

The One Around the Corner

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ABSTRACT

The One Around the Corner

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The One Around the Corner chronicles 72 hours in the life of Corey Bonspiel, a young University dropout from Ontario living in Montreal in April 2008. Following the breakup of a two-year relationship with his aspiring-poet girlfriend, Corey comes to recognize that he has been living his life for others, that he doesn't have a dream of his own or plans for the future, that the city he lives in has no place readily available for him, and it might be time to move. Set against a backdrop of a Montreal Canadiens playoff run and the subsequent post-series victory riot, the story addresses issues of being the "other" in your own country, of the "other" in Quebec, of the place of Anglos from the 'rest of Canada' within Montreal, the effect their annual influx has on the city as well as the effect the city has on them, as well as the effect its hockey team has on the city, focusing on themes of loss, of living and loving in our changing social-media-driven world, of growing up, of finding your place in the world, learning to accept harsh realities, learning when it's time to let go, time to move on.

for my wife, who feeds me

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1

An open-mic poetry reading is a terrible way to spend any Saturday night, but tonight, with the Habs one win away from the second round of the playoffs for the first time since I moved here, it's that much worse, yet attendance is mandatory, Sheila insists on it. And it's not like I am opposed to all readings, all poetry, like when the person has read the poem before, or read out loud before, or has been invited to read, it can be pretty alright. Or when the author is reading from a book, that had an editor, then it's usually good, entertaining—almost entertainment—and we understand our roles, buyer, seller, producer, consumer, it's familiar and comfortable, it's advertising. But the open-mic is a whole different animal, a dangerous breed, a showcase for unprepared poets with unedited poems. I understand people need to practice, need a place to try things, to experiment, work out the nerves, but I don't need to hear it and I've been to plenty of these already this year. I tried to argue my way out tonight but when "Corey, if you really love me, you'd want to be there for me" got thrown down I couldn't even respond, it's watertight that one, unless I want to say I don't love her, and it's not like I don't love her, I don't think. Like Sheila's got it all: she's smoking hot, the hottest girl I've ever been with, curvy, complains her ass is too big but it ain't, blond, though she helps that out a bit, with these incredible grey eyes and big dimply cheeks. And she's smart, way smarter than me, no doubt, and ambitious, like driven. Plus, she drinks draft beer and has a washer and dryer in her apartment.

So we're back at John Barleycorn's, a dank, dingy, low-ceilinged cube that smells like stale beer, piss, puke and fear, and looks like it was decorated with a mail-order Irish pub starter kit—posters of Irish doors, bas reliefs with Irish proverbs, Guinness and Harp

mirrors, an oversized “Erin Go Bragh” flag, plenty of shamrocks and green—the way all inauthentic authentic Irish pubs do. On top of that the layout is awful. It’s got an oversized, understaffed bar in one corner and an awkward, L-shaped island in the centre with pillars on its corners, so no matter where you sit you have an obstructed view of the stage. Of course, there isn’t actually a stage, just a lonely microphone set in front of a planked poster of Dublin pub signs not quite in a corner, which is referred to as the stage. Why Johnny B’s—as Sheila and them say—was chosen as the preferred place to hold these student association-run functions has never been explained to me, but it has been, and remains so. Naturally there’s no television, because no one would ever want to glance at the TV while poetry is being read.

Sheila’s crew is already here when we arrive, her posse of poets, sat around three small tables pushed together to make one, each of them clutching little scraps of paper, or nervously poking through notebooks. There’s Ming, who’s slender and sleek and trying to start a band, she wears shorts with nylons underneath and has a habit of sitting on laps. Beside her is Janie, who drinks hot chocolate in the summer and goes toque-less all winter, she has a strange fascination with serial killers and likes to dye her hair unnatural colours—it’s purple at the moment. In the corner is Roland whose face is bony and pointy like a bird or a Muppet or a Muppet bird, he’s a little strange, very in-touch with himself, but I like Roland, he’s not as into the whole being-a-poet deal as the rest of the bunch—plus he’s got a friend at *La Cage* texting updates on the game while most people here don’t even realise there is a game. Across from him is Amanda whose Dutch as can be, tall, blonde, athletic, and a hippie, makes all her own clothes—tonight she’s in a dress made out of an old Scottie Pippen jersey. And next to her, is Barry. Fair-haired, dimple-

cheeked, Barry. Sport-coated, sweater-vested, Barry. Past few months I been getting the feeling Sheila has a thing for Barry, or she might be fucking him. Either way, I don't like the guy. He's always calling me 'monoglot' which is some French insult I think. The only positive is that he's quite short so if we ever drop the Coopers I'm pretty sure I'd last a couple of minutes—reach advantage alone.

“Sorry we're late,” Sheila gets out through a clamour of ‘hellos’ and ‘heys’ and ‘how-are-ya’s’, before putting it on me. “Corey had to change his shirt.” Which is true, but only because she insisted, only because she thinks a shirt I bought to be a Halloween costume has to remain a Halloween costume, it can't become clothing, even if it's clean. Sheila sits down next to Barry while I scrounge up a chair from the next table—checking with this fedora-wearing hipster that it's okay first—and take a place at the head, or tail, of the table.

“Don't worry about it, these things never start on time,” notes Amanda, and she's right, they never start close to on time. They don't even try to.

“Actually you're probably wise arriving late. Otherwise you're end up sitting around all alone anxiously waiting for a familiar face to appear. Like me.” Roland gets a few sympathy ahs and a backrub from Janie.

“There's a simple solution for you Rol, just show up later,” Barry advises.

“I can't do it. I try, I have tried, but I always wind up on time. Even ahead of time. I think maybe, subconsciously, I distrust the power dynamic inherent in making people wait. The petty callousness of it is very off-putting to me. So I always end up waiting, watching the door, recognizing everyone who enters for half a second, getting the heart-stopping moment of excitement and getting it dashed. It's terrible, obviously, but the

thought of making someone else go through that is worse than the actual waiting, so I wait.”

No one responds to Roland immediately and then several side conversations break out at once. It’s times like this that makes hanging with Sheila’s friends the worst, when the conversations sprawl into meaningless shop-talk about poets—both real ones and those in attendance—and discussion of books I haven’t read, gossip about professors I don’t know who are sleeping with students I don’t know, rumours circulating through the department I’m not a part of. And it’s not that I can’t engage in these discussions, it’s not like they wouldn’t happily catch me up on all the details, I just don’t want to. I just don’t care. Does anyone really? Do they even? I go grab a couple of beers, and a scotch and water for Sheila—she thinks that writers should drink scotch—which gets me out of there for a few minutes. I will talk of course, I can’t just sit mute and brooding, Sheila’s unimpressed as it is, plus I need to know the score, so when I return I go around and ask Roland. We were up 1-0 when we left Sheila’s, after the first, but it’s 1-1 now. Fucking Kessel.

“Patience, patience, it’s early yet, the goals will come,” Roland taps his index finger into his palm. “They just have to stay calm and remember they beat these guys eight times this year.”

“Yeah I know, but I worry that they might’ve gotten to Price after the last game, that third period, he looked rattled,” I say, leaning in, sort of hovering above his shoulder. I never feel comfortable talking with people this way, I always feel I should crouch, or I should stand if I’m the one sitting.

“No way, not a chance. Carey’s just fine, he’s stoic, Zen-like, focused. He’s the re-in-frickin-carnation of Patrick Roy!”

“That’s just it, that’s my concern. Kid’s younger than I am, and the weight of expectations in this city, man. Fuck, I wouldn’t want to be out there with all that pressure.” Maybe I should crouch.

“I’m telling you, stoic. We’ll be fine.” I don’t exactly share Roland’s confidence, besides Patrick Roy ain’t dead, he’s causing controversy in the Q. Just as I’m about to say Gainey should’ve never traded Huet for a bag of pucks, we’re attacked by a blast of feedback, piercing and shrill, which signifies the night’s about to begin.

Tonight’s MC, a chunky, olive-skinned girl with a huge mane of curls, called Eula, calms the microphone and apologizes, then starts the show with a poem of her own—what a treat! Janie mouths the words ‘Fat Bitch!’ across the table about three lines in. Sheila and her clique are at odds with Eula and her friends because they control most school-related functions, head up the English Student’s Association which runs these events, and are editors of this year’s student publication—which led to much controversy and hissy-fitting when all of them had poems and stories included. Sheila’s gang has been pissed about this all year and have wrangled themselves into the same power positions for next year, but for one more night they have to suffer not running the show. Jealousy is a wicked mistress, and poets—or would-be poets—seem to enjoy eating their own. Shelia and friends love to slag off the other poets, nearly every performer who is not one of them. They hate them all. They hate them for being better poets than themselves, they

hate them for being worse poets than themselves, they hate them for being poets like themselves.

Although outwardly I fight the good fight, personally I could care less. Eula's fine with me, hell, she keeps it short, like haiku-short—not literally haikus, I think that's against the rules or whatever, but short—just a few lines, which, at an open-mic, based on what I've seen, is as it should be. I've found myself wondering, at more than one of these-type events: what makes poetry different? Why is it if someone's on stage with a microphone telling jokes it's acceptable, even encouraged, to heckle, but when the person with the microphone is reading poetry, it's not? Like one time Sheila and I were at this 'zine launch which—as 'zine launches will—also included an open-mic and people were very polite through a number of bad singer/songwriter types—indie-kids with acoustic guitars whining away—and more than a couple of bad poets, but the second a guy got up there and said 'Hey, how you all doing tonight? I'm gonna tell you a few jokes,' it was 'Fuck you!' and 'Quit wasting my fucking time,' and so on. Which made me think at the time, why don't we, as an audience, see that by heckling comics we're helping them, demanding a higher level of professionalism, a more polished act, a greater concern for the response of the crowd, and that if we did that the same thing to poets, the same thing could be true. Just once I'd love to see someone, when some twit was right in the middle of her epic about suburban malaise or the high school crush he was too pock-faced to pursue, I'd love it if somebody would get up and shout out a long, loud 'Boorrrringggg!' Or maybe a 'Save it for your therapist!' Or something. I guess I really wish I had the balls to do it myself, but what's the point, I already know the result.

The first set—there'll be three, three's the standard—goes along as they do, poets-to-be or wannabe reading away from the microphone, or too close to it, mumbling, stumbling, giggling, grinning, pausing for effect. Something about getting your period or his girlfriend's dream or a Brazilian boy, I'm not really listening. Sure, when someone from the table gets up to read, like Ming is, and everyone else sits up and leans in, I follow their lead, and I guess they're all hanging on every word or whatever, but I always lose the plot. I mean I try and I'm usually good for the first bit, but it gets boring, and there're so many distractions. I got two empty bottles in front of me for one—ordering beers while people read is verboten according to Sheila—and some serious concerns over a 1-1 tie, especially after they lit Price up for five last game. I have to try to retain something though. Sheila likes to talk about people's poems after readings and I have to contribute. I've already missed most of this, what's Ming talking about...fish? Sewage run off? Waking up on the floor naked? A shape-shifter for a lover? Huh? Not sure that makes sense, but it's something.

The evening dawdles along, words smashed together, metaphors mixed, similes at odds, when mercifully the opening set wraps, and I get a couple more beers and an update from Roland: 2-1 Habs late in the second. Then I try to get an answer to my question about what makes poetry different than comedy, but there's no consensus.

Amanda says, "Yeah, eh, that's weird. Like, why not?"

Ming says, "I think it's just not done, so it's just *not done*."

Barry says, "I don't want it done to me so I don't do it to them."

Janie says, "I invite it. Bring it on. Heckle away, I can handle it."

Roland says, “It doesn’t really matter though, does it? I mean everyone just comes to hear themselves read. Probably nobody *could* heckle, you have to listen to heckle. And isn’t indifference somehow worse than criticism?”

Sheila says nothing. She’s too focused, too nervous. Sheila’s on deck. Sheila likes to open the second set, it’s her preferred slot, feels it gives her time to settle in but still gets it out of the way, though nothing really kills the nerves for her, Sheila wants it too badly. She feels that reading at these events can, and eventually will, pay off. She believes that when the right person’s in the room to hear her, if she catches the ear of, say, a professor, or someone from a local paper, or someone with a ‘connection’, she’ll get published, and then she’ll be in, she’ll officially be a literati. She wears the pressure of this belief on her face in the minutes before every performance, strained lines around the eyes, sunken cheeks, biting her lip, and tonight she’s reading new stuff, so it’s doubly obvious.

Eula takes the microphone and introduces Sheila, and as she takes the stage I straighten up and sit forward to demonstrate my attentiveness, to warrant my coming, my missing the game. Sheila holds the mic on her hip and composes herself, trying to look the part. She’s wearing the co-ed ‘uniform’ of the past few years—a short dress over a pair of tights with a pair of ballet flats—and she’s the third girl to read tonight sporting some variation of the theme. She pulls her dress down over her bum, closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, opens them, glances down at her page quickly, then drops it over her shoulder, letting it flutter to the ground. When it hits the floor, she begins. As she reads, she chops the air with her right hand on every other syllable, emphasising the stresses. Starting above her head she chops lower and lower until she chops belt high. The poem is

called ‘Screening Method’ and it’s all about her lady bits, I think, it’s never laid out that plainly, she’s careful to remain vague—plus the chopping is kind of distracting. She begins chopping back up, using both hands this time, changing speeds with her hands in time with her voice, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

The halting manner in which Sheila delivers her poems had been one of the things that had interested me when I first saw her read. The way she would change up the pace of her delivery, speeding up and slowing down mid-sentence, mid-image, mid-thought. I found out later that her style was not her style at all, it’s called dub poetry, and many would-be poets are dabbling in it. It’s delivered in a rhythm you’d expect to hear in the Caribbean, and though Sheila’s from rural Nova Scotia, she mimics the cadence and inflection pretty well—though in truth, so do at least three other people at every reading, and not always the same three.

Her second poem is softer, less jolting, no chopping hand actions. Instead she stands almost still staring out above the heads of the crowd, a favourite technique of hers. Sheila thinks that by ignoring the audience she will draw them in deeper, get them listening, get them hanging on her next word—I’m not convinced, but she does it a lot, so maybe it works. This particular piece, which is called ‘Probing’, is very “active”—according to Sheila—all the lines start with ‘ing’ verbs, lines like ‘scanning fresh horizons’, ‘seeking new adventures’, ‘prowling in the night’, ‘questing after something’, ‘yearning to modify’ ‘transforming from without’. And so on. It’s more than a little unsettling and I can’t help staring across at Barry to gauge his reactions, and then at the rest of them. What are they thinking hearing this? What do they know? I search for signs

that one of them sees beneath the surface, but all I find are the forced smiles of fair-weather friends.

After Sheila the second set flies by—or seems to me to as I guzzle back beers daydreaming about possible second round matchups. I hear something about getting stoned in a church choir loft, about our collective desire to be naked and famous, about hanging cats with skipping ropes, about butting-out cigarettes on your tongue, but not all in the same poem, I don't think. By the time the set wraps and I've got more beers, the Bruins have tied it up—Sobotka of all people—but Roland's faith is unwavering.

"The Price is still right, buddy." We chat a little bit about the team's need to get Kovy going, to get traffic to the front of the net, to get the series finished tonight, when I overhear something I've just got to find out about.

"What's a poetry 'slam'?" I even make the hand-action quotation marks. "How does one 'slam'? Who gets 'slammed'?" The name itself is exciting. Let's slam some shit.

"A poetry slam," explains Janie, "is a reading which consists of poets who compete in timed sets head-to-head, single knockout, until you have a winner."

"How do you win at poetry?"

"Each poet is scored on a scale of 1 to 10 by judges," Janie goes on. "And the judges, usually there's five, but sometimes three, are chosen from the audience by the MC at the beginning of the night."

"So if I showed up I could be a judge?"

"Exactly!" Barry jumps in. "*Anyone* can be a judge. No credentials. No consideration for personal bias. Competitive poetry, it's fucking ridiculous! The whole

concept is flawed from the start—how can you judge a poem? It’s not the fucking balance beam! There are no required elements! It’s totally subjective!”

“That’s why there’s five judges, so it evens out.” Ming explains.

“And a good MC would never pick two people from the same table,” adds Amanda, but Barry isn’t buying it.

“It goes against everything we should be about, everything that this whole scene, the whole literary tradition, should be striving for. It doesn’t foster a sense of community that poets should be working to cultivate; it makes performances adversarial and paltry, turns it into fucking *8 Mile*! Brings in an unwanted element, rappers and hip-hop hipsters who think that it’s all about battling, all about laying the bigger insult. Plus all the hooting and hollering from the crowd, it’s nonsense.”

“Sour grapes,” teases Amanda. “You’re just pissed you lost to that guy.”

“Oh, well, the judges were all his fucking friends. And anyway that’s beside the point, the point is it’s not about...”

“I agree with Barry,” Sheila pipes in. “It’s just not a positive scene. It’s not about developing as an artist, it’s only about getting to the next round, giving the judges what they want. And a lot of it isn’t even *real* poetry. A lot of it rhymes.”

“And half the stuff is improvised. You might as well start a competitive improv night.” Barry stands up to drive this point into Amanda and Ming sitting across the table, so Roland bites back.

“You know they have those, Barry. Improv competitions. Even televise them. You can’t tell me you wouldn’t want to read on TV.”

“Poetry slam’s aren’t airing on no fucking TV, Rol, so not really a problem.”

“That’s true, but they do show spelling bees on television,” Amanda points out.

“Yeah, sure, fucking kids. People love kids. Kids are cute.”

“So what are saying, Barry? Poets aren’t cute?” Ming says, tilting her head and batting her lashes.

“Not cute enough for TV,” Barry fires back. “Present company excluded.”

“Yeah, but look at poker. They’re not cute, they’re on TV.”

“Stay out of this, Corey.” Sheila puts a hand on my arm and holds me back, not that I’m going anywhere.

“No, I’m just saying, five, six years ago you never saw poker on TV, and when you did you thought: why is poker on TV? And on the sports station, no less? It’s not a sport. But then they just kept showing it to fill time when there weren’t live sports and suddenly people just accepted that it was a sport and starting watching, and playing, and look at poker now.”

“So you’re saying poetry’s popularity will explode and we’ll have every jackass who can spell their name entering slams?” Sheila seems to always be against me these days. “That’ll do a lot for the art form.” Seems to be enjoying it, too.

“No, I just think anything that puts asses in seats can’t be bad for you guys. And this sounds like the best way to get people, regular non-poet, non-literary people, to hear your poems. Well, next to setting them to music.”

“You know, he’s not wrong.” Roland adds. “I would like to read to some new people once in a while. Look around, everyone here tonight, mostly everyone, is in the Creative Writing program; even if they aren’t reading, they’re in the program.” He reaches down, fidgeting with his pocket, but continues. “I mean we’re preaching to the

choir. I've heard everyone here read before, even heard some of these poems before." He pulls his phone up from under the table, flips it open and raises his eyebrows.

"That's a good point; all the slams I've been to have had fresh faces," Janie quips.

I love this whole concept—wondering why Sheila never took me to a 'slam' before—and I'm already thinking big picture. "Plus it uses a bracket system, right? Brackets are perfect for gambling, like office pools. Man, with the right promotion, maybe amp-up the 'slamming' angle a bit, like the hip-hop battles you were talking about, Barry," Barry rolls his eyes, Sheila stares daggers at me, and Roland's dropped out to return a text. "Fuck, the possibilities are endless."

"Slam poetry, the next big thing," says Janie laughing.

"Olympic Slam Poetry Gold Medallist," adds Amanda.

Roland taps me on the shoulder, "3-2 Habs. Bouillon." Before I even respond his phone vibrates again, he flips it open and checks it out. "Make that 3-3." With that the intermission is over, and the phone is shut off—lousy poetic politeness.

I can't sit still knowing the game is tied—could be the beer, too—let alone pay attention. I don't know how long this set has been going on, or how many people we've been through, I just know it's been forever and I've been to the bathroom once already. I'm barely containing myself, bordering on a boredom attack, cold sweats and fidgeting, when Lorelei Billingsgate takes the stage, and my attention. Although Lorelei almost certainly has no clue about it, Sheila considers her to be her nemesis. She's completely obsessed with her. During her first semester, whenever Sheila went to join a club or committee, Lorelei was already there, already a part of it, often helping run it. It was like

she was always where Sheila wanted to be one year ahead of time, and Sheila could never catch up. Lorelei is kind of short and super cute, not in an as-a-button way, more in a finger-on-the-pulse-of-what's-going-on way. She has big, brown doe eyes and a short, pixie haircut, and something about her screams, 'I'm up for a caper'. Her hair is spiked up into a horn-like point and she has a furry purple and pink striped tail attached to her belt. She's in a tattered pair of blue jeans and a black tee with what looks like a homemade print that reads '*Un Kostitsyn est bien, mais deux Kostitsyn est mieux*' in white lettering. And I don't know, maybe it's because I'm supposed to hate her, or maybe it's just the shirt she's wearing, or maybe because of the beers, but I dig this chick. There's something charming about a lack of self-consciousness.

She steps up to the mic, bats her lashes over her bright eyes, licks her upper lip and says "Hello peoples," in an almost inaudible squeak. "Um, so, I'm going to try something a little different. I'm going to read some found poetry." This announcement generates a low murmur from the crowd, anticipation, or trepidation, or both. Lorelei shoots a crooked grin, winks and begins reading slowly, with dramatic flare, the contents of the Arlington Punch Set.

"Arlington Punch Set

By Anchor Hocking

18 Piece Set

Punch Set Includes:

1-6 qt. Punch Bowl

8-6 oz. Punch Cups

8 Plastic Hooks

1 Plastic Ladle.”

It gets a lot of giggles. “Thank you,” squeaks Lorelei, “this next one is called ‘Resinous Glaze’.” A mischievous smirk creeps across her lips as she reaches into her pocket and pulls out a crumbled Reese’s Pieces wrapper, smoothes it out against her thigh, clears her throat, then delivers the ingredients list in a pseudo-scientific voice with mimed adjustments of invisible glasses.

“Ingredients: Sugar; Partially Defatted Peanuts; Partially Hydrogenated Vegetable Oil (Palm Kernel and Soybean Oil); Reduced Minerals; Whey (Milk) Dextrose; contains 2% or Less of: Corn Syrup; Salt; Soy Lecithin; Artificial Color (Blue 1 Lake; Red 40 Lake; Yellow 5 Lake; Yellow 6 Lake) Carnauba Wax; Resinous Glaze; and Artificial Flavor.”

It receives a rousing applause on top of the laughs, the only performer tonight to earn applause between poems. For her finale she does a Shatneresque rendition of the Spice Girls ‘Wannabe’

“Yo, I’ll tell you what I want, what I really really want,
So tell me what you want, what you really really want,
I’ll tell you what I want, what I really really want,
So tell me what you want, what you really really want,
I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna really
really really wanna zigzag ha...”

She even does the zigzag-ha’s. People start going nuts as soon as she begins, snapping fingers and laughing out loud, and by the end nearly everybody but our table is singing along, and one group of girls is on their feet zigzag-ha-ing along with her. It’s

brilliant, fucking brilliant—and it's official, I've got a crush—fully deserves the standing 'O' she's getting from some of the other tables. I clap along but don't dare stand. Sheila doesn't budge. She can't even muster the polite golf-clap Amanda and Janie manage. I put my arm around her to comfort her and she's shaking, actually shaking—anger, maybe jealousy, maybe disbelief—and she looks like she's going to puke.

Roland's got to follow Lorelei, which is not so good for him, but he also always reads last, which is *so* good for me. Standing well above the microphone—he stands well above everything—even at its full extension, hunching over, shoulder blades stretching his too-small sports coat, Roland looks more like Lurch or Riff Raff than a poet, but his poems are funny, clever, well read, and just, well, good. I'm not really sure, or always sure, what makes his poems better, but I know they're better. I mean, I even listen, and not just because he's a hockey fan. Tonight he just reads one called 'I Can't Believe It's Come To This', in which he recites the title followed by the person and/or situation which inspired it, then repeats the title like a refrain in between each scene. Some are funny: "I can't believe it's come to this, thinks Herr Hitler as he accepts that no one will believe his protestations of non-relation and files to legally change the family name; I can't believe it's come to this thinks Nana as she spoons toilet water into her mouth after a slip in the tub." Some are serious: "I can't believe it's come to this, says one teen to another as they chop up lines and roll up bills; I can't believe it's come to this, says a trapped hiker as he saws off his pinned arm with a his pocket knife." Some are sad: "I can't believe it's come to this, thinks a mother hiding vodka bottles in cereal boxes; I can't believe it's come to this, says the marooned crew as they draw lots to see who will make the ultimate sacrifice." By the end of it, the crowd, the audience, all of us, we're all

repeating it with him like a goddamn congregation, he's fully conducting like a maestro and all. He wraps it up with, "I can't believe it's come to this thought the man who gets his kicks by making a room full of strangers repeat the phrase I can't believe it's come to this." Followed by the evening's second standing 'O'.

Roland's too cool, or doesn't care, or wants to give the impression he doesn't care, for applause, so he just drops his head and bolts away from the microphone, slinking through the crowd with his long stride. He has his phone out before he even gets back to the table, before the crowd has even quieted down. He flips it open, takes a quick peek and his face drops, he just freezes, looks startled.

"The Bruins won, man, 5-4." He finally gets out, looking at me like he can't believe what he's saying. "Game 7. Monday night."

"I can't believe it's come to this."

2

Right when we get in the cab I can tell Sheila's super-pissed, but I can't say I feel too bad. Like, I definitely don't want to be shuffling up to St-Laurent right now, wouldn't rather be headed out for a night of dancing at some sweaty cramped club with Janie and Ming and Amanda and that fucker Barry—I wouldn't have minded heading with Roland to meet his buddies at *La Cage*, but what I am going to do, invite myself along with a guy I hardly know—so she can pout all the way home if she wants, silent treatment my ass if she wants.

“*A ou?* Where you going?” asks the driver in a heavy West-African accent, and Sheila fills him in—maybe we won't be riding in silence. Then again, maybe we will, clearly the air between us is less than copacetic. The air in the cab is a mingling of scents: curry, cigarettes and air-freshener—there's a yellow foam tree dangling from the mirror. There's a rosary accompanying the little yellow tree, its wooden beads rhyming with the driver's seat cushion. Pictures of what must be his kids taped to the dash, three of them, clearly school photos, smiling faces in front of a faux-bookshelf background, that they probably thought was neat, kids are easily impressed, I was. We stop at a red light and his eyes meet mine in the rear view.

“Very quiet, guys, bad night? You watching the game?”

“No, no, we couldn't do that. We had to go to a poetry reading instead.” Even with Sheila glaring I can't avoid spitting the words out.

“They lost, you know this?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Game 7. What's happening?”

“I don’t know things seem to be falling apart. But I didn’t see the game, so I can’t really say.”

Sheila catches me with a quick elbow to the ribs after I say this and I shudder slightly, the driver watching it all in his mirror. He tunes the radio to the post-game show, turns up the volume, and fast-talking French voices fill the cab. I’m getting nothing out of this. It’s impossible to even tell how many people are speaking, my French sucks so bad, plus they all talk at once.

“I can’t believe you, clapping for that bitch like that,” Sheila suddenly blurts out, catching me almost more off guard than that elbow.

“What? Who?” is all I can come up, though I realize *who* as the word comes out of my mouth.

“Lorelei, who do you think?” she says, hitting the ‘k’ extra hard.

“Well, I’m sorry. Like, I didn’t mean to piss you off or whatever, I wasn’t clapping just to, you know, upset you. I thought she was good.”

“So, I wasn’t good then?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying, I clapped for you too.”

“Golf claps.” Sheila mock claps and pulls a face, scrunching up her nose and pursing her lips. “Pity claps. That’s-my-girlfriend claps.”

“No, no, good claps. I clapped louder for you than anyone else.”

“Except Lorelei.” She drives her finger towards me, then sits back and crosses her arms.

“Well, what do you want me to say, I liked her, it. I thought it was funny. Entertaining.”

“So what, I wasn’t then?” She turns towards me, eyes wide, nostrils flared.

“Good, but not entertaining. That’s your review of me, Corey?”

“No, no, it’s, well, it’s just she did something different. Something new.”

“Oh, bullshit, ‘found poetry’, my poems were all mine and they were all new. That little bitch didn’t write any of it! Not one word!” Shelia pokes her palm violently.

“You’re right, okay, and maybe the whole found poetry deal doesn’t score points with you poets and writer-types, but I don’t see why not. What’s so wrong with it? Found art counts, why not found poetry? And what about photography?”

“What about it, Corey?”

“Well they don’t make anything, photographers, it’s all found, isn’t it?”

Sheila shrugs. “Found poetry. It’s all gimmick,” she spits.

“I’ll give you that. Anyone can do it. Hell, I could read a list of ingredients. But for an event like that one, full of people who are either taking themselves too seriously or are barely paying attention, I think it was exactly what was called for. She certainly got people’s attention. People listened to her, no denying that.”

“They didn’t listen to me then, is that it? I didn’t get their attention? Because I thought…”

“No, look, you did, that’s true, okay?” Holy shit, I’m in a hole here. “But her performance was original. She took a chance, and it worked. It worked tonight, might not work another night, might never work again, but tonight, it worked. That’s all I’m saying.”

“So what, I play safe then, is that it? Don’t take chances? My style is boring?”

“Well, no, not boring, just not original.”

A strange look washes over Sheila's face, something I've never seen before. I think I've crossed a line with that one, some imagined threshold. She's fuming. She's fucking grinding her teeth.

"Excuse me?" She clutches hold of my wrist.

"What? Your poems all sound the same." I squeak.

"Pardon me?" she says through her teeth, as she digs her fingernails into the underside of my forearm, twisting ever so slightly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it." I manage to pry my arm away and raise it up in a defensive pose to match her offensive one. "Really, I didn't mean it."

"But you said it. It must have meant something"

"I mean it's not just you. Janie, Amanda and the like three other girls, all you dub poets, you all sound exactly the same."

"What!?" Sheila's eyes open so wide five deep creases appear on her forehead. "I don't pigeonhole myself. I don't call myself a dub poet."

"No, no, of course you don't, but you might as wel...or you could. I mean you certainly sound like one of them."

"And what does that mean? What does that sound like?"

"Like you think you're a big black woman who's suffered generations of hardship."

She just turns away and looks out the window. That might have been a little harsh. The cab stops at a red light and suddenly she flings open the door and hops out, doesn't say a thing, just slams the door behind her. I guess I'm going to have to chase after her.

“Where you going? Where you going?” The driver yells as I open the door. “You no run! You pay me!”

“No, I no run.” I don’t know why, but I answer in his accent. “I pay you. No worries. I pay you. See?” I hand him a ten and keep fishing in my pockets for that fiver, I know I had one—I better have one. By the time I find it, hand it over and get out of the cab, she’s already turned the corner.

Goddamn, now what? Do I run? I’m going to have to run if I want to catch her, and I’ve got to catch her. She shouldn’t be alone in this end of St-Henri at this time of night—that’s good, take the high road—anyway I don’t feel much like walking home. Plus, Sheila will want to fight this out some more, she always does.

Holy shit, I’m out of shape, I’ll probably pay for this tomorrow. But jogging up to her, all out of breath, that’s got to, that should count for something, should be, like the heroic thing, or the boyfriend thing to do. She’s just up ahead, can almost stop, slow my pace, take a breath, try and act, play it cool.

“Hey,” control your breathing, “I ah...I took care of the taxi...you know...after you ran away.” And, smile.

“What are you doing, Corey?” Sheila asks turning up the walk to her building, glancing at me over her shoulder. Her eyes are worrying. They’re flat, lifeless. Something’s gone.

“I just thought...”

“What? That I’d want to talk to you right now?”

She steps inside the front door, stopping at the threshold and leaning back on the open door. I reach out my arm and lean against the other side of the doorframe, trying not to make it too obvious that I'm stretching out a cramp in my side.

"Did you think we were finished talking?" I'm not sure this is the question I should be asking, I just don't want to have to walk home.

"Were you not finished? Did you have some further criticism for me? A few more insights you wanted to share?"

"Sheila, come on." I reach out to stroke her shoulder but she bats my hand aside. "I'm sorry, look, it was unfair of me. It was unfair, and unqualified, and just, stupid." She looks totally unimpressed: slack jawed, clucking her tongue, fiddling with her bracelet, that doubtful smile. "Look, I'm just pissed off about the game tonight, okay? I lashed out and I'm sorry." Her eyes droop as she peers up at me, eyebrows lowering. "Can we just go upstairs? We don't have to talk about this, or we can, but not here." She drops her head and stares at her shoes. "Or I can go, whatever you like."

I step in closer and take her hands in mine. She looks up at me stares at me, right in my eyes, expressionless, for what feels like thirty seconds, then reaches up and brushes my bangs out of my eyes. "Let's go upstairs," she sighs.

"Are you sure?"

"Not really," she says heading in. That's good enough, I suppose.

We ride the elevator in silence, four flights, and it's tense. Maybe I should've gone. "Maybe I *should* go," I suggest as her key hits the hole.

“What? Why?” Surprisingly, she genuinely sounds surprised. She opens the door a little—not so much that Bacchus can escape—and strokes me on the shoulder. I give her what I think is a hopeful look.

“I’ll be ready to talk soon,” she says then opens the door wide and steps in.

Sheila’s apartment isn’t really an apartment at all. It’s a loft. A proper one too, in a converted factory, with 16-foot ceilings, old-school workshop floors, large wood columns, exposed ironwork, floor-to-ceiling windows, very la-di-da. The first time I laid eyes on the place I fell in love with her. The open concept takes some getting used to—no bedroom, just a screen to close off the bed, and the washer and dryer are in the bathroom—but once you adjust to doing everything in the one space, it’s awesome, it’s an awesome space. Of course she could never afford it, but her Mom pays her rent so long as she’s in school—if I had a deal like that, I’d go for a PhD.

Sheila heads straight over to the kitchen to check if Bacchus has food. He mustn’t, since I hear the rattle of kibble meeting bowl. So does Bacchus, emerging from parts unknown with a mournful wail and waddling into the kitchen. He’s a noisy bugger, but he’s all right as cats go, he tolerates me and I tolerate him. He’s fat and his head’s too small, but he doesn’t piss on the bed or scratch up my shoes. He does climb on Sheila’s lap and give me long looks that say, ‘I was here first, buddy’ and ‘She’s my mistress,’ but he’s never mean, never swipes, never gets too demanding—unless you’re eating chicken, God help you if you’re eating chicken within nose-shot—and anyway, Sheila’s awfully fond of him, and I guess I like the little wiener well enough too. I go over and give him a little pat on the head, and he looks up at me and squawks his disapproval. I take the hint

and a seat on the couch, turning on the TV while Sheila rummages through the fridge. I search for the highlights—to watch the two blown third-period leads, to see for myself where it all went wrong—but can't find them so I settle on the all-sports-highlights channel and wait.

Sheila settles on something to eat, three-day old Chalet Bar-B-Q. She must still be pissed if she's eating that, she's usually so freaked out about viruses and bacteria, not to mention calories and factory-farmed chicken. She sits down digging into a cold thigh. "Gimme the remote. We're not watching this," she says when she finally looks up.

"In a minute, I'm just waiting to see the highlights." I don't even look at her, I just stare at the screen, not even really registering what's on. It's only basketball.

"I didn't come home early, super early by the way, it's like barely eleven-thirty, and miss the rest of the night out with my friends, to watch you watch sports highlights." She reaches for the remote and I hold it away, so she lunges across me after it. Her breasts brush up against my face as her knee digs into my thigh. The sensation is confusing.

"Hey, come on, enough of that," I squeal as she climbs on top, straddling me, trying to pry the controller from my hand. "I just want to see the goals, just our game," I tell her, fighting her off and hiding my hand and the remote behind my back.

"It's at a commercial," she roars, gesturing towards the screen with both arms, losing her balance, tumbling backwards onto the table, then rolling onto the floor with a thump—looks like it hurt.

"You okay?" I extend a hand to help her up, which she doesn't take. "Anyway it'll be on soon, then you can watch whatever you want."

“No, gimme the remote,” she orders grabbing a drumstick and hurling it at me, at my face, hitting my neck.

“No!” I put my foot down, take a stand, I don’t take many but some need taking, and I won’t be pelted with poultry. “I missed the game to go to your stupid thing, and I think that entitles me to watch a little TV. Just a couple of highlights.”

“My stupid thing?” Sheila says slowly, as she stands, crossing her arms.

“Oh, don’t twist this around, you know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean,” she almost laughs, “I know what you mean. Well, I guess you mean my poetry. I suppose what you’re suggesting is, my poetry is stupid.” Her face is flush, her eyes moist. “That’s what my boyfriend’s telling me, that he thinks my passion, my *raison d’être*, is stupid!” And the tears begin.

“You know that’s not what I meant.” I feel like I’m sinking into the couch. “It just came out wrong.” I didn’t mean to make her cry.

“You’re damn right it did!” Sheila’s a screamer so the volume’s nothing new, but the intensity is. “You know I put up with all your *stupid* shit. The hours of video games, disappearing all day to go golfing, the terrible eighties movies—you know, Corey, just because a movie was made in the eighties doesn’t make it good, it usually makes it suck!” Sheila pauses to wipe away tears with the back of her hand. I have a chance, but I’m too scared to interrupt. “And do you think I give a damn about highlights, or who won between the Loose Leafs and Anteaters? I don’t even like hockey, and how many games have I watched with you?” Now is not the time to point out that it really hasn’t been that many. I just keep staring at her, trying to absorb the impact. “Plus you don’t *do* anything! You dropped out of school. You just hang around my house all day. You work

barely enough hours at that shitty job to cover the rent on your bug-infested room, which, by the way, I don't know why you keep since you always stay here. You have no money to take me anywhere, ever, or buy me anything, but somehow find money for beer. And you tell me *my* shit's stupid. Fuck you!"

Sheila storms off towards her desk at the far end of the loft. I should maybe follow, but the highlights of the game are starting at last, so I stay put. Also there's a real possibility that she might hit me. She's back in no time with an armful of folders and notebooks. She drops the load on the table with a thud.

"Stupid!" she declares, and she shoves the lot off the table towards me. Notebooks crash on my toes and papers fly all over my lap. I start trying to gather some of it up but she slaps a hand down on the pile I'm holding, grabs hold of my wrist and tells me, "Don't waste your time, Cor, it's stupid, remember? It's just my stupid thing!"

My eyes betray me for a moment, just a moment, and I glance at the TV catching Brisebois lollygagging back, letting Sturm race past him into the corner to get the puck and set up Kessel for the go-ahead goal. I grimace out of habit, almost involuntarily, and Sheila's wise to me.

"Are you even listening?" She's got her hands on her hips, looking menacing, towering over me. I kind of want to try and look around her, but don't.

"Yes, yes," I say turning off the TV, "I'm listening." The silence is deafening.

I go back to gathering her papers and poems and books, only now she doesn't try to stop me, instead she stares, sobbing, shaking, eventually collapsing in a quivery heap.

I stack the papers on the corner of the table and go over to her. I put my arms around her, and kiss her on the top of the head. "I'm sorry, baby." She looks up at me

with waterlogged eyes. “I’m an idiot.” I add, and she nods but still says nothing, convulsing with every sob. I need some time to think. How do you calm a hysterical woman? “I’m going to go take a shower,” I tell her, kissing her on the head again, breathing her in—she smells of herbal shampoo, of anxiety, of home—and leave her alone on the floor.

It takes a while to get used to the smell of cat piss while you shower, but you do it. At first it was almost enough to make me not want to stay over here, and there are times it’s nearly unbearable to pee, but Sheila’s pretty good about it. There really isn’t anywhere else to put the litter box, the bathroom is the only real room and it can’t just be sitting out in the open. The bathroom is also the only room with a lock, the only refuge in the whole apartment, but I didn’t lock it—we don’t usually lock each other out. Hopefully she’ll calm down a bit with me in here, realize how overblown the whole thing got—it really escalated. It was one slip of the tongue, one momentary lapse. I apologized.

I remember reading in a Michael Moore book once that men should try to respect the women in their lives enough to use a washcloth and not rub the bar of soap directly on their balls, as I rub the bar of soap directly on my balls. Funny how these thoughts shoot up in your brain at the moment you can use them least. Man, I got to start working out, this gut’s getting out of control. I’m not a big enough guy for a gut. Thin guy with a beer-belly, I’m going to look like the neighbour from ‘King of the Hill’. No ass, neither. I should cut my hair too, takes too long to rinse this shit out, lousy, awkward, head-high faucet—another knock on this bathroom—always getting shampoo in my eyes.

Suddenly the door flies open, slams in to the wall and Sheila enters in a fury.

“Hey, hon.” I try a soft tone, looking to ease into a reconciliation. No dice. Instead I’m scalded by hot water. “Holy Fuck!” I scream leaping out of the shower, through the curtain—taking it with me—winding up in a ball on the linoleum wrapped in plastic, possibly with third degree burns. Holy Fuck!

“Get out of my house!” Sheila yells at me through the curtain, which is sticking to me like a wet tissue.

“What’s wrong with you?” I yell back.

“Get the fuck out of my house!” She starts shoving me as I struggle to get my footing, and I tumble over, my skin searing. “I’m glad you never gave up your apartment, it’s a good thing, now you got someplace to go, somewhere to be kicked to.” And she literally kicks me in the ass. “So get out. Ba-bye!”

I manage to get free of the curtain finally and ask, “Seriously, what the fuck has gotten into you?”

“I told you,” she says, pulling me up and rolling me out the bathroom door, “I want you out of my fucking house!”

“All right, I get it, you’re really super pissed, but I’m soaking wet and…”

“Oh you’ve never seen pissed like I am.” She shoots me one of the hardest stares I’ve ever seen—eyes piercing, lips drawn tight, chin jutting out—one I would want to whip out myself if I ever wound up in prison, then slips past me and opens the front door.

“Is this because of Barry?”

“What? What are you talking about?” She laughs it off, her face loosening, but it’s a nervous laugh, guilty maybe.

