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It Takes a Lot of Lights to Make a City

By

Ryan Paterson

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature & Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2019

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It Takes a Lot of Lights to Make a City

by

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April 29, 2019

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ABSTRACT

“It Takes a Lot of Lights to Make a City” is a collection of short stories set in Halifax, Nova Scotia between 2010 and 2017, a period during which the city, long reliant on its heritage as the basis of its cultural identity, experienced a rapid shift toward modernization and urbanization. The characters of “It Takes a Lot of Light” experience forms of psychic displacement in response to the city’s socioeconomic transformation. These characters, including an unemployed university dropout, a social-climbing landscaper, and a middle-aged professional stifled by her retired husband, form a community of disparate individuals affected directly or indirectly by Halifax’s shifting economic landscape. This community is reflected in the structural approach to the short story collection; The six stories that comprise “It Takes a Lot of Lights” operate both individually, and as components of a larger unified work, linked by geography, character, and a recurrent focus on class disparity. This approach to the short story collection aims to explore the genre’s potential to function as a network of individual stories whose thematic context is transformed and expanded via their relationships with one another.

DEDICATION

To Fran Barnes and Greg Paterson.

For all your love and support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my parents, Fran Barnes and Greg Paterson, and my sister Stephanie, whose love carried me through the worst of it, and whose support encouraged me to pursue my passion.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The arranged sequence of “It Takes a Lot of Lights to Make a City” provides only one potential path through the collection. The present order has been designed to reveal key relationships among stories at various points in the sequence. The reader is encouraged to approach the collection in alternate arrangements, either initially or during subsequent readings, in order to discover unique relationships between stories that are not otherwise directly connected by the collection's linear sequence.

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HAD IT AND LOST IT

I started to go for walks in the evening. The doctor said it would be a good idea, that it would help clear my head. And at first, I took notice of the branches of beech trees reaching out over the roads, the evening sun filtered through their leaves. Sprinklers fawning over manicured lawns. Houses still and strong, newly renovated with stained wood siding and ornamental gardens. I'd never taken the time to admire West End Halifax during our two years in the house. Its beauty nearly brought me to tears more than once during those first evening walks, as if it had only bloomed the moment I joined it.

But a quiet came with the neighbourhood's stillness. I'd encounter a dog-walker, a small group of children playing in a yard, the cries coming from the soccer field a couple of blocks away. It was mostly quiet though, and I think that's what started to chip away at me. You can only look at the same trees and houses and sunset so many times before they bleed into the background. Then the thoughts come back.

This was one of those nights, after the thoughts had started rattling around the inner walls of my skull again. I walked a path that divided the back yards of two rows of houses, lined up perfectly. They never changed, never conceded to the passage of time. I found nothing left to look at, and my thoughts drifted back to the stuff I'd been avoiding at home, and all those duties that went with my job title, but weren't my responsibility anymore. A cat flickered in front of me like a memory and disappeared just as quickly. I froze and studied the wall of hedges it had shot through. Not even a dent.

The hedges opened into one of the backyards, the cat lay flat on the lawn and watched a mosquito dance in its orbit. I'd become familiar with this lean Siamese thanks to the posters

strewn on lampposts across the neighbourhood. These posters claimed it answered to its name, but that name had gotten away from me.

I approached the cat carefully. It glanced at me and returned to the mosquito. The insect made a sudden, lazy dive and the cat leapt with its front paws stretched upward. The mosquito slipped past and floated on while the Siamese sat embarrassed in the grass. I stooped over and moved in a little closer. It tiptoed toward me and shoved its head into my leg. I stroked it a few times and scooped it up. Just like that—I couldn't believe it. I kissed the top of the cat's head, brought the collar toward my face. The crown-shaped tag called him "Prince Charles."

I wondered how I'd forgotten that name.

A little girl wearing a frilly dress with frilly socks and her hair unevenly braided opened Prince Charles's front door. She squealed and called the cat by name. I handed him down and she squeezed him against her chest so his hind legs touched the tile floor. His front paws reached stiffly out toward me. The girl mashed her palm into his head.

"Bad Prince Charles!" she said.

I felt sorry for Prince Charles.

The girl's father stood behind her with one hand on her shoulder and the other on the door. I strained to smile at him. He didn't return the favour.

"Thank you," he said, like he was trying to keep it to himself.

I nodded and put my hands in my pockets. I didn't know what else to do. The girl glowed while Prince Charles grimaced at me like I'd done him a real disservice.

"I suppose you're wondering about the reward," her father said.

"Oh no, that's okay."

"Good night then," he said and closed the door.

The emotional peak of Prince Charles's rescue had come earlier than I'd expected, but I wanted to feel that again. I kept a constant eye out for posters after that, and if I saw a cat, I gave it a good once-over before carrying on. My walks began to extend well beyond my street as I searched for another one. A poster for a cat named Applejack appeared after a few days. A large tabby that sat perfectly upright in the photo, Applejack looked like he took himself too seriously. I hadn't devised a strategy in the days since finding Prince Charles, and it soon became apparent that I would only ever land Applejack by chance.

I struck gold four days later, casing a neighbourhood a half-dozen blocks from my own. The sidewalk ran in front of a dense line of houses with no more than a few feet between them. I heard the siren scream of two cats fighting and squeezed between two houses to follow the noise. A white longhair struck past me as soon as I came out of the crevice and into a backyard. Applejack remained in the middle of the green and yellow patched lawn, hairs standing straight as acupuncture needles on his arched back. I could tell he wasn't going to come along voluntarily.

I stripped off my windbreaker and hunched over. He hissed and bared his teeth. I called his name in the next best thing to a whisper and he hissed again. I got in close, lunged forward and caught him with the coat just as he turned to run. My knees landed first and slid. Then my face hit the ground. Not hard, but hard enough. Applejack broke free and kicked a clawed foot back at my cheek. He darted to the end of the yard, up around the side of a rock wall and into a row of trees. That's when I found out I wasn't alone.

A boy, twelve or thirteen, sat at the top of the rock. He wore a tucked-in button-down shirt and his legs dangled over the edge in brown corduroy pants and argyle socks buried in a

dirty pair of Nike trainers whose heels drummed the rock's face. I recognized him immediately, though I hadn't seen him since he was a toddler. Maybe he just looked like his dad.

"You're Rory Stillman's son," I called up. He didn't say anything, just took an unconvincing drag from a cigarette.

"I used to know your dad," I added.

"Who cares?"

I didn't really. Rory had always been something of a loser, and it sounded like his son had figured that out a long time ago.

"What're you doing?" he said.

I got up and tried to brush the grass and dirt off my pants. My cheek stung where Applejack had kicked me.

"That's Applejack," I said. "He's lost and I'm trying to catch him."

"For a reward?"

"No."

"Then why?"

"I don't know," I said. I had yet to let myself think about why I'd come to be standing in a stranger's yard, breathless and shaking with adrenaline.

"Come on." He stood up, brushed off his pants and pointed to the side of the rock wall. I did as he said and reached the top with more effort than I wanted to show. He dropped his cigarette, stamped it out, and turned into the woods. We followed a barely discernable path. I warded off branches where he passed through cleanly. We hit a fork about twenty feet in. The kid stopped.

"What?" I asked.

“Shh—shut up.”

I followed his eyes through the fog of brush. The second path opened into a small clearing, where Applejack sat licking his paw and tending to the cut above his eye.

“Give me your coat.” The kid took it and crouched down below the height of the lowest branches. Applejack watched him move into the clearing. The boy draped the jacket to one side and the animal took a defensive stance. Too late. The jacket whipped down from the side and swept over Applejack. The cat wailed and struggled, but the kid held tight.

He came back through the small tunnel of brush, cat swaddled in the windbreaker like a furious baby. Applejack’s ears lay flattened back but he didn’t have any fight left in him.

“That was awesome,” I said. “Sorry, I can’t remember your name.”

“I never gave it to you.”

“It’s just, I knew you when you were a baby. Of course, you wouldn’t remember that.”

“It’s Eric.” Applejack squirmed and Eric locked his arms. “You’re not some sort of creep, are you?”

“What? No,” I said, “of course not.”

“Okay, okay,” he said. “What now?”

I took this reunion in from the curb. A young couple answered the door with a lot of gushing and even waved down to me. Eric came back with a hundred dollars in twenties and the tooth-shattering grin of a model in an antidepressant pamphlet. I told him to keep the money. It felt good just to have shared my enthusiasm with someone else, unburdened by expectations.

“Wow, thanks!” he said. I took another look at those five green fingers spread across his hand.

“Actually, give me forty,” I said.

“What for?”

“A kid shouldn’t have that much money. And don’t spend that on cigarettes.”

I saw Eric again a few days later, his foot kicked up on a fire hydrant while he tied his shoe. He somehow managed to look both casual and deliberately posed. The cigarette dangled out of his lip, smoke lazily wafting from its tip. He’d become a veteran smoker in a matter of days. I hadn’t made half as much progress, either with the cats or myself. Eric caught up to me and blew smoke out of his mouth like a miniature newsman.

“I hope the Applejack money didn’t pay for that cigarette,” I said.

“I don’t even buy them. I take them from Chad.”

“Chad?”

“My mom’s boyfriend.”

I nodded. “That’s good then.”

“I used the money on this. Some of it, anyway.”

He held up the new addition to his ensemble, a navy necktie with small green schooners peppered all over. I must’ve smirked.

“What?”

“I thought your mom made you wear those clothes.”

“No. She doesn’t know anything about style.” He scowled and I put up my hands in self-defence.

“I didn’t mean anything by it. I just don’t know many thirteen-year-olds who dress that well.”

“First of all, I’m fourteen. Second, If I’m gonna be a famous mathematician, I should look the part.”

“I didn’t know there were famous mathematicians,” I said.

“Well I don’t know any famous cat catchers, do you?”

“Jim Corbett.”

“No one’s ever heard of that guy.”

I couldn’t argue with him. I hadn’t heard the name myself until I’d dived head-first into the trade. Since then, I’d channeled most of my energy into absorbing Corbett’s work, only to find out that little of his knowledge of tracking man-eating tigers and leopards translated to the house cat beat.

“Are you going to fill me in on how this works?” Eric asked.

“How what works?”

“Finding lost cats. Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

“No trade secrets,” I said, “we’re doing it right now.”

I’d become an expert at non-answers. Eric didn’t bother following-up, he kept pace with me and twirled an unlit cigarette between his fingers. We became business partners just like that, no contract, no handshake. I figured Eric was in it for the money alone, but I was happy to have the company—he made a good distraction.

“So you’re good at math?” I said. “That’s amazing. I always sucked at math.”

“Yeah, of course,” he said. “I actually have a test tomorrow.”

“Shouldn’t you be at home studying?” My words hung out in the air for Eric to gawk at. I may have been the first person to ever say something like that out of genuine concern, rather than authoritarian obligation.

“I’ll be fine,” he said to his Nikes. I navigated the sidewalk for both of us. We walked around and talked a little more, but we didn’t find anything.

Eric found me the next day before I’d even gotten started. He cut across the street, a rhythm of professional purpose in his step, hand fumbling around the pocket of his nylon jacket. He dug a piece of paper out and unfolded it.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” he said, prodded the paper and handed it over.

Missing kitty

TINA

Beautiful tortoise shell

BIG w/ green eyes

\$\$cash REWARD\$\$

The black-and-white photo showed Tina lying outstretched on a skateboard, one eye closed in a wink.

“*Cash* reward!” Eric poked the sheet again.

“Where’d you find this?”

“By my school.”

“It’s a little out of the way,” I said.

“You gotta go where the action is. Besides, I’ve got this place all staked-out.”

“You do, huh?”

Eric’s face was beamed with self-assurance. He must’ve been thinking about the money. Or neckties.

“You’re the boss,” I said.

Eric wouldn't tell me where we were going. "You have to see it for yourself," he said. "It's a cat goldmine."

He walked with confidence, and I let him take command. The houses got progressively smaller, more weather-beaten and less ornamental as we moved from my neighbourhood into his. They were houses for people to live in, not for others to admire.

Eric stopped at a power station surrounded by grass and a chain link fence. I counted a dozen cats laid out at one side of the lawn. Every one of them white, some with orange spots, and their coats covered in dirt. A small house just beyond the fence had three more cats in the yard. A sixteenth cat appeared from an open window and stretched out on the ledge. A middle-aged man sat just behind the cat and glared at me through the window screen. He had the look of someone who owns way too many cats. I barely raised my hand to him, more of a peace offering than a hello. He leaned in toward the window and lowered the blind.

Eric walked around to the other side of the station. I guess he still thought we might find Tina. One of the cats stood up when I approached the fence. It was missing one of its front legs and it hobbled up and rubbed its dirty white head against the chain. I knelt down and stuck my fingers through. It rubbed its face on them and let me brush off the dirt as best as I could.

"I think these cats belong here," I called out.

"At the power station?" Eric appeared from behind the station and walked along the perimeter of the fence to meet me.

"At that house," I said. "They've just spilled over."

He assessed the cats with a new eye. "That's messed up," he said.

"Anyway, I don't see Tina," I said. "Let's get out of here."

Eric assured me that we'd caught a hold of something. We spiraled out from the parameter of the power station, but night had settled comfortably into place without any trace of Tina.

I went two days without coming across Eric. He'd become an essential part of my routine, and I felt myself slipping away again. It struck me that I'd never come up with a reason to look for these cats. It felt like one more question I didn't hold the answer to. I was relieved to find Eric standing in the usual place the following evening. I hurried over to meet him, pushed myself to fall into our usual rhythm, with the hope that he'd pick up from there and carry us ahead.

"I thought we'd check out the area around your school again," I said. "You have to go where the action is, right?"

"Sure."

He took a couple of drags on his cigarette and flicked it carelessly onto one of my neighbour's immaculate lawns. He started ahead for the junior high while I pinched the cigarette between two fingers, dropped it through a sewer grate. I caught up to Eric but he didn't say anything or turn to acknowledge me. He kept on straight ahead, like he was trying to get away from something. It could've been school, or home—maybe something with that Mom's boyfriend he'd been skimming cigarettes off. I didn't want to intrude.

"Did you get your test back?"

"Yeah. I got a ninety-eight," he said, his voice low and tight.

"Way to go, man!" I clapped him on the shoulder but he didn't react at all, didn't even pull away. I reached for my wallet and took out the forty dollars left over from Applejack.

"What's this?" he said.

“You’ve earned it. I mean it, you should be proud. Anyway, I feel a lot better knowing you’re spending the money on ties.”

“Thanks.”

“Just keep it up,” I said.

The rest of the way, Eric stayed focused on the two twenty-dollar bills and I tried to take in the scenery. Eric’s school, a rotting white block teetering on its grey foundation, had little to offer in that department. Graffiti framed the steel front door and a crack in one of its windows traced an ornate pattern. Kids played basketball on one side of the building.

“Where should we start?” I asked. A shot rattled the backboard. Eric took a loose cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it on the third strike. He let the cigarette burn between his fingers.

“What’s up, Eric?” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Is everything alright?”

He started to bring the cigarette toward his mouth, stopped short and searched for something in its ember.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” he said, “but I heard you lost it.”

I froze. A few steps later Eric stopped too. He turned back toward me, body tense, like he needed to be ready to take off at any moment.

“Lost what?” I said.

“I dunno. Your mind, I guess.”

I started to walk again. I didn’t have a clue how he would’ve heard this or who from. I felt betrayed without the first clue who to blame. There was only this kid.

“It’s not like that,” I said. “It’s stress leave.”

“What happened?”

“Too many things, all at once.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not having this conversation with a ninth grader.”

“That’s not fair!” Eric protested. “Every day you ask me all sorts of questions about school and I go on answering them. You never tell me anything. Then when I ask you one question, you act like a prick.”

He took three straight drags from the cigarette.

“What do you smoke for?” I said. “What the hell’s the point? You don’t even inhale.”

“I don’t wanna get lung cancer.”

“Just don’t do it then. At all.”

He tossed the cigarette and picked up the pace. I hurried to keep up. I didn’t know what else to say, but I couldn’t let him get away without settling things.

“We’re not talking about me today,” he said.

“It’s none of your business,” I told him. We kept walking, Eric at a quick pace and me struggling to stay in rhythm.

“I gotta go,” he said. I reached out to grab hold of his arm and had to stop myself. His gait picked up and then he started to run. He sprinted across the street, up to the end of the block, and disappeared around the corner.

I wasn’t in the mood to walk anymore, let alone look for a goddamned cat.

I stopped going for walks, avoided going outside at all. I slept late and sat around the house. If my wife asked me to rearrange the living room or tighten the legs of the dining chairs, I'd do it without saying a word. Without asking why or explaining the different ways I could approach it. She asked me to watch Ben one night and all I could say was, "Okay."

"I need to run some errands before his birthday party tomorrow."

"Okay."

"My parents arrive tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay."

I sat at the desk in my home office and fed papers into the groaning mouth of a shredder. I needed to destroy any record of my past life.

"I'm going back to work next week," she said.

"I know."

I fed another bunch of sheets into the shredder, felt it pull them out of my hands and cut them into perfect strips. Chloe leaned up against the door frame and let a sigh escape. I longed for her. Not for us to go back to the way things were, but for us to become the thing we'd imagined when we planned a life together.

"Do you want my mother to come watch Ben while I'm at work for a while?" She asked. "Just at first, so you can keep working on feeling better."

"It'll be fine," I said, but I didn't know whether it was true. I wasn't sure I'd ever really tried to get better, and Chloe wasn't convinced either. That's what this babysitting thing was all about: a try-out at fatherhood. I didn't like the idea, but I didn't blame her.

I sat cross-legged on the living room carpet in front of Ben, all segmented by the mesh wall of his playpen. He turned one tomorrow. He waved his teething ring at me with a baby's

stilted movement. Seeing him through the mesh seemed unreal, like watching him on a TV with bad reception. I leaned forward and reached a finger into his free hand. It was such a tiny hand.

“How are you doing, buddy?” I asked.

He didn’t know what to think of me. I didn’t know what to think either. I’d been on stress leave for almost two months and the only thing I’d figured out is that you can step away, but you can’t leave everything behind when you do. It seeps into the crevices of your life, can appear in the form of a burst pipe, or your neighbour’s new car. This realization hadn’t made coping any easier.

The doorbell rang three times. I took a deep breath.

“I’ll be right back, buddy. Hang tight.”

I grabbed the baby monitor and headed down the hall. The bell rang twice more on my way down the hall. I opened the door to find Eric under the porchlight. His clothes dirty, shirt untucked and draped out, sleeve upturned, pants torn at one knee. His hair a mess, with dirt caked on his left cheek.

“How come you’re not out walking?” he asked before I could speak.

“My wife had to run some errands, so I’m watching my son tonight.”

That practically winded him. He drew a long breath.

“I thought maybe you were still mad at me,” he said.

I didn’t know if I was. I gave it a bit of thought.

“No, not at all,” I said. “What happened to you?”

“It was Tina. I saw her over by my school. I went after her, but I tripped and fell down this dirt hill. It was pretty steep.”

“It must’ve been. Are you okay?”

“Man, you shoulda been there. We woulda caught her for sure.”

He took a step backward, turned around and sat down on the front step. I stepped out and sat beside him. It was the farthest outside I’d ventured in three days and the stone tiles felt cold under my bare feet. I sat the monitor beside me. Eric clutched his arms and winced. I should’ve been there to help. If I hadn’t been sick, I might’ve been able to do more for him.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yeah, I just need to sit for a minute.”

I let him catch his breath. It hadn’t been dark long, but my street had already settled down for the night. Cars slept in driveways or garages, basketballs rooted into front lawns, the dim glows of kitchen lights barely reached front windows.

“So, you have a son.” Eric said.

“Ben. He’s going to be one tomorrow.”

“Huh.”

“Sorry,” I said, “I guess I forgot to mention him all those times I wasn’t talking about myself.”

Eric nodded, thinking hard about what to say next.

“Is that why you’re on stress leave?”

I wanted to ask him how he’d heard that thing in the first place—that I’d lost it. It didn’t really matter—it was true in a way, even if that wasn’t a term the doctor had ever used.

“Sorry,” Eric said.

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “It is one of the reasons, a small one—probably the smallest. Really, it would’ve been exciting if it weren’t for the rest of the stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Work mostly. I don’t know. I did everything right—the way I was supposed to. Everyone agreed, my parents, my coworkers. My wife. But it didn’t feel right to me. It still doesn’t, to be honest.”

“Does this happen a lot—like, adults realize they’re screwed up?”

