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A VERY BRIEF FALL

by

Lindsay McNiff

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

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2006

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Published Heritage  
Branch

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file* *Votre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-17071-7*  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-17071-7*

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## ABSTRACT

This collection contains eight short stories dealing with dissociated characters who strive for connection. Their displacement has, for the most part, a relation to age, place and status. A written discussion of character motivation and endings follows the text, where it is suggested that the characters here are motivated by their displacement, and that integration is never fully achieved.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the following for the impact they had on this project:

My committee: Susan Holbrook with admiration for her unwavering guidance, for all the time spent reading and re-reading, for her brilliant suggestions and careful edits, for helping me distil my ideas and shape the stories in this collection; Richard Douglass-Chin for his kindness and approachability, and for helping me pinpoint the smaller words that do not fit; Charlene Senn for her enthusiasm and for taking the time to be part of this project.

Di Brandt for three years of vigorous guidance; John Ditsky for his wise instruction and continued confidence in my writing; David Adams Richards for teaching me to keep the ending in mind; Margaret Christakos for showing me how to read my own writing in my head and with my voice.

My dearest friends: Rachel Eagen for her bottomless support and encouragement through every moment I have known her, for knowing more about most things than most people; Jenny Sampirisi for her sparkling insight and her measured, elegant words; Alex Zelenyj, the most sleepless writer I have ever known, a fiendish inspiration; Rachel Blok for the ice cream and nightmares, for her many years of friendship and wisdom, her clear and brilliant mind; Andria Kenney, my oldest and bravest friend, her stories have meant more to me than she knows; Kevin Durda for being there with patience and sympathy and a weakness for zombies, for his belief in me, for his own astonishing projects, so different from mine, that have made me want to see this project through to the end.

Thank you to my extraordinary parents, Wendy and Bill McNiff, with every bit of my love, for their unflinching support, affection and concern. Thank you to my incomparable Mom for teaching me to recognize what is most moving and vital about each person I know; to my remarkable Dad for his little stories that have helped me to value every tiny memory, and for teaching me confidence and modesty, their heartbreaking balance.

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*I'm still listening. I'm taking it all down.*  
- Barbara Gowdy

## A GIRLS NIGHT

Deedee draws hard on her cigarette and scans the room as though she is looking for someone.

Her friends left at least an hour ago and she's not sure what she's doing here. She remembers careening down the long staircase to the main floor of the bar and wishing explosive good nights to Carmella and Justine, who were both going home. We've had enough, Deed. Getting too old for this. This was cool though, we should do it again. Those stupid kisses on the cheek. Deedee hates herself for that. Why would she kiss the cheek of a girl she barely knows, a girl who once borrowed a pair of her pants and not only failed to return them but actually failed to mention them again, ever? Why would she stand there and wave like a jackass, her hand making duck motions and a big drunk smile on her face? She remembers an awareness of being there, alone, in the faintly misting rain with her big ugly purse clutched at her side because she's forever humiliated by the big purse, so startling and spinsterish next to the cute little handbags with decorative clasps and edgy designs carried by the other females at the bar. Deedee always buys the wrong size of purse. What she believes to be a small, cute bag in a store only grows larger and uglier once in her possession. The cute little handbags, those truly cute bags, were all black for the most part and probably held only a few plastic cards and maybe twenty dollars, one crisp folded bill. What single girl spent more than twenty dollars at a bar when there were so many men sidling up from all angles with their Can I buy you a drinks and This one's on mes and What are you drinkings. Maybe there's a pack of cigarettes in those handbags too because what girl doesn't smoke a little bit when



she has had a lot to drink? Deedee herself had spent at least forty dollars tonight, she realized an hour ago as she stood outside the bar smiling and waving goodbye, as she spied the ends of her hair frizzing into curls and wondered just how long she had been standing in this slight rain that never actually fell but just sat there in the air like a light fog. She showed the green stamp on her hand to the beefy but short bouncer and climbed the stairs again.

Now she is back here in the bar, and the cigarette she squeezes between her fingers is the gracious donation of one of a group of girls who look too young to be in here. Deedee herself doesn't smoke, at least not since one year ago next week. She is quite severely conscious of this and hopes that tomorrow morning when she wakes up both her mind and her body will have forgotten that she had filled up her lungs with the splendid toxins she had missed for the past year with something like a dull, almost unconscious passion. She tells herself there's a good chance she will forget about the cigarette and talks herself into asking someone else for another one. Hey, do you have an extra cigarette? she drawls, and the handsome boy in the baggy jeans and baseball cap glances at the half-finished cigarette already burning away in her hand and tells her he doesn't smoke. She takes a drag.

She'll probably forget about this. She feels shatteringly drunk. She can barely even remember the conversations she had with Justine and Carmella and she hopes quite suddenly and fervently that she hasn't said anything regrettable. Deedee had found, in her bar days of long past, a tendency to tell people things about herself that she never would have dreamed of telling anyone, least of all those people she happened to have actually told. She shakes her head and stares at the floor. She is convinced that she has said

something ridiculous. Dimly, she remembers telling the girls almost immediately upon their arrival at the bar following an overwhelming pre-drink at Carmella's house, that she wants to be mummified when she dies. She understands now how this must have sounded. The wine at Carmella's house had been sweet and too much on the chilly side – she had drunk it so fast that Justine had suggested they get her a funnel. Deedee remembers now their hesitant glances at each other as they each sipped ladylike from their fragile wine glasses and crossed their legs and smoothed their skirts and spoke of a colleague whom all three women mutually despised. Justine had a five year-old daughter who seemed to be picking up colouring inside the lines remarkably quickly; Carmella had made a fantastic turkey using a cheesecloth. Deedee had always hated the word “cheesecloth”. After her fifth or sixth glass of wine Deedee had gagged a little in the bathroom, trying hard to suppress her loud acidic burps and horrifically aware of the water filling up her eyes and her cold arms on the toilet bowl. She could hear quite clearly the voices of her co-workers in the next room, the tinkling laughter of women who have suddenly found themselves “a little tipsy”. She smelled the humiliating stench of the Hawaiian pizza that she herself had volunteered to pay for since it hadn't occurred to her to bring a bottle of wine the way it had occurred to Justine.

Alone now in the dark bar Deedee floats purposeless and a little on the finished side. Oh, I'm done, she burps to herself, pushing on her forehead which calmly sweats under the pounding lights. She laughs. Deedee decides to invent a purpose for herself by entering the women's washroom. She tells a tall pale girl with thin wispy hair and a haughty, finely carved face that she likes her skirt, but apparently the words don't come out right because the girl just stares at herself in the mirror. Deedee can't remember what

shade of lipstick she's wearing and her big motherish purse is just about half filled with lipsticks. She can barely open the purse, she staggers against the wall fumbling with the stupid clasp, its round metal sinking into her fingers. Finally unclamping the bag's ridged teeth she is angry at the troublesome thing, so extraneously full of makeup. She should really be ashamed of the care she takes in covering her face – this boring black bag does nothing but announce how very inadequate her less-than-youthful eyes nose mouth and cheeks are. She chooses a lipstick and drags it across her mouth, winces as she chips it off her tooth and gets a big, bitter taste of it. It isn't the right colour anyway, she looks clownish. She turns and poses, fixes her bra strap, sucks in her stomach. There are two girls behind her waiting to wash their hands and she takes painful note of their patient, vaguely annoyed and freshly lovely faces.

One of those girls has a face she could hate, Deedee decides as she pushes open the bathroom door, her palm sliding through something grimy and warmish. She wipes the hand on her black dress pants and concludes that she won't be wearing these pants to work on Monday. Certainly not. She'll need one last drink, it'll be a shot of black sambucca and somebody will buy it for her. She deeply regrets the streaks in her hair, who needs blond streaks? Her hair only looks straighter, older, tighter, silver almost, why did she do it? The hair on the top is growing in a light brown and she is vulnerable with those streaks, she determines as she strolls across the bar, head up, staring into set upon set of unfamiliar eyes. She is so obvious. The girl with the hateable face had dark hair, all one rich colour and eyes with heavy lids but no face makeup, none of the beige powdery residue that sometimes clings to the collar of the mall-bought wine coloured suit jacket Deedee wears to work repeatedly over different dress shirts. None of the creamy orangish

blobs like the ones Deedee will surely see on her pillow tomorrow morning. No way will she wash her face tonight, she is too tired. Too hammered. She'll probably call her ex-boyfriend when she gets home and mutter something into his answering machine. She'll walk home, she'll plan what to say to him. Something wise, she hopes.

Deedee wishes more than anything that she were close enough to the structure of the bar itself so she might lean on it or at least steady herself a bit. She feels like she might be swaying a little so she swings her hips slightly in hopes of looking perfectly together, happy, fun, dancing the night away like a partygirl. She is hot though, the smell of her sweat might betray her. There is never enough air in bars with all these other greedy breathers moving around. Everyone is too close to everyone else. Mummified. She is terrified of bugs. She has always felt that human burial is a game in which nobody wins but the fucking disgusting bugs. She doesn't want to be burned though. She supposes she doesn't really believe in death itself but more of a total cessation of movement. She thinks about this quite often, she might freely admit she has a little bit of a private obsession with the possible states of her body after she dies, and she is quite comfortable with the idea of her still body swaddled tightly like the Egyptians used to do. Bugs be damned. She herself rotting quietly, more importantly *slowly*, without any outside flesh-eating assistance. She can't believe she told Justine and Carmella. She feels crazy. You are what other people think you are. There are many more other people in the world than there are Deedees. Or this particular version of a Deedee, at any rate.

She bites her lip and feels sure that vomiting is three seconds away. A hand on her arm steadies her, it is a male hand, hairy and knobby, skinny fingers that are so long they look vaguely insectile, with overgrown but clean and strong fingernails. What are you

drinking? asks a voice belonging to the man with the hand. He is tall and boyish and a little bit young, his voice is gravelly but otherwise undifferentiated – the room is full of calling speaking laughing clanging voices like an unrehearsed chorus and his is maybe an alto. This bar is full of altos, she almost says, and I want to be wrapped up tightly when I die and the yellow in my hair is fake. So is the pink in yours. It's just the light. His hair is blond. She means to whisper Just water please into his wide and sort of flabby ear that looks astonishingly like a tiny elephant ear with its hanging lobes that feel like jelly to her lips which whisper Gin. Her whisper she thinks comes out like a croak, a bad contralto.

He is gone for a moment and during that moment she thinks about home. She does need to get there. Maybe that will be her excuse for calling her ex-boyfriend. She will dig her cell phone out of her mommy purse, she'll part the lipsticks, the compacts, the borrowed novel, the pay stubs, the garbage, the loose clinking coins, she'll call him up, she'll get the machine and she'll say something obscure and he'll wonder about her wild night, her time that he missed out on. He'll hear a million voices backing her.

But then the blond boy is beside her and her throat constricts when she sees the tall clear drink with the fresh leaping bubbles and the browning withered end-of-the-night lime wedge. Something climbs up the back of her throat, hot and sharp, when she gets a deep prickly smell of the strong drink. He says some boozy words into her ear and looks around him with a cocky, powerful gaze, his hand scooting boldly up and down her back. Every sip is like a tightening around her neck and the world falls out of focus like a dense, swirling whirlpool. They are holding hands soon after. If she does not keep a good solid grip on his hand she will definitely fall. She is sort of getting too old for this. See, I'm not too old for this, look at this boy, this band T-shirt, his lovely stiff hair bending at

her touch, his cologne that she knows she's smelled before somewhere. Everywhere before. They have a table now because the bar is clearing out. She is on his lap, straddling him, her feet off the ground, one of her shoes on her foot, the other on the floor. His hands are up her shirt. She hiccups over and over, tries to laugh but it hurts. His tongue is fat and sluggish, it is flopping in her mouth right when she hiccups. She almost bites his tongue. I almost bit off your tongue, she tells him. He doesn't hear her.

When she wakes up there is an immediate and brutal assault of pain behind her eyes. Her stomach sloshes and gurgles. It is him beside her, she can smell him. The small, untidy room is heavy with the sweet, rotten stench of old alcohol. Rancid breath marches from the blond boy's mouth in great moist snores. She does remember the night, the little details, the rum and RC cola that the boy (his name: Drew) had pulled from the freezer. The fact that the cola was frozen and had to be left on the stovetop for awhile. His movie collection, the multiple video game systems that lay in a complicated tangle of wires by the television. His photo albums, his elegant and complex-looking bong that his best friend had given him for his twenty-first birthday, his shirtless roommate with the barbed wire armband tattoo who promised to keep his door closed and his music on all night and all morning. Drew's empty Trojan Magnums box, his subsequent knock on his roommate's door. Why had he kept the box?

There is another smell in the room as well. Something familiar and filthy. She lifts the covers. Underneath the comforter and single sheet she is completely naked. It registers suddenly and with devastating force that the sheet stretched taut over the mattress is soaking wet. Not just damp, not just a few spots but a great squishy puddle

that is so completely deeply wet that she's sure the moisture must actually be seeping through to the floor underneath the bed. She recognizes the smell as her senses become painfully lucid. Of course, it's urine, and of course it's all over her side of the bed.

Deedee immediately begins to cry. She understands that most of her lower half is damp, chafed. She wonders how long she's been sleeping like this. All of her self-induced sickness evaporates, is eclipsed by a humiliation that goes beyond any she has ever felt or imagined. She stretches out, cold and wet, her muscles pulling painfully and her body pale and slack, creased with sleep in some places and scraped a red colour in others. She feels like a baby, a mental patient. The sobs shake her body in the form of hard, silent hacks. Deedee has no plan.

Drew stirs a little bit, his eyelids flick a few times and his sleepy arm stretches across the bed. Deedee panics, Oh nonononono, she hisses, her tears forgotten. She catches his hand in mid-stretch and guides it back to his side of the bed. He rolls onto his side, resumes snoring wetly.

Do you love me? Deedee asks. She wonders if those words really came out of her mouth. Again, Do you love me? They did come out of her mouth, really. She notices the pillow is damp as well, and there is a tight crusty feeling along the side of her mouth. She is mildly repulsed by the two used condoms lying side by side on a shag rug on the floor by his side of the bed. One of the condoms is orange, the other green. She knows for certain that they must never, ever see each other again. Do you love me? She asks three more times until she feels that the meaning of the words has disappeared sufficiently.

Yes, he groans in his sleep. Yes, I love you.

Her purse is on the floor, slumped over on its bulky side, a few tubes of lipstick and a crumpled tissue scattered around its mouth. She dresses quickly, knowing she'll have to walk home. She can't call anyone in this state. She would never live it down. She's an adult for Christ's sake. Remembering this she gulps hard, swallows the taste of morning and gin and rum and wine and cigarette smoke. Sex too, probably. That part she can't remember very well – the little details are clearer. The roommate, the hand-me-down TV set. The poster of some baseball player that had almost made her demand to be taken home. A cigarette, though. She does need one.

There is a glass of water on her side of the bed. The glass is plastic, actually, with orange and blue staggered stripes that are scratched away in places. It comes from one of the many mismatched sets of dishes Deedee had noticed last night in the dish rack, on the end tables and TV trays, in the cupboard where Drew had looked for something to hold their last few drinks.

She takes the glass of water and inches slowly across the bed, pulling back the covers as she goes. Drew is wearing a pair of unlabelled black boxer shorts. The water is lukewarm but she pulls his shorts away from his body just slightly so he isn't startled by the sudden wetness at his crotch. She lets the water trickle slowly from the mouth of the glass, her tongue pinched hard between her teeth with the effort. Just a little more. She allows the water to spread a bit before applying more again and again until the front of his shorts is calmly soaked and spreading around to the back. Now she drinks the rest of the water and tries to urge his sleeping body onto the wet side of the bed. He protests and squirms and tries to tuck his legs underneath him. She almost decides to give up when all of a sudden his groggy arm reaches for someone on her side of the bed. When the arm



doesn't connect with anything he rolls over, sighing with a sort of resigned confusion. She wonders if somebody usually sleeps on this side of the bed.

Outside of the four storey apartment building, Deedee is greeted with a gloomy day. It is not raining but the streets are slick and they look like black surfaces of water. She can't walk home – she doesn't know where she is. She supposes she could find a bus stop. But the thought of being seen like this by so many imaginative strangers is unbearable. She flips open her cell phone and dials her sister's house. Her husband says she's at work. At work? It's Sunday. She calls her sister's office. The phone rings and rings and a female voice on the answering machine lists off the hours of operation, which do not include Sunday, and advises her to leave a message at the beep. Deedee doesn't even consider leaving a message.

The wind is starting to pick up a lot. It races through her matted hair and pulls thick strands upward in little tornados. She hates the wind when it whips her face, pulls at her skin and dries out her eyes. It might be her most hated of all the elements in the natural world when it is in front of her. Behind her she doesn't mind, wind like a reminder settling into the small of her back, helping her to move. She keeps walking, not wanting to be seen standing in front of that apartment building. She is quite cold now, and she can smell herself strongly. The cold would maybe preserve the stench? Her stomach crawls audibly.

Deedee makes a few more phone calls but can't seem to get ahold of anybody. She finally dials Carmella and there is an answer on the first ring. There is a long silence. Deedee shrugs, scratches under her chin. She'll tell Carmella something. She'll make up something that sounds right.

## ADULT DIMENSION

Glenn Poole swallowed pills every morning with a pint of tomato juice. He took prostate pills and heart pills, B12 pills and candy-coated pink pills that the doctor had said would help with his sweating. He was a frantic sweater. He would sweat in the cold or in the heat; he would even sweat when he was beautifully calm with a *Reader's Digest* open on his lap. The jokes in *Reader's Digest* would make him chuckle every once in awhile, if he could get through to the end of the joke without forgetting what had happened in the beginning. He tended to do that often. He would think of other things like whether or not he'd let the cat in from the balcony or whether he'd remembered to write a note to Katie at the bakery to clean the donut fryer in the morning – it hadn't been cleaned in a few weeks.

If it weren't for Glenn the bakery would be chaos. He swallowed hard on the tomato juice, his throat bulging, and set the glass down before him on the table. He turned on the radio but couldn't get any stations. He frowned at the sun through the window above his sink. Why did the sun always shine on his days off? Why couldn't the nice days save themselves for his slow walks to the bakery on Tuesday and Thursday mornings? He couldn't leave his apartment on any other day because, frankly, there was nowhere to go. He couldn't understand people who just walked. Sometimes his daughter would tell him she had to get off the phone because she was going for a walk at eight-thirty. Walking where? It didn't make any sense. How could you walk nowhere? Wasn't that like pacing? Taking long, drawn-out paces up and down the street, trying to look like you're going somewhere. It was pathetic.

He might not finish the tomato juice today. There was a certain feeling in his stomach that he always associated with having eaten too much. His belly thrust hard against his belt and he could feel the buckle digging into his skin, imprinting itself. He forced a tremendous belch from the very bottom of his gut and noted a slight spray arching from his mouth.

He stared at the phone. He had once made the suggestion to his son-in-law that he get rid of the phone. Brian had said, "Why in the hell would you even think of something like that? How can you not have a phone? How would you ever get ahold of us if you were in trouble?" Glenn had agreed quickly because really, what had he been thinking? But then of course Brian had wanted to know what had put such a stupid idea in Glenn's head. "Oh, I don't know," Glenn had said. "I don't know. I really don't."

"Well, something must've made you say it! People don't just say things like that every day. Are people harassing you on the phone? People trying to sell something? Just hang up on them, Glenn, for god's sake."

"Well, I. I don't know, Brian, really."

"That's bullshit."

"Right. Well, I guess. I just. Nobody ever calls me."

"Aw Glenn, shut up, not this again. Forget it. Sherrie calls you every night, and you know it. If it's not her it's me. This is nonsense. We're not talking about this anymore, this is unbelievable."

Glenn now stared at the phone and felt his tongue drag along his lower lip. Part of the fun was looking for the right page in the phone directory, scanning through the Yellow Pages for words like *Adult*, or *Sex*. He felt a stirring when he did that, and

sometimes that was as far as it went; sometimes he closed the phone book then and turned on a game show.

He decided to call Katie at the bakery rather than making the call he really wanted to make. "Hello, Katie? Glenn here."

"Yeah. Glenn, can you hold on a second? I'm pretty busy in here."

"Oh, of course," Glenn said, but before he had even opened his mouth the phone had clattered to the counter. She shouldn't do that. She should put people on hold when they call, so they don't have to listen to all that ruckus in the kitchen. He would have to talk to her about that. He could hear the smacking of fridge doors, the screech of oven racks, the clamouring of pans and the soft whacking of feet as he waited and waited. His eyes trailed to the phone book. He turned to his tomato juice but the smell made him feel faint. He set the phone down on a table and emptied the remainder of the thick juice into the sink. It moved down the drain like slime and left a gritty film behind. He remembered the phone.

"Katie? Katie?" There was a dial tone. She must have come back on the line while he was throwing away the juice. He called the number back and nobody answered.

"Place falls apart when I'm not there," he muttered. Nobody could handle their work. The kitchen was a mess, the fryer was filthy, the doughnuts had an aftertaste. The icing on the cinnamon buns was never quite thick enough, the pastries were dry and very often the cash in the till at the end of the day didn't balance. He should tell Tim to hire some new staff, some kind people who actually cared about the work to be done instead of treating the place like a jungle gym. Maybe some college students instead of the perpetual ninth graders who chewed gum and sat on milk crates out back smoking

cigarettes. The boys were the worst, never responsible at all. Stuffing their faces with custard, telling Glenn to empty the garbages for them because they didn't want to go out in the rain. As if he didn't have enough to do operating the cash register and making sure there were always the right number of tarts in the display case and chatting with the customers. More than once Glenn had told these boys that their behaviour did not reflect the goals and values of the bakery. Sometimes they laughed at him, to his face or around the corner by the bathroom, swinging their mops around each other's ankles and Katie would say, "Glenn, why don't you take a breather, okay? Head home for the rest of the day and cool off, I'll talk to Kip." Or Corey or Brandon or Adam, whichever of the boys it was.

He stared into the sun for a little bit. He petted the cat, Bella, behind the ears. She raised her chin slightly and trotted off into the bedroom. He didn't follow her. He never really went into his bedroom unless he was going to bed. The rumpled sheets and the yellowing photographs and the age-old curtains and the smell of sweat depressed him. He never made his bed, didn't launder the sheets often enough. He was almost seventy-eight years old, and the little routines that constituted daily life had grown heavy with boredom. Glenn started at channel two on his television and pressed the up-arrow until he had scrolled through every station. The batteries in his converter seemed to be dying. He found he had to push extra hard on the buttons and wave the thing through the air in disorganized arcs to have any success with it whatsoever. He took out a battery and smelled it. He replaced the battery and tried to switch the TV off but it wouldn't work. Perhaps he had not replaced the battery properly. He crossed his legs. Took off his sock and fingered the slight hole in the heel. Ripped the hole until the sock was in two pieces.

Stood up and brought the sock to the trash can in the kitchen. His bare foot picked up the little bits of dirt and hair that littered the floor.

He flipped open the phone book and quickly dialed the number. He panted a little bit and muttered, "Oh. Oh," while he waited for an answer.

"Adult Dimension."

Glenn recognized the voice. He felt slightly deflated but decided to keep going. Sometimes, at this point, depending on what kind of voice the girl used or whether or not the voice was familiar to him, he would simply inquire about the store's hours of operation and then say a polite goodbye. "Oh, yes, hello dear. I was wondering, do you have what they call the Caress vibrator?"

He nodded to himself as he unzipped his pants. Yes. The Caress vibrator. "Yes, we do," the girl replied. She was brisk with him, and he could feel his heart beginning to slow down.

"And, how much is that, dear?" She was his dear. Oh god, she was. Tell me how much it is, I'll buy it, we'll use it together. He could feel sweat dripping down the back of his neck.

"Forty-nine ninety-five." Her voice was still curt, as though she were busy there with a customer. He would call back another time, at a better time surely.

"Thank you, dear," he managed to say before he fumbled the phone back down. The receiver fell off the cradle and twirled around and around on its cord. He sputtered a few times, his cock limp in his hand, his fingernails thick and dirty, the fingertips stained with yellow though he had quit smoking two years ago. The wretched old man hands

laughing at him, his cock a dead, soft worm covered in white springy hairs and lint from his underwear.

He resisted the urge to dial the number again. She would listen to him, goddamnit, she would speak to him. She would tell him how loose she was, how wet. The cat sauntered into the kitchen, stared at Glenn with heavy-lidded feline eyes, bored apparently, and lowered her face into the food bowl. Her quiet chomps resonated. She stopped in mid-chew, self-conscious at the noise she was making. Glenn zipped up his pants and lowered his head to the table, a little dismayed at the string of gelatinous drool that dripped to the place mat before him, and Bella continued to feast.

“Can I have twelve sticky buns, please?”

Glenn smiled. “You must mean the cinnamon buns, Ida?” Ida Mason, the drab, thirty-something daughter of a prison of war veteran named Rodney, came into the bakery once a week to buy a dozen cinnamon buns at her father’s demand. The teenagers Glenn worked with always snickered when Ida came in, always craned their necks around the corner of the kitchen or stopped their mopping or window washing to stare at her. She was almost embarrassingly tall and thin, gangly might be the proper description, with hunched shoulders and an oddly pointed head. Her unfortunate head, with its strips of greasy hair lying in strings on either side, was reminiscent of an inverted, half-peeled banana. She was fit to be laughed at maybe, with her trembling knuckles, her thin lips that did a poor job hiding the white foam that gathered in their corners – from Prozac, the boys often chuckled. But Glenn always politely corrected her, since she never failed to refer to the cinnamon buns as “sticky buns”, put the twelve gooey delicious buns in a red

and white box with a see-through lid, and told Ida to have a wonderful day. Enjoy the sun, or don't get too wet in the rain.

"Oh, right. Cinnamon buns. Daddy always calls them sticky buns, I don't know why."

"That'll be four dollars and fifty cents please."

She fished around in the little green beaded change purse she always carried. Glenn could feel the eyes of the mopping boys, the flour-dusted gum-snapping girls. Glenn heard a voice then, harsh and a little shrill.