“Are you fucking Barry?”

“Barry?” Her voice cracks and she won’t look at me. “I’m...no, no, Corey, I’m not *fucking* Barry, you asshole!” Still hasn’t made eye contact since I put that out there though. “What even...w-where would you...why? Barry?”

“Well you sure don’t seem to have any interest in fucking me anymore so...”

“C’mon, Cor, it hasn’t been that long,” she sighs

“Eleven days, Sheila, twelve when tonight ends. And that was the first time in a week.” Not that I’m counting.

One hand clutching the doorknob, the other planted firmly on her hip, Sheila looks at me, looks into me, bores through me with this unsettling expression, a dull lustre, doubtful and weary, like that can’t be right, the lines around her eyes, wrinkles, pronounced. I feel a heat in my temples, behind my eyes, and I know I’m returning a glare of my own, but I also know I’m losing this stare-down—I’m blinking like I’m looking at the sun—and my point is moot anyway. I’m right, but so what?

“Okay, Sheila, you win, I’ll go, but I need my clothes.” She sighs a heavy sigh, letting go of the doorknob and going to get what I need. She kicks my jeans over to me, sending them up into my gut, rubbing against the speckled burns on my belly. Then she grabs me by the shoulders, guides me to the door and shoves me backwards out of it. I trip on the threshold and land onto my ass, naked and dripping.

“Sheila,” I plead, raising open palms, “come on.” And she slams the door. “Is this because I asked you about Barry?”

I hop up and knock. Nothing. I knock again, louder. Still nothing. I kick the door. I pound on it with my fists. A neighbour pops her head out from down the hall. I cover myself with my jeans and shoot her a sheepish smile. She smiles back, almost giggling,

shakes her head, pushes one open palm towards the ground to gesture me to be quiet, then disappears. I knock again, softer, and start pleading.

“Sheila, come on. I need my clothes. All I have is a pair of jeans, I need some shoes at least.” But nothing, she may not even be close enough to hear. I knock some more, tapping out a beat, which I know she hates, and eventually she opens up, flinging the door back on me, scaring the be-Jesus out of me.

“What?” she says in the most indifferent tone imaginable. As if there could be any doubt as to what I want or need.

“Sheila, I’m sorry. I crossed the line with that dub poet comment,” she sighs, “or that Barry comment,” her face goes flush, “or that stupid comment,” her eyes narrow, “and I know you’re angry, so I’ll leave. But could I please have the rest of clothes? My shoes?” I puff my cheeks and raise my eyebrows in that ‘come on man’ face, but she’s unmoved. “Otherwise I’m going to have to just sleep here in the hall naked I guess.”

“You won’t last the night, Corey, somebody’ll call the cops.” Her lack of emotion is uncanny.

“Okay, I get it, you don’t want to talk to me...”

“I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t want to look at you. I don’t want to think about you. I want you out my house, out of my life, and I want you to pay me the money you owe me!” Her increased volume brings the nosy neighbour back out.

“*Je m’excuse, Mme. Orielle,*” Sheila sweetly slips in, and the old lady slinks away with a wave of her hand.

“Now, look at that, you’re making a scene, you’re embarrassing me.” I’m embarrassing you? I’m the one who’s naked and *I’m* embarrassing you. “Now get out of here.”

“I would *love* to get out of here. Nothing would make me happier, but I need my shoes. And my shirt.”

Sheila slips back inside shutting the door nearly all the way behind her. She’s back a moment later, shoes in hand. I snatch them away and she throws my t-shirt at me—the one with the sheriff’s badge and six-shooters printed on it, the one I had to change out of earlier. As I go to catch it I drop my jeans, and she laughs. I look down at myself, then at her, then back at my naked self, and sort of laugh too.

“Come on, Sheila, is this really how you want this to end? Is this really the last image you want of me?”

“Honestly,” she leans into the doorframe, arm above her head, “I couldn’t think of a better image to remember you by, then you standing here with your little dick in your hand, begging my forgiveness.” She crosses her arms and smiles a satisfied smile. Little?

“Actually I was begging for my shoes.”

“Fuck you, Corey Bonspiel,” she spits. “You see me, you cross the street!” And she slams the door.

What the fuck just happened?

I gather up my clothes, no socks or underwear, but enough. Fighting the urge to knock I dress quickly, careful on the zip up, and head out to face the night. I got a bottle at home and I need a drink, but it’s at least a five-or-six-song walk. Got “You’re A Woman, I’m A Machine” lined up on the iPod, time to get galumphing back.

3

Water. I need water. I could drink a swimming pool. Got a thirst to choke a camel, a rager of a headache, a rager of a hard-on—one more easily remedied than the other—and a dull recollection of last night. The reading, Lorelei, the cab, the highlights, the fight, the crying, the burns, the neighbour, the walk, thinking about but not stopping for poutine—no doubt a huge mistake—getting home, falling up the stairs, gulping CC straight from the bottle, and now the headache. Probably there's some sort of correlation between the speed you drink and the force of the hangover. Probably. It sure feels like it.

The girls next door are at it again. One thing I've learned about lesbian sex is that it's loud and goes on forever. These two are usually good for fifteen minutes of moaning and groaning. I guess it lasts longer when you take us out of the mix.

Sunlight's creeping through a crack in the curtains, piercing a line of shine, a bright wall of dust, across my room, which is not an apartment but passes for one, it's just an old bedroom in a Victorian Brownstone that's been converted into eight units, all tiny one-and-a-halves and two-and-a-halves, and mine's probably the smallest, maybe twelve-by-twelve. It's got everything you need though, the bare necessities, a bathroom with tub, a kitchen counter, sink, stove, mini-fridge, and room enough for a few furnishings. Sure the corner of the bed's a foot from the stove, and the TV's shoved in the closet, and when I wash the dishes I'm standing on the welcome mat, and the whole place reeks of propane, and it can't not be cluttered, but it's cheap, and right downtown—well, on the edge of it anyway, in the so-called Shaughnessy Village, though nobody actually calls it that.

I've decorated up the place, the room, not too bad, not too fancy, but pretty all right. Got a bunch of posters at a sale on campus the first fall I was here: four droogs silhouetted in lamplight, James Dean strolling through a rain-soaked Times Square, a couple of ironworkers breaking for lunch, the Eiffel tower through a wrought-iron gate. I went for wide shots to give the space some size, and black-and-whites to class it up a bit, then Sheila told me I needed some colour, bought me a blue meanie I stuck on the back of the door. We used to stay here a lot, Sheila and I, our little downtown pad to complement the loft on the canal, but we haven't been here much of late, not since we found the bugs, the bedbugs, the bedbug bites. Bedbugs. You think you can never get 'em but fucking bastards are everywhere downtown. It's an infestation, and my absentee landlady won't get her act together, so they ain't leaving quickly—itchy little blood-suckers—and we've been living at Sheila's.

Man, am I single? Am I alone? Should I call her? Would she like that? Would she want that? What would I say? Sorry? I'm not sorry, she should be sorry. Do I even want to call her?

Fuck, my head. You forget how bad it can be until you're back in the throes. Opening my eyes hurts. Sitting up hurts. Stretching hurts. Even blinking hurts. Remembering hurts most of all. I need a coffee and a nurse. I need an aspirin and a bath. I need a stiff drink and a slap in the face. I need a cure.

I need to smoke a joint.

Man, I wish I had a little bud right now. Goddamn if it ain't the best hangover cure. Fogs your head but like lightens it some too, dulls the throbbing. Gives your appetite the kick in the ass it needs so you can actually choke something down. Eating

always gets you feeling better, if not good. Of course, I don't have any weed, or any way to smoke it if I did. Don't even have papers or a pipe here since I ain't been smoking as much as I used too. Sheila's had me seeing it was hindering me, holding me back or whatever, I'm not convinced, but it's healthy, at least healthier. We smoked together all the time, Sheila and I, when we first started dating. Laughed all night, talked into the morning, but then she decided she wasn't writing any good poetry because of the weed—and who knows maybe that's true, maybe she wasn't—so no more for her. Then it was 'if it is in the house, I'll smoke it 'til it's gone,' so no bringing it in the house either. Now I'm not too sure where to even get some, don't have a dealer, or a guy, or a connection, but I know people who smoke pot, and if they smoke it they buy it.

C'mon, pick up your goddamn phone. Yada, yada, message, let's go. "Yo Quinn, where are you? It's Corey, buddy, I need you to talk to you. I've got a rager of a hangover, Sheila took a shit on my head last night and I'm dying to smoke up, hoping you can help me make that happen. All right, shoot me back A-sap, I'm counting on you. Make this happen." Useless motherfucker. This day ain't getting easier.

Do I have a Tylenol? Do I have anything? Why does it all have to be so hard? Everything's a struggle. Glass of water, have to wash a glass. Breakfast, have to go shopping. Got a layer of fuzz on my tongue like cat fur dragged through ass, got to brush my teeth to fix that, toothbrush is at Shelia's. Clothes are at Shelia's—all I got's an old work t-shirt with "STAFF" on the back—hell, everything's at Shelia's. Even Shelia. Bitch. And what set her off? When did I cross the line? Was it the dub poet comment? What did I do? What did I say? Was it the shoe comment? She fucking hates it when I change the subject during a fight. Probably was the 'stupid' comment but she knows that

was just a figure of speech, she should. I should've tried to have sex with her instead of showering, showering was stupid, even if she'd turned me down—she was going to turn me down—it couldn't have been worse then it was. Like, now what am I going to do?

Fuck, my head hurts. Maybe a shower will sort me out, but there's all that standing. I need a coffee, maybe coffee. Goddamn, no coffee either. No coffee, no Tylenol, no joint, no end in sight. Argh, I so don't want to work tonight, I don't want to work ever again really. Jesus, look at my eyes, that's brutal. My pores are oozing a lethal blend of lager and rye I can smell as well as feel. Bristly. I got to shave if I'm going to work, get written up if I don't, got to be clean-shaven to talk on the phone—pervasive corporate control. Maybe I won't go to work. Maybe I'll grow a beard, 'cause fuck them. Only, would that extenuate or exasperate the recessed chin? It would define the jaw line at least, but don't want a chinstrap. Maybe a moustache—though there are so many ironic moustaches out there already, bound to get lost in that crowd. Can you explain that your moustache is serious? If it *is* serious, does it need explaining? Shouldn't it stand for itself, defying explanation, being serious? I don't know. I know I don't want to shave. And I know I don't want to go to work.

Man, how did they lose that game last night, argh, so much shit last night, terrible. Two leads in the third period, you don't win series when you blow third period leads, such bullshit. And I couldn't even fucking watch it, stupid poetry, and then I had to fucking hear about it on top of that. So I would have rather watched the game than listened to another night of poetry, so what? Who wouldn't? It's a little light to be thrown out into the hall naked, like, fuck Sheila! And Christ I went out like a chump. Like two blown third period leads. I should've broken something. I should've pissed on her

doorstep. Fucking nosey neighbour would've probably called the cops, would've topped the night off perfect, an arrest. Might've been worth it though, hell, I could have run.

Drago.

Drago's my downstairs neighbour, well one of them, he lives in #2, just inside the front door, and it always stinks of weed outside his room, so I think maybe he can help me. I hope he can help me. Drago's a big Slavic monster, tall, broad-shouldered, fit, like built, clearly works out, with short-cropped blonde hair, sort of looks like his namesake from Rocky IV—actually I'm not sure his name is really Drago, people might just call him that because he looks like Dolph Lundgren—an imposing figure, he always has a serious, kind of threatening or disapproving look on his face, even when he's smiling, like he's always just about to ask you what the hell you're looking at, or want, or are doing here. But he's friendly enough I guess, not that we've talked, but we say hello, we nod, we acknowledge each other exist and live in the same building, so that's a start. One of us was bound to need a favour eventually.

I'm not too comfortable with this, little nervous about knocking, showing up unexpected for the first time ever and asking for drugs, well, weed anyway. But, fuck it, I want to get stoned and Quinn still ain't answering. Also not having any gitch on is throwing me off a bit. Couldn't find a single fucking pair in my entire room, and jeans without underwear is a rough and itchy adventure.

Man, I hope he's not sleeping. It's well after noon. Drago doesn't answer on the first knock, but I hear voices. Do I knock again? I still hear voices. Drago doesn't answer on the second knock; a tall, angular girl does though—probably his girlfriend. She looks

like a gypsy princess, or a Russian tennis player. She has long, straight, dark hair, almost black, high cheekbones, a pointy little nose and sparkling green eyes, yet something about her face is off, kind of strange. She's wearing an oversized man's dress shirt with a red-paisley pattern that's hanging off her left shoulder, a scarf tied around her head like a bandana, fuzzy pink leg warmers and not a lot else—maybe nothing else. She sort of closes the door on herself, half inside and half out, leans into me exposing a good deal of cleavage which my eyes dart down to—but not for too long—and says, “Yes?” in a tone somewhere between a challenge and a question.

“Hi, I'm Corey. I live upstairs.”

“Hello Corey from upstairs, I'm Radmila.” She extends a hand and I shake it.

“Were we expecting you?” There's that tone again.

“Ah, no, no I don't think so.” I force a smile I hope is friendly not creepy.

“Well, what can I help you then?” She opens the door back up a bit as she says this and crosses one long leg over the other—nice, nice legs.

“Yeah, maybe.” I hope his name really is Drago., “Is Drago around?” I ask even though I've already heard him and can see him over Radmila's shoulder in a wife-beater and grey sweatpants, waving at me from the couch.

“Hey man, what's up?” Drago rises up off the couch and Radmila steps back and I want to step inside but am afraid to ask, so I stand in the doorway feeling awkward.

Drago grabs something I can't make out off the coffee table and thrusts it towards me, right in my face.

“Look at this shit, man. Look.” He hands it to me with some force, and I fumble with it. It’s a matchbook with five or six small burn marks on it. “I found this shit on stoop, man. They’re doing drugs, man.”

“Who?” I ask as he pushes up on me, forcing me back into the hall, closing the door, almost slamming the door, behind him. Maybe I picked a bad time to introduce myself, I’m certainly not at my best, and I ain’t so sure my request’s going to be well received.

“The crackheads man, who else? They burn when they use cigarettes to pick up the crack-rock. They smoke their crack on our stoop, fucking dirty pig bastards! Last week, man, I find one sleeping inside the door. Right here.” He rushes past me and throws open the inside door of the vestibule, pointing. “He stinks piss and shit, like the vomit of the universe, man. I had to kick the fucker just to wake up the son of bitch. It’s two feet from my front door, man. Dirty crackheads could walk right in, right to my face.” He gets in my face to illustrate his point. I pity the crackhead who walks into Drago’s. “I call landlady, man, she does nothing, says it’s the neighbourhood. I say if neighbourhood so bad, you fix door lock. But she do nothing.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty useless.” I’m trying to be agreeable, trying not to look scared.

“Yeah.” Drago slaps my chest hard with the back of his hand, and I think I might puke, “Fucking right she’s useless, I’d fix myself but she’d never pay me back.”

“Probably not, man, probably not.” I need to get back upstairs, or at least off my feet, this is way more than I’m ready to deal with. Drago exhales forcefully and throws his hands up in frustration and I have no idea what he’s about to do next, like none. I take

a defensive stance just in case, but he doesn't notice, he just shakes his head and heads back into his place.

“Come, come,” he says. “You like smoke joint with us?”

I could kiss this man.

“You have no idea,” I say with a laugh, and he looks at me sort of puzzled, so I add, “Yes. Yes, I'd love to smoke a joint with you,” just so there's no confusion. Drago smirks and lays his giant mitt on my shoulder as he leads me inside.

Drago's place could almost be called an apartment. It has two distinct rooms, the kitchen—which is big enough for a small table—and the everything-else room, with a futon, currently folded into a couch, a long, low rectangular glass table, and a big home entertainment unit on the wall just inside the door. The table is covered in all sorts of trash: ashtrays, pop cans, dirty utensils, cigarette butts, bits of tobacco and weed. The floor's not a lot better. The big selling feature to his pad is the bay window that looks onto the street, nearly covers the whole wall. On the opposite wall, above the couch/bed, there's a giant red-white-and-green striped flag—Hungary or Bulgaria? It's not the one with the little rifle-toting French dude—and on the far wall, above a large wooden desk, is a collage of snapshots of what must be family and friends pasted to a corkboard. People grouped around tables in what look like bars and banquet halls, vacation photos, beaches and ski resorts.

“You want coffee, man?” Drago asks disappearing into the kitchen.

“Yes. Please.” Things are definitely looking up.

Once inside the full stench of the place hits me and it's a strange smell, animalistic and musty. I mean it's sweat and sex and stale cigarettes, half-empty beer bottles, marijuana, dirty laundry, but it's something else too, something stronger, something that's overpowering all the others. I'm trying to decipher it as I take a seat on the rolling office chair which is just inside the door, suspiciously far from the desk, and Radmila shuffles down the couch towards me, her head below her knees, looking underneath.

"Look at this little weasel." She says shovelling something furry up from under the couch and shoving it in my face.

"What the hell is that thing?" It looks like a fuzzy snake.

"It is ferret. You never seen a ferret?" She looks shocked, looks like I told her I'd never eaten a pear. The little creature hops out of her grip, onto my lap, scurries up my arm and starts sniffing and licking my ear. "Don't be scared, he can't hurt you," she assures me, giggling, but it's a creepy sensation, and I'm not in the mood. Plus, this thing is even smellier up close. Radmila notices I'm uncomfortable and takes the beast back, coddling it, rocking it in her arms, stroking its head. "So soft. You'd make very nice coat, ferret." I attempt a smile.

"Are you okay?" she suddenly asks, laying a hand on my knee. "You don't look too good." Gee, thanks for noticing, and this from someone who doesn't even know how I look.

"Ugh, hangover."

"Big night last night, man?" Drago asks, popping his head around the corner from the kitchen.

“Ah, not so much a big night, but a bad night.”

“What happened?” asks Radmila, with what seems like genuine concern—
Drago’s head disappeared before I even finished answering—but I’m not sure I want to
get into this, not sure I want to talk. But I don’t want to be rude.

“My girlfriend and I had a fight.”

“Sorry,” she says, slumping her shoulders. “She is the blonde girl? Face look like
a bulldog?” A bulldog?

“Uh, she’s blonde, yeah. And she kind of has a little pug nose if that’s what you
mean.” A bulldog?

“Why you date girl looks like dog?” Drago asks coming in with three mugs
clunked together in his left hand, sugar, milk and spoons in the right.

“I didn’t...she said she looked like a bulldog,” I point an accusing finger at
Radmila, “I never sai..I never even thought that.” A bulldog?

Drago puts the sugar and milk on the table, then lets the spoons fall, crashing
down, clanging together, ringing in my head. Where’s that joint? He lays the mugs down,
selecting one with a black-and-red crest encircled in Cyrillic writing for himself, pushing
the pink Betty-Boop one to Radmila, leaving me the skull-shaped one to try to drink
from. I scoop a spoonful of sugar and drop it into the very hot, very black, very strong-
smelling coffee, and stir. This is precisely the effect I wish some pot was having on my
head at this very moment. I take a sip—this skull thing weighs a ton—without waiting for
the milk. It scalds my tongue and leaves a bitter aftertaste. I put the skull down and try
not to look uncomfortable. I really should’ve showered. “Turkish!” Drago
exclaims unprovoked. “It’s good, yes?”

“Yeah. Yeah, great,” I return without conviction. Drago looks happy enough though, proud, playing host. He settles into the couch and lifts a cigar box off the floor. Radmila turns towards him, lifting her legs and stacking them together in front of her, across her, exposing her right thigh up to her ass, almost exposing her ass—can’t look too long. I look over at Drago, he’s got the box open, his weed supplies spread out within, baggie, grinder, papers, lighters, pipe, scale—I should’ve been down here ages ago. Drago pops open a little baggie, a new smell wafts into the mix.

“Sniff,” he demands, shoving the bud halfway up my nose. I sniff. “Good, yes?”

“Smells dank,” I tell him, though I don’t care for this ‘my weed’s the best, most crazy, knock you on your ass, it’s called whatever, it won a contest’ nonsense, but he’s opening the door for me. Plus I’ve been wondering when someone was going to ask me why I came over.

“You think you might could hook me up with some of that? Like with your guy, or whatever.” Drago doesn’t say anything, he doesn’t even look up, “like, next time you’re going, or...”

“He delivery. Always delivery.” Drago still doesn’t look up, just bits up a bud with his hands and puts the chunks in the grinder, spinning it between his giant man fingers. Somehow mine have never bulked out, never became real *hands*—then again Drago does construction, manual labour works unexpected muscles.

“I can try for you, I call him, but usually Sunday he work.” Drago spins his phone on the table in front of him and dials, turning the phone to speaker. It goes straight to voicemail, and he flips it shut with a flick of his wrist. “Sorry man.” He pats me on the

back, before slamming the open grinder on the glass table. It makes the coffee leap out of my one skull, and echoes through the other.

“So Corey,” Radmila says in a breathy voice, “what it is that happened with your girlfriend? What it is you two fight about?” She has soft, saucer eyes, but something’s not right about them.

“I said something stupid and she overreacted. Freaked out. Starting throwing things at me, crying, totally hysterical, like assaulted me. She threw me out of her apartment.”

A far-off look washes over her, contemplative, like she’s mulling something over. “What it is you said? Was it wery mean, or is she just total bitch?”

“You watching the game last night, man?” Drago asks, completely interrupting while running his pinkie across the pot in the paper, evening things out. “I watch, man, I like Habs, I like hockey. In my country, hockey is not sport number one, but here in Canada, I like hockey.” He smiles at me seeking approval. Somewhere the ferret scurries noisily, but invisibly.

“Yeah, I didn’t really watch last night’s game, I had to go to my girl’s poetry reading.” I turn to Radmila, “That’s where the fight started. I wanted to watch the game but I had to go to her...*thing*. She’s something of a self-styled poet.”

“Oh?” Radmila raises her eyebrows and looks strange, stranger. Then she looks over at Drago, then back at me, and pointing over my shoulder says, “I paint.”

I look and there’s a canvas in the corner, reds, and yellows, and oranges, and black, swirling and splattered. Abstract I guess. I look back at her and nod. “Interesting.”

“Thanks.” She spins around and leans towards me and I get another glimpse of cleavage, skin stretched tight across ribs. I peek over, but Drago’s oblivious, flicking a big cone of a joint with his index finger, shaking the weed down into place. Radmila lays her hand on my knee, so I meet her eyes, her unusual eyes.

“I think I know why she is angry, your girlfriend, I too understand. I have shows, exhibition of my paintings, at my school or at café or gallery. He,” she darts a thumb at Drago, “never wants to come for me, complains he has to come for me. When he is there he want to leave, he walk around like sad man.” She drops her shoulder in a mock ape walk. “Never looks anyone else’s work. Talks to no one, not smiling even, not polite. I must apologizing him all the time.” I feel kind of awkward listening to this with Drago sitting right there, next to her, yet he acts like he can’t even hear her. It’s fairly impressive. “He embarrass me to everyone, classmates, professors, parents, gallery owners, potential buyers. So, I leaving him at home. That’s it, I say, you don’t share with me my passion, my dream, stay away, but it’s still my dream.” She’s getting kind of riled up, her eyes look even stranger with tears in the corners. “This for me makes me wery angry, but I accept is not for him.”

“Here, man, light this up.” A beautifully sculpted joint and a lighter are tossed at me and I fumble, almost smooshing the doob, but save it. The lighter crashes at my feet. I scoop it up and pinch the joint between my lips. This is it. I flick the Bic. Flame meets paper. I inhale.

It’s fucking horrible.

I didn’t see it, but Drago cut this with tobacco. As soon as it hits the back of my throat I feel a tickle and burst out coughing, and once I start I can’t stop. My eyes well up

with tears, my lungs contract, my throat feels like it is being scraped from the inside with every hack. I pass the joint to Radmila, groping blindly for my coffee skull.

Drago laughs. “Strong shit, man.”

Yeah, strong shit: Tobacco! I hate it when people roll with tobacco. I hate it, and I don’t understand it. What are these, war times? Are we rationing? Is there a great weed shortage? Tastes like shit. Ruins the weeds. Throws a headache instead of a buzz. What a fucking day.

Radmila smokes the joint slowly, deliberately, savouring each puff, pursing her lips—her thick, full lips—as she inhales, looking like a studio starlet or sexy Bond villain. She passes it left to Drago, stands and wanders off into the kitchen. My eyes follow her out then wander over to the corkboard photo album, to a picture of Radmila wearing a tight leather vest and a strained smile—as if tired of posing, as if the camera was acting up—standing on a balcony or a rooftop with a sea of orange-tiled roofs and spooky spires extending out behind her. I wonder where that is? I’d ask, but Drago seems distracted, hitting the joint like it owes him money, quick, powerful pulls, exhaling out his mouth then inhaling back in through his nose, creating a reverse waterfall of smoke. Maybe he’s showing off. Maybe he just puffs tough. Radmila returns with three glasses of water and sets them on the table, clinking glass on glass.

“Thanks, Radmila,” I say.

“Not a problem. And call me Rad.” Rad? Not Mila, Rad? That’s pretty rad.

“That’s pretty *rad*,” I chuckle. She looks confused, maybe she wasn’t here in the 80’s, not familiar with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. I wave at the air with my hand,

wiping away the pun. Drago ashes the joint and passes it to me, and I take a slow, almost weak, hit, hoping not to reignite the tickle.

“You have talked today to your girlfriend?” Rad asks.

“No, not yet. Not sure I’m going to. She was pretty pissed last night.” I pass her the joint, our fingers mingling for a long second.

“Does she stay angry?” she asks inhaling. “Usually, when you are having a fight?”

“That’s the angriest I’ve ever seen her. She’s never broken up with me before.”

“You were dumped?” She just drops that out there, scuttling towards to me all eager and wide-eyed—even for her. I just shrug. I hadn’t thought of it like that, but I guess she’s right, I guess I was. She’s lost interest in the joint, tries passing it to Drago, but he’s lost interest too it seems, on his feet, hunched over the computer, scrolling through his iTunes library, so she sets it in the ashtray.

“You still love her? It was a love not just sex?”

“Yes,” I say quickly, reflexively, then clarify, “it was a love, we were in love. Though not sure how she feels about me anymore, not sure how I feel about her really either.” Still a little pissed about the end of the night, some unresolved shit there, for sure. Rad gives me a pity-filled look—one normally reserved for lost children or injured birds—it’s kind of nice, comforting almost.

“What you hate most about her?” Drago asks spinning into the conversation.

“What does she piss you off about? Think. Huh? Make yourself list. Now you don’t put up with that shit no more.” That’s an interesting piece of advice.

“That’s terrible piece of advice.” Rad smacks him on the shoulder for it, but he just smiles. Then she mutters something in Hulgarian—whatever it is—and he stops smiling and goes back to the computer.

“Don’t do that, please don’t do that. Tell me you don’t do that,” Rad pleads.

She’s got my hands in hers, stroking softly, comforting, concerned, like she’s really worried I might, that I already am, so I tell her, “I won’t do that.” But I’ve already begun: the way she whines, the pretentious hats she wears, having to carry her purse, her purple lipstick, when she quotes Foucault or Rimbaud or Dickinson or Emerson, that I even have all those names floating around my head, that...

“Good, good, don’t do. He’s...idiot. Do opposite if you must do.”

As she says this Drago plops down beside her, scooping up the joint and firing it up in one fell swoop, as the room fills with the unmistakable sound of a Jupiter-8. The synth gives way to palm-muted, distorted guitars over a driving drumbeat pounded out on floor toms. And it’s loud. Rad looks at Drago disapprovingly and shakes her head. He ignores her, or doesn’t notice, rocking along, alternating between air instruments. When the vocals come in he lip-syncs along: “*Here we stand, worlds apart, hearts broken in two, two, two.*” He holds up two fingers and pulses them towards me.

“Journey!” he finally says, sticking out his tongue and flashing the metal horns.

“You like?” he asks, passing the joint, then adds, “They’re awesome. They Rock!” before I can answer, which wouldn’t have been my answer.

“What about present, a gift?” Rad shouts at me over the music. “For your girlfriend. Flowers, teddy bear, chocolates. Women, we love to getting gifts. Love it.”

It's a thought, definitely, but what I would get? What brings you back from 'if you see me, you cross the street?' I sort of bob my head back and forth, hoping to convey a sceptical interest. As I hand her the joint I tell her, "It'll have to be *some* present."

"What kind gift you usually give her? She has favourite flower?" She leans back and takes a puff, tilting her head back and exhaling up into the air, Drago headbanging away next to her.

"I don't usually give her flowers." Or any gifts really. "I'm sure she likes roses, right?" Rad looks annoyed, three deep lines across her forehead, eyebrows jutting out—that's it! Her eyes are too far apart. Definitely it.

She takes another hit and says, "How about book of poems?"

"Oh, good idea."

"She has favourite poet? Who is this poet?"

"Oh, good question." It really is. I have no clue. Damn, I should know this.

"This, you should know this. You have been together with this girlfriend how long?"

"Two years. More than two years," I admit. I *really* should know that. "But, anyway, it doesn't matter, I don't think there's much hope left for us anymore. I'm pretty sure she's been cheating on me."

Suddenly Drago springs out of his Journey-induced stupor. "You should kick his ass, man! You can't have that." He's up on his feet, punching his hand. "Anyone touch her," he grabs Rad's arm and yanks her towards him and she has to reach for the back of the couch to steady herself, "I beat their ass, man. I fucking kill him!"

“Yes, yes, my defender. My big strong man.” Rad pats and rubs Drago’s large, now bulging, bicep. “But fighting is not always answer, not for everyone. Some people has to use other, different, approach.”

“What man, he a big guy? You cannot beat his ass?” Before I can explain myself, Rad does it for me.

“He doesn’t want to beat his ass. He doesn’t want to fight. He won’t win her back fighting, not if she already with other man.”

“Well, I do it anyway,” Drago says shaking his head, before carefully passing me the now quite small joint and moving back over to the computer, back to iTunes.

I feel something move against my leg again, and at first I think it’s the ferret, but it’s just my pocket vibrating. I dig in, crossing over my body, left hand in right pocket, since the joint’s in my right hand, since I’m still hitting it while struggling away. I get the phone, flip it open. It’s a text from Quinn: ‘green means go’.

Fucking far out man.

“Listen, guys, Drago, Rad, it’s been really great, thanks for the coffee and the joint, but I...” I stand up and put my phone away. “I should really...I got to be going.”

“That was your girlfriend?” Rad wonders aloud.

“Who? Sheila? Ah, no just a, this guy from work.”

She looks deflated, shoulders drooping. “Too bad.” She smiles, but it’s forced.

“Alright, man,” Drago says, standing and extending a hand, which I grasp, my bones being crushed in the shake. “Come by anytime.”

“Cool. Maybe I’ll swing by about grabbing some weed sometime.”

“I probably can get later if you want. Is no problem, one phone call.” He pats me on the back and heads back to his screen.

Rad is on her feet, we’re nearly eye-to-wonky-eye, “Give her time, Corey,” she says, kissing my right cheek, “she might do change of heart,” she adds, kissing the left.

As I’m closing the door behind me I notice Drago picking something up from the shelf over the desk. A vase with a single wilting rose in it.

“Yes, flower is dead,” says Rad with a sigh. “It was beautiful while it lasted.”

I shut the door and softly trudge upstairs.

4

Calling in sick when you're hungover is always a bit of a gamble, but only if you'll really miss your job. I mean, I didn't see anyone last night. No one from work would be out at a poetry reading. Still, depending on which TL answers, it could be a chore.

“Good Afternoon, Bijoux Communications, Tammy speaking.” Perfect! Tammy's a pushover, lets any guy who flirts the least bit get away with murder 'cause she's a total bag-over-the-head-er: hot body, ugly face. Like pockmarked, shovel-shaped face, but a smoking body, and always wearing these sexy get-ups, business suits with fishnets, or a corset, or animal-print, or something a little inappropriate, and always tight-fitting.

“Hey, Tammy, this is Corey Bonspiel. How you doing today, girl?”

“Okay. What's up Corey?”

“Um, yeah, listen Tammy...” You have to do these things slowly, pause like you're really sorry to have to do this. “...here's the thing, I'm supposed to work tonight but I don't think I'm going to be able to make it.” Pause again, build some suspense. “I'm *really* not feeling well.” One last pause, and hit her with the big guns, “I've been on my toilet all morning.”

“Okay, okay, TMI.” Who the hell still says TMI? “What time were you supposed to be in?”

“I'm scheduled 4-11.”

“You know it's almost two o'clock, don't you? You're supposed to give us at least four hours notice so that we have time to find a replacement.” Stupid corporate regulations.

“I know, I’m sorry. But I thought I might pull through, it’s not like I don’t need the money.” That’s always a good one. “I really wish there was some way I could do it, I hate to miss a shift working for you.” So is that.

“Well, if you’re sick, you’re sick, and you should stay home. We don’t everyt one here catching anything. But next time try to make the call a little earlier, okay?”

“Sure, yeah, no problem. Thanks, Tammy.”

Awesome, totally awesome, ‘bout time a bounce went my way. Still tired, still hungry, still feeling like shit—that joint didn’t do nothing, left a bad taste in my mouth and fuck all else—but not working will be nice though. Now if I could only get properly stoned and just...drift. Answer your phone, fuck face.

“Hey, Bonnie!” Quinn, when are you going to stop calling me Bonnie? Literally, you’re the only person in the world who calls me that. “Where’s the fire, big guy? You’ve been calling all day.”

“And I left messages, you don’t return phone calls now?”

“Hey, I texted you didn’t I? I mean I didn’t have to try to help you out, go out of my way to do you a favour.” Walked into that. Quinn loves to play the victim, loves acting put upon. Fuck him.

“Look Quinn, I don’t have time to jump through any of your fucking hoops, you obviously got my message, you said you can help me out, now sh...”

“Keep your panties on, dicknose! Just get your ass over here, and we’ll get you fixed up.”

Quinn’s place is in the Lower Plateau, on Hotel-du-Ville, a good half-hour walk. It’s nice enough out and Sherbrooke’s a great street to stroll and I want what’s coming to

me on the other end, but I'm not really in the mood for walking—especially with the chafing factor—but I don't think I can handle being underground in the heat and stink either. Anyway, maybe fresh air will do me good. Clear my head.

Walking I can't help thinking about what Drago said, about the things about Shelia I hate, about making a list. I probably shouldn't, but I already am. Like, I hate the way she's so concerned with where words come from, or phrases, or sayings, their 'entomology' or whatever. Like, I don't care why 'screwing the pooch' and 'fucking the dog' don't mean the same thing. Or if the past and present-form of a verb are spelt the same—the context tells you it's read. And I'm not annoyed that so many people say 'good' when they mean 'well,' or 'can' when they mean 'may.' It's language, it evolves, adapts, get used to it. I hate the fact that she hates it when people say "PIN number" or "ATM machine" so much she feels she needs to point out their error. And I hate her stupid, fucking tattoos, the treble clef on her ankle—supposedly she plays the piano, I never heard or saw evidence of this—and the Chinese characters for 'poet', or so she says—I've always secretly hoped it isn't—on the back of her neck. I hate her love of Pink and Alanis Morissette and the time I spent subjected to it. And I hate how what I'm doing plus what she's feeling equals what I'm thinking. How she cackles more than laughs. How she always talks for me, always answers for me. I hate how she threw me out. I hate that she has my clothes. I hate that she's my best friend. I hate that I stayed behind here for her. I hate that I don't know what I would've done if I hadn't. I hate...

This isn't really getting me anywhere, nowhere productive, nowhere useful. Could just as easily make a list of things I love about her: doing Sudoku together in bed, her chicken lasagne, reminding me to call my folks on their anniversary. Staying up all

night talking nonsense, trying to figure out how to spell ‘h’ or what a ‘roni’ is—let alone what it’s like having one. The way she’s helped me dress like less of a slob, the way she believed I could be...I don’t know...something, an adult maybe? The way she bites her lower lip when she’s horny, that thing she does with her tongue, waking me up with blowjobs. And that’s just off the top of my head. So what? What did that prove?

Fuck, I may have had my last blowjob from Shelia. I may actually never get to touch that ass again, or squeeze those tits, bite those nipples, rub her like she likes, or fuck. It’s a real investment learning someone like that. Gone. No return. Maybe that’s why people fight to get people back, to try and make it work, to patch things up. It’s just easier in some ways. I suppose there’s always Rad’s suggestion of a gift, a book of poetry—that was inspired—but it’d have to be the right poet, and the right book. And even if I nail it, even if I wander through *Chapters* and come upon a name I recognize, she can’t already have it, she’s read me *so* many poems, I don’t want to point out I’ve been ignoring her, or not listening, or not registering at least. Real possibility of backfire with that one, then I’m out thirty bucks or whatever.

Quinn’s place is like all places in the Plateau, long and thin and a triplex. He has a couple of roommates but somehow they never hear the doorbell ringing, or always figure it’s not for them, or they all have some Mormonphobia or something. It takes persistence to actually get inside. When the door finally flies open, Quinn bursts out laughing.

“You look like shit, man.” He looks about the same as ever, still scrawny—lanky if he were taller—same curly red hair, same stupid soul patch, same skinny jeans, another

too-small t-shirt—a brown one that reads *I Am Dirk Diggler* in faux marquee lettering. He bats the brim of my Habs hat into the bridge of my nose, “Still keeping the faith, I see.”

We step inside and head into his room. It’s a fucking mess, clothing and plates and take-out containers scattered, the desk littered with paper and glasses and wires, the bed unmade, mattress exposed and stained. It’s warm and stinks of laundry, stale sweat, fast food and CK One. Quinn plops down in the chair behind the desk and brings the volume down a touch on the annoying *Soulja Boy* song he’s got on, while I pull over a couple of milk crates stacked up, make a cushion out of my coat, and sit—hopefully not for long.

“So, how’s this gonna work? Do we go to him, does he come to us?”

“Jesus, Bonnie, you just got here.” He turns towards his computer. “Didn’t know it was such a high priority, thought we had time for some pleasantries.” Christ, this guy can be annoying, I don’t want to visit or hang out or fuck about and the look on my face must say so.

“Just thought that there might be a social element to this visit, didn’t realize it was strictly business.” He smiles a cracked-lipped smile, “But you had a rough night, I get it. I’ll give Jazz a ring for ya.”

“You still haven’t called your guy?” Useless motherfucker. “I thought green meant go?”

“It did. It does. It’s all good, nothing is fucked here, he just lives up the street, we just gotta wander over.” He assures me as his thumbs race around tapping out a text. I guess that it’s to the guy. Was that to the guy?

“Was that to the guy?”

“Yes, fuck! Man, what is wrong with you? I’m happy to help you out, make the connection, but I don’t need you harping on me, and rushing me and shit. She really spun your head around, eh?” His tone is sympathetic but the smirk undercuts it.

“What if we just stopped by? Does your guy, Jazz or whoever, have a problem with that? People dropping by unannounced?”

Quinn smiles, snorts, almost chuckles. “You really got a one-track mind right now, eh? Got something that needs forgetting?” Man, I want to slap that stupid grin off his face. “But no, he don’t really care. As long as ya got cash and he knows ya,”

All it takes is for Quinn to shower—something I still haven’t done—make himself up a tuna melt—not offer me one—grill it, eat it, argue with his roommate about the Spurs-Suns game last night—double OT apparently—and we’re out the door.

“Still I kinda like this feeling...”

“What’s that, Bonnie?” Quinn asks, catching up to me at the end of his walkway.

“Oh, nothing. Just singing.”

“Whatcha singing?”

“It’s not important. Something I was listening to walking over here.”

We walk in silence up Hotel-du-Ville, Quinn settling himself, popping his collar, straightening the tongues of his shoes, setting his jeans behind them. I sneak a scratch and readjust myself—I may have underestimated underwear’s usefulness—as we turn down Prince Arthur and head towards St-Laurent. The umbrella-filled terraces lining the street are swarmed, jam-packed, gatherings and smatterings of students finished or nearly finished for the year, plateau hipsters, out-of-towners, temporary residents and tourists, waitresses showing skin again—it’s a beautiful day, I guess—raking it in, making a mint.

The street's bustling too, cyclists and joggers and parents with strollers all bouncing along the bricks, little kids and grandparents and shoppers and buskers, even a goddamn puppeteer. Their vigour is repulsive. This is the problem with spring, everybody's got cabin fever, everybody's itching to get out, shed some layers, spread some mirth and merriment, make an ass of themselves.

“So you gonna tell me what happened or do I have to drag it out of you?” There's this weird, wild look in Quinn's eyes, like a dog waiting for a treat. “I mean, you tell me Sheila took a shit on your head, you gotta know I'm gonna to wanna know. She finally dump you?” He cocks his head and raises an eyebrow. I avert my eyes. “That's it, isn't it? What'd you do, try an' fuck her in the ass?” He backhands me across the arm as his says this.

“Jesus, Quinn! Fuck You! That's fucking out of line!” A woman with a couple of little kids shoots me a look, I return an evil glare—mind your business, bitch!

“Just clam down, man, okay.” He rests a hand on my shoulder that I shake off. “Look, I'm sorry, Corey.” Yeah, sure you are. Though something in his look says he means it, something genuine, or maybe he's just embarrassed 'cause I yelled. He throws an arm around me again and turns me up Saint-Dominique, then almost whispers, “Look, you're right, I was out of line.” He holds the “e” for a long beat, slithers it out, and slurs it into, “It's just I would've tried to hit that.” And laughs a big fake, fucking laugh.

I grab his right hand resting on my shoulder with my own, pulling him into me, and haul back my left arm, driving my elbow into his sternum. He drops backward, rolling out flat. That felt good.

“Fuck you, man!” Quinn’s lying in the gutter, “you can get your own fucking weed.” Oh, c’mon, don’t be a little bitch about this. You’re the one talking about fucking my girlfriend in the ass. I extend a hand to help him up.

