

Traverse

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## ABSTRACT

Traverse

Melanie Bell

*Traverse* is a coming of age novel in the künstlerroman tradition, following the coming of age of an artist—in this case Anna Stern, a piano prodigy in rural Prince Edward Island. It is less about art than about the idealization of art and artistic talent, especially as these relate to the Classical-Romantic ideal of a muse; *Traverse* foregrounds the human tendency to perceive and engage in relationships through this essentializing lens. Musical aspirations are a family legacy for Anna, who moves from emulation to agency, from idealizing another's gifts to being idealized by another, never losing awareness of her own potential and her shortcomings in relation to it.

*Traverse* engages with temporality by shifting between time lines over the course of the chapters. The protagonist's mythologization of talent contrasts with the narrative's focus on the mundane, providing a sometimes disillusioning grounding to the novel's cast of dreamers. The real-life artistic process proves more capricious than Anna's ideals, subject to the influence of individual personality and the shifting priorities inherent in the process of growing up. Given Anna's imperfect and malleable nature, failure is portrayed as a sometimes necessary component of an ongoing process of personal and artistic maturation.

For my mother,  
Linda Worley-Bell,  
in gratitude for her stories  
& her music

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## Prologue

There is no staircase at The Green Staircase, and only the outside of the building is green, the inside a butter yellow. It's one of those cafes that's always half-lit, with herbs in pots in the windows, more dangling in dried bundles from the rafters, candles at each table, and big splashy abstract paintings on the wall. Half of the food comes from BC, and all is organic. The band members with their torn jeans and ragged haircuts fit right in; the girl in the front row, less so.

The guitarist sidles over to her: "Any plans for tonight?"

"I have a lot of work to do." She doesn't.

His face cracks into a sideways grin, eyes crinkling. "Surely you can be persuaded to take a break, go out and have some fun."

"Thanks anyway," says Anna.

"Alright. Well, if you change your mind, here's my number. I'd love to hang out while we're in town." He pulls a notepad from his pocket, scrawls it on a page, tears and hands it to her. Anna catches a few jealous stares from the burrito-munching groupies. Why doesn't he go over to them instead?

It isn't long before the place is empty. Anna tidies tables, washes coffee cups. When all is clean, she moves towards the keyboard.

Liss could've done all sorts of things with its sound effects, but for now she keeps the setting normal. No one is there to clap as she launches into a first attempt at the band's last number. Her fingers relish the slick feel of keys, the quick acrobatics of motion. She

riffs on the melody, improvises, adds a solo section. For some of the song she sings along, not powerfully but perfectly in key.

*Down underwater my Laurie stays*

*Down where anemone and fishes play*

*Life lies above but our dreams swim below*

*Down underwater where the sun won't go*

For an incalculable splinter of time she wishes the band were back. She wants to play with them. To play with *someone*.

Before leaving The Green Staircase, she dials a number.

She meets the guitarist at a Beach Avenue restaurant with heavy tablecloths. “I’m glad you changed your mind,” he says, and pours more wine into her glass. She smiles weakly.

“Thanks for coming up. Your music is great, and I’m glad you could work us into your tour.”

“Of course, I love the old Staircase. Used to go there all the time when I lived in Vancouver—that was before your time, I bet. It’s nice to have a rest along the crazy tour circuit, you know?”

“Yeah.” She really doesn’t know.

The guitarist runs a hand through his tousled hair, pushes up one plaid sleeve. “We’ve been on the road so much, through Edmonton and Calgary, playing at the Stampede which was tiring. And I couldn’t even sleep last night because I had this new song in my head that wouldn’t let me go. Just had to write it down.”



Anna picks at a crumbling pink crab cake. It tastes bland compared to the Staircase burritos, but of course she doesn't mention this.

“But there's something about performing, you know. The music consumes you. It's almost, well, it's almost erotic.”

*Yeah, it is, isn't it? It is.*

He leans closer to Anna, takes one end of her scarf in his hands, runs the silk between his palms. He's cute but she feels nothing.

“Excuse me for a moment.”

She heads towards the bathroom and once out of sight, she runs.

The beach is paved with crowds, mostly the young. Couples sit on logs strewn about the thin grey sand, absorbed in conversations she can't hear. A volleyball game weaves among them. Men hawk hot dogs from white-painted stands. She tries not to think of the beaches she grew up around on P.E.I., those placid red spaces with shallow tides and sand bars she could dig into for clams. She could catch hermit crabs, write her name in the sand with sticks, and pop the bubbles on seaweed without meeting a single soul. Here bikers whizz past her, laughing.

The sky is tinting cantaloupe and pink above haze blue mountains. Sea breath balloons relief into her lungs. Her grin is luminous. She tears away from the beach-goers, past bustle into green, runs in her fancy sandals until she reaches Stanley Park. The trees engulf her.

## Chapter 1: Box

The Sterns' living room was as clean as Caroline's outfit, and just as ornamental. She swept to the door—one pace, two pace, a slight rhythmic sway to guide her walk. Anna, watching from the carpet, moved her plastic animals back and forth and thought that her mother looked almost like a ship, at least from what she'd seen of ships on TV.

A cloud of black and purple burst into the room, exclaiming. “Carol, you've got a new painting! Is that a new painting?”

“Ginny, good to see you! Yeah, it's something I picked up from a girl I met on the boardwalk. She's great at doing scenery. Has these huge eyes and fine hair like our Anna.”

“It's a nice piece.”

Anna wasn't sure what all that meant, but she felt the warmth of attention soak through her, invisible behind the couch.

“Isn't it?” Caroline giggled. “Come in, come in, I shall have to get you some tea!”

Ginny had already stuffed her coat in the closet, shoes on the rack, and made her way into the living room, so there was no reason for Caroline to say that.

“You people from away! ‘I shall have to get you some tea.’ Can't you talk regular for once?”

Anna set down a plastic zebra, stopped pretending to play, and listened.

“I'm from here as much as you are. Hank's an islander, we bought the house ourselves and—”

“Once from away, always from away, dear.”

“And you know I’m not serious when I talk like that. It happens every time I start wishing I was in an opera instead of, you know, here.”

“What did I tell ya? You people from away always want to be back there. Here’s not good enough.”

“Look at the view! Trees in the yard. Beaches on all sides. Would I have moved here if I didn’t love it? But it would be nice if people ate better. Look at what everyone puts in the grocery carts. Chips and pop and hot dogs and chocolate bars and fries and big fat steaks. They look at alfalfa sprouts like they’re some organism from Mars, and—”

What was wrong with chips and chocolate bars? Anna wondered.

Ginny’s reply dissolved into steamy noise as they meandered into the kitchen. Anna was left alone with the view. She leaned against the streaky velvet couch and surveyed the room that looked like her mother. A Japanese fan with two goldfish passing each other, red embroidered curtains, paintings in frames with small flowers on them, and a little fake stained-glass window Anna had painted. The new painting showed a mother and child against a seascape, in blue sundresses and bonnets, the mother clutching the huddling child to her chest as the waves lashed.

She heard Ginny again. “Where *is* Anna?”

“In her room, I think.”

She blended the women’s kitchen words together, hummed over them.

Loud laughing, and suddenly a sound cut into the air. Her mom must have put on a tape. A rich hollow thrum of strings, then a voice sang out sweeping words in a

language she didn't know.

"Da-dum da-dum, da-dum da-dum . . ." Ginny's loud voice joined in over the music. More laughing. She didn't know the words either, and seemed to be pretending with made-up ones. Her voice sounded sour. Anna wished she'd stop ruining the music.

Another voice came in then, her mother's, higher than the singer's, warmed honey in a wordless ah. She felt it braiding, threads of its texture spanning the space around her as clearly as sight.

The door opened and thudded shut as Hank stomped in. "Carol! I got the wood all chopped."

The tape and her singing cut off at the same time. "Oh?"

"You'll have to help me put it in the basement." Hank tracked from the mudroom to the kitchen, trailing the smell of sawdust.

"Not if you don't take off your boots, I don't," Caroline let out a loud breath. Anna couldn't see her, but knew her face would be looking stormy.

"I've been chopping wood for hours. Maybe Anna can help too, d'you think she's big enough?"

"Hank, you're out of your mind!"

"Don't you think she can carry the little pieces?"

"The boots. Take. Off. The boots."

Ginny's voice: "She's not even four yet, and not even big for her age. Give the poor girl a break."

I want to carry wood, thought Anna. She loved the smell of it, and her dad was

right, she knew she could at least carry the little pieces. Probably some bigger ones too.

“Tell you what, now.” Hank stomped back into the mudroom while talking. “You make supper, and then we’ll put the wood in the basement.” Anna watched him toss his boots in a heap, then trudge back into the kitchen out of sight. “Miss Ginny, you don’t have to help, of course.”

“Thanks. I have a family to get back to.”

Anna wondered why she said that. Ginny wasn’t married and didn’t have any kids, not that she knew of. If she did, she would have brought them here and Anna would have watched them take and fight over her toys. Maybe she had cousins. Everyone had cousins here, that’s what her mom said.

She listened to her father thud up the stairs and behind his office door. The music came back on. Anna took her toy zebra and tapped out the rhythm on the floor, banging its hooves as the music got louder.

“Anna, you in the living room?” yelled her mom.

“Yeah,” she yelled back.

“My goodness, I didn’t even know you were in there!” Caroline and Ginny appeared in the door frame.

“How are you doing?” Ginny asked, looking down at her. Her hair was curled in yellow puffs on top of her head.

“I want to carry wood,” said Anna, the first thing that came to mind.

“You do?” Her mom chuckled. She and Ginny looked at each other with those stupid grown-up smiles. “It’s a lot of work, carrying wood. I’m not sure you’d really like

it.”

“I could do it.”

“Are you hungry right now?” asked Caroline. “Thirsty?”

Anna hadn’t thought about eating or drinking, but suddenly her mouth felt dry.

“Yeah.”

“Come on into the kitchen. We’ve got rhubarb muffins, and do you want some tea?”

“Carol, the tea’s got caffeine in it.”

“I used to have black tea as a kid.”

“Yeah, I want some. And I want two muffins.”

They went to the kitchen and Caroline poured tea while Ginny put two muffins on a plate and set it in front of Anna. Caroline took a muffin off and placed it back in the serving bowl. “Better start with one. See if you have room for it.”

The tape had ended. Anna took a gulp of her tea. She hadn’t had any before, and wasn’t prepared for the way it scraped her throat. She wondered why grown-ups drank this stuff. Hot chocolate was better if you wanted something that burnt you. At least it tasted good.

“What music should I put on next, Anna?”

She waited for her mouth to calm down to answer, and tried to remember what the different tapes were called.

“Play that Box one.”

“Box?”

“The one that’s got the flute on it. You said Box made up the songs.”

“What’s she talking about?”

“She means Bach,” said Caroline. Her long hands rummaged in the drawer and pulled out a new tape. Soon the kitchen was filled with a clear fluid sound that Anna knew and liked. She sat as straight as she could and took a smaller drink of tea. The burning in her throat made her feel older. She ate two muffins while her mom and Ginny talked. She was still sipping at the tea when Ginny left and Caroline started making supper. The Bach tape played a piano song that sounded almost like a fountain, only the notes were much too fast.

Hank came down the stairs as soon as the house air smelled like ham. “You gonna turn that music off for dinner?”

“It’s not even ready yet.”

“Well, better not be much longer. We’ve got to—”

“Bring in the wood. Yes, I know.”

“Ginny not staying for dinner?”

“Of course not.”

“Alright, well call me when it’s done.” Back up the stairs. Anna couldn’t hear much over his loud feet.

They ate dinner without any music, like they always did. Then Anna went out with her parents to the backyard where hunks of wood were spread all over the grass, under the maple tree, even beside the trash cage.

“Couldn’t you have put them in piles, Hank? And Anna, are you sure you want to

do this?”

“Yeah!”

“What’s the point of piles when they’re gonna get unpled and moved anyway?”

Hank went into the basement, where there was a window to the outside of the house, covered with a board. Anna watched as the board swung in and her father’s hands appeared, then set the board on the grass.

“You can carry over the little chunks,” said Caroline.

Anna scanned the yard and found the biggest log she could. She walked over to it. She put her hand on the rough bark and thought that if she wanted to, she could scrape her hand against it hard enough for it to bleed. She put her nose to it and smelled its heavy wild scent. She spread out her arms but they wouldn’t fit around it. She tried to grab the bark and tug, but it wouldn’t move, and only made her arms sore, so she found a little white piece of wood and carried it to the window easily. It was a game, her collecting the smallest scraps and bringing them safe to the window cave. She decided they were pirate treasure. The basement was full of shadows and cobwebs, mud for the floor and jars of things on shelves and a big-bellied stove and pallets to stack the wood on that sometimes had little animals crawling from under them. No one would look there unless they had to.

The small chunks were finished quickly and Anna went for a bigger one. She fit her arms around it and started to drag, but it was too heavy. Her grip slipped and she fell onto the lawn.

“Anna, are you OK?” Her mother was rushing over, staring down at her.



She collected her breath. “Yeah.”

“I think you’ve worked enough. Want to go inside now?”

Anna looked around. She was tired and the yard was more than half clean. There were little red lines in her palms, not blood but marks on her skin from dragging. She was glad to be done with the wood.

Inside the house, she looked for something to do. She started lining up her plastic animals but that was boring and felt too much like carrying the wood. The house felt like a cave now, big and empty without people, without sound. She couldn’t reach the tape recorder and she couldn’t read what the tapes said anyway.

She looked around the living room and saw the piano. It was old, her great-grandmother’s, with birds carved into the wood on the sides, and it was her mom’s thing. She kept it dusted, and once a month a man with a blue hat would come tune it. She’d play it at holidays with Anna on her lap and sing Christmas carols. Anna never sang with her because she couldn’t remember the words.

She’d never touched the keys herself.

Why hadn’t she?

She looked at the piano again. The keys were covered by wood with a knob that her mother or the hat man used to push back. Shadows cut across this case. The bench was much bigger than her chair, and she wasn’t sure if she could reach it on her own. She pictured the white keys and the jagged black ones.

She’d just had tea and helped stack wood. Maybe she could try.

What would her mom say? She’d find her, daring to make noise, and she’d stare

like a snake about to hiss.

Anna inched forward, stopped, then forward again. She tried to jump onto the bench. Tried until she was sitting on it. She couldn't reach the keys, so she got down, pushed in one side, another, jumped back on, and stood up. The piano lurched in front of her, bulky and forbidding. Her hands grabbed each other and she stood there.

She reached for the knob and pulled. The first flap on the wooden case came up and she held it. Underneath were the keys laid out like teeth, half hidden in darkness. She quickly pushed the casing back.

She pressed her finger on the key in the middle and listened to the molasses tone until the sound had all drained. Another. Two at a time. She put her whole hands down. She made quiet noises and huge clashing loud ones. She stopped when it sounded bad. She made her fingers climb around. She felt the power in her fingers to make clouds in the living room, and fairies. It wasn't like the tambourine or play drum in the toy chest, something you shook or banged on.

It was like on the tapes! Maybe she could play the Bach song. The piano sounded heavier than the flute but the keys made the same noises. Her fingers searched until they landed on the first note. She tried for the second until she found it. Second-first again. Second-first-third. That wasn't quite right. The first note was held for a lot longer, and the others sped up. She searched, played back what she'd figured out, adding a new note or two each time, holding them the way she remembered from the tape. She tried playing very fast, and laughed. It felt like racing, and took the breath from her chest. Back to finding notes. It wasn't hard. There were no extra notes to muddle the sound of the song.

She heard boots. “Anna, what are you doing at the piano?”

“Shhh.” Her mom was there too.

She pretended she hadn’t heard them. She kept untangling the notes from each other, then playing them in the right order until the song was done. It was like a smell. Even after they were gone, the notes hung there flavouring the air. She listened until there was no noise, even though she felt a thin shiver in her body. It was time to start again. This time she sped up and played the middle louder. She only hit one wrong note. It wasn’t that bad, and she stopped herself from making the music drag. She felt her hands as horses carrying themselves with measured stamps of hooves, then quieting to a stop.

“Anna!”

She’d forgotten her mother was there.

“How the hell did you figure out how to play that?” Her dad was yelling or almost-yelling. It hurt her ears.

“Honey, your language.”

“Look at her. She just played one of them symphonies, the whole damn thing!”

“Sonata. Bach’s Flute Sonata in E, I believe.” Caroline’s voice had gotten too quiet and there was a weird look on her face, a noisy look, but it didn’t seem mad. Maybe scared.

She looked down at her fingers on the keys and tried to taste the music back into the air.

“Anna, would you like to take piano lessons?”

Mrs. Hobbes' piano was bigger than Caroline's. It was triangle-shaped, with round corners and a lid that lifted up like the top of a sinister black box. Anna wondered if it had salamanders in it like the basement did.

Mrs. Hobbes lifted Anna onto the bench. Her arms felt and smelled like bread dough.

"Dear, you can't reach, the keys, can you? Here, I'll scoot you in." She pushed Anna on the bench closer to the piano. "You're so little! Hang on, I'll get you some pillows so you can reach better." She picked Anna up and put a sofa cushion under her and a stack of them under her dangling feet. Anna felt much more comfortable, cuddled between cushions, her arms even with the keys.

"So, Anna, your mother said you taught yourself to play a song. Can I hear it?"

Anna squinted as she tried to remember. She'd practised a few times every day until lessons started. Caroline had let her. Each time Anna was done she'd look up to see her mother watching with a smile.

Anna pressed a first finger down. The note sounded deeper than on her piano at home. Startled, she stopped. She sat there, her stomach trembling, and looked into the gap where the lid was held up.

"It's OK, dear, start again."

The music here was richer. Playing, she felt enclosed in the high dome of a church. She was slower in the quickest part, it felt too solemn to go very fast, and her fingers slipped a note.

“Anna, that was . . . remarkable.” Mrs. Hobbes blinked like an owl, eyes too big for her cake-round face.

“I messed up the fast part,” she blurted.

“Everyone messes up, honey. That’s what practice is for.”

“Do you mess up?”

“Of course I do. Just ask my husband!” Her laugh was musty. She patted Anna’s shoulder and Anna looked around at the shelves of china animals and dancers on the walls, the cabinet of dolls with smooth round faces and unwrinkled ruffled dresses and perfect coils of hair. “So, where should we start? Do you know how to read music?”

“You can read music?”

“Yes! That’s how you can learn to play something new without hearing it first. Goodness, what *have* you been taught about music?”

“I haven’t got taught anything.”

“Goodness! Let’s just scoop you off the piano bench, dear, I’m going to get you some books.”

“But I can’t read yet!” said Anna, suddenly worried as she was lifted into the air. Behind Mrs. Hobbes’ shoulder she saw the dolls’ open eyes.

“You’ll learn.”

Mrs. Hobbes lifted Anna to the floor. She pulled the cushion from the piano bench, raised the lid, rummaged inside and pulled out two things: a thin book with cartoon pictures on the front, and a notebook. She set them on the rack on the piano, and sat the cushion, then Anna, back on the piano bench.