"Glenn, what are you doing?" It was Katie.

She was standing at his side looking tired, pieces of her hair tumbling out of her hairnet to curl around her ears in dry wisps. "I thought I told you on Tuesday that the cinnamon buns went up by a dollar. They're five fifty a dozen."

Glenn was flummoxed. "But why did they go up?"

"It doesn't matter why they went up. They went up. Tim just told me last week. A lot of different prices changed. Familiarize yourself with them. We'll make an exception for Miss Mason because you already told her they were four-fifty but next time why don't you look at what the cash register says instead of just guessing the price. How many other times have you done this today?"

Glenn trembled. He wasn't sure. At least a few times. "Why didn't anyone check with me about changing the prices?"

"Why would we check with you, Glenn?"

Glenn watched as Ida Mason slunk out the door. He hadn't asked her if she wanted a bag. She balanced the box in her thin arms as though she were carrying



something heavy and breakable. “Well, Katie,” he said, “I’ve been working here for forty years.”

“Yes. And?”

“And.”

“Look, Glenn, you’ve got a line-up here. Either take care of this or take the rest of the afternoon off, alright?” She hurried into the kitchen, shaking her head.

Glenn adjusted his glasses. The sweat parading down his forehead had caused them to slip down the bridge of his nose. “Can I help the next person, please?”

That night in his apartment he eyed the phone with a creeping dread. He should burn the phone book. He didn’t have the number memorized. No, that wouldn’t work. He would just end up getting a new phone book. Sherrie would notice and give him one of hers. She and Brian always ended up with more than one. There was a phone book at the bakery. He would write the number down, he would get it somehow. Glenn gulped. He put some frozen fish sticks on a cookie sheet and turned the oven on high. He nibbled on the corner of a raspberry turnover from a plastic box Katie had given him. She had told him she felt bad for losing her temper. The radio still wasn’t working. He called Sherrie and Brian but got the answering machine. He didn’t leave a message – one of them would call later anyway. He thought about calling back and leaving a funny message for them to listen to when they got home. What could he say? Hello Mister and Missus Bailey. You’ve won a trip! To nowhere!

Forget it. He drew a hot bath. The water took too long to fill up the tub. Somebody from another apartment was probably trying to have a bath too. He needed to

move to a better building with better plumbing. He went to the phone, flipped open the directory to the page. He could feel himself starting to warm up. He should save his bath for later. He hurried to the bathroom and turned off the scalding water. Just being near the water was enough to soak his entire back in sweat.

He dialed the seven digits. He eagerly unzipped and started to massage himself. Oh yes, this time, this time.

“Adult Dimension.” It was a new voice. “Yes, dear, I was wondering if you have what they call the Caress vibrator?” I know you have it, I know you do.

“Um... let me check... yes. Yes, we do have it, actually.”

He fought hard to keep the quiver from his voice. The phone receiver felt like it was melting in his hand. “How much does it cost, dear?”

Her voice was pleasant and kind. He wanted her pert little mouth tight around his aching cock. “That would be forty-nine, ninety-five.”

She would talk to him. She would. He proceeded, his hand clutching his cock, his underwear a swamp of sweat. “Now, does that have a hook on the shaft?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“What is your name, dear?”

“Maggie.”

“Hello, Maggie, my name is Bill. Now, Maggie, let me ask you, can you recommend something for me? My wife has a hard time getting an orgasm.”

“Right.”

“Now is there, do you think... is there anything you could think of that might...”

“Well... you might try a clit stimulator...”

Clit. Oh god, his fingernails dug into his upper leg. The sweet little thing had said “clit”. “Yes,” breathed Glenn. “That might help. You know, her, uh, her clit, I can, uh, I can see it sometimes, when we’re both really, you know, excited. It’s hard, you know, it looks like a small penis.”

There was a pause on the other end. “Right.”

“I heard there’s one vibrator, what do they call it, the Dolphin?”

“Yes, we sell the Dolphin.”

“Now, do you think, Maggie, from your experience dear, that my wife would be able to come with the Dolphin?”

“Well, I.”

“How about anal stimulation?” He pronounced ‘anal’ so it rhymed with ‘panel’. “Do you sell, what are they, syringes? For giving enemas?” Things were getting hot. He was hot. She was hot.

“No, we don’t sell those.”

“Have you ever tried an enema?”

“Uh, no.”

“Oh, they’re quite erotic. Maggie, I can tell from talking to you that you’re experienced.”

“Um, sir – ”

“Now, just tell me, Maggie, when you’re using the Dolphin, Maggie, when you’re using it, is it very easy for you to orgasm?”

She faltered, and the kindness left her voice. “I only work here. I’m not having this conversation with you.”

“Oh, Maggie. Oh, you must think I’m a terrible person.”

“I can tell you what products we have and how much they cost, but that’s about it.”

“I’m not a terrible person, Maggie, I’m really not.”

“I’m hanging up now. I have customers.”

He went cold all over, the sweat suctioning his clothes to his clammy skin, and he could smell something burning. The fish sticks.

“Uh, what time are you open until?”

“We’re open till one.” Her voice was faraway when she said it, she was hanging up already, she was going away. He wailed, slithered from his chair onto the floor and began struggling with the waistband of his pants. He fumbled everything off until he was naked and sodden on the linoleum. The fish sticks were burning. He crawled the short distance to the oven, his slick palms slipping across the floor. He could see the failed fish sticks, charred lines on a cookie sheet. He pulled himself up, his fingertips trembling along the edge of the counter, and managed to switch off the oven before slumping back down to the floor. Maybe he would eat the damned things, serve him right. The phone was ringing, it must be Sherrie. He stayed still and let it ring, as if moving would alert his daughter that he was here, that he was nude on the floor by the cat dish. He managed to roll out of the kitchen and onto the living room carpet to fall asleep, but not before flipping the phone book shut.

The next morning he limped to the kitchen, his joints stiff and brittle. He felt like he could split in two. His elbow cracked as he reached on top of the fridge and felt around

for his pills. His breathing quickened. Fuck the pills. The pills could wait. He flipped to the page. He dialed the number.

“Adult Dimension.”

“Yes, dear, do you have what they call the Caress vibrator?” He wasn’t even wearing pants, just a bathrobe, so he shifted his hand easily within the folds and groped at the humiliatingly flaccid thing inside.

The girl on the other end sighed. “Yes, we *still* have it. It’s forty-nine ninety-five.”

He swallowed. The pockets under his eyes throbbed. He didn’t know what to do. “Thank you, dear.” He hung up.

He tried to open one of his pill bottles. He pressed down hard on the lid and twisted it so suddenly that the bottle flew from his hands and the tablets leapt up into the air. He made a move to bend over and gather them, but his lower back seized, and he winced. He ignored the pellets swarming around his feet and opened another bottle. His hands shook again, betrayed him so badly that he simply tipped over the bottle and scattered the pills all over the kitchen floor. They rolled and circled and drove around like little wheels. He yelled at the cat. “Outta here! Now!” He staggered to the bathroom and stared into the mirror. There was so much in the mirror. He spat into the toilet and it was a little red, bloody like it was some mornings. He probed at his gums with his tongue, tasting iron. He shut off the light.

Glenn was surprised to see Katie standing behind the cash register when he got to work. On Tuesdays she didn’t usually make it in until ten o’clock because she and her husband

played in a poker group on Mondays that tended to end late at night. Sometimes she would show up with bad breath and a bottle of aspirin, and Glenn would throw his arms around her shoulders and remind her to take care of herself. But there she was, eight o'clock, hairnet tightly in place, the lines that creased the skin beside her lips slashing deeper than usual. There was a girl beside her wearing a fresh blue T-shirt advertising the bakery. All the employees wore a shirt like that. The colour was an unfortunate dark shade, something very close to navy, and usually within the first hour of any work shift everyone's torso was streaked with flour, sugar, and dots of icing. Too much in the bakery was white. Glenn laughed to think of it. He always joked to the new employees that their initiation was to spend a whole shift without whitening their shirts.

"Oh, good, Glenn, you're here," said Katie.

"Sure am, Katie."

"Jocelyn, this is Glenn. He's been working here for... how long, Glenn?"

"Getting on forty years." The girl blinked, not appearing overly impressed, but she managed a small smile.

"Glenn, this is Jocelyn. She'll be working a couple of afternoons a week. Which reminds me, Jocelyn, I'll need you to write out your availability for me. I know you have a second job."

Glenn smiled. He was pleased to hear that Katie had hired someone responsible enough to take on two jobs. She stood very erect beside Katie, her shoulders set smartly back and her hands clasped in front of her. She was taller than Katie and had a tight, neat ponytail and a single pink clip in her hair. Glenn bobbed his head at Jocelyn as if they had agreed on something.

“Nice to meet you,” Jocelyn said. Glenn stopped in mid nod. He knew her voice.

“I’ll write it down for you on my break,” the girl continued. “I don’t think there should be too many conflicts between the two jobs.”

Two jobs. Glenn swallowed, heat creeping up his neck. He excused himself abruptly and hurried into the kitchen. He could hear Katie showing her new worker where all the buttons were on the cash register. The voice, that voice of hers, quickly became reduced to a series of *okays*, *rights* and *uh-huhs*. He did know hers as one from a collection of voices that pulsed through the pinholes on his receiver, through the plastic that sat pressed between ear and shoulder. It had to be. He always knew their voices.

Glenn pressed his fists to his eyes and scuttled further into the kitchen. He could hear them crossing behind the bakery display case. Possibly the kitchen was next on the tour. The new girl had to see it sometime. Glenn would slip out the door. It was a nice day. He would sit on milk crates until the other teenaged employees started to trickle in for their shifts. He might tell Katie he wasn’t feeling so well today and walk home. It wouldn’t do to work with the sweat stains that were quickly darkening the blue of his comfortable old work shirt. Now the new girl was mentioning something to Katie about her mother. Katie chuckled at the comment and Glenn heard the rattle of her keys and then the *woosh* of the display case door. He knew all the sounds of this place so well, his past forty years were made up of these sounds. What if he spoke to this girl and she recognized him? Did most people recognize voices as easily as he did? Could he lose his job at the bakery? Had he done anything so terrible?

Glenn stumbled outside to the milk crates. The area was always a little swampy with old rain and the dumpster had a close, sickly stench. His back was too taut to sit on

those low milk crates. He attempted to pile two on top of each other but couldn't seem to line them up properly. He steadied himself on the concrete wall. The toe of his shoe touched a cigarette butt. He always warned the kids to wash their hands after smoking. The voice though, his voice that he would use to remind them, would sound filthy from now on, in the presence of Jocelyn whose very words raised the hair behind his ears, stirred his shameful old dick.

Glenn was afraid if he breathed too much he would sob. He was a terrible old man. He kicked at the cigarette ends, his head pounding. Perhaps he was wrong. Her name was, after all, Jocelyn, and he knew most certainly he had never had a phone conversation with anyone by that name. There was a Lizzie, a Maggie, a Bonnie, a Steph. Certainly no Jocelyn, that brash, awkward-sounding name. Maybe he had been mistaken.

He never gave his real name to those girls. He most often chose manly, one-syllable names. He didn't like to stumble over his words. Bill, Bob, Frank, Ed. It had never occurred to him that they might do the same, that they might have an awareness that he was not to be trusted with their names, that he didn't deserve to say them through the phone as his wrinkled hands played over his wasted old body, kneading his own skin to the sound of their voices.

He would lose his job, he really would. Katie would have one of the owners fire him. She wouldn't want to do it herself. Jesus Glenn, she might say as he walked out the door, but that would be all. He would tell Sherrie he had retired. Brian might even approve, might even toast him at their Sunday dinner and tell him it was about goddamn time. Maybe they would bake a little cake for him, Black Forest, his favourite. He wasn't a terrible old man. He was not.



Glenn walked home, his slow feet hurting, the beautiful little building that he left blurring fast in his glittering eyes.

There was a toolkit in the laundry closet, buried beneath assorted debris. Empty boxes of Sunlight and Cheer he hadn't bothered to throw away. The skeletons of bottomless drawers, their dressers long since scrapped. Filthy blankets, bits of yellow foam, a bicycle tire. Garbage. He tried to be calm as he removed the phone from the wall, cursing softly as he slipped with the screwdriver, the dull blade forcing itself into the skin beneath his brittle thumbnail. He made sure there was nobody walking on the lawn six floors below and he presented his phone to the air. He pretended it was a bird. The receiver was the tail, swirling after its square, ill-balanced body, eager to catch up. The thing shattered – his beige phone lay in a mess of plastic parts, some broken but familiar, some shards he could not have identified. Glenn had always had a certain hope or expectation of the soft spring grass beneath such a very brief fall. He was acting crazy, he knew. He would tell Sherrie. He would say, "Sherrie, I've been acting crazy," and he wouldn't say anything more than that.

He sat on his balcony in his bathrobe, his head bobbing from his hands to the dimming sun. He would wait for Brian's white Sunfire to pull into the parking lot. He would wait overnight maybe, he would wait until the next morning or even the next evening but they would come. They would step out of their car, familiar, worried, holding hands maybe. Sherrie's steps would be quick and Brian would look determined, a reassuring anger settled on his rough brow. They would not look up to the balcony

because they would never have expected Glenn to be there, waiting for nothing except their little white car.

## SILENT SAM

They could hear his parents arguing downstairs. They muffled it by shutting the door and turning up their game of Doom on the Super Nintendo. Kyle's mother had gone out with "the girls" for a drink after work, a few glasses of wine at a family restaurant, a plate of mixed fried appetizers, nothing too much. Her lips had been stained a crusty red, little moons arching like badly applied lip liner, and Jim had started to yell. It's nearly eight o'clock. You drove home. Fuckin drunk, you're a drunk, he said, drilling the rim of his bottle of Becks against one of his front teeth. He had a big, babyish face, red cheeks and an impeccably shaved chin, but the fat around his belly slunk downward, his glasses were a little askew, and one of the top buttons of his dress shirt was missing. Riley had caught him earlier, standing before the mirror in the front hall, his hand up his shirt scratching, muttering, looking out the window for his wife's car. Riley had ducked into the living room, embarrassed. She never had much to say to her boyfriend's stepfather, who always smiled and said hello to her, who always assured her politely that he would give Kyle the message when she called on the phone. Sometimes he embarrassed himself unintentionally, and she found that because of this she could barely even address him. Sometimes he would strut into the bathroom, which was unfortunately located right beside the living room where Riley and Kyle usually sat together watching television, groping each other beneath a ratty afghan, and piss loudly, a giant and robust stream shooting into the toilet bowl. Riley would cover her mouth when Jim sighed with satisfaction, or let slip a resounding fart which he tried, too late, to stopper. Or sometimes it was his dinner table manners, his insistence on please and thank you which was usually

deflated by the spaghetti sauce on his chin, or his failure to answer right away when Judy asked, Is it good, Jim? His eyes were big beneath his glasses. Big marbles.

After knocking the rim against his own tooth Jim had sat before the bottle, which made wet rings on the wooden kitchen table, and jammed his tongue between his upper lip and his teeth, grimacing, his nose pink. He stared at the bottle, confused, his lip bubbling up and down, the silence overwhelming as Riley wondered how things would proceed from here. Maybe Jim would lurch to the bathroom to rinse his mouth, or maybe just to inspect himself in the mirror, make sure his tooth wasn't loose. Then he would sit down to whatever restaurant take-out Judy had brought home, they would all sit down except Judy, who would trudge upstairs to change out of her work clothes and then flit back down to the table, bright and refreshed to say something like, It's a good job I brought home those chicken wings, you all look so hungry!

Riley wouldn't have minded the food. She hadn't eaten since a bowl of sugar sprinkled Corn Flakes at home that morning. Kyle, she knew, hadn't eaten anything all day, had slept in with a hangover. Riley had stopped by after school to find him stretched out on his single bed, one of his combat boots half undone and the other one still laced up completely, tangled in a muddy sheet. He was eighteen and smelled like an old drunk, boozy sweat stains on his t-shirt, the air in the room suffocating with the stench of used-up alcohol. A bottle of malt liquor sat beside his bed, a trace of yellow liquid still floating in the bottom, home to a butt of a Players Filter and a swirl of grimy ash. She had placed her hand in the middle of his back and nudged him gently. His mouth had turned up gladly, and he had rolled over. You came, he had said, and she had nodded. If she hadn't come he would have been sad for days, mopey even, they might have had a fight. And his

spine beneath her hand was a good thing, despite its notches which were too sharp, and the sickly warmth that came off his skin.

Sit-down meals with Kyle's family were something to be dreaded. Dinner was most often consumed in complete silence, Jim squishing the food between his teeth, his jaws working sloppily as though he were chewing on a mouthful of glue. Sometimes, if Judy had had enough to drink she would spout on about her day, not that anyone ever had any answer to her spiels. Riley, after spending an evening with Kyle, was usually a little bit high on hash oil, and the food would sit like sawdust in her mouth, refusing to go down her throat. They would get stoned in the backyard, pulling thick grey smoke into their lungs from a used plastic 7-Up bottle with a ragged hole in the side. Riley hated the very concept of neighbours at those times, the way they could walk in and out of their houses whenever they pleased, startling her with their screen doors and footsteps when she had a still-sticky bottle at her lips. Kyle never cared about the neighbours. When they first met, before they became a couple, Kyle had lit a joint in a coffee shop and the whole group of them got thrown out. Once they were out of danger, away from the coffee shop whose owner had threatened to call the police, Riley had quickened her pace to walk beside Kyle, who still pinched the joint in his fingers and moved on fast, wiry legs, almost like he was marching.

Jim was a retired police officer. At these dinners Riley always felt like he knew she was high, like he might call her parents and tell them. He knew the number from the caller ID. Sometimes Judy would ask Riley, her smile sparkling between bites of food, how school was. Riley would tell her about a project she was doing for her history class, her research on the Berlin Wall, and Jim would interrupt with something like, It would be

nice if Kyle would go back to school instead of sitting around on his ass all day and sleeping till noon. One time, when both Jim and Judy were drunk, Judy had barely managed to order a pizza, not without slurring her words and giggling after asking for two medium pizzas with “peeperooni”. She had joked about the mispronunciation, standing in the way of the TV with a gin and tonic in her hand and her hip cocked girlishly until the pizza arrived. Flinging open the boxes in the middle of the kitchen table, stuffing a piece into her watering mouth she had invited everyone to come eat. Jim, his hand around a cool bottle of Becks, hadn’t wanted pizza. He sat on the couch while Judy set plates before Kyle and Riley and announced, Oh, I see what this is. This is a Keeler dinner isn’t it? A dinner for Keelers.

Keeler was Judy’s maiden name. She had replied, grinning through a mouthful of pizza, that Riley wasn’t a Keeler. Riley’s not a Keeler, are you Riley? And Jim, his round shoulders like two arches above the couch had said, You’re an asshole, Judy. You’re nothing but a fucking asshole.

Judy, mozzarella stringing from her teeth, had washed down the bite with her gin and said, Maybe this is just a Keeler dinner then. The Keelers and Riley.

You stupid asshole.

This night was like that. Jim, tonguing his sore front tooth, began to speak to his wife in the diplomatic voice he reserved for the times when he knew absolutely that he was right. He paid for that car and she would drive it around drunk? He’d like to see the bill from the restaurant. Spending his money. Was she sure she went out with girls from work? Because he could easily find out.

Unlike family dinners at Riley's house, nobody had to ask to leave the table. There were no inquiries of May I please be excused. Kyle stood, his upset chair scraping against the linoleum behind him, and headed toward the sink with his plate. He dumped the remaining contents into a plastic bag that sat on the countertop, acting, Riley supposed, as a garbage pail, and set the plate down with a clatter. The lines of chicken wing sauce were visible on the white ceramic like a child's efforts at fingerprint. Without a word to anyone, Kyle slunk from the room.

Jim called, You gonna rinse that off? Just gonna leave your goddamn dirty dishes for your mother?

There was no reply except for the sound of determined sock feet on carpeted stairs, unhesitant, and his palm smacking the railing.

Get down here.

Riley stood, setting her own knife and fork in a polite column across her dinner which was not quite finished. At the counter she squeezed lemon-scented dish soap onto both Kyle's plate and her own and began to scrub lightly, the heat of the water pinching her knuckles. Oh, Riley! said Judy. You don't have to do that, you're our guest!

It's okay, Riley whispered, and washed. Kyle's plate had something stuck to it, she assumed from a past meal, a hard lump that was mustard-yellow and tricky. She picked it with her short nail, turned up the heat of the water to melt it, grimaced as the thing softened but still resisted, like a bit of stuck gum. Over the hiss of the faucet she could hear the whistling of Jim's breath, uneven and heavy. He laboured over his food, breath shooting out his nostrils and catching sometimes, making him cough. He muttered that the wings were too spicy. Judy protested that she had asked for mild. Riley glanced

at the back of Judy's head, at her bun of hair that was almost entirely grey. One night Riley's mother had driven over here to pick her up. She had remarked on the ride home that Judy was quite a beautiful lady. Riley had nodded, her eyes facing toward the moving dusk. She had replied, Yes, and she's really nice, too. She wanted her mother to like Judy, even if she didn't fully like Judy. As for being beautiful, Riley guessed she just didn't see it. Judy had a round stomach, often cinched beneath suit jackets that she wore to an unimportant job, her hair was grey and the untucked strands wisped around her face like smoke. She had pursed, assertive lips that somehow didn't fit her flighty, confused manner. Her eyes were bright, but usually red-rimmed. Beautiful, no.

Having finally freed the yellow gunk from the plate, Riley crept upstairs. The voices followed her.

This is the third time this week –

This is *not* the third time. You're exaggerating, you always exaggerate. You always think the worst of me that you possibly can and then you sit around here all day and think and think about how *bad* I am, how I'm such a *bad* wife –

You're drunk.

Kyle liked to play Doom but Riley didn't. He always told her that he needed her beside him, his brave woman, as he stalked around the caverns with a machine gun thrust out in front of him. She usually felt insulted as he paused the game between massacres and roamed underneath her shirt and thrust his inexpert hand down her pants. Tonight she didn't mind. She knew Jim and Judy were occupied – they could both hear them quite



clearly despite the closed door. Kyle scoffed when they heard his mother break into tears. She's a weak cunt, he said.

On his way upstairs Kyle had pilfered a bottle of Silent Sam from the liquor cabinet, brand new and unopened. He had snuck back down for a carton of orange juice from the garage, knowing Riley wouldn't drink it straight. They shared out of a plastic cup from the upstairs bathroom, slightly scummy on the bottom, a brownish ring from the wet countertop. Riley winced every time she took a sip. She actually didn't like the taste very much at all, or the dry burn at the back of her throat, but she didn't mind the feeling. Sort of mellow and easy. She wasn't resistant to her boyfriend's hands as they lifted her shirt between games of Doom, to his moist mouth as it engulfed her chin. She tried to match each of his sips with a sip of her own. She didn't want him to lose her. To go off in a place of his own and leave her behind. Like the one time toward the end of school last year, Riley had skipped class to hang out on a bench downtown with Kyle, watching buses whiz by, churning up slop behind their wheels as they went. She had money to buy hamburgers but he had said he couldn't eat. He'd taken a microdot and his stomach was upset – he'd already puked behind a restaurant and there was a spot of it on his pants, bright orange and stringy. He'd said to her You might as well go home. I can't have you here. You don't make sense, I'm too fucked up. She'd stood up to leave, her jaw aching with stifled sobs, and he'd said Where are you going? You're too embarrassed to be seen with me? She had said, I thought you wanted me to go. And he had said, I'm gone already, you don't have to go. You can stay here but I just want you to know that I'm off somewhere else right now, and I can't look out for you. That's okay, she had said. And it was okay.

You know, Kyle said after a swallow of vodka, she wasn't always such a spineless bitch.

Do you have to call your mother that?

Fine, you don't want me to talk, I won't talk.

I want you to talk.

Then don't make me censor what I say. She was alright before. She doesn't need Jim. She's only with him because we have a hot tub here and he lives in a good neighbourhood. He's such a fat fuck.

Riley knew all of this already. She knew about alcohol too, making you repeat yourself. You know what's important when you repeat it, when you tell it like it's brand new.

The first time Riley had been alone with Kyle, away from the mutual friends who had introduced them, he had called her from a bus stop and asked if he could borrow ten dollars. She had stammered Sure, I guess, in confusion, picturing him standing outside somewhere dialling her number, this strange tall boy who didn't go to school and spent a lot of time walking. She had forty-five minutes before dinner, and she had told her mother she was going to the 7-11. She had sat beside Kyle at his bus stop, wary of the clouds, the sky that might break in five seconds, and he had told her that if it rained she could have his jacket and she could keep it, because he never really got cold, and he liked rain anyway. Riley had never had a boyfriend, and she didn't like rain at all, but right then she had hoped that the sky would open so he could pass her his jacket, and anyone walking by might mistake them for a couple, and anyone who saw her striding toward home with dripping hair might note that she was wearing a boy's jacket.

Riley took her sock off to scratch the bottom of her foot. The voices downstairs were getting louder. They were becoming foreground noise, and the atmospheric footsteps of Doom were in the background. The voices of Judy and Jim were layered now, folding over each other, pierced by the unmistakable sound of cutlery being thrown into the sink, the thick bottom of a bottle being driven against the counter or table.

Fuckin' shut up! Kyle hollered, and the screaming carried on.

You know, he said, pulling back from a sloppy embrace, You haven't said anything about moving away.

Moving away where?

When you move away. When you go to university next year. You haven't said anything about it.

What was I supposed to say?

You were just gonna move and not say anything?

Riley looked at her bare foot. She thought the bottoms of her heels were disgusting. Yellowing, hard, porous, like the tops of overcooked muffins.

Now I'm getting the silent treatment?

No.

You didn't even so much as ask me to move there with you. It never even crossed your mind.

How would you possibly do that? I'll be living in residence and my parents are paying – where would you get the money to move away from here?

I could get on welfare and get an apartment. You could live with me and go to school and your parents could give you money for part of the rent.

