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SEASONS OF SALT, TEETH, AND PLASTIC

by

David Miller

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

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2006

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ABSTRACT

Incorporating stories in the modes of realism, marvellous realism, and autobiography, *Seasons of Salt, Teeth, and Plastic* is a Petri dish for examining how realism can be, and often is, limited in short stories so that the story suggests, rather than represents, reality. Realism is limited for reasons of plot, coherent themes, and ease of reading, because true realism would be less coherent and less interesting. Despite this, each story in *Seasons* is realistic, employing strategies to suggest that the realism portrayed is less limited than it actually is. This balance between suggesting and limiting realism is a tool for fulfilling short story conventions and is a basic dynamic of literary realism.

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STORIES

Taking Back the Worst of It

The Dorion driveway was a worn gravel track stretching four telephone poles from the sideroad to an old tower house. Hub left his Tempest on the road and walked. The day was still bright; a yellow haze drifted through the surrounding fields. Hub's attention wavered between the house and the massed rows of white bean plants. They were crisp brown and had been pulled that morning. A single combine lumbered in the distance.

The massive oak door had a tarnished brass knocker on it. Hub went in. Boots and shoes lined one wall of the narrow entranceway, while hanging coats brushed up against him from the other. He bent down and began to untie his sneakers.

"Hub? No." A woman's voice ventured from the kitchen up ahead.

"Hey May." He peeled off one grubby brown sneaker and put it in line with the other shoes.

"You get out of here. We don't want you."

May was lingering by the kitchen table. Her hair was a rich walnut, pulled back into a ponytail and completely at odds with her thin, pointed face. She had begun dyeing her hair years before, Hub knew, when she was still 35, the year it started to turn grey. He had never seen her wear makeup.

"You hear me? I'll get the gun."

Hub took his other shoe and put it alongside the first. "You won't do that." He took off his cap, ran his hand through the flattened curls of his white hair, and repositioned it.

"I'm not here to start anything."

He stepped into the kitchen.

“Get back. We don’t want you.” She spotted a child’s bright red book bag lying on the table and snatched it away. “Kidnapper.”

“May!” The shift in his tone made her jump. “You know that’s not true.”

“I was there.”

“Relax there chickadee, let’s talk. You were there. You saw it all. But you’ve also seen this ugly mug for better than ten years.”

She flinched as he took another step forward.

“You know me. I was bringing in the harvest, doing dishes by your side, helping Becky with her homework.”

“Stay away from her.”

He took her by the shoulders. “I could never hurt that girl. You hear me? I love Becky just as you or Jim. She’s like a daughter.”

“Hub,” her eyes were tired, “Becky was screaming. She was bleeding – crawling on the floor.”

He followed her gaze to where a chunk of vinyl tile had been gouged out by a rifle bullet.

“That wasn’t my fault. Wait wait,” he said as she tried to back away, “I just want to talk to her. Here now.”

He embraced May, holding her against his chest for a long moment. Her body had begun to lose the firmness of earlier years, though she fit trimly in her jeans. She had high, slender cheekbones and round little ears. She was a beautiful woman. Hub had almost forgotten.

“Jim’ll kill you,” she whispered.

“I only came to apologize. I wanna make things right, then I’m out’a here. You got to let me do that. Just this one last thing.”

He parted from May, watching for her reaction. She looked down to the floor and refused to meet his eyes.

“You were always there for me,” he said, taking the book bag from her arms, “my little chickadee.”

* * *

May was propped up in the hospital bed, looking slight and crimped in her pyjamas. Her sandy brown hair was streaked with its first strands of grey. Tears stroked silently down her cheeks.

“Hello.” Hub appeared through curtain divider. He removed his John Deere cap and ran his hand through his white hair.

“Oh Hub.” She dabbed her cheeks dry.

“Don’t do that,” he said softly. “Nothing wrong with crying. We could all use a good cry.” He walked to her side.

May sniffed away the last of her tears.

“Nothing wrong with crying,” he said again.

“These are bad times, Hub.”

“I know.”

“I just couldn’t hold onto him. He was there – his head was out. If I’d a...”

Hub slowly shifted from one foot to the other. “Bad things sometimes just happen.”

“Jim hates me.”

“Nah. He didn’t say that to ya.”

“He didn’t say it, but he does.” Her grey eyes began to well. She wiped them furiously.

“Is Jim here?”

“He left for the bathroom.”

“You need me to tell you Jim loves you? Well he does. Me too.” He worked May’s clammy hand into his own. “We’ve been sick worrying for you back at the house. I can’t imagine how worse it’d be for Jim, here with you all this time. But you’re going to be alright. That’s all that matters to me. That’s all that matters to Jim. He really is a great guy.”

May frowned and nodded, blinking quickly. “Thanks for coming. I know you were working.”

“Don’t think about it. May, you’re important to me. When Barbara died, you—”

“Is Becky with you?”

“Yeah, she is. I – ah – left her in the waiting room. I wasn’t sure you’d want’a see her just yet.”

“Maybe not yet,” she whispered.

“Okay.”

“Just not yet.”

“Alright chickadee.” Hub sat into the bedside chair, pulling it closer to May. An irrepressible smile crossed his lips. “Remember waiting for the school bus, trying to lure those birds? Chicka-dee-dee-dee, chicka-dee-dee-dee, chicka-dee-dee-dee, chicka—”

Jim strode in through the curtain. “Hey,” he said to Hub.

“Hey.” Hub rose to his feet, repositioning his cap.

Jim was a few years older than Hub, but while Hub’s curls had turned white at twenty, Jim’s ash brown hair was only beginning to thin and grey. Jim’s hair stuck up in tufts, matching his hairbrush eyebrows. His shirt had been draped across the end of the bed and he was left in his suspenders and undershirt. Hub looked down at his own strategically chosen shirt – one of the few white button-up shirts he had.

Jim walked over to the bed in silence, squeezed Hub’s shoulder firmly, and took a seat.

“Jim, you don’t—” Hub looked from Jim to May and stopped himself.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Jim watched him, waiting, and then finally turned back to his wife.

“I can’t think how my mom’ll react,” May said dreamily. “She’d always join Nancy and me in our games. I know I told you,” she took Jim’s hand, “but she was really the best mother. She made up her own games too, Kitty Disks, The Toe Game, Alligator.” She made no move to wipe away her tears. “We’d jump back n’ forth between our beds and she’d lie there with this old alligator oven-mitt – heh.”

“You’re a good mother,” Hub said.

“And at night, she’d make up stories right there on the spot. ‘Nancy’s Big Adventure,’ ‘May’s Trip to the Moon.’” May choked breathlessly. “She was such a good mother.”

“Hey now,” said Hub.

Jim leaned far over the bed, covering May's body with his own. "Shhh shhh shhh," he held her close, murmuring soothingly.

May was sobbing; she buried her face in Jim's hair.

Hub stood by the bed and gestured sympathetically. After a moment, he walked back through the curtain and out of the room.

Becky was hunched up in a waiting-room chair, indifferent to the way her pink Sunday dress hiked up past her knees. Her teenaged babysitter sat in the next chair over. She tugged at Becky's dress, all the while telling her everything was going to be alright.

"Hub," Becky turned her barretted head to face him full on as he approached, "where's Mom?"

Hub knelt down to her eye level. "These are bad times pup. Your mom's looking good. She's sad, though." He tapped her thigh twice and Becky immediately unfolded her legs and straightened her dress.

"Can we go see her?"

"Not right now. She's sleeping."

"Hub?" Her voice quivered.

"It's gonna be alright," he hugged her, "I gotchya."

Becky clung tightly to his neck, her little hand fondling the curls of his hair.

Jim leapt quickly down the snow-clogged walkway that lead to his house. Lint pellets of snow poured around him, a consuming mist farmers could vanish into forever. He pulled his coat tighter and headed to the door. Coming into the entranceway, he kicked his boots into the corner.

“Jim?” May stepped into view, rubbing her soap sudsy hands.

Jim hung his heavy coat with the rest. He dropped his plastic bag of binders and pens, leaned forward and pecked May on the cheek. “How are you?” Snow clumped in his hair. It frosted his eyebrows.

Hub was standing by the sink, a soaked towel slung over his shoulder. “We didn’t expect you to drive in weather like this.”

“It wasn’t so bad out in town.” Jim spotted Becky sitting at the dinner table, watching him over a page of sprawling long division. “How’s my girl?”

She gave a tight-lipped smile.

Jim whistled, looking over her homework. The page was a mess with arrows and crossed out answers. “You need my help with that?”

“No, I got it,” Becky sighed.

“They closed forty-two,” said May.

“You should’nt’ve been driving,” said Hub.

“It wasn’t so bad in town.”

“Well, we’re glad you made it back alright.” May gave him a hug. “Ah, how were classes this week?”

“They were good. Hey, where’s Carly?” he said, looking around. “He didn’t bark at all when I drove in.”

“Jim, Carly got out on the road.” May said. “I’m sorry.”

“He’s dead?”

No one moved.

“But, when?”

“Well—” Hub began. He turned toward Becky, who had begun to cry quietly. Tears snaked onto her page, smudging the equations to charcoal abstractions.

“Hey now,” said Hub, his arms outstretched.

Jim stepped forward and picked Becky from her seat. The wooden chair fell backwards to the floor. “There, there. He was a good dog.”

He sat the eight-year-old in his arms the way he had in the past. “But, you know, we’ll get a new one.”

Becky huddled into herself, covering her eyes with one hand. “I don’t wanna new dog.”

“Jim.” Hub hovered near Becky.

“A cute little puppy? Hmmm?” Jim plucked at her shielding hand, ducking his smiling face toward her. A white gash of scalp had blazed through his thinning hair in the past few years. “Anything you want.”

Becky refused to look at her dad. Jerking her hand back over her eyes, she squirmed energetically.

“Whoa there.” Jim was forced to set her down and she hurried from the room.

“Leave her be,” said Hub before Jim could follow her, “she’ll be alright.”

“You don’t know that.” Jim turned quickly to Hub. “Why didn’t you phone me my dog was dead? I looked like an idiot.”

“Don’t be like that,” Hub said.

“Damn it, Carly. Keep him away from the road. Where’d you bury him?”

“He’s out by the creek. We had a little funeral.”

“I should’ve been the one to bury him. He was my dog.”

“You should’ve.”

“Whadid you mean by that, huh?” Jim stepped in front of Hub, raising himself to his full height. His eyebrows were black, melted snow dripped down the width of his jaw.

“You’re just never here is all. You’re out wasting your time in town.” Hub held Jim’s gaze. Their eyes were inches apart.

“Boys,” May said sternly.

“You think you know everything there is about farmin’?” Jim gestured emphatically, grazing Hub’s shoulder. “You got no idea the stuff I’ve been learning.”

“Bunch of egghead computer stuff. Meanwhile I’ve been the one looking after your house.”

May took Jim’s arm and he let himself be guided away. His eyes never left Hub. “And who are you? Some bum who can’t find his own place to live? Get out of my house.”

May sat him at the table.

“I ain’t squatting. Don’t you forget—” Hub marched forward.

May stepped in his way. “Shhh, Hub, don’t you get into anything.” She took hold of his arms, squeezing them forcefully to his sides.

“He—”

“I want rent,” Jim called out.

“Quiet you.” May looked crossly over her shoulder.

Hub’s face went red. “How about doing all your work?”

“You too Hub,” she said.

“Hey.” Jim stood.

Hub jerked his arms upward but May held them tight. “Walk away; you aren’t doing any good here.”

Hub searched her face. The shadow of crow’s-feet edged her deep brown eyes. Her hair was an unnatural cherry-blonde.

“Hub.”

Hub bared his teeth and grudgingly unclenched his fists. After a moment, May released him.

“This is my home too. Who got those blades replaced?”

“I know,” said May.

“You asked me to stay.”

“I know.”

He looked from May to Jim before finally turning to leave the room.

“I’ll talk to him,” she said to Hub.

Hub turned back, mouth opening in protest.

“Go.”

He turned around once more and kicked the telephone stand. The little table flipped over and the telephone crashed to the ground.

“Ya bum.” Jim watched Hub until he turned the corner.

“What are you doing?” May took a seat next to Jim. “You’re being ridiculous.”

He looked down at her. “He’s gotta leave sometime.”

“He lives here now.”

“You’re always taking his side.”

“What side?”

“Why do I even come home?” He threw his arms up.

“Jim.”

“Well, he’s here isn’t he?”

“What’s up Pup?”

Becky came into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes. “You goin’ hunting?” The last year had seen a growth spurt for Becky. Her feet were ocean liners. Her ankles were visible, the pyjama cuffs hiked up to the bulge of her calves.

“Course.” Hunting equipment was spread across the table. Hub was standing nearby, carefully strapping a knife to his chest. A plaid shirt hung loosely over his faded grey hip waders.

Becky took a seat and watched him dress. Hub picked up his clunky pair of binoculars and hung them around his neck. One by one, he slipped gear into a hunting sash. Because May hated the sight of dead birds, he took his cleaning kit with him, hanging it from one arm. He rolled up a Rubbermaid drain mat, which he used as a seat, and hung it from his other arm in a plastic bag. For hunting he used a brown cap, which he settled onto his head. Most of the equipment dangled together into a pregnant hump. Finally, he took the rifle in both hands, the butt tucked into his armpit. Becky didn’t speak until he was done.

“Duck?”

Supporting the gun with one hand, he reached into his sash, took out a pink, egg-shaped duck call and held it to his lips.

“Quaaaaaa,” he buzzed.

Becky giggled. Smiling, she looked like her mother. She had the same bony nose and slim face.

“Quaaaaaa. Quaaaaaa.” Hub bobbed his head rapidly in Becky’s direction. He flapped his free elbow and bounced on his knees.

“Ahhh, it’s a duck monster!” Becky pushed away her chair. She flailed her arms, spread her legs into a wide V, and hopped from one foot to the other, slowly making her escape.

Tucking the rifle against the jumble of gear, Hub flapped his elbows. He rubbed his knees together and waddled after her, blowing the duck call. Halfway in a head bob, the binocular strap bit into his neck. He jerked it up quickly, shuffling his paunch of belongings.

“Quaaa—”

The rifle bucked, detonating with a deafening crack. His hand spasmed open to scalding metal and the gun fell to the floor.

Becky spun on one foot, her arms raised like a ballerina. Her extended leg whirled around her majestically, slapped into the wall and crumpled. She launched to the floor.

The duck call fell from Hub’s lips. “Oh God.”

Becky lay flat on her stomach, rocking back and forth, inching herself forward. She groaned piercingly. A slug trail of red shone in her wake. Hub shoved the rifle with his foot and slid to her side. He reached his arms around her and the cleaning kit slapped into her face. She groaned.

“God God God.” He fumbled for the constricting strap that attached the kit to his arm, ripping it off. He tore the plastic bag in half, tossing the drain mat away. It flopped onto the floor.

May ran into the kitchen wearing jeans and a bathrobe.

“Get a doctor,” Hub said.

“Becky?” She hurried to the girl.

“Get a doctor.”

She hesitated, reaching for Becky.

“Doctor!” he yelled.

May ran for the phone.

Becky groaned ceaselessly. Hub reached around her body and flipped her over. She continued to shuffle her arms and legs, a bug on its back. The blue pyjamas had a sickening hole down the belly, ballooned taut with a solid, wet mass. Cartoon moons and stars were soaked purple.

“Becky?”

Hub set his big hand on top of Becky’s burning stomach bulge and pressed, shoving it back into her torso. The girl coughed and sputtered blood. Her guts heaved against his hand, her frenzied pulse rushing against his tensed palm. He hugged her body against his, clutching her midriff with glistening hands. Her pyjama pants darkened, clinging around her slender hips and crotch.

“No no no.” Hubs arms strained with the effort. He held on.

* * *

Hub's room was directly across from Jim and May's bedroom. He had lived there for years. May had insisted he take that room instead of the tiny guestroom down the hall, where he had first been staying. The room's only furnishings were a bed and a sanded down dresser, pieces Hub had moved from the guestroom, which now sat empty. The walls were white and bare, one of the alterations he had made when he moved there.

He lay on his bed, hands folded, watching the cartoon clouds Jim had painted on the ceiling long ago. Hub had decided to leave the ceiling unchanged. The clouds were stretched ellipses rolling over stencilled half-circles. More half circles were jumbled in the blue outlines, each carefully tinted silver along the edges. Hub had spent long hours staring at the clouds, listening to the night sounds: Jim and May across the hall, Becky's boisterous sleep monologues from the next room, the house slouching and moaning in a blizzard. He listened. Becky's voice was mute. Swallows chirped outside his window. Downstairs, Jim and May argued.

"That's not fair, you can't just do that." May stomped across the kitchen.

"He didn't say anything."

"Well."

"I swear we've gone over all this."

Hub's attention drifted back to the ceiling. The edges of the far corner were tipped with a periwinkle residue left over from the old paint job. A naked light bulb lit the room, encircled by three bare hooks. The baseball fixture that once hung there had been carefully packed up and stored in the attic along with a crib and a bundle of tiny blue clothes.

“What about when she comes back? How’ll she take that, her shooter livin’ here?”

Jim was standing near the stairwell, speaking overly loud. “She’s just a little girl, a hurt, innocent, scared little girl.”

“Stop that,” May said soberly, “it was your father’s gun.”

“Reckless, mindless, dangerous.”

“What d’ya want from the man?”

“I want him out tonight. Predator.”

Hub squeezed his eyes shut.

“Too bad. That ain’t happening. Would’ya stop it?”

“May, he’s—”

“Here, come here.”

Their words became an unintelligible hum as the basement door clicked closed.

After a while, Hub heard the drone of the school bus. He sat up and watched. The bus coasted past his window, past the scorched foundations of his old home, and up a hill. In the distance, the flashers came on and the bus stopped. The kids got off, two minute figures running home.