I thought about Rory for the first time since the day I’d found Eric sitting up on that rock. There’d been something in his face that I connected to his father right away. Now that I’d gotten to know Eric, I had a hard time finding anything of Rory in him, even the bare genetic minimum.

“I think so,” I said. “I mean I wouldn’t be surprised.”

He mulled it over and rubbed the dirt off his face, tucked in his shirttails and turned his sleeve down.

“Maybe you’re doing better than you think,” he said.

“I don’t know about that,” I said. “But you’re right in a way. Maybe I could be.”

We stayed like that for a while, sitting on the edge of the porch.

“I quit smoking,” Eric said.

“That’s great. You’re too smart for that stuff.”

Ben started to cry inside. My heart rate shot up, but I tried to take it easy in front of Eric.

“Come in for a minute,” I told him. “You could use a glass of water.”

Eric didn’t get up, he tugged at his clothes.

“I don’t want to make a mess of your house.”

“It’s fine, come on.”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“I’ll be right back,” I said. I went in past the door—I didn’t even stop to close it. Ben turtled at the edge of the playpen, fingers tangled in the mesh. I freed his hand and took him in

my arms. Tears streaked down his reddened cheeks, snot glazed his upper lip. I wiped away what I could.

“Hey buddy, everything’s alright.”

I breathed as fast and heavily as Ben, held him tight and felt his head lift and fall against my chest. I panicked trying to think of what to do. It wasn’t until I started to pull at the clasps on his onesie that found him staring up at me, no longer crying. His breathing levelled-out and the panic left his face. It seemed like a miracle, I didn’t understand that my son had any reason to want to be near me. I stayed holding him that way for a few minutes, just to make sure.

The front door was still open, but only the baby monitor sat at the edge of the porch. I took Ben out on the walkway and saw Eric head up toward the end of the street, hands stuffed in his pockets. He kicked a pebble and then chased it and gave it another kick. I would’ve had to yell to get his attention, so I let him go. I sat down on the edge of the porch and held onto Ben, the two of us lit only by the porchlight. The warm night breeze gripped my shoulder.

“Looks like it’s just you and me, pal,” I said.

Chloe would be home soon. We’d be fine until then.

MAN OF THE PEOPLE

The first truly cold day of the year, but Kyle walked at a clip down Barrington, no hat, no gloves, no scarf. He still had on the windbreaker that had carried him out of the cool summer evenings and through early fall. Kyle had never paid attention to a thing like the weather forecast, and if he'd ever dressed for an occasion, must've been long before I met him.

Kyle only came to the bar after the lunch rush, and only to see Adam. He didn't spend money—never had any money to spend—but he didn't bother me the way he did the rest of our staff. The regulars huddled around inside didn't have any opinion of Kyle, and reacted to his entrance by drawing their faces closer to their beers, or turning away to stare at a neon Budweiser sign that they already knew by heart. Kyle shook off what was left of the cold and took up a stool between a retired social studies teacher and a guy who was either a Pepsi deliveryman, or had dressed up as one for Halloween and every day since.

Adam filled a pint glass and put it in front of Kyle, who didn't nod or say thanks. He just tossed-out the same hangdog look Adam got from every guy who asked for one more on his tab.

"I need to borrow some money," Kyle said. "Just twenty dollars this time."

Adam always gave Kyle the money, but he liked to see him earn it with a moment of anguish, when it might've seemed like Adam's goodwill had finally dried up.

"Come on," Kyle said.

"Alright, alright. I think there's a twenty in my jacket pocket. Go check."

Kyle walked downstairs to the office. In one of his more prideful moments, he told me he could work at the bar. In the kitchen, behind the bar, serving tables. He was flexible. He'd have assured me he could do the accounting if he'd thought to mention it. For whatever reason, he'd never been asked. I'd been able to come up with a reason or two right then and there, but I

happen to be an expert of what you might call self-restraint. Instead, I made an empty-handed gesture, like I would help if I could. Never mind that I do the hiring, and we had an opening or two filled by sparkling faces only weeks later.

Adam accepted Kyle's crooked ambition—even indulged it—but he and Kyle had been friends since childhood, and Adam could still recall a time when parents and teachers uttered Kyle's name and the word 'potential' in the same breath.

Once Kyle had pillaged Adam's pea coat, he straightened it out and admired it. It was one of those real-deal replicas with the anchors on the buttons and everything. A coat like that could do a lot of heavy lifting for him, and he went back to the bar wearing it like it had always belonged to him. He felt good. He had the confidence of a man with twenty dollars in his pocket.

"You look like you found everything alright." Adam said.

"Yeah, thanks," Kyle said, "you can add it to my tab."

Kyle's tab was tacked onto the side of the register. Long as a grocery bill, it draped down into the crevice between the bar counter and the big beer fridge. Adam kept it out in the open to shame Kyle and discourage him from adding to it. That worked for a month or so, until it settled in as a standard part of the lending process.

"You might think of getting a job, start paying this down sometime in your future. I could've paid off both our student loans by now."

"I'm looking, you know that. I can't just get a job as a telemarketer and hock insurance to stay-at-home moms and retirees all day. I've got principles."

"That right?"

"Yeah, I'm a man of the people."

"A man of the people." Adam said.

It's an old bartender trick: repeat a drunk's words and hope they realize how stupid it sounds coming out of someone else's mouth. Kyle wasn't drunk, but sobriety never seemed to get in his way.

"That's right," Kyle said. "Anyway, I think I need to borrow your jacket."

"I noticed. What exactly are you up to?"

"I don't want to jinx it," Kyle said. "I'll tell you about it tomorrow."

Kyle held his balled-up windbreaker out over the bar. Adam appraised the situation, tried to determine whether his sympathies extended to walking around freezing like a fool. He would've liked the answer to be no—thought maybe it was, until he found himself reaching over the threshold, clutching Kyle's bundle of nylon. Kyle thanked him, checked the clock and announced his departure. Today was a rare occasion when he had somewhere to be.

Barrington Street, a desert of concrete, brick and glass. This was before the city had taken a crack at remaking itself, back when anyone who could've saved the city skipped town for Toronto or Montreal or Calgary, and took their ambition with them. Downtown had withered and nearly died. The shop windows that lined Kyle's path had nothing in them but the reflection of the occasional passerby.

Kyle had a coffee date with a girl named Iris, who'd been within such-and-such a radius of his phone at such-and-such a time. He'd laid on whatever dormant charm he had in his reserves and managed to get an afternoon coffee date. A small victory, but he'd take it. Besides, coffee suited his financial situation just fine.

Kyle's palms started to sweat as he crossed the street toward Starbucks. The pea coat felt like the inside of a humidifier. He punched the buttons out and invited the cold air. He couldn't feel the cold, couldn't feel anything but the intense heat coming from deep inside him. He stood in

front of his hazy reflection in the picture window. He didn't look like himself, he looked like a guy who owns a pea coat and goes on coffee dates. Then he saw through himself and into the coffee shop. Iris sat in a booth lining the left wall, so peaceful in her solitude that he hesitated to disturb her, the way you might a deer grazing in your yard on a misty spring morning. He could walk away, be twenty dollars richer—twenty dollars closer to making rent or buying special dietary food for his cat. But then nothing else would have changed.

He pulled himself inside. Diffuse sunlight sifted in through the windows. The light had an inexplicable density, and Kyle had to force his way through to reach Iris. He couldn't rouse his vocal chords enough to produce anything like an introduction. He slid into the other side of the booth and waited. Iris finished pecking at her phone with her thumbs, then gave him the once over and confirmed the details.

“Well, you look like the guy, anyway.”

“I am the guy—I'm Kyle.”

“Nice to meet you, Kyle.” She tossed him the kind of smile that let you know she'd figured out all the angles in advance.

“Can I get you something?” He gestured toward the counter with his elbow. His hand squeezed the twenty in Adam's coat pocket. She asked for one of those six-dollar espresso concoctions. Soy milk, cinnamon, no whip cream. He put some lids on the cups and met her back at the booth with two hot drinks and a pair of cookies. She set her phone face-up on the table like a winning hand. The screen flickered then went to black. Kyle laid his phone down too. The phones lingered on the table like matching threats, as if to let each other know that they could find a replacement date in seconds. Probably someone in this very room.

“How’s it going?” Kyle said just to break the silence. The bravest thing he’d done all week.

“Alright,” she said. “The last week or so has been hectic. It’s a relief just to get the chance to sit down and catch my breath.”

“Oh, is it work or—”

“I should be so lucky,” she said. “Actually, I’m leaving for Toronto in a week.”

“Going on a trip?”

“Of the one-way variety.”

“How come?”

“I really don’t want to, but I haven’t been able to find a job here, and my dad has one all lined up, begging me to go back for it.”

“You’re from Toronto?”

Iris leaned forward and dropped her elbows on the table.

“You brought a lot of questions with you today, Kyle.”

“I guess I’m not used to talking about myself,” he said.

“Not much of a salesman, eh?”

“Never. Had a job selling small kitchen appliances once—coffee makers and blenders and that kind of thing. They mostly sold themselves, and the ones that didn’t weren’t being sold by me.”

“That’s okay, I didn’t come here to buy a blender.” Iris smiled a real smile this time—the kind that pinched her eyes shut for a half-second. She leaned back in the booth, palm open on the table. That hand alone, its slender fingers and cross-hatching creases held the warmth he sought. But Kyle couldn’t figure out her game—the schedule tight for a budding romance.

“Why did you wanna meet for coffee? I mean, if you’re leaving in a week—”

“Let’s say I liked your face—it’d look good on a postcard. Just because I’m leaving, doesn’t mean we can’t be friends.”

Her phone flickered again. His did nothing but lie there.

“But why me?”

“Sorry Kyle, I can’t help you there. It’s your job to convince me I should follow-through on the good feeling I had about you.”

Kyle couldn’t think of the last time he’d talked about himself. He regretted everything that had brought him to this point, from the time he’d downloaded the dating app to just now, when he’d disrupted Iris’s serene isolation. He even regretted the time Kimberly Price had leaned across the aisle of his first-grade classroom and pecked him on the cheek, and he’d realized he liked that feeling.

“How about this,” she said, “I’ll throw you a bone and go first. I couldn’t have told you the first thing about this town five years ago, but my dad went to university here, and felt like I should do the same. He studied civil engineering and felt like I should do the same. So here I was, in a town I never cared about, not feeling like my own person. But this city opens up to you. I got to do the whole university thing here. I grew up here, you know?”

“I’ve lived here my whole life,” Kyle said, “save for a camping trip in PEI when I was eight, and the occasional visit to my grandparents’ in Saint John. This is the biggest city I’ve ever seen. Toronto—I can’t even imagine.”

“You didn’t think about going away for university?”

“It didn’t seem possible at eighteen, my mom didn’t even let me to take the bus downtown in high school. I did go to Saint Mary’s for a couple of years, even had a scholarship, but half my high school was there.”

“A scholarship, huh?”

“Believe it or not, I was once considered a great beauty,” Kyle said.

“What do you do now?” Iris asked. “Since the blenders started selling themselves.”

“I’m between things.” He scuffed his shoes, flicked at the lid of his coffee. “Like you said, it’s a rough go.”

“I know, I know,” she said, “but it can’t all be grim.”

“I guess so. I have some good friends—guys I’ve known since I was a kid. You don’t get that unless you stick around a while. Let’s see, I’ve got a cat—”

“See? A cat is good.”

“You don’t have cats in Toronto?”

Kyle might have some charm buried somewhere inside after all. Iris took a sip of her drink and turned her palm toward the ceiling.

“Hey, you get to live on the ocean at least. There’s nothing like it.”

“The ocean? I don’t even notice it anymore. It’s like any other stranger you’d walk past on the street.”

“Aren’t we jaded,” she said. “The ocean and I have known each other five years now and we’ve never had a disagreement.”

“I’m happy for you two, really, but Toronto sounds pretty cool.”

“Find me a job by next week and Toronto’s all yours.” Her phone blinked. “Oh shit, I have to go, I’m supposed to have my car at the garage in five actual minutes.” She started to pull her stuff together, throw on her coat.

“I guess you had high expectations for our date, huh.”

“Don’t go soft on me now, Kyle. See me out, will you?”

Iris started for the door. She hadn’t touched her cookie, so Kyle stuffed it in his pocket and joined her outside.

“I love this dirty town,” she said.

“So I’ve heard.”

She turned and took stock of him.

“I’m going out with some friends tonight, Kyle,” she said, “and now that the two of us are friends, I really think you should come.”

He had his hands in the pockets of Adam’s coat. He stood as straight as he could and lifted his shoulders.

“I can probably do that.”

“I hope so. Call me around seven. I should know the plan then.”

Kyle liked the way she made him feel—like a different person than he’d been in a long while. He dug into the coat pocket and counted the change in his hand. Three bucks—not even enough to get a slice of pizza. A Sterling Hayden lookalike sat on the corner with a paper cup between pointy knees. Kyle bent over and dropped the change into the cup.

“God bless you,” Sterling said.

“Yeah, you too buddy.”

Kyle basked in the warmth of his own charity. He'd need to do some fundraising of his own. Adam would understand.

Kyle wandered back the way he'd come. His windbreaker a red flash in the shadow of the colossal church at the corner of Barrington and Spring Garden—the one tourists always clog up the sidewalk to take photos of. He darted across the street and almost got polished by a Lexus SUV. The driver punched the horn and brought him to Adam's attention.

"I ought to keep you on a leash," Adam said.

Kyle checked the street to make sure his body had made the trip to the sidewalk.

"Hey man, I was just looking for you."

"I suppose you wanted to congratulate me on a lifetime of good deeds."

"You know I never do this but I need to borrow some more. Sixty would be okay."

"Eighty dollars in one day—are you nuts?"

"This is a one-in-a-million chance. It's a chick—"

"I don't even have sixty dollars. I don't get paid until Friday."

Kyle narrowed his eyes, scoured Adam's face for some glimmer of charity. Adam held out his open palms.

"Oh," Kyle's lip quivered. "You should've seen her man. She was beautiful."

"I hear the Northern Lights are beautiful too. Come on, I have enough to get you a burger."

Adam started downtown. Kyle caught up.

"Can I get a beer too?"

"Of course," Adam said. "I'm getting one."

They found a table by the window and the server, Samantha, came by with the menus. Adam smiled at her from the side of his mouth and ordered a beer. Kyle delivered his order to the window.

“He doing okay?” Samantha said.

“Sure,” Adam said, “he’s just having one of those life experiences.”

Samantha nodded and got out of there. Half her customers came in under the same conditions, she preferred not to be party to another one.

“This is all a little melodramatic, no?” Adam said. Kyle offered Adam an empty expression he must’ve picked up from the window pane, mouth as tight as the municipal budget.

“Look, I’m paying for you to eat. At least afford me the pleasure of your company.”

Adam prodded Kyle with his menu. “What do you want?”

Kyle flapped it open but didn’t do it the courtesy of a glance. “I think I’d like to settle down,” he said.

“Settle down?”

“Yeah, like with a family.”

“Settle down with a family,” Adam said. “You don’t even have a job.”

“A job isn’t everything.”

“It is, however, one of the primary ingredients in ‘settling down’. What’s the big deal with this girl?”

“Her name’s Iris.”

Samantha came back with the beer and Kyle clammed up. Adam ordered and said thanks. Kyle eventually ordered the steak sandwich and handed her his menu.

“Don’t you ever have a good feeling about a girl?” Kyle said in the next best thing to a whisper, hands merging with the table. “I’m not talking about love at first sight here—but—you know.”

“Sure I do, several times a day.” Adam gestured to where Samantha had just stood. “But I don’t drop a diamond ring in the first cup of coffee I hand them.”

“You don’t get it.”

“I do get it, actually: You drank coffee across from an attractive woman and now your human brain is full of all sorts of fatalistic notions.”

Kyle had thought Adam would understand. Maybe he didn’t understand himself.

“And what’s the big deal with tonight in particular?” Adam said. “You kids have your whole lives ahead of you.”

“She’s leaving for Toronto in a week.”

It burned Kyle to say it. Adam let the words sit on the table like he needed to see them from every possible angle before he even dared touch them. Outside the window, backhoes moaned in the crater where the Chronicle Herald building had been carved out of the earth. Kyle figured he knew how the crater felt.

Samantha brought out their food. Kyle sifted through his fries with a fork, like a solution might’ve come with his meal. No luck.

“For good?” Adam asked.

“Yeah, for good.”

“Sorry buddy, but I think this might disqualify our Iris as a ‘settling down’ candidate.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Listen, you’d know better than me. I still don’t get the big deal, though. So she’s leaving in a week—that gives you six more days.”

“You only get one chance.”

“Where’d you pick up that kind of talk, the astrology page?” Adam laid Kyle’s cards on the table for him. “Call Iris tonight and tell her you can’t go—tell her your cat is sick. But you’d love to get together tomorrow. Ask her to do something simple—something cheap. You must have some of that twenty bucks left over. She just wants to have a good time before she skips town.”

Kyle didn’t like Adam’s paint-by-numbers Iris, she didn’t correspond to all the profound conclusions he’d drawn. But he couldn’t confess to having spent all the money, so he didn’t argue.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know because you’ve never met a good idea before.” Adam said. “I’m introducing you to one.”

Kyle let the marbles in his head roll around a little, then nodded. He might be able to hold Iris at bay and squeeze a bit more money out of Adam on Friday. He didn’t know if this qualified as a plan, but it was more than he’d walked in with.

Adam stepped out under the street light. The cold had taken a firm hold on the city. Kyle followed him out, shielded by the pea coat.

“Thanks,” Kyle said.

“Don’t mention it. How about you give back my jacket?”

“Fine, but I might need to borrow it again.”

Kyle caught a chill during the exchange that clung to him even after he'd put on his windbreaker.

“What're you going to do tonight, now that you fancy yourself a responsible adult?”

“I dunno. I have to go home and feed the cat.”

“Look at you—all grown up. Mind if I tag along?”

“Sure.”

Adam started up Sackville Street. Kyle lingered on the corner. The hill ran beyond the crater, the apartments and office buildings and pubs. At the bottom, dusk filled the harbour with black ink. The first time in years Kyle really noticed the ocean.

* * *

That Friday, Kyle came into the bar with Iris. The busiest night of the week, Adam and I both on bar and Erica and Alex serving. Kyle at a table with Iris and two of her girlfriends, unaware of the bodies consuming all space around them or the band playing like the end of the world. Iris's halter top, skin-tight jeans and heels, her indigo eyeshadow betrayed a performance. She covered her mouth when she laughed, caressed Kyle's hand on the tabletop. This was already a memory—something she could take back with her to Toronto.

Iris's friends took off and she stood over Kyle at the table, pulling his arm toward the dance floor. They danced awkwardly and laughed in each other's faces and blushed on their way out because we all knew where they were headed. Iris's goodbye carried the liberty that comes with saying it for the last time.

Instead of a goodbye, Kyle nodded and grinned at me like he'd obtained some rare knowledge that would change our world forever. I never saw him smile like that again.

NOBODY GETS ME BUT YOU

Matty's steel-toed work boots drummed the floorboards, tracking grass and dirt through Nathan's bedroom. One of those boots swung out through the window frame and smacked the shingles. Then the other, bringing Matty along with it. He passed a beer down to Nathan and used his molars to twist the cap off the other. The cap trickled down the roof into the eaves trough with all the others. Matty started down to join Nathan but held up halfway and pointed at the street below.

“Look at this rich fuck.”

Nathan followed the line Matty's finger drew to a guy unlocking the doors of a burnt orange Passat. The guy had half a puck of pomade in his hair, a polo shirt with a fist-sized alligator on the breast, and factory-torn jeans.

“I don't think that guy's all that rich,” Nathan said, though he'd never tell Matty what made him an authority—that his father was a high-ranking executive in a petroleum corporation whose name had appeared on more than one anti-fracking petition.

“All those courses and you can't even see what's in front of your face.” Matty killed his beer as the rich fuck gunned the Passat's engine.

“Hey!”

He yelled at the exact moment the car cut away from the curb. It shot through the yellow light at the end of the block and disappeared down South Street. Matty wound up and pitched his empty bottle at the blank slate the car had left behind. The bottle landed with a pop and scattered its shrapnel all over the pavement.

“Asshole.” Matty said it half under his breath, like he just wanted it on the record. “Want another?”

Nathan held his bottle up into the street light to show the glass still clouded up to the neck. Matty shook his head and started for the open window.