“I’m sorry, man, I’m just not in the mood for joking around about Sheila right now, okay?” Reluctantly, he takes my hand.

“So fucking what? You just throw me down? I got dirt and mud and shit all over my pants, my jacket.” He turns around to show me the damage, which ain’t all that bad, little bit of grime, totally washable. He brushes at it, rubbing it in, making it worse, while looking at me all bewildered like someone carrying a dismembered limb in a war movie.

“Sorry about your coat, Quinn, but you can be a real asshole.” He chuckles, sort of snorts, in agreement. “Can we just go grab some green?”

“You gonna tell me what happened with Sheila?” he asks, stopping and leaning up against a telephone pole. Looks like we aren’t going any further till I do—passive aggressive motherfucker.

“I pissed her off. I said some shit I shouldn’t have, so she threw me out of her place. Okay? And I was naked.” His eyes go huge. “And that’s the story. You happy?”

“Why were you naked?” He’s practically licking his lips.

“Because I was in the shower when she bust in and threw me out. Literally came in and grabbed me and pushed me out the door into the hall soaking wet. I had to bang on her door till she gave me some clothes.”

“Damn, man, that’s some cold-blooded shit right there,” he says, all teeth. He’s all about schadenfreude, can’t hold back a laugh. “Sorry, dude, it’s not funny, but you know, it’s funny,” he explains. “What’d you do to make her so angry, anyway?”

“It’s complicated,” sort of, not really. I take a few steps down the street, try to keep us moving in a positive direction, but he doesn’t budge—guess I have to give him the scoop. “Okay, look, it’s like this: we went to her reading last night with all her poetry friends, they all read poems and blah, blah, blah.” I try to make another move up the street but he’s pasted to that pole. I turn but I don’t walk back to him. “Of course, I never even wanted to be there, I wanted to be watching the game, but I went, right? I’m doing the good boyfriend thing, right? Like, she don’t have no TiVo, she don’t even have a fucking VCR, but I went. And it sucked, of course. Plus we fucking lost the game, so I’m pissed. Anyway when we get home, I said something like it was stupid or her poems were stupid or something and she just lost her shit. Started screaming, throwing books around, crying, everything, telling me I was stupid or whatever. After the blowout I got in the shower and, well, you know the rest.”

Quinn doesn’t respond right away, he looks like he’s really thinking it over, really taking it in, or searching for a one-liner. “Well, you know, man,” he finally says, “people are always gonna shit on those they perceive to be doing better than themselves, improving themselves, making progress, moving forward, especially when they aren’t doing anything themselves. When they got nothing going in their own lives.”

Wow. Seriously? “Fuck you!” I throw my hat at him ‘cause it’s the only thing I got, and he swats it to the ground. “Can we please just get where we’re going already?”

“We’re here.”

“We’re here?” What’s here? Where’s here? Where are we? We’re standing at the back of a big brick building that’s not even really on this street, outside a big blue double door. “The guy lives here?”

“Ah...yeah.” Quinn pounds a fist into the door a few times, which resonates metallic and deep, while I scoop up my hat. “Pretty cool front door, eh?” Is it a front door, or is it just for back alley dealings, pick-ups and deliveries?

The big blue door opens a crack. “Who dat?”

“Yo Jazz, it’s Quinn, man. I got my buddy here with me.” He points to me but I doubt Jazz can see me. Jazz? Who is this guy? The door opens further and a big, scruffy galoot in a black sweatshirt covered in small gold dollar signs, diamonds, guns and dollar bills, over-sized jeans and a pair of Timberlands appears.

“Mr. Key,” says the figure.

“Mr. Mulct,” Quinn responds, then the pair exchange a series of handshakes and holds and sign language to remind each other they know each other or something. I just stand behind Quinn feeling out of place—probably looking it too.

“This is my buddy, Bonnie.” I extend a hand, but he returns a fist, so I fold in my fingers and bump it.

“Call me Jazz.” He looks gangster all right, but the big brown puppy dog eyes undercut it, spoil the illusion.

“Hey, I’m Corey.” I say, noticing two large diamond studs in his right ear, almost too big to be real. Gangster puppy.

“Didn’t my boy just call you Bonnie?”

“Yeah, my last name’s Bonspiel.” I explain, stepping inside as Jazz lets the heavy metal door slam shut behind me.

Bizarre. That's the only word for this place. It looks like a poorly managed warehouse, but apparently it's an apartment, *Chez Jazz*. There's all kinds of junk hanging out in the loading dock entryway: big barrels and rolls of God knows what, a metallic maze of what looks like disassembled scaffolding, a pair of heavily dented maroon lockers, a smattering of old paint cans, a half dozen pallets stacked up in a corner, black garbage bags filled with... garbage I suppose, but who knows? There is a pathway cut through this fire hazard that we follow into the cavernous living area. This is the weirdest fucking apartment I ever seen. It's gigantic, just huge, three, four thousand square feet, and mostly empty. The ceiling must be at least twenty feet high, maybe thirty..The walls are cinderblock painted this clinical yellow, like the hallway of a public school or a nursing home. There's a tub sink in the back corner, the one without the door, next to which is a large olive-green fridge. Along the wall beside the fridge is a long folding table with a microwave and a couple of hot plates on it, and three plastic bins underneath. There is another, identical, folding table in the centre of the room, more or less, and near the opposite wall a seating area with a couch, a couple of camping chairs, a coffee table and an entertainment unit on a large square of royal blue carpet that looks like it was salvaged from a 1960s accounting firm. Beyond this little assemblage is an unmade bed, with a drowsy-looking girl in it. Beyond that, what appears to be the foreman's office, or used to be, maybe it's the washroom—there must be a washroom.

“Listen Jazz, Bonnie here's looking to pawn a little doobage, grab some mara-jawana.”

“You in a hurry?” Jazz asks me, which is about the worst question he could ask, especially as I'd prepared for ‘how much do you want?’

“Why?” I try not to drag out the word or squint too suspiciously.

“I’m all but out right at the moment, like, not even personal.” I feel my whole spirit drag and I think it shows. “Hey, but check it,” he snaps his fingers and slams a fist into his palm. “I’m grabbing some this evening. My guy will come by when he finishes up work, hustlers gotta keep honest jobs too, yo. He usually wraps up at six, so probably be by a lil’ after that.” I’m nodding but I’m not impressed. Quinn’s fucking smirking away. “But, but,” Jazz continues, as if sensing my anxiety, “if you’re not in a hurry, if you want to hang out, you’ve come at the right time. I rolled me a honey blunt earlier my girl,” he motions towards the sleepy-headed blonde now getting out of bed, “and me was gonna smoke at 4:20,” he rolls back his sleeve and flashes some bling, “and we’re coming up on it now.” He raises his eyebrows and shoulders questioningly.

“Sure, yeah,” I nod, sort of, more like shrug, “that’s cool.” I guess, not ideal but it’s something.

Jazz leads us over towards the couch, a large, curving sectional, which is at least as old as that fridge, its yellow-green floral pattern eye-attacking kitsch. I kind of want to ask Jazz how he ended up living in a place like this, what the rent is like, how he heats it, where his mailbox is, but I don’t want to seem strange. Don’t want to be looking around too much or too wide-eyed. Jazz’s girlfriend joins us, after covering herself up in an oversized hoodie, deep purple like a bruise.

“My name’s Polly,” she says, smiling my way, waving fluttery fingers.

“Corey,” I say holding up a hand. She looks like Sheila. A bit shorter, maybe a little plumper, but same shape, more or less, same roots growing in under the bottled

blonde. Sheila wouldn't wear a tank top without a bra, or pants that said anything on the ass, let alone 'JUICY,' but still there's something similar, something familiar.

"Can we can stoned yet or what?" she asks Jazz.

He checks his watch. "Soon, a couple minutes."

"Why do we hafta wait till 4:20 to light it?"

"Because, that's the ritual, babe. It's how the shit's done."

"Yeah, I know, but it's huge. If we fire it up now, it'll still be burning at 4:20, we'll still be smoking at 4:20."

"Oh, she's got you there, man," Quinn chimes in helping, but Polly shoots him a dirty look.

"Yeah, but nah," Jazz waves the suggestion away, "see 'cause it's 4:20 on 4/20, so if ever youse gotta follow protocol, today's the day."

"Man, it's the twentieth today?" I find myself asking, their nods and yeps answering. "Hitler's birthday," I add, almost without realising.

"Really? D'you think maybe that's where 4:20 comes from?" Jazz wonders with an earnest, puzzled look.

"I'm not saying that, I mean, I don't know. Like, I know April 20th is Hitler's birthday, but I don't know what 4:20's about." Frankly, I don't give a fuck. Fucking 4:20. I mean I dig weed but all this 4:20 and rituals and some of the culture surrounding it are damn ridiculous. Like sure, I'd love it if it were legalized—avoid dealing with the dealers—but I ain't about to waste an afternoon shouting about it.

"I'd heard it was police code for possession of marijuana," he tells me, "but I like the Hitler idea." Okay.

“Doesn’t really make sense though, does it honey? Hitler was a teetotaller. What’s the connection between Hitler and smoking pot?” Polly pauses to let Jazz answer but he doesn’t seem to want to, so she goes on. “I’ve heard it was started in the 60s in San Francisco by these hippies who would meet in Golden Gate Park at 4:20 to smoke up and folk out.”

“Ah, not quite,” Quinn’s quick to correct. “It was California, but not San Fran. And it was the 70s not the 60s. It was a group of kids from a high school in San Rafael, called themselves the Waldos, who used to meet at 4:20 at a statue on the school yard to go get stoned and search for a grow-op they’d heard about. They never found the crop, but people travel to their school to this day to get stoned by that statue.”

Not that I care but Quinn’s probably right—he’s usually right about the shit he shoves in people’s faces—it was probably just a bunch of high-schoolers made it up. But c’mon people, just because one group of stoners once upon a time thought that was cool doesn’t mean we have to—you’re smoking too much of that shit.

“I bet the tams is packed today,” I think out loud.

“Why you think I ain’t holding? People been stopping by all morning.” Of course, they have. Man, of all the days to decide to buy some weed.

Quinn chuckles and we all look over. “It’s 4:21,” he says.

“Fuck!” Jazz whips out—seemingly from his armpit, more likely an inside pocket—a quite substantial blunt, like every bit as big as it would’ve been as a cigar, and puts the flame to it. I have a feeling I’m going to get properly stoned this time. Jazz takes a couple of hits to get it burning nice, before passing it on to Polly.

“There’s no tobacco in there is there?” I ask. Jazz looks insulted.

“Clip? I don’t roll with clip.” Awesome.

“Cool. Cool. I wasn’t trying to accuse, you just never know.” Fuck, I hope he’s not pissed about that, doesn’t seem it. Hope he’s not just trying not to seem pissed. Quinn slaps my shoulder and hands me the smouldering blunt. I take a few hits, it tastes really good, fragrant, fruity, a hint of honey, delicious. And it’s strong, or maybe I’m just eager, but it feels like it’s hitting me already. I pass it my to left, back to Jazz, struggling against a cough—throat’s still a little sore from that earlier session at Drago’s.

“Whadda ya think?” Jazz asks, and I give thumbs up. “If youse like this, you’re gonna love what I gots for you later.” He takes a big pull off the blunt before passing to Polly and adds, “My boy says it’s better than God’s vagina,” then exhales a huge cloud of smoke in my face before finishing his thought, “and he ain’t really one to exaggerate.”

“Cool.” I say, I don’t know what else to say to that, or how one might qualify that, or quantify that. Does God, in fact, have a vagina? I guess if he did it would probably be like the best vagina, but still. Not that God has to be a man, but why a woman? Why a vagina? Would he even have a penis, this man-god? God-man? Wouldn’t he just be something sexless we don’t understand? Would he, she, *shim*, even have a form, or a body to have a sex organ? I guess like a Greek god, or Roman, they were all fucking each other and raping animals and having orgies, so if he had said it was better than, say, Aphrodite’s vagina, or Venus’ vagina then maybe... Christ, I’m stoned. Better weed than this and I might be in trouble.

As I watch Polly pass to Quinn, what he’s saying suddenly registers. “...he’s showering away having a shampoo and then BANG! his old lady is kicking his fucking ass to the curb. Shit! Imagine your girl throws your ass out the house buck fuckin’ nek-

kid. But that's exactly what fucking happened to this friend of mine, so he says." Quinn raises his palms defensively, "Crazy shit, I know." Jesus Christ, guy hears a story and five minutes later he's telling it like it's his own. I narrow my eyes and shoot Quinn a look as he hands me the blunt, but he doesn't stop, he gets more animated, waving his hands around, really hamming it up. "So then, he's naked in the hall, right? So he has no choice but to beg her for his clothes back, hadda knock, knocked so loud the neighbours down the hall came out and saw and shit."

"Oh snap!" Jazz slaps his fingers together and rolls back on the couch laughing, kicking his giant booted feet in the air. Polly's looking at me like 'can you believe this shit' and I know I'm blushing, and I think they suspect it's me—they must—and I wish to fuck Quinn would just shut up but I can't tell him to shut up or they'll *know* it's me. Fuck! I pass Jazz the blunt.

"Eventually he gets her to give it up. She returns the clothes, he goes home, but fuck she did a number on him, I'm telling ya." They're all fucking laughing their asses off. What an asshole. Quinn looks at me, shrugs and smirks. Didn't ID me but still, pretty low.

"That's some funny shit, Quinn. Damn!" Jazz says, staring off into space, stroking his chin, wandering away into his thoughts somewhere, but soon returns. "Say youse guys thirsty? I got some apple juice. You want apple juice?" Jazz points and Quinn nods. The pointing finger swings my way and I nod too.

"Three apple juices, baby," he commands, nudging Polly when she gives him a dirty look. "You can get yourself one too."

Slowly, pained, with great effort, she gets up, scrunches up her face half-angry half-annoyed, and heads over to the fridge. She really does look like Sheila, Polly, pudgier perhaps, but Sheila-shaped no doubt—though Sheila wouldn't have put up with that shit. The blunt finds me again and I take a couple of nice, slow pulls, trying to savour the experience, like Rad had been. I close my eyes and hold out my hand. I feel Jazz's fingers pry the blunt away and my stomach grumbling. I'm hungry. I feel a hand on my thigh, Polly's back, sat right next to me, my apple juice in her hand. I take it and have a sip, it tastes fantastic. "This tastes fantastic."

Quinn looks at me and grins goofily. "You're fucking baked." He points an accusing finger like the handle of a pot. Jazz starts to giggle, his mouth gaping open. I start to snicker, fight it, but lose it in a burst.

"I think we're all pretty stoned," Polly points out, not incorrectly. "I was just thinking about robots."

The blunt makes its way back around to me—this monster won't quit—and I take a quick hit and pass it on, sinking into the couch as I lean back, resting my head on the back, staring at the ceiling, metal braces, rivets, crisses and crosses. I wonder who built this place, what it was for, originally, what it has been, how it got to be an apartment? I bet it was textiles, endless rows of immigrant women busily sewing away, lots of textiles in this neighbourhood. Maybe this main floor was a storeroom, or a showroom; maybe it was an appliance store or electronics store. I could see vacuums or washers and dryers here, but who knows? Who owns this place?

Yanking me back to the circle, Quinn punches me in the thigh, Charlie-horsing me, to pass the blunt, I wave it away—I've had plenty.

“Well, take ‘er at least, pass ‘er on.” What are you so annoyed about? I’m the one who has to sit up, relay it, baton-like, to Jazz so you don’t have to move. I’m the one doing all the work. I’m the one with the bruise.

Jazz has clearly not had enough, not nearly. Cupping his hands, the blunt between his index and middle fingers, he creates a small bowl, filling and clearing it a half dozen or so times, looking like a dragon as he blows a huge puff of smoke, choking it out, his face and eyes beet red. It was pretty impressive. Polly looks unimpressed though. Our eyes meet, my impressed-ness battling her unimpressed-ness, staring each other down, until I blink and she winks, curling her upper lip, victorious.

“Well,” Quinn announces, jumping up and breaking the silence. “I think I’m going to get going.” He downs his juice then turns to me, “You’re alright here, aren’t you?”

“Y-yeah, fine, of course,” I stutter, not happy with the insinuation.

“Cool,” he says, nodding. “You working tomorrow?”

“Called in sick today, kind of have to.”

“See you then, then.” He holds out a fist for me to bump, which I do half-heartedly, but still do.

“Alright, dude,” says Jazz, standing, leading Quinn to the door. “Have a good one.” And they exchange another round of secret handshakes.

“Thanks for the smoke, and sorting out my boy.” Quinn looks over at me then sort of pulls Jazz away, acting all secret, then says, “Listen, I’m sorry to have to leave him here witcha, to drop him on ya like this, but I can’t hang any longer, got people and places,” in a voice loud enough to echo.

Jazz shakes his head. “No worries, man, no worries” and walks him over to the corner. As Quinn’s disappearing into the junk pile he shouts back a goodbye to Polly, who flips him the bird.

“Agh, how can you be friends with that guy, he’s such a douche.” She asks as soon as Quinn’s out of sight.

“Yeah, he can get tiresome.”

“That’s an understatement, he’s fucking disgusting. Talking shit, condescending, correcting, acting superior.” Polly sort of wiggles and sits up, mocking acting proper.

“I think it’s all social camouflage.” Can anyone be that confident and not be fronting?

“I’m not so sure,” she fires back, and neither am I really. “He’s always the same whenever I see him, always arguing, always insulting, always an asshole.”

“Yeah, like I just work with the guy, you know, we’re not such good friends. Most of my buddies, my *real* friends, most of ‘em, well all of ‘em really, moved away after graduation.”

“And you stayed behind after graduation?”

“I didn’t graduate.”

“Hmm,” she nods. “What were you studying?”

“PoliSci, for some reason.” She giggles. “Seriously, I don’t know what I was doing. I’m not really interested in politics. Or science. And I didn’t plan on going to law school.”

“So why’d you go?”

“I don’t know, ‘cause I got in. Gave me a reason to move, a reason to be in Montreal. I think I liked that it sounded a lot cooler than what other people were planning after high school. Moving to Montreal.” I shrug. “I guess I never gave it much thought.” Why am I telling her all this? What does she care?

She leans back and crosses her legs, left over right, turning slightly on the couch, pulling her sweatpants taut against her sizable thighs. She’s built for power this one, like a gymnast, or diver, or jumper of some kind. She takes the blunt from Jazz, smokes slowly, passes it back and asks, “So what’s your situation, Corey? Do you have a girlfriend?”

“I did.”

“Oh? What happened?”

I don’t know why but I tell her, them. “She came along while I was showering and threw me out of her apartment naked.”

“Shit, that was you?” Polly asks, and for the second time today I see that gentle, pitying look in a woman’s eyes—this love lost forlorn shit really seems to get to girls, make a great angle for a single guy, wait I’m a single guy. Jazz, still smoking, can’t stifle a laugh, chokes and bursts out a cackling cloud of smoke, burying my face in a fog. Polly smacks him on the thigh.

“Sorry dude,” he says with tears in his bloodshot eyes, butting out the blunt. “For laughing and for your girl. That’s rough.” I nod and raise my eyebrows, agreeing, it was rough.

“When was this?” Polly asks, inching closer.

“Yesterday.”

“Yesterday? Oh, you poor thing.” And she’s hugging me sort of sideways. I put one arm around her and pat her back, keeping an eye on Jazz who seems cool with it.

“What a horrible bitch,” declares Polly, and I agree, though she might not if she spoke to Sheila. “How could she do that?”

“Fuck dude, I figured Quinn was just bullshitting. That’s pretty terrible.” Jazz seems genuinely sympathetic, and suddenly sociable. “You want a beer, man?” he asks getting up.

“Beer sounds great,” even more fantastic than apple juice. I don’t really want to have to talk about Sheila but if it helps Jazz warm to me, I ain’t arguing. It ain’t even five yet, I got *at least* another hour of hanging out here, probably more like two if his guy is anything like everybody else’s.

Suddenly Polly’s pocket starts singing “Paper Planes,” gunshots ringing. She whips out her phone and answers with “*Oui, allo?*” and just keeps on going—I didn’t realize she was French.

As she hops up off the couch, Jazz returns with a couple of cans of PBR, catching me reading the NHL 08 box. “You wanna play?”

“For sure.” I’ve only been wanting to for like six months, beauty way to kill the time, too.

Jazz starts loading up the game, getting the controllers out, settling down to defend his home ice, while Polly’s pacing around the place, racing her mouth, making me nervous, when I think I hear something I recognize: *cheveux brun*. Brown hair—that’s definitely familiar, that definitely came up in French class. Wait, I have brown hair, is she

talking about me? I look over my shoulder towards her and her eyes dart down to the floor. What's she saying?

“...look negligee mais assez cute... Non, pas de goût pour s'habiller... Il est vraiment doux, mais il est en p'tits morceaux, sa copine a cassé avec lui hier...Non pas vraiment, c'est juste qu'il est vulnérable et seul au monde, comme toi...Écoute, les accolades, les discussions et prendre le thé avec moi, tout ça c'est bien, mais c'pas assez, un gars a besoin d'quelqu'un qui peut l'faire gicler, pis ce sera pas moi...”

Jazz nearly does a spit take, literally, he fights it but with nasty results, beer out the nose, and he's off to the tub sink in the corner, gagging and coughing. What the hell did she say?

“Envoye, t'a besoin d'une baise, il a besoin d'une baise, vous y gagnez tous les deux...” She smiles at me, her lips turned down at the edges, this glint in her eye, this look, furtive, coy hardly does it justice. *“Ça va être le fun... C'est ça qu'tu veux, tu le sais.”*

I wish to fuck I knew what she said, why it made Jazz choke. I got like three words out of that and one of them was ‘fun’, another was ‘cute’. French teacher after French teacher warned me to pay more attention, warned me it'd useful to know this shit one day, and I never believed them—even after almost four years in this city—until just now.

Jazz tosses a controller into my lap, landing with a thud on my under-protected balls. Game on. I pick up my sticks as Polly takes a seat next to me.

“So Corey,” she asks in a sugar-sweet tone, “you got plans for tonight?”

5

Maybe we shouldn't have smoked that second blunt. Maybe I shouldn't have. Head spinning, everything's heavy, soupy, like the air is made of Jell-O or something. They don't seem bothered or out of sorts, them, those guys, walking so goddamn fast, like a goddamn race, like power walkers who can't have two feet off the ground but walk forever like ridiculously fast in the Olympics—probably other places too—with special fast-walking shoes and nylon pinnies. Maybe I should've taken that pill—so-called “pure” MDMA—probably not. Definitely shouldn't have made that comment about Nazi pharmaceuticals. Plus that Hitler's birthday shit, they probably think I'm so weird, some neo-Nazi douche bag. Feels like there's a 'you used to be cool' vibe coming off of them now, maybe just the chemicals. I miss the couch and the PlayStation, easier to seem cool with my thumbs. Getting owned game after game by Jazz was better than this shit, nerves and worrying and insecurity. I look like a slob, I should've showered, should've shaved, still oozing booze from last night, reeking of garlic, bags under the eyes. And look at them up there, all hopped-up without me, probably talking about me. Telling secrets, French secrets, which are worse somehow, I think.

Fuck, I'm stoned, God's vagina notwithstanding.

Never should've agreed to this. Still in these grubby clothes, still no underwear—didn't think of that when I said I'd come out, meet her friend. Jacqueline's hot though, trim, sculpted, statuesque. Showing more leg than Sheila had. Great wiggle, great walk, like she'd be comfortable on a runway or a volleyball court. Not so much up top, but I don't think she's wearing a bra, which is pretty cool. Did she notice me looking down her top? Hope not. Unless she would want me to look down her shirt, not want me to want

me to, but her knowing that she's drawing attention there with a loose low-cut collar and knowing I was noticing, and liking that I was. Maybe that's it. Maybe she wants that, maybe that's her plan. Man, I hate set-ups, too much to think about. Knew this was a set-up soon as she walked in in that dress—white, flouncy, floral, short—a party dress, no doubt, with her hair freshly cut at irregular lengths, and those heels, all strappy and buckley and Roman. Knew right then shish taouk was a bad dinner choice—not enough mints in the world—should've made my excuses. Polly probably never accepts excuses. Probably ask me what I was doing tonight instead. What would I be doing tonight instead? What would I be doing any night instead? What will I do?

“Hurry it up, Chief,” Jazz instructs, “you're lagging behind.”

“Sorry, just stoned.” I try to adjust my situation, scratch an itch without scratching, “I'm okay though.” Jazz smiles, open-mouthed and wide—are his teeth too small for his jaw?

“You a little nervous, is that it? The chronic threw you for a bit of a loop?” He gives me a couple of playful jabs to the midsection, doing more damage than I let on. “No need to be worried, Chief, Jacqueline's game.”

Game for what? And why does he keep calling me Chief? I force a smile. My guts are in a twist. Maybe Jazz called it, maybe nerves, or maybe I'm still hungry, my nose working against me. Across the street the line outside Schwartz's shifts and shuffles, impatient, and I kind of wish I was in it, wish I could just disappear into it. Enter the warm, steamy sanctuary of smoked meat and become anonymous, become any other customer, get a sandwich, go home greasy and full, get blackout stoned, maybe jerk off—

definitely jerk off—and be disgusted with myself. But we don't cross over, we walk on by, I'll have to debase myself other ways.

The girls are waiting for us outside *Le Rocket Rouge*, dressed up for dancing, Polly in a yellow party dress of her own, both being ogled by the monstrous bouncer on the door. This guy is like something out of a medieval nightmare, huge, maybe seven feet tall, jar-headed, shoulders as wide as I am high, black golf-shirt uniform stretched thin across his chest, forearms the size of my head heavily tatted up—the right with a spider web, the left with the virgin Mary wrapped in a rosary—shit-your-pants imposing. The behemoth sizes us up, looks down on us, literally, staring daggers and shit. He scoffs and opens the door.

What the fuck? Sure, a dude in a “STAFF” t-shirt and another in a ridiculous hoodie might not be the most fashionable, might be miles behind the girls they're with, but it's not like you've got a dress code here—that's kind of the main selling point of the place, not so chic and chi-chi as some spots on this strip that you need to dress up, yet not so down-and-out that some guy's going to offer you a bump of coke off a switch blade in the bathroom—besides, you're wearing cowboy boots in Montreal, asshole.

Jazz shoots up the stairs ahead of Polly, but I do the gentlemanly thing and let Jacqueline lead the way. Then I do the un-gentlemanly thing, lagging far enough behind to sneak a peek at her behind. Polly looks over her shoulder and smiles at me, knowing, and I feel my face flare up for a second time. And I didn't even catch a glimpse of panties.

Le Rocket Rouge has an ominous, almost mischievous, atmosphere thanks to the *bordelloish* deep purple of the walls, copper ceiling, chemical smell of smoke machine and the fact that all the light bulbs in the place are either red or black. The layout is clumsy. Right in the door, top of the stairs, and you're funnelled between two sets of risers where a bruised shin is a real possibility. On the right there's a DJ booth, mixing board, turntables, smug asshole clicking a mouse—the standard fare. To the left is a patio-like enclosure, maybe 10 by 10, maybe more, with a bunch of beaten wooden tables and chairs—highly sought after real estate. You come out the funnel tunnel and you're face to back with people on bar stools, usually being thrust into them by those following you in. To the left, through the throng waiting to order, are a couple of chest-high tables to stand around, a scratched up leather banquette running the length of the wall and a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd. To the right, past the patio thing all the way towards the far wall is a stage, raised about two feet, which doubles as a dance floor, in front of which, sort of between the patio-thing and the stage, is an overflow area for both the bar and the dance floor where spilled drinks and elbows are the order of the day. Any fight that breaks out in this joint begins here. Though it's not that kind of place, not usually, but then something feels very unusual tonight, feels off or wrong or something, maybe it's me. Or maybe it's that Sunday nights are retro night, 90s music, and it's full of frat boys and douche bags and girls who are overly made up, who are, well, like the girls we're with.

“Let's get you a Jager-bomb, Chief. You're playing catch up as it is.” By the way Jazz's massaging my shoulders, I think it's safe to say the pills are kicking in.

I don't know what the fuck happened to the girls, came inside, and they were just, gone. Probably in the shitter, but who knows? Jazz pushes his way to the bar, talking with this scrawny barman with shaggy hair—drinks are on the way. Turning back to me he asks, “You getting anything?” I guess I should probably buy a round for him, assuming he's getting the Jager-bombs, which I think I can assume.

“Sure, order a couple of beers and I'll get those,” I tell him, handing him another twenty, the fifth to go out tonight—the fourth to Jazz—I'm bleeding money I don't have. The bartender returns with two shots of Jagermeister and two plastic cups half-full of Red Bull. As he lays them on the bar, Jazz pipes up and sends him off for the beers. Then he drops the shots in the cups and hands me one. “Salut!”

It just slides down so easy, warm and fizzy. On its own I hate Jager, hell, Red Bull too, but somehow the combination makes both tolerable. The barman returns with two bottles of beer and I see Jazz hand him my twenty, add a five of his own and wave his hand to say ‘keep the change.’ Looks like I'm buying both rounds.

I follow as Jazz shoves his way through toward the back wall, the banquette, and into the corner—is he trying to hide from Polly? I stand beside him but conversation is near impossible thanks to the sounds of *Snap!* blaring from the speaker overhead. Plus Jazz is tripping balls, all fidgety, eyes fluttering, peeling the label off his beer and tapping his foot. I look over the crowd, trying to find the girls, though I don't really know what either of their heads look like well enough. I don't even know why I'm bothering, things haven't been going so great so far, not exactly hitting it off with Jacqueline as of yet. But how was I supposed to know these guys were into that shit? I didn't come out to do E, I didn't even plan on coming out. All I ever wanted was some bud, some greasy food, and

some time to myself. I spot the girls, who've spotted me, take a big swig and brace myself.

"You are okay?" Jacqueline asks, laying a hand on my forearm. She's a touchy one, which is cool.

"Yeah, sure, fine. You?"

"Yes, it's very fun here." Her pupils are huge but her eyes aren't rolling back like Jazz's—he may have popped a couple. She looks past me, over my shoulder, scanning through the crowd, then back at me, then to my beer. "No drink for me?"

"Right. Of course, sorry." I hadn't even thought of that. Fuck, this is getting to be more and more of a date by the dollar. I take her by the hand and lead her through the throng to the bar—something Sheila once told me she liked, liked the feeling of being pulled along, of being taken away—Jacqueline playing with my fingers as we go. When we arrive, we wait in line in silence. It's not that I don't have anything to say, just nothing I want to say, nothing that feels worth talking about, and I can't say I'm super interested in her and what she's all about. I'm not really looking to put in time here. I'm not really looking for a replacement for Sheila, am I?

I pay for the drinks—another beer for me and a vodka-water for her—leave my empty on the bar, and follow Jacqueline through the crowd up onto the riser to a table with one chair tucked in a corner. She sits, fucking up the levels, the perspectives. I look around for a chair but there isn't one, so I bop my head and pretend to be enjoying *Ace Of Bass*, pretending I saw the sign. Jacqueline tries a few times to say something, but it's hopeless, and she ends up pulling out her phone to answer a text, which saves me from making conversation. I stand above her as she thumbs away at the tiny keypad. I can read

her texts over her shoulder, I can see she's texting with Polly—probably about me—but my French shorthand is nonexistent so who knows, it's not even worth reading. It's funny how you can be hanging out with someone and not really hanging with them at all, meanwhile they're really hanging out with someone they aren't hanging out with at all. And this shit, going out together, but not being together, but still talking together, I don't even know what that qualifies as, or signals. Other than that I'm boring as shit.

Man, these beers are just disappearing.

“Maybe I ‘ave an idea,” Jacqueline shouts, standing up. “You can sit, and I sit on you.” She raises her eyebrows suggestively. “Because like dis, we cannot talk.”

“Sure.” Sounds good to me, off my feet and you in my lap. She doesn't have to ask twice, I'm already sitting. I lean back and open my arms for her to find a place and I'm struck by déjà vu of lap dances past—of course she's clothed and not reeking of perfume.

“How's that?” she asks, settling in, sliding her ass back over my thigh, up towards my chafed member, crossing her legs, left over right, above mine. “Not too ‘eavy?”

“Not at all. It's perfect.” And it really is. The truth is she's no heavier than Sheila, but bonier, much bonier. She's got a bone in her ass Sheila didn't have, like right in the cheek, like there ain't enough on it to quite cover it, or maybe muscle rather than fat, I don't know, but I ain't complaining, really, this is all gravy. I slide a hand across her back, dry skin on my fingertips catching on the polyester of her dress, almost not feeling her at all, and snatch my sweaty bottle from the table.

“One time when I was at Paris, with my chum...’ave you been at Paris?” she asks, cutting off her story, searching for common ground.

“Unfortunately no,” I tell her, before remembering, “I’ve been to Paris, Ontario, but that hardly counts.”

“You ‘ave a Paris *en* Ontario?”

“Yep. It’s a just small, little town, not much to it.” She looks down at her phone again. “It’s got a bunch of Bed and Breakfasts lots of people go there for romantic weekends, or even honeymoons. You know, so they can say, ‘I’m going to Paris this weekend’ or whatever.”

“No way,” she says, stretching the ‘w’, inflecting the same way as an ‘*ah ouin?*’ She just stares at me big-eyed and disbelieving. I grin, grimace, and she leans in to tell me, “I don’t tink I wanted to know dat.” Yeah, me neither really.

With that she’s back on the phone again, all furious fingers and giggles, answering a text, I think, who knows, maybe not, maybe I’m not the best conversationalist. Whatever though, the shimmying and shaking the typing is making her do on my lap is, well, exciting, better than talking really. Plus I can fully see her left nipple from this angle. Fully.

Jacqueline finishes texting and starts in with questions, real datey type questions. We have to talk, it seems, can’t just enjoy her being on my lap and my looking down her shirt in silence. Talking breaks the tension, or eases the nerves, or whatever, I guess, I mean, who the hell knows why she wants to chitchat? Why any of us do, what is there to know, really? Like, what’s the point? We don’t care, not beyond morbid curiosity, not beyond digging for dirt, so why ask? Are we so afraid of strangers, of the unknown? Personally I’m more afraid of having to make idle chitchat than I am of not knowing fuck all about anyone else. Anonymity is the biggest plus in the city. But it seems to make her

happy, keeps her off the phone, and it keeps the mind occupied, off the strangeness and excitement of an unfamiliar body on my lap, one high on E and jittery, saves any embarrassing giddiness.

“So I ‘ave ‘eard you break up wit’ your girlfriend.” I see I’ve been discussed.

“Ah, yeah, she ah...” fuck it, it is what is, “she dumped my ass.” I say throwing a thumb over my shoulder to make the point clear.

“It was yesterday, no?” she asks, shimmying around, digging her ass bone in my thigh and sliding her right cheek across my under-protected junk, denim rubbing rough, and she settles there and we’re eye to eye, just inches apart.

“Yep, just yesterday,” I confirm, and slip my hand down her back and rest it familiarly on her hip, feeling bold, and a stirring down below. Maybe I am screening applicants, looking to fill a vacant position. Maybe I want to change the subject.

“You are okay? You seem okay,” she smiles.

“I’m surviving.” I tell her, shifting my weight and giving her hip a squeeze—I wanted the ass but never moved my hand—and her smile wanes a touch, loses teeth. I lift my arm, rest my elbow on the armrest, moving my hand off her hip, cutting contact, before adding, “I guess it hasn’t hit me yet.”

“You don’t seem like to ‘ave a girlfriend to me,” she says, laughing and rubbing her hand up my thigh.

“Well, true.” Of course I’m not telling you how weird this is for me? How I know it’s over and I know I’m allowed to be here, with you, on my lap, and this is nice—definitely nice—but at the same time totally bizarre and sort of forbidden and naughty. “I

guess what I mean is it's still so new, it's like, 'I'm single? Really? Weird.' If that makes any sense."

"Yes, it do, I know dis. When *mon chum*, when we break up," she makes a motion with her hands like she's snapping a twig, "at first I do not believe dis is true. *Pour quelques semaines, j'ai dit 'C'est pas vrai. C'est pas vrai,' mais...* It was true, of course, it was over, 'e was fucking with 'is neighbour even..."

"Oh, that sucks." I don't think Sheila's been fucking with any of her neighbours, not in that building, not likely. Barry on the other hand—fucking Barry!

"It was truly a bad time of my life," she admits in a quiet voice, almost ashamed but not quite, more like wounded, and stares down at her hands stirring ice in an empty glass with a swizzle stick. Waiting, it seems, for something, I don't know, me to say something maybe? But what do I say? I'm not a guy who says things, right things. Like, I guess it's a bad time for anyone, isn't it?

"You need another drink?" is what I settle on. My leg's asleep anyway and I've got the urge for leaving. Scooting her forward with a little push on the top of the bum, I slide her off my lap. She's up on her feet and I follow, shake my leg out a bit and announce, "I'm going to get a beer," more out of my own feeling that I need some parting words than to inform, she knows well enough. Anyway, she's back on that phone again already, I won't be sorely missed.

Leaving the scene, fleeing, running almost, from the table and the conversation, from the confession or confiding that seemed imminent, the opening-up, heart-pouring, rehashing bullshit I know was just around the corner, I get moving a little to quick for my wobbly leg—to say nothing of the Jager and beer—and I miss the two steps off this patio-

thing completely, nearly do a header, face-plant, probably should've but crash into some poor bastard reeking of L'Homme who breaks my fall, bounce off him, and land on one knee—the wobbly one. Buddy don't look impressed or anything, but he don't look like he's going to hit me either, apparently his testosterone level's not on a par with his cologne. I apologize profusely, pathetically, wasting no time getting back on my feet, steadying myself, looking around to see if any one noticed—or how many noticed—while trying to look like I'm not just looking around to see who noticed, like I'm not embarrassed, like I'm shameless, when I spot a familiar face bobbing above the crowd—I'd recognize that beak anywhere.

“Roland.” I tap a shoulder, his head spins, eyes light up in recognition. He's wearing this old-school bowling shirt, like one from the fifties, two-toned brown with vertical stripes and a pair of tapered khakis—what my mother would call slacks—and a pair of those chequered Vans, pink and white.

“Corey,” he says, spinning his body around to meet his head before laying a hand down softly on my shoulder, giving it a friendly squeeze, letting go just before it becomes uncomfortable. “Who you here with?” he asks sort of suddenly. “Sheila's not here, is she?”

“Nope. I'm on my own tonight.” His face relaxes. “I mean, I'm with some people, I'm not here all alone, by myself, just not with anyone, ah, nobody you'd know.” I don't know why I'm explaining all this, why I feel nervous. I mean, so what if he does see Jacqueline? What then?

“Right, I was going to say...” And he just trails off. What? What were you going to say? What do you know? What have you heard?

“Sorry, what were you going to say?” Now I have to know. Does he know something? Has she said something?

“Nothing, nothing. It’s good to see you again, man, I always liked you.” That hand is back on my shoulder and he’s staring at me with those bulbous bird-eyes of his, heavy-lidded and serious.

“Yeah, sure, you too.”

“Have you been crying?” Roland asks in a tone like he’s cracked the fucking case

“No, why?”

“Oh,” he seems slightly embarrassed, taken aback, caught out, “I just thought...your eyes were kind of red, and...anyway.” He waves a hand to say ‘forget it.’

“I’ve been smoking weed today,” I say, pointing at my eyes, “so maybe...”

“Yeah, maybe. Sorry. Forget I mentioned it.” Sure, sure, only, not likely.

I hadn’t even considered crying. Really, it didn’t even come to mind. Should I have cried? I mean, I suppose that’s a reasonable response, a normal response, right? So why didn’t I cry? I don’t feel like crying. Why don’t I feel like crying? Do you have to cry? Is that required? If I don’t cry, does it mean I don’t care? Does it mean I didn’t love her? Is there something wrong with me? Crying. Fuck me, this is too much.

“Look, man, it’s nice to see you or whatever,” much better than someone from work who could bust my ass, “but I was just on my way to get a beer...”

“I could use one of those myself. Hell, let me buy you one.” That hand is back on my shoulder again, patting, sympathetic. “It’s the least I can do.” Can’t argue with that, I

don't know why he's being so extra-friendly, why this isn't the *most* he can do—it's more than I could fucking do for him—but I ain't got cash enough to care.

It's a zoo around the bar, total fucking gong show, lined up at least four or five people deep—not sure what's happened to ole cowboy-boots but this place feels dangerously full—but being a head taller than everyone in line ahead of you has its advantages. Roland makes eye contact with a blond barmaid, smiles at her, holds up two fingers on one hand and shakes an empty bottle in the other. Message delivered and received.

“So, tell me Corey, how was the rest of your night last night?” I stare up at him and he smiles, innocently enough, but something about the way he said ‘tell me’ undercuts it, makes it somehow insidious, makes me uncomfortable. Why the fuck should I *tell you* anything? But I got to say something, can't just ignore him, he's buying me a beer.

“It was a rare evening.” That should suffice. Now deflect. “And you? How was *La Cage*?”

“It was demure, sort of deflated following the loss.” I nod, agreeing, as Roland hands the barmaid a ten over the heads of those in front of him, ahead of him even, and she returns the gesture with two bottles. She makes a move to give him his change but he waves it away, hands me my beer, and finishes his thought. “Everyone was pretty let down. I think crestfallen would be the best word for it. People had come out to party and celebrate and, being denied that, it was a pretty low energy room.” I just keep nodding, for sure it was, the whole city has been low energy today, till this place, and even here there's an anxiousness I'm not accustomed to. Or maybe it's me.

I follow Roland around to the edge of the bar, struggling against a wave of people fleeing the dance floor crowding and cramming us. Why can't people just stand on the dance floor if they don't like the song? Why do they have to go crowd up the rest of the bar and leave this big void, this no man's land, like it's plagued or something? Maybe I should just go stand in the void myself. Fucking shitty DJ.