He turned from the window. His dresser was set with two framed pictures; he took the pictures and studied them in his lap, side by side. A straight silver frame held the wedding photo of Barbara and him. The other picture was set in a plastic frame decorated by macaroni noodles and vibrant finger-paints. It showed him in the backyard with Becky, swinging her around by her feet. He saw himself with a wide-open mouth, his yelling choked by dizzy laughter. Becky’s face was a blur of skin and teeth. May had taken the picture.

“Hub?” His door opened and May slipped into the room. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Looking at pictures.”

May stood over him. “Oh?”

In the wedding picture, a severe, round faced Hub stood stiffly beside his bride. His brown hair was evenly cropped across his head. Barbara was smiling, her mouth gaping slightly as she watched Hub pose. Her black poof of hair curled out of her lifted veil.

“When Barbara died, you were there for me, you and Jim. I had no house, no family. I’ll never forget. Here, sit down.” He shuffled over, leaving a patch of vacant bed.

“Jim and I’ve been talking.” She remained standing.

“Yeah.”

“Well, we think it was unfair what Jim said. Of course you can stay ‘til you find a new place.”

Hub stared into his lap. “I don’t wanna go anytime.”

Jim crept past the open door, momentarily catching Hub’s eye.

“There hasn’t been anything worse done in the world, but don’tcha think you’ll ever forgive me?” Hub placed his hand on May’s forearm.

“It isn’t that.” May took Hub’s hand in her own. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Don’t you want your own place?” she said, dropping his hand. “Be alone a while?”

Hub looked from May to the pictures. His photo replica roared, spinning faster as the little girl shrieked. May had sniggered uncontrollably, unable to form a full sentence scolding Hub to be careful.

“May.”

Jim walked by the doorway.

“You were only gonna stay ‘til you found somewhere else anyway, remember?”

May said.

“I’m not a bum.”

“We all love you Hub, all these years. But I do think it’s time for a change. You know?”

Becky was a screaming blur of skin and teeth.

Jim reappeared at the door. He stopped and looked in.

“You can stay as long as you need.” May walked to the door. “‘Til you find a new place,” she added over her shoulder. She pushed past her husband.

Jim stood in the doorway a moment longer, staring at Hub, then turned and followed May out of sight. Hub picked at a green macaroni noodle.

Hub stood in the middle of the kitchen facing the front doorway, hands coupled behind his back. A large blue panda slumped face down on the table next to him. Hub fiddled at the waist of his good pants, looking over at the panda. The tag on its butt happily proclaimed, “My name is Mako.” Hub lifted Mako up by the head, setting it straight. As soon as he let go, the bear doubled over.

There was the muted crumble and final squeal of a car coming to a stop in the driveway. Hub strode to the window as doors thumped shut. Only the rear of the car was visible, where Jim was leaning into the trunk. Jim reached around and brought out the accordion body of a folded up wheelchair.

Hub turned away, tugging at his shirtsleeves. He looked down at his clothes, breathing in the mothball scent, then shifted his gaze to Mako's face flop. He picked up the panda by the neck and stepped to a nearby cabinet. Dice and cards skidded as Hub yanked open the top drawer and drove Mako's head inside. He packed in the large blue body with both hands, unable to get the legs and rear inside. "My name is Mako," dangled in the air. Outside, another door shut. He pushed at the drawer, unable to close it.

Jim entered the front door walking backwards, pulling Becky's wheelchair up the steps with him. "Here we are," he sang.

May followed, her hand raised protectively to the chair. "Jim, lift her out of there."

With a quick jerk, Hub took the bear out from the drawer and hid it behind his back.

"We've made up your room with white new curtains." Jim stepped backwards into the kitchen, not bothering to take off his shoes. His survey of the room passed over Hub without pause. "And we're going to have mash potatoes for dinner, and cake."

Becky sagged forward into the chair's shoulder restraints, her eyes staring blankly from her pale face. Her cheekbones jutted out over drawn cheeks. The middle of her T-shirt bulged with stiff, clasping bandages.

May caught sight of Hub. “Hey, I thought you were out looking at that place by the bank.”

Becky’s eyes flickered in his direction. “Hub,” she croaked, “you didn’t come see me.”

In the entranceway, May stood motionless. Jim had stopped mid-stride. Becky watched Hub, each of her breaths straining against the tight bandage.

“Becky—” Hub looked down to the floor, then quickly out the window. “I got you a bear.” He held Mako out from his body, his fist crushing its chest. “It’s not my – well, it’s a gift. For coming home,” he added.

Becky watched the bear.

“Thanks Hub,” said May, walking into the kitchen.

Hub withdrew the panda, holding it by his side. “I—” Under the bandages, he could envision a twisted braces grin stapling Becky’s smooth white stomach from side to side.

“Let’s go see your room.” Jim angled the chair up on two wheels, making motor sounds as he wheeled Becky away.

May stopped in front of Hub. “Here, I can give it to her later.”

Hub blinked at her.

“The bear.” May pointed to his left hand.

He followed her finger to Mako’s bloated cotton face. He pushed the bear into May’s arms and walked from the kitchen.

The remains of the last snowfall encrusted the ground, broken by shards of black earth and flattened brown vegetation. The snow clung between furrows and along the

sides of ditches, murmuring wetly in the intermittent sun. Hub sighed and could see his breath. He walked along the road toward the Dorion house. Glancing backward, he saw his pickup parked alongside the burn pit of wood and brick that had once been his home. The truck was a massive affair, its navy blue exterior pocked with an indigo he had painted over dents and rust patches. It was the last piece of equipment Hub moved from the Dorion farm, transferring it from its place alongside the shed.

His Tempest sat by Jim's front steps, filled with the last of his possessions, a few coats, workboots, and other clothing that hadn't been moved to his new apartment in a nearby town. Hub made his way past the car, up the front steps, and through the door.

"May." Jim said flatly.

Hub looked up from his half-untied shoelaces. Jim was sitting somewhat apart from the newspaper spread over the table. His chair faced the front door. Rising from his seat, Jim walked over to the entranceway and stood just at the edge of the mat. "We'll see you around Hub. Good luck with that apartment." He extended his hand.

Rising from his shoes, Hub shook the offered hand, squeezing firmly. "No problem. You'd better take care."

"Don't you worry."

May came into the kitchen with measured steps, carrying Becky. Becky hung off her mother like a monkey, limbs dangling. May took her place beside Jim in the narrow entranceway. Their bodies were crowded together, enclosing Hub in the meagre space between the coats and shoes of the small room.

"Say goodbye to Hub," May said to Becky.

Becky stiffly turned halfway to face Hub. She was silent a moment, then reached her hand forward. "Do you have to go?"

Hub leaned toward her, letting Becky's hand press against his chest. He looked at Jim. Jim didn't move.

"Afraid so Pup," Hub said.

"We'll miss you Hub. Well, here." May passed her daughter to Jim and embraced Hub.

"Me too." Hub began rubbing her back.

She pulled away, letting his arms fall.

"I'll miss you," Hub said.

May nodded.

"And Becky." He turned to the girl, who sat lightly in the crook of Jim's beefy arm. Becky reached for him and Hub hugged her closely, his forearm brushing Jim's chest. Hub pulled the girl towards him but Jim wouldn't let go of Becky's legs. The thick bandages fastened around Becky's midriff pressed against Hub's arm.

Jim's eyes never left Hub's face. May waited, keeping careful watch of Becky. Hub's mouth silently opened, then clamped shut.

"I love you," Becky whispered in his ear, her thumb rubbed the unshaved hair along the back of his neck.

Hub pressed her closer. Then, with a quick motion, he threw his shoulder into Jim and jerked Becky free from his grip. Jim reeled. Hub sprinted for the door and fumbled it open. He spun through the opening, shutting the bulky piece of oak just in time for Jim

to fling himself against it. Jumping down the steps, Hub ran past his car and down the gravel driveway. Becky clung rigidly to him, wailing.

“Shhh,” Hub puffed, “shhh shhh.”

Jim raced after them, his extended strides kicking stones from the frozen earth.

“Becky,” May yelled from the doorway.

Hub heard the grinding gravel of Jim’s pursuit. He beat the ground harder and ran on, his trousers swishing noisily. He was already losing ground when his untied left shoe wrenched on an angle, pitching him forward. Gravel scuffed and skidded and he regained his footing, his left foot angled and dipping.

“Ow ow.” Becky hugged her stomach with one hand.

“Oh don’t, it’s alright.” Hub heaved his left leg forward, swinging his whole left side with each stride. “Don’t worry, shhh shhh shhh.”

Becky jerked and bumped in his arms. “No no,” she whimpered.

Jim’s hurried steps dogged at Hub’s heels. Fingertips swiped at his coat.

“I’m sorry.”

Thick coat fabric bit into his throat and Hub was yanked backwards. He swivelled on his good foot and fell to his knees. Becky screamed, still clinging to Hub as Jim enfolded her in his arms and pulled her away.

Jim reared and kicked. His foot slammed into Hub’s chest, hurling him to the ground. Another kick blasted into his gut. Hub gasped.

Jostled by the impact, Becky hugged her stomach tighter. “Owww.”

Jim drove his heel into Hub’s shoulder.

Hub was rolled backwards, tipping off the driveway into the ditch. Flailing his arms, he ploughed headfirst through the snow into a shallow stream of stinging-cold water. He cried out.

Jim stood at the edge of the ditch, clutching Becky. He cupped her head over his shoulder like an infant. "You're dead. I ever see you again, you're dead."

Hub thrashed his legs, shuffling and splashing.

* * *

Hub followed May as she steadily made her way down the short hallway leading from the kitchen. The bullet gashed tile gaped at him like vinyl lips sucked over broken, ragged teeth. His foot landed, covering over the hole and then moving on.

May came to a stop just before the living room doorway, still refusing to meet Hub's eyes. He paused in front of her. A T.V. chattered from around the corner. A family portrait hung on the wall beside Hub's head. It showed Jim and May leaning towards Becky between them. Becky was missing one of her front teeth. She was young enough, the picture must have been taken while Hub still lived in the house. He had never seen it before.

"I'm gonna need a minute," he whispered to May.

May looked up suddenly, scrutinizing his face.

"I gotta say I'm sorry."

She didn't move. He walked around her. At the doorway he patted her shoulder, lightly pressing her away. She turned to look at him, arms crossed.

"Come on May." He handed her the book bag he'd taken. "Come on, five minutes. Just that." He lifted his hands, palms facing up.

May's eyes narrowed. "No."

"May."

She paced a few steps, stopped, turned, and waited, the book bag cradled in her arms.

Hub hesitated a moment and, when May didn't move, looked into the living room. Becky was sitting in an ancient reclining chair, her thin, ungraceful limbs tucked together awkwardly. Squat humps of developing breasts pushed against her red and white T-shirt. Her attention was wholly focused on the wood-panelled television.

There was a flowered sofa running along the opposite wall. Hub casually walked into the room and took a seat. "What's up Pup?"

She didn't look up from the T.V. When Hub lived down the road, a four-year-old Becky would come running in to greet him when he visited, yelling his name over and over. She would jump into his arms and he would hoist her into the air. He would grunt and complain how much she'd grown.

"Becky?" he said. "Becky, look at me."

She turned her head. Her eyes shifted to his face, then away.

"Ah, how're you? How's school?"

She swallowed. "Good."

"Good. You're getting good grades?"

She watched the floor. Her hair had changed since Hub had seen it last. It was shorter, hanging to just below her ears, severe and composed.

“Any boyfriends? I betchya have—” Hub looked away. He slumped into the couch, licking his lips. The television sang a ditty about shampoo. “Do ya think I can see the scar?”

Becky hugged herself, her arms covering her chest and stomach.

“Right, sorry. It’s just—”

They sat there for a moment.

“Why are you back?” Her voice was low and boyish.

“Why am I back?” Hub whispered. Then louder, “Oh, word is it’s your birthday tomorrow. I came to wish ya happy birthday. I even gotchya something.” He patted his chest. “I, ah, left it in my jacket. It’s a stuffed giraffe. Wrapped up and with a bow, but that’s what it is. So, happy birthday. I’ll give it to you after.”

“Okay.” She turned back to the television.

“Look.” He sat up, leaning towards her. “Here, look here. I wanna explain some things.”

Her eyes met his full on.

“I wanna apologize, right? But we were so good of friends, you and me. I wouldn’a gone far. You were always there, cheering me up, singing and putting on plays. You’re like a daughter.”

Hub paused. Becky remained hunched in the chair.

“Sit up at least, for cryin’ out loud.”

A tear rolled down her thin cheek.

“I - I’m sorry, I didn’t mean’a be snappy. Don’t cry. Don’t cry. I never, ever, wanted to hurt you, Becky. I love you. We got along so well you—” He pressed the

palms of his hands into his temples, taking a sharp breath. "Would you ever have gone off with me?"

Becky hugged herself more closely, burrowing into the chair. Her chin trembled.

"Not now. Then. Back, back. We could have been happy just playing together."

"Mom!"

"Games. Tag, board games, like that. Playing, damnit."

May rushed into the doorway, taking in the scene in an instant. "Stop it."

"I never meant to do any of it." He stood. "Don't be scared Becky. That's all I wanted to say. I wanna keep things right between us."

"Hey, hey," May warned. She hurried from the room.

Becky began to wail.

"Stop it now. I wanted to apologize. I never meant nothing. You're like a daughter."

May came back into the room wielding the hunting rifle. "You get out'a here." She shook the barrel at him unsteadily.

"Whoa, hey." Hub raised his arms.

Becky caught sight of the rifle. She coughed scratchingly, hunching over the edge of the chair. Hacking, she threw up on the carpet, heaved, and threw up again.

"God damnit." May pushed the barrel vigorously into Hub's chest.

"Put it down May," he rumbled.

"Get out of my house," May shouted. "Out!"

Becky was leaning over the chair arm, spasming dryly. Her short hair was bunched up in her face.

Hub hastily sidestepped to the doorway. "I couldn't've hurt you," he called to Becky, his arms still raised.

May thrust the gun at Hub. "Stay away." Her eyes were red.

He turned from the living room, racing down the hall. May didn't follow.

Reaching the entranceway, he found everything still and silent. The shoes and coats sat in their places as if they couldn't be affected by him, like a picture. Quickly lacing his ratty sneakers, he could hear May's soothing words to her daughter from the living room. "It's alright, he's gone. He's gone baby." He yanked his coat from the hanger and went out the door.

Hub stopped halfway down the concrete steps. He reached into his jacket's inside pocket and took out a lump of gift-wrap. The wrapping was uneven, wrinkled around the giraffe's neck. The back was taped in two different places, partially hidden with a large red bow he had curled and tied himself. Turning back, Hub opened the oak door a crack, tossed the present inside, and closed it again.

A few clouds lazily shifted in the bright day. A chill breeze tumbled the yellow bean-harvest mist along the ground. Hub made his way up the driveway, watching his shoes beat the worn gravel. Mid-stride, he began jogging, then sprinting. He reached his Tempest breathing heavily. Looking over the farm once more, he saw the single combine gathering up heaped bean plants, moving towards the house as if defending its den. Hub took off his hat and ran his hand through his hair. He stepped into his car and started the engine.

Dinosaurs and the Modern Day Work Place

Memo: For administrative reasons, for the benefit of the company, and for ease of use by every employee, the current Mac network will be replaced with the most up to date, fully integrated PC network. This Mac to PC conversion will affect office wiring, computer systems, disks, printers, telephones, e-mail addresses, as well as phone and fax numbers. A technological company has been hired in order to facilitate these changes. During the conversion process, network blackouts and some interface failures are to be expected.

Welcome to a world of quick and easy photocopying!

Exac-copy 5001. The next generation of business photocopying solutions.

2400 x 2400 dpi

60 ppm

Max 5126 sheets

5 paper trays inc. bypass tray

Finishing options include stapling, hole punching, v-folding, and saddle stitch booklets.

“Are you almost done?”

The Exac-copy 5001 hummed to life. Lights flashed and the first sheet of eighty-seven buzzed into the machine.

Copying in Progress.

Gwen stood in the center of a ring of machines, bins, and shelves of paper. She made a show of thumbing the stack of paper in her hands, shrugging her shoulders sympathetically. "It'll be a bit."

"I've just got a few pages." Mr. Roy Garnot stood just outside the doorway to the little photocopying room. His diminutive round head looked too small for his shoulder-padded suit and roast beef body.

"Sorry." She shrugged again.

The Exac-copy buzzed and whirled, spooling out hot sheets of freshly inked charts and graphs, an action mirrored in the little view screen by a cartoon photocopying machine. Gwen pretended to study the screen. Cartoon photocopies formed an immeasurable pile that never got any higher or lower. Finally Roy stalked off, leaving Gwen on her own.

A photocopier is a very fragile machine.

The paper must be dry and cold. If transparencies are used, they must be of good quality and heat resistant. If labels are used, they must be of good quality and designed for photocopying.

Never move photocopier when it is warm.

Never stand on or lean against photocopier.

Keep away from dust, moisture, and direct sunlight.

There was no chair in the photocopying room. Gwen stood watching as page after page was automatically fed through the photocopier.

Bvvvvvv - bzzzzzz. Bvvvvvv - bzzzzzz. Much slower than 60 ppm, since it was scanning both sides in colour.

See fig. 3a. See stat chart 5. Page 20. Page 21. Page 22. All neatly laid out for the conference on Friday.

Gwen was thinking about a whiney, piercing voice. About needy phone calls and notes and in general a constant barrage of crap that she had put up with for four months. The nowhere mystery novels and mindless sitcoms she had to hear about, the loser friends and family, and always the unceasing whine. Gwen had agreed to an early-evening dinner with her ex-boyfriend Terry.

