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SHALLOW ENOUGH TO WALK THROUGH

by

Marissa Reaume

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at the
UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR

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2009

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ABSTRACT

Shallow Enough to Walk Through is a novel and critical essay that together approach the writing process through a feminist perspective, exploring the plight of a modern female writer in fear of being entrapped by traditional patriarchal constraints. The novel is a portrait of the artist that writes, rewrites, and erases itself as the female protagonist makes physical marks on the text with ~~striketroughs~~ and other editorial interjections.

Magic Realist images of weather in the form of puddles, or the lack thereof, contribute to the portrait of the artist that appears in fragments. My protagonist embarks on a search for puddles—symbols of progress that she believes will lead her out of her stagnant life and her writing rut. As the novel progresses and the possibility of puddles appearing decreases, my protagonist becomes at risk of drowning on dry land.

Aside from my protagonist, all characters in the novel experience their own forms of entrapment from confinement within the novel's setting—Windsor—to confinement within their own hobbies and lifestyles. In addition, all characters are fragments that the reader collects while reading, only to realize that there are never enough pieces to create a whole.

DEDICATION

For the eternally puddled Gatsby.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the following people:

Nicole Markotić: for her editorial advice, patience, and constant encouragement. My novel would not have progressed as smoothly and as steadily without her dedication to her role as my advisor and her constant mentoring in the form of emails, meetings, and long chats over coffee at Chapters on Saturday afternoons.

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Catherine: for her adventures and misadventures in eye-sex that motivated me to create the first scene of what became my novel.

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Gatsby, pale as death, with his hands plunged like weights in his coat pockets, was standing in a puddle of water glaring tragically into my eyes.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *The Great Gatsby*

Doctor Foster went to Gloucester,
In a shower of rain;
He stepped in a puddle,
Right up to his middle,
And never went there again

Eighteenth-century poem

Three weeks it's been raining, but no puddles. No pools of murky water hiding pennies thrown from car windows, pebbles kicked along uneven pavement, bottle caps from a weekend party. Only a round seashell, with the word FLORIDA painted on its googly-eyed face and a magnet glued to its back. I found it last night in a crack of cement next to the curb while taking out the garbage. I was going to leave it in its concrete grave but it stuck to my finger. Now on the fridge, it's holding up a picture of Dan and me from Angie and Luke's wedding. Some of its magnetic force may have remained in my finger, which has a strong attraction to my backspace key. I erase everything I write.

Through my bedroom window I stare down the street, searching for an overflowing eavestrough, a full bird bath, but they are dry. The water doesn't settle, doesn't stop to create puddles, but instead races to the sewer grates and disappears. There is a soft swishing, like the hush of a distant waterfall. Pastel walls surround me, lurk in shadows created by the glow of the computer screen and the sheets of dim light pouring through my window. From inside the air-conditioned house, I pretend it's one of those Septembers with rustling leaves and cool nights. When I'm home alone I wear a grey sweater, breathing in the wool as it scratches my skin.

I break from my weather daze as Angie bursts through the front door, and realize that I have been repeatedly typing 0000000000000000.

"Okay, tell me if you think this is bad," she yells to me while running up the stairs. I remove the sweater and throw it on the side of my bed closest to the wall. She stands in the doorway, raindrops at the tips of her long brown hair. "You know Professor Janik? He teaches my Sociology of Sex class."

“Not personally.”

“Okay, but you know who he is, right?” She waves away the importance of my actual familiarity with her professor. “We just had eye-sex.”

“Oh no, I hope you used protection,” I mumble, erasing the line of zeroes.

“Come on Sara, don’t you want to hear the details?”

“Not really.”

“You are honestly the most unfazed person I know.”

“Is unfazed a word?”

“You know what I mean. During his lecture he kept looking over at me, quick glances at first. Of course I stared back. I could just eat his little grey curls. They’re like tortellini without the sauce.”

She always shows interest in other guys. The kind that play professional sports inside television sets and star in romance movies and soap operas. Especially those with onyx eyes and dark curly hair. Even an exotic-looking face on a magazine cologne ad makes her grab at the tube of berry lipstick in her pocket and twist its neck. As long as she can watch him from her favourite spot on the left side of the couch or a seat no higher than the eighth row of the theatre. Nothing beyond watching; she’s married to Luke.

“Grey curls? How old is this guy? Could you get to the good part, I’m losing my train of thought.”

“I can’t stand writers.”

“I’m not a writer. I have an English degree. I wrote essays at school. Now I write articles for a website. No creativity.” Either my nostrils are flaring uncontrollably or I’m doing it on purpose.

“You’re writing a story right now.”

“Right now I’m listening to the story you’re not telling.”

“All right, so the glances continued until he gave me this really long stare as he said ‘Occipital Lobe’.”

“And that’s eye-sex?”

“No. Sorry. Eye-sex is where you make—”

We are drawn to the window by sharp screams. The grandchildren of the house owners next door taunt their grandparent’s puppy with sticks, holding the jagged limbs of wood in front of its mouth like a dangling piece of meat, then retracting them before he can clamp his jaws around the tree bark.

“Those kids are so annoying,” I say.

“They’re just kids, Sara.”

“They don’t need to scream. The window is hardly open and I can still hear them harassing that poor dog.”

“They’re playing with it.”

“They don’t have to be so loud.”

“You just don’t like kids.”

She’s right. Children lick their fingers and then touch clean, well-dressed people. I blame the parents—bad parents make sticky children. Angie says that all children act the same way, regardless of their parental upbringing, but I was not a sticky child. There’s not one photograph from my childhood (in the pink velvet album on my mother’s dresser) where I have nostrils full of snot or a purple Kool-aid moustache. My father took all the pictures, while my mother posed with me. We wore matching dresses, my mother topped with a wide-brimmed straw hat or a parasol, satin bows tied into my hair. Other girls wore corduroy jumpers and jelly shoes but my dresses always had ruffles and flower prints. He

liked taking snapshots of us on benches or next to trees in parks where Doberman feces dotted the lawns and smokers hacked into the fresh air. But he always found a small patch of grass that was unsoiled or a wooden bench with only a few engravings. We looked like mothers and daughters of the past. The kind picture frame companies sell along with their frames. It wasn't me and it wasn't her and it took me a long time to figure out who I really was in those pictures. After reading *The Great Gatsby* in the twelfth grade I knew. I was Pam Buchanan. A beautiful little fool.

The pictures stopped when I was in fifth grade. Everyone stopped wearing dresses and I began 'accidentally' falling into puddles of mud at recess, creating dirt and grass stains too deep to work out of white linen. I told him it happened while I was playing hopscotch or some other girl games and he told me he was spending too much money on my clothes. I started wearing Mark's hand-me-down's. But dad wasn't about to let me dress like a boy and I wouldn't keep nice dresses clean. My mother gave me money one afternoon so Angie and I could try on clothes while she had her hair done at the mall. Three hours later when my mother came to meet us, hair dyed caramel and pinned into a French twist, I had clothes just like anyone else—capri pants, tank tops, hoodies, coloured track shorts and my very own pair of jelly shoes. He only scowled when—

“—Can I finish my story? Where was I?” Angie asks, interrupting my thoughts.

“Do you remember those jelly shoes I used to have? They were just like yours.

The ones with the plastic neon beads inside.”

“Those things were hideous. I can't believe we wore those.”

“I know. But I loved them.”

Angie sighed.

“Sorry,” I said. Finish your story. You were telling me about eye-sex.”

“Right. It’s when you make eye contact with someone and you think about having sex while you’re looking at them.”

“How do you know he was thinking about sex?”

“His pupils were dilated.”

“You could see his pupils dilate from that far away?”

“Shut-up Sara. I think I should know when I just had sex. Anyway, do you think I cheated on Luke? I feel terrible.”

“Are you serious? You wasted ten minutes of my life on this?”

“I just cheated on my husband and that’s all you can say? You’re being a real bitch today. What’s your problem?”

“I hate writing. I suck.”

“You just sent a story out to *Bee Hive Books*.”

“*Bee Line Magazine*. And now I can’t write anything better.”

“How do you know? Let me read it.”

“I deleted it.”

“Well, who cares? Write some other time. Jace Morgan is on in two minutes. This one’s about mothers who find out their daughters are undercover spies for the Chinese government,” she says, leaving the room.

It’s not real, I want to yell. Jace Morgan isn’t real. He’s a guy who hires actors to pose as guests on his show and pretend that they’re pregnant with a child who is half human half alien or that they’ve been running a whore house in Alabama and cheating on their boyfriends with some celebrity no one’s heard of. At the end of each show, Jace offers the guests professional counselling from one of the top psychologists in America and modestly nods his head saying, “Jace Morgan can fix you. That’s why you’re here.”

There are never any Canadian talk shows about human beings who believe they were polar bears in another life or women giving birth to the child of their great great grandfather. The Americans may make up drastic unrealistic story lines, but at least they don't lack in creativity.

"Hey Angie," I yell at the empty doorway. "I don't think you cheated on him. Just try to keep your eyes in your pants next time."

This is the scene: Friday night, eight o'clock, Dan, me, his Border Burger uniform, my grey jogging pants and ~~pink t-shirt blue t-shirt~~ white t-shirt, this living room, this green couch, that seventeen-inch television, that movie.

"We're leaving now," Angie says, grabbing her purse from my kitchen table. I stare through her large earrings. Metallic. Circular. Unbreakable. On the other side of the hollow hoop, her shiny chocolate hair—with cherry streaks—is ready for a night outside this cloudy house. Angie's hair goes out more than I do on weekends. It goes bowling or dancing or to an actual movie theatre. It doesn't have to watch *Groundhog Day* every Friday night or watch Dan pull at the growing skin tag on his back, which looks like a ball of chewed gum on a foam flip-flop sole. Regardless of how hard he tugs, the ball of skin will not let go—it always bounces back, shrinking to its original shape.

"Okay, have fun."

"Sure you don't want to come?" Luke's voice echoes in the stairwell.

"I'm sure," I say with a sigh. "We'll just watch *Groundhog Day* for the fortieth time."

The door closes and Dan moves closer. I stare at his round face—a pasty complexion with red pimples scattered around a plump nose. The ~~dark circles~~ bluish purple moons hanging below his eyes are a memory of the all-nighter he pulled to play *Vessel of Battle*. He claims he beat a lot of raids, including one he's been working on for quite a while. Whatever that means.

“I'm thinking of dying my hair,” I say, twisting a few strands, knowing I'm too timid to change my hair. It's a reasonable fear. I could end up looking like a carrot rather than a blond.

“I like it brown.”

“It's boring.”

Dan pushes PLAY. I leave to make popcorn, my bare feet sticking to the muggy floor. As I watch the bag inflate, the fridge magnet stares at me with its googly eyes. Still round, still holding up our photo. I wonder how it travelled here from Florida. Probably a couple brought it back from their honeymoon. Upon return and after her husband was asleep, the wife slipped it in her pocket, jumped into the car and drove until she was at least fifty miles from home. Rolling the window down just enough, she flung it as far as possible, sped away. She didn't want to spend every Wednesday night at his brother Joe's house, watching the men play cards or checkers as she and her sister-in-law grew dizzy with red wine, whispering about recipes and orgasms. She didn't want him to make her bacon and eggs every morning, complete with a tall glass of orange juice. Sometimes she wanted pancakes, or cheese and Nutella, or even steak on an English muffin. So she threw the honeymoon memento and it landed on my fridge. I had bacon and eggs for breakfast. The orange juice was just how I like it—pulp free.

The kernels pop rhythmically so I try to hear a flaw in the pattern. I inhale the artificial condiments that waft through the air. The salt burns my throat, the chemical butter burns my nostrils. But there's no change. *Pop Pop Pop Pop Pop Pop Pop Pop*. So I turn off the microwave and go back into the living room empty handed. Dan keeps watching the DVD.

After Bill Murray's alarm clock goes off for the fifth time, I'm ready for a nap. Usually I close my eyes and debate whether the character really wished he had died after driving off that cliff. But today Dan is on the inside of my eyelids as I fall asleep. In my dream-like state he's wearing his Border Burger uniform—a goofy hat, a baggy golf shirt with a crooked name tag hanging from the left side, oversized black pants. Inside his pocket, his wallet contains a crumpled five-dollar bill, a two-dollar bill that he can't let go of, an old Wal-Mart receipt, and a health card. No student card to take up space. No space for it to fill. I open my eyes.

“Are you still going to start school next year?” I ask in a sleepy voice.

“Sure, Sare.”

“What will you take?” What would he take? He hates reading, so English, Philosophy, History, and the rest of the humanities are out. Science would be too stressful with all the new discoveries. He would sabotage research just so nothing could change. Human Kinetics isn't an option because it requires some interest in mobility beyond the movements fingers make while operating a computer keyboard. He may enjoy Computer Science but would likely be penalized for playing *Vessel of Battle* during class.

“Who cares? It's not for a year.”

The last thing I hear before the dream starts. Dan's working the morning shift at Border Burger. He's making me an egg and cheese breakfast sandwich. He pours oil into

the frying pan and then breaks the egg. He drops the shell on the floor and crushes it with a scuffed black shoe. Then he covers the egg with orange plastic cheese. Where's the bacon? He knows I like bacon. I watch the cheese and egg sizzle for hours. For days. *Add the bacon*, I try to yell, *it's the best part*. Instead he grabs a jar on the shelf hovering above his head, and sprinkles something into the pan. Small round objects sink into the soft cheese. Tiny pink skin tags bubble into my breakfast.

I gasp as Dan taps his calloused fingertips on my forehead. "You asleep, Sare?"

I wipe the sticky coating of sweat from my chin with the tingly hand I fell asleep on. Dan pulls the blinds open. Dark grey clouds roll like smoke in the night sky. Day twenty-seven and it's still raining. Still no puddles.

It's a Monday in October. I'm walking to The Coffee Pot. It's only five minutes away but I get there in twenty. Abandon my original route, walk down unfamiliar streets, follow foreign sidewalks. I try to find them but I can't. Mid fall and still no puddles.

Inside the Coffee Pot the air is chili and chocolate donuts. Hair-netted teenagers scramble behind the counter, filling paper bags with sandwiches and warm cookies. Dan sits in a slump at our usual table. It's one of only two circular tables, the rest are square. I once asked a waitress about the tables. She said when the restaurant was renovated three years ago, not enough tables were shipped. It turns out that the company supplying the tables went out of business without fulfilling its last few orders. The restaurant manager, through breaths of marijuana air, said, "Keep them. It'll be like art. Different shapes of art in one room."

Dan projects his half-smile my way. His hair is washed but not combed and he's wearing his favourite plaid pajama pants and white t-shirt. It's his day off. It's wrong to wear pajamas out in public. It can disrupt your sleep cycle in the way that doing homework, an activity which requires alertness, in your bed will either cause you to fall asleep in the middle of a math problem or trick your mind into associating your bed with the need to stay awake.

He brushes a drop of rain from my forehead and we get in line. Our sandals shuffle across the russet tiles as we move toward the counter.

"Two cinnamon raisin bagels and two chocolate milks?" I ask Dan.

"Yup, you?"

"What do you think?"

"Chicken soup and a chicken sandwich?"

"Of course."

I reach the front of the line and begin to order but the blond behind the counter stops me.

"Sorry Hun. We only have ~~Mexican Bean and Curry Squash~~ Beef Barley and Vegetable with rice today."

"Don't you have chicken soup everyday?"

She replies with an airy sigh which allows a piece of hair that escaped from her hair net to lift and curl upwards like an elephant's trunk. I get vegetable soup and a chicken sandwich and walk back to the round table.

It's orange. Orange with chunks of green and yellow and more green. I dip the white spoon into the bowl and retrieve two peas, a carrot, and a bean. Eyes closed, I

scoop some soup into my mouth and swallow without chewing. Surprisingly, it tastes like salty tomatoes and the herbs Angie's mother cooks with.

I eat another spoonful, taking time to chew the vegetables. Dan watches closely.

"It's really good. You should try some," I say, noticing a shallow crack in the side of the bowl that may not have been there before.

"It looks gross."

"It's just vegetables and rice."

"Fine. I'll try it," he says angrily.

"You don't have to."

"No, I will if you're going to make a big deal."

I bring the white plastic spoon—only half-filled with soup—to his lips. He opens them just enough to let a drop of broth trickle onto his tongue. I tip the spoon a bit more. Within seconds there's a spray of orange and a grain of rice on my cheek.

"That was gross," he says, cheeks flushing, eyes watering. "I told you."

"You said you'd taste it. You didn't have to spit it everywhere."

"You forced me to," he says, picking up his untouched cinnamon-raisin bagels and two milks. He walks toward the door, throwing everything in the garbage on his way out. The plate thuds as it hits the bottom of the bin, ~~I doubt it breaks~~ but doesn't break.

In high school I was a fixer. I spent my days scouring the hallways for fragments, collecting tiny jagged pieces, searching for their counterparts so I could put them back together and make something I could use. Every time I came across a shard or fleck of broken matter I picked it up gently, careful not to crush it, and stored it on the top shelf of

my locker. Although these pieces were invisible, I could hold them in my hands, rubbing my smooth fingertips along their sharp edges. Sometimes they broke the skin. In high school I was a fixer. A fixer of men.

At the start of high school, I didn't bleach my hair blond or cut myself wispy side bangs or perm my hair into tiny ringlets which I crunched between my hands with hair gel every morning, nor did I feel the need to bake my skin orange in a tanning bed or hem my uniform kilt so that it just grazed the point at which my legs turned into my buttocks like the other girls did in the ninth grade. I didn't need to lift my skirt so a tattoo needle could inject a heart or a butterfly into the blank canvas which I covered with pastel bikini-style underwear—not usually thongs. I kept my skin metalless and my hair brown, kept my collection of Shakespeare plays, stuffed elephants and dolphins, and my fear of roller-coasters, eyes, loose teeth, and burglars with masks and large knives.

Other girls were too busy ridding their bodies of all traces of hair and succumbing to sex to ensure a long-term boyfriend. Avoiding developing friendships with these girls was easy. We asked about each other's weekends during homeroom and occasionally shared a table at lunch but I never had tattoos or piercings to show them and they never invited me to parties. I didn't feel like an outcast. I still had Angie who avoided the tattoos and piercings due to the risk of infection and possible limb amputation. (Since elementary school her fear of germs and my fear of change had brought and kept us together. I refused to play soccer at recess because I didn't like soccer and I wasn't going to play it just because everyone else was. Angie said that there were over a million living bacteria in puddles of stagnant water. Up until the fifth grade we sat on purple plastic benches, watching the other children play, making bracelets out of embroidery thread or

playing with our Nano pets. We later turned to teen magazines and Walkmans to fill our recesses).

Boys, on the other hand, seemed dangerous to me. I wanted to have a relationship like Helena and Demetrius from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In elementary school, boys brought girls flowers and wrote them love notes during math class. In high school, boys dug in their pockets for handfuls of Shakespearian fairy dust, sprinkling it on their female counterparts, erasing their intelligence, driving them to feel jealousy and hate for other girls, making them desire inked needles and revealing clothing, or no clothing at all. I didn't want to get in the path of this dust, becoming the girl at the back of dark parties fiddling with buttons and zippers while her new-found boyfriend flicks her still tender tongue ring.

In order to stop a boy from changing me, he would have to be broken. Broken and too preoccupied with missing pieces of himself to try to alter my composition. My plan was to fix these broken males, because anyone with the authority to fix must be errorless.

This fixer role was a difficult job. Most of my broken men were shy outcast types. My first broken man was in the tenth grade. Gregory's locker was beside mine. His lips were always swollen or bruised or oozing a translucent orange, or sometimes yellow, liquid. Angie told me he was in her science class. He sat at the back, picking skin from around his fingernails, dropping it on the floor next to his feet, never writing anything down, but pinching off a sheet from his notebook, using up one blank page every class. I began smiling at him each time I passed his locker. ~~I don't remember.~~ I eventually managed to make eye contact around midterms. Our eyes didn't connect in an eye-sex sort of way but him seeing me helped me to continue to gather pieces of him, sliding them to the back of my locker when he wasn't around. I began saying hi when I saw him in the

mornings. At first he would merely nod while chewing on peeling skin lifting from his lips but weeks later his reply progressed to a small wave. He ate lunch by his locker so I did the same, sitting next to him on the dusty tile floor, eating a tuna sandwich while the crumbs collected on my shirt. We sat next to each other listening to each other's throats swallow, each other's stomachs bubble as the food made room for itself amid the stomach acid. Sometimes I would slide my saran-wrapped fruit across the floor until it stopped, brushing against the side of his leg. He would retrieve a grape and only a grape, never a chunk of pineapple or melon or a berry, and then slide it back without turning his head. I began bringing extra grapes, just for him. He started sitting closer to me, accidentally brushing his hand against mine as we reached for the fruit simultaneously. Soon the skin around his fingernails was falling on the floor next to the couch in my parent's house every Saturday night, then every Friday and Saturday, then every Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and sometimes Monday. I never found out what had happened to his lips. When I asked about them he would say, "I live in a bad neighbourhood, what can you do?" All I knew was that the wounds were rough on my lips, tasting salty or medicinal like antibiotic cream. There was something underneath the scabs, a shard of Gregory that wasn't smooth or healed. I was always searching for one more piece of him, one more grape.

Even though I technically couldn't fix him, because he didn't let me know what needed fixing, I felt like I was making progress when Angie told me he took notes in class on mornings after he'd seen me the night before. When the school year finished and summer began, he and his family went to Alberta to visit an aunt who was ill. He would be gone a month and would call me as soon as he had a chance. By mid-August I tried calling his house, assuming he'd bailed on long-distance phone calls. I called every week

until September when my math teacher read his name aloud from the attendance sheet on the first day of class. No reply. I caught up to his only friend at lunch who stared at me through green pupils surrounded by engorged red veins, pursing his pierced eyebrow and walked away.

I was now single. Exposed with no broken man to hide behind. Mostly guys from the football team asked me out, inviting me to their games and parties at burger places afterward. I wasn't available in the evenings. Had to babysit. It was a good excuse because they didn't know me. Didn't know I despised children.

I gave the academic guys the same excuse. It was less convincing. My voice always shook because they made me nervous. They were average guys who wanted typical high school relationships with girls they could take to the movies and out for dinner and to the prom and give them their school rings when they graduated. As I declined their answers, and they grinned, misinterpreting my rejection as playing hard to get, I felt the rings choking me—gold embossed metal topped with a royal blue stone cold and tight around my neck.

By winter break the guys gave up, found other single girls to suffocate and I could breathe.

I'm down in Angie and Luke's level of the house. This is where I write when no one is home, when Angie and Luke aren't using their kitchen table for romantic married people meals with pasta and salad and dinner rolls and chicken and red candlesticks. I find the air in this area of the house clearer, less stuffy than my living quarters upstairs. I'm more creative when I can breathe through both nostrils. They don't mind, say I

should come down any time, but I never ask permission. When I hear the door latch, I grab my notebook and run back upstairs.

Angie left early this morning to get her yearly flu shot. She takes the first appointment of the day when no sick people crowd the waiting room with their germs. She said she wouldn't be back until well after four when her classes are over for the day. Luke left around the same time, wearing his blue track pants and St. Anne's High School t-shirt. Even gym teachers are expected to wear business-casual attire. Not Luke. Last May he won Teacher of the Year. A gym teacher winning this award in his first year teaching is so unheard of in this city that when the other schools found out about Luke, they wanted him on their staff and offered him larger salaries. St. Anne's was able to keep him by allowing him to wear his track pants to work because he complained that Dockers, "constrict his stuff when he plays sports."

I type, "She dug her pink fingernails into the ocean of hair at the nape of his neck," as a rumbling noise outside the front door startles me. I hear it again. Now there's a swishing noise, like legs in track pants moving swiftly, coming to kill. I know they aren't Luke's legs. He wore quiet track pants today. The kind made of material that shines like silk in the light. I grab the cordless phone from the coffee table, clutching it as I creep to the door. Through the peep hole I see Angie. She's struggling to find her keys amid yellow grocery bags and a large stack of mail.

Our house sits snugly in the middle of the second block of Charles Street, in the South part of Windsor. The street only has three blocks. Angie's parents live in the first block and my parents live in the third. When Angie and I were younger we planned to marry boys from our elementary school (our selections varied each week) and move into the houses which stood beside each other at the end of the second block of Charles Street.

These houses all had triangular roofs, single-car garages, and centred front doors. We both agreed that front doors which were off to the side of the house, even by a little bit, were really side doors. The summer before we began university, a house in the second block of Charles Street went up for rent. Surprising as this street is inhabited by elderly couples and small families with children who usually live in these homes for twenty-five years or more. Angie and I never expected to move into our own house on Charles Street before our late twenties. I thought it wouldn't be a big change because I could just take a few steps and be at my parents' home, back on my favourite chair, back at my spot at the dinner table, half my stuff still in my old bedroom. Angie's parents still had three younger daughters at home to care for. My dad said I shouldn't move out until I was married. I sat on my bedroom floor next to the radiator, listening through the pastel pink paint I begged my mother to colour the vent when I was seven. Even though I couldn't see the three of them, I knew my mother was sitting beside him, hands folded in her lap, nodding in agreement, her eyes to the floor. It was Mark who changed their minds.

“Luke is a *man* he said.” By the way he stressed the word *man* I knew he was using air quotations and I laughed to myself, picking at the chipped pink paint, enjoying listening to Mark mock my father's views of gender. “We all know he's going to marry Angie once he finishes Teacher's College and move in to that house with them.”

Luke Baggio had been my brother Mark's best friend since the third grade and practically lived at my house in the summers when his windowsill air conditioner was nothing compared to our central air. In elementary school, Mark and Luke spent almost every summer afternoon playing soccer or basketball in my backyard. Some days they rode their bikes to the park and hit tennis balls on the baseball diamonds. At night they played cards or board games on my front porch before coming inside to play video

games. Luke always slept on the couch in the living room uncovered so he could feel the cool air exhale from the vent above him on the ceiling.

When Luke first started sleeping at my house, I couldn't understand why my father allowed him to stay for dinner every night when I was only allowed to invite a friend for dinner once a month when we had tacos or hot dogs. One night when I was sitting in the stairwell writing down everything my parents said in a smiley face notepad (something I did for years when I was a child because I thought that's what writers did) I heard my father say,

"That Baggio kid likes his sports. He's a good influence for Mark. A man who plays sports stays away from the details of the house. The woman's realm."

My mother didn't reply but I knew she was sipping a cup of orange tea and nodding.

When my father found out Luke would be moving in with Angie and me he said, "Someone needs to be in charge."

He believed that even though Luke wasn't *my* man, he was *a* man and could bring some governance to the house.

"You know Dad," Mark continued, "You're going to create a rebel. Stop Sara from doing what she wants and she's going to rebel in any way she can. Start dressing like a hooker. Maybe dye her hair lipstick orange. Get piercings. Make herself unappealing to the honest men who have stable jobs and live to marry and be the family *breadwinner*." Air quotations again.

Mark wanted my room. A larger space for a larger television for *Mariokart* races. But he was also protecting me from becoming my mother and the pink flowered apron she rolled up and crammed into my Christmas stocking.

After paying the first month's rent, Angie and I realized that her babysitting and tutoring money and my article writing money could not pay for both the house and for food. I suggested Angie move upstairs with me so we could rent out the basement but she didn't feel right about letting a stranger's germs onto our house. So Luke moved in much earlier than we had expected. There was now a man in the house. My father's dream come true.

The house isn't perfect. It's a duplex with a side door, not a front door, and the lawn is always dry and dead looking regardless how much rain falls. I cleverly chose the top because if burglars were to break in, I could hear them and call the police before they realized someone was upstairs. Angie lives on the bottom level with Luke who moved in last year after their wedding. They plan to live here for a few more years until Angie finishes school and they save up enough money to buy their own house. I will have to move back with my parent's, let Dan move in here, or follow Angie and Luke even though they haven't invited me. I'm not living alone.

There is a door at the top of the stairs that separates me from Angie and Luke. It's only locked on nights when they have 'married people evenings.' On these nights I put on a pair of running shoes with good traction and descend the crooked metal staircase that leads from the roof to our back yard and go over to my parent's house to play Uno or Monopoly or another of our childhood board games with Mark. I rarely win but losing is better than staying at home as the smell of vanilla and rose petals wafts through my radiator while bass vibrates my floor boards.

The kitchen floors on both levels are putrid shades of yellow linoleum with four round brown marks in the centre where years ago the owners had a wood stove in the middle of both kitchens. The ceiling in my bedroom sags in one corner from water

damage and the closet door in Angie and Luke's room needs to be opened with a crowbar. We refer to it as a house, not a home, because it is a temporary holding cell providing us with shelter until Angie and Luke move out.

For the first two weeks in this house, I woke up in the morning to Snowball sleeping on my stomach, wondering how I travelled in my pajamas, in the dark, down the street and into my parent's home. How I got in wasn't a mystery as my parents started leaving the doors unlocked after I moved out. After all, I was the only one who used to lock them. How I got there was less explicit since Angie and Luke didn't notice my feet clunking down the stairs into their part of the house and then leaving through the front door. I didn't notice walking down the sidewalk.

After Mark's birthday, his friends began coming over to play with the new video game system our parents bought him. They would play well into the night and sometimes sleep over. I woke up one morning next to Mark's friend Chris Bedlem who had slept in the guest bedroom, which used to be my own. I left before he woke up, but knew something needed to prevent me from wandering home at night. As white peroxide bubbles seeped from the cut on the bottom of my foot—caused by stepping on Snowball's cat toy in my sleep—Luke installed a lock at the top of our front door, so high that I couldn't reach to unlock it. Mark picked up the toys so I would not get another injury if I did walk over again in the dark. The first night I outsmarted the lock in my sleep by making my way into the dining room, grabbing a chair to stand on, and freeing myself from the house. I woke up Chris Bedlem by pushing him out of bed. The next day Luke installed another lock on the door at the top of the stairs and also on the door that led to the roof in case I tried to descend the outdoor metal stairs while not fully conscious. Angie put the dining room chairs in the back yard so that I had no way of escaping if I

made it down the stairs. And I did make it down the stairs. I was on the floor of the foyer when I woke up in the morning, feeling tired but happy to be waking up in the correct house. I became so exhausted from my nightly efforts of escaping the house that I eventually remained in my bed.

“I didn’t think you were home. I’ve been out here for ten minutes with these bags. I tried to hit the doorbell with my foot but couldn’t reach,” Angie says as I open the door with an embarrassed laugh. “I forgot my key.”

“What are you wearing?” I ask, staring at her oversized track pants. The kind that look and sound like sheets of tissue paper.

“They’re Luke’s. All my ugly clothes are in the wash.”

And then I remember that Angie never wears her non-ugly clothes to medical appointments. The chairs in the waiting room are full of germs.

Leaving the ice cream to melt on the porch, she steps in and hands me one of two brown envelopes.