“You better speed it up. Drinks downtown aren’t cheap.”

They didn’t have plans to go downtown, had never gone downtown together even though Matty went out almost every night over the last six weeks. Nathan hadn’t expected to encounter Matty at all when he arrived in town for a summer co-op. He subleased a room in the apartment from his friend James, with the expectation that the three other rooms would be empty. Nathan stepped out of the airport limousine with nothing but a suitcase and a backpack. The building had a chipped teal paint job and a bruise-coloured front door, and came with that slightly spooky feeling that everything big and old and empty has.

It’d taken Nathan a week to settle into the apartment’s closed doors and silences. Second week, he found a mouse in the crevice between the dryer and the wall, already dead. He pinched the tail between two fingers shielded by a dish glove. Then the door downstairs jolted in its doorframe and he dropped the mouse on the floor. The door rattled again, like the glass might jump out of the frame. He went downstairs and a guy on the other side of the glass waved at him. In his early twenties, with a week’s worth of stubble and the kind of tan only real work earns you.

Matty.

Matty waved, and when Nathan didn’t wave back, he shook the door handle even harder. Nathan opened the door. He didn’t know what else to do—the guy could’ve been one of James’s roommates for all Nathan knew. Matty wore what turned out to be his uniform: a black Atlantic Edge Landscaping t-shirt, worn and tattered jeans, and an Orioles hat that’d been turned brown

by sun and sweat. He stood on the landing and grinned at Nathan. One of his canines was broken in half.

“Goddamn key doesn’t even work.” He shook it out of the doorknob, jumped off the porch and ran to pop the tailgate on a truck that matched his t-shirt.

“You going to give me a hand or what?”

Landscaping wasn’t just Matty’s job—he let it do the heavy lifting when it came to defining his personality. No childhood, no school, no future. All he brought to the apartment with him was a queen-size mattress and box spring, a hockey bag full of clothes, and some stolen milk crates.

“I didn’t know someone else was moving in,” Nathan said.

“There’s room to spare, isn’t there?”

“Sure. James didn’t mention it. That’s all.”

“I came and looked at the room a few weeks ago—before you were here, that’s for sure. Things came together last minute—like magic—and here we are.”

“Cool.”

“Isn’t it,” Matty said. He tore an arm’s length of duct tape from a roll and looped it around two milk crate handles. He fused the crates into a shelving unit, four on top and four below, like a cross-section of the flat, each empty room waiting to be occupied.

Nathan’s phone rang with Lindsay’s custom-set tone: Rick Astley’s “Never Going to Give You Up,” a one-time joke that had since become familiar and mundane. Nathan held up his phone against the sky and found her face lit by a desk lamp, a vanity and Romeo + Juliet poster in the background.

“Hey honey,” he said. She returned the favour and tagged on an exaggerated wave. She started to talk about her day, at the same time Nathan became conscious of the work boots again, stomping into his room, holding up, moving away from the window ever so slightly and halting again.

“How was your day?” Lindsay asked him.

“Oh, okay. The usual.”

“And how’s the local colour?” She asked. This was how they’d decided to refer to Matty. Nathan had started documenting the experience and messaging the photos to her: The barren bedroom, the messes in the kitchen and living room, the catalogue of women’s shoes he’d find waiting on the landing over a series of nights. That time he’d walked past Matty’s bedroom in the morning and seen chicken nuggets scattered around his bed. Matty updates had started to dominate their conversations.

Nathan heard the work boots starting again toward the window.

“Actually, I can’t really talk. He’s in my room—right now. He’s coming.”

Lindsay puffed out a breath. “Ookay, good night then. I love you.”

“I love you too, honey.”

Matty climbed out through the window wearing a button-up dress shirt taken from Nathan’s closet, a size too small, tight in the chest and arms. The cuffs ended before his wrists and the tails would’ve been too short to tuck in, were Matty ever to consider it. He had a hanger with a second dress shirt in one hand, the other jammed in a box of Honeycomb.

“You know, you sound like a real fruit sometimes.”

“Because I tell my girlfriend I love her?”

Matty shrugged and shook a handful of Honeycomb into his mouth.

“There’s different kinds of fruits.”

Nathan’s shoulders shot-up, back tightened. He sloshed the last of his beer in his mouth and heaved the bottle toward the street. It came up short and thumped the brown grass.

“Why the hell are you wearing my shirt?” he barked.

“I brought you one too. We gotta look good downtown.”

“I’m not going downtown,” Nathan said. “I have to work in the morning.”

“Me too. Real work, not lounging back in one of those ergonomic chairs for a few hours. Come on, it’ll be good for you.”

Nathan heard a kind of plea buried underneath the usual insult. Despite all the details Nathan managed to scrounge up, polish and feed to Lindsay, Matty never really talked about himself. Never bragged about the amount of work he did, booze he drank, or girls he brought home. At Matty’s request, Nathan had talked endlessly about university:

“What’s the Calgary campus like?”

“Big at first—intimidating. You have ten minutes between classes to get to a building across campus that you’ve never seen. But then it all becomes familiar and you don’t notice it anymore. You just move from one room to the next.”

“What about the professors?”

“I mean, some of them give a shit and some of them don’t. Some of the students don’t give a shit either.”

Nathan had wondered if he cared anymore, or if he ever had. He’d never been proud of going to university until it had granted him this authority.

“How’s your work term here going?”

“It’s fine, I guess—it’s accounting. The office is cool, at least. The building looks out over the harbour.”

A segment of the city Matty never entered. He only ever saw these office buildings from outside, their walls of glass reflecting back the city around them. Nathan arrived in town with that key already in his hand, and he hadn’t even earned it.

But Nathan didn’t agree to go downtown out of charity. Those six weeks he’d been waiting for Matty to ask. Sitting on James’s bed, back against the wall, he’d listen to Matty slip his shoes on, hoping Matty would appear in the doorway. Instead, those shoes took turns slapping the stairs, until the door slammed.

Nathan had gone out with people from the office a couple of times, when each co-worker took a turn getting too drunk, vomiting into the aluminum bucket that held napkins and cutlery or being thrown in the drunk tank for pissing on a pedestal in front of the Province House. They were mostly people his age, from Cape Breton or the South Shore—places that were only words to Nathan.

Nathan was tired of sitting around the apartment waiting for Lindsay to call, and tired of waiting for those calls to end once they came. He’d seen Halifax as an escape—a rare new experience. Now he spent his nights wishing he were back in Calgary with the only friends he’d ever known. He knew nothing at home would be different, but it terrified him to think that he won’t have changed either.

Matty mashed Honeycomb around in his mouth and shook the shirt in front of Nathan’s face.

“Alright, I’ll go,” Nathan said. “Will you cut that out?”

Matty flashed that broken canine. He shoved his hand into the cereal box, pulled a beer bottle out, and handed it to Nathan. The wet bottle covered in Honeycomb dust.

“Where’re we going anyway?” Nathan said. “I can’t stay out too late.”

“All you have to worry about is plugging that beer into your head. I know just the place.”

Nathan and Matty stood in line on Argyle with a bunch of other guys in jeans and untucked dress shirts. Most already hammered, they swayed in place, leaned against their friends or on the shoulders of girls whose black skirts showed-off their spray-tanned knees. Nathan had only known this block in daylight. The darkness brought with it a haze of street lamps and taxi cabs. Loud, tight groups closed in on the bar from both directions on Argyle, down Carmichael street and up the stairs from Parade Square. Nathan’s office, a ten-minute walk from there, had never seemed farther away. He shivered, though the heat had him turning-up his shirt sleeves. Matty smacked him across the chest.

“Will you look at this. You did the right thing, buddy.”

The line jerked forward. It tripled in length, snaking around the corner of Prince. Bass-drenched primary colours seeped out from the open door. An elbow swiped at Nathan’s ribcage. A girl in line behind him stabbed at the moon with a cigarette. High-heels brought her eyes even with his.

“I’d love it if you had a lighter.”

Nathan tossed-up a hand in apology, but Matty raised his fist, a flame peeking out of its centre.

“You’re the last gentleman alive,” she said. Matty bowed and turned around to face their destination.

“You don’t even smoke,” Nathan muttered.

“Always be prepared,” Matty said. “Come on, you look like the boy scout type.”

The bodies in front trickled into the building, presenting Nathan and Matty to a doorman who looked forward to ruining someone’s night and spent a good minute looking for a reason in Nathan’s Alberta driver’s license.

“What about you?” He swiped a hand in front of Matty.

“Oh, my ID’s in those pants.”

“Why would your ID be in my jeans?” Nathan said. He dug around the hip pockets and came out empty-handed.

“I wore them out last night.” Matty slipped his hand into a back pocket and came out with the ID. He handed it to the doorman, who frowned at them and held the ID up next to Matty.

“Go on.”

“Don’t you want to stamp our hands?” Matty grinned.

“She does it in there,” the doorman barked. “You know she does.”

“Of course, my mistake. You have a good night out here.”

Matty opened the door and invited Nathan to step inside. The music from the dance floor flooded the hallway and shook the walls. Matty pulled out a wad of twenties and paid their cover.

“He makes for good company.” Matty nodded toward the door.

“Tell me about it,” she said. “Actually, he and I are planning to run away together as soon as our shifts end.”

Matty stuffed a five in the cocktail glass on her desk. “That’ll get you as far as Dartmouth.”

“Thanks, hon. You two behave yourselves.”

Fake candelabras revealed sections of the geometric wallpaper. A gap in the right-side wall opened into a room of crowded booths. One booth threw back shots from neon test tubes. On the left was the dancefloor, where men and women pressed up against one another in near-darkness, moving in-and-out of time with the music. A rotation of green, red, and blue lights lashed out across the crowd in one-second flashes, when they appeared as people and not just bodies.

“You didn’t have to pay my cover,” Nathan said. “I have plenty of money.”

“Relax. You’re my guest. I dragged you out here, I’ll make sure you’re taken care of.”

Nathan stuck his hand in the back pocket of his jeans. A server pressed down the hall and cut in between them.

“Why’d you say that shit to the bouncer? We might not have gotten in.”

“Ah, they’ve all got hearts of gold around here.”

A glass shattered. Shouting erupted on the dancefloor. Two men in dress shirts and jeans spilled out into the corridor clutching each other’s sleeves. An arm broke loose, a fist fired forward and missed its target, brushing against the cheek on the pullback. They tumbled into the room on the right, big bodies in black windbreakers crowding the corridor after them, pressing Matty and Nathan against a wall. The bouncers forced their way into the room, pinning one man’s arms behind his back and throwing the other to the floor.

Nathan moved into the archway, trying to catalogue the bodies in the room, the people pressed up against one another in the booths to get away from it. Matty grabbed his arm and pulled him deeper into the club, to a bar where he pushed his way to the front, ordered two doubles for himself and two for Nathan. The room fell quiet, everyone charged with the energy

of the fight. People filtered out the way Nathan and Matty had come, hoping to catch a fleeting glimpse of the action, a fragment they could stitch into the story of their night. Matty threw back a double while Nathan tried to do the same. The music, at least a couple of years old, had sucked even then. It reminded Nathan of high school dances, where he hadn't drunk and had only ever danced with Lindsay, or maybe one of her friends as a gag.

“What do we do now?” he said.

“What?” Matty stopped halfway through his other double and leaned in.

“This place sucks.”

“Sure it does,” Matty said, “but look at the girls.”

Only a couple of girls loitered in the room. Nathan smiled at one of them and she sneered back. Matty erased his second drink and then took Nathan up a flight of stairs, through a door and into another part of the bar. A live band did ill-will to a Matchbox 20 song and the people trying to figure out how to dance to it. There was another bar, booths lining the wall, tables scattered around. A fifty-year-old in a sweat-wicking golf shirt and pleated pants begged a Dolly Parton lookalike to join him on the dance floor for a bongo-heavy rendition of Why Can't We Be Friends. Nathan and Matty slid into the table they abandoned while golf shirt swung his hips behind Dolly. Matty drummed the table and Nathan threw back a double and tried not to think about the closing gap between that night and the next morning.

“Come on, get in the game.” Matty smacked Nathan's hand. “You know what your problem is? Attitude.”

“I don't know how else to act. I have to work tomorrow—”

“This is what I’m talking about—you sit around the house all day moaning about the next day’s work. What about tonight?” Matty nodded at his own profundity. “We’re all worried about you.”

“We?”

“All of us.” Matty waved his arm around the room. “Luckily, I know just the pill for a college boy like you.”

Matty took off for the bar while Nathan scanned the room for escape routes. Matty came back clutching four doubles to his chest like emergency rations. He told Nathan to hold on and came back with four shots of clear fluid.

“What the fuck?” Nathan said.

“You wanted to find out how the local colour lives, didn’t you?”

Nathan tensed up. He wondered what exactly Matty’d heard, and how much. Maybe this spread was a sick punishment. Matty slid two shots across the wet table and clinked one of his shots against one of Nathan’s.

“Here’s to your health.”

Matty threw it back. Nathan picked one up, had it level to his mouth. Then he put the rim against his lips and choked it back.

The band belted out Curtis Mayfield’s Super Fly—a song Nathan decided in that moment he’d always liked. People flailed on the dance floor and leaned against one another in the booths, talking over each other and laughing up at the ceiling.

“I think I get it,” Nathan said after another double. “People here have a good time. It’s that simple.”

“Now you’re starting to get the picture.” Matty lifted a shot glass to Nathan pursed lips and Nathan choked it back. The tequila burned his throat and diffused into his stomach, then bloomed upward until its tendrils took hold of his mind.

“You know, I think I get this town.” Nathan said. “I hadn’t figured it out until right—now.”

“How’d a Calgary stiff like you end up here anyway? It’s a long way to go for a couple of credits.”

Nathan threw a hand up.

“Gotta go where they send you.” He took a drink and leaned in. “Want to know the truth? I applied for a lot of different co-ops: Calgary, Toronto, Vancouver... you name it. Didn’t even get interviews. This was the bottom of the barrel.”

Nathan forced a laugh, an invitation for Matty to do the same. He didn’t—he leaned in the way he always did when Nathan talked about school.

“What happened?”

“My grades stink is what happened. I was even on academic probation last year. You know, they all tell you to go to school—get an education. Really, the whole thing sucks. It’s not for me, anyway. I’m more like you than you realize.”

“Jesus Christ,” Matty said.

“S’true.”

Nathan took a long, satisfied sip. It felt good to tell someone, even if he’d left out the part about his grandfather having a university auditorium named after him, that being the crucial element that had evaporated his academic probation.

“What about you?” Nathan said.

Matty frowned and tilted his glass toward his mouth. He scanned the room and inventoried the bodies occupying the tables and booths.

“There they are,” he said.

Two women sat across from one another in a booth on the near wall. One of them had on a black cocktail dress, the neckline scooped-out to show-off her clavicle, her bare shoulders yellowed by the table light. The other wore a white blouse with the top three brass buttons undone, and earrings like dollhouse chandeliers. Both had hair tightly pulled back in sleek ponytails.

“You know those two?” Nathan said.

“We’re about to introduce ourselves.”

Matty stood up and tugged at the sleeves of the too-small shirt. He started over and only stopped to shoot Nathan a ‘don’t make me count to three’ look. Nathan arrived in tow just in time for the meet-cute.

“Sorry to interrupt, ladies. My friend and I were over there wondering whether we’d be able to buy each of you a drink, and figured there was only one way to know for sure.”

Matty didn’t sound like himself, he didn’t even sound like a real person. Nathan stood over his shoulder, hesitant to join in, despite having already been implicated.

“We appreciate the offer,” the woman in the dress said. “Maybe you couldn’t see from over there, but we already have drinks.”

“Oh, let the boys buy us a drink,” her friend said. “Can’t you see they’re just trying to be gentlemanly?”

“What the hell? One more couldn’t hurt,” the first woman said. “You have our blessing.”

Nathan lifted two glass off the bar and a quarter's worth of vodka-cran splashed his wrist as he leaned into Matty.

“What're we going to do?”

They stopped in between two lights. Nathan sipped his drink and it caught at the edge of his throat. He fought to choke it down.

“Listen, I'll do the talking,” Matty said. “You just chip in once in a while so I know you're still conscious.”

“I'ma be conscious,” Nathan said. “Why wouldn't I be?”

They each slotted into one side of the booth. Matty sat in close to the woman on his side, while Nathan straddled the ledge of the seat. Nathan's drinks stomped on the table and he slid one to the woman beside him.

“My name's Matt and this is my friend Nate.”

“It's an honour to meet you both,” The woman beside Nathan said. She raised her glass to the centre of the table, so the red liquid glittered under the light. They all clinked glasses and tipped them back.

“Suppose we should tell them our names?” The woman beside Matty asked.

“It'd only be fair,” Matty said. “We've laid ourselves bare in front of you.”

“Look at that, I suppose you have.” The woman beside Nathan said. “I'm Lindsay and my friend here is Samantha?”

“Samantha?” Her friend squinted across the table.

“It's always suited you. Your parents must've known what they were doing.”

“Alright, I see.” Matty said. “Those will do just fine.”

Matty pressed them for additional details. Lindsay and Samantha studied law at Dalhousie. Matty asked them about professors and courses like he had Nathan.

“We’re in university too,” Matt said. “I’m at Saint Mary’s here. My buddy Nate is at Calgary. I’m in commerce, but I’m thinking about law school afterward.”

Nathan thought about cutting in, like Matty had made a mistake, and he’d do him a favour by correcting it. Matty continued to spit out information Nathan had once offered in hopes that they’d become friends.

“My buddy here isn’t doing quite so well. He was even on academic probation last year. No law school in his cards.”

“Aw, what a shame,” Lindsay said.

Nathan expected them to go into this as equal partners, but Matty had cast him as the sidekick from the start, pillaged Nathan’s own experiences and discarded him. Matty leaned in close to Samantha, grinning and speaking privately.

“Hey, I was just joking,” Lindsay said. “You’ll be fine. I fucked off for my first couple of years too.” She tapped his hand with hers.

“It’s not that. I just have to work tomorrow.”

“Oh, where do you work?” Lindsay asked.

Nathan told her about his work term, about just getting to town last month and going back to school in Calgary at the end of the summer.

“You know, my girlfriend’s name is Lindsay.”

“You don’t say.” Lindsay’s eyes narrowed.

“Yeah, but she’s back in Calgary.” Nathan smiled at her, moved his hand out from under hers and rested it on top.

“We have spread ourselves out, coast-to-coast,” she said. She turned away from Nathan, toward Samantha, whose eyes swiveled away from Matty.

“Everything OK?” Matty said.

“I think your friend’s getting ahead of himself here.”

Matty scowled at Nathan and let go of a long, condescending breath.

“I’m ahead of myself?” Nathan spit out. “He’s not even in school—he mows lawns.”

Lindsay tipped back the last of her drink, so that the ice clacked against her teeth.

“Thank you for the drinks, boys. We’ve been entertained by your company, but it appears you have your own stuff to sort out.” She waved them out of the booth with the back of her hand. Matty wove through the pockets of people, toward the exit. Nathan caught up and gripped his shoulder.

“What the hell’s going on?”

“I’m going home. You do whatever the fuck you want.”

Matty walked double-time, fists clenched at his sides. The night had blanketed Queen Street, it was that in-between hour when everyone else had either been in bed for hours, or would be downtown for hours still. Nathan struggled to keep pace behind Matty, hands in his pockets. He watched every unlit space for potential dangers.

“What’s your problem, man?” Nathan barked.

“You were supposed to back me up.” Matty said. “What’d you think, that you were going to hook up with that girl? She’s out of your league.”

“Out of yours. I know plenty of girls just like those.”

“Right, of course you do. And you were so damned charming—you have a girlfriend, for christ’s sake.”

“What was your big plan then?”

“I was just testing the waters.”

“Yeah, by stealing my entire identity.”

“Not at all. Fuck, you rich college boys have rocks in your heads.”

Nathan had let himself give in to the liquor and now it felt like a hood he couldn’t take off. They reached the corner of South Street and a large middle-aged man wobbled in their path, a brick in hand. He had a grey beard, woolly and knotted with some copper strands woven in. He turned his smouldering eyes on them and massaged the rough surface of the brick.

“You old son of a bitch,” Matty said.

The man’s eyes cooled and he let out a laugh that could’ve been trapped in his guts for decades.

“How’re ya young man?” he growled.

“Now what we have here is a real man,” Matty said. “Tom here has worked—really worked—his whole damn life. You oughtta take notes.”

