was on his stomach with his cheek pressed against the plastic rivulets in the floor. The door swung shut.

The Landlord

There were always ripped open sugar packets and smears of ketchup to be wiped up. They got wiped up with the same rags that were used to wipe crusted molasses off the top of the squeeze bottles they passed out with toutons. After using the rags Karen sometimes noticed a smell on her hands that reminded her of the way her belly-button ring smelled when it got infected. They always played Coast 101 at Family Restaurant. At the end of the evening shift Karen flipped all the chairs so their seats rested on the tables and mopped to hits from the '80s.

She hated being disliked. When the dishwasher invited her into the corner of the dish pit that couldn't be seen on the security tape to do a shot of Jameson's, she didn't feel like drinking; for one thing she was exhausted, but she did it to be likable. To prove her likability. When she went to sweep out the bathrooms she noticed her bangs were greasy and clumping together. When she got back she did three more shots and started feeling very likeable. A customer saw her pick an onion ring off his appetizer combo and eat it while the cook was arranging the cheesy fingers on the opposite side of the plate. She found herself making eye contact as she crumbled the rest of the onion ring into her mouth. There were breadcrumbs on the front of her shirt. She wiped them with greasy fingers.

"Go with it, take it," the cook was saying with urgency. She saw the customer lean in and tell his girlfriend about her eating the onion ring. She brought the plate to the table anyway.

“Can I get you anything else? A refill on your Coke?” She pretended she hadn’t seen him seeing her, hoping he would begin to doubt it had happened, hoping there wouldn’t be a TripAdvisor review.

He didn’t tip. But he also didn’t say anything after the meal, when she stood at his table while they waited together for his debit payment to go through.

She unraveled the twin scrolls from the debit machine and computer to do off the cash at the end of the night. The numbers were too small and blurry to manage. She would be in the next morning, so she sealed and dated the envelope with a blank cash sheet inside.

After the shift the head cook went home to his family, but the dishwasher and the line cook invited her out for drinks. They waited while she locked the door, lighting cigarettes, zipping their jackets. It was mild but raining. She was starving and dizzily drunk.

She noticed the landlord as soon as she got to the bar, but it took her a while to place him. The dishwasher ordered them beers and she ordered a plate of nachos for the table. You could hear the rain against the windows even over the radio. They took a booth, and she sat on the dishwasher’s side.

“We thought you were too normal at first but I’m starting to think you’re a weirdo like the rest of us,” the line cook told her.

The dishwasher ordered them a round of shots. A waitress brought them over on a brown plastic tray and laid them on the edge of the table. After they finished the shots, the dishwasher filled the small glasses with a flask he had in his pocket.

The dishwasher was a couple of years younger than her. His chef's coat was too small, his wide wrists always stuck out below the sleeves. Now he was wearing a t-shirt with a skateboarding logo on the front. His book bag was on the floor, under the table. He unzipped the front pouch and showed them a brick of tinfoil that he explained was really good hash his buddy had hooked him up with.

"Nice," the line cook said, tapping his shot glass on the table for the dishwasher to refill.

On the way back from the bathroom, where she'd been tussling her bangs trying to make them look less greasy, she realized the man at the bar was her landlord. Karen's aunt had gone skydiving on vacation in the south of France. As the helicopter blades beat the air above a field, the instructor pointed out a small corrugated iron shed to the left of the helicopter and told them not to look at it. One woman became fixated on the shed. Her inability to look away drew her to it. A sheet of iron grazed her leg on the way down and sliced her thigh apart, exposing the bone. That was what was happening to Karen: the eye contact was propelling her towards the landlord against her will.

"You're one of the girls from Fleming." He was sitting with another man.

"Karen." She put out her hand.

"Can I get you a drink? Rum and Coke?" He held up his own glass. "Let me get you a rum and Coke. "

"Greg, I've got to get on the go," the landlord's friend said as the landlord beckoned the bartender.

"She's a tenant of mine, on Fleming Street."

“I’d say you’re expected home soon,” the landlord’s friend said. He stood up and lifted his coat off the back of his chair.

She sat next to landlord in the seat warmed by his friend. She saw the nachos arrive at her table, a sheet of tanned wax paper sitting between the plate and chips.