“I thought you had class,” I say, seeing a university logo on the envelope, knowing what’s inside.

“Cancelled. The border is too crowded for the prof to make it in time. I’m glad you’re home though. Now I don’t have to wait for you.”

We rip them open.

“I got in! Did you? I’m going to cry,” she points to my envelope.

“You would. You cried at that Tim Horton’s commercial last night.”

“Just tell me if you got in.”

“I guess so.”

“You don’t sound happy.”

“It’s only November. Should we be getting these now?”

“Early acceptance.”

“But it’s so early.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“I don’t know if I want to go to Teacher’s College. I don’t like kids.”

“You don’t have to be a teacher. You have a good job.”

“I write technology articles for a website, *Microsoft and Nokia Forge Alliance*, *Will Google Make You a Peeping Tom? Can Sony Save the Environment?* I write them at home during *Full House* reruns. I couldn’t tell you what DSL stands for but I write about it anyway.” I’m doing that nostril thing again.

Another rumbling noise from behind the front door.

“What if it’s a burglar?” I say in a shaky voice. “I thought you were one.”

I was one of those children who saw *Tom and Huck* at a matinee performance at the movie theatre and couldn’t get to sleep later that night because I feared Joe’s eyes appearing in my room.

“It’s the middle of the day. No one is going to break into our house while the whole neighbourhood is watching.” Angie walks to the door.

“Shit,” she says, covering her mouth, looking around for children like she always does when accidentally swearing out loud. Bottles of cranberry juice are scattered across the soggy front lawn. They rest lifelessly on their sides and backs like bowling pins after a strike, rolling ever so slightly.

“Do you have an addiction I don’t know about?” I ask.

“I heard it’s good for bladder infections.”

“Do you have one?”

“No, but Carly in my Family Dynamics class does.”

“Are you serious?”

“Of course I am. I have midterms coming up.”

“You can’t catch a bladder infection by sitting next to someone.”

“Why not?”

“You just can’t. Unless of course your bladder touches their bladder and the bacteria spreads and even then—”

“—Stop Sara. Stop. That’s disgusting.”

I laugh and walk across the lawn collecting red bottles, avoiding those that are broken and leaking. The ground is cooler than in September but still wet. It’s drizzling. There’s a continual rushing sound of the sewer as the rain and the red disappear. I bend down by the curb and place my finger in the crack where I found the seashell magnet over a month ago. Although the cement is damp, there’s no water collecting in the crack.

On the fridge, I place my acceptance letter under the picture of Dan and me. The shell magnet supports us all.

Throughout the eleventh grade I went back to searching, dusting the hallways for prints of Gregory, looking for bits of plaster that may have cracked beneath his thick opaque layer of bruised skin. I never found anything that resembled him, aside from a blank sheet of paper with a missing corner. But other pieces lay in that hallway, like those of Nicholai. I stayed late after school one afternoon for some math tutoring. When I emerged from the tutor room with creased eyeshadow and a dry mouth, the halls were empty, the air tense like in a scene from a horror film. I walked quickly to the front doors

of the school, determined to make it to the sidewalk without being sliced with an oversized knife. But as I proceeded down the last hallway I heard a snuffle, then another. I began running, my sandal fell off, and I contemplated returning home with one shoe but the bus floor was dirty and I didn't want to take the chance of stepping in anything a child may have excreted under my seat. As I grabbed the sandal I heard footsteps coming towards me. I froze.

"What?" I heard a voice say behind me. From around the corner a boy appeared. His face a ghastly shade of pink and his cheeks streaked with black tears, his hands coated with blood.

"Get away from me," I yelled, walking backwards.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

I pointed at his hands, breathing loudly enough for him to hear.

"What? It's paint," he said, showing me his palms. "It's just paint."

"Why?" was all I could say.

"Come here."

"No."

"Please come," he said, walking into a room at the end of the hall.

I followed but kept my distance, trying not to step in the drips of red ~~blood~~ paint ~~blood~~ paint that trailed from the room he led me to, knowing that I would lie awake that night, waiting to hear him tapping on my window with a sharp blade if I didn't find an explanation for his horrific appearance.

"Are you coming?" he called once inside.

I slowly made my way to the doorway. The room breathed a paint aroma in my direction, so I stepped inside. The art room.

Silhouettes of students lay on tables and chairs, littering the room with featureless faces. The floor was speckled with years of dried paint—some neon pink and green but mostly black. The desks were set up in twos and contained metal wires that ran from corner to corner. On the top of one of the many desks was a large white sheet of paper dotted with red handprints. And blue dots.

“See, not blood,” he said, sniffing, pointing to the page, and then smearing the black streaks on his face from blotchy lines to wisps like whiskers.

“What—what is it?” I asked.

“It’s Sylvie, and my mom, and Marilyn Monroe.”

“Who’s Sylvie?”

“My girlfriend. She died in a car accident two years ago. The blue dots are tears, naturally,” he said, wiping his eyes again.

I felt a shock surge through my teeth, like a mirror had cracked, dividing glass into isolated sections at risk of losing grasp with each other.

“Is this an assignment?” I asked, moving closer to him.

“We have to work with a photograph of an important person in our life. I did the women. And I didn’t work with a photograph, just memories. The best art happens when you don’t follow the rules.”

I began to fix Nicholai with the pattern I’d designed while involved with Gregory: first listen for hours while they talk about their destructive families, breakups, jail time, suicide attempts, etc., next tell them that I understand how they must be feeling and that I can help. Once they thanked me for my kindness but insisted that they would never feel better no matter what happened, I proved them wrong, injecting them with compliments (e.g. “You’re so strong,” “You have such a great life ahead of you,” “You’re the best

boyfriend I have ever had,” etc.), planning exciting evenings (e.g. picking up dinner and climbing on top of the roof of my elementary school to eat it, going to see local bands at coffee shops) to make them forget their worries, helping them study for tests. But with Nicholai I could never make him forget his problem. He didn’t want to.

“Sylvie would want you to be happy,” I said whenever he sunk into his desk chair, throwing red splatters of paint on a fresh canvas. “She would want you to know that she’s not hurting anymore.”

“No, she suffered a lot. It took her six hours to die. She wants me to feel what she felt when she was dying,” he would always retort, forcefully drawing tears into his eyes, letting them glaze his irises until they sparkled. And he smiled excitedly.

Four months in, after I had given my best efforts to fix him I asked, “Why do you want to keep dwelling on the fact that Sylvie suffered in a car accident, and that your mom battled cancer until the pain killed her? Why not think about before the pain? Do you never want to be at peace?”

He looked at me as if I had ripped layers of skin from my face, exposing the bone structure and scaly complexion of a creature from an alternate planet. “It’s about art,” he finally said. “I thought you knew that. I thought you understood that this is how I create art. I want to be an artist. Stop trying to make me forget. Stop holding me back.”

And I did just that. I put the pieces of him back into the hallway. I even kicked them a bit, distancing the bits of Nicholai from each other so that the next person trying to put him back together would never find every piece of his puzzle. He didn’t want to be fixed. The least I could do was make sure no one else had a chance to fix him either.

For the remainder of that school year I avoided the cafeteria, knowing that the single guys would notice me sitting alone. Before I could swallow my bite of fish stick and tartar sauce they would appear next to me, slipping their class rings around my throat.

While passing through the hallway of broken men, I kept my eyes to the ceiling, wondering if my efforts would ever be successful. It was hard to stay away from the plethora of fragments that had kept me busy since I started high school. I often rubbed my hand across the top shelf of my locker, just to make sure that nothing was left back there, that there were no more pieces.

Angie and I are sitting in faux leather massage chairs with our feet dipped into swirling buckets of soapy water, chewing on pastel Chinese mints. Angie's chair is covered with a towel because people's legs sweat when they have contact with leather and toxins are released through sweat, so even when the perspiration dries on the leather, the toxins are still there.

"My mom sent us pedicure gift certificates," she said last night, holding up a pink envelope with gold writing. Angie's mother knows how much her daughter loves getting mail so every Monday she goes to the drug store to send Angie, who lives right down the street, a letter. Usually the letter says 'Hope you are having a good week. See you at dinner. Love Mom.'

"That was nice of her," I said insincerely, thinking back to those afternoons where I would sit next to my mother on a swivel chair and watch an esthetician with bare nails and waterlogged hands scrape and prod at my mother's feet with tools that looked like they belonged on a tray in a dentist's office. I can no longer eat desserts topped with

shaved white chocolate because the ivory curls remind me of shards of my mother's skin which would lift from her body by the blade of a razor and fall into the miniature pool of water by her feet, sinking to the bottom.

"I know you don't like other people touching your feet, but I think you'll enjoy this place because they have bowls of those Chinese mints next to the pedicure chairs, the chewy kind. And the place is downtown so we can go shopping or go out to eat after."

"Fine," I said, "I'll go."

"That's it? You'll just go. No argument?"

I nodded, accepting Angie's offer because we'd be going downtown. The centre of the city would be the best place to start looking for puddles beyond my front lawn. Everything is downtown, the bars, the clubs, the casino, the restaurants, the theatre, maybe even puddles.

~~Does this count as a puddle? I ask myself while staring at my feet below the water. No, because if I allow this bowl of soapy foot water to be a puddle then a regular glass of water or even a bowl of soup can count as puddles. Since they're not made of rain and were filled from taps and pots and pans, not clouds or any other atmospheric matter. But the water that human beings use to fill soup bowls and footbaths did come from the clouds at one time. The water in the Detroit River came from the clouds at one time but not this time. They can't count as puddles because real puddles are made by rain which falls directly from the sky and it's been raining since August 20 and here it's November 30 and still no puddles, but I can just turn on a tap and fill a glass with water. Footbaths cannot be puddles. I need puddles created from rain when it contacts pavement. And stays there. These are the puddles that are not forming; these are the puddles I need to find.~~

The woman with the sharp tools sits in front of my feet and gets to work with a pair of nail clippers that look like teeth pulling pliers. I sit with squinted eyes and tight lips, waiting for her to pinch off a piece of skin at the corner of my big toe as Angie sits back in her chair, eyes closed, sipping a cup of raspberry zinger tea, relaxing to the clicking sound of our toenails shooting across the room.

“So,” she says, pulling her hair from beneath her heated neck wrap, “Did you tell your parents you got into Teacher’s College?”

“I forgot about that. Just as well. My father will be disappointed. He wants me to get married, stay home with the children. My mother will encourage me to go. She believes that if a woman must have a job she should be a nurse or a teacher. Or my father believes that.”

“Did you tell Dan?”

“Not yet.”

“Sara, it’s been three weeks. What are you waiting for?”

“I told you I don’t know if I want to go. It would be so English major of me if I did. There has to be something else out there.” Like puddles, I think to myself. Angie doesn’t continue arguing because her woman with the tools is now scraping around Angie’s nails with the sharp pointy one, removing cuticles. Angie is bending down to get a closer look, and the woman points to bottles of cleaning solution.

“We sanitize everything as well as place our tools in a machine that disinfects with glass beads heated at germ-killing temperatures.”

“I should probably just get my own,” Angie says and I wonder why she doesn’t already own a pair of tools to bring whenever she goes to a salon.

The tool is unable to touch her toes until the woman has disinfected it a second time before Angie's eyes. My tool woman bites her lip, trying to hide a smile, while she scrapes at my nails, wiping the residue on a towel draped across her lap. I hide my own smile with a bite of Chinese mint.

"Did you tell Dan that you're getting a pedicure?" Angie asks when the tools have been sterilized and she's once again resting against her chair, surrendering to the massaging fingers embedded within the leather.

"He asked me who I'm painting myself for. I said I'm doing it for Angie. Then he said he heard on the news that there's formaldehyde in nail polish and that I could die. Asked if it's worth the risk to paint myself up to impress people if it's just going to kill me."

"It's only dangerous to wear nail polish if you're pregnant because it can harm the baby. Believe me, I've done research. Nothing for a child hater like you to worry about. But since I want children one day, I request that they use Formald-a-hide."

Aside from the tools, the inside of the salon reminds me of a dentist's office. The walls are papered in a pattern of pastel brush strokes of varying blues and purples. I once read in an interior decorating magazine (sent to the previous renter of our house a week after Angie and I moved in) that pastel wallpaper is often used in doctor's and dentist's offices because it evokes calm emotions. The walls of mirrors and large wall hangings of hands adorned with long sparkly, or neon, or jewel encrusted fingernails counteract the calming effect of the wallpaper in this room. The growl of hair dryers and the chattering voices which surround me make the room chaotic and cause my breathing to increase.

“I was cleaning Andrea’s room yesterday and found an issue of *Cosmo*. My fourteen-year-old with a *Cosmo*,” a woman in the chair to my left complains to the woman on her left.

“You’d better be careful with her. After reading one article she’ll know about everything from orgasms to chocolate covered nipples. That’s why Donald and I won’t allow those magazines in the house until Shelia turns eighteen.”

“Pete and I argue about whether we should expose Andrea to this type of content. I think it’s inappropriate but Pete thinks the opposite. His mother let him run around with the neighbour girls when he was twelve. Now he thinks sex is a healthy part of life and that the teenage years are meant for exploration. He doesn’t think daughters are different from sons.”

“You need to watch that Andrea doesn’t get pregnant. It only takes one night and there you are, a grandmother at thirty-five with another screaming baby in the house.”

The woman next to me shudders and takes a sip from her mug.

“My mom never cared about that stuff,” Angie says to me in a low tone.

“Yeah. You never got in trouble for anything.” One Saturday afternoon when we were eleven, Angie and I planned to meet a boy we both had a crush on, Cameron, at the park in our neighbourhood and then walk to Zac’s Convenience store for ice cream bars and slushies. My mother folded her arms across her chest and raised her eyebrows when I told her our plans but allowed me to go. Angie’s mom only knew that she was spending the afternoon with me. When we met Cameron at noon, the warm summer air had already heated to well over eighty degrees. “Let’s go to the Zac’s on Melville,” Cameron said. It was closer, but across a busy street which I knew my mother would not want me crossing. But Angie agreed, “I don’t feel like walking a lot. Let’s just go to the closer one.” I did

not argue. As we turned and started heading in the opposite direction of our usual Zac's, my mother's white car pulled up next to us. "Where do you kids think you're going?" She asked as my brother Mark grinned at me from the passenger seat. "We're walking to Zac's," I said.

"Zac's is the other way. I knew I would catch you in a lie."

"No," I pleaded. "We were going to the one on Melville. It's not as far."

She lectured Angie and me, "See what happens when you sneak around? You get caught. You'll be grounded. Where did you even meet this boy? Do his parents know he's roaming the city?" pointing her finger out the window, driving next to us slowly as we walked to Angie's house and made it inside. Cameron ran in the other direction as soon as my mother appeared and did not participate in our usual recess game of Crazy Eights on Monday. Fine with me since my face turned red every time I saw him for the rest of that school year. My first and last crush. My mother called Angie's mother when she got home. "They were going to cross Melville?" her mother said while eating a slice of bread with Nutella. "Those girls are crazy. Thanks for letting me know."

Angie's mother actually laughed and told us to be good so that we didn't get in trouble from my mother. But I still had to pay. I lost phone privileges for a week and missed out on Tila Pentleby's weekend birthday party where Tila became Cameron's girlfriend. Angie tried to warn me on Monday morning during math period by slipping me a note but I was too afraid of getting caught and having my parents called so I pretended not to feel her pencil jabs on my back.

Unaware of this new relationship, I smiled at Cameron during lunch period and the rest of the girls refused to talk to me until the following weekend when Jessika Lentel

had her birthday party at Bowlero (which I was allowed to attend) and Tila and Cameron broke up because Cameron laughed at Tila for bowling a twenty.

I'm so engrossed in the memory that I almost forget about the sharp objects poking at my toes. The woman with the tools in front of me has a piece of my toenail in her hair. It's resting lightly like a feather perched on one of her brown curls. She's now wearing a dentist mask, which I don't remember her putting on, and turning on a drill. She points the sharp end of the drill down at my toes and begins circling my cuticles with it. Once all cuticles have been buffed, she turns off the drill and changes the pointy tip to a larger one resembling the tip of a thumb. This specific tip is meant for the bottom of my feet. The woman runs the rough tip along my soles and I tense the muscles in order to curb the intense tickling sensation. I've been gripping the chair with each of my hands. I release and notice sweaty handprints on the faux leather.

"This is great," Angie says to me. "I love pedicures. We should get them more often."

I nod, unclenching my teeth.

"What do you want to do when we're done here?"

"I think I want to stop at the university library to get some more books," I say.

Angie won't try to follow me if I'm doing something educational on a Thursday afternoon.

"I thought you don't like it there?"

"I don't but it's so close."

"Not really. It's a long walk."

"That's fine. It has more books than the one in Riverside does."

"Do you want me to pick you up at the library when I'm done?"

“No thanks.”

“How will you get home?”

“I’ll take a cab. Or a bus.”

“Gross, Sara. Do you know how many germs thrive on public transportation? We should have taken separate cars.”

“I’ll walk. I know it’s far but exercise is always good. It boosts the immune system.” I knew my immune system bullshit would convince her.

“I’ll meet you at home then. I have some Christmas shopping to do. I know I still have a month to shop but I don’t know what to get Luke. What are you getting Dan?”

“The usual. Some new plaid pajama pants, white t-shirts, and whatever else he might need—shaving cream, gum, socks.”

“Get him something more creative this year. He can buy his own clothes. Get him a high-tech popcorn maker for when you watch movies. Movie.”

“I might as well just get it for myself. I make the popcorn every Friday night.”

“Yeah, that’s the point.”

She tilts her head away. “Then get him a new watch,” she says after returning her head and eyes to their normal positions.

“Right,” I laugh. “An expensive silver watch would look just gorgeous with his sweatpants or Border Burger uniform.”

“You should get him some new clothes then,” she says with slight exasperation. “Some nice khakis and polo shirts.”

“I can hear him now, ‘This shirt is too colourful, teal isn’t even a colour.’”

We both laugh as the tool women lather up their latex gloves with cucumber lotion to apply to our feet and legs. Angie sinks back in her chair again, enjoying the

massage as I pick at my fingernails, trying to forget how much the woman's moist rubber fingers remind me of how I imagine snakes would feel if they were crawling up my legs in water. They slither around my ankles, curl up to my knees and then work their way back down. Are puddles worth this torture?

"What colour do you want?" The woman says to me once she has poured white powder over the lotion, making my legs pastier.

"You can just do clear. I don't need colour."

"No clear!" Angie says. "Give her a bright pink. It will make her skin look rosy."

I'm thankful that she doesn't suggest red and sit quietly as the woman glazes my toes the colour of watermelon bubblegum.

"I'll have a sexy red, one from the Formald-a-hide brand, of course," Angie tells the tool woman. "And jewels. Silver or gold. Your choice."

"If you like red you'll love this new electric purple we just got in," the woman remarks.

"Purple is hot but red is sexier. How about one that's a bit orangey this time. You know, for the end of fall."

Once we have been painted and studded and sprayed with quick dry, Angie and I sit on a bench outside the nail salon and remove the pieces of tissue twisted between our toes.

"Your feet look so hot with a pedicure," Angie says. "We should go again before Christmas."

"You think so?" I say, staring down at my toes, surprised at how nice they look all shiny and pink. I almost regret that I didn't get my fingers done as well. "Maybe I could go for another one."

Angie heads towards the downtown shopping area and I walk in the direction of the library even though I won't be stopping there. The drizzle is light for the moment but the winds are increasing and I know my hair will be a mess by the time I get home. I pass by a store window to evaluate my reflection. Wool sweater, jeans, and thong sandals. Not a very practical outfit. Angie warned me against putting regular shoes on for two hours so that I don't ruin my nail polish. Looking down at my painted toes I decide that I should invest in a toe ring. Nothing dramatic like rhinestones or coloured gold, just a plain solid silver ring, maybe even one like my Aunt Emma used to wear—a silver dolphin that curled its body around the toe from nose to tail. I think of the ring that Dan bought me when I started my third year of university. It was yellow gold which made my pale hands look a sickly shade of jaundice. There were three small cubic zirconium no bigger than the jewels on my toenails which sat unevenly in the gold as if someone had pushed them into the metal while it was warm but not hot enough for them to meld successfully. He said they “represented our past, present, and future.” I lost it when my family and I went to my mother's friend's cottage on the beach, a two-hour drive away. I was crawling across a sandbar when a wave came up and took the ring away, covering my head with water, spitting algae in my hair. When I returned home and told Dan that I'd lost his ring he said, “I'm never buying you jewellery again. It's bad luck for our relationship and your lack of care for this symbol of our past, present, and future shows how much you *really* care about me.” I could really use that water right now, I thought.

The first place I look for puddles is by the curb just outside the salon. There's wet sand at the side of the road—not beach sand but sand created by cars grinding stray pebbles under their tires until the stones turn to dust and the wind blows the dust to the side of the road where the curb stops it, allowing it to collect. I bend down and run my

finger through the dust as pedestrians step over me, carrying on in their pursuits to offices, stores, restaurants, and wherever else people go at 2:00 p.m. in this city. I draw a heart in the dust with my finger but cross it out, wondering why I drew a heart and then why I crossed out the heart rather than letting it become stamped with tire tracks or covered with more dust. The sewer by the curb is quiet now. Its grates are wet but there's not enough water rushing underground to create sound. It's still stealing the rain before it can form puddles. Stealing slowly.

From my seat on the curb I find another idea: alleys. There's always water collecting in the crevices of broken pavement in alleys. But I'm alone, I think to myself. What if someone, or a creature, emerges from the garbage bin, drawing me in, wrapping knobby wart-covered fingers around my neck, cutting off my air supply? Or maybe someone who's missing an eyeball—or worse, someone whose eyeball has fallen from its socket and is dangling beside his face by a thread of veiny skin. Or what if a large rat with red eyes and bloody teeth (bloody from the bleeding carcass of the last person it infected with rabies and then devoured) tiptoes over my perfectly pedicured feet, cornering me between the graffitied wall of a building and a hill of rotting trash bags, licking its lips as I scream for help?

The creepiness of the alley makes me think of how November came in, crawling silently into a room, taking a seat and not speaking a word. It sat there at the back of the room, not speaking, absorbing everyone's conversations like a spider in the corner, unnoticed. November in this city always snows; only flurries that dust carcasses of leaves, but still snow. That's how it separates itself from October which hasn't seen snow since 1989 and even then no one was sure if the flakes were actually snow or just tiny bits of lint which blew out of a dryer vent.

I decide to avoid the alley for now and walk past restaurants' outdoor patios to see if any rain may have collected atop the glass surfaces of dining tables. The coffee bars do not qualify because they don't have tables outside, just large garage doors which they open so people inside can eat while still feeling the breeze and feeding the tiny sparrows that enter and jump around the customers' feet. The sparrows are most involved with the customers at the bar, the birds ready to grasp peanut shells and the paper that comes on drinking straws which the customers roll into little balls and throw on the floor.

I turn the corner, looking behind me first to make sure that Angie doesn't see me veer away from the direction of the library. There's a row of fancy restaurants, complete with patios and outdoor table and chair sets. The first one I examine is Mondo's, the place where my mother took Angie and me for lunch on my thirteenth birthday. She said we were becoming women and women eat at nice restaurants and dip their fingers into bowls of lemon water when they're done eating to clean food oils from their fingers. She smiled when she told us this, making me wonder if she was serious or if she was just mocking the entire finger bowl ritual. The only time we had finger bowls was for holidays when my mother prepared dinner for my aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and all their significant others. She placed one silver bowl at each place setting, dropping a lemon into each one, then covering the lemon with water which she had chilled in the fridge. When we eat meals at home, just the four of us, my mother leaves the finger bowls in the cupboard and washes her hands with lemon soap before dinner. At regular, less than upscale restaurants, she wipes her fingers with a lemon-scented hand wipe.

Unfortunately the outdoor tables at Mondo's are draped with white linen table cloths, they are slightly damp, just like the dust by the curb, nowhere near puddle potential. A busboy walks through the maze of tables, mechanically wiping the chairs

with a towel. When he sees me watching, he points to a chair, motioning for me to sit. I wave my hand, indicating that I'm not staying for a curry vegetable pasta salad with lemon pepper shrimp or a baked apple with walnuts and brown sugar. He shrugs and continues wiping. I pause for a moment, remembering the way the flavour of tandoori salmon and mango cubes burst on my tongue that afternoon I ate lunch here, and how I kept smelling my fingers for the rest of the day, breathing in the scent of a fresh lemon finger bowl. I continue on to the next restaurant.

Jersey's sounds like the name of a sports bar but it's actually quite an upscale restaurant with chandeliers that glitter from beyond tall windows draped with velvet curtains. The patio is elegant with square glass tables topped with jewel encrusted candle centerpieces, and gold wrought iron chairs. I imagine that, despite the beauty of these chairs they would be quite uncomfortable and cold on a late fall day. Though, are they wet? is my real question. Yes, wet and tepid I discover while running my hand over the seat of one. I wipe my hand on my sweater and examine the tables. They're spotted with raindrops, large raindrops, much larger than the small spatters of drizzle falling on my cheeks. I wonder if the drops are not even rain but the tears of some rich woman vacationing here from Hollywood where house pets wear outfits more expensive than anything in my closet and the stores only sell designer labels. She's crying because she walked into her penthouse room at the casino hotel to see her husband and a housekeeping maid on their silk sheets with an outstanding thread count. She doesn't cry because her husband is cheating on her but because he wants to get a divorce, leaving his wife with only half their 5.4 billion dollars. Ridiculous, I think to myself. These water drops can't be tears. A rich woman likely had so many Botox injections that her tear ducts can no longer produce enough tears to fully decorate a dinner table.

As I leave Jersey's and move on to The Sushi Platter, a city bus stops beside a curb ahead of me. Students with knapsacks littered with charity buttons and key chains filter onto the sidewalk followed by men and women with briefcases and a mother grasping the wrists of two children. The doors close and the bus moves a foot and stops again. The doors swing open and the bus exhales a male onto the sidewalk. His body is familiar but I don't recognize his gelled hairstyle. Then I realize that it's Dan. Dan dressed in khaki Dockers, a crisp blue button up shirt, and a beige tie. Dan in a tie. I question whether it's him or not but I see his chunky Border Burger shoes hanging out from beneath his pant hems. I follow him down the sidewalk, staying close to the buildings in case he turns around and I need to duck for cover. His shirt is slightly untucked near the small of his back and I think he may have missed a belt loop.

Dan leads me down the street, passing the strings of restaurants and coffee bars, across side streets and past alleys. Did he get on the wrong bus after work and now he's trying to walk home from downtown? That wouldn't explain the clothes, unless his Border Burger uniform was in the wash and he scrounged through his father's closet for something. We reach an intersection with an orange 'Don't Walk' indicator and Dan's head turns to the left. He's looking at a girl across the street that's walking towards him. Dan turns his head straight and then left again. Could he be cheating? Did he get dressed up for a date with this woman with an hourglass figure and chocolate hair longer and shinier than Angie's? She has a perfect nose. A small one, round and smooth like a five-year-old's. She's walking towards Dan and he has his head turned in her direction. Surprisingly his body's still facing straight ahead. The 'Don't Walk' indicator disappears into 'Walk' but Dan doesn't move. He reaches in his pocket, removes a piece of paper, reads it, and then returns it to his pocket. He glances to the left again, then walks forward,

just in time to avoid an intersection with the woman gliding on shiny white pumps towards him. I continue following Dan, glancing at my painted toes, hoping they're more beautiful than the toes that woman squished into her chestnut pumps. I hope that Dan doesn't smell the formaldehyde and look behind him.

He continues down the street and I keep him in my vision, occasionally bending to check grooves in the sidewalk for evidence of puddles. Then he stops at La Vino, an expensive Italian restaurant with Greek-looking patio pillars that support a cement canopy, and cement tables and benches covered with gold cushions. There are also ceramic statues of naked women, concealing themselves with long tendrils of hair, bunches of grapes, and seashells. The statues are so old that many of the women have missing hands and toes. He *is* on a date. Why else would he go to a restaurant like this wearing nice clothes (well, nice clothes for Dan). Can he even afford La Vino on his Border Burger salary? And why hasn't he ever wanted to meet me here? I normally have to eat across from him at an old round table at The Coffee Pot because it has the cheapest lunch specials. There's a woman alone at a table. A menu covers her face so I can't see if her hair and her nose surpass those of the woman on the street, but her nails are long and French tipped. Dan walks up to her table and I hold my breath, shocked that he will actually go through with this. That he will actually cheat on me after all the times that he accused me of cheating on him and sneaking out during the night to meet other men. But I'm wrong. He takes a right at the woman who moves her menu, revealing her wrinkled fiftysomething nose and dry, grey-streaked hair, and stops before a table where a man, about thirty, sits at a patio table, dressed in an expensive suit, sipping beer from a fancy glass. I'm not relieved.

The man stands, holding his tie to his stomach, preventing it from dipping into his drink, and shakes Dan's hand. I can tell Dan's handshake is weak by the way his arm flops around as if it were rubber. Dan has a seat and a waiter appears. I get comfortable on a window ledge along the wall of the restaurant next to the outdoor patio, hidden cleverly behind a large potted plant. My toes are getting cold from the drizzle and the wind. I cover them with my hands, trying to thaw the chapped skin, but my hands are cold as well and are no help. I wonder why the people sitting on the patio are not wearing coats or sweaters and don't appear as cold as I am but then remember that La Vino is known for its heated patio floors and canopy heaters. Technology as simple as the silver toaster-like heating coils that dangle from arena ceilings, hidden inside gold painted metal harps attached to the canopy's ceiling and beams. The waiter returns with a bottle of Blue. Dan likely asked for no glass. He feels manly pressing his lips to a bottle instead of a glass which has a rim wide enough for a woman to leave a lipstick print on its surface. Knowing that he does not have the tendency to be careful about where his tie droops, I decide it's best that Dan has a bottle so that his shirt sleeves and the tip of his tie can't graze his drink, sending alcohol creeping through the fabric, leaving wet dots of beer on his clothing.

I can't hear what they're saying due to distance and the monotonous tapping sound the rain makes on the taut vinyl canopy, but Dan and the man chat back and forth, the man making frequent hand gestures, Dan with one hand on his beer, the other arm draped over the back of his chair, helping him to lean back a bit, providing distance between his torso and that of the man's. The two frequently smile and Dan's lips shift from his crooked half smile to a straight serious mouth and back again. At times he even chews on the right side of his bottom lip. I'm watching Dan's mouth so closely I almost

don't realize that people walking down the street are wondering why I'm sitting on a window ledge with my head peeking around the corner of a building. A woman walks by, her arms loaded with shopping bags. She doesn't notice me until her Smart Set bag hits my knee. She turns around and shakes her head while holding her precious bag close to her body as if my knee had purposely hit her bag rather than her bag accidentally hitting my knee.