"Do you think it's disingenuous for these guys to keep playing this song?" Roland wonders aloud more than asks, leaving no chance for a response. "I think it's disingenuous for these guys to keep playing this song in concert. Let's face it; they obviously *have* a million dollars by now, many times over most likely. But I'll bet..." Out of nowhere this misshapen mass, this block-shouldered, bow-legged, big-boned bruiser of a girl, a roller derby queen in a denim dress and purple polka dot stockings, leaps out and pokes Roland in the ribs with a well-placed elbow.

"Whatcha forget about me?" she barks. "The fuck's my beer?" Is this Roland's girlfriend? She's a handful. Not exactly the type I would have expected from him, but maybe she wears the pants. By the way he hands that beer over without arguing it sure seems like it. I almost feel bad standing here sipping this beer he bought, almost, not enough to offer it to him. "The fuck's this?" She asks him, pointing a thumb my way.

"Right, this is Corey. Corey this is my friend, Micah." I extend a hand which she slaps, hard, almost too hard, first palm-to-palm then back again, back-to-back, knuckles clacking—that one hurt. "Micah's also in the Creative Writing program," he tells me.

"Yeah, but I don't write poems like this one." She gives him another elbow, then turns to me and snarls, "I hope you don't write poems," like some ominous warning, a caution, like she's putting me on notice in case I do.

“You don’t like poetry?” I almost add ‘either,’ but stop short.

“Poetry’s all smoke and mirrors, the good stuff anyway. I can’t blow smoke rings, never could. Not even in high school when I actually smoked.” She’s all up in my face, forehead to chin, invading my space, challenging. “I suppose you’re a poet yourself, dark and disturbed, loitering on lonely cliffs, sleeping in cemeteries...”

“Actually Corey’s not in the program,” Roland interrupts to explain, “he’s dating Shelia Postiche.”

“That bitch?” she asks without hesitating, no restraint, no attempt to play nice. I have to laugh—what else can I do?—but I fight it, choke it into a snort, just as she adds, “I’m sorry, but it’s true,” and steps back.

I smile. “It’s funny, I’ve been thinking the same thing all day.” I turn to Roland, “We had a bit of a...falling out last night.”

“I know, or, well, I guessed as much. She changed her Facebook status from *In a Relationship* to *Single*, so I knew something had to have happened.”

Sheila did what now?

I feel like I might pass out, like I might throw up. I feel like Roland just punched me in the gut. Winded me. Kicked me in the nuts. I’m weak-kneed, short of breath, lost for words. I need to sit down.

She changed her Facebook status to *Single*?

Well, I guess that’s that. I guess it’s over, really over, *over* over. Sonovabitch. Then forget the present, forget flowers or the book of poetry or an apology.

Changed her Facebook status to *Single*?

Put it out there for everyone, for Roland, for Barry—fucking Barry!—for every other guy waiting this relationship out. I got to catch my breath. I feel the room spinning around me, falling away from me, everything, everyone falling back, cascading down over a horizon that moves steadily closer, closing in on all sides, until there's nothing left, just me alone, suspended in space like Wile E. Coyote before he looks down.

Maybe I'm having a heart attack.

Fucking thing is pounding, beating a bruise on my ribcage, racing out of control. No pains in the arm though, none in the chest, tight not painful, a physiological response not angina. A cold chill and sweat pours down my back. Blinking, squinting, things are coming into focus, coming back, like Roland's bug-eyes ogling. I'm still a little wobbly, a little woozy, but certain I'm on my own two feet, that I'm still standing, if shaken.

Micah's oblivious, not even looking at me, lost in her own train of thought, ranting at Roland whether he wants to hear it or not. And I'm hearing it too, out of context—if it had a context—because she's screaming it over the music. "...whiny middle-class kids who've never faced hardships or struggled for anything their whole lives. Of course there're exceptions, there's always exceptions, some kid from the Balkans or something, but then they flip the bitch on you, read a poem about their idyllic communist childhood. Plus I hate all these tourists in my city, kids from Ontario enchanted by the Frenchness, the so-called Europeanness romanticizing things they don't understand, throwing French into their poems now that they know a little..."

Wait, why am I listening to this shit? I don't care about any of it. Fuck this chick and her fucking bitching. Fuck writers. Fuck Sheila! Changed her Facebook status to *Single*. Fuck Facebook!

Where's that Jacqueline gone?

This is ridiculous, I can't find her anywhere, would she just take off? Christ, I wasn't gone that long, was I? Not where I left her, not dancing, not at the bar, not where Jazz was earlier. Jazz is gone too it seems, and Polly. Have I been abandoned? Left alone with these douche bags and frat boys and hoodrats and homies. And this horrible music, 90s party music, jock jams and shiny tunes—you can't stand the rain, I can't stand this song!—man, this weekend sucks.

Without warning, a pair of cold hands slap me across the face, eight long bony fingers covering my eyes, followed by “Guezzou?” Not that I need to—I'm not the type of guy strange women go putting their hands on—it could only ever be one person. “I give you a 'int, you owe me a drink.” That's right, I do too.

Taking Jacqueline's hands off my eyes, I press my thumbs into her palms, drawing little circles on them, and turning around say, as nonchalantly as possible, as if I hadn't totally forgot about it, “Vodka-water, right?”

Jacqueline smiles, and I notice her nose is slightly turned up, just enough that when you look directly at her you can see straight up her nostrils, also it's narrow, and boxy, and angular—like it has corners—and distracting. It's almost like I never really looked at her before. Whatever, it's nit-picky, focus on the smile, you're making her smile, get the drink and keep her smiling. Might as well get a beer too, just spend till the money runs out, overdraft till I can't overdraft no more.

She takes her drink and my hand and leads me through the crowd—which admittedly is kind of fun—to the dance floor, up onto the stage. She takes my beer and

puts it down with her drink on a sidebar along the wall, mingling with the drinks of other dancers, then takes my hands in hers and we hit the floor. I normally don't dance, or don't like to, and I never dance up on this stage—you can be seen from way at the other end of the club and people make asses of themselves up here—but if she's letting me put my hands on her, I'll do what I have to do.

Jacqueline's so much taller than Sheila, so much longer, it's very different dancing with her, good, but different. Different good. She turns around and backs up onto me, shaking herself all over me, looking over her shoulder and laughing. We're grooving along, we got "Mo' Money, Mo' Problems," but it's all good. Jacqueline takes my hands and places them on her hips, her hands resting on mine. She's got another weird bone that juts out from her hip—her hip bone, I guess—that Sheila had covered, or padded, or whatever, it was a lot less pointy, *she* was a lot less pointy. Jacqueline takes my hands and starts running them up and down her thigh, then up over her bony hips to her waist, then wraps them around her waist, all the while still shaking her booty into my crouch, against it, rubbing it, grinding zipper against my unprotected cock, then she brings my hands right up under her breasts, almost groping them, then just drops her hands away. Do I grab her tits? Is that the plan? What do I do? I nervously fondle her ribs for what feels like forever, then she leans her head back into me, looks up over her shoulder and, while her left hand reaches down and touches my semi-erect penis for just a second—confirming a suspicion, I suppose—asks, "You are 'aving fun, *oui*?"

Before I say anything she slithers away and wheels around, flinging her arms over on my shoulders, her hands dangling down my back, fingers tapping on my spine. She looks at me with soft eyes, big brown eyes, bites her lower lip and asks, "You tink I am

pretty?” like she already knows the answer, like she isn’t really asking, more like stating a fact or starting a negotiation.

“Of course,” is all I can say, I mean I do, she is. Like maybe she’s gone a bit heavy on the make up—she’s a little shiny—and I’m not sure about the hair dyed jet black, the whole Snow White thing, polar opposite to Sheila’s blonde-in-a-bottle look, but just as overplayed—what’s so wrong with every woman’s natural hair colour? Of course, if I was still with Sheila black hairs on my clothes would be a death sentence, but since she changed her Facebook status to *Single...*

“So, you tink that I am pretty, and you are ‘aving fun.” I nod along. “So, would you like to play a game?”

“Sure.” Feeling a big dopey smile grow, I’m powerless to stop it.

“Okay, *bonne, bonne*, is a fun game.” She leans in, curls her fingers around my ear and whispers “We will, ah, find udder people ew is dancing, and we will crashed into them, but pretending like it was an accident, like we are so loving to dance with each udder we don’t even seen them, but really...”

“But really we’ll know we bumped into them on purpose?”

“*Ouin!*” Backing away, I see her smile is huge, but my dick’s gone soft. This is not at all what I thought—or hoped—she would say when she asked if I wanted to play a game, but what the hell.

So we start to dance, my hands back on her bony hips, hers back up behind my neck, and she starts leading me towards our first targets, a couple making out in the corner, and she backs into them, but they’re unmoved, they don’t even seem to notice. So we keep close, crowding them. I brush against them but they don’t give a shit, they’ve

got their tongues and hands exploring each other, they're completely oblivious. So Jacqueline starts really going for it, whirling around in circles, waving her arms like a maniac, slowly working her way closer to them, then right into them, just plows through them, spinning and chopping like some overzealous chaperone at a high school dance. The couple, separated, look stunned and shocked and lonely. Jacqueline apologizes half-heartedly, and giggles her way back over to me.

"D'you see dat?" she says clutching at my shirtsleeve, "Dat was awesome!" Big open-mouthed smile, eyes bright, face full of joy, silly happy, she asks, "So, ew is dee next target?"

"How 'bout him?" I nod towards this clown near the front of the stage in a mesh tank top, arms in the air, pulsating his chest, really feeling he is too sexy for this song. Taking Jacqueline by the arm, I twirl her closer to him, moving in for the shot, once we're get in range I pull her towards me then fling her, sending her spinning right at him and she goes into him hard, lays a forearm across his lower back, sort of stumbles off of him backwards into this group of girls, spilling their drinks. She's laughing. I think she did it on purpose, I think they think so too. I apologize to mesh tank top and he's like, "Watch it there, guy!" But fuck him, she's having a blast. Jacqueline takes me by the arm, arm in arm, and we slip back to the side of the stage, back to our drinks. I can't help smiling.

"I telled you it was a fun game, *ouin*?"

"Yeah, it's pretty good."

"*Mon chum*, my ex-boyfriend, 'e never want to play dis game wit me, 'e never want anymore to 'ave fun, or to do tings dat I like." This sounds familiar, painfully

familiar, and maybe something in my face shows it, or she thinks she's boring me, or she's embarrassed. "But I don't talk about 'im anymore." She pats me gently on the chest, three times, "I am 'appy you play my game with me."

"Yeah, me too. It's a good game. Maybe a little dangerous but, otherw..."

"*Mais non, c'est pas dangereux.* Is not dangerous."

"You're risking a punch in a face playing this game." Jacqueline brushes the suggestion away and smiles. She's very pretty when she smiles. Looking up at me—though only slightly—she starts to say something but stops. She drops her right hand down to my side, taking my left, fingers intertwining. In her left hand is her drink, I can feel her pressing the glass into my back, cold and wet.

"Can I tell you someting?" She looks so sincere it's almost scary. "Just to now, after my chum breaked up with me, I am not doing so good. I 'ave been very um, depressed?" She sounds unsure of the word and opens her eyes wide for confirmation, so I nod. "I 'ave not 'ad any fun, *mais* I cannot change my head." She taps a finger against her noggin. "I try to yoga, I go at the gym, I follow a course in *peinture*," she mimes a little painting, "*Ne rein.* Nothing, I feel *aucun change.*" Tears are forming at the corners of her eyes, she's choking up, her voice quaking. "Now I tink dat if anyting can bring for me a real change, it may be only some kind of pleasure. But where is dis pleasure?"

Her eyes scan mine searching for something, understanding, maybe compassion, I'm not sure, but I hope she finds it. I know this whole spiel could just be the E talking—her pupils are fucking huge—might be nothing but fleeting chemical attraction, but what else have I got going? Apparently, according to Facebook, I'm single, might as well

enjoy it. I brush a stray strand of hair out of her face, as she bites her lower lip, exposing her front teeth, and her eyelids droop, eyes nearly shut.

Kiss her, you idiot.

“Hey you guys!” Polly pops up out of nowhere, seemingly, though maybe she’s been here all along. Hell, she’s probably been watching all night, her little project, matchmaker, matchmaker make me a match. “How’s it going?” She smiles a silly smile I want to slap off her face.

Jacqueline answers—in French—and they’re off to the races again, babbling away right in front of me, revelling in my ignorance. I hadn’t thought of this, this friends of the girlfriend—not that Jacqueline is anything near to my girlfriend—bullshit. The having to meet people that goes along with being single and dating. Not just meeting dates, but their friends, and roommates, and colleagues. Then it’s parents, the family. Meeting Sheila’s parents was awful, an awkward dinner, questions to answer, stressing over what to reveal and what to hide. Her folks seemed to like me well enough, her mom was always super nice, her dad hardly ever said anything, but hell, who really knows? I know I don’t look forward to doing it all again, meeting a whole new family. Flirty little sisters, psychotic older brothers, maladapted cousins, bipolar aunts, alcoholic uncles, grandparents with strange illnesses in stranger nursing homes, and getting grilled by all of them: What do you do? What did your parents do? Where is your family from? Where did you grow up? What do you study? What are your plans for the future? What are your intentions with my daughter? Sister? Granddaughter? Niece? Cousin? All the anxiety, all the stress that goes along with families, weird traditions, strange meals, awkward sleeping arrangements, weddings, funerals, summer vacation, Christmas dinner. And then

you have the other side of the coin, introducing her to my family and all our hang-ups and bullshit. Fuck, there's a lot to being single I haven't considered yet. The full scope of this thing is only just beginning to become apparent.

I got to take a piss.

The bathrooms in this place fucking suck, I hate them. They're upstairs—the only thing upstairs—which is annoying the first time you come here and you can't find them when you need them, the rest of the time it's just annoying to have to march up the stairs every time you got to piss. Then there's only three piss pots—two urinals and a stall—which feels like it's below code or whatever cause there's always a line, which creates an atmosphere of impatience and intolerance which gets to me, gives me performance anxiety, slows up the works. Tonight's no exception, even worse I didn't luck out and land the stall, relief from the waiting eyes staring through my back, mounting the pressure to be speedy. So I unzip very carefully—as you do when you're going commando—and saddle up to the available urinal. The urinals, the two, are right next to one another, almost touching, so users are forced to stand shoulder-to-shoulder, which certainly doesn't help pick up the pace. I try to just keep myself to myself but my neighbour wants a chat. Strike three on this visit. No way I can piss with this asshole jawing in my ear.

“Hey, that's a nice hat,” Buddy says.

“Cheers.” I don't even look up.

“I said that's a nice hat,” Buddy says again, only louder and more slurred. So I turn to him to repeat what I already said but just as I'm opening my mouth I notice we're

wearing the exact same hat, white with a burgundy plaid pattern across it and a dark—almost black—blue Habs logo on the front. I smile and nod.

“Where’d you get it?”

“Ah,” I stammer, “it was a gift from my girlfriend actually.” Ex-girlfriend, but whatever, “so I don’t really know.”

“Well, it won’t stand.”

“What?” I zip up, unrelieved. I can’t even try to pretend I’m pissing with this shit going on. “What won’t stand?”

“You wearing that hat in my bar,” Buddy tells me, stepping away from the urinal, swinging around, teetering, showing off his Calvin’s, while doing up his fly.

I make a stop at the sink—half for show—splashing water on the hands. “Is that a fact?”

“Yeah it is,” he says, stepping right up into my face, almost nose to nose, closer even than I just was with Jacqueline before that fucking Polly interrupted. “This here is *my* bar,” he points to himself, “I’m here three, four nights a week, and,” he points to the hat, “I always wear this hat. This bar, this hat, me!” Is this guy for real?

“Okay man, whatever,” I tell him, pushing past him out into the stairwell, but he grabs my shoulder, pins me back against the wall.

“I’m fucking serious, guy, if I see you in here in that hat again...” and he makes a slash across his throat with his finger. Some of the other guys in the bathroom start getting on him, ‘we’re all Habs fans here’ and ‘it’s just a fucking hat, dude,’ and ‘chill the fuck out, guys’ and ‘take it outside,’ and whatever else, and Buddy starts in with some them so I use the moment to make an escape. I don’t know how serious Buddy is, but

he's seriously drunk, and you just never know, people have done a lot worse over a lot less.

I get downstairs and I find Jacqueline by the bar. "Hey, I'm kind of hungry, you wanna get out of here and go grab a bite?" I ask, and she agrees. As we're leaving, I hear some familiar lyrics that hit home in a way they never quite did before.

Himalayas of the mind, my ass!

Stepping outside, stumbling outside, heart pounding, ears ringing, sweat pouring off of me, the change in temperature is a welcome relief. I have no clue what time it is, but based on the street traffic it's sometime after midnight but before three. There's no sign of cowboy boots anywhere now, but there are signs that it's garbage day in the morning all up and down the street. In one pile of junk there's this old office chair on wheels that Jacqueline prances over to all excited, and plops herself down on without wiping it off first or even checking how dirty it is. She starts kicking her feet in the air like a little kid, and shouting "*Pousser-moi! Pousser-moi!*" So I go get behind her, grab the chair by the back and give it a heave, really put my back into it, kind of throw myself into it, and shoot her off down the street so hard I fall to my knees. She's cruising along not too bad, the slope of the street carrying her momentum, only a little crooked, and totally out of control. The chair veers towards the curb and Jacqueline leaps up out of it, running away in front of it—in heels no less—a black and white blur, seconds before it slams into the curb.

Getting back to my feet and rushing over, I yell, "Sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." But she's laughing her fucking head off, so I think I'm off the hook.

“Dat was sooooo fun.” She’s grinning like a psychopath, panting, tongue hanging out, hair in her face. “Let’s go, me and you *ensemble*.”

I pick the chair up—no worse for wear—and roll it back and forth in place a bit, still holding it by the back.

“No, no, no, not like dat,” Jacqueline takes the chair from me “like dis,” spins it round and straddles it, holding the back with both hands like a steering wheel. “See? Now you will push my,” she taps her shoulders thrice, “back, and den you will jump on de,” she points to the ground and makes a motion with her finger, “de wheels.”

Do I have a choice? I grab hold of her shoulders, take a deep breath and let a cab pass. This is fucking crazy. Racing down St-Laurent against traffic, the wrong way on a one-way street, doubling on an office chair. This is going to end badly. “You ready?”

“*Ouin!*” Jacqueline’s shaking with excitement. I start to push, to trot, almost jog, and she starts yelling, “*Vite, vite, vite!*” So now I’m running and I’m looking at the feet, the chair’s feet, ‘de wheels’ as she said, trying to figure out how to time a jump onto them, and then I just go for it, almost involuntarily, like my inner daredevil just takes over and I jump, I’m airborne and I feel Jacqueline’s shoulders collapsing under me, but I also feel my feet finding feet, finding footing. The vibration is ridiculous, like a foot massage from a sadist, rattling me so much I can’t see straight. This is the craziest thing I’ve done in a long, long time. Sheila was never this reckless. One time we doubled along Sherbrooke on a bicycle in a snowstorm during rush hour, not too smart, but not this dumb. Jacqueline’s screeching like a kid on a carnival ride, her legs straight stuck out in front of her, but I’m shitting bricks. We’re missing parked cars by mere inches, traffic passing us in the open lane to our left, and picking up speed by the second. I don’t know

how fast we're moving—probably not very—but it sure as shit feels fast, and I don't have a clue how we stop this thing. I mean I could jump off the back but then she's kind of screwed, and how would that look?

“How do we stop?”

“*Comme ca*,” and she drops her feet to drag them along the ground, but it works too well, we stop almost instantly. The chair tips forward, and I'm tossed right over her shoulders, my knees nailing her in the back, upending me ass over teakettle, I keel forward and see the street racing up at me. Fortunately Jacqueline and the chair go over too, and under me, breaking my fall, saving my face, and luckily a car doesn't hit us while we're in a heap on the road. We both get up laughing, I'm scraped up a bit to be sure, road rash on both palms. So is she, I can see on her knee, probably bruises in the morning too, but right now it's just funny. We get out of the street and I notice we're almost at Pins, and then I see the sign: \$2 Chow Mein

Something about that sign, handwritten on a torn piece of cardboard, something about a restaurant with no name, or none to be seen, so unassuming, so modest, and cheap, it's my kind of place. And score, there's not even too big a line, seven, eight people tops. Not eating is the mistake I made last night, and what could be better than noodles smothered in peanut butter diluted with oil?

Still on a bit of a buzz from that chair ride when I get in line. This chick is a wild one, probably wild in bed too. Am I really going to go home with Jacqueline tonight? Is that something that can happen? I think so. Should that happen? Do I want that to happen? What happens if that happens? Do we go to hers or mine? Do I have to spend the night if we go to hers? I don't know if I'm ready for this yet. I mean, I don't even I have a

fucking condom. I don't even know her last name. Still, I am single. Sheila changed her Facebook status to *Single*. I could do this, I can do this, it's allowed, single guys sleep with girls whose last names they don't know, nothing wrong with it. I would like to kiss her, to French kiss her, to French kiss a French girl—a personal goal gone unfulfilled despite living here almost four years. Yeah, get a kiss, get her number, thank her for the fun, go home, get stoned, jerk off, and go to bed. That's what you're going to do. That's the plan.

I get two chow meins, grab a couple of pairs of chop sticks, and spin around to find Jacqueline, but she's nowhere to be found. I look up and down St-Laurent, nothing. Up and down Pins, nothing still. She's just gone. She just left me here, alone with chow mein. Didn't even say goodbye.

6

Christ, there it is, I'm *Single*. Sheila has indeed changed her Facebook status—and mine—to *Single*. Ended our relationship in the digital world as well the real one. It's official as official gets now. Oh what? What kind of fucking status update is that?

Shelia is: *out from under the weight*

Like, what the fuck, Sheila? Why the public display? Why drag me through the shit? Everybody we know is on here. Is she that malicious or is it just that easy? Revenge right at your fingertips, literally just a click away, is that it? It's pretty bitchy, whatever it is. Or is it for someone specific to see? Someone like Barry? Fucking Barry. Go...fuck, Sheila!

Fuck it, I'm getting stoned.

Somehow my dirty, little room looks dirtier and littler than usual. Run down. Worn out. Dilapidated. Maybe it's me. Stiff, sore, kind of banged up a bit, still pulling pebbles out of my hands. Hangover's not so bad as yesterday's, probably 'cause I ate, probably it was a good thing Jacqueline took off and left me her chow mein, probably needed both. Plus if she would've stuck around, if she would've invited me over, I'd've gone, good intentions or not, it was all in her hands. And if I did go home with her, then where would I be, in her bed right now? I'm not sure if that's better or worse. Better and worse? She was hot though, Jacqueline, before she took off, pretty fucking hot. Long. Lean. Firm...I should hop in the shower.

That felt terrific. Scrubbed off the stench of bar and beer and self-loathing. Probably shouldn't have smoked before shaving, but it looks all right. Eyes don't look so bad either, not too red, shouldn't raise any suspicion. What to wear, what to wear? I'd like to wear some Habs gear but it's all at Sheila's. Fucking Sheila. If I hadn't called in

yesterday, I could call in today, go watch the game. Still no underwear either, I wonder if corduroys would be softer on the junk than jeans? They're cleaner anyway. And any clean shirts here? None I've worn in months, just dress shirts and plaids, this black one smells best.

Almost 3:30, I got to go if I'm going to stop at Timmy Ho's. Keys, phone, wallet, water, a joint for after work, hat, jacket, shut this down...or wait, let's just update the ole status first:

Corey is: *on the second day of wearing pants with no underwear*

Beauty.

As I'm heading out I hear the unmistakable sounds of fucking coming from Drago's. Rad screaming away like a goddamn porn star: "Yeah Baby! Fuck Me, Baby! Harder Baby!" I didn't think girls actually did that.

It's only three stops and another nice day, but I'm riding the Metro, spending money I don't have instead of walking—chafed balls will do that to you. A not-too-dirty-looking-yet-nonetheless-most-likely-homeless man approaches me as I approach the Metro, "English? *Francais?*" he asks before starting his scam, and I shake my head, wave a hand over him like I'm Obe Wan Kenobi, and just keep moving.

English or French? The essential Montreal question, quintessential even. It's fun for tourists, but at the end of the day I think it makes the city less friendly, a walking-on-eggshells atmosphere in all encounters. No one wants to talk to anyone in case they do it in the wrong language, or they get frustrated when they speak and people don't understand, or they just don't want to step on anyone's toes. Though lately it's been different, there's the tie that binds, a playoff run will do that. A big game for the

Canadiens will always break the language barrier, bring us all together, on the ice it's all one language—and anyway *everyone's* going to be watching in French, only Pierre and Yvon can give a game like tonight's the passion it needs, Bob Cole would probably just call us the Leafs. Loads of people have taken the afternoon off to get a seat in bars to watch the game. Streets are packed, *terrasses* are packed, everybody's wearing Habs gear, nearly every car's flying a flag. Maybe it's me, I'm pretty lit up at the moment, but there's a palpable buzz on the streets, an anxious energy—potential energy—just waiting to go off. I can't believe I have to go work. Who's going to answer their phone tonight? I shouldn't have called in yesterday, never should've called in yesterday, should've saved it for tonight. Fucking Sheila, I wasn't thinking.

Train's pulling into the station as I arrive, racing, running down the stairs with quick sideways steps, I'm there in plenty of time, as the doors open. Metro's not so busy at it usually is, or would be, exams and all, but it's busy enough, like half-empty. I take the first seat I see inside the door, digging through my backpack for my headphones, nowhere to be found—knew I'd forget something if I smoked. Looking up I notice this cute girl sitting across from me, really cute. Wearing this bright orange dress, she's showing off these great legs, her dark skin contrasted against the orange of the dress, and the white heels that match her blazer. Her hair, worn natural, a loose kind of afro, bouncing up and down as train rumbles along—not the only thing bouncing either. I smile and she smiles back, a small gap in her teeth exposed. Should I go talk to her? Girls can't like it when guys hit on them in the Metro, can they? It smacks of creepiness and desperation, doesn't it? On the other hand, I'm never going to see her again, I mean not likely, so if I do have a chance, if I'm ever going to have a chance, it's now, isn't it?

I smile again and wave a non-threatening wave and move over to sit closer to her, just to her right, her three o'clock, our knees practically touching. I lean in, summon my courage and reveal, "I'm on the second day of wearing pants with no underwear."

She doesn't answer right away, she looks like she's about to burst out laughing but doesn't, this glint comes into her eye, her tongue flashes across her upper lip, then, in a strong voice, she makes a revelation of her own: "I've always wanted to share my bed with a racist."

What? Whoa now, wait, who's a racist? What the fuck?

I get up and go stand by the door, pretend to be waiting to get off, though my stop isn't next—maybe I'll change cars...maybe not—she doesn't try to stop me or say anything else so I guess we're finished. Is it necessarily the case that I'm a racist if I hit on a black girl? Wouldn't it make me the opposite? Like I don't have jungle fever or nothing, I don't just see her and think 'black girl' and put her in a box, make her a type. I see her and say 'cute girl' and put her in that box, make her that type. Cute is cute. I like cute girls as a rule, not black girls. Not that I dislike black girls or anything...Goddamn, what the fuck? Are you just fucking with me? Spying her in the reflection of the window I can see she's grinning, satisfied. I wonder if she works at Bijoux. That might explain it. Maybe Patrick told her about the time I asked him why so many young black people want to work at call centres. I remember that look on his face, somewhere between aggressive and pitying, like he couldn't believe I was naïve enough to think there wasn't racism in this country, then he just shook his head and said, 'This isn't nobody's first choice. We all have bills to pay, man.' I've always felt a little uncomfortable around my black co-workers since then. No one's ever said anything, and nothing's ever happened, I don't

know, maybe it's just guilt, or embarrassment, but there's something. I hope she's not getting off here. Thank Christ.

The reality is the only people who work at call centres, in telemarketing, are those desperate enough to go looking for those jobs, to answer those ads, place that call, send that email. People who have been turned down for other jobs, searching for months with evil results, new immigrants and kids from out of province who can't speak French, lots of young black people, I guess because people won't hire young black people—what other conclusion is there?—and lots of Arabs, probably because most people won't call up Loubna, or Urooj, or Widad or Wajiha, because it's embarrassing to ask to speak to someone whose name you can't pronounce. I should know, I do it at least a half dozen times a shift. And I'm sure they're lovely names in Arabic or whatever, they could mean 'joy' or 'love' or 'excellent,' it doesn't matter, no one is going to call and ask for Fakhir, just in case. Also, if the Bouchard-Taylor commission is any evidence, Muslims aren't exactly being reasonably accommodated for here. Of course Bijoux doesn't care, this place is a revolving door, they'll take pretty much anybody who can say, "Hello, may I please speak to..." I mean, when your employer's recruiting strategy is to bribe existing staff into suckering their friends in, that should be a red flag, but that's how they do: fifty bucks for every new hire you bring in who completes eighty hours of work—I put fifty into Sheila's pocket myself. Of course this job puts money in my pocket, but not that much, it's too horrible to work much more than the minimum sixteen hours per week. A three-hour shift can feel like a month, sitting there watching each second tick away.

Just entering the building requires summoning courage, fighting the urge to walk by, turn around, go anywhere else. A quick stop off at the Timmy Ho's is almost

required, the final delay, the last gasp of freedom before the suck sets in. Coffee in hand, it's a deep breath and push through the revolving doors into the drab lobby, grey walls, grey elevator, security guard in grey uniform, with grey hair, behind metallic grey desk. This place really sets the mood, blands the life right out of you before you get up there. Because once you step off that elevator, you're theirs. You schmuck!

Bijoux's offices occupy the top two floors of the building, eleven and twelve, but the elevator doesn't go to the top, it only goes to eleven. There's a separate intra-office elevator that goes to twelve, but you need a key, us agents have to take the stairs. Upstairs there's conference, meeting, and training rooms, plus offices for upper management types, supervisors, IT, HR, and Mr. Martinet the COO—a near mythic creature I hear of but almost never see on the floor. Down on eleven is where the magic happens. Stepping out of the elevator into reception the place is deceptively awe-inspiring. A nice dark wood desk with a granite top, cathedral ceilings and twenty-foot plus windows opening onto the mountain give the impression that in this office important work is going on. Only the carpet, worn, tattered, stained, gives an honest reflection. The reception is manned by a sextet of young allophone girls, CEGEP grads who aren't quite university material and don't realise they're getting screwed into doing translation—every memo and schedule and announcement, French to English—for a third of what a translator would make, on top of the rest of their duties. On either side of those suckers there are glass double doors that open onto the real office, and the *real* suckers, the poor, headset wearing saps, annoying honest, hard-working Canadians—sometimes Americans—with calls hawking products and services no one needs. It's a depressing sight, a panic-attack-inducing sight, row after row of aging computers on workaday tables with thin canvas-

covered dividers—most torn or graffitied—to make so-called cubicles. Rolling chairs with missing wheels, broken hydraulics, gum ground into the seat, ceiling tiles missing or off kilter, Venetian blinds thick with dust, carpet so coffee-stained it's a leopard-like beige and grey. Everything in here's beige and grey, except the walls, they're painted these hideous tropical colours, one green, one orange, one purple, one yellow. I guess they think it helps us forget what a shit job this is or something, fool us into thinking we work in Maui or something. It just gives me a headache. Plus the place smells, there's a permanent stench of people, sweat and feet and bodies, of stale coffee and lowered expectations, of capitulation, desperation and self-loathing.

Fuck I hate this job.

Should've got here earlier, might have been able to get a seat by the window. Of course then I'd have been here earlier, and longer, and that's just not worth it. It is nice though, sitting next to the window, looking across into other people's offices in other buildings, wishing I were doing whatever job they're doing—it's got to be better than this one—but no dice. So I take the furthest seat from the supervisor's I can manage, the one next to Grandma. I don't know if Grandma is really a grandma, or even a mom, everyone just calls her that because she's like sixty-something, with a short bob of steel wool-like hair—I think her name's Margaret. Grandma's a real fixture here, has a window-cubicle all her own decorated with fake flowers and pine cones, greeting cards, postcards, a calendar, a laminated phonetic alphabet—'cause god forbid someone say 'D as in David'—and the full Bijoux contact list, all pinned to the canvas walls.

“You better put that in a travel mug,” says Grandma, pointing at my coffee cup. “Marc just gave me hell for having a ‘dangerous’, disposable coffee cup.” Grandma makes a face and hand quotation marks. She’s wearing a grey sweatshirt with a landscape print on it, a moose knee-deep in a forest pond, purple corduroys, and big, plastic-framed glasses with a string that hangs around her neck. “He was all fire and brimstone, you should have seen it, all high and mighty, hoity-toity, and who is he? IT? What does that have to do with me? He’s not *my* boss. It isn’t a computer issue, or a system issue. He has no right to yell at me like tha...Hello, may I please speak with...” Her change in tone is startling.

Downing my coffee, I crush up the cup, toss it, and take my seat. I log in, and start wiping down my station with an alcohol swab—this job breeds disease, sharing headphones and mice—when Grandma’s call ends, I get a tap on the shoulder.

“Like who the hell does he think he is, eh? He walks around here like cock of the walk,” she puffs out her chest and cranes her neck, “doesn’t seem to do anything at all, but then he yells at me? Why? For a lousy cup?” Grandma talks at me in one ear while the phone rings away in the other. Occasionally somebody’s voicemail message will begin. “Have you ever noticed how yelling at people is a well-guarded privilege? Those who are in a position to do it rarely give it up? And they certainly can’t handle it in return. Imagine if I yelled back at Marc, put the little bald twerp in his place. I wouldn’t be sitting here now, let me tell you.” Grandma rests her hand on my shoulder a little too familiarly, the stench of cigarettes wafting up from her fingers and, whispering for some reason, continues. “We live in a democracy, do we not? So why is this office run like a dictatorship? It’s like feudalism in the workplace! It’s like the dark ages. The lords can

just come down from on high and yell at you whenever they want, and...Hello may I please speak with..."

I *so* don't want to be here right now, and Grandma's not the worst of it: the constant ringing in my ears, the script, the pitch, the hang-ups, the insults. No one really wants additional insurance for his or her credit card. Fuck, it's barely been five minutes, how the hell am I going to last seven hours? Every shift is like climbing a mountain. I like Grandma calling Marc a twerp though that was fun. She's in rare form today.

"Hello may I please speak with Mrs Fei-Hung Kao?...Oh I'm sorry. May I speak with *Mr.* Fei-Hung Kao...Yes Mr. Kao, my name is Corey Bonspiel and I'm calling from Bijoux communications on behalf of Bank of Canada Visa and we are very excited to offer you..." the opportunity to hang up on me. Awesome. And it's ringing again...two...three...four...hang up. Next number, one ring...two...three...four, hang-up. And another, ring...two...three...I wish we had to dial ourselves instead of the computer, that'd give me plenty of time to slow the pace, though it'd probably just create another stat to worry about: calls dialled.

"Listen, Corey, I'm real sorry to have to do this," I hear in a familiar voice from over my shoulder. Looking back I find Neb Quisling waving some memo or something, "but I need a signature from you."

Most of Neb's hair is buzzed except for a strip, maybe an inch of two thick, at the very top that is long, worn down the left side of his face to the chin, and died black, drawing attention to the fact that the rest is clearly greying, silver even. He's wearing a white dress t-shirt with a Wolverine tie, black pants, and black buckled shoes.

“You’re a team leader now? My team leader?” I recognize the form he’s holding, it’s an official warning, mine apparently, I set my status to ‘away’ and put my headset down.

“Yep, pretty strange, eh? Started off sitting beside each other in training and now I’m your boss.” Neb laughs out the side of his face. “And I need you to sign this written warning for failure to adhere to protocol as regards calling in sick. It’s just the basic stuff, you agree that you were in breach of protocol and that you were aware of the protocol as per your training, and so forth.”

I take the warning from him and scribble across it without even reading it. I can’t believe that bitch Tammy threw me under the bus. Fucking corporate, stupid policies and regulations, standards and practices bullshit.

“Sorry, but it’s part of the job now, you understand? Over my head, out of my hands,” Neb tells me as he takes it back. He sounds sympathetic enough, but who knows, maybe it’s bullshit, maybe he’s truly management material. “It is sort of nice that it’s you, Corey, that you’re my first. Not for you obviously, but for me it’s nice, easier in a way.” Yeah okay, really fucking easy Neb. “Thanks for this, thanks for being cool about it.” He pats me on the back. “And I’m real sorry about Sheila.” I do a double take, eyes wide. “I saw it on Facebook, figured that was why you weren’t in yesterday,” he half-whispers.

Fucking Facebook! Goddamn it, Sheila!

A great groaning comes from my left, from the straining of a chair, the one under Alastair Taradiddle as he turns my way. “What’s happened to Sheila? Nothing serious I hope. Nothing infectious. Nothing contagious. Nothing salacious.”

“She’s fine, dude, don’t worry about it,” I tell him, logging back in.

Alastair is a big, big, man—my father would call him a tub-of-goo—like maybe four-hundred pounds, but who knows? I’m no carny. He’s all over fat, fat fingers, fat face, he even has neck fat—rolls at the back of his neck, three of them, bulging and folding over each other—if ever there was a guy who should be nicknamed ‘Lumpy’ Alastair Taradiddle is him. Alastair always wears sweatpants, always, black or navy or grey like today. Pairs them with XXXL golf shirts, usually a solid-colour, like this green one—Alastair’s not a stripes kind of guy. I think he thinks the collar classes the look up a bit, his own brand of business casual.

“But what has happened to her? Why does Neb feel sorry? What has he to be sorry about? I’m only trying to understand, you see.”

“He’s not sorry for her, not because of something that happened to her, he’s sorry about...for me alright? My situation, my misfortune.” Someone answer the goddamn phone.

“Ah,” Alastair taps a chubby finger on his nostril, “say no more. I’m not one to pry. I will just say though,” he pauses and gazes off across the room somewhere, “I always thought she was a very nice girl. Pleasant, amicable, it was a real shame when she left us here. I found her to be a potent example of how one can make intellectualism sexy. Beauty and brains, very fine specimen indeed.”

“Yeah, that’s awesome, man. Sure she’d love to know you think that.” But Alastair doesn’t answer, he’s got one on the line, he’s using his salesman voice, smiling with his voice, inflecting, enunciating, projecting, I think he thinks he’s performing.

“Hello, may I please speak with Mrs. Frances Gottlieb?...Good day, Mrs. Gottlieb, and how are you today?...Excellent, glad to hear it. Mrs. Gottlieb, my name is Alastair Taradiddle, and I am phoning today from Bijoux Communications on behalf of Bills Telecom, your telecommunications company. Now, the reason I’m calling today, Mrs. Gottlieb, is because as a valued client we would like to offer you the opportunity to....” Blah, blah, whatever.

I don’t get these people, people like Grandma and Alastair, people who make this job a job, like a proper one, like a J-O-B. Sure it opens doors for those who wouldn’t do well in sales if they were done face-to-face, but still they’re getting screwed, worse than the rest of us even. Like, some big company, a bank or telecommunications company, shuts down their own customer service centre, lays a bunch of people off, doesn’t pay out on their pensions, huge savings for the company. These are jobs these people could’ve and would’ve had, pensions that could’ve and would’ve been theirs, people like Grandma and Alastair, hell, people like me. Then that same company turns around and contracts out all their phone-related business—because that side of the business didn’t go anywhere, it was just a burden paying employees—to an outside company, like Bijoux, who pay their employees way less and offer no pension—the word is as taboo as *union* around here. That little scheme works so well they do the same thing with their repair centres, and their home delivery service, and before you know it everything’s being done second-hand, there’s no chain of command, no accountability. One company makes a product or provides a service, another sells that product or service, another handles customer service, another deals with repairs, another deliveries, and nobody anywhere along the line really gives a shit, or cares about their job, or feels like their job cares

about them. There's no one overarching unifying centre to the operation, one headquarters, one company that values its employees enough to make jobs into careers. Yet somehow there is money being made, lots of it, enough to pay all those employees at all those companies—however poorly. That's the part that I can't figure out, how does this work? Where does the money come from? Go to? If I knew, I wouldn't be sitting here. Oh...

“Hello, may I please speak with Mister Larry Camperdown please?...Yes, Mr. Camperdown, good afternoon sir, how are you today?...I'm excellent, thanks for asking. Mr Camperdown, my name is Corey Bonspiel and I'm calling on behalf of Bank of Canada Visa and we're excited to offer you the opportunity to protect yourself and your loved ones in case of unforeseen events in your life, such as the loss of your job through no fault of your own, or an accident, loss of limb, or even death...I can appreciate your hesitancy Mr Camperdown, but you see the cost of this plan is based upon your average monthly balance, so should you not carry a balance the cost to you would be nothing, yet you would still be covered up to \$10,000...Yes, your card does have insurance on it already, Mr. Camperdown, this offer is more additional coverage....I understand, Mr Camperdown, I can respect that...Well, thank you very much, you have a great day now.” I hate getting past the opening line without finishing the sale, either hang up or buy, shit or get off the pot. I've got to make rate today.

“Do you mind if I inquire as to how you are feeling?” Alastair asks, his call finished, sale made.

“How I'm feeling?”

“Yes, have you found you’re not quite yourself, feeling unwell or antsy or unusual since...” He pauses, seemingly unsure of how best to phrase what he wants to say. He just rolls his hand over a few times, stammering, then blushes. “Well, since your, ‘misfortune’ as you put it.”

“Um, I guess I’ve been off, maybe, I don’t know. Unusual?” What does he want from me, “I guess I feel like a guy who got dumped, probably, is that it?”

“It’s not for me to decide what it is you feel, or how you feel. I would not presume to know such things. I only ask because I have been doing some reading lately, online journals mostly, medical science, advances in neuroscience in particular, CAT scans, brain waves, that type of thing, very interesting subject matter. All that to say, perhaps you are suffering from oxytocin withdrawal.”

“From what now?”

