

We Are What Claims Us

short stories

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Abstract

We Are What Claims Us is a short story collection exploring the ways stories are sacred, how each telling and retelling is an iteration of ceremony and healing. Stories such as “Notes from Over the Rainbow” and “Swimming Studies” are insights into intergenerational trauma and how bodies relate to land and water, love and belonging. “Can You Tell Me a Joke About Your Profession?” explores obsession, creativity and music as a means to control and overcome pain and isolation. “Ancestral Arguments,” and “Only Young” navigate the complexities of identity, queerness, and Indigeneity. *We Are What Claims Us* translates what it means to find yourself in the thick of or on the other side of trauma - what parts we own, which parts contain us, and ultimately what we need to relinquish. These stories are decolonial attempts to name, claim and undo harm.

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May we all honour these traditional lands and waters, and tread lightly for the next seven generations.

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Notes from Over the Rainbow

Mark's pale skin turned to braille from the strong winds on the boat's deck. A thin dress shirt wasn't warm enough, despite the heat. The 45-minute crossing felt like a lifetime. He leaned over the white paint-chipped rail, sucked on a hand-rolled cigarette. He lived for the exhale, just like his grandmother.

It was a balmy day in late September, but Mark was child. These days, he was always cold. He left his sweatshirt in the car, swore to his mother, Veronica, he'd keep wearing the blue dress shirt she got on sale at Winners. He couldn't show up to his grandmother's funeral in a hoodie. Everything he owned hung off his tall frame.

Mark untucked the shirt, felt salt air through threads of fabric. He looked out at the Change Islands, through sandy brown hair that hung over his eyes. He checked his phone – no messages – and stared out. Nothing for miles. The grey of the sea and the grey of the sky were the same colour. For a moment, he imagined going overboard. His body would be dragged under, churned up by the boat. Maybe he'd be able to see his grandmother again.

The last time he came to Newfoundland, Mark was 16, and he accidentally overdosed on his grandmother's pain medication. He danced slow-release, milligrams of morphine into the ether, for 21 days and 21 nights in intensive care. Mark spent 500 hours unconscious. Even after the doctors and psychologist grilled him, he'd sworn he only wanted to get high.

Ever since then, Mark acted like a fallen trapeze artist. He staggered along, half on tiptoe, convinced he could find the balance between tightrope walking and level ground. Mostly, his life was a series of fuck ups.

The overdose led to years with the wrong crowd, more drugs, more booze, and eventually being accused of raping his best friend, Coco. He was high; she was drunk on coconut water and rum (she thought drinking copious amounts of coconut was way healthier than mixing with coke). Another guy was in the bed, and they were all high as kites. It was sex, and he stopped the moment she said to, but that's not how the story got retold. Coco never charged him; instead, he had to live out his moral consequences –guilt –and a vigilante justice. Everyone he had grown up with had run him out of his hometown, so eight months ago he'd fled to Vancouver. He missed Coco every day, he never meant to hurt her. Things went too far, and then he never got to explain his side of the story. Mark had started calling her Coco, even though her real name was actually Coconut, in elementary school because her family had lots of cash, and they took him with them on their family vacation to Florida when he was in grade 6. They drank virgin pina coladas out of coconut shells with triangles of pineapple morning, noon and night. She drank so many one day that she threw up virgin pina coladas while they were swimming in the ocean. Mark helped carry her back to shore, and they hung out under a palapa in the shade.

Coco was like a sister to him growing up, yet their relationship changed after puberty. She started wearing a bra and kissing boys. Coco became a “player.” She knew how to navigate men because she steered her father's life. She was daddy's little girl and daddy's little nightmare all rolled into a rail thin body. Her father set up a trust fund so she'd never have to feel vulnerable, yet being given money never teaches us the value of hard work, or how to take pride in oneself. Like her own mother, Coco thought her power was in her ability to control her own actions and those surrounding her. She knew how to get what she wanted when she wanted it, and somehow convinced the giver it was their idea, even though Coco was ultimately a taker. She knew what boys wanted long before she met Mark, who didn't quite know what he wanted

himself. She thought boys wanted to feel masculine and useful. They needed their ego stroked for every little thing, and they loved to imagine they'd won the prize. With a name like Coconut, she knew she was the whole kit and caboodle. Both hard and soft, like the outside of a coconut, but filled with a fresh sweetness. Her father called her his coconut girl. Then, Mark teased her by re-naming her Coco, because his own mother Veronica made him watch the film about Coco Chanel with her nearly a hundred times. Veronica was obsessed with the rags-to-riches story of the fashion icon, and hoped someday Coconut would become her daughter-in-law.

Truthfully, Mark didn't know how to be a good boyfriend, so he tried to be a good best friend. Trouble was, he didn't know how to be good to himself. At 20 years old, he oscillated between pill popping and booze-benders to shooting OxyContin. Slow-release wasn't fast enough. All Mark wanted in life was to escape. He shot up half a pill in the Halifax Stanfield Airport bathroom on a stopover before he boarded the plane with Veronica. Promised his mother he'd stay clean for the duration of the trip in exchange for a return ticket.

The boat rocked, made his stomach do backflips. Mark tried to remember his grandmother's voice, and how she always said she loved him unconditionally, no matter what. But he couldn't really hear her anymore. Only wind met his ears now.

He lit another Drum hand-rolled cigarette, closed his eyes on the inhale. The sun split the rocks on the brow of Fogo Island. The ferry rocked back and forth, an unsettling lullaby of choppy sea.

Mark's grandmother smoked Rothmans. Smoked all her life, didn't even bother to crack a window. Never believed it was a health risk.

He lit another. This one's for you, Nan.

Your grandmother hated that you smoked, said Deirdre.

I know, said Mark.

Pass one over here, said Deirdre.

Aunt Deirdre took a smoke from Mark's pack, and he extended his light. She inhaled deeply.

Listen, I know you've been having a hard time, said Deirdre.

I don't want to get into it, said Mark.

Do you know what you're doing to your mother? She's worried sick, said Deirdre. We all are.

I'm getting clean, said Mark.

It's not just the drugs, Mark. You're gonna be a father. Do you know how much responsibility that takes? It's not all about you anymore.

I know, Aunt D. I'm gonna straighten up.

We're all here to help you, you know. You're not an island, said Deirdre. None of us are.

Fogo came into view, a stunning landmass in the middle of the ocean.

I can't believe Nan came from such a small place, said Mark.

Yet, she was so worldly. My mother loved hockey, politics, and could hold a conversation with anyone. In fact, everyone who met her was drawn to her.

I remember when she moved in with Mom and me in Cow Bay, said Mark.

That was right around the time your father went to jail, said Deirdre.

Mom said he had guns in the wall, said Mark.

He was still dealing back then, said Deirdre.

Dad's cleaned up his act over the years. Got a job. A new life, said Mark.

Your grandmother loved you so deeply. No one could make her light up the way you did, said Deirdre.

She used to walk me to school every morning, and have a snack ready for when I got home, said Mark.

For a moment, the memory of his grandmother eclipsed his desire to get high. The boat docked. He flicked the remains of his cigarette overboard, pulled up his black dress pants, and half-tucked in his shirt again. His phone buzzed. A message from Coco: *Can we talk?*

He fingered the front pocket of his pants. Two morphine pills. Mark had found them in the bathroom of his Nan's house, behind the toilet. Veronica flushed the remains of her mother's medication when they arrived, but she must have dropped two. There wasn't a pharmacy on Fogo anymore. Mark had one needle left in the front pocket of his hoodie.

Franny knew her family would struggle when she was gone, that's why she hung on so long. 80 years old, and she had spent the past two decades in excruciating pain. A weaker woman would have died long ago.

On the last day of summer, between the gap of one season's end and the other's beginning, she knew it was over. Franny could feel the rhythm of the earth, and the heart of the ocean beating inside of her heart. The human heart beats 900 times every minute. She took her last breath when the moon passed through Taurus. Franny died alone.

In her final hour, she was merely a 60-pound body. A broken-necked woman in a hospital bed, sores on her legs. Her body had deteriorated, filled with the worst gallstones the doctors in St. John's had ever seen. No amount of morphine could relieve her. She begged for one last smoke. At that point, she'd take a cigar.

Neither of Franny's daughters had a man on her arm at the cemetery on Fogo. No marriage could weather their internal storms. They stood together, one daughter after another, after another, three of them like Russian nesting dolls, clad in various black dresses, uncomfortable heels. The tall overgrown grasses of the graveyard, unkempt for most of the year, whipped against their legs. Mostly, visitors only came back to Fogo for mid-July's flower service. As per their mother's request, no one brought flowers to the grave. She believed it was a total waste of money, especially when one was dead.

September 13, 2011

Dear Wanda,

Thank you for coming home, to be here with me in the hospital. It meant the world to see you after days of unfamiliar nurses and doctors. I loved feeling your sweet hands rubbing coconut cream on my legs. Those cysts around my ankles exploded and never quite healed over.

Your hands on my legs reminded me of when you were a little girl, fresh out of the tub. Your long blond hair hung down your back like a mermaid. I'd sing Judy Garland's "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," as I towed you off.

Each of Franny's three children had their own idea of how their mother's ashes should rest. Wanda, a tall, health-obsessed blonde, the eldest sister, in her mid-50s, drove from Saskatchewan to Newfoundland a few weeks prior, and wanted an organic burial. No church service graveyard. Wanda wanted to scatter the ashes across Fogo, and toss some out into the ocean for the whales to feed. Wanda's two other sisters disagreed.

This life has been hard for you, Wanda. I should have helped you more with your schoolwork when you were young. Back then, we didn't know much about learning disabilities. You were such an artist. Still are.

You gave me two beautiful grandchildren. You are a good mother, and never knew all that would come. When you came to live with me after everything that went down with your ex-husband, I am sorry I never told you about my own story. I know it could have helped to know I'd been through it, and I didn't say anything. I spent a lifetime trying to protect my mother, and in my day, you never shamed your family. I knew it wasn't right. I never knew how my silence would affect you.

Deirdre, a soon-to-be retired guidance counselor in her early 50s, flew to Newfoundland three days after her mother's death, and swung into action as executor of the will. She planned to honour her mother's request, and have her grandmother's grave opened up and the box of ashes placed in the womb of the grave.

September 14, 2011

Dear Deirdre,

We've had our differences, and I'm not quite sure over what all these years. You were most like me – studious, stylish, and followed through on your word. But there's been an iceberg between us for years now. I realize, I haven't been easy on you, and in exchange, you have been guarded with me.

I never knew I broke your heart when you were young, and you thought you couldn't come home after running away to Vancouver. I didn't agree with your first marriage because I didn't see you had much in common with Leonard. Thankfully, you got your daughter out of it, my first grandchild.

Love is never easy.

The youngest daughter, Veronica, a Cow Bay-based bed and breakfast owner in her late 40s, flew over, paralyzed by loss. All she knew to do was to cut the crusts off the egg salad

sandwiches boxed up for the boat ride back in the trunk. Her mother taught her: no mayo, just mixed with butter. A pinch of salt.

September 15, 2011

Dear Veronica,

You've been quiet lately, which leads me to believe you aren't happy in your life. I can always tell when something is wrong, I never hear from you. It's not like you not to be here, to come visit now I'm in the hospital. Truthfully, I am glad you haven't hopped on the plane yet.

Things with Mark seem to be escalating, from bad to worse. Ever since Mark overdosed that winter here at my house, it's been hard for him to get his life together. He's got a gentle spirit, but has become so lost along the way. He needs help. He needs love.

Deirdre had talked the graveyard grounds-men into opening up her grandmother's tomb, closed for the past 30 years, to put her mother's box of ashes in. She had an assertive way about her. Despite the complications of her decompression surgery a few months ago, she knew how to command and control a situation. She treated everyone like an elementary student.

I know I just gave the eulogy, but I wanted to say aloud, with all of you here, Mom, we love you. You gave us love, and a sense of family. We will carry this with us always, said Deirdre.

Deirdre smiled at Wanda; they two were the closest of the sisters. Deirdre knew Wanda took some of the ashes, but it didn't bother her. Their mother loved being on the ocean: nothing in life felt as free. Back in the day, when she was healthy, she'd go out fishing for hours, days on end sometimes, sleeping in the back of the car by herself.

All three of Franny's daughters brought their children. Franny's handful of grandchildren, all grown-ups, didn't believe they were adults yet. Neither had a child of their own, so Franny never got her wish to be a great-grandmother, like she wanted.

Each of them carried a part of Franny within them, and in a way, they had to live out their grandmother's undertow.

Mom, did you see this? said Mark. He pointed towards the gravestone. His callused fingers touched the weathered stone. He rolled up his shirtsleeve, and traced the dates—a cross-stitch of needle marks spotted his veins.

Veronica, cloaked in grief, could hardly acknowledge Mark's discovery. He pulled down his shirtsleeves, suddenly self-conscious, walked towards his mother and embraced her. Mark loved to smell his mother's perfume.

I remember when Nan told me about her mom dying, he said, whispering to his mother. She threw herself across her mother's (or Nan's) grave, but she got better. It will get better.

Veronica held him closer.

I can't believe I am going to be a grandmother, said Veronica.

The priest and minister had come over on the boat from the church in Twillingate, to the gravesite overlooking Fogo.

You're going to be a grandmother? said Wanda.

Mark's cleaning up his act, said Deirdre.

He better, said Wanda.

And our mother is gone, said Veronica.

Franny O'Brien was the exception even, though there wasn't a burial plot left. The minister placed the box into the grave, while the black-cloaked priest sang a death hymn: *along the silent path, by viewless spirits trod, another little traveler hath gone to be with God.*

All heads bowed in prayer.

Once everyone paid their respects, the minister handed each of Franny's daughter an envelope.

Your mother wanted me to give each of you these letters after we buried her. She left specific instructions with the nurses at the hospital, and asked to have them read as soon as you could, said the priest.

Wanda sat on the corner of her grandmother's grave, the same site that now held most of the ashes of her mother. She opened her letter.

I'm sorry your daughter had to go through what I went through. If I could do anything in this world, I would take away that hurt from you both. I'd heal your hearts and your bodies. I'd let you know, it happened to me too. All these years, and I never even told your father when we were together. I'm sorry, dear Wanda. I truly am.

I hope you keep healthy, though don't go too far. All that raw food can't be good for you. I love you.

Mom

Wanda looked up from the pages, out to the ocean. A wave of forgiveness overcame her. All these years, she suspected her mother held a dark secret. And finally, she let it go.

Deirdre, walking over to the fence outlining the periphery of the graveyard, leaned on it for support as she read her letter.

You've been very private about your surgery. I can only imagine how decompression surgery will change your life, and eating habits. Every time I tried to talk to you about my health concerns around your weight, you'd shoot me down. I never meant to hurt your feelings; I just wanted you to know I was worried about your well-being.

Operations take a long time to heal. After the car accident, years ago, when that transport truck forgot to break on the Ruby Line, the doctors never put all the bones in my back in their rightful place. For years, I could feel something was wrong. It only got worse.

You'll be retiring soon; it will be hard for you to leave behind being a counselor. You were always so good in school. Remember when I used to help you write your speeches? I'll never forget the year you won first place in high school. I was so proud and still am.