The man bends down to his briefcase and Dan takes a long sip of beer, wiping his mouth with his sleeve and then wiping the sleeve on his Dockers. I begin to think that I like his hair gelled. I perceive most men who wear gel as walking heads of hair in need of a good shampoo. Dan didn't use a lot of gel so his hair looks neat, even attractive. The gel darkens his hair, making his muddy brown eyes look more energetic like coffee. When the man emerges from beneath the table he's holding a silver laptop which he opens on the table and begins clicking his fingers against the keys. He stops, turns the laptop, and motions Dan to the screen. Dan rubs his hands together and smoothly takes control over the keys, smiling and nodding as his eyes shift back and forth. The man pulls a notebook from his briefcase and writes as Dan works on the laptop. Judging by the short downward and longer upward movements of his hand, it seems as if the man is repeatedly making checkmarks in the book with his pen. When Dan's finished, he turns the laptop around to face the man. I creep closer to see what Dan had been doing on the laptop. All I can see is a wash of bright purples and blues and gold images, maybe writing, but I'm not close enough to read it. The man nods. He closes the laptop, waves to the waiter and talks to Dan again. The waiter brings the man the bill and the man hands him a credit card.

At a table close to me a woman also draws a gold credit card from her wallet. The man sitting across from her pulls his silver card out and the two begin to argue over who will pay.

“It’s on me,” he says.

“No I’ll get it this time. You can pay if we go out again.”

“Really, it’s all right, let me.”

“I would rather pay. At least for my own.”

“I asked you here. I’ll pay.”

“Women can leave the home now and even wear pants. We can pay too,” she says, straightening her skirt under the table.

“Brenda, I insist. Let me be a gentleman. You don’t refuse when I open the car door for you, how is this any different?”

“Mine is a company credit card,” she says. “Let me.”

“Okay,” he agrees. “Let’s order another drink before we go.”

Across the room Dan and the man stand up to shake hands. The man sits back down to wait for his credit card and Dan exits the restaurant, smiling as he drags his Border Burger heels down the sidewalk. I leave my seat on the window ledge right when it’s finally warming up. I no longer can feel my toes and worry that I have frostbite. I slip off my sandals and look at the bottoms of my feet. They are a bright shade of pink but are still smooth from the cucumber lotion that the tool woman applied over an hour ago. They’re okay, I think to myself. When you have frostbite your feet peel. I know this because my cousin Lia walked home from her friend’s house barefoot in January when she was eight years old. Her friend dared her to do it and Lia accepted. Her mother brought her to my house, hoping that my mother, a former nurse, would know what to do.

As the child sat on my mother's couch, wrapped in an afghan, my mother told her that women never remove their shoes in public. It is not ladylike and makes them appear sexually promiscuous. She then suggested that Lia go to the emergency room where the doctor told her she had frostbite and gave her a tube of cream and told her that dares are a one-way ticket to the hospital.

Dan stops at Energy Café, a coffee shop we go to sometimes when it's after 11:00 p.m. and The Coffee Pot is closed for the night. Who is he going to meet now? I wonder. And at our place. The café doesn't have an outdoor patio so I duck into the doorway of an apartment building to wait until he comes out. Beside me is a panel of white buttons, next to each is a last name. Garamond attracts my eye. I have a professor with that last name. A frail looking woman with matted blond hair and crystal blue eyes which she widens every few minutes. She's always crumpled, her hands clasped together and tucked against her chest, her back hunched over. I doubt she's the Garamond living in this apartment. She has a car. A station wagon with enough seats for a husband, a dog, and 2-4 children.

Dan leaves the café with a tray balancing in one hand and a paper bag in the other. I creep closer and see that there are two cups resting in the tray—a larger one (likely a plain black coffee for himself) and a medium. An apple cider for me? A bus pulls up ahead of Dan, the doors open and inhale him.

When I finished my eleventh grade exams and summer came again, I regretted not grabbing shards of boys from the floor before the doors of the school were locked until next September. I knew that each time I linked two scraps together I became closer to finding my own Demetrius. Angie had just met Luke and was spending all her time in

movie theatres and restaurants. She also began making frequent trips to the salon to stain her dark brown hair with red streaks. She'd seen crimson highlights on women and claimed that they were "sexy." Once she met Luke, she knew she needed to make herself "extra sexy." He was on student council and played soccer for the school's team. Most girls fought over the student council president and the team's captain, but there were still a few girls who competed for Luke's espresso hair and matching eyes. Angie needed to stand out from the group of white blondes and golden brunettes. She needed red highlights.

Hair colour was my last thought that summer. My hair felt right at just brown. Not golden, auburn, or red brown. Just brown. Like my eyes. Like mud. I needed to find someone broken to replace Nicholai so that I could walk down the hallway without receiving unwanted weekend invitations from football players when school resumed. But since the school was locked, where could I find fragmented bits of a fight with a drunken mother, missing the winning goal because he stayed up all night talking to a girl who only wanted to know what to do to attract his best friend, not being invited to a best friend's 18th birthday party because all the popular people were coming with their designer clothes and bottles of raspberry vodka and there was just no room for those who stayed home on Friday nights to finish a sketch and wore t-shirts from a second-hand store? By August, I stumbled across some copper flecks glittering in the sun in the corner of a grocery store parking lot. Up close I realized they were pieces of broken boy. I knew the whole was close, waiting for me to bring him the missing parts of himself.

"What do you mean?" a voice behind me said. "You're not being reasonable. You know I didn't do anything. Jordan's a liar. Come on Amy. You have to believe me."

The voice of a boy sitting on the curb, cell phone clutched tightly to his ear. “Fine. Fine,” he said. “But I love you. You know that.” He threw the cell phone. It jumped against the cement like a fish on the floor of a boat.

I walked towards him. As I got closer I could see that his face was red but he wasn't crying despite his pursed lips and pinched eyebrows. He began cutting through the air with his hands, whispering angrily to himself.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He looked at me cautiously, evaluating whether I saw his angry hand movements, whether he should be embarrassed.

“What?”

“I asked if you were okay. You seem mad.”

“I'm fine.”

“Okay,” I said. Walking over to pick up his cell phone.

“Oh, thanks,” he said as I handed it to him. He brushed the screen with his finger, rubbing his nail over a new scrape. “Piece of shit.” He threw down the phone again. It hit the edge of my big toe then landed on my other foot.

“Sorry. Sorry about that,” he said. Standing up to remove the phone from my foot.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. It didn't hurt. I know you said you were fine—”

“—I'm fine. I'm fine.”

“Oh, yes. You look fine.”

He rubbed his eyes, then his cheeks.

“My girlfriend,” he said through his hands. “She broke up with me. Nineteen months and she broke up with me over a lie. I don’t lie. What a bitch. No. No. She’s not a bitch. I love her. This is all my fault.”

“You’re being pretty hard on yourself. That is, if you didn’t lie.”

“I didn’t. I don’t know what to do now.”

We talked for a while and I even progressed through a few steps of my fixing ritual.

“Amy’s brother’s friend, Jordan,” he said, “told Amy that I was late for her birthday party because I was at a strip club with some guys from work. But I wasn’t. I went alone to the jewellery store by the strip club after work to get Amy an opal pendant like the one her grandmother wore as a teenager. The necklace wasn’t there so I spent an hour looking around to find something better before the clerk told me that they’re getting more opals next week. So I decided to wait until then and went to the party late and empty handed. I couldn’t tell Amy where I was. It would ruin the surprise.”

I convinced him to call me the next day. He did and the day after that and so on. But I was still wishing I had a bigger project to tackle with a larger selection of pieces and more sharp edges to prevent myself from being one of those single girls that girls in relationships hate because they may try to steal their boyfriends. Justin started working extra shifts to pay for college the day after we met and I was only able to talk to him on the phone sometime after midnight. That was perfect. I spent my days lying on the driveway reading Timothy Findley, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Margaret Atwood. I never tanned or burned despite the oil I applied to my skin in amounts so large it soaked through the towel, staining my driveway with a large oil spot that my father was not too impressed about. Someone told him to put cat litter on the spot and it would dry up in a few days. It

worked but cats began using our driveway as a litter box, so my parents bought me a lounge chair to spare the driveway.

One night when I was at home reorganizing my collection of Shakespeare plays, Justin called me.

“She forgave me,” he said. “Amy forgave me.”

“Uh, great?” I said.

“Yeah, I’m so happy. But, um, this means we’re getting back together. Are you okay?”

“Sure,” I said, and I meant it. I had no use for a guy who no longer needed fixing.

“Where’s Dan?” my mother asks, as I shiver on the doorstep.

“Working.”

“Is he coming later?”

I push past her into the house, rake cold fingers through damp hair and sigh in disappointment that there’s no snow for Christmas this year. Just rain. I smell peaches. My parents’ house always smells like peaches.

She leads me into the kitchen, placing a small ceramic dish into my hand. It’s painted a metallic silver colour.

“Look at these,” she says. “My new finger bowls. Don’t they look rich?”

I turn the bowl over, noticing the uneven line the silver paint makes along the edge of the bowl. The bottom is white with a magenta stamp saying ‘Made in Taiwan.’ My mother taps her hands against her scalp, making sure the hair spray hasn’t given up and that her artificial curls are still intact. Her updo looks the same for every special

occasion she attends or hosts—slicked back into a bun-type of nest of little spirals, stabbed with a jewelled rose hair pin that my father’s mother gave her to wear for the rehearsal dinner before my parents’ wedding. My mother brings the hair pin with her whenever she has Selma do her hair. Selma never created a fancy updo in my hair but she cut it a few times when I was younger. She always had hair pins in her mouth as if she were waiting to stick them into someone’s hair, yet she never used the ones from her mouth and often ran to open a fresh box of pins while in the middle of constructing my mother’s updo. I always thought she would go home at night and put the pins on a table beside her bed so she could pop them into her mouth in the morning, only removing them to eat or brush her teeth.

“So rich,” I say, showing her where the bowls were made.

She brings her manicured finger to her perfectly lined and painted lips to silence me.

“I got them at the dollar store,” she whispers. “But a woman never tells her secrets of entertaining.”

On the kitchen table there’s a row of identical silver bowls, all half filled with water, a lemon floating inside each topped with a piece of parsley or a basil leaf. Maybe it’s spinach or oregano. A green spice is a green spice.

“MARK, COME DOWN AND SEE YOUR SISTER,” my mom yells.

No reply. Even Christmas day can’t lift him from the body indent in his futon.

“Don’t worry Mom, I’ll go up.”

Climbing the stairs, I almost answer their familiar creaks. But the top one is speaking in a different language. I descend two steps and walk back up in case I heard wrong, but I didn’t.

“What do you want?” Mark asks in a monotone voice as I pound on his door.

“Merry Christmas lazy-ass” I say, entering.

“Sara! What are you doing here?”

“It’s Christmas. I’m always here for Christmas. I was here yesterday and three times last week. I just live down the street. Remember me?”

Mark likes to pretend I’m never home. I think it’s his way of saying that he misses having me around.

“Anything new? Did you break up with Dan?”

“No, and I doubt anything is new with you.”

“Actually, I found a piece of a corn chip in my belly button this morning. The strange thing is that I haven’t eaten chips for at least a month.”

“That’s gross.”

“Gross? It’s like a treasure buried beneath my belly button hair. I could probably sell it.”

Mom appears in the doorway. “Mark, it’s time to come downstairs. Your grandparents are on their way. Sara, I need you to get your cat off my kitchen table. By the way, has Angelica looked into those shots yet? The second she can handle cat dander you are taking this animal home with you.”

“I told you before, Mom, Angie is not allergic to cats. She just thinks they can bring germs and diseases into the house.”

“But Snowball is a house cat.”

“You know Angie. She thinks everything can make her sick.”

“Regardless, get that cat off my table.”

“Snowball isn’t hurting anyone.”

“He’s getting fur in my cranberry sauce. Hurry up. You too, Mark.”

“I just need to beat this level.”

“You can play later. Have you told Sara your news?”

“Don’t worry, Mom, I heard the corn chip story.”

“What?”

“Nothing. What news Mark?”

“Just some internship thing I was offered.”

“You go through two years of college and get an internship?”

“Damn right. And it’s in Vegas.”

“Too bad you have video games to win.”

“That’s the thing Sara. I never win. I’ve played every day for the last three years but *Mariokart* still kicks my ass. I need a break.”

“You’re actually going?”

“Why not?”

“It’s so far.”

“That’s the best part. I’ve lived here my whole life. It’s only a year.”

“Mark, this is crazy.”

“It’s Vegas. Come with me.”

“What? I can’t! I have next year’s Teacher’s College—if I get in— and my writing, and work.”

“Work? You write articles for a website no one’s heard of. I’m sure they have internet in Vegas. If not, it’ll survive if you leave for a year. Take a semester off. Finish school in the summer. Or come to Vegas in May when school’s done. You can bring your writing. Last time I checked, laptops were allowed on planes.”

“I don’t have a laptop.”

“Get one. They’ve really gone down in price.”

“I’m terrified of flying.”

“How do you know? You’ve never flown anywhere. It’ll be fun. Vegas is always warm.”

“I hate warm weather.”

“And it never rains.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Well, it does sometimes, but the rain doesn’t have a chance to stay on the ground.”

“That’s the last thing I need.”

Mark looks at me puzzled and then returns to his game.

Throughout the evening I excuse myself frequently to walk up and down the stairs. I know the top step is saying something but I can’t discern the message. Mom says she wants me to take time off work to “give my brain a rest.” I sit in the living room with everyone else. They watch *A Christmas Carol*. I listen to the raindrops on the window, encouraging them to condense into puddles.

In the twelfth grade I focused on school. I’d received early acceptance to university providing I kept my grades at honour roll level. I only stepped into the hallway of broken men in May to find a date for prom. I wasn’t going to go alone and argue with drunk classmates because their dates saw me sitting by myself and asked me to dance as a gentlemanly gesture.

When I hadn't found anyone by the middle of the month, Angie was in a panic.

"Who will you take pictures with? Prom is a girl's most important high school memory. Ten years from now you'll have a daughter who'll ask to see your prom picture. Do you want her to know you just sat by yourself all night while everyone else was dancing?" she said, waving a yolk-covered fork as we ate her mother's famous sunny-side-up eggs with feta and apple.

"I'm not having children. And not everyone will have a date."

"Most people. It's just what people do." And she meant for this to apply to everything. "And you'll be the odd person in the limo. I don't want you to feel weird."

The ninth wheel. Standing at the end of a row of interlocking couples in pictures set against the backdrop of thousands of colourful roses at Jackson Park. Not having anyone to hold the oversized plate of pasta during dinner while I slide some of the noodles onto my plate without staining my dress. Dancing with Angie and Luke until a slow song when I'd have to slip back to the table as couples paired off.

So I went back to the hallway and dug up the pieces of Nicholai, the guy I left lying in fragments because he didn't want to be fixed. I only picked up a few bits of him. I didn't want him to think I was fully interested. And I wasn't. I just needed a date. I told him we could go as friends. He told me Sylvie would have accepted me as his date.

We took a lot of digital pictures. None that I would show to the future daughter I will never have. He took control of the camera, tucking roses into my hair, folding my fingers like a ballerina's, perching me on a cement bench as he snapped photo after photo of me in "artistic poses" that he could use in his portfolio when applying to university. I was happy to help but drew the line at water. My dress was satin. A seafoam green satin ruched on the bodice with a ruffled skirt that cascaded in layers. I wore opalescent satin

shoes that caught the green of the skirt when I walked in a well-lit room. I picked it out in a prom magazine along with the shoes. Ordered both online. They fit. Perfectly. Most girls here went over to Detroit to buy their dresses six months before prom. They were cheaper and there was less risk of another, better accessorized girl, wearing the same dress. I never trusted the bridge. Or the tunnel.

He wanted me to lie down in a pond in Jackson Park.

“Be Ophelia,” he said. “Be the Lady of Shallot. I’ll put flowers in the water. You can die gracefully.”

“I don’t think you’re allowed to cut the flowers.”

“No one’s around.”

“No. I’ll ruin my dress, not to mention my shoes and hair.”

“You’re right,” he said. “We can come back after prom. The darkness will set my picture apart from the inspiration. That’s a good thing.”

“Sure,” I said, knowing that I would accidentally misplace his extra role of film I was carrying in my purse so the photo shoot couldn’t continue after prom.

The dinner portion of the night took almost three hours. Luke, in his third year at university getting a minor in Art History, was intrigued by Nicholai’s tuxedo.

“You painted that yourself?” Luke asked, passing Nicholai the salad.

“Yes. I used a dry brush technique to make the material look textured.”

“Can I touch it?”

“Sure. It’s oil based. Won’t smudge even in the wash.”

But then the music started. Nicholai disappeared and I found him talking to the DeeJay, requesting songs. They were all slow, sad, depressing songs that lowered the dancing mood. Some of the girls were crying a bit. Nicholai was crying the most. Crying

while dancing with me, droplets of his black eyeliner melting into my satin shoes, creating circles that were grey at the centre, darker on the edges. He was happy.

“This is it,” I say to Angie when she appears in the doorway of my room with a handful of purple grapes. “This is what’s going help me write a story.”

“What is?”

“This,” I say, holding up a rejection letter from *In the Sand* magazine.

She takes the paper from my hands, reads silently. “It’s a rejection. How will it help?”

“The editor says my writing is too ordinary, too boring.”

“Okay?”

“Wait. What’s that noise?”

Angie turns her eyes towards the windows as if she were using them to hear.

“Rain.”

“It sounds different.”

“No. It’s just raining harder.”

I peel back the curtains, scanning the yard for puddles. Despite the rain’s increase, the cement is only wet enough to appear darker, not form puddles. The glistening blades of grass indicate that the ground is slippery, not soggy. The tears streaming down the window evaporate before collecting on the ground below the ledge.

“You act like you’ve never heard rain before.” Angie says. “It’s been raining for months.”

“Do you think that’s normal?”

“Look where we live. The summer when we were seven, it snowed. Remember you slept at my house and we sat out on the porch in our shorts and winter coats with that *Beauty and the Beast* blanket my sister Reta used to have? Two years ago we had storms twice a week. Bad storms. This year we haven’t had any. Just drizzle. The weather here is unpredictable.”

“But it’s winter.”

“Just be happy you don’t have to wear snow boots.”

“You’re right, boots are boring. Dull shape, dull colours. And heavy.”

“You’re calling my new sexy boots dull? They have a six-inch heel and they’re pointy.”

“Too shiny for me. But they suit you.”

“They’re not real leather. I’m not a teacher yet. Back to your writing career.”

“Whatever. This is my third rejection this month commenting on how unoriginal my writing is. Did you see who signed it?”

She scrolls to the bottom of the paper. “Grenarion Brost?”

“Exactly. Grenarion Brost. Grenarion Brost. What a perfect name for an unusual character. I’m going to put Grenarion Brost right where he wants to be—in a world where nothing is normal, every character must deal with some crazy psychological issue,” I explain, raising my voice over the rain. “He will be a child. Not a young sticky one but at least ten years old. He will be dealing with so many issues, wishing he were back in the normal worlds that my stories usually encompass. Grenarion’s family will not be the typical mom and dad, brother and sister under a middle class roof bordered by a white picket fence family. There will be incest. Lots of it. And family tensions like you wouldn’t believe. And maybe I’ll let one of the kids suffer from severe asthma. No,

retardation. Not severe but enough to make him an outcast. Twelve-year-olds won't be playing with dolls or watching television. They'll be behind bushes, naked, defiling the human body."

"You're scaring me," Angie says, crunching grapes. "Is that how you think about your own brother?"

"No, no. Gross. This is fiction. It's okay as long as it doesn't happen to you."

"Still disturbing."

"Wait. I haven't reached the best part. If you think Grenarion is creative, wait until you hear who some of the other characters will be. Not human. The water, the landscape, the garbage dump. These elements will be driving forces in the story, elemental characters shaping the human characters' lives, confining them. How creative is this?"

"I'm still scared. I just came in here so you could taste these. They're so crunchy. It's your turn to go grocery shopping." She hands me the grapes. I tear one from the stem. Chewing it sounds like leaves crunching under my feet. Delicious but not good enough for me to run out to the grocery store to get more. I always hope Angie will decide to take over the grocery shopping entirely. Shopping makes her olive cheeks flush and her pupils dilate regardless of whether she's looking for handbags or toilet paper. For me, grocery stores are so cold, even in the winter when the furnace should be on. In the summer when I take a trip down to Zehrs, I bundle up in jeans and a sweatshirt, sweating on the car ride over but then trying to rub away goose bumps twenty minutes later when I'm rolling down the produce aisle.

"They *are* good," I say. "Not better than my story though. I already have 37 pages. I've been typing since lunch."

“Can I read it?”

“Not until it’s finished. I don’t have time to stop right now. I might forget everything I planned.”

“See, I told you this writing business would work out. I’m meeting Luke downtown for dessert after he takes his Aunt Maria to the airport.”

“Are restaurants open? It’s New Year’s Eve eve.”

“Erie Street restaurants are always open. We’re going to Noi.”

“Why are you eating now then?”

“The grapes looked too crunchy. Here, finish these so I don’t get too full.”

She shoves three more grapes into her mouth and then grabs a scrap of paper from my desk placing the fruit on top, flipping her chocolate hair, and exits my room. ~~I rip a grape from its stem and remember a boy who I knew in high school. I picture him pushing red grapes through scabbed lips, crunching them slowly as to not disturb the sores.~~

The rain beats harder, louder, and I close my eyes, trying to catch my thoughts. I try to decide how to word my next sentence. It can’t be plain. It has to be writerly, magical language and whatnot, like the very first sentences of my story, “Grenarion felt her hand on his, wondering if she placed it there on her own or if the earth drew her hand to his, fusing them together with its energy. He feared looking at the pattern which her fingers made as they laced through his because he felt a finger beside his thumb, but also beside his pinky, meaning that six fingers must adorn her milky white hand. He wondered how he had never noticed her extra appendage before, and yet felt like he knew of it all along.” I type and erase, type and erase, as the rain comes closer, growing louder, as if it were chasing me, entering my room. I look around at the dry ceiling and continue. “The

water grabbed him by the kneecaps,” I write. The rain comes closer, now in my room, a hacking cough in a room of students writing a final exam. It’s pounding on my chest now, bouncing off my ribcage, hard like pebbles. I breathe in sharply with a gasp, lift the rain from my bones but it pounds and knocks, jumping from my ribs to my ears through my brain and back out again, throwing stones at my thoughts, denting them. Should the water grab him by the kneecaps or his big toes? Maybe by his leg hair, sending prickles through his epidermis. The rain’s in my teeth, tickling the enamel, racing down my throat to my stomach where it pounds my spine and stops. Nothing.

“Angie,” I call in the dark. “Are you still here?”

I hear Angie’s fake leather boots clunk up to my room but wonder for a moment if it’s Angie walking on the stairs or a criminal who cut the power cords outside and sneaked into the house. He planned the whole thing. The clunking sound is an axe he’s dragging up the steps. A small circular beam of light from Angie’s keychain appears.

“The stupid lights went out,” she says. I only have my top lip done and now I can’t see to do the bottom. Hold this light by the mirror while I finish.”

“My computer. It’s off. My story’s gone.”

“Don’t worry, you must have a surge protector. Everything will be there when the power comes back on.”

“I don’t.”

New Year’s Eve: *Groundhog Day*. Plaid pajamas. Microwave popcorn. Rain. No puddles.

“Next year is going to be different for you,” Angie said when I called her the morning after prom. “Better guys to choose from. No more of these emotionally challenged outcasts.”

And when we began university, she made sure things were different. Angie started introducing me to guys in her program before I had a chance to locate hallways with fragments of broken men. “Guys in Sociology are sensitive, yet stable,” she told me. I didn’t want sensitive, yet stable. I wanted broken yet fixable. But I dated them anyway because I didn’t have to contemplate a future with these guys. They had no hold over me, and were just men who accompanied me to my older cousins’ weddings and parties. Male hands I could hold so that no drunk fraternity guys slipped pills into my drink, and no already-drunk college girl could accuse me of flipping my eyelashes at the guy she’d already flipped hers at. I knew from reading novels and watching movies that single girls looking for single guys find other single girls threatening.

I drew the line at sweater vests and guys who wore argyle and talked with their hands about Freud and Descartes and Skinner as they sipped glasses of Vodka and Sprite or sometimes Smirnoff Ice and 7up. Dress shirts were not an option either, especially when paired with large silvertone watches and skinny graduate student ties. I tolerated guys in golf shirts and polos. Spent time with them at movie theatres. Changed guys every few months. I usually told them I needed time to myself because I wasn’t sure if guys were actually my thing and needed to be alone to explore. They were all very understanding and made sure I didn’t forget their email because they were in to everything. I moved on. Went on a few dates and then told the story before moving on to the next and the next. Pulling on dull outfit after dull outfit like a uniform

I dated the guys Angie picked for me—2-4 dates each— until our second year of university. That’s when I found my own.

The university library was open twenty-four hours a day. But every time I sat down with my book, some guy flew a paper-plane invitation into my study area. I decided to do my school work at the public library in my neighbourhood to avoid another three months of studying amid male students wearing glasses purely for cosmetic appeal, topped in dress shirts covered with sweaters, leading down to jeans to feet cozily resting in Converse running shoes. But when I pulled into the empty parking lot and walked to the door, my Anthology of British Literature in hand, I saw windows covered in black paper, and the return book chute blocked with a wooden board. “How long has it been closed?” I asked Angie from my cell phone as I sat in my car in the empty parking lot. The landscape out my window became more barren and depressed by the second as I began to notice the thick hives of grass surfacing on the cracked cement of the parking lot under random sprays of light snow. “Since the eighth grade,” she replied. You have to go to the one in Riverside now.”

I drove down Wyandotte to Riverside, a small town-like area enmeshed within Windsor, the largest landmarks being an ice cream parlour, a high school, and of course, an arena. As I passed blocks and blocks of side streets, the buildings on Wyandotte began to turn from large bingo halls to small specialty shops that clung tightly to each other while standing side by side. All the side streets branching off from the right side of Wyandotte featured middle to lower class homes with minimal landscaping and broken wooden fences. On the left side there were large older homes with perfectly cut grass and expensive cars parked in the driveways. The Riverside library was on the right side of the

road. A silver and glass building. An intricate ice sculpture standing in the middle of a trailer park.

And it was quiet. Always quiet. On weekends I sat for hours at the wooden table in the corner by an old glass door with the round water mark, below the sign saying ‘No food or beverages allowed in the library’. The door was no longer used as a door, but instead was covered in posters advertising community events and new books being released. All customers were to use the doors on the left side of the building closest to the parking lot. Regardless of the many signs on the door there was nothing to indicate that the door with the flyers was the wrong door and not to be used. I never made the mistake though. I picked the right door on my first try. None of the other customers came in the wrong door either.

I never observed more than five people on a regular Saturday and no more than ten on a Sunday. Most people who walked through the correct door were mothers with children struggling to finish a school project due Monday or high school students making a quick trip to check their e-mail at the circle of computers in the middle of the library’s only room. Everyone worked and searched and read under metallic paper snowflakes dangling from the ceiling by uneven strings of yarn that decorated the room year round because the librarians were too “unfazed” to take them down.

Only once did someone try to enter through the wrong set of doors. I was reading the retraction to Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* for the fifth time that day. I had a paper due Monday. “What is he trying to say?” I kept whispering to myself. “Is he sorry or just being sarcastic? The guy wrote this a million years ago. Why does it matter now?” I was doing this thing that I do where I’m reading but thinking about something else and forgetting that I actually need to pay attention to the words. I was contemplating whether

it would be wrong to pull up the SparkNotes on a computer. Was it my eyes or was the wall jiggling? Not the wall but the doors with the posters which by this time felt like a wall because I leaned against them every time I sat at the wooden table in the corner with the water mark.

The building wasn't shaking me, trying to bring me back to my senses, telling me that if I were a real English student I would figure this out myself and would not pick Mr. Spark's summarized brain for the answer. It was a man. A boy or a man. He was hard to see through the blocks of posters on the glass door. From what I could see, he was just a mouth with lips which jutted into a 'fuck me' before the palm of his hand impacted the door, his flesh turning white from the pressure. Then the hand disappeared.

Moments later the lips entered through the correct door, now calm but pale, pursed and dry. They appeared painted on a pasty canvas which sprouted mousy hair that was unkempt and frizzy on one side likely from being rubbed violently after the poster-door-wall incident.

The man (and I say man because a boy would not have under-eye circles, swollen eyelids and ancient acne scars) in boy's pajama pants rang the bell on the desk which echoed throughout the entire room insulated with hard-covered children's books. No one responded. The one librarian who worked weekends took her lunch break from 1:00 until well after 3:00. Most customers showed up before noon and then again around 4:30, close to closing time.

"She's gone," I said from across the room. "Won't be back for an hour at least."

He looked towards my corner of the room, scratching the back of his neck as if he just realized that he was not alone, that someone may have actually seen him trying to open the wrong door.

Up close he looked a few years older than me. A grad student dressed in his studying clothes—plaid pajama pants, a white t-shirt, a winter coat, and gloves. Weekend armour similar to my grey sweatpants and white hoodie.

“Just great. Just great,” he said, coming to my table. “Now I have to sit around and wait for an hour just to return a book.”

“You don’t have to. Just leave it on the front desk.”

“It’s my little sister’s book. She said I have to personally give it to the librarian. Last week she left it on the desk and the book got lost. My parents have had to pay a twelve dollar late charge so far for the book that no one can find. They told her she needs to be responsible and actually hand her books to the librarian now but she’s working on an experiment and things are flammable so I had to come. But the librarian isn’t here. Just my luck. Always my luck.”

A flush was trying to appear on his cheeks but they were too washed out and trying to reject it. I bit my top lip to conceal the smile coming on as a result of my amusement with his frustration.

“I’ll give it to the librarian for you. Leave it here.”

“Thanks but I need to deliver it personally. I promised my sister.”

“The librarian might be longer than an hour. Sometimes on weekends she sneaks off to the salon.”

“For real? I can’t wait that long. I have to—I have stuff. I have to have stuff to do.”

He was stuttering and I noticed a glimmer of sweat emerging from the creases in his palm. I put my hand on his book which was lying on the table, partially protected by

his hand, and made eye contact—a requirement when fixing broken men. He didn't fit the usual broken man criteria but the stuttering was a start.

"I'll take it. It will be okay," I said.

He kept his hand firm on the book.

"It will be okay," I repeated.

His knuckles relaxed.

"Could you really? I've got a lot going on at home. I need to get back," he said.

I nodded.

He pushed the book closer to me, my hand still resting on it, and turned towards the door, nodding to me. His lips and eyebrows relaxed a bit.

"Wait," I said. "This is your little sister's book? Darwin's *Survival of the Fittest*?"

"Yeah. She's into all that smart stuff."

"Must be. I took a Philosophy class last year that required this book. I got twenty pages in and dropped the class. I'm an English major; just wasn't my strength. What's your sister in?"

He sat down in the chair across from me. "What's she in?"