“Oxytocin withdrawal. It’s a chemical in the brain that is released when one is in love, hence its sobriquet ‘the love hormone.’ It stimulates pair-bonding and mating, generates feelings of contentment, reduces anxiety, amplifies empathy, decreases fear, increases trust. Leaves a glaze in the eyes, gives one a nice, healthy appearance, makes you attractive to potential mates, aids seduction. Interestingly it also appears to stimulate an increase in cultural and racial biases, which...”

“What? What biases? Whose biases? What made you...why would you say that? Why to me?”

“I would say it to anyone, these are merely the facts as they are known to us now. I do apologize if these facts disturb you. The field of neuroscience moves very quickly, you understand, advances all the time, but at present these are the facts of oxytocin and

its effects as far as we understand. As I said, oxytocin is a chemical in the brain released when people are in love, or experiencing love, or, well, being intimate, let's say. Levels are said to be particularly high at orgasm." He pauses for a moment lost in thought, before snapping back. "Did Sheila experience orgasm with you?"

"What kind of fucking question is that?" You fat fuck. I sit up straight and stare down into him. "She did, as a matter of fact," I'm pretty sure, not all the time maybe, but sometimes, "not that it's any your business."

"You're right, it was inappropriate, I was woolgathering there a bit, I admit. It is absolutely none of my business, and it's of no consequence." Sheila might disagree with you there. "Anyhow, my point was directed at you not at her, and I trust *you* had no difficulty in that regard." Alastair rubs all three chins with a chubby hand, eyes far away, pondering, and then, "Good afternoon, may I please speak with..."

I let my head fall, landing on the keyboard, resting it there until the beeping and screeching from the computer competing with the ringing in my headset gets to me—maybe three seconds—and I raise my head up to face the office. In that instant there's a tap on the shoulder from Grandma and a Queen wave to see if it's safe to talk, I motion towards myself with my fingers.

"Did I hear you saying that your girlfriend left you?" Grandma's sharpening pencils, and pauses to examine the tip of one. Satisfied, she sets it down and starts twisting the next. "Are you up to talking about it?" She looks at me with heavy eyelids and a small closed-mouth smile, I don't really want to talk about it, but Grandma's old, she might, I don't know, *be wise?* Seems unlikely, but who knows what people's lives have been.

“Yeah,” I sigh, “not so much, but there isn’t much to tell either. Probably it was a lot of things, maybe I’m not the most romantic, but the final straw was the other night when I called her poetry stupid.”

“She’s a poet? Well, isn’t that nice.” Grandma lays the sarcasm on pretty thick, which is nice. “She any good?”

“I don’t know, how do you tell?” Grandma giggles, and I laugh too, but I wasn’t joking, I really don’t know.

“She is quite excellent actually.” Alastair interrupts to inform. “She shared a few poems with me while she was still employed here. Her work is highly feminine, and sexual also. Very precise, her choices are daring, stirring and... Good afternoon, may I please speak with...”

“Some people clearly like it,” I say pointing to Alastair, “and she’s studying to be a poet in university, whatever that’s worth.”

“Listen,” Grandma starts, and then stops suddenly. “Can I assume you’re not a poet yourself then? Not a performer?”

“No.” I can’t help snickering. Why do people keep thinking this?

“Well, good, because all performer types, actors, singers, dancers, poets, they’re all nuts. Vain and self-involved, always out for the spotlight, they’re desperate, emotional people. My first husband was a comic, he made no money at all, was never at home, completely immersed himself in his work, never made any time for me. I make one crack about his material, offer one critique, give him one note about his performance,” Grandma snaps her fingers, “he files for divorce, ‘lack of support of his ambitions’ was the reason he gave.” She crosses her arms, mouth turned down at the corners and stares off

somewhere, into the past maybe? But returns with a blink a moment later. “Anyway, everybody’s an attention-seeker these days, it’s become very boring and predictable. The whole generation of you kids running around like my ex-husband, screaming ‘look at me, look at me’, but there’s nothing to see, no one’s doing anything. Blogs and video blogs, I don’t understand it. People blog about which groceries they bought and what they had for lunch. If I wanted to know that stuff, I’d make a friend.”

“I have a blog. I blog daily.” Alastair, his call evidently finished, informs. “I follow many other bloggers as well. We’re quite a large number, Martha, and not so young as you may think.”

“All I’m saying is it doesn’t pay to be humble these days. If you don’t want to toot your own horn, you’re in trouble. It’s none of my never mind, I’m not in the mix anymore, but you,” Grandma directs a open-palmed hand my way, “well, it’s your generation, you have to play by the rules, you can’t afford to fall behind. No more hiding in the crowd, keeping your head down, quietly doing your job well and expecting someone to notice, that’s not enough anymore. You have to be cutting you colleagues’ legs out at the knees too. There are no more unsung heroes in the world, everyone’s singing about themselves, bragging about everything and anything and nothing,” Grandma mocks a couple rah-rahs with her hands like a cheerleader, “at every available opportunity, through every available channel.”

“And I would simply say to that that you need to give it a try, need to be open to the wonders of the blogosphere, embrace the Internet,” Alastair suggests.

“Fuck the Internet,” I tell him. “I was dumped on the internet.”

“Really? How cold.” Grandma’s sympathy feels real.

“Well, no, okay, she did it face-to-face to begin with, but then she also changed her status on Facebook to *Single*,” Grandma nods, but looks confused, “which pretty well announces it to everyone she knows. Or not even, to anyone she’s friends with on Facebook which is *way* more people that she’s actually friends with. Hell, it’s even people she hates.”

“Well I don’t Facebook, or MySpace, or any of those. I mean I do email, you have to do email, but I don’t do the others. However, I recently tried Skype. They’ve been promising us the videophone for decades, and finally, Skype. It’s the first Internet thing I really like, I did it with my daughter and the kids it was so nice. You can interact with the children in a way you just can’t on the phone, they showed me art and toys and owies. Of course when I was a child I used to write letters to my grandmother, I loved to lick the stamps. And my kids exchanged cassettes with my mother, they would sing songs and give her updates on their tapes and she would read stories on the ones she would send back.” That far off look washes back over Grandma’s face, she’s either lost in the past or lost her train of thought. “But you know,” she turns towards me, her eyes back in focus, “with Skype there’s no product. Sure it’s fast, it’s in real time, but there’s nothing left in the end, nothing tangible to hold, or hide, or treasure. Even email, they can be retrieved but it’s not the same, not like a letter.” Yeah and Skype is different than a regular phone call how exactly? She untangles the cord connecting headset to phone and carries on without irony. “I suppose it’s those little things, little differences, small changes through the years that affect us the most, but that we notice the least. We don’t wait anymore, we don’t anticipate anymore, we don’t cherish, don’t appreciate...” I show Grandma my shushing finger.

”Hello may I please speak to Ms. Lynne Dinunzio?” Oh shit, still on mute.

“Hello, may I please spea...” Gone. Fuck, I hope that one wasn’t being monitored.

“Another hang-up? Tough day, eh?”

“I haven’t hit rate in a couple of weeks,” I shrug. We’re supposed to try to make 1.75 sales per hour, but whatever.

“You need to watch that, you know that they do monitor those types of things and if you don’t want a week of re-training, unpaid, better buckle down.” She pats me on the knee the way you’d pat a dog on the head, good boy.

I can’t believe I’m working tonight. How could I be so stupid? How did I never even think of it yesterday? I find a copy of the *Hour* someone left behind the computer. I flip to the classifieds and search through the job postings, right out in the open, as brazenly as possible, because fuck them. It’s mostly just other telemarketing gigs, a few collection agencies—not sure if that’s better or worse—and a bunch of jobs I’m nowhere near qualified for, ones that require years of school and experience on top of being bilingual. Nonetheless, I circle an intriguing one:

Open call for prison architects. Send me blue prints A.S.A.P.

I sketch a rough outline of the room, and copy down the address. Just two and a half hours till lunch.

7

I've decided I don't trust margarine. Sheila used to cook with it instead of butter and I could always taste the difference, something about it doesn't sit well with me, it doesn't melt right maybe, I don't know. Someone put a tub of it in the lunchroom fridge with "Communal" written on it—you can keep your bacteria farm, thank you anyway. I don't even know why I opened the fridge, I don't have anything in here, I don't have any food at all, not even enough change for a bag of chips. The lunchroom is dull in contrast to the sales floor, no tropical colours on the walls, just a drab beige, a dozen or so round brown tables with grey plastic chairs, the pair of fridges and the cupboards stark white, the countertop blue-grey, four black microwaves lined up across it. I don't really like eating in here, the tables always seem to be divided along racial, ethnic, religious or linguistic lines. I don't really know how or why that always happens, or why it bothers me, but it does. Still, I eat here enough, saves time not going out to grab food, plus once you're here it's best to stay, leave and there's always a chance you won't come back. Anyway I got no money for food, what would be the point in leaving? To tease myself, seeing all those people gathering around TVs to watch the game? Fuck that. Five after seven, puck'll be dropping soon. No way I'm seeing this game, not unless it goes into like double overtime—don't even think that, it better fucking not go into double overtime, or any overtime.

"Bonnie! Buddy!" Quinn, up to answer the call of the microwave, slaps my back hard—like a body glove from back in the day—on the way by, and it stings. "How was the rest of the night last night?" Quinn removes a steaming Tupperware full of ribs and mashed potatoes. It smells delicious.

“Where the hell did you get that?” He looks up and shows me that goofy smile again. I know he sure as shit didn’t make it.

“Leftovers from the roommate. Pretty sweet. His old lady can cook it up.” Quinn starts to take a bite but it’s way too hot, he can’t even really pick up a rib. I follow him over to a table, as we’re sitting he says, “Big game tonight, eh? You think they’re going to blow it or what?”

“Fuck, I hope not. I can’t believe I’m not going to be watching it. Shouldn’t have called in yesterday. For what, weed? That was fucking stupid, huge mistake. Biggest game we’ve played all year...”

“We’ve? You moonlighting with the Canadiens now, Bonnie?”

“You know what I mean, man. The *true* fans, we speak in plurals, the royal *we*, we’re fully invested.” He gives me the finger. “I put a lot of time and energy into this team, I yell at the TV, cheer every goal and big hit, suffer through every bad penalty, every shootout. I die a little inside when we lose. Just like all the other *real* fans, and those twenty-one thousand people there tonight will be a big part of helping *us* win.”

He shakes his head, “Whatever dude,” and cleans a rib in one bite. Talking with his mouthful, he continues, “You could listen to it though, that’s what *we*—the people working incoming not the Montreal Canadiens—are doing. On CJAD.”

“You can do that?”

“Yeah, Mohammed brings his laptop and speakers and plays the radio.” I shake my head in disbelief. “On incoming we have cool supervisors like Mohammed, not assholes like Quisling here.” Quinn nods, and turning, I find Neb behind me, box of *Timbits* in one hand, a *Hungry Man* in the other.

“Mind if I join you guys?” he asks, setting the donuts down, but leaves without getting an answer, off to heat up his meal. Must’ve assumed the answer was yes.

“Yeah, it’s pretty awesome listening to the game at work, kind of like not even working at all.” Quinn’s laying it on thick, and it’s working. I think I feel my face turning green. “Of course it’s not like watching it, but it’s not nothing. It’s funny if you’re on a call when the Habs score a goal though, gets pretty loud.”

“Man, I wish I worked on incoming, as if you fuckers don’t already have the sweetest gig here.”

“Yeah, well, if you didn’t suck, they might think about it.” Suck? Do I really suck? I mean I know I’m not the best, but suck? I open Neb’s box of Timbits and pop a jelly in my mouth just as he returns with his steaming *Hungry Man*.

“Hey Corey, c’mon now those are prizes, you have to earn those.” He snatches the box away, sugar and cinnamon and powder jumping out all over the table, and my arm. “These are for first sale of the hour, most sales per hour, highest rate, that kind of thing. What’s the matter with you? If you’re so hungry, I have another one of these,” he lifts his TV dinner with his fork, “in the freezer if you want it.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. It’s a Salisbury steak, I believe, or maybe not, it has my name on it in indelible marker either way.” Awesome, I’m starved. I hope it has cobbler.

Carrying my turkey dinner from the microwave to the table, my fork, resting on the edge of the plastic container, begins to slip. I twist my wrist and the fork slides back down towards the centre of the plate, into the food and not onto the floor. Nice. Just then

a roar erupts from the other side of the office, from incoming, from the radio. The Habs must've scored.

I get back and Quinn's lecturing Neb. "...I'm telling you, Quisling, you're leaving money on the table. It wouldn't take that much to learn how to start up a site, run a site. Get yourself a camera, if you get a good video camera it can take stills too, or you can capture screen shots. You already have a bed, a couch, a shower, what more do you need?"

"I don't know, it feels complicated, seems very involved. Also, I'm not sure it's the career for me, I don't think I'm ready to be a pornographer."

"Happy just to keep fucking one, eh?"

Neb's got no immediate response to that one. I reach over his plate and grab a couple little packets of pepper, opening one over the turkey, one over the peas and carrots and mashed potatoes. This looks horrible. As I dig in, Neb musters something.

"She's not...she's a web-cam girl, not some..."

"Same difference, fuck face."

"Hey!" Neb's face hardens, glaring, brows lowered, serious. "Quinn, you can't be saying things like that to me anymore, not in here. I'm your superior now, like it or not, and with a position of authority I have an aura I have to project."

"Authority, what authority? You're a damn Team Leader, so what?"

Suddenly Rabi, this wiry Lebanese guy from incoming, comes running into the lunchroom. "One-zip, Canadiens. Komisarek. Whooooooot!" Komisarek?

Rabi may be the biggest Habs fan here, he's never not wearing Habs gear of some kind, a hat, a shirt, a watch, a keychain. He has a leather jacket with all the Stanley Cup

years on little patches on the back, for Christ's sake. Tonight he's in a red sweatshirt with those same years printed on both sleeves, in pint-sized white banners, the first twelve on the right, the last twelve on the left, and he's waving a flag. He does a lap of the room giving high fives and is gone as quickly and noisily as he came. "Whoooooot!"

God, I wish I were watching this game.

Some people across the way, in the next building, three of them, two men and a woman, are gathered around a second woman's desk. I wonder if they're watching the game? Streaming it, or listening to it? Or maybe it's just a meeting. Or maybe they're watching YouTube. I wish I had a job where I could watch YouTube. Hell, I wish I had a job where I would be home in the evening watching hockey not here listening to this shit...

"...Quisling, buddy, alls I'm saying is you could be making enough money off her that it could be both of your jobs, okay? And she doesn't have to fuck anyone else, it doesn't have to be hardcore. I get it, you don't want that, and she's not doing that now. That's fine. She doesn't even have to fuck you. Though you could do that, you know? Film her blowing you, do some pov shit, like some doggy or..."

"Can we just not talk about Caroline and her work anymore, Quinn, please?" Neb glowers at Quinn, steely-eyed, tight-lipped, fuming. "Besides I'm not looking for employment, I have a job, recently promoted, on track to land a weekend floor manager position."

"Fine, fine, you do what you want, become CEO of fucking Bijoux for all I care. Alls I'm saying is that if my woman was stripping, sticking dildos up her ass for money, I'd want a piece of that action."

Neb's jaw drops, his mouth just hangs open. "How do you...? When were you...?"

"Quisling, buddy, c'mon, quit being naïve. She told everyone here what she was leaving to go do. You don't think we're going to get curious? Check it out for ourselves? Like, I don't have to tell you she's a tight little number." Neb looks befuddled, like a man who just lost his faith or his life savings. "Anyway, what do you care, it's okay for loads of guys out in Internet-land to ogle her but not those you know?"

"I just never thought..." Nebs face is as red as his can of *Coke*.

I don't how he couldn't have thought of it, he wasn't even dating Caroline when she left here, telling all of us where to find her online, telling us to come check her out. Hell, Neb probably checked her out himself. Who didn't?

"You should be thinking it, Quisling, and it's okay, it's fine actually, just cash in on her. I mean, like what's she making now?"

"It's good money, Quinn. She does very well, better than me even."

No doubt she does, but I couldn't do it, date a girl doing that, I would've dumped her ass just like her old boyfriend. And dollars to donuts if she had stayed in Toronto, or moved to Vancouver or Calgary instead of Montreal, or if she could speak a lick of French, she wouldn't be alone in a little room stripping for a camera, chatting up perverts and teenagers and lonely old men on her little headset—the one bit of continuity from her old job here at Bijoux—masturbating for them, with them. And once you're in that world, seems, from what I can tell, you never really get out, even when you are out.

"I'm sure she makes more money than you, okay? I know that, earns every penny too. But brass tacks time here, how much is she getting?"

“It’s twenty an hour,” Neb concedes, “plus five for every private session she sells.” Sales, more continuity with Bijoux—maybe this job prepared her better than I knew. “And she makes her sales, has regulars and everything.”

Quinn reaches over and lays a hand on Neb’s shoulder “I know, buddy, I’m one of them.” He lets that sink in a second and takes his hand away before continuing, “But here’s the thing, those private sessions cost me, and other guys like me, twenty-five bucks. She’s only getting twenty percent. If she’s got regular traffic she should spin off and start her own site. I’m telling you, Quisling, you’re fucking a goldmine and you don’t even realize it.”

“Okay, can we please move on to something else, as much as I enjoy you giving me the gears about my life and my girlfriend,” Quinn smirks, “I’ve asked you politely to stop, and you shouldn’t push me, I am your superior and I could make things very uncomfortable for you here.” Neb balls his hands into fists, a bit of spittle leaping out his mouth, across the table. “Now let’s change the subject, okay?” It’s kind of a pathetic display, but point made I guess. Quinn shifts gears.

“Sure, sure, no worries. Corey’s got a story, a great story, story about a girlfriend too. Have you heard that one?”

“If this is about the break up, then no, I haven’t heard it, not the particulars, just Sheila’s Facebook announcement. I kind of see this as a private matter, personal business, Corey’s personal business, but if,” Neb turns my way, waggling his fork as he says, “well, if you wanted to, that is, I mean,” his tongue flashes across his upper lip, “well, what happened?”

“She threw him out of her apartment naked! Tossed him on his ass! He had to beg her on his hands and knees to get his clothes back.”

“Enough Quinn, what are you, the fucking town crier?”

“Did she really throw you out of her place naked?” Neb’s ears are perked, that’s for sure, but I’m not going there.

“Look, I don’t really want to go through the whole thing right now, yes she threw me out, yes I was naked, we had a fight about me not supporting her art or whatever and I’d say it’s fair to say I really pissed her off. But there was more, there were other issues, there was...I think she might’ve been cheating on me.”

“Yeah, I thought that too man,” Neb confides, “when she was still working here, not now, I’ve haven’t seen her in a while, but I don’t know, I just got this feeling off of her, a vibe, like she was seducing me or something.” Somehow I doubt that, but unnerving all the same.

“Thing about cheating,” Quinn informs, changing the subject, “if you’re going to cheat, I’m not saying you should or shouldn’t—you probably should’ve Bonnie, but too late now. But if you are going to cheat, you should do it with someone who is also cheating, like a chick with a boyfriend, preferably not a big boyfriend, but whatever, this way you know she’ll be quiet, won’t go all bat-shit on you, won’t fall in love with you. Eliminates that whole issue.”

“This a big problem for you is it, Quinn? Women falling in love with you?” Neb asks and Quinn flicks a spoonful of mashed potato at him.

“I got to go take a piss.”

Not sure what this office was before Bijoux rented it, but clearly they cared about their employees, or at least about appearances. The washrooms here, like the lobby, are surprisingly, unfittingly, luxurious. Faux marble countertops, textured tiles, brass fixtures, recessed lighting, even wainscoting, very classy, looks like it was done by one of those design shows on HGTV Sheila loved so much—and where I heard the term wainscoting. The one drawback is that it's small, two urinals, two sinks, two stalls, two soap dispensers, two hand-dryers, and one big mirror, but still, beauty pisser.

Entering, I come face to face with a familiar face, a guy whose name I don't know so I call him Same Suit, washing up at one of the sinks. Same Suit is a Chinese—I think—immigrant who wears the same suit—his only suit?—to work every day, a brown wool deal, single-breasted, very plain and cheap-looking. Same Suit looks up and for a second our eyes meet. As per usual during these encounters neither of us speaks, but in our silence there is acceptance. We understand each other. Share a common problem, and a common solution.

I slip into one of the stalls, get a seat protector in place, and sit. Recently I've begun to increase my visits to the washroom as a way to avoid doing work. Come in for three to five minutes or so, about once an hour, sometimes more. During one particularly brazen three-hour shift, I made eight trips. Over time I've started to notice familiar faces, like Same Suit. It seems a small number of my fellow employees are practicing this same technique. I've dubbed us 'The Stall Squad.' We're kind of like superheroes of fucking the dog. Not that I'm telling anybody that, not even the other members, but it's as a good name as any. I don't know all of them by name—I only know one by name—but there are five of us for sure that I've identified: Same Suit, Baggy Pants, The Goth Kid,

Decius—whose name I know—and me. Today it's not such an obvious time-wasting tactic, with the game distracting everyone, but usually, well, I don't really understand how no one has caught on. Upper management must be okay with it, or the Supervisors haven't told them, or the Team Leaders haven't told the Supervisors, but that seems unlikely. More likely nobody really gives a shit since this job sucks anyway, otherwise they'd be guarding against it. Either way, I keep doing it—Stall Squad keeps doing it—and it continues to go unchecked. And if they start checking for it, counting the number and duration of our bathroom breaks, then fuck them, I'll quit.

I don't hear anymore cheering, some groans, someone yelling 'bullshit.' I think maybe we got a penalty—better not have been a goal against, didn't sound *that* disappointed though. I shouldn't have called in sick yesterday. Fucking Sheila, if she knew what she'd done, she'd be loving it, proud as punch, a pig in shit, or whatever. *Out from under the weight*, man, what is that? God damn it! What did I ever do? Man, fuck. And what am I doing now? What? Why? Fuck my life, this job fucking sucks.

I hear someone come into the washroom, the door squawking open, creaking shut, a faucet turn, water running, maybe I've been here long enough. Exiting the stall I find an African dude, tall, lanky, very dark complexion, in a well-worn navy pinstriped suit, washing up at the sink. And not just his hands, he's got his sleeves rolled up and he's scooping water all the way up his forearms. Splashing water on his face, and drying himself with toilet paper taken from the other stall. I turn on the other sink, soap up, and start washing my hands. The man finishes with his hands, arms, and face, removes his right shoe, then sock, and begins cupping water in his hands and scrubbing his foot and lower leg. Where does this guy live that he has to do this? Has to wash up in a sink, in his

suit, at work. How badly do you need this job buddy? And it's after seven; this is probably a second job. I hit the button on the hand dryer, feel the blast of warm air, and shake my hands out underneath it. I look over my shoulder and watch the man in the mirror, he's on to his left leg now. He's probably got a family at home, kids to feed, and what, no shower? Is that possible? Here? Now?

Leaving the bathroom I spot the score being kept on a white board, the words *Habs* and *Bruins* written in red and black, respectively, both underlined with a vertical line drawn between them. Underneath *Habs* is a big one, underneath *Bruins* a big zero. A fucking nail-biter. I need to be watching this game. I don't need to be here. I don't have a family at home. I don't have a house with no shower. I don't have any underwear on, but at least I have a shower. At least I'm not washing up in the sink. How far am I from washing up in the sink? I'm a ways still, I think, but working here isn't helping. Pay's shit, I don't make enough commission to make it worth it, it's sucking my will to live, plus I'm missing this game. Next to the white board with the score is a second with a typical Bijoux message scrawled on it in big green letters: '3 Important Things To Remember: Upsell! Upsell! Upsell!'

That's fucking it. I quit.

Wow, I can't believe how easy that was. Just walked out, just walked away. Got in the elevator, let the doors close and was gone. No one tried to stop me, no one asked any questions. No one seemed to notice, no one seemed to care. I just quit my job. And they may not even know it yet. Anyway, it's only Neb. Actually it's kind of nice that it's him, kind of *easier* this way.

Man, it's a beautiful night, cool but not cold, I swear the air is lighter or sweeter or...there's something to it, I don't know, something almost magical. It's like a giant weight lifted off of my shoulders. *I'm out from under the weight.*

Now to find a beer and a TV, Go Habs Go! I suppose I could always go home, CBC comes in all right, could stop at a dep, grab a six, but I need people, I need the crowd, if we're going to win tonight I want to be in a bar with other Habs fans celebrating when we do. Where's a good sports bar 'round here? Better head down Union, always best to head down. Maisonneuve, Ste-Catherine, maybe Rene-Levesque if it comes to it, there'll be a bar.

The streets are empty, crazy empty, it's totally bizarre. You can spot places with TVs from down the street, packs of people gathered out front watching through windows, everywhere jam packed, standing room only. I hope I can find somewhere to watch. I keep moving down the street, past The Bay—Ste-Catherine is so quiet—and into the square, which is almost eerily empty, the sounds of the game coming from a radio in one of the flower stalls, employees crowding round. But I keep walking, moving into a corridor of concrete, dark, grey and cold, makes the street feel alleyway narrow. Spit out onto Rene-Levesque, I sprint across the street Frogger-style. Where do people go for lunch around here? All these big office buildings, people must eat somewhere, must go for drinks after work somewhere, but there's nothing here. And the street ends. I look right, nothing, I look left, this street ends too, in a block or two at what looks like a bar. As I walk towards this other street—what street am I on?—people begin appearing as if by magic, crowds materialising all around me, folks stepping out to smoke, little huddles of *blue, blanc et rouge*, and as I reach the corner it's *tricolouer* as far as the eye can see.

Must be intermission. As I approach one little crowd I scan for someone standing alone, someone with the group but not in the group, someone who knows the score. “Still 1-0?” I ask a man in a Richer home jersey.

“*Ah ouin*. But Boston ‘ave many good chance. *Deux jeux puissance*.” He holds up two fingers. “I’d prefer it more better if de *Canadiens* score anudder goal. Is easier for de ‘eart,” he tells me tapping his chest.

I nod, and keep moving down the street, down the hill, away from him, away from the crowd on the corner and the bar with no seats. He’s not wrong, Richer, we’d all like it if this had been easier on the heart, if it hadn’t gone to seven. Who wouldn’t want to rewind, back to game 5, before that third period, before the four unanswered goals, and somehow make it come out right, avoid the nerves, the heart-stopping moments, the lost face-offs, penalties, big saves, blocked shots, hit posts, missed calls, overtime—Christ, Corey, don’t even think it—it’s all too much sometimes. And the Bruins, so many years ruined by the Bruins, every damn spring when I was young. Bourque, Moog, Neely, the boogiemens of my childhood. We can’t lose to the fucking Bruins, not the Bruins, anyone but the Bruins. After taking a 3-1 lead. And after we did it to them in ’04, they return the favour four years later, it can’t happen, boys. Fifteen fucking years is way too long, we need this, and so much more than this. This has to happen. We have to win. And so we will. It’s written on the face of every person I see: *Nous Croyons!* We Believe!

In this square at the end of this park is a strange man statue, quite a large block-man, bending, one hand on the ground, wearing a gigantic Habs jersey, number 31, Price. That’s so cool. What is this place? Where is this place? I don’t know where the hell am I, this part of town I’ve never seen, this weird cavernous park-square, tall glass buildings on

three sides and art deco office buildings on the other, two large grassy, bench-filled parks in the centre, but no bars. Where are the bars? Maybe I shouldn't have come down the hill. I reach the end of the park and I look down both streets, one's broad and bright and busy, the other is narrow and dark and near empty. Both are lined with imposing old buildings, colonial buildings, important buildings—or once important—buildings built to impress. I think I might be way out of my price range here—of course *Bar Diana* is out of my price range these days. I choose the dark street, I don't know why, but it's a change of direction, so that's something.

I ramble down this street, past a couple of banks, looking for somewhere, anywhere, with a TV. So many of these places are closed already, lunch spots only, others are super-fancy little restos, not the types of places that have televisions in sight—in the kitchen maybe, for the staff, but not out front—not the types of places that cater to sports fans. Passing one, a little brassiere, almost past it, I catch something in my peripheral, something unexpected. I stop and double check, peering in the window to see if I see what I think I see, and sure enough I do.

I walk in and all heads and eyes turn in my direction, not that there are many, there's less than a dozen people here, plus the barman. It's not a big place and very narrow, maybe ten, twelve feet wide, but real nice, fancy, brass ceilings, low-lighting, well-stocked bar. Towards the back of the room, balancing atop a bar stool, is a small television set facing the bar, a little crowd gathered around it. They must not have cable because it's on CBC, and the picture's not perfect, but it's good enough, it'll do. I walk up and the bartender nods, "I'll take a pint of your most modestly priced blonde," I tell him, and he grins. I look to my left and there's a woman, older woman, thirty-five, forty,

pretty attractive, a cougar really, with a short-cropped dark hair, in a grey skirt-suit, stockings, heels, sitting at the bar backwards, leaning against the bar, elbow on the bar, watching the game. She looks over at me and smiles, I lean into her and confess, “I’m on the second day of wearing pants with no underwear.”

She smiles and motions for me to come closer, index finger curling towards her, then leans in and whispers, “I like to make whale noises in the bathtub,” and I feel her breath on my neck. She pulls away and smiles again, her eyes glazed over and green. I pay the barman, take a sip of beer, and pull out the stool next to hers.

“I’m Evelyn,” she’s tells me, extending a hand, palm down, fingers curled underneath, as though I’m supposed to take it and kiss it. So I do and she doesn’t complain.

“Corey.”

This could be the start of a beautiful friendship.

8

“You in software? You’ve got that look,” Evelyn asks without looking at me, watching the game. I’m watching too, but I’m sneaking glances at the same time. She’s all made up for work, grey eye shadow and shiny lips. Pearl earrings matching pearl necklace matching pearl bracelet, maybe knockoffs, maybe not.

“No. Why? What look?” I have a look? What’s my look? She looks tired, looks like she had a long day, but she looks good.

“Oh, I don’t know. Don’t worry about it, it’s not a bad thing.” She puts her hand on my shoulder. “You’re just the right age and there’s a lot of those types of companies in this part of town, software developers, making computer games, video games, websites, so I just thought...plus, you’re Anglo and those places skew a little English.” Wow, people hire English people down here? She spins her finger around in a circle, letting the bartender know she wants another—not sure what she’s drinking. “So what do you do then?”

“Ah...I don’t do anything actually. I just quit my job.”

“Okay,” smiles and licks her lips, “well then, what *did* you do?”

“Telemarketing,” I admit, eyes lowered. So glad I can stop telling people that.

“So you’re the one who keeps calling me asking me to buy things I don’t want, offer me services I don’t need and promotions I didn’t ask to be apart of, huh kid?” accuses the bartender as he returns with her drink, clear and ice-filled. He’s a handsome man, the bartender, with shampoo-commercial hair, curly and dark, five o’clock shadow, designer jeans, shirt unbuttoned three buttons showing chest hair—he probably does well for himself working here, both in tips and cougars.

“Not if you bought anything,” I assure him, and he grins. His teeth scary white.

“It’s okay, Ziggy, he’s no longer the enemy. He just quit,” Evelyn tells him, Ziggy, I guess.

“Really?” he asks, and I nod. “Cool. Can I ask you why?”

“Do you need a reason to quit a job like that? Mostly I left to watch the game.” I open my hands presenting the TV like I’m one of Barker’s Beauties. “Sweet setup by the way.”

“Hey, when it’s game 7 and you’ve gotta work, you’ve gotta do what you gotta do to find a way,” Ziggy says with a wink, and zips down the bar to field an order.

The TV is seriously old, with dials, actual dials. If I had to guess I’d say it’s from the late-70s, a white plastic box with a handle and rabbit ears, extended and, I think, working. The picture’s pretty good all things considered, sounds fine, and it’s in colour. Things are still looking good, still 1-0, but it’s tense, every play, every pass, every stride, threatens to be a bad one, to be a turnover, to turn the tide, shift momentum, give them some life, a goal—touch wood. Despite the awesomeness of the TV’s presence, there’re only a few of us watching it. Me, Evelyn, a middle-aged couple dressed like tourists—khaki Capri’s and shirts with loud prints—a wrinkly old guy in a Tilley hat with a bad case of rosacea sitting inches from the screen, and Ziggy when he has the time. Ziggy’s back now with a couple of shots of something dark brown.

“Here kid, it’s on me,” he says. Sliding one of them in front of me, then raising the other up he adds, “to quitting your job.” We clink glasses and gulp the shots, bourbon I think, burns like bourbon. I try to take it like a seasoned drinker, try not to show any

outward signs that it was rough, but I don't manage, I shudder all over as it hits my stomach. At least the price was right.

“So how'd you do it, kid?” he says nodding and leaning in, elbows chicken winging out on the bar top. He keeps calling me kid, but isn't that much older than me, ten years, twelve tops—he can't be more than 35.

“I don't know, I didn't do anything really, I just left. I got up and went to the bathroom on lunch and, I don't know, I hate that job right? And I don't need it, and, well, fuck, game 7, so I just left. Grabbed my bag and got in the elevator and left.”

“So no telling off the boss? No big scene? No sabotage? Nothing like that?” I shake my head. “That's not bad, I suppose, not good enough for the show, not to win, but...”

“What show, what are you talking about?”

Evelyn rolls her eyes—drawing attention to her crow's feet—and gives me a wide-eyed, loose-jawed look that says *it's your funeral*, as Ziggy carries on.

“The show, is *my* show, my idea for a reality TV show.” He stands up straight and spreads his hands out as he gives me the title. “It's called ‘Quit Your Job’ and the premise is three people who are fed up with their jobs go into work and quit. We'd have hidden cameras and all the rest of it, give you the angles, mic it all up, the works. Full *Candid Camera* shit. Then at the end the audience votes for whoever quit their job best, whatever they've done, filled the bathroom with water, erased company files, bricked up the boss' office door, whatever it is, and the winner gets \$50,000. Enough to live on without a job for a year or so depending on lifestyle, expenditures, what have you.”

“But then the losers are just out of a job? What happens to them?”

“No, exactly, this show has consequences.” He’s smiling like he won the lottery. “That’s what’s missing in reality TV, real consequences for losing. Example: I seen this British trivia show, a game show, where the contestants put their own car on the line, if they got so many answers wrong, their car went into a crusher. It was awesome. Consequences.” He drives this point home with an outstretched finger then settles back, chuffed with himself.

“Pretty sure I wouldn’t want to go on a show like that. I might watch it, but I wouldn’t want to be on it.” I give him a giggle, might be a decent show. “Anyway I’m not like, *so* sure of my decision. Not positive I won’t live to regret it.”

“You only have regrets when you’re not happy where you’re at, kid. If you’re happy in your life, you’re happy with the decisions you’ve made, since those decisions have led you to where you are.” Spoken like a true bartender.

“Ah, bullshit!” The old rosacea man yells at the TV, pulling me back to the game, and Ziggy heads down the bar back to work. “C’mon, Little Tits, use your head,” the old guy continues, and sure enough Sergei’s heading to the box, interference.

“This is a big kill,” Evelyn says to herself, almost under her breath.

“They were solid on the PK last game,” I try to assure her.

She looks over and smirks. “For all the good that did us.” *Us*. Too cool.

As the penalty kill goes on though, the boys are getting it done, getting pucks out, keeping shots to the outside, not really giving Boston anything. I should be focused, watching this, I left work to be watching this, but I can’t help sneaking glances at Evelyn. At her small but full-lipped mouth, her chin that comes together in a point, slightly upturned. At her big almond-shaped eyes, lashes long and thick, starring intently at our

boys in red, white and blue. She's quite fetching. The Habs kill the penalty, the game goes to commercial, and I order another beer. I turn and ask Evelyn if she wants anything but she's already gone, heading for the washroom.

"I fell in love with her walking away," the old man tells me, nudging my foot with his, extending out from under his table by the TV. "Onion ass: so pretty it makes you want to cry." He laughs to himself, and kind of gestures to me to join in. I grin, toothless, and sort of squint, not really approving but not wanting to disapprove either. I mean, it is a nice ass—looks good with that skirt stretch across it, more like an apple than an onion I'd say—nice legs too, fit, sculpted, the kind of well-defined calves that years of wearing heels gets you. I could mention this, but I don't really feel like bonding with rosacea here. "What I wouldn't do for five minutes alone with that," he tells me, his hands above the table shaped like he's gripping her ass.

"Settle down, Norm, or you're gonna hafta go," Ziggy interjects, returning with my beer. "And you," he says to me, "don't be encouraging him. It takes two to tell a dirty joke." I raise my hands, palms up, shaking my head, innocent. "You keep grinning like a moron at him and he'll really start telling you what he wants to do to her, and with E out here to hear it herself. Then I'll have to ask him to leave, and he's one of my regulars, I don't wanna hafta do that, kid. So you just leave him alone."

"I didn't even..." I touch my fingertips to my chest. "He talked to me, I never..."

"Ignore him, alright?" I nod and he turns and takes a bottle of Wild Turkey down from behind the bar, pours a shot and shows it to Norm, "This is yours if you shut your yap." Norm waves it over and Ziggy hands me the shot and motions with his head to pass

it on to the old man, so I do, spilling some on my hand that I lick off as the game returns from commercial and Evelyn from the washroom.

“We need a goal,” she says clapping her hands and taking her seat, “we need a boost.” And she’s right too, we certainly do. Something like the boost I got from that shot earlier. Belly fire.

Almost on cue the Habs respond: regrouping during a line change, Kovalev finds Lapierre streaking through the neutral zone, he makes a little move to the outside, takes the d-man with him, drops it off to Streit who undresses Chara with a pretty little dangle, gets in alone, head fakes and slides it past Thomas. The Bell Centre explodes with noise and so does the bar—at least with the noise of a half dozen people. The old man, Norm, is on his feet clapping his hands and pumping his fist, Evelyn’s shaking so much she nearly stumbles off her stool, dropping a foot to steady herself, Ziggy’s ringing the tip bell like the place is on fire, the couple both jump to their feet to hug, her waving a flag.

“Fucking Eh!” I yell and start high fiving everyone there: Norm, Ziggy, the couple, and finally a big double-hander with Evelyn, our fingers intertwining for a long second as the replay shows the goal from every angle.

“We’re gonna win this fucking game!” Ziggy yells, slapping an open hand down on the bar.

“Easy there,” Norm tells him, “don’t get ahead of yourself just yet.” And he’s right, Ziggy shouldn’t get ahead of himself, but I can’t say I don’t agree, can’t say I don’t have a feeling it’s true. That building is rocking and if they can build on this momentum, well, maybe he really will be right.

“Man, look at that crowd, eh? Must be so fucking loud in there.”

“Have you been to a game?” Evelyn asks.

“Yeah one time, a couple years ago when the lockout ended. But the playoffs, it’s impossible, just ridiculously expensive. But what an experience, I mean to be there, with that crowd...it’s better than this,” I add, motioning around the bar.

“Hey now, this is a great place to watch the game. If you want to be packed to the rafters, you should’ve gone to a sports bar.”

“No, I know, it’s great, I dig it. It’s just, it’s a better experience being there is all.”

“Experiences aren’t better or worse, Corey. Yours is yours, mine is mine,” she gestures towards Norm, “Norm’s is Norm’s, that’s all. No one’s is better or worse, they’re better and worse and utterly incomparable all at once. An experience is just stuff happening, stuff that has happened, its just life. You’re still watching the game with people, you’re still having an experience.” She folds her arms like *point made*, but I’m not convinced. I know it’d be better to be in that rink, no matter what she tries to tell me.

“I need another drink, Zig,” Evelyn says, swishes the dregs around the bottom of her glass, before turning to me. “You need a drink? You want another beer?”

“Sure, yeah, but I’ll have what you’re having.” Smooth, Corey, well played.

“Two G&Ts then?” Ziggy asks. She nods and he’s off to mix them up.

Ziggy spins round and slides the drinks over. Gin and tonic, not something I’d order for myself, but actually, pretty good, kind of dry, almost tart, but then, not at all. Tasty. Raising my glass after a sip I say, “Cheers,” and gulp down some more. These babies disappear quickly. Evelyn winks, smiling like a happy cat, squinting, that triangle of cheekbones and chin glowing around her giant toothless grin. Her face is exceptionally

symmetrical, big and round, with that little point of a chin—if she cocked her head to the right she'd look like a 'Q'.

“Oh what the fuck, ref?” Ziggy suddenly screams, tossing a dishrag at the TV.

“Settle down, he got it, he got it,” Norm informs him, us.

Chara, two minutes for holding. The crowd is on their feet again, waving white towels and roaring. Evelyn's rubbing her hands together in anticipation, scooching to the edge of her seat, while the man from the couple gives voice to the thought in all of our heads, telling his wife or whatever, “We've got to get one here, with that big ape in the box.”

“Amen, brother,” says Norm, and he orders the man a shot of Wild Turkey and another for himself. Once again Ziggy has me run relay with the shots—maybe I could work here?

After the top unit gets set up in the zone and gets a solid chance, Pleky comes on with the Kostitsyns, the second unit. They win the draw and Sergei's on his off-wing controlling the puck on the half-board. He shoots, it's blocked in front but the rebound comes right back to him. He resets, looks off Plekanec down low and zips a pass to his brother in the high slot who, despite three Bruins converging on him, somehow gets a terrific snap shot off—quick and powerful, all wrists—firing it up into the top corner past Thomas' glove just as the penalty expires. Canadiens 3, Bruins 0.

The Bell Centre is going absolutely ape-shit, somehow the decibel level has been increased over the previous goal, the TV cameras rocking in the stands, shaking the picture, blurring the rows of white towel waving fanatics. Our little half dozen all spring up, high fives all around, the man from the couple—I still don't know their names—hugs

Norm and I together, almost bonking our heads. His lady friend is cleaning up a drink she spilt on herself in her excitement. Free from the man's grip, I lean over the bar and give Ziggy a hard high five, then turn and hug Evelyn—she doesn't even try to stop me. I don't hang on too long, don't want to seem weird, but long enough to feel her breasts pressed against me. I let go and she's beaming, pumping her fist like Arsenio Hall. This is fucking awesome! I'm so glad I quit my job. Man, I'm flush, warm, excited, a little drunk. I can't stop smiling, I'm giddy, I'm... Evelyn lays her hand on my thigh, near the knee, "Settle down, Corey," she remembered my name, "there's still a lot of time left."