Thank you for agreeing to be executor of my will. I know you'll do the right thing and honour my wishes. I hope you can keep the family grounded. I've been so afraid everyone would fall apart once I die. Keep together, and hold yourselves close.

I love you,

Mom.

Wanda waited for Deirdre to put down the page, then walked over to embrace her sister. They stayed held together while the clouds in the sky drifted on by.

Veronica started to cry before she opened hers. Her mother's handwriting broke her.

I wish I was healthier, and that I could have been more involved in his life these past few years. He never had any brothers or sisters, anyone to confide in. I hope you can stay strong in all this. Mark needs his mother.

Veronica could hardly react before Mark dropped his smoke and rushed over to her. He knew his mother well, she held everything in until she snapped. She was becoming a

grandmother, and he was the only one on his own, out in the wild – the feral grandchild. Nanny always saw this so clearly.

Some day, we'll all be together again, Veronica. Until then, keep well. I know you'll remember all the recipes I showed you – cabbage rolls, how to make a good loaf of bread, and how long to steep tea. Don't forget to leave the kettle to boil for ten minutes. It's the only way to make a good cup.

I love you with all my heart.

Mom.

He could feel the loss of his mother's own mother now that he was becoming a father. He pulled her in close, knew she needed more support than she ever let on.

Nan always wanted to go home, to be back with her parents, he said. Mom, this is a sad day, but she's no longer in pain.

Veronica let go of her son's embrace, finding so much comfort in his face. She kissed his cheek.

You're going to make a good father, Mark.

Everyone took a few minutes to say goodbye, and one-by-one deeply embraced one another. They dropped letters, another a deck of cards, a few cigarettes, and Mark tossed in a Bic lighters into the grave.

Nan will need a light, he said. It's dark where she's gone.

As the bright sun started to fall in the sky, everyone piled back into their cars. All of the grandchildren were together with their mothers, Deirdre and Wanda, and Mark drove off alone with Veronica, along the long stretch of road. They waited in silence to board the boat. Roy Payne's "Little Boats of Newfoundland" crackled over the car radio.

Back on the ferry, Fogo shrunk only slightly in the distance, Mark ate a triangle egg salad sandwich with the crusts cut off as he made his way to the top deck for a smoke. All he could taste was butter. The wind had died down. He could feel his nose and forehead tighten. On the last day of September, he had a Newfoundland sunburn.

Mark reached into his pocket. Another message from Coco: *It's important*. He placed the two pills in the palm of his hand. The shape of the pills reminded him of his grandmother. She always had to take so many pain pills. Mark looked out at the ocean, and remembered the last time his grandmother held him when he got out of the hospital. She smelled like stale cigarettes and baby powder.

A whale came up to the surface of the ocean's skin, close to the boat. He remembered reading somewhere online that a whale's heart weighed 400 pounds. Checked his phone.

We need to talk.

He squinted hard against the dying light, hoped to witness another spray from the blowhole. Another message.

Seriously. It's important.

Mark stared out for most of the boat ride back to the mainland, chain-smoking one cigarette after another, until he ran out of rollies. When the ferry finally bumped back against the shore, he checked his phone again.

I know you haven't blocked me.

He took a picture of Fogo, his grandmother's island. Another text from Coco buzzed.

Coconut sent a photo of a tiny baby wrapped in a soft white blanket.

I had the baby.

Mark couldn't believe it. His eyes welled up. A baby's heart is the size of a walnut. He enlarged the image with his fingers, and zoomed in to see the baby's features. He took the orange pills in his pocket, and pulled them out. He looked at the photo again, and then tossed the drugs out to sea. The pills made small halos in the dark water.

I named our girl Francis.

Swimming Studies

Jacquelyn loved swimming. It made her think of birth. How the body becomes and comes from water. Like drinking, swimming had a drifting feel – a full head-to-toe experience. In her tiniest cells, she felt estranged in her body when dry. And now, for the first time in 5 years, she had agreed to swim again.

When Walter asked her out, in line while ordering coffee, her gut instinct was to shy away. It wasn't that she didn't find him attractive; he had a beard, glasses and a curious intelligence about him, but she didn't go on dates. Not anymore.

The barista poured boiling water into a paper cup. Jacquelyn always ordered the same drink: a double Americano, with room for a dollop of milk. She was trying to break out of her routine of editing at home. Most days looked the same: she came to the café late morning every day. She had to pass by the liquor store on her way there and back. This morning, she waltzed in, browsed the Spanish wine racks and left. Counted to herself: 296 days sober.

She used to swim after school. Her father would go for beer at the legion, and Jacquelyn swam lengths. Twice a week she met with her synchronized swimming team. Together, they would arch backwards, forwards, and make artful shapes with their legs towards the sky. Upright, their little red swim cap covered heads bobbed like apples. She threw herself into synchronized swimming, training often as she could, the silent, underwater realm a perfect escape from her father's sexual use of her. Later, she found a similar reprieve at the bottom of the bottle.

At Java Blend, Walter was often one or two people ahead or behind Jacquelyn in line. They always said hello. Today, he stood in front of her, and ordered a cup of the North End

blend. He liked his coffee black. Hot on the tongue. Walter was a philosopher, worked part-time at the university. She studied him closely: his hair was wet and a towel poked out of his bag.

Walter: Just came from the pool. I'm taking swimming lessons.

Jacquelyn: You can't swim?

I can swim, somewhat. Just hate the smell of chlorine.

I love the water.

She looked down at the hem of her A line tweed skirt and wondered why she hadn't seen those loose threads when she dressed. Her dark brown hair was piled in a messy up-do. She fiddled with the small sign over the trio of tip jar bowls – What do you want out of life? Each bowl had an answer taped on the counter in front of it: A) Money B) Love C) Purpose. The Money bowl overflowed with coins, Love was half-full, and only Purpose had a single dime.

Apparently, everyone finds life in money or love?

Jacquelyn smiled, half-heartedly.

Not you?

Most certainly can.

The barista reached over the cash register and passed them their drinks. Walter pulled out a \$10 bill, paid for both. Dropped a dollar into the Purpose tip bowl.

Jacquelyn thanked him. They walked together towards the milk and sugar station. Walter reached for a stir stick. Jacquelyn poured half and half into her cup until it turned murky.

Where do you swim? Centennial's been closed for months now.

It opened up last week. I'm taking intermediate swimming lessons, perfecting my butterfly. We should go sometime. Or go for a drink.

I don't really drink.

She looked at the tip jar.

And I don't own a good bathing suit.

You just said you love the water.

Used to. Not much of a swimmer these days.

You must have something you could wear.

Jacqueline cocked her head in defiance, but remembered she had resolved to try to make an effort to get back in the water this year.

I'll meet you on the bench outside the men's change rooms.

Friday?

Friday.

The next day, she went searching for a swimsuit at the local retro shop. She tried on several types in the change room – a halter-top one-piece, a keyhole black – all of them made her feel frumpy. She was repulsed by the reflection in the change-room, wished she could cut flesh from her bones like a butcher.

How about a tankini? offered the sales girl from outside the door.

The last time Jacquelyn wore a bikini she was a kid, and even then, she had hated being exposed. Her stepmother picked it up second hand at the Sally Anne, thought her father would adore his little girl in ruffles. Jacquelyn found relief when she finally put on a white and butter yellow-checker swimsuit– an Esther Williams bathing beauty one piece. It had low cut legs; a halter neck and flirty ruching across the breast that made her full figure feel subtly romantic. Getting dressed for a first date is one thing – wearing a bathing suit, a lifetime of insecurity burps.

Jacquelyn arrived early. The pool was blocked. She covered herself up in a towel and sat on the sidelines. A boy leapt off the top diving board. He didn't seem fazed, free-falling from the heights of rafters, plunging into the belly of the deep end. He was a born cannon-baller.

Jacquelyn felt like a walrus with all the rail-thin women in bikinis around. She used to depend on a cocktail to soothe her. When she drank, she loved a dry dirty martini –heavy on the olives.

Mostly, she could feel anxiety roll through her entire body, under her skin, almost as if it was electric. The only way to get it out, or try to get it out, was to drink. Or swim. When drunk, all of her anxiety dissipated, and she felt at ease, separate yet within her body. There was a sense of weightless embodiment –a lack of gravity to adhere to.

The last time she drank herself into a breaststroke was on a first date. Too many dirty martinis to count, and she woke up naked next to a stranger, having peed the bed. Jacquelyn pushed the damp sheet from her body, which didn't even rouse the sleeping man beside her. She got up, put on her black dress, and walked home in a twilight haze. Obviously, he never called her again.

After that night, nearly two years ago, she stopped drinking for the most part, and as a result, stopped dating too. She tried a few sober dates, but they were awful – a teetotaler whose hobbies were masturbating and video games, and a realtor who got loaded on liqueur at a dessert bar while Jacquelyn nibbled on cheesecake. So, she stayed in most nights with her cat Malbec, reading, and watching old black-and-white movies.

While Jacquelyn waited for Walter, she watched the swimmers. Two teen girls jumped off the second diving board together, hand-in-hand, and extended their limbs like starfish. Their voices echoed up through the high rafters until their bodies landed with a splash. A small group

of girls pretended to be synchronized swimmers, and practiced their flamingo-like routine. Their bodies like physical poetry.

It took a moment for Jacquelyn to recognize Walter walking towards her; he seemed like a different man without his glasses. He was wearing bright copper trunks.

Walter: Nice swimsuit.

Jacquelyn: This old thing? I picked it up the other day.

A girl flung herself off the diving board. Her tiny body went flying, and she made two peace signs as she threw her arms up.

What an entrance. Wish I had the nerve.

Jacquelyn tried to imagine Walter running out from the change room –this staggeringly tall thin man, awkwardly curling his knees into his chest, orange swim shorts billowing, and dropping into the pool without even a hello.

It doesn't seem like your style.

Should it to be?

She shook her head no, and patted the seat next to her. Walter pulled in the drawstring of his trunks and sat down.

What kind of swimmer were you?

I was a synchronized swimmer.

Do you miss it?

Sometimes. It was years ago.

Jacquelyn's memories of her synchronized swimmer years were splintered: ditching swim practice to get drunk in the woods, the sound of her father's slurs waking her in the night. The time she jumped in the fountain at the mall, believed she was a mermaid; the time she woke

up in a strange bed. The second time she woke up in a strange bed; then, the third time. Now she moves more slowly, takes time to make the necessary connections.

Walter: Think you're ready to get back in?

Jacquelyn stood up, reluctant at first. Walter quietly encouraged her, nodding his head. She dropped her towel on the bench, and tiptoed over to the shallow end.

Dipping her left toes in, attempting to feel the temperature, she placed the soles of her feet on the first step. Now ankle deep, she breathed in. Returning to the water reminded her how she used to feel. Only chlorine could touch her. Her heart didn't beat like a panic-driven metronome; the pool was in sync with her.

She eased back into the water, slowly lowering herself, her skin rippled in goose bumps. Waist-deep, she held onto the edge and watched Walter, dive head first in. His body was long and thin, which made it seem effortless, as if there was no division between being above or below.

Jacquelyn took another deep breath and submerged herself. Underwater, she felt every part of her body awaken – loose, aware only of her lungs. She opened her eyes to a series of legs, like eggbeaters. The chlorine irritated her eyes. She didn't care.

She was back in. She should have known: Jacquelyn was hard-wired for swimming. At 4 she knew how to swim; by the age of 10 she was a synchronized swimmer, despite her father who'd forget to pick her up from the pool. He'd stumble in long after she tied her wet swimsuit around the door handle, trying to lock her bedroom door. A puddle soaked her father's socks.

As a teenager, she found triumph in boys and booze. It derailed her, and instead of heading to the pool after class, she threw back plastic water bottles of peach schnapps, gin, and

vodka – whatever they could steal from their parent’s liquor cabinet. Drinking slowed things down.

She held her breath for as long as she could. By the time she made it back, Walter had swum the length of the pool on his side to catch up with her long strides.

Jacquelyn stopped swimming when she started drinking. Boys liked her more half-cut, undressed, above water. Her father loved the smell of chlorine on skin.

Looks like you’ve been perfecting your backstroke in your swimming lessons.

Not bad, huh?

Jacquelyn splashed Walter, and dove down to the bottom of the pool to know it was still there. When she came up, Walter beamed.

Heidegger said the best place to think philosophy was in a hut deep in the Black Forest while a storm raged outside. Do you think the pool is your hut?

I love lake swimming in a storm, when you can’t tell if you are above or below water.

She flutter-kicked over to the edge of the pool, and hung on for support.

You look nice without your glasses.

He rested on his elbows. She tried to pull herself up to meet him, but fell back into the water.

What are you up to when you’re not getting coffee in the mornings?

I edit a literary journal. I have a calico cat named Malbec. Don’t laugh. Sometimes, I read to her.

Walter: What’s her favourite?

Jacquelyn: She loves poetry. Michael Ondaatje. *The Cinnamon Peeler*.

Walter: *“When we swam once I touched you in water and our bodies remained free, you could hold me and be blind of smell.”*

Her eyelashes curtained her green eyes.

You know it? It’s my favourite poem. Truthfully, I don’t think my cat understands English.

He couldn’t help but smile.

Of course, it’s on my Philosophy of Love and Sex syllabus.

There’s a philosophy to sex?

Most certainly.

Jacquelyn tried to pull herself up again. This time, she held her weight.

I can’t believe men aren’t lined up at the door trying to take you out.

Jacquelyn scrunched her face in disbelief.

Can we swim some more?

She pushed off the edge of the pool, and front-crawled her way towards the lane swimmers. Jacquelyn swam several laps with Walter at her feet. She could see him swimming on his back, behind her when she turned her head to the right, mid-stroke, and opened her mouth to let oxygen in.

Eventually, she had enough lengths in.

Can you dive? I’m terrified of heights.

I used to be good at it.

Jacquelyn wanted to show off a little for Walter. She dragged herself up by the small adjacent twin metal candy canes hanging on the edge of the pool. One leg after the other, her feet took up half the whole step. As she got out, gravity overwhelmed her.

She walked heavily over to the diving boards. Climbed the ladder one foot after the other. The higher she went, the more her anxiety grew. From the top diving board, she scanned the pool, trying to spot Walter's face. She saw a group of teenagers tossing a black and white beach ball back and forth. A father had his little daughter on his shoulders. Despite wearing water wings, she held onto his chin for dear life.

Jacquelyn couldn't help but watch them for a moment – noticing how he held her, protective yet trying to instill a sense of safety within her. How he was trying to teach her to trust herself, above and below water. Finally, Jacquelyn saw Walter, who waved. She took a deep breath. She raised her arms overhead, making the shape of a crane's beak. Jacquelyn heard the little girl giggle, splashing her father.

Everything around her went fuzzy. Suddenly, panic anchored her, and her own father's voice gurgled within her. His boozy muffles – sorry Jackie, for leaving you at the pool. Promising her, it wouldn't ever happen again, as he buried her small body deeper into her My Little Pony flannel bed-sheets.

Walter shouted: Jacquelyn, ok up there?