"In school. What program?"

He looked down at his hands, rubbing them as if they were itchy. "She's in the eighth grade."

I laughed. His mouth softened even more. Finally, a guy who was modest. Didn't brag about his thriving thesis on Darwin's greatest book. Can make a joke without holding a cigar that he has no intention of smoking but just holds because it makes him look suave, especially when paired with his argyle sweater.

“Really,” I said coyly. “This sister of yours. The thirteen-year-old genius who reads Darwin, what’s her name?” I puckered my glossed lips, making them shine.

His laugh poured out smooth like a cake batter with equal parts honey, melted butter, and suspicion.

“Mica’s eleven. She skipped grades four and six.”

“Mica, like the mineral? Or is it a rock? No, I think it’s a mineral.” I flipped my eyelashes.

“Yes,” he said. What he agreed to, I wasn’t sure.

“And what creative name do you have?”

“Dan.”

“No mineral name?”

“My parents say when my sister was born her black eyes had a silvery grey sheen. They glittered like mica.”

He speaks in simile. He makes up cute stories to suppress the arrogance which is probably aching to escape his body. Perfect.

There was nothing wrong with his round brown eyes but they didn’t glitter.

“I really have to go,” he said, looking at the clock above us. “Thanks for taking the book.”

“Will I see you next week?” I asked.

“It’s possible. Mica reads a lot of books. She does her experiments on weekends so she locks herself in her room.”

He left from the correct door and I didn’t stop staring at the wrong door until his body passed it on the sidewalk in a jigsaw of posters.

I opened the book he had left, flipping to the back cover, and removed the book's charge card. 'Jan 8: D, Mica' was written on the very first line.

I walk into the electronics store and feel magnetic. The men surrounding me remind me of the googly eyes of the seashell magnet on my refrigerator as they stare at me, wide eyed and glassy. They are wearing tan coloured pants and dark grey shirts with green rectangular name tags hanging from their necks by green strings. "Doing some shopping today, Miss?" "Looking for something in particular, a laptop, maybe a desktop?" "Just this way," "Let me know what you need, I'm an expert, I'll make sure you leave here satisfied," "We've got some fantastic sales this week." Their words swirl around me and I choose one from the semi-circle of salesmen before me. He looks less like a salesman and more like one of the broken fragments I collected in high school. Artsy with thick square glasses and messy hair; more appealing than his gel-slicked, cologne drenched co-workers with their massive silver watches. The rest of the group separates and disperses through the aisles, getting into formation for the next customer to walk through the door.

"So you like bananas?" the artsy one asks once he has won my attention.

"Bananas? No. Why?"

He leans over and peels a round sticker from my shoulder and hands it to me. It's stamped with a small picture of a banana and the words 'Always Fresh.' I grab the sticker and roll it between my fingers.

"I went shopping. Grocery shopping. Must have got it at the store."

“There’s nothing wrong with bananas. Lot of potassium from those things. Great with a cold glass of beer and a dash of cinnamon.” He laughs while I hide my disgusted facial expression, wondering if he’s serious about beer and bananas.

We reach an aisle lined with computers, all turned on, all displaying different coloured objects that bounce across the black screens, constantly repeating their patterns. He shifts a clipboard from his right hand to his left and then offers the right to me. “Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself, I’m Graham.” I shake his hand slowly. It’s warm and rough, but not calloused enough to make me want to let go.

“Sara,” I say.

“Cool name. Is it short for Seraphina or something? Like that character in *Heave?*”

“No.”

“Well, Miss Sara,” he says with a flirty smile, “What can I do you for? A computer? Maybe a printer? A beer and banana smoothie?”

“A computer. Mine surged a few days ago.”

“How old was your computer?”

“Well I got it when I started university. About four years.”

“Four years. You’re due for an upgrade. I’m surprised it lasted this long. What kind of things do you use it for? Graphics? What were you working on when the surge happened?”

“I was typing a story. A really creative one about mental illness, incest, all these crazy things. My protagonist, you know, the main character, was ten years old and already suffered really dramatic life experiences.” Graham begins tapping at the desktop floor models. The swirly objects change into rolling British landscapes. “Then earlier this

morning I started to think that this book could be historical and even a bit magical, like the landscape and the water turn into characters and then tell the story of the town that plagues its inhabitants forever, something mysterious.”

“Oh, I know what you mean. I love that book,” he says when I’m finished.

“How? I haven’t written it yet.”

“Swift did. Graham Swift. Cool, same name as me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I read that in a British Fiction class I took. I loved the Fens, that marsh sort of thing, and the whole thing about that key and that box and what’s inside. Kept me in wonder through the whole book. Really great story.”

“Wait. You’re telling me that Graham Swift wrote my story?”

“Why do you keep calling it your story? The dude wrote *Waterland* in like 1983 or something. You just thought of it last night.”

I feel like I’m back in my room swallowing the rain, letting my story drip from my throat to my stomach and down my legs to my feet where it rolls to the tip of my toes and then down the sewer grate.

“So now what happened to that computer, Miss Sara?” Graham’s voice echoes in my ear. “Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes—yes,” I say. “It was the rain. The power went out. My computer wouldn’t turn back on.”

“Fried it, eh?”

“I guess so.”

“We’ll have to get you a surge protector then. First, I need to know if you want a laptop or desktop. Laptops are our most popular product.”

“Sure,” I say, suppressing the urge to slap Graham’s hands away from the parade of keyboards. Who is Swift anyway? He must not be that important if I’ve studied literature for four years, never coming across his writing. Maybe Graham the salesperson is lying about Graham the writer. These salespeople are taught to lie. Whatever it takes to get the customer to buy. No, no, he wants to make a sale. Can’t intentionally crush the dreams of a customer and then expect them to slide over a credit card for his commission.

“Right. We’ve got HP Pavilion Laptops on sale for \$849.99. This gets you a 2.0GHz processing speed, 4 GB of ram, a 14 inch screen, Windows XP. If you buy it today we’ll throw in a free mouse and a trial of the latest version of Microsoft Office. Really great deal. I’ll go grab you one from the back.”

“Is it better than this one?” I ask, pointing to a bright orange laptop with a white Apple logo on its back.

“Yes. Much better he said.”

I touched the crisp white keyboard. “How much better?”

“Way better. Better than the dickens.”

“You’re comparing a computer to a writer?”

“What writer?”

“Charles Dickens. Obviously.”

“When did I compare a computer to Charles Dickens?”

“You said it was better than the dickens.”

“Not the Charles Dickens. Just the dickens.”

“Who is the dickens?”

“The hell if I know.”

“How can you compare the computer to him if you don’t even know him?”

“It’s just a saying. I think it’s British.”

“Isn’t Dickens from England?”

“Ok.”

“Then it must be about him. And if not, then who?”

“Never thought about it Miss Sara. Give me a minute. I’ll go get your laptop.”

I knew he wasn’t getting me the orange one.

Graham saunters past two display units, one stocked with a variety of different bags of chips, popcorn, pretzels, the other unit lined with gold boxes. The snacks interest me because they seem out of place, food sitting in the middle of a store filled with the newest technological gadgets. However, something about the display of boxes draws me across the aisle. In the middle of each box there’s a face. I can’t decide whether it’s a feminine looking man’s face or a manly looking woman’s face. I decide it’s a woman because of the silvery glowing eyes and cat-like winged eyeliner. She has long blue eyebrows which extend beyond her face and into her mess of matted black hair, frosted with a deep blue tint. A gold stud punched through her nose. At the bottom of the box, near her chin stands a man with a long red beard and a large nose which peeks from beneath a hood. In his hands rests a gun with a sharp dagger on the end. Both figures stare at me, threatening me, proposing a battle. The top of the boxes reads *Vessel of Battle* in gold letters.

A gelled salesperson sidles up from behind the display. “Great game. Shall I bring one up to the front for you, ma’am?” Maybe I nod, because he hauls the top box down, and motions me to the front of the store.

Graham appears behind me carrying a box like it's a briefcase. "Back off, man," he whispers to the other salesperson who already has the gold box ready to take to the checkout. The two walk to the other side of the display and continue their argument.

"She's my customer now, became my customer when she left your department. I didn't push her into my department, she's interested in my products."

"She was just waiting for me to come back with her laptop."

"You've pulled this lie with me before Grammy Gram. Last time the customer hadn't even talked to you but there you were, forcing a computer box in her face just so I couldn't make a sale."

"I've been talking to this customer for twenty minutes."

"Oh yeah, what's her name?"

"Sara."

They both look back at me for confirmation. I nod.

"All right, so you know her name. I haven't made a sale all day. It's my turn."

"Dude, you don't even make commission. Tell you what, next teenager who walks through that door is yours. No questions."

The gelled salesperson puts the box back on the shelf, slips behind the display unit and disappears.

"Sorry about that," Graham says. "Just business talk."

I nod again.

"Should I bring this up to the front for you, Miss Sara? Don't think I'm just trying to push a sale, but I really believe you'll be happy with this laptop."

"Is it portable?"

"Of course, laptops have your convenience in mind."

“Can I bring it on a plane?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll take it.”

Four days after meeting Dan at the library I slipped into the booth at The Aquarium Bar and Grill and slid my purse between Angie and me. Luke sat across from us. Ever since their two-month anniversary, he and Angie like to have eye-sex while eating.

“Is Colin parking the car?” Angie asked, not noticing the new sweater I was wearing.

“Who’s Colin?”

“Stop joking around Sara,” Angie said, fiddling with the buttons on her cardigan. She knew I wasn’t joking but wanted me to be. “Colin, you know Colin. I gave him your phone number over a month ago. You two went bowling twice and he—”

“—and he went over all the multiple choice answers he wasn’t sure of on the Sociology of Sex midterm he had earlier that day. Colin. I remember Colin.”

“I was going to say, and he walked you to the door after your date and held your hand while you took your shoes off. What a gentleman.”

“Quite. He told me that from a sociological perspective women like to be helpless and taken care of by men. It’s a concept developed by Jung called the female inferiority desire. He told me he could fulfill that desire for me. I told him thanks for helping me take off my shoes but he had better keep his on.”

“By Jung? I never studied that. I think he made that up,” Angie said, scrunching her eyebrows in thought.

“You think?”

Luke laughed to himself behind his menu. “So what are you guys getting? I can’t decide.”

“I want something summery,” I said. “Coconut shrimp with pineapple sauce. Oh and we should get some sort of appetizer. Something spicy.”

“Definitely an appetizer,” Luke said, flipping to the appropriate page on the menu. “Which one did we get last year?”

“Mushrooms Neptune. The one with crab and cream cheese,” I replied. “Comes with those tiny forks.”

“I feel like a woman when I eat from those. Let’s get nachos instead.”

“I don’t want bar food. We’re at a nice restaurant. Not a sport’s bar.”

“Fine, Madame, what do you propose we get,” Luke said, rolling his eyes.

Normally Angie would laugh at Luke’s British accent but she was lost behind her menu, looking small compared to the large diamond engagement ring glittering on her left hand.

“Tandoori salmon stuffed with a lemon cream puree.”

“Funny how Sara eats so much fish considering eyes freak her out.” He turned to me. “You know, sometimes they serve these salmon appetizers with little eyes sprinkled on top for decoration.”

“Those are capers, you ass.”

“Not here. This restaurant is upscale and eyes are expensive.”

“Fine, we’ll get the nachos. Are you good with nachos, Ange?” I asked, turning towards her.

“Whatever. Salmon is good,” she said, dropping her menu on the table.

“I asked if you wanted nachos.”

“What’s wrong, darling,” Luke asked in his British accent. “Not hungry?”

“I’m sad that Colin didn’t work out,” Angie said. “He was handsome. And it’s our annual Christmas double date. You should have just brought him. Made him pay for your dinner. We never have to pay for our Christmas dinners.” She winked at Luke but she was right. Angie’s and my Christmas double date had taken place on January twenty-seventh since the twelfth grade. When we were in the second grade, we began spending time at each other’s houses on Christmas day—she would have dinner at my house after I had brunch with her family. We had a good eight years of this tradition until she met Luke and began having Christmas dinner at his house on the twenty-fifth. So we decided to celebrate on the twenty-seventh of January, after New Year’s Eve and high school exams. The schedule stuck.

“I don’t need him. I found my own guy.”

Angie let go of the button she was playing with and Luke’s face appeared from behind his menu.

“Who?” They asked simultaneously.

“His name is Dan.” I thought of how cute he was trying to open the wrong door.

“Dan who?” Angie asked.

“Do we know him?” Luke said.

“I don’t know yet. We just met at the library. He was returning that philosophy book that made me drop Intro Phil. The librarian was gone so I told him I would hand in the book. He’s smart but so modest. The opposite of the guys you’ve been setting me up with. He even wrote a fake name in the book so no one would know it was him who used it.”

“Obviously. Those guys are such tools. Look at me, I’m wearing patterned socks,” Luke added.

Angie ignored him. “The guys I set you up with are—”

“—he tried to pretend the book was his little sister’s. Like an eleven-year-old would read Darwin. He even made up a name for her. Mica. Like the rock or mineral or whatever it is.”

“Mica?” Luke asked.

“Yes.”

“Mica.” He said again. “Mica. Mica. Mica Down. Mica Dune.”

“Are you making up a song?” I asked.

“Mica Dunn!” Angie exclaimed, slapping her menu.”

“Wow. Have you two been drinking?” I asked.

“That’s it,” Luke said. “Mica Dunn. Child genius.”

“She once made enough electricity to light a ten-watt bulb with a copper wire and a firefly,” Angie said.

“And she grew a tiny maple tree inside an apple by injecting a seed into the fruit with a syringe,” Luke added.

“Are you guys making this up? There’s really a Mica?” I asked. “He wasn’t just being cute?”

“She’s graduating this year,” Luke said. “The government is giving her a research grant to use over the next four years. No one knows about her exact project but it involves charcoal. All the universities in the States want her.”

“Oh. I guess Dan Dunn is no better than Cody. Or at least no smarter,” I said.

“Colin,” Angie said. “Don’t be too hard on Dan. He’s probably had a difficult life. Being the brother of a child genius. He probably feels like he’s never good enough.”

“You’re right,” I said, playing with the straw in the Piña Colada Angie ordered for me before I arrived. “He’s probably broken.” I sipped the cool coconut liquid, and couldn’t wait to go to the library the following Sunday.

This is the fifth time I have seen Mica in the three years since Dan and I started dating. She stays in her attic room, which is rumoured by Dan to have only a tiny bed and nightstand in one corner. The rest of the room is filled with Bunsen burners and test tubes and microscopes and calculators and other scientific gadgets that cover tops of old school desks which her and Dan’s parents buy her at weekend garage sales. She only comes downstairs on her way to school and at meal times when she fills herself a plate of food and returns to her room, bringing the plate down no more than thirty minutes later to put it in the dishwasher. Her parents have no issues with their fourteen-year-old daughter’s strange behaviour because she has been acting this way for years and if she keeps going the way she is, there is no question that she will be the first Dunn in her generation to go to university. Then grad school.

Though dishevelled, Mica’s appearance is always strangely balanced. Starting from the top, there are identical dents in her hair on each side of her head so that it appears as if she has been sleeping for the same amount of time on each side of her body. At first I believed that her head was misshapen but then sat across the table from her at her mother’s 50th birthday party. That day her hair was pulled tight into an elastic and all was smooth. She wears t-shirts, the sleeves always partially turned up, creating the question of whether they have mistakenly unfolded or folded themselves. The wrinkles on her linen pants are an expression of artistic symmetry; each crease on the right mimics

one on the left, or the other way around, creating pleats of identical twins which turn fraternal when she walks.

When Mica called me this morning I was in the basement, doing laundry, stuffing my clothes into the washing machine's large round mouth, pouring powdered soap over shirts and pants and underwear so that twenty minutes later, when it's time to open the lid, the clothes will be the same as they were when they were clean and fresh and folded before I wore them, before they lived. I answered the rotary phone my grandmother couldn't sell in a yard sale and was going to throw out until I decided that we could use a phone in our unfinished basement in case the door accidentally locked and we needed to call for help. I ran towards the ring in my bare feet, against the cement floor that the previous owners painted a dark rust, wishing that I'd worn shoes. Mica explained who she was, unaware that I did not know anyone else named Mica, and then told me that I needed to come over right away. Her parents were out and Dan was sick and she couldn't take care of him for too long because she had a beaker on the burner and conditions were highly flammable. She said she wasn't sure what was wrong with him but would examine the evidence and develop a hypothesis to present to me when I arrived. I rushed over, forgetting to add fabric softener to the washing machine because Dan had never been sick as long as I had known him, likely because he rarely left the house and wasn't exposed to as many germs as a person who interacted with a multitude of people and places on a daily basis. That was Angie's hypothesis.

Here I am and here she is. We are shaking hands in the Dunn's front foyer, exchanging awkward greetings and I feel like she's a relative I haven't seen for years. I know who she is and what she looks like but I don't know her and won't know her once I leave this house and don't see her again for at least another six months.

“Downstairs,” she says. “Follow me.”

From behind her I can see the bulges of matted hair on each side of her head. The back of her hair is smooth but greasy at the crown and white flakes appear and disappear beneath the strands like glitter as she moves.

In the basement there’s a spatter of canary yellow liquid which has sunk into the beige carpet. Mica crouches over it, scratching notes onto a sheet of foolscap with a purple pencil inscribed with ‘Happy Birthday’ in silver letters.

“What’s that?” I ask, backing away from its sour smell.

“Regurgitation,” she answers without halting her note taking.

“Dan threw up yellow? What did he eat?”

“Nothing. It’s just stomach bile. There’s a yellow layer. Hold on. I’m almost done and then I’ll explain everything.”

She continues writing, stopping frequently while poking the side of her cheek with the pencil’s eraser. She’s wearing the same t-shirt she had on last time I was here—a white background decorated with different types of insects, their species written below their pictures. Aside from the ladybug, the other insects—spiders, bees, centipedes—have spindly legs which look lifelike as they move with the creases of her shirt. On one knee of her grey linen pants is a dot of blue ink. There’s a similar dot of pink ink on her other knee. Despite her unkempt appearance, her skin is smooth and radiant and pleasantly flushed. I’m tempted to ask her whether she has concocted some kind of miracle facial mask but then remember she’s only fourteen and has a naturally youthful complexion.

“I’m done,” she says. “Are you ready for my hypothesis? Here it is.” She walks to the other side of the room and I follow until we are in front of Dan’s computer. The desk is cluttered with empty food plates, smeared with pasta sauce and ketchup and glasses

filled with different amounts of water. "It began here," Mica says. "He was playing *Vessel of Battle*. Since six this morning. I know because he tripped on his sleeping bag and crashed into my abacus on his way down the stairs. I came down at ten for breakfast and he kept screaming, "I got a raid!" By eleven he was sweating from his forehead. Then things were quiet for hours. I came down at two to check on him and he was sweating under his arms. He kept whispering to himself and shaking. I told him he should take a break. He said he had to get the next raid. Then his eyes closed for a few minutes but his hands were still playing. I shook him and he regained consciousness. Said he never blacked out. I decided to stay down here to keep an eye on him." She looks down at her foolscap, running a finger across the writing. "Oh, yes, and then at four minutes after three he stood up suddenly, walked towards me. His hands were still moving in mid air. He stopped right by this chair," she walks me over to the chair, pointing down at the yellow substance, "then regurgitated. I sent him to bed."

Her eyes are wide and I feel mine opening to mirror hers.

"What do you think caused this?" I ask, knowing she's waiting for this question.

She smiles, her teeth bone white. "I'm not completely sure, but I have formulated a number of possibilities. One, Dan could have a brain abnormality triggered from overstimulation while playing computer games. Two, continuous eye movements may have made him dizzy, causing him to be nauseated. Three, since he has not eaten all day, no food to neutralize stomach acid, hence, the stomach acid took over and forced his stomach to purge. This is the simplest and most likely scenario. I have a few others but they are not finalized so I can't share them yet. I'm going upstairs to work on them and watch over my beaker. Dan is in his room. Nice seeing you again, Sara."

She flies up the stairs with her foolscap and her pencil and I'm alone with the yellow stomach bile. I consider cleaning it but the smell warns me that if I get too close I may be at risk of producing my own yellow stain on the carpet.

Dan's bedroom door is open a crack. I tap lightly then enter. I'm mesmerized by this room, every time. Two blue walls, two white, the carpet a light blue, the ceiling white. There's a wooden dresser set. Its pieces scattered around the room. The main dresser which holds the most drawers stands at the wall to the right of the doorway, supporting a thirteen-inch television. Above this dresser is a shelf holding trophies that Dan won years ago in little league tournaments and a few first place and third place metals. There's a desk on the wall beside the door. It's very plain and holds only a small silver cup filled with pens and pencils. Another dresser, which looks much like the desk but is only a dresser, stands on the wall opposite the desk. It too is adorned with a small cup but this one holds deodorant and a large tube of blemish medication. The last wall, opposite the dresser with the television, is where the night stand rests, next to Dan's bed, topped with a small blue lamp and, at the moment, an empty water glass. I always wonder why Dan's room is so clean but this time, after being able to look around silently, I'm realizing that it's because he doesn't have a lot of stuff—no hair products, no textbooks, no action figures, no knickknacks, no baseball hats. The most interesting object in the room is his ceiling light, covered with glow-in-the-dark stars which turn into a bright lime colour when it's dark. It was there when Dan's parents moved in before he was born and he's never taken it down.

Dan's curled up in the fetal position, his back to me, his shirt pulled taut so that I can see the skin tag's profile. "Dan," I say, sitting beside him, pulling up the blanket enough to cover the skin tag region, "Are you awake?" No words. Only a noise that

sounds like a desk fan—a pained humming noise. He turns onto his back and a wet cloth from his forehead falls onto his blue sheets, the water oozes through the fabric.

His lips are redder than usual and slightly swollen, almost juicy and supple like the skin of a gala apple. The flush in his cheeks makes him look happy as if he just finished laughing, laughing to the point of crying. His face is gleaming below his eyes, across the top of the nose, forehead, chin. My mother tells me that women don't sweat like men do, they glisten. Sweat is animalistic, women are not. Dan's a ~~man~~ a boy male but he's not sweating and he's definitely not glistening. He's gleaming with sickness and he looks more pleasant and more alive than I have ever seen him.

Using only his legs, he removes the blanket, mumbling he's too hot. He motions for my hand. His is sweaty and now mine is glistening. "Sare," he says slowly. I lean in closer to hear. "Sare Bear. Bear Sare. You're Sare. Here. You're here."

Dan hasn't called me Sare Bear since the first year that we were dating. Maybe because he called me Sare Bear when he was at his weakest, during times when he had to hang up during our phone conversations and call me back because his parents were fighting so loudly that his mind could not form another sentence. He called me Sare Bear when we were alone, away from the noise, and he was ready and willing to let me fix him because nothing and no one else could help except for Sare Bear. I thought it was cute that he saw this nickname as something secretive and special between us, something original that he gave me, not knowing that Sare Bear is a nickname for the majority of the Sara's and even the Sarah's in the world.

"How are you feeling, Dan?"

"It hurts. My stomach hurts."

"From the game?"

“No, no. The game would never do this to me.”

You’re right, I think to myself. It wasn’t the game. It was your need to play it for a ridiculous amount of hours on an empty stomach.

“What can I get for you?” I ask. “Do you want some water? Maybe a mint? Some ginger. Do you want a banana or some toast or some ginger ale?” I’m trying to think of foods my parents fed me when I was a kid and had an upset stomach.

He folds back into the fetal position. This time he faces me, the skin tag doesn’t. The fan within his body murmurs, and then, “No Sare Bear. Nothing. Just you. I need you here to make me feel better.”

“You want me to help you feel better?”

“Yes,” he says, in a whiny voice.

“So you *need* me to help you?”

“Yes.” He looks up at me with glassy eyes. His answer is genuine.

“So you could say that you need me to fix you?”

“Yes.”

Shatter.

Angie was wrong. Dan wasn’t broken from living with a child genius. And he wasn’t there the next time I went to the library. Not physically. But there was a little note on my table next to the out-of-commission glass door covered with flyers.

One of the snowflakes had fallen from the ceiling and landed on my chair. Its string hung over the edge of the seat. A fishing line dangling towards nothing more than a worn out puddle of carpet and a few chunks of slush left behind from a pair of boots.

S. Guess I missed you. Two bad. Catch me online.
ddunn@vesofbat.org. I'll be glade to hear from you.

"He'll be glade?" I thought, and hoped I would be glade as well.

I peel the layer of protective plastic from the screen of my new laptop. The way the desktop images come into a clearer focus reminds me of winter mornings when I was in elementary school and I would stand at my front door, fogging the cold glass with warm breath before wiping my mittens across the spray of fog to reveal an icy street as I waited for Angie's mom to pick me up. Angie's family always had old cars with bubbles of copper rust that surfaced from beneath the paint, disfiguring it like burns on skin. I never knew where these cars came from, but there was always a new old car in September with ripped seats, floors littered with bits of colourful aluminum foil, coffee stains in cup holders, buckled door panels, and manual windows. On the last few days of August, the car would vanish and their driveway would be empty. Days later, another car on the brink of extinction would materialize beside her house. The family never commented on getting another car, they merely clicked in their broken seatbelts, adjusting straps that were now grey when they had once been burgundy.

I open a word processing program. I've decided to postpone my story writing, partially because Graham Swift stole the novel that I was destined to write, but mainly because of the confrontation I had at 3:00 a.m. this morning with the rain and that googly-eyed magnet. All I wanted was a glass of water and half a chocolate chip cookie. I didn't eat my usual bedtime snack of chocolate pudding and animal crackers. I stayed late at Dan's to take care of him and was too tired to eat when I got home. The rain had quieted

since the week before, when it damaged my computer, sending me into that gadget store only to encounter Graham the salesperson who clued me into Graham Swift the writer and his creative thievery. The glass I grabbed was the same glass I drink from almost every night. It's on the top shelf of the cupboard between my white bowl dotted with orange cherries that I eat chocolate ice cream from and a plain blue bowl that Dan brought over to eat his potato chips in. Dan claims that my bowls are too "eccentric" with their artificial patterns and colours not found on the standardized colour wheel we were taught in ninth grade art period. Even though I'd turned off the faucet, I heard water running into the sink as I tipped the glass and brought it to my lips. The water in my glass was disappearing faster than I could drink. There was a hole in the bottom and a tiny misshapen piece of glass lying in the sink. I dried the glass off and put it back on the shelf between the cherry and blue bowls.

I felt the seashell watching me. "What," I said. "What do you want?" No answer. The rain outside instantly grew louder until it was inside the kitchen, tapping on my shoulder from within my body. I looked from the magnet to the rain out the window, and then touched my arm, feeling the rain in me. I knew it was a warning, that the rain was preventing me from writing stories, or at least creative, publishable stories. "What do you want?" I asked again. I stood in the kitchen for almost an hour rubbing from my wrist to my shoulder, making sure the rain had left my body. The magnet's googly eyes looked tired once the rain was quiet and so I went back to bed and fell asleep.

This morning I thought it was just a crazy dream but the piece of glass was still in the sink. I threw it out before Angie found it and lectured me about leaving glass in the sink which she would claim could have cut her hand, letting bacteria crawl through her body, paralyzing her with a life-threatening disease.

Now the sky outside is bright and the day almost pleasant except for the steady yet calm rain, dripping. I yawn at the rain and open the red folder on which Dennis has written my name in black marker. Dennis is my employer. I have never met him but there's a picture of him in the 'About' section of the website I work for. He lives somewhere up north which likely explains the striped toque he wears in the picture. The sunglasses on the other hand are less explicable. He sends me my assignments in the mail once a week along with a cheque from the week before adorned with a post-it saying some encouraging phrase such as, 'Keep up the good work,' or 'Keep on typing', and sometimes, 'Yellow is never a dull colour.'

I begin typing my article for the week:

Sony Sued for Stealing Security!

Another patent infringement occurs in the world of technology. This time, Sony may be the guilty party.

Sony may be the guilty party I repeat over and over again in my mind. It sounds like Sony is not a company but a character. Sony is a character living in this so-called world of technology which exists in a fifth dimension. How do earth's inhabitants get into this world? When women here miscarry, the babies don't actually die, they enter this world of technology through teleportation and populate the world just like earth. But it's not like earth in the way that criminals go to jail for crimes such as homicide and robbery, no, the bad guys in the technology world are locked up in floating towers for crimes such as patent infringements. Regardless, it's really just a regular world made up of miscarried babies. Miscarried babies? Am I really trying to write science fiction? Or is this science fiction? Either way, I bet Mr. Graham Swift never thought of this.

“We need to use your television,” Angie says bursting through my bedroom door with two remotes in one hand and Luke in the other. “The one in the living room is still fuzzy from that rainstorm we had the other day and the one in our room is too small to see Salvatore’s dimples,” she jumps onto my bed, pulling Luke on with her. He silently opens his mouth in speaking position and stiffens his eyebrows to ask whether it’s all right for him to sit on my freshly made bed.

“Would you stop talking about the guy’s ass,” Luke says to Angie, once he sees my nod of approval. “You watch soccer for the game, not the players’ body parts.”

“I can’t help that he’s sexy. Don’t get jealous, you’re sexy too. Sorry Sara, are we bothering you?” she asks, placing the other remotes on my dresser.

“No, I’m just doing some work. It’s not due until Friday, though.”

“Good because I need to watch this game.”

Footsteps in the hallway. I grab Luke’s arm in alarm.

“By the way,” Angie whispers. “Dan’s here.”

I’m surprised to see a large round bowl adorned with a checkered pattern in Dan’s arms as he enters my room in his Border Burger uniform. I begin to wonder whether Dan has gotten over his phobia of eccentric bowls but then realize that the checkered bowl was sitting on the counter because I forgot to put it away after washing it. Laziness often wins with Dan.

“Here,” he says, walking right over to me, failing to notice Angie and Luke, “I got you some Skittles to eat while you work.”

“Thanks,” I say. There’s something different about Dan. He’s cleaner (only one smudge of mustard on his uniform), his hair isn’t as messy, and he brought me Skittles. I’m beginning to think the power between us has shifted after he shattered while he was

sick, begging for me to stay with him and pick up the pieces. He fell asleep right after admitting that he needed me to fix him. While he was sleeping, Mica and I had a quiet dinner alone—frozen pizza. Normally, pizza doesn't last around Dan's house because pizza is his second favourite food—penne with meat sauce is first—but this pizza was feta cheese with pesto and Dan eats mozzarella cheese with pepperoni. Pesto quickly became unappealing to me as well because Mica continually talked about the “regurgitation” which was still on the carpet, turning greenish from being exposed to the air. Four hours later, when Dan woke, he was surprised to see me. “You’ve been here for five hours?” he said, no longer gleaming, but sweating, animalistic sweat that dripped from his brow, settling on his cheekbone and upper lip. “What have you been doing here? I appreciate the thought Sare [not Sare Bear] but don’t you have work to do? An article to write?” This was yesterday. Maybe it took twenty-four hours for him to fully break, to fully assume shattering status. After all, here he is tidy (for Dan) and bearing gifts.