Riley grabbed the controller and began to press buttons. She barely knew how to play Doom. Kyle had once given her a crash course when they were at his friend Jay's house, stoned out of their minds, and the only reason she had given in to the lesson was because she had been too high to have conversations with a group of people she didn't know, boys sitting around a bong with a pack of cards in a room without furniture, just a standing lamp in the corner. There had been the one girl, too, which made it worse, Robin, her name was, with the limp purple mohawk flopping over her hard eyes, a girl who squeegied people's windshields at stoplights. Riley had followed Kyle into Jay's bedroom, he had taught her the basics of Doom, and had reached around to undo her bra. She had whispered No. No. She didn't know why. Kyle had said, I seen you looking at Frankie. You want me to send him in here instead? You think you'd have a better time with him? She had cried, and they had left. Rain soaked, they had yelled at each other all the way to the bus stop, her shoes filling up with slush from the gutter, the sewer grates frightening and abysmal in the night. Once she had pointed out that sewer grates were like the burners of big ovens, but on nights like that one he would never have listened to such nonsense.

Now she pressed buttons, and the gun waved erratically across the screen, smashing into video brick walls and lodging itself in corners. You're not answering my question, Kyle said.

I just don't want to talk about it right now.

Right. Too fuckin good for me, huh?

No. Riley's screen persona took a hit, a great spinning gob of fire from the fist of a horned demon. I can't aim at him, she said. He moves too fast.

No, I get it. I understand what you're saying. You never take this fuckin relationship seriously. We've been together a year and a half and you couldn't give less of a shit if you tried.

That isn't true.

It is. You – oh goddamn I wish they'd shut up.

Kyle stood up and stalked toward the bedroom door, the toes of his socks flapping. Clamping his hands on the banister he leaned over, both feet rising perilously off the floor, balancing most of his weight on his thin stomach. Frightened, Riley swallowed a big gulp of the vodka drink. She could taste the neglected, unwashed plastic of the bathroom cup as a prelude to the thin drink whose potency, she thought, might make her collapse were she standing. She could feel tears in her eyes, a sizzling in her nostrils.

Kyle, swaying where he stood by the stairs, called Can't you idiots shut up for five minutes? I'm trying to have a – I'm trying to have a fucking conversation with my girlfriend and I can't hear what the fuck is being said!

There were some heavy footsteps, slow and, Riley noticed, a little bit thoughtful, and then Jim's voice: This isn't your business, Kyle. Then came Judy's: You don't raise your voice at my son.

And Kyle was gone, bounding down into whatever was going on in the kitchen. Riley sat with the Nintendo controller in her hands. There was a window just above the bed; she could see the roof shingles, their roughness dull in the moonlight. She could climb out there, she could be gone. She could slip down the eaves trough; the metal might rip apart her palms. She would shake her hands, let the blood whip off in specks, streak

the air like spray paint. She would wipe the excess on the grass, the skin pulling away on the pale green blades, the crisping, dying ground. If she scarred then she would remember, she would never forget what followed a Nintendo game, a take-out dinner, a drink of Silent Sam.

He was back in the room then, a black-green baseball cap jammed onto his head, his face now just a shadow. We've gotta go.

Why?

Jim hit my mom. I called the cops, we have to leave.

You saw him do it?

I didn't *see* him do it, but she's laid out on the chair and she's holding her arm funny.

Where are we going to go?

He said nothing, but unscrewed the top from the bottle of vodka. His lips held a sneer she associated with his most dramatic moments, and she despised herself a little bit for feeling annoyed at this whole thing. His upper lip would curl like that right before he started to rage at something, and he would usually be drunk but at the same time so very, deadly serious. At these times Riley would feel a laugh bubbling away in her stomach like a terrible soup, and she would gulp to keep it down, she would look away. She often pulled at her earlobe, twirled her hair. Like the time on the back patio of this house, the two of them cross-legged in their tiny circle, his mother's ashtray between them. He was drunk, desperate for a cigarette, and the two of them picked through the loaded ashtray with the tips of their fingers, searching for enough second-hand tobacco to sprinkle into a rolling paper. God hates me, he had screamed, and his voice had had a forced deepness

Riley could never take seriously. Judy smoked her cigarettes until they were lipsticked nubs. Hurling the ashtray into the dense, dark yard, little beige bits shooting in every direction and grey grains tumbling to the ground, Kyle had let the neighbours know that God hated him and his mother was a whore. He hollered that he had seen hell. He had gone searching through the black night grass for the ashtray, because he had wanted to smash it against the side of the house and watch his mother's used up ashes explode, but he hadn't been able to find it. Instead he had charged over to the barbeque, which sat quietly beneath a plastic sheath that was covered in bird droppings, and had toppled it. The thing had resisted at first, rolling along on its set of wheels, and that had frustrated Kyle even more. Riley had had her hand pressed tightly over her mouth. Tears had slid calmly along her cheeks but she had been afraid to take her hand off because of the laugh-soup that danced against her ribcage.

He tipped the Silent Sam upright, like it was a bottle of water and he had just finished playing soccer. She watched his modest Adam's apple jog up and down as he swallowed an absolutely startling amount, little trails of alcohol leaking out the corners of his lips. He brought the bottle to the floor, what remained of the vodka careening in oily sheets along the inside of the glass. Kyle leaned forward, his chest nearly touching his bare knees, knobby and scratched and waxen, that peeked out from the ends of his frayed army cut-offs. He was always falling on those knees, Riley thought to herself, and he was tall, tall enough. Each kneecap was flattened in places by smooth white scars, places where his dark hair wouldn't grow, places that proclaimed his foolishness. His drunkenness, his mild vandalism. His fence climbing, his arbitrary window-smashing. The night he had tried to ditch a cab without paying the fare and had been tackled by the

driver from behind, thrown to the ground and cuffed on the side of the head, chastised in front of a young family watching their little girl float on water wings in their apartment building's pool. Things like that.

Kyle heaved, his neck stretching, drawing his throat out like a pulled elastic. The O of his mouth glistened with the vodka that had refused to go to his wracked belly, and he opened his throat to a scream that never quite came, just a strangled *aah*, a gargle, a twisting of his lips. Riley said, Do you still want to leave? And Kyle coiled over onto his side, his hand still clamped around the bottle of vodka and said No, I don't want to leave but you do. You fuckin wanna leave. Go. You're all I have, you don't believe me? You don't think I'm in this mess every day? What the fuck is your problem? You don't appreciate my life, you don't appreciate that this is my life.

You're drunk.

*You're* drunk. I love you so much, I love you so much, I love you so much.

Riley could hear two new voices downstairs, both men. Kyle seemed to remember then that he had called the police, and he staggered back to the top of his stairs, his hands fisted around the railing, swaying backward this time, and called, Mom! You show them! You show them your arms, you tell them about the X-rays. Show them or I am not your son, I am not your fucking son anymore if you don't show them!

He fell against the wall, arms flapping, his full weight crashing into the closed linen closet. C'mon, Riley, he winced, holding his back where he'd connected with the doorknob. Come downstairs if you care one little bit.

On the way down the stairs Riley noticed she was still missing her socks. She felt silly, thoughtless. She felt like she shouldn't look this way. She glanced at Judy, who



stood beside one of the policemen, dressed in a yellow sweater of some puffy material. Angora maybe, or an imitation. Judy was busy tucking her hair behind her ears with pinched fingers, organizing herself. With the other hand she gestured, her wrist flicking in loose circles as she explained her family to a cop who held a notepad. My son shouldn't have called you, really, it's, it's a private argument we're having and my son heard some things, you know, *part* of the argument, and he thinks he may have seen something but –

Jim stood in the background, his hands in a burly ball at his waist and admitted, We've all been drinking a little bit tonight, and –

Are these kids underage?

Yes they are.

And you allow them to drink in your house?

He isn't my son. He's my wife's son and what he does is his business. I don't know what goes on upstairs. I prefer not to. If he's drinking up there it is certainly not with my fucking permission.

Easy, now.

Kyle ran at his mother, his steps uneven, and tugged at the downy sweater. Show them.

The policeman asked Kyle's name, told him he'd best move away from his mother and calm down. They led him into the front yard. Jim disappeared into the kitchen under a knotted wood archway.

Riley watched from the porch, her butt teetering on the little metal edge beneath the doorframe. Judy sat beside her, sucking strongly on a long king-sized cigarette. Her

lipstick, pink when she sat down to dinner, was faded and her lips were chapped. The neighbour's windows lit up like eyes, flying open to reveal shadowed men and women without faces, just figures breaking up the lightness of the rooms. They were nice houses but none of them were overly spectacular, at least not on the outside. Much like Riley's own street, where she lived with her parents and a brother three years her junior, this was where people came to raise families and plant amateur gardens, earnest flowerbeds with sprinkles of eggshells brightening the dirt, and to paint their living rooms one rich colour after another every few years to keep up with what was in style. The two policemen were pillars, each erect with their feet planted firmly in the grass, and Kyle flailed before them, never keeping both feet on the ground at the same time, his mouth curling. Riley was afraid that Kyle would try to hit one of them. Wouldn't that be perfect. They're not listening to you, Kyle, she thought to herself. How could they?

Their first organized date had been a trip downtown to smoke pot. Riley had made up an elaborate lie to her mother, a lie that would cover at least six hours of her day, and she had braved a bus system she didn't know very well. She had thought about him all day at school, his voice, his way of putting things, his name matched with hers. What she remembered the most about that day was their wonderful aimlessness, their movement from store to store at the mall, and outside between various benches and people who seemed to know Kyle, who took his hand in passing or gave him a hug and asked him how he had been. Each time he had replied, I moved back in with my mom. He had shown her a cubby hole beside a building's fire escape and mentioned offhandedly that he had slept in it one night when his dad locked him out of his house. He had laughed at her little gasp and said Yeah, that sucked. When they waited at the bus stop so she could

go home he had nudged her elbow and cocked his head at a tiny old woman who muttered over a plastic bag gripped in her fingers. Troll, he'd whispered, and the one word had sent them both into giggles. He hadn't tried to kiss her, but he had watched her through the window as the bus pulled away, the old lady adorably dwarfed at his side, saying something to him now. Kyle had been smiling.

Judy's nails were painted, Riley noticed, a delicate rose colour, and they looked like such strong, bright nails on her wrinkling hands. She swayed a little in Riley's direction, her soft sweated shoulder feeling around like an antenna, searching for something to hold her up. She looked tired. Riley was tired too. The thought of the plushy angora, or whatever it was, pushing at her goosebumped, bony shoulder made her a little terrified. She felt a force field go up around her, just like something from a cartoon, something magic and electrified to protect her. She cleared her throat and asked Judy the very same question she had asked her mother that morning: Do you remember what you were doing when JFK was shot?

Her mother had said, Well, yes. Riley knew her mother remembered where she was, she knew because they had had that very conversation before. In sixth grade, Riley had been astonished to learn that somebody would actually take it upon themselves to kill a president, to hide up high somewhere and kill a president, and such a dashing president riding in his car. She had taken the information home to her mother who had told her she remembered it clear as day. She had been twelve years old. She had been tobogganing with two of her friends. She had come home for hot chocolate, stripping off the layers of sweaty clothing, the snowy toque, the wet wool mittens, and then her father had told her. He had a rum and coke and a bag of peanuts and his glasses were on the coffee table

beside him. He looked like he had been crying. Riley had asked her mother again that very morning over Corn Flakes if she remembered where she had been. She already knew the answer but there were so few things, so few things left to mention on sullen mornings when Riley spooned milk and cereal dutifully into her mouth, her mother watching her lovingly and asking every once in awhile What would you like for supper tonight? What time will you be home? What time do you have to wake up tomorrow morning? Do you want me to wake you? Do you need any binder paper – we have lots at the office. Did you pack a lunch for today? Are you coming home for lunch? Would you like me to leave something out? Riley had watched the Kevin Costner movie at school a few days before. She had felt, at the moment of watching it, that few things in the world were as mad as the footage of JFK getting his brains blown out of his head. The act even, might have been less cruel than the footage. The way his poor head just split quietly into red, like a broken egg, or something just as open and messy, and he sort of ducked down as if there was something he could do about it. If I just move this way a little bit, cup my hands and scoop. Just like bailing out a sinking boat. No problem, people. And Jackie looked like she was trying to climb out the back of the car – what was she doing? Riley had never seen anything like it. It was so real, and he was just riding up the road, smiling and trusting everybody there, and you knew he trusted everybody because he left the hood of his car down, and he waved and his hair was parted neatly and then half his skull disappeared. Well, yes. We were out sledding. Carol, Joanne and I. You remember my cousin, Carol? Grandpa told me about it when I got home. My mother was standing beside the bookshelf, white as a ghost. I went to bed crying, I couldn't eat supper.

Judy sniffed, tears running through the shallow crinkle on her cheeks, puddling around her mouth. I don't know where I was, she said, I don't remember. I guess maybe I heard about it a few days later. Riley, she wept. The cigarette, only half finished, slipped from her shaking hand to the pavement. She stamped at it with the heel of a salmon pink shoe and missed it, clipping the cement beside it. Judy wiped at her eyes and sagged against Riley, their two frames not fitting together quite right. Judy tried to nestle her heavy, frizzy head between Riley's chin and shoulder but Judy was a tall woman and a little uncoordinated. The angora shoulder flopped along Riley's cheek, a cushiony scrape, and Judy's wet eye slipped over to lean awkwardly against the top of Riley's head. Riley reached out and crushed Judy's smouldering cigarette against the pavement, mindful of how close it was to the woman's ankle. Her pant cuff had come up slightly, revealing a white leg, the paleness betraying a few sheepish veins, a murky purple beneath the skin. I feel like you're my own kid, Judy whispered, choking on tears. Her legs bicycled against the porch cement as she tried to right herself. I feel like you're my own kid.

Horrified, Riley nodded. The puffy shoulder was still there fizzling against her face, such an intrusive thing. Riley cupped the shoulder with both hands, gingerly, as if it were an egg. Judy sobbed harder, her entire face moist, tears smudged and reaching up past her eyebrows. Riley hadn't known Judy wore eye makeup until she saw it sloping down her face in brown-black clots. Riley stood and glanced at her boyfriend. His shoulders were slumped now; he had lit a cigarette. He was staring at the ground, his hat pulled low over his face, looking feeble beside the two uniformed men. His t-shirt hung from his small bones, and the back fell just shy of the army shorts that were sliding from his thin waist. He didn't own a belt. The shirt was home-made by Riley, a plain thrift-

store t-shirt embellished by crude magic marker – a picture of a grinning weasel with a joint shoved between his clamped teeth. Kyle was shivering, though it was a pleasantly warm night. Riley had the urge to step toward him but stopped herself. He was better there, in the middle of the lawn, his shoulder blades popping out like wings. If she got too close, if he saw her, if he remembered she was still here he would walk to her with one hand in his pocket, he would make his way over. He would open his mouth and say something, and she would say something back.

From where she sat Judy howled, Don't you hurt my son! Kyle said, Shut up, Mom, I don't need your help. I can take care of myself, unlike some fuckin people around here. And from the blue back of his t-shirt, violet in the night's dark, Riley turned and tiptoed into the house. She passed Jim, his large form planted again on a kitchen chair, his chest heaving as he collected himself. She moved slowly through the room, trying to act like she wasn't in a rush, like she wasn't running away from a boy and his mother, like she wasn't thinking about her backpack and her socks sitting upstairs beside a paused game of Doom. Jim's head was propped up by his big palm, his chin crumpled up around his lips. I would offer you a ride home, he said, his voice gargled with foam and disuse. But, you know.

Riley whispered, I'll walk. It's not a far walk.

Jim said, You could call your mother to come and get you? Riley shook her head, her hand on the screen door. Jim must have understood. If she phoned her mother for a ride, if her maroon Cavalier pulled up in front of a house lit blue and red by palsied police lights she would never be allowed to come here again. Riley would have no argument. She would be out of reasons why her trips to this unfortunate boy's house were

necessary. The backyard looked wide and endless in the dark but she knew what was out there, she had walked through there more times than she could count. There was a deck of wood planks, a criss-cross railing and a table with an umbrella, the tabletop dotted with a few extra ashtrays and a wrinkled magazine. At the end of the deck there was a stretch of mowed grass framed by a few randomly tended gardens, one with a solemn little gnome wearing a chipped hat. And then out there, after how many footsteps, there was some longer grass, the kind that reached out for ankles, and sore arthritic tree branches, bent from the weight of their leaves, or so it seemed, and Riley wasn't sure she could remember how those branches leaned after autumn when they were naked. Through the grass and tickling leaves there was an unlatched gate, and through the gate a road that would take her home.

Thanks for having me, Riley said. Thanks for dinner.

When she got to the road she started to run. The soles of her shoes were hard and flat, and she still wasn't wearing any socks. She could feel the canvas inside chafing her bare feet, the sweat forming pasty little puddles between her toes. She wasn't used to running and she felt ridiculous, out of form, puffing away on the shoulder of the road while cars coasted along past her. It was a stretch of road to her street, a slight upward incline, a left turn, three blocks and then a right turn. She yelped a few times, her lungs burning bright in her chest. She felt like her ribs were drawing in the skin that covered them, just like a sponge. Slowing to a jog, Riley checked her watch. Her parents liked her to be home by midnight – the rule was she could call for a ride before eleven, otherwise Kyle should walk her home. It was just past eleven. Her father would have been asleep hours ago, his

legs crossed in front of him on a stool, a homemade blanket pulled up to his shoulders, snoring away before the history channel on TV. He liked to watch biographies of people whose life stories he had already read about. Sometimes he would draw Riley into the room and make her look at the archaic faces on the screen, the painted people who all had the same blank, homely faces, sturdy bodies and tightly curled hair, and he would say, Listen to this part. You'll find this interesting. And he would watch her face while she watched the TV and tried to absorb anything, the smallest fact about the pale faces, the flat eyes, the tiny and indiscernible smiles and the boats they arrived on, the people they slaughtered, the places they named or the documents they signed. Her father would catch himself sleeping by the TV and would stand up, a delighted grin on his face because bedtime was the greatest part of any day. His eyes just slits so it would take nothing at all to close them again once he got into his room. Riley's mother would have just gone to bed. She never slept very well. She would hear Riley's key in the front door and she would ask questions. The questions would be How's Kyle? What did you have for supper? What did you do? The answers would be Fine. Chicken wings. Watched a movie. Why do you always have to ask me so many questions?

There was yelling coming from somewhere behind her, and she turned around. She could see an outline weaving in her direction, two pale arms cutting through the air, pinwheeling from a darker body. Goddamnit, Riley said out loud, gravel dusting her ankles as she stopped. A car horn honked in the slight distance, swerving to avoid Kyle. Her eyes throbbed with tears as she heard him scream, Fuck you! His voice had dissolved into its predictable roar, a raspy deepness that cracked easily, turned shrill.



The honking car had stopped a few feet ahead of Kyle and he approached the window, his hands fused to the vehicle's roof as he leaned into the passenger side. Riley turned again, taking off down the road.

The porch light, as usual, blazed unfalteringly from its decorative wrought iron holder when Riley got home. She stepped into its calm yellow light, panting, her entire body saturated in sweat. The doormat had two friendly ducks woven into it, each wearing overalls, reaching across the mat to shake hands with one another. Their bodies, their winding arms, made a heart. Riley wiped the soles of her shoes on the mortifying ducks, ground her heel against their clasped hands. She sputtered a little bit and drew the back of her hand across her moist brow. In spite of herself, she couldn't wait to be in her bed in a clean t-shirt and pyjama bottoms, and most of all she couldn't wait to wash off her makeup, pat her face dry and sob into her pillows. To smother her face in marshmallow soft cushions, to cry quietly, to do it all night if she had to.

She locked the door behind her, handle and deadbolt, and slipped her shoes off. Her mother would notice the sweaty footprints. Riley's home was making her even hotter despite the open windows and the mild night air wisping freely through the house. While surrounded by the unbearable softness of Judy, the crunch of gravel as she ran, Riley had felt dead sober but now, with the smooth air of her house, the cream-coloured walls, the warm scent of apple potpourri, and the knowledge of people shifting around between sheets upstairs, murmuring in their supple sleep with the taste of morning already filling their mouths, Riley felt drunk and frightened. She filled a glass of water at the kitchen

sink, tiptoeing to avoid the spots on the floor that were known to creak, and began inching up the stairs.

She was in her bedroom with the light on, considering dropping into bed without even changing her clothes, when she heard the doorbell chiming one ring after another. The kindness of the doorbell, such an unsatisfying little bong that pulsed through the house, was punctuated by what could only have been boot-kicks to the lower part of the door. Riley heard the deep squeal of her parents' bedsprings as they got up, and her mother, who always walked heavily on her heels, croaked into the hallway. Her father was close behind, and as she peeked beyond her door she could see him making his way groggily down the stairs, his soft back puffy and creased from the bedsheets, his cotton boxer shorts a faded white from many washings. Riley whimpered and trotted down after them. Daddy, she begged, It's just Kyle. I'll send him away.

Just Kyle! Her mother sputtered. What does he think he's doing? It's the middle of the night. Did you just get home?

Mom, I know. Riley hurried to keep up. Just, please let me handle this, I just need to talk to him and –

Her father stood in the doorway, his arms outstretched, one hand on each side of the frame. Riley could see Kyle beneath her father's arm, bent at the waist, clutching his flushed cheeks as he staggered backwards. His hat was gone and his hair was plastered to his skull in dark coils. His forehead was beaded with clear drops and his face was grey. He screamed wordlessly at the porch ground, at the smeared welcome mat. He stumbled over the single wooden chair that her father sat in on weekend mornings to read the newspaper. Riley! He hollered, Oh fuck!

Oh my God, he's drunk, said her mother. He's drunk, Riley, isn't he?

Riley, you fuckin bitch, you heartless fuckin bitch.

Go home, her father said evenly. You need to get off this porch right now.

I'll talk to him, Riley protested, her hand grasping her father's arm at head level like a monkey bar. Just leave us alone for a minute. It's fine, just go to bed.

Riley Lang, you do not go near him. Her mother's lips were quivering. She laced her fingers around Riley's own, pressing firmly, her expression one of easily shattered stone. Repulsed, Riley pulled her hand away, terrified and confused by the parched fingers. What was this? Dad! She screamed, as her father began to chase Kyle down the driveway in his bare feet. Riley's fifteen year-old brother Josh peeked around the corner, a smirk curling the corners of his mouth. Get the hell out of here! Nosy little jerk!

And there were the hands again, the dry hands, smooth as though covered in some kind of coating. Her mother was always picking things up, moving things, adjusting things, working. In the fall Riley's mother would complain of calluses from raking the backyard into mountains of rusty leaves that tumbled each minute from the great oak tree in the centre of the lawn. When Riley was little she used to turn cartwheels into the leaves. They had photographs of her in a pink hooded sweater, five years old and bodiless, buried to her chin in leaves. She couldn't cartwheel anymore, didn't trust herself to hold her body up on her two arms, but she would flop into the leaves, the moist ones dampening her jeans and the earthy smell filling up her nostrils, shooting straight to her head. Autumn. Her mother with the rake, tisking at her impropriety, laughing, thrusting the rake in her direction. Fine, then, you do the work. That was part of the joke. And she would lie there engulfed by the sky, while her mother raked around her.

The hands encircled her wrists, keeping them locked at her hips. Let. Go. Riley hissed through her pressed teeth. You don't know what this is about. You don't know what this is about! Her father drifted back toward the house, his head down, his boxer shorts enamel white in the dark. He walked gingerly along the driveway, careful not to step on something sharp. Staring at her father's careful feet Riley felt an instant and almost overwhelming regret, and she wrenched away from her mother's hold. Do not touch me! Mom, he shouldn't have let him go. He might get hurt on the way home, he might, God, you don't know anything, you don't know ANYTHING. You don't know anything.

Riley's mother brought her husband a damp paper towel to wash the black driveway from the bottoms of his feet. Neither of them said anything. Her brother made himself a hot chocolate in the microwave despite Riley's sidelong glares that begged him to go upstairs and leave her alone. Her brother made such a fuss with the chocolate syrup and the milk bag, finding the right mug and adjusting the temperature. Riley lay on the couch and shuddered, crying loudly. When his feet were clean, her father made his way back to bed in silence. Her mother shooed Josh to his room with his mug of cocoa, though Riley could have sworn she heard his footsteps stop halfway up the stairs. Riley, she said. It's time for bed. We'll talk about it all in the morning. If that phone rings you are *not* to answer it, do you understand? If he keeps calling we're taking it off the hook. This has to stop. Is that clear?

Riley said nothing.

Riley, you don't – Oh, God, I heard the things he said to you, darling, I *heard* them.

Stop it, Mom.

Your father heard them.

Stop it. Please.

You come to bed now.

I'll come to bed when I'm ready.

Now, Riley, damnit, right now!

She didn't move but shook slightly, her elbows trembling under her palms. She wouldn't move. She would not. Her mother padded upstairs, crying quietly. She cinched her housecoat tight around her waist and left the light on.

## COMING HOME

Anna's mother called and asked me if I wanted to come with her to pick Anna up at the airport. I had planned to paint my toenails on the deck. My mother had bought blender cocktails, these sickly piña colada drinks that came in a package with cherry red rimmer – sparkles like the ones you might dust onto shortbread cookies at Christmas. She was saving the drinks for the first hot day, and I suppose I was saving my toes for the same thing, the nails having grown hard and mottled over the winter, their edges wavy like the disturbed surface of water.

But Anna had been away for more than a year. I rolled my socks up over my disgraceful toes and told my mother I was sorry. She was on her knees in the garden anyway, muttering over neighbourhood cats and their penchant for pissing in her garden. She reminded me about the sandbox – my beloved sandbox where I used to bury my little brother's army figurines and put sand in my shorts and try to dig to the other end of the earth. We had to get rid of it because the roaming cats, shut out of their homes and pawing their way through the suburbs, had turned it into a fine litter box. Anna and I used to make sand castles that were never much more than crumbling triangles reaching skyward, a stick jutting out here and there, feeble ledges attempted near the bottom. If we poked caverns too high up, where the dusty walls were thin, the whole thing would come down. This was one of the things we knew.