Cartoons filled the pages of the thin book, kids and animals and pianos with big bug eyes. Between them was writing and a lot of lines with dots and squiggles dancing between them. Mrs. Hobbes taught Anna to draw some squiggles she called a treble clef and a bass clef. Anna had just started tracing the bass clef when she heard a rustle in the room. Something like a small sugar bag climbed on top of her feet. She screamed.

“Down, Gordon!”

It was a striped grey cat the size of a footstool. It climbed over Anna’s feet again, squishing the pillows.

“Don’t mind Gordon, he’s just curious.”

Gordon ground his head against her sock and purred loudly. He walked away, still purring. Anna wondered when he was going to stop. Maybe he'd go on purring forever.

“Do you have any pets at home?” asked Mrs. Hobbes.

Anna thought of Hungry the zebra. “No real ones. My mom's allergic.”

They went back to tracing the thing called a bass clef and learning about the lines called a staff. The circles on them were music notes, Mrs. Hobbes said, each one like a sound on the keyboard. Anna tried to make sense of that, how little round things that made no sound could be sounds. There was a piece of paper on the piano stand with what looked like hundreds of those little circles on the staff. If she knew how to read them, the page of scribbles could be turned into a real song! It was a singing paper, she just didn’t know how to make it work yet.

After drawing notes and learning their letter names, Mrs. Hobbes told her she’d done a good job and held out a sticker box. Anna picked a sticker of a smiling cat to put

on her new notebook. She wondered when they would get to playing music, and was surprised when Mrs. Hobbes put the theory book and the notebook in her hands and lifted her off the piano bench. “Tell your mom you can work on the theory pages I wrote in your notebook.” Gordon came to rub against Anna’s legs. Timidly, she stroked his puffy fur.

On the ride home, Anna glared at the cows out the window, flopped down inside their fences. She would do the exercises, but she was going to learn songs on her own too, not just draw notes all the time! The road rolled past potato fields that all the potatoes had been picked out of and hay fields filled with the giant marshmallows that were bales wrapped in white plastic. Then the dentist’s house, next to the building with the big tooth on the sign, but the house had birds all over the yard—chickens chasing each other, ducks and geese paddling in a big puddle her dad said was too small to be a pond, even a few sea gulls. Her dad said the dentist wished he was a bird farmer. Why wasn’t he, then?

Anna learned D, E, F and G that evening, the letters at the same time as the notes. She practised the Bach Sonata even though it was for flute and not really for piano. It was her song, for her piano. She thought of it as her piano now, with five days of playing it, and already it didn’t scare her anymore.

The next day she went to the piano even before breakfast. There were pieces of tape over all the keys. They had letters written on them: ABCDEFGABCDEFG on the white ones and nothing on the black ones.

“Anna, come have some pancakes. I made them to celebrate your piano lessons.”

Her dad had already left for work and left his coffee cup and dirty plate on the table.

Anna was glad to have pancakes. Caroline made them bigger than anyone, and always with something in them, this time was blueberries. They looked like giant spotted frisbees on her plate. Anna cut into one and said “I want a tape recorder.” She stuffed two bites in her mouth and waited for an answer. Two more bites. She watched the prism throw little rainbows on the walls.

“Alright, I’ll take you to buy one. I put the letters on the piano keys so you can learn which ones they are. Maybe you can look at them when you practice.”

Anna hardly heard her. “A tape recorder! I’m gonna get a tape recorder!”

“Don’t talk with food in your mouth. You’re just like your father.”

At the store, Caroline picked out the tape recorder and let Anna pick out some tapes.

“Which ones do you want? This one’s Bach. This is Beethoven.”

Anna wanted everything. She pointed to the tape with the most colourful picture on it. It was a man in red with hair sticking up on top of his head like a tree. “What’s that one?”

“That’s Elvis. He’s a rock singer who lived a long time ago.”

“What’s that one?”

“Oh, it’s country music. Like the stupid songs your dad listens to on the radio.”

“I want that one and that one and that one—”

Anna plugged in her new tape recorder and played with the buttons. Open-shut.



Open-shut. She put a tape in and watched the ribbon spinning inside. It started to play and she closed her eyes. A slow sea moved through her. She tried to tap the rhythm on the carpet.

She didn't want to do theory. She listened through all the tape, then the next one, then the next, staying on the carpet with her eyes closed until each time she had to change the side. Over and over, continually, like watching snow fall outside the window. But this wasn't something to jump into and play in. The movement was all inside. She wanted and she had this. And to feel it, she had to be still.

When the tapes were done, she went to the piano. She could play anything. She'd done the first song, The Bach So-Na-Ta, so she could do others. She tried to play the tape again in her mind. She listened and pressed her finger to the first key of the first song.

A part, a part, a part, a whole. One song, two, three. The songs came in her mind and moved through her back and arms until it only took her fingers to bring the sea. The third song had a lady singing in a funny-sounding language. Of course Anna couldn't play the words, but a lady's voice, clean and strong as the lady on the tape's, came in at all the right parts. Was this part of the piano's magic too, somehow? No, she knew that voice.

Anna stopped. Caroline stopped and they looked at each other. She looked hungry, almost, like the monsters in stories who ate you in the dark. She'd never been scared of her mother like this.

Anna went back to playing, her mother to singing. Her voice was something ocean-like, shining and rushing from all directions. None of her notes sounded sour. None at all.

Lunch, then theory pages, then a nap, then she was woken up by talking.

“Mark just got laid off,” her dad was saying. “He’s takin’ it real hard.”

Anna watched the light on the ceiling and thought about being laid off, which probably meant kicked out of bed. It didn’t sound fun.

“You’d better take care.”

“I do! You know inspection is awful these days. We’re supposed to expect all the crops to be blemish-free, but look at them puttin’ pesticides in the air. They ever think of what that does to a plant?”

“Not enough, I’m sure.” Caroline might have been petting Gordon, the way she talked.

“Sometimes I wonder about quitting.”

Anna wondered if she’d heard right. She bolted out of bed and towards the stairs.

“What on earth would you do?”

“Get a little farm in some out of the way place, live off the land—”

“Henry Alexander, we already live in some out of the way place. Farming is not financially viable, especially not ‘living off the land.’ That’s a Luddite fantasy—”

“Look, I know, goddammit! Otherwise I would’ve *gone* out and bought a farm by now—”

Anna stepped into the kitchen where her parents were yelling at each other.

“Oh, hi, Anna,” Caroline suddenly smiled. “Hank, you have to hear what she taught herself today.”

Anna felt shaken. Her parents were facing each other like knives in the knife rack, Caroline straight as her tied-back hair, Hank's shoulders stiff in the faded black t-shirt with a hole in the sleeve. She walked to the piano.

The music started the same way she'd heard it on the tape. Smooth like waves or the sky on cloudless nights. Anna's body loosened as the last of her shakiness lifted.

"Ah," said Hank. "For-A-Lease." He laughed.

"That's not funny," said Caroline.

"Furry Elise," he tried, and Anna laughed. "Furry furry furry!" He got behind her on the piano bench and tickled her.

Every afternoon, Caroline took a break from translating to help Anna do some theory pages while her dad was out. Anna liked working at the table. For the first time ever, she had Something Important To Do. Her mom bought new teas, ones she said didn't have caffeine in them, which was probably why they didn't taste horrible. Something Important To Drink. Anna liked the licorice best. It was the sweetest and left a pleasant heaviness in her throat, like the salty Dutch licorice bits her dad liked to bring home on good days. Caroline didn't like the licorice bits and Hank didn't like the licorice tea. Anna loved both.

She learned to tell the notes on the page and the keyboard. She learned scales and rhythms and how to count them. She learned how to put her fingers on the right notes and change them the easiest ways. She learned she liked Beethoven better than Bach most of the time and peppermint tea better than chamomile all the time. She learned not to drink

juice around the tape recorder when it got a purple stain and she had to scrub it off herself.

“You’re lucky it still works,” said Caroline.

Her lessons started with made-up songs from the cartoon book: EFG, EFG, EGFABAC. She didn't like those much. Then one day Mrs. Hobbes gave her a not-made-up song. Her mother knew the words to that one too. “Down in the vall-ey, the vall-ey so loooow...”

She was playing that one day when her father stomped in, stomped up the stairs (thud-thud-thudthud-thudthudthud), and then there was a pause, a whole rest. Thunk, thunk, crackacrack, fwip. Anna stopped playing. It sounded like a thunderstorm, but it wasn't one of the ones that you could count outside and know it was far away and couldn't hurt you. This one was in the house. She pulled her zippered sweater tight around her and shivered as the throb of noises pressed against her ribs.

Thwunk! A low E. Thud! A low G. She pressed her finger to a key and listened as the echo matched the sound. She couldn't stop. She heard and pressed and banged. Every note upstairs was answered by her angry hands. If she could make her own storm, the other wouldn't hurt her.

“Goddamn, cut out that damn piano!”

Anna threw herself against the keys, higher sounds for screams.

“I said stop that!”

C-E-A-C!

Thud thudthud thudthudthud. Down the stairs. Where was her mother? Where was

she? Her father was breathing heavy over her. She smelled rotten potatoes. His voice came soft and compressed now, like something crushed against gravel. “You stop that right now. You sound awful. I’d better not catch you banging on your mother’s good piano again.” His hand was on Anna’s side, pressing hard. Her shoulders started to tremble.

Thud thudthud thudthud creak thunk! He was out the door. Anna put her hands against her ribs. It was like locks had grown on them, she thought. Her hands were on the keys again without even thinking, clang, clunk.

The door creaked open. Anna stopped banging. Her breathing felt too fast, too tight.

“Anna, I’ve picked some moss if you want to help make Thanksgiving decorations.”

It was Caroline.

Anna couldn’t talk. Her hands went back to banging. The air smelled like wood dirt, roots, high C, low F, crash.

“Darling, is something wrong?”

She didn’t look at her mother’s face. Low F, high A, middle C, low E, three notes, four notes, crash.

“Tell me the story about the Nutcracker again.”

The Tchaikovsky tape was playing. It was on the mouse king’s battle song, the one Anna didn’t like. The kitchen had been decorated with wreaths, prickly doughnuts of

pine branches and glued-on pine cones that Caroline had twisted together and pinned in place with red ribbons. “One Christmas, Clara's uncle brought her brother a wooden doll . . .” The table and counter were decorated with flour so that Anna couldn't see the designs in the wood, the owl eyes that stared out and watched you while you ate.

Caroline took the pie out of the oven. Anna had helped her pick the apples from the tree in the yard and spread the butter and cinnamon sugar on top. The smell made Anna want to eat it Now.

“They stayed there in the Land of Candy and lived happily ever after,” Caroline finished. “Your pie crust should be almost cool by now.” She took a plate from the cupboard and reached into the glass casserole dish. She lifted out a flat expanse of dough glistening with cinnamon and tiny diamonds of sugar.

“Give me it,” said Anna.

“It's still a little hot. You don't want to burn your throat. Wait.”

“I want it!”

“I said Wait. I'll tell you another story.”

Anna ignored her and kept looking at the pie crust. “It looks like a map,” she said, “and I wanna eat it now.”

“What do you think it's a map of?”

“The Land of Candy. Can we go there?”

“Anna, darling, I don't think it's real.”

Anna looked at the map but it was gone. It had been turned into a flat mass of crust, the sugar only sugar. She thought of popped balloons.

“But maybe we can take you to listen to the Nutcracker story played by real musicians.”

“Really?”

“I’ll see if I can find a performance for you. If not, we can watch it on a video.”

“I want the real one.”

Anna grabbed the pie crust and put it in her mouth.

A growling in the driveway signalled Uncle Theo’s car. Anna had been practising with half her attention, taking many breaks to listen towards the window with the other half. She had been delighted that week when she got a Nutcracker song to play. She’d taught herself most of them from the tape, but this time she could hear them from the key signature, the rhythm of black markings that marched between the measures, and could draw the music directly from the page. Still, it was the concert night.

Uncle Theo tumbled through the door in his overcoat, a brown-bearded Santa shaking snow. Jason and Zack chased each other in behind his legs, and then Aunt Bet, trying to hold onto Zack’s hood.

“Anna, you’ve gotten bigger!” boomed Uncle Theo. “Look at you!” His voice came broad and hollow, like a tree would sound, thought Anna, if a tree could talk. He swooped down and Anna was surrounded by itchy sweater and kissed by itchy beard.

It was true. She could reach the piano keys without her cushion now, though she still used one for her feet and could not yet reach the pedals.

“Look at those cool decorations!” Jason pointed to the knitted Santa hanging from

the doorknob, the Nativity scene in the living room window, the wreaths on the walls.

“Can we stay here and play with ‘em instead of going to the stupid concert?”

“Yeah, please, please?” said Zack.

“You’ll like the concert,” said Aunt Bet. “The music’s even louder than you boys get.”

Zack and Jason pulled faces at her. Their eyes screwed up and their tongues stuck out like lollipops. Anna laughed.

“I could stay home with them,” said Hank.

“You can’t do that!”

“No, Carol, we’ll be fine.”

“Uncle Hank, you’re awesome!” The boys rushed over to grab onto his legs.

“Tell ya what, how about we have a snowball fight.”

“Yeah! Zack and I are gonna whoop your butt!”

“Jason, your language,” said Aunt Bet, but Hank was already talking: “You wanna bet? I’ll whoop both your butts!”

“Listen to that,” said Uncle Theo. “I think you boys have met your match.”

Anna could have sat next to her mother, but she wanted the back seat to herself. Her car only had a front and a back seat, but Uncle Theo’s van had a very-back seat that was extra soft, with no armrests in the way. She buckled herself right in the middle. She didn’t see the Christmas lights up close that way, but she could watch them on both sides while Christmas music bugled from the radio. It was dark already. The only things she



could see were houses of lit-up gingerbread, trees that glowed redgreenwhiteblue, giant candy canes, a lit-up reindeer that slowly moved its head, guardrails with many tiny lamps in them and, dimly, snow.

“The music school’s been here for awhile now, has it?” asked Caroline.

“Laine started it in... oh, I can’t remember. But it’s been going about ten years.”

“Who would have thought they could have got a music school going on P.E.I. and found enough people to come to it?”

“Well, Laine’s a character. She used to teach at Julliard and all. Big concert pianist back in the day.”

“Yes, but I didn’t know she was the one who had the school here,” said Caroline. Anna watched her run a hand through her stream of hair. “I’m not from the Island. I still have to learn these things.”

“She takes students as young as grade one,” said Aunt Bet. “Maybe you could send Anna there in a couple years.”

Anna sat up in her seat.

“I don’t think so. She’s going in French Immersion.”

“But you said she’s brilliant at the piano. You don’t want to let that talent go to waste.”

“She’s taking lessons.”

“She could take French lessons too. Have you ever thought of that?”

“Hmm.” It was between a no-sound and a maybe-sound.

“Pine Grove to the right!” Uncle Theo turned into the parking lot of a stone

building that looked like a mansion. Cars were packing in and there wasn't any room left, so he turned out and parked along the street at the back of a line. He waited until "Deck the Halls" was finished before turning the radio off and letting everyone get out of the car.

"Hold onto my hand, Anna," said Caroline. She slipped her mittened hand into Caroline's gloved one and they walked across the ice, slowly so she wouldn't fall. Crowds in black coats hurried past them, babies howling from arms, a brother and sister pretending to skate, a man leading an old man with a walker, a mother yelling to be careful. It was a snowstorm of people to the doorway and the ground was slippery underneath in the places where it didn't feel like the pebbles that were salt. Anna clung to the glove and watched her feet.

There was a black case full of money at the table where they paid to get in. Uncle Theo reached into his wallet and threw a bill inside it. The auditorium was vast, with rows and rows of seats and aisles that were lit up. You could yell into the room and it would echo, Anna thought, if there was no one there. She looked up as they went in and saw people sitting in a balcony. Their seats were in the middle, plastic blocks you had to pull down to turn into soft red chairs. Anna sat on hers and it snapped up, trapping her between two cushions. The top of her back and bottom of her legs stuck out.

"Poor Anna! Come, I'll get you out." Aunt Bet laughed a grown-up laugh and lifted Anna out of her hungry seat.

"Come sit on my lap," said Uncle Theo, and Aunt Bet set her there. There wasn't much room on his lap because of his stomach, but Anna could see the whole stage that

way. Around them people shuffled with programs, blew their noses, wiggled in their seats and coughed. Anna tried to copy the rhythms they made by tapping the back of the seat in front, but there were far too many.

“You want to play the drums too?” asked Uncle Theo.

“Anna, you’re going to be quiet, right?” said Caroline. “This is an important concert, put on by people who have studied music a lot. You’re the one who wanted to hear it.”

A light appeared in front of the stage. Anna could see there were red curtains across it and a microphone in front. The curtains moved and a man climbed out, tall and thin with a black suit on. His hair was black and cut shaggy. He walked with a puppet’s stiffness and an animal’s muscled energy. The suit was loose on the clothes hanger of his shoulders.

“That’s Laine Winters,” whispered Aunt Bet, “the lady who runs the music school. She used to be famous playing the piano. I think your mom has one of her tapes.”

“That’s a lady?”

“Yes.”

“Why does she look like a man?”

“She likes dressing that way.”

Laine Winters walked up to the microphone. She cleared her throat. A frog noise echoed in the auditorium. “Well, hello,” she said. Anna heard a soft ell-lo from the back of the space. She had a woman’s voice, although not a high one.

“I don’t really like speaking in public.” The audience laughed. “But this is our

Christmas Concert. What can you do?” She shifted from foot to foot. Anna’s attention drifted to the woman’s funny movements and the stop-start sounds of her speech. She scratched an ear. She paused. She sliced her hands through the air and said something, A D G G F-sharp. The audience laughed.

Suddenly the curtains flew apart. Behind them were rows of people with instruments and music stands. Laine Winters turned her back to the crowd to face the orchestra. Her jacket had two tails hanging in back. Two cat tails, two pull-toy strings. Anna giggled. “Shhh,” hissed her mother across Uncle Theo’s lap.

The people in the front row started playing a C on their instruments. “They’re tuning them,” whispered Caroline. Just like the man in the blue hat checking the piano hammers. The second row, now. Anna heard sounds she recognized from tapes. It was the first time she saw the things that made them. So violins looked like little guitars! So brass instruments were golden tubes with bells in front!

Laine Winters raised her arms. She held a stick in one of them. It came down and the violins were off! The sound was huge, foresting the whole inside with rabbits, running rabbit feet through Anna’s body. The orchestra was louder and better than any tape, ever. Anna tapped the piano notes on her legs and felt them shiver slightly with each note. She couldn’t keep up. The orchestra was flying.