He leans over to kiss me. He smells like Border Burger cookies, the kind with chocolate flavoured chips. Our lips touch for no more than an eighth of a second and I retract my thoughts about anything being unusual or broken. He brings a chair next to mine and sits down with the bowl of Skittles on his lap. I dive my hand into the candies, imagining that my fingers are tiny children sinking into the ball pit in the play area of Border Burger, plotting to leave stains of bodily fluids in the bottom of the pit for the next unfortunate diver. My hand feels through the candies. I’m not exactly sure what I’m looking for but am pleased to find a purple Skittle pinched between my thumb and pointer finger. It’s shiny and stamped with an ‘S’ like all the others, but has a dent on one side that I run my tongue over numerous times until the candy shell melts into the chewier centre.

“Pass me some red ones,” Angie says without removing her eyes from Salvatore’s buttocks.

“Are the red ones sexy? Is that why you want them?” Luke asks.

“Yeah, they are actually.” She wasn’t trying to annoy him. Well, she was, but she wasn’t lying. Angie has thought red candies were sexy for years and purple ones are second on the sexy list. A few years ago orange came in at a close third when all Angie’s fashion magazines boasted that orange was the new pink.

“Is this computer new?” Dan asks as Angie and Luke argue about what’s sexy and not sexy.

“Yes. My other computer surged from the rain.”

“Why would you get a laptop? New technology is never better. Cheaply made. Won’t last half as long as a desktop. Sometimes the batteries explode.”

“My desktop died.”

“I guess.” And then, “What are you writing?”

“Just an article about Sony.” I resume.

Certicom, a Toronto-based development company is suing the Sony Corporation for patent infringement. The equipment in question includes Sony's Playstation 3, DVD players, personal computers, and various high definition televisions and audio products. Sony is accused of breaching Certicom's patents by manufacturing, using, importing, distributing, and selling their products in the United States without Certicom's permission.

I revert back to the world of technology in the fifth dimension. I see Sony the criminal again, dressed from head to toe in neon green because the sun in this world casts

a lime glow throughout the town so a neon green outfit is perfect camouflage for criminals. He's crawling through a trap door in a warehouse filled with Mr. Certicom's electronic gadgets that the Certicom family made by hand in their one-bedroom house in a bad neighbourhood of the city where rabid children claw at the windows at night, threatening to bite people's ankles unless they provide these children with Skittles— this world's kiddie Cocaine.

"You all right, Sare?" Dan says. "You're just staring at the screen." He's asking me if I'm all right? He cares? Maybe I shouldn't have judged the power in this relationship by a fractional kiss. I wasn't even wearing lip balm. I would have pulled away from these dry lips in an eighth of a second too.

"Oh, no, I'm fine." I dig my hand into the bowl of candy again, pulling out a yellow skittle which is almost flat. "Wouldn't it be cool if Skittles were drugs on another planet?"

"Um, sure Sare. You sure you're all right?" Dan, not broken.

"Yeah, like aphrodisiacs," Angie interjects.

"Now I see why you eat so many of those things while you watch that metrosexual," Luke says.

"Salvatore is not a metrosexual," Angie argues. "And I don't need Skittles when I watch him. Salvatore is an aphrodisiac himself."

"Not a metrosexual? The guy has no leg hair. His legs are smoother than yours."

"There's nothing wrong with being well groomed. I happen to like Salvatore's legs. Nice definition."

"You're making me nauseated," Luke says, grabbing his stomach dramatically.

"Run Salvatore, run," Angie yells.

Dan lines up a row of yellow Skittles along my desk. Yellow is his favourite but he likes almost every kind of Skittle except the purple ones which he claims are “wrong” but won’t say how or why. On his search for yellow Skittles, he picks up the purple ones, flinging them to the side of the bowl. When he finds the yellow ones, he likes to put ten in a row and then eat them one by one. When the ten are gone he makes another row of ten and repeats the cycle. He does this with other candies as well, M&Ms, and sometimes Nerds but he prefers not to eat the latter because aside from purple Nerds there are also pink ones which are as wrong as purple candy. One time he accidentally ate a pink Nerd in a handful of red Nerds and his stomach hurt for the rest of the day. No animalistic sweat, but he threatened to regurgitate four times.

Under my desk, his Border Burger shoes. Devoid of his feet they remind me of the shoes I once encountered at a fast-food Mexican restaurant when I was ten. The employee whose shoes I was watching swept the floor under my family’s table, pushing crumpled napkins and shreds of dried-out hardened cheese into a black dustpan. One of his shoes had a regular half-inch thick sole. The other sole was a foot tall. I was mesmerized by these dissimilar shoes and even more intrigued by the pair of uneven legs that stood in these shoes via the man’s feet. Was one of his legs shorter than the other, the thick sole balancing them out? Or were these shoe soles creating some sort of magical illusion—technically the same height but visibly different? Though Dan’s shoes match, I am tempted to slide my feet into them and stand tall on one leg, while the other doesn’t reach the floor, barely grazing the shin of my tall leg.

On the other side of my room Skittles fly from Angie’s fingertips at Luke’s torso, from Luke’s mouth at Angie’s hair, under my duvet cover, under my bed, on my floor, some even in my dirty clothes basket.

“Be careful of my hair, Luciano,” Angie says. “I just washed it and I don’t want it sticky with your slobber.”

“Luciano, eh? Well, it doesn’t look that clean to me, Angelica.”

“We should go see a real game so I can watch Salvatore live,” she throws a red Skittle at Luke which bounces off his chest and makes a ding noise as it hits the metal spokes of my fan.

“You’re right, we should go. Have you ever seen Salvatore’s wife? When it’s hot in Italy she doesn’t wear a bra.”

Angie will clean up the mess. She won’t want the candies to grow mould and poison her lungs. An orange one lands in my lap but it is perfectly rounded, symmetrical, so I drop it on the floor, aiming for Dan’s shoe.

While Angelica and Luciano engage in a Skittle war with flying saliva, Dan and I sit silently, alternating between watching Skittles land in various areas of my room and staring at a computer screen.

I place my fingers back on the laptop’s keys and ~~reenter the fifth dimension~~ return to my article.

The violated Certicom patents—employed in content protection technologies used in wired and wireless distribution of compression audio and video—were discovered recently in Sony products. Specifically, the patents-in-suit are two of Certicom’s fundamental patents used in consumer electronics. Legal actions, as highlighted by Certicom, are merely a last resort in most cases of infringement; however, Sony has gone too far this time.

Sony has gone too far this time! That's what it says in Friday's issue of *Fifth-Dimension Daily*. Kitchens and workplaces and telephone lines across the fifth dimension cluster with voices talking about what will happen to Sony when he's caught. Rumours start swirling about injecting him with hormones that will cause him to regress back to an evil childhood, turning him into a rabid child hungry for a Skittle overdose. Some citizens in the world think Sony should have to build Certicom and his family a new house and pay the family's living expenses for the rest of their lives. Some don't think this Mr. Sony exists and that his character was merely created by a government agency trying to show the world that stealing will render dire consequences.

"Want to watch a movie tonight?" Dan says.

"What movie?"

"I kind of feel like *Groundhog Day*. It's relaxing."

"Fine," I say, agreeing because I lost two hours of sleep last night because of my encounter with the rain and the magnet. And besides, Dan bought me Skittles. Angie would sarcastically say that the least I could do is chaperone his date with Bill Murray.

In the words of the prosecuting company, "We normally prefer to resolve such issues through commercial discussions and without litigation. Yet Sony has left us with no alternative but to file suit." Most corporations that apply Certicom security features to their products have obtained Certicom licenses to do so. In fact, Certicom security offerings are currently licensed to more than 300 customers. As a result of the large number of companies with Certicom licenses, an obvious question

remains unanswered: Why does Sony, a leading media company worldwide, need to break the law?

Who cares why? I think to myself. He did it and that's what matters. I mean, they did it, or it did it—the company, that is. Sony is way more interesting as a character than as a corporation. Most people likely don't care that a company mistreats another company. There's no mystery, no human fear. Mr. Sony, however, in the world of technology, he's breaking news. What would it be like to sit at a triangular kitchen table in the fifth dimension and read the newspaper as the green glow of the sun pours through the windows on a pleasant winter morning? That Sony, I think to myself as I sip on the warm liquid in my mug, he needs to be caught. Then I remember that I don't read the newspaper because the few times that I have attempted to read it on earth I left the house for school with grey smudges on my lips and cheeks. I decide the newspaper ink in the fifth dimension is less transferrable. Or I watch television, which looks like one of those special flat screen ones that lined that gadget store. Sony would be on every news station and updates about him would run across the bottom of the television screen on the non-news stations. I imagine Sony would be a decent looking man with an evil that glows in his irises. The kind of criminal that every woman fears will slip in through a window when her husband is at work, slicing her wrists until she bleeds to death, then laying her in a bathtub of cool water, placing a razorblade on the ledge to look like suicide. I start to worry whether Sony could come to my house tonight but then remember that I'm on earth and he's a whole five dimensions away. I wonder where this fifth dimension is. It's a place that's always warm, contains people who were miscarried at birth on earth, and it's always sunny, a neon green sunny. Could the fifth dimension be a green-sunned Vegas?

Could it even be Vegas? If I found a way to get to the fifth dimension, this world of technology, could Mr. Sony hide me in his neon green building amid piles upon piles of Mr. Certicom's electronics, sneaking me handfuls of Skittles through the secret door?

It was mostly small talk when I'd first started chatting with Dan. He liked video games. Any war games but also Minesweeper and even Donkeykong. Worked at Border Burger. Had a high school diploma. Was taking a bit of time off from school. Four years and counting. But who was counting? No sense in paying for school when you didn't know what field you wanted to study. Didn't actually like books but liked movies. Nothing foreign that forced him to read. *Groundhog Day* was his favourite.

He liked his sister. Wasn't jealous of her. She was quiet and he didn't have to fight with her for the computer. Sometimes in high school she'd helped him with his science homework.

Normally I would have logged off, blocked him from sending me any more messages and studied in Angie and Luke's part of the house more often instead of going to the library in case I encountered him. But something he said on the third night he sent me a message changed my mind. I read the email (I *always* read the paper-plane notes—that's why I had to move to a new library).

My parents want to divorce because grandma Dunn and grandpa Smith slept together when both sets of grandparents stayed hear on New Year's Eve. My parents keep fighting over who's parent is at fault. There even accusing each other of cheating. They think

our house is bad luck and each want to move into there own homes. I have to pick who I want to live with if this all happens.

I felt it. That shattering in my teeth. This time sweet and icy. I closed my eyes and imagined the pile of rubble under Dan's computer desk. I wanted to pick through it gently, find the pieces I needed, a bottle of glue beside me. He was perfect.

Dan took a long time to fix, from January well into April before I registered progress. His parents never divorced. They just stayed up all night fighting and sometimes throwing his mother's shoes which hit Dan's wall. I suggested Dan start sleeping in the attic in his little sister's room. He walked around hunched over for a bit from sleeping curled into a ball under a desk on a hardwood floor covered by a sleeping bag but never said anything to his parents because he knew any mention of the situation would only fuel another fight, which could lead to two house purchases on opposite sides of the city. His change in sleeping venue began to work and his complexion changed from ashen to ivory and his lips grew a bit pinker. I decided the dark circles under his eyes were hereditary because no amount of sleep erased them or turned them a shade lighter. After Easter, the family tensions calmed because both sets of grandparents stayed away for the holidays and Dan ate ham and honey mustard sauce with his parents and his sister in peace. But any mention of Christmas, real-estate or elderly fornication risked more arguments and more flying objects. Perfect for me because he was fixed but still broken, which meant that we had been together for about four months and he had done absolutely nothing to change me.

When Dan started resisting my efforts, it became harder to find bits of him that fit together without force. His parents argued three times a week and then five and then two then not once in over a month, and then three times in the same day. Dan decided that he

didn't want to feel better and appreciate the days where his family was united, he wanted to be angry. With his parents and with everyone else. He even started to question my faithfulness and shot angry glares towards me whenever I spoke to any male that wasn't him, even if I was speaking to Mr. Baird, our sixty-seven-year-old neighbour. The only time Dan wasn't accusing me of sneaking through my window at night, running to the park in my neighbourhood to meet a "university guy" was when his parents were out for the night and we were in his room under the afghan that his grandma Dunn knitted back when she was an innocent old grandmother. It took three occasions under that blanket before I was introduced to his skin tag. Dan's goal was to keep on as many clothes as possible. I never knew why until I tried to brush something off his shirt and then realized that what I was brushing off was actually under his shirt, and attached to him. When he felt my fingers glide over his extra appendage, he put the rest of his clothes back on, two white socks, and excused himself from the room. I found him sitting at his computer, playing a game, acting as if nothing had happened. We talked about the skin tag before he let me see it.

"I don't know if I should show you," he always said, "You might scream."

"I told you I can handle skin, just not eyes."

Once I got a look at its large squishy appearance, I could no longer eat gummy bears or any gummy candy in case the skin tag accidentally got into the handful I was eating, squishing itself between my teeth.

Then during one night when Dan was working the midnight shift at Border Burger, he and a few guys were talking about their girlfriends. He showed them a picture of me and one of the guys recognized me. He went to my high school. He asked Dan if I ever found out what happened to Gregory. When Dan got home early in the morning,

after his parents were at work and Mica had gone to school, he found the deeds to an apartment on his kitchen counter. They were not signed but he dropped them into a trash bin on his way to bed.

“Is that who you were with on Wednesday, this Gregory guy?” Dan asked me later that afternoon as we waited in line at The Coffee Pot.

“I was with Angie. We were at the mall. You can ask her.”

“When’s the last time you saw this Gregory?”

“A few years ago. I don’t even know where he is now. No one does. Why are you being like this?”

“You want me to believe this Gregory disappeared? He was your boyfriend and then he wasn’t because he just disappeared. Unbelievable.” He turned around, flustered, clenching the hem of his white t-shirt.

After going through my high school year books with Dan, showing him how Gregory’s picture disappeared between tenth and eleventh grades, Dan believed the story. But he called my cell phone every hour when I was out without him. He started commenting on how my shirts were too low cut and my jeans were too tight and how I was dressing to get attention from other guys because I was planning to leave him. Is this him being broken? I wondered. Can I fix this? I tried to wear more modest clothing. He kept up the phone calls but dialed back the accusations.

The dress is lying on my favourite side of the bed and the shoes are standing on my chair. The last time I wore a dress (aside from Angie’s wedding and prom) was the day of my eighth grade graduation. I gave in and let my mom drag me to The Dress Rack

the night before. The gown was a ~~light blue~~, an eggshell blue, and had spaghetti straps and a vine of navy roses ~~on~~ crawling up the left side. Luckily, there was no time to have it hemmed so I wore white flip flops.

Tonight I have to wear patent dress shoes with a three-inch heel and a web of interlocking straps. They are Angie's sister Reta's. The dress as well.

On the stairs I hear Angie talking quietly with Luke.

"I don't know what to say to him," Luke says. "He never has anything to say. He just sits there not talking. Or he bitches. The guy is so boring."

"Ask him about work. If he had a good day."

"Guys don't ask other guys stuff like that."

"Yes they do."

"But then Dan will bitch boringly."

"Computer games. Ask about those. I heard Sara say something about him playing *War Ship*."

"*War Ship*?" Luke laughs. "It's *Vessel of Battle*. And I'm not talking to him about stupid computer games. We're not twelve."

"I don't care what you ask him, Luciano, but the longer you argue with me, the longer it will take me to get Sara ready and the longer you will have to entertain Dan."

"Ok. I'll think of something."

"There's beer in the fridge. Offer him one," Angie suggests.

"Fine, but hurry."

"Come on, Sara," Angie says, walking into my room as Luke clunks down the stairs slowly. "We have to leave soon. You haven't started getting dressed."

"Maybe we're getting too dressed up. My black skirt might be more appropriate."

“Remember Wednesday? I almost froze to death. You dragged me all over the neighbourhood again. If I have to go on these long rainy walks you have to come to this.”

“I’ll go. I just don’t want to wear a dress.”

“It’s only for a few hours. And I let you choose the black dress even though the burgundy one showed sexier cleavage. When I come up here I don’t want to see you wearing sweatpants.”

“Fine. But I’m taking the shoes off when we sit down,” I whisper as she exits the room.

The heel of my right shoe gets caught as I step into the black dress. Balancing on my left leg, I dive through the top of the dress with my right hand and wade through the fabric, searching for the distressed heel. When I locate the victim, I find the strap, and release the foot from its hold. The shoe ~~makes a thud when it hits the floor~~ hits the floor stiffly like a ~~dead bird falling from a branch my television remote falling from my couch on to the hardwood as Dan shifts positions during *Groundhog Day* a hammer hitting a nail an icicle falling from a roof a book falling from a shelf a boxing glove impacting a jaw~~. Before I can put on the dress, my left leg gives out. I’m on the floor, tangled in the dress, lying next to the patent ~~bird remote hammer icicle book boxing glove~~.

I hear Angie on the stairs again.

“What are you doing?” she asks from my doorway.

“Why do I have to wear this?” I ask.

“Dancing is more fun when you’re wearing a dress.”

“I don’t dance.”

“Dan doesn’t dance, you do.”

She helps me up and into the dress, awkwardly bending my arms and legs as if I’m a plastic Barbie. The mirror beside my bed reflects someone else. Not a tanned, pleasantly disproportionate Barbie, but a badly made porcelain doll with pasty skin. ~~The black dress makes my veins glow.~~ Black fabric highlights greenish-blue veins that crawl beneath lucent hands. Bony knees peek beyond an angled hem. I wave shyly at the doll in the mirror. She moves her hand in synch. I feel as if I’m at my twelfth grade prom wearing nothing but the red rose corsage Nicholai gave me.

“You need lipstick,” Angie says.

“I’m too pale. I’ll look like a hooker.”

“It’ll come off when you eat.”

“I don’t have any.”

“Use mine. You’re not sick are you? I don’t have time to get sick.”

“Do I look sick?”

“No, but you stayed up late last night. You’re going to catch a cold.”

“A cold is a virus. You can’t catch it from staying up late.”

“Not true. My mom always used to tell me that I would catch a cold if I stayed up late. I always caught one.”

“Coincidence. Or placebo effect. Reverse placebo.”

“In a few days you’ll be agreeing with me. And even if I’m wrong, keep the lipstick. Just to be safe.”

She points to the chair by my desk, motioning for me to sit, then leaves the room. I don’t hear her on the stairs this time. She returns moments later with a tube of lipstick and some cotton swabs. Biting her bottom lip, she rubs the end of a cotton swab against

the stick of pink paint and brings it to my mouth. I smell the Clinique Happy on her wrist and wonder if she can smell my Dial body wash.

After colouring my lips, Angie begins poking earrings through empty holes, jamming jewellery on bare appendages, and rearranging stray hairs. Satiny red shoes carry her around. I watch them create circles in the carpet when moving to the right, and then erase them on the way back.

~~Silence settles on the floor below as Dan and Luke sit in front of the television, swallowing mouthfuls of beer.~~ Dan's voice vibrates under my feet. Through the radiator I hear him complaining to Luke about tonight. "Christmas is in December, not January." He said this exact same phrase last year and the year before on this night. He wants to watch *Groundhog Day*. "All right man, all right whatever," Luke mumbles.

Once I'm presentable, Angie and I reach the bottom of the stairs and appear in the doorway. I feel naked in Reta's clothes and Angie's makeup. Dan's looking at me naked. I'm looking at his grease-dotted Border Burger uniform.

Through the rain-streaked windows of Luke's car, I see the wrinkles. Dan's blue shirt and black pants are ~~creased like a crumpled piece of lined paper~~ creased like an elephant's kneecaps. He slams the door to his house, angry that we drove him home to change, and drags his oversized Border Burger shoes down the driveway. A child in protest. As we drive to the Pimento Lounge, repetitive sighs gust through his lips while Luke shuffles through radio stations. When we arrive, Angie and I go to the bathroom to brush our damp hair.

"They're ruined!" Angie says, dramatically.

“Hair dye doesn’t fade that fast.”

“Not my highlights, my shoes. Didn’t you see me step in the huge puddle by the curb?”

“No. My feet are dry.”

Angie lifts her foot. The light red satin is bleeding. Dots of crimson blood seep from its pores, leaving bruises on the thin straps. I bend down, run my finger through the droplets on Angie’s toes and bring it to my lips. The water is warm from her skin.

“Stop joking around Sara,” Angie says, kicking me away. “Help me dry them.”

“Where was the puddle?”

“I told you, by the curb.”

“But I didn’t step in any water.”

“Are you going to gloat or are you going to help me?”

On the day of Angie and Luke’s wedding, I slipped into a red dress with a sweetheart neckline. Dan said it was too revealing. Slutty for a Maid of Honour dress. He never saw the gold one I tried on while we were shopping at Daisy’s Bridal. It tied up the back in a corset type fashion, pressing my breasts up, allowing them to spill over the top of the dress like the dresses I imagined Helena wore to balls and gatherings on which occasions she danced with Demetrius, his fingers running over the strip of her bare back crossed with ribbons. Angie said it was her wedding and that I was going to wear red like everyone else. A red dress with a sweetheart neckline because it was elegant.

Angie’s dress was strapless, adorned with pearls, puffed with heaps of crinoline, and tied at the waist with a red satin bow. The bow made the dress sexy. Her garter was

red too and so were her undergarments. Her nails and lips were painted red because, “A girl’s wedding day should be the sexiest day of her life.” That’s what she told me and followed the comment with, “Once she’s married her body goes downhill to accommodate children. But it’s well worth it,” she said. I still can’t figure out why.

The cake looked just like Angie, white with pearls and red ribbons. Numerous pictures were taken of Angie beside her cake—a mother standing next to her small child whom she insisted on dressing just like her. And I saw myself as a child, trapped within the picture frames on store shelves, next to my mother, posing in our dresses ever so femininely just as my father wanted.

The bridesmaids (Angie’s sisters Reta and Teresa, and her cousins Katrina and Sonia) wore red dresses with white pearls running around the midriff. The groomsmen (Luke’s Brother, Mario, cousin Gino, and friends Jason and Matthew) had red ties and cummerbunds to match. My dress didn’t have pearls. Angie wanted her Maid of Honour in as much red as possible because, aside from the bride, the Maid of Honour should be the sexiest woman in the wedding party. I too had red nails and lips but the lips only lasted until I could find a bathroom and remove the majority of the lipstick with toilet paper and re-cover with clear lip balm.

There were four flower girls, one ring bearer, and three assistant ring bearers. Angie thought that there could never be enough children in a wedding party so she collected young ones to fill red lace dresses and miniature black suits with little red bow ties. Three of the flower girls were Angie’s sisters. The fourth belonged to Luke’s brother and his wife. The ring bearer and assistant ring bearers were the sons of Angie’s or Luke’s cousins. Angie even had me ask Mica to be a junior bridesmaid because she didn’t know anyone old or young enough to fill that role. Mica agreed at first until she found out

that makeup and hairspray would be involved. "I can't be flammable that day," she said. "I'm working with the burners all week." I explained that the hairspray could be washed out easily with a bit of shampoo. She mumbled something about wasting time and went back up to her room.

Mark and I told Angie that we would walk down the aisle together but were not going to be each other's dance partners for the first dance of the night. We were siblings and didn't like touching each other if we didn't have to aside from the occasional hug at birthdays.

Angie's seating arrangements located Dan at a table with Mark's date (a girl whom he had met at a soccer stadium concession stand two weeks before the wedding), and the bridesmaids' and groomsmens' significant others. Everyone at that table was dark haired and Italian skinned except for Dan with his pasty skin and his hair that could not decide whether it wanted to be dark blond or light brown. Mousy was the word that came to mind. It was frizzy in the damp July air, and the back left side of it was slightly matted as if he'd been sleeping on it. But he hadn't. He only rested it against my purple velvet throw pillows after leaving five minutes into the wedding photos. He pretended to have a headache and fled while the females in the wedding party were perched on white benches in Jackson Park holding red roses. Angie was fine with that. Frowns weren't welcome in her pictures.

I found him curled up in front of the first half of *Groundhog Day*, his tie and suit coat lying lifelessly on my living room floor. We only managed to take one picture together that day. It's now on my fridge under the seashell magnet.

I didn't get to see Dan until dinner was over. He was laughing at Mark. Actually laughing at the best man speech Mark had just given. I felt my stomach flutter nervously as Mark had spoken, frequently glancing over at Dan to gauge his reaction.

"Luke," Mark said, unfolding the paper he pulled from his pants pocket. "I wrote you a poem." He cleared his throat. "Just kidding, man. This is the receipt for my tux. You owe me, by the way. A red tie?" Angie laughed but her eyebrows were raised. My mother lifted her napkin to her lips to suppress the extent of her laughter. My father lifted his hand towards her as if to calm his "hysterical" wife. "No, seriously," Mark continued. "I only wish you and Angie the best. That is, now that you don't hate each other anymore. I'll never forget the night that Luke and Angie met. One night when we were in eighth grade, Luke stayed over to play video games. He had moved to Windsor five years before but still hadn't made friends. He was so good at soccer that everyone hated him. Okay, not true. He had friends but I always asked him to hang out before they did. I decided that the more time I spent with him, the easier it would be for me to steal his soccer skills and then just ignore him as all the girls flocked to me. When Sara found out that Luke was staying over she was pissed because she and Angie had been planning a sleepover for that night. So, whatever, my mom said we all had to share the TV. We rented a scary movie. And Sara was pissed again because she hates scary movies. That's why I rented it. Anyway, Angie takes a sip from her can of coke, but it's lighter than before. 'That was mine,' Luke says. 'Yours is over there'." Mark pointed towards the guests, imitating Luke from the past. I looked back at Angie. Her arms were crossed. "Well, Angie had a fit," Mark continues. "She ran to the bathroom to wash her tongue. She kept yelling 'I'm going to need a tetanus shot. I need to go home. Now I'm sick. Who knows what a creature like that could have'." Now Angie was laughing. Luke was laughing. The rest of

the guests were laughing. Dan was not laughing. He was finishing off his second plate of pasta. His plate of roasted chicken, bowl of soup, plate of salad, dinner roll, and roast beef, surrounded his plate of pasta untouched. "And that's how they met. Good luck in the future, Luke. You've got a lot to handle," Mark said, raising his glass. After the laughing died down, Mark cleared his throat. "No really, I wish you two the best. Get out your tissues, mom." My father searched under the table for my mother's purse and handed it to her. Mark continued. "Angie, Luke is my best friend and I couldn't imagine someone better for him. I only hope that one day I can find a girl as perfect for me as you are for Luke." A simultaneous 'awwww' filled the room. Even Mark's date 'awwww'ed. "And I hope that my sister Sara here will one day meet a guy as great as Luke." Mark raised his glass again and the 'awwww' increased in tempo.

Dan laughed and said, "I love Mark. The guy makes the funniest jokes." But Mark wasn't joking. Dan's laughter smelled like beer but not enough for him to find an insult humorous. Moments later when plates of cake started circulating Dan's lips returned to their natural frown.

"I just want to sit here," Dan said when I asked him to dance.

"But I had to argue with Angie, for, like, four days to get her to agree to let me dance with you instead of Mark."

"Really? Why? I'm not done eating yet."

He picked up his fork and began making designs in the icing he scraped from his cake.

"Well do you mind if I ask someone else to dance? I'm tired of sitting."

"Whatever. Dance with other guys. Do what you want."

My knees bent and I found myself smoothing my dress beneath me, sitting down in the empty chair next to Dan that once cushioned the behind of Mark's date. Dan began removing his button covers for a game of checkers.

He was so into his game when Angie was ready to throw her bouquet that he didn't notice Angie's two cousins drag me in line to catch it. If it came my way I would have stepped aside swiftly before anyone knew what I was doing. But it didn't matter. Angie was aiming away from me even though we had made plans at age seven to deliberately toss each other our bouquets. Reta, Angie's sister, caught the bouquet and got engaged a week later.

That night I went to bed before midnight. Dan didn't want to stay once people completely migrated from the tables to the dance floor, taking off their shoes, some even sitting down on the glazed hardwood to feast on plates of chocolate dipped fruit and Italian cookies. "Weddings are just for people to get drunk and then cheat on the people they're dating. They'll wake up in the morning with alcohol stains on their clothes next to someone they had never met but became accustomed to during a game of strip poker."

"Strip poker? At Angie's wedding? Her parents were there. So were mine."

I opened the window by my bed even though it was a warm July night and the air conditioner was on. I needed air. I lay in the dark waiting for a breeze. The curtains danced above my body, blue curtains that turned into tangoing black silhouettes when the light was out. Papers on my desk fluttered, the clothes hanger on my door swayed in synch. But I never felt the wind.

"I missed you last night," Angie said the next morning, her hair still perfectly curled, pinned, and glazed. "You're not in any of my pictures from the reception. This sucks—"

“—Sara,” Angie’s mother interrupted. “Have you eaten?”

Angie was at her parent’s house for breakfast. When I saw that no one was home when I woke I had no idea where Luke was but knew where Angie would be and wandered down the street into her mother’s kitchen.

“Yes, I had some toast.”

“You look pale. Sit down and I’ll fix you a plate of food.”

The goldfish on the shelf circled its tank. Angie asked for a fish for Christmas five years ago. They were clean because they lived in water and, just in case, she also asked for one of those glass cleaning snails. She named the snail Sweeper but they had to get rid of him because he kept escaping from the lid-free fish bowl, sticking to the picture frames hanging on the walls of Angie’s family’s house. The fish’s name was Swimmer but then was changed to Fresh because, despite the absence of Sweeper, the fish didn’t dirty the tank. Angie didn’t bring it with her when she moved because she believed the travelling would give Fresh motion sickness, causing him to pollute the tank with regurgitation.

“Sara? Are you listening to me?” Angie’s mother said, dangling a plate of Nutella pancakes in front of my face.

“Thank-you,” I said.

She put the plate and a fork in front of me. “I was there last night. You have to break up with him,” she said, disappearing into the kitchen.

Angie pushed a mouthful of her mother’s Nutella pancakes into her mouth. I sliced a piece off mine. Angie’s mother’s pancakes were always perfectly round, oozing Nutella. I slipped the piece into my mouth, chewing slowly, stretching my mouth so that it appeared too full to answer.

“You just sat there all night, watching him play with button covers,” Angie said once her mother had left the room. “And you wouldn’t dance with my cousin Emilio. Dan’s even jealous of gay guys. The guy is a puddle.”

“Dan’s a puddle?” I asked, swallowing only half my mouthful in case I needed it again.

“A puddle of neuroses. And the funny thing is that he has you now. He has you and he knows that you will never cheat on him if you can’t even dance with someone else at your own best friend’s wedding. You watch, he won’t even accuse you of liking other guys now because he knows that you won’t. He has complete control.”