Slowly, everything came back into focus. Jacquelyn felt all eyes on her. Screaming children and swimmers formed a whirlpool around her, and she tripped over herself stubbing her toe, belly-flopping into the deep end. The collision of her body and water thundered.

Underwater, all she could feel was the sting. From the bottom of the pool, she saw a small halo of red floated up to the surface. Suddenly, she resurfaced. The lifeguard with a mushroom cut jumped into the deep end. Another lifeguard blew a whistle, and alerted swimmers to evacuate the pool.

The lifeguard swam over to Jacquelyn, and helped her get her bearings. Slowly, they swam together towards the metal ladder. Another lifeguard helped her out of the pool, and yet another passed her a big beach towel.

Dripping, Walter ran towards Jacquelyn, nearly slipping twice before he squatted down beside her. Droplets of water fell from his beard and pooled on her thighs.

Are you okay? That looked like quite the drop.

She noticed his brow furrowed, his features softened with concern. Jacquelyn shrugged, her shoulder blades rubbed together like wings. Her bathing suit strap fell down her shoulder. Walter gently helped pull it up.

Next to them a mother explained to her son it was time to head home – a woman got hurt on the diving board, cut her toe, and the lifeguards had to be cautious of open wounds in water.

Jacquelyn noticed the little girl with blonde curls perched on her father's shoulders. The little girl waved, still wearing her water wings. Jacquelyn half-waved back. The Olympic-sized swimming pool looked like an empty box store's parking lot after hours.

Jacquelyn sat up after the lifeguards finished bandaging her big toe. Once they were finished, Walter offered her his hand, and helped her to her feet.

It's okay, Walter. I've got this.

Jacquelyn limped along, holding a towel around her waist with one arm. Walter offered his arm. She softened, and linked her arm in his. They walked slowly together until they made it to the change rooms.

Can I help you get dressed?

I don't think the other ladies in the change room would be so happy to see you.

You know what I mean. Should I get a lifeguard to help?

I'm fine. It was just a bad belly flop.

Let's get dressed and go for a drink.

Jacquelyn stepped away from him.

I told you already. I don't drink.

She steeled herself.

Just a glass of wine. Or tea.

Let me clean up. I'll see you on the other side.

Jacquelyn pushed the door of the change room and hobbled to the showers. She pulled down both straps, and rolled the butter-yellow and white-checkered swimsuit over her hips. Her belly was raw. She rinsed the chlorine off her new bathing suit, rung it out, and hung it on an empty hook.

Two thin elderly women finished showering; their catty conversation had softened to a quiet purr. They reached for their pink and peach towels beside her limp swimsuit. Jacquelyn felt their gaze go up and down her body. She closed her eyes and listened to their wet footsteps on ceramic tile.

Standing there naked, under the showerhead, she felt the hot water rush over her. Her foot throbbed. Her stretchmark-laced stomach burned. Jacquelyn sighed heavily to herself; a breath so deep her shoulders fell and her heart unbuttoned.

She could still feel how Walter looked at her, as if she were made of water. What if he only saw the mirage of her – how could she tell him about what her father drained from her, and how she desperately tried to pickle, and preserve *that* part of her.

She dropped her head back, and let the water splash over her face. No matter how long she stood there, under the water, she knew she could never wash the scent of chlorine from her skin.

Can You Tell Me A Joke About Your Profession?

Rachel understood life as a cadence of rituals. She took pride in monotonous tasks – eating, sleeping. How, in a way, living could be an art.

At 30 years old, Rachel's best features were her green eyes and thin wrists. She found patterns and particularities in the way she ate breakfast, what time she went to bed, when she masturbated. Kept track of everything in a Moleskin journal.

Throughout the day, she recorded every morsel consumed, hour overslept, turn-on, turn-off, and glass of water. Even kept a strand of her brown hair when she got a haircut. Her parents believed her to be obsessive compulsive, but she imagined herself to be a diligent documentarian. Bodies required food, water, stimulation, and rest.

Transcription became ritual when she was in journalism school. Her need to record and preserve got her straight A's. Rachel kept hundreds of Moleskins, assorted by colours, all dated in a rainbow of aligned spines.

She was never a very strong news reporter. Preferred the editing side of things. Instead of seeking story, sniffing for truth, ravenous to be the first reporter to break the news, Rachel lived for the small details. Copyediting was her calling. Put her faith in the quality of good grammar.

In small-town New Brunswick, she looked forward to the *Telegraph Journal's* weekend arts insert, "Salon." Rachel didn't copyedit this section of the paper, so it felt new to her. On the weekends, she read it with fresh eyes.

Hunched over the breakfast table, a cup of lukewarm coffee, and a day-old carrot muffin, she read with a red pen in hand. Added an Oxford comma when required.

Saturday, Rachel decided to go to the local indie art gallery. She had to get out of the house because she felt cooped up. Put on her beige overcoat and walked from her wartime housing suburb into town. Halfway down the main drag, it started to rain. Felt wet pavement pool through the soles of her navy-blue Converse sneakers.

The gallery was still four blocks away. Passed the barbershop, public library, and two overpriced cafes. By the time she made it to the bus terminal, her toes pruned in her wet socks.

Right outside the gallery hung an obnoxious all-capitalized sign – CAN YOU TELL ME A JOKE ABOUT YOUR PROFESSION? Nothing annoyed Rachel more than caps lock. People used it to command attention, for emphasis, but no one liked being yelled at. It enraged her.

Every year, on June 28 and August 22, Rachel received a slew of emails in all capital letters wishing her a Happy International Caps Lock Day. Last year, she called in sick, didn't check her email for an entire day.

Between the weather and the signage, Rachel pushed through the gallery door with agitation. The door swung so hard the bells above the doorframe crashed to the linoleum floor.

Oh God, sorry about that. She squatted awkwardly, a pool of rainwater dripped from her coat onto the floor. Picking up the bells, she stood up and nearly slipped. She tried to re-hinge the bells, but she wasn't tall enough. A gangly, bald man walked towards her.

Let me help you, he said in a thick European accent.

Rachel stammered, I'm such a klutz. Wet sneakers squeaked across the floor.

I'm Alwyn Engelen. Who are you?

Rachel MacDonald.

He extended his right hand. Hers felt childlike in his.

You are here for the art show?

Rachel nodded.

I am the visiting artist-in-residence, he said.

I saw your photo in the paper this morning. Berlin is pretty far from New Brunswick.

Alwyn cocked his head. Reminded her of her grandfather who towered over her.

It is exactly 3, 456 miles apart.

She smiled.

He led her to a wall divided by primary colours, arranged in the form of a grid. Each colour represented a corresponding graphical score based on diary entries from members from the local classical ensemble.

I translated diaries entries from each member's daily life and created a musical score to soundtrack the entries after asking them a series of questions.

Rachel was dumbfounded. Never heard of anyone taking stock of repetitive daily tasks and making them into music.

You see, the questions I asked were very plain, ordinary records of everyday life.

Like. What sort of questions? she stammered.

He squinted in answer.

Things like: can you describe the character of your voice and the way you speak? Do you know the key of your voice? What did you eat for every meal? And, of course, can you tell me a joke about your profession?

I'm a copyeditor. Nothing funny about that. I do record everything I eat, when I sleep. I've been doing it since I was a teenager, and it became compulsive in university.

She reached into her recycled tote bag with *The Walrus* in Times New Roman font and took out a black Moleskin journal. Opened to the middle of the book.

Wow. Mind if I take a look?

She handed over her notebook with trepidation: everything was written in blue ink, every letter perfectly formed. Noticed his eyebrows arch when he grazed over how frequently she got herself off.

Twice, sometimes three times a day. You are very sexually active with yourself.

She turned a shade of cherry blossom pink. He handed back her notebook with a shy smile. Changed the subject.

Thank you for sharing.

So, what do you do with all this information?

I translate spoken language into a musical language. Can you tell me a joke about your profession?

Me?

Alwyn nodded.

Rachel took a moment.

Four dons were walking down an Oxford Street one evening. All were philologists and members of the English department. They were discussing group nouns: a covey of quail, a pride of lions, an exaltation of larks.

She continued the joke with wild hand gestures.

Alwyn scratched his head. What is a lark?

A lark is a bird. Haven't you ever seen a lark?

He shrugged.

Oh, they are adorable. Nice feathers, very small birds. She reached to take out her iPhone from her jacket pocket to show him a Google image.

No, no. Go on with your joke.

Rachel felt him study her mouth as she continued.

Okay, as they talked, they passed four ladies of the evening. The dons did not exactly ignore the hussies – in a literary way, that is. One of them asked: How would you describe a group like that?

Alwyn rested his hand on his right hip. Her breath shortened, as she grew more excited with every word.

A jam of tarts? suggested the first. A flourish of strumpet? said the second. The third: an essay of Trollope's? Then the dean of the dons, the eldest and most scholarly of them all, closed the discussion: I wish that you gentleman would consider an anthology of pros.

Rachel let out a deep belly laugh at her own joke. Alwyn half-heartedly joined in.

You're funny. Visual artists don't have any humour at all. They are the most boring people you can meet. Most artists don't have any humour, especially the painters. What do you do as a profession?

I'm a copyeditor for *Telegraph Journal*. Not exactly a born comedian, but I love a good grammar joke.

Alwyn paced around the installation, a backdrop of colour made him look like a mad primary school teacher. Calculating figures in the air, he pointed at the red rectangles on the wall with intent, his brow furrowed in concentration.

You are very similar to the cellist in the ensemble. Similar sleep patterns, food consumption, and personal pleasure. He used to be a journalist.

Rachel was surprised at his keen ability to size her up.

See these green blocks? They are your sleep patterns.

Wrinkled her nose in disbelief.

I don't really grasp how you can decipher all of this from a joke.

That's where the art comes in. I've colour coded specific hours, and from there can count how many you spend sleeping, eating, and find where you sit in this musical staff I've created. From here, I add in the humour of you, and what I learn from your notebook.

So, where I see art in punctuation, you hear sound in the copy?

He nodded. Somewhat. I am a sound artist. I work with sound because it's in the air and then it's gone. I am interested in how you have to concentrate. You have this notion of hearing, and then it's immediately gone. It's the joy of the moment. You document all that, and create something new.

How do I sound?

That part, I don't know yet. If you let me borrow your notebook, I can chart a musical score for the ensemble to play at the opening tomorrow night.

Rachel took her notebook back out from her purse. She knew, in her own way, life was all about small moments. Like sound, life was intangible. But she desperately tried to contain it, to preserve and distill – to capture the moment.

I better get back to work now, anyway. I've got lots to prepare for tomorrow. I will return your notebook.

Taken aback by his bluntness. Ok. I guess I'll get going. See you tomorrow?

Yes, tomorrow.

Squeaking her way out of the gallery, she felt both naked and invisible. How had she left her notebook with a complete stranger? The bells above the door jangled. She nearly turned

around to ask for it back, but something, somewhere deep down inside yearned to hear what she might sound like. What if her life held a melody?

The ensemble was half way through their performance by the time Rachel made it to the gallery. Stuck late at work, she'd had to copyedit the sports section over again. All day she was distracted and could care less about baseball scores. The tiny gallery was packed with curious art lovers. Some faces familiar, others she couldn't decipher, Alwyn's face she recognized immediately. He looked softer under dim light. Rachel stood in the back of the room, tried to go unnoticed.

The lower string quartet featured a viola player, two cellos, and a double bass. Deep classical. She loved the sound of the cello, and how it embodied both sorrow and a slight promise of hope. Alwyn stood off to the left of the ensemble clad in black suit with a red bowtie.

Just as they finished their first movement, all hands in the room thundered together in applause. Alwyn towered over the crowd, so she spotted Rachel in the back. Waved her over. He reserved a front row spot with her notebook on the seat.

Alwyn approached the microphone. This next performance is called, Anthology of Pros. He bowed towards Rachel.

She gathered up her skirt, placed her Moleskin back in her purse. It was nearly 24 hours since she recorded her daily rituals. In a way, she felt free. The violinist arched over the wood of the bow and created a cusp effect. Started to pluck the strings one by one. Slowly, his fingertips inched up the neck of the viola. At first, she felt embarrassed by the dull plodding melody. This is what she sounded like – ordinary plucking?

Suddenly, two cellists came in, and sunk their arm weight into the strings near the bridge of their instruments. The gallery filled with sound. One cello held a high note a little longer than the other, and the double bass kicked in in B Minor. Struck by the haunting, yet beautiful melody, she felt the music overwhelm her.

Rachel ached; a swell of relief came over her. Alwyn had paid witness to something deep down inside her. Heard the woman in her, beyond the lines of obsessiveness, documentation of daily rhythms. What she was made of.

Her eyes filled with tears as the song ended on the lowest cello note. Her heart roared in her chest. She stammered to her feet and was the only one in standing ovation.

While everyone politely clamored, Rachel stood in the front row alone, filled with something extraordinary. Pieces of her, rhythms from a notebook, lifted from the page, and transformed into sound. Turns out, she was a subtle symphony.

Ancestral Arguments

Allen: *Can you talk? I miss you, baby.*

Maggie: *Just in meeting with a curator. Will try you later. xx*

Allen: *I need you now. I want you.*

Maggie: *Can't now. Xx*

Allen: *Come on.*

Maggie: *Meeting turned into drinks at James Joyce Pub. Remember our night here at the Foxtrot Hotel?*

Allen: *How could I ever forget room 405.*

Maggie: *I still have bruises on my breasts.*

Allen: *Who are you drinking with?*

Maggie: *Don't play jealous.*

Allen: *Tell me who, and I won't be.*

Maggie: *Vesta. The curator of my next show, silly.*

Allen: *The foxy red head. Right.*

Maggie: *Gotta run! Love you. Xx*

Allen: *I can still taste you on my tongue. Your sweet juices.*

The hotel's dimly lit bar looks like an old cigar room. Maggie and Vesta are in two red velvet sling back chairs, finishing their second round of cosmopolitans. Vodka makes Vesta blush a shade of pink similar to her big city girl drink. Freddy's finest.

We've mapped out the installation dates and blocked off the opening. I think it's going to be a spectacular exhibition.

Maggie folds into herself. I still don't know what to call this body of work.

Vesta sips her martini, and looks at the calendar on her phone. You've got until next week, otherwise we'll go with your original proposal.

Maggie throws her head back in protest. *This Is As Far As We Come* is a terrible title for a show. I'm leaning towards *Arguments With Ancestors*.

Vesta finishes her martini and takes Maggie by the hand. I love both. It's up to you ultimately. But listen... I gotta get going soon. Early morning.

A short bartender with hairy arms and an oversized watch walks over to the table. He's balancing a tray with two cosmos, shaken, no ice. A side of lime. He smiles and puts fresh martinis before Vesta and Maggie.

We didn't order these, said Vesta.

Ladies, these are from your secret admirer, said the bartender.

Admirer? There's no one else here, said Maggie.

Vesta looks down at her phone. Honestly, I don't think I can do another, Mags. Gotta be at the airport 6:00 a.m.

I can't drink them both. Oh, please stay for one more. We can settle on the name for the show.

Fine. I'll stay for this round. But let's get the bill, said Vesta, and snapped for the bartender's attention.