Tom let out another laugh, shook Matty’s hand. Tom had a voice like a broken radio, and Nathan could only make out the odd word among the static. Nathan saw that it wasn’t just Tom’s beard that was grey, it was all of him. Years of booze and hard labour had drained all the colour from him.

“You know what?” Tom said. “You’re just the man for the job.” He held the brick out to Matty and patted it one last time. “Goodnight young fella.”

Tom hobbled past them and onto Queen Street. Without the brick, he had become the torn-down man that work and booze had made him. Matty inherited that power, the flash of red a lit fuse in his hand.

“Get rid of that, will you?”

“Fuck you. It was a gift.”

“What if the cops drive by?”

Matty didn't answer. He twirled the brick in the air and caught it. Then stopped just after the old hospital. They were almost home.

“This motherfucker again.”

Nathan doubled back. He didn't know what Matty was talking about. The car wasn't even close.

“That's a Volvo,” Nathan said. “Besides, it's red.”

Matty walked around in front of the hood and lifted the brick over his head.

“You fucking idiot.” Nathan came up beside him and shoved him into the street. “I said it isn't even close.”

Matty faced Nathan, brick still in the air, shaking in his hand. Nathan pushed him again. Matty stumbled a few strides. His arm swung back, both legs kicked out from underneath him. The brick hit the pavement first. Then Matty's head did likewise, landing right on the crown. Those words cycled through Nathan's head again and again. The crown, the crown, the crown.

“Get up, get up.”

Matty lay splayed out on South Street, within eyeshot of the IWK Children's Hospital. Nathan scrambled toward Matty. He was out cold. He tried to shake him awake, and then grabbed Matty's hand with both of his and dragged his body to the curb. It took all the energy

and focus he had left. He sat on the edge of the curb and held Matty's head up close to his own, his fingers wet against Matty's hair. Matty's eyes flashed open in front of Nathan's, their faces inches away. Matty's face softened, a bead of drool broke the seam of his lips and curled under his jaw. He broke away, scrambled to his feet. Nathan struggled to stand up in front of him. He held his hand out between them, slick with blood—the black kind that comes from somewhere deep inside. The odd hair sealed within like a blade of grass preserved in amber.

“You rich college fuck,” Matt said, but his lip quivered and his red eyes welled-up.

“What he fuck was I supposed to do?” Nathan pleaded.

Matty turned away to hide the hot tears and snot streaking down his cheeks. Nathan caught sight of the back of his head, the ruby gunk matted in his hair.

“You need stitches or something.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

A voice shot through the silence. A security guard stood at the edge of the hospital's parking lot. A doughy thirty-something in a posture of rented authority. They took off running, Nathan sprinted the whole way, not looking back, with nothing in his head but the picture of his key slotted into the front door. At some point the adrenaline took over, and all the sudden, he stood under the porch light. A moth flickered above and slapped the bare bulb.

Matty hadn't caught up and Nathan didn't know what to do. Matty could pass out somewhere and die, or get picked up by the cops, who'd come looking for hm. He needed to get inside before they swept South Street. He stationed himself at the upstairs landing, where he woke up at six-thirty. His head felt like a stopped drain, water pooling up and applying increasing pressure. Matty wasn't in his bedroom, hadn't been in the apartment at all. Nathan

could go wander the neighbourhood, but Matty could've ended up anywhere. The best thing to do was go to work. Matty would be back by the end of the day.

In the morning meeting, Nathan's head felt something like Matty's had looked. He stared out at the poisonous grey-green harbour, the ripples sloshing over one another. He ate a sandwich in his cubicle at ten-thirty. At ten-forty he was keeled over in the bathroom stall, spilling the sandwich into the toilet. A co-worker Nathan had once seen projectile vomit into a planter cackled while he pissed in the urinal beside the stall.

Nathan got permission to go home and called a cab. Once the taxi hit South, the panic peaked again. Matty would be there. Even if he wasn't, Nathan needed to sleep. After that, he'd go looking for him. He'd call the police himself if it came to that.

There was a halo of dirt and grass where Matty's work boots usually stood. He'd somehow gotten home and to work, where they must've made sure he was taken care of. Nathan started to the bathroom and doubled-back into Matty's bedroom doorway. He walked inside and around the room. The box-spring and mattress, the milk crates and hockey bag and mounds of clothes that had formed around them were all gone. The room was empty, except for Nathan's shirt rumped on the floor, thick red blotches dyed into its fabric.

When Nathan got to work the next morning, there was a canopy of intersecting streamers hanging over his cubicle. A series of heads peeked up over the walls of cubicles. He got a standing ovation and a 'Baby's First ~~Birth~~ Birthday Hangover' card.

Nathan spent the rest of the summer becoming friends with his coworkers. He went out to bars and took his turn getting too drunk, but also went to beaches and on hikes. A bunch of them went to a cottage for Canada Day, and Nathan tried—and failed—to stand up on a surfboard, and

came within seconds of losing a hand to a firework. His officemates threw a party for him at the end of his co-op and gave him a Nova Scotia flag and a sand pail.

“To puke in,” someone explained.

James came back to town a few days early to hang out before Nathan left. Nathan told him everything that happened with Matty, and how he’d up-and-vanished.

“I remember that motherfucker,” James said. “I showed him the place a week before I left town. He walked around like he was casing it. Said he was interested and we made arrangements to meet so he could pony up the rent cheques. He never showed.”

Nathan and Lindsay moved to Halifax two years later, into a condo that hadn’t existed the last time Nathan walked down Barrington Street. He received a partial scholarship to complete his Master’s at Dalhousie, and a teacher’s assistant position, running a lab for a first-year microeconomics class. He walked into the classroom on the first day, practically high on his assigned authority.

He didn’t notice Matty at first. He scanned the heads as indistinct units, students who, in a certain sense, belonged to him. He wrote his name on the board, introduced himself and started to hand out the syllabus. Matty registered as familiar then, but it took half the class before Nathan realized why. It wasn’t the Matty he’d last seen with a split-open head, but he was dressed sort of like he’d been that night. The shirt fit and he’d lost the scruff and the tan and had combed his hair.

His eye frequently wandered toward Matty during lectures, even among a group of seventy students, but there was never any sign Matty recognized him. Matty was one of the few students who participated in class, reciting information from the textbook or lectures. The first

test four weeks in, Nathan monitored Matty the entire time. Despite the effort he'd shown in class, Nathan decided this was another one of Matty's cons. Matty was the last to finish. He sauntered to the front of the class and carefully laid his test on top of the stack.

"Have a good weekend, sir."

"Are you really going to go through the semester pretending you don't remember me?"

Nathan stood up and walked around the desk.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Drop the 'sir'—you know my name is Nathan. Come on, we lived together for a month and a half—until you disappeared. Looking at you now, two years might seem like a lifetime to you."

Matty moved around him and followed the board toward the door. Nathan caught up and cut off his path.

"Admit it, you used me, you fucked over my friend. All for this, huh? All to be in this room right now."

Matty tried to tuck his lip under the broken canine. Nathan shoved Matty, whose back rocked the white board. His backpack fell off his shoulder onto the floor. Matty coughed, the wind knocked out of him. The smile settled back in. He bent over to pick up his backpack and moved past Nathan to the door.

"Fuck, I'm sorry." Nathan followed him to the door, breathing hard. Matty opened the door and turned back.

"Don't worry, sir. I won't say a thing."

The door closed behind Matty, leaving Nathan in an empty room. He sat back in the chair, smeared his face with unsteady hands. Then he pulled himself together, leaned

forward and picked up Matty's test from the stack, held it up like a rune that would expose a great truth once deciphered. He dug the answer key out of his bag and laid it out next to Matty's test, ran through the questions, and again a second time. Matty scored twenty-seven out of thirty, a better grade than Nathan had gotten his entire first year.

Nathan combed the test one final time, wrote the score at the top, and circled it. Then he wrote 'Keep up the good work, Matt!' pressing the red pen into the page until the ink bled.

THE THIRTY-SIX-YEAR PLAN

It all starts up again when we move Zach into his new apartment. Zach announces the move to me, face tight with pride. I nod and let go of one long sigh, relieved to no longer have to chase my twenty-seven-year-old son around the house, asking—and then telling—him to pick up after himself, do his dishes and laundry, and turn down whatever vaguely upsetting music permeates the floorboards.

All the relief dumps out of me as soon as I see the apartment he's chosen with his newly-acquired independence: a one-bedroom above a cheque-cashing business. Across the street, a pornography store's neon XXX sign flickers in a script that conjures elegant depravity. Black garbage bags are taped over its windows.

"I didn't know any of those places survived the internet," Wayne says.

"It's the only one left in the entire city," Zach says.

They both seem more informed on the matter than I am, but I doubt the store will make any of the business association's desperate heritage-themed marketing campaigns.

The apartment's vinyl floors slope downward from the entryway, through the living room and into the kitchenette. Floor tiles have lifted or been chipped away altogether to expose ancient goop. The bedroom carpet is tramped-down and rust-brown. Dust shadows on the surrounding walls memorialize that previous tenant's recently-departed furniture. I bolt for the Superstore on the corner as Wayne and Zach head back to the house for the final haul. I buy Mr. Clean and commercial-grade disinfectant sprays and bleach, a pail and mop. I get on my knees to clean each individual floor tile, wall, baseboard. I scrub the pink mould from the shower and the black mould from the pitch-dark corner of the bedroom closet. I put the cleaners away under the sink

and the mop and bucket in the front closet, and wonder how long it will be before Zach uses them.

Zach and his father carry up a desk and a dresser and the last of the boxes. Zach looks beyond the boxes and furniture, rubs his chin and nods. The apartment doesn't look nice—no amount of time or effort could accomplish that feat—but it looks *better*. Better, probably, than it will ever look again.

“Thanks Mom,” Zach says. But he follows it with, “You didn't have to do that,” not said in gratitude, but to inform me that he's his own man now. Wayne shakes Zach's hand with all the passion of a job well-done. He punches the horn twice as the truck drifts away from the curb. Then he lets go of a short, breathless laugh. It sounds as if he's choked on something vile.

“What a dump.”

“That's funny to you?” I say.

“Oh, come on,” Wayne says. “He doesn't know any better.”

What's left of the daylight pours in through our naked basement window, illuminating the bedroom and all its emptiness. I'd expected to find abandoned participation trophies, high school yearbooks, torn-up posters. But he hasn't left anything behind, not even the garbage. Either he took it all with him in a fit of nostalgia, or else threw it all out. Some of the now-missing furniture had taken root in the room years ago, and remained as each of the kids claimed the basement as their haven. From probing siblings, and from me, their captor. That furniture belonged to the room itself, more than any single child. Its removal might threaten the house's integrity, just as much as a blow to the foundation or roof.

I strip away the room's progress and reconstruct it. Cover its skeleton with drywall and plaster and paint, and carpet its cement floor. I see the moment that a seventeen-year-old Jennifer planted her flag there in the form of a *Cruel Intentions* poster. The tacks that held it in place have left the wall pock-marked. A splash of turquoise on the eggshell carpet—a bottle of nail polish Kristen sent spiralling to the floor during some tiff over how late she could stay out, where she hung out, and with what company. The hole punched through the window screen, the result of a drunken Zach's attempt to covertly enter the house in the middle of the night. Each of these an act of violence at the time, they now seem like essential features of the room.

Wayne comes up behind me and straps his arms around my ribcage.

"What're you doing, standing down here all by yourself? We've done enough work today. Besides, the food's here. I ordered Chinese."

"It's never been like this before," I said. "Not since the day we moved in. Thirty-six years ago."

"This is how it's supposed to work," Wayne says. "Even if it does seem like a miracle."

Red sauce glistens at the corner of his mouth. Wayne spent most of his career travelling. Rooms have always provided empty spaces to be occupied, and then abandoned.

After dinner, I lie on the couch in the den watching Turner Classic. Wayne fills the doorframe. His chest rises and falls with some imagined urgency.

"I've been thinking—it'd be nice to finally get around to those renovations, turn that room downstairs into an office."

I do my best to seem absorbed by the television, but when an idea burrows its way into Wayne's head, he has to tear it out of there as soon as he can, and I'm his sole audience. After a

minute or so of Cary Grant bawling out Ingrid Bergman with his vaguely-exotic charm, Wayne starts tapping his RCMP ring on the doorframe.

“What’re you bothering me with this for now? Can’t you see I’m trying to watch something? I thought you were watching football in there.”

“It’s half-time. And I’m not bothering you. What I’m trying to do is have a conversation.”

I give up, turn to face him. Retirement hasn’t been kind to Wayne—which means it hasn’t been kind to me either. He’s gained weight, and five years in, his stomach bowls forward and slings out from the bottom of his t-shirt. His beard grows in uneven and patchy, one half totally grey and the other marbled. It’s like he’s evolved over the years, and this shell of fat and fur will better serve him now.

“Why the rush?” I ask. “I can’t imagine why you’d need an office.”

“I’d like to do some security consulting. A lot of guys do when they retire.”

This idea doesn’t come from Wayne. This idea of comes via an old work acquaintance that Wayne has bumped into at the mall or grocery store. Probably not someone he particularly liked or even respected. If that guy could do it, surely, Wayne could. He never thought to consider whether the guy’d had any success. He’s never wondered why this security consultant also stood in line at the mall Tim Horton’s at eleven-thirty in the morning.

“Wayne, you’ve been retired five years now. If you were going to become some consultant, you’d have done it already.”

He tugs at the breast pocket on his t-shirt, and his chest sinks an inch or two.

“We’ve been talking about fixing up this old place for years now—finally making it our own. Now that Zach’s out of our hair, I’d like to get the ball rolling. Who knows how many years I have left.”

“What’s the use in talking like that?” I say. “We can discuss it tomorrow, when I’m not trying to watch a show.”

He stalks out of the doorframe and the football game becomes louder and louder.

Wayne falls asleep on the couch. I turn off the TV and drape a throw over him, kill the light and lay his dishes with the others on the kitchen counter. I wash them all by hand with the oldies station turned down to a whisper. It’s three a.m. when I put the last dishes away. Upstairs, I toss all the decorative pillows in a heap on the floor. The bedsheets are soft and cold. Even as my body warms them, I press my hand into the space beside me and feel how cold it still is. It used to be on nights like this, alone in bed during these in-between hours, that I missed Wayne the most. All those overnight shifts he worked in the early days, and then once he became an instructor and travelled across the country, always calling from a hotel somewhere. I’d get all three kids into bed and take the call in the bedroom with the door closed. Wayne never had much to say, but I’d be relieved just to hear his voice. Some nights, I’d fall asleep with the receiver pressed to my ear and wake up in the morning with a red ring tattooed on the side of my head, the receiver screeching into the bedspread. Other nights I’d hang up the phone and cry. Sure, I missed him. But mostly I knew I’d have to wake up in the morning and do it all over again on my own.

Wayne calls me at work at least once a day. Usually to tell me about some gadget he bought while wandering around the mall. A professional-grade drill with built in LED flashlight. A

waffle maker that he'd insisted I had a special talent for using, until our family doctor urged him to cut down on saturated fats. These calls carry the implicit suggestion that my job as the secretary of the university's Math department provides me with ample time to entertain his adventures in retirement. They also act to remind me that, five years in, Wayne has yet to develop even a vague plan for his retirement. Even the mention of his renovating the house or starting his own business signals progress. But, Zach's presence in the house hadn't been the real impediment, he would've been a tremendous asset to any of the several renovation projects Wayne has dreamed up.

My phone rarely rings anymore. Everything comes in through email: faculty memos, student inquiries, prof's petty complaints about one another. A deluge of these flood my inbox, and I spend too many of my work hours filtering information to relevant parties. If the phone rings, it's almost always Wayne.

But Wayne doesn't call at all the day after Zach moved. Had Wayne made headway on anything that might be mistaken for work, he would've provided me with the details. It's just as unlikely that he's continued sulking after our little argument the night before.

I get more concerned as the day wears on. By mid-afternoon, the slightest sound—someone punching the button on the water fountain outside my office, or the photocopier chiming to life—pulls my attention in the direction of the phone. It never rings, and I don't call him. Perhaps this signals progress.

I do battle with the speed limit the entire way home. I use side roads, wring the steering wheel when a school bus stops in front of me, and tell myself I'm not worried—I'm just saving time. I park the car in the driveway and duck under the garage door before it's halfway up. The only sound in the house, the murmur of some sports program on the living room TV, carrying on

without Wayne. Upstairs, the bedroom door is nearly closed. I nudge the door with my finger tips and feel it float toward the wall. Wayne's not there either but his old uniform is laid out on the bedspread. The red jacket's arms spread helplessly, the placket unbuttoned and flapped open. The navy pants droop at the knee, over the edge of the bed and to the floor. I sweep the rest of the upstairs and first floor, and then head down the basement stairs, one hand flattened on the wall. One foot and then the other sink into the basement carpet and I hear Wayne in Zach's old room punching out heavy, strangled breaths. I turn the corner in a quick arc, and am standing in the room. Wayne is nowhere at eye level—It takes a second spin around the room to find him in the far corner. He's in his undershirt and a pair of pajama pants, bare feet strapped into a rowing machine that I last saw about six Easters ago. The machine faces the wall and the seat clacks backward. Then he pulls himself forward and his head slings along with it.

“What're you doing?” I say. “What about your heart?”

Wayne pumps the machine eight more times, nodding his head once for each. He strains to lean forward and release his feet from the stirrups.

“The heart's fine—it feels good. I'll tell you, I really needed that.” He stands bent over slightly, hands on his waist. I have a desire to interrogate him—or is it embarrass him—after the stress he's put me through. But it's all right there, the shame in his flushed face that he's tried to channel into this perceived feat of virility.

“I thought you wanted this room as an office?”

“Oh, I do—the rowing machine is part of it. That's the beauty of those things, they don't just work-out the body, but the mind.” He swings his hand down toward the machine, the way the salesman who duped him into buying it likely had. “I can't tell you how many cases I've worked through while on that machine.”

“Wayne, you haven’t worked a case in twenty-nine years.”

“Other people’s cases. They’d come to me for advice and I’d throw my two cents in. A lot of guys credited me with breaking their case wide open.”

“Like a consultant,” I volunteer.

“Exactly, honey. This thing’s got all sorts of potential—I just need to get it off the ground.” He clings onto the sleeves of my shirt and I’m not completely sure whether it’s for effect, or the beginnings of a cardiac episode. His bare arms shine with a glaze of sweat.

“Anyway,” he says. “How was your day?”

“It was fine. Did you take anything out for dinner?”

“Didn’t have time, I’ve been so busy. I went to that new IKEA there in Dartmouth Crossing to look at desks. They didn’t have any, you know, man’s desks.” He makes a box out of his hands to explain. “I guess that’s Sweden for you.”

“I guess it is,” I say. “I’m going up to thaw something for dinner.”

“Wait, there’s something I did see.”

Wayne takes his phone from the window ledge, enters the correct passcode on his third attempt, fumbles with it and finally hands it over, displaying a sofa in a deep red tone. It’s made up of thick, low rectangles arranged together, like someone traced it out on graph paper and coloured it in with one of the eight basic Crayola markers.

“For the living room,” Wayne says. “The pictures don’t do it justice.”

That I can believe. In each photo, it seems like Wayne has done his best to evade the store’s harsh lighting, leaving the sofa cloaked in murk. It’s hard to picture it in anyone’s home—or anywhere at all outside of the store’s warehouse sprawl.

“It’s not that I don’t like it,” I say, “but it doesn’t fit with the living room décor. The red alone—”

“This is for the new living room,” Wayne says. “After the renovations.”

His cheeks glow for his blooming talent for interior decorating. I count this sofa as another snap decision that will pass as he ferries himself from impulse to impulse. Like the security consulting job, or his now-lapsed tennis club membership.

“Why don’t we finish the renovations before we marry ourselves to specific furniture?”

“Finds like this don’t stick around and wait for you to decide.”

I picture a mammoth, dull warehouse—probably somewhere in China—with hundreds of these sofas stacked on top of one another, disassembled—broken down into pieces for some poor soul like Wayne to grunt and wheeze over. This sofa will be repopulating the Earth long after Wayne and I have left it.

I don’t point any of this out to Wayne, he knows better. It’s just an excuse—a fast, foolish attempt to set into motion the events that would lead to the sofa conquering our home. A fire sparked by some Viking marauder, which would soon after consume what remained of my living room.

“We can talk about it later,” I say. “After you shower.”