“You’re a student?” He was younger than her father, definitely.

“Yeah.” She saw her coworkers look around for her before they started on the nachos.

“At MUN? What’re you studying?” He was wearing a golf shirt. The top button was undone and she could see his chest hair. She saw that there was also thick hair on his forearms and that was sexy to her.

“My major is in Religious Studies. You’re a landlord, I mean you manage properties?” She swivelled the seat of the stool.

“I’ve got a few properties around. One on Honeycomb, one on Whiteway, one right across from Brother Rice, and Fleming. My wife is a real estate agent.”

“It’s really raining out there now.” One of her waitressing lines.

“I’m just leaving, why don’t I drop you off? I’ve only had one drink.”

“Let me just tell my friends I’m leaving.” Her polyester work pants had got soaked on the way over. They were stuck to her skin in an uncomfortable way.

When she got to the table she picked a chip off the plate.

“Who’s that?” asked the line cook.

“My landlord.”

“You’re leaving with your landlord?” the dishwasher asked.

“I just ran into him, he offered me a ride.”

“Be careful,” the line cook said.

“He’s just giving me a ride.” She was ripping chips off the wax paper and stacking them on her palm, to eat in the car.

“I’d say you’re going to end up giving him a ride,” the line cook said. “He looks sleazy as fuck.”

“Whatever, let her go, she’s a big girl.” The dishwasher finished his beer. “Let’s do some shots and go downtown.”

In the car she felt drunker. She hadn’t eaten since three o’clock. She ate her little pile of chips. There were chunks of pale tomato anchored in the cold cheese. He had K-Rock on; it was warm in the car and she felt nauseous. When they pulled up outside her house he put his hand on her thigh.

“Should I come in and check the place out? Any leaks?”

“I think we’re all good.” She summoned coordination.

“Well, nice to get to know you. Call if you need anything.”

“Thanks for the ride.”

On the way to the front door the ground swooped beneath her. She lurched to the left of the door and steadied herself on the slick plastic siding. It was raining so heavily that water dripped off her nose and chin. Her keys were not in either of her coat pockets. He was idling, waiting for her to get in. She rang the doorbell before she started going through the zippered compartment in the front of her book bag. She rang the doorbell a second time, three quick rings in a row. She glanced behind her and saw he was leaning over to unroll the passenger side window. A bobby pin in the front pouch stuck into the

tender place underneath her nail and she drew it out of the pouch and put her finger in her mouth.

“Do you want me to take you somewhere else?” he called out the window.

“No, I’m going to text my roommate, she’s probably studying.”

She listened for footsteps inside the house but there were none. She shifted things in the front pouch and felt the key. She held it up for him to see and he nodded but didn’t drive away. Karen dropped her book bag on to the wet front step. She shimmed the key into the keyhole but it wouldn’t move in the slot. She wrenched it right and left but it wouldn’t move.

“I can’t get the key to turn,” she said from the step.

He turned off the car and got out into the rain. He took the key from her and as he turned it he rammed the door with his shoulder. It flew open and he stumbled inside.

“I’ll have to do something about that, it shouldn’t be sticking like that,” he told her as she entered the dark porch. “Maybe while I’m here I’ll have a look at the dryer really quickly. If it’s what I think it is, I’ll let Ryan know the part he needs and save him a trip.”

He drew back the curtain that separated the washer and dryer from the rest of the porch. Karen followed him in and flicked the light.

“This will only take a second.” He was jerking the washer back and forth to get it away from the wall. Then he leaned over the top of the machine to look behind it.

“Okay, see the tear in that silver tube?” He asked.

She hoisted herself up to see. When the edge of the dryer dug into her stomach, acidic liquid sloshed up her throat. There were huge swathes of dryer lint on the floor.

“See the tear there? That’s your problem.” Their hips were touching. She became aware of his hand on her ass.

“So that’s very easy to fix.” When she didn’t respond he squeezed her ass. She stayed leaning into the washer and he moved behind her and pressed his hard-on into her wet slacks. He slid his hand under her coat and t-shirt, reaching from behind holding her against him. Her hand clenched around his wrist to stop his hand from moving down her body. He had her pinned against the washer with his pudgy stomach.