"No, yeah, I know. I'm just really glad I'm here right now. *So* happy I'm not at work. Plus, we're winning so..."

"And if we lose, you're out of a job *and* we're out of the playoffs."

"Exactly. You're a smart cookie, you," I tell her, wagging a finger at her. Yep, I'm drunk. She arches an eyebrow, curls her lip, clucks her tongue and winks, again. I think she's a bit drunk too.

"So what's your deal? What do you do, besides not telemarketing? Do you go to school, are you a student?"

"Ah, not at the moment. I mean, technically I think I'm a student as long as I never enrol anywhere else. But I'm not registered right now. I kind of dropped out for a bit."

"Really? Ah," she sucks her tongue, tisk, tisk, "I loved university. I loved being a student."

Norm turns around and, not so much glares or stares or glowers, but just *looks* at us, hard, annoyed, saying ‘Shut the fuck up, I’m watching the game!’ with his eyes.

Evelyn scrunches up her nose at him and carries on. “What were you studying?”

“Ah...nothing seriously. Officially, Political Science, but, um...I didn’t really care for it much. I wasn’t really doing the work, mostly just taking electives, picking classes based on *ratemyprofessor.com*, looking for easy grades. Just farting around.”

“Why even go then?”

“That’s what I started to think.”

“No,” she laughs an aw-shucks laugh, “I mean in the first place. Why go at all?”

“Well, my folks are all gung ho on higher education...”

“For sure, it’s like the middle-class social imperative to get a B.A.,” Ziggy points out, as much to himself as us, while wiping down the bar.

Norm gets up, staggering slightly, and turns the knob, upping the volume. The period’s almost done, all they have to do is ride it out, not give the Bruins any life going into the third. Knock on wood—I shouldn’t even think it.

“I studied philosophy,” Evelyn declares loudly—I think just to piss Norm off. “It was interesting, like I said, I really loved it. So, I got my Master’s too, also very interesting, and challenging. But then I had to start thinking about paying my own way, bills, student loans, and I didn’t really want to teach, so I did a diploma in accounting and found a job.”

“Crunching numbers?” She nods, smiling. “Sounds fucking terrible.”

“I was always good at math,” she shrugs, “and at a certain point you have to grow up. Accept responsibility for your life, you know? I think we’ve made childhood too

good, *so* good people never want it to end. But you reach a point where you are okay with the fact that you're not a kid anymore. Recognise you're an adult with an adult life and adult responsibilities. Make choices for the future. You have to."

"Yeah, E," Ziggy says, leaning over the bar between our heads, "and people drink alcohol to forgot how shitty it is to have adult responsibilities. I should know, if they didn't I wouldn't have a job."

"Ah, motherfuck!" Norm shouts, slamming his hand down, shaking his table, splashing his beer everywhere. "Don't give 'em any momentum, goddamn!" He shakes his head so hard his hat falls off, revealing a bald spot like a yellowing yarmulke. Sure enough Kovy's taken a penalty. Norm swats at the air and stoops down to get his hat, muttering "lousy prima donna Russian" while breathing heavy, wheezing, laboured and wet. It sounds awful, is that the sound of emphysema? Tuberculosis? I wonder where Norm goes when he stumbles out of here. What's his life about? What's the world done to him? What kind of horrible adult life makes a noise like that in your chest? Makes a nose that red and blistered? How do I make sure I'm not sitting in his chair in 40 years?

The period ends with the Habs up three, but down a man—nearly a full minute of power play time on fresh ice—could be the biggest kill of the year. Perfect time for a piss, too.

I get back from the can—a nice one, private, with a locking door—and Evelyn's chatting with Ziggy, fresh drink in hand. Norm's out front hacking a smoke, and the tourist couple's getting lovey, petting each other and sucking face—maybe this is an affair. I sit down to a grumbling stomach.

“You got any food here, Ziggy?”

“Some old beer nuts.”

“Let’s have ‘em.” He pulls a large bag out from under the bar and pours some into a wooden bowl that looks like the kind of thing they would sell at the gift shop of some recreated Indian village, or a store on St-Paul, the nuts rattling like marbles. I scoop a handful into my mouth before presenting the bowl to Evelyn, who waves it away, then stops and, as I’m putting it back down on the bar, rethinks it, grabbing just one.

“So,” she says chewing, “you never really answered my question.” She gives me this look, sort of peers at me—like a grade school teacher—admonishing but sympathetic. “What’s your deal, Corey?” she asks again, her knee nudging mine.

“I don’t have a deal. I’m just a guy, you know, average, nothing special.”

“C’mon, kid, everybody’s special,” Ziggy jumps in to tell me. “Didn’t you watch Sesame Street?” And he laughs to himself, emptying the dishwasher.

“Well, I’m no *more* special than anyone else. I’m typical. Just regular.”

“What do you do though?” Evelyn asks. “You must do something.”

“Must I?”

She rolls her eyes—they seem to be getting greener as the night goes on. “What are you passionate about, what brings you pleasure? What’s your *raison d’être*? “What’s your...” I roll my eyes. ‘*Raison d’être*.’ What a Sheila thing to say. “What?”

“Nothing, just...” I sigh and exaggerate it, “You sound like my ex. She had a *raison d’être*. Liked to talk about it, too. Me? I’m not so sure.”

“Oh, come on, you must.” She slaps my shoulder playfully. “I mean, you do know what it means, right?” I give a long look, sort of pained, and nod slowly. “Well, then,

what is it? You have to have one. Why do you get up in the morning, why do you get out of bed?”

“To make it to the end of the day I guess. I don’t know,” I shrug. I don’t know.

“That’s depressing.”

“No, no, not like that, I’m not depressed,” I don’t think, “just I don’t really spend a lot of time thinking about tomorrow, or about the future. It just, I don’t know, doesn’t cross my mind.” Or I ignore it as much as I can.

Evelyn looks slightly puzzled, her brow two deep furrows like folds, disbelieving, like it can’t be, like I must be putting her on, or it’s bullshit—maybe it is. “Probably…” she starts and stops. “How old are you?” she asks, the tone of her voice unsure.

“Twenty-three, why?”

“Because everyone is looking for an answer to the question ‘What do you do?’ Maybe not as consciously at your age, but they are, trust me, they are; even you. The future is coming whether you like it or not. What kind of a future will yours be?”

“What if you just don’t care? About the answer, I mean, not the future. What if you don’t care what your answer or anyone else’s is? What if you don’t think it’s important what people do, or even really matters at all?”

Evelyn looks at me like I’m simple, doe-eyed and tight-lipped. “Oh honey, people will judge regardless. People will form their image of you, and decide things about you, and consider you in light of your answer.” I stare at the bar top and take a sip of a beer that sticks in my throat, hurts as I force it down. “So what do you want to see yourself do, Corey? Who do you want to see yourself become?” She nudges me to make sure I’m listening. I turn and meet her eyes. “Who are you, Corey?” Evelyn kind of nods and

raises her brows, like ‘well, go on then,’ sort of issuing a challenge. I decline, look away. “Maybe try to think of what you *aren’t*, that might help. Most people spend more time worrying about who they aren’t than who they are, anyhow.”

“Look, I don’t know what you want to hear, maybe I don’t really know who or what I am. All I know is some people are out to set the world on fire and some of us are just trying not to get burnt. Like Sheila, my ex-girlfriend, she wants to be famous so bad she could puke. She *wants* it. Bad. Me, I don’t want that. I just want to watch hockey.”

“What happened with the girl, your girlfriend? You say she’s an ex now?” Ziggy comes barging back into the conversation. “How’d that come undone?”

“You got a show about breaking up with your boyfriend too?” I ask over my shoulder. If he does, Sheila might be a winner.

“Nah, kid, just asking, making conversation.” He steps away from the bar, hands up like I’m trying to rob him, “I’m a bartender, this is what we do. Listen some, ask a question or two, maybe getcha out of a jam sometime.” Slapping a towel against the bar, a wet snap, Ziggy shifts gears. “She watch *Sex and the City*, kid?” he asks, propping a leg up and sort of leaning in to me, one knee up almost head high.

“Yeah, she did. Had the whole series on DVD.” I swivel around a touch, relaxing my neck.

“Let me guess,” he seems really excited to guess, “she dumped you, right?” I nod guilty as charged. “That fucking show, man, that fucking show. Fucks with their minds, kid.” Evelyn rolls her eyes and turns them towards the TV. “I’m telling ya, kid, that show, groups of women pretending to be *Sex and the City*, valuing selfishness at all costs.” Ziggy drops the leg, standing back on two feet, agitated and feisty and loud. “And

they always accuse us, men can't commit, are afraid of commitment, but that fucking show, that fucking message: You're the most important! Never sacrifice any of *you* for *him!*"

"And shop till you drop," I suggest. Ziggy smiles but looks annoyed, looks like he's lost his train of thought. I'm not sure what that show did to him, but it cut deep, and I don't want to rub salt in the wound. "Who knows? Maybe it was that show, maybe its message just fucked her...fucked us up?"

"That's such a cop out, come on!" Evelyn's right back in the conversation now. "No responsibility on you at all, I suppose. No reason to take ownership of your part of the mess."

"Mess?"

"The failure of the relationship, the reason she dumped you. There had to be one, I know it isn't because she watched *Sex and the City*." Her head's shaking, big, slow, disappointed shakes. "You might as well blame the Canadiens for losing game 6 and forcing you to quit your job."

"Well, that's kind of true. Not the *Sex and the City* stuff, that, well, he brought that up; but the game 6 stuff...kind of true. And actually, if they would've won game 5, I might still have my girlfriend, and my job, but who knows?"

"Game 5?" Evelyn says under her breath, doing the math, "So this just happened, the breakup?"

"Yeah, just the other day, Saturday."

The game's been back on a while, but no one really seems to be into it except for Norm who glares at us from time to time, but says nothing. As long as nothing bad

happens in the game he'll probably stay that way, passive, careful, steady, a bit like the way the Habs are playing. Just sitting on the lead, dumping pucks in, one man chasing, and clogging up the neutral zone. Boring as shit, but it works.

“Was this a serious relationship?”

“I don't know,” I shrug. “I guess so. It was like over two years, so serious enough or whatever.”

“Was it love? Were you guys in love? Did you love her?”

“I think so, yeah. I mean, what does that mean, right? If you have to ask you aren't, or whatever, I don't know. Like, I never shared what I shared with Sheila with anyone else. I never had that with my previous girlfriend, that was high school, but still. And I liked it, I mean for sure, definitely liked it, it was good, you know, nice having someone around, taking care of things, and me. Whatever it was, call it what you want, it had its advantages.”

“Sounds like you were in love with being in love.”

“Maybe.” Whatever that means. I swig back a big gulp of beer. “We're not in love anymore, though.”

“No?” She's shifted in her seat now so that she's facing me, her expression warm and inviting, head slightly cocked to the side, eyes glassy and wide, a small closed-mouth smile—the way I imagine a therapist should look—reassuring me that she's hearing me.

“Definitely not. It's done. We're done. That was made clear. But even if it was love, if she was my first love, I don't know where it was going, I didn't have plans to marry her or anything.” Pretty sure Sheila's not the marrying type.

“You don't have to be married to be in love.”

“Obviously.” I can’t help rolling my eyes, so much like Sheila, telling me things I already know, saying what doesn’t need saying. Evelyn’s face has changed, her eyes, they’re smaller, less glassy, like she’s lost respect for, or faith in, me, or like she’s just made a realization, maybe she thought she was dealing with an adult. “I haven’t cried if that means anything,” I tell her. “Haven’t even really felt like it, I don’t know what you want to make of that.”

“You don’t have to cry,” Evelyn tells me, ignoring the game and Norm moaning about a penalty call. “It might help, it might not, and if you’re not inclined to, then don’t.”

“But shouldn’t I, somehow?”

“There’s no *should* to feelings or emotions. Do you normally cry?”

“Not really. Sure, when Shelia makes me watch, ‘Extreme Home Makeover,’ or ‘Intervention,’ maybe then, but not for things in my life, no.”

“So then why think you would, or *should*, now? What is different about this time that makes you think you should suddenly shed a tear?” Good question.

“I guess because this is the first time I’ve ever really been dumped, maybe. I’ve been shot down before, you know, turned down for a date or a dance or a drink, but I’ve only really had two girlfriends and I dumped the last one. She bawled her eyes out.”

“Look, Corey, it’s not a matter of crying. This girlfriend who cried, that’s just her response, it doesn’t dictate yours. What’s more important for you, at this stage, is deciding how to begin remembering your relationship. To consider how this break up is going to affect you. How do you want to preserve it? What memories do you want to keep? Personal identity is strongly tied to memory. Who you think you are depends on

what you remember yourself doing and having done to you. If you're not careful, you can really load down your memory bank with a lot of old wounds."

"Wouldn't I be better off to forget her entirely then?"

"If you can actually do that, sure, but you're never going to fully forget two years of your life, not everything. You will have memories of your time her, it's inevitable, so you should try to remember it the way you want it remembered. Remember it the way that works for you, in a way that makes memories of her become ones you want. Even the painful ones."

"Yeah?" I can't help but smile. "But how do I remember being thrown out of her apartment naked in a positive light?"

Evelyn snorts and Ziggy makes a noise like a talk show audience—ohhhhh—towards her, like, 'he's got you now.'

"Zig, go make yourself useful and get me a drink," Evelyn spits, and he slowly, like it's a huge effort, straightens up and gets to work. Norm grunts and waves his empty bottle at the sound of the drink being poured.

"That really happened?" she asks and I nod. "Really?" I nod again. "Wow. Well, you may have a hard time with that one." She lays a hand on my knee, and gives it a squeeze. "But that doesn't mean, well, yeah..." She looks flustered, at a loss, and she mumbles to herself, "No, no, that will probably colour your memories of the whole relationship," tapping her fingernails on the bar top, and biting her lower lip, all cute and perturbed, her other hand still on my knee. "Still, still, you can't let that moment define you. You can't come to see yourself as the...the, you know...the..."

"Naked one in the hallway?"

“Well yeah. I was going to say the victim, but yeah.” She looks, I don’t know, sad. Mouth drooping open, eyes half shut. “I can’t believe she did that to you, I’m so sorry for you.” More squeezing. Then she presses her other hand to her chest, to her heart, tugging her shirt, revealing cleavage and a bit of bra, red. “I would be mortified if...” Ziggy slides her drink over and she lets go of her chest to grab it. She takes a gulp. “It’s embarrassing to even think about.”

She’s right, it is, and I’d like to be done doing it. I stare straight ahead at the TV. There’s not much time left, less than five minutes. The Bruins look beaten, defeated, like the fight’s gone out of them—they look awesome really, best way they could—and the Habs aren’t taking any chances. The crowd’s getting more and more fired up as the seconds tick away. It’s almost like they hadn’t taken the win for granted yet, that they wouldn’t allow themselves that luxury, wouldn’t even think it in case they witnessed a great unravelling, but now, with time running off the clock they’re willing to admit to themselves what we in here have seemed sure of since the end of the second, the Habs are moving on. The game feels decided, over, finished—like me and Sheila; me and Bijoux.

“Okay,” Evelyn breaks a nice little silence to say, “fair enough then. After what happened to you, you really have no choice but to let go, to try and forget, to...”

“He could try to win her back,” Norm shouts without turning around. He doesn’t follow up with a suggestion or anything, he reacts as if he hasn’t said anything at all, like it was reflex, like a hiccup.

“That would be a bad choice,” I say, pointing a finger at his floppy hat. Evelyn rolls her eyes.

“There aren’t ‘good’ choices and ‘bad’ choices, Corey, there are just choices,” she tells me. “Everything else is hindsight. Sure, there are ‘big’ decisions and ‘small’ decisions, but there are not ‘right’ decisions and ‘wrong’ decisions.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes no decision is the easiest decision of all,” I counter. “I find people make decisions for you if you give them enough time.”

“Only people who do nothing make no mistakes,” she says with a lilt, a schoolyard razz. “You’ve heard the expression ‘Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained’?”

“I have, yes. But, have you considered how much better that saying is than say, ‘Much Ventured, Much Lost’?” I can’t help but smile.

“Son,” Norm says, turning and addressing me even though the game is on, “you miss 100% of the shots you don’t take.” He gives a stern nod, punctuating it.

“But again, that’s better than missing 100% of shots taken.” Those big furry caterpillar eyebrows of Norm’s lower as he grumbles and waves a hand at me, turning back to the game.

“You have made a choice though,” Evelyn tells me, continuing our conversation. “Quitting your job, you did that. The breakup was forced upon you, you got dumped, and maybe you only went to school because your parents wanted you to, or you thought they did, or it was easier than telling them you didn’t. But this decision, to quit that job and become unemployed, to take your chances, you made that change happen by yourself.”

“*Et le but!*” screams Ziggy—pretty much right in my ear—and he’s right. Andrei Kostitsyn cleaning up the garbage in front of the net, 4-0 Habs. The Bell Centre’s going berzerk, just when you think it can’t get louder, it seems to. We’re getting loud in here too. I’m on my feet, high fiving Norm, Ziggy drumming on the bar like it’s a fucking

bongo drum, even the tourist couple's jumping around. The woman gives me a hug and I get another from Evelyn, her bouncing up and down in my arms, rubbing all over my chest. When we sit back down, she throws her arm around me swaying and singing, "Ole, ole, ole, ole." Her face is flush, eyes bright, smile exploding off her face.

Slapping my knee harder than I mean to, I shout, "God damn, I love beating the Bruins!"

It's a party atmosphere in the rink. The puck's been dropped, but everyone's still on their feet, clapping their hands red, screaming themselves hoarse. This city's going to go off tonight. It's a great atmosphere in here too, no more questions, just drinking and shouting and cheering and—not sitting at work in a fucking cubicle—watching the Habs get 'er done.

"One more boys, Papa wants some chicken wings," Norm says to the TV—presumably he's 'Papa'—and why not, I could eat some free wings.

Evelyn grabs me by the shoulders and starts shaking me, falling on me, "One more minute," she laughs into my ear. I'm so glad it's not close, couldn't handle sweating out a one-goal lead, dreading every Bruins' shot, worrying about every line change, every failed attempt to clear the zone, every missed opportunity to increase the lead. This has been great, just a nice, relaxed, uncontested third period punctuated by that late goal to seal the deal. I hope Carey gets his shutout. As the seconds tick off. Ziggy starts the countdown, and we all join in. "Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five!" Sometime before 'Four!' Sergei Kostitsyn taps one into the gaping 4' by 6'. Canadiens 5 Bruins 0. And we're all back on our feet, high-fiving again, hugging again, laughing and screaming and spilling drinks again. Joy on everyone's face, perfect strangers a few hours ago, joined by

Le Saint Flannel, Les Glorieux, sharing in something special, something that has become all too uncommon in this city, something we've learned to no longer accept as a foregone conclusion, a first round victory.

Norm starts to sing, "Na, Na, Na, Na. Na, Na, Na, Na. Hey, hey, hey, goodbye." And it doesn't take long before the rest of us join in, Evelyn and I swaying on our stools, arms around each other. The final seconds tick off, the horn sounds, that's it, it's over. The boys gather around Carey, head pats and head butts, high fives and hugs, smiles and shouts. Somehow it sounds like it has gotten even louder in the rink too, it must be up around 130 db. The celebration peters out and guys start to slowly make their way to centre ice where the Bruins are waiting, dejected—what a beautiful sight—to shake hands. What an awesome fucking night!

"Ring me up, Zig." Evelyn says, standing and turning to face the bar, and he spins and punches some buttons into the register. That's a good idea.

"Me too, man, Ziggy." He looks over his shoulder at me, I make a pen motion with my hand, "I'll settle up." Turning back around he gives me the a-okay.

"What are your plans now," Evelyn asks, and I think she means immediately until she clarifies, "work-wise?" Shattered dreams.

"I don't know. I haven't really given it a lot of thought yet. Looking for work, I suppose." Fuck that sucks. Really hadn't thought of that.

"Any ideas what you want to do? What you're looking for?"

"No, none. But I'm tired of feeling dumb, I know that much." 'Cause, I'm not dumb.

"Why do you feel dumb, what makes you feel dumb?"

”I can’t speak French, and, ah, job interviews have a way of hammering that point home.” I wait for a response that never comes as she counts out cash for Ziggy, so I try to explain. “When I do try talking French, it’s like people won’t really let me. They always correct me. It’s always something not quite right. One old lady actually touched my face, tried to shape the words with my mouth. Or they just speak in English to me because they know their English is *way* better than my French and it will speed things up if they do.” Evelyn’s still not saying anything, and she looks kind of pissed off, her mouth is tight and flat. “If they weren’t so obsessed with their language being spoken perfectly, Anglos might be less shy, might not feel so put upon, or...”

“Put upon! Boy, you sure can toss the blame around, Corey. It’s always somebody else’s fault you didn’t make the effort, eh? I’m an Anglo. I’m from away. I speak French. I learned.” She pushes a thumb into her chest to accentuate each point. I don’t know what to tell her—I mean she’s not wrong, not really, not that it’s so easy to learn but I could have tried—so I don’t say anything, and after a bit she carries on. “*Ici on parle francais,*” she tells me, “It’s kind of the deal. Not that I disagree with you, okay? You’re right, there is a glass ceiling for English speakers in this city for sure, but if you learn French, doors open. What’s stopping you?”

“Laziness mostly.”

“Why did you stay this long? If it’s so hopeless and difficult, why have you stuck around at all? Why didn’t you leave Quebec once you dropped out of school?”

“My girlfriend was here, my apartment was here, my job was here.”

“You can get another job and another apartment and another girlfriend somewhere else.”

“Yeah, you’re right, I could. Maybe I will.” I shrug, “Maybe it’s time to move.”

“Where you going to move, kid?” Ziggy asks, sliding the bill my way,—fucking \$18.75 for three beers?

I hand him a twenty, “I don’t know, home probably, maybe TO…”

“Toronto? No, no.” He shakes his head. “You go to Toronto, okay, and what happens, kid?” He answers before I can. “Nothing at first, you settle in, adjust to overpaying for your TTC pass and living life at the whim of the LCBO, but the slow TORontonization has begun.” He snaps his fingers on both sides of my head. “You turn around, two years have passed and you’re discussing a ‘quality return’ on your ‘sound investment’.”

“I talk about that stuff every day. And in this city. Right down the street,” Evelyn points out, incredulous, putting her coat on—a red wool one with big plastic buttons and belt—but he isn’t listening, he hasn’t even stopped talking.

“I’m telling you, kid, I seen it too many times.” He shakes his head “Some young buck like yourself comes to town, falls in love with the city, feels the rhythm, digs the vibe, hangs out. Life’s good. But when school finishes, they can’t get a job. So they suck it up, move to *Taranna* for work, and a part of them dies, kid. Breaks my heart every time.” He’s all dramatic as he lays out my change—which I add a toonie to—long faced and dismayed, like I just told him I joined the army and was off to war. Slipping an arm into my sleeve I reach down and grab my backpack off the ground.

“This is what you’ll really miss, kid,” he tells me, making two large circles with his arms, his index fingers sticking out, defining an imaginary boundary, the bar, “if you go to Toronto: catching a game, talking hockey in this city, with people who really know

the game, and know your team, know players' ice times, career point totals, what junior team they played for." He shakes his head, disappointed, as though this place were the height of Habs game watching experiences. "Saturday nights at *Kilgour's* is the closest you'll get, and it'll hardly suffice."

I raise my shoulders to him and tap my change on the bar. "Thanks for the beer."

"Say if you're leaving too, would you like to walk with me to the Metro?" Evelyn asks.

"Absolutely." Hell, I'll walk you all the way home if you want. I start to follow her out.

"Hey son," Norm grabs hold of my wrist, those bushy caterpillar eyebrows of his twitching, and stares into space for a while, licks his lips, looks confused, but never lets go of me. Eventually, his eyes find mine and he says, "Life is a million possible things. Keep your head on a swivel and your stick on the ice." Then he winks. I turn and head out front where Evelyn is waiting.

Outside the air is colder, but not cold. Evelyn sidles up to me and sticks out her elbow, hand planted on her hip, the loop inviting me to interlock my arm with it. I do, and we start down the street. We take a few steps in a very comfortable silence, car horns honking in the distance.

"So, Corey, are you going to tell me why your girlfriend threw you out naked or do I have to ask?" Fuck. And here I thought I might get laid. "Must've been pretty major."

“It’s not that interesting actually.” What does everyone want to know this shit for?
“It’s pretty typical really. I’m not motivated, I lack routine and order and structure in my life, I spend all my time playing video games and watching hockey. You know, the usual things chicks complain about.”

“Chicks.” The word drips off her tongue, a look of dissatisfaction on her face, like a teacher who puts in extra time on a kid only to have them turn around and cheat on the exam. She unhooks her arm from mine. More horns honk in the distance, somewhere there’s celebrating. We reach the end of the street, or not the end but a place where it opens up onto that square with the jersey-wearing statue, and Evelyn crosses, walking faster now, walking away.

“Come on,” I yell, “Evelyn wait, don’t...go.” I don’t know why but I feel I should tell her, like telling her might somehow arouse some sympathy, or something, like maybe there’s still hope for a pity fuck. I move up beside her and take her hand in mine. It’s thicker, more muscley than Sheila’s, much more so. “Listen, that’s a cop out, I know that, I do, it’s, but...”

Her eyes soften as she looks into mine. “Go on, you can tell me.”

As I search for the words, we walk together down the centre of two rows of budding trees in granite planters surrounded by granite benches where business-types like Evelyn eat lunches in the summer. It’s a cold and artificial space, urban and urbane, manicured and maintained, smacks of effort and futility. I kind of like it.

“I don’t know, I’ve always been an underachiever I guess, and I always felt I was punching above my weight with Sheila, you know? And I think she felt it too, or at least, she sure seemed to feel she was smarter than me. Mostly though it was a lot of her telling

me to figure myself out, get my shit together. She was always like, ‘maybe you shouldn’t have dropped out,’ or ‘maybe there’s another program you could do,’ or ‘you should get another job if you hate yours so much,’ or...”

“Sounds like she was only trying to help,” Evelyn suggests as we stop to let a car pass before crossing another street.

“Okay, but there was also ‘you never have any money,’ and ‘you never take me out anywhere anymore,’ and ‘we never have fun anymore,’ and that type of thing. Also there was the whole ‘you don’t support my art’ argument, which was kind of, what do you call it, the deal breaker.” We’re at the Metro entrance now—a fucking fancy-assed one at that—a big green wrought-iron arc deal over the stairway that looks like something out of the nineteenth century, like it belongs in Paris, and reads “Metropolitain” in elegant yellow lettering. Maybe it is from Paris.

“What’s her ‘art’?”

“Poetry.”

“Hmm,” she nods, contemplating this little tidbit. I’m not sure what kind of art she was expecting, but seems it wasn’t that. “And you just didn’t like her poems, or...”

“No, I, no, I don’t know. Like, I complained about going to readings and I probably didn’t really listen, or pay attention a lot of the times she read poems to me. Hell, I didn’t understand some of them, most of them. But I wasn’t against her, I wasn’t hoping she failed, or trying to sabotage her, or, like, I mean I went to tons of poetry and writing shit with her, tons. ‘Zine launches and book launches and wine and cheeses, I went to all of them. Felt like I had to, but still, I was there.”

“Corey, tisk, tisk, tisk.” She shakes her head, her hair swinging above her ears. “Being there without being present,” her finger taps against on her temple, “doesn’t really count, does it? You can not be against someone and not be for them either, and it can be pretty tough to be with someone who’s not in your corner.”

“Apparently.”

“Ah,” Evelyn steps forward and gives me a hug, “it’ll be alright, you’ll be alright,” soothing me with gentle pats on the back. “It doesn’t make you a bad guy.” There’s more honking now, louder and longer and way more often. Releasing me she asks, “Do you think maybe you had a hard time being supportive because, actually, you’re jealous that she has a dream, something she loves to do?”

“Yeah, but she can’t make a living writing poems, it’s not like that’s a career, it’s not like...”

“Shhhhh,” she lays a finger on my lips, “no need to get your back up. I was merely suggesting that perhaps, just perhaps, you might be a little bit jealous Sheila has this thing she loves and you don’t. Or maybe you’re scared, and wondering why you don’t.” She looks at me for a long time, her face half-covered in shadow, like a beautiful phantom of the opera, her one eye glinting in the streetlight. “Figure out what you love and do it, Corey. That’s my advice.”

“What if I don’t love anything? Or don’t know what I love?”

“Figure out what you need, that’s a start. Life is an endless series of *and then* moments. What’s next?”

“And then?”

“Yeah. *And then* this happened. *And then* that happened. You know, life. Getting blindsided on a Tuesday while you’re making other plans. Eventually one of those *and then*’s leads you to what you want, or what you need, or what you love. To where you want to be.”

“But some lead you into the shit. *And then* Sheila dumped me.”

“True, but no matter what *and then* just happened, there’s always another *and then* around the corner.”

“Yeah,” I huff. “*And then* I quit my job.”

“Exactly!” She’s all smiley again. “*And then* the Canadiens knocked off Boston, so there you go.” Evelyn gives my ribs a knuckling. “And who knows, maybe you don’t have to leave. There may still be something here for you. It’s not the city’s fault you haven’t found your place in it yet. The one around the corner could be anything, Corey, just open yourself up to the possibilities.”

I can’t help rolling my eyes. “Like it’s that fucking simple.”

“Hey,” she says stepping into the light, “things have a funny way of working out.” I shake my head, and she grabs it with both hands, clutching me—fingers in my hair, on my ears, on my neck—making my eyes meet hers. “Opportunities present themselves all the time, you just need to recognize them. The universe has a way of delivering when you least expect it.” I look down into her eyes and see myself reflecting back in their greenness. I close my eyes, pull her towards me and lean in to kiss her.

“Hey, hey, easy now, down boy.” She pushes me away just as our lips make contact.

“I’m sorry, I thought...” I smile and shrug. “It’s a celebration.”

“I’m flattered, really,” she says, smiling a flat, closed-mouth smile, “but I think, it’s best if I go. You’re a little young and you’re confused and drunk and I’d be...well I don’t know what I’d be, but I don’t like it.” She turns to go, dropping under the archway.

“You’re just going to leave me here, confused and unemployed and broke and drunk and lonely and vulnerable? Something bad might happen to me, could you live with yourself if it did?”

“I think I’ll survive,” she says smiling, digging around in her purse and grabbing a hold of my arm. Her other hand reappears with a pen in it and she starts writing on my palm. It tickles and I squirm. “Hold still.” She finishes and I go to read it but she stops me, taking my hand in hers. “Take care of yourself, Corey,” she tells me, kissing my cheek, “I’m sure you’ll be just fine.” Then she scoots down the stairs.

I look down at my hand it reads: “E. Vince 514-802-2097 call if you need anything.” Why did she underline *anything*? Does she want me to call her, follow her? Why didn’t she let me kiss her then?

“I need something,” I yell just as Evelyn’s opening the door at the bottom of the stairs. She stops in the doorway and looks up. “I need to get laid.”

She smiles a crooked smile, turns and walks away, the door swinging shut behind her. Maybe I should follow her, probably not. I should smoke that joint. I should swing past the Bell Centre, check out the scene. Stop off at *La Cage* for those chicken wings.

9

The noise is incredible, this ruckus that grows louder and wilder the closer I get to the rink. So many horns, non-stop horns, every car on the street honking. Flags flying, passengers hanging out of windows screaming, screeching, high-fiving people walking by. Streets are filling up fast, everyone in jerseys or t-shirts with big CH's on the front, carrying banners, pennants, programs, pucks, sticks and giant foam hands, a throng of merchandise—they must've sold fifty grand worth tonight. Every face coming at me is huge. Moon-shaped and wide-eyed, with over-sized euphoric smiles, giddy Game 7 victory grins. Big open mouths bellowing, hooting and hollering, opening extra wide, exaggerated like cartoon ghosts.

I should butt out this joint.

Cresting the hill at Peel, finally seeing what I've been hearing for several blocks, it's even crazier than I imagined—awesomer too—the universe has provided mayhem. So many people, a raucous chorus of “ole's” mixing with chants of “Fuck the Bruins!” and “We want the cup!” and “Go Habs Go!” blending with shrieks and horns, creating a discordant but beautiful delirium. It's complete insanity down here, anarchy. It's all in good spirits, though, all in good fun. Everyone's apologetic, everyone's excited, everyone's having a blast. Even still, I don't think there's any fucking chance of getting near the door of *La cage* let alone inside for wings. It's too crowded to move, getting jostled and elbowed and cut-off and bumped into. It's too loud to think, ceaseless honking, constant cheering, like a white noise machine set to *Carnival*. Press is out front of the rink, several large TV cameras hoisted onto shoulders, fans swarming them, jumping up and down yelling at the top of their lungs. All those white towels I was

watching all night are here—it seems—being waved, flapped, flown, and thrown into the air. That’s the second cheap replica Stanley Cup I’ve seen doing the rounds, people fighting each other to touch it even though they know it’s cardboard wrapped in aluminum foil. Several Canadiens flags—or jerseys or blankets, anything handy with a Habs logo—attached to hockey sticks, or umbrellas, or whatever, are being waved feverishly. I stop at a gathering crowd, quite a large crowd, watching a Bruins jersey being set on fire, though not really lighting, three guys struggling, holding lighters to it. It’s kind of anti-climactic...oh wait, there it goes. Smokey. Stinky. This whole crowd stinks really, not just like burning polyester, like beer-breath and nervous sweat, like cheap cologne and cigarettes, like...like people. Like 20,000-plus people gathered together in a small space going nuts and setting some shit on fire.

Hey, I recognize that face, or that hat—like looking in the mirror—that’s the fucking guy from the bathroom yesterday. Coming right at me too, big dumb look on his face, drunk, clueless, I don’t know if he’s going to hit me or hug me—he can’t think this is *his* parking lot, can he? I brace myself as he moves faster, rushes up, gets right in my face. But he doesn’t punch me. He flashes me the metal horns instead and screeches “Woouooooo!” Grabs a hold of my shoulders, sort of squeezes them together, I flinch thinking he’s going to spit on me, or head butt me, but he just keeps screaming. “Oh, yeah, baby! Woouooooo! Fuck Boston! Fuck the Bruins! Woouooooo!” He throws up a hand for me to five, then nearly smacks my arm off. He doesn’t know me from Adam, even with this hat on. “Goddamn, what a game. Perfect game!” And he’s off to shout in someone else’s face.

He's not wrong though, the game was perfect, never a hiccup, no heart in the throat tension—hell, I hardly had to pay attention in the third—we got the lead, never looked back. It was never cut into, never diminished, it just grew and grew, almost exponential, like if the game went on forever the lead would have only gotten bigger and bigger. 50-0. 500-0. 5000-0. And the Bruins would never score. Shut out. Perfect. If only life were like that. Maybe I should've been a better hockey player.

Pushing through the throng and being pushed, swept along, sort of riding the wave of the crowd, following the momentum, the path of least resistance, I make my way out to the party formerly known as *boul. Rene-Levesque*. It's a mess of people and cars and *bleu, blanc, rouge*. Traffic is at an absolute standstill. Nobody's going anywhere anytime soon, but everyone, seemingly, is honking their horn. Groups of fans gathered jumping up and down, their *ole, ole, ole's* as persistent as the beep-beep-beeping. People in cars throwing high fives and thumbs up to people on the street, people on the street banging on the roofs and shaking the people and their cars. It's still all innocent and harmless, if just on the edge. The police presence is visible, several cruisers, a couple of officers on each corner. With a crowd this size you just never know—but it's only the first round. I get across the street and keep moving north—or what passes for north in this city—with the crowd, roaring like a tidal wave of people, towards the epicentre of the party, towards the meeting of those who were at the game and those who were in the bars, towards Ste-Catherine.

Go Habs Go! Go Habs Go! Go Habs Go! Beep-beep-beep! Beep-beep-beep!
Beep-beep-beep! Ole, ole, ole, ole...Ole! Ole! We Want the Cup! We Want the Cup!

This is fucking out of control, like outside the Bell Centre on crack. Stop moving and likely get trampled. Probably lose my voice; hands are going to be swollen from high fives. This is totally awesome, unreal, and fucking amazing. Shaking people's cars, hugging stinky strangers, getting lost in the crowd.

“Whooooooooooooo!” God damn, I feel great. Like I can do anything I want, like anything goes. “Go Habs Goooo! Yeah Baby! Whoo-Whooo-Whooooooooooooo!”

Oh, that guy's got the idea, climb a lamppost, get a *real* look at this scene. I grope my way along to the next one up the block and shimmy a few feet up, doing my best to try to look like those jungle men who climb trees in Polynesia or the Amazon or wherever, except I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, I'm just some drunk asshole. I get about four, five feet off the ground, get my feet up to near the same height as my hands—which isn't helping any, I just can't figure how the hell I'm supposed to move my hands—and suddenly I just lose it, my left foot goes, my leg shoots out, kicks some poor girl, my fingers lose their grip, I'm free falling blind for about half a second, land with the curb in my back, half on the sidewalk, half on the street. Searing pain. Struggling for breath. Man, I'm an ass.

And then I fell and winded myself.

A pair of pink-and-white-chequered Vans appears in my field of vision, right beside me face, and a familiar voice follows as I start to sit up. “Hey now, maybe don't move just yet, you don't...Corey?” I look up and see Roland in a pair of pinstriped jeans and a *Members Only* jacket. “Jesus, Corey,” he says to me, brushing off my shoulders, “are you alright? That was quite the fall, I saw it from the street and I thought...”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I wave away his concerns. “I’m good, thanks.” I put a hand on the lamppost to steady myself and get to my feet. Roland loops one of his chimpanzee arms under my free one and helps me along. “I just wanted to see the scene, you know, bird’s eye view. It didn’t work out.”

“Clearly. So where are you coming from, where did you take in the game?” Roland asks, changing the subject for me. He’s good about not pressing issues this guy.

“Ah, some little hole in the wall down in Old Montreal somewhere, I don’t really know where, I don’t even know the name of the place.” I really don’t. Ziggys? That can’t be it. “But anyway there was a little TV there and people watching, it was good. You?”

“*Peel Pub*,” he says pointing up the street. The crowd’s just getting bigger and bigger and more and more cars seem to be stuck on, or stuck waiting to cross, Ste-Catherine. People aren’t just banging on the cars and rocking them anymore, they’re fully climbing on top of them. Sometimes it’s a passenger that gets out and onto the roof, but other people too—complete fucking strangers—are climbing on cars.

“What were you doing down in Old Montreal?” Roland asks, laying a hand on my shoulder, directing me up Peel out of the mob. There are so many people it’s clearer on the side streets than the sidewalks.

“I don’t really know. I don’t even know where I was. I just, well, I quit my job ‘cause the Habs scored that first goal and I was just like, ‘Fuck this I got to be watching this game,’ and left, found the first bar I could with a TV.”

“Where did you work?”

“Place called Bijoux.”

“Telemarketing.” I nod, not surprised he’s familiar with Bijoux, *everyone* knows someone who works there, worked there. “I’ve managed to avoid that minefield.” Surprise, surprise, you’re from here, it’s not the same for you. “So what do you think you’ll do? I assume you don’t have another job lined up.”

“No I don’t.” I can’t help but laugh. The thought of forethought is fucking hilarious. “Maybe I’ll try to find a job testing video games, I hear that’s something they do in this city, hear they hire English-speakers.”

“Oh yeah, Barry does that. You know Barry right?” Fucking Barry. He would have a job testing fucking video games. Man, I hate that guy.

“Yeah, I know Barry.” Should I ask him? Is Roland really a *friend* of Barry’s? Of Sheila’s? Where does his loyalty lie? Fuck it. “I always got the feeling, well not always, but lately, lately I got the feeling, been getting the feeling, that Sheila and Barry, well maybe...” he doesn’t bite on the bait, “I don’t know.”

“I wouldn’t put anything past anybody,” Roland tells me as he reads a text, “but I wouldn’t know anything to tell.” He thumb types a return message, then looking up, right at me, he says, “Two words, man: *Le Ménage*.” And then his hand vibrates.

What the fuck’s *le ménage*? A *ménage a trois*? Is that a proposition? “What the fuck is that?”

As he answers me, he answers the text too. “It’s cleaning, Corey. For a job, I mean. It’s *way* better than telemarketing and you don’t need to speak French because you don’t need to speak at all. Works for me.”

“Yeah, but aren’t you from here? Don’t you speak French? Couldn’t you...”

“Yeah, maybe. I mean I do speak French, you’re correct. But I’m from Westmount, my French is so-so,” he turns his hand back and forth, “and I can’t write it perfectly. I know how it sounds, but not all the proper conjugation, I know when it sounds right, or wrong, but not if it ends in an “s” or a “t” or whatever. Point being, I can’t get a lot of jobs that I could were my written French not so poor, and the jobs I can get mostly involve serving people.”

“I hate people.”

“Yeah, people suck, quite a lot actually.” Roland looks into the throng again, intense and steely and super serious. “Anyway,” evidently he didn’t find who he looking for, “I know a lot of people don’t want to clean, they think that it’s low class, or it’s below them, or it’s for immigrants, but I kind of enjoy it. I just daydream all day. I write so many poems while I work. People leave me alone too, they probably think I must be stupid or something, like a high school dropout or dead head, but they don’t ask me for any favours or extra work. I quietly do my business and go home, and the work never comes home with me. Also it pays per job not per hour, so the better you get, the faster you can go, your dollars per hour increase.”

‘How the hell did we end up talking about work in the middle of a party?’ is what I should say, but I just change the subject and say, “This is crazy,” pointing to the non-stop flood of fans, “it’s only the first round.”