I come back up to the kitchen and stick my head in the freezer. The butterscotch ice cream’s lid teeters halfway off the container, a spoon handle jabbed out from the lip. Frost crystals pollute what’s left of the ice cream. I take it out, drop it in the sink and run the faucet over the container. I burrow among the vegetables and zip-lock bags, pitch a bag of peas onto the counter, and then dig out two petrified chicken breasts. I watch them turn in the womb of the

microwave, listen to the droning hum that seems like it will go on forever, until the moment it settles in and sounds like nothing at all.

We've owned our current living room furniture as long as we've lived in the house. I thought— at the time—of the living room as the heart of the home, a notion I probably absorbed from *Good Housekeeper*. Their glossy expertise sent me searching for furniture that married aesthetic and utility. The furniture has served us over decades, from my own toddlers through grandkids.

I plummet into shock when I pull up to the house a week later and find Kristen's truck in the driveway and my living room sofa on the front lawn. Its legs removed, its apron flayed out on the blades of dying November grass. I idle at the curb and wait for I-don't-know-what. I need to be ready to peel out of there at the slightest hint of danger.

But nothing happens. I strip my key from the ignition, come around the truck and head for the couch. I run my hand over the armrest, the way you might caress an injured animal to let it know you mean no harm. That you're there to help. Ahead, the front door appears to be wide open, until I notice it's been stripped from the hinges altogether. I can see through the barren hallway, back into the kitchen, to the glass patio door and the browned leaves of my crab apple tree in the back yard. All visible to our neighbours, our mail lady, or one of those pushy Bell Telecom salesmen. I know what waits for me in the living room. My brain automatically begins to formulate words into the sentences I will use to articulate this particular brand of displeasure, but then Bobby flies out the entryway, arms flaying as he charges toward me. I kneel down to take him in my arms, but he loops toward the sofa and dives head-first onto it. Then he rubs his face into the seat cushion.

“Oh, don't do that, Bobby. People put their bums there.”

He twists his face toward me and grins with his tongue peeking through a new space between his teeth. I owe him a loonie.

“This is ours now,” he says, writhes around on it and rolls off onto the grass.

“And who made this decision?”

“We did,” he says. “Me and Papa.”

These magic words conjure Wayne in the doorway. He leans against it and waves, as if to say *yes, I am using your grandson as a shield.*

“Come in and keep the girls company,” he calls down. “I’ve got dinner going.”

I try to cling to the words I’d reserved for Wayne—to store them away until Kristen and Heather take Bobby far away—and apparently my living room sofa along with him. During dinner, we fall into our old roles, and the words get away from me. Wayne talks to Kristen about the advantages of the new body armour her department has purchased, and I ask Heather about this year’s crop of third-graders.

“We’re learning about dinosaurs right now,” she says, “but none of them—child or dinosaur—is as wild as this one.”

Bobby has his pork chop by the bone. He uses whatever teeth he has left to tear a chunk off the bone and then growls. Juice dribbles down his chin.

“Put that down and use your utensils,” Heather says, pressing her son’s arm toward the plate. “You’re not a wild animal.”

“His Mom was the same way.” I smile and wait for some sign of approval from Heather. From time to time, I still worry that I’ll say the wrong thing.

“He takes after his Papa,” Wayne calls across the table. “Don’t you, trooper?”

Wayne seizes the opportunity to dive headlong into one of our regular routines: stories of heroic embarrassment from before we married. These episodes mortified me at the time, caused actual fights and rifts that sometimes took months to heal. The game involves Wayne framing the story as a tall tale with him in the hero role, while I fact-check his version in real-time.

“Actually, I’m the one who asked *him* to dance,” I say, “and he knocked *your* tooth out.”

Wayne tongues the dental implant at the front of his mouth. “Checks out,” he says. “I must’ve looked something like that critter over there.”

Bobby smiles and flaunts the gaps in his teeth. “My teeth got knocked out!”

“Oh, please don’t go around saying *that*,” Kristen says. “They’ll be convinced one of us did it.”

Then Kristen does something I’ve never heard her do before: launches into her own version of Wayne’s shtick and tells a story about a time she abandoned Heather in a bar parking lot over some perceived slight, only to take a tour around the block and come back for her.

“She’d already hopped into a cab with some strangers!”

“I could see your mother jumping in that cab too, just out of spite,” Wayne says and laughs. But without the obscuring lens of time, Kristen’s story sounds cruel. And at no point does Heather jump in. She sits head down, cheeks flushed.

“It wasn’t quite that dramatic,” she says.

Kristen and Wayne have had a few drinks by the end of the night, so Heather climbs in on the driver’s side while Kristen straps down the sofa and then hops out of the truck bed.

“Good to see you,” she says and touches my arm. “Thanks for dinner, and of course for the sofa here. I couldn’t believe it when Dad said you were getting rid of it.”

I hug my arms to my chest and her hand falls away. She steps backward, into the glow of the truck's brake light. She crosses her own arms, all of her bathed in red.

"What is it?" she demands.

"I love you and Heather both," I say. "And when I hear you treated her that way—it just makes me sad for both of you."

"It was ages ago, Mom. *All* couples go through these things—they aren't unique to you and Dad. Heather's stronger than you give her credit for."

Kristen shoves the tailgate up with both hands and gives it a tug to make sure it's closed.

"Good night," she says.

Bobby waves furiously from the back window as the truck pulls away and takes my furniture to a new home.

The IKEA sofa is three husks enveloped in foam and cardboard and plastic. These cubes destabilize the entire living room. The coffee table and end tables have been pushed aside to the far wall. Boot prints from the movers or Wayne and Kristen trace a waltz around the room and out into the hall. Like a crime scene, with every element preserved.

Wayne bristles when I come into the kitchen. He stands at the sink and strangles the last gasps of soap from the Palmolive bottle.

"Don't, Wayne—I'll do them," I say. "You made dinner."

Really, I just want him to go hide-out in the den for the rest of the night, so I won't recite any of the choice words that I'd begun to recall in the living room. He bows out a little quickly for someone who had any sincere intentions of doing the dishes. I run my hand under the stream of tap water and Wayne pushes a chair in toward the table. The backrest squeals under his weight.

“We’re a good team, Max,” he says. “I wish you wouldn’t forget that.”

“Meaning?”

“At dinner—we don’t get to be like that enough.”

“What’s that sofa doing in my house? I said to wait until after the renovations.”

I fight to roll a dish glove over my hand while Wayne steps under the kitchen light, all set to deliver the monologue he’s been rehearsing since last week, when he must’ve paid for the sofa and set-up delivery.

“We’re not going to renovate,” he says. “Let someone else have that headache.”

“What are you saying, Wayne?”

“I’m saying it’s time to get out of here. We don’t need an entire house. I’ve been looking at condos in that new subdivision off the highway—we’d be closer to Kristen and Bobby. Plus, this place must be worth ten times what we paid for it. People are clawing to get into the North End. All around us, the neighbourhood is getting younger. We’ve aged out. It’s time to move on and do all those things we dreamed about in our twenties.”

“What about my job—what about Zach? We wouldn’t be closer to either.”

“Zach doesn’t want us hanging around. He wants to chart his own path—Christ knows where to. As far as your job goes, you’ll be out of there in a year, tops. You taking that job was never part of the plan in the first place.”

This plan is something we laid out while I was nestled under Wayne’s arm in his childhood bedroom, before we had our own roof. We wanted to have children, to raise a family. Wayne wanted a career. But we’d found so much joy under the room’s sloped ceiling, among his die-cast sports trophies and mail-order encyclopaedias. Nesting our fingers together, rings tapping while we whispered in his twin bed. We truly believed that we could relocate that

version of us decades later, once Wayne retired, once the children moved out. I suppose Wayne still does, but the Wayne I shared these dreams with wasn't so far removed from the leading scorer of our high school hockey team. I could rest my head on that Wayne's chest and feel the hard muscle underneath. How could I have known he'd leave me with the children for days at a time? That I would have to sit up in bed at night—a cop's wife—evaluating each shudder of the house?

“I like my job—I don't want to retire,” I say. “And I don't want to move. I want the kids to have a home they like coming back to. Where we can come together as a family.”

“They're not going to come home—they already don't. Hell, Jenny's on the other side of the country, and we barely hear from her. This place is a museum.”

“This house has never been any more than a way-point for you,” I say. “Go watch a hockey game. I need to finish these and go to bed.”

His expression crumples and his posture gets hard. He has this ability to turn, to become unspeakably cruel, but it requires a transformation. I've never understood what goes on during this in-between moment—whether it's a conscious decision he makes, or if it's an impulse he battles with, and loses. But it doesn't happen this time. He forces it all inward, to the centre where his heart already fights to pump blood through partially-clogged arteries. He leaves, but not to watch TV or work it out on the rowing machine. He goes straight out through the garage, and then the door rumbles open and closes after him. I listen to the distant tug of the truck's engine as Wayne goes anywhere else. My shoulders shake in time with the water dribbling off the cloth and dropping into the sink's murky pool. I wring the cloth and get all the stale water out.

Wayne left his RCMP ring on the counter beside the sink. Its crest and engraved letters and numbers rewarding his years of commitment. The last time he wore his wedding band was to my department Christmas party six years ago. He'd volunteered to come along, but he was gloomy from the moment we arrived and clung to me the entire night. I don't know what he'd expected to find there—maybe he didn't understand that these people, like him, had signed up to be part of a closed world, and this insularity was all that they had in common.

At some point, I'd gotten away from him to chat with Bernard, who'd joined the faculty only weeks before my hiring, and for this reason, we'd become friends. Bernard is a dozen years younger than me, wears clothes two sizes too big, and memorizes jokes from a book to recite to his students. He reminds me of Zach.

I don't know what Wayne thought he saw that night. Maybe we talked too close together, or maybe we laughed in a private way. I might've batted his hand playfully. Wayne shut down. He sat in a chair alone and smoothed out the tablecloth for half an hour, until I escorted him home. He said goodbye via nods, half-smiles, grunts. He didn't say a word in the car, even as I asked *what's the matter*, and then told him, *you're acting like a child*.

After the garage door closed behind us, he pushed on the steering wheel as if to snap it off the column.

“So you like those eggheads now, huh?”

“I haven't the slightest clue what you're talking about.” I might've laughed—not at him exactly, but at the confusion. To Wayne, the laugh itself was an indiscretion. He swatted the red pull-cord on the garage door opener on his way out of the truck. It swung back and forth, its shadow cutting the room down the middle.

Wayne came around the front of the car to his work bench. He fought with his wedding band, tugged his arm across his entire body. This was around the time he'd started gaining weight. He yanked his finger in every direction, there seemed a real chance he'd take the next step and hack the whole finger off, until the ring slipped free. Insulated in the car, I felt like I was watching some old melodrama play out on the windshield. Wayne pinched the ring in the space between the walls of his vise, turning the crank in wide, clumsy loops. It took what seemed like minutes for it to close in on the ring. All the drama had been sucked out of the room, but he couldn't go back. The car had settled, the garage felt cold. I rolled my hands out toward the windshield, urging him to get it over with.

After he'd pressed the ring flat, Wayne held it out in front of him, as if a stranger had wandered by and dropped it in his palm. Later he said he'd get it repaired, after days of me convincing him that not even a sliver of romance existed between Bernard and me. I explained to him that you can't unflatten a ring, and he then promised to replace it altogether.

Wayne had never done anything like that before—not at home, at least. The impact of that night lingered for a long time. Not until that story too had been used to entertain dinner guests did I realize that it no longer posed a threat. That's how Wayne saw it, anyway.

I roll the RCMP ring around in my palm. I haven't held it in years. It's heavier than I remember and rattles around when I slip it onto my thumb. I drop it into the pocket of my jumper and "Mellow Yellow" comes on the radio. I finish the dishes and leave them to dry on the rack. Upstairs, I change into pajamas, fold my jumper and lay it in place on my closet shelf. I don't take Wayne's ring out and don't lay it on his dresser. I get into bed expecting to toss and turn, to run over our argument and all its implications. But once I settle in, I feel absolved. I fall asleep within minutes and I don't wake up when Wayne comes in.

I stare at the blank white box I'm supposed to fill in with words—a department-wide email reminding faculty members to wash their own dishes. I pull out the drawer above my lap, take out Wayne's ring and place it on the desk between me and the keyboard. Maybe I'm celebrating my own daring. There's a certain thrill in the knowledge that this ring, here, will send Wayne for a loop—that is, once he's awake.

“What's that you have there?”

Bernard loafs in my doorway wearing a suit jacket that almost meets his knees. He has to bend forward to stuff his hands in its pockets.

“Oh, hi there Maxine,” he says, like we've just bumped into one another.

“How's that fern doing, Bernard?”

“I did what you suggested—tried to, anyway. But the damn thing's about bowed to the floor. I'm afraid I don't have much of a green thumb.”

“Well, I hope you're doing better than your plants.”

“I am, thank you... Hey, have you seen my mug around anywhere? It's the one that says ‘Without geometry there'd be no point’. I left it in the sink last night but it's disappeared on me.”

I take the mug from beside my computer and put it on the upper ledge of my desk.

“I was going to walk it over to your office after I washed it,” I tell him. “I must've gotten sidetracked.”

“Well, no harm done then,” he says.

“Actually, Bernard, can I ask you a question.”

“Hmm?” He’s getting reacquainted with his mug. I try to see all the possible versions of him. Teacher, colleague—sure. But can I picture him out in the world, evaluating a head of lettuce at Sobey’s or laughing freely in the darkness of a movie theatre?

The phone rings. I consider not answering it, but Bernard puts up a finger to say he’ll come back. Alone, I want to answer it. I’ve been waiting all morning to answer this call.

“Max,” Wayne huffs. Sounds like he’s calling from the rowing machine.

“Hello dear. When did you get home last night?”

“My ring. I can’t find it. Have you seen it—did you move it?”

“I haven’t seen it,” I say. “Maybe you put it somewhere after you left. In the truck?”

“No, no. I took it off to wash the dishes. I left it on the counter.”

Bernard strolls back into the room, sipping from his mug. He begins to study a framed print that’s been in the same place since 1995.

“If that were true, I’d have seen it,” I say. Wayne pants into the phone. “It can’t have gone far. Worst case scenario, it’s in the old sofa. Have Kristen dig around for it.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” he whimpers.

“Oh, don’t overreact. We’ll find it this evening. I have to go, I’m at work.”

Wayne spills a heavy breath into the receiver and says OK.

“Oh, and Wayne—why don’t you put that sofa together? I’d like to have somewhere to sit when I get home.”

I cradle the phone and sit up, more composed than I have sat since the first day of grade one. Bernard walks from the print to the space in front of my desk.

“Someone lose something?” he asks.

“I don’t know about that,” I say. “Someone thinks they have.”

“You should tell him to check his desk. You wouldn’t believe the things I’ve found buried in mine.”

“He doesn’t have a desk, actually.”

“That does make it harder,” he says. “You had a question?”

I’d gotten caught up in the phone call and can’t relocate the moment when asking that question might’ve passed as idle curiosity. I search the room for something.

“Just wondering, Bernard—well, do you think it’s okay that I wash your mug?”

He takes a pronounced draw from the mug and then delivers his response into its mouth.

“How do you mean?”

It sounds muffled, like it’s come through an old PA system. I press my palms into the thighs of my pants.

“It’s not just you—all the faculty members leave their dishes for me to wash.”

“I’m sorry, Max. I didn’t realize you minded.”

“That’s the thing—I don’t mind when it’s you, but it really irks me when, say, Jeff expects that. Doesn’t that seem strange to you?”

“I don’t know.” He narrows his eyes at the ring, framed by my flattened hand. “We’re friends, right?”

“Of course we are,” I say.

“I’d say that’s all there is to it.” Bernard smiles and turns to leave the room, but then doubles back to the doorway. “Thank you for washing my mug. I should’ve said that earlier.”

I stare back at him, and then at the space he used to occupy. Soon I’m not looking for Bernard, but at the space itself, the big pock-marked stone blocks all painted-over in beige. The way they come together, one on top of the other, in some inexplicable sequence.

I meet Zach at the Tim Horton's by his apartment after work. I've spent most of the afternoon wondering if I should cancel. I mull this over even as I drive up Robie Street. Only when I stop at the crosswalk in front of the QE2 do I realize it's too late.

Zach appears to be all in one piece, though must not have done laundry since he moved in, because he's wearing a pair of tearaway pants and a Class of '06 shirt with its big block numbers filled-in by student signatures. He stands up to hug me and offers to buy me a tea.

"My treat," he says. He leans in on the counter and talks to the girl working there. When she giggles. I can see he's been here before.

"What was that?" I say.

"What was what? I got you a tea." His grin cracks into a little laugh and I laugh too.

"What're you laughing at?" he says.

"Nothing," I say. "I'm glad you're getting acclimated to your new neighbourhood."

Zach tosses a hand up, like he doesn't catch my drift.

"OK, I'm done," I say. "Tell me. We haven't talked since the big move."

"I texted you."

"You respond to my texts. And one-word answers don't pass for conversation."

"We're laying wire in that new condo development on Morris. You seen it?"

"I can't remember," I say, "It's getting hard to keep a line on all these condos."

"Tell me about it. I don't know who the hell's going to live in them. Not that it matters, they don't pay me to sell them."

Zach talks like he's been on his own for years. I can't tell if this is an act he's trying on for size. But this talk of work as an all-encompassing force scares me too—for his sake.

“What about your apartment?” I ask.

“It’s good, mostly—really good. It’s just, at home—at the house—I know where everything is, you know? My apartment is big enough, I have room for everything, but I put something away—where it belongs—and then I forget where that is.”

He pauses to make sure I’m listening. Then he glances at the counter, where she’s taking the order of a pre-teen in full hockey gear.

“I just don’t know where everything belongs yet,” he says. “At home, I knew.”

He sips his coffee and then peels the lid off and presses it back into place. I lay my hand on his, then pull it away. Afraid, I suppose, that he’d pull away first.

The red sofa cubes are scattered around the living room, along with the foam and cardboard and plastic. Wayne looks out over the landscape and assesses the damage.

“And what all happened here?” I say.

“There was a hole in the top of the plastic, like my or Kristen’s finger punched through when we carried it in. I knew it wouldn’t be there—there’s no way. But once the idea gets into your head—what else could I do?”

All around his eyes is puffy. I don’t think I’ve seen him cry since his father died. Before that, our wedding night, once we were finally alone in our room.

“Didn’t you call Kristen?” I ask, and I want to believe that the ring can be there, tucked in under the seat cushion. That it isn’t zipped away in the inside pocket of my purse.

“I did call. I even drove over there and dug around for myself. I thought there might be a spot deep in its guts that only I could reach.”

“Wayne, this is ridiculous. It’ll turn up—it doesn’t have legs. Come and eat dinner before you drive yourself batty.”

Wayne stick-handles his food before every bite and runs through the house in his head, trying to uncover some spot he hasn’t already turned upside down.

“Wayne, stop thinking about your ring. Talk to me.”

“I wasn’t,” he says. “I was thinking I want to eat healthier.”

“Healthy like what?”

“Like the stuff you suggested before, after the cardiologist.”

“OK, we can certainly give it a go,” I say.

“I don’t want to move,” I say. “I don’t want to sell the house. It might not mean much to you, but this is your family’s home. I don’t care if the whole neighbourhood’s overrun with thirty-year-olds.”

“Fine, we won’t sell the house.”

“Fine?” I say. “Just like that?”

“It was never about the house,” he says.

“Then what, Wayne—what is it? The consulting, the renovations, the condo, that hideous couch. What’s this all about?”

“It’s you,” he says. “I want us together. I don’t want to be a damned consultant—I’m just tired of waiting. All those years, I’d get off the phone with you at night and look out my hotel window at some city or airport, or just at the black windows of the office building across the street. I’d ask myself what the hell I was doing in Mississauga or Winnipeg or Dawson City. I’d remind myself that a day would come when I wouldn’t have to miss another birthday party or anniversary.”

“I’m not ready to retire, Wayne. I like my job—I’m good at it. And I’ve been here all along. When you were working and since you retired. These five years you’ve been waiting around for me to join you are just five more years gone.”

“All this time I’ve tried to follow our plan.”

“We were kids when we came up with that damned plan,” I say. “We’ve all lived entire lives since then. It’s your responsibility to catch up.”

Wayne’s shoulders jerk up and down. I come around and put a hand on his shoulder and he reaches across his chest to hold it there.

“You should go lie down,” I tell him. “I’ll clean up here.”

“I think I’ll just go to bed,” he says. “I’ll put the sofa together tomorrow.”

“Sure,” I say.