“I’m going to bed now.” She made her body stiff.

He stepped away from her.

“Okay. I’ll let myself out, you get yourself some water.”

She waited in the laundry room for him to leave. When she heard the door she went into the porch and locked the deadbolt.

When she woke up, her gut was cramping from the liquor. She’d barely eaten the day before. She remembered that she had left the cash sheet blank and that she’d smoked two of the dishwasher’s cigarettes on the way to the bar even though she barely ever smoked. She was still wearing her work clothes. The taste of cigarettes in her mouth reminded her of biting into mouldy bread. She’d wasted at least thirty-five bucks at the bar. She remembered those things before she remembered being in the laundry room with the landlord.

When she peeled her pants off, the tops of her thighs were red and covered in small pimples from the clammy polyester. She wore tights and a skirt to work. She threw up on the sidewalk on the way, clear yellowish liquid and soggy chips that caught in her throat and made her cough. The sky was clear blue, the spring light was rimming all the

hard edges in gold. The earth was soaked and cold and ready for life to work its way up out of it.

When she got to work the line cook was doing prep in the kitchen. She turned the key in the cash register with her other hand against the drawer to stop it from making a noise when it sprang open. She didn't want to draw attention to the fact that she'd messed up the settlement the night before. She took the envelope with the blank cash-out sheet from under the tray with the float. Fleetwood Mac was playing on the radio in the kitchen and the line cook sang along emphatically with the chorus, fading into a mumbling hum during the verse. She ripped open the top of the envelope and tossed it into the garbage. The light coming through the wide window in the front of the diner stung her brain. She uncurled the reams of paper from the debit machine and computer. The dishwasher came up over the back stairs with the smell of cigarettes on him.

"How's it going?" she asked as he passed.

"Same shit different day." He didn't slow down on his way into the kitchen.

She bent over the counter, jotting the totals onto the slip as quickly as possible. It was all adding up perfectly.

When the front door opened she straightened, ready to say "I'm sorry, we don't open for another twenty minutes" but it was the owner. He had a cardboard box of lettuce and tomatoes. His teenage son was behind him with two bags of potatoes in each fist.

"Karen? You're in this morning?"

"Yes."

"Can you grab Len, to take this stuff?"

"Of course."

When she turned around to call out to the dishwasher, the owner laid the box on the counter.

“What’s this?”

“The cash-out from last night, I’m just finishing it up.”

“Why wasn’t it finished last night?”

The dishwasher came out of the kitchen and lifted the box off the counter. He stood for a moment taking in the conversation. The owner’s son laid the potatoes on the floor.

“I forgot about it, I’ll have it done in a moment though.”

“That’s not the point.” He picked up the torn envelope with the date in her handwriting. “You do the cash-out when it’s meant to be done, this is the time for prepping for breakfast, you need to get the syrups on the tables. Len, let’s move, I don’t have all day, there’s more in the trunk.”

After lunch service Karen changed the garbages. She lifted a sneaker over the garbage bucket and brought it down into the food scraps and coffee filters.

“Do you think there’s rats down there?” Karen stood at the top of stairs leading to the garbage alley.

“I know there’s rats down there. Ted’s in a foul fucking mood because of you, and I have to deal with him.” The line cook undid his bandana and put it in his back pocket.

“You saw one?”

“I saw more than one. When I’m down there having a smoke they come out and stare at me.”

“You’re trying to freak me out.”

“I don’t really care if you believe me.” He knotted his bandanna and took off downstairs without offering to take the garbage down for her. He normally took the garbage down. Even lifting it out of the bucket was a struggle for her. The bag was wider than her and came up to her waist. It was probably sixty percent wet coffee grounds.

She was always pissing people off by accident in this job. Or they were pissed off already and she provoked them by not knowing where things went or which lights to turn off at the end of night or that the French onion soup didn’t come with a side of toast.

She propped the door to the alley open with her hip, two hands wrapped around the knot in the top of the garbage bag.

“You got coffee grounds everywhere,” the line cook told her.