Vesta reached for her wallet inside her purse. Dutch this time.

The lanky bartender returned to their corner table. Your tab has been taken care of.

Maggie dropped her orange wallet on the floor. Leaned over to pick it back up and nearly hit her head on the table. What? By who?

Another gift from your secret admirer, said the bartender.

What's going on? said Vesta, taking a swig of her drink.

Does this admirer have a 902-area code? said Maggie. The bartender didn't answer, and instead passed a folded scrap piece of paper to Maggie. He winked and walked away.

What's with that guy? It's like he belongs in a Wes Anderson film, said Vesta.

Maggie unfolded the receipt. She could hardly make out the bartender's chicken scratch. She looked for her cat glasses in her purse and put them on her nose. The note read: *Miss you, Mags. Love you, too. XX A.*

Thought Allen might have had a hand in all this, said Maggie.

Think you've got more than a secret admirer, Maggie. Borderline stalker or potential marriage material, said Vesta.

Maggie looked down at her phone. Seven unread message from Allen.

Allen: *If I was there, I'd take you up to the room. Take you into my arms and pull you so close.*

Allen: *I'd slip my hands up your skirt. Tease you with my fingertips.*

Allen: *You'd gasp. I'd throw you on the hotel bed.*

Allen: *You'd pull me in, and wrap your thighs around my waist.*

Allen: *I love the way your orchid opens up for me.*

Allen: *I need you to ride me, baby. I'm so hot for you.*

Allen: *To feel you grind your universe up against me.*

Maggie: *You shouldn't have paid for our drinks. Thank you, love. I'll try and call when I get home.*

Allen: *It's all for you. I'm all for you.*

Maggie: *Very sweet of you. Wish I could meet you upstairs.*

Allen: *You can.*

Maggie: *In my fantasy land. Long distance sucks.*

Allen: *Finish your martini, and go to the front desk to get your key. I'm in Room 405.*

Vesta returns triumphant with two bags of kettle chips.

Allen is upstairs.

What? Vesta tears open both bags. "I'm ravenous. What do you mean they are upstairs?"

In the hotel?

I told them we were meeting here this afternoon, and they must have drove up. It's only four hours between Halifax and Freddy.

Maggie looks at her flamingo pink martini, picks up the stem, brings the lip of the glass to her lips, and downs it all in one gulp. Vesta offers some chips.

Do they do this sort of thing often? said Vesta. Better eat a few of these. You're gonna need some fuel.

Shit. I am not dressed for this. I'm still in my studio clothes.

Vesta speaks with a mouthful of chips. I don't think you'll be wearing much for long. Better get your ass up there, girl. Enjoy your lova.

Maggie never thought she'd move in with Allen after four months of dating long distance, especially because she only meant to have a one-night-stand. It was a romp after a bottle of Prosecco at her opening *Ancestral Arguments*. She never imagined Allen would come at her heart with full force, it was supposed to be a fling. Weeks of text messages, late night phone

calls, emails, handwritten letters, long drives back and forth, and dozens of bouquets of red roses later. Maggie hated roses, thought they were a cliché, preferred peonies. Had to graciously smile when Allen created a treasure trail of crimson rose petals that led up to their master bedroom the night she moved in, and their freshly washed white linen sheets were now covered in a death bed of Costco cut roses. It took everything in Maggie not to burst into laughter. Allen was a little over the top most of the time.

The first few nights on Colonial Crescent were like a honeymoon. After days and nights of fucking, eating in bed, and sleeping, Maggie showered and got dressed to leave the house. With a towel on her head, she shouted out to Allen. I'm gonna head out for coffee for a few hours. Finally leave the love nest. Set my eyes on the city.

Allen was still wrapped up in the wrinkled bed sheets. Babe, don't leave. Come back to bed. I'm not done with you yet, Maggie.

My body needs a rest! I can't possibly take any more sex.

Maggie had not had so much sex in the span of her whole lifetime as she'd had with Allen those first three days living together. She felt outside of herself, like her skin was no longer attached to her body.

That's not what you said last night.

Let me finish brushing my teeth, she said with a toothbrush in her mouth. All these orgasms were turning her inside out. She tightened her robe, and ran up the flight of stairs to the master bedroom, and took a seat on the bed next to Allen, who pulled her under the covers.

We've already done it this morning.

Baby, you make me hard, said Allen. They pulled Maggie's hips closer.

How can you possibly want more?

Wait until I'll have all this testosterone pumping through my body. I'll devour you then.

Maggie wrapped her arms around Allen's neck. Kissed their cheek.

Allen, I gotta leave the house.

But I want you so bad.

I need a break. You've got me rubbed raw.

Need a break from me?

I just need some air.

Maggie untangled herself from Allen, and got up from the bed.

Where are you going?

Downtown somewhere.

With who?

Myself.

I'll get dressed quick. Allen sat up in the bed, and pulled on their wife beater from the floor.

I've been with you for days on end. I need time to myself.

Where do you think you'll go?

Not sure yet. I'm like the wind, I need to roam.

Allen was looking out the window at the trees.

Text me. I want to make sure you're safe.

I'm always safe.

Kiss me one more time, and go on then.

They kiss softly. Allen attempts to untie her satin kimono, and cups her breasts. She pulls away and staggers to her feet. Tightly ties up her robe. Allen. I said no. I'll see you later tonight.

Maggie wasn't going to the cafe. She had a therapy session, but didn't want to tell Allen about it. Her therapist was a queer woman who specialized in trauma. They decided to keep their long distance therapeutic relationship going via telephone while Maggie was settling into her new life.

Before Allen, I had no problem breaking up with people, and cutting them out of my life, said Maggie. I had sex with them for a few weeks, and then split. I know this is different. I am living with Allen now. But sometimes I still want to run.

Over the past few months, Maggie had some major breakthroughs with her therapist, who thought her intimacy issues related back to Maggie's wayward father, who left when she was thirteen. Same day she got her first moon. The lack of a stable male figure in her life led her to believe intimacy couldn't exist. Sex was a series of fragmented experiences, two bodies separated by their desire.

It's never been about love until Allen. I know I want to be with them, but sometimes it's hard. They don't see all I've done to be with them. I just moved my entire life.

Allen had a charm that could pull the wool over the eyes of an entire province. It's that potent kind of appeal – a Machiavellian, or as *Psychology Today* calls High Machs. Allen was a master manipulator.

Maggie knew of Allen through Facebook, and the 305 friends they had in common. She was surprised to hear from Tabitha, an old friend, via iMessage, who was a mutual friend of Allen, too.

Maggs, I know we haven't talked in a long time. I've noticed you are dating Allen. I don't want to cross any boundaries, but I wanted to let you know that I am friends with their ex-wife,

who says be careful of Allen. They love-bomb, and then later turned everything against their lover. Consider this a warning. I only want the best for you. Take care girl, and if you find yourself back in these parts, do look me up. Dinner's on me.

Maggie read Tabitha's message over again, and decided to ignore it. She didn't know what to say to Tabitha, and besides, most exes don't have nice things to say about their former partners. There is a reason they divorced, and it takes two to tango.

Anyone who knew Allen got they were a fighter, they stood up when others remained quiet, and their acting was part of their long-term vision of having a role in shaping the future of theatre. Allen was relentless when they wanted something – they had a hunter's precision. This is how they lured Maggie in.

Maggie was soft spoken, ballerina-thin, with bright green eyes, and turning 32 years old in July. Allen was going on 40, and was more established than Maggie, who was a mixed-media painter, and mostly created abstracts fused with Mi'kmaq hieroglyphs.

Allen knew their way around a woman's body, as they slept with most of the women in town – gay or straight. Allen loved that moment when a woman gave herself over – the split second she became animal, and let go of all shame and insecurity. Women's bodies fascinated Allen, who no longer related to their own female body, but loved every inch of a woman. Their own breasts felt like deadweight, but they could almost suck off their lovers' nipples. It made them feel manly.

Allen could see how Maggie was vulnerable. It's why she was open to letting Allen spend the night in a hotel room the after their vernissage at Vox Gallery. She wanted more than a quick fix night of lovin' because she couldn't find a solid queer partner. Before Allen came along, Maggie was casually dating a military man who squeezed her ass like he was handling a

grenade. Eventually, she dumped him because he refused to go down on her. Said it was because her vagina smelled like hot garbage.

Allen loved Maggie's femininity. Her soft skin, and short skirts. They could see parts of themselves in her – not quite manipulative, but certainly a trickster of her own. Allen got it, and related to Maggie's ability to seduce, and never fully give themselves over to the other lover. Both knew it drives people crazy when you let them into your body, but nowhere else. Allen listened closely to Maggie that night at the hotel and had brought over a canister of edible body paint. Best way to seduce a painter is to let their body be the canvas. Allen loved the way Maggie whispered and cooed. Her body responded instantly to touch, much like Allen's. Allen noted this as they drew circles over her belly button like a bull's eye. Most women took some coaxing into orgasm. Not Maggie. She came instantly, her thighs covered in edible paint.

While their whirlwind long-distance relationship quickly grew arms and legs via text, email, and late-night phone calls, it was when Maggie spoke about being raped that Allen recognized kin. Trauma bonding.

Allen dealt with their own traumatic sexual history through acting. Instead of repenting in a confession booth, Allen made love to every woman who would have them. Allen never let what those boys did in the schoolyard steal their desire to touch and be touched. They knew the closest to God anyone ever gets is through orgasm. It's a carnal connection no priest could ever comprehend.

Maggie was starting to understand the closest she ever came to Creator was walking the land. Her Auntie taught her about good medicines, and told her to always carry tobacco to make an offering.

Sex felt like an offering. Maggie was interested in Allen's theory of sexual satisfaction as a means of prayer, a type of worship. How the body isn't separate from God. But the bible had many rules and regulations around sex. First of all, according to the holy book, sex outside of marriage was a sin. Homosexuality was definitely a no-no. And, from what she'd heard, blowjobs were out of the question. She'd bet big bucks that God didn't like her sucking off her trans-boyfriend.

Allen and Maggie moved in with one another after four months of dating long distance. It was the old U-Haul cliché, and perhaps the fastest way to figure out if a relationship is gonna work is to share a roof. Colonial Crescent was a small street, and Maggie was well aware of the problematic connotations of holding a postal code on Colonial. She has been fighting against the colonial agenda since her biological father came back into her life, and made her apply for her status card a decade or so ago. Allen had bought the house after their divorce, a fixer-upper with an A-frame master bedroom and a view. Allen's mother helped them get the house before the market skyrocketed, and ultimately crashed.

Maggie had never lived in an actual home after leaving her mother's house at sixteen. It was always rentals, mostly with academics, artists, and queers. The idea of shacking up in coastal house she could never afford appealed to her. It wasn't social climbing, but definitely played a part in Maggie's attraction to Allen. A newly renovated house in Halifax was better than renting a shared dump in Freddy. Maggie was embarrassed whenever she wrote the return address. It wasn't bad enough the government was revoking her status card, now she's was a half-breed Indian living on Colonial Crescent.

Maggie didn't know she belonged to the land, or that it was her ancestors that called her back, not Allen. It took her some time to get it. At first, she was convinced she was losing her

mind when she thought she heard voices on the wind, something about having responsibility to the land, water, and her people for the next seven generations. But that was daftly romantic. The thing is she didn't know what she was hearing. Started looking at her life, reflecting on her bad choices, and wondering what led her here to standing on the edge of a cliff, looking out to the Atlantic. She never liked the East Coast Trail – thought of it as a trail made by white people for white people, but everything is colonized, so she forged her own path in the woods, didn't care if she brushed up against poison ivy or got lost. She trusted her intuition, which always led her to the coast.

When she couldn't get to the coast, she walked around the edges of Long Lake, but never stuck to the pathway, even if it meant walking in the tall grasses. On the day she got the letter saying she no longer qualified to be part of her Mi'kmaq band, she cut her status card in half, and threw it into the lake. In truth, she was never comfortable with the idea of carrying around government issued identity. What did she know about being Indigenous? She started to burn medicines when Allen was out of the house, and when she painted.

What's *that* smell? said Allen.

Sage. I got another package in the mail from my Auntie today, said Maggie.

Why does she keep sending presents? We'll see her soon for Thanksgiving, said Allen. She can just bring them to you.

Because she loves me, and misses me. I think it's how she lets me know she's always with me, said Maggie.

You two are thick as thieves. Hard to get between ya, said Allen. What did she send this time?

We're more like best friends, said Maggie. Tobacco, more cedar, sweet grass and lavender.

I thought I was your best friend, said Allen.

You're my partner. It's not the same.

You're my best friend, said Allen.

Family is family, said Maggie. It's different.

The more Maggie smudged and walked, the more she could feel her grandmothers in her bones. She started picking berries and cedar. She started to grow roots for the first time in her life. Allen was the catalyst and the ancestors knew how desperate Maggie was to find love. But Maggie knew, love could be like a wild dog. Things about her relationship barked and nipped at her, triggering something she tried to keep buried. She started to smudge every day, and read about the past. Took comfort in stories about the old ways. Allen hated that Maggie always had her nose in a book, and started to loathe the smell of burning sweet grass. Said it was for hippies.

Allen and Maggie lived together for all of four months, each worse than the last. September was a slew of parties, drinking until dawn, and one smashed window. Allen lost it one night after they saw Maggie talking to another man at a party.

Who was that guy you were having a cigarette with in the garage? said Allen.

He's a sculptor, said Maggie.

Did you want him? said Allen.

Want him? No. I was asking him about his studio.

He was flirting with you. Everyone saw it, said Allen.

No, he wasn't.

Did he kiss you, or try to touch you? I'll fucking kill him, said Allen.

Nothing happened. We were just having a smoke, Allen.

Do you know how hard it is on me to see you with another man?

We're together even if I am talking to someone else.

Do you want a real cock?

Allen, I only want you. This has nothing to do with biology. I was talking to a man at a party. Nothing happened.

You're not really gay, are you? said Allen.

Fuck you, that's totally unfair, said Maggie.

I'm not accusing you. I'm just asking, said Allen.

Their fights became daily, as Allen would undermine her perception by throwing doubt or memory on her constantly, questioning where she was going, showing up to her studio accusing her of cheating, drunk texting, and constantly undercutting Maggie.

Allen arrived late for Thanksgiving. They tried to text Maggie, but she didn't get any reception down in The Cove. Allen had spent most of the day in bed nursing a hangover. Maggie's mother didn't abide by most East Coast Sunday rules (having cooked dinner made for lunch hour), and told Allen to show up for six o'clock. It was closer to seven by the time they walked in the door.

Are you avoiding my texts, Maggie? said Allen.

Maggie's mother was already half cut on box wine when Allen came in for a hug. They tried to give Maggie a kiss, but she turned her cheek.

You finally decided to join us, said Auntie.

I'd never miss an opportunity to share a meal with three of the most beautiful women in The Cove, said Allen.

You can lay off the charm, Allen. We don't need a big show put on around here, said Maggie's mother.

Allen leaned back in their seat and folded their arms in a huff, but said nothing. This was Maggie's mother after all.

Did you bring a bottle of wine like I asked? said Maggie.