The battle music came on. Anna burrowed into Uncle Theo’s stomach. She covered her ears, but the bass notes shuddered through her body no matter how close she clung. She closed her eyes. Bloated mice scurried across the screens of her eyelids. She opened them. Shadows flickered on the walls. She looked at her mother beside her who

would say it wasn't real. Caroline's eyes were closed. They had her too! She was watching them devour all the Christmas cookies and gnaw the wreaths to wire, leaving needles all over the floors.

When the song was done, Anna let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. The Waltz of the Flowers came in spring-like, piles of white and yellow petals feathering open. Anna watched the water-pipe flutes and licorice clarinets as they came in. Laine Winters' baton drew a swishy triangle over and over again. Anna thought of skating and wondered if you could slide across the wooden stage in sock feet. The sounds hung around the space, became an indoor sky.

Everything was over too soon. They put on coats and headed to the car. Anna held no one's hand and ran ahead. She dropped to the ground and slid, not far because of the salt.

"Look, Mom, I can skate on the parking lot!"

"Anna, stop it!"

Uncle Theo grabbed her hand and pulled her up. "When are you going to play music for us, Anna?" he asked as they got into the car.

"She could probably play at the house," said Caroline. "What do you think? Do you want to show them your piano?"

"OK."

"I wonder how the boys are doing with Hank," said Aunt Bet. Anna felt hands pressing against her sides, shaking her body. A stone sunk in her stomach. It stayed there while she watched the light-up Marys and Josephs watch their light-up Jesuses in their

light-up mangers, while they drove into the driveway of her own house with no lights but a multicoloured tree glowing from the living room window.

Anna heard loud laughing as her mother opened the door. Hank was dragging the boys around the floor on top of the Christmas blanket Caroline had knitted, the one with the knotted holly berries.

“Henry Alexander, you put that thing down!”

“Uh-oh, you’re in trouble,” Jason sniggered.

“That’s our good Christmas blanket. Let me see, did you make a hole in it already?”

“I was just giving the boys a ride.”

Zack grabbed another blanket from the couch. “Pull me around, Jase,” he coaxed.

The stone in Anna’s stomach dissolved. Her father went with the other grown-ups into the kitchen, leaving the boys to pull each other around. Anna hovered in the doorway between the rooms, unsure where to go. She watched Jason pull the blanket out from under Zack and tackle him to the floor, where they wrestled. She heard the grown-ups talking.

“She really liked that concert,” said Aunt Bet. “Almost as much as her mother did.”

“Oh, she loves music. When it’s not the piano, it’s the tape recorder.”

“Are you singing at all these days, Carol?”

“Not really.”

“My brother said you were studying opera when you met.”

The boys were under the tree, holding presents to their ears and shaking them. Anna had already shaken them all. She knew she was getting clothes, and something in a box.

“Oh, that.” Caroline laughed, a low it’s-not-really-funny laugh. “I was young. I had no idea what I was doing, really.”

“We should get Anna to play for us,” said Uncle Theo. She turned to the kitchen. He was watching her standing in the doorway. He smiled a Santa-Claus smile.

The other grown-ups looked at her. “Good idea,” said Aunt Bet, putting a hand on her husband’s knee. “Let’s go to the living room.”

Anna sat at the piano. The boys were banished from the floor and made to sit on couches, where they wiggled. She played her Nutcracker song, the Miniature Overture, with crisp quick notes and clean crescendos. She played the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy from memory. She played Bach’s Flute Sonata in E, the right notes on the wrong instrument. She looked to see if it was enough. Caroline was beaming, Aunt Bet staring like a goldfish.

“My God, you can play that thing,” said Uncle Theo.

“But she’s brilliant,” said Aunt Bet. “It must have something to do with those opera genes. Didn’t you say you had perfect pitch? Did you say she did too?”

“Yes, and she can figure out almost anything she hears.”

“Anna, Anna, who plays the piana.” Hank laughed at his own joke. No one else did.

The cousins had disappeared. Anna and the grown-ups found them in the kitchen,

seeing how many cookies they could stuff in their mouths at once.

Birthdays and summers came and went. Anna grew out of two more sets of clothes. She learned to spell “KEEP OUT” and made a sign for her door. Caroline tried to teach her how to knit. The yarn kept getting tangled. She threw the ball across the room and left a spider web before running off to Holst and the Planets on her tape recorder.

Caroline stopped buying paintings for the house. She started circling things in flyers and saving coupons in the mail. Hank came home from work with boxes of Dusty’s Fried Chicken for supper. Her parents started talking about school.

“You have two choices,” said Caroline. “We can put you in French Immersion, or we can see if you can get a scholarship to music school. Pine Grove doesn’t do French, so you’ll have to take lessons at home if you get in.”

“You’ll like public school better,” said Hank.

“No, I wanna go to music school.”

“You’ll have to work extra hard to get in,” said Caroline.

“Who are you kidding? She bangs at that piano at least an hour every day.”

Anna got new theory exercises and new songs that Mrs. Hobbes made her practice note by note, then phrase by phrase. She waited for that animal called An-tissa-pay-shun to swing down from the ceiling onto the top of her head and to the floor, leaving a pathway tingling down her spine, leaving a space in her head to open to something new. She didn’t feel anything different. Even playing the new songs in front of the audition examiner—a teapot-shaped man who made her think of a troll so that she had to stop



laughing before she could play—she only felt a little nervous.

The classrooms were made of wood and smelled like old polished furniture. That was the first thing Anna noticed. People her own age were scuffling around like mice in all directions, the floorboards making all kinds of squeaks. Anna wished they wouldn't see her, and they didn't seem to. A pair of boys in blue shirts were talking already. Did they go together or was it only the shirts? There were four kids in the front row, so she went to the back corner—the wood chair was heavy—and sat in it. Was she supposed to? Well, that's what people were doing, with about as much order as mice. One girl in the middle with a pink ribboned dress—why couldn't she be wearing a pink ribboned dress?—was munching something. Sunflower seeds, stale cookies? It was a snake or something, it was a fruit roll-up.

There was a teacher in front of the room whose back was very tall. She had on a black dress to her knees, no sleeves, her hair in two brown braids on the sides of her head, a string around her neck that looked like coloured coins. There was nothing soft in her tall face, and also nothing mean.

“Welcome to Pine Grove Music School.” Her mouth was a moving line. “My name is Mrs. Benjamin.” She wrote it on the chalkboard in loopy letters. “Everyone sit down, please.”

Anna watched as the last kids shuffled into seats. A short black boy, two Asian girls with pigtails who looked like twins, a boy with yellow hair, a big redheaded girl drumming on the desk. And the smallest girl of all sat in front of her, with mysterious

copper-coloured skin and glossy straight fox hair. She had on just jeans and a red sweater. Her head was low to her desk.

“Hi,” said the big boy at the desk beside Anna’s, the boy whose face was like a groundhog’s. “Let’s not listen to the teacher.” Anna didn’t want to listen to him. Mrs. Benjamin was more interesting, like a talking piece of furniture, striking maybe.

The smallest girl was bundled on the swing set. Her sweater was too big for her. Anna walked by, trying not to look, and heard whimpering. She looked. The girl was rubbing and rubbing at tears.

“What’s wrong?”

“My dog, I miss my dog, I want to go home and they won’t let me call my mother. I told the teacher she’d growl her for it, my mother said if I phoned she’d be up here right away.” She didn’t really look, she kept rubbing. There were raccoon patches under her eyes. But now her face was dry and she tilted her head up to stare straight at Anna. Not a raccoon, then. A fox. Anna shrunk to mouse size.

“What instruments do you play?”

“The piano,” Anna answered.

“Oh, is that all? I learned piano at age three, well I’m still learning, but my mother made me start violin at age five. I want to learn the viola someday, don’t you?”

She had a sharp sad face. Anna could almost see the bones.

“I said, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” The viola, that was like a big violin, right, or was that the cello? Anna felt

like she was lying at first. She'd never thought of playing one. But if this wild-looking person, this fox girl, learned to hold and make sound come from that case of wood, suddenly she wanted to do the same. She wanted her hands to be that thin and to cling to the swing chains like they owned them.

“What’s your name anyway?”

“Anna Caroline Stern.” She liked the serious sound of it.

“That sounds like an old person’s name. I’m Liss. My birth mother called me Felicity but no one says it, it’s too long, and plus I hate it anyway.”

“I like Felicity.”

“Don’t you ever call me that, you hear? It’s Liss.” She stared hard. “Do you know how to do the spider?”

“No.” Was that something like the viola, part of an adult code she’d never been taught?

“Well, come on, then. Get on the swing.”

Anna obeyed.

“What you do to play Spider, you go on your stomach and spin til there’s as many knots as you can get.” Liss had gone belly-down while talking and was spinning around. Anna was dizzy watching her. Then she stopped and sat under an impressive ladder of knots, her feet barely scraping the ground. “Then you pull your feet up and unspin.”

Anna got on her stomach and spun around, her feet scraping against the sand until the chain had knotted itself down to her back and there was no more to twist.

“There,” said Liss. “That’s how you do it. Now take your feet up.”

Anna's stomach twisted. "You first."

"Chicken! Bokbokbokchicken!"

Anna didn't want to be a bokbokchicken. The schoolyard spun around her in a greengreybrown blur. Her feet were kicking, she was going to fall.

She stopped in the middle of the air. Still on her swing. Liss was laughing.

"You're holding on so tight you'd think you were scared or something!" She kicked the rocks beneath her feet as Anna got off her swing, then sat on it right side up.

"Do you know if you're the kid your parents were supposed to have?" asked Liss.

## Chapter 2: Check and Mate

The solo had been newly composed by Michael O'Hara, her clarinet teacher (never Mike). "Fuck jumping the octave," Anna told the "Do Not Enter" sign on the wall, red circle with a white bar across, an old road sign she'd rescued from a trash heap. She wouldn't swear so casually around her parents, but the once-biting words fell flat. Her lean against the window made her elbows ache. She was beginning to feel old some days already.

Sixteen was supposed to be young, a time to be the Dancing Queen Almost Seventeen, to dye your hair and stay up too late and blow off homework and sneak alcohol, a time to feel excitement rush through blood. Mastering clarinet was much slower than mastering piano had been. Her fingers still got in each other's way sometimes when she tried cadenzas. It helped that piano notes were one finger each, if often simultaneous.

The window overlooked the woods, bleached branches almost bare between dark needles. There were other signs on the walls, a collection, some genuine and some from the dollar store. Caution. Beware Falling Objects. Slow: School Zone. Enter at Your Own Risk. A hammock from the ceiling held stuffed animals, mostly new ones won at the carnival games: a giant crocodile, squashed red and pink teddies, a duck with the head of a bear. The fluffy grey kitten, a long-ago present from Liss, she kept on her pillow. Her bureau held her make-up and jewelry box, her desk untidy piles of school papers and books, her night table the CD radio alarm clock with the CD rack beside it on the floor. It

stretched almost to the ceiling, and she had to drag her chair over to reach the ones on top. As a rule, that was where the worst ones went.

Music stand, music books. She opened her clarinet case, greased the corks, twisted the segments together, licked and adjusted the reed, set the instrument on her bed and made sure the door was shut. That was the advantage to a wind instrument: it could be practised in private. All you knew outside the door was whatever the sounds betrayed.

She played a long C, noticed it was off, and unscrewed the mouthpiece slightly. Tuning was fickle. Long tones. Scales. Arpeggios. The sound was never as clear as she wanted, always a pool whose reflective powers were mucked up by the least clot on the surface.

When the bell rang, the girls took off to Dusty's Fried Chicken in Sarah's car. Horrible food, Hank always said, all deep-fried and so many hormones in those birds, although he ate it well enough when they were short on money and there were many times he'd brought the Family Meal Deal home. Michelle smiled at the guy behind the counter—messy hair and a couple pimples, but tall with a sculpted chest—and ordered “The tender chicken sandwich and a hot fudge sundae, please.”

“Just the salad, please,” said Chen behind her.

“I'll take the spicy burger combo with crispy fries,” said Anna.

“You never worry about your weight, do you?” Irena scowled.

They took their food to a table and ignored the vestiges of salt and pepper on top. Dusty's had been renovated that summer, a rotating bucket of chicken installed by the

sign and the inside stripped of its flowered wallpaper, repainted mustard yellow with ketchup-coloured trim. Anna sat on the bench between Chen and Michelle. A Liang twin on either side. They knew that was the only arrangement that would allow them all to fit.

In one of the chairs across from them, Sarah leaned on the table and unwrapped the yellow paper from her burger. “I can’t believe they want us to practice before school starts.”

“Lucky I’m in woodwinds,” said Irena.

“Yeah, Mr. McAvoy’s crazy.”

“Kinda cute, though.”

“Cute enough to want to go to early morning section practice?”

“Nah.”

“Did you guys all get your essays done?” asked Chen, fingering her cap of straight hair.

“I asked for an extension,” said Irena.

“Stop changing the subject,” said Michelle. “We’re talking about men here.”

“Yeah,” Sarah added. “Any love interests lately?”

“Um, not really,” said Chen.

“Not really. Not really.” Michelle went to reach across Anna to heckle her sister, but Anna blocked her. “You have to take an interest someday in *someone* who’s not an anime character.”

“Come on,” said Irena, “Rurouni Kenshin’s hot.”

Michelle had something of an anime look herself, thought Anna. Her delicacy was

not simply physical but stylized. She wore tiny cardigans, jean skirts with patches, a headband with a tiny satin rose, and kept her hair long and glossy for the full princess effect. Chen had the same smallness, the same pronounced cheekbones, but if she had a style it was sparseness. A hummingbird who chomped through life and a barn owl who wavered. Irena was a blonde swan, Sarah a tanned and curly-haired grackle—

“You still nursing hopes of Ed, Anna?” It was Sarah, of course, grinning.

“Come on, that was years ago.” She pushed some curly fries around their container with the fork she’d taken and had no use for.

“Any other guys?” Sarah winked.

“Or girls,” said Chen.

“Yeah, that’s right, the girl thing. Do *you* like girls?”

“No,” said Chen, affronted.

“I guess the guy at the counter’s cute,” Anna mumbled.

“That doesn’t count. You’re as fun as Chen is,” said Michelle.

“Be nice.” Irena took a smug bite of dressing-less salad.

Was she like Chen? She hoped not. She’d scarcely seen a spark of passion on Chen’s face in all the years she’d known her, while she herself had felt so much her body had seemed increasingly brittle glass. But maybe it was there in both cases, just invisible. She touched a wrist nervously, checked for a pulse.

“New guy alert.” Irena nudged her in the clarinet section.

The guy in question wore a neck strap and was kneeling on the floor, fitting the



reed for an alto saxophone.

“I thought new people weren’t allowed to start after the first week,” Anna whispered back.

“Maybe he was sick. Or maybe he’s good enough they bent the rules.” Irena seemed pleased by either possibility. Anna looked again. He did seem well built, although all she could see was his back and a fluff of rusty hair. Maybe he snuck in, Anna would once have suggested with equal relish. Maybe he’s an impostor, maybe he bribed somebody to get in (Who, Laine? Highly unlikely.), maybe he slept with someone, maybe he’s a prodigy who had to move to P.E.I. from Juilliard. A dashing intruder in the midst of concert band sectionals. But she was too old for that.

He turned around. His face was rather slim (genetically gifted, she thought), though she could scarcely tell the specifics since he went to sit down so quickly and everyone around them started tuning. Adjust the reed, adjust the barrel. She and Irena angled their clarinets towards each other and checked to see if their tones blended. Irena pulled her barrel out a little and their next sound merged almost clearly. “I love you, tuning fork.”

Mr. Haslam waddled to the podium and raised his baton. Shorter than Anna, he looked and moved like a penguin. They tuned with the sleek black device in his hand. Sharp, thought Anna, we’re all sharp! But he seemed satisfied, and wouldn’t have believed or listened to her.

The song was a new march, but it reminded her less of soldiers than of circus music, parading performers on stilts, or the bouncy up-down, up-down of a Whack-a-

Mole game. She counted rests while the saxophones hit the notes with an imaginary mallet, and watched Irena's head bob to the rhythm. Then they were in, up-down, up-down, marching like a circus clown.

They finished packing up their instruments. Irena nudged Anna to signal they should stay. "Oh, please," Anna whispered, but already Irena had begun a few brisk strides towards the corner where the new guy and Paul, the baritone sax player, were chatting. Anna followed.

"Hi! Welcome to Pine Grove." Irena held out a smooth hand, smoothly. Smoothly he shook it. "I'm Irena Nikanova."

"Pleased to meet you. Darien Ross."

He held himself stiffly. A musician uncomfortable with overtures. Ironic, Anna thought, and Irena took her smile to be directed at Darien.

"This is Anna, our resident piano prodigy," Irena introduced her before she could.

"Irena composes stuff," said Anna hastily. Stuff. How unattractive-sounding. She should have kept her mouth shut.

"Sounds talented," said Darien.

"A talented talker too," said Paul. Irena shot him A Look.

"Surprising for a clarinetist," said Darien. "I've noticed people usually match their instruments. The quiet ones will play clarinet or flute, and the loudmouths will be in the trumpet section."

"The blowhards," said Paul. They chuckled.

“And the bari sax is worst of all,” said Irena, her neck high.

“Seriously, if we were going by your logic,” said Paul, “all pianists would have a penis. And that’s obviously not true.”

“No,” said Irena, “luckily.”

Anna pretended to laugh.

“You should hear Irena’s compositions sometime,” she said. “Darren.”

“Sure. That would be great.”

“You doing anything for lunch tomorrow?” asked Irena. A smile, so much more subtle than Michelle’s, her head remaining untilted.

“Besides eating, I have no plans.”

“Want to go to Ginny’s Cafe with us?”

He hesitated for a second. “Why not?”

Irena beamed at Anna as they left the music room. Con-quest! Soon she would be taken, the Swan Princess’s every curve inclined towards her leggy freckled Swan Prince who didn’t look unlike Rurouni Kenshin. Anna rolled her eyes.

She caught a ride home with Chen and Michelle, who lived even further from the school than she did. Chen wanted to put on some Philip Glass tracks, but Michelle searched her iPod until she found Surrender and turned the volume up.

“Hot guys who can actually make music,” she yelled over it. “That’s a work of genius if you ask me.”

*I’ll be standing here when the sun collides with Earth*

*I'll be standing here when the Judgement Day shows up*

*I'll be standing here when the ground does meet your birth*

Anna caught herself singing along.

“It’s meteors!” said Michelle. “Not meet your or whatever you’re singing.”

“What?”

Michelle paused the music. “I’ll be standing here when the ground *gives meteors* birth.”

“It sounds kinda like ‘does meet your’,” said Chen.

“They’re singing artfully. That means they’re focused on sound, not on singing clearly.”

“They have good lyrics,” said Chen. “I wish you could understand them. If I were singing I’d want it to be clear.”

“You should sing along, then,” said Michelle. “So Anna won’t keep making my favourite songs sound ridiculous.”

Chen reached over from the driver’s seat and turned the iPod back on.

“Did you hear about the new guy?” Anna asked.

“What?” said Michelle, grinning suddenly.