Around page 31, Roy peeked in the door again. Gwen shook her head, and he stomped off. One thing her job did, it gave her a marked aversion to white middle-aged men. They made up a tapestry of pattern baldness, of bulging guts there on the executive floor.

Bvvvvvv - Bzzzzzz.

The break-up with Terry hadn't been easy. It had stretched out for a full month of clipped-off arguments, on-again off-again separations, and Terry's smothering overcompensation. What was dinner that night except an attempt to get the two of them back together? More clinginess. But she had felt bad. Terry had sounded sincere on the phone, insisting that they should spend some time together, that she couldn't "just disappear" from his life. She had decided to go to dinner. It was the thing to do.

Bvvvvvv - Bzzzzzz. Bvvvvvv - Bzzvvvvrrrckkk.

The photocopy machine made a series of clicks and a high pitch beep.

Paper Jam. Paper Jam. Paper Jam.

(line break)

Open photocopier. Open flap 1 by pulling the tab on the side **gently** toward the floor. If there is paper jammed inside, turn roller while **gently** pulling out jammed paper. Close flap. If there is no jammed paper, close flap 1, close photocopier. Open flap 2.

Modern photocopying machines have big, bright, candy-coloured access tabs for playschool-level maintenance. Gwen opened flap 2, pulling the tab **gently** toward her. Inside, two rollers had chewed page 36 into origami. She pulled the page out, silently cursing that she'd have to manually copy and collate it into every pile.

Close flap 2.

Press Start button.

The Exac-copy 5001 resumed its hum. Gwen watched it, thinking about a whiney, piercing voice, needy phone calls, Terry's loser friends, and how much she wasn't looking forward to dinner.

Photocopiers and facsimile machines are necessary equipment for an office. They pose minimal health risks under most circumstances, but can be hazardous if incorrectly used or maintained. Precautions should be taken to protect the health of workers.

Page 44. Page 45. Page 46.

Bzzvvvrrrrckkk - click - click - click - click.

Damnit.

The machine beeped shrilly.

Open photocopier. Open flap 1 by pulling the tab on the side **gently** toward the floor...

The normal concentration of ozone around photocopiers is not sufficient to cause negative effects but, when concentrated, health effects include eye, nose, throat and lung irritation, dermatitis, headaches and nausea, premature aging and potential reproductive dangers. Pruritus, a kind of itching, occurs on the face, neck and areas of skin exposed to ozone. Mixed with nitrogen oxide, it can affect the central nervous system.

Again, Gwen had to pull at the lollipop green tab on flap 2. Page 49 was a complete mess, twisted and crumpled right off the roller track. It wasn't even jammed, which meant another piece was.

Gwen sighed.

Page 48 came next. Then 47, wedged between the rollers. As Gwen tugged at it, 47 ripped along the centre. She gave a final pull and with a sickening crack the top roller popped out.

Shit. Shit.

She grabbed the broken roller, trying to force it back into place.

A photocopier is a very fragile machine!

The roller cracked again. Something was getting in the way. Gwen reached into the machine's insides, feeling around.

Though most machines automatically shut off when opened, turn off photocopier before removing a paper jam to avoid the risk of skin or appendages being caught, torn, or damaged in the mechanics of the photocopier. Avoid interior hot surfaces and wash hands immediately afterwards.

Ouch!

She yanked her arm back as a sharp bit of plastic stabbed into her palm. She looked inside, but couldn't figure out what she'd touched. After a moment, she slowly reached back into the machine, carefully prodding the remaining roller like it was a broken leg. There was an object just behind the roller. Her fingers traced four plastic spikes to a rubbery-plastic base and two rows of irregular, crooked ridges.

Excessive dust in electrical equipment will cause sparking. Fire extinguishers in the photocopying room are essential.

Some copiers use selenium or cadmium sulphide. The gas emitted from these materials, especially when hot, can cause throat irritation and sensitization. Short term exposure to high levels of selenium causes nausea, vomiting, skin rashes, and rhinitis.

Finally, she pulled at the object. There was some resistance and then it popped out. A six-inch dinosaur. A stegosaurus, painted in vibrant shades of green and yellow with purple eyes. Solid plastic spines - its infamous plates - ran across its back, downward to

tail spikes that were surprisingly sharp for a children's toy. She turned the dinosaur over in her hands. *Made in Taiwan.*

"Are you almost done?"

"Uh?" She shoved the stegosaurus into the Exac-copy 5001.

Roy was in the doorway, standing over her as she crouched on the floor. In response, he waved the papers he was holding.

"I think the photocopier's broken," she said.

Roy sighed dramatically. "What? What's wrong with it?" He took a half-step forward.

Inside, the plastic stegosaurus looked at Gwen suspiciously.

"It's broken."

"Hmmm." Roy stopped, unable to get much further into the photocopy room. He looked at his watch. "You should call maintenance then."

"Yes."

There were no children in the office. Management strictly forbade it. There were no children in the building, none on the management floors, and most certainly none in the executive photocopying room playing with expensive office equipment.

Gwen walked through the cubical halls, passing by a woman carrying away a computer. A battalion of technicians had been rewiring, rewriting, and replacing almost all the electrical equipment in the building as they switched everything from Mac to PC. It was a two-week process. Different floors, different people and stations disappearing,

going offline, falling off mail lists and then reappearing under a different setting, name, and address on a whole new network.

Short, white-haired Tracy was standing at one of the cubical entrances, waiting for the person inside to get off the phone.

“Tracy?”

Tracy scowled slightly, hating to be turned away from her task. She was always scowling at Gwen. Overhead, a technician worked atop a ladder, his face and shoulders lost above the ceiling tiles as he rewired the network.

“Do you - uh - know who was in the copy room before me?” Gwen had passed Tracy earlier.

“Hmmm,” Tracy turned away from Gwen, intently staring into the cubical, “I think it was Milo.”

Gwen didn't really like Tracy.

“Great, thanks.”

Tracy half nodded. Gwen waited for a moment, but couldn't think of anything else to say. In the ceiling, the technician was making faint shuffling and scratching sounds.

“I'll see you later,” Gwen said and walked away. Tucked between her papers and her chest, the green and yellow stegosaurus stabbed at her skin.

The stegosaurus was the largest plated dinosaur, growing up to thirty feet long. This herbivore had tall bony plates shooting up from its neck, back, and tail. Its tail was armed with three-foot long spikes, which the stegosaurus used to defend itself. A single blow from these razor sharp spikes could cripple an unwary predator.

(line break)

Gwen's office was small but not claustrophobic. Not like the cubicles on some of the other floors. She kept her desk nearly bare, with a Mac computer on one corner, her "in" and "out" boxes on the other, and her name plate in-between. Gwen set the stegosaurus on the desk and sat down. She looked at her watch. 4:34. She'd had to argue with the tech people to fix the photocopier that day rather than the next. And even then it would take a while for them to come, for them to fix it, and for her to be able to get back to work. She would have to stay late.

The stegosaurus looked as if it were going to charge her from its position on the desktop, crippling her with a single blow of its razor sharp spikes.

And what would people think if they saw her pulling a plastic dinosaur out of the photocopying machine?

Oh, how like a woman, unable to work with any advanced technology without getting a toy stegosaurus gummed up in the works.

Actually, she didn't know what people would think. But they'd definitely blame her.

She must have kids.

And was this - this purple-eyed rainbow lizard - the reason she had to stay late?

She had to talk to Milo. But first--

"Hello hello." 70's glasses and wispy bangs dipped neck-deep through Gwen's door. In her mid-twenties, Natalie Slaughts was one of the younger people on the floor.

"Working like crazy, or crazy from working?"

"Hello," Gwen said. And, after a self-conscious moment, "Hello hello."

Gwen liked Natalie just as much as she hated her. Natalie was a friendly face in the office but--

“Have you figured out if you’re coming for the potluck tomorrow?”

“I haven’t really decided.”

“Oh, you have to come.” She marched into Gwen’s office. “Everyone is coming. I’m bringing the greatest lasagne you’ll ever eat in your life.”

“You know I want to, it’s just--”

“What are you good at making?” She scooted up beside Gwen’s desk.

“Ah.”

“It’s like a family event. Eating together, getting to know each other outside the office.” She wiggled her ass to perch on Gwen’s desk.

Cold blooded or hot blooded, we can only speculate on how specific dinosaurs behaved with members of their own species. For some species, it is clear they had intricate family and herd interaction and relationships. Others were likely loners, abandoning eggs and living a solitary, territorial life, reacting negatively, even violently, when confronting another of its species.

“Bring whatever you can and - Ah, Ah God!” Natalie leapt to her feet. The stegosaurus tumbled to the desk, rolling over its spiny plates and spikes. “Ow, damnit.” She rubbed her ass. “Ow,” she looked at Gwen reproachfully, even accusingly, “damnit.”

“Oh God!” Gwen stood. The stegosaurus had come to a stop, rocking on its side.

“What--!”

"I'm sorry. It's just--" *a stegosaurus*.

Natalie shook her head. "I think there's a rip in my pants. What--" She felt up the seam of her pants, fingers carefully tracing her crack. Gwen cocked her head, searching for damage. Natalie noticed Gwen's stare and quickly turned away. "I've gotta check this. You--" She side-stepped out of the room, flashing Gwen a final dirty look. Gwen was left gesturing sympathetically to her empty office.

Natalie would hate her now. Or maybe Natalie was incapable of sustaining bad feelings, she was just so chipper and bubbly. But she would be awkward with Gwen now. She would hesitate in her friendliness - the Natalie version of hatred.

There goes another one. Gwen sat back into her chair.

Personal skills.

Works as a team: 1. Very Poor 2. Poor 3. Adequate 4. Good 5.

Very Good

Is friendly, polite, and personable. 1. Very Poor 2. Poor 3. Adequate 4.

Good 5. Very Good

Gwen picked up the stegosaurus, pressing her thumb against the four spikes one by one, making four little impressions in her skin. She watched as the imprints filled out once again, her skin rounding back into shape. Natalie wouldn't be back hawking any lame office events for a while. Gwen always felt guilty about not wanting to go. She sometimes felt like she should be more social. When she sat in her office, no one ever came to see her but Natalie unless it was business-related and important. Her

conversations with co-workers were limited to hello/good morning and have a good night/see you later. Both a reason to embrace and a reason to reject Natalie's offer of an office potluck and the greatest lasagne she'd ever eat in her life.

Screw it.

4:42. Gwen thumbed through the stack of paper left to photocopy, collate, and DuoTang before the end of the day. Not much. But enough that she had to stay.

Stegosaurus was low built, bulky, but was likely extremely strong and muscular. Its skin was armour in itself, tough and resilient. In all, the stegosaurus was well adapted, able to take care of itself in the Upper Jurassic world it lived in.

In the egg-shell hallway, another technician torso was swallowed by the ceiling. Gwen stepped around the ladder. Yet another tecky was running wires beneath the carpet. "Sorry," Gwen said, stepping carefully over the area.

How did Milo get a stegosaurus jammed in the photocopier? Did he do it on purpose? Was he sending her some sort of message? Was he trying to sleep with her or was he trying to get her fired?

"Milo?" She wrapped at his open door.

He was rifling through his filing cabinets. Milo looked like a hippie sell-out with his characteristically awkward-looking John Lennon beard and glasses, which hung on him like afterthought additions to his chubby face and expensive suit.

"How are you? How is life treating you?" she asked.

"Oh, hey Gwen. What can I do for you?" He continued to go through the cabinet.

“Well, you know--” The stegosaurus stabbed at her skin. “Were you using the photocopier earlier?”

“Sure.” He pulled a few papers from the filing cabinet and set them on his desk.

“Why?”

“I used it after you.” She paused dramatically, waiting for a look of realization on his face. Waiting for him to reveal his intentions like a mad scientist’s plot.

He looked from his papers to her.

“And now it’s broken,” she added.

“It was working fine when I was using it.” He looked over his glasses at her.

Clearly he thought she was accusing him of breaking it.

“Oh,” she said quickly, “it was working when I was using it at first. But then there was a **paper jam** in tray **two**.”

He looked at her blankly.

A plastic photo cube lay on the edge of his desk with three sides exposed to her. Gwen saw two children aged about grade two or three in various poses. She hadn’t even known Milo had kids. Gwen felt a rush of guilt. Milo always seemed like a good guy and she thought she had always tried to be friendly. Yet as she looked around, she realized that she hadn’t even been in his office before. There was a diploma on the wall, a framed portrait of Adam West (signed), a grade two watercolour of a house, trees, and family, and a finger painting abstract on the side of the filing cabinet.

For a giddy second, Gwen took the children’s paintings as irrefutable proof Milo was responsible for the stegosaurus. *Bringing children’s things into the office!* His voice

broke her train of thought. "Do you have something for me?" He gestured toward her chest, where the lumpy, hard shape of the stegosaurus was pressed against her shirt.

She almost gasped.

"Those papers?" he asked.

"What do you think about dinosaurs?"

"What are you up to?" *It's the end of the day, leave me alone*, his weary gaze added.

"Just, what do you think about dinosaurs?"

"Big, dumb lizards? Eating one another? Dinosaurs?"

You're dumb!

Obviously he hadn't put the stegosaurus in the photocopier. It was beautiful. It was strong. It was smart.

"You know what, it's nothing. Just wanted to warn you the copier's broken."

He nodded and Gwen quickly retreated from his office. She could have stayed, could have caught up with Milo and asked him about this or that poorly painted watercolour, but she realized that Milo was exactly the kind of person she hated. His kids' art all over his office, a framed portrait of Adam West. He would be one of those people who wouldn't shut up about the stupid cutesy things little Milo jr. had gotten up to today, or who would yap on about bad 60's TV shows. She hated that.

Being able to connect with co-workers is key to a comfortable work environment, maintaining healthy work relationships, and can help you schmooze your boss and advance your standing among your colleagues.

Stay focused. Take an interest in what the person is saying, give feedback, and maintain eye contact. Never glance around the room while someone is talking to you. Remember details for later conversations.

Gwen could remember a time she went to Red Lobster with Terry. The waitress brought a treasure chest filled with cheap little toys over to a family of four. The little girl, maybe seven, rooted through the chest for a very long time, finally pulling out a suction cup butterfly with transparent wings. She had smiled triumphantly at her family, gloating over her younger brother as he searched through the toy chest and brought out a yellow tyrannosaurus-shaped eraser.

The little girl continued to flaunt her butterfly while the boy lumbered his tyrannosaurus across the table. The T-rex lurked behind his glass. It kicked his silverware and roared at his parents. The girl watched him for a while, and then reached out and swiped away the tyrannosaurus, tucking both toys to her lap as her brother let out a wail.

“Kids,” Terry said under his breath, waving his hand in dismissal.

The girl held on to her toys despite her brother’s crying, despite her parents’ disapproval and their waitress’s polite suggestion that she would feel better sharing her toys.

Gwen had loved this little girl. She would NOT feel better sharing her toys. She would not feel better by giving, by being nice, by listening. Screw the world.

“Nnn-No!” the little girl complained the way only kids could. “No no no no no no NO.”

(line break)

We, not I.

The key feature of any relationship is communication. Above all, partners must be open and honest with one another. They must be willing to listen.

“So, you won’t be able to come at all tonight?” Over the phone, there was the barest hint of Terry’s whine.

“I can’t,” she said, dancing her stegosaurus across her desk, phone cradled in her shoulder. “The conference is in two days. I need this done tonight.”

“Okay. Okay, fair enough. But we could meet later.”

Gwen was silent.

“Look, I just want to talk a bit. To even see you again.” *After all we’ve been through*, he was really saying, *can’t you spare a bit of time?*

Nnn-No! No no no no no NO.

“No,” she breathed.

Stegosaurus had more of a beak than a snout. The mouth was represented by a painted black line on Gwen’s toy. But it wasn’t the grimace of a dumb grazing animal. It was a smile. The intelligent, conspiratorial smirk of a being absolutely content with itself.

And what have you been up to?

Stegosaurus stuff.

(line break)

The phone went dead before Terry could begin whining all over again. Gwen's computer flashed network and internet warnings. When she stuck her head out her office, she found a ladder set up right against the doorway. A pair of navy pants pivoted to meet her.

"Oop, sorry," came a voice from above. She looked through the narrow gap left between the doorway and ladder to see a heavily moustached face look down at her from among wires and ventilation pipes. "I thought most people were gone home by now. I'm afraid you're going to be blacked out for a bit."

"Fine," she said noncommittally. She picked up her photocopying and marched out her office from beneath the ladder.

"Had a busy day?" The technician ducked his head into view, smiling.

"Not bad. Have a good one," she said, walking away.

"Nice stegosaurus," he called.

She kept walking. She would not feel better sharing. She would not feel better by giving, by being nice, by listening. The stegosaurus pinched at her chest, hidden behind her stack of photocopying.

Bastard, she thought. If he could see the stegosaurus, he was looking down her shirt. Screw the world!

* * *

Roy Garnot stood in the confined space of the photocopy room. He looked through the door, down the cubical hallway. The technician battalion had been withdrawing, the new network set up, the new disks and phones, operating systems and computers all installed. The technicians left behind a world half the floor was unfamiliar with. People

were confused and lost among the new phone numbers and e-mail addresses, the different systems and mislabelled disks. Calls for technical help and reports of blackouts were increasing daily.

Bvvvvvv - BZZZZZZ. Bvvvvvv - BZZZZZZ.

The PC friendly Monster-copy 6000 buzzed and whirled as Roy waited.

Bvvvvvv - Bzzvvvvrrrrckkk.

The machine made a series of clicks and a high pitch beep.

Paper Jam. Paper Jam. Paper Jam.

Roy opened flap 2, pulling the tab on the front **gently** toward himself.