The bottom of the bag was torn and there were coffee grounds and putrid garbage juice smeared across the space between the bottom of the stairs and door.

“I didn’t mean that I didn’t believe you, I’m just scared of rats.”

“You can’t drag the bag, you better mop that up before someone slips.”

There was a clumpy trail of coffee grounds going up the stairs.

Alicia was always studying on the sofa in the living room. She hooked her laptop up to the TV and played episode after episode of *The X-Files*. She didn’t mind watching the same episodes over again. She kept her little weed case on the arm of the sofa. She would wrap herself in a comforter. Each time she moved, bottles of nail polish tumbled out of the blanket and thwacked against the floor. Alicia was often in the living room all day reading and making notes with the TV going. The sunlight coming through the window made the screen too dark to make out clearly.

Karen could study for only an hour at a time. She needed silence and she needed to be sober and she needed her room to be clean. But she would come down and sit with a book open in her lap as Alicia copied dates and definitions on to looseleaf. Eventually Alicia would roll a joint and Karen would have two short puffs and then make them both something for dinner.

She cleaned Darren Holloway's apartment twice a week for 100 bucks. Darren Holloway's deceased wife was a friend of Karen's great aunt. Darren Holloway's daughter lived in Alberta and emailed Karen the money.

Mr. Holloway was bald and tiny. Often when she rang the doorbell he didn't recognize her. She would be on the other side of the screen door and he would stare at her before pulling it open. She came on Fridays after her Women in Eastern Religions class and on Wednesdays after her Spanish conversation class.

"Hi Mr. Holloway, I'm here to help clean up and make some lunch," she'd say when he opened the door.

Karen did the dishes first. She started by stacking them up across the length of the counter. Half a week's worth of dishes: glasses in front closest to the sink, then mugs, plates and bowls, finally the crusty pots. She worked from least greasy to most greasy to get the most out of the dishwater.

"The cleaning has been a little overwhelming," he usually said as he let her in.

There was an armchair in the kitchen and he would sit behind her. Once the dishes were stacked in the dish rack she made his lunch. Usually pasta with tomato sauce from a can with orange cheese grated on top of it. Someone else bought the groceries.

She set a place for him, laying a paper napkin next to his knife and fork and filling a glass with milk. She sat at the opposite side of the dining room table as he struggled to wrap the spaghetti around a shaking fork. Usually by lunch he had begun to warm up and talk to her.

He had operated a metal detector in a Hershey factory in New Brunswick for six years. He scanned the boxes of misshapen Hershey Kisses; all the deformed chocolates were boxed up separately and sold in bulk for cheap. He only ever found bits of foil. Minuscule flecks. They still had to be removed, no matter how minuscule. He told her the guy who worked Tuesdays and Thursdays had been doing it for decades and had found screws in the chocolate and once, a filling.

“‘How’d you know it was a filling?’ I asked him,” Mr. Holloway said. “He was terrible at paperwork. It took him two shifts to do what I could get done in an afternoon. He had the place backlogged. You couldn’t read his handwriting. Who knows, can’t really trust a guy like that, a guy with no work ethic.”

“Did it smell like chocolate?”

“Yes, not as strong as you’d think but it was always there and you never got sick of it.”

The diner didn’t fire Karen; they just cut her shifts until she was only ever on call. The shift after the incident with the cash-out sheet, she checked the schedule taped to the cinderblock wall of the break room and saw that her name only appeared once.

“I guess Ted was pretty pissed about the cash-out thing the other day.” The dishwasher had walked in and caught her staring at the schedule.

She took her non-slip black sneakers out of her messenger bag. She could feel that she was blushing.

“Sharon is going to be out next week because of her son’s getting surgery on his jaw. They’ve got to fly to the mainland for it. Ted’ll need someone to cover her shifts. She might have asked for extra this week to make up for it.” The dishwasher was backtracking, trying to save them both from her embarrassment.

The line cook was chopping onions in the adjacent prep room and the break room was full of the raw smell.

“And you have another job anyway, right?” the dishwasher asked her.

“It’s not a big deal. I don’t care.” She took an elastic out of her coat pocket and pulled her hair into a ponytail; she cried easily from onions and she wanted to get out of there.