“There’s a new guy in woodwind sectionals who just transferred to our school. Damien or something. Irena seems to like him.”

“If Irena wants him, Irena will have him,” said Michelle. Anna couldn’t see everything from the back seat, but she thought she heard a kick.

“He looks like Kenshin,” said Anna.

“Really?” Chen exclaimed.

“Well, his hair’s not spiky and his eyes are normal size and he doesn’t carry around a giant sword, but other than that.”

“If you want him, Chen, go for it,” said Michelle. “And it would be pretty awesome if that worked.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“Of course not.”

“Guys,” said Anna, “you haven’t even met him. And that’s my driveway, slow down.”

“Here, birdie-birdie-birdie!” Caroline would be at work for another little while, and the parakeet had to be fed. Anna shook some pellets into Callas’ bowl. He turned his head so she could only see the side, the pale eye haughtily watching, the Elvis-tuft of yellow feathers above it spoiling the effect. “Silly bird,” she said. “Eat your food.” She closed the cage, walked off, and looked back. Callas looked up from his bowl to stare. “Yes, you were eating, good birdie. You know you were. I saw ya.”

She poured some water in a pot, set it on the stovetop to boil, and took out a box of Mac’n’cheese, glad that her father wasn’t living there anymore. Enough time to go out while the water boiled. She used to hate how her music couldn’t follow her outside. But now Anna had not only her old Walkman but a new MP3 player. She carried it outside in her jacket pocket, stood on the prayer rock and clasped the dogwood branch above her out of habit, and searched her device until Ride of the Valkyries came searing through the

forest, unheard to anything but her.

*Ay-a, Ay-a, stars in my body . . .* Stop it, she thought. The chant was old and silly. Heck, she'd made it up in first grade. She couldn't remember if she'd ever actually seen something she thought was her goddess above that rock, or just imagined her there. Ay-a had had a body as slim as a tree, she'd decided, and one that bent just as easily. Silly. Humans had many more joints than trees did. Why not a flower? Flowers were short and stubby, even the regal ones, compared to the woods. Her eyes were whatever colour the sky was that day, whether it be blue or almost black or dingy yellow-grey.

There were good things about the chant. It adapted to any tune. Anna let her arms unclench and her eyes be drawn inevitably upwards in this tiny clearing fortified with trees. The light here was leaf-sieved, and inevitably mixed with the scent of sap and pine needles. She let go of the dogwood branch—her contact zone at one point for speaking to the goddess, a thing that touched both earth and sky (sky was only atmosphere, just air, and air was everywhere a body wasn't). The Valkyries filled her veins. They flung her arms out.

Her hand knocked against the dogwood branch and she felt silly. Turned the music off, switched to a dirge, and walked inside. The water had boiled over while she'd been out there.

Caroline came in swinging her briefcase. "I made us dinner," said Anna. "I fed the bird."

"Good," said Caroline absently. "Have you had time to practice for your solo or

the orchestra?”

“No, I just got home!”

“Well, what are we having for dinner?”

“It’s on the stove.”

Caroline went to look. “One of us should make a salad. It’s good that we’re finishing up the macaroni, though. We need to get that stuff out of the house before my mother comes.”

From the living room, Callas cheeped loudly.

“Sometimes I wonder how much English he understands,” said Caroline.

“He’s a bird. I doubt it’s much.”

“When did you get so cynical on me? You wouldn’t have said that last year.”

“Yeah, I would. It’s a bird, for goodness’ sake.” Would she have?

Caroline was already pulling vegetables from the crisper. “Anna, I should probably tell you something. You’re not going to like it.”

“What?”

“Well. You know. Well.” She took out a bowl, a chopping board, a cleaver, and started washing the lettuce. What was it? What *was* it? Why the secrecy, from *her*?

“Well, um, you know how your father’s been gone for, well, a little while.”

She tried to ignore the churning in her stomach.

“Well, I met someone at work.” Anna jolted. Watched her closely. Could see the side of her face, which was edging upwards in a silly smile.

“When was that, Mom?”

“Oh, well, weeks ago. I mean I knew him for a couple years, but we only started dating recently. Or started thinking about dating. It wouldn’t have been right to do anything earlier. You know.”

“Tom?” said Anna, startled.

“How did you know?” Caroline’s back was to her and she was chopping lettuce furiously.

“He’s the one male colleague you’ve talked about the most.” One of those colleagues she’d never even met. *Nice* guy. Tom said he liked my blouse today. Tom’s daughter’s away at McGill. You might want to go there, Anna, it has a good music program, though I’d understand if you don’t want to be in the same city as my mom. Tom brought in muffins for the office. Tom is a really great translator, yeah, really great. Uh, yes. Good at his job, I mean. Tom and Mom. Mom and Tom. Mommy and Tommy up a tree... Grow up, Anna! Stupid Tom. No. Let Mom be happy. Gods know she needs it.

“You’re a perceptive one, Anna.” She was chopping lettuce that had already been chopped. If she kept going at this rate, they would soon need to eat it with a spoon to get all the bits. Salad with a spoon. Ridiculous. Stupid Tom.

“That’s great, Mom.”

“You really think so?”

“Yeah. Of course I do.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“Want me to grate the carrots?”

“Oh, sure. That would be lovely.” She was grinning again. “We’re going to have a



really good dinner tonight.”

“What’s Grandma gonna say?”

“Don’t tell her! Please, don’t say a word. That’s one reason I told you before she could ever find out. Do you think you could help me hide it, if it comes to that?”

“I don’t see how Grandma of all people could find out who you’re dating! For heaven’s sake.” She peeled the carrot faster, wishing she could listen to her music without looking disrespectful. “It’s not like she’ll stalk you at work or something.”

“You’re right, you’re right, I’m worrying again.”

They finished the salad and ate with candles on the table, Caroline’s idea. It would only take a small push to shove one into the napkin holder.

“You’re awfully quiet tonight.”

Anna didn’t do it.

Caroline forgot about her being quiet and started talking. “I’m so glad I told you. Oh, I’m so glad you’re not upset. He’s really a *sweet* guy. I think you’d get along well. He loves Beethoven. That’s your favourite, right?” No, Mom, I like Chopin better now for the most part. She didn’t say it. “He’s so quick with French, probably the best translator the bureau’s got. I wish you’d learned. Do you want to try lessons again, maybe?”

“I don’t have time.”

“Well, you are pretty busy. But maybe I could teach you on my own time, si ça te convient.”

“See-saw? What?”

“Oh. If it works for you.”

“We’ll see.”

The mac’n’cheese tasted like paper with a liberal dose of mayonnaise and the salad dressing was too watery, but Caroline beamed the whole way through. Don’t remind her of Grandma. Don’t.

There was a god in the kitchen who watched over the goings-on of the house. A goddess in the garden to ensure that things that sprouted continued to grow. A god in the driveway to ensure clear passage in all of life. Over the years, they’d crept into every corner Anna went. She spilled her hands over the piano keys and forgot to think of Tom somewhere in Chopin’s Nocturne in C Sharp, Opus 27. The gods of music, invisible as atoms, soaked all through her. There were many tiny gods that bent her spine to the rhythm.

Anna managed to skip lunch with Irena and Darien by hiding the first half hour in the music room before getting her sandwich. Last thing she needed, lunch with someone else’s Tom.

“You stupid girl!” said Sarah. Michelle had gone off with Sean, her “I-like-him-but-am-not-committing-at-this-stage”, and Chen was probably in a practice room, trombone in hand. She didn’t fit the people-match-their-instruments rule.

“So stupid,” said Anna, “to do what I want to during break. Last I heard, it’s a free country. And my mom’s dating someone now.”

“Really? Details, girl!”

“Well, I haven’t even met him. All I know is that he’s some translator colleague named Tom.”

“Ooh, workplace romances are the best,” said Sarah with relish. “I bet they have so much in common! I bet they leave secret notes for each other in their cubicles.”

“Actually, they’re mostly working on-site, out of office. So not much office time, really.”

“I bet they take those goofy ear phones during breaks and use them to say romantic messages to each other.”

“I bet the ear phones don’t even work like that.”

“So, is your mom practically bouncing off the walls?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“A sure sign of roooo-mance!” Sarah sang that last part, an alto scale that drew stares even in music school. Singing wasn’t done in the cafeteria. Anna wondered if she was blushing; Sarah wasn’t.

House vacuumed: check. Groceries bought: check. Items purchased to look good, like fresh strawberries and salmon pâté and five kinds of crackers. Tablecloth: check. White lace, looked crocheted and the box that betrayed its factory manufacture had been long ago wood-stoved. Flowers on the table: check. Caroline had bought the cliché dozen red roses because Anna hadn’t been with her. Pull-out bed made in the living room: check. So the sheets weren’t satin. Grandma would just have to deal.

“Anything we forgot?” Caroline called out, zooming around the house with a list.

“Doubt it.”

“You should do something with your hair. It looks messy.”

Anna grabbed the black elastic from her wrist and pulled it into a ponytail, which, she thought, looked just as messy.

“She’ll only be here a couple weeks, I think,” said Caroline. “We’ll be fine. You’ll have to play her your clarinet solo. God, I hope she goes to bed early.”

Anna quietly decided to spend a weekend at her dad’s place. He wasn’t far, and his apartment in town was way closer to Pine Grove than the house. Aunt Bet and Uncle Theo might come over. There wasn’t a piano there, but there was one in the community center just a walk away that had decent sound quality and was only a little flat. On the other hand, it would be a great excuse to take a couple days off practising.

“Hop in the car! Hop to already!” Caroline tended to say silly things when she got rattled.

“Can I drive?” Anna tried.

“Not this time. I’m too nervous and you’d run into everything on the road.”

“*You* being nervous makes *me* run into things?”

“We can practice again when she’s gone.”

Two whole weeks. Well, Dad had a car, and Uncle Theo and Aunt Bet’s family had three between them all, plus the pickup truck although Anna didn’t really want to drive that.

Caroline backed out of the driveway and they set off down the road towards the airport.

### Chapter 3: Grass Fort

“Do you know if you’re the kid your parents were supposed to have?” asked Liss.

“Do I what?”

“My parents were supposed to have another kid but she died,” said Liss, suspended beneath her knots. “That’s why they adopted me. Are you adopted? I bet you got real parents.”

Anna had never wondered that, and suddenly her throat knotted like the swing chains. “I think I do,” she said.

“They never told you, then. Maybe you’re not their kid.”

The knot burrowed a little deeper. “Of course I am.”

“Well, maybe they’d wanted another kid but they got you. There are tons of us, you know. Kids who are replacements for someone else. If we all got together in the same place, we could make a whole country. Maybe even a continent.”

Anna tried to picture a map of Canada with people standing all across it, people who hadn’t been wanted in the first place. She had a hard time thinking there were enough of them to fill P.E.I.. But maybe there were lots of people who were secretly replacements, so secretly they didn’t know it themselves. Maybe she was one of them.

“Let’s make a fort,” said Liss. “Let’s make our own country.”

“How can we make a fort when there’s no snow?”

“Haven’t you heard of a grass fort, stupid?”

Anna hadn’t. She felt suddenly too young for school. There were too many things

that everyone knew and no one had bothered to teach her.

“Well, come on then.” Liss grabbed Anna, a claw around her wrist, and headed to the fence that bordered the schoolyard. The grass was long around it, with clover and goldenrod and asters growing. Miniature spruce were spaced evenly along it, like green traffic cones. Some older kids were a few feet away, ripping up grass. Liss began to do the same thing.

“Look, you’ve got to get a bunch of grass to make the walls. That’s why it’s a grass fort, of course.”

Anna started pulling, glancing between handfuls to see if any teachers came around. Her mother had told her not to pick grass or flowers in public places. What would the teachers say if they caught her picking all the school’s own grass, how would they stare at her, what noises would swell up from their throats? What would they make her do? She’d heard the word detention, but only knew it was what happened when you did Something Bad. Would they send her home from music school forever, to the tape recorder and French Immersion, send her home when she hadn’t even started learning?

She saw a tall shape moving briskly towards them and moved to hide behind Liss. Her breath came short. Should she drop the grass? Liss was holding hers balled in her fist, and picking more. She seemed not to notice. Were they going to get in trouble? Should she tell?

The teacher moved closer, walking like a heron on its stilt-legs, wearing a black suit. Anna had seen him before. Her. The Mouse King’s battle song keyed up in her head, crescendoed.

“Hello,” said Laine Winters.

“Hello,” said Liss.

Laine Winters’ gaze was no less intent than Liss’s, her eyes a darting hazel. She looked behind her, to where Anna was trying to hide. “Hey, you. Come out. Did you think I was going to eat you?” She chuckled, a French Horn sound. Anna edged slowly from behind Liss, holding the grass crumpled in her palm so it wouldn’t be seen.

“I think I know who you both are.” Laine Winters scratched her chin. “You’re Felicity, and you must be Anna.”

“My regular name’s Liss,” said Liss. Anna wondered how she could stay so unafraid, her head so straight it was almost thrown back. Her own head felt too heavy to stay up.

“And you are Anna, right?” Anna had to look. Eye contact. Don’t be dis-ris-pect-ful.

“Yeah—yes.”

“My name’s Laine Winters, but please just call me Laine.”

“I knew that,” said Liss.

The French Horn, again. Liss’s shoulders drooped.

Anna wondered. This was the first time a grown-up had asked her to call them by their first name. She’d been scolded when she called her mother’s-side grandma Mary on the phone, after hearing her father call her that. It Wasn’t Very Polite. Did first names mean they were in trouble? Was that a nice-laugh or the laugh of a wicked queen in front of her mirror, polishing an apple?

“Well,” said Laine, “I just wanted to say hi. I’m the principal here, which means I’m the one people get mad at if anything goes wrong. Oh, and you might have me for piano.” She pushed a strand of hair behind an ear with a movement like a squirrel’s.

Anna thought of Mrs. Hobbes. Their lessons had stopped that week. She said that Anna played about as well as her now. Anna had taken home her third theory notebook, its few remaining blue patches faded between the stickers, dogs and pandas and giraffes and smiling Bravos that clung together in a jungle. She’d taken a box of chocolates wrapped in a red ribbon that Mrs. Hobbes had handed her, “For your whole family.” And she’d left Gordon, curled up on a couch cushion. He’d hardly moved when she petted him goodbye. She wondered if Laine had a cat, but that was probably a stupid thing to ask. If she did, it wouldn’t come to school.

“I’ll see you at the assembly,” Laine was saying. “I’m going to be talking to the whole school this afternoon. Not my favourite thing to do, but I won’t go on for too long.” She waved and turned and started walking.

“Bye!” called Liss.

Anna found it easier to breathe again. She remembered the grass in her palm, which was squished and sweaty. She started picking more.

“Let’s make the foundation,” said Liss. She started patting down a square of grass behind a traffic-cone tree and picking some of it. Anna joined her. Pat-pick-pick, pat-pick-pick. Soon the square was flat. Liss sat down in it and started arranging grass around the border. Anna did the same. “We need more grass,” said Liss once the square was completed. “Can you guard it?”



“OK.” Anna wondered what the dangers were. Pirates, poachers, bears?

“Don’t let the other kids wreck it. My brother said they do that sometimes.”

Liss walked off. Anna sat in this picture frame of grass, her back against the tree. Its bristles only hurt a little where her arms were bare, and the prickliness was interesting. It wasn’t a very big fort. Just big enough for the two of them to sit in comfortably. She watched a caterpillar crawl across a goldenrod stalk, black and yellow with fur on top. One-two-three-four. Its many feet went slow, and its body bent in the middle to walk. She reached out to pet it. It didn’t prick her like some of the other ones did.

Liss was back, her arms full of grass. They set to work stacking the walls higher. When they were done, the fort was above their ankles. What a wonderful thing a grass fort was! Liss sat down cross-legged inside. Anna wondered why she’d never heard of grass forts and checked to see if the caterpillar was still on the goldenrod. It was. “Look,” she pointed.

Liss didn’t see the caterpillar at first. When she did, she got out of the fort and stretched out her hand, blocking the animal’s path. “Here, kitty, kitty.” She waited for it to crawl onto her fingers, then brought it into the fort.

“Do you have a cat?” asked Anna.

“We used to. Now we’ve got a dog.”

“I wish I had a cat. My mom’s allergic.”

“Oh, I’ve got asthma, but pets don’t hurt it.” She set the caterpillar down on a grass wall. They watched it inch its way down. “Let’s have this fort be our country,” she said.

“Yeah, let’s.” Anna thought about the possibilities. They could have a flag, make holidays, laws, their own language, adopt the caterpillar as their castle guard...

“It’ll be the country of music,” said Liss.

“The Land of Music,” said Anna. “And the Castle of Treble Clef!”

“We need a Castle of Bass Clef, then.”

“We’ll make that too,” said Anna.

They didn’t have piano right away. They had English class. The chairs were arranged in rows, the desks pushed to the side. Mrs. Benjamin had a sort of easel at the front of the room with a giant book on top of it. On the cover was a cartoon picture of a girl, a boy, and a brown dog with floppy ears. “Jenny, Matt, and Bow-Wow,” said Mrs. Benjamin. She turned to the first page and began to read, pointing under the words with a ruler. The picture showed a house on a road with faces at the window. “Jenny and Matt lived on Willow Street. They were lonely.” Anna watched the ruler change places. The letters were big enough to see. She could read and, on, but that was all. No Keep Out here. The story was boring so she stopped listening to it and gave her attention to Swan Lake inside her head, watching the buttons on Mrs. Benjamin’s necklace swim back and forth.

When the story was done, Mrs. Benjamin told them to line up for the assembly. Anna got in line behind the Asian twins and Liss got in line behind her. They exchanged a look. They were brought into the same auditorium where Anna had gone to the Christmas concert for the past three years and sat down on the same red fold-down chairs. Mrs.

Benjamin made them sit in front. Anna perched on the edge of her seat so it wouldn't fold her up inside. They waited while more people rustled in—all the new students, Mrs. Benjamin had said, in different grades. They only took up the first three rows.

The curtains moved. "Hello." (Ello-lo.) Laine Winters walked out onto the otherwise empty stage with her baton. There was no one to conduct, so she was rolling it from one hand to the other. "I'm sure you're sick of hearing this, but welcome to Pine Grove Music School. There used to be pines here, enough to merit the name. But people chopped them all down years ago, so now we only have the three in the front yard. Sometimes I hate people."

Anna looked to Liss but her hawk eyes were watching Laine's. Some students in the audience half-laughed. A couple teachers whole-laughed.

"Some of you may think you got in because you have talent." Laine spun the baton in her hand. "Well, I have news for you. There is no such thing as talent."

The shuffling in the audience chopped off.

"Talent is what happens when you work hard. How much you achieve is determined by the effort you put into it. Every one of you is able to put in effort. That's why you are here." She tapped the baton against her hand. "The other reason you are here is because you're lucky. You had parents or teachers who were willing to put a lot of effort into helping you. All those times they made you practice, you were getting better. Think about it."