Mom said to go ahead. You could both have dinner here next week. Invite Anna, tell her to bring pictures. We can save the piña coladas until then.

Those special drinks never tasted as good as you expected them to anyway. My mother imagined that Anna would need some time out of her house. She was right. Things had changed so much since Anna had left last May. Her parents had split up, for one thing. I didn't know that parents still did that after they had suffered more than twenty years together. But hers did. Her mother escaped temporarily to a small town up north near the city she grew up in – she stayed with an old high school friend and kept up her work through email and telephone. Despite having spent close to half my childhood over at Anna's house listening to her parents holler through the walls at each other and barely maintain civility at dinner, I was astounded when I heard they actually separated. I always thought there was something communal about their arguments – like the whole family was involved somehow. I too, was involved, because I was there. Even though I was a quiet kid Anna's mother snapped at me more than once in frustration over some button she couldn't fasten, or something sticky on the counter that Anna or one of the boys had failed to wipe up. Don't listen to her, my Mom always said. You know how she gets. Anna was less than shocked when she heard. She had that way of taking things easily, of adjusting so smoothly to giant quakes in her life. She told me she knew things with her parents weren't right one day in the kitchen when her mother pulled down her shorts to show Anna her newly waxed bikini line. I did it for your father, Kathleen had said, Not that he's likely to notice. Anna told me there was a desperateness in the way she held the waistband of her shorts, yanking them down past the black and turquoise bathing suit pulled taut over the ballooning belly she had only recently resolved to lose. Mom looked totally mortified, Anna had said. I didn't want to look at her shaved crotch! I

looked at the tiles instead. She got so mad, slammed the patio door. Can't even talk to my own daughter, she said.

Anna was most concerned about her house. I'll never see the inside again, she said. It sold on the second day. Remember when we moved in there how my room echoed before we put the furniture in? I did remember the echo – I didn't believe a bedroom, let alone my best friend Anna's bedroom, could be so big as to produce an echo. We pretended we were in the mountains, stooped over with heavy backpacks and climbing with the aid of wooden staffs. We somersaulted along her carpet, our spines banging the floor as loud as we wanted since our mothers were outside roaming the property, exclaiming over the ornate front door, the kidney-shaped pool, the large sloping, freshly-paved driveway.

I thought of the little buds that fell from the oak tree in the middle of our back yard. Fuzzy yellow on the outside and a little fan-explosion in the middle when you broke them open with the tip of your fingernail, sort of like the underside of a mushroom cap. They were yellow and red inside. We used to call them peanut butter and jam sandwiches. I would have brought one with me to the airport in my pocket, but they were out of season. We didn't really see them until fall, when they would litter the yard like confetti and Anna and I would sit on the cool grass and pop them open one by one.

Her mother took us to a McDonald's along the highway. She grimaced as we stood in line, folding her purse carefully over her shrinking belly, pretending that it hadn't been her idea to come here. Anna's mother was losing weight, had dyed her hair lighter, yellow like an under-ripe peach. I told her it looked nice, the dry crisping hair, cut in a



long layered style that high school kids had adopted about five years ago. Sitcom hair. From Anna I had gotten a stiff hug, and she had bent into it, her shoulders pointing toward me so our torsos didn't have to touch. But Anna's mother had thrown herself at me, kissing both cheeks, asking me where I got my necklace, her grin frozen as she took in my hair, my shoes, my dress. Her mother had pinched the pale bundle of flesh that peeked out from the top of Anna's shorts. Here I thought you'd be skinnier, she laughed, planting a kiss on her forehead. It's the tea, Anna whispered. She had told me this in one of her infrequent letters. Everybody puts cream in their tea.

Her mother ordered from the health food section of the menu, muttering at the lack of choice. She asked Anna, what would you like, Sis? I'm buying. Anna had two brothers and sometimes the family called her Sis. Anna's eyes careened back and forth along the neon menu, her eyelids flapping, the edge of her mouth quivering. Can you – ? Mom, I don't know.

Just pick something, Kathleen laughed, groping through her purse for her wallet. There's a lineup behind us.

Her mother tapped her elbow. Anna had paled slightly and was holding her ponytail in her hands. She stared over the shoulder of the cashier to where the deep fryers were, and the line behind her was growing restless. I could hear the shuffle of people behind us deciding to move to another line. Her eyes looked like they were made of glass, teared up, clean and luminous.

Kathleen was now embarrassed. She tried to explain to the cashier, a teenaged girl with short hair and a McDonald's baseball cap shoved low over her eyes, chewing a piece

of gum, that her daughter had been out of the country for the past year and was a little confused. You order, Mom. I'll be better next time.

Well, Kathleen huffed, I wouldn't know what to order. I don't eat this stuff anymore.

Anymore. I thought about how Anna didn't need to be reminded about things such as then and now. Standing next to me, she bristled. I told the counter-girl that Anna would like a Fish Filet, and I told her this because that's what Anna used to get when we were maybe six years old and took swimming lessons together. We would stop here on the way home. Not this McDonald's but one somewhere in the city, along the side of the road across the street from a wooded cemetery. The only reason I remembered that was because I always thought the fish sandwich smelled horrendous, and I would refuse to sit across from her where she could breathe her fishy breath at me, and wriggle her tartar sauce-smearred fingertips in my face, grinning. Anna shot me a grateful but hurried look, and nodded in acquiescence. She would have the fish. She brushed something off her shirt, swallowed and glanced around as if to challenge someone to suggest that she was not fully in control.

While we ate she told us a story about a goat. The first time I was in Kenya I used to spend a lot of time with this cook and his family, they really helped me out a lot. They told me when I left that they'd bought me a goat, which is a really high honour there, to have a goat bought and named for you. They told me when I got back to Kenya we would all eat it, because by then it would be ready.

Kathleen winced, plucking a French fry from her daughter's untouched carton. At least he was a cook, right? Knew how to make that goat taste good?

Well, Anna went on, when I got back there this time I knew the goat would be ready. I was afraid they would make me slaughter it, since it was my goat essentially.

Oh Sis, Kathleen groaned. Maybe you should save this story for when we're done eating. She took another guilty fry and wiped her hands on the paper napkin that was spread neatly in her lap. She didn't usually call Anna "Sis" unless at least one of Anna's two brothers was around.

Mom, will you let me finish? I got there and the goat was already, you know, done, thankfully. Two of the grandchildren rushed at me with the goat's head. They were so excited, and the goat's blood went all the way up to their elbows. They brought me to the kitchen where they added the head to this bubbling pot which I found out already held the goat's boiling testicles. It was soup for tomorrow. They use every single part.

Did you eat the soup? I asked.

I only ate the liver. Or part of it. I had to leave the next day anyway.

Anna finally began to eat, first her fries, which were beginning to soak through the red cardboard, then her fish filet. She ate the fries one by one, always swallowing one before chomping down on the next. The sandwich, though, she ate ravenously, in about four gigantic bites. A piece of lettuce stuck to her lip, and I could see a spot of creamy tartar sauce gleaming from the corner of her mouth. I half expected her to open up and show me. She didn't. Kathleen said, Well my appetite is ruined, how about yours?

Anna rolled her eyes but stopped talking. I ate more than I should have. I ate until I thought I would throw up while Kathleen chattered about something that had happened to Anna's old piano teacher. I overheard cancer and mother and car and baby but I was too preoccupied with my shame at the way my stomach was reeling at the thought of a

goat's mutilated neck in the hands of eager children, severed boiling sex parts of an animal named for my oldest friend. I ate and ate the cooling food to show that the description hadn't affected me. I felt like she was gauging my reaction as we both chewed. She licked grease from her fingers before snatching up a thin paper napkin. She asked me what was new as she stuffed the soiled napkin and the rest of her garbage into her empty French fry carton, stood up, and headed for the trash can.

When we got into town we stopped at a grocery store to pick up mandarin oranges. It's the last ingredient I need for dinner, Kathleen insisted over her daughter's mild protests. I know you want to get home and call Nick.

I don't want to get home and call Nick. I want to go to bed.

You're not going to call Nick?

I'll call him eventually.

You know he's living with that Stacy girl now?

I know that, Mom.

Did he tell you? I'll bet he made a point of telling you. That sounds like something he'd do.

Of course he told me. Do you expect him to hide it from me?

Well, you just make sure to tell him that you met a guy in Kenya. Just don't mention that he doesn't have a job.

He does have a job.

Working with his father for no money doesn't count as a job.

Anna nudged the car door closed with her foot. Are we going to buy these oranges or what?

Don't do that.

What?

That with your foot. Don't do that.

Here we go.

How often do you talk to Nick? Kathleen shouldered her purse, a delicately woven beaded thing that hung past her hip. A gift mailed from Anna, who had once written to me that she had been sending her mother garishly coloured souvenirs regularly. It was an experiment, she claimed, to test what Kathleen would consent to wearing now that she was divorced. I lagged behind them as they walked briskly toward the supermarket. They were both tall, hearty people, their strides long and determined, each reaching a little further than the other.

Barely ever. Why would I talk to him?

Well he still loves you, doesn't he?

I guess maybe.

So call him.

I'm not calling him today.

But you'll call tomorrow?

Just leave it alone. He has Stacy now.

And I suppose you have this Kenyan guy.

He's Rwandan.

Well you never mentioned that.

Kathleen debated between canned mandarins or fresh ones in a box, humming over factors such as syrup vs. no syrup, malleability, convenience, price, and whether the family would eat the leftover oranges if she went with the box of fresh ones, while Anna and I stood by the bananas. She touched the end of a green banana and told me she wanted to go look at the frozen desserts. The Sara Lee and the Bryer's.

They've made the carts bigger, Anna commented. They're about twice the size.

You weren't gone that long.

I guess it depends when you go.

She took a box of chocolate éclairs from the freezer, the steam fogging her face for a second as she yanked open the door. I'm gonna make Mom buy these, she said. It's just what we both need.

It wasn't different enough, strangely. Anna so jet-lagged, her memory still living in a small ghetto house across the street from a variety store with a tarnished Coca-Cola sign swinging above the door. The picture she took of that sign sat under a magnet on my refrigerator. Two tiny children sprouted up from the ragged doormat, their hands half-closed in the motion of a wave. A long sharp shadow dulled their grins. Anna having just left, with only two bags, the room where she kept a single spider corpse to warn others to stay away. It worked, she said. The spiders know I'm dangerous. Kathleen single and blond, picking at her fast food, wearing too much blush. Not different enough, now that we were here. I tried to think of something to tell her. I said, Are you glad to be back?

I'm glad to be somewhere where people aren't staring at me all the time.

I guess so.

I mean, in Kenya I was like this weird sasquatch or something. The kids would wait on the porch to watch me walk by in the mornings and call to me. Annie! Annie! Sometimes they would leave their houses and walk with me. They had the littlest hands.

She grabbed a box of Ritz crackers from the shelf as we wandered through the aisles, looking for her mother. And then in Rwanda I was just ridiculous. People would gawk at me openly on the streets. They would laugh at me whenever I went jogging because I'm so out of shape. Everything is slow there. My jogging on the street was funny not only because I'm this fat, white sagging thing, but because I'm in a hurry. I'm wearing a watch, you know, I have to be somewhere. It's embarrassing to have to be somewhere, to be in a hurry. Time and order don't really matter there. Everything is slow. I got so angry. One day I said to a little boy who couldn't have been more than twelve years old: what the *fuck* are you staring at? He had no idea what I had said so I went on: stop looking at me you fucking idiot. That's what I said to him.

In Kenya she had taught rudimentary science classes in a high school for deaf kids. She had started dating one of her older students a few months ago.

He came from Rwanda, right?

Right. So I call him Rwandan. His real name is Alain, but there were two Alains in the class so I just thought of him as Rwandan. Not that I ever had to call him anything, since he's deaf. This was his name.

She made a sign of two fingers standing upright on the back of her other fist.

Alain, she said. Rwandan.

Kathleen came flying down the snacks aisle holding a pair of tin cans with tiny flip tabs. I had hoped she would go with the fresh oranges so I could eat one in the car.

She held the wrist of Mrs. Brayce, who had once been a neighbour of theirs, between her thumb and forefinger. Mrs. Brayce pushed a cart full of healthy cereals, sealed chicken and ground beef, clear bags of produce and a case of diet Pepsi. She was a small round woman in a burgundy gold-trimmed spring jacket. There had been a time when Anna would dog sit for the Brayce's, but she had never liked the dog very much.

Look who I found! Kathleen said. You remember Charlotte Brayce, Anna.

You look great, Anna, said Mrs. Brayce.

I've gained weight.

You'd never know.

There was a pause. Anna looked at her box of éclairs. These might melt.

Your mom tells me you were in Africa?

Yes, Anna sighed. Her eyes were helpless. Kenya and then Rwanda.

Rwanda! Isn't that unsafe?

Well. Most of that stuff is over.

But I would think it would still be unsafe!

Well.

Did you feel looked after? Safe?

Most of the time.

Did you have someone to cook for you?

In Rwanda I did.

What about your clothes? Laundry and such?

I usually just washed them in a tub in the backyard.

There was no one to do that for you?



Well I could have given them to someone but they're my clothes. You know. I felt too colonial. Dumping my dirty laundry. Underwear and whatnot.

Was there much food there? Was there a lot of food available?

Kathleen took Anna's elbow, ready to move on now. Don't ask her about the food, she said. We had to hear all about it while we were eating lunch. C'mon, Sis, let's go.

It was nice seeing you again, Anna. I'm glad to hear you're alright.

Yes, okay. Enjoy shopping.

Ha! You wouldn't be saying that if you knew how much this family costs me in groceries. And I've barely even started!

She pushed her cart down the aisle, shaking her head and laughing. They really had made the carts bigger, I supposed. The aisles too, then? How did we avoid hitting each other when we pushed so much of this food in front of us? How did we keep to ourselves?

C'mon Sis, I've got to get dinner made.

We paid in the fast lane: three items.

Kathleen invited me for dinner. I said Yes, thank you, wishing I had said no. We turned down odd streets heading toward the place where we would all eat. These subdivisions were only vaguely familiar – I might have been part of a carpool for Girl Guides or dance class or soccer with someone who lived around here. Anna was quiet in the front seat, clearly exhausted. She snapped answers and turned down the radio. She pressed her

forehead to the window. What time is it in Rwanda? I asked her. I don't know, she said.  
The right time. I'm so tired.

Your father's going to be there, Kathleen said. He wanted to be there for dinner  
when you got home.

That's good.

I almost said no.

I would have been mad.

Well, I know Anna, but things are different now. It might be harder that he's here  
tonight.

Only if you make it harder.

Now you're being selfish.

Selfish. Pfffft. I'm not even going to answer that.

Kathleen's new place was a light green condominium with a single window in the  
front. It was so attached to the units on its right and left that it looked embedded, almost  
non-existent. There was no driveway, so Kathleen let us out in front and went to park the  
car in the parking lot. I suddenly remembered who had lived in this neighbourhood.  
Jessica W. A strange last name with a silent "c" somewhere within it. She used to wear  
long dresses her dad sent her from Italy. Remember Jessica? I asked Anna.

Wilczak, Anna said. She used to lived just over there. You don't have to stay, you  
know. For dinner. I don't why she's making such a big deal out of it.

She missed you, I said, not knowing why I was defending her. So did I.

Yeah. Anna knocked on the door impatiently and set her bags at her feet. But now  
I have to pretend that everything is so different and I hate that. I can feel it already. It's

going to be this whole thing with me living up to how different I am now, and the two of them trying to show me how different things are with them. And with all this focus on how much we've changed we'll never be able to talk to each other again. And it's not like we've changed. We haven't changed.

The door swung open and there stood Anna's father. The last time I had seen him was at this year's Christmas party. He and Kathleen weren't living separately then, but they didn't have much to say to each other. He had sat beside me on a couch desperately flipping through about three hundred photographs taken when he visited Anna in Kenya. Here's the pyramids, here's the hotel we stayed in. Here's a friend she made in Egypt; he showed us some of the best restaurants. Here's, no, we can skip past these. You've already seen these. He didn't want me to get bored. The pictures were almost dulled with fingerprints from so many handlings. I didn't know what to say to him. People had seemed intent on avoiding him that night. His clothes were rumpled and smelled a little dirty, like fried food and sweat. He was never very good to her, you know, my mother told me on the car ride home. You can leave anyone, and that's a good thing.

Now he was haggard-looking, his skin flaccid and a little transparent, his hair thin. He appeared to have made an effort with his clothes this time, however – his shirt looked freshly ironed and he wore a good beige cardigan and a pair of sharp-seamed grey dress pants. He had lost a lot of weight; his cheekbones pushed at his skin. He looked like a skull jammed on top of a wooden rod or a broom handle. Or at least that was a description I could imagine Anna using later when we were alone, after dinner, or on the phone tomorrow. I could imagine her laughing. He looked emaciated, exhausted.

He smiled slightly and wavered a little bit. He held out one arm, the other gripping the doorknob and said, Welcome home, Sis.

## BLUE BABY

She spits out the window of her mother's precious car. Hard-to-get car. Honda Civic, last year's model. Cobalt blue. Mother/woman small. Sporty conservative. Fucking stupid worthless car. It's not such a big deal, really. All girls do it. All girls give head. She's touched a dick once – her ninth grade boyfriend. It wasn't much, not a big deal. Smaller than she'd expected, and softer. It had lain flat below his waist and had curved slightly at the end, silly really, not jutting out stiffly like the little arm she'd always envisioned thanks to health class. Those diagram dicks, peach coloured, veined inside with blue and green highways showing you where the semen travels, which way it trucks along. She'll probably tell Lisa about this. She spits again, takes a drag. She takes quick, shallow puffs, her mouth fills up with saliva. Sputtering, she feels a sprinkle of ash blow back at her face. Fuck off, she snarls at the wind. Driving too fast in her mother's car at night. Smoking cigarettes her friend Lisa always pilfers and carries around in twist-tied sandwich bags, priced at a quarter each. The wind snakes through a gap in her teeth because she grins. Grins and drives. Rolls up the window, fills up the car with a grey stench, honks the horn. Her skin is this strange sheath, veil-like, loose, odd, presentable. Underneath is an unpleasant tickle.

Karen yelps twice and turns on the radio. Her hand tremors and the cigarette falls, half-finished, to the Tweety Bird car mat and she stamps it out. The smell of melted rubber mixes with dirt mixes with ash. It is not at all an expected smell. Christ, her mother. The Tweety mat with its smelly new hole like a single tooth mark. She thinks about pulling over and finding somewhere to sit and hold the steering wheel, find a grip

of something, die maybe, maybe make a phone call. What a night, she whispers out loud. The inadequacy of these words shakes her. She chokes a bit, lights another cigarette. She has yet to master the art of driving and smoking at the same time. She doesn't know if it's better to let your cigarette simmer in the car's pull-out ashtray or whether it should be scissored between her first two fingers and resting against the wheel. Her mother used to smoke. She quit a few years ago by chewing a dark green gum – not even chewing it exactly but letting it rest at the back of her mouth. Did she drive and smoke? She must have. She used to drive Karen forty-five minutes to grade school every morning. Lisa smokes but Lisa neither has a driver's license nor has ever discussed getting one, even in passing, even wistfully.

What a night. Someone beeps their horn and she beeps back twice. She composes a song on the horn in which the words are do-do-duh-do. She screams the words do-do-duh-do against the car's sealed windows until they aren't words anymore (they were never really words though) but more of a rasp, the scratchiest part of a very heavy song. She is singing then, bashing her hands against the horn in the merciful nighttime which obscures the faces of other drivers who wouldn't know what she's on about. Tinted windows float past like black panels and Karen croons until the cum she still feels in the back of her throat is bubbling, boiling actually, melting and evaporating, smoking back up where it came from, somewhere far far up from some inner part of a tall and narrow man and the sound, the orchestra, is made up of long and short beeps like an action movie chase scene. She screams and shoots through the traffic, going home. She is sixteen.

Why not give a man head? Why not? She has the option, does she not? She has the right, as a desirable female with hair and breasts and a soft neck and whatever else is

found attractive or alluring in this world. Whatever is found sexy in photographed or live, sauntering women, in girls who drive their mothers' cars smoking long thin cigarettes.

She has it.

She doesn't like to think of her mother but she does anyway. It's late and Karen is supposed to be home by now. Her mother on the cold tiles; broom, slippers, moisturized cheeks. Peeing with the bathroom door open in case the phone rings. Sweeping the clean front hall with the door open to nothing but street lights. Karen checks her shirt for remnants of what may have fallen out of her mouth, the hot fluid that made her tongue twitch and her throat spasm. The man had held her head from both sides, and on the gravel, from that angle, she had looked legless. Amputated at the knee. She hadn't flicked away the pebble that gouged her kneecap. Instead she had concentrated on the pebble, its digging, its burrowing.

Blow job, she repeats over and over in her mother's car, on her mother's seat, her ass on her mother's driver's seat. Her mouth O's around the word carefully. She has done it. She'll tell Lisa tomorrow, they'll compare blow job stories. She is okay.

The Honda Civic was hard to get from her mother, because it was her mother's baby. Mom no longer had human babies so she had a chrome and wheeled baby snuggled in the garage. Mom treated her Blue Baby to an automatic car wash once a week and hung a tennis ball from the ceiling of the garage so there would be no dispute about how far Blue Baby was allowed to go before finding herself too precariously close to the back wall of the garage. There were limits for Baby – Blue Baby inched along. Blue Baby had a clean backseat, not so much as a magazine took up space. Always the assumption, the

impression of much room. There was a Tweety Bird mat, a gift from Karen's younger brother, his first attempt at a non-homemade Christmas gift for a parent. The ridged rubber mat was an embarrassment, but Karen's mother used it under the condition that she made a qualifying comment about it to every first-time passenger who rode in the front right-hand seat of Blue Baby. *Like my Tweety mat? Brandon bought it with his allowance. It's the thought that counts.* The ridges were home to rich filthy water that gushed off shoes and boots on wet days, minute stones jutting from the small spaces and were often a distraction to Karen's mother while driving. She would use her long painted fingernails like tweezers and pluck them; flick them out a partially opened window in disdain.

Karen needed her mother's car because she had promised to give Lisa and her boyfriend Cam a ride to the show. The show was something like a concert in the bar of a hotel that Karen knew she would never be allowed to go to because her mother never let her do anything. Even if she swore to her mother on her very life, on her dead grandfather's grave (she would never do such a thing, never) that it was an "all-ages" show, that she wouldn't drink any alcohol, Karen's mother knew what Lisa and Cam were like and she knew what area of town the bar fit into so well – the broken-windowed suburb with the garbaged streets and the clang of old pop cans scurrying along the cement in the wind, the men in puddles between buildings talking about things Karen should never hear and putting things on and into their bodies. The two friends Karen was not allowed to have over when nobody was home to supervise. Cam with dark eye makeup and painted fingernails and thick cheap jewellery. His heavy, baggy black pants, frayed at the ankles, his Skool-glue stiff hair. Cam had a friend who lived downtown who



once cut a demon's face into his skinny torso and broke a Bic pen over it to make a tattoo. Cam was there. Karen's brother once asked if Cam was a fag. Their mother had warned Brandon not to use that language, and that Cam was most certainly a confused, unattractive boy who painted his face to get attention. Lisa with her puffy whore's lipstick smudged beyond the natural lines of her lips, her mini-skirts and grimy shoes, bracelets and chipped nail polish and fishnet stockings. Lisa always wore deep musky scented oils and covered her binders with stickers, her bookbag with patches and buttons. They were Karen's favourite friends, and it felt magnificent that they thought she was okay, that they sometimes nodded their approval and flashed their eyes at each other, that at least one of them called her on the phone every few days, that they stopped by her locker and asked her if she wanted to go smoke outside. Sometimes Lisa did Karen's makeup in the girl's washroom, drew outside her lips and pressed dark kohl spikes around her eyes. Scary doll eyes. Karen always washed it off before going home for the day.

They wanted to see a local band called The Cankers and they needed a ride. Karen had never heard of the band but she wanted to go very badly. She would go to Lisa's first and get her makeup done, she'd ask Lisa to pick an outfit for her, something she would never wear to school and they'd smoke a joint on Lisa's unmade bed. Lisa's mom didn't mind as long as they did it when she wasn't home. If she was home they usually went and sat beside the green electrical box across the street. Going to drink Kool-Aid? Lisa's mom would sometimes ask, a little coolly, and Lisa would reply, Maybe when we get back we might need some of that Kool-Aid. No ice in mine, Mom. They would whistle one-note tunes with pieces of grass and make green woven bracelets that broke right

away, or they would just throw grass at each other. They would forget to go back inside. At the show maybe Karen would kiss a cute boy with piercings and coloured hair. She told her mother she needed to go to the downtown library to get books about the role of women in World War II because the school library didn't have enough information. Is the library even open at this time? Yes, it's open until midnight. Why don't you pick a different topic? Because I really want to do this one. It interests me. You know women in the aircraft industry earned double what they made before the war? And when the men came back they just screwed everything up. The women stopped working, the whole world was Leave it to Beaver and all the women were allowed to do was cook. You know, Karen scoffed. Your messed-up generation.

I'll drive you to the library. I don't want to be rushed. Why don't you take the bus? I don't want to have to carry all the books home on the bus. Oh for god's sake. You had better drive damn carefully and I don't want you setting foot inside this house one millisecond after 12:15, do you understand? Not one second.