“I just came down to get my smokes.” The dishwasher held up his cigarettes and jogged up the stairs to go smoke out front before service.

Karen woke up late and decided not to go to Women in Eastern Religions. She walked to the store in the leggings and sweatshirt she’d worn to bed and bought a carton of chocolate milk. The air was warm; a fine mist was darkening the pavement.

Earlier that week her mother had told her she wouldn’t lend her any more money unless she passed all her courses. Karen needed three more courses to finish her degree, but she always dropped courses. She’d sleep in and miss a class and then when she went back she was disoriented. She hated floundering for an answer in front of the class. If she got a bad grade, she couldn’t face going back to the classroom knowing the prof thought

she was stupid, had judged everyone in the room, and found her to be among the bottom tier. She hated going to school in the first place because she would run into profs whose classes she had stopped going to in previous semesters.

To punish herself for not going, she spent the morning flipping through Facebook photos of people she went to high school with who had nice, well paying jobs. She sat on her bed in the saggy, slept-in leggings, drinking milk from the carton. She could hear Alicia in the kitchen making stove-top espresso and blending a smoothie. She waited quietly in her room for Alicia to leave because she didn't feel like talking to her. That meant she was late leaving for Mr. Holloway's.

Halfway there the mist gathered itself into fat rain drops. At first there were long intervals and wide spaces between the drops, but they multiplied and picked up momentum. When Mr. Holloway looked at her through the screen door, she was soaked.

"Hi Mr. Holloway, I'm here to do some cleaning for you."

"You're drenched." Mr. Holloway let her in and went to his bedroom.

She began sorting the dishes in the kitchen. Her wet socks left imprints of her feet all over the linoleum.

"Put this on and throw your clothes in the dryer." Mr. Holloway laid a pile of folded clothes on the table.

Karen changed in the bathroom. She looked at herself in the skinny full-length mirror screwed to the back of the door. She was wearing calf-length, custard-yellow, shorts and a polyester blouse with lace on the collar. A summer outfit belonging to the late Mrs. Holloway. It had the smell of baby powder on it.

Karen emptied her purse on the top of the dryer and put it in with her clothes. She peeled her socks off and threw them in too.

“Much better,” Mr. Holloway called from the living room couch when she came out of the laundry room in the dry clothes.

She scrubbed out a pot with crusted on oatmeal in her bare feet and billowy outfit. There was a branch pressed against the small window above the sink. She saw a bright green bud untwist itself into a leaf in the rain.

Karen was aware of the end of the month approaching but she didn’t check to see exactly how close it was. She had less than half of her half of the rent in the bank. She would get paid from Darren Holloway’s daughter in a week, but that would only get her three-quarters of the way there.

Karen was planning to make barbecue tofu to have with Alicia when she got off work. She took a dishtowel out of the drawer to press the tofu in and noticed a couple of ketchup packets in the drawer. Then she saw they were husks of ketchup packets. They’d been torn open and cleaned out. She could see teeth had ripped them and she thought the word “mice” just as she noticed the tail. There was a rat curled in the back of the drawer. Its tail was as long as the inside of the drawer and thicker than a pencil. It didn’t move. It didn’t have a pointy face; it had a flat chinchilla-like face and it was looking at her. She took her phone out of her pocket and called the landlord.

“Hi, it’s Karen from Fleming Street. There’s a rat in my kitchen.”

“Are you sure it’s not a mouse?”

“I’m looking at it right now, its body is as big as my sneaker. It’s just sitting there.”

“Is there any way you can trap it? I’ll come right now, I’m just around the corner.”

He normally sent a repair guy, Ryan. Karen was afraid to look away from the drawer. If the rat moved she wanted to know where it went. She turned around to get the broom and when she looked back the rat was in the front of the drawer and was sitting on its hind legs. She checked the time on her phone; she was going to miss Women in Eastern Religions again.

The doorbell rang and she had to leave the rat to open it. The landlord untied his shoes and left them on the mat in the porch, even though Karen had opened the door in sneakers with jagged salt stains across the toes. When they got back to the kitchen, the rat was gone. Karen saw the landlord noticing the pile of dirty dishes next to the sink. She was still holding the broom.