A new chorus rose in Anna's ears. Ginny and Aunt Bet and Uncle Theo and Uncle Jeffrey and Aunt Carrie and Aunt Sue and Mrs. Hobbes and Mary-call-me-Grandma and

Louise-call-me-Grammy and George-call-me-Grampy. “Listen to her!” “My God, you can play that thing.” “Amazing.” “She got her talent from her mother, that’s for sure!” (But she wasn’t her mother.) “Anna, that was . . . remarkable.” “Opera in her blood.” (But she didn’t sing opera. Her voice was thin and quiet.) “Perfect pitch.” “Natural sense of rhythm.” “Can pick things out by ear.” “Did it occur to you that she’s got incredible talent?” (But there was no such thing.) (She got a talent. No, Anna, she *has* a talent. No, Anna, she doesn’t. Let’s get out your theory books.)

Something sharp against her arm. Liss’s elbow. “Ow! Stop it!”

“Anna, she’s done talking. Get in line before the teacher thinks you’re stupid.”

Instrument lessons were twice a week, Mrs. Benjamin explained. Half the class had them while the other had choir, so there were two choir classes and everyone had to be in one. On Friday they practised together. She called out names for choir. Caroline had mentioned alphabetical order, and the teacher was using it. Carl Arsenault, Brandon Betts . . . Anna tapped her waiting to hear Stern. Sloan . . . Travers.

The line was made, and she and Liss weren’t in it. Liss turned back and whispered to talk to Anna in the back row. “I had to bring my violin, but I don’t suppose you have to bring a piano.”

“Do you like to sing?” asked Anna with insects in her throat. She would have to go to choir tomorrow.

“Of course, don’t you?”

“Do your mom and dad sing?”

“Not really. But my little sisters do. My mom and dad just work all the time.”

A man teacher came into class to take the line to choir. He had square black glasses like the kind that would have a fake nose and moustache attached to them, except they didn't. All the instrument lesson kids were talking while the line was led away, trotting like puppies down the hall.

Mrs. Benjamin had a list that told everyone which room to go to and who would be their teacher. Anna was to meet Laine Winters in a room downstairs.

She repeated the number in her head—122, 122—as she climbed alone past the fish tank and the principal's office, down the big staircase across the pebble-patterned floor, past white doors and white doors, some of them with papers full of writing and coloured pictures, all of them with numbers on the front. 122 was down the hallway to the right. Closed door. No pictures. She hoped she remembered the number right. Insects scuttling in throat. Knocked.

Laine was at the door. She was more than twice as tall as Anna. “Oh, hi. Come on in.” Anna followed her uncertainly. There were two pianos in the room, side by side against the right wall. A small wooden one, brown and polished, and a grand piano, black and polished. Words on their sides in gold, too loopy and skinny to tell the letters even if she could read them. The rest of the room was echoey. Anna knew because the hollow tromp-tromp of Laine's polished black pointy shoes and the usually dull scuff-shuff of her Zellers-new, town-bought blue sneakers were magnified to dignity.

Laine sat down on the black bench of the grand piano, leaving Anna to sit at the little one. She scooted the bench in and was tall enough to reach the pedals. It had

happened about a month ago. “So, you’re Anna,” said Laine. Anna said nothing, wondering if a yes was expected. Her father’s voice in her head: An-na, An-na, in her blue pa-jam-as. No, she wouldn’t tap the rhythm.

“So. Can you play something for me?”

The salamanders in her brain were all saying different things. Fur Elise (Furry Elise). The Bach So-Na-Ta (Box-oh-not-a). Something from the Nutcracker Suite (Nut Cracker Sweet). Mozart (Moat’s Art). Handel (Handle. The Mess-Eye-A).

“You nervous?”

“No.” She bit her lip.

“How about we talk.” Anna waited for her to say something else while the clock kept time like a metronome. “So, what does your family do?”

“They, they—” the insects choked her off. They’d built nests in her throat, from sand and paper. She turned and her fingers hit the keyboard. The Four Seasons came spilling out, the thing she’d practised most lately. She loved how the song wasn’t anything else, just leaves and birds and snow and branches hurrying to happen. There was air in her throat again, Vivaldi’s springtime in her lungs.

“Thank you,” said Laine. “Now play it for me slower.”

Anna’s arms felt heavy, but she did. Laine stopped her halfway through Spring. “Let’s hear you play those last two bars again. Pay attention to the order the notes come in. Don’t let them get ahead of each other or muddy each other up.”

But it’s Spring, Anna thought of saying, and Spring is all mud! Of course, she didn’t say that. She was old enough to know that wasn’t what Laine meant, and that this

particular song wasn't about mud. Probably driveways weren't full of red muck in the Spring where Vivaldi had lived. Probably cars did not get stuck in them.

She played the bars, carefully, handling a glass ball between her fingers. This time, not a single note was mud. "Better," said Laine. "Now let's hear you try with the energy back in it."

She couldn't do any of this right. Laine got her to practice bar after bar, fix this, fix that. "You have a strong grasp of this piece but you need to pay more attention to technical details." The little things in fingers and throat that scritch and scratch and grab you. Laine sent her out the door with a list of specific things to practice in the songs and a new chromatic scale, written in the middle of her latest theory notebook with a cover full of stickers.

Anna didn't take the bus home like Liss did. Caroline came to pick her up. The school was 45 minutes away from Creighton—three drives there make a Christmas concert—and there weren't enough students from around there to have a bus. Creighton was only Creighton for fifteen houses spread out between potato and hay fields and cow fields and barns and strips of trees. Then it became Salmon Falls on one side and Yorkville on the other and after that something else and something else, spelled out on blue signs.

"How was your first day of school?" asked Caroline, pressing down her hair.

Anna said nothing. She watched the swing set and the traffic-cone trees by her grass fort shrink to the size of candy corn.

“Was it OK, I hope?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. I made a carrot cake for when you get home.”

She watched the big houses in town with flower planters and curly trim, the one with a stained-glass window, the one with turrets. She watched the Tim Horton’s and the Burger King and the shopping mall with the kite logo and the signs she couldn’t read but would learn to.

“Do you have any homework?”

“Just music stuff.”

She couldn’t ask the question. She didn’t know which question to ask, if one of them would dissolve the lead ball in her stomach, if one of them would have an answer that would make things make sense. Even if it was the worst answer, moving on salamander feet. It was only once they were driving past fields again that Anna tried to straighten her words and ask.

“Was I the kid you wanted to have?”

“Of course you are! Why would you even think that?”

It was alright then. Wasn’t it?

But at home she had another question before she could let herself be hungry.

“How do I know I’m your real kid?”

“Darling, just look at yourself in the mirror!”

Caroline led Anna towards the bathroom door. It wasn’t interesting, just the same thing she saw every time she passed.



“See the shape of your face? It’s round like your father’s, but you’ve got my smaller chin. See your nose? Look at my nose. It’s just the same. Our hair is the same kind of brown.”

It wasn’t straight like Caroline’s but had some of her father’s wave, although not enough to be curly. She was built like her mother, thinly, so her body didn’t quite go with her face. Anna the Scarecrow with a pumpkin head or a stuffed one. She was missing one of her teeth. Her skin was white like a grub when you pull a log up. Or maybe not quite as white as that, but almost. Not coppery like Liss’s. Her eyes were a weird colour. Caroline’s eyes were coffee like her hair, Hank’s eyes were the grey-green of dusty moss, but hers were like puddles in fall with a golden-orange reflected through the brown. Not the real colour, but little coloured pebbles inside and a tawny shine over them. Her parents didn’t have yellow or orange in their eyes.

“You look too much like your father and I to be someone else’s kid,” said her mother.

Anna pushed her bangs away from her face to see if she’d look more like Caroline then. She didn’t. Maybe more like Hank. She didn’t like that, and pulled them back in place. Her mother had to be right.

“Can we have the cake for dinner and the roast beef for dessert?” asked Anna. Hank laughed. Caroline didn’t. “You wouldn’t eat any meat if we did that,” she said.

They had the roast beef from Uncle Jeffrey’s cows and green beans from Hank’s garden and potatoes from Hank’s garden. They almost always had potatoes. Like the

carrots, they could last the winter in cold barrels in the basement. “All local,” said Hank. “No pesticides. If only that was the mandate for crops here, by God, I’d love doin’ my inspections.”

“The standards are horrible, we know,” said Caroline. “Just make sure to keep your job.”

“How was school?” asked Hank.

“Good.” Anna took a whole slice of butter this time.

“Anna, put some back,” said Caroline. “It’s not good for your health.”

“Look at the salt on that plate of yours,” Hank chuckled. “There’s more salt on those potatoes than on Anna’s and my whole plates combined! Let Anna have her butter, I say.” Yeah, there was a whole moat of salt crystals on top of the potatoes she’d mashed up. Anna giggled.

Even after carrot cake, Anna dragged. While the dishes were being washed she took out her theory book and started on the new chromatic scale, but her fingers didn’t move as fast as usual. Slow was good, Laine had said so. A few times, then Spring, attention to the notes and bars. “Let’s hear you try with the energy back in it.” But the flowers had limp petals and the energy was gone.

“Take a break,” said Hank.

“No.”

“Stop it. You’re exhausting yourself.”

She pressed a limp hand back to the keys, but his eyes were hard arrows, the green in them spiking out. Standing over her, especially while she was sitting on the bench, he

was twice as big as Laine. At least.

“Stop bangin’ on that piano. We’re going to the park.”

He took her by the arm and they walked towards the car, the insects in her throat still scratching. “Have fun,” called Caroline as the door closed.

They drove to the playground circled by trees and trails and a river that led to the ocean, a walk from the Marina where Caroline sometimes brought her to do nature crafts in the summer with kids who talked and laughed and yelled a lot, broke the crayons and spilled the paint and broke wafer cookies in half to share them. The radio played one of Hank’s favourite songs: “If you drink don’t drive, do the watermelon crawl.” It didn’t make any sense, but he sang along. His voice was much better than the singer’s which seemed to be off key on purpose. A tenor, Caroline called him, more chocolate than watermelon or twanging guitar.

They got out and Anna ran to the swing set. She did the Spider, twirlingveryfast, again and again until it wasn’t scary and the high-pitched jolt in her stomach felt like excitement. She looked backwards and saw that her father was on a bench, watching. She kicked up and swung, tilting her head back, letting her hair swish with the motion, Spring in her lungs if not in her fingers, fall starting with a very few yellow leaves in the trees she was facing, her feet reaching higher than them. If only there was a swing set at home, if only, if only—

A sea gull squawked as her feet scraped the gravel to land. She jumped off. “Want to play on the see-saw?” her father called. “Or how ‘bout I spin you on the merry-go-round?” She let him spin her until she was dizzy and her screams tore out and it wasn’t

fun anymore. They went up and down on the see-saw and he kept her in the air for almost too long. She hated that she couldn't keep him up too. She ran to the slide. Covered in metal, it burned bare legs in the summer but now it was too cold to hurt her hands. She slid down on her back and on her belly.

“We should go fishing here sometime,” said Hank, pointing to the river that ran under the road and between the park's trees. “I can't believe I've never taken you fishing here.”

Anna could remember fishing maybe three times, with worms that squiggled horribly. She wouldn't put them on the hooks. Last time she'd caught some flounder with both white eyes on one side next to each other and watched them die in the bucket at home, their flat mouths gasping.

They walked on a path along the river by the trees where ferns had started turning brown. They walked on needles and springy moss and already a few leaves. Anna looked down often so the roots wouldn't trip her flat. “There used to be a mill here but it went out of business,” said her father. Anna heard the gurgling of the river and, getting ever louder, the swooshing of the sea. Forest made way to marram grass, pine path to boardwalk and sand. They followed the boardwalk past dunes of piled-up seaweed, blackgreenpurple curlybubblystrings, and out onto the dock. It was a short beach, and the water fast became a deep basin Anna couldn't stand in. Sea gulls and cormorants flew around making hungry sounds. Two gulls had part of the same fish in their beaks and were pulling at it.

“Look in the water,” said Hank.

Anna followed his finger and there was something pink! A jellyfish was drifting, the soft glass of its body displaying the streaky dial of its insides. There was another one, clear white and small enough to fit between Anna's thumb and pointer finger. "What are they doing there in the fall?" asked Hank.

Animals that weren't supposed to be there. Anna ran to the other side to see if there were more. Then to the end of the dock. She didn't see any other ones, but the water was full of seaweed with fat bubbles in it, seaweed like strips of slimy grass and mats of curled red hair. Through the layers of water, a crab followed its mechanical sideways path between rocks.

The jellyfish breathed their bodies in and their tentacles out. Sea flowers suspended, in no hurry. Maybe they lived in a different time signature from people, a dirge to their presto. There was no railing, and their stinging closeness thrilled her. Standing on the very edge of the dock, she held her arms out.

"Don't jump!" yelled Hank.

Anna hadn't realized she'd been about to. She pulled her heavy crouching body back, slowly. Looked at her father whose face was thunder, who held fists, and looked away prestissimo. She wanted to go further. Her head streamed wind-tossed tentacles.

"Whatever you do, don't jump."

## Chapter 4: Love Shack

Anna's first sight of Mary Clemens was a black speck bobbing amid the crowd. As it got closer, she saw the speck seemed to be wearing a hat. It came closer, a tall woman in a black peacoat with a bob of stark white hair. A grandmother from a makeover movie.

"Carrie!" She pulled Caroline towards her and held on. Anna edged behind and tried to read her mother's expression, but she was squished against Grandma.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi . . . at six, Grandma pulled away. Anna watched her eyes rove up and down. "You haven't lost much of your beauty, Carrie dear, but be careful not to let your hands get too dry. You've always had finely shaped hands."

"I brought Anna with me, Mom," said Caroline stiffly, indicating her.

Grandma looked around, handed her luggage brusquely to Caroline, walked over, and investigated Anna like an object. "This is Anna? I hardly recognize you. You've rather filled out." She grabbed Anna's shoulders with bony hands and held her at arm's length. Like Caroline, she was taller, though not by much more than an inch. "Though that isn't quite true, I suppose. You're just tall. Fairly flat-figured, but you're thin. Definite potential for elegance." Potential, Anna supposed, was what you had when you were too gawky for cute but couldn't quite be said to have beauty.

The opening bars from Beethoven's Fifth ran through her ears. Da-da-da-DUMMMM! She wasn't sure whether to giggle or cringe.

“Where am I sleeping?” asked Mary. She was Grandma whenever she was away in Montreal and far from Anna’s presence, but in person Anna could never think of her as Grandma for long. The word was too cozy.

“We have a bed for you in the living room,” said Caroline. “I hope that’s alright.” It sounded tentative, not like the *it had better be alright* version she would have used with Anna.

“That’s fine, Carrie.” She began a march towards the exit, leaving daughter and granddaughter to grab her suitcases and trail her out. She acted as if she knew where the car was, even though the old one had broken down a year ago and she hadn’t seen the new one yet. Caroline led the way to their parking place, Anna supposed, but her grandmother somehow managed to make herself look in charge.

“You hungry, Mom?” asked Caroline while Anna tried to look at the car-sparse grey expanse of the parking lot and the surrounding buildings instead of at her grandmother.

“I suppose I will be in a few hours.”

“We have some things almost ready for dinner. It will only take a bit to put them together. There’s a new vase I bought online in the living room. Online shopping is so convenient. You have to be careful if you’re buying art to make sure it’s genuine and reliable, of course, but it’s a great place to find new artists. And it’s so wonderful for Christmas presents, just wonderful. I don’t know how we managed without it for all these years, do you?” She was babbling again, and kept babbling on the way home. “Here’s the new Superstore, I don’t know if you’ve seen it. Not that you’d be impressed coming from

Westmount. They have a vegetarian section in there, so that's definitely progress. They still don't have one in our Price Saver, but I saw someone with sprouts in their cart today, and people are starting to know what frozen yogurt is."

"Progress indeed," Mary scoffed. "Does your coffee shack make lattes yet?"

"It's a donut place, but they do now."

"Well, whatever they call it."

"Anna had a job there one summer. She can make coffee for you when you want some."

Anna didn't relish the thought of attempting a latte for Mary, who would demand extra foam or nuts on top or a more pungent brew or *something*. And coffee shack? Tim Horton's was no shack. It was not only the community's main hangout (Dusty's coffee sucked) but as commercial a place as any other fast food joint, using the same mass-produced recipes as they did in Montreal. Not somewhere her parents were keen for her to work, but how many moneymaking options were there for teenagers in West Prince? Her piano playing at Kelly's Family Restaurant could only go so far. Besides, she got free donuts. Such a slim young woman wasting her stomach on greasy food: Mary wouldn't approve of that part.

Caroline seemed to have an agenda once in the house: neat arrangement of suitcases, Maria Callas CD, Anna how about you talk to your grandma at the table while I get dinner ready, maybe play dominoes (which were conveniently right there). Mary, hovering, had her mind on other things. "A bird in your living room?" she gawped.



“He’s very sweet, Mom. His name’s Callas and he’s really no trouble at all.”

“Don’t tell me that thing can sing.”

She sounds like me, thought Anna, for a moment surprised.

“In his own way, yes. If you want to hear music, Anna’s gotten quite good at both her instruments.”

“She’s always been good,” said Mary dryly. “What does that bird eat?”

“Mostly his feed mix. Some leftover vegetables. Sometimes millet if he’s good.”

“Good for garbage disposal, I suppose. Do you let it out of its cage?”

“No.” She was lying.

“And how are things with you, Carrie-bird? Any men chasing my best daughter?”

*No one should call me Carrie-bird and live to tell about it*, Anna remembered her mother saying once. She stifled a giggle.

“No, none at all.”

“Good. You’d better keep it that way, with all the trouble brought on by the last one. I don’t trust your judgement.”

Callas had started cheeping a little while ago. “It sure does make an awful sound,” said Mary, her hands folded primly.

Irena was leaning against Anna’s locker when she got there. “Where were you for lunch with Darien? I could have used some moral support!”

“Let me get my books,” said Anna, scanning Irena’s face. A gloat was edging its way through the pout mask.

“Not before you tell me where you were.” Irena crossed her arms. In her platforms she was definitely taller than Anna, her blouse and jeans fitted, hair braided, eyebrows plucked thin and arching sternly. Anna considered shoving her.

“Just in a practice room.”

“Why didn’t you want to go out with us?”

“You guys needed some special time alone!” She felt a Sarah-like smirk cross her face. “So move, then tell me how it went.”

Irena complied and Anna bent to collect her books. Irena didn’t speak until she looked up.

“It was fun. He’s so nice, strangely polite and everything. He kept asking about my friends and why none of them wanted to come along, and asking questions about school and the town and things. Do you mind if I gush a little?”

“Go ahead,” Anna laughed.

“He insisted on paying for everything although I said we’d split the bill. I wonder if that means he likes me. He kept asking about my compositions, and when I said my dad had immigrated from Russia he wanted to hear *everything* about it! OK, forget I said a little. Shut me up. He’s so cute. No, beyond cute. Don’t you think he’s gorgeous?”