“I know, how embarrassing, eh? This isn’t Calgary or Vancouver. Canadiens fans just aren’t supposed to be *this* excited about advancing to the second round. In less than convincing fashion, no less. And after finishing first in the conference, this should have been expected.”

“It’s a bit over the top for sure, but still, hell of a game.”

“No doubt.” Roland answers like he couldn’t care less, like he hardly heard the comment. He’s staring into the crowd with purpose, he’s looking for someone, doubt he’s here alone, only a loser’d be here alone, probably lost his friends helping out a drunken douche and now they’ve left him behind. He takes a few steps closer to the madness and scans over the heads in both directions, currents of crowd moving, intersecting, interweaving, bumping, grinding, girls being carried on shoulders, children too, all eyes bright, all mouths smiling.

Ole, ole, ole, ole! Ole! Ole! Beep-beep-beep Beep-Beeeeep-Beeeeeeppppppp! Go Habs Go! Go Habs Go! Na na na na, Na na na na, Hey, Hey, Hey, Goodbye!

A guy comes running by with a jersey numbered 93, the name on the back *Feels Like*; so cool. A couple of cute young things are close behind handing out victory hugs, one a waifish little blonde, the other a tall, bosomy brunette. The blonde intercepts Roland and they embrace; the brunette finding her way to me for a really great hug, her height just right that her boobs press under my chin—she smells like vanilla. They’re gone as quickly as they come, off hugging other Habs fans, but that was a nice surprise.

“That was a nice surprise,” I say hoping for some confirmation, a consensus; but Roland either didn’t hear or isn’t listening, lost in another text message. Once again I can’t compete with people’s digital friends. I need some digital friends, the only person I ever text is Sheila. Or was.

People, fans, the crowd just won’t stop, just keeps growing. I swear more and more must be coming downtown as they see the scene on TV or something. That or every single bar has cleared out. And it’s every kind of people, person. It’s kids and old folks,

mostly not, but they're here too. It's wealthy and poor, it's all colours, it's both languages. It's bullhorns, it's megaphones, it's verging on pandemonium.

A loud whoosh comes from behind me, the unmistakable sound of air brakes releasing. I turn and there's a bus foolishly coming down Peel. I'm not the only one who notices it either, there is a distinct, ominous sense that many people in the crowd are thinking the same thing, until someone voices our collective thought: "Bus!" And the stampede is on.

The driver is desperately trying to do a three-point turn but he's run it up onto the curb and is just sitting sideways on the street waiting for the siege. A couple of dozen, maybe a hundred, people turn and start bearing down on me, on the bus. I watch them come, watch them pass, get caught up in the wave of reckless, charging abandon. It's downright dangerous to be out in the street not moving, but I stand my ground for a few seconds. Eventually though, I've got to give it up. Roland's already gone—no wonder he lost his buddies so fast—even his extreme height doesn't make him easy to pick out.

The bus has been completely surrounded, the crush of charging people now subsiding into an orderly encircling. People are pounding on the outside, smacking the windows, trying to jimmy open the doors, climbing up the sides, just out to destroy. A long snowy winter's frustration boiled over. Turning to take in the whole scene, I notice a restaurant behind me—a pretty nice-looking one, soft lighting, swanky interior, a wall made out of lights—with a bunch of diners gathered at the door, locked in, panic-stricken faces twisted and contorted like political caricatures, watching the scene unfold on the other side of the glass.

Wait, is that? Couldn't be. Though if I didn't know better, I'd say that's Sheila sitting in that restaurant, sitting, eating dinner, calmly ignoring the riot. Sure it's only the back of her head but I think I know it well enough. She's sitting with a man, too, a man with fair hair and a sports coat. It's fucking Barry, I just know it. I feel like I'm going to be sick. And she acted so fucking hurt, so insulted by the insinuation. Well, fuck you! I give the window two big middle fingers, which only freaks out the stranded, mostly middle-aged, clientele even more. Maybe the universe is providing me the opportunity to get revenge. But I'd never get through the door. Staff would probably tackle me. Argh, I just want to smash his fucking face in. Or smash something in.

Bus!

By the time I decide to join the assault the crowd's already gotten inside. The driver is M.I.A. and the whole bus is full of screaming, drunken idiots, mostly kids even younger than me. Those surrounding it have got it rocking pretty good, those standing on top surfing the wave of the bouncing and bumping. Somewhere someone lets out a howl, long and loud and beastly. People are kicking the bus, punching the bus, someone at the back of the mob throws a bottle at the bus—ricochets off, hits a girl in the face. I push my way through to the back door and climb on in. It stinks of piss in here—from before or after this began, who knows?—and boozy sweat and cheap cologne and marijuana. There's a couple of kids, maybe 16 or 17, pimples, just sitting in a seat smoking a doob as the bus rattles and rolls around them. I don't join them though, I don't want to smoke, don't want to chill out. I want to destroy. Clutching hold of the back of a seat I start shaking with all I've got but it goes nowhere. I grab my keys and slash at it, tearing into

the upholstery. Reaching in with my hands, I pull the seat apart, tossing foam around like confetti *a la* George “the Animal” Steele. That felt great. I reach up and take hold of the ‘holy shit’ bar, pick my legs up and swing into the window kicking with all my might, to no avail. I go again. And again. And again. And again. And again. A lot of noise but not even a crack, hardly a footprint, and I need to stop to catch my breath. The crowd outside is crazy. They look like lunatics on the loose. So many screaming faces, laughing, maniacal faces, scratching and clawing at the bus like something out of a fucking zombie movie. The two kids with the joint have popped out the emergency exit window—smart little stoners—and a stream of rioters comes pouring in. I got to get out of here. Climbing over seats I get to the emergency hatch, jump up and pull myself through, the cool hitting me, making me realize how hot it is in there.

Up on the roof I struggle to get my footing. Somewhere in the distance there’s a loud thumping, a clanging, a rhythmic pounding like a drum, and it’s growing louder. Thump! Thump! Thump! replacing Beep! Beep! Beep! I stand up on the roof and behind the crowd laying siege to the bus I see cops in riot gear turning up Peel, beating their batons against their shields, coming to put an end to our fun. I can see a lot more from up here too, can see how big this crowd is, how crazy, can see several dozen other hooligans heading towards the relative safety of de Maisonneuve, can see a dimpled, fair-haired man in a sports coat backpedalling up the street with them. That’s fucking Barry! I don’t know how he got out of that restaurant and I don’t care, I just want revenge. In midair, jumping down off the bus, it strikes me that busses are a lot higher than I thought. The bottoms of my feet stinging, tingling, all pins and needles, I bolt up the street, target in sight. Coming up from behind, full speed, it’s almost too easy. I just plough into him,

shoving his back with both hands while sticking a foot in between his. He flies forward and slides across the pavement. I don't get a good look at his face, don't have time to stop and savour the moment, I keep on running and round the corner.

Fuck, that felt good. I hope that cut up his hands and knees.

I could just go home, be done with the mayhem, but fuck that, this is too good, think I'll loop back around a few blocks, head home along Ste-Catherine, through the storm. The street's a little less crowded now but it's way fucking rowdier, seems like less fans, more punks. Looters are racing by with their arms loaded down with stolen shit: T-shirts, jerseys, dresses, jeans. They must have hit the SAQ, lots of stolen bottles being scurried away, out of the light, out of sight—whiskeys, gins, vodkas, and expensive shit too, champagnes and cognacs and *Crystal*. A guy in a Guy Lafleur jersey—a cheap one, the number 10 ironed on, not stitched—that doesn't really fit, races by with an entire rack of magazines. What the hell are you going to do with those?

As I reach the next corner—where am I, the street looks so different like this it's hard to tell—I see a really unruly crowd, even for this bunch, gathered around an abandoned police car. Two guys are jumping up and down on the roof, kicking out the lights, another is on the hood doing body drops, leaving big body dents in it, and the crowd's fucking eating it up. People are coming in from the outskirts kicking out headlights, kicking the doors, a couple of dudes pick up a garbage can and heave it into the rear window, leaving a spider web of shattering. It's official. We got a full out riot on our hands.

“Whoooooooooo!” I feel fucking terrific. I feel like I'm setting some shit straight, taking charge, assuming the lead, running my own adult life. Across the street the *Foot*

Locker is being looted relentlessly—it's hard to believe they have any shoes left—but I'm betting no one's been after what I'm after. I climb in through the broken window, grinding glass under my feet, and start scanning the scene. It's a madhouse in this place, noisy as shit, screechy screams and laughing and crashing and pushing and shoving and just, commotion. People grabbing at anything they can, filling bags with hats and shorts and socks and laces and...fuck, I hope there's some underwear left. I have to shove my way to the rack, fight to get a shot to steal, but I do and I do, I grab every pair I can see, six of them, and scuttle away to a corner. What have I got here: Two XL, two small, a medium and a large. I toss the XLs and the smalls aside, cram the other two into my backpack, hop up and jet out of here. Goddamn, what a rush!

And then I became a felon.

I can hear the thump-thump-thumping of the riot police amid the beep-beep-beeping, which has receded but never stops. It sounds like the cops are headed this way. People are just running wild now. There are windows smashed all up and down Ste-Catherine. Still plenty of Habs fans, plenty of jerseys and flags and ole, ole, ole; but there's a seedier element, thugs lurking against the walls, young kids in black jackets and oversized jeans up to something. Looting, sure, but what else? They look organized, they look like trouble, like a gang, or rapists, or a gang of rapists. Thump! Thump! Thump! I can see them now, coming at me, police spread out in a line, shoulder-to-shoulder, across the entire street, maybe a block away. I slink into a crowd at a side street and watch the show of force pass, off to clear the SAQ and *Foot Locker*. I don't even know what they're doing down here, I mean, the looting has happened, the cars are destroyed, you're a little late guys.

I move along Ste-Catherine heading west, using the street to make up time as now the sidewalks are far more packed, the street starting its slow return to normal. Beeeep! Beep-beep-bee-bee-bee-beeeeeeeep! A car rushes down the street chased by the mob banging the roof and hood and trying to force him to stop. What they plan to do if he does I don't want to guess. Up ahead there's some light or a fire or something, or yep, that's a police car on fire. And holy shit, that guy's got a Molotov cocktail, a real honest to God Molotov cocktail. He takes his bottle, flaming wick poking out the top, drops of fire trailing behind him, races into the street and throws in onto another abandoned police car. It explodes in an alcoholic fireball leaving the car doused in flames. The crowd erupts in cheers, loud, after-a-goal cheers.

Up the street there's a half dozen or so people, maybe more, shaking yet another police car trying to get it to flip over. Where'd all the cops go? They just abandoned their cars all over the place. Do they want them to get destroyed, are they that unprepared? More people join in to try and finish the job. Maybe I should join in. As I get to the car, they get it turned over, smashing the roof on the ground. The crowd on the other side comes into view and I notice something. Spiky hair. Crooked smile. Dimples. That's Lorelei Billingsgate wearing a Mats Naslund jersey.

I should make a move. Should !? Come on Corey, you can do this, who is she anyway? Who the fuck am I? Fuck it, what do I have to lose? I walk over, chest out, trying to look confident, feeling like I look like an asshole, but so what. I move over right beside her, we're practically shoulder to elbow, what do I say? Now that I'm this close I

can see she has temporary tattoos on her cheeks, a Habs logo on each. She looks up at me with those big doe eyes and smirks. I smile back—now's your chance, jackass.

“Say, ah, I like your tattoos.”

“Thanks, dude.” She gives me a once over. “Nice hat.”

“Thanks.” See, that wasn't so bad, didn't hurt or leave a mark. “Hey, um, sorry, but aren't you Lorelei Billingsgate?” I accuse.

“Yes?” she says with a lilt, somewhere between coy and annoyed.

“I saw you read the other night, at *Johnny B's*, Saturday.” She nods but still looks sceptical, seems unsure. “You were really good; great.”

“Thanks.”

Extending a hand I tell her, “I'm Corey by the way.” And she looks insulted.

“You don't shake my hand,” she declares, hands on her hip, lower lip pouting. Then she grabs my elbow, pulls me close and hugs me. I can feel she's on her tippy-toes, so I crouch a bit and she lets go. That was unexpected and cool.

“I'm on the second day of wearing pants with no underwear.”

Lorelei giggles, leans in and, cupping her hand around my ear, informs me, “I haven't worn underwears in years.” Then she pulls back her jeans a touch to prove it.

“Doesn't that get sweaty?” I ask, immediately wishing I could take it back, even before the words are fully spoken.

“I shave.” she replies, nonchalantly, as if I'd asked for the time.

And then she stole my heart.

Man, this girl is incredible. All right, Corey, relax, see the opportunities the universe provides. Seize the opportunities. But how do I respond to that? I don't. We just stand together and watch as a chubby dude with his t-shirt pulled over his face, beer belly hanging out, tosses a brick—or something—through the driver's side window, which gets the crowd fired up. Okay, here goes.

“So, ah, like I was saying, I really enjoyed your performance, laughed my ass off.” I laugh but she doesn't. “I never understood why making people laugh is somehow lower than, or, or not as sophisticated as making them cry.” Lorelei looks unimpressed, like I'm talking about work on the weekend. I know I should shut up but my mouth keeps moving and words keep dribbling out. “People think laughs are cheap because people will laugh at people falling down, but people cry just as easily, every wedding I've ever been to, and terrible movies, and...I don't know, I guess I just like to laugh.”

She doesn't look at me and she doesn't answer. Staring at the crowd spinning the flipped-over cop car around like a giant bottle at a seventh grade party, god knows what she's thinking. After forever, she speaks. “Thanks, I guess. Glad to hear it.”

That was the flattest, most lifeless response, like a dead fish. My flirting skills are for fucking shit. I don't have anything else to say but I don't want to leave, and the longer I don't say anything the more awkward this gets. I look at her and smile and she turns her head. Fucking hell.

“What did you say your name was?” Oh, a sign of life. Though her voice is still dead, none of the playful inflection I heard the other night.

“Corey.”

“Right.” Nodding she scans around, not looking at me. “How do we know each other?”

“Do we know each other?”

“Well, you knew my name, I thought maybe we’d meet before.”

Fuck, yeah, hadn’t thought of that. “Well, I don’t think we were ever properly introduced, like I said, I’ve seen you read.”

“You hang around at readings trying to pick up poets, is that it?”

I feel my face go flush, but it’s making her laugh to see me blush, so now I’m conflicted. Maybe this isn’t going so badly after all. Just then this stunning dark-haired girl with sweeping cat eyes and curves, curves, curves—cheekbones, chin, tits, hips, ass, so many nice rounded supple curves—and the same stickers on her cheeks, walks right up to us, right up to Lorelei and plants a long, wet, tonguey kiss on her. Full face sucking. I feel my heart sink and my dick jump.

“Hey honey, there you are,” says Lorelei’s lesbian lover. “I missed you while I was gone.”

“Been right here waiting.” The pair kiss again—I should have stopped to put one of these pairs of underwear on. “Katja, this is Corey. Corey, Katja.” I wave, sheepish and stupid and shy. I can’t believe I didn’t know she was a lesbian. “Corey’s a fan of mine.”

“Oh,” Katja’s face lights up with pride, “aren’t her poems just *the* best?”

“Yeah, yeah, the best.” Lorelei and Katja are hugging and hanging off each other, totally in love. Is Sheila so self-absorbed that she never noticed Lorelei was a lesbian? Did she tell me at some point and I didn’t hear? How did this shit get past me? I turn around and there are a couple of people standing up on the underside of the car jumping. I

race over to join them without saying goodbye, these two will be fine without me I won't even be missed.

I don't know what it is about stomping on a police car, but it's every bit as fun as it looks. It's fucking awesome. Bouncier than I was expecting, dangerous too—it's totally unsteady, wobbly and keeps being spun around—but such a blast. Jumping. On. A. Mother. Fucking. Cop. Car. Crunch! Smash! Crack! Pop! It's a symphony of destruction. And where are the cops? What happens when they find us beating their car all to hell? Fuck it, there's so many of us, how are they going to stop us? Just. Keep. Jumping. Keep. On. Smashing. I'm getting fucking tired. Catching my breath, I notice that there are a lot of people taking pictures or video or pictures and video with their cell phones, like a ton of them. I must be in a dozen by now. Some pictures for sure, there have been flashes, flashes from real proper cameras. Fuck, one guy even has a camcorder, a camcorder and...a red soul patch. Quinn?

Wait, what is that? Is that...is that gas? Do I smell gas? Sure enough, a guy in a white hoodie—hood up—is emptying a little jerry can around the cruiser. Son of a bitch, what's wrong with this jackass? There are still four of us standing on this thing! I jump down, slipping on the gasoline and nearly doing a header, nearly cracking my head off the concrete. Then I hear it, the roar as he lights it up, and I start running in case I'm leaving a trail of gas behind, but I'm not.

“Hey Bonnie! Buddy!” That's Quinn with the camera all right, waving, flailing his free arm around like an idiot. “Is this fucking unbelievable or what?” He smacks his camera, “I got a shitload of amazing footage. There's gotta be a dozen pig cars on fire.

Maybe more.” He’s panting, he’s so excited, and for some reason he’s all dressed in black. Black coat, shiny black shoes, black fedora, he kind of looks like he’s out of the 50s, except for the camcorder. “Come on, Bonnie, let’s go find some more craziness.”

I follow Quinn down the street, towards school, towards home, towards a fiery orange glow that can only be another car. Quinn flips open the screen on his camera, hits the power button while rushing, speed walking, to make it in time. I’m not sure what he thinks might happen, what he might miss, but he seems to need to be there A-sap. Keeping pace isn’t that hard, but I’m fucking out of shape, and I got a cramp in my side, a stitch. Quinn beats me by about ten seconds. When I arrive this car is fully lit up, you can feel the heat coming off of it. I wonder if the gas tank could explode or is that just something you see in the movies? It’d be worth knowing.

“Man, I can’t believe this shit. You’d think we’d won the Cup,” I tell him when I catch up, realizing as I say it that anything I say will be caught by the mic, the backdrop for Quinn’s film. “I didn’t know Habs fans hated the fucking cops so much.”

“It’s not Habs fans, man.” Quinn waves his hand at the burning patrol car. “*This* is not Canadiens fans doing this shit. This shit is street gangs, man.”

“You think so?” I watch over Quinn’s shoulder in the little screen while he talks. It’s not bad, his camera work—a little shaky for sure, but fuck, it’s a riot—pulling in tight for nice shots of pure fire, panning across the SPVM logo, the battered red and blues, the scattered shattered glass.

“For sure. I know so. Don’t you remember a few weeks ago, maybe a month, like six or seven pigmobiles were torched out at the precinct in Hochelaga? I guarantee, guarantee, this is the same group of punks. Gonna end up costing thousands to replace these

things. Fucking taxpayer money too.” I wonder if that’s why so few cops are around? Do they just want new cruisers?

Quinn stops filming and points the camera down, folding in the screen against his thigh. “So you caused a bit of a stir today,” he tells me. I look at him blankly, like I don’t have a clue in hell what he’s talking about. “Your mini-mutiny.” He clarifies. “You got anything to say for yourself?”

I just shrug—what business is it of yours?—try to play it cool, but I can’t stop the smile creeping across my face. I hope I did cause a stir. “Well, you know, Game 7, had to be done.”

“Fucking Bonnie, full of surprises.” Quinn shakes his head and punches me in the shoulder. “You’re a crazy fucker.” He just keeps shaking his head in disbelief. “Say, if you’re looking to get another job, best get on that, now’s the time, summer jobs are disappearing.” Fuck, good point.

Man, the smell of burning plastic and rubber and melting metal is just awful, clouds of black smoke rising all over downtown, and this one here’s choking us out; smoking us out. We step out of the smokescreen onto the sidewalk. Quinn looks around, up the street and down, surveying, plotting his next move.

“So what’s the plan, Bonnie? What are we up to now?” We? “Wanna head to *Biftek*? Couple pitchers, shoot some stick,” he bends over and makes like he’s playing pool, “what do you say?” And he socks me in the shoulder again. I just shrug. “Come on, don’t be a pussy.” Pussy or not, I don’t want to walk all the way over there and back just to drink beer I can’t afford and get my ass kicked at pool.

“You know what, Quinn, I think I’ve had enough for tonight. Going to go home check the news, should be plenty of riot footage.” He calls me a pussy again then turns and heads back into the fray, camera rolling.

Almost home now and things seem to have settled a little this far west—wouldn’t have been the case when the AMC was still the Forum—no crowds of hoodlums, no waving flags, no rising smoke, no beep-beep-beep or thump-thump-thump, no sirens either, just an eerie after-the-storm sort of feel. What a night. I can’t wipe the smile off my face. Man, this city, just when you think it’s not for you, it goes and gives you a night like this.

Maybe I’ll be on YouTube. Maybe I already am. What if I’m getting hits right now? What if I get a million hits or millions of hits? Me stomping on police cars, busting windows, running wild on little screens all over the world. Who knows how many people have seen me causing mayhem already? Soon as I get home, I’ll see for myself. Maybe the universe has delivered more than a beating and I just don’t know it yet. The one around the corner could be anything.

And then I became an Internet sensation.

That’d be sweet. I could live with that.

10

Out of nowhere this giant mitt of a hand clasps onto my shoulder, a second clutching my waist, my belt, giving me a wedgie whether planned or not, and I'm being shoved around the corner and into an alley, pitched forward into a wall, commands barked out in French. I turn to face my attacker and find two of them, cops, regular ones not riot-gearred, but big fuckers, bulletproof vests making them bigger. Nothing really distinguishes one from the other, they're just a couple of regular cops: jar-headed, square-shouldered, beady-eyed, angry cops. They pin me to the wall, one on each shoulder, and lift me up off my feet, thumbs digging into my armpits. They're yakking back and forth a whole shitload, like asking each other questions and playing at answers and really hamming it up. There's something to be said about me it seems.

Do they know I was stomping on cars? Do they know about the underwear? What do they want with me? What the fuck is going on here? I just want to go home.

“Please, come on, what did I do? I don't understand what's going on, what's this about? I'm just trying to go home.”

Nothing but the filthy pig Latin, and laughter—French laughter—goddamn it, what are they saying? They drop me and one of the two, the one who pushed me down here, rips my backpack off babbling to his partner about god knows what. The partner pins my arms behind me in some kind of crazy MMA hold where it feels like it's about to snap off, like the tendons are just going to give out. I let out a yelp, try to subdue it into a whimper, and he responds by pushing my feet apart with his foot, way apart, way beyond shoulder-width, tapping them out if I inch them closer together.

“What the hell, eh? I’m co-operating with you. I’m compliant. I’m non-resistant.”

I feel him take my wallet out of my pocket.

The one with my backpack is tossing everything out of it, like everything. The underwear, my keys, my phone, water bottle rolling away, so many pens and pieces of paper—more than I knew were in there—flying this way and that, even the little tin I keep my weed in—with a half-smoked doob inside—takes a ride. Thankfully it didn’t get opened first.

“Guys, officers, what’s the problem? I still don’t know what the I’ve done here.”

A voice behind me says, “Cor-eh Bown-spell. Ontario.” I guess he’s got my license. They just laugh and keep talking in French, I think about me not talking French. Ha, ha, ha, real fucking funny assholes, am I under arrest or what? What the fuck is going on?

Eventually the one who threw my shit around asks, or sort of decides, “*Vous ne parle pas Francais, hein?* So I shake my head, eyes down. “*C’est dommage pour vous, parce que ici on parle francais.*” Yeah, so I hear.

“Come on please, you must speak English, you can’t *only* speak French, you must be able to understand me.” But that doesn’t help, just gets me shaking heads and angry eyes. Please don’t find the weed. Please don’t figure out that underwear’s stolen. Or I was destroying police property. They must know, they must have something; they can’t just be fucking with me, can they?

Finally the one who manhandled me to begin with—Gagnon, according to his nametag—claps and says, “Okay, you can go, if you first say for me a liddle someting *en Francais.*” I stare, dumbfounded, how the fuck am I supposed to do that?

“*Repete après moi:*” he continues, followed by a string of what sounds like nonsense complete with accents and conjugation and whatever else. You can’t be serious; but he is, completely, and he tells me something in a sterner voice, a mean voice, guttural and authoritative. I don’t think I’m leaving here until I repeat what he has for me to say, or at least try, and really, what choice do I have?

“All right, I’ll give it shot, I’ll say whatever it is you want me say. I just want to go home.” Home might not be far enough at this point. “But you talk way too fast for me, you have to slow down if I’m ever going to hear you, let alone repeat you.”

The pair talk this over. It’s clear that they both know English, both understand me just fine. They are just fucking with me, but what can I do, they’re the police, they can fuck with you if they want. Gagnon repeats his phrase again. This time, I’m all ears.

“Chui un Chris’ de bloke, une maudite tête carrée. Chui laid et mou, ché pas comment m’habiller, pis j’pue. Ché pas quoi faire avec les femmes. J’baise les lumières fermées. J’rèpète tout ce qu’on me dit, pis ché pas ce que je dis, Chui trop stupide, paresseux et frais chié pour me forcer à apprendre la langue. J’devrais juste m’en retourner chez nous, pis pu jamais revenir ici.”

I give her a go: “Shoe-we une...”

“Ah, ah, ah, c’est un, pas une. Encore.”

“Shoe-we un Christy bloog...” is as far as I get before they’re giggling and snorting, and I just give up. Son of a bitch! Any other city and I’d be home by now, or arrested for looting and possession. This is such bullshit. I roll my eyes and the other cop grabs me by the chin, starts screaming in my fucking face, pointing his finger, nearly poking me in the eye, spittle flying all over. He’s letting me have it whatever the fuck

he's saying, and he's hurting my fucking jaw, too. He lets go and I get a look at his nametag: Tremblay.

Gagnon taps his ear saying, "*Ecouter cet fois*" and repeats himself again, very slowly, deliberately, like he's talking to a child or an old person or a retard. "*Chui un Chris' de bloke, une maudite tête carrée. Chui laid et mou, ché pas comment m'habiller, pis j'pue. Ché pas quoi faire avec les femmes. J'baise les lumières fermées. J'répète tout ce qu'on me dit, pis ché pas ce que je dis, Chui trop stupide, paresseux et frais chié pour me forcer à apprendre la langue. J'devrais juste m'en retourner chez nous, pis pu jamais revenir ici.*"

But I still don't understand a word.

"Shoe-we un..."

I try and fail to get even halfway through, I don't even know what the fuck I'm saying, trying to remember sounds, but it isn't working. He makes me try again.

"mo-dite tet car-eh..."

And again.

"Blaze-eh laze lum-y-air farm-eh..."

And again.

"Shoe-we trow stupid..."

I'm never going to get this, butchering the language, struggling with every word, needing each one repeated, each syllable stressed, I can barely string an entire sentence together. All I'm really doing is giving them a few laughs on an otherwise horrible night for the Montreal Police. Like I know they have a shit reputation, I know the annual anti-

police brutality rally always ends with rock tossing, riot police and mass arrests, but this is fucking criminal.

“Come on, this is fucking fascism. Since when can you detain people and make them learn a language? What right do you...” and Tremblay sucker punches me right in the solar plexus. Holy fuck that hurt! I go down in a heap and vomit on myself—mostly beer. I cough and struggle to breathe, eyes welling up, I spit puke, trying to get the acidity out of my mouth, trying to figure out what the fuck just happened. Tremblay and Gagnon just snicker to each other and walk away like it was nothing, just another night on the beat. Fucking pigs!

And then I was the victim of an abuse of authority.

But Christ, what am I going to do about it? I’m just happy he didn’t hit me again, or worse, can only imagine what would’ve happened if I was a chick. Plus they didn’t say shit about the underwear, didn’t seem to notice, never found that joint neither, so it could’ve been worse.

Oh, come on! You got to be shitting me, where are my keys? Did they toss them? Where’d they toss them? I didn’t see what went where when shit got strewn about. Did they keep them? Would they do that? Bet their yukking it up right now, laughing away about it. Fucking asshole cops got me digging through weeds on the side of an alley, probably been pissed in and shit in by crackheads and drunks.

“ARRRRRRGH!” All I want to do is go home, get off the streets, smoke this joint; maybe take a shower...Oh sweet, yes! Never thought I could be so excited to see a set of keys...Goddamn Fuck Shit! Keys to my folk’s place, what good are these? Why? Why do you have two sets of keys, Corey? Why? “FUUUUUCCCKK!”

I'm looking for a while, five minutes, ten, kicking at weeds along the sides of buildings, using my phone as a flashlight, literally turning over stones, before this drunken Inuit comes stumbling into the alley, leaning on the wall, sort of bounding along it, muttering to himself and slobbering. He shuffles over to me, quickly but not fast, holding out his hand. I look at him and shrug. I ain't got money to spare. He smiles at me, missing three front teeth on the top, just a hole straight through to his tongue. He's wearing a raggedy-ass navy blue sweatshirt that says 'Trust the Media' in bubbly white letters, and he fucking reeks. Beer and piss and shit and...maybe he's the one who was sleeping in the vestibule last week.

I keep digging through the weeds and whatever along the wall—probably this fucker's toilet—but all I'm finding is garbage and occasionally another pen. It's slow work too, have to watch for needles—even if this is more a crackhead end of town—broken glass and whatever, plus now I got stinky to deal with. I try to ignore him but he doesn't make it easy. He sidles up to me all sneaky silent like a cat burglar, and starts pawing at my arm, tugging, clawing, and muttering something or other. He's quite short, squat, and his face is all weathered, cracked and creased, deep lines in his cheeks, across his forehead, around the eyes, his yellow eyes. His hair is a mess, sticking up all everywhere, clumps and loose ends, two days growth of bristly grey beard.

“Come on, gimme some money, you got some money, some change.” His breath is like a septic tank. “What's in the bag?” Those eyes are focused now, beady and intent, malicious. I shove him away.

Unfazed, he comes back at me arms outstretched, dirty fingers poking at my face, grabbing for my collar. I think he's trying to attack me, but it's happening so slowly. I bat

his right arm away, then the left, but he brings them back up swinging listless punches like we're fighting underwater. Grabbing hold of him by the wrists to keep him off me, I kick him in the shin hard, bending my toes back, stubbing them, and it hurts, but it hurts him too. He yelps and falls back some, but I've still got him by the wrist so he doesn't go far and comes back at me with a kick of his own, wild and flailing, missing me and knocking him off balance, making me lose my grip on his right hand. I move fast so he doesn't have a chance to do anything with his free arm and I knee him hard in the balls just like they teach women in self-defence training—or at least women in sit-coms. He makes a wheezing sound, an air-escaping whine, and falls backward against the wall, sliding down to the ground cross-eyed and huddled up. Then he just lies with a hand clutching his junk, growling obscenities at me, “Motherfucker fuck you son of a cunt rag bitch ass motherfucking cocksucker dick...” until I leave.

But I can't really leave, I can't go anywhere, can't get anywhere, without keys. Fuck what am I going to do? He's probably sitting right on top of my keys, too. He can't lie there forever, he'll have to get up and get on his way eventually—but how long is eventually? Come on buddy, get going. I need a spot to stake out the alley, wait out this dirty fucker, somewhere like...there. Yes, this'll do nicely, got an angle on the alley from under these steps, can use my backpack as a cushion, use the wall as a backrest, stay out of sight but still know when he leaves. Unless he leaves out the other way—these alley systems can be surprisingly extensive—but I'll make the rounds in a few minutes to be sure he's gone.

Ten minutes and the fucker's still there.

Twenty. Leave, asshole, I got a search to conduct.

Forty-five fucking minutes? Is he asleep? Dead? How long's this going to take?

Oh shit, what? Huh? Whoa, did I? Must've dosed off, sky's all purple dawn, what time is it? Jesus, I slept on the fucking street. This isn't good. Okay, still got my phone—it's dead, but I got it—still got my backpack, my wallet...is everything in my wallet? All right, didn't get robbed, that's a start. Can't believe I passed out, man, fuck! Oh Christ I'm stiff, neck's throbbing, can't even really look down. What is this shit? Oh right, puked on myself, gross. Oh, and a good bruise just below the ribcage. Fucking cops. Assholes!

Crawling out front under the stoop, I get back on my feet, look down the alley and feel a twinge in my neck but see the drunk's gone. He made it home, wherever home may be, probably the Seville. I stagger along using the wall to steady myself as he had before. No sign of the keys even with the added light. Good thing they're on the ground because I can hardly look up, my neck's aching so bad. And it fucking stinks down here, way worse than I recall. Oh, fucking hell, that bastard took a shit. Filthy, fucking, drunken, *trust the media*, eh? Well the media's taught me not to trust you homeless fucks cause you'll just beg for money you use for booze, and piss and shit on the goddamn street!

“ARRRRRRGH! FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! Where are my fucking keys!”

Settle down, Corey, you'll find them, they'll be here; but where, where are you little fuckers? Did the pigs steal them? Why would they steal them, what could they do? Did they go to my house and rob me, the one read my license, but that's from Ontario, that's got my folks address. Why would they steal my keys? Why? They wouldn't. Why would they? They wouldn't. But they did fuck with me pretty good, they were assholes,

you never know with an asshole. And if they didn't take them, then where the fuck could they be? I've looked everywhere in this damn alley...nearly everywhere.

Oh no. Oh Christ. That disgusting fucker probably shat right on my keys. Ah I just know it. I'd bet my life on it. My keys are under his pile of shit.

Okay, going to need a stick or something, something long, something to keep a safe distance. Jesus, you wouldn't think it would be so hard to find something pokey in an alley, guess this'll have to do. All right Corey, it's not that bad, you can do this. I can't do this. If I do this, the keys won't be there, they just won't, I'll have done it for nothing, I just know it. But if I don't do it, they'll be there, and I won't find them anywhere else 'cause they'll be there, and I'll never get home. Goddamn it.

And then I pushed some drunken Inuit's shit around.

God, this is disgusting—wish I could've found a longer stick—so soft and mushy and smelly, this terrible yellow-brown, streaky green. What the fuck's this guy been eating? Or drinking. Jesus! At least this is in an alley, not out on the street, not in front of anyone. I don't need strangers watching me root through someone's shit—though they would probably think it was mine, but that's no better. I can't even believe I'm fucking doing this, this has to be the worst godda...ooh. There they are. Now how do I pick them up? Fucking hell. Like a leaf, or some garbage maybe? Hmmm. I must have some paper or something in my backpack, a napkin, or a metro ticket or...my copy of the official warning from Bijoux. Perfect. Oh, my neck—that's a shooting pain—can't even really bend down to pick them up. Bend from the waist here we go. And I thought digging through it with a stick was disgusting. God this shit stinks. Wish I had a faucet or a tap or a bucket or something. Ah, shit, it's on my hand. Sonovabitch. What do I do, do I wipe

it? I guess use the warning. Man this paper is just covered in it now, so much shit everywhere, but at least I can shower now. Better clean the grooves out if I can, don't want my door stinking of this disgusting bum forever. The key I can wash, the inside of the lock is more difficult. Gross. This is not the type of thing you want to be doing detail work on. I need some liquid, I need...I had a bottle of water, didn't I? Where the fuck did that go? I can spit I suppose, that's something, sort of. Fuck it, that'll have to do.

Getting in the house without leaving too much alky shit on the lock, I wash everything right away, toss the keys in the tub and hop in the shower. I take my time, the water's warm, the pressure's great, and I'd like to feel it on splashing on my face but I can't really lift my head, so I just stand in the stream with my forehead pressed against the cool tiles, feeling the street slowly slide off my back, puddle and drain away. It feels good, quite good, but somehow incomplete, like I'm still not fully clean yet, not after what I've been through—even though the soap made the rounds thrice—like nothing's enough after that.

Towelling off, I light what remains of that joint and log on to YouTube. My head slumped forward, neck knotted, I type 'montreal riot' into the search window and get dozens of results. I click on the first one and watch a montage of helicopter news footage from around downtown, mostly pig cars left to burn, not too much of the actual destruction. I click a few others: a cop car with the driver's door bent backwards, a guy on the hood stomping; one where a guy runs across a cruiser that's on fire; another where a large group are working to get a car turned over, ole's ringing out in the background; another with a guy dressed in camouflage tossing a Molotov cocktail into a car, and one

with the bus, and a...ha, holy shit, that's me, on top of it with a bunch of other rowdies running wild.

It's strange watching this, it looks so insane, reckless, just like anarchy, but at the time there was so much adrenaline, something visceral about being in the mob that just doesn't come across on screen. Watching the footage it looks scary, out of control and unruly, not something I'd want to be a part of, but in the moment, I couldn't not be a part of it. I watch the bus footage to the end, until the point where the faces of the crowd change, when the sounds of the batons slapping shields become overwhelming and the image becomes a shaky mix of street and feet and upside down bus.

I search out footage uploaded by *quinndaddy69* and there's a half dozen recent posts. The first one I click on is familiar, it's the one I watched him film, the artsy close-ups of the police car burning. It's had over 1700 hits already. I turn up the volume to find you can't really make out what we were saying after all, you can hear voices, but the roar of the fire and the roar of the mob muffle them out.

I click on another and soon enough spot myself again, atop that overturned car, stomping. Quinn clearly recognized me, got some nice close shots of my face, eyes closed, jaw clenched, teeth bared. I look kind of crazy. Angry and frustrated, I don't look like a guy celebrating, not like some of the people in some of the footage, laughing and smiling and happily destroying. I don't look happy at all, I look like I'm stomping the pig car out of a sense of obligation, like I don't want to but have to, like it's my job.

I click onto the next one of Quinn's and spot another familiar face, a brutish oaf with a blond crew cut in a red Kovalev tee: Drago. He's laying into this car—not a police car, just this little Toyota, a two-door, an *Echo* or a *Yaris*, maybe *Tercel*—kicking in the

side of it, denting up the doors, snapping off the side mirror. Working with focused ferocity, fury, rage, he's businesslike in his total dismantling of this car. He opens the driver's side door and bends in backwards, then does the same on the passenger side, holding off other rioters that try to get in on the destruction, screaming at them, even shoving one beanpole guy to the ground. The crowd makes space and Drago flips the car over on his own, then kicks out all the windows and screams into the air, howling like wolf, laughing, a big toothy grin on his face, crazy eyes. And this lunatic lives right downstairs.

Yawning, I consider clicking on the next video, but notice the sun's up—it's fully daytime. It's been a long night, maybe I should try and get some sleep.

11

Vibrating, my phone startles me awake. I tweak my neck springing up to answer it, and it's only fucking Quinn.

“Hey Bonnie, buddy, what's shaking yo? You been on YouTube yet?”

“What time is it?”

“After one. Are you just getting up? Fucking Bonnie, late riser, eh? I, on the other hand, got a wake-up call from the police this morning. That's right. Little after nine, they gave yours truly a ring, asking me all sorts of questions 'bout last night and the footage I uploaded. They wanted to know if I knew any people in the videos. Like they wanted me to identify people and rat people out. Wanted me to name names. Wanted names and addresses, man.”

“Shit, you didn't do it, did you?”

“Snitches get stitches, Bonnie.” Good. “But I had to go down to the local cop shop here and turn over all my raw footage, everything I had, not just what was online. It's all evidence now. It was either bring it in or they send an officer to my place to pick it up, and fuck that, I ain't having no cops in here, so I had to spend a whole damned morning being processed and questioned and shit. Just got home now, thought I'd let ya know the cops are looking to lay charges based on video footage, since you're in my videos.”

“I'm in other videos too, I've seen myself.”

“Well, head's up then, Bonnie, you've been warned. Peace.”

Fuck, this isn't good. I've had enough of the Montreal police for a lifetime. What are the chances somebody recognizes me? Decent. But what are the chances someone

recognises me and calls it in? Who would do that? Sheila, maybe, if she really wanted to be a bitch, or Neb if he's pissed enough about me quitting on him, or anyone else from work who might have suffered because of my early exit or is just jealous I watched the game while they worked. Fuck or Barry, I did shove him to ground. But fuck Barry! No I'm probably fine, probably nothing will come of this, but what if does? Goddamn Quinn got me all worked up waking me up with this shit. I should warn Drago. He'll want to know, he'll need to know, after what he did.

I toss on some clothes—the shirt Sheila sent me home in but with fresh underwear—and head downstairs. It's quiet, no sounds coming from inside his place at all. He's probably at work, but I knock anyway. Rad answers almost immediately, slowly prying the door open to peek her head out.

“Corey from upstairs,” she says with a bright-eyed smile. “Hello again.”

“Hey Rad, is Drago here? I need to talk to him, it's kind of important.”

“No, he working now,” she tells me and opens the door wider, watching her feet, watching for the ferret, then stands duck-footed, blocking the way. “Until 3:30 he work, then home at four o'clock.” Rad's wearing a smock of sorts, an old plaid button-down with splatter marks all over it, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, flecks of paint on her arms, in her hair, on her hands and her long, bare legs.

“Were you with him last night? Did you hear about the cops? You know there was a riot, don't you? Fires and destruction and mayhem all over downtown? Did you see what he did? Have you seen the news? There're videos all over YouTube, you know?”

“What is happening to you, Corey? Calm down, relax.” She puts her hands on my shoulders and steadies me and I notice I’m shaking. “Please, come inside?” Rad leads me in then closes the door.

She’s definitely been painting, easel set up just inside the door, dropcloth over the futon, curtains drawn, room bright with sunlight, smell of paint almost covering the ferret musk. She shoves the easel into a corner, pulls off and folds up the dropcloth, then gestures for me to take a seat. But I don’t want to sit, the cops could be on their way here for all I know, could bust the door down at any second.

“Have you talked to him today, has he called? He didn’t say anything to you about last night?” I pace across the small amount of open floor in front of the window, biting my nails.

“Corey, what is wrong?” She stands and blocks my path so I have to stop pacing. “Why so worked up about?”

The little weasel appears from somewhere and starts clawing my leg, sniffing my ankle, licking, trying to climb up it, I think. I shake my foot at it and Rad picks it up, rescues it, or me, the ferret scurrying onto her shoulder.