“You really think he’s a puddle?”

“Focus, Sara. This isn’t a good thing. It’s like he’s dripping all over the floor and you’re walking in this gross pool of neuroses and you slip every time. You’re drowning in the puddle of Dan. You’re going to die.”

“You’re speaking in metaphor. Do you feel okay?”

“I’m fine. You’re not. You don’t get to be in your best friend’s wedding again. I’m done. That was it. You spent it with someone who won’t let you dance even though he’s playing board games with bits of his clothing.”

“I know,” I said. I couldn’t break up with him. ~~Breaking up with Dan would be too big of a change. I would rather put up with Dan and his Border Burger uniform and his skin tag and his jealousy, as long as I didn’t have to change or find someone else to fix and start all over again.~~

At the table Luke and Dan hide behind their menus.

“I want to try the salmon.” I slide into the booth next to Dan.

“Salmon has mercury in it. Didn’t you watch the news last week? You could die,”

Dan retorts. Luke’s body jerks slightly as Angie kicks him under the table.

Angie examines her fork, placing it down in approval, then her knife, nodding with satisfaction. She looks at her spoon from many angles, twisting and turning it, drawing it close to her eyes and then farther away, frowning.

“My spoon is dirty,” she says, dropping it down, pushing it away with a napkin. “There’s a mark on it. Someone’s old food. The germs that must be crawling in that.”

Luke picks up the spoon and looks at the microscopic mark, “Just a water mark from the dishwasher,” he says, putting the spoon next to his plate. “Here, you can have my spoon instead.” Angie inspects the new spoon, nodding.

Dan orders our dinner. Spaghetti with meat sauce. One plate, two forks. I sip on ice water. The glass leaves a circular ring of condensation on the table. My finger drags through, attempting to obstruct it but the circle melts back into place.

Angie pokes at the ice cubes in her tropical drink with a short red and white striped straw. Luke rotates his beer bottle, twisting its neck. Dan plays with the collar of his shirt, pulling it away from his throat as if it’s threatening to choke him.

“So,” Angie says, “Anyone notice my new hair?”

“It’s new?” Luke and I say simultaneously.

Angie glares at Luke. “Not new but I had my red highlights retouched.”

“I don’t get why girls do that,” Dan interjects, rubbing at an itch on his chin.

“You’re born with the hair colour you’re meant to have.”

“Some people aren’t. Look at that girl from that television show about the sixties or seventies, or whatever,” Angie says. “She was born a redhead but was destined to be a blond. Once she dyed her hair she signed more movie contracts. She was asked to audition for more roles.”

“They didn’t want her then. Just her hair. Which was fake,” Dan says, gripping the body of his beer bottle.”

“Leafs are off to a good start this year. Same with Toronto’s OHL team. Canada has a good chance at the cup. Really good chance,” Luke says, picking at a scab on his finger.

“Her hair wasn’t fake. She enhanced her colour. The hair was still hers. And mine is just highlighted. I still have my natural colour.” Angie picks up a piece of hair, weeding through the colours, isolating a chocolate chunk, throwing the red strands behind her. She points the section of hair in Dan’s direction. He rolls his eyes, taking a sip of Blue.

Angie’s ice cube stabbing is more violent now.

“Sara, come to the salon with me next time. You could get violet streaks. They’d make your eyes stand out,” Angie says, her eyes locked with Dan’s.

I don’t answer. She wasn’t talking to me.

“Yeah, get purple, Sare,” Dan replies, his knuckles turning white from the grip on his beer. “And then get your nose and lips and eyebrows pierced. And your tongue too. Get some black lipstick. Paint your nails black. Start breaking into houses to steal cigarettes—”

“—My cousin Joey plays the games. Computer. I mean video games. Or computer. Which ones do you like, Dan? The television kind? Might be something I could get into. Could you tell me about them?” Luke interrupts.

Dan loosens his grip on the bottle and takes a sip, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

The waitress brings our dinner and Dan and I wind the meaty orange pasta around forks. With each twirl we uncover sections of the white plate. Soon we've excavated the entire circle, and only traces of ground beef freckle its face. It reminds me of Dan—round face, pale skin, brownish-red blemishes.

I see my reflection in the plate. Inching closer, I look for tiny white hands that could pull me into its round vortex. I imagine there's a circular room on the other side of the plate. Smaller than my bathroom, whiter than the fridge with the seashell magnet. Silver hoops on chains dangle from the ceiling, threatening to clasp me, lift me off the ground, and suspend me in the air. On the white floor there's a deep puddle. It's there to catch me when the circles let go. But when they release, the puddle disappears. I fall hard on white wood.

With a casual stretch, I glide the plate a few inches across the marble table with my wrist. Dan quickly returns to Angie and Luke's conversation about the new weather woman on the six o'clock news. "Old doesn't mean bad. Everyone was used to Marcia Walton. I just can't see them liking this new girl. I think she had plastic surgery or something. She looks fake," he interrupts. I wonder why my plate is not peach and square like Angie's or green and triangular like Luke's. Maybe they only serve salmon on square plates. But there's mercury in salmon.

It looks like an accident when the plate slips from my fingers, jumping over the edge of the table like a fearless parachuter. It lands hard on linoleum without a bounce, like the ~~bird remote hammer icicle book boxing glove shoe~~. The waitress comes over.

“Everything okay here?”

“I broke my plate. I’m sorry,” I say, pinching my lips together.

“No, don’t worry,” she says, “It doesn’t look broken.”

I escape from the booth and reach the sidewalk when the tears reach my lips.

Saline mixed with mascara and falling raindrops tastes chemical on my tongue.

“Why are you so upset Sara? It didn’t even break,” Angie says stepping out of the restaurant.

“Where’s the puddle? The one that ruined your shoes.”

She points. “Near that fire hydrant. Why?”

There’s no static liquid in the small groove between the red minivan and the sidewalk. No liquid whatsoever. Just to be sure I wedge my foot into the space and drag it against damp concrete. No wet toes, no bleeding shoe straps. A few feet away the sewer sucks up rain and I sit on the wet curb. Tears trickle down my face, lose their grasp at the tip of my chin and fall towards the street. I think I hear the plopping sounds of water droplets melting into a pool of water. But it’s just my imagination.

“What are you doing?” Angie asks. “Your dress is getting wet. Let’s go back in.”

“The puddle isn’t here.”

“It dried up. Be happy Reta’s shoes aren’t ruined.”

“But it’s still raining.”

I stop hearing Angie or she stops talking. I sit by the curb scraping my feet back and forth across concrete, scuffing up the soles of Reta’s shoes. Every few minutes I squeeze my hair, trying to collect raindrops in my hand, but it’s not wet enough. My last resort is saliva. It takes a couple of minutes to collect a mouthful of spit. In a large wad it hangs over my bottom lip. Before I let it drop I turn to Angie. I expect to see her cringe at

my dangling glob of spit, but she's gone back inside. Behind me there's a woman waiting under an umbrella. She reminds me of my high school principal. Mrs. Stoutland carried a ruler in her back pocket. She used it to measure the distance from a girl's kilt hem to her knee. No shirt sleeves rolled, no more than two buttons undone. One time my tenth grade biology teacher sent me to see her after accusing me of reading my notes during a test. She slipped the ruler out and ran her nail across the numbers, then put it back in her pocket. "I never expected this from you," she said. She pulled a cigarette out of a silver tin on her desk and rolled it between her fingers. "I quit a month ago but it seems like every time I try to quit one of you honest students disappoints me. Go back to class. I don't want to see you in here again." Her chin quivered as I left the room. So did mine. I rolled my kilt down until it rested comfortably on my knees and left it that length until I graduated. I can't make a spit puddle. She'll see me cheating. Puddles are made of H₂O. ~~Technically, salvia has H₂O in it. I just don't know how much. Or is there H₂O in saliva?~~
No. No, still cheating.

When I return, Dan's hugging the round plate, keeping it safe.

"Look, it didn't break. I kept it to show you."

I scan the room for something triangular or hexagonal.

Angie and Luke dance on the other side of the restaurant. Her hair shines as rotating lights bounce off its smooth surface. It flies through the air with each twist and turn of her body, opening and closing like a Chinese fan. Crimson highlights dart across a brown canvas, creating something striking enough to hang in an art gallery. Just another Friday night for Angie's hair.

When the song ends, Angie motions me to dance.

“No,” I say. “You guys keep going.”

“Are you forgetting Wednesday? My hands are still sore from the frostbite I almost endured while walking for over an hour in the rain. What you were looking for in open mailboxes and dirty empty pop cans I still don’t know, and don’t want to know, but I’m guessing you didn’t find it.”

“It’s not my fault you left your gloves at home.”

“Please dance, Sara. Just a couple songs.”

Dan bites his bottom lip as I let her drag me onto the dance floor. Luke gets up to go to the bar.

“Remember the circle game,” she says, pointing to the round design of tiles on the middle of the floor.

“We are not doing that.”

“Come on. No one’s watching. This place is practically empty.”

Dan’s alone, tending to the precious plate, so I agree to play.

Grabbing Angie’s hands I close my eyes and spin around, pretending it’s twelve years ago and we’re in Angie’s living room. A circle of pink flowers lies in the middle of an old throw rug. The first to touch the circle loses. Loser has to run through the dark alley alone. Old men with warts, red eyes, black teeth, and missing fingers live in the alley, Reta warned us. A few years later we buried a treasure in that alley—a silver necklace with a heart pendant. It rested fifteen centimetres below the dirt in a cocoon of hot sauce, relish, honey, and an egg yolk. Spencer Thomas gave it to Angie in grade six. He left her for Stacy Patterson so we cast a spell on him and buried it next to a bush that grew poisonous green berries.

An hour later, we haven't touched the circle. Angie's starting to sweat and I'm thirsty so we return to the table for cocktails. Dan's on his fifth beer. Without scanning the label I imagine the taste of Blue on his top lip. There's a tic-tac-toe game on the plate. Luke and Dan are playing, Dan using only his pointer finger and the meat sauce residue, Luke using the end of his knife. Luke shrugs, takes a sip of beer and glides his knife across the plate, marking an X.

"You're a good dancer Sara," Angie jokes. "You should go to Vegas with Mark. If your writing doesn't work out you could make it as a showgirl." She covers her mouth with her hand.

Luke and Dan are in the middle of a good game. Dan's beating Luke 2-1.

"Mark's going to Vegas?" Dan asks, outlining the fourth game.

"Yes, for an internship."

"Why would you go?"

"He invited me. I'm not going."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"Because I'm not going."

"Las Vegas is the most dangerous city in the world. Do you know how many murders happen there? You could become addicted to gambling. Or drinking."

"There's a casino right downtown here," Angie interjects.

Dan slides his saucy orange finger in the top right corner, marking an O. I concentrate on bending a beer cap with my fingers.

"You cheated. It was my turn," Luke protests.

Dan drags his finger through three diagonal O's. He won the fourth game.

"And you'll get a blood clot if you fly there," he says, smearing the finished game.
"You'll have to sit for four hours on the plane. At least. Didn't you hear about that girl who flew to England? She stood up when the plane landed and just passed out. Died on the way to the hospital."

"I could walk around the plane every once in a while. Plus I'm not going. To England or Vegas."

"Vegas has a busy airport. You'll probably be stuck in the plane for a long time while it circles, waiting for its turn to land."

Angie releases an exaggerated sigh. Luke etches a new game board, adding an X in the middle square. Dan gulps his beer, sipping so much that an amber tear trickles down the bottle's neck. He stares at the plate, then touches the bottom middle square but pulls his finger away, bringing it to his chin, his eyes widening as if he has thought of something brilliant. "And there's no rain. Your skin will dry out. It will peel and crack and bleed. Not to mention you'll burn. You're so pale. You could get skin cancer." He points at me with his dirty finger. "No jobs there. You'll have to work in a casino and creepy men will grab your ass when you walk by. But maybe you like that kind of attention."

The orange fingerprint on his chin moves up and down as he speaks.

"And like I said," he continues, "you'll have to fly there. It's a long flight and you're afraid of flying. I don't blame you, a lot of people die in plane crashes."

I stand up and grab the plate before Dan makes his next O. This time, I can see a shallow crack down its centre as it lies lifelessly on the floor. I leave the restaurant, removing my shoes when I reach the sidewalk.

I hear rain before opening my eyes. It's knocking on the windows with wet knuckles. I'm still in last night's black dress. The last time I saw Reta's shoes it was after eleven and they were standing on the doorstep of a hair salon somewhere between Prince and Main. I ran in case they decided to chase me.

"Are you awake?"

I sit up at the sound of Dan's voice. My eyelids are garage doors, lifting slowly and steadily, letting blurry light in. The room is hazy through my stiff eyelashes, still caked with Angie's mascara.

"You scared me. Why are you here?"

"I called you. You didn't answer. Wanted to tell you some good news."

"Where's Angie?"

"Luke took her to Grand Bend for the day. She said it's the anniversary of their first kiss. That's so dumb. The guy is whipped."

I tug at my twisted bra, lifting the clasp from its indent in my back. Dan doesn't offer to help.

Last night. The tic-tac-toe board with the shallow crack. I left before Dan could clench his eyebrows into a chubby caterpillar. ~~I bumped my knee on the hostess's station on the way out the door.~~ I walked firmly, yet gracefully, skimming my hand across a bowl of peppermint candies as I walked out the door. There's a bruise on my knee.

Despite the rain, I walked eighteen blocks home. Nine in bare feet. I was cold but it didn't matter. The walk lasted two hours. I was a private investigator, concealing my identity with Reta's black dress and a tube of Angie's pink lipstick. Lurking through the

city, I dug fingers and toes into bird baths, potholes, used coffee cups, open mailboxes, recycle bins, crevices in pavement, searching for puddles. At one point I passed a house with a large window and saw a woman's reflection in the glass. It was me, painted, and sprayed, and gloved in a dress and all I could think at that moment was, *Angie's right, this dress really shows off my butt*. Angie called my cell phone from the restaurant. I told her I was okay. Begged her not to follow me. She didn't. Dan didn't. It was just me and the rain and the damp concrete and non-existent puddles.

Dan hands me an envelope.

"You brought in my mail? This is the good news?"

"No. I found this on your porch."

It's a brown envelope addressed to myself in my own writing. At the end of my first name someone has added an 'h' in purple pen. Inside there's a letter from *Sunday Afternoon* magazine.

Ms. Sara Pierce,

I regret to inform you that your submission is not suitable for this issue of *Sunday Afternoon*. Your work displays potential but lacks creativity. We are looking for short stories that capture the extraordinary. I encourage you to re-submit with a more original piece of work. Best of luck.

Boronian Marsh, Editor-in-chief.

Signed in purple pen.

"What does it say?"

"My story. They didn't like it."

“Don’t worry Sare. You can write another one. Want a cookie?” he asks, pulling a box of Border Burger chocolate chip cookies from his coat pocket. The package reminds me of an identical one I saw last night during my investigation. It was lying at the end of a driveway, soggy but not soaked. No water inside its centre groove. I wondered who ate its cookies. Probably a sticky child with ketchup fingers and a chocolate milk moustache.

Dan pops cookies into his mouth, two at a time. Occasionally he examines one closely, rolls its round body between his thumb and pointer finger, and then holds it to the light, as if to see through its tan exterior. With his ring finger, he removes each individual chip, sucking the chocolate-flavoured substance out from beneath his nail before consuming the rest of the cookie. He brushes the crumbs from his chest on to my bedroom floor.

Across the room I see the message light flashing on my answering machine. I get up to listen but stop since Dan said he called this morning.

“Where you going?” he asks with a finger in his mouth.

“To get the message. What did you say?”

“Didn’t leave a message. I came over.”

I get out of bed.

“Gross, Sare. What happened to your feet?”

My toes are grey from the walk home. I look back at my bed and notice the smudges of dirt on my rose-coloured sheets. ~~They are like charcoal fingerprints on an otherwise blank canvas.~~ They are soiled prints.

The message was from last night. 11:18 p.m.

“*Hey Sara. It’s your favourite brother.*” I crawl back into bed, bringing the covers up to my neck. “*Did you break up with Dan yet? You should. He’s like the Pillsbury*

Dough Boy but lazier. Plus, he's fugly." I hide my smile under the blanket. Dan crumples his cookie box. *"Bet you know why I'm calling. I leave in twelve hours. Mom's a mess. She's looking at pictures from that time we went to Boblo and you threw up purple bear juice on the carousel."* Dan makes a noise that sounds like a laugh but might just mean he's disgusted. *"Hmmm maybe you can't handle the plane ride. Kidding. Seriously, mom doesn't want me to go. She left a puddle of tears on the kitchen table. Guess I'm a lot to lose. Never saw her cry when you moved out."* I ignore Mark's laughter and stare hard at the machine as if I can see the puddle through the telephone wires—a misshapen circle of tears on the round glass table. Could still be there. *"Then Snowball started licking it. I told you that cat's dumb."* I rub my eyes hard, erasing the two seconds long hope. I might be erasing Dan too but he's not disappearing. *"Anyway, you really should come. You need to get away. Get a tan. Get a tanned boyfriend. I leave at eleven sharp. Call me if you change your mind. Love Ya."*

"Get a tan? He wants you to get skin cancer," Dan says.

The clock on my dresser says two fourteen. I wouldn't have gone anyway. I'm scared of flying. And there are no puddles in Vegas. Just like there are no puddles here.

"Why don't you tell me your news," I say.

"Okay," he says, ~~rubbing his hands together~~ rubbing his hands together like an arthritic old woman applying lotion. "I got a job. A real job. Full time. I quit Border Burger."

Dan's outside the bathroom door. It's locked. In the mirror above the sink black flecks from last night's mascara pepper my cheeks. My forehead glistens. I turn on the tap to splash away the mess on my face. The faucet squeaks but nothing comes out.

"Sare," Dan yells in a muffled voice on the other side of the door. "There was a note on your porch this morning. The water is off. Pipes getting fixed."

I crawl into the bathtub, covering myself with a towel. The rain no longer knocks on the window with knuckles. It's tapping with fingernails. ~~Long green fingernails. maybe short uneven ones, stuffed with chocolate like Dan's.~~ Perfectly rounded, shiny orange fingernails. The noise echoes off the tub. I roll into a ball like a potato bug and cover my ears.

Maybe Dan left. Went shopping for shirts and ties and other business attire. The last time I saw him in a full suit was at Angie and Luke's wedding. His pants were too short and he lost three button covers in a game of checkers which he played against himself while alone at the table. Mark's black button covers against Dan's gold ones. The next morning my mom waved the tux rental receipt in Mark's face as he tried to sleep off the night's red wine, white wine, beer, rum and coke, and tequila shots, angry at him for lending the covers to Dan who lost Mark's as well.

"You sick or something Sare?" Dan yells, knocking.

He's still here. I imagine him on the other side of the door, standing like a coat rack next to a stack of magazines, playing with his skin-tag. He'll need high collared shirts. The guys at the office won't want to stare at him squeezing his extra glob of skin while drinking their lattes.

"Answer me Sare. Are you all right? Come on, don't do this. I'm tired."

And then there's the office secretary. Young, naïve, dressed in low-cut blouses from Victoria's Secret. He will fantasize about her collagen-injected lips and white-blond hair as we watch Canada Council or CNN on my couch. No more *Groundhog Day*.

"Sare, I'm going to open the door."

He can't. He pounds on the wood with his former Border Burger hands. The hands that sprinkled skin tags onto my breakfast in a dream I had months ago. Now they will extend from Gucci sleeves and hold a metallic pen with ink cartridge refills. He will sign his name: Daniel Dunn, Assistant Manager. Or D. Dunn, Manager-in-Chief. Or CEO.

The door stops banging. Dan's gone. To meet Lisa or Suzie or Brittany—the woman who will answer his phone calls and leave him seductive messages on post-its in his top drawer. I uncurl in the bathtub and leave grey toe prints on its white surface. I smear the dirt with my finger, writing my name, circling it with a square.

There's a scratch at the door.

"Sare, are you still there? I've got something to open it."

Something metal, maybe a hanger, scratches against the door. I listen to it clink for almost a minute before the lock releases.

Dan steps into the bathroom holding a butter knife.

"What are you doing in there? Why didn't you answer me? It took me forever to open this thing. You really need to wash your feet."

Hours later I wake up again and remember I needed a nap after the whole rainbathtubbutterknife ordeal. I'm still wearing the black dress, the makeup, the dirt. Dan's in the chair by my bed reading *Cosmo*. Couldn't find a copy of *Business Today*.

“Shouldn’t you be at work?” I ask.

“I don’t start until Monday. The water’s back on.”

“Why are you still here?”

“To make sure you’re not crazy. And to tell you about my job.”

“I’m going to shower first.”

“Fine,” he says, removing another box of cookies from his coat on the chair.

I want to put the plug in the bathtub drain but I can’t find it. Angie must have thrown it out again. We’ve been through at least six plugs since we moved in. She believes baths make a person dirtier.

With the first cool spray of water I swish my foot around the oval tub to wash away my prints. As the water warms, I restrict its flow by covering the drain with my heel. But it still escapes and disappears, like rain sucked down a sewer grate.

Through the steam of the shower I smell bacon. Dan’s making me a BLT. I don’t want to sit at my kitchen table and hear about his full time job. I picture us years from now. We have an expensive wedding with chocolate fountains and a ~~Tanzanite adorned~~ diamond studded wedding dress. Dan pays for all my novels to get published. I’ll be famous. But Dan mistakes me for Kristi or Katie in the dark. He locks his briefcase so I won’t see the post-its that he brings home to hide in the back of his sock drawer. Tells me I’m cute when I don’t understand why the stock market crashed.

Icy water shocks me from my thoughts. Dan’s using the water in the kitchen. I should get out before my food gets cold.

It's not a BLT. Just an egg and cheese sandwich between two pieces of bread. The ends of a loaf that I hadn't yet thrown out. I peel apart the layers, checking for skin tags before taking a bite.

"I can go shopping with you tomorrow."

"For what?"

"New clothes. You'll need something professional. Suits and ties and stuff. And new shoes. ~~Shiny ones.~~" I don't end up saying "shiny ones." I don't need to help him look up Candi's skirt.

"Why?"

"Your new job. You have no dress clothes."

"I'm wearing my work clothes right now."

I examine his baggy jogging pants and wrinkled t-shirt. I hope the suit is underneath but know it's not.

"The uniform is one of the advantages."

"I don't understand."

"I'm going to play *Vessel of Battle*. Professionally. I get paid to win. All that practice has finally paid off."

My extravagant wedding and published novels slip between the 'enter' and 'shift' keys on Dan's keyboard as the image of Dan and the well-dressed man with the laptop on the restaurant patio fills my mind. The hair gel, the Dockers, the weak handshake. It was a job interview.

"You're not going to have an office? Are they giving you a new computer at least?"

“Nope. That’s the best part. I get to stay home. Watch TV between games. Play whenever I feel like it. No set hours. No rules. I’m my own boss.”

“Wow. What a promotion.”

Dan doesn’t understand why I need to give my mind a vacation. He slammed the door on his way out mumbling his girlfriend was having a “mental breakdown.” I told him I’ll call when I get there. He told me I won’t go. I’ll turn around at the airport because I’m just as afraid of change as he is. He also said that the temperature is dropping so there’s a great likelihood that the plane’s propellers will get too icy and stop working in mid-flight.

I fill my suitcase with underwear, socks and Reta’s black dress. Tuck the tube of pink lipstick in my purse.

In the kitchen I throw open the cupboard doors and remove every round plate I see. Drop them one by one on the tile floor. Most don’t break. But they crack. Deep cracks. Seismic cracks that cannot be glued back together.

My acceptance letter to Teacher’s College and the prom picture of Dan and me I stuff in a kitchen drawer under the phone book and some old calendars Angie kept because they are decorated with pictures of babies sitting in baskets with flowers and fruit. The seashell magnet with the googly eyes fits in my pocket snugly.

Orange chairs make me nervous. Not just an orange chair or two orange chairs but the whole row of orange chairs, sitting side by side, joined together by their shoulders because they don't have arms. Multiple rows of orange chairs that stand together at attention on a smooth hazy blue carpet. Rows that face each other under the 'Gate A' or 'Gate B' signs surrounded by silver desks with 'Sunquest' and 'Skyservice' logos, but also those labeled 'Georgian Express' and 'Jazz'. Two directions, two gates. Only four flights a day. The airport the size of a hotel lobby but far less flashy. Not all orange chairs make me nervous; these orange chairs because they are for waiting. Not for relaxing while watching television, or for support while eating meals, but for people to sit on while waiting to step onto an airplane and shoot billions or even trillions of feet into the air, flying over vicious bodies of water and buildings with steaming concrete rooftops and sharp pointy towers.

The small airport is quiet aside from the hum of a vacuum cleaner an employee pushes at the other end of the building. Only the voice of a vending machine speaks in a corner, repeatedly whispering to itself to stay awake—empty words which mimic its minimal contents. Inside there's circular silver wires which once held bags of chips and chocolate bars. The remaining food is held by wires resting above D4 and H7, unsalted peanuts and broken oatmeal cookies, the food no one wanted to waste \$1.50 on. The bags of food, though alone, look content sitting hunched over in their compartments within the glass and metal walls of the vending machine, comforted by the whispers rolling in its throat, unprepared for silver and gold coins to roll into their home, waking them from sleep, pushing them over the edge so that they may fall into a slot and be pulled into the

airport air, never to return to D4 and H7. I stare at the peanuts and the cookies. ~~They are weak for being unwanted by airport traffic, but strong for hanging on to what's familiar.~~

A television above the Jazz desk displays rotating screens of departure and arrival times, blue screens with magenta letters. Jazz is the only airline open. There's a woman wearing a button-up shirt with the Jazz logo, fancy red lettering atop four coloured maple leaves, two red, a yellow, and a green, along with a little gold pin with wings on her shirt lapels and a triangular hat which looks like it belongs on a bakery worker from the 1920s. Ordering a donut and a large double double would be much easier right now than ordering a plane ticket, even if coffee burns holes in my stomach lining.

"I need to go to Vegas," I say to the woman behind the Jazz desk. "Today. As soon as possible. ~~Unless I can't get a flight until tomorrow in which case that would be fine too.~~"

She tucks some hair under her bakery hat and lifts her hand, motioning for me to stop speaking.

"I can get you to Toronto," She says tightening her lips which match the magenta letters on the television above her.

"Toronto? I don't understand," I say, wondering if this is one of my dreams where I'm walking down narrow hallways, passing people and places, interacting with everyone and everything as if they are not clustered together in a hallway but in their normal spaces, functioning as they do, only stopping when I come across something unfamiliar. I approach the alien cautiously, afraid of what it may try to do to change me. But, instead, it fears me, and what I want with it, trying to make me the danger, not the innocent. And now I'm trying to wake up, trying to do that thing where I squint my eyes really hard when I'm in the middle of a nightmare and then they open and I'm awake and have

escaped from the dream, but I've tried three times and the woman is still here, saying, "Yes, Toronto, Ontario. Then from there you can fly Air Canada or US Airways to Vegas."

Worth it? Only for the puddles. I agree to fly to Toronto and she clicks her computer keys.

"There's a flight leaving in three hours," She says, "We're a bit delayed because of the weather."

"Rain?" I ask, too eagerly.

"Wind. But the gusts are dying down and it will be safe to fly when it's time to depart. Did you want to book for today?"

"Yes, today. Or tomorrow even. What do you think is best?"

"That's completely up to you ma'am. Let's see here." She goes back to typing, saying "Uh huh" and "Ok" quietly to herself. "Well," she says, "let's weigh the pros and cons. Pro, today Air Canada has a flight leaving at 6:00 p.m. from Pearson Airport. You will arrive in Toronto at 4:08 p.m. and have enough time to collect your bags and go through security to make the flight. Con, the weather report now shows it's raining in Vegas today. Hardly ever rains but it's really coming down, says heavy downpours right here. They may even keep some on the ground this time."

"It's raining? And the rain is staying on the ground? Like puddles?"

"Yes, but don't worry. It only rains a couple times a year in Vegas. By tomorrow morning the sky will be clear again and the sand will be dry."

"I need to go today," I say, handing her a credit card.

She begins printing my ticket.

“Ms. Pierce,” she says, handing back my card, motioning for me to sign the receipt, “you will board from Gate C. Your flight to Toronto will be leaving in approximately two hours forty-eight minutes. Security check begins in two hours eighteen minutes. Thanks for choosing Jazz airlines.”

Two hours thirty minutes. That leaves only thirty minutes for security check. I thought security checks are extensive with men in police-type uniforms, waving black weapon and bomb detectors over all sectors of a person’s body, removing shoes and all objects from their pockets. All liquid-filled containers confiscated, all bags opened and searched. Why would all this only take thirty minutes? I look around the small airport. A few people dispersed among the orange chairs.

The orange chairs at Gate C look different from those at gates A and B. The chairs are shinier and brighter, surrounded by an aura. It reminds me of a picture of Angie and me in front of the Henry Ford IMAX in Dearborn, Michigan. Angie’s parents took us there on her thirteenth birthday. It was our first road trip. We saw a film about panthers—the sexiest animals according to Angie. I brought this up when Angie refused to live with me if Snowball didn’t remain with my parents. I reminded her of her admiration for panthers and told her house cats were a smaller version of sexy. She agreed but said she preferred to watch any form of cat from a distance, since that way no germs could be passed from the cat to her immune system.

It was dark outside when the film finished, making our features barely visible in the photograph, but a greenish yellow glow surrounded our bodies. Friends and relatives who saw the picture said it was “eerie,” but I knew it was just the smog and pollution smouldering in the camera’s flash. The aura around the orange chairs is not pollution but the light from outside bouncing off the smooth faux leather. Not sunlight as the sky is

drizzling, but daylight which the airport's rosy artificial lighting fails to mimic. It disappears when I get closer.

Only two people sit in the middle of the long row of chairs—a woman reading a magazine and an elderly man sleeping beneath a baseball cap. The two sit only one chair apart despite the plethora of seats. I'm not sure why sitting between them makes me feel less likely to get up and leave than if I were on an aisle.

My skin creaks against the orange faux leather when I sit thinking of Angie and her phobia of contracting a disease from leather and sweat. When she arrives home from Grand Bend she will throw out all the plates, picking them up off the floor with rubber gloves, throwing them into a large plastic garbage bag, along with the gloves once she has deposited the last cracked plate. She will then place the bag into another bag, securing them closed with three twist ties and leave the bag by the side of the road, as far away from the house as possible. She will feel dizzy when the job is done from holding her breath as she bends down to the floor to pick up each plate to prevent herself from breathing in the germs collecting in the grout between the tiles. She'll buy new plates in the morning, wash them in the dishwasher twice, and then once by hand in the sink with a potent antibacterial soap.