After Wayne goes up, I wash the dishes. Then I go into the dining room buffet, bring the case of my mother’s silverware back to the kitchen table. I polish each piece by hand, turning it under the table light as I move the cloth over its surface, to ensure that I reach every spot. I finish and carry the case back to the buffet, put it away on the shelf where no light will reach it. Back at the kitchen table I take out Wayne’s ring, rub the cloth over its insignia, into its crevices—around and between the letters and numbers. In our bedroom, I leave the polished ring on Wayne’s dresser, undress and get into the cold side of the bed.

In three hours, I’ll wake-up, shower, eat a piece of toast and drive to work. The phone will ring some time later. I’ll let it ring three, four times, and answer the moment before it’s too late.

TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATIONS

You're at work, waiting for Erica to find a last-minute babysitter. You lean against the back bar, trying to blend in with the whisky bottles, thinking about your student loans and the philosophy degree that came along with them. You rattle around the tip jar and find some relief in the fact that you'll be three one-thousandths of a percent closer to paying them off by the end of the shift.

There's a siren somewhere off in the distance, getting farther away by the second. So what? You hear sirens all the time. Another fender-bender at the corner of Spring Garden and Robie. But then you hear a second one and more. Not an orchestra's worth, but a five-piece jazz band with no chemistry, every man playing his own solo with no consideration for his bandmates.

The door busts open and scares the shit out of you. For a second, you think whatever's out there must've made its way to the bar, that you're going to have to take it on barehanded. But it's just Erica and her too-big purse fluttering behind her and smacking you when she knocks in behind the bar. Some big disaster on Argyle, she tells you. Traffic is bananas, she had to get out of her cab and walk. There's dust or smoke everywhere and they're closing streets farther downtown. It sounds bad, but you hope it isn't. You hope everyone is okay. The main thing is that you're standing behind the bar all in one piece. The shock turns into more of a distant curiosity—you want to know what's going on, mostly just to know. You grab your phone and check Twitter, hold it out with Erica squeezed in beside you. You see the picture before you read anything, and then you can't read anything.

It's the same blue-and-white construction crane that's loomed across the street from your apartment window. The one that's kept the work-in-progress convention centre company. But the picture's not of the work site, but your apartment building. The crane has become a part of it,

resting soundly at the fourth floor, the unit directly below yours. A titanic zipper, like all you'd need to do is pull the crane up out of there and the building would slide back together, good as new.

It isn't quite as neat and tidy as all that. Your apartment doesn't look much like home anymore. The plate glass window replaced by gnarled girders, hard steel all twisted like arthritic fingers. There's not much left of the floor, but a jagged ridge coated in dust thick as volcanic ash. All you can think about is your dog Monk, a bulldog-boxer mix you rescued from the SPCA three years ago. You want to throw up, but you don't. You force your way through the crowd, cutting in where you can, two-hand shoving people who don't get the picture. Some blockhead tries to grab your shoulder, fighting words follow you through the crowd. He doesn't get that it's nothing personal, you're running on pure adrenaline. You could lift the front half of a sedan over your head like one of those baby-saving moms.

You hurdle the police barrier and ignore the filtered screams of the cop in a protective mask and reflective vest who's chasing you, palm still outstretched like it hadn't failed him five long strides ago. You find out why you're not supposed to be there. The dust forms a dense fog and there's no clear destination, nothing to do but run in a straight line and try to use the few senses that have any worth. There's debris everywhere, shattered glass and shards of metal under and around your feet. You come out clear on the other side of the block with a cough and a sprained ankle. The officer on this side offers a few harsh words to go with his kung-fu grip.

Then you hear barking.

It's muffled, just one sound in a crowd, but you know it by heart. You glimpse Monk preserved behind the window of a fire engine and sweet-talk the good officer into making his

way over. A firefighter explains how they saved him. Not a scratch on him, he tells you, but the damned thing won't stop barking.

You spend some quality time with Monk in the cab of the fire truck. Then you're sitting in the back of an ambulance with one of those foil blankets cloaked over you while an EMT wraps your bum ankle. The officer gives you an earful and directions to a cot in a church basement. You check your phone and see that the people who still love you have seen the news and would like to know whether you're still a member of the club they call the living. Your best friend offers to put you up at his sister's. As inviting as that cot in the church basement sounds, you accept.

* * *

That's pretty much how I came to be lying with my feet hanging off the end of the couch in Kyle's sister's basement in the West End, while Kyle plays the Xbox I lent him four-hundred dollars to buy for his nephew. I may as well write off my four hundred bucks with everything else. I make an involuntary sound—some groan untethered to language. Kyle looks back at me like I just crawled out of the Black Lagoon.

“Sorry Adam, thought you were asleep.” He turns the volume down a generous couple of ticks. “How're you doing?”

I have no idea how to answer. I've laid on couches watching him play videogames since we were kids. Once I've slept here for days, I'll know that my home and possessions are lost, and that this couch is, in fact, a life raft. No point trying to convey any of this to Kyle, so I settle on 'fine', but he's onto a new round, sprinting through some bombed-out Middle Eastern city, just like he will next round.

“What's the point of this game?”

Kyle looks at me like maybe it was my head the crane caved in.

“To not die.”

That does it for me. I roll over and close my eyes, listen to the noises coming out of the TV, rounds unloading, grenades exploding, knives digging in and tearing open flesh. Behind all this, Monk’s muffled barks slip out under the bathroom door, one after another, after another.

I wake up in unfamiliar darkness, scour black space for an anchor and find only the Xbox’s white light to remind me that I’m not at home, and that I’d be far worse off if I was. My phone tells me it’s almost three a.m. and that it’s going to die soon. I make it halfway to the bathroom and notice that the barking has stopped. I stand at the door, palm pressed against the panel. Then I take a decisive breath and dive right in, watch that heavy head shoot up, jaw drop, tongue lunge forward.

“Pipe down buddy, it’s just me.”

Monk gives me this pitiful ‘I promise this isn’t about you’ look, and I know it isn’t. He’s a rescue dog that let a steel crane get the jump on him—nothing in his biological programming can effectively respond to that.

Those firefighters—god bless them—didn’t think to grab Monk’s leash while pulling him from the precipice of death. I venture out onto Berlin Street in the middle of the night, clutching one end of an HDMI cable, the other end looped around the collar of a shell-shocked dog doing his part to spread awareness of an oft-overlooked condition. This presents a problem on a residential west end street at three fifteen a.m.—at no hour is it ever this quiet downtown. Downtown, quiet means taxis splashing through day-old puddles, their doors cracking open and slamming shut. Drunks screeching in the dark. Sirens briefly blazing. Even inside our

apartments, the city always presses against the other side of the glass, lightly tapping, searching for a flaw—a way in. Quiet has another meaning here, only fifteen minutes from where my apartment heaved its guts into the street. Here, Monk’s barking monopolizes all carefully-cultivated space.

Monk stops barking all of a sudden. I kneel and look him over, as if this means that he hasn’t gone back to normal, but progressed to some new and terrible phase. He sits and scratches at his ear, like we usually walk the streets of this foreign neighbourhood just hours before dawn. The fresh air stings my eyes. My ankle swells against the bandage. I need to retreat, find that dark place I woke up in and put this silence to use.

Stacey is up in the kitchen bright and early, flying around, opening the fridge and cupboard doors, laying food and condiments and containers out, combining them with a lunch bag and that with a backpack. It’s been a while since I’ve seen her, and even longer since I’ve seen her done-up for work. Chestnut hair shining and wound in some elaborate top knot, bare arms blooming from a sleeveless blouse, navy slacks tracing the lines of her legs. Like she belongs to another world, one that guys like her brother and I can only glimpse in fleeting moments.

“Is Jason gone to work?” I ask.

“Yes, he left fifteen minutes ago,” Stacey says. “How are you?”

She goes on to the next task.

“I think I’m OK. I’m not really sure how you’re supposed to feel about this kind of thing.” I head toward the counter where she’s connecting the points of some unknown constellation. I try to dance around her, but she skims by and her body brushes mine.

“OK is fine.” She says. “You know you can stay here until—whenever.”

“Thanks.” I say, trying to dodge her next move. “Do you need a hand at all?”

“No.” She stops. “Kyle’s supposed to take Nicholas to school. Maybe you can see that he and the morning make each other’s acquaintance.”

I make it to the coffee maker, pour myself a cup and slip out of her way.

“I can walk Nick over.”

I sit at the kitchen table. Nick is at the other end, behind a row of plastic Ninja Turtles. His scowls over the Turtles’ green domes.

“I told you never to call me that.”

“Sorry, you just look like a Nick to me, a tough guy like you.”

“I’m not a tough guy. You are.”

“Me?” I take a gulp of coffee. “I can’t even stop a crane from smashing up my apartment.”

It’s the first time I’ve said it out loud.

“You lived in there? Cool.”

“Nicholas!” Stacey says, but that’s all the time she can afford.

“How does a lad like you know about the latest disaster?”

“It’s right there.” He points out the newspaper in the middle of the table. “There’s a picture.”

There it is again, the old place not quite looking its old self. The news isn’t good. The crane operator and another worker killed, along with a man who lived in the top-floor apartment, two up from mine. He’d stayed home from work with a head cold. I picture the poor guy sitting at a table just like mine in a kitchen just like mine, blanket cloaked over him, steam from a coffee cup working over his sinuses. Then boom—it’s all over.

“Can you see your apartment?” Nick asks, leaning in. I drop my finger right in the middle of the thumb-sized gash.

“It’s part of the scenery now, friend.”

“Wow. Has Uncle Kyle ever been there?”

“Sure.”

“Nicholas, cut it out. Adam doesn’t want to talk about it. It’s very sad for him.”

Stacey zips up the backpack and drops it next to us. She pushes the hair away from Nick’s forehead and kisses it.

“I’ve got to run. Love you.” She places a hand on my shoulder. “Thanks a lot.”

“Mom, have you ever been there?”

“Where?”

“Adam’s apartment.”

Stacey doesn’t answer him.

“Mom?” Nick insists.

She tightens her hand on my shoulder again, but not to say thanks.

“Uh—I don’t think so,” I say.

“Huh,” Nick says. “I wish I coulda seen it before everything blew up.”

Stacey slinks down the hall. “Bye,” she calls. The door adds a punctuation mark. I treat myself to a long, hard sigh.

“Alright, pal. Let’s get the dog and get out of here.”

Monk takes point with Nick trying to walk and pet him at the same time. It's a cool morning and the sun comes through the leaves all nice, and I feel obligated to appreciate that I'm still alive. I pluck a curled leaf from a passing hedge and mash it between my fingers.

"How long are you going to live at my house?" Nick says with none of the malice built into a question like that.

"I'm not sure, pal. Hopefully I'll be out of your hair soon."

"What do you mean, out of my hair?"

"I don't know—just that I'll find a new place."

He scrunches up his face, then goes on to the next thing, a host trying to fill in the silences.

"Are you friends with my dad?"

"Sure I am. Of course."

"But not like with Uncle Kyle. Or Mom."

"Well no, I've known them longer. I've been friends with your Uncle since I was your age."

I can't stay at the house long, there's too much history clinging to the baseboards. Nick senses something he's too young to comprehend—that I'm an intruder.

"But we're not friends," Nick says.

"We aren't?"

"Nope."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

He nods like he agrees it's a shame, but it can't be helped.

We cut through a footpath, clouded by shrubs on both sides. It opens into an entire world. The school sprawls over the block. SUVs and vans parked along the sidewalks, kids pouring from their doors. Parents lean on window frames to gab or stand in pairs, clutching their arms like there's a chill only they're privy to.

"I gotta go," Nick says.

"Can you take it from here?"

He nods and I hand down the bag. He hoists it onto both shoulders and grimaces under the weight. "Sorry your house got smashed."

"It's alright. It wasn't much of a home anyway."

"But you lived there."

"Sure, but I live at your house now. And pretty soon I'll find a new place to live."

I don't know if I buy my own optimism, but Nick salutes me and runs off, backpack working against him the entire way. He melts into the throng of grade-schoolers running around the soccer field and blacktop. They all shout like they need to get away from the building at all costs but some gravitational force holds them in its orbit.

The school bell consumes all other sound. That shrill wail, meant to demand order, only re-channels the chaos. Kids crowd toward school, collide into one another, bump and jostle for the few entrances. The parents respond by dovetailing into silence. Doors slam and cars cut away from the curb. Everyone else has an escape plan, but not you—the one sucker who never saw it coming. You stand with your dog at the mouth of the footpath, unsure of which way to turn. You can't go home anymore. The house you just left compresses disaster into a five-by-three box with accompanying caption. There's no room for tragedy's reverberations in a house where

curtains match the wall paint and the oak dining table matches the curtains. Four chairs for four people. Not five—not you or your seventy-pound mutt.

Take a deep breath and then another. Now, tell yourself it's over.

END OF DAYS

I started for the Outlet Store's employee entrance an hour late, in yesterday's clothes, without having showered or eaten breakfast. Seagulls circled the lampposts and pecked at cigarette butts on the pavement. The sun flooded the sky and threatened to bring down the first truly hot day of the year. A row of four men stood at the edge of the building's roof. One of them pointed, as if directing the sun's glare to assault me. I beaked a hand over my eyes and they stepped back out of view.

The heat attacked me when I came into the building, tried to push me back out and seal the door behind me. The humidity brushed the cement floor with a slick glaze. Portable air conditioners whispered into the mouths of empty trailers at four of the dock's twelve bay doors. Usually, we'd spend a day like this unloading trailers, bringing stock to the floor. Now that the store had closed for good, we needed to fill these trailers with everything left: old stock, fixtures, pallets of shopping bags. I pushed on to the lockers and dug out my boots. Bill punched through the doors from the sales floor behind a flatbed cart with a tangle of clothes racks on it. He stopped in front of me and locked hands on hips. A W of sweat darkened the front of his shirt.

"I must say, it's an honour to have you in our presence." He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"There's guys on the roof," I said. "At least four of them."

"Sure there are. They're taking out the HVAC unit." He lifted his hand up and underlined the air above his head. "Hence the tropical climate."

"They were just standing there."

"And you're an hour late for your job. What do you want from them?"

Just the day before, our store closed its doors to customers for the last time—two years after I started working there. I'd watched Bill, a middle-aged former construction worker bend over to envelop a five-foot-nothing saleswoman who'd worked at the store for three decades. A front-load washer had once crushed Bill's fingers and he'd done nothing but swallow a few choice words before they punched through his gnashed teeth. But yesterday, tears flushed down his cheeks and pelted the shoulder pads of Angie's blouse. Now Bill acted as if this was just another day and gave me a hard time. Sunlight streaked through a bay window and illuminated a halo of dust particles over his head.

Langley burst through the doors with his own cartload of racks.

"There he is!" he shouted. "We were all worried about you."

"Bill here sure was." I pointed a thumb at Bill, who led one of the aluminum clothes racks in a dance across the floor of a trailer.

"Pay no mind," Langley said. "Here, check this out." He dug his phone out of his pocket and pushed an earbud in front of my face. I plugged it into my ear and he did the same with the left one. Our team lead Claire walked off one of the trailers and leaned on the coat rack, casting a shadow between Langley and me.

"Are you two having a moment, or is it OK to prescribe some work?"

Claire had once been provincial judo champion, and had been considered a shoe-in for the '96 Olympic team before a couple of ruptured discs put her down for good. She carried a tension in her all the time, this immense power that wanted to get out. She negotiated it by giving as much grief as we could handle, and never any more.

"You already ruined the mood," Langley said. "Might as well get on with it."

“Why thank you, sir.” She showed us her teeth. “Steven, if you feel up to doing work today, you might join Pepper, Matty and me in pulling the shoe racking off the floor and onto the Montreal trailer.”

“Can I at least put my lunch in the fridge?” I asked, headphone still snaked in my ear.

“Two hours late and now you want access to the fridge?” Claire said. “If you insist, but no more goofing off.”

The lunch room was tucked away in the far corner of the dock. I walked the twenty or so feet around the teal racking that reached up three stories to the roof, which used to hold pallets of boxed furniture, hundreds of pounds’ worth of shopping bags. All that was left were some old Christmas decorations: lengths of garland like decayed boa constrictors, Christmas tree boxes consumed by dust, a full-size Santa sleigh that hadn’t made a floor display during either of the two Christmases I’d worked here.

Once around the racking, I took the straight shot through the isle that stretched the length of a hockey rink. It’s the first time I’d ever seen the door to the lunch room closed. Inside, Matty stood in front of the Coke machine on the far wall, cycling through his key chain. He still had his jacket and sneakers on, with a GoodLife duffel bag looped over his shoulder.

“What’re you doing?”

“Close the door, will you?” he said. He settled on a key, slotted it into the machine’s padlock and stripped it. Then he choked down a lever on the side of the machine and pulled its casing open to expose all the tin cylinders slotted into their narrow cages. The slot on the far left had been emptied of cans and filled with watches, each still looped around its hollowed-out plastic bone. Matty rolled a chair over to the machine, set down the duffel bag, and started pulling watches.

“That’s theft,” I said.

Matty shrugged. “I don’t know, is it? You ever get a raise in the couple of years you worked here? You getting severance? They’re not gonna take care of you, they’re not gonna take care of me. This is my severance—what I’m owed.”

Matty had only been hired a few months ago, only weeks before they announced the store’s closure. When they made the announcement, he shrugged and muttered *perfect timing* so that only I could hear. He started in Commerce at Saint Mary’s that Fall, though he must’ve been four or five years older than me.

“What makes you think you deserve some severance when no one else is getting any?”

He dropped the last batch of watches into the bag and sealed it.

“They all deserve severance too—a hell of a lot more than a bag full of watches. Only difference is that they still think they owe the company something. Or they don’t have the guts to take what they deserve.”

He pressed the front of the machine closed, set the lever back into place, and hooked the padlock on. The watches jangled when he threw the bag over his shoulder. On his way out, he held-up right in front of me.

“You’re not one of them, you know,” he said. “There’s nothing left here for you—it’s just a trap you’re standing under, looking up, waiting for it to fall. You can walk out of here right along with me.”

“I wouldn’t do that to them.”

“Don’t you get it? There is no them. The store, the company—they’re dead already.”

Matty pulled a watch out of his jacket pocket, silver with gold accents, a larger face with the date at the bottom. My dad had a watch like it, that the bank gave to him for twenty-five

years of service. He took my forearm, lifted my palm and laid the watch in it. Then he took my other hand and pressed it on top. Matty grinned, and I noticed for the first time that one of his teeth was broken.

“See you around campus, Steve,” he said. He walked past me, the bag clinking against his back. He snapped the light switch off, and left me holding the watch out against the glow of the Coke machine. I walked across the room to the fridge and opened the door. Totally empty. Old lunch bags and Tupperware containers that had accumulated to mark the passage of time, all cleaned out. I tossed my lunch bag on the shelf and then held the watch under the fridge light, jangled it around in my hand to feel its weight. Then I slipped the watch into my jeans pocket, passed through the light of the Coke machine, and left the lunch room behind, lights still out.

There'd been days when I couldn't even force a cart through the aisle, it had been so flooded with customers. The cart itself would pick up on their start-stop rhythm, and I'd be nothing more than a stranded passenger. I'd always hated those days, but this was worse. Emptied of customers and most of the stock, the aisle bordered three hundred yards of post-apocalyptic emptiness. I traced a tangle of scuffs from one end of the floor to the other, weaving through the maze as one scuff struck-out and another picked up on that failure and went the distance. Only the dregs of the furniture and appliances remained: a coil-top range with three busted knobs, one-third of a floral print sectional, a mattress that curled up at both ends like a giant taco shell. The area in between the aisles was an otherwise undisturbed expanse of blue-grey carpet, as wide, it seemed, as the Halifax Harbour.

I came around the wall at the end of the heavy goods department and followed the elbow to the other side of the store. This side, twice as large, was once polluted with clothing, bedding, toys, but now offered no more than sparsely filled racking and shelving. Registers had already

been stripped from the bank of check-out counters. Abandoned wires clung like matted hair to the counters' sides. The headless torsos of mannequins teetered on a ledge above a naked wall, white turned a shade of yellow. A distant hammer pounded in a steady rhythm, like the thump of an enormous heart.

Each shoe rack consisted of a metal slab the length of a station wagon with shelving striped across each side of the wall in five tiers. The rack had a bone-white colour, with a polished texture that made it slick in your hands. Each weighed about two hundred pounds with the shelves on, so we had to disassemble them. Pepper held one end of the rack's wall while Claire separated the legs.