He took off his jacket and hung it on the back of a chair.

“This is the drawer here?”

“See the ketchup packets? I haven’t noticed any sign of a rat, I’ve had mice before, nothing was chewed up, rice or crackers or anything like that, I haven’t seen any shit around. Those packets were the first thing I saw.”

The landlord opened the cupboard below the drawer.

“There’s a small flashlight in the pocket of my jacket, can you grab it for me? We’ll try and find the hole and stuff it. I’ve got poison in the car. Do you have any steel wool?” The landlord was speaking from inside the cupboard, just his ass in light denim outside the cabinet. He was like the witch from *Hansel and Gretel*, half in the oven.

Karen reached in one pocket and found the flashlight. The second pocket had his wallet, a pack of cigarettes still half in the wrapper and his car keys.

“I’ve got the flashlight.”

He backed out of the cabinet on his hands and knees to accept it. For a moment he fiddled with the flashlight, twisting the front of it to make the scope of the light widen and narrow. She stood with her arms crossed a few feet from him. When he leaned back into the cupboard she took his wallet from his coat pocket and stuck it in the front pouch of her hoody. She folded her hands over it, pressing it into her belly.

“Yup, I think I’m seeing the hole. We’ll stuff that and see if it solves the problem,” he told her.

The landlord emerged from the cabinet.

“Do you have a beer? Just one, I’m driving.”

“I don’t.”

“We should talk about your plan for the rent. It’s going to be April before you know it and then you’ll have two months rent to deal with. It all adds up, right?” The landlord was pulling out a kitchen chair.

“I’m just going to use the washroom.”

She took everything out of the wallet and laid it on the edge of the sink. Seventy bucks in twenties and fives. Some credit cards. Gift cards to Mark’s Work Wearhouse and Kent. She put the wallet back together. He would know she took it. She slid the wallet into a folded towel on the shelf behind the door. She flushed the toilet.

When she came back to the kitchen the landlord was examining the window frame.

“Notice any leaking here?”

“I’ll have the rest of the money, I think I get paid on the twentieth. Definitely before the end of the month.” She stayed on the other side of the kitchen.

“Okay, if you don’t have the money by the end of the month we’re going to have to have a more serious conversation. Just come look at this window. “

She approached the window and he laid a hand on her shoulder and pointed at the frame.

“See the discolouration there? Keep an eye on that for me.” He squeezed her shoulder. “If there’s any leaking the whole wall could rot out.”

“Okay.” Karen shifted to get him to take his hand off her and he slid it down her back.

“I’ve been doing this for a long time, I can tell who might be late once or twice and who is going to fuck off in the middle of the night without paying me, leaving a pile of crap for me to take to the dump. I don’t think you’re the type to fuck someone over but I don’t want you to make a habit of lateness.” His hand was moving in a slow circle on her lower back.

“Okay, I’ll have it by the end of this month, definitely.”

“You must have got some fright when you saw that rat.” He moved his hand down again and cupped her ass. She stepped away.

“Okay I’m going to run down to the car for that poison. See if you can find the steel wool.”

“What if it didn’t go back in the hole and we trap it in the kitchen?” she asked when he came back.

“I’d say he’s back in the hole, he was probably as scared of you as you are of him.” The landlord was opening the poison.

When he left she took all the dishtowels out of the drawer with rubber gloves and put them in the washer with a splash of bleach. Her phone was vibrating on the counter; the words, “Greg landlord”, lit up the screen again and again. She put on a hoody and carried the old garbage that was piled up on the deck down the street and threw it in the alley. Rainwater from the garbage bags got on her jeans. She took the cash out of the long pouch in the back of the wallet. She stuffed the wallet with the cards still in it into the bathroom garbage, down into the used pads and tissues.

Alicia had to be at work in twenty minutes. Thai Express had just opened in the mall and the girls got takeout and ate in the parking lot.

“Did the landlord come by for the rent?” Alicia was wearing a black scoop neck dress with black tights under her winter jacket.

“I talked to him,” Karen told her.

“You didn’t give him the money?” The tail of Alicia’s braid dipped into her take-out container and she flicked it over shoulder.