Salt and Vinegar Syndrome

Her kisses were machine gun repetitions, quick and hard, pulled away just as my mouth tried to form any new vowels, only to return in the same position, consistent and unvaried. Cherry and vodka lips, fruity and weak as a wine cooler, with only a bare alcoholic whiff escaping the chaste gap of her mouth. I thought to myself: *Kate just doesn't know how to kiss*. She and I sat together on my bed like high schoolers, leaning our chests together, hands playing across each other's backs, working the fully clothed muscles, rimming pant edges, over a hip, and back up. We were still awkward with each other's bodies despite the slightly lowered inhibition of a weak alcohol buzz. I was awkward. My fingertips retreated from the opened gap they had made between her skin and the warm elastic of her underwear. As she began to pull away, they rushed innocently to the small of her back, nonchalantly whistling, outlining the shape of her spine like that's what they intended all along.

"You're such a good kisser," she said.

"Mmmm."

Kiss. Cherry Coke. I wished she was a better kisser. I wished I could travel beyond that heavily buckled belt. *I should*. My hands skated down her butterfly shoulder blades.

"What's—" Kate's breath played along my cheekbone as she thrust herself towards my ear. A secret. "Tell me," inhalation, "your deepest, darkest fantasy."

Two co-ed friends rolled together over the thickly furred bedroom carpet of an overly drawn out B movie. They came to a stop, the wavy haired

brunette breathing hard as she was pinned down by the man's bare-chested weight. The carpet matched her hair, one flowing into the other like she was woven into place. His hands crept up her body, peeling her shirt back to reveal baseball-round breasts. Black fabric slid over her head, the insides of her shirt folding out to enwrap her face, her out-stretched arms, her carpet hair. He stretched the elastic neck of the T-shirt over the woman's chin, her heavily lipsticked lips, and then stopped, leaving the rest of her head covered. Faceless lips puckered and gaped like a landed fish, blindly searching for the man.

And he kissed her.

That is the hottest thing I've ever seen.

"I don't know."

"You do too know. Come on, the dirtiest"

"Dirtiest?" I lowered my lips for a brief kiss.

My fantasy. A series of stick-person sex positions ran through my mind. A rush of sexy moments I'd either experienced or seen on T.V. I had never taken a woman from behind as she was hugging the bedcovers, her baby-skinned ass hanging over the side. I had never tasted the sickening over-sweetness of edible underwear. But these weren't fantasies. *I want. I want.*

"I really don't know," I said, pulling away. Pixie eyes. Disappointed? "You just go first and give me an idea. What's your deepest, darkest fantasy?"

“That’s not how it works.” She used a soft-porn seductress tone when she was trying to be sexy. “You gotta go first.”

“But,” I started helplessly, “I don’t have one.”

“Why won’t you tell me?” The seductress voice rose an octave into a full-blown whine. She shifted onto her haunches.

“I don’t know! Look, kay uh- a B.J. Happy?”

“What?”

“A blowjob. Nothing beats a blowjob.”

“That’s your fantasy?”

“Sure.” *Sure.* Kate’s hair was a short, almost Beatles-esque heap you could get your fingers tangled in while palming the back of her head. Those eyes looking up at you as she rocked forward on her knees in front of you, lips locked. *I want. I want that.*

There’s something wrong with this photograph.

It was taken from shoulder height, looking across the furry landscape of a man’s chest and belly to the crowded heads of two women crouching at his feet. Eager eyes and puckered lips focused on the porn star cock inches above them, as if waiting for some signal to collectively pounce on it.

I was eleven years old. I struck a match, holding it for a moment too long. “Agh.” The matchbook dropped among the knots of weeds and islands of snow that covered the ground.

I was balanced on the slope of a ravine, surrounded by a narrow covering of trees that ran down to the river. Nearby, a massive drain pipe

echoed with the rush of near-freezing water, hurried by the afternoon sun. I retrieved the matches, striking again with numbed fingers.

The picture, along with a dozen others, had been hiding in my room for months, tucked into the torn side of my chair's cushion. The flame caught on the picture's edge, eating away one of the women's eyes, spreading across her cheek, down her nose, her mouth, neck, and over the tips of her breasts visible beyond her face and shoulders. There was something disturbing about the picture. Some perversion that went beyond nudity and threesomes.

I was wary of the smoke, worried that one of my parents would look out the window and see it rising from the ravine floor. But I felt good as the pictures crumbled apart. I had even begun to dream about the pictures, the features of the two women grotesquely bloated, their lips inflated like water-wings, stretched wide as a snake's unhinged jaws. *No more.*

Six months later, I was back in the ravine burning pictures.

Kate searched my face for any hint of irony. "This is serious. Is that really it?"

"Yeah. Why? What's your fantasy?"

Her face scrunched up. "Well, I don't know if I'm going to tell you now."

"I told you."

"A blowjob?" She drawled out the word incredulously.

"That's all there is to it." I tried to sex up my voice, enunciating like a midget Barry

White. I moved to kiss her.

She pulled back, just out of reach. I moved towards her again and she leaned onto her elbows, dipping away. Her Razzmatazz lips pulled together thinly, an almost mocking imitation of my frown.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said lightly.

“No?” As I bent towards her, she nimbly side-stepped off the bed.

“Hhhhuuuughhh,” I sighed and collapsed to the covers, eyeing the door-knocker belt I had been dreaming of just moments before.

“Want to know what my fantasy is?”

“A blowjob?”

“Shut up,” she yelped playfully.

“No, no. Just tell me. I’m listening.”

“Well, I-” her gaze faltered and then returned, unfathomable, “I want a guy to keep going down on me with ice cubes and stuff,” wine cooler staleness, “until I cry.”

She watched me for my reaction.

Beat.

You ever turn on late night TV and end up stumbling on those creepy sex shows? Tonight, exploring the world of latex obsession. Of midget swingers. Of submission and domination, leashes and ball gags.

I sat alone on my couch. On screen, human ponies trotted around a rural pasture. Their half-naked torsos were compensated by specialized leather saddles, tasselled bridles, reins, and brightly coloured feather plumes.

“What the hell is this?” I asked my empty living room.

A young filly tugged on her bit-gag as she was fit with cumbersome blinders. Her harness bound her like tightly-drawn shoelaces. She had a tail.

“That’s messed up.”

A half-naked man stepped over the filly’s back, straddling her.

“Messed up!” I changed the channel.

“What?”

“Mitch!”

“Er-ah, I mean...” Can you see those eyes shining up at you, her Audrey Hepburn voice huffing gibberish? “Alright,” I said, sitting upright. “That’s my - or, I want to be the guy to do that.” Can you see the ice cube curled in my tongue? Melting and dripping. “To you. Wait.” And then, a tear. *What? Wait.*

Kate’s initial frown had turned into an almost pitying half-smile. She watched as I screwed up my face in thought. After a few seconds, she stepped away from me and started to undo her blouse. Kate lacked the lazy grace and rhythm of a stripper, eagerly looking from me to her buttons with an embellished coy smile. Each white button came undone with a sharp click of her tongue.

“Here.” I rose from the bed, reaching to pull her towards me. She backed away.

“Here.” Frowning, I took a step forward. She took a step back.

Pause. I examined her face for an explanation but there was only her frustratingly exaggerated coyness. “I don’t think I like this game.”

She made a grade-2 pouting face, her jutting bottom lip an equator split of Razzmatazz and the natural flesh pink of her inner lip. Her tongue clicked as she undid another button.

I marched to her without halting. She retreated backwards until she ran into the wall, my arms, my hips pinning her lightly. I moved to kiss her.

Her shoulders bunched up defensively and she turned her head away. My arms dropped.

“It’s okay,” she said softly, pressing her forehead against mine, “I want you to pull me close.” She was so near that her features blurred together. “To, like, force me.”

“Um.” Her hands played along my sides, flitting under the bottom of my shirt.

Her seductive tone was always edged in childishness - playground assertions and posturing. “I’ll be your bi-iiiiitchhh.” It was immature, but there was something deeply erotic about that voice. “You can be my bitch too,” she smiled. “Now bitch. Bite it!”

“Ooof, ooof,” Kate breathed in a hushed voice.

I looked over at her in the flickering half-light of the television. She was wincing slightly, her lips pursed. “What is it?”

She sucked on her finger, thin eyebrows drawn together. “Mmm,” she whined, “paper cut.”

“Here.”

The chip bowl was tilted in her lap, the acidic vinegar smell clinging to her. I gently pulled at her wrist. For a second she resisted, then breathed out and allowed me to bring her index finger to my lips. It had the faintest salty

residue, a lingering bit of vinegar that had bit into her most recent paper cut.

A fingerprint of saliva wetness pressed against my lower lip, and was gone.

“There. All better.”

My hands found their hold on her face - the dip of her temples, the wide-angles of her cheekbones - my fingertips were lost in her thick mop-top of hair. And I kissed her like movie stars kiss, cannibalistic. Like James Bond. Like John Wayne. I pushed her lips open. And maybe she tried to pull back, but there was nowhere to pull back to, her repetitive pecking silenced in the crush of my kiss.

For Halloween, I invited Kate over for a slasher movie marathon, just the two of us and a big bowl of candy on the coffee table.

Crunch-crunch-crunch.

Kate leaned forward and picked another chalky Bite-Berry from the bowl. On screen, the murderer’s reflection appeared in a dark window.

Crunch. Crunch-crunch-crunch.

I looked from the bowl to her. “Screw the kids, they can fend for themselves.”

“No one’s even come yet.” She popped another candy into her mouth.

Crunch-crunch-crunch.

“Maybe save some just in case.” I took her hand as she reached for the bowl and brought it to my side, locking her fingers with mine. Her other hand shot out and snatched another Bite-Berry.

“Hey.”

Crunch-crunch-crunch.

I grabbed for her other hand, but she pulled it away, waving it high above her head. “Fine,” I said, turning back to the movie.

With her free hand, she took a piece of candy and put it in her lap. I tried to focus on the TV screen, ignoring her frequent glances at me for a reaction. Kate reached out and took another Bite Berry, then another, making a pile in her lap.

Crunch-crunch-crunch.

I lunged at her, grappling for her hands, but Kate clearly expected this response. She squirmed from the couch onto the floor and I was taken down with her, knocking the candy bowl into the air. I found myself lying on top of Kate. I was holding her arms above her head, her body stretched out below me, surrounded by candy. Hip-hugging khakis, a snug T-shirt with a plunging neckline. *I want.*

She didn't struggle; she glanced up at her restrained arms and then looked at me curiously. Expecting?

I bent my head to hers and gave her an awkward kiss, then immediately released her hands and stood up. She remained lying there for a moment before getting up and helping me pick up the Halloween candy.

(line break)

But when we parted, my hands lingering on her face, I suddenly didn't know what else to do. See the ice cube as it sweats and runs, melted to a sliver as it's buried deeper inside her body.

Tell me your deepest, darkest fantasy.

This is it.

"Your fantasy," I said as if finishing off a sentence. All the buttons she'd undone left her shirt hanging open, exposing a plain white bra, a deep stretch of skin down to her navel. I traced my hands down her neck, her shoulders, her still-hidden bra strap, outlining the place where it met the swell of her breasts, sliding down to her hips. One, two fingers made contact with the thick cowboy leather of her belt.

Kate's arms enwrapped my torso, roping me in.

"What do you want?" I asked.

She made a kissy face and I kissed her, less hard this time but still firmly.

"What do you want?" I whispered. My fingers lingered on her belt, not moving.

She spun from between me and the wall, her open shirt waving around her, and backed away to the door. I was left facing the uneven white of the wall.

"You're slippery," I said carefully.

She raised her eyebrows at me and pressed herself against the doorframe, the opening of her shirt pushed against factory-stained pine.

"Anything else?"

A copy of the Sunday paper and a pack of gum lay on the convenience store counter, obscuring the lottery ticket collage below its transparent surface.

“No.”

The woman behind the counter typed on the cash register with tired disinterest. She was a slim woman, hunched with weariness. There may have been a touch of Hispanic to her features, though I couldn't really tell. Her hair was a deadened black, framing her face like window shutters.

I was looking at the cheap plastic mat that covered the area in front of the counter. “Nice day,” I said.

I never knew her name. I was sure that she was in a harmful marriage with the brush moustached man who was behind the counter with her from time to time. Her focus was always directed inward when he wasn't there. Her eyes were cast downward.

“Two-twenty-six is your change. Have a nice day.” Deadpan.

When the moustached man was in the store with her, there was a frightening tension in the air.

“Thanks.” I took my paper and my gum and left the store.

Where will this end? Her escaping through the doorway, retreating through the house as I approached? “How about we sit on the bed?”

Kate remained leaning against the doorframe as I made my way over to the bed and took a seat. Once I had settled myself on the bed and was clearly going to stay there, she

let her arms fall to her sides. The coy sexuality melted from her posture and she stepped to the bed, re-buttoning her blouse.

“Oh. No, you don’t have -” I fumbled.

The buttons were fastened up to her collar bone as she came to a stop in front of me.

“Here, sit down.” I patted the bed beside me lamely.

She stayed where she was.

“I don’t- we’re not getting anywhere like this,” I said.

“What are you talking about?” Her voice was low.

“It’s just a bit weird. I’m-”

She huffed, crossing her arms.

“Maybe we should go back to what we were doing before. You know?”

My fingertips retreated from the opened gap they had made between her skin and the warm elastic of her underwear. They rushed innocently to the small of her back as she began to pull away, nonchalantly whistling, outlining the shape of her spine like that’s what they intended all along.

“Sometimes I wonder about you,” she said.

I had crossed my arms and legs, pensively folding into myself.

“I just wonder,” she answered an imaginary question, “what do you even want?”

See: Her head between my thighs, her hair pulled back in pigtail fists. Quick and hard machine gun repetitions.

“Like, what do you want?”

What do YOU want?

“Do you even like all this?” she continued. “Do you like girls?”

(line break)

Even if I were a gynaecologist.

Even if I spent ten years in gynaecology school studying the intricacies of women's bodies, making them into a science, and then spent every day inspecting every feminine square inch.

Even if humanity walked around naked. If clothes hadn't been invented. If there were giant signs flashing dirty parts everywhere I looked.

Even if all the world's women carefully lined up and one by one came to my apartment to lift their skirts, loosen their belts, unbutton their clothes.

Even then, I would never, never get tired of their bodies. I want each one of them to do wild acrobatics for me. To flex and stretch and wrestle as I watch.

I'd like to be the only man on earth. I'd like to have every woman come to me frustrated, desperate, and horny as hell.

I stretched my arms towards her. How many times had she threatened men's sexuality in order to get what she wanted?

She took a step back.

"Oh come on." My arms remained outstretched.

"Mitch -"

I jumped to my feet, grabbed Kate by her knobby shoulders and twirled her toward the bed. She tripped backwards and bounced face up onto the bed covers. The bed squeaked suggestively and I watched for an instant as she buoyed on the bed. *Where will this end? Tell me your deepest, darkest fantasy.* I carefully flopped on top of her, my

knees and elbows at her sides. She was smiling tight-lipped, that sad, pitying half-smile.

I lowered my head and kissed her. Cherry Coke.

Tonight, exploring the world of cunnilingus fetishes.

The snow around the little fire had melted into a puddle. I stood with my boots tangled among the ravine weeds and watched the flames burn themselves down to the water, hissing and sputtering as the ashes sank below its surface.

Her one hand was rubbing against my side, the other pressing against my chest. I didn't know if they were stroking me or trying to direct me somewhere. Asking to slow down or trying to communicate some complex message. Without breaking our kiss, I took her by the wrists and crossed her arms over her head, holding them there with one hand.

“Mitch?” Kate’s voice came over all the chirping, the squeaking, meowing, and the bubbling fish tanks, the shelves and displays of hamster balls, chew toys, and plastic skulls. “The fish are over here.”

“Alright.” I walked past a red and black row of dog collars.

I was teaching Kate’s lips a new rhythm, a steady, unbroken language. With my free hand I fumbled at the boxy doorknocker of her belt, unfastening it. Kate raised her

hips slightly and I pulled the belt off and threw it away. It crashed into the mess on my dresser.

Kate flinched languagelessly as my fingertips burrowed under the waistband of her still-fastened jeans.

Faceless lips puckering and gaping.

Her jeans were tight, chafing at my knuckles as I explored the space-age smoothness of her underwear, the prickly stubble below. She made an indecipherable “Eh,” her arms stiffening.

See: Deepest.

See: Darkest.

“Wait.” She twisted away, flexing her arms free.

“Now bitch!” *Bite it.*

Eleven years old. I lay on top of my sky blue comforter, eyes closed.

Don't do it. Don't do it.

I rolled off the bed onto my feet.

I hate myself. I hate the world. Light the sky on fire. Damn. Damn.

Lifting the tattered edge of my chair's cushion, I reached into its ragged opening. Inside, my fingers made contact with the smooth surface of my pictures.

Eager eyes, puckered lips.

(line break)

Her hands were back against my chest and side, pushing me away. They were on my arm, tugging it from her jeans. My knuckle came out rug burn red. *The ice cube sweating and running, eyes shining, huffing gibberish.* Kate's thin frown had widened, the coyness stripped away.

Tonight, exploring the world of powerplay.

Even if I were a gynaecologist.

Even if I spent ten years in gynaecology school studying the intricacies of women's bodies, making them into a science, and then spent every day inspecting every feminine square inch.

Already red and tingling, my hand flew out. No longer sandwiched between space age underwear and prickly pubic hair, it arched through the air and slapped Kate's bare cheek.

Beat.

Her cheek blossomed a faint red.

Kate sputtered speechlessly, reeling for the outrage and righteous fury that was coming. The utter condemnation for something she could never, would never forgive. She was looking for the words that would sever the relationship and any contact between us. For threats and sexual insults. The forthcoming excuses, the pleading for forgiveness were not yet formed in my mind. But in this moment between us, before she found her voice and blew the quiet apart, I knew I had made a terrible mistake.