She wore one of Lisa's mini skirts and a tight spiderweb shirt. Bits of her white stomach puffed out the sides and when she sat down to drive the waistline of the skirt cut and chafed. The rolls were peachy marshmallows and they made her feel a little sick and bloated. She would go on a diet tomorrow. She would make herself a list of what she was allowed to eat each day. She wouldn't starve herself exactly, she would just cut down. Karen said no smoking in the car and her friends abided but complained. She liked how Cam sat in the middle of the backseat instead of by the window, and he leaned over and stuck his head between the two front seats. Sometimes she wished Cam would like her

instead of Lisa. She wondered what she would ever say to Lisa if Cam were to take her hand and tell her he'd like to go out with her. She drove fast so they could all get out of the car and smoke. When she spun the wheel she didn't use two hands like her mother always insisted, like she'd been taught in Driver's Ed. At Driver's Ed they seemed most concerned with making you believe that the steering wheel was something it wasn't, like a clock, or a plate. Like the road, too, was something different, a carefully mapped out space, a world with its own boundaries and rules that was easily depicted in their workbooks with bold and thin lines and one colour for go, one colour for maybe-go, and one colour for stop, instead of just a flattened path people moved along. She used only the tips of the fingers on one of her hands and took both hands off the wheel at red lights. She played a tape Lisa had brought – a brash girl singer, slightly operatic and grittily off-key, punctuated by a cavernous man's growl and some spoken samples of Vincent Price. Cam drummed his fists on the back of her seat and tried to hit the gear shift with his heel. Karen laughed and told him to stop it. He made a footprint on the ceiling. He smelled a little bit like beer.

She parked in a lot behind a shabby bank under a sign that read Customer Parking Only. Unauthorized Vehicles Will Be Towed Away At Owner's Expense. Cam promised her that they only towed cars away when the stores and banks were open. It was past ten o'clock and everything was closed except a 7-11 that had its own parking lot. Lisa immediately sprawled out on the closed lid of a dumpster and lit a cigarette. Fuck, she moaned. This thing is wet. She squirmed a little bit and Karen thought she looked like a photograph lying there, such a skinny cool girl just smoking and staring at the empty sky, not caring that she sat in trash, that garbage seeped into her, unmindful.

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Karen left at ten minutes to midnight, just as The Cankers were beginning their second song. Lisa and Cam had jeered a little bit, had ribbed her about running home to mommy. Karen had been feeling a little desperate and out of place, she had wanted to leave the second she realized that the thick fog of cigarette smoke would surely make her hair smell and she thought of the sunflower perfume zipped up in her purse that she hoped would fool her mother. Then there were Lisa and Cam, both acting silly and strange from a pill they had split in half outside by the dumpster. Lisa shook and shivered a lot and her eyes seemed darker, larger, she rubbed her thumb manically inside Cam's hand and took her breaths in short deep gulps. Cam spoke quickly and seemed paler than usual. Karen left but they both stayed because they didn't have curfews, because they were sixteen, not eight.

She fumbled in her purse on the way out. Keys and perfume. She would change her shirt in the car – drop Lisa's spiderweb shirt in her mailbox on the way home since it would smell like smoke and Karen's mother would surely be waiting for her by the door, pretending like she needed to sweep the front hallway at midnight or something equally implausible. She walked across the street enjoying the clipping of her shoes on cement ghetto streets, enjoying her presence in such a faraway place, her being here, her having been here.

She saw her car, her mother's car, Blue Baby, its back end elevated slightly as though offering itself up, fused to the back of a dingy white and red tow-truck. Her stomach tickled her ribs as she yelled with a breaking voice, STOP! Stop it! I'm here!

The tow truck roared loudly before a tilted Blue Baby, its brown exhaust simmering about the cerulean chrome like a steaming bath. Karen's slight heels slowed her down; she could feel their plastic pounds on the road in the very core of her kneecaps. Too late, too late, oh damn, she whispered in between sharp clacks of her heels and her hitching breaths in the deep coolness of urban night. What a wicked place that she never should have come to. She touched Blue Baby on her faintly soiled hood (car wash was usually scheduled for Monday – three days away) and rounded her front end breathlessly, heading for the driver's side window. There might still be time. At this point it would be worse to watch the truck trudge off into the night, hauling off the helpless Baby, a near miss, than it would have been to have returned to an empty parking lot in the first place.

The tow truck was a big dirty machine with a strappingly menacing triangular arm that gripped Blue Baby from somewhere along her rear bumper, forcing her upwards. But a tow truck man could be reasoned with, couldn't he? A tow truck man? She said the word, Mister, approaching the window, Mister this is mine. Because surely a tow truck driver was a sensible man, an even-handed man despite his rusty red pipe of an arm, despite his high seat in his truck, despite the smell, the exhaust, the human stench, the sweat, the cigarette smoke that billowed from his open window. A tow truck driver was not a stranger you didn't speak to – a tow truck driver was an *occupation*. She knew this as she approached, as she lied the words I just had to run across the street, Mister, please, I just parked here for a second so I could run over to the bar and tell my friend her mom's looking for her!

Since a tow truck driver is an occupation. Just like a police officer, merely enforcing the no-parking laws. All occupations were a form of law enforcement. A form of safety.

The man revved the engine, though the truck was already running. When he spoke his voice lacked the gruffness she had been expecting, the sureness of a man who would dare to drive away with her mother's car strapped to his own. I circled the block three times, he muttered. That's about fifteen minutes. You didn't show up, I'm taking your car.

She hugged her purse to her chest, feeling the clasp digging into her neck above the low-cut spider shirt. Please, Mister. This is. Oh god, this is my mother's car!

Well, I figured that, he said. It sure ain't your car. You're what? Fifteen? He faltered slightly, his eyes wavering over her neck and shoulders. She wished for a sweater. He turned his eyes to his oil-stained hands which hung from the steering wheel. One hand trembled a little bit, fumbled around the wheel. She waited.

He flipped down a plastic laminated ID badge that was hidden in the visor flap above his head. Donald Howe. In the photograph he was clean-shaven with a flat nose and a close-cropped haircut, one vaguely shadowy roll echoing beneath his creased chin. In real life he had a patchy brown beard with unattractive tufts of metallic grey under the lower lip and stretching up toward his temples. He wore a dark green baseball cap with a sewn-on logo for the Formosa Brewery. The cap may once have been black. Hearty grey-speckled clumps of hair announced themselves above and around his ample ears and stuck together like sloppy V's along his forehead. Karen looked to the grey streaks, to the age they indicated, reminding herself that he was a grown man of sense, a tow truck

driver after all. She *was* parked illegally. She was in the wrong, he was the one with the sense. He might not take her seriously, being that she was so young, but she would plead, she would cry like a child, like a little girl begging from an adult neither parent nor teacher – an adult unfamiliar with the emotions of children not his own. He was skinny, his facial features skull-like, and his neck-skin hung with a certain bonelessness suggestive of a dramatic weight loss. His nose was not flat, but long and wide, stretching between his cheeks. The nostrils opened darkly when he grimaced. He glanced anxiously from the passenger seat to his lap to Karen's face to the purple cardboard disk hanging from his dashboard and smelling of bubblegum.

He coughed. I didn't catch your name.

Karen. She stared at the green digital numerals on the dashboard of the truck. It was almost midnight. She prepared to ask the question: I'm here now, Sir.

Don.

Don. I'm here now, so could I please get my car back? I need to be home in fifteen minutes.

He fiddled with the brim of his hat, pulling it off of his eyes which were a little blackened, ringed and drooping, the corners a gummy pink. In the light that bounced from his headlights to the back of the bank, simmering around the compromised Blue Baby and her, Karen, dressed in her best friend's clothes, the man looked a hundred years old. He opened and closed his mouth once and asked, Fifteen minutes? That isn't very much time.

Yes, please, fifteen minutes. Maybe fourteen by now. Karen felt okay. She even touched the shoulder of his coat through the window, and her thumb connected with a

jagged bone that poked against the fabric. He was a thin man, truly. Her fingers felt damp from the coat, vaguely grimy on their tips and she crossed her arms again.

I guess the only problem is that I get a commission, you know, for towing cars. This is how I get, how I get paid. So if I don't tow your car then that means I only towed uh, two cars tonight, and I already called this one in before you got here. My boss is going to want to know what happened to it. And it means I wasted half an hour not towing this car, you know, when I could have been finding other cars to tow to get my commission.

He said the word "commission" carefully, as though he would have liked to think of a better, clearer word to use in its place.

Karen had been nodding in time with Don's words, her eyes never leaving the slowly climbing green numbers. 12:01. The numerals swam a little bit and she widened her eyes, hoping to make room for the tears so they wouldn't splash onto her cheeks. She must not cry. She had twenty dollars in her wallet.

How much is your commission? She asked.

Don shook his head and coughed into his hand. He lowered his skull eyes again and opened his glove compartment, searching for something buried within opened and wrinkled envelopes, some sort of daybook, and a crinkling doughnut shop bag. I'll just call you a cab, he said. The pickup price at the lot is ninety bucks.

Please, she whispered. 12:02. Her mother. Her mother in the front hall with the white plastic broom and the dustpan. Her mother in slippers on the tiles, her mother with a tiny square pile of dust at her feet, the kind of dust that just collects somehow and doesn't seem to come from anywhere. Staring out the screen door through her own



bedtime reflection, her ringless hands and her scrubbed face and her housecoat, the slight fall frost along the edge of the windows making a photograph of her. Her mother watching for headlights, headlights passing. Blue Baby nowhere in sight. Her mother feeling angry and disobeyed and let down and untrusting. Her mother sputtering and infuriated. *You have no respect for me, you and your deadbeat friends. I knew you once.*

Please, she begged, her voice stronger and her tears sinking back into her eyes.

Please let me take my car home to my mother. 12:03.

Where'd you get all that makeup? he whispered.

Pardon?

It's your. It's all your mommy's makeup. Is that right?

I have to be home. I have to be home by 12:15 and it's my mother's car.

That's some shirt, honey. You got some tits hidin away in there. His voice shook with the words. His fingers played with the hair on his chin, and his forehead shone. He faced her but stared at his bluejeaned knees. She glanced across the street at the bar. Karen was a little surprised that she couldn't hear the music from this small distance. If she could only run back to get her friends. Cam would threaten this tow truck driver. Lisa would tear his balls off, she would.

My mom. She doesn't like my friends and I have her car and she thinks I'm at the library. 12:04.

Don swallowed hard, his Adam's apple swinging forward like a second pointy nose. He fumbled for the key, grasped the plastic replica of a Smurf that dangled from the ignition, and gave it a rough turn. The engine sighed into silence.

Karen put an arm across her chest absently. In the dark, Blue Baby wasn't very shiny. Blue Baby usually slept in the garage. Karen spat on the ground. 12:05.

## INJURY

Spencer hadn't realized that they sold Sympathy cards in the hospital gift shop. He wondered if all the cards were about Sympathy for the same thing. A person dying. He flipped through a few, and they all seemed about the same. Soft tones, anywhere from yellow to beige and whatever hung between those, the letters dipping across the page in colours that were either offensively bright or even more muted than beige, if that was even possible. Like a dull quiet silver. You could barely see them in that case. You had to squint. The letters were raised a little bit, springing from the page to remind you. So you could feel them with your fingertips.

Sorry about your loss, always put prosaically, never giving death enough tribute. He felt that hospital Sympathy cards should be of a greater variety. Sympathy for your loss to Sympathy for what's hurting you. Those cards could be red, maybe. Sorry you broke your arm, it shouldn't have happened. Sorry you can't feed yourself right now, but you'll get better. Sorry your guts exploded up through your throat. Sorry.

New Baby. Get Well. Sympathy. There was a small section for Birthdays, for those unfortunate enough to suffer their birthday in a tilted bed in a room where nurses brought pudding and small stuffed things on special occasions, where the doors were open to anyone wandering the halls of such a private but unbearably public place. You could pull the curtain across. But then you were a curtain in the middle of the room. You were a miserable hider, an inept one.

He selected a Get Well card and searched his pocket for change. In the rush of calling the ambulance and making sure his mother was stable enough, in no danger of

splitting her bobbing head open on the side of the bathtub, he had left his wallet somewhere. In his other coat, probably, which hung on a hook at the stairs leading down to the basement. He had put a shirt on but still wore his pyjama pants. The coat he had grabbed was a puffy black ski jacket he tried to avoid wearing because he had realized that, having never participated in any winter sports, the jacket didn't suit him. Luckily there was some loose change and a ten dollar bill zippered into the coat's side pocket, left over from an old winter when he might have worn it. Sometimes his mother asked him whatever happened to that coat, when she knew very well that it hung in his bedroom closet. He would usually shrug. That coat cost a lot of money, she would say, without pressing the issue any further.

The sweat that had pooled at the backs of his knees, not to mention his crotch, was finally starting to dry. The flannel had held it well, and the dampness was an invisible embarrassment on the navy blue garment, like he had fallen or soiled himself, or like he was fevered, himself a patient.

He was seven cents short. He had that found ten dollar bill, which at any other time would have delighted him, but it just seemed that he had already been standing there too long with his insufficient change dotting the glass counter to bring out that bill. The matter stumped him, and he breathed evenly at the woman behind the counter, aware that his breath must be rancid, full of the drool of an unrealized sleep. He knew his eyes were crusted, and he could feel something tight drawing the skin together around his lips. Like everything was drying out, tightening up on him, making a mask of his real face. He wasn't breaking the ten here. Not in this place. He gulped and turned around, prepared to

put the card back on the shelf. The woman could watch him do it. It might have been a waste anyway. His mother might still die.

“Go ahead,” said the lady behind the counter. She was in her fifties with a full face and an overgrown set of curls foaming around her head. “Don’t worry about the seven cents, hon.”

Hon. He was twenty-one years old. She looked like she hadn’t meant it anyway. Like she was just saying it to avoid a confrontation from this sloppy human, who was obviously half out of it on something. Probably some patient from upstairs, taking a tour of the free corridors. Or maybe an escapee. She was probably just saying it so she could go home and feel good about herself for helping out a sick person when most of the people she encountered in this gift shop were sad and worried but otherwise well.

I have a job, he wanted to say. I go to university. If she lives it’s because I saved her life. If she dies it’s because I didn’t wake up in time. Too used to the sounds around me. Too deep into a dream about a bright purple octopus slurping along land, getting the bottom of his tentacles dirty, messing up the suction cups so they don’t suck anymore, if they ever did. Or because I spent too long with my hands around her neck, trying to stop the blood from belching out, and didn’t call the ambulance in time. I thought it made sense, like I was making a tourniquet. Now when I look back on it I guess I didn’t know what I was doing. I guess it was pretty stupid, what do you think?

Instead he thanked her and let her put the card into a little bag that was just a few inches bigger than the card itself. The bag was paper, so it made that pleasing crinkling sound like brown shopping bags in movies with loose bread loaves jutting out the top. Paper bags were so impractical. He didn’t even need a bag, he was just going upstairs.

Not yet though, not for awhile. He noticed as he turned away that his hands were covered in crusting blood that reddened his skin like a burn, or clung to it like a second, unfinished layer. "Damnit," he whispered, noticing the way it stuck to his nails. The woman had her fingertips pressed to her forehead, creeping slowly over to her temples. She stared absently into the clear display case before her, a glass box full of keychains that proclaimed the city. For the injured traveller. He covered his mouth in a laugh and got a whiff of the blood. It was the blood-smell, he hadn't expected it to be any different. It smelled like the taste of a bitten tongue, of a sucked hangnail or paper cut. Not his mother at all, just injury. He knew it stuck to his chest like paste under his shirt, hardening. It didn't move as he moved, as he walked head-up out of the gift shop. The blood stayed still, cracking a little as his modest chest shook in and out with his breathing. It was 6:11 a.m.

He should have cleaned up in the washroom. He had meant to, hadn't he? But somehow he had ended up at the gift shop in the basement. The basement was the safest place in the building with the neon cafeteria sign that blazed steadily without blips and devastating blurps. The place for visitors, like him. He would go now then. To wash himself off.

Greg found Spencer alone in the cafeteria, carefully spooning tiny moons of chocolate pudding into his mouth. There was an untouched whirl of whipped cream in the centre, tipped over and too-smooth on one side.

"Saving the white stuff till last?"

"Yeah," Spencer sniffed. "Right."

Greg pulled up a chair, its drab metal legs squealing in the bacon-choked air. He sat so that there was one chair between them, but even so Spencer turned his body slightly, pulling the small plastic bowl of pudding into his chest. He considered asking Spencer if he could buy him a real breakfast, but he knew he would simply shake his head and stare into the chocolate depths of his pudding, his stomach a hollow thing. Spencer was a vegetarian and wouldn't go much for the greasy breakfast items they sold here, not to mention he was funny about eating out places. Bridgette had told Greg she had been petrified when Spencer had started applying to universities a few years ago, afraid of how he would react if he wasn't accepted at the local school and had to move away from home. She said she could barely imagine him in the big bustling common rooms with his coffee, his chin shaking, his t-shirt like a blank canvas awaiting his spills. Or refusing to leave home at all, which would have been worse. Continuing to deliver moist boxes of pizza in lousy neighbourhoods across town, the cardboard burning his hands as he stood on soiled doorsteps, children running to find their parents or parents running to find their wallets. But he had been accepted, and he didn't have to move away. He had such an interest in biology. Bridgette would always run her hand through her son's floppy flaxen hair, reminding him in her breathy little voice that he should think about getting it cut sometime soon and the boy would shrug her off, a smile on his face, and gulp his milk. Greg would watch the hand that had been in Spencer's hair, watch it trail along the counter, fist around the tap to rinse a plate, tug the placemats from their settings and heap them on the counter, the three of them. Dance along Greg's arm up to his shoulder, cool fingers shaping around his jaw, hooking behind his ears, along the stubble of his own hair that grew up from the base of his skull. This was how close he

would get to Spencer, who would, by this point, be at his desk in his bedroom, clicking away on his computer, wiping his babyish milk moustache with the back of his hand. Or so Greg might imagine. Spencer hated him. There was no father to speak of – Spencer had been an unplanned pregnancy just after Bridgette had finished high school. Greg was not the first man Bridgette had dated but, according to Bridgette, he was the first that she had ever encouraged her son to like.

“Spence, I want to thank you for calling me when this happened.”

“What else was I gonna do?”

“Well, you didn’t *have* to call me. That was a decision you made.”

Spencer didn’t reply.

“I spoke to the doctor. I want to try to explain to you what happened.”

“I already know what happened.”

“I know you do. You know what happened because you were there, but I want to tell you what the doctor said about what happened to your Mom.”

“Right.”

“She had what’s called a perforated ulcer. She – ”

“I know that. I know what she had. Forget it. I’m going home. Call me there or whatever.”

“Can we at least – ”

Spencer pulled a flat brown bag out of his bulky jacket. “Just give her this. I got her a card.” He handed Greg the card, still in the bag.

“Did you get to sign it at least?”

“I don’t have a pen. Just tell her it’s from me.”



Greg watched him leave, his flannel pyjama bottoms bunching around his ankles. Those pyjamas had been a gift to Greg from Bridgette at Christmas. They hadn't fit him properly, had left a rectangle of hairy skin between his slippers and the cuffs. Bridgette had been sheepish, though a little amused at the jig he had performed in front of the Christmas tree in the short pants. I'll return them, Bridgette had laughed, and Greg had figured it would be nice for everyone if he gave them to Spencer, who sat in the corner quietly and ceremoniously unwrapping a new chess set. Now Greg blinked as a few humiliating tears shot to his eyes. An ulcer wasn't anything too bad. A lot of people had ulcers. She would be alright. He had already ordered flowers. Once she was stabilized Greg was going to go home and gather up her favourite DVD's – he already had a list planned out in his mind. And now Spencer had vanished. God damn him. His pettiness. This was his mother.

Greg shook his head of angry thoughts. Of course Spencer would be mixed up right now. He was there when it happened, whatever *it* was. The perforation of the ulcer. Greg had to admit he didn't know exactly what it was. He owned a small but well-esteemed electronics store. To try to define what went on in a machine in terms of what goes on in a human body was something he struggled with daily. Think of this like the heart, he would tell confused clients. And these are the veins. But that would never be right. At times he thought it might be easier to think of things the other way around. To think of his veins like wires, his cells like tiny batteries.

He would understand Spencer. He would try. He stood up and joined the short line-up of breakfasters, counting out the bills in his wallet.

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Spencer sat behind the wheel in the hospital parking lot. They charged you here, they charged you to park. He was interested in finding out how much they would demand of him when he drove through the toll booth on the way out. He hoped it was less than eight dollars and fifty-five cents. What if he didn't have enough cash on him? Could they ask him to stay here, at the hospital? Really, they had no Sympathy. None at all.

Perforated. Like a cardboard edge. Like a dotted line. Like something neat, a nice border, a snappy perforated frame. Or maybe it was the sound of splattering in the middle of the night, a splash that turned his dream octopus into a strange humping puddle, that dissolved its pulpy body save for those saucer-like domes that were its ineffectual suction cups floating on through the puddle like abandoned dinner plates. Maybe it was her voice that usually trickled so quietly along the walls of the house transformed into a hard hack followed by a dumping sound, like something emptying out. Maybe it was her bare arms covered up to the shoulders in her own blood, grasping the toilet lid, forcing it down on her head for no apparent reason, following along with her own logic of that moment. Possibly it was the blood mixed with toilet water that clung to the stucco ceiling, having bounced up there by the force of her heaving. Her knees crumpled under her, her nightgown a dirty bib. Perforated.

He turned the key angrily in the ignition. Some things were not right.

Having been dismissed by Dr. Frieson, advised to go home and get some rest, Greg drove instead to the two-storey house where Bridgette and Spencer lived. He called work from his cell phone, advising Bruce that he wouldn't be around today due to a family

emergency. It unnerved him a bit to see Spencer's car in the driveway, settled neatly into its place. Of course, he had said he was going home. Greg guessed he didn't know what to say to the boy. Of course he would say, Your Mom is doing fine. Spencer might stand his presence long enough for Greg to fix them each a coffee, but he probably wouldn't say anything. Greg might try to explain to him again what was wrong with Bridgette, how long she might be in the hospital. Greg had to admit that he felt ill-equipped, like he didn't have even close to enough information about what had happened to the poor kid's mother. His beloved Bridgette.

He opened the front door with his key and called, "Spence! Hey, Spence! It's Greg, are you alright?"

There was no answer, and Greg figured he might be sleeping. It had been a long, interrupted night. One of Bridgette's plants, the high leafy one beside by the front door, had been knocked over. Paramedics maybe. Greg shuddered and righted the plant, scooping the wayward dirt into his palms and shaking it back into the pot.

He called for Spencer again, and made his way up the carpeted stairs. The bathroom light was on, and there he found Spencer, shirtless on his knees, looking shrunken and white, his back sprinkled with pimples. He had a bucket beside him, steam rising from its plastic rim, and a sponge in his hand. "I just started," he muttered. "You can help me. We might need some, you know, paper towels. Or another sponge, something."

Spencer knelt in a pool of blood deep enough to have retained its moisture, its greasy sheen. The blood covered the tiles, groping up the base of the toilet in spider-like reaches, up the bathtub, the base of the counter. The inside of the bathtub as well as the

tap was coated in blood. The pale green shower curtain was bunched up, the folds dotted with sprays of blood like holes. The toilet was almost unrecognizable; its shape confused by the gobs of thick, brackish gore, the appliance itself looked like an organ pumping black there on the bathroom floor. Greg noticed hand prints in the bathtub, and immediately tears started racing down his cheeks.

“She did it in the bathtub too. I figure that won’t be too hard, we can just turn on the tap and rinse it down the drain, we might need to scrub in the calking a bit. Maybe you can go to the store and grab some rougher scrub-things and then – ”

“Oh no, oh no Spence, I had no idea, I – we can get someone to do this, I can do it later maybe,” Greg wept, darting to the boy’s side. He tried to take the sponge but it was pinched in his fist and he wouldn’t let go.

“We’ll need a chair to reach the part on the ceiling. And it’s getting between the tiles, so we’ll have to do something about that.”

Greg took the boy by the armpits, lifting him. His pale hair smelled like grease and laundry, it was painfully thin and delicate. Spencer was a dead weight.

“We’ll have to do something about that. Put me down.”

Greg bearhugged Spencer from behind, his arms crossing over the boy’s chest. He was uncooperative, and had to be dragged from the bathroom. The backs of his legs were saturated with blood, and his body made tracks on the tiles as Greg pulled him.

“We’ll have to do something about that.”

“About what?” Greg whispered, their heads right next to each other. He lowered Spencer into the carpeted hallway and shut the bathroom door.

“You know,” Spencer said, his face crumpling. He flipped over and gripped Greg’s forearms clumsily, his back leaving a bloody outline on the carpet. “You know,” he gasped, pressing a swampy eye into Greg’s bluejeaned knee, his back quaking.

“She’ll be alright,” Greg said, his voice too loud, bursting ineffectually between Spencer’s sobs, terrified for his flailing white arms and bloody wrists, the random red splashes careening up his freckled skin. He covered his face, mindful of the blood on the underside of his own arms and felt the gravity of the bloody boy in front of him, and the tableau behind the closed bathroom door. He removed himself from Spencer’s clawing hands, his feet that bashed randomly against the wall, and locked himself in the bathroom. From beyond the door he could hear his offended sobs, You schmuck, you fucker, you come out here. The howls still came from ankle-level as Greg began to scrub, the blood resistant, spreading with the help of the sponge, not going anywhere at all.

## ELECTRIC CLOTHES

When her mother first walked into the house in a torn skirt Penny's initial reaction was embarrassment. She finally had an after-school friend beside her on the couch, a girl named Melanie whom she had convinced to come over with the promise that her dad might paint a picture of the two of them in old fashioned gowns and slippers. It was true that Penny had a box of musty clothes, old bridesmaids' dresses and clunky shoes with the buckles broken and the straps permanently squished down into the shoe, and it was true that her dad liked to paint. That was all he did, really. Penny hadn't touched that trunk of clothes since two houses ago, when they had lived in Phoenix, and she had been nine. She had asked her mother who "D.R." was while staring at the initials marked to the tag of a strappy dark green dress that pooled around her ankles as she stood in the kitchen while her mother smoked and stared out the window. "D.R." said Penny's mother, "Was the worst, fattest bitch I have ever known. She died ten years ago. Electrocuted."

"Struck by lightning?" Penny had asked.

"No, Penny for godsake. Hair dryer. She was drunk, getting ready to go someplace. She might have been wearing that dress. Is it a little burned anywhere? No, I don't see any burns."