"If you got any extra beauty rest, it certainly didn't pay off." Claire tossed a naked bolt on the carpet. I hadn't even had time to wet my hair down. I brushed at it feebly now and the mess of peaks snapped back against my hand. I'd started to sweat already, and that sour tang mixed poisonously with yesterday's stale musk.

"Morning, Steve," Pepper said, trying to straighten-up against the strain of the wall.

"Come around and hold up this other side, will you?" Claire asked. She stripped the bolts from the set of legs and pulled them away from the wall. The freed weight yanked me down an inch, but I caught it and steadied myself. The wall levitated between me and Pepper.

Moving anything is a kind of conversation. One comprised of the slightest movements, subtle shifts in the distribution and direction of a force trying to pull you both down. A weight that wants to separate your shoulders from their sockets, to rupture your spine. The thing you're lifting would love to break your hand or shatter your metatarsal. All that's going to prevent one or more of these things from happening is you and your partner exchanging this dialogue with

fluency. Pepper and Claire made me believe, not in the company or the job, but in the work itself.

Pepper and I lifted the section of wall to a long pallet, titled it together, slowly negotiated it down and squatted in time for it to settle on the pallet.

“It’s all yours.” He laid the sections of legs on top, opened his cupped hands and spilled the hardware into my own. “Good work,” he said. “You smell terrible, but good work.”

Claire massaged her lower back with the handle of a screwdriver. “You happen to see where Matty dicked off to?”

“He left,” I told her. “I don’t think he’s coming back.”

“What gave you that idea?” Now she needled her spine with the butt of the handle.

“He told me he’d see me around campus.”

“Just beautiful,” she said. “Aren’t you two sweet.”

“Nothing to do with me,” I barked. “I’m still here, aren’t I?”

Claire pressed her lips together, nodded her head while she swapped out the words she wanted to say.

“An hour late—at least,” she hissed. “But you’re right, you certainly are here. All this means is that you need to hurry up and haul that unit back to the trailer, so we can get on with the next one.”

The watch leaned hot against my thigh. I walked double time back around the elbow to the old furniture and appliance department, the pallet jack threatening to bite at my heels as I caught the long straightaway to the dock. The section of wall got caught up coming through the dock doors. I yanked the handle of the pallet jack, swiped it side-to-side. I shook the piece of wall itself, kicked it again and again, my steel-capped toes punching at that bone veneer. The

near corner snapped, flicked up and onto the floor. Loose particles splintered around my boot. I said the word *fuck*.

After I'd steadied my breathing, I picked up the shard and dropped it on top, straightened out the pallet as best I could and pumped the jack as high as it would go, put both hands on the handle, and yanked as hard as I could. It eked through incrementally until the doors swung closed behind it after the fifth tug. An invisible hand needled my shoulder as I drove the pallet ahead and onto the trailer. Four shelving units left.

I popped around to the mouth of the next trailer. Bill tangled with a clothes rack, hugging its slender body close, trying to turn it along with him. He noticed me and held-up mid-embrace.

"It's a miracle," he barked.

"What is?"

"You—doing work."

Bill had this long, narrow neck, so his Adam's apple bulged out like a cyst. That neck would've looked good with my hands around it. All the grime I'd walked in with, and all the sweat layered on top of that felt like it was some outside force trying to seep into my skin, rather than having come from it. Like it was pushing on me.

"Hey, come on," Bill said. "It's called a joke."

A smokey blur flashed in front of Bill, along with a whipping that whistled and dovetailed into a crack, all in a second—less. A shaft of sunlight shot down through the trailer a foot in front of Bill. His face whitened behind the glow. His eyes all iris.

"Shit, you OK?" I croaked out.

Bill tilted his head down, where the sunlight kissed the floorboards.

"Oh—oh Jesus."

I stepped into the trailer in a half-crouch and wove wall-to-wall. The sledgehammer had nestled peacefully into one of the planks. It had punched a hole through the fibre glass roof. Dust particles writhed in the invasive light.

“Think there’s more?” Bill kept his eyes straight ahead, as if a step forward or wave of the arm would send a wrench down to join us. I tugged at his arm and led back to the dock, pushed both his shoulders to force him to sit down in a chair.

“That was just about the damndest thing,” he told the coat rack.

I paged Claire, Stu, anyone. Whoever showed up would be better with Bill than I was. Claire arrived, checked on Bill, checked on the hammer, and then went outside and yelled in the general direction of the roof. It took several minutes before a murky voice spilled down after her. The HVAC boss spent a good hour locked up in the office with Stu and Claire. Stu’s furniture had all been sold off and they’d had to drag in whatever was nearby. The HVAC guy walked in clutching the step stoop the customer service ladies had used to reach winter coats and pillows on the top shelves.

No one felt up to working until things were hashed out. Pepper sat beside Bill with a hand on his shoulder.

“A freak accident,” he said. “You’re all good.”

I paced between them and the opening of the trailer, hand tight on the watch in my pocket, so that it didn’t rattle with every step.

“You still with us, Steve?” Pepper asked.

“Yeah, I’m still here.” But I wasn’t really. I wondered where Matty might be right now, but I knew next to nothing about him. I could only picture him walking around the Saint Mary’s campus, cutting across the quad, leaning on the wall outside a classroom. No matter where I

pictured Matty—the Loyola student lounge, the Gorsebrook, the Tower—the hammer came crashing down again and again. I hadn't even seen it fall, but now it played-back in slow motion, an invention more than a memory.

Langley swatted at my hair and I snapped out of it. “Come on, let's go for a walk.”

We walked the straight line from the mouth of the Montreal trailer to the doors out to the sales floor. I counted all seventy-four steps until Langley hammered the doors open. We walked halfway down the aisle and then Langley cut left and into the centre of the harbour of carpet. I followed, and only once I stood in the centre of the empty expanse did I fully understand the store would never be open again. This vacuum had once been filled with more than a dozen rows of furniture, sofas, chairs, tables, dressers lined-up back-to-back, and now all those things had been liquidated.

“I understand you're fucked up right now,” Langley said, “but Pepper's right—it's over. It's not worth getting hung-up on.”

“Bill came this close to dying.” I held my hands straight in front of me, two walls an inch apart. My hands shook so bad I couldn't stop the walls from caving in. “What're we still doing here? The store closed yesterday. Now it's coming down on top of us.”

“It's a job,” Langley said. “I need to hang around as long as I can get paid. Maybe it's not like that for you.”

“Did you know Matty left? I talked to him before he walked out of here. He said I'm not like you guys, that I should get out of here while I could. I thought he was crazy—no way I'd bail on you guys. But it makes so much sense now.”

“Come on, that's not true. We're friends, Steve.”

“Are we going to be friends next week? Are we going to hang-out at each other’s houses, swap music recommendations on Facebook?”

“I don’t even know what next week is,” Langley said. “I know I’m not going to have a job, I won’t have any university to go to in September. Hell, I never even finished high school. You tell me if we’re going to be friends.”

“You’re still young,” I told him. “You should go back and finish high school. You’re definitely smart enough to go to university.”

“I don’t want to do either of those things.”

“I don’t want you to end up like Bill,” I said.

“No one’s going to end up like Bill. Department stores like this are extinct.” Langley threw his hands up and waved them around the empty floor. “I’m going back to the dock with everyone else. I wanted to make sure you’re OK, but I see I can’t help you.”

“Langley—”

He cut across the carpet and pressed the dock door open only enough to slip through before it swung closed again. I walked to the far end of the carpet, where the leftover appliances and furniture were corralled. I walked in between the two half-rows and glided my hand over the polished surface of a washer, the pebbled face of a fridge. I sat down on a leather chair with a slash in the backrest and one leg missing, so that it rocked forward under my weight, dropped my elbows onto my thighs and cupped my hands over my face. Then I sucked in a deep breath and choked trying to expel it.

Pepper and Claire laid a sheet of plywood over the dent the hammer had left. The HVAC guy was gone, but Bill sat in that same chair, a hand tight around his lower jaw.

“What happened to the guy from the roof?” I asked.

“We gave him his hammer back and told him where to stick it,” Claire said. “After that, we ordered pizza.”

Bill stuffed a slice of meat lovers into his face along with the rest of us, but he didn’t do much in the way of blinking.

“I bet that’s the best slice of pizza you’ve ever tasted,” Claire said. Bill nodded, but too slowly and too many times. He picked a little meatball off his slice and held it up in the dull light, like a diamond.

“This building’s haunted.”

“Come on, Bill. You’re all right,” Pepper said.

“I mean it, I always thought so—always. When you’re alone out here or down in the warehouse, you see a flicker of light where there ain’t any, you hear a sound when nothing’s there to make it.”

Our pizza slices drooped in front of our mouths.

“It was an accident,” Claire said. “The man said so when he apologized.”

“Listen, why don’t you take the rest of the day off,” Stu said. “Go home, and get some rest.”

“No. No, I gotta see this through to the end.” Bill said. “Besides, I need the money.”

Then no sound except for the wet grind of our mouths mashing pizza. Bill looked at me across our loose circle. It was the first time since the hammer dropped that he’d looked at something located in the room. I couldn’t face him. I craned my head up toward the concrete ceiling three stories above our heads, where the fluorescent lights bled-out in their cages.

The freight elevator moaned down to the basement. Its rust-streaked cage grumbled out of place and the door's rubber lips parted to spit out Langley and me. The warehouse's pendant lights, set deep in their metal bowls, cast shadows on pallets of anonymous boxes, empty clothes racks, a stack of broken kitchen tables. I could see half as clearly as up on the dock. Abandoned pallets of clothes soured in the heat. We'd been sent down to pull a decade worth of receipts from a locked room at the far end of the warehouse, past the pallets and through a set of narrow tunnels bordered by empty clothes rails, running a good fifty-feet toward the wall. The rails' red paint had turned brown in the shallow light.

The warehouse had always creeped me out a little, whenever I'd had to go down alone to pull stock after the warehouse crew had gone home. The greyness of it—the ceiling and walls, the lights, gave the sense of a perpetual fog. Langley and I pushed our carts through the rails. The deeper into them we went, the less you could see the open expanse we'd come from. Langley stuck the key into the belly of the knob and the steel door shrieked open to reveal a black screen—the room could've been as big as a second warehouse, or as small as a bathroom stall. The darkness swallowed Langley, and the room filled with a humming orange light. A rancid smell stung the air and the room boiled like a furnace. The cement floor buried under a stalagmite carpet. Rat shit.

“For fuck's sake.” Langley pressed his lips shut and put a hand over them. We took in short breaths and pushed five times as much air out through our nostrils. Stacks of banker's boxes, cloaked in mould-licked dust, housed the receipts. There might've been a hundred boxes, but it was hard to count while scanning the floor for rats.

“This will take hours,” Langley mumbled. He traced the words *Fuck* and *this* onto a canvas of dust. Then he heaved the box halfway across the room. It skidded on the cart and nose-dived off. The next box he picked up rapped back at him like a set of knuckles on a door. He dropped the box on the shelf and it rapped again, then again. Langley squeezed the plastic handle at the front of the box. The box slid open enough to stick a hand in, but instead, the rat jabbed its front paws out onto the ledge and lifted its head up and out. Its eyes were amber beads gleaming in the orange light.

“Christ,” Langley said, but he didn’t back off. He grabbed at it, the rat’s fur bristling against his hands. It squirmed through his fingers to the tail, which Langley tightened his hands over. He stepped forward, twisted his body all the way around and spun the rat in mid-air. It torpedoed across the room, its body bending around a shelf post. The rat made the sound of helium escaping from a balloon.

“You killed it,” I said.

Langley walked around the shelf he’d been standing at, and I followed-up to the aisle to the rat. It had disappeared.

“Where’d it go?” I said.

“It ran the fuck away,” Langley said. “What else?”

He held his palms up in up to the light and turned his eyes from one to the other. Then he started to wipe them on the thighs of his jeans, pressing harder and harder. I opened a box marked *August 2015* and pulled out a wad of receipts. I flipped from the first receipt to the second and third, and then cut to the middle. All blank. The ink faded to nothing.

Back upstairs at the coat rack, I dug my backpack out of the locker. I pulled off my work boots and catapulted them into the dumpster. I shuffled around the slick cement in my socks, stuffing shirts and books into the bag. I threw out last year's microeconomics textbook, a ball cap with the company's logo on it, a broken box cutter and a dozen Sharpies. I did all this with a kind of insulated self-righteous ire, which Pepper broke when he walked out of the Montreal trailer. I kept going, but in a more contained, self-conscious way, trying to give the impression that this was the end of just another shift.

“What's the matter, Steve?” He slid his hands into his pockets, as if disarming himself.

“We're leaving,” I said into the bag.

“Who's we?”

I punched at the bag, tried to tamp everything down and zip it shut, then tightened my hand into a fist and slugged it hard. The edge of a book cover bit my knuckles.

“Me and Langley. We're getting out of here and we're not coming back.”

“Hmm,” Lines waved across Pepper's forehead, his eyes dipped at their edges. I couldn't find the energy to sustain my outrage. I picked up the wad of receipts and offered them to him, as if they explained everything. He considered each carefully before flipping to the next, as if reading all the information that time had brushed away.

“These certainly have faded,” he said. “But what about the others?”

“I don't care about the others,” I said.

Langley walked up behind Pepper, his hands so red and swollen that mine began to ache at my sides.

“Would you feel better if I offered to trade?” Pepper said. “Let me finish up down there, and you two pull the remaining furniture and appliances.”

“No,” I protested. “That’s not the point. No one should have to—it’s disgusting and it’s not OK. And anyway, it’s not just that gross room—what about the hammer? Bill could’ve died, and it could’ve been Langley or me, or any of us. But no one says anything. We’re just supposed to go on working.”

“I see what you’re saying. Maybe you should leave,” Pepper told me.

A flush of regret shot up from my stomach and burned the back of my teeth. I didn’t regret my decision, or even what I’d said. But I did regret that Pepper was the one who had to hear it.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be sorry,” he told me. “I mean it—I think leaving is the right decision for you. But I think you should know that it’s not a decision we all get to make. Now Bill—did Bill almost die? I can’t say, I wasn’t there. But is he hurt, is he on life support, or in the hospital? Right this minute he’s with Claire, helping dismount the jewellery cases. Bill’s done this job for a long time—he likes it, as far as I can tell. Come next week, he won’t be able to do it anymore, and that’s not a choice he gets to make either.”

Langley came around Pepper, but he didn’t start to dig through his locker, pack his bag or put on his jacket. He hung in Pepper’s periphery and massaged his hands. Pepper nodded to Langley then at me.

“A couple of months from now and you’ll be back in your courses, and that’s good—for you. Some of us—those already gone and those still here—we don’t know what comes next. Maybe it’ll take those couple of months to find our next jobs. Maybe it’ll take a year, or six. You see, there’s a world where that hammer landing on Bill is a sick kind of gift. A world where it hits him, and it doesn’t kill him, doesn’t put him in a coma. In that world, it does serious damage

to an arm or a leg. It hurts—it might hurt for what’s left of his life. He may never mow the lawn or hold his grandson again. But he goes on worker’s comp. He goes on long term disability. And what this means is that this same injury, this life-altering pain, also saves Bill, with all his skills and certifications, from having to sit down and put together his first resume of your lifetime. He won’t have to shuffle from interview to interview, only for the manager to discover that the man on the other side of the desk, asking for a job, has already had his sixty-second birthday.”

Pepper offered me his hand. I shook it knowing there was no turning back. I stabbed my feet into my sneakers, looped a backpack strap over a shoulder, and said thanks.

“You coming?” I asked Langley.

“You go ahead, I’ve gotta get my stuff.”

“I’ll wait.”

“It’s OK,” he said. “We’re not going the same way anyway.”

I couldn’t go home. I took the Spring Garden bus downtown and walked around, went to the comic store, the library. Got a french vanilla at Tim Hortons. Mostly I walked and thought about how someone else was down in that room, doing the job that I was supposed to. I did this every day for the rest of the week. On that last day, I sat around the dinner table with my parents in my spotless work clothes.

“We’re proud of you for seeing this through to the end,” my mom said. “You must feel like you earned your summer vacation now.”

I stabbed my hand in my pocket and pulled out the watch, held it out above the table, so the light caught the metal strap.

“They were so grateful,” I said. “They gave me this watch as a thank you. We all got one.” I undid the clasp, slipped the watch onto my wrist and snapped it closed. Three or four

links too big, the strap slipped and the watch face dipped down toward the table. Dad held out his own wrist across the table, bringing his watch close to mine.

“Hey, we match,” he said.

“I know,” I told him. “That makes it even more special.”

Even now, a year and a half later, sitting in a third-year accounting or management class, I look down at my silver watch with a gold stripe, and think of Claire or Pepper or Bill. Or Langley. I try to picture what they’re doing that very moment, and I never can. I can only ever see them at work. Pepper shaking a customer’s hand after running a fridge onto a truck. Claire negotiating the forklift through a narrow lane between walls of sofas. I see Bill staring wide-eyed at the hammer. Langley abandoned in the rat room, hands on his hips, surveying this mausoleum of banker’s boxes, face still hardened by betrayal.

Other times I picture the store itself. As it was, sure, but also what it must be like now, a tomb raided before it’d even been sealed. Those lifeless seas of carpet, bordered by tarnished white shorelines. The empty counters like rock formations. And below that, the warehouse, home of the rats and other unseen beings. I think of those five big blue letters bulging out from the face of the building, that once glowed against the black night, but never will again.

THE SHORT STORY COLLECTION: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY APPROACH

In my thesis project, “It Takes a Lot of Lights to Make a City,” I want to emphasize and explore the short story collection’s potential to function as a network of individual stories. Previous critics have attempted to define the unified short story collection using either circular or linear approaches to the collection. Though these critics lay essential groundwork for this unified approach, but their assertions for the maintenance of the author’s designed sequence restricts the reader. I intend to build upon these critical conceptions to provide a reader-inclusive approach to the short story collection which encourages a nonlinear approach to the genre. This argument extends and expands the short story collection’s potential to function as a genre offering a unique narrative approach.

Attempts in the latter half of the twentieth-century to define a unified approach to the short story collection faced a history of critical ambivalence toward the genre. Critics such as Forrest L. Ingram and Robert M. Luscher attempted to recast the short story collection, simultaneously encouraging further division within the genre. By attempting to excise the *short story cycle* (Ingram) or *short story sequence* (Luscher) from the “mere collection” (Ingram 16), critics obscured its generic features and placed the responsibility of distinguishing the short story cycle/sequence from the ‘mere collection’ on the reader. This artificial distinction threatens to further alienate the genre’s potential audience, while also expelling from critical discussion any work not meeting their unique criteria for sufficient unity.

Critical neglect of the short story collection has persisted through the first quarter of the twenty-first century. This neglect endures despite the genre’s compact form and tendency to address a “sense of isolation or fragmentation or indeterminacy” (Mann 11), concerns that dominated twentieth-century discourse, and have grown in urgency as the internet has come to

dominate global culture. The short story's investment in compression and preference for dialogism appeal to contemporary audiences who consume content in brief intervals and are comfortable with navigations into liminal territories. Yet, the work of critics such as Ingram and Luscher has accomplished little in terms of connecting the genre to its audience. Nor has even Ingram's more widely-adopted term, "short story cycle," been employed outside the small sphere of critical study devoted to the form. Despite the efforts of critics such as Ingram and Luscher, the term short story collection persists in the marketplace.

Critical studies of the short story display preference toward individual units, rather than coherent wholes. Michael Trussler observes that "it is commonplace for critical studies devoted to contemporary short fiction to ignore generic issues" (598). This approach to short stories as distinct units encourages the compilation of anthologies and, when attention is given to individual authors, retrospective "Collected/Selected Stories" omnibuses, which function as comprehensive or 'greatest hits' collections that betray unity and direct the reader to isolate individual stories. This philosophy trains readers to view stories in isolation, discouraging any effort to draw connections between the constituent units of a larger work.

The challenges faced by the short story collection extend beyond a failure to acknowledge the significance of the collection's potential to as a unified work. The preference may be to analyze individual stories, but even these analyses remain narrow, without the application of a unique set of tools suited to the genre. Even specialists in the genre fail to identify its unique qualities, as "most articles published in journals specifically devoted to short fiction pay scant attention to genre; these essays most often examine writing that just happens to take the short story as a form" (Trussler 598). This complacent attitude toward the short story as one type of genre only reinforces the misconception that the short story collection is no more

than an inferior novel; a work insignificant in scale, whose insufficient character development, narrative ambiguity, and rejection of monologism are perceived as faults, rather than generic traits.