Tonight, exploring worlds of perversion.

“Ooof, ooof.”

Now Bitch.

Was I joking?

Do you get it?

“The fuck-” she sputtered, “the fuck. What sort of sick-”

She didn’t struggle

“Mmm,” she whined, “paper cut.”

“-even thinking? It’s goddamn-”

The delicate chimes that announced my entrance into the convenience store were an alarm bell for the husband and wife owners. The introverted woman and moustached man stepped away from one another, the man releasing her shoulders.

“Morning,” the man said cheerfully.

I nodded, walking to the newspaper display.

If it weren’t for their postures, their lack of eye contact and the distance between them, the couple could have been interrupted in the middle of a kiss.

I put my pack of gum and newspaper on top of the lottery ticket displays, as always. The man was already typing in the prices. I couldn't see far enough over the counter to see the woman's arms, her wrists.

"Two-seventy-four," the man said from under his thick moustache. He was a fairly short man, middle aged with a cue-ball forehead. I was reaching for my wallet. I was imagining my knuckles imbedded in his mouth, bloody up to my wrist. He would cough and retch on his own broken teeth. "From a five. Here you go."

Bad things.

The man poured the change into my palm, his hand making contact for a second. "Thanks. Have a good day."

The woman was looking at the floor.

"Thanks," I said. I stiffly turned and walked to the door.

"Messed up. Messed up!"

"Er-ah, I mean..."

A fingerprint of saliva wetness.

Damn. Damn.

Salty residue, a lingering bit of vinegar.

Hippocrates' Bluff

*You see my dear Glaucon, the world is governed by a balance of the four elements
Cold balanced by hot, wet balanced by dry. Everything is ruled by an elemental mix.
Reason is cold, blood is hot and moist, autumn is cold and dry. The dryness and hotness
that governs women is balanced by the wetness and coldness that governs men.
Imbalance is what causes illness. Hysteria was your fine example. When a young
woman is not equalized by male reason and sexuality, the womb becomes dehydrated,
fluttering against the lungs and heart in search of fluid, causing the disease we call
hysteria. We see intemperate women suffering from giddiness, nervous anxiety, delirium,
fainting, and spells of choking.*

That night, there was a light pattering of rain whipping against the Fosters' extravagant two-story windows. The clouds sprawled across the horizon, low over the churning ocean below. Inside, the guests chattered with one another, unaffected. They shuffled in the blaze of overhead spotlights hanging high in the ceiling. By degrees, each guest made their way to greet their host, Mrs. Megan Foster. She wore an extravagant dress of winding royal blue fabrics. Megan had taken up a permanent position at the apex of the room, a corner where two walls of windows met.

"Lynda, Mark," She took hold of the guests' hands as they came, grasping them tightly, "I'm so glad you actually came. I was so sure you wouldn't. So sure – ac-hem, k-hem." Her voice caught in her throat and she coughed into her slight shoulder, making mousy gagging sounds as if her wind pipe were coated with dust. Her overwhelming, stale perfume burnt your eyes.

Megan lived holed up in her aquarium house, teetering on the gated edge of the world. No one had seen her for months. Her husband Fergus lived with her, a tired man who was slumped by the brimming fireplace. His face was like an ancient baseball glove pulled from a sand box. He was entirely bald with a withered root mouth and furrows of thick skin that, if parted, might reveal stray grains of sand hiding within its folds. There were rumours about the couple, of course. How young she was. How old he was. The two separate beds in their bedroom.

“Jeremy, Edith, I’m so glad you actually came. I was so sure you wouldn’t. Kem, hem.” She took hold of another pair of hands. The skin of her face and arms was salt white against the dark sky behind her. She shivered slightly, like a Chihuahua, though the room baked with body heat and the shadowless, omnipresent burn of the overhead lights. It actually stung against your exposed skin. It frizzed your hair and chapped your lips.

Each table, mantel, and countertop was set with clever little crafts straight from Martha Stewart’s magazine, painstakingly handcrafted by Mrs. Foster for the rare occasion when people came to visit her. Sunflower seed candles, glittery pinecones, coasters made out of twigs. She had spent hours arranging them just right. The words “Please Come Back Soon” hung beside the doorway, spelled out in desiccated flowers. The guests eyed these objects peripherally, unsure what to make of them.

The noisy banter of the guests was pierced by rounds of Mrs. Foster’s looping, girlish laughter. She threw back her head, bubbling over, shaking and gasping, unable to catch her breath. Jeremy and Edith exchanged straight-backed glances. Her laugh cut into a dry hack interspersed with little choking sounds. She doubled over and gave one

final, whole body cough. Her knees buckled and she crumpled to the floor, a tangle of blue fabrics. People dutifully came to her side, believing it was just another bout of fainting.

A bulge in her splayed dress moved, then moved again. People backed up as the shrivelled balloon of Mrs. Foster's womb crept from the folds of the dress.

"Hrrck, hrughk," it retched.

Everyone stared. The organ contorted, pulling itself forward like an inch worm. It was a thick triangle of withered dinosaur skin. Fallopian tubes flaccidly dragged behind its wide backside like little legs. It pulled itself forward and collapsed as if exhausted by the effort. The cervix head lifted itself up, peeking at the gaping onlookers.

"Hrruck, gra."

The organ tilted toward the buffet table and, with a burst of motion, leapt into the air. Someone screamed. The womb smashed into the punchbowl in an explosion of glass and steam. No one came forward for a long time, even after the steam cleared. When someone finally shifted close enough to examine the broken bowl, they found a lifeless coal of dark flesh fused into the scorched and melted glass.

I wasn't there, but I heard all about it, retold to me again and again by various friends. Mr. Foster left the country soon after and the funeral was first delayed, then restricted to only the closest family members. I heard it was a closed casket to keep gaping mourners from wondering just what was left under the burial clothes. Still, Megan Foster's shocking end loomed in my mind as I watched Fiona fighting with the brittle fizz of her hair. I lay in bed, peeking through the open bathroom door. Strands of

dark blond and soft red highlights stuck out like wire, crackling and clinging to one another from the brush's static. Each brush stroke caused another eruption of stray ends. Her eyebrows knitted in frustration, her knife-tip nose scrunching in concentration.

It had been a solid three weeks since Fiona and I had been at all intimate. Three weeks because, nonsensically, my office Christmas party was held after Christmas, shoved into the anti-climax of the post-holidays, right before work went back into full tilt the day after the party. Almost none of the call staff showed up – recent arts graduates and business flunkies, mostly. I couldn't remember if we even invited them anymore. But all of management was there, half-heartedly shaking hands and wandering about with strategically chosen low-alcohol drinks. Our eyes listlessly traced the walls that we had tried to forget over the long holiday.

I stood in a closed group of four, looking into the dark liquid of my glass for something to say. Our polite Christmas inquiries were spent. My short anecdote about car troubles on Christmas Eve was met with straight faces and petered out into awkward silence. I took a drink. From the corner of my eye, I could see Human Resources Frank Margot studying his shiny black shoes. The loose skin of his neck was rumped around his chin.

"It's been surprisingly warm lately." I looked at the other men around me. They passively looked back. Frank didn't look up from his shoes.

"Drew." Fiona's arm enwrapped me from behind as she appeared beside me.

"Gentlemen." She nodded to each of the three, ending off with Frank. "Anything new and interesting for this new year?" She asked him.

Frank shrugged. "Business as usual, mostly."

“Oh come on,” she pressed, “you guys must be switching things up a bit. What about personally? Any New Year’s resolutions? What’d you do for New Years?”

“You always do this,” I said, throwing my coat on the couch. “You’re so boyish.”
Like a jet engine sucking down a swan.

“How am I boyish?”

“You have no sense of decorum; you just waltz into any conversation and take it over.”

She tossed her heels into the closet. “It’s called taking an interest in people. I don’t take over conversations.”

“You push people around. You completely push me out. These are my co-workers, my boss.”

“You’re mad at me for talking.”

“I’m mad at you for having a penis.”

“Oh yeah—!”

That night, she took all the blankets off the bed and slept in the other room. The next night, she brought them back, but lay on top of the sheet like we were two kids worried about catching cooties. She kept her distance. We barely touched each other for a week before I finally broke down.

“Look, I’m sorry I freaked out.”

“No, it’s your whole outlook: you have a penis and I have a vagina and that’s it, that’s everything.”

We were sitting on separate couches. I reached over and put my hand on her knee.

“I shouldn’t have called you boyish,” I said evenly.

“No more touching, no more sex.”

“You’re still mad? I’m here apologizing.”

She stood, brushing off my hand. “Think of Megan. I’m not some little wife dependent on every little thing you do. It’s not right.”

“You know what? Fine. You can do whatever you want. Leave me out of it.”

“Good. You’re out.”

“Good.”

In the mirror, she overburdened her thin lips with deep red makeup, trying to cover stray bits of broken skin. She rubbed greasy moisturizer into her cheeks for the third time that day. My sister was coming to dinner.

Hanna was a beautiful girl, born two years after me. She had fashionable, close-cropped hair with waves of black streaming around her ears. Her husband, Jack, plopped himself next to her on the couch, passing her a pink cocktail.

“Thank you my dear.” She inclined her head and kissed him with polished lips before nestling casually into him, shoulders against his chest.

Fiona’s eyes flashed at me for leaving her alone with Hanna while getting the drinks. I sat into my folding chair across from the couple. “How’s the apartment coming?” I asked Hanna.

“It’s a hassle,” Jack said cheerfully. He was a long, tall man, trim and shapely, with a pair of round owl glasses perched on his nose. “We practically had to start from scratch.

I retiled the bathroom and the kitchen. But it does give Hanna the chance to design it all from the bottom up.”

“Oh, you design?” Fiona asked from the other couch.

“Yes,” Hanna said. Her eyes were ringed with faint blue sparkles. They shimmered like a pool of water whenever she moved her head.

“She’s been busy,” Jack said, “new paint, new drapes.”

“We’ll have to come over when it’s all done,” I chipped in.

“You design – Hanna? Where did you pick that up?” Fiona shifted to the edge of her seat, eyes fixed on Hanna’s face.

“I’ve always had an eye for colour in a room.”

“She once made up an entire room in peach. It was amazing. She’s always had an eye for it.” Jack said. Hanna relaxed her head against his shoulder, listening as he described her peach room.

“—the bedspread, she got the idea from one of her magazines. It had this reddish tint to it—”

“Pf-ahaha,” Fiona burst out with throaty laughter.

Everyone looked at her, Jack with a wide grin, ready to get the joke.

Fiona wiped her mouth, glaring at each of us in turn.

“What’s that?” Jack pushed.

“Nothing.” Then she added, “Sorry.”

“Alright, alright, well for the furniture she found these old pieces at a yard sale. Solid wood. And painted this deep, rich peachy-gold—”

“Pwahahahahaha-ha-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a.” Fiona’s shoulders hunched in, her arms grasping one another. Her lips were unsmilingly drawn back, husky laughter gunning through bared teeth.

Jack’s big grin had faded. Fiona stood and hurried from the room. “Aha-aha-aha-aha-aha,” she sputtered. We heard her choke and hack dryly in the hallway.

I set up Hanna and Jack in the guestroom for the night. They quietly disappeared into their room, leaving me alone to sit in my bed, listening to Fiona in the bathroom. The toilet echoed her coughing and heaving, her gasps for air cutting into moaning sobs.

“Hrrugh, go awark,” she had yelled when I knocked.

“Fiona?”

She had coughed scratchingly.

“Fiona?”

“Gah away!”

I sat half-covered in blankets, zoned out by my guilty thoughts. *No, I haven’t done anything wrong.* My eyes trailed to the closed door each time there was a pause. Seconds passed. Then the retching and choking giggle would begin again. How much longer could this go on?

“Drew.”

The voice made me jump. “Hanna?”

She stood next to the bed in sunshine yellow pyjamas. “You alright?” She shifted her weight from one leg to another.

“What are you doing up?” I was in my boxers, the upper part of a hairy belly visible over the covers. She didn’t flinch.

Another coughing fit erupted from the bathroom. The sparkles around Hanna’s eyes rippled and glistened. “Is something going on between you two?”

“Fine,” I sighed, “come on.” I lifted the covers and she crawled into the bed, snuggling her cool form up against me like she did as a child.

I told her about the fight and everything else. “I don’t know,” I said, “do you think she’s overreacting?”

“Honestly, she may be trying to get attention.” Hanna’s head was pressed against my shoulder. She brushed back a shiny lock of her hair.

“I’m not even sure it’s about the argument anymore.”

“Well, she can only take all this so far,” she shrugged.

“Yeah, I’m worried about that.”

“See? That’s what she wants you to think. Believe me, she’ll give in.” She cocked a smooth eyebrow. “She needs you.”

I stayed silent. More retching came from the bathroom, a shrivelled stomach with nothing left to throw up. *I guess.*

Hanna and Jack left in the morning. “Your skin is so dry,” Hanna exclaimed as she gave Fiona a dainty, forearm hug. “You should try this moisturizer I have.”

“Oh, peachy.” Fiona flashed Jack a hostile look as he pulled on his jacket. “But I’m okay all on my own.”

I listened to Hanna's advice, waiting Fiona out. Loose strands of hair hovered around her head, clinging to her hand as she ran it over her brow. They stretched towards the fridge as she poured herself yet another glass of water.

"Agh, damnit!"

I looked across the kitchen to see her rubbing her scalp. The wire of her hair drooped lifelessly across her face, having shocked the fridge.

Empty bottles of eye drops were piled in the bathroom waste basket.

"For God's sake," I yelled one day, "you're going to die you know."

"I'm not your sister."

"What?"

"I'm not your little toy."

It may have been the paranoia; her arguments rambled on.

"It's for all women, for all women. We're not babies, not Barbies. You can't dress us up and dress us down. All the lies, all that elemental balance stuff. Libraries and textbooks saying we're sick."

"Megan is dead; no one's lying about that."

She looked into the distance, rapidly blinking dry eyes. "You lied to her so much."

She also accused me of only caring about her looks, causing bias on TV, and stealing her slippers, which she spent hours scouring the house for. But she was wavering. I saw it each morning she silently stood in front of the mirror, staring at her cracked, cut up lips, the tightening lizard flesh around her mouth and eyes. Or when she came to bed after a choking fit in the bathroom, I saw it in her death row footsteps, her

blank face. She slept without covers, her fevered flesh setting down beside me like the rush of a suddenly opened oven. I began sleeping in the guestroom.

I sometimes peeked into the bathroom to see her lying in a tub of ice water. She would stay there for hours, the water slowly evaporating away, misting off her skin. She was growing quieter, retreating into herself.

We only went out once, visiting her friend Patricia and Patricia's common-law husband, Martin. By then Patricia was massively pregnant, due any time that month. She was surprisingly energetic, quick on her feet and cheerful. Her pitched, bubbly anecdotes had us in an uproar. Even Martin laughed, though he must have heard it all before.

Fiona was completely enraptured by Patricia. I came from the bathroom to find the two of them talking quietly.

Martin was bothering me. He was constantly out of the room, doting on his common-law wife, getting drinks, and doing whatever else out of sight.

"This is it," Patricia said at one point. She wrapped her hands around her belly. "The root of fetishism, obsession, adultery, latex, power play. Barry White, wet dreams, and a million frustrating or long hot nights. When you come down to it," she held my eyes, "all our psyches, all our lives revolve around this."

I nodded politely, not arguing the point. Still, her eyes stayed on my face, lingering even as I looked away and back again.

"I realized it the moment I became a mother. Civilizations rise and fall all around this belly."

The other thing that bothered me about Martin: he was so distant from the pregnancy, like he no longer had any part in it. He hardly said anything, waiting on Patricia as if trying to appease a boss who no longer needed him. Fiona seemed to notice too. She was mostly quiet, but much more alert than before, carefully observing the unbelievable self-sufficiency and confidence radiating from the pregnant woman.

“They’re an odd couple,” I said, rifling through my drawers. There were a few articles that hadn’t yet emigrated to the guestroom dresser.

Fiona was perched on the edge of our old bed. It was coverless. “Patricia’s really great.”

“I’m not sure about that Martin guy though.”

“She was telling me what she’ll do if it’s a girl. How she’ll bring her up different.”

“That’s weird.”

“She asked me to be the Godmother.”

I looked at her. She was still in her slack blouse and good pants. Her skin had been taking on a reddish tint lately, like she had come from a sauna, like boiled meat. A triangle of pinkish skin peeked between blouse buttons at her neck. “So I’m going to be a Godfather.”

“You know what she told me? She said she’ll back up anything I want to teach her child.”

“Hmmm.” The opening in her blouse was mouthing secrets to me. She sleeps naked, it mouthed, she’s always too hot. It had been so long since I held her, her round

breasts now radiating hotly. Sweat slowly bubbling from her skin, the opening in her blouse mouthed, to be traced out with an extended finger.

“Kids accept anything they’re told, you know? It becomes true.”

I put my hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged me away, about to say something when her throat caught, “Kem-hec-kem.” I moved back, ready for her to run to the bathroom. Her eyes closed; she covered her mouth and swallowed hard a few times.

“You want some water?”

She shook her head. “Hrck. Hhh-aaaa. Hhhh-aaaa.”

“Water?”

She shook her head more violently, her breath coming in gravelled gasps. She swallowed again, “Hra, whewwww, whewwww,” and took long, clear breaths. Her eyes opened. “I’m alright.” And it seemed like she was.

I turned away. I suddenly had to pee very badly.

2:35. The smoke alarm screeched in the hallway. I leapt from my bed not knowing where I was and sent my bedside table crashing to the floor. The clock crunched apart under my heel, spilling its insides as I groped for the light switch.

“Damn it.” My voice was nearly lost in the alarm’s pulse.