“You know about the riot last night?” I ask. “D’you see the news? The cop cars being damaged and burned?” She nods along, looking bewildered. “Well the cops are looking to press charges, they’re looking for the people who did it? So I need to talk to Drago, I need to warn him, need to…”

“Why warn him? What did Drago do?” The question slithers out, her tone uncertain, suspicious and anxious, eyes sharpened, head cocked to one side.

“He went fucking nuts, he trashed a car, destroyed it! And who knows what else, I only saw him in one video, but there are dozens, maybe hundreds of them.”

“Of what?” The ferret hops off of her onto the couch and starts digging at nothing.

“Of videos! Of last night, the riot, of people vandalizing and looting and arson...ing. Now the cops are out looking for people from those videos. Looking to make arrests. Drago is in those videos. I’m in those videos.”

Rad’s jaw loosens, shoulders slack, relaxing, eyelids heavy, doubting. “How bad can be?”

“Bad! Like the cops could be on their way here right now! They’re investigating it, they’re on the case, and you don’t know maybe, but the cops in this city, man, they’re fucking cocksuckers, they do whatever the fuck they want, they don’t care about shit.”

“It can’t be so bad as you say.”

“See for yourself, it’s all over YouTube.”

“Please.” She motions to the desk, to the computer, so I go over and pull up the chair. I log on to YouTube and once again search ‘montreal riot.’ There are hundreds of hits now. Rad leans in, I can feel her breath on my ear, sense her just off my shoulder, hunching, her chin nearly resting on it. Scrolling along the sidebar, I’m looking for *quinndaddy69* when Rad reaches across me and clicks on a video. Instantly there’s noise, screeching, screaming, cheering, crunching, an image of the SAQ window being kicked in, bottles being looted. Rad clicks on another video, a guy tossing something incendiary into a heavily damaged cop car, then on another of the crowd in front of the rink right after the game, loud but not yet unruly, except for the Bruins’ jersey on fire. Rad is mesmerised by what she sees, her wonky eyes huge, almost bugging out, bulbous.

“I hear last night helicopter, but I had no idea it was this...” She clicks on another, then slides around me, crouches next to me, elbow resting on my knee, her eyes never leaving the screen, “Where is Drago?” she asks after viewing a few more clips.

I find Quinn’s footage of Drago, click on it, and there he is again demolishing that Toyota like his life depends on it, shattering and smattering it to smithereens. He’s a fucking lunatic, it’s like ‘roid rage mixed with alcohol mixed with mob mentality. Rad isn’t even blinking, her mouth gaping, nose and forehead slowly wrinkling, scrunching, furrowing, as her eyes narrow. She curses—it seems like—in Slavic, whatever she speaks, before confiding, “He work only half day yesterday, he was at bar so many hours before game. I meet him for dinner, 5:30, already he so drunk, screaming, banging on tabletop. I did not stay for game. Drago came home *wery* late. He say me nothing of this.” She dry spits. “Nothing.”

“Well, people get into to a crowd that size they just go nuts, like morality goes out the window with anonymity, like if there are enough other people doing it then I can act like a maniac and no one will notice. Trust me, I felt it.”

“No, Drago always act like maniac when drinking.” She shakes her head and mock spits again. “Always.”

“So you get it now? You see why I say cops could be coming here? They’re going to want to identify him, charge him, arrest him. It’s not safe here.”

“No, they will not come, no. I do not believe this.”

“Didn’t you see what he did?” She stares at me, incredulous. “You don’t get it, man, Rad, these cops are assholes! They beat the shit out of me and left me in an alley last night for no reason, for nothing. They even made me speak French for fuck’s sake!

You never know what they'll do, don't even try telling me you do, 'cause you don't, you don't even appreciate the situation, things are spiralling, they ain't taking this lightly, the city don't look good, it's international news..." I need to catch my breath.

Rad's laughing but her eyes look angry, small and joyless. "You need to calm, Corey, we should smoke a bong," she decides, standing up. Did she not hear anything I was saying about the police? "I make coffee and we smoke a bong, yes?" She tips her head to me and disappears around the corner, into the kitchen. The sounds of crashing dishes, water running, propane stove being lit follow. I lean back and rub my eyes. Relax. How can I relax? Coffee and a bong would be nice though, be a start.

While I wait, that furry weasel starts sniffing at my feet again and I kick at it—kick it—and it bounds away, but not far. My eyes wander around the room, through the pictures on the corkboard again, outside at the street, quiet and empty, eventually landing on the easel and the large canvas—or maybe not, I don't really know what counts as large in canvases, it's like 4' x 3' probably—a work in progress. Pools of blue and red splattered and freckled with gold, crisp white lines at odd angles, black poured—it appears—over everything like tar or oil and smeared around, obscuring what lies beneath. It kind of looks like shit, but what do I know? Rad comes back in with a large glass bong—maybe two feet tall—and the same box of paraphernalia Drago had the other day, the weed box.

"Nice painting," I tell her with a smile.

"You think? Is not finished yet. I just start painting it last night. There is much to do still." She stares at her work a while, cocks her head to the left, then the right, sighs and sits down opening the box.

“I’m sorry if I interrupted,” I tell her, but she ignores me or doesn’t hear or isn’t listening. She’s silent, focused on packing the bong, lips clamped, eyebrows lowered. She’s very pretty despite her eyes being too far apart, high cheekbones, that swept back look, the slight upturn of her full lip, her small pointy nose. Satisfied she fires the bong up and takes a big, big hit, holding it in until smoke explodes out of her mouth and nose in a fit of hacking coughs. Red eyed and red faced, tears streaming, she goes back for more. I thought I was the one would needed calming. When she decides she’s had enough, the bowl cashed, she knocks out the ash, packs it again, passes it to me then leaves to get coffee, the sounds and smells of it percolating wafting in from the kitchen.

It’s quite heavy, the bong, and really nice blue-green blown glass, probably cost a hundred bucks or more. As I light up, Rad shouts, “Want some water?” from the kitchen, and I get a “Yes please” out mid-toke, a stream of smoke escaping uninhaled. She comes in with two glasses and lays them on the table, then goes over and opens a door on the entertainment unit. I’m not really paying attention to her, focusing on getting lit up, but when I catch a record in my peripheral I’m intrigued. Laying the bong back down, I crane my neck—wince in pain—and confirm that she is, in fact, putting on a record, on a turntable, and I recognize that cover, *Who’s Next*. She drops the needle and disappears into the kitchen just as ‘Baba O’Riley’ begins. She’s back with coffees, milk and sugar before the piano kicks in, and hitting the bong again by the time Roger finishes the first verse.

Passing me the bong she tells me, “I love vinyl. Drago likes to use computer, iTunes, but for me, music sound right from a record.” Her ‘r’s rolling.

I nod but I'm not really convinced. I always found CD's have the best sound, mp3 is fine too, sometimes shit but usually not, I don't know, maybe I'm too young to appreciate clicks and hisses—she certainly is, but maybe an Eastern European childhood sets you back a decade or two technology-wise.

I smoke another bowl and then another and another. Rad just keeps packing them, passing them, keeps smoking them herself, but she says nothing, neither of us do—I'm too stoned to even move—we just sit on either end of the couch drinking our coffees and zoning out to the music. Sometime during 'Love Ain't for Keeping' the ferret starts working his way up my pant leg again, gets under the cuff, over the sock, his little sniffer tickling my leg hairs, startling me, snapping me to attention, to shaking out my leg. That brings some life back to the room and we laugh about the silence, about spacing out, being in our own worlds, then Rad asks "Have you talk to your girlfriend? Did you give her present?" And suddenly I'm not so stoned.

"No I haven't called her, or emailed her, or texted her, or tried to talk to her at all actually."

"You do not want to talk with her? Do you like to have closure?"

Closure, hmmm? Hadn't really thought of that. "Fuck it, what's the point?" I shrug and pick up the bong, light what's left in the bowl, but it tastes ashy. What would be the point? Maybe get my laundry back. I would like my clothes, that'd be nice, but worth it? "She changed her Facebook status to *Single* so that's pretty much that, what's left to talk about?"

"For me, I would like to have a one last 'fuck you' before is over. This is what I do, but maybe is not for you."

She keeps smoking and the conversation picks up a little, but only a little. She curses Drago some more, drinking too much, hanging with his friends more than her, out at the bar watching hockey—the playoffs are murder on relationships. I don't have much to add, I quietly try to enjoy the music, the buzz, try not to think about cops busting the door down, about what I had to do to get my keys, about looking for a job, or about Sheila. I think about all of it, all of them, all the time, but I try not to.

After another bong hit—her eighth, ninth—Rad looks over her painting for a long time, transfixed, staring off into the corner while I stare at her legs, so slender, so smooth, so long. I want to reach over and touch them, rub them, rub my face against them. Rad turns back to me and notices me noticing her. She smiles, reticent but not unwelcoming, lips apart showing a few teeth, then sort of tucks her chin under her shoulder, bats her eyelashes, looks herself up and down. And then the side ends, the song actually is over, and a very stark uncomfortable silence descends. We stare at each other and I feel flush, faint. I'm glad I'm sitting down but I also kind of want to get the hell out of here. Rad pops up, propping herself with her wrists, and goes over to the turntable to flip on side B, then starts swaying slowly as the piano comes in, eyes closed, hands running over her body.

Is it getting hot in here?

Rad saunters over to and closes the curtain before turning and tuning in on me, staring wild-eyed, lusty, lecherous and hungry. What's happening here? Where did this shit come from? I check myself, look myself over; I'm still the same, still as dorky as ever, what's gotten into her? She stands leaning against the window frame, hand on hip, hip jutting out, breasts pointed outward, pointed at me, thrust towards me. Biting her

lower lip she unbuttons her shirt, her smock, and lets it fall open, revealing a very tight stomach, taught, nearly flat, with a tiny little dimple of a bellybutton, and this space between her thighs that runs all the way up to these lacy pink panties. She does, however, stop short of the nipples. I can feel my mouth hanging open—I might be drooling—but I can't do anything about, I can't even move, I can't believe this is actually happening. She smiles, salacious, lascivious, and peels her shirt off her left shoulder, slowly revealing her left breast, then the right, her nipples nearly invisible, almost indiscernibly darker than the rest of her, though they are.

“Make love to me, Corey,” Rad demands, sliding off her panties.

“What?!” Jesus! “Where did this come from?” Is she serious? ‘Make love to me.’ That’s a lot of pressure.

“You are nice. Drago is being asshole. I want a man to be nice to me.” She locks the door then comes over and sits next to me on the couch. My stomach’s all over the place, nerves, anxiety, excitement, I’m afraid I might throw up. He’s being an asshole, okay, but so you sleep with me? That’s your solution?

“Yeah, okay, but, I mean, I can be nice but we can’t.” I move my hands back and forth between us. “Drago would fucking kill me.”

“No, no, he will not know, it will be secret.” She walks her fingers up my thigh, suggestively raises her eyebrows, winking, and I feel a rush of blood, stiffening. Am I insane? It’s exciting, no doubt, my heart’s racing, but whether it’s from her touch or the thought of Drago’s, I’m not sure. I can’t shake the feeling he’s going to walk in and find us, that maybe she wants that—she couldn’t want me, could she? Her hand reaches my

crotch and she gives it a squeeze, gentle but firm. “Please, Corey, take off clothes. You want me naked all by myself?”

Oh Jesus, I have to get naked in front of her. This is moving really quickly. What will she think of my cock? Sure she’s touching it, but what about when she sees it? Is it smaller than Drago’s? Is his macho posturing just macho posturing? Goddamn, you forget about this shit when you’re in a relationship, getting naked in front of a stranger is not an everyday thing, you take for granted that the other knows your body, won’t laugh at your body, won’t be turned off by your body, accepts it in all its misery, its soft spots and rough edges. Plus, I only just finally got some underwear on. She’s seems so comfortable too, like being naked in front me, a guy she met just the other day, planning to let me stick my penis in her, is no big deal, so comfortable it’s kind of unnerving, unattractive, I don’t like it. She’s definitely been with more than two people before, for sure that’s a for sure.

She’s so thin, even thinner with her clothes off, it seems, all ribs and hips, pelvis, my eyes going there, drawn to jagged edges before tits and racing stripe. I slide my pants down, outline of hard cock on my underwear—I hope she doesn’t think it’s too small. I smile weakly and yank the underwear down in one swift movement, popping back up to find her inches away. She takes my cock in her hand, stroking, and kisses me, then straddling me, directs it, rubs the head against her, and I feel myself slide into her.

Congratulations, universe, you win! Now I’m going to have to leave Montreal.

Why am I doing this, what is my problem? Do I want to die? Or at best, be beaten to a pulp? Just watched Drago tear the shit out of a car for a second time, can only imagine what he’ll do to me when he finds out...if he finds out. Oh God, this feels good

though, terrific really, a little strange, but fucking fantastic. As much as I don't want Sheila back, this is still weird, way stranger than dancing with a new girl, but I guess I had to get over this hump eventually, I'm not turning celibate.

“Shouldn't I be wearing a condom?”

“You have condom?”

“No, not here, upstairs.”

“You want to stop our sex?” she asks, lips pouty, puffed out. “I am on pill.” She winks again before attacking, biting my lower lip hard and pressing her pelvis into mine. I guess I'll take my chances.

And then I was having unprotected sex with my psycho neighbour's girlfriend.

I'm doing my best, working away with her hair in my face, trying to thrust upward, nibbling on nipples and squeezing her ass. Rad's silent, not a sound, not anything, none of the screams and cries I heard her making with Drago. Of course, he was probably really giving it to her, or maybe not, maybe he tells her to do that, maybe he begs. Or maybe she doesn't want the neighbours to hear. More likely I'm shit as a lover, how do you know when you've only had the same partner for so long? When you know one body so well? I run my hands up her back, feel every rib, her spiky spine, jagged shoulder blades, pokey pelvis bouncing off my belly. Can't focus at all, can't stay in the moment, can hardly stay hard, thinking about Drago killing me. I look to the door, watch the knob, wait for it to turn. It doesn't. Rad gets up on her knees and climbs off me—is this over?

One knee resting on the couch, the other foot on the floor she wiggles her ass at me, so I arrange myself behind her, leg up on the couch, and I enter her. Since I can't

really bend my neck at all, I can't really see what I'm doing, can't really see past her waist. She hunches over, arching her back, a pointy line of vertebrae like a stegosaur, anything but sexy, so I push down on the small of her back, make her arch the other way, ass up, hands stretched out in front of her, clutching the far arm of the couch. Rad shakes some hair from her face, blows it away, then reaches a hand back to my stomach—my belly—and presses on it, adjusting the rhythm, slowing it, me, and then she moans, quiet and yielding. I hear my breathing, syncopated, wheezy, and feel my heart racing, sweat on my chest and forehead, running down my face.

It's fucking hot in here.

We settle into a nice, gentle rhythm, I'm trying to hang on as long as I can, trying not to turn my neck in a way that will hurt, trying to stay in the moment, not think about being yanked off of her from behind by an angry Drago. Rad watches me over her shoulder for a time, then she grabs hold of my neck, pulling me close—hurting me, too—kissing me and looking at me intently, intensely. Then she says, breathy and rhythmic, “Stop. Stop. Stop.” When I do, she leans forward, slips away, then wriggles around beneath me, turning over quickly, deftly, onto her back. Wrapping her legs around me, she tells me to, “Look into my eyes.”

So I do and it's weird, awkward and unsexy—not just because of her wonky eyes either—like making eye contact with a stripper, it's disarming, unsettling, putting me way too into the moment, making this all even realer than it was, more intimate—too intimate. I can't believe I'm doing this. I can't believe she's letting me. I can't stop imagining what Drago will do when he walks in. Looking into her eyes, I see his, angry and ferocious and bloodthirsty. I close mine and she clutches my cheeks with her hands,

telling me to open them, to look at her, to let her watch me. All this pressure to perform is making my penis soft, and she can tell.

“What is wrong, you are okay?”

Without answering, I bury my head into her shoulder and give it my all, ignoring the throb in my neck, pumping my hips for all I’m worth, trying to show her I am okay, that nothing’s wrong with me or my junk. It springs back to life and I’m done in about twenty seconds. Panting and sweaty, heart pounding, I lie on top of her afraid to get up, afraid to have to look at her, afraid of the look on her face, in her eyes, in the cold, sober light. But I can’t lie here forever, so after about ten seconds I push myself up and off of her, and sit up at the end of the couch, one hand in my lap, one rubbing my neck, ‘Goin’ Mobile’ filling the silence.

I’ve got to get out of here.

“When’s Drago finish work? When does he usually get home? Is it soon?” I don’t know why but I get the sense she’s punishing him, she’s going to want Drago to know about this, she’s going to tell him. I don’t know why—or how—but I know this. I can’t be here when he gets home, this may be the only place less safe than mine.

“Yes, obviously when Drago come home, you should not be here.”

“I think I should just go now.” I can’t even look at her. What was I thinking? I dress as fast as I can, like my life depends on it—which it might—embarrassed by her eyes on my naked skin, by my nakedness. I don’t do well with nudity. I like it, sure, but not too close, not with the lights on, not looking me in the face, and certainly not my own. Dressed, I stand by the door and try to listen to the hallway, try to assure myself the coast is clear, no neighbours spotting an exit—did anyone see the entrance?

I look back in as I'm closing the door and see her lying on the couch, hands on her naked stomach, glistening and glowing, satisfied—whether from the sex or from completing her plan, I don't care—she's looks incredible. I take a mental picture before shutting the door behind me and racing upstairs to pack, knowing all too well how it feels to be the bad man.

12

Packing like a madman, like a fugitive, like a man with one chance to escape certain death, it hits me that Rad was right, I do want closure, a final ‘fuck you’ could be awesome. And I want my fucking clothes back. I log on to Facebook, write a message on Sheila’s wall then send her a text, each referencing the other and letting her know I’m coming by to get my clothes, giving only a vague ETA of ‘sometime this evening.’ I’d call but then I’d have to talk to her and she might convince me not to go or try to weasel out of seeing me, try to send me my clothes. It’s better this way, surer if still unsure.

I don’t pack much, because, well, what would I take? The bed’s a piece of shit, just an old mattress and box spring, and I couldn’t carry it anyway, the desk’s an Ikea, so no loss there, the TV is old, crappy, Chinese, plus I won it as a door prize at a stag and doe, the VCR is a VCR, and that’s all there is really. Oh, and dishes, and cutlery, and pots and pans—mom kitted me out when I moved here—but fuck, I can’t take that stuff, where would I put it? All I have’s a backpack. In it I put my laptop, the weed, papers, lighter, deodorant, toothbrush, razor, sandals and the underwear. That’s all I really need, I’ll get my clothing and my PlayStation from Sheila’s and I’m good to go.

As I’m about to leave I decide to take a shower, I don’t know when I’ll get another chance and I’ve made that mistake before. Also I should try to scrub the smell of sex off in case Drago does get home—for all that would help his place probably reeks of it—though it might be a nice ‘fuck you’ if Sheila picked up the scent. Either way I’m in now, smelling of soap. When I finish I have to put my dirty clothes back on, underwear’s fairly fresh but the pants are filthy. I do have one clean shirt still, a dress shirt, very

dressy, frilly, the kind you should wear with a tux, but fuck it, it's clean at least, I ain't going to no fashion show.

As I'm coming out of the house, out of the building, there's a guy sitting on the stoop, not doing anything that I can see, just sitting on the stoop, but he hops up when I open the door all guilty-like, submissive and apologetic. "I'm sorry, I was just resting...I didn't mean to be...I was coming from..."

"Well get the fuck out of here!" I roar and he hops to, scurrying away like the ferret, bouncy, jaunty, compliant but still curious. He's wearing a t-shirt that reads 'The future is not what it used to be.' You're fucking telling me.

Walking down to Sheila's, slowly—I'm in no rush it's nowhere near evening yet—under the autoroute into Little Burgundy and through to St-Henri, I can't help but think about leaving, about not living in Montreal any more, really thinking about it, like it's a reality, and it's strange. I've gotten used to the signs being in French, can even read some—though I don't know how to pronounce the words I see—gotten used to crumbling infrastructure, dangerous drivers, reckless pedestrians, no right on reds, the Metro, the autoroute, *depanneurs*, to *blonde ou rousse*, to steamees, poutine and Pepsi. It's almost like home. It's quite strange to think seriously about leaving, to think about not being back in a long time, not being here all the time, not waking up here, seeing it, smelling it, hearing it everyday, living Montreal everyday—even when I don't leave the house. The city looks different when you look at it this way, when you're trying to make a memory, consciously trying to remember, to commit to memory sights and sounds and smells that have passed through your senses nearly unnoticed for years. The houses right on the street, living rooms three feet from the sidewalk, the long, overgrown alleys and

back porches, clotheslines, green boxes, feral cats, overpriced gas, sales on beer, people smoking and dressing like it's the 1970s, beards, fur-lined parkas, Expos hats and Nordiques jerseys, extensive bike paths and farmer's markets, urban renewal and gentrification. Sure I could find these things somewhere else, but somehow they'll never be the same, there's a magic to this city that can't—or seemingly can't—be replicated, something I'm not going to find somewhere else. The city won't be the same either, not once I'm gone, not once I'm not living it everyday, it'll just be a dot on the map again, an image on the TV, on the internet, in a movie, somewhere else, always somewhere else. I'm going miss this city, no doubt, but I ain't arguing with the universe—won't stay where I'm not welcome, or stick around to have my teeth punched in—just realizing what I'll be missing, what I'm leaving, what I've taken for granted. And that's not even figuring for all the things I haven't even thought of that I'll surely miss, the type of thing that sneaks up on you in the middle of the night, and suddenly you wish you were at _____ or had a _____ or could see the _____, but you can't, 'cause you don't live there anymore. It's always stupid things too, a park or a sandwich or a local jam band, something you shouldn't miss, something that shouldn't be anything, but when you think of it, you feel at home, and when you have it, you are home, and with distance comes longing, absence, fond heart and all. And then these things mean more than they ever could've when you were still here, you find yourself having a smoked meat or Wilensky's special or a Forum toastee air mailed across the country just to try to get some of what you've lost, a literal taste of what you once had.

Man, I hope I'm ready for this.

I stop at a dep on the way and grab some liquid courage, a giant bottle of *Bleue*—I want this final ‘fuck you’ to be good—and take it down to the canal, find a bench, roll a joint, drink, smoke and wait for dark, building up my nerve. Sheila’s is only like ten minutes walk down the canal, along the bike path, but it needs to be dark I feel like, needs to be night, or at least dusk. Dusk’ll do. I watch the canal and think about what it used to be, when it was built, when it was a transport superhighway, when all along it there were factories filled with working men instead of yuppies with fashionable furniture, men who walked to work from the neighbourhoods nearby, from St-Henri, Pointe St-Charles, Little Burgundy, Griffintown, in the heat, in the cold, in the snow, in the rain, for ten, twelve hour days, men who made this country what it is, the backs on which the mansions of Westmount were built. These were men, real men, men who wouldn’t need liquid courage, men who put their women in their place, men in a world that still had a defined place for them and their women. I don’t really feel like I could have made it then, like I could have been one of those men, or worked those jobs. And so what if my woman had her place, she’d be my wife, Sheila a wife, probably have kids too, mouths to feed, backs to clothe. Suppose I’m not so nostalgic, but life was well-defined at least, boundaries were in place, roles were born into not found.

I’m not sure what’s worse: no choices or too many.

It must’ve stunk too, back then, all along the canal it would’ve been smoky, coal dust, trailing pools of God knows what running off into the water, down into the river, out to the gulf, then the ocean. And the noise, it would’ve been loud, industrial loud, cutting, welding, forging, hammering, riveting—always riveting in those days. Nowadays it’s bikes and rollerblades, longboards and joggers, picnics and romantic walks, plus

some hobos and punks like me getting drunk—probably been men getting drunk next to this canal since it was still being dredged—but mostly it’s serene, peaceful, almost natural in a really man-made way. And it’s where I’m spending one of my last moments thinking of the corner up ahead, thinking about what to say, thinking about what might be said, thinking and drinking.

And then it was dark.

Sheila’s building seems bigger today, more hulking, imposing, more like a mountain to climb than a factory-cum-condo. I can’t believe it’s only been three days since I was last here, it feels more like a week, feels like so much has happened since I last saw her, since she threw me out. And I’ve been here so many times before, practically lived here, yet at the moment I can’t bring myself to cross the street, let alone walk up to the place, open the door, buzz her buzzer, get in the elevator, see her face. That beer didn’t give me courage, it just made me nervous—or maybe that’s the joint. I was hoping it might get me riled up, give me the attitude I want for this, the righteous indignation and anger and general aura of moral superiority. Instead I’m bloated and I have to pee, not the best disposition heading into battle. Fuck, I hope this isn’t a battle, I’m not really that angry, I don’t really want to yell, don’t really know if I need a last ‘fuck you’—already got some sweet revenge on Barry—I just want my clothes back. It’d almost be better if she just left them outside her apartment, if I didn’t have to see her at all. I take a few steps towards the building, cross the street. Fuck, why is this so difficult?

The lobby looks chic, brightly lit, striking me as flashy the way it did the first time I came here, when I was super impressed that Sheila lived in such swanky digs and

had invited me over. Also it smells, not in bad way in the usual way, sterile, disinfected, like chemical orange and bleach and home. I miss this place. I get in the elevator and take a deep breath, push the button for the fourth floor and the doors close, shutting me in. When I step out and into the hall, I round the corner and head towards Sheila's door, towards the spot where it all came undone, where she left me naked and unhinged.

Okay Corey, it's time. Don't get scared now. I knock.

Sheila opens the door almost right away, wearing black yoga pants, a pale green tank top, plastic lightning bolt earrings, her hair up in a ponytail, and this green on her eyelids that really pops—why is she wearing makeup? She looks great. Looks a little plump maybe after being with Rad this afternoon, and dancing with that Jacqueline, but mostly she just looks good, curvy, healthy, squeezable, and, well, hot—has she always looked so good? I try not to let on, not show any effects, but worry my face might've lit up when I first saw her. It sure felt like it, my stomach certainly tumbled—what's that about? Surprisingly I find myself fighting the urge to hug her. I don't think I want to but I feel like I do, like my mind and body are arguing—maybe that's the beer. I keep staring at her hoping she'll say something, hoping she'll make the first move, like she's done all throughout our relationship, but she just stands holding the door knob looking bored, cheeks slack, mouth open, eyes dull and flat.

“Hey,” I finally say.

“Hey yourself,” she says and crosses her arms, but sort of loosely, uncommitted. I can see my clothes, or at least my hiking bag, waiting just inside the door. Maybe this won't be too long.

“You’ve been alright, I guess. You look well.” I scan the room from the doorway. Nothing’s changed but everything looks different, maybe she dusted or something, passed the vacuum, I don’t know, can’t put my finger on it.

“How’ve you been? You okay?” Her eyes soften, opening wider and relaxing, not staring, just looking, maybe looking over, maybe trying to see what she saw in me. I can see what I saw in her, I can see her. That’s the difference I think. Women look for something in a man, something elusive, something magical, like a buried treasure or a long-lost sibling. Men just look at women, stare even, ogle, take in every angle and either like it or don’t, there’s only surface, nothing underneath, nothing else we want. Maybe that’s a problem, maybe both are, maybe it’s just me.

“I’ve been better,” I tell her with a shrug, and she looks pained, hurt, like she doesn’t actually enjoy making me suffer, or maybe it’s just hard to have to see it. “But I’m surviving, I’ll be alright.” Don’t want to make her victory too great.

Sheila opens the door wide and steps back, motioning with her head for me to come in. As I pass her I get in close enough to smell her, to breathe her in, herbal shampoo, strawberries and vanilla—Sheila loves her bath products.

“You smell like a brewery,” she spits—guess I was a little too close.

“Oh, yeah. I had a beer,” I confess. “So what?” I lean in as I say this, try to breathe the words out on her.

“So nothing.” She rolls her eyes, her beautiful eyes. “Whatever, I don’t care what you do anymore, it’s not my problem. *You’re* not my problem.” Ouch.

“Yeah, well, fuck you too.” I nod quickly, two, three times, raise my eyebrows and puff out my cheeks. Sheila pulls a face to counter, sulky and lopsided, eyes and mouth out of line, unimpressed, I guess.

“Look, I’m not trying to be bitchy, Corey, okay? I’m sorry about that. You need your stuff, I got it, and I sure don’t want it. Just take it and go.”

“So that’s that then? Take it and go, end of story.”

“Seems like, eh? Let’s face it, we’re not going to keep being friends.” Suddenly her face changes, screws up, like she realizes she might have just stuck her foot in mouth. “I mean unless you wanted that. You don’t want that, do you?”

I shake my head no. I’d say something but I’m dumbstruck. This ‘fuck you’ isn’t working out at all. I take my school bag off my shoulder to scoop my backpack up. It’s heavy and I lose my balance a bit getting it on, stumble, wobble, but steady myself, and hold on. Working me towards the door, directing me, arms out blocking off the rest of the loft, Sheila suggests, “This probably isn’t it, you know, we’ll probably run into each other around town.”

“Doubt that.” Her face opens up in an ‘oh really’ surprise look. “I got to go, I can’t stay here, it’s no longer safe. I need to be out of this city.” She looks confused, creased forehead and upturned lip. “Cops are after rioters and looters, using YouTube and Facebook to ID them,” I elaborate, “and, well, I’m in both camps, I’m a rioter and looter. And a vandal, and a fugitive, an asshole probably some other shit too. Point is I’m in trouble.”

“So you were one of them, eh? I should’ve guessed you go out and join the hysteria. Seize the moment, take advantage of the situation.”

“Me? The cops took advantage if anyone did, they were acting without impunity.”

“Without impunity, or with impunity?” She tilts her head, arms still crossed, and gives me a pouty-lipped look, an all-too-familiar look, the look that says ‘I’m right, you’re wrong.’ Annoying in typical Sheila way

I shake my head. “They were doing whatever the fuck they wanted, okay? And now they’re going to continue by making arrests after the fact. So I’m out of here, I’m leaving, skipping town. That’s why I need my goddamn laundry!”

“You know, Cor, you’re probably just overreacting again, they probably won’t find you.”

“Fuck it, what do I have to stay for? Huh? I’ve got nothing going in my life, remember?” She lowers her eyes, her whole head, slightly wounded or guilty or ashamed, or maybe happy and hiding a smile, who knows? “So a fresh start will...”

“Look Corey, I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to make you leave town. I wasn’t suggesting that you had to get *so* far away from me...”

“You conceited little bitch, you actually think this is all about you, eh? Well, Sheila, I’ve got my own shit, you know, I’ve got a life, I’ve got things going on...”

“What things?” She solidifies her crossed arms, tightening them and holding them close.

“Fucking things, man, you know, like getting a new job maybe, and like, getting back to school maybe or like...”

“I told you to do those things! I always wanted you to do something like that. You think you just came up with these ideas on your own? You get away from me for a few days and you suddenly forget everything I ever said? All of my suggestions?”

“No. Look, I don’t know, okay? Sheila, I don’t want to fight, I didn’t come to fight, I don’t need to fight to prove I’m right, and I don’t need to be forgiven.”

“Forgiven for what?” She’s back at top volume now, just like the other night, only this time it’s driven by exasperation not infuriation.

“Exactly! I should be pissed at you, if anyone is, I should be forgiving you! But I’m not, pissed I mean, I don’t care. I’m over you, Sheila. I think I have been for a while, just took you dumping me to make me see it, you know, to make me understand that I don’t want this, you, us. Like, the past couple days I’ve hardly missed you at all.”

“Wonderful. Thanks for sharing.”

“No, listen, you’re obviously over me, you’ve obviously been over me for a while, you dumped me, you ended it with me, you cheated on me with Barry...”

“Fuck you, Corey, okay? Your clothes are packed, take them and go.”

“You know I saw you last night, with him.”

The colour drains from her face, her eyes go wide, pupil’s dilating. “Saw me where?” She plants her hands on her hips, defiant, tucks her chin to her chest and peers at me over her cheekbones. “With who?”

“In the fucking restaurant, with Barry, who else? I was right outside. I was in the crowd climbing on the bus.”

“I wasn’t with Barry last night.” Her shoulders unfurl as she says this, her whole body loosening, relaxing, tension seeping out. “I’m afraid you’re mistaken.”

Bullshit. Or is it? Something about her face, so stoic, set in stone, I don’t know, it makes me wonder. But that was Barry? Yeah, had to be. I didn’t just push over some random guy, did I? No, had to be Barry, Barry and a different girl? I guess that’s

possible, anything's possible. Suddenly there's a crash from the bathroom, like something fell or got knocked over, something landed hard. Who's in the bathroom? Fucking Barry!

"That's him, isn't it? He's fucking here and you're still denying it!"

"Barry's not here, Corey."

"Then what the hell was that? Bacchus is on the couch." I point at the fat cat lazing. "You got a ghost?" Sheila folds her arms and scrunches her nose. I didn't think so. "So it's somebody, eh? Uh huh, and I bet I know who."

"No you don't, I mean, nobody's here."

"Nobody's here? Nobody's here? So you won't mind if I use the bathroom then, if it's not occupied?" I watch but her face never changes, she never lets anything on. She should probably play poker—could get her on TV at least.

As I reach for the knob, she says, "Corey wait, don't. Look nothing is happening, nothing was happening, but don't. Please."

"I won't get fooled again, Sheila. It's bad enough you've been running around behind my back for however long it's been, but it's over now, we're over, so own up. It's okay, the cheating, what's done is done, it's this lying that's pissing me off, and right to my face!"

Before Sheila can respond, as she's opening her mouth, the bathroom door creaks open a touch and both our heads spin. The first thing I see is a foot, a chequered foot, white and pink, grey corduroys, a brown sweater, a giant schnauz...Holy shit, it's Roland.

My head starts spinning, stomach is doing cartwheels, a rush of adrenaline and anger and disbelief. I feel disconnected, like I'm floating, like I'm light or the air has

gone out of me or, or like I'm fucking shocked—it feels like my eyes are jumping out of my head. Roland? I like Roland. Roland's always nice. Roland's a good guy. Roland's been fucking my girlfriend behind my back. I look at Sheila and she looks as surprised as me, giving him her angry eyes, sharp and fierce. His reveal seems to have caught her off guard too, wasn't in the plan.

Roland smiles, tight-lipped, sheepish, and bows his head slightly, eyes darting back and forth between us, before saying, "I'm sorry you had to find out this way, Corey. I didn't, we didn't mean to hurt you. It was never our intention to start this up, it just started, and once it did we..."

I stop listening. I just want him to shut up, I don't fucking care why or how this happened, I almost don't even fucking care that it did happen—at least I had myself believing that of Barry—but Roland? That's the shot to the balls of it all.

"How long has this...have you two..." I just keeping pointing at them, one then the other, one then the other, wagging my finger like an idiot and stuttering. "I c-can't...I never even suspected...Fuck!"

I'm almost too angry to speak, or it is anger? What is this emotion, shock? Does shock make your knees weak? Does shock knock the wind out of you? Does shock make you unable to move even when you'd like to punch something, or somebody? No wonder Roland was acting so weird the past few nights, asking me if Sheila was at *Le Rocket Rouge*, probably worried she'd see him with that bruise, or he knew where she actually was, was supposed to be. Then he bought that beer, the least he could do. Motherfucker! And last night, with the texts, the non-stop rubbernecking and double-taking, he was

probably with her, probably warning her to stay away in those texts. Holy shit you're blind, Corey.

"You two were together last night, weren't you? When I ran into you," I direct an accusatory finger at Roland "you were looking for her," Sheila gets one too, "weren't you? Plotting, scheming, trying to stay the fuck away from me!"

The pair look at each other, at the floor, the ceiling, the cat, anywhere but me, neither will meet my eyes. I fucking knew it! But so what, what does this do for me, where does this leave me? Now I know. So?

"Are you going to be okay?" Sheila asks with a look of concern, jaw straining, eyes soft and warm.

"He's probably, that is you might be, in a delicate state right now." Roland suggests. "I mean that shirt alone, Corey..."

"You think I'm dressed this way 'cause I want to be? You think I did this for show? My laundry's here, all my clothes, this" I tug at my collar, "is all I had at home." I wipe my eyes with my sleeve.

"Just stay out of it, Rollie," Sheila advises, shooting him a glare, admonishing and hard. Rollie? She's got pet names for him already. I feel warm, hot, sweaty, like I really might puke.

"Fair enough, if you think that's best." Roland raises his arms like she's sticking him up. "I just, well, I feel for Corey. It's a blow he wasn't expecting. Bad enough he's lost you, he has to discover you've already moved on and are doing well, better even."

"I think you ought to listen to her and shut the fuck up, man." I try to be stern but my voice cracks a little. Who am I kidding? He's not wrong, it is a blow, it is unexpected,

a total blindside. I'd punch him in the face if his eyes didn't look so sad—and if I were the type to go punching people in the face—still kind of want to though, but what would that prove, where would that get me?

“Maybe you should just take your stuff and go,” she tells me. Go where? I hadn't thought that far ahead. I can't go home, I kind of hoped I could talk her into letting me crash here—even on the floor—for old time's sake, to help me out, to be a friend, but Sheila's not my friend anymore, that's been made clear, so now what?

“Okay. But I want my PlayStation too. And my games and DVDs.”

“Sure. Of course.” Sheila heads over to the corner, to the TV, and takes a look around the back. “Maybe you should unhook it yourself, I'm not too sure what's what,” she says, coming back to the door, so I do. I go off leaving the two of them exchanging glances and whispers and secrets—more fucking secrets.

Fiddling with the wires, untangling and disconnecting, I hear snippets of their conversation, of Roland's baritone saying something like “...just imagine how hard this must be for him to see you and I...” and “...he's suffering, he's lost a friend, a lover and a language. No more 'I love you's'...” and “...fortunately love passes, it's the nature of it, he'll move on, the madness will cease, he'll recover...” Who is this fucking guy anyway?

Sheila is trying to shut him up, slapping at him to stop, but it's playful, coquettish, almost naughty—it's about touching him more than anything. I cram the PlayStation into my backpack with my laptop, and 'borrow' a canvas shopping bag for the games and DVDs and wires and controllers and shit.

“Do you need a ride somewhere, Corey?” Roland eventually shouts over at me. “I have my mother’s Acura, I could give you a lift home.”

“I’m not going home,” I shoot back like it could hurt him, wound him. Heading over to the door to my giant hiking pack, my laundry, I add, “I can’t go home, it’s not safe for me there.”

“Because of the police?” Sheila’s sceptical. “They won’t actually come to your house.”

“First, you don’t know that, you don’t know what the police might do, none of us do, trust me. Second, the pigs are the least of my worries; my insane downstairs neighbour is probably waiting to kill me if I go within three blocks of the building. At least I imagine, at least if his girlfriend told him we had sex.” Sheila’s face changes, looks taken aback, caught off guard—it almost makes coming here worthwhile. “I was thinking, well, I don’t know, maybe...maybe I’ll sleep at the bus station or the train station. I’m out of here first thing in the morning. I’m going home, *home* home.”

“Oh, don’t do that,” Roland says to me with a genuine look of concern. He turns to Sheila. “We can’t let him do that.”

“Well, he can’t stay here,” she shoots back. “It’s his bed, let him lie in it!”

Roland looks despondent, disappointed, undone. “Well, even still, I’d be happy to give you ride to the bus station, or train station, whichever you prefer. I think it’s the...”

“The least you can do?”

“Yeah.” He looks down and his feet, those pink and white Vans, a little embarrassed but only about being caught, not about stealing Sheila away, that he’s clearly fine with. “Beats walking, I’m sure,” he says, looking at me with earnestness, like

he truly feels for me, sympathizes, but is also guilty, needs absolution. “What do you say?”

I sigh, loud and forced and deliberate. “I can’t believe it’s come to this.”

Roland smiles, wry and creeping, “Is that a yes?”

“It’ll get me the hell out of here at least, far away from her.” I do my best to spit that last line at Sheila, really try to hit her with the words, but it comes out sounding petulant and sore and I wish I’d kept my mouth shut.

Lugging my oversized backpack-hamper back onto my shoulders, I sink under the weight of it, readjust the straps and settle it. I pick up the shopping bag full of DVDs and my school bag with my laptop, one in each hand and wait, weighted down, for Roland and Sheila to exchange a goodbye kiss before we can leave—an awkward one for all of us, I think. As they break their embrace I look away, avoid eye contact, do not take one last look at her, do not make a memory. I’ve seen enough, I’ve seen it all, I’ve seen what Sheila is and wants to be and I don’t need to see it again. As I turn and walk away, I hear her say, “Good bye, Corey, good luck.”

Yeah, fuck you too.

Driving through St-Henri along Notre-Dame, we’re quiet, Roland and I, silent even—what is there to say? It’s got to be as awkward for him as me, maybe more, guilt will do that, but then he’s going home to her and I’m not even going home, so there’s that too. I guess that makes him the winner, the victor, spoils and all—Sheila’s certainly spoiled. I watch Roland, stare at him until I sense he senses it, until I sense he’s uncomfortable.

Fuck it, Sheila can have him if she wants, and he her. They might be right for each other, whatever that means.

What a crazy few days: game 6, the break-up, that hangover, Jacqueline, quitting my job, game 7, Evelyn and Ziggy, rioting, my run in with the pigs, the shit with the keys, Radmila, I even got laid. You really never do know what's coming next, what might be waiting around the corner, what life has in store. There's got to be something out there with Corey Bonspiel's name on it.

Waiting at a red light, it finally hits me. I've got it, the 'fuck you' I've been searching for all evening, the idea I didn't know I was waiting for. I turn to Roland and ask, "You got a pen?"

"Check the glove box. If not, there's probably one in my satchel. Why?"

"I think I've got a good idea for a poem."

Roland looks over at me with toothless smile and lifeless eyes, as he accelerates through the intersection. He probably thinks I'm kidding, but I'm not kidding, I think I do, I think it will be. I mean how hard can it be, Sheila writes them all the time.

And then I stole her thunder.