The establishment of a functional framework upon which to build a critical approach to the short story collection depends on an democratic approach to the genre. Previous attempts to provide a set of guidelines with which the reader can observe the unifying features of the short story collection have failed as a result of the emphasis these critics have placed on distinguishing, and redefining, collections of related stories. A successful approach to the study of the genre should not encourage division within, by promoting unclear distinctions between the short story cycle/sequence and the story collection. Rather, this approach demands the establishment of a set of critical tools with which one can examine the relationship between constituent works in any collection, and distinguish a sufficiently unified collection from a set of unique stories.

This revised critical conception of the short story collection requires a modern approach to it as a genre. The genre should no longer be viewed in terms of Luscher's linearity or Ingram's circularity of form, but as a multidimensional network of story modules whose relative significance is not solely determined by an arranged sequence, but also by the non-linear connections between individual modules or module groups. The designed sequence of a collection provides only one potential path toward unity. Relationships between individual stories expand outwardly from the initial sequence, and compound exponentially as stories are read in alternate configurations. In this discussion, a collection such as Curtis Sittenfeld's *You Think It, I'll Say It*, which may have the superficial characteristics of a 'mere collection', can be analyzed for thematic unity based on the component stories' recurrent focus on time, place, and

social milieu. It is through this non-linear conception of the short story collection that the genre flourishes and proposes a kind of fiction that transcends the enforced structural parameters.

Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century, Forrest L. Ingram's pioneering study of the genre, offers the first major attempt to define a unified approach to the short story collection. Ingram considered the term *short story collection* an insufficient descriptor of the 'complete' work whose characteristics he sought to articulate. Ingram defines his short story cycle as "a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts" (19). This attempt at definition exposes Ingram's struggle to establish a firm set of constraints upon his generic conception. The employment of phrases such as "so linked," "on various levels," and "significantly modifies," betrays a lack of definition. Though Ingram suggests the author will provide the reader with signifiers that indicate the work's cyclical form, he is unable to define the limits of the signifiers. Furthermore, Ingram's definition fails to account for the cycle's distinction from the short story collection, beyond the implication that the reader should expect to discover in the collection an absence of these signifiers. To supplement his definition, Ingram illustrates the relationship between genres, asking his reader to picture "the panorama of short story cycles as a spectrum, the limit of one extreme of the spectrum would be the 'mere collection' of unconnected stories, while the limit of the other extreme would be the novel" (14). Ingram argues that any given short story cycle is not automatically placed at the centre of the spectrum, but instead can appear anywhere on the spectrum between the 'mere collection' and the novel. This spectral conception of the cycle presents to the reader further challenges of genre classification. There are no defined criteria the

reader can apply to differentiate the “loosest cycle form” (18) from the ‘mere collection’, or the tightest of these forms from the novel. Ingram himself concedes that this challenge is not easily surmounted: “A cycle’s form is elusive. Its patterns must be studied in detail as the cycle progresses from first story to last” (13). Ingram’s definition of his cycle places expectation for generic construction on the writer, yet this concession of his form’s elusiveness transfers the onus onto its reader, threatening to alienate the reader from the genre. Ingram’s insistence on defining complete works as distinct from collected stories is counterproductive; critics feel no compulsion to separate successful poetry collections or novels from the generic framework upon which they have been built, and neither should critics of the short story collection. Even generic conceptions of the short story collection attempt to separate works of coherence from ‘mere collections’ whose individual components do not form meaningful relationships. Such distinctions may be achieved within the genre, and do not require further designation, such as Ingram’s short story cycle.

Ingram suggests that the production of a short story cycle distinguishes itself from the collection based on its author’s unifying strategy. The coherence of a cycle is dependent on the author’s intent. Ingram provides a liberal determination of when this unifying strategy should be implemented: “Linked stories may have been COMPOSED as a continuous whole, or ARRANGED into a series, or COMPLETED to form a set” (Ingram 17). Ingram provides the author leeway to transform their ‘mere’ short story collection into a cycle at any stage during the work’s conception or development, whether initially conceived of as a ‘blueprint’ from which the author works at the outset, during the writing process, or even by arranging or realizing the unification process after the work’s initial completion. This perspective is problematic on two accounts. The first is that the critic or even the reader of a given collection will not be aware of

the author's intent—the process via which the work has been created—and thus will not have access to this criterion as an evaluative tool for differentiating the cycle from the collection. The second issue is that this process-oriented determinant is too flexible to act as a reliable tool of evaluation. Under this criterion, the only conception of the collection which does not produce a unified product is that for which the author at no stage considers the relationship between component stories. Even the act of placing a set of stories in sequence to form a single work infers connective relationships between component works. Ingram himself acknowledges that an author can subconsciously compose a series of related stories, in which case all that differentiates his cycle from a 'mere collection' is a revelatory moment on the part of its author, who becomes "conscious of unifying strands which [they] may have, even subconsciously, woven into the action of the stories" and then completes "the unifying task which [they] may have subconsciously began" (18). The difficulty Ingram faces in defining the criteria with which a reader can evaluate a short story cycle apart from the collection has subsequently led to the further expansion of its parameters—an extension of that spectrum on which Ingram argues short story cycles of varying purity can be distributed. The unique significance of the term *short story cycle* has been further obscured as a result, contributing to the continued neglect of the short story collection as a literary genre. In my own collection, the order of the stories matters. I deliberately chose this particular order, with some changes along the way. Yet I consider other factors in the stories (shared geography, recurrent characters, an economic bleakness) far more binding than an after-the-fact decision about linear placement.

Susan Garland Mann picks up on Ingram's research nearly twenty years after the publication of *Representative Short Story Cycles*. In the intervening years, Garland observes that "book

reviewers have started to demonstrate some familiarity with the concept of the unified short story collection” (x). Mann acknowledges that these reviewers are “quick to notice and evaluate the kinds of reverberations that connect the stories” without aid of the term *short story cycle* (x). This again brings into question the necessity of a distinct term with which the critic can differentiate a unified work from a mere short story collection. Yet Mann nonetheless adopts Ingram’s term in order to trace the genre’s development, and to make a more concentrated effort to define the cycle’s conventions and essential characteristic. As Ingram had before, Mann defines the cycle in relation to its author and attempts to work around the frequent lack of clarity regarding the author’s generic ambitions by identifying signals the reader can use in their definition of a cycle. One such signal, according to Mann, is the inclusion of an epigraph, which will “frequently appear at the beginning of the cycle to emphasize key ideas” (15). An epigraph can indeed provide insight into an author’s thematic intentions, whether in a short story cycle, a ‘mere collection’, or a novel; yet the epigraph’s employment as signalling device exclusively related to a unified story cycle is superficial and arbitrary. The exclusion of an epigraph does not disqualify a collection from achieving the status of cycle, nor does the inclusion of an epigraph disqualify a work from reaching either of the poles of Ingram’s spectrum. In my own collection, I have chosen to forgo the inclusion of an epigraph as a superficial signifier of unity. Rather, I prefer to use signifiers implanted across the stories, such as recurrent locations (West End Halifax) and visual motifs (the colour red), and subtle variations of character relationships that transcend or preserve class barriers.

Mann argues that the most immediately present signal “is a work’s title. In the case of the short story cycle, the title emphasizes that a book is not a miscellany or a ‘mere collection’. It underscores a major form of unity in the book: perhaps setting... protagonist or group of

people... or an idea of thematic plot” (14). Mann asserts that the short story cycle’s title will be governed by, and thus reflect, its unifying principle. Thus, titles of short story collections such as James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* identify a location as the collection’s governing principle of unification. The titles of these cycles also distinguish the works from ‘mere collections’ by describing the entire work, rather than having been mined from the title of a story contained within. Mann argues that a collection which borrows its title from one of its constituent stories signals a lack of unity. This title story is “generally placed first or last in the volume” and “represents what the author feels is the best work or, in some cases, best-known work” (14). In such cases, the collection may feature the subtitle ‘and other stories’, and in these instances, the author “obviously makes no claims for unity among the stories” (14). These supposed signals are superficial and unreliable, and reliance upon them requires an idealistic view of the author’s role in the publication process. Mann’s own example of the ‘and other stories’ label as statement against a collection’s unity exposes the writer’s lack of agency in regard to the marketing of their work:

The importance of the title as a means of communicating generic expectations is so important that William Faulkner became furious when Random House took the initiative to change the title of *Go Down, Moses* to *Go Down Moses and Other Stories*. When the book was reissued in 1949, Faulkner made sure that the subtitle (‘And Other Stories’) was permanently deleted. (14)

Mann’s example is problematic on several counts. One can intuit that Faulkner perceived the ‘And Other Stories’ subtitle as a threat to the perception of *Go Down, Moses* as a unified work. Yet, this concern provides no support for its distinction as a cycle, rather than as a ‘mere collection’. The greater threat posed by the subtitle is its explicit suggestion that its six other

stories are subservient to the title story. This suggestion of hierarchy remains implicit through the preservation of the *Go Down, Moses* title, which also belongs to the collection's final story. This promotion of one story over the others contradicts Mann's criterion of the title as a signal of unity. Furthermore, though Faulkner possessed the power to have the subtitle removed, it nonetheless appeared on first printings of the book, indicating a lack of authority on the part of the writer in determining how a given work is ultimately marketed. The 'and other stories' subtitle, or a title borrowed from a constituent story, can be enforced by the publisher without the writer's consent, and all but the most influential authors will be powerless to liberate their unified short story collection from such imposed commercial constraints.

The present title of my collection, "It Takes a Lot of Lights to Make a City", conforms to Mann's expectation that a unique title can function to describe a unified work; however, the entire work might be retitled "End of Days" without sacrificing the unity of the collection. One could argue that "End of Days" as a story title, and "End of Days" as a title for the entire collection, work independently and autonomously to convey nuanced narrative thrusts. Furthermore, contemporary short story collections such as Alexander MacLeod's *Light Lifting*, Kris Bertin's *Bad Things Happen*, and Alice Munro's *Runaway* are not rendered any less coherent because they have borrowed their titles from a story contained within. MacLeod and Bertin's collections each include the subtitle 'Stories', a modern compression of the 'And Other Stories' subtitle, as does the paperback printing of Munro's collection. Yet, as with *Go Down, Moses*, these collections remain unified works, whether or not their authors (or publishers) have signalled them to be short story cycles via the title. *Bad Things Happen* and *Runaway* each include miniature story-suites within the greater collection, which establish a unity that resonates throughout the remaining stories. *Light Lifting* uses Windsor, Ontario as a central location, a

decision which dictates the socio-economic conditions under which superficially-distinct narratives operate. Each of these collections maintains a strong thematic unity without employing the book's title as a generic signifier.

A sole essential characteristic defines Mann's conception of the short story cycle: "the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated. On the one hand, the stories work independently of one another... On the other hand, however, the stories work together, creating something that could not be achieved in a single story" (15). This criterion proves valuable when evaluating the coherence of a short story collection, but it does not justify the cycle's generic distinction. Neither does it account for the complex relationship between either the text and author or the reader and text. The placement of individual stories in relation to one another, by the author, will draw connections between individual stories, as will the sequence of the whole. Whether done with the conscious intent of constructing a unified work, the author nonetheless achieves this coherence by composing a set number of stories and placing them in a designed sequence. Kris Bertin recalls having not made a conscious effort to emphasize the connectivity of the individual stories in *Bad Things Happen*. Instead, the collection's process of unification occurred organically (K. Bertin, personal communication, March 28, 2019). Despite the unconscious design of Bertin's work, *Bad Things Happen* is nonetheless unified by recurrence of character, setting, and theme.

An attentive reader will recognize patterns within a collection, whether consciously or unconsciously designed by the author. In my own collection, the unity is a deliberate attempt to intertwine characters and geography, contemporary narrative challenges and economic backdrop. For example, the protagonist's damaged apartment building in "Temporary Accommodations" corresponds to the shuttered department store in "End of Days," as each presents a

socioeconomic casualty of Halifax's urban renewal. Mann affords 'mere collections' some continuity, but nonetheless asserts their distinction from the cycle: "Although there are always similarities among stories written by the same author, not every collection of stories is a cycle. This in no way reduces the significance of such collections: they are simply not cycles" (15). Mann provides no further discussion of these collections, nor their significance, following Ingram's lead in marginalizing the collection relative to the perceived cycle. Similarly, she asserts that despite similarities between a collection's stories, it remains a 'mere collection'. Yet the distinction remains elusive. She follows up this discussion with an attempt to further articulate her definition of the story cycle:

A cycle can be unified by varying degrees and through various means, but the reverberations must involve more than the connections that link any writer's work: that is, the places the author knows, or the historical period in which the author lives, including certain social, economic, or political realities. (16)

Mann faces the same struggle of definition Ingram encounters, affording the cycle the liberty to be "unified by varying degrees and through various means." Her attempt to set this vague conception of the short story cycle in opposition to "any writer's work" (i.e. a 'mere collection') again relies on a series of generalities, which may or may not appear in a given collection, and which may or may not produce meaningful connections between individual stories. For my own project, I attempted to write stories that not only surpass the 'mere collection' category, but also work together in a non-linear process what emphasizes their individuality *and* their connectivity.

Ingram provides a superficially compelling metaphor for his conception of the short story cycle, which stresses both the interconnectivity of the individual stories, as well as the progress achieved via the unified work:

Like the moving parts of a mobile, the interconnected parts of some story cycles seem to shift their positions with relation to the other parts, as the cycle moves forward in its typical pattern of recurrent development. Shifting internal relationships, of course, continually alter the originally perceived pattern of the whole cycle. (13)

Ingram's emphasis on shifting internal relationships within the short story collection-as-machine highlights a crucial criterion for achieving the complex of intratextual relationships within a collection. However, Ingram's mobile metaphor, like his criteria for the cycle, does not adequately stress the significance of this complex. For Ingram, the unique components of the short story cycle, like the parts of the mobile, remain fixed in place, defined by the author's placement of them. Though the individual parts may shift in places to some extent as the mobile turns, they cannot be rearranged in order to emphasize relationships between otherwise distant parts. Ingram's focus on singular, unidirectional progress limits the potential to discover the shifting internal relationships he emphasizes. In particular, the term 'cycle' stresses circularity, which suggests that although revisiting a work will reveal new connections within the complex, this revision is always achieved by interacting with the work via its defined sequence. This prescriptive approach strips the reader's autonomy and limits the opportunity to discover potential patterns achieved by redefining relationships between the cycle's constituent parts. Ingram attempts to resolve this constraint, but in doing so, only further obscures his own definition of the cycle:

More important by far for determining the special kind of unity a short story cycle has are the dynamic patterns of RECURRENCE and DEVELOPMENT. The patterns of recurrence may be symmetrical... or asymmetrical... The patterns of development may be linear... or multidirectional. (20)

Ingram acknowledges the potential multidirectional patterns of development, but his commitment to recurrence, that is, to a work's defined sequence as the cycle's definitive criterion, restricts the reader's opportunity to discover these alternative patterns.

Robert M. Luscher offers an alternate conception of the unified short story collection, which he terms the "short story sequence." As with Ingram, Luscher's term 'sequence' emphasizes the horizontal linearity of the collection's defined arrangement. Luscher applauds Ingram for "drawing attention to the recurrence of theme, symbol, and character" but criticizes Ingram's approach for not adequately stressing this linearity, claiming Ingram successfully highlights these recurrences "at the expense of deemphasizing the volume's successiveness" (149). Luscher's sequence implies a singular pattern which develops as the work's linear sequence progresses. This conception results in a layering of meanings: each successive story may build upon themes, symbols, and characters introduced in previous units of the sequence; however, the reader's unidirectional progression through the sequence ensures an extending distance between each successive story and the previous units. As an example, the title story of Haruki Murakami's *Men Without Women*, the last in the sequence, explicitly defines a 'Men Without Women' as a type of individual. Murakami's definition provides a method of diagnosis which the reader can apply to the protagonist of each of the preceding stories. The story "Men Without Women" can thus be applied to the individual stories as a kind of thematic key, a key which is most effectively employed by breaking the arranged linear sequence. Luscher himself

acknowledges the potential danger of his assertion of linearity: “Although a sequential arrangement of short stories may indeed do violence to the compact world we expect to explore in each, such bumping and the ensuing binding cannot be avoided” (148). The sequential arrangement itself does not necessarily do violence to the integrity of the work. Rather, this violence results from Luscher’s assertion that this initial sequence can neither be disrupted nor transcended. Luscher, as Ingram has before, strips the reader of the autonomy to control the work, insisting on the writer’s linear construction as absolute.

The cycle’s requirement for circularity and the sequence’s focus on linearity distort the short story collection’s potential to expand beyond the parameters of its initial arrangement. Rather than consider the collection via Ingram’s mobile metaphor, I would like to consider the individual stories as points on a map. The initial arrangement may provide the most efficient method of travelling, successively, between these points. Nonetheless, the potential ‘routes’ available to the reader increase exponentially with the inclusion each additional story. This genre map provides an autonomous reader the opportunity to draw their own connections between individual points on the map, achieved not only by reading a sequence of six stories in order, but also observing the unique relationship between, for example, stories two, five, and six. In my thesis, these three stories, “Man of the People,” “Temporary Accommodations,” and “End of Days” focus on the economic casualties of Halifax’s rapid modernization (including recurring characters in the former two). This approach expands the purely horizontal plane of the cycle/sequence across a second, vertical plane, providing the reader access to the full scope a short story collection, erasing the “violence” which Luscher acknowledges these linear conceptions do to the collection’s “compact world.” Releasing the critical reader from the collection’s horizontal arrangement nullifies the perceived necessity of the cycle/sequence

distinctions, as the reader is no longer required to search for clues which signal the author's intent, but can instead view the collection in various arrangements in order to evaluate its unity. It is through this approach, rather than Luscher's sequence, that the collection "becomes an open book, inviting the reader to construct a network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact" (148). The "open book" is a crucial theoretical statement, as it acknowledges reader autonomy over the text; however, Luscher's sequence fails to uphold the promise to free the reader from structural constraints. Rather, opening the book is achieved by viewing the text as an exploded-view diagram, in which the constituent parts of the collection are spread out across a two-dimensional plane. Curtis Sittenfeld, discussing the sequence of her short story collection, *You Think It, I'll Say It*, recalls, "When I knew that I was going to have a collection, I actually printed [the stories] out and put them on the floor of my office, and physically [moved] them all around and [thought about] how these will echo each other" (Sittenfeld). The development of a sequential order may be necessary to the commodification of the short story collection, but it is this initial arrangement—the component stories spread out across the floor—which best represents Luscher's "open book." The individual, untethered stories, provide the reader an opportunity to, like Sittenfeld, arrange, and rearrange, the modules across this two-dimensional plane. It is through this process of pattern-making that the reader discovers the relationships between unique story combinations. As an example, the reader may observe the psychic displacement of economically prosperous characters in "Had It and Lost It" and "The Thirty-Six-Year Plan."

A short story collection is, as Luscher suggests, a network comprised of individual modules that can be connected, disconnected, and reconnected by the reader. New arrangements are sought based on the same internal criteria observed by critics of the short story

cycle/sequence: location, character, time, and theme provide potential unifying bonds. The reader may evaluate these criteria to determine the relative connectedness of a given collection. A non-linear approach to critical theorization of the short story collection is essential to the development of the genre, and provides the time-space continuum for characters to fully complete their narrative development at more than one point of the map at one time. So, for example, Matty in “Nobody Gets Me but You” exists to challenge and supplement the protagonist’s tale. Yet Matty can also appear in “End of Days” as both foil and temptation to that story’s protagonist. Reading the two together, the reader may gain more insight into Matty’s character and motivation; but more important is the effect of a major character, in the former, on the protagonist, a character who shifts his world views and even effects the decisions he makes for his career. Such an influence contrasts the effect Matty, a minor character, who never-the-less has a significant impact on a very different protagonist in the latter story. As separate entities, the stories would fit Ingram’s definition of ‘mere’ stories in a collection, especially if I changed one of the Matty-character’s names. But together, the effect and influence this supporting character has on two different protagonists is exponential.

In my thesis, I want to emphasize and explore the complex relationships between individual stories, not diminish them. In doing so, I hope to illuminate a new, inclusive approach to writing and reading the short story collection by encouraging a nonlinear approach to the genre. This approach extends and expands the short story collection’s potential to function as a unique genre, thus securing its place in the literary canon.

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