Finally I got the light on. I hurried into the hallway just as the sound stopped. Fiona stood in the middle of the hall in bare feet. Her naked thighs peeked out from an oversized T-shirt. The disconnected smoke detector was in her palm, twisted away from the wall.

“Wha—?”

She observed me dispassionately, like she somehow didn't expect me to be in the house.

“Are you alright?” I breathed. “Is there fire?”

I could smell it. Faint wisps of smoke curled out from her bedroom door.

“No,” she said. “False alarm.”

I took a step forward. “What was it?”

“I think it was my lamp. Burning out.”

“What's that?” I peeked into her room, unable to see much. The sheet of her bed was heaped in the corner. I couldn't see the lamp.

“Don't worry.”

Her T-shirt was an old one with a faded sports logo and rips along the neck and arms. It hung off her shoulders, her breasts, so that it dangled slack over her hidden stomach, the egg-shaped groove of her belly button, the smooth curve toward her hips.

“Alright?” she said, half gesturing toward my room.

“Alright.”

Just then the living room smoke alarm began to screech.

“I'll get it,” she said, already walking away.

The tails of the worn shirt played over her ass as I watched her go. I was going to peep into her room again, but was overcome by the need to pee.

(line break)

It was becoming a problem; I had to go to the washroom all the time, a sloshing heaviness in my gut that sprung on me randomly. As I hurried into the bathroom once again, I caught sight of a dark spot on my shirt.

“Shit.” I held myself in front of the mirror. Had I peed myself?

I pulled a hand towel from the rack and began wiping. The shirt was soaked, sucking against the rim of my stomach and nearly transparent. The leather of my belt was glistening below it. I untucked myself and lifted the shirt. An angry black and green vein peeked from the lip of my boxers. Slick curls clung wetly around my navel. Hurriedly, I undid my belt, following the vein down its twists and exposed branches to where it widened, joining a puffy forest of dark veins. Moisture beaded along my skin, spreading among pubic hairs.

From somewhere in the house, Fiona gave a single bursting giggle.

I sunk backwards onto the toilet, quickly covering myself.

“Oh shit, oh shit. Shit shit shit.”

“Hanna!” I hissed into the phone.

“Yeah? What is it?” She sounded distracted, like I’d pulled her away from a formal dinner.

“It’s not working.”

“Drew?”

“She’s not trying to get attention, she doesn’t need me, things are falling apart here.”

“What? Oh, Fiona.”

“What do I do?”

“Hold on, hold on. I thought—”

“I can’t wait her out,” I sputtered. “Forget all the mind games, how do I get her?”

“I – hold on – Jack?”

“Hrrugh.” I slammed down the phone.

I didn’t pick it up again for five rings, then I had to go through it all again, trying to explain. I didn’t say anything about the full bladder pulling at my gut.

“You have to serenade her, make her bend first,” Jack said. “Sweep her off her feet.”

“Right.”

A candle lit dinner. Fiona sat across from me, her hair loose and waving above her as if lifted by the candle’s flickering heat. Her hair had become more and more unruly since we visited Patricia and Martin. Flashes of blue ignited its tips, leaping into the air. She was barely touching the steak I’d cooked her, eating one or two little square pieces and then putting her utensils down.

“How is it?”

Her eyes moved to me without focusing – as if blind – taking in the whole room.

“It’s all alright right.”

Her glass of wine remained untouched. In the other room, the fireplace was spilling over with fashion magazines and collectable teddy bears, Martha Stewart cook books and fruity shampoo. Sticks of lipstick rolled onto the carpet, a pair of eyelash curlers, and a scattering of menstrual pads still individually packaged in their papery green. She had

been on her knees, wadding clothes into the pile when I asked her to dinner. Summer dresses dangled half-stuffed into the mound of possessions. The sight of it was almost gruesome, flowery plastics and bright magazine paper mangled together in the fireplace. Somewhat frightening. I tried to push it from my mind.

“Look, we’ve got to talk.”

She didn’t say anything.

“We’ve spun so far out of control. We’re falling apart, Fiona. It’s just not right.”

When was the last time I’d touched her hand? When was Christmas? The fireplace, then full of wood, the two of us in front of it in our underwear. And her body, the cool skin along the small of her back.

Beads of liquid trickled across my leg and soaked into my pants.

“We should talk,” I said.

Her unfocused stare encompassed everything around her.

“I said some things I shouldn’t have, Fiona. I like it when you are social and talkative. People say things.” Saliva pooled over my words. I swallowed. “You know? Can’t we ever get over this?”

“It’s not that-at.” Her voice softened and she seemed to nod at me.

“Then what? What is it?”

“Hanna.”

“Hanna?”

“You always looked after her as a kid. Now Jack looks after her. There always has to be someone.”

“That makes no sense.” I swallowed hard, wiping a bit of moisture from the side of my mouth.

“There always has to be facial scrubs and wrinkle creams, moist lips-ips, moist skin-in. Balance. Stay young, stay hydrated. She believes in all those things, all the science.”

I almost blew up at her right there. “Stop—!” *I, I. I just want you back.*

“You know what I believe?” she said calmly, and I caught myself.

“What do you believe?”

Her eyes turned to her lap, her assuredness suddenly stripped away.

“What do you believe?” I stood, taking my glass with me, to lean against the table in front of her. Her tight shirt waved and flapped against her skin as if conflicting breezes were trapped beneath. “I’m not the enemy.” I topped off her untouched wine glass. “God Fiona, I miss us. Your lips—” they were cratered and crusted with scabby red “Your touch. I miss lying in bed all morning.”

“Oh Drew,” she said uncertainly, shifting her unfocused eyes from the wine glass back to me.

“I miss...” I trailed off, running the back of my hand across her cheek. “Ow, damnit.” I jerked back my hand. Her skin stabbed like a blazing element.

She rose to her feet. “Don’t,” she intoned. Her hair and clothes whipped around her fiercely.

Her heat made my skin pour with sweat, dampening my shirt. I had to wipe away my eyes and step back. “Don’t you miss any of it?” I said, rubbing my scalded hand.

Don’t you miss any of it?

“I’m okay kay,” she said bluntly.

“We can’t keep this up; we’re going to fall apart.”

“So?”

We stood facing off. I was groping for something to say. My socks were soaking through. “You’re going to die you know.”

She didn’t say anything.

I went out into the night, pulling on my jacket. The wind lashed bitterly at my pants, piercing the moist fabric that sucked at my crotch. My damp hair quivered against clammy skin, numbingly cold.

There had been a time when Fiona and I were dating, shakily dating, uncertain if we’d fall to pieces and try again with someone different. She had complained about not knowing where we were headed. I was idly browsing through a flower shop, Eli’s Flora, trying to find something for her. The shopkeeper was a diminutive prune with puffy white eyebrows. “Ah, some lovely flowers for the lady-friend.” He winked at me.

“Hmmm, sure,” I said.

He scuttled over, leaning in close to me with tobacco breath. “Flowers, they’re the clearest way to express yourself. So supple and delicate they break your heart.” He winked again, picking out a mini white rose with violet tips. Beads of moisture rolled down its coloured pedals. “She won’t be able to resist; she’ll be hooked.”

And he had been right. I had put the bouquet into some water and from that night on we were on much more certain ground.

(line break)

The drive through the city took longer than I thought. It was still winter and was getting late. Little snow drifts clung in shadowed corners and along the curbs. No flower places were open. Eli's Flora had been replaced by some sort of Goth and dominatrix clothing store. In the window were capes and massive boots with a dozen buckles and flames along the side. After a brief rest stop, I made my way to a 24h grocery store and bought some standard, predictable red roses.

The middle-aged cashier woman smiled at me knowingly. "She won't be able to resist."

I wasn't so sure. I rubbed my cracked hands together, the cold was killing me. Clear pus slickened my palms. I was thinking about the flowery patterns heaped in the fireplace.

I sped home, my gut sinking as flashing lights appeared in my rear-view mirror. The sinking feeling turned to sweat as a police car and fire truck rushed past me. I accelerated after the sirens. *Fiona*. Freezing sweat ran down my nose.

When I got home, the windows were screaming with flame. Beams punctured the roof like blackened vertebrae. Glass covered the shadow-strewn ground. An officer stopped my car and I sprang out, searching the scurrying shapes of firemen, the scrutinizing neighbour faces.

"Fiona?" I called.

The roof collapsed like a shelf of pots and pans. The flames coughed and stretched higher.

"Fiona?"

(line break)

There was an investigation. Analysts combed the ruined house, finding bits of clothing, fire-gutted appliances, the casing of a melted fire extinguisher. No human remains were found, they said. The police had their theories. So did the neighbours. Fiona's indoor bonfire may have gone out of control, leaping to the ceiling, the curtains, devouring the carpet around her. She may have freaked out and bolted. Or maybe the fire was of vindictive, even murderous intent.

"And the two of you had been arguing?" asked a police officer not so casually.

"Not that badly!"

Was she trying to hurt me? Burning everything? Some people thought so. Or maybe the fire didn't start because of the fireplace at all; maybe it was the candle-lit dinner, maybe the furnace. Specialists argued with each other over evidence.

What did Fiona believe?

Mrs. Debus swore she saw someone run from the back door of our house completely engulfed by flame. You couldn't even make out the person's body, just rushing, shuttering light. The figure darted through the backyard, Mrs. Debus told the police, and disappeared past emptied backyard pools, the young family houses, manicured gardens, handy crafts, stay at home wives, wedding pictures over the mantle, and elegant hand soaps. It ran, not being consumed or dampering, not panicked but straight and unwavering. Ran beyond the suburb fences that could no longer endure or contain her. Leaving melted footsteps in the still frozen earth.

The Barb Taboo

Colon apostrophe right-bracket

–You know I hate those faces– I typed.

Colon apostrophe left-bracket

–How are you Barb Miller?–

A pause and then, –good–

–good–

–and how are things?– Barb typed back.

–I’ve been alright. Not much new–

–cool–

–yeah– My fingers hovered over the keyboard. I was trying to think. The computer screen’s glow was the only illumination in the darkness of my room. –Is it raining there?–

–pouring. I can barely see my driveway–

–Yeah. Here too.–

–hmmm–

–I can still see my driveway though.–

–how does it look?–

–dark wet.–

–wow–

–So, how are you?–

(line break)

There was an ongoing gag between Barb and me about our last names. Barb Miller. David Miller. We pretended we were siblings and referred to one another by our first and last names.

“So, how’s Barb Miller?” my mother would ask.

“Good.”

And the inevitable, “You know, if you married her she wouldn’t have to change her last name.”

“Hmmm.”

We were always one-after-another in role call and formal assemblies. During graduation I poked her in the back all the way down the gym. “Poke.” “Cut it out.” “Poke.” “Cut it out.”

The graduation party was a complete bust. My anti-social friends sat in the dark watching Space Balls and drinking smuggled beer.

I was lying on a flowery loveseat. Paul and Lawrence were on a couch. Barb shared a sloping cushion with her boyfriend, a pasty French exchange student named Yves. She nestled herself against his chest, her hand running up and down his leg.

Everyone’s attention was fixed on the screen. I angled my watch to catch as much of the television’s light as possible but couldn’t make out the time.

“Alright,” I said, standing up, “I’m heading out.”

There were some murmurs, some goodbyes.

“Bye kids. Bye.” I made my way across the room, stopping over Barb and Yves.

“Sister.”

“Bye,” she said, giving a single wave.

“Oh get up.”

“Hrrruuuuhhhh,” she sighed, awkwardly disengaging from Yves and standing.

“Goodbye goodbye, goodbye forever. I’ll never see you again,” I sang.

Her blond hair was all messed up, sticking out on the side she had been lying on.

She wrapped her small arms around my back. “I’ll never see you again,” she said cheerfully, half laughing.

I held onto her, swaying her back and forth as I teetered from one widely spread leg to the other. Finally, I let her down. “You know what?” I said.

“What?”

“Hey Yves, I’m going to kiss your girlfriend.”

Yves waved his hand dismissively, his eyes never leaving the television.

I looked at Barb. She scrunched up her face, shaking her head admonishingly.

“Ewww.”

“I know! But it must be done!”

A quick peck. Her lips were surprisingly cool. We parted and she stuck out her tongue. I stuck out my tongue back. “I’m gone everyone.”

Barb slid in along her boyfriend’s arm.

“Have a good summer,” I called when I reached the door. Barb waved as I closed it behind me. “Bye,” I said.

(line break)

Using emoticons, she once staged a two act play with a lengthy and involved sex scene.

Colon apostrophe P, zero equals-sign equals-sign equals-sign

–Beautiful– I typed when it was over, –now leave me alone.–

Silence on the phone. I lay back in my bed, going over the day’s events in my mind – the little jokes and banter – all the regular life stuff that is so boring to talk about.

“You still there?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah.”

I examined the cracks in my ceiling. “So, how was work today?”

“It was alright,” she said. “My boss was really bitchy.”

“Bitchy?” A few seconds passed by. “Like how?”

“Just really bitchy. She’s always angry, always in a bad mood.”

“Ah.”

More silence.

“I guess,” I drew out the words ponderously; “I guess I’ll let you go.”

“Well, unless you want to know what I’m wearing.”

“What are you wearing?”

“Jeans,” she stated. “And a ‘Rockstar’ T-shirt.”

“Now I know.”

“Now you know. You can sleep tonight.”

“Wonderful. So, I’ll call you tomorrow?”

“Yep, talk to you later.”

“If you hurt her—” Shortly after they began dating, I found myself alone with Yves in the men’s washroom. My voice echoed slightly. “If you so much as look at her in the wrong way, I will cut – you – open. You won’t be able to breathe on your own for months.”

Yves was half a foot taller than I was. He peevishly shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “Okay,” he said, as if it were a joke.

“Try me.”

On prom night, we left our dates upstairs and played Mario Cart in my basement, squatting on little pink and blue plastic chairs in our formal wear.

“How do I look,” she had asked with a curving white dress and a bottle of beer. It was the only time I’d ever seen her wear makeup, her tight lips accentuated super model red.

“Your hair looks reptilian,” I smirked. It was tightly segmented into little scale-like bumps. I reached out and touched it. “Poke.” It was like a shell.

“What about the boobs?” She stuck her chest out, pulling back her petite bare shoulders.

“Meh, they’re alright. Almost looks like you have some.”

Miss you (not in the sack, just in general),

Barb

(line break)

“So, what are you wearing?”

“A big cowboy hat, vest, boots, no pants, but chaps and silk underwear. You?”

“Actually, I’m wearing the underwear Yves got me.”

“Boxers?”

“Thong.”

“Sweet. You have a wedgie?”

“Nope, it’s alright.”

“How about Roxanne? How’s she holding out?”

“She likes the fabric. It’s very soft.”

“If she ain’t happy, no one’s happy.”

“Damn right.”

Roxanne. You don’t have to put on the red light.

Those days are over. You don’t have to sell your body to the night.

Roxanne. You don’t have to wear that dress tonight.

Walk the streets of money. You don’t care if it’s wrong or if it’s right.

Miss you in the sack,

David.

Ps. Ha ha

–hmmm. Well what did you eat for breakfast?–

-toast, apple- she typed.

-Good good, very healthy.-

-so...-

-So, you making lots of friends?-

-some. I met this guy Luke. You'd really like him - he's hilarious-

-Ah. You hang out a lot?-

-sometimes, I just met him a bit ago. You meet anyone?-

-Sure, people equally hilarious.-

-any GIRLS?-

-There's girls.-

-oh yeah?-

For my seventeenth birthday, one of my friends bought me a pornographic deck of cards. Barb and I sat in my parent's basement, going through the cards one by one.

"Here's another one - holding her boobs." Barb picked up the next card.

"Someone has to."

From Barb, I got a jumbo Batman colouring book and fourteen dollars in quarters.

"This is going to be great," her voice came over the phone.

I watched my darkened window reflection grin stupidly. "We'll spend the whole day hanging out and playing outside. We'll go for ice cream."

"I'm not sure about the ice cream."

“How about a cheap-ass economy tub that we can lug around? We’ll take turns licking from it.”

“Eugh, maybe not a whole tub.”

“We gotta!”

“I don’t think a tub of ice cream would help right now. I’m kinda trying to lose weight.”

“YOU’RE trying to lose weight? But, it’s ice cream.” My grin was frozen in the window.

“Well, we have to eat ice cream. Just not crazy amounts.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, I guess. I’ll write it on my calendar, ‘Happy Barb Day.’”

“Perfect.”

“Perfect.”

Your Sister,

Barb

Ps. Roxanne wants you to know she’s getting a haircut.

Love Love Love

“Anyway. What’d you do on the weekend?” she asked.

“Nothing very entertaining. Homework, Nintendo, some random hanging out.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah.”

“I went to a couple different bars with Luke and his friends.”

“Ah.”

“It was great.”

“That’s cool.” My reflection’s head bobbed in an extended nod and I looked away.

“How does Yves feel about the two of you hanging out?”

“She’s practically like my sister anyway. Barb Miller. David Miller.” I walked with Nicole through the unkempt streets of Windsor’s student housing ghetto.

“Or you could marry her; Barb wouldn’t have to change her name.” She smiled widely. Nicole was only about an inch shorter than me. She was a few years older than everyone else and all the first year guys would have fawned over her if she put up with that sort of thing.

“Yeah.” I pushed a smile back. There was a moment of silence. Our feet tapped the pavement. “They might get us for incest, though.”

“You know,” her smile remained, her peach lips curved up in an almost semi-circle, “you talk about her a lot.” The day I met Nicole, she stole my binder and wrote her number inside.

“Do I?”

She nodded vigorously.

“I haven’t seen her, like, forever.”

“Awww.”

“Awww,” I imitated her.

“I think you’re made for one another.”

“We’ll blow away this weekend together, then I’ll shut up about her for a long while.”