“Sort of.”

“We’re going to practice together today and try each other’s instruments. He’s never played a clarinet before. He’s already asked some other people to come too, so you should come with us.”

“Sure.” Anna still wasn’t sure she wanted to be bothered seeing her friend and a

new love interest cooing to each other, not now when everything in her life was getting annoying, but she didn't want to upset Irena by not showing up. What else would she do anyway, listen to Sarah plan another fantasy date or go outside to sulk?

She slung on her backpack and started towards class.

Laine was late, which wasn't like her. Anna sat at the smaller piano and waited. Normally, she didn't practice before a tutorial. Like writing an exam, she liked to have her head clear before she started. But sitting on the bench in the utter quiet of a soundproof music room provoked too many voices: That isn't quite true, you're just tall. Does your coffee shack make lattes yet? We only started dating recently. Get started on this and the path of order would unravel. She tore up the piano keys' cover and slammed into the Presto movement from Ravel's Piano Concerto. The concert piece was a speeding train, a manic swinging bridge, the only way to banish—others' words? Dust.

“Your playing has energy today.” Laine's lanky figure stood above her, hair askew. She moves like a cat, Sarah had said once, and they'd had fun theorizing ways the awkward woman could have learned her stealth. Anna imagined that Laine's firm demeanour must block the bile of others' lives from her mind, a thought that was likely false but comforted her anyway. “Though I'm pretty sure it's called Presto for a reason, and not Prestissimo.”

Anna was an emotional pianist the way some people were emotional eaters, and Laine knew that by now. Anna simply grinned at the accusation. “Just warming up.”

“If you don't slow down, I'll have to bring out the metronome.” Laine swung

herself into place at the grand piano bench. “Are you nervous?”

“Not really. Well, not about the concert,” she amended. “It’s not like this is my first.”

“True, but I was nervous at least the first twenty times I did it.” So casual, like dropping a pebble into a lake, stirring the waters. “Do you want to go over the program again, tell me if it’s OK?”

I don’t see how we could change it at this point, Anna would have said to Caroline. But not to Laine. She nodded. Laine rummaged through her briefcase and pulled out a typed sheet.

*Fall Program with Pianist Anna Stern*

*Accompanying Pianist Laine Winters*

*Island Symphonie Orchestra*

“Symphony is supposed to have a Y,” she corrected automatically. “Not an i-e.”

“Thanks.” Laine took a pencil and fixed it.

Anna scanned the program. Start off with Beethoven for a dramatic entrance, then Chopin, Ravel, and Saint-Saens, ending on the Carnival of the Animals. Anna had suggested that because she knew Laine would laugh. She liked how the composer's “animals” included things like fossils, pianists, and a jab at music critics—“people with long ears.”

“What do you want me to play now?” asked Anna, setting down the program.

“Everything’s OK?”

“Yeah.”

Laine paused. "Let me hear you play that Presto a little bit slower. Try not to muck up any notes this time."

It was hard to get the zest back, and Anna's hands felt too measured for the swinging bridge, too robotic to dredge in any muck. "I'm sorry," she muttered at the end, pressing her hands together to avoid banging them on the keys. She began again. Faster but not much better.

"Let's take a break from that," said Laine. "Play something *you* want to play."

She plunged into a piano version of Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries. Ay-a, Ay-a. Don't think of that, just move your hands into a thunderous crescendo.

"You like that song," said Laine. "Want me to add it to your repertoire?"

Bird cries. Adrenaline. A splintering sound. "No!"

"A song for just yourself. I understand."

That wasn't it, and Anna didn't want to clarify. It was nice of Laine not to ask questions.

"Feel up for practising another concert piece?"

"Maybe something like Marche Funèbre."

"Go ahead."

The Chopin funeral march was detached, hollowed, with bars of measured grief periodically interrupted by bars of furious jollity. Weight gone delicate. Anger in a happy mask.

"Let's hear the first few bars again."

For the rest of the lesson they went through the Chopin, phrase by phrase,

polishing. Anna didn't notice the time until the bell rang.

“As soon as you're able,” said Laine as Anna shrugged into her backpack, “I'd like you to work on Ravel's Presto again.”

Anna looked up at her. From that angle, the sun through the music room blinds threw a stripe across her face, and Anna felt a brief pang of attraction. She looked down at Laine's long knotted hands and saw the same old hands that corrected her piano playing every week. The spell dissolved.

Anna disliked Math class even more than she'd disliked Chorus in the years when it was mandatory. She sat by herself, doodling while Michelle and Sean helped each other with equations or wrote each other notes (she couldn't tell which—most likely some of both) at the desks in front of her. Anna's Masterpiece #1: The Lopsided Espresso Cup! Anna's Masterpiece #2: The Grand Piano With Scowly Face! (Come to think of it, that face looked a little like her grandmother's.)

“To find the circumference of a circle, you . . .”

Masterpiece #3: The Bored Chipmunk. Masterpiece #4: The Evil Cooking Pot. Masterpiece #5: Cartoon Anna, Onstage in Sleek Dress. Her face was too thin (if only!) and her eyelashes were too long. The piano didn't have a scowly face. She drew the silhouette of a swan behind her. That wasn't a swan, that was an awkward-looking duck. She was glad when the bell interrupted her failed attempts to fix its bill.

The practice room. She got her clarinet from her locker and headed for 102, their usual spot. Chen and Sakura the trombone were already there. “Hey. Are Irena and

Darien coming to this one?" she asked.

"I don't know. Probably. What do you want to play?"

"How about the German hymns?"

"Sure." They searched their folders for the medley they were practising for concert band.

They heard laughing before the door swung open. Irena had a hand on Darien's shoulder. Anna was relieved that his wasn't on hers.

"Irena was just telling me a joke," said Darien. He turned to her. "You should tell it to your friends."

"Oh, they've heard it before."

"I've got another one," said Darien. "An Irishman, a Scotsman and a Frenchman walk into a bar. What an excellent example of cross-cultural integration!"

"They're missing the non-Europeans," said Irena over Chen's laughter.

"So they are. We need a search warrant!"

Chen blew on Sakura the trombone. "What was that?" asked Darien.

"Supposed to be fanfare," she said into her music stand.

"Oh!" He chuckled too loudly. Anna contemplated what his face might look like with light splayed across it. This was where Math class might be helpful. Math and Art, a face full of fractals.

"Should we practice?" said Irena, opening her clarinet case. Darien opened his alto sax case and secured his neck strap.

"You know, you really shouldn't have brought that in here with us," said Anna.

“Why?”

“Men aren’t allowed to have sax with minors.”

What had possessed her to be so bold? Anna didn’t say bold things around guys, not since the old stalker days anyway. But he actually seemed to be laughing.

“That’s not even funny,” said Irena.

“Hey, we’re past the age of consent,” said Chen. Anna noted her obliviousness to Irena’s scowl. Then again, maybe she noticed and just didn’t care.

Chen started playing the German hymns and the others went quiet. Her part was mostly accompaniment, and when matched with the others shuffling papers and scraping music stands across the floor, it sounded grating. Anna was watching Darien and Irena more than the music, noting the intricacies of their little two-person dance that only Irena seemed to be aware of. Irena leaned in, Darien adjusted his reed. Irena smiled slightly, Darien scratched his ear. If Darien was an Anna Masterpiece, he’d probably be the Bored Chipmunk. The Gorgeous Bored Chipmunk.

Chen finished with a bom-bom-bom sound. “Alright,” said Irena brightly, “let’s try this all together now! On the count of three—” A nod towards Darien.

Battle of the clarinets? Bring it on! Anna drew breaths like gulps of water, holding until her stomach strained, smoothing the slurs of her First Clarinet part fluid with her tongue. She noticed that Irena was doing the same, holding on extra long for dramatic effect. She couldn’t curb a glance at Darien. Burnished hair, symmetrical Greek nose. Like Irena, no flaws detectable, no matter how she looked. Don’t look. Irena was looking too. Eyes on music. Music. It was nothing, Anna would say if asked, she was just looking



up in a state of melodic transport. *Es ist genug*. It is enough. But it wasn't.

"Let's switch instruments," said Irena after the hymns.

"And play the same thing?" asked Darien.

"First we'd better see if we can get any sound out of them," said Anna.

Irena offered Darien her clarinet, leaving Anna to hand hers to Chen and accept the trombone. "You purse your lips and blow into it like this," said Chen.

"I know how to blow in a mouthpiece."

But her attempts to control the notes with the slide resulted in random sputtering sounds. Try and it squelched, try and it squawked. Chen had a much easier time getting the clarinet. Well, no one could call it a hard instrument, thought Anna. Irena was playing an entire, clear melody on the alto sax.

*What go-oes up*

*Must co-ome down*

*Spinning wheel*

*Got-ta go rooound*

She must have played one before.

"You should try my alto, Anne," said Darien. "It's way easier. It is Anne, right?"

"Anna."

"Wow, I'm sorry."

"No problem. They sound alike."

"Half note versus whole note. One's twice the length of the other. I really should've remembered."

“No, it’s fine.”

“Irena, can you get Anna a new reed?”

Anna watched her dip silently into the alto case, her face hidden. Deliberately, she was sure.

Accept saxophone, a heavy golden body, its weight unexpected. Tighten neck strap, pulling hair casually away from neck so Darien can see its full slenderness. Lick reed, taste slightly sweetened tongue depressor. Wipe mouthpiece clean of remnants of Irena’s spit. Two ways she’d seen people hold a sax: to the side or between their legs. She tried holding it to the side but found she couldn’t trust the weight, and switched. Accidentally looked up towards the acute triangle of Darien’s chest region. Effects like fractals in her pulse. Look down so you can catch enough air to blow into the thing. She hoped she wasn’t blushing.

You played it the same way as a clarinet, only spreading your fingers wider and feeding more air. It wasn’t hard. Fingers could relax, didn’t have to press so precisely against the holes because there were keys that did the job. A G was sonorous, filled the air, spread. It was also a little sharp, so she adjusted. Irena was back on clarinet, showing off her fancy fingerwork with cadenzas and crescendos, but Anna, Anna was louder. She who was sometimes soloist but never *louder*. She paused, then tried a scale. A few mistaken notes, the ones that differed, but she figured it out quickly enough.

“Can I try the hymns?” she paused long enough to ask Darien.

“Sure. You just picked up that thing, do you know what the notes are?”

“Not really,” she admitted.

“Well, the first note you were playing was G-”

She launched into the scale again—the G scale was nearly the same as the clarinet's C scale. Darien shuffled the sheet of hymns onto her music stand. *Es ist genug*. She began. The instrument had a clear tone and crescendoed easily. It wasn't difficult, she thought, a giddy smoothness in her chest. There was something ascendant about it.

Anna was thinking lighthouses, promontories, vistas viewed from overhead. When the hymns were done she was ready to play again, to devour the hours in a sound which was simply more.

“Good tone.” She started, wanted the interruption to shut up. But it was Darien.

“Oh. Thanks.”

I want to play this. I want to have one. No, not Darien, stupid, the saxophone! What was Irena doing? Looking carefully down at the floor. Oh. She should have a turn with the alto again. After all, it was a music orgy. Everyone was swapping spittle. Even blondes whose elegance surpassed *potential*.

“We should play the hymns together,” said Chen. “We still haven't done that.”

The others mumbled agreement.

“I'll count us in,” said Chen. “One-two--” They made a muffled entrance, clarinets droning. Dead leaves—insulting—no, honestly, hymns had the energy of dead leaves. Then Anna came in, and found she could be heard even over the trombone.

She gave the saxophone back to Irena to play another jazz tune, Irena whose smile was wary, and let Chen play her clarinet again, Chen whose grin was eager. Darien the anime swordsman, Darien the prince, whoever he was, watched Irena. The attention he'd

shown Anna had been brief and cordial, and couldn't have been more.

She didn't have a clarinet tutorial that day, but she stopped in at Michael O'Hara's office during his prep period and her “practice session”. She was too old for teachers to hover around censoring her time, luckily. She waited for him to finish scribbling in his notebook and look up. Music notes on staff paper, with scattered words at odd angles on the pages, all too small for her to read anything.

“What do you want?”

“Hi. I just wanted to say I'm thinking of taking up a third instrument.”

“Which one would that be now?” He rolled the pencil between his fingers.

“Alto sax, if the school has any extra. If not, maybe a tenor.”

“And why did you come on my break to tell me that?”

“I don't know.” She queried herself, and found she really didn't. “I just thought I should.”

“And you want to do this while you're prepping for a concert *and* have an upcoming solo in my band piece.”

“Yes. I need to do something new, or fun, or just—something.”

“Well, fine. Go check the shelves. And don't stop practising your solo.”

She found a battered case without an owner, A.S. #8 painted in white on its crumbling leather. The instrument inside was dulled with scratches so that most of the original gold tone had become a muted silver. There was a dent in the right side of the

bell. Its former occupant had left a pile of coloured candy wrappers in the hollow with the neck strap. Saxophone slob. Anna decided to give them to Sarah, who made bracelets with them. There was a lot of room to hide small things in that hollow.

She tried it out, having persuaded Michael-never-Mike O'Hara to sell her a reed. The sound quality was as resonant as the other's, or more. The thought crossed her mind that maybe instruments got better with age like cheeses did, and she laughed at its absurdity. The older instruments had simply been made of better quality.

Alright, Anna, a license to be loud! Now better practice some piano. The clarinet stuff could wait.

And it didn't remind her of Darien, not really.

Mary was waiting with a plate of shortbread and a teapot on the table. At least she had the baking part of grandma-hood down, thought Anna wryly.

“What's that thing you're dragging, Anna?”

“A saxophone.” What does it look like, a weapon of mass destruction?

“How many things do you play now?”

“I'm just starting on this one.”

“I hope you'll stick around for awhile and not run off to your father's place. I have plans to take you shopping.”

The house smelled like disinfectant, also Mary's doing. Shopping and buying. Anna's friends would envy her, but she didn't like the idea of trailing a griping grandma through the mall's dully lit stores with their vapid, tuneless music. She poured herself

some tea, grabbed a piece of shortbread, and bit hard. Leaving the rest on the plate, she checked to make sure that the bird had enough food.

*Book Report: The Pigman*

*(In margins, a jowled pig, feet in mud, top hat on head, straw sticking from its mouth.)*

*Thesis: Love is ~~the main force in the book~~ but the way Pigman and teenagers/ the monkey/ wife/*

*But the characters just die don't they*

*All the characters The Pigman loved except for the kids but then he dies so it's like they've traded places*

*Judgment: good/bad: liked the book*

*-well written*

*-searching for meaning*

*-quirky: things they eat, monkey, things they do at house*

*(Cloud in the margin with a grumpy face)*

*-honest about stuff, not always flattering (Pigman name, Pigman is big kid, parents)*

*Real thesis: Love is a force that promises meaning but destroys ~~it things~~ substance. It wrecks the stuff it makes happen?*

“Anna, come down and help me set the table!”

She drew a line through “Real thesis” and went downstairs. Her mother was home. Mashed potatoes and salad and ham were served. After dinner she would give the

book report a break and brainstorm excuses for getting out of the house. Then practice.

Caroline had other plans. “Anna, I've got something in my room I want you to have a look at.” The only time she had something in her room for Anna to look at was when some Christmas article of clothing was slightly too small or a sweater had shrunk in the wash to the point of non-fitting. But there was no clothes pile on Caroline's cream-coloured quilt. The room was as always, immaculate. Carpet, curtains, bureau, everything was “creamy white,” the colour she'd painted the house after Hank left, chosen over “soft eggshell”. Anna saw little difference between that and the dingy white it had replaced, but apparently the house was “so much fresher now”. There was a doily on the bureau topped with a carved wooden bird, a Botticelli on the wall, and beeswax candles in the window. A well-dusted shrine not meant to be touched, but no clothes out anywhere. Strange how this one slight fact could be unnerving.

“You're smart, Anna.” Caroline's hair was being briskly sorted in her fingers.

“You're good at planning things, right?”

“What am I supposed to say to that—no, I'm stupid?”

“Be serious for once. Alright, so I'm babbling. But you know Tom. My mother doesn't know Tom. We made plans to get together tonight and I'm wondering if—you know, since your grandmother goes to bed early there's probably no need for you to do anything, I'm fairly confident but—”

“You mean you want me to cover for you?” Anna's laugh was too abrupt, incredulous.

“Well . . . yes. That *is* what I'm asking, isn't it?” Caroline laughed, a small lost sound, and turned towards the window.

Anna imagined herself telling Irena this: My grandma wants to take me shopping and my mom wants me to cover for her while she sneaks out to have sex with her coworker dude! No, she wouldn't tell Irena. Not Sarah either, who would make too big a deal of it. Darien would think it was hilarious, if she knew him better. Stupid thought.

“I shouldn't ask you this. I should be able to get out fine.”

Funny, that Caroline was talking about having to “get out” of her own house.

“I'll leave early in the morning so it will be alright.”

“No worries, Mom. I'll make sure your hot date is kept top secret. I'll do a better job than the CIA, even.” She flounced out of the room whistling the tune to “Love Shack.”

“Anna,” a thin voice followed, “please try to be quieter.”

*A love shack is a little old place where*

*We can get to-ge-therrr*

*Love shack bay-ay-beeeee*

She slammed the door to her room where two clothes piles had heaped up in the corner, not put away, and papers were spread across the floor. She plugged in her earphones and turned to Wagner's Ring cycle. Love Shack superimposed itself on the operatic words.

*Huggin' and a kissin', dancin' and a lovin'*

*Wearin' next to nothing, 'cause it's hot as an oven*



Her mother had had sex before, obviously. Otherwise she wouldn't be alive. She reckoned her mother hadn't had sex in a lot of years. No wonder she was turned on by this Tom guy. At Chen and Michelle's birthday sleepover (a no-guys affair), Sarah had tiptoed down into the basement with a story of overheard groaning and grunting in the master bedroom. The twins had looked at each other, horrified. Knowing Sarah, she might have made that up. She had imitated the sounds: "Uh, uh, ooh! Oh oh oh oh!"

Tom would bend towards Caroline at the door, take her coat, put it on a wire hanger in a closet full of hunting jackets. He'd usher her into a creamy-white house that was very clean and had brown furniture. He would have baked some lasagne in the oven even though it wasn't his forte, or maybe grilled some sausages for their midnight meal. If he really wanted her, both. She'd insist on having some fruits or vegetables and he'd drag out a bag of sorry-looking MacIntosh apples, on sale for \$2.99. They'd have gotten bruised in the trunk on the way home from the grocery. Tom would suggest they go to Kelly's Restaurant the next time they got together and Caroline would stammer some version of "Uh, uh, no." He'd ask and ask and she'd admit through her blush that her daughter worked there, so it would be awfully embarrassing, and anyway she didn't want them to be seen together and talked about in public. It wouldn't be safe to make out to her own offspring's romantic piano tunes, is what she would be thinking while saying that. Then again, having Anna there might remind her of old sexytimes. It might be an effective aphrodisiac.