Struck by lightning, Penny had thought, the dress hanging from her bones like a shroud. Struck by lightning in this very dress. Anytime Penny tried to wear her old dress-up clothes after that she could only picture D.R.'s flesh cooking and snapping like a sausage on a grill, D.R. outside on the wet grass flopping with the last bit of her life,

filled up with energy from some other source, and she would strip the clothes off in fear. She felt electric; she locked up the clothes. Her deadly, electric clothes, she thought of them, but spoke of them to no one.

Penny had told Melanie that her dad would paint them like two angels, and all the way home she was terrified of opening the front door and finding him sitting on the couch with his legs open wearing his terrible grey draw-string pants and no shirt. Sometimes when he couldn't think of anything worth painting he would watch cartoons – he had a cabinet full of old VHS tapes of recorded cartoon shows, the commercials blanked out. Sometimes when Penny had nothing better to do she would watch a few episodes with her dad but it always confused her the way he refused the snacks she offered and never laughed at any of the jokes. It got so that Penny didn't want to laugh at the jokes either, and the silence in the room after some zany character made a wisecrack was so uncomfortable it was almost disrespectful. Penny would go to the kitchen then, and watch her mother smoke and fret over numbers on haphazard stacks of papers, punching calculator buttons with her long fingernail.

He hadn't been watching TV when Penny walked through the door with her new friend. She had called "Dad! I'm home! It's me!" and had warned Melanie not to sit on the deacon's bench when she took her shoes off because it was an artefact from a pirate ship and might still be covered in scurvy. "I know there are little bits of scurvy on the right near the bottom. You can't touch it without mittens. My parents tried to wash it off but they couldn't get it all."

She had told Melanie to wait by the TV, warning her that they sometimes picked up signals from other planets, so not to worry too much if a lot of the channels were

fuzzy, and had shut herself in her father's painting room. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and the room was a sort of oily hot and smelled like chemicals and her dad's sweat. He never shaved when he was preparing for an art show, or else the room would have smelled like his aftershave. The room-smell in the absence of aftershave didn't quite suggest her father, but a man who painted fervently through dinner and then through much of the night, and sometimes forgot to tuck her in. To her many complaints on that subject, her mother always suggested she remember that she was eleven now, and shouldn't need any tucking in.

"Hey Daddy."

"Hey there baby. Home from school already?"

"Will you paint me and my friend?"

He put down some instrument she couldn't see. His back was to her and his workbench was a long, cluttered thing that stretched out from either side of him. He might have been working with a pencil or a paintbrush. He turned around and took off his glasses. He looked hungry, messy. His patchy beard was trying to move downward – tufts of wiry hair dotted his neck like little branches and his colour was uneven. One of his cheeks was a furious red, probably from propping his head in his hand while he painted, and his eyes were small and tired-looking. Her new friend couldn't meet this man unless he was going to paint them.

"I don't paint people, Pen. You know I don't paint people."

"If you can paint other things why can't you paint people?"

"It's just not what I paint, baby. I'm not good at people. Or if I did paint you and your friend, nobody would recognize that it was you."



Her stupid father in his bare feet, stupid paint-splattered windows and the tiny radio that played nothing but news and classical music. There were plates in his workshop that they could have used in the kitchen, she and her mother, the two people who actually ate regular meals in this house. There were forks crusted with food that had been in his mouth but not swallowed, bitten remains on the plates, scrunched napkins and a squishy peach pit. She gathered them up quietly so that he would have no reason to leave his workshop. She didn't want Melanie to see him. "Thank you, baby," he said to the scrape of stacking plates, and he resumed his hurried sketching. A pencil, Penny realized, was what skated over the page.

She told Melanie that her dad was preparing the room so he could paint them. Melanie couldn't decide what to do with her hair and Penny suggested a French braid. A nice, tight French braid in Melanie's long thick hair could take awhile – could take them until dinner time, when Melanie's mother would call and say it's time to come home. Melanie had started out trying to protest the French braid, but Penny insisted it was a hairstyle particular to the time period her father hoped to capture. Melanie asked how long the painting would take. "Twenty minutes," Penny said. "Twenty minutes start to finish, and you can even take the painting home with you. But it has to be a French braid."

Then the door opened to reveal her mother at the end of a short stretch of linoleum hallway with a torn skirt. She leaned on the wall and tried to kick off the smart low heels she wore every day to the office (it was just "the office" to Penny, and her mother dealt in figures, numbers that Dad would ask about between forkfuls if he ever joined them for dinner – Dad seemed to have minimal information about the numbers,

figures, dates, calculations, but enough information to remember to make semi-specific queries). Both girls could see her from the side, struggling with the shoes, hands splayed out on the wallpaper. Penny noticed with wonder that her mother's small belly actually jutted from her midsection like a big piece of fruit, curving her usually rake-like frame. There was a ragged tear tracing its way up her knee-length skirt, broken threads coiling around her thighs which, Penny noticed, were dirty.

"Is that your mom?" Melanie asked, her upper lip creeping toward her nose.

*No*, Penny was about to reply. She was about to say that the woman in the ripped skirt whose hair, she now noticed, hung free of her clip, now missing, that looked like alligator teeth, the one Penny had a twin for though she always wore her hair gathered up in an orange elastic, and who stared blankly into the front hall mirror when on any other day she would have bustled in, thrown her purse on the couch and made a few phone calls, that woman was the gardener who lived in the gazebo out back with her pet Rottweiler and tended the gardens on Mondays, the grass on Tuesdays, the bird feeders every day, and all the indoor plants on Wednesdays, which was why she had happened to enter the house at this moment.

But at the word 'mom', as though she had heard the whispered jeer of the after-school friend, Penny's mother turned to face them. She had failed to kick off both shoes, and the one that still clung to her foot scraped and clucked against the hard floor. She was limping. Her beige suit jacket was open and she wore nothing underneath – her breasts reached down from her chest, lower and thinner than Penny had expected. She had often pictured her mother without clothes on, pulling up nylons for work with a comb clenched between her teeth. She had expected high, authoritative breasts, not these small, sad half-

arms that somehow concealed the nipples, hid them beneath their hanging, but did not conceal the deep tracks of broken skin, the feathery strips of flesh that looked like Penny's mosquito-bitten legs when they were at the cottage, or the bumpy rash that spread to her stomach, disturbingly round and dough-white, sagging over the waistline of the torn skirt.

Penny was, in an instant, inside Melanie's head and seeing through her eyes, the way her English teacher told her to do when she wrote a story, and she could feel the ineffectual couch sagging in the middle where she most often sat cross-legged to watch television or read or eat some snack she had concocted – peanut butter crackers with pineapple slices or raisins mixed into her yoghurt. This couch moved from house to house, and there were still boxes sealed and marked with the name of the room they would sit in for months, untouched, until somebody wrestled the tape off and opened it like an unwanted present. She had lately put her schoolbooks on one of the boxes that sat by the couch marked "Family Room". The box had become furniture. Sometimes she would put her juice there in between sips. Through Melanie's eyes there were tacky flattened cushions on the couch and the whole place had a faint scent of turpentine instead of dinner, and there stood the culpable slut-mother by the door, home from a hard day on the job, her naked torso offered up like spoiled meat and dust on her legs.

Penny turned toward Melanie to tell her she didn't know what was going on but the girl had her eyes covered and her little shoulders under her green t-shirt shuddered. *What?* Penny wanted to say. *That's not my mom,* she had meant to say, or maybe just *She doesn't usually look like that when she comes home. Don't you cry. Don't you dare.* Her mother loomed monstrous on the hall floor and Penny noticed the skirt wasn't merely

torn but wet, its cream-colour darkened near the crotch and as she crept slowly closer, her one shoe still scraping the floor, Penny could see a band of bruising across her naked middle and the inside of one of her eyes was as red as a poppy. The swollen eye fluttered; it was trying so very hard, at the corner, to close. The worst was the gash Penny could now see splitting her mother's lower leg, black and open, the skin around it raised and dirty. That wound was something else. Penny said, "Mommy, what happened?" and her mother merely stood, fingers groping open and shut uselessly by her sides, and screamed her husband's name, Richard, over and over again.

They started eating pizza every night. Penny's father tried to order as many toppings as possible, claiming that a growing girl needed her mushrooms, olives, tri-coloured peppers, zucchini wedges and soggy piles of overcooked tomatoes. Penny did her best to pick off everything except the cheese. Sometimes the vegetable pieces were trapped underneath the cheese, flattened and almost invisible under their yellow-white barrier. She would pick and dig with her fingernails the way her mother never would have allowed if she had been sitting at the table with them. Penny didn't need to ask where her mother was – she already knew she was in her bedroom, propped up on just about every pillow in the house, including one from Penny's bed, staring out the window with messy hair. She knew this because she saw her through the heavy parted curtains on her walks home from school. She had stopped trying to bring friends over.

Kids on her street did enough staring into that wide window. It wasn't like they could see very much of her. Maybe a faded lump, depending on the time of day. But they knew what they were looking at. Penny usually went in the back door, or sometimes she

would pretend to drop something in the mailbox if the kids were staring too hard, or if a group of them had stopped to look up, and then she would walk around the block. She would make herself believe for a second that she was delivering exotic medicines to help her mother, to close that wound on her leg that Penny had dreamt of two nights in a row.

The house smelled like medicine now, or so she imagined. If pills had a smell the house smelled of pills. Plastic and gummy for capsules, bitter and chalky for caplets. Her father had stopped painting. Just for awhile, he had said. The pizza boxes started to pile up. "You could make those into a craft or something, Pen," he suggested. "Like an alligator mouth or something."

"No, Dad."

"Why not?"

She shrugged. TV was off-limits. Her father didn't even know what to do with himself. He told her that he and her mother had decided that television hurts the mind and they wanted her to grow up smart. Therefore he couldn't watch his cartoons either, at the risk of being a hypocrite, and he didn't dare close himself into his workshop in case of his wife's feeble call of "Richard!" It was all Penny ever heard of her mother. Without the cartoons her father was an aimless wanderer. He drifted from the kitchen to the living room and touched the plants' leaves. He never watered them. He pinched the still-green parts beneath his nail and then checked his nail for plant juice. He broke off the browner parts and carried them to the garbage. The leaves started to look ragged, like someone had been crawling around chewing on them. Penny watched her dad and wanted to scream. He slept on the couch now, which made the living room more "his". Whenever he wanted a nap, which was often, Penny would have to find somewhere else to be.

Usually she would lie in the backyard grass. Her bedroom was too close to her mother. One evening, maybe a week after the torn skirt, Penny heard a howl coming from the master bedroom. It was long and guttural, punctuated by hitching breaths. She recognized the breathing as her mother, the slight squeal that followed each breath as she prepared for another, but she did not recognize the howl. The time had been 8:04 – too early for a physical transformation that might take place in the moonlight. Penny pushed her face into the crease where the door met the doorframe and whispered, “Are you okay?” like she used to do to startle her mother, for laughs, while she put on her makeup in the morning. Penny had giggled. The breathing had stopped, and so had the howling, and there had been no response. Penny could only picture her mother lying there in the pillows like a child who was supposed to be asleep hours ago, trying to will herself into obscurity. “Bedtime, Penny,” her father had said, finding her at the closed bedroom door. She could never seem to fall asleep on the grass outside, though she would have liked to.

“Bedtime,” she had scoffed. Eight o’clock.

He was trying to keep her from the news broadcasts, she knew. The television was a mouthpiece. Approaching it slowly, when she knew her father was closed up in the bedroom with her mother, feeding her, propping up her million pillows or whatever he did in there that made him feel useful, Penny’s fingers would tingle. She would reach out slowly, her hand stretching toward the ON/OFF button, willing herself to do it. Just for a second, and then she would turn it off. She never did it. She could feel the nerves burning all the way up her arm to her shoulder. She was afraid if she turned it on it would never go back off. What if every channel was her mother? Nothing but her mother wearing ripped clothes and a savage expression, her breasts hanging loose and a knife in her hand.

The kids at school sometimes said there was a knife, sometimes a revolver. Sometimes a sword, and Penny's mother was the Dragonlady. If every newscaster agreed, what then?

Some rude boy in her class had passed her a drawing of her mother that he had worked on while he was supposed to be reading quietly. Her mother had four arms, all of them snake-like, and a big scaled belly with two plump bowls for breasts. She was covered from head to toe in red ink blood and she had two pointed fangs spiking down from the top of her depraved grin. From the hasty belt sketched around her waist there hung a series of weapons including a chainsaw. Penny had tucked the drawing thoughtfully into the pocket of her jeans. The rude boy had stared, waiting for a response. Her eyes had roamed over the words in her novel but she never turned a page. Her gaze quivered over the word "quill" for what seemed like forever. She thought of pilgrims, though she didn't think this book was about pilgrims. It could have been. Satisfied, the boy had flipped open his own copy of the book.

The ridicule mounted. One of the bathroom stalls read "Beware of Penny Lake" in black magic marker. She stared at it while she sat on her hands and peed. It occurred to her that most of the kids in her school, probably even the eighth graders, must now know her name. When she had first started going to Riverside school last October she had told anyone who would listen that her family had to move because the entire town she came from was being overhauled, made into a gigantic cemetery for unclaimed bodies. She told her classmates that each family in the town had been paid five million dollars to evacuate. She had been unable to make a name for herself with that story. It seemed that either the kids she told didn't believe her, or they didn't understand the significance of her claim.

Like towns were made into graveyards every day. Like the world was so full of unclaimed dead.

She stopped going out for recess because her teacher told her she didn't have to anymore. She was given the option of spending her recesses in the library whenever she wanted to. At first she resisted, maintaining to herself that she was no different from any of those other students whose mothers were not whispered about, and she liked the sunshine on her neck and the grass pricking her thighs as she sat cross-legged in shorts by one of the big trees. But then one day as she sat writing in her colourful star-stickered journal that "Everybody is afraid of me. They say my mom killed someone but she still gets to stay in our house instead of going to jail. I don't agree with killing. I don't think you should kill but some people can't help it. There is evil and good in the world, and if you are evil you can't help killing. If she's evil then I'm half evil, like the way Dad is half-Irish because Grandma is Irish," the journal was stolen from her. She barely made a move to grab it. Let them have it. Let them know. She spent every recess in the library after that.

Her mother did move in and out of the house but it was a different sort of movement now. She wore a coat, even though it was summer time, and she held her husband's elbow and bent slightly at the waist. She used to be taller than he was. He had to start driving again, though to Penny's knowledge her father hadn't driven a car in years. He might not even have a license. He looked funny with keys in his hands, his beard gone and his hair cut short and his shirt tucked into a pair of rumpled dress pants that seemed too big around the waist. They bunched up under his old belt. *What're you trying to prove?* Penny wanted to ask, but she didn't dare speak as he ushered her



hunched mother with her unwashed hair out the door to the waiting car. Mrs. Peterson from across the street would sit with her while her parents were out. She was a mild old widow who spent most of her time, at least while she was minding Penny, on the phone or with a crossword puzzle.

“Where did they go?” Penny would always ask.

“Never you mind now. It’s not for children.”

“What’s not for children?”

“Don’t get smart.”

And while Mrs. Peterson talked on the phone, her sentences slow and thoughtful as she doodled flowers and worms with eyes and smiles, Penny would fling open her mother’s bedroom door and look for signs. Blood, hidden weapons. A bank statement. Would she kill for money? Her mother loved money. She was always complaining that they didn’t have enough of it. A taped confession, or maybe a letter to Penny explaining herself. She tried to be organized in her searching, to maintain order in the room so her investigation would not be discovered. The bedclothes were a mess anyway, but as she lifted pillows, ran her hands along the disturbed sheets and strained to lift the mattress corners, she made sure that the mess she left matched the one she found when she opened the door.

Nothing. But the room had the medicine scent and the pillows, when she pressed them to her face, held no trace of her mother. She breathed in old dampness, grease, sweat. Sometimes, if she sniffed deeply enough, she thought she detected the smell of blood like the pennies in her strawberry change purse. Her mother’s perfume was an unused bottle that sat on her dresser, having only the faintest remembrance of a

relationship to a neck and wrists. Her blazers hung in her closet. The folded corners of the bedsheets were coming loose.

When a half-moon of Penny's stomach glinted white as she reached up to grab a fly ball during gym class, a rude girl asked her if she was sex-starved like her mother. Nobody heard. Her teacher cheered, "Atta girl, Penny! Nice catch!", and the weather-beaten, oversized softball in Penny's glove seemed the perfect weapon for her evil as she moved it to her throwing hand and whipped it at the girl's sweaty face. The girl went down on her knees, her pink baseball cap askew, blood spurting from the general area of her nose and mouth. Penny snarled, revolted and terrified by the bright spray of blood that filled her classmate's cupped hands and soaked the front of her gym shirt. "I showed her," she protested to the crowd that soon formed around her. There were hands on her shoulders, pulling her back. She met her teacher's horror-stricken eyes and attempted a roar. Her teeth clicked together, her jaw smarted a little by her ear. She pulled away from the teacher and hissed, throwing her glove on the ground. She wiped her wet eyes and pulled at the bottom of her shirt. Too damn small.

During her suspension from school Penny played Scrabble with her father. They were usually quiet games, interrupted by the occasional ringing of a phone Penny was no longer allowed to answer, or the odd wail from the forbidden upstairs bedroom. The world seemed to have become an off-limits place. Whenever her father rose abruptly, often upsetting a few of the game pieces when the tops of his thighs jarred the kitchen table, Penny would protest, "Why do you have to go to her? She's an adult, isn't she? She

can take care of herself, can't she?" Her questions would seethe there, unanswered, and she could hear her father's slippered feet taking the stairs two at a time. "Go on, hurry up," she would mutter. "Go do whatever she tells you, as usual." She would look at her father's letters while he was gone, memorize them. If it suited her, she would make a trade. He barely ever paid attention anyway. Spent more time scratching a rash on his jaw that showed up every few days, picking at calluses under his socks, or wandering toward the kitchen door when it was Penny's turn to make a word. His face seemed to ask, "Did you hear something?" but he refused to acknowledge his concern.

"How's Mom?" Penny would ask whenever he sat back down to the new set of letters she had given him in his absence.

"Oh, just fine. She's tired."

One hot afternoon they sat sweating in the kitchen, a bag of chocolate chip cookies opened and half-finished between them. The biggest fan in the house blew on her mother's elusive form upstairs behind a closed door; the only other fan puffed weak warm blasts into the stagnant air by the gaping kitchen window. The plants along the window ledge were all dead and collecting cobwebs. Penny couldn't wait to get back to school where it was air conditioned. She could picture herself dying here. Part of her believed her mother was dead already, or at the very least melted, transformed into something useless and wet, saturating the sheets, and her father only pretended she still existed so that Penny wouldn't have to grow up without a mother.

Penny spelled REPE. Her father said, "What's that supposed to say? Reap?"

Sometimes he gave her the points just for her good effort, even if she spelled something wrong. This time she was missing an A.

“I was trying to spell Rape,” she said, folding her hands in her lap. “Isn’t that how you spell Rape?”

They stared at each other for a long time before her father finally pushed his chair back. “How about a barbeque tonight? I haven’t barbequed in a long time. What do you think of kabobs?”

“It’s out of propane.”

“What, baby?” he asked, his hands carefully breaking apart the words they had already made, filling up the cloth letter bag.

“The last time you tried to barbeque you couldn’t do it because there wasn’t any propane left in the tank.” She spoke carefully, mindful of the scream she could feel inching its way up her throat, and the A that she had absently pulled from her father’s costly word AXEL pressed into her moist palm.

“I’ll pick up some more,” he chirped. “It’ll take me less than ten minutes. I’ll just go and tell Mommy where I’m going.”

An empty house followed his tired footsteps first up and then down the stairs, and the screeching slam of the front screen door. It was the first time since the torn skirt that she had been alone in the house, with her mother or otherwise. She didn’t know what she was supposed to do with this time that she had. Would it be right not to act? Now that she had these few precious minutes to use as she pleased? She could go into the master bedroom, finally, the way she used to do all the time while her mother figured out numbers in the kitchen with her long cigarettes and her bright nails, while her father painted everything except people in the drafty room that hid him. The best thing about their bedroom was that it wasn’t hers, and the mattress felt so different than her own

against her ankles as she pressed herself up into the air and fell back down, hitting the hard springs in a creaky bounce. She couldn't believe people slept here. The closet was depthless, filled with old clothes her mother rarely wore, and Penny would stand among them with her eyes closed, feeling fabric against every part of her, the darkness complete and stifling. She imagined that if she came into contact with the wrong article of clothing it would come to life, draw her closer with its empty sleeves or stuff part of itself down her throat so she couldn't speak. She always grinned to herself, delightfully scared. They were bodies, all of them. They had once walked the streets.

If she wanted to she could go in there right now and force her mother to speak to her. If she had known in advance that she would have this opportunity she would have made a list of things to ask her. She would have asked them in order of importance, just in case her father got home before she made her way through the entire list. She could say, Mom, I still live here. He won't let me see you, and he doesn't talk about you very much, but I'm still here. If he's worried about your evil spreading to me he doesn't need to. I just want to know what happened. I won't tell anyone. I know what it's like, Mom, really I know.

She made it halfway up the stairs and then fled back down. She could picture her mother contorting, seizing up in fear at the sound of her footsteps. Not heavy enough. Not the steps of her nursemaid husband who was nothing without his workshop, without his acrylics and his soft lead pencils. Penny turned on the tap and sobbed a few times. There weren't any tears so she wondered whether or not she was actually sad. The sound just burst from her, stinging her chest and throat. She was afraid to see her mother. It had been weeks. There was still the chance that it wasn't her mother in that room at all.

When Penny turned off the water she heard it: “Richard!” She gripped the edge of the counter, not knowing what to do. Hadn’t he told her he was going out for propane? There was her father’s name again, snaking down the staircase, airy and tearful. If she didn’t move, Penny thought, it might go away. But her mother was like a baby wailing from its crib without any concept of the possibility that someone might not respond. Her voice was shaky and urgent: “Richard! Richard! Richard!” climbing in pitch and volume until she was screaming it, that name, and Penny lifted herself up onto the counter, her butt jostling the clutter of used dishes. She tucked her legs up to her chin; tipped over a glass with her heel. It split into a million pieces, shards skating across the linoleum to rest like icicles, their tiny blades reaching. Penny covered her ears. With each scream she was guiltier. If she could keep out three in a row she would undo the first few minutes of screaming. And then the next scream she heard could be the first – her father could enter on the very first scream and ascend the stairs, and everything would be back to normal.

The screen door creaked again and its sound matched the lowered, frantic croaks in its moment of opening. She heard the thud of the propane tank, the dashing of rubber shoe soles on the staircase as her father sprinted toward the bedroom. She heard him lose his footing once, and stumble. He cried her name: Christine.

Penny sat on the kitchen counter for half an hour. It wasn’t safe to step down. Her stomach growled and she gripped her middle, rocking forward. Her father found her in her tight ball.

“Careful, Dad,” she said. “I broke a glass.”

His face was pink in places, the white of his eyes stained red and slick in the corners. He struggled with his words. "Mom said she called for me at least twenty times."

"You were out," Penny said, her mouth pressed to her kneecap.

"You should have gone to her, Penny."

"I'm not allowed in there."

"You should have checked on her. Use your common sense."

She wanted to whip a glass at her father. One of the dirty ones half full of old, sour milk. The backs of her eyes were burning.

"Do you know what your mother might do to herself up there? Do you have any idea?"

There was glass everywhere. Tiny flecks glinting like stars, or like something remarkably clean. She could see the kitchen floor through them. They were tricky. It was only because of their sharp edges that she could tell they were there. She could run across them like some ancient form of torture, she could be out of this suffocating hot house and on the grass in a matter of seconds. She shifted back toward the cupboards, hiding her flushed face as she said, "She's a killer anyway."

"What did you say?"

"I said she's a killer. Anyway."

He crossed the floor to her, his feet crunching over glass pieces that shot through his socks. He brought them with him. Penny's hands were still gripping her ears, pulling at their folds, trying to fill her hearing with an oceany roaring. He pinched her elbows in his own hands and lowered his face to hers. She shut her eyes. She knew her father was

crying but she would not look at his wet alien face, his baggy eyes and quivering, downturned mouth.

“She was *hurt*,” he spat. “She is *hurt*, goddamnit. Don’t you say that again.”

He slumped onto one of the kitchen chairs and tore off his socks. The bottoms of his feet were sparkled with blood. “Jesus,” he muttered, and set to work pulling the edges of each of his wounds and pinching out the glass. “Stay up there, Penny. The whole floor is covered in glass.”

She found him later that night shirtless by the television, his feet bare and bandaged. He was watching one of his cartoon tapes. His face was as stoic as ever, not even flinching toward a smile as a walking mushroom shot a cream pie at a foolish banana with legs and cried, “Score!”

Penny was about to remind him about the no-TV rule but he cut her off. “I’ve already done all my growing up, thank you very much. I’m smart enough already.”

She sank to the carpet and crossed her legs, her gaze locked eagerly on the television. “Don’t look too hard, Penny,” said her father. “It’ll mush your brain.”

The banana joined forces with a giggling cherry jellybean on a pair of white roller skates. They prepared a counterattack; Penny laughed.



## HE MIGHT HAVE WORN SANDALS

Dad and I were a little drunk, and we had a fire going in the chimenea. The sounds from the yard that backed into ours came from Justin McVay and his wedding party rehearsing for their big day tomorrow, or celebrating the end of that rehearsal by cannonballing into his parents' pool. So I had learned that night at dinner – Justin was to be married to some girl whose name my parents didn't know but who, my mother insisted knowingly, he had been dating for a long time. The bottoms of my feet, stretched out before me, were scorching a little in my mom's sandals. My dad was proud of his little fires. I told him it seemed that every time I visited, some neighbour, some ex-school mate, was getting married. First it was Margot, next door, who married her boyfriend of some ghastly number of years, some number reaching up toward six or eight – my mother had made sure to send me pictures of Margot looking like a movie star in a simple white dress to match her massive, irritating smile. Not that my parents had been invited to that wedding exactly. Rather, my dad had taken pictures of her in their driveway as she was leaving the house to go to the church. I could picture her grinning brightly at my poor dad with his camera, his old shorts and his grimy lawn-mowing shoes. I imagined it was a perfect day for it all, the wind only barely stirring her dress as she glided between her mother's flower beds and over the lawn that was half ours to pose for an aging man whose daughter used to play tag with her in the evenings before it got dark. Dad had received a frantic phone call that afternoon from Margot's father. Somehow they had forgotten one of the rings, and it became my dad's job to let himself into their house with a hidden key, shoo away the desperate cat who greeted him, retrieve the ring and drive it to the church.