The ice cream place sat on a six-lane street, an open dome made entirely from plastic. There was a faint chill in the air, the wind humming against the dome like wax paper. Traffic roared by.

“Not exactly a tub,” I said, pulling up a straight-backed plastic chair across from Barb. I raised three scoops of mint chocolate-chip for her inspection.

Barb looked up from her strawberry sundae. Her face was edged by thin hair styled back in a tumble of blond, more modern than her usual grade 3, polyester splay of jaw-length hair. “Ice cream,” she said, mouth full. “Ehhhh.” She stuck out a tongue-full of chewed banana and strawberry mash.

“Don’t make me tell Mom.” I had to talk loudly over the traffic and wind.

“Your mom is scary.”

“She is not,” I responded like a three-year-old. “She’s the nicest mom ever.”

“She always scared me.”

“I know, I know. But there’s no reason to it.”

“Hmmm.”

Her coat was open, revealing a snug DQ shirt. The red logo was like big lips rising over her breasts – almost looked like she had some. I ate my ice cream and watched the traffic. Barb was silent.

“What’s your favourite kind of car?” I said finally, turning to her.

She was licking the back of her spoon. “Bug,” she said simply. “We’ve had this conversation before.”

“Right.”

“Or the Princess car. Do you remember prom? Playing Mario Cart in your basement?” She squeaked her girlish, three note giggle.

“Right.” I took a bite out of my cone. “I’d like a hummer.”

She choked on a strawberry spoonful. “Oh yeah? Right now?”

“I mean the car.”

“Sure you do.”

Down highway 84 and about a third of the way to Barb’s old house, there was an isolated little playground we used to go to. It was just a few swings and a plastic playground set bordered off from the surrounding fields by a decorative chain fence and a few trees. Being in the middle of nowhere, no kids were ever seen there, giving Barb and me free range all through high school. We’d grab ice cream cones and head to the park, spending our days dangling on the swings and talking. Hanging from the short playground bars, legs limp, our knees almost touching the ground while we talked about the drama plaguing our lives.

“My mom says she’s going to throw me out of the house,” she told me.

“Hey, you wanna stop by one of the parks?”

“I don’t know. Wanna just watch a movie or something?”

(line break)

We slouched on opposite ends of my diminutive couch, arms crossed. The little living room was cluttered with my roommate's junk along the walls, a giant inflatable football, an extra desk, and piles of movies. Barb giggled at the television.

"Remember, we forgot our scripts at home?"

On screen, a younger Barb Miller adlibbed a coffee house skit, gesturing wildly in a navy blue trench coat.

"Argh, argh," Barb intoned, imitating her T.V. self as a matted hair David Miller strangled his stage partner.

I crossed my legs and smiled at her when she glanced over at me. We watched this tape almost every time we hung out.

"Do you remember practicing for that at, like, 1:00 in the morning? Yves wasn't even jealous when you stayed overnight. Ha ha. Do you remember?"

Do you remember watching movies together?

We once went out with Daryl to see Austin Powers. Daryl was a tall guy with permanent three-day stubble who had played Barb's psychopathic husband in a one-act murder mystery play.

Barb settled herself between Daryl and me, resting her hand on Daryl's knee. He looked down, surprised, and then casually brushed her off. I was pretending to watch the previews. Barb put her hand on his leg once more, flashing a coy smile. He rubbed his knees, pushing her off again.

"Hey Barb." I stuck out a tongue-full of chewed gummy bear mush.

When she didn't respond, I slid my hand on her knee, moving along her leg and squeezing it like a melon. Soon I got my other hand into it, kneading and pulling at both legs.

"Oh David Miller," she cried.

"Oh Barb Miller!"

We grabbed at each other, making loud kissy noises, arms and legs flailing.

We had slipped into silence, letting our coffee house counterparts chatter away. I shifted towards her on the couch, feeling her hip press into mine.

"Yawwwwn." I enwrapped her shoulders with an exaggerated stretch. "So, how are you?" I squeezed.

Her arm came around my side, her palm on my hip. "Pretty good. And you?"

"Oh, I can't complain. Have you ever had a guy go down on you in a theatre?"

Her smile was lopsided. "This isn't a theatre."

"Have you?" Our noses were inches apart.

"Nope."

"Ah."

"Not yet."

"I see." Her eyebrows were very sparse, nearly invisible. She had a doll face, just a bit slimmer. Her new hair cut brought it all out, emphasizing the roundness of her cheeks, the circularity of her face.

After a moment, we turned back to the television. On screen, the resurrected Barb zombie did a little dance, Charleston Charleston, while David clapped along. “We’ll make millions,” he said. “Oh hideous zombie, will you marry me?”

“How is Roxanne?” I said finally.

“Good, good.”

“Good.”

Twice, Barb and I had sat in my parents’ house, watching movies together on my bed past any reasonable hour. Twice, stayed up into the night beyond the possibility of driving home, of even getting up. We were just barely able to roll under the covers before falling asleep. Twice, Barb’s breath on my face as she sighed asleep. The final moment before my eyes finally closed.

Once, I stayed over at her house. Yves wasn’t even jealous.

I tapped my way through the darkened hallway in bare feet, my sleeping bag and pillow bundled against my chest. I could make out the outline of my door. It was closed. Inside, the light was turned off, the knob motionless since Barb had disappeared inside in her baby-blue, monkey patterned pyjamas.

Are you sure you want me to take the bed?

Sure.

I stopped in front of the door and listened. There was nothing, only the hum of the furnace. After a second, I continued to tap my way across the cool hardwood floor, heading for the living room and the couch.

(line break)

“Is it down here?”

We were in Barb’s boxy old man car.

“Hold on,” I said, eyeing the upcoming intersection. I had promised Barb the greatest bacon and pancakes in the world.

“I can’t hold on.” She slowed down slightly, glancing around the car and into the rear-view mirror.

“Okay, uhhhh – that’s not it.”

“Right.” The engine revved and the car jolted forward.

“I’m pretty sure it’s on this side of the road.” I scanned the low-lying buildings.

Barb put on her signal, moving into the right lane.

“No,” I said.

“What?” The lane angled right, forcing Barb to turn at the next intersection. “No’ doesn’t help,” she said.

“Sorry, I didn’t think you’d get into the lane marked ‘must turn right.’” My words sounded much harsher than the joking tone I intended.

“Well, let’s go somewhere you can actually find.”

“But this is the best bacon and pancakes.”

She flicked her signal light at the last minute to pull into a McDonald’s drive-through.

“What is this?”

The car behind us honked and whizzed by.

“Well, we’re here,” she said.

“I hate McDonald’s breakfast. I can’t stand it.”

“It’s better than nothing.”

“It’s crap on a stick.”

“Fine.” She put the car into reverse.

How many millions of little, stupid arguments had there been over the years that we didn’t even blink at? I stared out the window as we drove on in silence.

“How about this: Pancake Joe’s.”

“Sure.” I said, before adding, “That’s a good place.”

“But does his cape always have to be black?”

We lay together in my parent’s TV room. Crayons were spilled across the carpet.

Barb coloured a cowl dark black. “I’m Batgirl,” she said.

“I’m Orange Batman!”

“Well, this is it.” Barb pulled up to my building. “Last stop.”

“Okay.” I looked out at the little apartment building styled like a discount motel.

“Well, thanks for coming out to breakfast.”

“No problem.”

“It actually did turn out to be alright.”

“Yeah.”

“Even if it wasn’t the best bacon in the world.”

“I’m glad I came.”

“Happy Barb day.”

“Right. Right, thinks.” She was still gripping the steering wheel, looking at me over her shoulder.

“Here.” I pushed past the wheel for a half hug.

“Bye.” She gave a quick squeeze and released.

“Bye.”

“So, you’re like, friends with benefits?” Nathan, my roommate, turned up shortly after Barb left. He balanced his giant inflatable football between his belly and the wall, bouncing as he spoke.

“No. Man. She’s like my sister.”

“Whatever, David.”

“We went out last night. It was great.”

“Who’d you go with?”

“Just the regular crowd.”

“Oh. Was Luke there?”

“Yeah, he was there.”

“Barb,” I said sternly.

“I know. But he’s a good guy. It’s not Yves’s problem.” Yves was back in France, planning to return the next month.

“I don’t know Barb. I think you’re just making things worse. He’ll be pissed if he finds out.”

“Yeah, well. He’s always pissed about something.”

(line break)

Dry humping is the rubbing of two people's bodies against each other, simulating the motions of intercourse without penetration. Often genitals are moved against each other. The partners can be clothed or naked. Dry humping is also called dry sex or frottage. Dry humping can be pleasurable in and of itself and can lead to orgasm for one or both partners.

I had taken to including sex quotes in my e-mails.

–That's hilarious!!! Where did you even find that?–

–So. How's Yves?–

–uh – she typed –we don't really talk anymore–

–What? What happened?–

–nothing–

I waited, and then typed –nothing–

–it just wasn't working–

–It's over for good?!–

–pretty much–

–Since when!– I typed. I erased it and wrote –But, you're crazy about that boy.–

She'd constantly go on about him, about how he teased her, how funny he was.

–I still love him and everything.–

I threw up my hands at the computer screen. –He's a great guy. And what is all this stuff with Luke?–

My fingers were poised. There was no response.

–Here, give me a call– I added.

–cant sorry gtg. I’ll call you tomorrow k?– She went offline before I could write anything back.

She may have called the next day. I wasn’t home.

Medical doctors regard semen as neither inherently toxic nor dangerous when ingested or when in the mouth. Likewise, in and of themselves, female sexual fluids are inherently harmless. Couples should be careful to avoid biting or scratching harder than desired.

Ever your sex slave,

David.

Barb responded by e-mailing a medical diagram of the male reproductive system.

“I sometimes hate it.” Barb was swaying on the park swing. Our bookbags were tossed under a nearby tree.

I was leaning up against the slide. “What?”

“Everything.”

“You’ve got to get off this.”

“David.”

“If you kill yourself, I swear to God Barb Miller, I’ll kick your ass.”

The next day in chemistry class, I drew her a cartoon in my daytime planner about how sad I'd be if she killed herself, followed by a few panels of me kicking the ass of a corpse. I never heard her talk about it again.

"Hello Barb Miller."

"David Miller!"

"Hey! What's up?"

"I've got a dog!"

"A dog? When did you get that?"

"Last week – or maybe a bit before that."

"That's cool."

"Her name is Cindy and she's a Papillion."

"Hmmm," I said, sitting on my bed, "I have no idea what that is."

"She's a toy Spaniel."

"Ah."

"Aren't you? Yes. Yeah, she's great. She's so cute."

"Uh-huh."

"She's just a puppy. Like, the size of my hand. We went and got her from Luke's uncle. He owns a pet shop."

"That's cool."

I loved you since I knew you. I wouldn't talk down to you.

I have to tell just how I feel. I won't share you with another boy.

I know my mind is made up. So put away your make up.

Told you once I won't tell you again. It's a bad way.

The Infinite Vagina: Hold your fingers in a ring at the head of the penis, allowing your partner to squeeze his penis into your fist. Before the penis pops out of your hand, bring the other hand up for the next penetration. For best results, keep the penetration continuous. Try faster or slower speeds.

I looked over the draft e-mail I had addressed to Barb, and then clicked the delete button.

–Luke got a new car–

–That's cool– I pecked out with one hand.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” I said, cradling the phone in my shoulder. Out the window, light winds stirred the few centimetres of snow covering the lawn and driveway.

–You won't believe it. It's a bug– Barb's words popped onto my screen. At least that was better than the Princess car.

“Oh. Hey, what's up?”

“Let's go for ice cream. Right this very minute.”

“Ice cream?” Nicole intoned disapprovingly. “Are you insane?”

–Hey Barb I've got to go. Talk to you later?–

–it's bright yellow–

“Oh come on, it'll be great.”

–That's pretty cool. But it's not a hummer.–

–no, it's not a hummer,– she typed. *Semicolon apostrophe right-bracket*

AFTERWORD Limiting and Suggesting Reality

There is one assignment that it seems every first year creative writing student is given. All across North America, young writers are spying on their families, their friends, hiding tape recorders, taking notes, carefully listening and transcribing real life conversations for their creative writing classes. The assignment was created to help students write realistic dialogue by teaching them how people really speak. At the same time, students learn an important lesson: that real life dialogue and events are most often boring, circular, rambling, and usually pointless. Memoirist Sharon Butala states that a person's daily life is filled with "trash" (Butala n.p.). This trash includes the "'ums' and 'ahs' and total banality and trivia, red herrings, dead ends and irrelevancies, mixed in with the significant and interesting" (Butala n.p.). Because real life includes uninteresting and meaningless events and conversation, it is logical to assume that completely realistic stories would thus also be filled with meaningless and boring events and conversation. The stories presented in this dissertation are realistic, but not completely realistic. They suggest, rather than represent reality, thus avoiding the banality of real life by altering, embellishing, and omitting elements that would make the story truly realistic for reasons of plot, thematic coherence, and ease of reading.

Realism

"Real" is a contentious term. Theorists from linguistics to metaphysics debate the notion that there is no universal reality, no impartial reality, and even that there is nothing real at all. For the sake of this paper, it will be assumed that while there is a "universe" of counterfactuals, beliefs, wishes, points of view, dreams, etc., there is only one

objective world “existing independently of the human mind,” the actual world (abbreviated AW) (Ryan 554). Likewise, there are counterfactuals, beliefs, wishes and so on in stories, and one textual actual world (abbreviated TAW), where all factual and accurate textual events are considered to take place (Ryan 554). As applied to stories, realism can be defined in two different ways. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, realism can either describe a story where the TAW is similar to the AW (in laws of nature, objects, properties, etc...), or a story where the events, conflicts, and characters are statistically plausible, even common (Baldick “realism”). The latter definition characterizes realism in opposition to idealization and escapism, the “improbable adventures of idealized characters” (Baldick “romance”). To further illustrate the difference between these definitions, a story about an international espionage agent could be realistic according to the first definition, but not realistic according to the second definition. Espionage agents exist in the AW, so the existence of an espionage agent in the TAW does not make the story dissimilar from the AW. But neither espionage agents nor the experiences encountered by espionage agents are common. Thus a story about an espionage agent would involve elements that are not statistically plausible or common, going against the second definition of realism. A story about a school teacher, on the other hand, could be realistic according to both definitions, since teachers both exist and are statistically common in the AW.

“Taking Back the Worst of It” and “Salt and Vinegar Syndrome” are both realistic stories. The TAWs are similar to the AW. Following the second definition of realism, the plot of either story is made up of statistically plausible events such as a gun accident and tension between friends in “Taking Back,” the discussion of fantasies and awkward

sexuality in "Salt and Vinegar." Yet the realism of the two stories is limited. While the events in the stories are plausible, if the stories were really to present a "slice of life" featuring the most probable and common life experiences (Baldick "realism"), the events and dialogue would be much more mundane, random, and circular. For this reason, events and dialogue are used in the story that are more direct, straightforward, and pointed than in the AW. The argument over Hub leaving, for example, is compacted into one scene, whereas it could take days in the AW. Hence, rather than representing reality my realistic stories only suggest or give the impression of reality.

In reviewing the work of Alice Munro, Christina A. E. Canitz and Roger Seamon note that Munro's novels include "melodrama, romance, legend, and adventure," but use certain strategies to convince readers that a realistic world is being presented (Canitz 67). As exemplified in "Taking Back the Worst of It" and "Salt and Vinegar Syndrome," each of my stories likewise uses strategies to suggest that the TAW of the story is more similar to the AW than it really is. A major way "Taking Back" and "Salt and Vinegar" suggest reality is through the dialogue used. While the dialogue is more pointed, direct, and compressed than what would occur in the AW, the inclusion of some dialogue circularity, meandering, colloquialism, and miscommunication mimics and suggests AW dialogue to the reader.

In "Taking Back," Jim asks "why didn't you phone me my dog was dead?" The more grammatically correct sentence would be: "why didn't you phone and tell me my dog was dead?" Both forms of the question are realistic and believable speech that could (and surely do) occur in the AW. Yet the first form is more suggestive of AW dialogue because it is more colloquial and less grammatical, referencing the extreme colloquialism

and poor grammar used in AW dialogue. As such, Jim's grammatical mistake serves as a reminder to the readers that Jim is meant to be read as a realistic person living in a TAW similar to the AW. Likewise, in "Salt and Vinegar," Mitch's answer to Kate, "Er-ah, I mean...that's my -- or, I want to be the guy to do that" mimics the choppiness and mid-sentence subject change of AW conversation. Instead of making choppiness and mid-sentence subject change as frequent as it is in the AW, this single instance is enough to suggest AW dialogue.

As mentioned earlier, a "realistic story" can be defined as a story where the TAW is similar to the AW or as a story that is statistically plausible. Both definitions are applicable to the psychology of the characters of "Taking Back the Worst of It" and "Salt and Vinegar Syndrome." According to Marie-Laure Ryan, characters are realistic (in the first sense of realism) if they are psychologically credible. That is, if the "mental properties of the characters could be those of members of the AW" and they are "complete human beings to whom we can relate as persons" (Ryan 572-3). An indicator of psychological credibility, the main characters of "Taking Back" and "Salt and Vinegar" can be analyzed psychologically. Hub suffers from emotional displacement. Mitch is afraid of his own emotions and so rejects his desires through most of the story.

Following the second definition of realism, the characters' personalities are also statistically plausible. Though extremely insane people exist in the AW and therefore are realistic/psychologically credible, Ryan notes that "madness is only an extreme point on the scale of psychological possibility" (Ryan 573). Extreme insanity is thus less statistically plausible than sanity (in the same way that espionage agents are less statistically plausible than school teachers). Likewise, people with extremely polarized

attitudes (i.e.: “final solution” racism) are statistically uncommon. While it is certainly not necessary for realist stories to be about the most statistically common people, readers more easily relate to characters that are similar to themselves in some manner. Polarized attitudes and extreme insanity are hard to relate to. A character’s insane or polarized actions and emotions are hard to understand because readers do not necessarily comprehend the cause or reasoning behind such actions or emotions.