Baby, I thought you were going to slow down drinking. It's been a bit of an issue lately, said Allen.

What? That's not true, Allen.

You know it is.

It's not for me. It's for Mom, said Maggie. Plus, there was like half a dozen bottles at our house when I left.

Maggie felt strange even saying the word ours. The house belonged to Allen, and never felt like it was hers. It wasn't their house – even though she paid half the mortgage. The Cove house was a half hour outside of the city, where her Mom wintered. It felt more like home than where she actually lived.

Oh, shit. We drank 'em all last night. Had the gang over to the house. You know what they're like. Bunch of booze bags, said Allen.

I thought you wanted a quiet night in. Going back to bachelor life? said Maggie.

Hey, I'm still all yours, baby, said Allen.

I'm not sharing any of my wine. Bottle's nearly gone, said Maggie's mother, pouring another drink.

Allen got up from the table, and walked out of the house in a huff.

Where are they off to now? said Auntie.

They get like this when they're hung over. Moody.

My ex-husband used to do the same thing, said Auntie. I don't like the way they are treating you. Transition or not.

Can we not talk about this right now? We've spent the whole long weekend hashing out my relationship.

Allen reappeared with two bottles of bubbly.

We're gonna get ripped tonight!

Allen handed over the two bottles to Maggie's mother.

Thought I showed up empty handed for Thanksgiving dinner, didn't ya? said Allen.

Auntie rolled her eyes.

What was that for? said Allen.

Nothing, Allen. We don't need any more drama tonight, said Auntie.

I've been nothing but respectful to you, said Allen.

Respectful? You show up here hung over. That's not how you show respect, said Auntie.

I brought more wine, said Allen.

Why doesn't everyone wash up. I'm gonna start taking up our plates, said Maggie's mom.

Allen followed Maggie upstairs to the tiny bathroom with a half tub.

What's going on, Mags? said Allen. Did I do something wrong? Your Auntie has it out for me.

Let's not get into it right now, Allen. It's fucking Thanksgiving.

Happy National Genocide Day, said Allen.

More like National Land Theft Day, said Maggie.

Allen stood behind Maggie as she washed her hands. They leaned in and wrapped their arms around her waist. Allen admired their reflections in the mirror.

We're a pretty hot couple, Maggie. Don't you forget it, said Allen. Wait until I can grow a beard.

Maggie looked up from her hands, and flashed Allen a half smile in the mirror.

Can you give me a little space for a sec? This bathroom hardly fits one.

Allen let go of Maggie's hips, and slapped her ass.

Fuck. What was that for? said Maggie.

You'll pay for this later, said Allen.

Maggie looked up at herself in the mirror. She hated when Allen treated her like a piece of meat. By the time she got downstairs to the kitchen, her mother had cracked another bottle, and started launching into Allen. The two were drinking out of her grandmother's champagne flutes.

You know our Maggie needs a lot of freedom. I'm her mother. I know these things. She's been on her own for a long time. It's not in her nature to be in a relationship. Mags doesn't know what it's like, or how to compromise.

She's an independent spirit, said Auntie. We all are.

I'm good to her. I treat her like a queen, said Allen.

The expectations are different for you. You've been married before. You've made big commitments, said Maggie's mom.

But you haven't kept them, said Auntie.

Maggie's face turned the colour of cherry kombucha.

Please don't talk about me behind my back, said Maggie.

Allen could hardly look at her. Their ears were burning.

Here, have a glass of Prosecco, sweetie, said Auntie.

I'm not drinking tonight, said Maggie.

Are you pregnant? said Allen.

That's impossible, and you know it, said Maggie. I don't feel like it tonight.

That's a first, said Allen. I'll drink yours then.

Let me mix up the gravy, and then we can eat, said Auntie. She poured the fat from the turkey into an old mayonnaise jar filled with flour, and dropped some gravy browning in.

Danced around the kitchen shaking gravy like a martini. Old 50s tunes played over the old kitchen radio.

Can we have a game of cards after dinner? said Maggie's mom. You couldn't hear the woodstove over the music, but you could feel its heat. Dinner was perfectly laid out – bowls of carrots, turnips, mashed potatoes, a gravy boat, and a platter of white meat. Elbow to elbow, no one said a word throughout the meal. After licking their plates clean, Allen belched.

Think I'm gonna need a nap after all this turkey. Mind if I pass on the cards? said Allen.

You're gonna lie down now? You've only been here for an hour and a half, said Maggie.

You can lay with me, said Allen.

Let Allen have a rest, said Maggie's mom.

Babe, go easy on me. The gang had me up until 4AM.

That's not my problem, said Maggie.

Come up with me, said Allen.

I'm on dish duty. So are you, said Maggie.

Wake me up in an hour or so, said Allen.

Allen went up to bed. Maggie started clearing the table, and her Aunt piled the dishes up by the sink. Maggie's mother was half asleep in her chair, drunk again. Side by side at the sink, Maggie washed while her Auntie helped her dry.

If they are like this without T, I can't imagine what it's going to be like in a few months, said Maggie.

You should think about getting your own place, said Auntie. Give yourself some space to think about what you want. I'll help cover your rent for a few months. Get you back on your feet.

Maggie had no qualms about people going through the process, but she'd had enough friends who had been through horrifying relationships with an abusive partner while they were under the influence of T, and they felt like they couldn't ever leave. It's not the first queer relationship to leave a femme barely a husk of who they were before. Maggie was already an emotional punching bag. She had to leave. If they couldn't work pre-T, they'd never work it while Allen was adjusting to the new hormones in their body. Maggie wasn't transphobic, she had a hunch half of why Allen was so drawn to her is that she'd had a trans partner before.

The last night Maggie spent on Colonial Crescent, she nearly drank herself blind at a bar, listening to Bruce Springsteen albums with the bartender who should have cut her off, but didn't. Allen was down the road at the hockey game at the stadium. By the time Allen collected Maggie to walk her home, the bartender told them Maggie was in the bathroom throwing up. Allen was furious, and lost it on the bartender who over served her. They banged on the door. Maggie opened it enough to let Allen in, and they held her hair back until she stopped dry heaving. Allen

helped her wash her face, and took her home in a cab. Maggie drank a pitcher of water to sober up. Allen suggested she brush her teeth. Maggie gurgled with mouthwash, and came out of the bathroom and went straight for Allen's neck, a last attempt to coax them into sleeping with her one last time.

You're loaded, Mags. We can't have sex right now, said Allen.

They tried to put her to bed in spare bedroom, but Maggie felt so rejected she stripped off all her clothes.

Baby, please fuck me with your cock, she said. You're the only man I want.

Maggie stood bare-breasted, only wearing blue feather earrings, with her black silk panties at her feet. Her toenails painted the colour of the Mi'kmaq flag. I could never really love a squaw, said Allen, who locked the bedroom door behind them.

I'll let you come out in morning. Until then, try and sleep it off.

Maggie started sobbing, and pounding on the door to get out. Allen shouted back at her.

Don't you dare wake the neighbours, Maggie. You know the walls are paper thin.

Maggie shrunk into her smallest animal self, and eventually passed out on the floor. A raven came to her in a dream as her ancestors lingered outside the window, careful to make sure she didn't swallow her tongue, or choke on her own vomit in the night. They knew her journey on the red road started tomorrow when she woke to her humility, and moved off Colonial Crescent.

Only Young

There are all kinds of medicines. Some are more potent than others. That's why I make my own moonshine. I use a milk can still. I keep my coals low. I get my potatoes from my garden. It's not easy to grow vegetables around here.

I make moonshine to preserve what food we got. Keep the bear meat good. But it don't always work. It preserves the partridgeberries.

The first bit of moonshine is high-grade liquor. Strong enough to blind you. I make a gallon or two at a time. I say a prayer when I make the shine. There are too many hungry mouths to feed. Never enough food. I trade the shine for flour and sugar. Sometimes molasses. My great-grandbabies dies for molasses. They spread it all over their toutons.

Like a good grandmother, I tell my grandchildren about the ancestors. How everything they need comes from the land. I show them the medicines. I remind them to respect one another, to take care of each other. It's how they learn to honour themselves. Lying don't get anyone anywhere. I remind them to speak from the heart.

There's a few hard tickets who always want into my stash. Old John is gone for it. When the men come back from the woods they come around looking for him. They live for the old stuff. I told them not to drink so much. Their livers can't take it.

Sometimes the men talk to bad spirits. They say they drink the shine to help forget. I can't drink the stuff. I don't like the taste.

Old John won't drink my tea unless I put a little sugar shine in. Says I am his sweetness, but he can only sleep three sheets to the wind. I tell him this stuff ain't meant for drinking. Moonshine is how I make my medicines. Tinctures. Tonics. Teas.

The most important use for moonshine is when the babies come. I cut the twigs from a juniper tree and boil it up. It helps with the afterbirth pains. I use it to bleach all the blood and waters from the labour, and as comfort in case anything goes wrong. The shine helps keep the mothers and babies healthy and clean, so they can grow strong together. A mother's love is the most potent medicine.

I was never allowed in my mother's bedroom growing up. It was her sacred territory, the only turf where no children, or mess, crept into. The one place in her life where she could control every single thing – the line-up of perfumes colour-coded, her chez lounge where she'd do her nails, and dozens of throw cushions on top of a canopy bed.

I'm standing in her walk-in closet wearing a pair of her red heels, which already rub my feet, and I am looking into her full-length mirror. Whether I like it or not, I look just like her. I've got the same love handles, pear shape, and high forehead.

Charles, my father, sent me a stack of government papers from Northern and Indian Affairs. I'm supposed to apply for Registration of an Adult under the Indian Act.

The Indian what? You're not an adult, says Josephine.

Yes, I am. Mom shoots me a look and cocks her head. But you're a twenty-ish white girl living in Ontario.

I've got a Calgary hat. Josephine is quick to remind me, I am not in fact from Alberta. I am a Newfoundlander. How can I be a Newfoundlander if I don't live in Newfoundland? She insists – both your parents are Newfoundlanders. It's in your blood.

According to these papers, I've got more in my blood than Josephine realized. I kick off her shoes, and drop in height. What am I supposed to do now?

Josephine reads the papers over, half-muttering to herself. Looks like you'll need a sworn affidavit declaring that you visit hometown of Faraway Bay, because your father was born there. She throws the papers on the floor. What about where your mother was born? You'll need to attach a copy of your long form birth certificate, and baptismal papers. No one has these things lying around. You weren't even baptized.

Mom hands me another pair of heels. You don't know these people. They aren't your family. I scrunch up my face – but they are, technically. I raised you, she declares. Two decades of your father's family never being in touch, and now it's one yellow post-it note: good luck.

I don't need luck. I never asked for this. Josephine is livid, and huffing and puffing about how could my father send me these papers without talking to her first. As I browse my mother's closet, I admire her collection of black dresses from downtown Toronto shops. She's always had a classic taste. So, does Charlie need your permission for everything? This is about him and me for once.

It's always been about you and your father. Believe me. Sign the papers. Or don't. It's your life.

Josephine has mediated a relationship between my father and me for various reasons, none of which she ever intends to tell me. I grab a shimmery cocktail dress from the hanger, and hold it up to my front, smoothing it over my hips and belly. I take off my clothes, and pull my mother's dress over my head. I catch a glimpse of my pale blotchy body in the mirror. I try to not hate myself for what I see in the reflection.

Charlie keeps calling me asking if I sent my papers in yet.

So, your father's calling you now, is he?

I turn around so Josephine can do up the back of my borrowed dress, and tell her, we've talked more in the past week than my whole life.

Josephine quickly hands me a pair of flats. Motions for me to try them on, and crosses her arms over her chest in defence. When my mother gets like this, I see how much she is like her mother, and fear I'm becoming her. I look at myself in the mirror again. Try and be kind to yourself, Sarah. You are disgustingly human. I blurt out: I hate myself.

Oh honey, don't hate yourself. You are a beautiful princess. You are. I even had you named Tiffany for the first three days of your life. But your father would have nothing to do with it. No daughter of his was a Tiff.

I roll my eyes. Tiffany? Thank you, Charles. I walk all over the papers scattered on the closet floor. Of course, Josephine thinks it's pretty, especially since it was her mother's name, and her middle name.

Stop biting your nails, she instructs.

This is who I am, Mom. Josephine picks at my dress. Tells me suck in. Stand up. This is as tall as I get.

In my day, Josephine says, we did everything you could to get a man's attention. These days you girls walk around dressed in pyjamas. Josephine puts the heels on, and glares at herself in the mirror. How's the weight watchers coming along?

I'm done with dieting. Stop trying to be like me, Mom. I kick off my mother's heels, and pull my jeans over my hips. I reach for my plaid shirt, and start to button it up. My belly rolls over like a muffin top. Josephine says, you're gonna want to keep that man of yours happy.

I don't even want to acknowledge her statement, but like every other mother-daughter conversation in history, I can't hold back. Ben loves me for me, I say. Not for my dress size. My

mother like her mother never considers holding back an opinion either. You're not gonna have a baby looking like that, she says. You went up another dress size.

I grab my belly roll. I've got a little baby fat, so what? I know, I know. I've got my father's genes. I twirl around to my mother, and sing out: I'm not a cowgirl. I'm an Indian.

You're not really either, says Josephine, who loves things in boxes. Believes in order. There's only either/or. Doesn't believe in shades of greys, or in-betweens.

I stop swirling, and look plainly at myself in the mirror. I'm white as an eggshell. Never been on a reserve. Been home to the west coast a handful of times, and that was not by choice.

Those shoes look great on you, she says. They make you look like a grown woman. I can barely walk.

I like my boots better, I tell her, they make me feel closer to the land.

Josephine dangles another pair of fancy dress shoes before me. I don't need another pair of your heels I'm never going to wear. Come on, she says. I can't believe that boy goes out with you wearing Doc Martens.

Charlie got them for me from a second-hand shop, I remind her.

My mother hates second-hand anything, and believes it's a sign of lower class to wear someone else's old clothes, especially their boots. What if the previous owner died, and they left their soul in their boots? Josephine's beet red face says it all.

All I ever heard were complaints. Mom, please don't make me go with my father. Now you love his old boots?

I lost twelve pounds in ten days the last time I went to Newfoundland!

A smile comes across my mother's face. You looked so good. Smallest you've ever been.

I was hungry all of the time. Charlie drove straight from Toronto to North Sydney. Only

stopped to pee. Shared a buck of KFC. I am a vegetarian. I could only eat French fries and coleslaw for 24 hours. Listened to Harry Hibbs the entire drive.

Josephine's entire body tenses. I married the God damn *Wild Rover*. You don't know what he put me through. Had to forgive him for every Q on the calendar.

I had to ask, what's with the Q's?

Your father would mark a big red Q for every day he quit drinking'. *And it's No, Nay Never. Will I play the wild rover. No never no more.* By mid-May all the Q's fell off the calendar. Harry played at our wedding you know. It was our only waltz.

I bet old Charlie wasn't sure if he wanted to marry you, or Harry.

Your father sat right on Harry's lap!