“I don’t have my half together. But I talked to him about it. He’s fine with it.”

“I’m going to try and get you a job. One of the servers has an interview at the new place on the waterfront, so there could be an opening for a server. You should apply at that new place too.”

“I already applied there. They said I’d have more shifts at the diner when tourist season picks up.” She was struggling to keep a slippery noodle between the tips of her chopsticks.

“Karen, I don’t want to be a dick, but we’re going to have to take care of the rent before that. What did you do with my half?”

“It’s in the envelope in my room. I wouldn’t spend it, god.”

Alicia closed the lid of her take-out container and turned the key in the ignition.

When Karen opened the door for the landlord at the end of the month, she saw that his son was sitting in the passenger seat. He looked about five or six: he had a *Cars* book bag in his lap.

“I only have half the rent, I get paid next week and I can email it to you, do you have online banking?”

“I left my wallet here when I came about the rat. I called a few times.” It was the first hot day of spring, the landlord was wearing shorts and a sweatshirt.

“I haven’t seen it.” She had been ignoring the landlord’s calls for almost two weeks.

“This is the last place I had it.”

“I’ll call you if I see it.” She held the envelope with Alicia’s half of the rent and the cash from his wallet out to him.

“I cancelled all the credit cards but my license is in there.”

He took the envelop from her and tore it open.

“I’m going to be expecting the full amount next time around. The remainder of this month and next month’s.” He was looking at her breasts. She caved into herself, drawing her shoulders towards each other in the front.

He put a hand on the doorframe and leaned in. She backed into the dark porch.

“Next week is your final extension. I like you but I have to draw the line somewhere. I don’t want to have to ask you to move out.”

“I’ll have it next week.”

“Any sign of the rat?”

“I haven’t seen it.”

“Sounds like we got him. Otherwise he’d be into the food and everything by now. Make sure you put the garbage out on time. Keep the place clean. You don’t want him coming back. Okay, I’m gone, I’m taking Everett to a birthday party.”

The money coming from Mr. Holloway’s daughter next week would still only bring her up to half of what she owed the landlord. And then she’d be completely broke.

Alicia wanted to go to a movie.

“I can’t, I’m broke.”

“Please? I’ll pay for it. I made so much in tips last night, it’s ridiculous.” The girls were hungover; there was a bag of chips open on the couch between them. “There was this table of oil executives with company credit cards and they were buying bottle after bottle of wine.”

“How do you know they had company credit cards? ”

“I don’t know, business people have company credit cards. Usually, I guess.”

Alicia turned the bottle of nail polish remover upside down on a wad of toilet paper.

“I could pay you back.”

She and Alicia were getting fries at Dairy Queen before the movie when she saw the landlord across the food court. His son was walking next to him. The son’s cheeks were flushed, his winter coat was open, and he was wearing a hockey jersey. There was a woman with them.

“That’s our landlord over there,” she told Alicia.

Alicia turned around.

“Don’t look at him, I mean don’t be obvious, do you think that’s his wife?” The woman had on a puffy coat and she had short hair. She was younger than the landlord but older than them.

“I don’t care if he sees me, I paid my half of the rent.”

Then the girls were at the counter. They ordered the fries and moved to the side to wait for them. The landlord and his family were lining up at Buck Weaver’s. He was pointing up at the board. She couldn’t tell if he was ignoring her or he hadn’t seen her. At the counter the landlord took a new wallet out of his back pocket to pay for the sandwiches.

Karen and Alicia sat at a table in the center of the food court. They were sharing fries from a paper sleeve, dipping them in a paper cup of ketchup. The landlord and his family walked down the wide aisle between the tables.

“Hi there girls,” the landlord said as he passed them.

“Hi,” Alicia answered.

He didn’t alter his pace. He wasn’t embarrassed to see her.

Sharon's return flight was delayed and Karen got called in to cover breakfast/lunch service. She started her shift by collecting all the dirty rags in a milk crate to bring down to laundry station in the basement.

"Ted wants to see you in the office." The line cook passed with a stack of Costco cheesecake boxes in his arms.