Neither Hub nor Mitch would be considered insane if they existed in the AW. Just as most people in the AW are not completely racist or completely insane, Hub is a little bit paedophilic and Mitch is a little bit sadistic and misogynistic. Non-sadistic or paedophilic readers therefore do not have to make a large logical or empathetic leap to understand and identify with the characters. Most people have not kidnapped a child as Hub does, but might be capable of kidnapping under the right circumstances and therefore might relate to Hub as a character. As well as being easier to relate to, characters who are psychologically plausible also act as a strategy for suggesting reality. Psychologically credible and plausible characters suggest the AW, where most humans are not insane or extreme. Together with dialogue, psychologically credible and plausible characters work to suggest realism in “Taking Back the Worst of It” and “Salt and Vinegar Syndrome.”

“Marvellous Realism”

“Hippocrates’ Bluff” and “Dinosaurs and the Modern Day Work Place” are stories that might be considered magic realist works. The term, magic realist, however, is problematic. Definitions of magic realism show “inconsistency, juxtaposition, and even

contradiction” (Hinchcliffe 6). In fact, many writers reject the term magic realism entirely (Connell 95). As Liam Connell points out in his paper “Discarding Magic Realism,” many definitions of magic realism are imprecise and culturally biased. The definitions Connell advocates against posit that magic realism brings together two “views of the world,” the “rational” and the “traditional.” The rational world view is framed as the realistic Western belief system, while the traditional world view is framed as the non-Western/non-Christian belief system, which is magical and irrational (Connell 101). These definitions are culturally biased. They assert that there is no magic in the world, suggesting that the Western world view is the correct one and that non-Western beliefs are somehow unrealistic (Connell 102). Furthermore, these definitions are specious because the Western world is not purely scientific and rational, but has its own traditions of magic and superstition (Connell 106). To avoid labelling magical elements as realistic or not, and therefore to avoid disregarding certain beliefs as inaccurate, I will distinguish between two types of readers. Those readers who believe that there are common magical happenings (such as those that happen in my stories) in the AW will be referred to as “believers.” Those who do not believe that magical things commonly happen will be referred to as “non-believers.”

There are many and varied conceptualizations of what magic realism is, argued by a diverse group of names such as Alejo Carpentier, Canadian Geoff Hancock, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Kathryn Hume, Jorge Luis Borges, and many more. No universally accepted term or definition has been agreed upon. Alejo Carpentier’s term “marvellous realism” will be used in this paper not to reference his definition of marvellous realism (Echevarría 110), but because the word “magic” has dismissive connotations. Something

that is “marvellous” is not necessarily untrue or anti-scientific. “Marvellous” can refer to something supernatural or to something “superbly fine” (“Marvellous”). Thus the word “marvellous” is broad enough to incorporate the interpretations of both believing readers and non-believing readers, avoiding the cultural bias Connell warns against.¹

Whether being read by believers or non-believers, “Hippocrates’ Bluff” and “Dinosaurs and the Modern Day Work Place” are primarily realistic stories. Like “Taking Back the Worst of It” and “Salt and Vinegar Syndrome,” they use realistic dialogue, plausible and credible psychology, and other strategies for convincing readers that the TAW is similar to the AW. In addition, because the stories contain marvellous elements, further or modified strategies are required to convince non-believing readers of the stories’ realism.

For non-believers, any marvellous element that happens in the TAW serves as an indicator that the story is not meant to be similar to the AW and that the TAW can only be experienced through what Marie-Laure Ryan calls “a playful relocation to another system of reality” (Ryan 574). A marvellous element thus opens up the story to the possibility of existing in a world entirely dissimilar from the AW. The non-believing reader might then dismiss the realism of other characters, settings, and events, even if they are not marvellous elements. While some stories such as fairy tales and fantasy novels (in the pop cultural sense) are meant to be read as occurring in an entirely different world, the TAWs of “Hippocrates” and “Dinosaurs” are meant to be similar to the AW. One strategy to overcome the expectations of non-believers and to suggest realism is

¹ The definition of marvelous realism is kept purposefully vague in this paper. This essay is not the place to determine or defend a definition of marvelous or magic realism. Doing so would require an essay within itself.

including a set of rules that guide marvellous elements and limiting a story to one set of marvellous rules.

In “Dinosaurs and the Modern Day Work Place,” it is possible for plastic dinosaurs to appear in photocopying machines. It is not possible for plastic dinosaurs to appear anywhere else, or for objects other than plastic dinosaurs to appear in photocopying machines. The marvellous is thus limited and controlled in the TAW, allowing the TAW to appear realistic (to the non-believer) in all ways but the single set of marvellous rules. Though the plastic dinosaur’s appearance breaks the laws of nature (as observed by a non-believing reader), the set of rules around this appearance indicates that the TAW still follows cause and effect and the rule of non-contradiction. Though the dynamics of cause and effect involved are marvellous, they still exist. The dinosaur appears in a photocopying machine because dinosaurs can appear in photocopying machines. The rules guide the marvellous in a way that mimics natural laws in the AW such as those governing rain or gravity. The set of marvellous rules guiding “Hippocrates” are more complicated than the rules of “Dinosaurs,” but have a similar result. In the TAW, humans are subject to the balance of elements theorized by Hippocrates. They can become hot and dry or cold and wet depending on their attitudes and their frequency of sexual activity.

In a story where marvellous elements occur without any rules, non-believing readers might assume that anything can happen without any reasoning behind it. The TAW would then appear to the non-believing reader as a wholly different world from the AW; one that can not be predicted or understood even on the level of basic logical mechanics (cause and effect), since there are no apparent governing rules. According to

theorist Umberto Eco, for an author to “construct a world,” the reader must be able to make inferences about it (Ashline n.p.). Rules assist readers in making inferences about a world they may be unfamiliar with. Robert R. Wilson compares marvellous rules to the rules of a game or “a bizarre geometry” (Wilson 68). The reader is able to follow the rules and understand how the marvellous works in a story.

For a non-believer, the marvellous elements in “Hippocrates” and “Dinosaurs” are not possible in the AW, let alone statistically common. A non-believer would thus discount any story containing marvellous elements as realist if realism is defined as stories that depict statistically common characters, objects, and events. There is a third definition of realism however, mentioned by Marie-Laure Ryan, that modifies the realistic=statistically plausible definition of realism. This third definition of realistic work emphasizes “thematic focus,” characterizing a work as realistic if it “concentrates on everyday life within the regions of the TAW” (Ryan 572). In other words, a story is realistic if it primarily depicts things that are statistically plausible and common not in the AW, but in the TAW. Ryan uses Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” as an example, where the protagonist deals with the day to day obstacles of being a giant insect (Ryan 572). This modified definition of realism is applicable to both “Hippocrates” and “Dinosaurs.” “Hippocrates’ Bluff” is primarily about a couple’s marital problems. In the world that Drew and Fiona inhabit, extreme physical change is presented as common, a topic Drew can calmly ask for advice on. “Dinosaurs and the Modern Day Work Place” would be considered a realistic work following Ryan’s definition since it “concentrates” on Gwen’s emotional detachment and the distance between her and her co-workers as revealed

through a work day. The less plausible event, the appearance of the dinosaur, is only a small part of the story.

Just as in my realistic stories, the characters in “Hippocrates’ Bluff” and “Dinosaurs and the Modern Day Work Place” are psychologically credible and plausible in order to suggest that the TAWs are similar to the AW. Taken from a non-believing reader’s perspective, characters such as Drew and Fiona are not realistic because they do not respond to the marvellous events around them like someone from the AW. A non-believer from the AW would likely be traumatized by a disembodied womb crawling across the floor. He or she would have to question all of his or her beliefs. Despite this, Drew and Fiona are realistic. They respond to marvellous events in a psychologically similar way to people in the AW, but do so as natives of the TAW familiar with the rules of their world. They are not traumatized or forced to question their beliefs, but respond to events that are plausible in their world. The only event in the story that takes the characters by surprise is Fiona’s bursting into flame. The possibility of bursting into flame is part of Drew and Fiona’s TAW, but not all the characters are aware that bursting into flame is possible. Hence the police and neighbours are not able to deduce Fiona’s fate at the end of the story.

In “Dinosaurs and the Modern Day Work Place,” Gwen does not question the possibility of the dinosaur appearing. Unlike in “Hippocrates,” the marvellous element – the appearance of the dinosaur – is not an everyday event. Otherwise, there would be a section in the photocopying manual about plastic dinosaur removal. Gwen is surprised to see the dinosaur and worries that her co-workers will blame her for its appearance. She is not overly surprised, however. Gwen does not need to question all her beliefs because

she lives in a world where dinosaurs appearing in photocopiers is a possibility. As characters native to their TAWs, Gwen, Drew, and Fiona's reactions are both psychologically plausible and credible.

Most of the discussion about marvellous realism has been centered on the non-believing reader. The believing reader would accept the TAW as similar to the AW and would thus view the stories as realistic. The strategies used to suggest realism would therefore be the same as a realistic story.

Autobiography

The strategies for limiting and suggesting realism that are used in all my stories are exemplified in "The Barb Taboo." Unlike the other stories mentioned, "Barb Taboo" is an autobiography. The concepts of reality and realism thus take on special meaning and the differences between the AW and the TAW can be compared on a one-to-one basis that can not be used for the other stories. As defined by Marie-Laure Ryan, a work of "true fiction" (such as a non-fiction novel) is an accurate true story that uses narrative techniques (Ryan 561). Though "The Barb Taboo" is based on AW events and people, however, events and dialogue have been altered, embellished, and sometimes fabricated for the sake of the story's plot, thematic coherence, and readability. The character of Barb Miller, for example, and all the events and dialogue surrounding her character, reflect a melding of two separate AW people. Realism is limited in "Barb Taboo" for the same aesthetic reasons as limiting realism in realistic and marvellous realistic stories. With this limited realism, "Barb Taboo" is more accurately defined as what Ryan calls "realistic ahistorical fiction" (Ryan 562-3).

Many theorists, such as Paul de Man and Edward Said argue that no portrayal of the past can be entirely factual (Dodd 65). According to new historicism, any description of the past involves “point of view, selection of detail, and concept of audience” (Berryman n.p.). Theorists debate whether autobiography is historical text or entirely fictional (Dodd 62). In “Barb Taboo,” however, the events, characters, and dialogue are purposefully altered from their occurrence in the AW. The estrangement between Barb Miller and David Miller is a true event, but in the AW it took four years of almost insignificant events slowly building upon one another to occur. To make the story more coherent and concise, “Barb Taboo” features only the most pointed, meaningful events and dialogue. These events and dialogue are further simplified and condensed to occur within sentences rather than over many conversations. Other events and dialogue are entirely fabricated in order to more pointedly express the alienation between the two characters. Even though the AW dialogue would be filled with indicators of a disintegrating friendship, these would not be as clear as they are in the story. The first section of dialogue in “Barb Taboo,” for example, is entirely fabricated. The dialogue mimics the awkward, meandering dialogue that occurred during the AW estrangement, but expresses that awkwardness and meandering more quickly and efficiently than an actual excerpt of AW dialogue would.

Limiting reality in “The Barb Taboo” also involves omitting certain AW facts and events. It is an interesting and revealing character trait of David Miller that everyone hated Barb except for him. Yet including this trait in the story would distract from overall thematic coherence, confusing and complicating the plot. Also left out is Barb’s moving in with Luke. Not only would its inclusion distract from the overall story, it

would also border on unrealistic. Although technically realistic since it is based on the AW, moving in with Luke is such an extreme and unexplained event (as it was in real life) that, ironically, it would make the character of Barb seem less psychologically credible.

Sharon Butala calls memoir “the backward search through happenstance, trivia, the flotsam and jetsam of life to search out a pattern, themes, a meaning,” an “imposition of order onto what was chaotic” (Butala n.p.). While limiting realism in “The Barb Taboo” allows the story to be more straightforward and include coherent themes, it is necessary to maintain the suggestion of realism in autobiography. Though the relation between autobiographical work and reality is a controversial topic (Dodd 62), it is the possibility of linking autobiography directly to reality that distinguishes it from first-person fiction. According to Charles Berryman, Autobiography can be defined simply as “writing about the self” (Berryman n.p.). As such, realism is expected in autobiography, so that any elements that seem unrealistic cast doubt on the realism and credibility of the entire story. Some authors purposefully disrupt these expectations, such as Kurt Vonnegut in Slaughter House Five, which fuses history, fiction, and autobiography (Berryman n.p.). But in “The Barb Taboo,” the TAW is purposefully engineered to mimic the AW and seem like accurate autobiography to readers. Therefore, maintaining realism in “Barb Taboo” is crucial. The same strategies used in realistic and marvellous realistic stories are used in order to suggest similarity to the AW despite the limited realism used.

Genre and Structure

The limited realism and strategies of suggesting realism used in my stories are highly influenced by the form and conventions of short stories. The necessary concision of short stories means that no word can be wasted. For reasons of concision, I limit the amount of rambling dialogue, miscommunication, and awkward conversation. Furthermore, the rambling and miscommunication that is included is used in a meaningful, strategic way in short stories. “The Barb Taboo” and “Dinosaurs and the Modern Day Work Place” most clearly use rambling dialogue, miscommunication, and awkward conversation both to suggest realism and to reveal the strained relationships between the protagonist and other characters.

Another common convention of short stories is coherence and relative straightforwardness. This is not to suggest that short stories are or should be simple, but readers expect brevity in short stories. Anything appearing in the story is thus assumed to be there for a reason, to contribute to the story in some way (even if that contribution is to purposefully misdirect the reader). Returning to Sharon Butala’s description of the “trash” of daily life, Butala suggests that if a writer includes trivia, dead ends, and irrelevancies that do not contribute to the story, “the storyline would be muddled,” the themes and meaning lost among the “noise” (Butala n.p.). A short story that includes elements not relevant to the story would break short story conventions and would likely confuse, misdirect, and bore the reader.

One strategy used in this dissertation for presenting the most relevant events and dialogue in my stories is fragmentation. By fragmentation, I am referring to the use of many sections appearing out of chronological order and even appearing in different

narrative voices. The sections are sometimes whole scenes, sometimes only parts of scenes. This structure is “fragmented” in comparison to a story formed of a single, unified scene or a series of scenes that follow one after another in a predictable and chronological way. Fragmentation is used differently in each story. “Taking Back the Worst of It” is less fragmented than the others, each section making up an entire scene. “The Barb Taboo” and “Salt and Vinegar Syndrome” are the most fragmented, with many sections, some of which are only a few words long. The fragmentation itself is not realistic. Events in the AW always happen chronologically, without the jumps in time and space that fragmentation uses. Yet events in the AW are rarely self-contained and straightforward. In the AW, something such as an argument may be affected by past conversations, events, and emotions that occurred at very different times and locations. Fragmentation mimics the AW in presenting the relevant conversations, events, and emotions from a variety of times and locations rather than forcing all relevant information into a single scene. Fragmentation also allows greater concision and word economy by only presenting what is relevant to the story. In “Barb Taboo,” for example, dialogue excerpts are often used instead of whole scenes because it is often the dialogue excerpt, not the entire conversation or scene that is most relevant to the story. Including the entire conversation rather than the excerpt would make the section less pointed, less straightforward, and duller.

Conclusion

The stories presented in this dissertation are realistic. Whether the story is marvellous realistic, autobiographical, or realistic, each one uses strategies to suggest that

the TAW is similar to the AW. The stories are centered on events that are statistically plausible. The dialogue mimics AW dialogue through colloquialism, circularity, and miscommunication. Characters are psychologically credible and plausible. In my works of marvellous realism, additional strategies are used to convince non-believing readers of the stories' realism, such as including a set of rules that guide the marvellous and limiting the story to one set of rules.

At the same time, realism in my stories is limited for the sake of plot, thematic coherence, and ease of reading. Events and dialogue are more pointed, simplified, and direct than they would be in the AW. Only meaningful, coherent, and relevant events are included. Reasons for limiting realism include following short story conventions such as concision, coherence, and straightforwardness. Fragmentation in my stories is used both as a tool of concision and as a method for mimicking the AW.

The use of strategies to limit and suggest realism presupposes the desire for realistic depiction, as well as the desire to follow short story conventions, to have coherent themes, and to maintain reader interest. Many stories, especially modern and postmodern works purposefully disrupt the illusion that a story is depicting real events (Ashline n.p.). Writers may willingly break short story conventions, complicate the plot and themes, or include banality and irrelevancies. For this reason, though suggesting and limiting realism are central principles in my own work, they are not applicable to all short stories. The stories included in this dissertation use strategies for limiting and suggesting realism because they are specifically meant to balance realism with concision, thematic pointedness, and short story conventions.

In completing the dialogue assignment almost all first year creative writers are given, students can choose to accurately reproduce real dialogue or can choose to edit the dialogue they collect. Most students choose to edit the dialogue, learning from the assignment that real life is most often circular and boring. They have to retain the ums and uhs so that the dialogue will still be realistic (since that is the purpose of the assignment), but decide to include only the portions of dialogue that seem worthy of being in a story. They also alter the dialogue to be as engaging and coherent as possible. While the assignment teaches how to write realistic dialogue, it also teaches the student that truly realistic dialogue rarely appears in stories. Fiction writers do not simply record reality for the purpose of accuracy, they manipulate their TAWs in a coordinated and deliberate way. This manipulation often entails making the text more coherent and straightforward than reality. It sometimes also entails the occasional dinosaur in a photocopier.

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