Even though I've heard this story a thousand times, I always loved imagining Charlie sitting on another grown man's lap. As I start to pick up the papers from my mother's walk-in closet, she confesses, your father never told me he was Native. Now he's got you signing status papers. I try and arrange the documents in order. Look at the man, I say in defence. He's got Aboriginal written all over him. Black hair. Cheekbones that cut glass. Tans like a hide in the summer.

I'll give you that. I was married to the man, says Josephine. You think he could have said something.

I rest my hands on my hips the way I do when I try and humour my mother. What do you mean you didn't know he was Native? There are no Indians in Newfoundland. Joey Smallwood said so, says Josephine. I throw my hands up in the air, and tell her, that place is an island of denial.

Growing up we only heard tell of Jackytars on the west coast, says Josephine. Now your father's one of them Micmacs. He's not a real Indian.

I think of the last time I saw my father, and how he looked older, and wiser than ever before. We had brunch at the Bus Depot. Two eggs, over easy, brown toast. Dry. Black coffees.

Charlie talks about a real connection to Creator, I say.

Josephine takes a moment to connect the dots. But he never had a long braid. And your father never smoked, she says. I can't see him dancing at a powwow. I remind her, he did live off the land. She corrects me—we all lived off the land. You grew up in Mount Pearl, Mom. I can't see him braiding sweet grass. He's a man of riddles, that's for sure.

Your father drank like an Indian. He was lawless. Put me through hell.

I try and change the subject, and tell her last week I got a package in the mail from Charlie. It was a drum made from caribou hide by an Elder in Stephenville. I think he's trying to ask forgiveness. Josephine wasn't ready to let it go just yet.

He would come home loaded drunk every night I had a test, she says. I tried to so hard to study, and get through school so we could have a future, and not be living on the streets.

Charlie does talk to the crows, I offer. He always sent money back to Newfoundland to help out.

Your father is a trickster, Josephine says. He'd pound his chest. I'm Charlie from Faraway Bay. Never said a word about being Micmac or whatever you call it.

Mom, it's Mi'kmaq. His great-grandmother is famous.

Josephine says, I know who Mary is. I remind her she was a medicine woman. Mom snaps, Some little old woman making moonshine. Delivering babies.

For a moment, I try and imagine what it would be like to hold a newborn, but I'm afraid of babies. They are just too small, and fragile.

Mary's a Mi'kmaq Elder – a big deal in the community, I tell her. So, I got a Facebook message last week. Who is Mitch?

Josephine's face drops in colour, and says, Take that up with your father.

Driving to Atlantic Canada feels like falling off the map, drifting off into the ether. The destination is somewhere, yet where you are going is otherworldly.

Charlie announces: Eastbound Newfoundland. He's been saying that since we got on the 401.

Charlie doesn't care. He's going home. Cape Breton's like a little chunk of Newfoundland that's drifted off, he says Marine Atlantic, we're coming honey!

I realize my father hasn't been home in five years, but I've never seen him this excited over anything in my entire life. Save for the white dream catcher he's had hanging in his rear-view mirror. Years ago, he told me dream catcher is designed to catch the bad dreams as they pass through the web, and float down the feathers. I tell him, you should keep it in your bedroom. It's not like you sleep in the truck.

Through the rear-view mirror, Charlie looks at me, and likely realizes how naïve and young I really am. We used to sleep wherever we passed out, he says. The lawn. The park. The truck was warm. I listen, and say, I've never seen a white one. Mine was black with turquoise feathers. I got it in Chinatown.

Not many Mi'kmaq in China, he says, taking a quick look out the window at the endless fields. He declares, Best cabbage that ever grows in Newfoundland. Like a total snob, I turn my

nose up, and say, you think everything from Newfoundland is better. He doesn't disagree, and says, in my drinkin' days, I'd boil up a feed of salt beef no matter what the hour. A drink of cabbage soup to cure the hangover.

I think to myself, my best hangover cure is a tuna sandwich and a Diet Coke, which I am desperate for, but I don't dare tell my father. Truthfully, I could still taste the pineapple Jell-O-shooters I threw up just before he picked me up.

See da sky? Best get on the boat before the snow comes, says Charlie. Is that all you got to wear?

I shrugged, Yeah so. I didn't think I needed a winter coat in October.

What are you like? he says. We're crossing the Atlantic. Here put on my cowboy hat. Keep your head warm.

My head is much smaller than my father's, and his cowboy hat covers my eyes. He pushes the brim of the hat up so I can see. I tip my cap to my father, and then I sing: *"Oh, you can't fool your old man by dressin' like that. Oh, you're still just a Newfie in a Calgary hat."*

You are a saltwater cowgirl.

I hate that song. I'm not a Newfie.

This time Charlie is offended. Newfoundlanders are the hardest workers around, he says. If we're not good for nothin' Indians, we're Goddamn Newfies. I got no time for Canada.

Newfoundland was the first place of contact, and, in turn, is ground zero for colonization. Charlie has always hated Europeans, and his Newfoundland pride is practically religious. We drive in silence for a few hours until we make it to North Sydney, and Charlie drives the truck onto the mouth of the boat. No man's land.

Charlie is making little x's with his finger. One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl. I grab his finger, and ask him what he's doing. Four for a boy! he says. I'm crossing out the crows. Maybe I'll be a grandfather after all. I don't have the heart to tell him I don't think I want kids. I'm too selfish, and still very much consider myself a child.

Mommy won't recognize me with my hair cut. Gotta keep my rags on, he says. Wouldn't know me in my good clothes. I'm saving d'em for when I go into the casket.

All I can think about is French fries with extra salt, and a side of plum sauce. Charlie stuffs his face with jube-jubes. I reach into his bag of candies for a green one.

Loves these black ones, he says. Do you know what they called these in my day? Nig...I cut Charlie off before he can finish the word. We don't say the N word anymore. It's like Newfie.

Charlie goes on about how they never had a name for jube-jubes when he was growing up in the late 1950s. I'm surprised jube-jubes were even manufactured back then.

He says, Jesus, girl. How old do you think I am? We used to stay up all night on the boat drinking with Eddie Coffey.

By this point of my life, Dad's drinking stories were sermons. He served me all the moral coding, and left out the juicy details. Last time we went on a trip to Newfoundland, I was a little girl, and Charlie and his girlfriend at the time made a bed for me on the floor outside the bar. Drunks kept stepping over me on their way to the bathroom all night long.

Your mother said you got a boyfriend, says Charlie.

The family grapevine never ceased to amaze me. News circulates in rapids. My mother tells my father everything, even though they have been divorced for nearly three decades.

I had a boyfriend. I mean I don't know if I do. We're still talking.

Charlie's spidey senses tingle. I'll kill him if he hurts you.

I rarely, if ever, get to see the protective side of my father. I can't help but find it a bit amusing, and sweet. Benjamin wouldn't hurt a fly. He's a teacher, and a vegan. Charlie is baffled – a what?

A vegan. He doesn't eat meat, animal products, eggs, or dairy. Charlie digests this new information about Ben who is no longer my boyfriend, but we're still sleeping together. Then asks, Does he eat moose meat? I stress again. He doesn't eat any meat.

Does he got a car? Is it new? he says. I don't know what kind of car he drives. It's clean. I have no idea if it's new or not. Charlie takes this as a good time to start his sermon. Relationships aren't easy. Best you can do is go around together.

Taking dating or relationship advice from my father seems like having sex with a virgin. Neither have a clue what women want.

Your Mom and I never went anywhere, he says. Better go somewhere with Benny the vegan. For God's sakes don't follow your parents' examples.

It seems I was falling in familial line, as I tell my father we broke up before I left for this trip. And no, I don't want to talk about it. Charlie attempts to pry a little deeper, why? I grind my teeth, and tell him, I don't want to talk about it. He says, you're getting up there, Sarah. You're not young forever. Believe me. I shoot back, it's not like I have an expiration date.

Being given the third degree from your wayward father about your inability to keep a relationship is a clear example of why dating is a challenge in the first place. I ask him, why are you so interested in my love life? What do you care?

Charlie is quick to remind me, Ben has a car and a job. That's more stocks than I've got. Instead of pushing back and telling him there's more to a relationship than money and wheels, I try and give him the silent treatment. Silence is not Charlie's strong point.

It's not like you can help him with the driving. When are you gonna get your license?

I'd like to say, add it to the list of things I don't have, but stay firm in my position and continue with the silent treatment. Charlie cracks open a bag of cheesies, and attempts a peace offering.

Here, have a cheesy, he says. Don't like the crunchy hard kind myself. These ones go nice and soft on your tongue.

There is a special kind of purgatory when you are stuck on a boat in the middle of the Atlantic listening to your father chew *Hawkins* cheesies, and having to listen to his relationship advice. I shake my head, no.

I'd like to stick some Cheesies up these snorers' noses, he says.

When I finally speak, all I can mutter is, I'm still cold. Charlie tries to put his jean jacket over me. But I stop him, and ask him what on earth he thinks he's doing.

I'm trying to cover you up, he says. Don't want you to catch a cold.

Dad, I don't need you to wrap me up like a baby. I am a grown-ass woman. How is anyone supposed to sleep with all these snoring people around? Ben can sleep anywhere. It's annoying. I'll be tossing and turning, and he is out like a light. Sometimes I find him head back, slack jaw on the couch. Dead asleep.

Charlie put his fingers in his ears. Starts singing *la la la la la la*. I don't want to hear tell of him sleeping' with you.

The whole thing about men and daughters is bullshit. Men spend their lifetimes cheating, lying, and running around on women, then suddenly they have a daughter, and they become like emperor penguins.

I need to close my eyes, so Charlie and I find a seat on the boat. The new ferry is like being at a 70s disco crossing the Atlantic. Charlie stares at the posters advertising to tourists. John Cabot and all of d'em, who cares if they found Newfoundland, he says. We weren't lost. We're Newfoundlanders. We weren't lost for a poor chump to find us. Just sayin' d'at so they can steal all da fish.

This is nothing like the Newfoundland tourism ads.

They took the fish. Our land, he says and takes off his shirt. The government would take the shirt off my back if they could.

Jesus, Charlie. Keep your clothes on.

It's only skin.

Put your shirt back on. While Charlie pulls his arms through the sleeves of his white t-shirt, I try drifting off. The boat rocks back and forth, and my internal rhythms soften. There's something about being on water that elevates particular forms of land-locked anxiety.

My girl is all worn out, he says. Time to crawl into the wrapper. Not gonna call Benny? Charlie loves to razz me. I'm not calling Ben. It's the middle of the night! Come on, he says. Wish him sweet dreams for me.

I refuse to call my boyfriend in the middle from the midst of the North Atlantic, while my father rests next to me. Goodnight, Charlie.

Goodnight, sleep tight, he says. Don't let the bed bugs bite. I remind him, I'm too old for this. Go to sleep. Charlie says, why don't you call Benny in the morning? He's probably making himself sick. I tell him that Ben knows I am with my father.

Exactly, says Charlie. He's up there tearing his hair out.

A bell rings to announce the boat has arrived in Port Aux Basques. Charlie softly sings:

*I came upon a charming girl and Sarah is her name,
Her parents wants a husband with riches, wealth and fame,
I have no wealth, but riches and fame has never come my way
'til the night I went to visit my love and through the keyhole say:*

I'm still sleeping.

Sarah, Sarah won't you come out tonight,

Sarah, Sarah the moon is shining bright

Can you please stop singing? This isn't a musical.

Put your hat and jacket on, tell your mother you won't be long,

And I'll be waiting for you round the corner.

Did you just stare at me like a total weirdo all night? I ask.

You look just like you did when you were little, he says. I roll my eyes.

Like you actually remember.

Oh, I remember, says Charlie pulling out his wallet. Your Mom sent me this picture after you left Calgary. You looked like a little doll. She said the only way she could get you to sleep is to wrap you up in my old shirt.

I was so tiny. I look pretty good in plaid. Look at my little hands, I say pointing at the photograph. You drool a lot more now, says Charlie. I thought about getting a dish rag from the by's in the kitchen to mop you up. I wipe my mouth, and ask if Charlie got any sleep. I laid here waiting for the time to go, he says. What a crowd of snorers around here. Shoulda brought some clothespins for da nose. I've got some grips in da truck.

I lean back in my seat, and start yawning something about dying for a coffee. I can feel the boat rub up against the shore below my seat. Charlie says, it sounds like the devil waking up in the morning gathering up all his tools. You're the one being painted red now. I say, makes you the original devil. He notes, I've been called worse.

Is there a Starbucks around? I don't drink drip coffee, I say. My girl, you gotta shake that mainland off ya. We're soon in God's country. No \$20 coffees around there. I take look around at the rocky cliffs, and think I'm in Hell. We're home! says Charlie. Welcome to the best place on earth. Personally, I don't get why you are so excited.

Don't bury my bones up in Toronto, says Charlie. Spread my ashes off the boat right here at Port Aux Basques. Without hesitation, I say, this is like the land time forgot. Charlie declares, this is the rock we're made of.

I braid my long black hair strand by strand. I haven't cut my hair in many moons. It ties me to Mother Earth. Keeps me close to all the babies and mothers whose placentas I buried in the ground.

The land is where our food comes from. People are no different than the animals who feed on the grass. We are like the fish caught from the sea. I know how to hunt caribou. How to

trap rabbits. How to cut wood to keep the house warm. But the most important job is to help the babies get born.

One time it took me three days on snowshoe to get to the Codroy Valley. The wind howled. I couldn't see past the snow. I had to leave my youngsters behind. John worried about me out there. I take my medicine bag wherever I go.

Some mothers didn't like when I smudged before the babies came. Their husbands couldn't abide by the old ways. Sure, they didn't like the look of me. But they needed me when the young ones came, didn't they?

I whispered Mi'kmaq words into the babies.

That one baby screamed all through the night. Mother was weak. Made her juniper tonic. Husband was out hunting. The baby had no name. Had to wait for her father to get home.

Then he got back and screamed at me, you dirty little squaw, get away from my baby. I told him to go sleep off the moonshine. Sometimes I got scared. The mother called her Glory, so she always knew she was something, even if someone told her she was nothing.

I born hundreds of babies up and down the coast. I've gone up to Corner Brook, and over to the Bay of Islands. Some families paid me. Most had no money. They gave what they could. A bag of flour. Some root vegetables.

I'm not young no more. My body aches, and I can't get around like I once did. All I know is when I die don't cut off my hair.

Throughout the years, Josephine talks about renovating the place, but never gets around to it. She has the best of intentions, but not enough money to cover the bills let alone change or improve anything. I'm sitting in my mother's kitchen squinting at the blue and white wallpaper

walls trying to see the patterns like those magic eye paintings popular when I was a kid. I'm not going on this trip. No way.

Josephine looks at me like I have two heads. You have to, she says. I tell her I don't have to do anything. I'm an adult. You are 24, she says. Your brain is not even fully developed.

The last time I went on a trip with my father I nearly starved to death. When I came home, Josephine told me I never had to go with him again if I didn't want to. She seems to have conveniently forgotten her own promise. All I can think is, I can hardly be around either of my parents without wanting to drink myself blind. Now Josephine thinks I owe it to my father.

Oh, you don't think you owe anybody anything, she says. Who paid off your credit card last month?