"None of that, then," Tom would croon into her ear. He'd lean down and plant a wet one on her lipstick. During dinner they wouldn't be able to stop gaping and giggling

at each other. He'd feed her a sausage and it would make her think of his dick. They'd put dark chocolate in each other's mouths and get it smeared all over their faces. Maybe lick it off. Who knew translators' ideas of foreplay? He'd take her shirt off and unbuckle her bra right in the dining room. They'd make out on the couch cushions. Anna hoped one of them had condoms. His hands would have ink stains permanently under his fingernails and she'd find that hot. The hands would grab around in Caroline's furry pubic hair. He'd suck on Caroline's sagging breasts and come up with a sound like a plunger unsticking from a toilet. Then she would munch his dick like a sausage.

Anna's insides curdled.

She would spend the rest of the evening in her room, not working (except the music which didn't count anyway, or shouldn't), not planning, listening for footsteps.

Now Brünnhilde was singing:

*Bang, bang, bang, on the door, baby.*

That song was really fucking stupid.

## Chapter 5: Washing Machine

It was jacket weather, the trees and ground collapsing together in waterfalls of sun-coloured, fire-coloured, tiger-coloured leaves. Liss stood on the grass hill that had almost all turned brown, the one facing the school or away from the school depending which way you looked. Liss was looking away, towards the oak tree and the four pine trees and the road where cars moved like snails. Away so the sun shimmered and blended the edges of her into the edgeless scene.

“I'm the Queen of the Castle!”

Anna wanted to be the Queen of the Castle, but Liss was the one who'd made the fort. Liss was the one on the top of the hill and she was the one looking up, behind.

“What do I get to be?”

“You're the Dirty Rascal!”

“No I'm not!”

“You are too! And you know why? 'Cause you're not tough enough to beat me!”

Another Anna rushed up the hill, barrelled into Liss and started punching.

Another Anna was six feet tall, as big as her dad, and stood there with the sun coming from her body. Another Anna knew exactly what to do.

“Look,” said Liss to Anna still on the low ground, “you don't even know how to fight. That's 'cause you ain't got any sisters.”

“Ain't's not a word,” said Anna. That was what her mom said.

“No, it's ain't *ain't* a word. Everyone knows that.”

Anna's stomach felt like a sewer pipe. She noticed something climbing on her shoe. It was a red ant—she must have stepped on one of their nests! She screamed and jumped away.

“What's wrong?” Liss had turned and was facing her now.

“It's a, it's nothing, just an old red ant.”

“You better be careful, you know how they bite. Those things could kill you.”

They had started doing journals in English class. Anna hated her handwriting which looked like threads pulling in all directions. She spent most of her time drawing pictures. After the date (she couldn't tell if the 7 in it was backwards or forwards), she took her red crayon and outlined a giant insect. She gave it a pair of crunching jaws like the pictures of bugs in books and tried to make the eyes look mean. In a speech bubble she wrote *I kill yo yuo*—that didn't look right, so she wrote in her name instead. *I kill yo yuo Anna*.

After that was chorus: “Everybody on the risers!” Sopranos in front, Anna and Liss side by side. They were learning a song about peace with words in Latin. Anna wondered if Mr. Wilder, the teacher, could speak Latin or just sing in it. What country did people speak Latin in? Maybe his family came from there. The kids were noisy with their words she could just half-hear and their snorting laughs and and one or two with gum which wasn't allowed, Mr. Wilder calling “Spit that out in the garbage can!”

“I got gum too,” Liss whispered. “I'll give you some after school.”

“You're not sposed to,” whispered Chen beside them.

“You weren't sposed to hear,” hissed Liss. “And plus gum's fine for after school.”

The song went something like “Donanoby spachum pachum”. The words on the page didn't look quite like that, but that's how they sounded. Liss's voice was loud, like her mother's. It cut across the others' in a lighthouse beam of sound. No, a lighthouse beam wouldn't be so much like the crystal in the breakfront, wouldn't be so see-through and breakable, wouldn't lift quite so much. Copper hair and a shirt that showed her collarbones and stage lights that were just enough to read what Anna could read of those funny words, just enough to make Liss's face look soft and bits of gold catch in the little threads sticking out from her clothes. Anna felt something lighten in her ribcage. She felt a need to press against the air. She pushed her voice up and up, following, trying to be more than what she heard. And her wave-like voice was loud, so loud she was bound to be noticed, pronouncing Spachum Pachum with every sound perfect from her lips. She was above, hovering up there where the millions of stage lights were turned on or off, where the tips of curtains hung just at the edge of sight.

She ended a beat after the rest of them, showing how long she could hold on.

Mr. Wilder kept her after class. She waited, pulse ticking like a sped-up metronome, as everyone else ran and shuffled noisily out of class. Liss put gum in her mouth on the way out and handed some to Michelle. Anna probably wouldn't get some now.

“Anna, your singing is lovely.” The teacher, a wall of curly hair with a tie on, was right in front of her.

He'd noticed how far she'd gone. Maybe he'd seen her fly to the curtains for a

moment. Had she been like Liss? But Liss hadn't been kept after class.

“You know when you're playing one piano and your teacher's playing the big one, how you try to match her notes?”

“Yeah.”

“As I've said, I'd like you to do this with singing. We're a chorus, and the point is to have a sound that blends together, not to have one person stick out. If someone's too loud or off key or something, it makes the whole thing sound bad. Listen and try to match the people around you.”

She hadn't been off key! She wasn't stupid, she knew that much. Did she sound bad? She needed to ask people, 'cause the Chorus teacher didn't know anything.

She thought of asking Liss or her mother, but she couldn't ask someone who sounded like lit-up glass or someone who sounded like an ocean. She could ask her father but he'd probably yell.

“Come to my house after school,” Liss had said the day before, and her mom had let her. So Anna had come to school with a little yellow note in slanted writing she couldn't read, and the secretary with big shoulders had given her a pass for Bus 54.

“Got any candy, Joe?” Liss yelled as soon as they were up the stairs.

The bus driver held out a bag of licorice nibs. They were the red kind, not the kind Anna's dad liked, but Anna liked them fine. She'd never had a bus driver. Such a wonderful thing, a man in a pointy blue hat who gave out candy.

Liss grabbed a handful and started towards the back. Two older boys were

fighting over the back seat. They sat two seats in front of all the noise. Liss snuggled in by the window, leaving Anna to squeeze between the seat and a curved hump that jutted up from the floor. Her legs had to sit on top of it. But least she had the candy, a few bright pieces closed in her fist. She'd make them last 'til Liss's house.

The bus played country music, the kind her dad listened to in the truck, a song about a sad girl. Liss sang along to all the words, though it was harder to hear the light in her voice over the dull-sounding radio. "Come on, Anna, you gonna sing?" she cut in during the middle. Then she broke back into song. Anna couldn't see much out the window, but what she did see was great, the bus's extra height turning tractors and barns into farm toys.

"Bump!" yelled the kids around them, and the bus lurched and Anna flew a little off the seat and her legs fell hard on the solid curved hump and her hand uncurled and the candy bits bounced on the floor. Her legs hurt. She looked at her hands which were red and sticky. She started licking them. "Bump!" She was thrown up again and thrown back down, landing into Liss. "Ow," they both said at the same time, then laughed.

Liss had to grab Anna's hand and nudge her. "This is our stop." Anna was glad her hand was licked clean as they skipped into the yard. A clipped lawn with short clipped trees, a driveway made of pebbles, a big grey house with a porch that had pots of flowers and chairs on it. The window on the door looked like a fan with flowers drawn in the glass. Anna wasn't sure exactly how to tell an old house from a new house, but she thought this one looked new.

“Hello,” said a face at the door. Liss's mother didn't look at all like her. She was round and white like a biscuit, with her blond hair up and fancy work clothes on. Then Anna remembered that Liss was adopted, and noticed the two little bodies in the background. The twins looked like her mother, except that their shirts were pink and had animal faces on them. When Liss's mom told them to say hi, they darted behind her and stood watching from across the room.

The inside looked new, too, but it had cabinets of old stuff—dishes with flowers on them, little glass angels, paperweights with more flowers in them (some even seemed real). It had painted rooms and Liss grabbed Anna's hand and pulled her into a room-sized explosion. Footsteps followed them.

“This is the playroom.” came Liss's mom's voice while Anna gaped. “I'm sorry it's messy.”

It was huge, white and unfinished, with slides and Barbies and stuffed animals and pieces of costumes and giant trucks clumped on the floor. In one corner was a pretend oven with too-bright plastic foods that could fit in Anna's hand, in another a puppet theatre with hollow felt animals slumped on the floor in front. The walls were splendid. Coloured markers had drawn and written all over them. *I was here, L.M., Love, Piece, Shcool is garbidge, MOZART ALWAYS*, handprints, squiggles, cats, trains, dinosaurs, and the smallest wall covered in music notes.

“You can write on the walls?” asked Anna.

“Yeah. We got lots of markers and stuff.” Liss balanced to the corner through the mess and rustled through a pile of puppets. She came up with pink, orange, blue, green,



red and black. “The other ones are somewhere. What colour d'you want? Dibs green.”

You weren't allowed to write on the walls, not anywhere that Anna knew of. But the twins stepped up and fought over the orange. Anna backed away from the screaming into a wall with a train and squiggles chugging across it, but Liss dropped the markers, grabbed the twin who was punching the other and pulled her off. “*You* take the red, Katie.” She forced a marker into the girl's hand. “And Cassie, you take the pink.” Liss stuck the orange in her own pocket. The twins were already scribbling across the lowest parts of a wall.

The world and its rules had done backflips into crazyland. Anna took the blue. She started to draw a castle. It looked like a box with funny pipes sticking out. She didn't want to scratch it out because it was on a wall. How did you spell castle again?

“Come listen to me practice.” Anna frowned at the lopsided castle she didn't want to just leave there, but followed Liss.

The piano was in a music room which had stands and violin cases and drums. A lace cloth sat on top of it, and on top of that was a statue of a man's head, glaring. “Mom got the piano the year before I was adopted,” said Liss.

“How old were you?”

“Just a baby. I don't remember anything.” She said that proudly. “The twins are in piano too. Mom uses these tapes on them because she wants them to learn to play faster.”

“What tapes?”

Liss was placing herself on the piano bench, not listening. She played some scales, then began a Mozart minuet. Anna couldn't remember which one it was, but she

recognized it. It had been one of the songs she'd practised with Mrs. Hobbes. She missed a note and started again. Her hands dragged too much. "Try it faster," Laine would say. It was an easy song.

*I'm better at it than she is.*

Anna found a chair and sat on it. It was across the room, had a music stand in front, and wasn't very comfortable, but where else could she go?

Liss turned pages noisily and started on another song. Still dragging. Anna wondered about the tapes. Would they make the twins better? Had Liss listened to them too? In the corner was a piece of furniture with shelves of music books on top and shelves of tapes stacked on the bottom, probably hundreds of gleaming cases. Liss's mom had so many more regular music tapes than her mom did. Was she allowed to look?

*I want to play one.*

Liss's hair glowed in this light too, but it didn't look magical. Her back was so thin. She kept playing, song after song. Anna was bored.

*I want to listen to some real music.*

She thought about building a real castle on the hill in the schoolyard. It would have tinted windows like Uncle Theo's van, so that she could see out but no one else could see her in there. She'd wear a blue cape that sparkled like the sky and eat candy on golden plates. She'd keep a tape recorder and headphones inside and decide what rules to make for the world. She wouldn't allow there to be bugs.

"Now I'm gonna practice violin." She hadn't realized that Liss had finished. "Listen to this." Liss put the instrument to her chin and sat in the chair beside Anna, in

front of a music stand. “This is a chromatic scale.” She, Anna, knew what a chromatic scale was. She wasn't stupid.

The violin hummed through semitones. It fit against Liss's chin as if it had been built to go exactly there. Then a song that Anna didn't recognize, mostly in key and quivering slightly the way violins did, coming from a honeysweet hollow caveplace no piano could. Liss who could play two instruments and sing. No wonder Anna was better at piano. Maybe if she'd had Liss's mother she would have been able to do more things. Maybe if she'd had special tapes. Or maybe she'd never have been able to.

*I'm bored*, she tried to pretend, tried to wish herself back to the castle. She heard something that was probably the twins screaming at each other. Footsteps came into the room and Liss's playing stopped.

“I'm wondering if you girls are hungry.”

“Yeah,” said Anna before she thought whether that was polite.

“Good, I've got cookies and milk on the table.”

The cookies were chocolate chip and dry. They were all the same roundness and size. Anna wondered what was wrong with them. Oh yeah, they probably came from a box.

Something scratched at the door and Liss's mom got up to open it. Black fluff bounced in, jumped up, and pressed its paws against her. Liss broke off a piece of her cookie and held it under the table. Anna waited for her mom to say something. You weren't supposed to feed animals junk food. But the dog pranced over and grabbed the piece of cookie in its mouth without a word being said. It dropped the piece on the floor,

leaned its head down, chomped and gulped.

“How do you like school, Anna?” asked Liss's mom.

Anna found herself answering a bunch of questions she didn't really want to answer. Where did she live? What did her parents do? How long had she been playing piano? What kind of music did she like most? She didn't know what to say to that one.

“Anna likes everything,” said Liss. “Like me.”

Anna pictured the house as a washing machine. People like Liss were drawn in to the middle of it, tossed around with toys and dogs and music stands and soapsuds, and came out clean.

“Let's play Land of Music,” she said, not wanting to think of washing machines.

“No, that's for the grass fort.” They were standing in the living room next to the music room, a round place with bookshelves and squishy blue furniture. Liss spread her arms above the corner easy chair. “This is my beauty salon. Do you want a haircut?”

“Sure. How much is it?” Anna sat down.

“Free for you, ma'am. Wait while I get my things.” Liss went off and came back holding a spray bottle, a mirror and scissors.

*You aren't going to really cut my hair*

“You'd look lovely with a little trim on that side” and Liss was edging closer, sliver of metal shining in her hand breath in face broken rhythm hair spilling across Anna's eyes *this is just pretend* snipping sound and something falling in her lap

Anna screamed.

“Shut up.”

Her ribs were banging against her arms stiffed at her sides like a toy soldier her eyes too soft water shivering in them

“You look really pretty. Here, look in the mirror.”

Her reflection was forced on her, face all puffed, a chunk on the right side of her hair came down just past her ear when the rest was to her shoulder, too blurred to see right because she couldn't stop the crying.

“You said you wanted a haircut. Want me to fix it?”

“No!” *You can't fix it you can never fix it I've come out the wrong end dirty*

“Wanna play Land of Music now?”

She gulped so she could talk. “No.”

“Wanna see my horse collection?”

“No.”

“You sure you don't want me to fix it?” The scissors flashed again.

Anna tried to think of what could fix it. Not the scissors that had ruined it. The boring aisles of church came to mind, the Sunday School lessons with a loud-voiced lady who had a nest for hair.

“God'll fix it!” she sobbed. The Sunday School lady said he'd answer prayers so if she prayed with a pure conscience and a pure heart, He'd have to listen, wouldn't he, like grown-ups didn't? If it just took him seven days to make the world, hair shouldn't take very long, unless he had a waiting list but she didn't think God worked like doctors.

“God's not even real,” said Liss.

“Yeah he is.”

Liss set down the mirror and bottle and scissors. “How do you know? 'Cause your Sunday School teacher told you?”

“Cause everyone knows he is.” She felt her chopped off hair. All wrecked.

“I proved that he's not. I prayed for stuff before and it never happened.”

“You probably didn't have a pure conscience when you did it,” said Anna.

“Go into church next time and just ask him to talk to you. Say you won't believe him if he won't talk to you, and see if he says anything back.”

The chair pressed into her uncomfortably. Her eyes felt onioned. She'd never asked God to talk to her. Wasn't that Interrupting, and Not Polite? What would his voice sound like? A man who'd turned into a burning bush, and terrified shepherds, and flooded the whole world—she wasn't sure she wanted to know. Thunder shivered her mind. He would be mad is probably what would happen, and what would he do then?

“Anna, you OK?”

In the Castle of Treble Clef, a red cape and solid gold sceptre were waiting for the Other Anna. She moved towards the throne. There were fires burning at either side, piled with wood, pulsing to the Mouse King music. She couldn't get too close or they could burn off layers of her skin. A spark jumped towards her. A gravelly voice called down from above: “God wants to talk to you.”

The face attached looked like it belonged to a cliff, all points and tiny indents. Sharp eyebrows.

“Bone-joor.”

She couldn't even understand it.

“Bon-jour. Say it.”

She felt a leash close around her throat.

“Say it.”

“Bone-joor.” The word tasted heavy, strange.

“Bohn-jooooor,” the cliffman repeated. “Now body parts. Les yeux.” His thin finger pointed at her eyes while his own stared down. “Lez yeuh.”

Lez yeuh, luh nay, lah boosh.

“Lay sheuveu.”

Leaning in pawing hair her mom had said she'd fix and cut around a bowl until she looked like a boy like her father too shaggy too short and the face with nostrils like caves and clunk of footsteps in the hall sour somersaults in stomach (didn't know the word for stomach had he leaned in and said it) body shivered as if something was clawing it from the inside

Threw up on the floor. *Are you OK are you OK* Another Anna threw the golden sceptre and it clanged across the room.

*Our Father who art in Heaven* She pulled on her tights. *Hallowed be thy name*  
Buttoned her white dress in place.

“Hurry up, Anna, we can't be late for church.”

*Thy kingdom come* Buckled her white shoes. Snapped out the door to where the

car grumbled, warming up.

No one from school was in her Sunday School class, since Pine Grove was so far away from where she lived. The other kids chattered while she stared at the blackboard. There were coloured-in pictures of sheep taped up along the side. She could hear the organ going in the church, its full-bodied formal drone. The instrument's wall of pipes scared her, so she couldn't go near without slowing down, without her breath weakening. Organs were instruments and organs were body parts. She wondered about the link between Communion and organs, whether the instrument was a body the way the wafer and grape juice were, what it would do to the body of someone who played it. When would she get to play it? Did it have something to do with the voice of God?

*Don't think about God*

*Ask him*

*Wait*

Wait til after Sunday school, til after the teacher's mouth had stopped moving, til after the board had been erased, the pages about Jesus coloured in, when the other kids stopped talking and went out to the yard to play tag, the grown-ups went out to munch on cookies and slurp coffee and stand in little circles.

The church emptied out into the reception room and the sun-soaked yard around it. Anna moved into the space that everyone had left. She'd been to smaller churches but this was the vast and hollow kind where everything pointed up—the wooden cross by the altar, the praying hands on the blue-swaddled statue of Mary, saints bending to perform miracles across the stained glass windows with peaks like daggers, the angled ceiling so



many feet above her head. The organ with its pipes that could swallow and fit her inside, the light glowing off them slightly blue. By the altar, another statue of some saint lying on a coffin, carved from grey stone. She wasn't allowed to ask anything. Couldn't go in someone's house and ask the owner if they were real, not when everyone was certain and even a pious man's attentions could bring a thunderstorm. If she spoke to God, the saint's sleeping eyes would open and that massive robed body would grind up from its uncomfortable bed. If she spoke to God, Mary's head would raise itself and stare. A wind would ripple across the altar, and what would it do when it hit her? The organ, like a vacuum cleaner, would bellow and suck her in.