The row of chairs opposite my own chair is empty, devoid of human bodies whose legs and torsos shift and fold, trying to find a comfortable position on the awkward fabric. These chairs look warm and sticky like maple donut glaze as they glisten, reflecting the ceiling lights, producing the illusion of large white blobs that meld into their orange surfaces. My seat is cool and I consider moving to the warm chairs but know I would escape, go back home and slip into my dirt-streaked bed, if I were out in the open and not between the sleeping man and the magazine woman whose bodies hold me in place with

invisible magnetic strength. And I think of the magnet hidden in my pocket. Its silhouette is visible on my thigh through the denim. I leave it where it is since I don't know what effect its googly eyes will have on me at this very moment.

A snorting noise from the man beside me. The hands resting in his lap are dotted with brown marks and crawling with engorged purple veins that pop from the skin's surface and twist up his wrist. My skin grows taut at this sight. Veins make me squeamish, even more than eyes, less than Dan's skin tag. He's probably at home, on his computer playing *Vessel of Battle* while pulling at it, wondering what just happened. Did we break up? We couldn't have. We've been together for years and neither of us could let a change as big as a break-up happen. If we did, who would watch *Groundhog Day* with him? What else would I watch in Vegas and who else would I watch it with? Who would he go to The Coffee Pot with to eat cinnamon raisin bagels and drink chocolate milk? Who would I go with for chicken soup and a chicken sandwich? What would I do while Mark's at work? Whose couch would Dan sit on wearing his greasy Border Burger uniform? What would I—

"I'm done with this, want to read it?" The woman beside me says. "It's *Business Today*." I take the magazine from her, noticing the lacklustre cover decorated with an off-white background and brown letters, a black barcode in the bottom right corner. "It almost put me to sleep," the woman continues. "The writing is so blah. Know what I mean?"

"Yes," I say, thinking back to Boronian Marsh and his rejection letter sitting atop the pile of rejection letters in my room, all commenting on my writing's lack of originality and interesting themes.

“It just gets to the point, tells it how it is and then it’s over. Nothing creative. You know?” she asks, turning towards me, her legs bent underneath her on the chair. She looks like a frequent flyer, dry ashen skin, bags under her eyes, not to mention her raspy voice likely caused by a dry throat in need of watering from breathing in stale airplane air. Angie says airplanes are teeming with viruses because people sit in the plane for hours and no new air comes in so germs just circulate and no one breathes in clean air. Or maybe she has a blood clot. Maybe she gets blood clots from flying so frequently.

“You know?” she asks again.

“Yes.”

“It’s like that website, dailytechnews.com.”

“Technewsweekly.ca?”

“That’s it. That’s it. You know what I mean,” her voice cracking as it raises with ‘mean’. “Ronald Evans is the best writer they’ve got. He still relays boring tech stories but his writing has a bit of spunk. Even then, he can put me to sleep. Dave Rhys and Adam Stark are okay, big yawn nonetheless. Then there’s Jessica something. Or maybe it’s Samantha. A female writer nonetheless. You know her work?”

Is she talking about me?

“I may have read some,” I say, wondering if this woman will make me wish a blood clot upon her.

“When you read her articles do you feel like she’s just as bored writing them as you are reading them?”

“Yes.” I’m surprised at my automatic answer and then wonder if I said yes out loud.

“So do I. It’s like she’s stuck in some kind of writing rut and she needs to get out before she bores us all to death or dies from boredom herself. You know what I mean?”

I nod. I know what she means. She doesn’t know that’s why I’m here, sitting next to her in this orange chair, using her body for safety. I decide against hoping she gets a blood clot.

The population of orange chair occupants has increased since a plane arrived from Toronto, bringing with it two businessmen, their thighs adorned with laptops, their ears holding Bluetooth headsets, one teenage girl with a shrunken miniskirt and a can of orange pop, and a woman with a bag of Papillion dogs. I wonder where they go from here. This airport, I discover, only has flights from Windsor to Toronto and vice versa. If they came here from Toronto and are now in Windsor then there is nowhere else for them to go besides back to Toronto so why aren’t they leaving the airport? Why is the teenager sitting cross-legged, her shoes empty on the floor, the businessmen devoid of their coats, typing and making deals over the phone, the woman with the dogs now filing her nails, the old hat man still sleeping, the magazine woman now reading a fashion magazine? Maybe they came for the orange chairs?

~~Or maybe they feel so safe and familiar in the airport that they aren’t ready to change locations. Maybe they’re having second thoughts about walking through the doors into Windsor or admitting that there’s a ticket warming in their pocket that will take them to Toronto, a city with more traffic jams, more shopping venues, more business people than Windsor could ever imagine. Adjusting to taking the subway in Toronto as opposed to driving to work in Windsor may. Sleeping in hotels as opposed to your own bed where you know who slept on your sheets last may be. Spending Friday nights gambling or~~

~~taking shots of alcohol off cocktail waitresses in Vegas instead of staying home and watching the same movie that you've watched almost every Friday night for four years in Windsor might actually.~~

I finished *Business Today* over an hour ago. It only took twenty minutes as I read the ads, examining the people with freshly styled hair standing in front of their businesses, intertwined with slogans and phone numbers. Just as boring as the business website I work for. I think of the man who I work for, the guy living in Upper Canada, hiding behind a striped toque and sunglasses. Does he know that no one likes his website because he has writers who are so bored that they can't think beyond the obvious or understand the inexplicable phrases that he scribbles on the post-its stuck to their cheques? What is he trying to tell us with those little yellow sticky notes? Are they the real payment for a job not well done—a dose of creativity, the good stuff bought from a trustworthy dealer (if those exist) to shock us out of our writing ruts and write something that doesn't induce sever fatigue or uncontrollable yawning? Is the cheque, a few measly dollars, pity compensation? Or does it entitle us to enough money to buy a human-sized cardboard box so that we can enclose ourselves within them and step out? We need to step out.

But sometimes I like when I can't breathe. When no one expects me to be creative. When a few short paragraphs about a leading technological company's latest patent infringement are enough to earn a paycheque. When there's no story for me to submit which will render a rejection letter from someone with a name more creative than my best thought-out character. When I'm locked in Dan's arms in front of Bill Murray and his alarm clock goes off at 6:00 a.m. every morning and it's never a new day but it's a familiar day and nothing has to change unless Murray wants it to. ~~Unless I want it to.~~

I've seen the movie two-hundred and eight times but it's my Friday night, the glimmer of the television screen reflecting off Dan's pasty face as he pushes microwave popcorn through dry lips. Dan suffocates me but I know that the air isn't there because it never is and if it was I wouldn't know what to do with it anyway because I can't remember what it's like. Air is unfamiliar to me now.

~~I'm coming to realize the answer to this question: Why is air not a necessity but puddles are? I was deprived of air five years ago on prom night. I was deprived of puddles sometime in August. Why? Dan made me lose air but he couldn't have made me lose the ability to see puddles because they were there all along until August and Dan has been here way before that. Puddles mean progress. Tiny masses of precipitation which give proof that the rain has been and has left something in its wake. Since I had been without air I never made an effort to get it back. But I'm going to Vegas to find puddles. Or to escape looking for them. But I'm~~

A voice in the ceiling says, "All passengers boarding from Gate C, flight 7754 leaving from Windsor, please enter the doors under the red security sign at the east end of the airport to begin security check." I look to the Jazz desk and find the voice's face. It's the woman who sold me the ticket. Her face is flushed as if embarrassed from projecting her voice in front of the entire airport population, wondering if listeners picture her as a tiny woman, small enough to fit into the round speaker in the ceiling, no bigger than a Frisbee, projecting her voice through an even tinier microphone which surprisingly has extreme projection capabilities. She puts down the microphone. It's actually just a phone. She holds the ear piece away, holding the receiver in front of her face like a police radio. She clicks her fingers on her computer keyboard and then picks up the phone once again. "Flight 7755 from Vegas to Windsor has arrived and will be entering at Gate B." I watch

her in the ceiling and feel the vibration of her voice touching down on me, tapping my scalp. Vegas to Windsor? No flights go from Vegas to Windsor. They always stop in Toronto. Always. The voice in the microphone must be mistaken.

The magazine woman is first to leave the orange chairs. She closes the fashion magazine and pushes it in my direction, exactly as she did with *Business Today*, minus the conversation about boring writing. I take the magazine, fluttering through the pages, but leave it on the floor under my chair once she heads towards the security check, disappearing. The lady with the Papillion dogs, the teenager, and one of the businessmen rise together on cue, gathering their things and trailing in a cluster of three down the hallway after the magazine woman. Their exit accompanies muffled whimpering emanating from the bag of dogs which dangles from the woman's grip. Hanging up his phone, the other businessman shifts around, realizing that almost everyone has left. He pushes the sleeve of his sport coat, revealing a metallic silver watch, similar to the ones the salesmen in the gadget store wear, but with a larger face and hands which glitter as if they were extending from the slender arms of a Broadway dancer, hugged by silver sequin gloves.

It's just the sleeping man and I. He's still just a nose, mouth, scruffy white beard and chin due to the extreme tilt of his hat over the top half of his face. The woman with the phone announces the security check again and he coughs, expelling stale air through a gap in his mouth past a jagged front tooth, and sleeps on. He's devoid of luggage, not even a jacket to drape over his arm. He's also wearing two opposing socks. Not a simple black and navy sock mistake which can happen to the best of people, but a true mismatch—one brown sock swirled with a grey paisley pattern, and one white sock with an orange basketball patch. When he stands, his pant legs will reunite with the tops of his

shoes, the inconsistency will become a secret, hidden until the next time he sits. The seashell magnet is concealed but not hidden, bulging beneath my pocket, telling me to go find puddles before it digs a hole into my thigh with its beady eyes.

Should I have gathered my bag and left the orange chairs without waking the sleeping man? I tell myself he didn't want me to wake him. There will be another flight to Toronto in a few more hours. And then another.

Multicoloured objects come towards me. Passengers filing in from an arriving flight, bringing a rush of sound and clutter, clogging the small hallway which has never before contained more than twelve people at once. I push through the suitcases on wheels and hugging relatives and significant others and people who have no one to hug and stop at the bathrooms instead or at garbage cans to relieve themselves of wastes collected on the plane. The river of faces makes me dizzy so I keep my focus down, watching the feet which seem to be moving slower than the faces. I pass what looks like a peg leg, the kind attached to pirates in cartoons. But when I stop the image comes into focus and it's only a black umbrella held tight to a woman's body. Two sets of matching feet skim by me, buckled into matching white dress shoes topped with little pink bows and puffs of white lace. The shoes belong to four identical feet and four identical legs which lead up to two matching torsos clothed in white and pink satin dresses topped with two identical faces—twins. And they're gone. Up ahead, three giggling women come towards me, overpowering the hallway as they juggle six awkward suitcases. Though still far away, their sunburns are visible, especially on their noses and they wear hot pink t-shirts which say Caesars in triangular gold lettering. Caesars, I think, Caesars is in Vegas. I learned that from an episode of *Friends*. Joey goes to Nevada to film a movie and the filming is

cancelled so he gets a job at Caesars taking pictures with tourists in a Grecian warrior outfit. Caesars is in Vegas. I'm going to Vegas.

"Excuse me, excuse me," I say, tapping the closest hot pink sun burnt woman on the arm as we intersect paths. She halts her giggling and turns to me, still smiling. "I'm sorry. You were in Vegas?"

The women look at each other, turn to me and scream, "Vegas," raising their hands, almost dropping their bags, giggling.

Passersby shoot annoyed glances, and even a few brief laughs in the direction of the women and me who are now creating a small island in the sea of moving airport people.

"Tell me," I say to the women in all seriousness, "how was the weather?"

"So rainy," the woman whose arm I touched answers, pulling her shirt away from her skin, running a hand through her frizzy hair. "Just hours ago we were drenched." She holds out her sandaled foot. "Those sandy puddles ruined my pedicure." Her toes show peeling polish and dirt under the nails.

"But that was just today," the other woman giggles. "We wouldn't be this crispy otherwise." She lightly touches her face, wincing.

"Great. Thanks. That's all I need to know." I grab my bags and continue on to the security check.

"You're welcome," one of the voices yells behind me. "And don't worry about the weather. It's all over now."

People trip over the bag that I leave in the hallway to run after the women.

"What do you mean?" I say, walking in unison with them.

“The rain. It’s over. Sky dried up as we were boarding the plane. Lots of sunny days ahead.” And they disappear in a hot pink sun burnt blur before I can speak. The seashell magnet, hot in my pocket, makes me question whether there’s a burn mark on my thigh. I stand firmly on the spot where the women stood moments ago. Continue standing firmly until the hallway clears. And then my legs start moving again, continuing on to security check.

I’m removing my shoes and my socks and my zip-up sweater for a woman dressed in police-type attire with the hand-held metal detector. She pushes the white bin, in which I placed my bag of clothing and purse, through an x-ray. The man next to her watching a television screen confirms that I carry no knives or guns or homemade bombs or liquid. My feet, bare, resist the cold of the rough airport carpet. I take careful steps, fearing that I may step on a thumbtack or some other small piercing object that people often step on when they aren’t wearing shoes in places where shoes are required. “Through,” the woman says, from beyond the metal-detecting archway as she motions for me to walk towards her. It beeps. I walk out and walk through again. It beeps. She tells me to stand on a red X indicated on the carpet with red tape as she waves the hand-held metal detector over my body as if I were a wall and she were painting me grey with magnets. The beep happens when she reaches my left thigh. She has me empty the contents of my pockets and I place the seashell magnet at the edge of a table by itself. The woman examines it, flipping it over on its back, leaving it that way like a turtle flipped on its shell, struggling to catch its balance. “Fridge magnets don’t make the machine beep,” she says. I tell her that’s all I have and pull my pockets inside out. She waves the metal detector in front of me again and it doesn’t speak. She then waves it in front of the magnet and I think I see it

jump just slightly but maybe not at all. She tries again and again, staring at the magnet, showing it to other police-like employees who wave their own metal detectors above the seashell, making it beep. They contemplate what could be making it beep, whispering to each other, coming up with no other explanation besides that it's just a shell which may have come from magnetic waters near the Bermuda triangle, causing it to set off metal detectors. "This could be a safety hazard," she says once the group has finished prodding and poking at the shell. "You can't go through with this," she says, holding it in the air and then placing it into a bin with metal nail files, lighters, and tiny manicure scissors.

"I know."

The plates are swept from the tile floor as I suspected they would be, the chips of ceramic and glass swept away, the kitchen floor shinier than usual, all cupboards closed. Mr. Clean vibrates in the air. His all purpose cleanser cologne hikes up my nose, poking my sinuses with tiny pins of alcohol and lemon scent. The room is a fresh and moist mouth after a toothbrush has done its work with peppermint paste. A window above the sink, the only window in the kitchen, is open letting the cool yet humid late January air fill spaces between walls and cupboards and large appliances. I inhale and taste the rain and I know I'm home, back from the airport, not in Vegas, but back home. In Windsor in Angie's and Luke's and my house in the middle of the second block of Charles Street.

My bare feet stick to the floor as I pass through the kitchen. Angie likes to leave a very thin layer of cleanser on surfaces she cleans to prevent new germs and bacteria from materializing. Or so she thinks. Two envelopes, neatly stacked, are on the counter next to the stove, addressed to me from me, my own self addressed stamped envelopes. The envelope on top is mailed by Lotorium Hamzinger from *Maple Leaf Review*, the bottom one mailed by Sundeera Sandstergen at *Dollhouse Letters*. The letters, though from Lotorium and Sundeera, are written in the voice of Grenarion Brost and I hear him say "unoriginal" before I read it in the letters. How did these letters get here? Dan already brought in the mail this morning. And then I remember that he's too lazy to always reach to the bottom of the mailbox.

Above my head the ceiling moans as Angie walks on its stomach, heading towards the staircase. What was she doing in my level of the house? Looking for clues of my disappearance? She's in the kitchen, standing before me and I don't know how she got down here so fast and why I only counted four stairs creak instead of eight. Her jeans are

wrinkled at the thighs from the car ride to and from Grand Bend, her fuzzy pink sweater still buttoned and tied at the waist. She has beach hair but not sexy beach hair that hairstylists create on models with large velero rollers, mousse, and shine spray. No, the humid, salty January lake air has turned Angie's strands into frizzy, uneven waves that make her dark chocolate hair look milky and dull and stringy.

It's not often that Angie has nothing to say. Usually she initiates our conversations when I haven't even put my keys down and she's still on the stairs, talking through the walls until she can use more than the sense of sound to interact with me. I worry when she has nothing to say. It means that her grandmother died or she's battling a bad case of PMS and even then she often tells me that she has been crying all day because they only play sad Tim Horton's commercials when her emotional state is fragile. I worry that if she has nothing to say and if I have nothing only our eyes will talk and the last thing I want to hear from is eyes and the sticky sounds they sometimes make when blinking.

But her evenly spaced feet, clasped hands, and forward lean tell me that I misinterpreted her silence. She's not at a loss of words because she has nothing to say; rather, she's not speaking because it's my turn. My turn to give an explanation, to relay the events of my day, to tell her a story. Me to her. Finally.

After minutes of standing statue like, I utter nothing more than, "I'm sorry about the plates. I'll buy new ones." She puckers her lips and eyebrows. I try again. "I'm sorry about the mess and the broken glass. I will buy new plates—whatever pattern you prefer."

She opens the cupboard door. The plates are stacked as high as usual, not one missing. "They're fine," she says. "Nothing's broken." I take them out one by one, restacking them on the counter, the top plate now at the bottom of the new stack. "I saw them crack. I saw them. I saw them," I say, rubbing my fingers across their round glass

bodies, scratching surfaces with my nails, checking for cracks. I know Angie will rewash all of them when I'm finished. She fluffs her unsexy beach hair. "He's here, you know." I don't ask who.

Dan is in the living room wearing plaid pajama pants and a white t shirt—his new work uniform. The bright yellow piece of popcorn resting on his chest below his pasty pimply chin doesn't seem out of place with its chemical butter and overabundance of salt. Bill Murray is performing his 117th piano concert inside the television and I'm very aware that it's not Friday night but that's okay because every night is Friday night.

"Want some popcorn, Sare?" Dan points the large, white bowl in my direction without looking away from the television.

I wonder if I really just attempted to go to Vegas, sat at the airport all day, came home hours later to find Dan waiting on my couch, with no other reaction upon my return than to offer me the same snack which we eat every Friday night.

"That's it?" I say, pushing angry air through my nostrils, tempted to curl my fingers through the oily, fluffy kernels.

He paces his answer. "Well. What else. Do you want? Chips? You don't have any."

I grab a handful of popcorn and throw it at his left earlobe. "That's all you have to say, Dan? Like nothing has happened. Like I didn't leave?"

"Leave where? Like you're going to fly off to Vegas!" He eats the thrown popcorn morsels that landed on his lap and his hair.

I dig my hand in the bowl again and eat what I retrieve this time. We both crunch and swallow. Bill Murray drives his car over a cliff, knowing that even if he dies he will

~~wake up the next morning inside the previous morning. And I hold my breath just in case something changes this time, just in case the movie ends with a funeral for a man who drove his car off a cliff.~~

~~I exhale when the alarm clock goes off and he's back at the beginning of the same day that he's been at the beginning of every day since the movie began.~~

~~"Sit down Sare, there's a lot left, still."~~

~~"I will, I just have to do something."~~

~~"You're not going to pretend to run away again, are you?"~~

~~The raindrops are large. They hit my cheeks hard like hail and I now feel rejuvenated by the rain's touch, it lets me know I'm awake. I place the seashell magnet in the crack by the curb where I found it half a year ago. It looks up at me with its googly eyes, emotionless, not saying goodbye because it was never mine to begin with. The water rushes over the seashell on its way to the sewer, finally carrying it along and down through the grates, carrying it along with whatever the rain becomes when it joins the rest of us here on the ground.~~

I was fine for a while, sipping on miniature bottles of water, nibbling on pretzels that look like tiny hollow waffles, quietly crumpling my garbage so as not to disturb those around me, placing it into the tiny bag taped to the seat in front of me. I read the entire magazine that came with my seat, learning how to put on the oxygen mask that will fall from the ceiling if the cabin loses pressure, viewing the diagrams of the emergency doors

and the life raft that I will have to slide down if we crash over water. It doesn't say what to do if we crash on land.

Now the earth is a magnet pulling me. Not just me but all of us, including the teenager with the orange pop moustache who fell asleep before takeoff and still has closed eyes and an open mouth. My body is falling without my stomach which seems to be pushing through my esophagus, regardless of how hard I swallow.

Minutes ago the fluffy atmosphere out the window turned white then bluish grey but now all I'm seeing are mountaintops so close that I could tap them with my fingertips, digging my nails into their thin layers of snow. We dip from left to right, always coming closer to these mountains and I picture myself being dropped on the side of a mountain, rolling down its body against the brown skin which looks like tree bark. For hours.

The men and women in the navy pants and skirts and eggshell dress shirts are fastening their seatbelts. This cannot be good. Neither can the needles wading through my eardrums into my throat. If they swim any further they will meet my stomach somewhere between my tonsils and the back of my tongue.

Someone turned the lights out and the seat-belt sign on. Everything starts shaking, jumping, as if we are hitting a trampoline but not soaring higher upon contact, only falling and shaking and jumping. I clasp the arm rests, closing my eyes and hear a high pitched hum, the sound of the dentist's chair as it moves up and down, pushing me closer to the yellow beetle-shaped light.

We hit something. I hear a noise like two cars colliding. I think we hit a mountain but can't be sure because I closed the window, not wanting to see myself dangling over something that stretches millions of feet in the air, especially when I'm at the top. Why

aren't the oxygen masks falling down? Where is the raft? Why does everyone else look so calm and how can she with the orange pop moustache still be asleep?

Lights. "This is your captain speaking. Welcome to Las Vegas. If you look to your left you can see some of the hotels, especially the pyramid, the Luxor, which was at one time the second largest hotel in the world. Please remove all items from overhead compartments and enjoy your stay. Thank-you for flying with us today. Enjoy the sun."

AFTERWORD

I open my novel with a quotation from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which reads "Gatsby, pale as death, with his hands plunged like weights in his coat pockets, was standing in a puddle of water glaring tragically into my eyes." This line is a prime example of the long-standing association between puddles and drowning. Gatsby's facial expression, ghastly complexion, and heavy body allude to the fact that he may drown in the puddle in which he stands. Although the thought of drowning in a puddle is almost impossible, and often translates as comical, these pools of water—which are literally "shallow enough to walk through"—are frequent symbols of death in traditional stories and literary texts. Therefore, the fear of puddles is not truly a fear of puddles themselves but of what they represent.

What exactly is it about puddles, small pools of water that do not hold the force of nature, which labels them as representations of drowning and death? I contend that the ironic terror associated with drowning in puddles exists because puddles are miniature forms of larger bodies of water (which people can and do drown in) such as swimming pools, lakes, oceans, rivers, etc. They act like earthquake foreshocks, light jolts that warn of a more immense danger to proceed. While the image of a character standing in a puddle that grazes nothing more than their ankles seems harmless, that puddle of minutia submerging only a fraction of the body is dangerous when it acts as a mere preview of the literal and metaphorical bodies of water that can and will cause drowning.

In *The Great Gatsby*, puddles which surround Gatsby throughout the novel foreshadow his death at the novel's end as he drowns in a swimming pool after being shot. The aforementioned quotation alludes to this death because it occurs immediately prior to Gatsby's reunion with Daisy, the woman whom he has loved for a long time.

Following this reunion, elements of Gatsby and Daisy's affair create a misunderstanding which leads a man to shoot Gatsby, and thus, leave him to drown in his own swimming pool. In her essay, "Gatsby as a drowned sailor," Margaret Lukens proposes that Gatsby's death by water is not just literal but also figurative. Lukens contends that, "Metaphorically, [Gatsby] drowns while attempting to live like the rich, to swim with those of inherited wealth" (45).

Puddles follow Gatsby throughout the novel until his death, demonstrating that in order to avoid death by drowning, puddles must be avoided. This idea that puddles must be sidestepped also appears in the Eighteenth-century poem that I quote at the beginning of my novel. In this poem, a man decides to never return to the city in which he stepped in a puddle deep enough to submerge a large portion of his body. Significantly in this humorous verse, the puddle is *not* shallow enough to walk through, but encases the man's entire lower body. Furthermore, the idea of avoiding puddles appears in real life Elizabethan history as Sir Walter Raleigh is said to have placed his cloak over a puddle in order to prevent Queen Elizabeth the first from walking through it. His act signifies male chivalry, and implies that the comical danger of puddles to men is a real threat to maintaining the fiction of femininity. Thus, both men and women need fear puddles, yet that fear itself is often ridiculed.

In my novel, I challenge the notion that puddles are associated with drowning and must be shunned in order to avoid death by using Magic Realism to prevent my protagonist, Sara, from seeing puddles when her life enters a period of stasis and entrapment. While her inability to notice puddles may seem ideal since the presence of puddles often foreshadows death by drowning, Sara panics at the absence of puddles which she believes represent progress and life. Whereas puddles follow Gatsby, my

character embarks on a quest to follow and seek out puddles which become symbols of her escape of a metaphorical death. Therefore, unlike Gatsby, the absence of puddles puts Sara at risk of drowning on dry land.

For Sara, the question of what constitutes a puddle becomes almost as important as finding puddles. For instance, she contemplates whether she might classify a collection of saliva or a pool of tears as puddles. However, she always returns to the belief that the only collections of water that are truly puddles are those left behind by the rain. Although, technically, all collections of water, including those created by saliva and tears, were once raindrops in some form, Sara decides that only those left behind directly after a rain session constitute puddles; she abides by this definition as a way to negotiate her desire to control her surroundings.

As a result of Sara's attempts to place constraints of control over her search for puddles, she never finds puddles. While Sara accepts the rain's lack of puddle creation as a message that she must find a way to rediscover puddles, she overlooks the fact that she must break her own life rules in order to do so, and hence, in order to survive. In her search for puddles, Sara merely creates new rules (such as those that dictate what constitutes a puddle) and, consequently, Sara and her readers never see puddles of water in the novel.

Puddles also intertwine with the notion of who controls whom in *The Great Gatsby*. Lukens speaks to this fact, proposing that the above instance where Gatsby stands in a puddle "is not only a premonition of his end but also an image of his inability to control or to survive his relationship with Daisy Buchanan" (45).

For Gatsby, puddles symbolize his powerlessness, and yet he constantly surrounds himself with them. For example, he stands in puddles and even moves into a house across

the bay from that of Daisy's—only a small body of water separates them. As a result, is it valid to conclude that Gatsby brought on his own death by merely filling his life with, and literally submerging himself in, puddles? Did he have every intention of drowning as he stood on the porch in a puddle? Although the answers to these questions may seem insignificant to my novel, my protagonist's opposing view of puddles portrays these natural elements of death in a new light. Whereas puddles may be the ultimate cause of Gatsby's death, Sara believes that they are the only things that can save her.

In this essay I will explore the role of puddles in Sara's plight to avoid death in the novel. In addition, I will approach this essay from a feminist perspective and will explore situations that place Sara on the path to a metaphorical death and how this metaphorical death relates to the traditional fate that female characters in literary texts and female writers of literary texts face.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis opens her book, *Writing beyond the Ending*, by saying, "Once upon a time, the end, the rightful end, of women in novels was social—successful courtship, marriage—or judgmental of her sexual and social failure—death." This DuPlessis quotation reveals that traditional novels present female characters with an ultimatum—to either fulfill traditional female roles, and thus enter into private sphere confinement, or experience death when unable or reluctant to fulfill these roles. Even when female protagonists end up with a choice that leads to marriage rather than death, I argue that they still experience death on a metaphorical level in that marriage intertwines with private sphere oppression, killing their independent voices, occupational dreams, etc. In her essay, *The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma*, Andrea Nicki confirms the affects private sphere confinement has on women by proposing that "women become mentally ill as they realize to an extreme degree feminine

norms of dependency, vulnerability, and helplessness in order to escape constraining traditional female roles” (83). Although Nicki refers to cases of actual women in Twentieth-century North America, I find her comments pertinent to contemporary literature in that the deaths female protagonists face are often metaphorical, sending female characters into depression and suicidal states, as well as hysteria as a result of their confinement within the private sphere.

Similar to the struggles of female characters in literary tradition, female writers also struggle as a result of private sphere confinement. In the preface to her book, *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel*, Rosalind Miles reveals that women novelists, “had to fight a much deeper and usually unacknowledged battle within the predominately masculine novel tradition, first to find a permitted place, and second to find a voice that could make itself heard” (ix). Traditionally, patriarchal society silenced the voices of women writers trying to enter the male realm of literature by discouraging women from education and merely viewing them as moral teachers responsible for sustaining governance within the home. Consequently, their writing was seen as inferior. The connection between female characters in contemporary literature and female writers becomes important in my novel, *Shallow Enough to Walk Through*, as my protagonist attempts to become a writer throughout the novel. Thus, my novel explores two literary struggles females faced in North American literary tradition.

While, in the Twenty-first century, female writers no longer struggle to write and publish novels, female characters continue to experience metaphorical deaths resulting from private sphere confinement. As a result, DuPlessis proposes that “It is the project of...women writers to...replace the alternate endings in marriage and death...by offering a different set of choices” (4). In my novel, I embark on this task. Although I could easily

change literary history by constructing a female protagonist who avoids private sphere confinement altogether, never having to choose between marriage or death, I decided to tackle the issue of private sphere confinement by allowing my female protagonist to literally write her way out of a metaphorical death. In doing so, I create a character who, despite her own efforts to avoid private sphere confinement, finds herself on this confining path. As a writer herself, my protagonist Sara Pierce, whether she knows it or not, has the power to write herself a new ending. As a result, my novel simultaneously tackles the oppression female writers and female protagonists experience as a result of private sphere confinement; in doing so, my protagonist's journey throughout the novel becomes a starting point for female writers and female characters striving to overcome the fate of female literary icons.

In *Shallow Enough to Walk Through*, Sara anticipates the unpleasant fate that awaits her once she reaches high school and enters romantic relationships with men. In an attempt to prevent herself from succumbing to her own metaphorical death, Sara vows to remain the sole agent of her life by organizing and containing every part of it so that no one else can. To this end, she fosters unconventional relationships with male characters. For example, she decides to date only men who are what she designates as "broken" and need fixing because she believes this type of man will be dependent on her and not criticize her flaws due to his preoccupation with his own issues. Once Sara emotionally "fixes" a man, she moves on and finds another to take his place, never allowing these relationships to last long enough for her to develop an attachment to them. However, by altering many aspects of her life for convenience, Sara ultimately slips into the role of the typical oppressed girlfriend in literary texts in that she "designs" herself around the men

she dates— thus confining herself before they impose a confinement upon her. Ironically, she becomes entrapped by believing she can never be trapped.