Charlie didn't pay child support for most of my life. He did buy me new winter boots and second hand down-filled coats at the second-hand shops in Hamilton. Charlie loved a deal – and better yet if it was free. Bonus, he'd say.

Josephine asks how on earth did I get so selfish. I tell her, she taught me well. You didn't learn that from me, she says. You've always been your father's daughter. But the thing is I haven't been. I was raised as someone else's daughter. I took his last name. I honoured his cultural background. As a child, I believed I was a blank slate. I could write whatever history onto my body I desired.

In grade two, when we had a Dollies of the World recital, my teacher asked us all to dress up in our traditional cultural background. My best friend who was from Nigeria dressed up as an African Queen, and the girl I sat next to every day was from India. She wore the most beautiful fuchsia sari. I had no background. I was from nowhere. No past. No future. No present. The suburbs had no traditional outfit, so I had to be an elf. I wore red bloomers, a black and white

striped t-shirt and a red felt elf hat. Dollies of the World and I was basically the court jester. Sure, I had my biological father's last name when I was born, but had no idea of the complex history it gave me. I inherited lifetimes of trauma unbeknownst to me.

Why are you so afraid of going back to Newfoundland? says Josephine. You're being so dramatic.

I'm not afraid, I tell her. But there's a fine line between love and hate. I was born into crisis. I don't know Charles. I don't know his family. Now he's claiming me, and wanting to show me off to his dying mother. One last rodeo.

Your father wants to play hero, she says. May be your last chance to see her. Who cares I think, but say, I can't help that I come from a family of wild cards.

Sarah. Stop it. Don't be so mean, says Josephine. She's a hard ticket. I'll give you that. It's a few days out of your precious life. Not like you are working full time.

Charlie doesn't know me. He has no clue what my interests are. Who I am dating. My best friend's name. My favourite colour. My politics. He doesn't know what I like to read, or know if I am allergic to peanuts.

This will be a way for him to get to know you, says Josephine. Or else kiss your credit card goodbye. Be good.

I'll be myself. I walk over to the fridge and take a look.

Try and be a little less yourself, she says. I close the door, and glare at my mother.

Then I'll be just like you. Josephine reminds me, I was only to the west coast once. Better wear good walking shoes. I left barefoot.

Westcoast Newfoundland is like being in a horror film. There's not streetlights, and the only time there is light is during the day. Dozens of transport trucks whiz by. Charlie is glowing like a lightbulb – he hasn't lit up like this since he quit drinking.

Needs another coffee. Can't do a jig in the morning, he says. I ask, Where on earth are we, Charlie? He tells me God lives on the west coast. Look at this weather. Sometimes he goes back to St. John's.

I don't care about God. Never had much faith in anything above. I'm more worried about the moose. Or worse yet, blowing off the road.

I just about shit my drawers first time driving the Wreck House. We're almost to Faraway Bay. Only 7 more kilometers. You've seen da sign before? Population 49. Six dropped dead. 150 cats. My brother Joel takes 'em all in.

Father has so many siblings I've never met, it's hard to call any of them Aunts, or Uncles. It's been over 60 years for Charlie travelling down this road, and over 80 for his mother –my grandmother. Charlie reaches for the bottle of water.

I'm gonna splash it across the windshield. Clean her off for you. The grand entry. You gotta see da new sign. Mi'kmaq on d'ere. This is your heritage. This is my heritage, too.

I've been Googling Mi'kmaq words though Charlie doesn't know what Google is. He tries to sound out the sign – Peeeeeeeejjjjllllllsa. It reads: pjila'si. Welcome, come in. Sit down.

That's Grammie's tongue. Here we are. Da town without pity. D'ats what they calls it.

All I can think is: nobody *actually* lives here anymore.

Sure, they do. D'ats my teacher d'ere getting' in the car. Should we stop and say hello? You can tell her that Mi'kmaq word. Haven't seen her in years. Taught me grade 3. Then I quit.

You told me you went to Grade 4. You quit everything.

Do you see da doors below the Indian Museum? D'ats da jail cells. I was there until they transferred me to the Penitentiary in St. John's. Used to write home to mommy. A0N 1N0.

I wouldn't dare ask what he was in for, but it seems I didn't need to.

Stupid stuff. Stealing beer. I was only young. Took da Newfie Bullet in 1965. My first time across the island. Went to the pen, so I could get out quicker. Now you knows your fadder was a criminal.

There's never a dull moment being your daughter.

Most times you could walk along the train faster than the Newfie bullet. Took us a week and a half to get to St. John's. It's only an 8-hour drive across the island.

Though Charlie and I never took any scenic drives while I was growing up in Ontario. Out of the blue he says, you've got the Indian chief watching over you at all times, almost like an omen.

Must have been fun cruising around growing up.

We had no car. Rode horseback across da sands. Stole da neighbours.

You stole horses?

For God's sakes, thirteen of us slept in one bed. I took the floor. Didn't have a pot to piss in. You don't know anything about poverty.

I wondered where Mary, my great-great grandmother lived. Charlie points to up there beyond the single tree. House is gone now. Mary had no room. Couldn't take them all in. She saved Charlie apples at Christmas. Made the best toutons. Hard to imagine being a midwife to seven hundred babies around here.

Thought she could cure you as long as you believed in the medicines, and followed Creator. She helped me get born. Bootlegger, too. Tough ol' girl.

I liked the sounds of her. Charlie slipped a copy of her obituary from *The Telegram* into my 19th birthday card. She spoke Mi'kmaq. Gaelic. And some French. She was small. Only four feet tall. Boy, was she was mighty. Her little old house isn't far from what is now known as the powwow grounds.

I'm sorry I never came with you a few years ago. The flight was nearly a thousand dollars.

It's only money. You know I would have paid it, he says. I wanted you to see the dancers. To be proud of where you come from.

I've never been to a powwow.

We never had powwows when I was growin' up, he says. I started going when I lived out west. Long before I met your mother, I stayed all over British Columbia.

I couldn't resist– did you dance?

Only dance I does is a jig. D'ere's da sweat lodge. It's for ceremony. Purification.

Looks like a makeshift stick dome. It's kinda creepy. Have you ever been in?

This is where all da dancers were. Thousands of colours. I'm too scared I might catch fire.

I think your sweat would protect you. Bet there were dreamcatchers everywhere.

I loved the feathers. You would have loved the dresses. The chief came. Sarah, I'm always with you wherever you go. Sober now.

How come you couldn't stop drinking for Mom and me?

Charlie doesn't answer. He doesn't have to. I know it's because the pain is greater than the drink. Booze softens the blows. For a moment you can forget – it makes you happy, and then makes your sorrows roar. You don't know what happened, and there is no language to tell

because the retelling is too painful. Trauma only beckons more trauma. It's why we are living generations of silence. It's too hard to speak the pain because the pain is too real. Language isn't enough. All alcoholics know they are better when they are sober, and nothing is quite like the first drink. That's when they get drunk. The rest is just some lazy river of excuses.

I'm your father, says Charlie. I've never left you. I never will.

But you did leave me, I say.

You got it wrong, my girl. It's your mother who left. She did what she had to.

No she didn't, I say. She just likes everything her way.

Respect your mother, Sarah. She didn't want me around no more. I was no good. I was drinkin' too much d'en.

Why are we on this trip? You know I didn't want to come, I say.

You can't go anywhere if you don't know where you're from, says Charlie. You need to know your roots. What makes you up.

I'm standing in an empty field with you.

Your home, he says. This is our land. Mi'kmaq territory.

I'm nowhere. No one. Nothing. Then I remember, you took me here when I was a little girl.

Charlie is awash in memory. I washed your hair in the pond down the road. I remember the water was so soft. My hair was like silk.

You didn't want to get out of the water, he says. D'ere's my brother's old bus. He used to live in it years ago. Still got the old bed sheets up. No money to heat the place.

I cannot believe my mother came here for her honeymoon. Charlie assured me they took the sheets down for Josephine, though noted all women who came there ran away. Mom told me

she left barefoot, and walked off storming down the road. Don't be like d'em, he says. You're an Indian now. Time to skin a rabbit. I told you was Mi'kmaq. Here's your proof. Charlie whips out a dead bunny from the freezer.

I'm not skinning anything. There's no way I'm touching that thing.

It's our supper, he says. I tell him, then I'm not hungry.

I am making caribou stew for my granddaughter Agnes. Mixing in a few carrots and turnip. She needs everything good for her. My second great-grandchild came two weeks ago. Gale force winds. Snow. It was the one-year anniversary of Confederation.

I remember the sky was grey. There were no stars that night. A darkness came, and never left. I knew they did something wrong. Next day we became Canadian.

My three daughters came in snowstorms, two years apart. I've memorized the birth dates for each of my twenty-four grandchildren.

But when my great-grandbaby came, my granddaughter said don't you dare speak Mi'kmaq to the baby. She held him to her breast, and told him – you are always a Newfoundlander. You hear me? Don't matter where you go.

Joey Smallwood said, there were no Mi'kmaq in Newfoundland. I don't care what Smallwood said. He only wanted to rule the place. I saw myself in the mirror. I knew who I was.

Though I know we can never go back. No one thought about what came after. We spent years marking things down, living by the tick. Then all they worried about was getting' their baby bonuses. Families grew by the dozens. They started to make more babies to get cash. The church told the women my medicines were bad. Thought I was a stupid old woman who couldn't read The Bible. I don't need no book.

So, I try to teach the young ones the same way I learned. I tell them about the medicines. They don't want to listen. They want things they don't need. Can't see what they've got. They are too busy trying' to become someone else.

No one can know their language if they can't speak it. How could the next generation know who they are? You can't move forward if you don't know what you're made of. If you lose your language, you lose yourself.

What I want to know, who were these people up in Ottawa making all the rules? We have no relations. I never met a Canadian. I don't know who voted us in. I didn't get to check a box. No one asked me to sign any papers. Those people up along said I wasn't Mi'kmaq no more. Then I couldn't be a Newfoundlander. I didn't belong to Canada. I belong to the land.

It doesn't matter where you go in the world, the hospital is always the last place you want to be. Stephenville wasn't any different. Blank walls. Paper thin dressing gowns. Scratchy sheets. Don't even get me started on the food.

I always flew the Indian flag, says Charlie. Now I need a sheet. Gotta surprise Mommy. She doesn't know we're coming? I ask.

I never tells her I'm comin' home, says Charlie. One year I drove circles around her house, revving on the gas with my coat pulled up over my head. Mommy thought it was a headless hobo out to get her.

Do you have to walk so close? Please Charlie, give me just a little space. Look at da nurse's desk, he says. All decorated for Halloween. I ask, what are you doing with the hospital sheet? Charlie puts the sheet on over his head like a ghost. Gotta dress up for Mommeeeee. She can't see who I am under here.

Grandmother looks me up and down, and tells me to turn around. Needs to get a good look. Asks, are you married? I shake my head no. Got a boyfriend? Charlie intervenes, better not to talk about it. She has a... Grandmother interrupts, and says, no man wants a fat wife.

The words I don't want to talk about it manage to escape through a locked jaw. Grandmother pleads, but I'm a sick old woman in a hospital bed. Give me something. Charlie attempts to switch the conversation. Brother must be gone hunting for a few days.

That house has gone to the dogs, says Grandmother.

The nurse storms in, looks at Charlie and me, and speaks directly to me – It's time for her pills. Do you want to feed her?

Me?

Take the spoon, says Charlie.

I hate eating off plastic says Grandmother. It's for poor people.

It's all they have in the hospital, Mom. It's your favourite Boysenberry yogurt.

Poison berries. We used to pick berries for days, says Grandmother. Filled up all the beef buckets. Remember, Charlie?

Take a bigger spoonful, says Charlie. Don't want mommy starvin' da death.

I'm trying. She keeps spitting yogurt back at me.

An ominous grey takes over the hospital room. Charlie paces by the window. Da storms a comin'. Good thing we got on the boat last night.

I could have stayed in North Sydney for the rest of my life.

Do you live there? says Grandmother.

No. I live in Ontario. Now open your mouth.

Grandmother swallows a big mouthful of yogurt. I try and encourage her. Yogurt's good for you. Helps heal your gut. I'm beyond healing, girl, says Grandmother. You still got some life left in there. I see a spark.

Charlie announces he's got to pee, and asks does anyone wanna a cup of tea? I need a real drink, I say. You got any vodka? He responds, liquor is no good for you. How do you take your tea? I answer black. Grandmother scoffs, she likes her tea raw? Can't be from our family. We loves the sugar.

I'm cutting back these days, says Charlie. No good for you. It causes diabetes. I'll be back with some black teas. Gotta take a leak.

Oh, I got the diabetes, says Grandmother. Open d'em cheesies, my girl. But the nurse said to finish your yogurt. Grandmother dismisses me, I don't care what anyone says. Get me those cheesies before your father gets back. Hesitantly, I agree to finish my Grandmother's yogurt so the nurse thinks I did my job. Hurry up, Grandmother says. Open that bag. I hand her a fistful, and she lights up.

I loves NTV, she says. Big snowstorm headed for da west coast tonight. I pray out loud – hope we don't get stuck here. I hate hospitals. Try living here, says Grandmother, who reaches for the bag of Hawkins. You look like your mother. She was here. All dolled up. Thought she was too good for my son. Townies.

She never mentioned meeting you, I say. While Grandmother licks neon orange cheese dust from her fingers, she asks, what does she make of you being Mi'kmaq? I pop a couple of cheesies in my mouth. Chew, and then answer, honestly, I'm not sure she gets it. You got your fadder's eyes, she says. And his spirit.

Mom says, I've got his stubbornness. Grandmother half laughs. Nudding wrong with d'at, girl, she says. Now hide d'em cheesies before your father sees 'em.

Mother and I are in it to win it tonight. We've got three bottles of white wine, and nowhere to be.

Nothing better than a glass of Pinot Gris, she says. I live for drinking wine.

I plead with her to top me up, and am surprised by her concern.

Another glass, already?

I'll be the first to admit, I've been drinking too much lately. It's easy for a vice to become a bad habit, and rituals to turn into patterns. But it's the only time I'm not shaking with anxiety. Puts a divide between me and my mother, and sometimes that barrier is impossible to build. The booze keeps me safe – an internal landscape I can call all my own.

Mother sees it another way. What are you gettin' on with? Not feeling safe. No one held my hand, only to shove me out the door. Who is safe? I never felt safe. Not in my body, and never in my marriages.

I respond that I don't feel safe right now, and fill up my wine glass. So, why did you get married then?

In my day, you married because you had sex. And boy did we. As soon as your father laid eyes on me it was all over.

Gross, Mom.

It was a true romance. Your grandmother was dead set against us. It's not that I didn't like your father, Nanny would say. I just don't like him with my daughter. Pushed me right into your father's arms.

Ok, no offence to Charles, but you are way out of his league. I know, I know, men like the prize. They always go for a step above. You've been telling me this all my life.

Your grandmother tried to talk me out of marrying him the night before the wedding, says Josephine. I ask, where was old Charlie? She answers, drinking at a bar where women aren't allowed. Of course, he was, I say. You know you shouldn't get married when. Josephine loves this game – your fiancé steals your wedding ring. I say, or if he shows up drunk to the wedding. We both laugh. Then Josephine reflects on the truth, your father did both. I should have married my high school sweetheart. I remind her, no one marries their high school boyfriend anymore. That's no fun.