Next to be married had been Sara from across the street. She and I shared a first name, and our mothers shared a first name. It was a neighbourhood joke but none of us really cared about each other that much despite our supposed bond. Sara and I used to play basketball on her driveway, though I had my own net too. She went to teacher's college and married, appropriately, another teacher, and I could imagine our mothers standing cross-armed on the lawn whenever they happened to be outdoors at the same time, discussing the crystal-clear appropriateness of a union between two teachers – the convenience of their summers off and the trips they would take with children who didn't yet exist. Their breakfasts and lunches, their dinners, as though food consumed at the same time makes a life and a marriage run smoothly. I could picture her shaking her head, No, my Sara still hasn't married. We thought things were going really well with the one fellow but she broke it off with him. She never really said why.

Nicole got married, followed by the Gibson girls who were both so short I still couldn't help but see them as children whose marriages, and subsequent buying of houses and furniture, could really make no more sense to me than a game of house with plastic appliances and air-kisses *have a nice day dear*. It was more than absurd to me that they had become wives when I could still taste the repellent tomato soup and Goldfish cracker lunches at their kitchen table, when I could still remember the Easy-Bake oven that made cakes no bigger than oversized cookies and their grandfather clock, bonging away the hours of my little-kid insomnia as I summoned sleeping bag bravery on Erin's bedroom floor. I woke her mean mother up once to tell her I couldn't sleep, and she let me lie on the couch with extra pillows and she left the TV on quietly. I apologized but she didn't mind, and I thought about how other people's mothers are different at night when you're

weak and pyjamaed, in their house, your feet bare on their carpets and your hair unbrushed. All of the Gaston kids married, except the youngest who had a four year-old and lived with her boyfriend. Recently Jill, who was my other next door neighbour, had married and then divorced. Ironically, her first boyfriend in sixth grade had been Justin McVay, whose pre-marriage laughter I could hear shooting over our fence among clinks of glasses, splashing, and the mild slaps of poolside footsteps. Not that I could distinguish his laugh from other laughs. I hadn't looked at his face in at least seven years, though he was still my parents' neighbour. I couldn't see them from here. Justin and Jill had been quite the item in sixth grade. They used to sit cross-legged in the middle of the empty soccer field and make out. To us it was movie-style. I was a year younger than they were, and I could watch from afar but I was not allowed past the white painted lines on the field because what they did with their lips and their hands out there in the grass was for sixth graders only. They charged sixth graders a dollar each to watch them make out. Everyone knew about them. The sixth graders paid it, swiping dollars from parents or trading in their coins for a bill at the 7-11 – we fifth graders just stood by the aluminium portables and squinted at them from a respectable distance.

Justin McVay was the first boy I ever loved but I did it from afar. He moved onto my street and joined my split grade three/four class and I couldn't believe him sitting in the corner there by the brown curtains. His astonishing beauty. Even when I pictured him now I never saw a fourth grader but rather a soap opera star. This dark curly hair and a strange Hawaiian shirt the likes of which I'd never seen before, weird eyes so bright and wide you'd have thought they were rimmed by mascara, eyeliner, those lashes long and thick as bug legs only so beautiful they seemed to wave when he blinked like those of a

bashful cartoon animal. The first day of class he was stung by a bee that flew in through one of the windows, probably stalked through the halls seeking out the most lovely of new boys in town who sat quietly in the back corner not knowing any of us, suspicious of the backs of our heads and sweaty summer necks, this group of us who had come up together since kindergarten and regarded newcomers with almost too much excitement and a little fear. The school had only one hall and a portable gym and the oldest students were the sixth graders whom Mr. Martin (the only male teacher) taught in the big room through his dark sunglasses, his chalky hands clapping in time with the lines from “In Flanders Fields” and “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”. His was the room with the table-desks instead of lift-lid desks, the second last room from the back doors. We would hear the sixth graders sometimes chanting those stanzas and we knew they were doing it from memory, and we abhorred the day when our brains would hold that much. The bee would have had no trouble navigating that one hallway toward Justin McVay’s nervous arm on his first day of school. When the bee stung him he held the fleshy part above his elbow, marred by a few random freckles and now a raised bit of harmless bee poison. His face turned very red and I was in love with him already but even more so when he shouted “Oh heck!” in pain, a word so close to swearing. It staggered me that the new boy would dare to utter such a word on his first day in a new classroom, that word that earned a grimace from my mother if I said it in her presence. Not a bad word really but a substitute for a really awful word like “hell” or “fuck”. “Oh heck” was so close to “oh fuck” I could see the forbidden word on his lips, I could feel him thinking it, but he was bold enough to replace that word with another word when I knew and I’m sure our teacher knew he wanted to swear his head off like dads do when they’re mad. He

tore at the collar of his blue Hawaiian shirt and doubled over, too much of a spectacle for his first day in a new school, too much in need of Mrs. Rogers' comfort to go from here to the playground at recess and play respectably with the other boys. Something about his red cheeks and teared-up eyes tried to cancel out his grown-up outburst – but I remembered.

I loved Justin my entire third grade year but of course it was unrequited and unspoken. I had to forcibly split him with my best friend April and perhaps a horde of other girls who wouldn't discuss their loves so openly. We fought bitterly in her basement or mine, on her backyard swings, we kept our mouths shut during dinner or when parents or other friends were around but we resurrected him whenever we could. We named our board game pieces for him (hers was Justin, mine McVay), we spelled his name when the soles of our feet stamped the ground in hopscotch or skipping, he was the only husband we wanted to win in games of MASH. I insisted that I would marry Justin McVay and she would marry Paul Becker, Justin's best friend who was cute enough but nothing compared to Justin, whose eternal company in fact was a further sentence for whichever one of us was denied the love of Justin. She would argue that she would marry Justin, and I would suffer my days with the insignificant Paul Becker, down the street from their happy home possibly, where I could watch them holding hands on the porch and driving around in Justin's parents' Chrysler.

It was only third grade that I loved him and then he vanished into fifth grade, Mrs. Skinner's class, to reappear the following year in daily cinematic embraces with my laughably early-blooming next door neighbour Jill, his hands up her billowing t-shirts, his face lost in her months-old perm. Of course I didn't mention any of this to my father that

night by his chimenea as we listened to their patio-lit party from where we sat, warming our feet though the evening was warm already. Dad balked at my crushes, even the ones that had died almost twenty years ago.

Backyard fires were Dad's evening thing in the summer. He did have a penchant for fire. Indoor fires during the winter had long ago become not forbidden exactly, but openly detested by my mother. The ashes on the carpet, the dirty prints from Dad refusing to take off his boots while burdened by a heavy pile of logs from the garage. The heat, when it was already warm in there. Chimenea fires were his, and each time I joined him outside on these rare occasions when I came to town for a visit, sick of essay deadlines and frozen food, wearing socks two and three times to put off laundry day, scraps of paper like grocery receipts or corners of phone messages sitting in little messes in room corners, I never quite felt like I properly belonged on the sparsely lit patio. Sometimes he fell asleep out there, jumping slightly when a squirrel or raccoon rustled through the gardens or a neighbour slammed a backyard door. His legs would be stretched out before him on another chair, crossed at the ankles, his whiskered face slack, his pale chin pooling against his neck. If I went out there he would move his feet and let me sit on the chair across from him, feigning alertness in the sleepy warmth, my presence for a moment unfamiliar.

This weekend we had been drinking a lot. Wine and beer mostly for Dad, rum and coke for me. He always had limes. My own drinks at home were sad iceless mixtures without any adornment. My freezer was always piled high with dollar-store ice cube trays, each half full of shrunken cubes that collected tiny dark particles I could only assume were dirt. Whenever I sat with Dad for long periods of time I found myself, for

lack of anything else to say, commenting on surrounding physical objects. The fire, the bricks. New bricks? A few years, Sara. When did Mom buy that statue? Oh, who knows. Comes home with something new every day. How many times a day do you fill up the bird feeder? Just once usually, Sare. My tweety birds like to eat in the mornings. You see how I have it hanging far off from the tree trunk? The damned squirrels still manage to get in there.

He would make gun motions with his fingers, and squint into an imaginary sight. Piff. A light, whistling death for squirrels. Their invisible bodies would drop from trees beneath my dad's bullets, the real versions of which I used to load shells for on his lap when I was a kid, in the room in the basement with the low ceiling that was reserved for his loading and cleaning of locked up guns, for the display of dead feathers and other parts, for photos of him wearing camouflage, standing in groups of men I didn't know.

Warm enough, Sare? he asked, taking a swallow of beer. Sure, I said. Really warm.

Your uncle Derek makes me laugh, said Dad, leaning forward a little conspiratorially. He often prefaced a negative comment about someone by saying they made him laugh, as if laughing was such an odd thing, so much the fault of someone else and not of his own sense of humour. He would smile when he said it. My uncle was about ten years divorced from the mother of his two children, a tall willowy American whose hypochondria smothered her son and daughter. They would trade their strange sandwiches and gluten-free food for Gummy Bears in the cafeteria. The sandwiches, they admitted to me, were not eaten by the traders (who always had more than enough Gummies and other junk to go around) but rather were used as weapons and makeshift

experiments and in most cases they ended up either burned or squashed into tight hard knots and pelted at someone.

He's good-looking enough, he's got a decent job, he's funny, but he doesn't know how to talk to women! He's too picky. He had a date a few weeks ago and he never called her again because she chewed a salad too loudly at the restaurant. He's like a TV character.

I protested, Maybe he doesn't want to date anyone.

He does. You should see the way he flirts with your mother.

I pushed myself further into the lawn chair – I could feel its plastic strands against my back. I wondered to myself, had I ever had a real conversation with Justin McVay? Had I ever any cause to? Did I ever, at any point, know what he did with himself beyond our school years together? I remembered him in high school, but only vaguely. If I ever thought of him now I pictured a taller version of his fourth-grade self, Hawaiian dressed with rich thick hair and freckles and navy blue eyes. Or was I confusing his eyes with his shirt? I knew he was tall in high school, and he might have worn sandals. Glasses? Maybe sometimes. Did he play sports? Did he ever pass me in the halls, holding his books? We must have had a locker in the same hallway at some point. I might have seen him stuff his coat inside and jangle the lock, put a pen in his pocket and walk down the hall to class with his faceless friends. Did we speak, ever? Did I take a class with him? He was getting married tomorrow. Another person from my neighbourhood that I didn't really know anymore about to become even further unknown. I dimly remembered one of Justin's high school friends: Ben Cooper. He had a pimply face and ropey arms that swung around horrendously when he talked, and his bright orange hat was always cocked



back too far on his head. Ben used to make fun of me for trouncing up the halls all in black except for my pale knee skin between the spokes of fishnets, and that is why I remembered him. I didn't remember Justin doing that, or standing by while Ben did that. Would I have cared? I didn't really remember his high school face at all. The thought of Justin McVay with facial hair was preposterous – a teenaged smirk would never have fit his soft face.

My mother stepped onto the flickering patio and shut the door behind her.

Wearing my sandals, Sare? she asked, smiling. She wore a 6 and I wore a 7, and my heels nudged off the edge.

Sorry. I went to kick them off and she stopped me. No, no, she said. Do you want a blanket? Are you warm enough?

It's really warm out here, Mom.

I just got off the phone with Laura, she said. Laura was my dad's sister who lived in California with her second husband. They were both scuba divers in their spare time because they could afford things like that between her job as a criminal lawyer and his job as a veterinarian. When they called to talk to our family they spoke on different extensions in their sprawling house so that they could banter back and forth and finish each other's sentences. Because of it they sometimes sounded further away than they were, if it were possible for a distance to be greater than the one between Berkeley California and Cambridge Ontario. She had three daughters from her first marriage to an artist/psychiatrist who used to collect scrap from roadsides for his artwork, sculptures that I never received a good description of much less a photograph. He was gone from the family before I was born. I was always left wondering to what degree garbage was

malleable, and the more my parents scoffed at the ex-husband the more I wanted to know him, to be his niece that he might have addressed by mail or lifted up over his head with his trash-stained hands. My mother turned to my father and spoke of Holly, the youngest of my three cousins, though still older than me, and to my relief, still unmarried.

Whenever there were crises Mom shut me out. She spoke in a low voice to Dad, and I slipped my feet free of her sandals and tucked them up under me.

They just found out Holly's bulimic, Mom said of my twenty-eight year-old cousin. They've got her booked in to see someone on Monday.

Monday I would be going back home. My parents always insisted that this was home, this patio, my bedroom upstairs, clean and carpeted. New fixtures every time I visited. Everything so new and clean that I couldn't tell the old from the new, ever. I might have had too much rum tonight, just like last night, and there was the wine with dinner, but for a second while Mom described closed bathroom doors and diet pills and doctors and all of Holly's other problems that might have been factors leading up to this strange, strange circumstance, I loved the girl so much I thought I would have to call her on Monday. Maybe after her appointment. I would have to calculate the time difference. I would have to steady my voice and introduce myself. I had only met my cousin once when I was in the seventh grade and she was just starting high school, and her face was round and clear and free of makeup and she wore this floppy hat that I distantly admired and our conversations were mediated by our mothers who took us out for lunch, and I ordered what Holly ordered and neither of us talked about whether or not we enjoyed it. Twenty-eight years old! Mom was saying. Dad was shaking his head impatiently. I might

tell Holly I knew how hard it was to be fed, and how terrible it was to accept everything, but I was a stranger to her, I couldn't ever call.

Mom went inside and Dad and I were quiet for a moment. He turned to me and chuckled. Jesus, Sare, he muttered, reaching for some newspaper to add to his chimenea. The fire was low and blue, soundless.

L.A., said Dad. Fucks you up.

During the day Dad listened to country music on the patio, or downstairs in his workshop. At night he usually kept things silent for the lazy wind that characterized summer nights in our neighbourhood, but tonight we had Simon & Garfunkel turned up a little louder each time we particularly liked a song. The nights when I was a little kid seemed safer than the days, when we would walk to school in groups past all those concerned red and white Block Parent signs sitting between curtains and glass because what responsible neighbour or parent refused Block Parenthood? They didn't, they mounted the signs to remind us that there is a difference between safe *strangers* and *strangers* who will press a piece of candy into your palm and then take you somewhere and never bring you back. The red and white sign made the difference, apparently, and evenings of tag and hide-and-seek, and other more complicated made-up games like Wolf and Disease were safer because we couldn't see the red and white signs and all of our moms and dads were by the television anyway, waiting for the hour when they would call us in and we would ask for just a few more minutes. When Mom would go to work she would sometimes forget to take the Block Parent sign out of the window, and she would tisk to herself as we took off our shoes, and I would picture some dishevelled kid from another neighbourhood pounding on our ineffectual Block Parent door while a *stranger*

pulled at the back of her coat, the door of his rusty car opened to a black interior full of half-eaten chocolates and strips of hardened liquorice.

*Cecilia*, Dad sang, tapping his heel against the wooden deck. Once I dated a French girl who made me translate this song for her.

She didn't speak any English?

Just a few words.

I pictured him writing out the words for his French girl, who probably lounged on his couch tapping the rhythm on her belly while my grandmother made dinner upstairs, her loud heavy shoes settling down hard on the kitchen linoleum. I could see the two of them conversing in a language I could never figure out from all the workbooks and overhead slides and our mock conversations in French class that always seemed to end up in English. I could see the little lines and hooks of accents sweeping across the page in his handwriting which was probably a little bit like the writing that signed my birthday cards and used to write me phone messages before I moved away. I almost said, You know I used to be in love with Justin McVay? but I didn't want to ruin things. It wasn't real love anyway.

I'm trying to remember the name of this singer, Sare, Dad was saying. God he was something. I saw him play when he was twenty-two years old. That was a time. Me and old Bob Gifford in Sherbrooke. I can picture his face but I can't think of his name. He wasn't that well known and he died really young. Jesus. What was his name? He wore sunglasses, and he sang good songs.

Dad was looking at the bluing fire with a half-smile, shaking his head.

Goddamn, he went on. Don't ever do the things I did, Sare.

But he was laughing, proud, and I never knew between the Labatt 50's and the chimenea fires if he really wanted to go on with these story beginnings or if he would regret reminding me that a father was something he became after he was something else. I couldn't tell, so I just laughed. I already knew he put moths in his brother's crinkly hair when they were kids, little blond Derek who had problems with women these days. I knew that as a teenager he liked to fight. I knew he knocked a guy out in a movie theatre washroom by smashing his head against a porcelain sink – I knew this because when I was twelve he didn't want me to go to the movies by myself, or at the very least never to go into the washroom by myself, to always bring a friend. He had both of my shoulders in his palms when he told me with wet eyes that he could have died if the sink hadn't been there, and that this was something he hadn't even told Mom, and that I should always for godsake be careful.

I stood up, the soles of my bare feet sponging the dirt from the patio. Where you off to? he asked, his voice still merry. I don't know, I said.

Going inside?

No, I said, stepping off the patio onto the grass. It was surprisingly cool for a lawn on a warm night. The grass shuffled between my toes and it was something I hadn't felt in a long time. Where I lived I didn't have a lawn really. Gravel backing onto weeds in the back, gravel tracing its way to the road out in front. I'm going to say congratulations to Justin, I told my dad.

Oh yeah? he said to the fire. I didn't realize you knew him.

The sounds of water and laughing had died down at this point, and I could just barely make out lazy arms parting the water with their thin strokes, a few mild splashes

here and there. The guests would be going home to get good sleeps in preparation for tomorrow. I recognized him right away, sitting on the edge of the pool with a cigar in his mouth. Cigars were right for all occasions, I gathered, or at least the ones that signified that you were properly growing older. I called to him. Justin, I said, my fingers gripping the brown wires of the fence. I could see him through the fence's diamond holes, making his way over to me with curiosity.

Sara, I said to his confusion. Sara Brennan.

I know, I know. Cathy and Bruce's daughter.

We went to school together.

My wrists hung between the diamonds, and I pushed them as far as they would go. I hadn't been this thin in years, it was the frozen meals and the peanut butter, the time I didn't have much of, and all the sleep on my cozy bed in my comfortable mess of a bedroom a few hours away. I was so thin I could push my arms almost up to my elbows, and as I did this I could grab his shoulders, which were meaty and cold and still sprinkled with freckles that stood out even in this darkness. I could picture him standing at the barbeque. He was that type now, maybe. I never could have married him. I dragged my hands over his wet shoulders and up his neck which I pulled toward my lips, pursed through the diamond-shaped fence, a hole big enough for my mouth but not for his lips which were still pretty ample and smelling like whiskey and the cigar that hung from his fingers by his side. I barely scraped his teeth with my tongue before he staggered back, amazed and horrified, and shuffled through the grass to the lighted pool that sparkled with bodies that hadn't seen what I did. His dear pale back vanished quickly from my view but I did make out his bent elbow, his hand arching toward his mouth for another

puff of the vile cigar whose taste somehow, for all his resistance, sat on my tongue. I wiped my mouth and spat on the ground, laughing a little, and turned toward the silhouette of my dad by his little fire, his chin on his chest, his feet crossed on my chair.

Coherent Parts:

Character Motivation and Endings in Short Fiction

Throughout the organization of this project I was compelled to examine some problem areas in my writing. In considering my own writing process it did not take me very long to identify two recurring difficulties that affect not only plot and character in my short fiction but also, necessarily, the entire scope of a story. These areas are, specifically, a clear understanding of character motivation in my own mind as well as a concise execution of the same in my text, and finding the right ending. At times, readers of my work have remained unconvinced of various choices made by my characters, usually because the action either seems outside the nature of that particular character or because the action doesn't seem plausible within the frame of the narrative, ie. the action or choice does not seem to cohere with or further my theme. Endings have been another ongoing effort for me. I have always favoured short fiction which, given its necessity for unity, calls for a well-controlled ending that is as close to perfect as possible. Naturally I have struggled against the urge to come up with a quick ending when the word count



starts to exceed what I actually mean to say. There have been other times when I feel like an ending is appropriate but when I or somebody else actually reads the story from start to finish the ending is all wrong. It was “okay” to begin with, and perhaps when it comes to endings “okay” can never be good enough. Sometimes the problem is simply how to word the final sentence so that it makes an impact and other times it just isn’t clear what the characters should do, or how I would like to leave them. I never want to desert them completely.

These two problem points have a tremendous impact on the entire short narrative. Character motivation is a vital aspect of story coherence and reader identification; endings, as well as being the writer’s final chance to reach the reader are, as Robert Louis Stevenson suggested, “bone of the bone and blood of the blood of the beginning” (qtd. in Matthews 33). Through careful attention paid to these two problem points while writing and editing, and through a very close investigation of my work toward the final stages I have identified a thread that links the stories in this collection with respect to character motivation and endings. By examining the short story theories of Frank O’Connor and theories of the grotesque and the short story posed by Maria Jesus Hernaez Lerena, I will argue that my characters are motivated by a desire to fit into or connect with something in their worlds, and that my endings, which offer very little in the way of resolution, are a testament to the futility of trying to erase contradictions in people. The stories appearing in this collection make the claim that the human being is incurably multifaceted and will not fit perfectly into any world.

A clear understanding of character motivation is heavily dependent on the creation of credible characters. The actions and choices of a character who is not

coherent, whose traits and contradictions do not make sense in light of the story, will not be believable – even the mere consideration by the writer of how these characters will behave will be flawed if the character is not well-articulated. There are, in fiction, flat characters and round characters, and it is the round characters whose actions are the most complex. The art of juggling a round character’s many traits, past experiences, and idiosyncrasies will posit more of a challenge when it comes time to justify their actions. A flat character could easily throw a baseball at a classmate’s face like Penny does in “Electric Clothes” and we as readers would just have to accept that. Penny herself, however, as the protagonist of that story, cannot just *do* something like that without our understanding that she is, for example, struggling with a world that has recently become unknown to her and this physical assault is not only her way of asserting control, it is also her misguided attempt to reconnect with her mother, who she believes has turned evil overnight. Given the nature of a short story, which in most cases explores a very brief moment or situation in a life, writers lack the opportunity to follow a character through his or her entire existence the way we might be able to in a novel. Therefore the approach must be different, and there must be some attention paid to what has occurred in the character’s life prior to the text that might have contributed to the character’s personality and therefore to the choices made. The characters should be imaginable outside of the text so that they can properly function in the text – their actions within the narrative should be clear enough to suggest how they might behave in different but related circumstances. Characters can exist outside of the text by way of overt narrative statements, such as, “Things had changed so much since Anna had left last May. Her parents had split up, for one thing” or possible character traits can be implied through

details. Sherwood Anderson notes the importance of the human element in considering a character's existence outside of the text. He criticizes plot-driven Westerns which follow the movement of a second-rate man into the woods where he becomes a successful landowner and an utterly changed man without giving the reader any indication of how the character was before the change (71). If the agent of the change (the woods) is the only variable, the human personality is left unaccounted for. A change like this is so unrealistic that it creeps dangerously close to meaninglessness. Anderson claims that in such writing any consideration of human beings is absent, and therefore there really is no transformation taking place – readers can only assume that the man in the woods is the same man who went into the woods (71). It takes more than an outside force, in the case of a story a plot point, to realistically change a person. In order to create credible characters we must always observe a close interaction between plot or action and character while keeping in mind that this character should be believable as existing somewhere before the narrative.

An important result of clear character motivation is achieved sympathy (McKenzie 48). If a reader can first believe in a character and, based on that belief, understand why the character acts in a particular way, there will be a greater chance of garnering sympathy from the reader. Since the author is in the position to manipulate which characters readers will feel a connection to, sympathy is linked to tone. By choosing which characters the readers are to sympathize with, the author can elucidate his or her theme. Using “Adult Dimension” as an example, it is clear that sympathy should reside with Glenn even though he behaves in a way that might in other circumstances be considered repulsive. If the story were told from the perspective of one of the video store

clerks, or if Glenn were a real man about whom we know nothing aside from his penchant for making perverted phone calls, his actions would be explicitly vile. However, due to my decision to tell the story in the third person limited omniscient point of view with Glenn as my protagonist, the reader is given the opportunity to view him as a lonely old man who upholds a fiction of himself as a respectable and authoritative figure when actually he is, in almost every aspect of his life, impotent. His false idea of himself as an indispensable asset to the bakery begins to crumble as he simultaneously starts to doubt the propriety of his evening phone calls to the sex shop, and his struggle against these realities is clearly motivated. The reader is made to feel at least some sympathy for Glenn though his behaviour is unappealing. My project as the writer of this story is to depict a lonely old man whose fictitious life is starting to come apart rather than a sex-starved pervert who can't stop making phone calls.

Point of view is important to distribution of sympathy, but it can also be very useful with respect to the characters' understanding of their own motivations and actions. Laurence Perrine claims that first person narration can be good for dramatic irony (305). He states that "an author achieves striking and significant effects by using a narrator not aware of the full import of the events he is reporting" (307). Perrine testifies to the impact of this dichotomy specifically in the first person point of view, but I have used this technique far more often in my third person stories, all of which are told from the limited omniscient perspective of one character. I have found this technique to be especially useful in the stories concerning children and adolescents. In "Blue Baby", Karen is clear on her motivation for performing oral sex on the tow truck driver: she wants to get the car home to her mother. However, she is not aware, while the reader most definitely is, of

how completely and utterly absurd her motivation is, how great the cleft is between the punishment she would receive from her strict but, for the most part, well-meaning mother and the potential for emotional injury from the choice she makes. As she drives home, convincing herself that she is okay and that she made the right choice, it is clear from her various outbursts and physical reactions that she has been damaged. It is also clear, from a reader's perspective, that Karen's efforts were in vain – she will be arriving home late, she is now smoking carelessly in her mother's car, and it doesn't seem possible, given her somewhat deranged state, that she will be able to conceal the night's events in their entirety. The gravity of the circumstances strikes the reader, but Karen is too close to the situation to fully comprehend it.