Although Sara, in many ways, fulfills traditional female roles, she, unlike the female characters in literary texts that act as her forbearers, escapes a metaphorical death at the novel's close. As the novel progresses, key literary techniques and structural elements of the text contribute to Sara's downfall as well as her ultimate escape from the roles which entrap her. I turn to meta-narrative, palimpsest, and Magic Realism techniques to separate Sara's story from the plethora of stories about female protagonists which end in depression, suicide, and hysteria. I use these techniques because they allow me, as the author, to hand my female protagonist a pen, giving her the power to gain her voice as a female writer and, in doing so, construct herself an ending that challenges the literary traditions of marriage or death. In this essay, I explore the ways in which elements of the text contribute to the transition Sara makes from a woman with a plan to escape traditional female roles, to a woman unable to avoid her downfall as a female character to, ultimately, a female protagonist who literally avoids metaphorical death and emotional confinement, thus outsmarting her fate.

Readers learn of Sara's attempts to avoid confining female roles from an early age as she resists her father's efforts to emphasize her femininity. In the opening scene the text reads:

[In the fifth grade,] everyone stopped wearing dresses and I began 'accidentally' falling into puddles of mud at recess, creating dirt and grass stains too deep to work out of white linen. I told him it happened while I was playing hopscotch or some other girl games and he told me he was spending too much money on my clothes. I started wearing

Mark's hand-me-downs. But Dad wasn't about to let me dress like a boy and I wouldn't keep nice dresses clean. (4)

While this scene demonstrates Sara's resistance when male characters pressure her to wear traditional female attire, readers also learn in this chapter about Sara's lack of occupational success. Although she desires to be a writer, Sara begins the novel inside a frustrating (for her, and amusing for the reader) case of writer's block, "repeatedly typing 0000000000000000" on her keyboard as a result (1). This juxtaposition between Sara's strengths and weaknesses simultaneously reveals how I construct my novel to depict a female protagonist driven to resist private sphere confinement and metaphorical death, at the same time as she as struggles as a writer in a world where male characters attempt to dominate her.

As the second chapter unfolds, Dan, the main character who contributes to Sara's private sphere entrapment, enters the story. At this time, I arm Sara with a writerly weapon of defense and allow her to take authorial control over the text through the technique of palimpsest. Sara's first palimpsestic efforts, which surface through ~~strikeroughs~~, mainly affect the novel's descriptions. A prime example occurs in the following section: "This is the scene: Friday night, eight o'clock, Dan, me, his Border Burger uniform, my grey jogging pants and ~~pink t-shirt blue t-shirt~~ white t-shirt, this living room, this green couch, that seventeen-inch television, that movie" (6). Through her palimpsestic typing, Sara attempts to take over the role of storyteller, shifting authorial power from the author, to her, the narrator. But Sara's physical marks on the text represent her as the artist only in a limited and contained manner, as she frequently rewrites the colour of a t-shirt or a pattern on plates, and does not alter the more important aspects of the plot. Her hesitation symbolizes the struggles female writers have faced,

such as a patriarchal literary world labelling their writing as inferior and in constant need of editing (usually from men).

In addition, the hesitation evident in Sara's palimpsestic marks on the text represents her fear of change. The fear of change features prominently in this novel, for other characters as well as Sara, and plays out in myriad ways. For example, Dan fears change so much that he gets angry at Sara for ordering a kind of soup different from the one that she orders every day. Angie, though she despises the way Dan tries to control Sara, believes in living out traditional gender roles—getting married, becoming a mother, and working as a teacher. Angie, however, does not experience a metaphorical death because she willingly chooses marriage and a traditional male-female relationship, never feeling confined in the private sphere. Sara's fear in particular arises due to her belief that she can avoid the dating fate of girls in her high school by rejecting change. In Sara's mind, change intertwines with images of husbands and fathers forcing their wives to hide their emotions and their daughters to wear dresses. Sara's subtle marks on the text also represent her struggles with her relationship with Dan, a man who appears broken upon their first encounter but, as time passes, also proves unfixable. Believing she needs a broken man to avoid the dating pitfalls she feared in high school, Sara invests heavily in a future with Dan once she realizes that he does not fit her plan—she has been with him for so long that breaking up would be too large a change for her. As well, as unhappy as Sara is with Dan, she knows she would be even unhappier with other men who are not as accommodating about her fears and anxieties. Dan, for all his faults, lets Sara roam unchallenged in their small relationship cage. That neither of them realize they exist within a caged relationship is part of the ongoing trap. Again, Sara ironically traps herself by embracing a relationship that will not require her to change. Therefore, in order to stay

on track with her plan to escape a female confining role, Sara believes she must carefully plan and control the details of her everyday existence. As she becomes bolder as a writer (though not necessarily as a character), she crosses out more and more of the “original” text; her contribution to the story, through ~~striketroughs~~, progresses at a steady pace, beginning with her interjection of subtle descriptive details to her ability to cross out entire scenes by the end of the novel.

Although Sara’s increasing participation in the novel’s creation is significant for her escape of the fate of female protagonists in literary texts, the content of her comments in larger sections of ~~striketroughs~~ proves otherwise. As Sara transitions from crossing out small details of the text to omitting larger selections, she begins obstructing areas of text containing her own internal monologues. For example, in one of the novel’s ending scenes, Sara has the opportunity to escape her confining life by flying to Toronto and then to Vegas which will physically distance her from oppressive male characters such as her father and her boyfriend, Dan. Yet, while waiting in the airport for her flight, the text reveals Sara’s emotions through her stream of consciousness by informing readers of her own feelings through her assessment and evaluation of the other people at the airport, and her suppression of that assessment:

~~Maybe they’re having second thoughts about walking through the doors into Windsor or admitting that there’s a ticket warming in their pocket that will take them to Toronto, a city with more traffic jams, more shopping venues, more business people than Windsor could ever imagine. Adjusting to taking the subway in Toronto as opposed to driving to work in Windsor may. Sleeping in hotels as opposed to your own bed where you know who slept on your sheets last may be. Spending Friday nights gambling or taking shots of alcohol off cocktail waitresses in Vegas instead of staying home and~~

~~watching the same movie that you've watched almost every Friday night for four years in Windsor might actually.~~ (137)

In this section, Sara's fear of change complicates her attempts to gain authorial control because she draws attention to her reluctance to embrace this opportunity of escape by crossing out her internal monologue. By crossing out this section of text, Sara crosses out herself in that she indicates that she does not want to communicate her own personal feelings to readers. On the other hand, since Sara does use palimpsest to control this section, Sara as writer overpowers Sara a woman who fears change. Additionally, while Sara's emotions (which she crosses out) may show her weakness and fear of change even to the extent of escaping private sphere entrapment, no one else has influenced them and they belong only to her. Yet Sara erases them, making herself another one of her oppressors. In doing so, Sara challenges traditional book endings because, whereas men prove to be the ultimate oppressors of women in literary texts, Sara may be her own ultimate oppressor; when given authorial control, Sara uses it to silence her own voice rather than promote it.

Despite the ways Sara unsuccessfully and hesitantly uses these palimpsest strategies, she commits to her authorial control by using palimpsest as an escapist technique before the novel's end. In the scene following the aforementioned one where she crosses out her internal monologue, Sara crosses out an entire scene and—by doing so—she contributes to her escape of her former oppressive life in Windsor—a scene where she does not go to Vegas. The scene in question begins with Sara's return from the airport (having not gotten onto the plane) where she arrives home to find that her stagnant unproductive life was just as she had left it. This entire scene is crossed out, allowing the novel to continue on to a scene where Sara, in fact, does fly to Vegas. Therefore, by

handing Sara a pen, and by presenting her with two alternate endings, I allow her to choose her ending. She has two options—to return home to Windsor and remain on the path headed straight for a metaphorical death or to go to Vegas, an option which presents her with neither marriage nor death. Consequently, by giving Sara these options, my novel not only fulfills DuPlessis's request for female writers to allow their female protagonists to escape endings of marriage and death by giving them other options, but I write an ending that lets my protagonist choose her fate.

Just as my novel's use of palimpsest works to aid my female protagonist in determining her own fate, my use of meta-narrative also presents Sara with a pen to contribute to her story. However, whereas Sara eventually employs palimpsestic control to save herself, she does not successfully take advantage of meta-narrative and merely alludes to this literary technique to push her towards a metaphorical death. Meta-narrative primarily appears in the text when Sara writes articles for the technology website where she works. During the scene where she writes, the events unfolding in the meta-narrative parallel the events happening around her. For example, in one scene, Dan comes to visit Sara, bringing with him a bag of Skittles. As she and Dan, as well as her friends, consume the candies, Sara writes an article about Certicom, a company suing Sony for patent infringement. While writing, Sara's mind wanders and she develops a story in her mind about a fifth-dimension plagued by the criminal acts of Mr. Sony, a thief "dressed from head to toe in neon green" (91). Interestingly, other colours that glow and commonly appear in neon tones, such as yellow, find significance in other aspects of this chapter because Dan

... lines up a row of yellow Skittles along [Sara's] desk. Yellow is his favourite but he likes almost every kind of Skittle except the purple ones which he claims are

“wrong” but won’t say how or why. On his search for yellow Skittles, he picks up the purple ones, flinging them to the side of the bowl. When he finds the yellow ones, he likes to put ten in a row and then eat them one by one. When the ten are gone he makes another row of ten and repeats the cycle. (93)

While Sara does not entirely understand why Dan despises purple candies, readers have some indication; by this point in the text, they have learned that Dan has an even stronger fear of change than Sara and, as a result, rejects whatever he deems abnormal. As purple is not a primary colour, Dan feels threatened by it and reacts by isolating it from his view. In addition, the repeating patterns Dan makes with the candies and his system for consuming them further contribute to the novel’s depiction of Dan’s fear of change in that he is a character invested in habits and patterns that date back to his childhood, and sees no reason to change any aspect of his personality or behaviour, despite approaching adulthood.

As the scene progresses, Sara’s internal story involving Mr. Sony evolves. Each time she shifts from her personal narration to Mr. Sony’s story, Sara herself notes how she slips back into the fifth dimension, employing this story-writing as an escape from the confining world around her. Moreover, unlike the stagnant life she lives as Dan’s girlfriend—characterized by watching the same movie every Friday night, eating at the same restaurant, etc.—the world Sara imagines includes unpredictable events such the fifth-dimension thievery and characters, like Mr. Sony, who constantly evolves as she creates him. As a result, Sara relies on meta-narrative as an attempt to mentally escape her boring life with Dan. However, within Sara’s narration of Sony’s story, readers see that the fifth dimension is hardly an escape for her, for the very reason that it so closely resembles Sara’s daily world:

I imagine Sony would be a decent looking man with an evil that glows in his irises. The kind of criminal that every woman fears will slip in through a window when her husband is at work, slicing her wrists until she bleeds to death, then laying her in a bathtub of cool water, placing a razorblade on the ledge to look like suicide. (96)

Unlike in this story of the fifth dimension, female characters in literary texts often do commit suicide as a reaction to their entrapment in the private sphere. According to DuPlessis, “in texts ending with death, there is often a moment of protest—social energy or a desiring life—just as in the marriage ending, the protest is autonomy or vocation” (16). Therefore, these moments of protest preceding suicide highlight that while female characters in literary texts do fight for their autonomy they ultimately fail; consequently, suicide figures as the only true escape from confining traditional female roles.

DuPlessis’s statement convinces me that this scene only subtly differs from a scene where a woman commits suicide because, even in literary situations of suicide, male characters are technically the murderers as their oppressive acts are what lead the female characters to end their own lives. Moreover, this scene unfolds to show how Dan metaphorically leads Sara to death because, like a criminal, Dan hinders her plan to escape. In Dan’s case, Sara can never successfully fix him because he constantly embraces his flaws and expects Sara to confine her world to his own limited expectations. Yet by the time Sara realizes the control Dan exerts over her, he is a part of her life. Dan, like a sci-fi criminal, robs Sara of metaphorically escaping death, moulding her into a typically oppressed girlfriend character. In addition, in this scene Sara becomes an active agent of her own confinement because she writes the story of Mr. Sony which involves an entrapped woman.

A final literary technique I employ to allow my female protagonist's story to have an ending that includes neither marriage nor death is Magic Realism. Although many definitions of Magic Realism exist, I find the explanation M.H. Abrams includes in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* most useful. According to Abrams, writers achieve Magic Realism by interweaving, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairytales (196). In her book, *Magic(al) Realism*, Maggie Ann Bowers adds to this definition, saying that "magic realism relies most upon the matter-of-fact realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings (3). Basically, Magical Realism occurs in literary texts when magical or extraordinary things happen within a realistic context but these magical or extraordinary occurrences are accepted by the characters experiencing them as absolutely ordinary and *unmagical*.

I use Magic Realism in *Shallow Enough to Walk Through* in various ways, but primarily to create Sara's relationship with the outcome of weather. At the novel's opening, Sara notes, "Three weeks it's been raining, but no puddles" (1). In the first few chapters, readers come to realize that, for Sara, puddles signal progress: puddles are proof that rain has occurred. Since Sara fails in her attempts to write creatively, she becomes obsessed with searching for puddles, hoping that their presence will cure her writer's block, or at the very least hoping to discover a flaw in nature that will allow her to untangle her own reliance on character flaws, on the natural and obvious cause and effect that puddles promise. I include Sara's writer's block in the text to symbolize Sara's retreat into private sphere confinement by allowing her writer's block to continue as Sara slips further into the oppressed girlfriend role. Due to the life she lives with Dan—a life

where she constantly monitors what she does or says so that Dan will not become angry or disoriented—Sara cannot think creatively and has trouble writing stories. By depicting Sara as a character who finds creative success important, I demonstrate how female characters in literary texts and female writers of literary texts often experience metaphorical deaths when male characters silence their voices. Parallel to Sara’s inability to write creatively due to the way Dan controls her voice—by getting angry when she speaks of change, often reacting by providing her with information intended to make her fear new ideas or adventures—is her job as a technical writer. While writing for a technology website, Sara merely dictates news occurring in the consumer-driven, patriarchal world. For this reason, she tries to find her own voice by writing creatively, yet is unsuccessful due to writer’s block and her inability to write an original masterpiece because of her restraint; a restraint she feels in order to please Dan, but also to shield herself from change and—ultimately—personal growth. Consequently, once the weather itself reflects Sara’s lack of progress through pathetic fallacy, she becomes obsessed with finding these remnants of rain.

Primarily, the absence of puddles signifies a breakdown of rules which govern the world because, normally, excessive rain equals post-rain puddles. Throughout history, much literature has been written to dictate rules that women must follow in order to show proper etiquette. Even when women began writing themselves, they did so in the form of conduct books. According to Lucy Morrison, in her essay “Conduct (Un)Becoming to Ladies of Literature: How-to Guides for Romantic Women Writers,” women wrote conduct books to set examples for women following them. In addition, “The definitions of and restrictions placed upon women [in these conduct books] shifted with each text as the feminine realm claimed its own ideology and discourse from within masculine

boundaries” (203). Therefore, women found their writing voices by writing about rules. Although this seemed to be an achievement because women were putting their own words to paper, they were equating success with writing in a patriarchal fashion, promoting the idea that women must follow a fixed set of rules in order to function correctly in society. In my novel, I attempt to subvert the idea that women find success by following rules. Through Magic Realism, I demonstrate that for Sara this upturning of rules signifies that her efforts to confine and organize her life have failed. By living by these rules, Sara unnoticeably becomes trapped in the abused girlfriend role. By breaking the rules of weather through Magic Realism, I set an example for Sara, showing her that she must break her own rules in order to escape a metaphorical death by the novel’s close.

I use Magic Realism techniques in the novel in an attempt to make Sara conscious of her impending fate by employing them to mirror the ways men set out to control her through consumption. Consumption is a primary theme in feminist texts and often leads female characters to their metaphorical deaths. For example, in Margaret Atwood’s novel, *The Edible Woman*, a female protagonist’s body and mind react to her loss of identity by literally preventing her from consuming certain types of foods. In *Shallow Enough to Walk Through*, Sara does not avoid eating because of male influences as Atwood’s protagonist does. However, food consumption does become regulated by the men in her life. A prime example of the hold that male characters have over Sara’s identity in terms of consumption relates to a ritual—an annual Christmas double date—that she attends with her best friend Angie and the men whom they are dating at the time. While the text reveals only a few particulars of this tradition, one specific piece of information appears in a comment Angie makes one year: “You should have just brought him. Made him pay for your dinner. We never have to pay for our Christmas dinners,” Angie says when Sara

admits that she did not bring a date to the dinner as she had planned (77). Although it seems as if Angie encourages Sara to invite a man along just to pay for her dinner, her statement also buys into a way that men control women through consumption—by paying for their food so that women do not technically own what they consume.

At this specific dinner, although Sara does not have a male date in attendance to pay her way to consumption, she turns to the only man at the table—Angie’s boyfriend Luke—to help her decide what to order. Luke proposes that they order nachos as an appetizer but Sara says, “I don’t want bar food. We’re at a nice restaurant. Not a sport’s bar” and proposes “Tandoori salmon stuffed with a lemon cream puree” (76). While Sara does declare what she would like to eat, her mind is easily changed when Luke says, “Funny how Sara eats so much fish considering eyes freak her out... You know, sometimes they serve these salmon appetizers with little eyes sprinkled on top for decoration” (76). With little argument, Sara eventually replies, “Fine, we’ll get the nachos” (76). Not only is this passage significant because Sara allows Luke to choose her food for her even though she prefers a different dish, but also because Luke convinces her to choose a dish that is not at all close to the type of food in the novel frequently associated with Sara—fish. Whenever Sara has the chance to choose what she would like to eat, she turns to such dishes as “...coconut shrimp with pineapple sauce,” (76), “Tandoori salmon stuffed with a lemon cream puree” (76), and “Mushroom’s Neptune. The one with crab and cream cheese” (76). Seafood is significant to Sara’s identity because fish are living, breathing creatures and by eating them Sara is exercising power over another being through consumption. Yet when Luke discourages her from eating fish, replacing her meal with the ultimately inanimate nachos, he leads her away from her ability to consume a food that will give her power.

This incident involving Luke occurs early on in the novel and introduces the idea of men gaining power over Sara by controlling her consumption, yet even more prominent consumption-based battles of power exist in Sara's relationship with her boyfriend Dan. Since Sara is romantically linked with Dan, the ways in which he controls her consumption are more aggressive than those of Luke. For example, when Sara attends her and Angie's annual Christmas dinner years after the incident with Luke and the fish eyes, she brings Dan, who also tries to discourage her from eating fish.

"I want to try the salmon. Angie says it's good," Sara says after scanning her menu. "Salmon has mercury in it. Didn't you watch the news last week? You could die," Dan replies. As a result, Sara settles for "Spaghetti with meat sauce. One plate, two forks," which she shares with Dan (113). Emma Parker's essay, "You are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood" is useful to help read this scene because Parker says that "...men and women hunt each other like prey and metaphorically consume each other just as hunters once devoured animals" (364). By equating Sara's desire to consume salmon with death, Dan metaphorically "hunts" her by taking away her role as hunter which she acquires through eating other creatures. Whereas Luke jokingly deters Sara from ordering fish by encouraging her to find it unappetizing, Dan labels it as life threatening, rendering her opinion inferior to his. Moreover, since Dan's control over Sara's consumption follows that of Luke's and is more severe than that of Luke's, readers witness how the male control over Sara's consumption increases and gains a stronger hold over Sara as the novel progresses, pushing her further towards a metaphorical death.

Sara is robbed of what she truly desires to consume—writing—just as Dan and Luke do. Through Magic Realist metaphors, I show Sara’s inability to drink water from a glass. In this scene, the text reads:

Even though I’d turned off the faucet, I heard water running into the sink as I tipped the glass and brought it to my lips. The water in my glass was disappearing faster than I could drink. There was a hole in the bottom and a tiny misshapen piece of glass lying in the sink. (87)

Whereas Luke and Dan deter Sara from consuming her foods of choice by manipulating her emotions, I use the technique of Magic Realism in the text to literally rob Sara of the substance she attempts to consume. By controlling Sara’s consumption in a way that she is visually aware of, Magic Realist images point her to the fact that she is being controlled. It does so by providing her with physical evidence of this control, material evidence not present when Luke and Dan prevent her from consumption by merely using words. In this same scene, I further use the technique of Magic Realism as a way for the text to warn Sara of the control men have over her by creating a physical connection between Sarah and the rain when she is indoors.

The rain outside instantly grew louder until it was inside the kitchen, tapping on my shoulder from within my body. I looked...to the rain out the window, and then touched my arm, feeling the rain in me. I knew it was a warning, that the rain was determined to prevent me from writing stories, or at least creative, publishable stories. (87)

While Magic Realist images overtly and physically warn Sara of the male contribution to her fate as a female character in literary texts, Sara misinterprets the warning, and instead, believes that it is the rain that tries to hinder her from achieving her goals, not men. On

the one hand, Magic Realism appears as a failure, proposing that an effort to save this female protagonist through literary devices will be unsuccessful. On the other hand, the Magic Realism message does help Sara stray from the path to metaphorical death because by believing that the rain tries to prevent her from writing creatively, Sara at least realizes that some force is trying to hinder her progress, even if she misinterprets what it is.

When Sara notices the absence of puddles and the breakdown of rules that govern her world, this character who fears change desperately searches for puddles so that she can be reassured to avoid the fate of female characters. However, her desperate search for puddles only pushes her further into her fate by portraying her as the hysterical woman in literary texts, experiencing hallucinations. A specific text which demonstrates a female character fallen into hysterics is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. In this text, a woman's husband and doctor/brother decide that she is hysterical and lock her in a room decorated with yellow wallpaper so that she can rest. Yet, this entrapment alone causes her hysterics, leading her to hallucinate women imprisoned behind bars trapped within the wallpaper in need of her rescue. Like this character, Sara's role sends her into hysterics because when puddles do not appear and she realizes her efforts to write creatively have failed, she becomes obsessed with finding puddles and gaining the control she once had over her life.

Sara becomes a hysterical female character when other characters, especially those who have little or no trouble seeing puddles (or simply those who do not notice whether there are puddles around or not), show a lack of understanding for her obsession. For example, when Angie casually notes that she stepped into a large puddle, she views Sara's concern for the puddles as an attempt at humour:

“Didn't you see me step in the huge puddle by the curb?” [Angie says]

“No. My feet are dry.”

Angie lifts her foot. The light red satin is bleeding. Dots of crimson blood seep from its pores, leaving bruises on the thin straps. I bend down, run my finger through the droplets on Angie’s toes and bring it to my lips. The water is warm from her skin.

“Stop joking around Sara,” Angie says, kicking me away. “Help me dry them.”

“Where was the puddle?”

“I told you, by the curb.”

“But I didn’t step in any water.”

“Are you going to gloat or are you going to help me?” (105)

When Angie says, “Stop joking around” as Sara bends to examine the drops of water on her shoes, readers see how other characters brush off Sara’s obsession with puddles as a joke. Therefore, readers perceive Sara as possibly hysterical when other characters minimize the seriousness of her obsession with puddles. Like the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* who only becomes hysterical when men lock her in a room because they believe she is hysterical because she is a woman, Sara takes on the role of a hysterical character because other characters consider her search and concern for puddles as strange, presenting this strangeness to readers as absurd, and deeming Sara on a hysterical quest.

The Magic Realist images in the novel further contribute to Sara’s retreat into the fate of female characters in literary texts because she misinterprets the message, which indicates that she must avoid her metaphorical death by breaking her own rules. While the message deals with the rules Sara has concerning relationships with “broken” men, Sara attempts to change her life by breaking her rules about puddles, deciding on page 116 that pools of water other than those created by rain constitute puddles. Leading up to this breaking of rules is a dinner scene where Dan prevents Sara from ordering her desired

food. Sara, feeling helpless, becomes obsessed with her reflection in a round white plate.

In this scene the text reads:

I see my reflection in the plate. Inching closer I look for tiny white hands that could pull me into its round vortex. I imagine there's a circular room on the other side of the plate. Smaller than my bathroom, whiter than the fridge with the seashell magnet. Silver hoops on chains dangle from the ceiling, threatening to clasp me, lift me off the ground, and suspend me in the air. On the white floor there's a deep puddle. It's there to catch me when the circles let go. But when they release, the puddle disappears. I fall hard on white wood. (115)

The events Sara imagines in this scene exaggerate her fear of creative success. This fear is also linked to her inability to escape Dan's hold on her since she finds herself trapped in a "circular room." As previously mentioned, Dan's control over Sara and the boring life she lives as his ill-treated girlfriend contribute to her inability to write creatively. Therefore, locating puddles is Sara's only way of finding her writing voice and escaping her life with Dan

I shall apply Andrea Nicki's aforementioned contention, that women become mentally ill upon realizing their entrapment within the private sphere, to this scene because Sara realizing the seriousness of her inability to find puddles and how close she is to falling to her metaphorical death indicates a breakdown of her mental sanity. Her hallucinations push her into a hysterical state as she runs outside and tries to create a puddle with her own saliva. This image of Sara lowering a dangling blob of saliva into her hand symbolizes how desperate Sara is to "solve" her problems. She attempts to invent puddles (which is an action she considers to be breaking the rules), risking

onlookers who would judge Sara's behaviour as hysterical, and thus, convincing readers that she is now hysterical from a patriarchal point-of-view.

Although Sara attempts to break the rules by creating a puddle with saliva, she ultimately does not "count" such a puddle when she spots an onlooker—a woman who resembles a principal she had in high school. Since principals represent rules and governing, the image of this woman reminds Sara of her fear of change and of breaking the rules. As a result, she decides that making a puddle out of saliva would be cheating because "Puddles are made of H₂O" (117) and saliva is not. As she escapes her hysteria by rethinking her idea about breaking the rules, just as I show the weather breaking the rules through Magic Realism by not leaving puddles in its wake, she returns to her role of a woman entrapped by that very system of rules. Either way, Sara fails in that moment to escape her journey towards a metaphorical death. Therefore, in this section of the text, the Magic Realist images fail to save Sara from a metaphorical death. Her one attempt to break free of rules ironically sends Sara toward a literary state of female hysteria.

Despite Sara's inability to let Magic Realism save her throughout most of the novel, my employment of this literary technique at the novel's close does prove successful for Sara. At the ending of the novel, Sara arrives in Vegas, distanced from Dan and her father, ready to restart her life, uncontrolled by oppressive men. Ironically, Sara runs away from two male characters (and, ultimately, her female roommate), toward the presence of her brother Mark, a male character who always tries to help her escape situations where other male characters try to oppress her. For example, Mark convinces their parents to let Sara move out of the house, distancing her from her oppressive father. Also, Mark suggests that Sara accompany him to Vegas, a proposition that would separate Sara from Dan. During the novel's last few scenes, readers learn that Sara must

take a plane from Windsor to Toronto and then another to Vegas. Considering Sara's fear of flying, as well as her fear of change, readers can assume by this point that even if she did get on the plane to Toronto, she would never have the motivation and nerve to board the next plane to Vegas, and would, instead, return via train to Windsor without ever making it to Vegas.

But she does.

A flight from Windsor to Vegas suddenly becomes available and—through one (magically) direct flight only—she ends up in Vegas. Consequently, I provide Sara with a Magic Realist setting which allows the possibility for extraordinary events to take place. Sara continues her life and escapes a metaphorical death because the Magic Realist plot elements alter realistic events to make it possible for her to bypass the step of flying from Windsor to Toronto to immediately land in Vegas, preventing her from contemplating a retreat to her old life. Magic Realism makes it possible for Sara to escape the containing realism that subsumes female characters in literary texts. As Sara escapes her metaphorical death not only through a fortuitous direct flight from small-town Windsor to big-time sin city, readers rethink the “magic” narrative thus far, ready to believe in puddle-less rain, and how searching for such mundane evidence of weather can assist a character in becoming an artist, becoming the writer who strikes out her own metaphorical death, and writes a seemingly “escapist” finale.

Despite the fact that Sara believes that puddles can save her, Sara is only truly saved from drowning on dry land when she moves to an area where the land is even drier—Vegas. In Vegas, rain occurs so infrequently that puddles are never the norm. However, even though Sara spends the course of the novel trying to find these puddles that she believes will save her life, once she flies to Vegas, she cannot be saved, nor

drowned, by them because they do not exist (ie, they never exist, rather than that they simply do not exist to Sara alone). But how does this change in location absolve Sara of her obsession with puddles? The question does not surface as a concern for Sara because once she boards the plane, puddles are never mentioned again.

I will again turn to *The Great Gatsby* to more fully answer this question. Puddles and the idea of drowning follow Gatsby throughout the novel to symbolize his unsuccessful attempts to reunite with Daisy which ultimately lead him to death. Daisy is something beyond Gatsby's grasp so he engages in strenuous efforts, including moving to a house that is only across the bay from hers, in order to regain Daisy's love. He believes that by living near Daisy his life will improve but his actions only push him closer to death and deeper in to the puddles that will ultimately drown him. For Sara, puddles are equivalent to Daisy because, just like Gatsby cannot have Daisy, Sara cannot have puddles. She wants them and engages in extensive efforts—even those that deem her hysterical according to patriarchal society—to find them. But when she moves to Vegas, a place so arid that standing pools of water are nonexistent, puddles are no longer an option for Sara. As a result, her quest becomes unnecessary because she can no longer use puddles to gauge her life's stasis and her entrapment within this static life. By getting on the plane, Sara has taken a stance, followed through on the action of leaving her own life, and no longer needs the detritus of weather to assist her as a fully-formed character. Gatsby, on the other hand, remains in the realm of puddles, and thus of Daisy, and eventually drowns as a result of his existing plight to have his love requited.

My novel proposes that puddles, or, in Sara's case, the lack thereof, are only a threat in situations where they have the possibility or capability of existing. Would Gatsby have still drowned if he had moved to a home across the desert from Daisy? Sara

will definitely not drown in any Las Vegas puddles, nor will she need her “Daisy” to achieve a successful life. Unlike Gatsby, Sara faces away from the momentous puddles, and embraces the desert as a creative, redolent environment.

In my novel, *Shallow Enough to Walk Through*, I reply to DuPlessis’s plea for female writers to save female protagonists from endings characterized by either marriage or death. I do so by allowing my character authorial control through palimpsest and meta-narrative to literally write her own ending. When Sara attempts to escape metaphorical death by controlling her own life with a fixed set of failed rules, the Magic Realist ending offers her a way to escape a metaphorical death. I supply Sara with two endings—one where she remains on the path to her metaphorical death, and one where extraordinary events physically transport her to Vegas, a city where puddles do not save one’s literary desires, so much as the absurdist nature of the city convinces characters they can gamble and achieve their dreams. While I contribute to Sara’s escape of a metaphorical death by giving her these choices, she ultimately saves herself by using palimpsest to cross out the first ending, choosing the seemingly escapist ending. Thus, I not only allow Sara to escape the fate of female characters in traditional literary texts but also show her as an example of a female writer overcoming literary struggles to exist—in order to not “die,” she writes her own ending.

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