I dumped him because he wouldn't pay for my ticket to the dance, she says. I was Josephine Coombs for heaven's sake. Belle of the Pearl.

I brazenly ask, so you went and married someone else?

I never would have married your father had I stayed in Newfoundland, says Josephine. We would have never met. Out west we were two homesick Newfies drying up in Alberta. No ocean. No family. No perspective.

I raise my eyebrow, and say, I doubt anyone forced you to leave. You have no idea. I was living in exile, she says. Your grandmother was no picnic. Let me tell you. You believe she was a saint. Who's the martyr now?

Nan must have been beside herself when you stole your tuition.

I needed the money for the plane ticket to Calgary. I was following my big sister. Mom didn't speak to us for six months. I couldn't go back home. *No nay never*. Nanny knew it would never last. Most people could see that. Are you happy, Mom? You were right. You were always right. Hope you can hear me now.

So, then you came back home to Newfoundland with me? I ask. I bet that went over well. Not only did I marry a baymen, says Josephine. I had his baby. Two strikes, and you're out. I tell my mother I don't get provincial politics. They don't mix, she says. Then I'll never marry a Newfoundlander.

Your father used to get up at the crack of dawn to gas up my car, she says. Even if he'd been out drinking the whole night before. We were all drinkin' then. Bet you didn't tell Nan that, I say. And ask time for another glass? Mother nods yes. She knows how I love it when she gets into stories of Charlie from long ago. It's when she's most animated and comes alive. Josephine starts into another story, and says, he made sure that car was spotless, even after he wrapped it around a telephone pole.

I refill her glass, and say, I'm guessing there is a lot she didn't know.

No Anglican daughter of hers should have ever ended up with, she says. I finish her sentence: A Catholic.

She corrects me – an Indian.

Charles was a real badass in his day. He wore his hair long, tight jeans and a belt buckle. He was rugged and handsome – the type of man women are intrigued by, yet weren't sure why. Being with him gives the allusion of starring in a soap opera.

Bad boys are fun short term, says Josephine. It's all about the action. But they make terrible husbands. Do yourself a favour. Stay with that nice guy. You'll have a better chance. I'm not surprised by my mother's words, but compared to Charles, Ben looks like deadweight. There's no big spark, I say.

If I were you, I'd consider myself lucky, she says. But at your age you want wildfire. I get it. It's what all girls think they want. You won't always be twenty-something. You're in lust.

I think I'm in love, I say. What's the difference? Love is more complex, she says. I whine –why is everything so complicated?

I tried to protect you, says Josephine. That what love's about. If love is about protection I say, then why did you pick Charlie to be my father? Josephine tosses back her glass of wine.

What kind of question is that? she says. Without your father, you'd never be you.

And who am I now – Indigenous? I say. I don't know what any of this means.

You are who you want to be, says Josephine. Back then we were better off alone. Trust me. I raised you as my own in Ontario. I never expected your father would come to Hamilton. Unsatisfied with her response, I push a little further. But why would you have me knowing you were gonna leave him? Who has a baby with someone they don't want to be with?

Many women do. You know nothing about real life, says Josephine. Most of us know who we'd get knocked up within the first meeting. Now, I'm not saying Charlie was a good fit to be a father. Honestly, I didn't want to be alone anymore.

I ask the obvious questions – why couldn't you have just made some friends?

I know it doesn't make sense to you, Sarah, she says. It was hard being away. I really wanted you. I wanted us. My ovaries were roaring since I first started to bleed. I always wanted a baby. I ask, what about Charles? What did he want? Josephine takes a moment to answer, I think he tried to want what I wanted. But he loved the drink more.

You think I'm selfish, I say. You brought me into this world to keep you company.

Josephine rolls her eyes – knowing full well she had options. And sometimes she wished could have picked and tailor-made her daughter, but that's not how it works. She tried to make a little girl into a doll, but love is harder – motherhood is the biggest life lesson of all.

We were in it together, Sarah. We always are.

I start to cry. Josephine is confused, and asks why on earth am I crying?

I think Ben wants to marry me some day, I say. Josephine nearly jumps through the roof – Oh, honey. That’s great news, she says. I cry a little harder – No it’s not. I don’t know who I am. Or what it means to be Mi’kmaq. How to be somebody’s wife. I am only going to end up getting divorced anyway. It’s in my DNA.

You don’t have to wear white, she says. Is that why you broke up with Ben out of the blue?

I can’t imagine walking down the aisle. It’s like a death sentence. Who would give me away? Charles did that long ago. Josephine puts her feet up on the empty chair, and says, I could give you away. I’m like your mother-father.

Totally frustrated, and annoyed with myself and my mother’s response, I blurt out, I can’t commit to anything for the rest of my life. Josephine lays in on me: no one knows what they really want. They just take the best route at the time, and try to live it. If you can’t grin and bear it, you move on to the next desire.

But you always knew what you wanted, I say. A baby.

Josephine, who rarely falters in knowing exactly what she wants at every precise moment of her life despite the outcome, pours another drink, and says, your father and I had some good times. I snap back, like picking up hitchhikers on your wedding night?

It was a tourist who had never been up Signal Hill, she says. We stayed up in the Battery. Headed straight for the west coast the next day. I interrupt, and say, I’m guessing this was the first time you met the in-laws. She says, the first and only time.

Didn’t Charlie get into a fistfight with his father?”

Who told you that?

The more Josephine drinks, the more she digs into the deep past, which collides with the present. You did, I tell her, you are obsessed with this story.

I should have got in the car, and headed directly back to town, she says. But instead Charles drove the rental car off the cliff.

Oh, newlyweds. What a honeymoon! I say. Weren't you the same age as me?

Your father was ten years older. He had an entire life before I met him, says Josephine. He had hundreds, I mean hundreds, of friends. Charlie knew everyone, and hitchhiked all over. He lived off pigeon stew, or that's what he told me.

Whenever Josephine talked about Charlie something inside her stirred. You know if he wasn't drinking, he was pretty good, she says. But man, he'd have me ripping the curtains. Throwing his clothes on the lawn. I couldn't pour another bottle down the sink.

I open bottle of wine number two, and refill our glasses.

You were in the hospital for eight weeks. Born two months early, says Josephine. No one came from Newfoundland to help. Not even your Nanny. It was just me, and your father. We had to go to the hospital twelve times a day to feed you through a little tube. You didn't know how to suck. All these alarms would go off.

Josephine worked at a drugstore back then, and three of her co-workers were pregnant at the same time. She was due first, but the only one who didn't have her baby home. Two months later, she finally got to take me back from the hospital. Then she booked a ticket to Newfoundland. Had to bring me back to my grandmother.

I knew I was leaving your father, she says. He drove us to the airport, and cried at security. Not long after I met your stepfather at a bar on George Street. He was working on the boats back then. We moved up to Ontario. That was it.

My father ate pigeons? I say. That's disgusting.

He's a storyteller, she says. Hard to know what is true.

Neither of you is the most reliable narrator, I say. I think Ben wants kids.

I love the sounds of him. You'd make beautiful babies, says Josephine. I'm just happy you're not a lesbian.

You know, she says with a fresh cup of wine that she insists on pouring into a clean glass because it tastes better, I only slept with your father one last time. He broke his arm. I kinda felt sorry for him. It was raining. You know how it was when it rained. The construction workers didn't have any work, so they drank. He got in a bar fight. That's how you happened.

They took Charlie out of school. Boys shouldn't have been out working in the woods. But they didn't teach him how to read, or write. So, he went off to the mainland.

He didn't know anybody out there. Charlie never had two cents to rub together. I thought they were gonna be mean to him. I never wanted him to feel ashamed.

Charlie told me he was gonna hitchhike. He'd say, Grammie, I gotta make it on my own. He wanted to make a few dollars to send back home. He told me there was loads of work up in Canada. He called it a gold rush. At that time Newfoundlanders left in droves.

One time he came back from St. John's all riled up. Told me they didn't like the look of him, or the way he talked. People in town called us all Jackytars. I told him don't listen to the likes of them. They don't know any better. They only call you down to the dirt to try and make themselves look better.

Charlie knew who he was. Where he came from. I told him if he lived right the ancestors would take of him.

Though he had many brothers and sisters, I worried for poor Aggie. She had finally left Cyrl. That man never treated her right. Too much moonshine. Before he went away, Charlie and his brother Joel helped build her a little house up over the hill. The youngsters stayed with her. Their father still went out to the woods. He'd come home, and go on a tear. Beat up the place. Not fit.

Charlie looked identical to Cyrl, they were both dark and handsome. Different ways though. Charlie was always my favourite. Even when he did wrong, he did right. He tried to do good. Boys will be boys. He always came around for a visit, and brought a few licorice candies. I fixed him a little lunch. Bologna and toutons. Charlie never liked tea.

When I was in better health, Charlie used to ask me for a dance. Between the jigs and the reels, he'd spin me around the kitchen. He always had a big old grin on him. If he wasn't dragged off with the by's, he'd stay for a story. Pour me another cup of tea.

Grammie, he'd say, tell me about the good old days.

The first snowstorm of the season hits western Newfoundland. Charlie announces, another journey almost made to no one in particular, like he's talking to the night sky, or ancestors from long ago. The weather is volatile.

I know d'ese roads like the back of my hand, he says. I tell him we should pull over, or at least slow down. Trust me, Sarah, for once in your life, says Charlie, who turns down the radio, and places his palms together in prayer. I've been driving fifty years. Only two accidents.

What are you doing now? I ask. Keep your hands on the wheel. Charlie says, I'm praying to da Indian Chief. Hear me? Help us get through this drive. The snow is falling sideways, I knew we should have stayed another night.

I've never seen weather like this before. Keep da daughter safe, says Charlie. Newfoundland's like an abusive relationship. One moment you're in love, the next she's storming out the door. Then you're left bawling, trying to get off the rock.

For the first time, I pray out loud. Please Chief, Mary, somebody save us.

D'ats my girl, he says. Who is Mitch? I ask. Charlie says he doesn't know anyone named Mitch. I can tell he's lying by the way he repeats Mitch's name. I think you do. He wrote me on Facebook, and says he's my brother. This gets Charlie jumping internally. Can't get into d'at now, he says. I'm drivin'. Can't you see? I can't let it go – if he is my brother, I have the right to know.

Not da time to get into it, girl. We're in a blizzard on the wreck house. Want me to drive off the road? I press further – Charlie, if he's my half-brother. Full blooded Native. I want to meet him.

Charlie nearly swerves off the road. Look at what you're making me do, he says. It was years ago, long before your time. I don't know if he's my son.

Charlie slows down. I keep pressing on the emotional gas, saying, he looks just like you. Like me. Like us.

Back then all the men had women – no one claimed the babies, says Charlie.

Why did you claim me then?

Charlie says he's never left me, and puts his hand on my knee. You still belong to me, he says. My little Jackytar.

I correct him – I'm only half. Charlie doesn't care – you're still an Indian.

This time I'm the one with my hands together in prayer. Whoever is out there, please don't get us killed tonight. I can't end up road kill on the Trans Canada.

Da Indian Chief will never let you down, says Charlie. We gotta get back to the boat.

The road was covered in blowing snow, and truck sliding all over the place. I beg with Charlie to stop driving towards Port Aux Basques, turn around, and get us somewhere safe. He finally listens. Alright, Chief. Keep the daughter and me alive, he says. She's got to learn to drive before she hits the highway to heaven.

The truck swerves out of control, and slams into a towering moose. Whiteout.

Laying on the frozen ground, trying to look out to the swirling weather, I can't feel my body. I start screaming but cannot move a muscle. I'm not sure if I've died, or lost my mind, or am somewhere in-between time. A figure hovers above me, slipping in and out of focus. I can only hear a voice, softly, soothingly saying, Shhh. Child. It's alright. I'm here. It's Mary, she says. I'm your great-great grandmother. I died five years before you were born. I'm a medicine woman. Just lay still.

Am I paralyzed? What's going to happen to me? Oh my God, where's my father? Is he ok? Just breathe, she says. You've been in an accident. The truck hit a moose. Don't you worry about Charlie. He's with me. I need you to stay calm.

Where is my father, who is this, what's going on? Where am I? Am I dying? Have I already died? I don't think I am saying any of this out loud, but a familiar, yet distant voice answers. You are here on the land, says Mary. This is where you come from. So, I am dying. Or I have died. In a state of confusion, I ask the snow – how did you die?

Mary, the unfamiliar yet familiar voice speaks back. They cut off my hair in the hospital in Stephenville, she says. I ate bad bear meat. If the bear is sick, you'll get sick. If the bear is healthy, you'll stay healthy.

All I can manage –I can't imagine eating a bear.

The meat is tough. Poor bear was sick, she says. He ate too many poisoned berries. Made me sick. I'm going to give you some medicines. Open your mouth.

What is this? I ask. Mary drops something down my throat, and says all you need to heal is to believe. Sarah, you need to think of your actions before you act. You're too weak to know love is unconditional.

Laying on the Trans-Canada covered in moose blood, I tell my great great-grandmother/spirit guide, I feel unlovable. Mary instructs, you must remember respect comes without expectation. You've got to be there for yourself even when others can't. You've got to do the right thing, even if you did the wrong thing. You've got to be brave.

I cough deep into my lungs, and tell her I don't know how.

Sometimes you'll be wrong, but that's okay, she says. Understand you cannot know everything for everyone else but yourself. Honesty begins and ends with you.

Mary, I have to talk to my Dad. Where is he? I need him now.

You'll meet your father again, says Mary. For now, speak your truth even if you don't want to.

Hesitantly, I say, I'm afraid of what I don't know. That I'm not Mi'kmaq enough. I'm no good. I don't belong.

Mary listens, and assures me – Go on. You can say more. You're safe here. Tell Creator who you are.

I'm Sarah. Charlie and Josephine's daughter. I never learned my culture. I don't know who to turn to. I am burning with shame. Listen to the land, says Mary. I can't hear voices on the land. I'm not crazy. I can't even move. What is going on?

Just breathe, says Mary. Try. Listen closely. Ask for forgiveness. Ask for guidance. Ask for the Old ones.

Please forgive me, Creator. I need my ancestors. My grandmothers and my grandfathers.

We've always been with you, says Mary. You come from the people of the dawn.

Through the snow, something around Mary comes into soft focus. It's a small leather sack with an embroidered star. It's my medicine bag, says Mary. I carry everything I need to heal, and to keep myself protected. What's in there? The beadwork is gorgeous. Who gave you this?

It was a gift passed down the generations. Mary takes off her medicine bag from around her neck. I'm giving it to you. You need to respect these medicines, and use them wisely.

I can't take that. I haven't earned it.

Mary insists, Yes, you have. Close your eyes. She leans in closer, and whispers in my ear.

Msit No 'kmaq.

I ask her to say it again in English.

She translates *Msit No 'kmaq*, it means all my relations.

I repeat Mary's words back to her as the storm howls, and we both dissolve into the blowing snow. We are all one.

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