Perrine draws attention to the importance of artistic unity in a short story, claiming that “There must be nothing in the story which is irrelevant, which does not contribute to the total meaning, nothing which is there only for its own sake or its own excitement” (66). In editing my own work I took this advice into account especially with regard to character motivation. I took care, in an attentive reading and reworking of my stories, to make sure that, given the need for tightness in a short story, I understood each and every one of the characters' actions. If I could not justify a particular move, that was cause enough to rethink its place in the story. All of my stories exist within a rather short time frame and all actions had to be accounted for. Not only does this help to preserve unity for a reader, it also helped me form a deeper understanding of the characters and the story, and during the revision process I was able to write much more fluently within the frame of each short narrative. Much of the time I found that the story worked itself out. I questioned the somewhat lengthy discourse on JFK that occurs in “Silent Sam” but a

close reading of the section in context with the rest of the story allowed that moment to explain itself. Riley's interest in JFK both as a historical subject and as an example of appalling violence supports her growing intellect, which is what will eventually extract her from this detrimental relationship. The posing of the question, "Do you remember what you were doing when JFK was shot?" to both her mother, that morning, and to Judy on the porch is her attempt to normalize an otherwise bizarre and awful situation. JFK himself as an image of unexpected and unpreventable assault coheres with a theme that occurs both in this story and in "Blue Baby" – that despite rigorous parenting a child cannot always be kept safe from outside harm. Henry Seidal Canby claims that the process of a short story is "very artificial but very powerful" (41) – the unity in a short story is, of course, impossible in real life. While actions in real life are accountable toward some purpose they rarely accentuate a greater, logical whole that is so vital in a short story. In this small way the short story could be considered a more precise art than the novel, which affords the opportunity to more closely replicate life in its often senseless meanderings.

Jack Hodgins notes the importance of knowing or sensing a character's long- or short-term goals in order to better understand character motivation (106). Taking this point into consideration I found that, for the most part, long-term goals are particular to the adults in my stories and the short-term goals to the adolescents. While the teenagers might have long-term goals, their primary actions are more often motivated by their short-term goals. I am thinking in particular of Riley in "Silent Sam", who eventually hopes to go to university and has a vague expectation that this muddied fraction of her life is temporary. The action of Riley's that caused me the most trouble in writing this

story was her persisting relationship with Kyle – readers of this story could not form a clear grasp of why exactly she remained in the relationship. While I believed in the situation in my own mind I was well aware that the text, at that point in my revision process, did not sufficiently justify it. I went back and added various moments of recollection to Riley’s internal dialogue so that it would seem that she is motivated and at least partly blinded by short-term goals. Initially she wants a boyfriend, having never had one before, and as the relationship progresses her persistence becomes a matter of comfort, duty, and a very mild sort of rebellion against her parents. The reader can hopefully understand that these are all merely short-term wants, since Riley eventually plans on moving away to university, which is a convenient way to escape the relationship. Karen’s goals in “Blue Baby” are, of course, horrifically short-term, which is central to the drama of the story. Glenn’s goals are long-term – he simply wishes to feel comfortable, in control, and important. Not only does Greg in “Injury” hope to be a father-figure to his girlfriend’s son Spencer, he also craves the father role in general – we see at the conclusion that he is actually forced to compete with Spencer for that role.

Clear and coherent characters should be supplemented by action. Actions will, of course, speak for the characters as sufficiently as what the narrator chooses to state overtly. Character motivation is, I believe, the point at which character and action are linked directly. The action speaks for the character’s personality, but the action is only possible and believable if the character’s personality allows for it. Perrine states that plot and character are “one substance; there can be no movement at one end without movement at the other” (85). A short story does not allow for as much character development as a novel does, and specific actions are much more vital in what they say

about a character. The actions, then, should be made significant by the writer. An example in my work, though I did try to make all actions in all stories contain some level of significance, is "He Might Have Worn Sandals", a story which contains little movement, physically. Therefore, each question and comment passed between Sara and her father, as well as the implied information that they withhold, is intended to be significant. Their action in this story is dialogue, and it is through this dialogue that their personalities are revealed. Henry James questions "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" (qtd. in McKenzie 27). It is through this interaction between character and action, specifically through character motivation, that we can better understand what the author is trying to say about the condition of human beings both inside and outside the narrative.

If a clear understanding of character motivation helps to further the theme by elucidating some aspect of humanity, the right ending should reinforce what is being suggested. Clark Blaise recognizes two types of endings – "those that lead you back into the story, and those that lead you – gently, or violently – away" (770). He addresses the "That's it?" (770) type of endings which became more prevalent with the modern short story, specifically in the writing of Ernest Hemingway. This sort of ending, which does not seem like an ending as it is generally understood (ie. there is no dramatic gathering up of themes and threads, no stated "moral", no provocative final sentence), is subversive because it resists these conventions, but it works because it avoids directly helping the reader to grasp the story's meaning (770). This sort of ending actually reinforces the story's unity by necessitating another look at the story as a whole. The ending, then, is not self-contained – it should not be. The ending should be inseparable from the story,



and an ending that resists the confines of a traditional ending will not only encourage further thinking on the story as a whole, but it is more likely to resonate because its meaning, which hides, festers in a reader's intellect as he or she tries to make connections. Blaise makes note of the Chekhovian ending, which reinforces Chekhov's vision of a "static, purposeless society" (770). Blaise notes that Chekhov's project demanded "the destruction of climax and resolution; the lack of an expected ending makes us feel the lack of resolution, vitality, movement. It preserves tension" (770). In my own writing I do support an ending which maintains the tensions wrought by the story. I would rather my story make a suggestion about the characters without resolving their dilemmas. An ending which provides all of the answers not only reduces interaction between reader and story, it also forces the story to become more specifically focused on the characters and situation it describes. The story will have enormous import for its characters but very little meaning for readers, for humans. The story speaks less powerfully than it might have otherwise. I have tried, in most of these stories, to carry a character through part of a situation, allow them to make choices which will speak to their personalities, and leave them at a point where there is the potential for change but the probability of stasis. A more appropriate description for the dropped-off ending (an example of which would be the endings of short story master Raymond Carver) Perrine suggests is "indeterminate" (66). This sort of ending, which I have employed in most of the stories appearing here, has no definite conclusion or resolution and therefore reflects life itself by suggesting greater social and emotional conflicts for which there are no easy solutions.

Blaise also draws attention to the endings of James Joyce. Joyce makes use of the epiphany in his short fiction – a sudden revelation of the unconscious (770). Though the epiphanic ending may seem in contrast to the static, unresolved endings common in Chekhov, Blaise claims that Joyce actually used the Russian vision in his own writing by reconfiguring the notion of paralysis as an actual gateway to the unconscious, promoting epiphany (770). The only point at which this idea might come into play in my own work is in regard to “He Might Have Worn Sandals”, whose ending is a great deal more uplifting than that of any of the other stories appearing here. The story takes place through a conversation spoken in one place, and much of the narrator’s internal dialogue has to do with an inability to move forward, to grow up. Through this inertia the story builds toward the moment at which the narrator actually shakes her paralysis and does something that might be considered irrational. This conclusion would be an example of the type of ending Blaise suggests leads away from the story. The character behaves proactively, and while the ending certainly suits the story it is still at least somewhat unexpected. The story is undoubtedly over at this point. Her most ordinary conversation with her father cannot continue even if they both wanted it to because she has so disrupted her night, and her own apathy. She has ended her twenty year-old crush and has replaced it with a new sense of agency. While her actions go unseen by the rest of the wedding party they are decidedly selfish, cruel in their potential to discolour the coming wedding day. I chose to finish with this piece because its ending is distinct from those of the other stories in this collection. It didn’t seem to fit anywhere else – it didn’t seem right to end so decidedly and then to start again.

I do not favour happy endings in my stories because I do not find that they stay with a reader, and again, a forced resolution seems to preclude an adequate consideration of the human element. Perrine defends unhappy endings by suggesting, quite simply, that most real-life situations end unfavourably, and unfortunate mathematics suggests that each time one person benefits it may be at the expense of many others (65). He also claims that an unhappy ending has value for a writer who would like his or her readers to ponder life (65). Happy endings, he claims, wrap up the story and allow a reader to stop thinking – the story will always have a greater lasting impact if the reader is encouraged to ruminate on what has been read (66). Much like the indeterminate ending, which may not be specifically *unhappy* but can never actually be *happy*, an unhappy ending allows for a greater connection with the reader because the story, unresolved for the characters, will be unresolved for the reader also. Because it is profoundly lacking in realism, the happy ending runs a greater risk of alienating the reader.

In my mind, the most notable endings in this collection are in the stories “He Might Have Worn Sandals” and “Blue Baby”. “He Might Have Worn Sandals” is actually the only story appearing here whose ending was conceptualized prior to the rest of the story. For that reason, I think, it feels more like an ending than those of the other stories. This story was in fact based upon the ending; everything within the narrative leads up to the one moment I had considered before anything else. I had to do a lot of reworking within the story so as not to hinder the ending. I do not usually write this way. There is a brief discussion of the narrator’s cousin’s sudden diagnosis of bulimia near the middle of the story. Originally this segment appeared immediately before the final moment with the kiss. The story, then, had to be reorganized so that the bulimia, which is

a heavy-handed and in many cases cliché example of a destructive reassertion of bodily and mental control, would not eclipse the ending or run the risk of forcing a different interpretation on the ending. I feel that this story can easily be divided into constituent parts, some being external conversation, others internal dialogue or memory. Aside from some small movements there is only one moment of physical action, and I felt in the writing and reorganizing of this text that each of the parts became its own unit which in some way cohered with the story's end. "Blue Baby" is altogether unique in this collection in terms of its ending. In this story the ending actually appears at the beginning, narrated in third person present tense, while the body of the story is narrated in third person past tense. While the situation is made significant from the start (i.e. it is immediately shown that Karen has compromised herself and is disturbed by it), the true impact of the story, her devastating sense of logic, is not revealed until later. It becomes clear through the story's unfolding that her reasons for compromising herself are realistic in her own mind but completely ludicrous in the true scope of things. Her actions are pointless and shattering, and a second reading of this story would in fact grant a heavier weight to the beginning. The literal ending of the story, when Don shuts off the truck's engine, is decidedly dropped off and, in fact, the original draft of the story continued from that point. My original plan had been to shift back to the present tense and bring Karen home to face her mother but I soon realized that all the information was already there and the story would lose its power if I went any further.

The potential for change, or lack thereof, is important to endings. While most novels contain a number of developing characters who undergo major changes through the course of the narrative, the short story often allows for no more than one round and/or

developing character, and in some cases does not even allow for development. When I say development I am not referring to how well-rounded a character is, but rather to the degree to which a character is dynamic – how much he or she changes during the course of the narrative. Barbara McKenzie notes that many characters in a novel may undergo change, but that the short story might only bring the characters to the point of change and then end, leaving the change unrealized (24). There is the implication that the potentially dynamic character will be different in the future but the narratives themselves do not take us that far (24). The indeterminate ending is intended, in its subtle ambiguity, to extend beyond the narrative and to allow the character the continued potential for existence the way that a cleanly wrapped up and determinate ending would not. Change is important to endings as well as to character motivation. A change in a character must be clearly motivated in order to properly elucidate theme – change, in many short stories, signifies or facilitates the ending. Change as a reaction to a critical situation, which is the basis for most short stories, can provide access into the story's meaning. An indeterminate ending which does not allow that change to be fully realized or leaves some doubt as to the potential for, or the impact of, that change, gives the reader a richer opportunity to contemplate and learn from the story. Perrine claims that a change must meet three conditions in order to be convincing: 1) the change must be possible for that particular character, 2) the change must be sufficiently motivated by the story/circumstances, and 3) the change must be given a sufficient allotment of time to occur (89). I take this final point as a suggestion that, given the small frame of a short story, there should be some indication that the change was possible prior to the narrative. For example, the change might react against an implied condition that existed before the story started. There is the

sense, in “Adult Dimension”, that Glenn has been behaving this way for some time. I have tried to suggest, in the stories appearing here, that the circumstances into which the narrative jumps contain elements which have been ongoing in the characters’ lives up until this point. I think I do bring my characters to the point of change by the endings. In some cases I have tried to signal the importance of a change and often to juxtapose that with the unlikelihood of the change – examples would be “Coming Home”, “A Girls’ Night”, and “Injury”. “Coming Home” is in fact a story of a young woman surrounded by change who refuses to acknowledge it. “Silent Sam” could fall into this category as well. The inevitability of an eventual change is implied, but Riley’s return home and subsequent defence of Kyle’s actions, and her unwillingness to be cared for by her mother, suggest that further damage might be done before her situation finally changes. In “Adult Dimension” Glenn is on the verge of change but there is the implication that his efforts toward that change are superficial. He walks home from the bakery but the situation (if there even is really a situation) has not yet been dealt with, and the destruction of his telephone is a temporary solution at best. The character in this collection who faces a definite change is Karen in “Blue Baby”. Her change, however, is destined to be a negative one. We can see that her initial fastidiousness has been almost immediately reduced to carelessness, her attitude is negative where before it was positive, almost innocent, despite her attraction to rebellion. Her opinions toward her own gender, signified prior to her sexual encounter by her interest in the role of women for her school project, have been horribly compromised.

In linking character motivation and endings in my fiction I would like to employ the short story theory of Frank O’Connor as well as theories of the grotesque as applied

to the short story by Maria Jesus Hernaez Lerena in her discussion of Barbara Gowdy's short fiction. Since I have written since childhood, and any person is influenced by the material that they read, I think it is impossible to give too much credit to the genre of horror and the grotesque. While my reading has branched off in numerous other directions, it is important to note that in my early teen years, when I read and wrote voraciously, my access to the world of books was narrowly limited to horror stories and novels. Horror stories are essentially the foundation for all of my writing. Though it has become rare for me to write what might specifically classify as a "horror" story, my characters and plots are almost always, in some way, grotesque. Things grotesque depend not only on dread but also on distortion. The reader should feel uncomfortable, even frightened, both for and of the character, so that when the character moves, the appalled and fascinated reader is right there with them. In the majority of cases I tend toward the social grotesque in my writing. This can be amplified by physicality, the outer body that faces the world and complements or contradicts the inner person with which readers shudder to identify. Since the grotesque is both dreadful and somehow appealing, I find that stories can make a very great impact if a character is in some way repellent, initiating a sort of barrier between reader and character, and if that barrier can from that point be broken down. The reader may be drawn to what is grotesque, and the sympathy thereby evoked is essential to the idea that this sort of disintegration is subjective. If any character can be portrayed in such a way that revulsion and sympathy are simultaneously evoked, then the very idea of *what* is grotesque is called into question. If sympathy is achieved in the rational reader then we have to wonder what exactly is the grotesque – if what is portrayed is an example of disintegration then what is integration? I think this idea is

most directly addressed in “Electric Clothes” when Penny’s mother is considered more monstrous than the violation perpetrated against her. She is demonized by the public (we can assume that at least some of the children’s opinions have originated with their parents) and she is made visually grotesque in the drawing made by Penny’s classmate. By extension Penny herself is demonized and her view of herself becomes distorted, promoting her own disintegration. In referencing the term “evil” as understood by Penny in this story, I have hoped to depict the arbitrariness of this kind of vilification. The basis for the understanding of Penny’s mother as grotesque is clearly faulty, is actually aligned with a child’s undeveloped concept of good and evil, which questions what considerations we make when deciding what is and is not grotesque.

In differentiating a novel from a short story, O’Connor notes that novels promote identification with society while short stories do not. He states that short stories have “an intense awareness of human loneliness” (87), and that short fiction, in dealing with what he calls a “submerged population group” (86) – not necessarily with respect to financial or material considerations – creates a sense of characters on the periphery. While a novel has time to integrate its characters into their worlds, a short story, much of the time, deals with characters who, at least at that moment, do not fit. O’Connor notes that, given the restrictions of a short story, the writer cannot work with a complete human life and consequently must find the right way, each time, to enter that life (88). An apt approach is to focus on the moment at which the character’s life is in some way disturbed.

In his discussion of the carnivalesque, which involves attention to and inversion of dependent relationships between the high and low, Bakhtin notes the fundamental importance of grotesque realism. Grotesque realism is the use of the physical body to



depict “cosmic, social, topographical and linguistic elements of the world” (Stallybrass and White 9). The body is posited as “multiple, bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete” (9). One characteristic of the grotesque is that it is always in the process of becoming (9), and the very fragmentary nature of the lives of my characters and the stories’ momentary depiction of these lives imply the grotesque not merely within the characters, but within the nature of the short story itself.

Lerena’s investigation of Barbara Gowdy’s short works is particularly relevant here because I would consider Gowdy’s fiction to be a primary influence over my own. My work is similar to Gowdy’s in tone, particularly in our attention to and sympathy for misfit characters. Gowdy gives vivid and unflinching descriptions of uncomfortable situations – I too have tried to be courageous in my fiction by giving voice to some characters whose actions might be considered unsettling. Also like Gowdy, I do not shy away from the use of humour when a fine opportunity presents itself. Lerena ties the theory of the grotesque to short story theory. Gowdy’s collection *We So Seldom Look On Love* contains numerous characters who are grotesque in either body or mind – she does, in fact, take apart the human body through this text in her attention to disfigurement, amputations, Siamese twins and their separation. The grotesque, Lerena maintains, concerns parts which are coherent in the rational being but not so in the grotesque being (716). The habit of looking at the body as a unified whole becomes disturbed, and an important link between the grotesque and any short story is that they both expose incongruity without exerting knowledge over it (717). Accompanying the physically grotesque is the socially grotesque, which is often augmented or, in some cases, contradicted by the physical grotesque. Given their inclinations toward necrophilia and

exhibitionism, many of Gowdy's characters are socially unhinged. The way in which Gowdy's characters are physically grotesque but are still believable to readers as part of society suggests the necessity of the grotesque, the dependence of the high on the low as the high seeks to define itself (referenced by Bakhtin), as well as the possibility of the grotesque in all people. By enlivening these characters in such a way that we believe in and sympathize with them, Gowdy seems to suggest the inadequacy of the physical grotesque as a metaphor for psychosocial disintegration. The characters who are the most socially removed (the necrophile and the exhibitionist) do in fact have complete bodies while those characters who are more accessible mentally are in some way physically deformed.

The socially grotesque, which I attend to in my stories, can be highlighted by the physical. While I do promote a feeling of social isolation and discomfort for these characters, I have, in many instances, supported this by at least some reference to the body. It is important to note, though, that these physical descriptions are always subjective. The third person omniscient point of view helps to suggest the dichotomy between the physical and the psychosocial by commenting on the problematic linking of the two. The physical is not an adequate metaphor for the psychosocial, and I would say that my own stories contain the reverse of this – an outward projection of the emotional situation on the body, which is depicted subjectively. Glenn, in “Adult Dimension”, notes his own bulging stomach, “wretched old man hands”, and of course his ineffectual genitals. Karen in “Blue Baby” notes that in her compromising position she looks, “legless. Amputated at the knee”, and she thinks herself too chubby and malformed to fit into her friend's clothes. Anna in “Coming Home” is, to those who observe her, a

“sasquatch”, and a “fat, white, sagging thing”. She promotes her own separateness by othering herself and projecting her self-image as the vision the Rwandan people must have of her. Within this self-othering there is also a surprising sort of identification as Anna is able to momentarily predict her image in the eyes of someone who might not see the white visitor as a benevolent presence. Such an understanding is shown to be impossible for the other characters in the story. In “A Girls Night”, Deedee thinks she looks “clownish”, and her reversion to an infantile state, swaddled in sheets and covered in her own urine, is symbolic of her confused mental age. Penny in “Electric Clothes” notes her mother’s protruding stomach “curving her usually rake-like frame” when her mother becomes so detached from her raped body that all normally well-composed parts seem to droop and jut. Her mother’s breasts are described as “small, sad half-arms”, Penny imagines her “naked torso offered up like spoiled meat”, and Penny becomes preoccupied and momentarily grounded by the sight of an open gash on her mother’s leg. Barbara Babcock’s claim, “What is socially peripheral is often symbolically central” (32), applies to this collection. Whatever is disruptive in these characters, physically or mentally, serves a purpose in clarifying each story’s suggestion about human consciousness. Physical description is used in this collection to elucidate character subjectivity. The characters can actually see their separateness on their physical bodies. Their subjective understanding of their bodies suggests that social disintegration might also be subjective. Their own emotional separation is tied to the inadequacies they feel about their physical bodies, suggesting that both are a combination of a subjective self-consciousness and a reaction to society’s expectations. Society makes suggestions as to what is and is not acceptable and coherent with respect to the physical and social being,

and the characters' attempts to fully integrate the self only draw further attention to their incongruities. The sense of disconnectedness has foundations in both the self and its relationship to society.

Lerena draws attention to the work of Charles May, who describes the short story in the same terms as the grotesque – humanity cannot be explained by way of short fiction, it can only be deeply explored (May 95). The grotesque by nature lacks integration – characters in a short story, especially if we consider O'Connor's theory, lack integration as well, and the project of the story is to expose but not solve their incongruities. Lerena asserts that stories do not aim for an understanding of life from their readers, and feelings of unrest in a short story are the result of a displacement in the characters which is intentional (722).

I would argue that my characters are motivated to action by a general sense of discomfort with their positions, and by a desire to fit into some situation or group they see as more attractive. Since a short story, in O'Connor's view, necessitates the portrayal of lonely people and their loneliness is often what motivates them, it would seem that the project of the characters in these short stories is to overcome the barriers of the fiction.

Lerena notes the concept of a "shared story" in Gowdy's work (722). The shared story is the world that surrounds the characters by way of relationships and conventions, but it is a world to which they feel unable to connect. Motherhood in Gowdy's fiction promotes the shared story because it is an aspect of human society and interaction that all people can understand. Gowdy writes of children trying to bind themselves to a mother because they think it will allow them to be part of a world they can't seem to access. In my stories, the characters also try to connect with something or someone that they think

will help fasten them to their desired world – a rebellious group of teenagers, the responsible adult world, fatherhood, etc. My characters do lack integration in the same way as the grotesque, although their physical descriptions are always subjective. Many of them suffer double lives or uphold fictions for themselves which are their sole hopes of keeping their lives intact.

Lerena argues that Gowdy's characters are trapped by their grotesque bodies, "enslaved by faulty physicality" (722), and that their integration into the world is thereby hampered. I would suggest that a parallel feeling of enslavement which occurs in many of my characters often has to do with awkwardness in their age or place. Much of the conflict in these stories has to do with adolescents or young adults who would like to join the adult world but whose parents would rather protect them. Because of her youth, Penny in "Electric Clothes" is not allowed to hear what has happened to her mother. She uses her mania for fiction to try to understand, and her vision of her parents and consequently herself becomes drastically distorted. Greg, in "Injury", cannot grasp the idea that Spencer might have his own more organic and essentially gruesome understanding of what has happened to Bridgette because he is young, and Greg assumes it is his duty to shield Spencer. Conversely, some of the adults in these stories do not understand themselves in relation to their ages. Glenn does not deal well with his sense of uselessness provoked by age, and Deedee in "A Girls Night" does not feel like she belongs in the adult working world but feels a similar discomfort when she tries to fit in with younger people at the bar. With regard to place, Anna in "Coming Home" resists the differences between her physical worlds and therefore cannot seem to fit into either one. She believes her own distortion comes from outside when in fact it comes from within

herself. Lerena argues that the restriction of context in a story, that is, the brief moment in a character's life and the situation imposed on that moment, creates a feeling of entrapment for the reader (722). Readers of short stories do not achieve the feeling of "continuity and connectedness" (722) provided by novels. Lerena states that "Entering a short story implies the perception of incongruity, based on the absence of a connective tissue that would make experiences mesh" (719). A common sensation of disconnectedness and helplessness introduces a further integration between the story and the reader.

In regard to endings, Lerena argues that a short story, much like the grotesque, is set to expose but not explain incongruity, and she argues that a story can be complete just by presenting an element that questions the "taken-for-granted" state of things (719). She claims that the "no way out entanglement" (722) is essential to the genre, and Clark Blaise, in his discussion of endings, agrees that the potential circularity of the story encourages a poignant reading which will linger with a reader (770). The somewhat ambiguous endings where a change is possible but not definite, and where the characters' motivated actions are not always successful, suggests what Lerena would call the "impossibility of extirpating unwanted redundancies in favour of a clear identity" (726). Therefore, while my characters are motivated by the need to integrate themselves to their satisfaction, the endings suggest that such a seamless assimilation, and the desired ironing-out of their dual selves, is impossible and unnatural. The human being is by nature divided and lonesome. In her own discussion of the grotesque, Joyce Carol Oates writes:

“I take as the most profound mystery of our human experience the fact that, though we each exist subjectively, and know the world only through the prism of self, this ‘subjectivity’ is inaccessible, thus unreal, and mysterious, to others. And the obverse – all *others* are, in the deepest sense, *strangers*.” (303)

Societies may appear logical, but the components, the individuals, are disorganized, and their efforts to mesh completely with their worlds are in vain. The commonality of these short stories, then, rests on the realistic incongruity of human beings and in their continued attempts to resist their own lonesome and fractured natures.

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## VITA AUCTORIS

NAME: Lindsay McNiff

PLACE OF BIRTH: Ste. Hilaire, Quebec

YEAR OF BIRTH: 1979

EDUCATION: Oakridge Secondary School, London, Ontario  
1993-1998

University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario  
1998-2002 B.A. Hons

Humber School for Writers  
2003 Postgraduate Certificate

University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario  
2004-2006 M.A.