She took the dirty rags with her and left them by the laundry station on her way to the office where her boss tabulated hours and did up the checks. Her boss's office chair was against the back wall and his beer gut was pressing up against the edge of the desk. He was wearing a grey sweatshirt and had stubble on his face. She stood in the door and he waved her in. There was a chair on the other side of his desk made of rusty metal tubes and two squares of lacquered plywood.

"I want to show you something." Her boss moved the monitor so she could see it. She leaned forward in the chair and a splinter of plywood dug into the bottom of her thigh. The screen was divided into four: the porch, the dining room, behind the cash including the register, and a bit of the line, and a bit of the dish pit, the back door including the laundry station. There was a date at the bottom of the screen, three sets of numbers in bright green divided by slashes. She was too nervous to work out what night it was. She was in the bottom square of the screen, standing behind the cash tightening her ponytail. She hadn't expected the tapes to be in colour.

"I didn't have a chance to go through this until last night." Her boss pushed a stack of files to the edge of the desk to make sure she could see the screen. "When some one doesn't do the cash that's a red flag for me, I go back and check the tapes. I don't want to assume the worst but I have to look out for myself."

He pressed a button on the screen and fast-forwarded through the night, making her speed around the dining room; wiping tables, running food, taking payments. You could see the line cook's hand laying plates at the edge of the line. In the sped up version of the night, the dishwasher walked back and forth like Charlie Chaplin with pans of dirty dishes in his arms. In the dining room customers' arms moved from their plates to their mouths like very hungry people in *Looney Tunes*. The top square with the backdoor stayed dark and static.

She was trying to remember when she started drinking. He flew past her stealing the onion ring with out comment. He hit the space bar and things slowed to real time. It was the end of the shift. She was filling the mop bucket with the hose from the dish pit. She let the hose flop on its springy coil. Her back was to the camera. Her boss froze the tape.

"What do you have to say about that?" He put his finger on the screen. She was holding a shot glass with amber liquid. "People drinking on the job deeply pisses me off. I didn't want to call you in to work today but I had no choice."

If only she hadn't stuck her arm out to the side like that or if she'd moved deeper into the dish pit. She couldn't take her eyes off the floor.

"We're done here. I'll send your check and T4s through the mail."

When she got up stairs there were people waiting in the porch to be seated. Her heart was pounding her chest. She wanted to leave but she needed the sixty bucks she'd make from the shift. The dishwasher made sympathetic eyes at her as he laid a tray of glasses on the counter by the microwave to be shined.

When she was cleaning the bathroom, Mr. Holloway sat on the couch in the living room with the TV on.

“Would you straighten the couch for me?” he’d ask when he finished his lunch. There were two crocheted blankets on the couch, mustard and burgundy pucks stitched together at their edges, one draped over the back of the couch and one stretched over the seat. Mr. Holloway hated them to be wrinkled but he didn’t have the flexibility to flick the blankets out over the couch and smooth them. When Karen made up the couch, Mr. Holloway got up and left his dishes on the dining room table.

Once he was settled, tailbone against the back of the couch spine curved out past the armrests, he entered a meditative state. He was barely able to hear or see the television but he liked it being on.

Karen collected the cleaning supplies from under the sink. With the bathroom door open she could see into Mr. Holloway’s bedroom. She had looked around in there before; on Fridays she usually washed the bedding. Mrs. Holloway’s jewelry box was still on the dresser. Karen lifted the lid a tiny plastic ballerina on a delicate metal coil sprang up, the first plucks of a melody were churned out before she slammed the lid down. She stripped the bed, heaping the dirty sheets on the floor. They had a small crucifix with a brass Jesus hanging off it above their bed. She pulled open the drawer of the left bedside table. There was a jelly eye-mask, probably belonging to the late Mrs. Holloway as well, and a Bible. The right bedside table had a chequebook in it. It fit into the deep pocket of her hoody with just a bit of the cardboard backing sticking out but she put it back in the drawer.

In the bathroom she used cleaning products they didn't keep at her apartment because of Alicia's allergies and what the chemicals did to the environment. She liked the way the bleach burned her nose. She loved grinding Comet into the bathtub and then swiping it away to make the bath glare white. You couldn't draw out that blunt, absolute white with the cleaners at her house.