Her skin prickled up.

She stood in front of the altar in the coat of her body, shivering.

Chapter 6: Progress Donuts and Jubilation Fried Chicken

*Hey Liss,*

*How are you? I know we haven't talked in a long time but*

*Hi Liss,*

*Or are you going by Felicity now? Let me know because I don't want to use the wrong name*

*Dear Liss,*

*I'm sorry for not writing earlier. I was depressed and*

*Liss,*

*I was a jerk and I'm really sorry*

Anna crumpled the papers and looked at them sitting on her desk for ten full minutes before she threw them away. She hadn't been in contact with Liss for over a year since Liss had moved anyway. This was a distraction from her mom's freaky sex life, a distraction from Darien (and thinking of her mom's sex life was leading her to think of Darien now—just great).

Maybe she could get his attention. Hang out with Irena whenever they had plans to get together. Moral support, yup. What did Irena have that she didn't? (Beauty, curves,

elegance, cool, everything.) Well, what could she do about it?

Get some sleep, Anna, her mom would say if she could hear. If she wasn't off. . . fornicating somewhere, presumably with better things to think about.

Check on Mary.

Or not. The living room didn't have a door, and her grandmother was hopefully sleeping. Waking her would be a huge mistake. She couldn't hear snores. She didn't know if Mary snored, didn't see her enough.

She hadn't practised as much as she was supposed to that day. One hour of each, if she counted the clarinet's assembly, dis-assembly, and cleaning. Hadn't even touched the saxophone. She sat staring at the stuffed cat by her pillow. She was so tired.

She woke up to yipping.

“And why'd you come in with all your clothes on? Why's your hair all messed up?”

Stretched and shook her head free from her crossed arms. She'd fallen asleep at her desk. There were pencil marks across her forearms and the notes for her book report were smudged.

“It's the middle of the night and you can't even let your mother sleep?”

“Look, I'm sorry. I wasn't sleeping well and needed to go for a walk.”

“Oh, I believe that alright!”

“Well, I did!”

“Where were you?”

“Out in the woods.”

“Carrie, that look on your face doesn't say woods, it says sex.”

But this wasn't supposed to happen. Anna had been on guard. If she'd been doing her job, Caroline wouldn't have been found out. But what could she have done? Stayed up all night and kept watch on every shadow in the house? Stood outside the door and come in with her mother when she arrived, so things might look suspicious but innocent?

Ridiculous.

Her mother asked too much. She, Anna, had concerts to prepare for and book reports to write and. . . living to figure out.

“How many times have you done this to me? How many times? Your own mother! Alright, if you won't treat me as your mother, at least treat me as a house guest. Can you. At least. Find. The decency?”

Anna grabbed some clothes from her drawer and slunk toward the shower.

“I was hoping at least one of you girls would turn out right. But you. You're a failure!”

“This is my life and I do what I want, when I want!”

She heard a clattering that may or may not have been a dish breaking. Then she heard nothing because the water was on and running like a warm motile envelope over her body. She scrubbed her stomach. She scrubbed her legs. She scrubbed and scrubbed between them.

That day she pulled her hair into a French braid and went to lunch with Irena and

Darien. Only the three of them. Told herself *keep a cool head, keep a cool head*, which could be hard to do with Darien's jokes and her own nerves quavering. He smelled slightly spicy and wore a grey plaid shirt. She counted glances. He didn't seem to be looking at Irena more than her. He didn't seem to be looking at her more than Irena.

“So Irena says you have a big concert coming up, Anna?”

Irena was telling him things. When? Where?

Things about her—an advantage. Had he asked?

“Uh, uh, yeah.” The sounds tripped over each other. Stupid!

“That's awesome. I mean, you aren't any older than us, right, but you're doing a concert with a symphony and everything?”

“Yeah.”

“What's that like?”

“It's great,” said Irena, smiling widely. “She's doing a full programme. Laine, you know Laine, is going to be in it too, but Anna's the star, of course.”

Anna hated herself for looking down and picking at her salad.

“I asked Anna.”

Unable to look up from the pale vinaigrette-spattered leaves in their plastic dish, she said without thinking, “Actually I'm nervous.”

“You'll do fine.”

God! Why couldn't she just look up? She did, and her eyes went back down.

This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. This wasn't who she was supposed to be.

She spent arpeggios thinking about her inability to carry on a conversation. In music she was fine. Rehearsed the trouble spots in her pieces over and over again. But her fingers kept tripping and slipping. She binged on the saxophone and its sound, slacked off on the clarinet. Hey, at least she was practising another wind instrument, keeping her chops in shape.

She had a shift at Tim Horton's that night, and her mom had to drive her. They left Mary at home to watch What Not to Wear on TV and scoff at the poor participants' fashion choices. At Kelly's Anna had to dress up for “entertaining,” but Tim Horton's required she wear a blue and tan shirt, a name tag, and a stupid little hat. The Small size was too short for Anna, so she'd had to take a Medium which hung off her arms. Sarah would have rolled up the sleeves and secured the sides with rubber bands, but that wasn't allowed.

She punched in her time card in the back and went out to the counter, where Mike was lounging on his elbows. She stood behind the other register.

“How's it goin'?” asked Mike.

“Alright. You?”

“Same. You missed rush hour. Go make some new chicken salad, will ya? We're almost out.”

She went to the walk-in fridge. When she'd started working there she liked to imagine it was a giant metal cryogenic unit, but pretending that had gotten boring. She took out the chicken, celery and mayo and went to the tiny back room, where she grabbed

a bowl. She glanced back at Mike, who was chewing on his lower lip.

This was not a place to think about Darien. This was not a place to think about the concert or the solo. This was a place to not-think. (The image of a red bedroom flashed up as if on a screen. The idea of her hands peeling boxers off.) This was going to be awesome chicken salad. For other people to eat. Because she knew the chicken had extra chunks of fat in it. Was bred like that. It had probably had part of its beak cut off and been raised in a cage, immobile. Her dad wouldn't eat it, if he lived in his own ideal world. Her dad's boxers were faded and had holes in the elastic. Ew, why on earth was she thinking of that?

Back to the counter. She felt her elbows sink against the hard top of it and stared.

A bald man shorter than Anna stood in front of her, rocking slightly.

“Hello, how may I help you?” she asked. Upward inflection on the ending.

“You wouldn't happen to, uh, you wouldn't have the directions for Dusty's Fried Chicken, would ya?”

“Oh, uh, sure. You go out to the right—”

“Wait, go slower. I need to write them down.” He fished a crumpled paper and a pen from his pocket.

Mike sauntered from his cash towards the customer. “Sir, would you like to order something from our menu to tide you over for the ride?”

Dusty's was only five minutes away. He sure was trying.

“Uh, no thanks, I'm just fine.”

“Are you absolutely sure about that?”

Anna drew him a little map and let him turn his back from the counter. “Would you like to try our donut of the week?” she remembered to ask then. They were all supposed to.

“It's the Maple Rainbow,” said Mike. “Ten percent of the proceeds from its sales go to the Tim Horton's Children's Camp.”

The man nodded curtly and left through the glass doors. Mike rolled his eyes at her. “People suck.” He reached into the display case and grabbed a Boston Creme.

“Hey, you're not supposed to eat on shift,” said Anna.

“Yeah, yeah. If this was my restaurant, people would eat all the time. It would show everyone how good the food was.” He bit into his donut and licked a splat of cream from his lips. “And it would have a better name than Tim Horton's. Like, The Taste of Super Awesome.” He flashed his fingers in the sign of a gun.

“Uh, yeah,” said Anna. “I'd go there.”

“Of course you would. 'Cause you're super awesome.”

She knew Mike had dropped out of school a few months ago, and wondered why. Maybe he just didn't like it.

At home there was a note on the counter. *Out tonight. Please feed bird and wash dishes.* Mary was sitting at the table, playing Solitaire. She didn't notice Anna coming in, still wearing her silly Tim Horton's uniform.

“I brought some Timbits,” said Anna, setting the box of extras on the counter.

“Your mother's out again.”



“I know, that's what the note said.”

“How could she do this to me?”

Anna opened the box and grabbed a glazed circle.

“Her own mother. Staying at her very own house. And she won't even tell me who she's with! She always had big dreams, Carrie. Wanted to be an *opera* singer.” She spread her skinny arms wide, a gesture that was almost comical. Anna observed tiny pouches of flesh hanging from them. “And what did she do? Marry a hippie farm boy and end up putting papers into French for the government out in the middle of nowhere. And now she works in a cubicle and talks through ear phones! Now Louise was always lazy. But your mother wasn't.” Anna couldn't pretend to eat anymore. “At least Louise has a husband with a reputable job.” Mary lowered her voice. “Your mother doesn't have good taste in men.”

Anna wanted to get out of the room without being rude. She couldn't think of a way that would work.

“And here she goes, saying she'd be glad for me to visit, and she leaves on me to sleep with some translating sleazebag! Warm welcome, isn't it?”

And she leaves me with this insufferable Eeyore and a note telling me to do all the chores, thought Anna, anger rising.

Mary looked at the table, momentarily, then cast her gaze back up. Her thin eyes locked onto Anna's. “Tell me you won't end up like her.”

Anna squirmed in her chair. “No, I mean, I won't.”

“I bet you're sick of her too.”

Anna said nothing.

“And he said if it was his restaurant, he'd call it The Taste of Super Awesome!”

Darien and Anna chuckled simultaneously.

“And wait til I tell you about my crazy grandmother! I'm not sure she's all there, if you know what I mean.” Anna twirled a finger around her ear in a crazy signal.

“Why, what did she do?”

Anna didn't know what was going on. Yesterday she had scarcely been able to speak to Darien, and today she couldn't stop talking. Words spilled from her mouth, emptied themselves from the pressurized vault of mental storage. She laughed out loud for no reason but relief.

“It's too bad Irena had a skill test this lunch break,” said Darien.

“Yeah.”

“It's nice to hear you talk, though.”

The old Anna was suddenly back, her eyes stuck down at the plate of cafe club sandwich slightly nicer than yesterday's salad at Dusty's.

“Irena, she talks a lot.” He shaped his hand like a puppet, opened and closed its mouth. “Blah blah blah. Blah de blah de blah. And Anna, she sits there and goes 'Huh?’” He made his other hand into a puppet and cocked it quizzically.

Between hysterics, Anna noticed that Darien's plate was already empty. She had only eaten a third of her food so far. “And Darien just goes 'Om nom nom!’” Her hand made giant munching motions at her sandwich.

“Maybe I should open a restaurant too, eh?”

“Maybe you should. What would you call it?”

“I think I'd name it like one of those Chinese places. Let's say... Love and Peace Diner. Or Progress Donuts.”

“Or a fried chicken place,” said Anna. “Jubilation Fried Chicken!”

“You'd need an opening ceremony for that. With fireworks.”

He was too good to be friends with her. But here they were, acting like they were friends already. And they couldn't stop talking.

So Darien had grown up in Ottawa and gone to another music school. So his parents had wanted him to play concerts and get famous and have babies who'd be doctors. So years later his mom had run off with, his dad suspected, a real doctor. So his dad had found a new job on the island, and he'd been given a choice—stay with his aunt and uncle and keep going to the same school, or leave and try to get into Pine Grove. So he'd been bored for too many years, was lagging behind his class, was unsure of himself, so he left. So he already liked the beaches here. So once he'd found his dad talking to his sock drawer. So he'd stayed behind the door listening and trying to be unseen, and that's how he'd caught his dad calling the furniture by his mother's name. So Darien hadn't trusted sock drawers since then. He laughed. And Anna? What was Anna's story?

So Anna tried to talk like her grandmother: *Anna, what are you doing in those scraggly clothes? I need to take you shopping.* So her mom had a boyfriend and her dad had a girlfriend. So she felt stifled in this spacious house. So she didn't know where to go but her dad's. So she wanted to run, but never mind, it was fine, why was she telling him

all this?

“So go to your dad's house.”

“Yeah, I think I will.”

“Don't think it, do it.”

“OK, I will.”

“I always think it. That's a Darien mistake. You don't get much farther.”

“You know what? I think I'll go today.”

“Are they expecting you? Does your mom think you're coming home?”

“Um, no and yeah.”

“Maybe that's not a good idea. Will they be mad?”

“Know what? If they are, I'll deal with it.”

For a moment Anna looked ahead and Darien looked down at his hands on the table.

“How's the saxophone going, by the way?”

“Oh, it's great!”

They walked to their World History class together for the first time.

Hank's apartment was downtown, within walking distance. Books on her back, clarinet in hand, Anna motored down the sidewalk past the tan rows of cheap apartments and the McDonald's and the Wendy's and the shopping mall with the kite logo which had shut down a few years back and was still standing empty. She would call Caroline when she got there.

Her dad lived in one of those cheap apartments a few blocks down. From there she could smell traces of salt water and chemicals from the French fry plant. It was on the second floor and she rang the doorbell, staring at the peeling paint as she waited, trying to divine patterns.

“Hello?”

Hank stood at the door in a black t-shirt with a hole in the sleeve. He had always been like that, preferred to wear the same rag-ready clothes from the top of his drawer even when he'd just been bought new ones. Caroline had made sure he'd dressed appropriately when needed, such as when going to Anna's concerts, and scolded him for wearing things with holes—not the new woman. Anna tried to picture her father at one of the concerts, clean-shaven in his grey suit and navy tie. The old Hank was leaner than the new, and his hair had more overgrown, unkempt curl. Mullet time, thought Anna—her next Masterpiece should involve Dad + hairdo, so she could show it to Darien and they'd laugh.

“Anna. What are you doing here?”

“Just thought I'd visit.”

“Well, don't stand on the doorstep. Come in.”

Anna wore her shoes into the house, sauntered through the narrow hallway past the girlfriend's welcome mat and into the kitchen where she poured herself orange juice in an old trade show mug. The fridge was full of jars. The girlfriend spent days of the summer making things in jars, pickling vegetables that Hank grew in his community garden plot or the living room or anywhere else they'd fit, congealing jam made with fruit

from the You-Pick. The rooms in the apartment were dusty, the sink piled with dishes. Anna slung her school bag and clarinet case onto an empty chair. “Anything to eat that's not pickled?”

“You can look around.”

“Apparently not.”

“There's bread on the counter. Stop being difficult.”

Difficult? That was the girlfriend talking through him. She cut herself a slab of whole wheat and covered it half in raspberry jam, half in blueberry, dipping from two different jars. She was hungrier than should be reasonable. She'd have to have another piece, and another, and another, and maybe a plate of acidic veggies. Yeah, wonderful cooking. She gulped down her juice. Her stomach churning with the surge of something more than hunger, she walked towards the living room.

“Stop!”

“What?”

“Don't go in the living room.”

“Why? Don't want me to ruin your yard sale furniture?”

“Just wait. I'll go with you.”

Hank marched brusquely past said yard sale furniture and Anna followed. He pointed to the old toy chest and she saw there was a cage on top with something in it. Something squeaking and scrabbling with claws. Anna screamed.

Hank knelt down by the cage and made clucking sounds. With one hand he opened the top, with the other scooped out a foot-long hairless rat which clambered

readily onto his shoulder.

“Isn't she beautiful? Her name's Lucy.”

Anna had edged as far away as possible.

“Don't be scared. She won't bite. Will ya, girl? Yeah, you're a good girl.” He made squeaking sounds and used a finger to stroke the top of the rat's head.

“Um, hi Lucy,” said Anna. “Does she, uh, come out of the cage a lot?”

“Yeah, sure, when Gwen's home we sometimes let her have the run of the house. She's very friendly.”

“Cool.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“You could have warned me there was a rat in the house!”

“I thought you'd like her. Thought she'd be sort of a surprise for you, you know?”

“Yeah, she was a surprise.” Anna stalked back into the kitchen. Now for that plate of pickles, and that rat had better go back in the cage.

Thankfully, she was gone when Hank joined Anna in the kitchen. “How's school?” he asked.

“You know, good.”

“How's work?”

“Fine.”

He sat at the other chair, said nothing, did nothing while she finished her snack. She took out her history textbook and started reading one of the sections, trying to imagine that Louis Riel was fascinating. She supposed that when you thought about him

he kind of was, what with his deterioration into madness, eventual claim to be a prophet, and insistence on renaming the days of the week while there was a rebellion to be managed. For whatever reason, he thought he had a calling. Back in the Liss days she would have related to that.

“Aren't you supposed to be practicin' your songs or something?”

“I can do it later. Hey, can I have a driving lesson?”

“Not tonight. I'm tired. More work to do in crop inspection here than back out West.”

“What if I come tomorrow?”

“We'll see.”

She was so grateful to the kind Department of Agriculture people out West for firing him and precipitating the divorce. He'd had the brains to find another job. It seemed there was no way parents could stay with one thing anymore, even Sarah's mom who'd worked with the school board for thirty years. The economy wasn't much worse than usual, but it was never exactly *nice*.

He leaned on the table, elbows forward, trying to think of what to say. She wasn't helping. But she had nothing to say either. They had grown strange around each other.

*Have you called yer mother yet?* That was the thing she knew he wouldn't ask.

She wasn't even looking at her textbook anymore, and he could see that.

“You should practice your music, eh?”

“I'm still hungry.” She grabbed more bread.

“Gwen's coming home and making supper. Don't spoil your appetite.”



Her mom called anyway, mid-bite. By the time the phone was passed to Anna, Caroline sounded hysterical. “Why didn't you tell me you were going to your father's? I was so worried something had happened! Are you going to stay the night? Is there someone to drive you home? You don't have clothes there, do you?”

Anna kept nothing in the apartment, which only had one bedroom and an air mattress for guests.

“If you can pick me up this evening, that would be great.”

She hung up and practised her boring clarinet solo, then the band pieces. There wasn't a piano in the apartment. Well, that was just too bad. She thought that and her fingers arced themselves, unstoppably, into movement. All she wanted to play was Wagner, but she very much wanted to. She was rehearsing fingerings on the tabletop when the girlfriend came in with two plastic bags.

“Hi honey!” She moved to Hank, who rushed forward, and hugged him, reaching up to smash her lips to his while squishing the plastic bags against his back.

“Hi, Gwen.” There was softness in his voice. “How was work?”

“Lucas is really coming along with his reading. And Matt, of course, is a holy terror. I'm trying to think of a way for him to keep his participation up without disrupting the whole class.”

Gwen was small and round, her hair flyaway with white bits almost indistinguishable from the blond. She hemmed her pants herself, always an inch above the ankle.

“I see we have Anna here,” she said. “C'mere, sweetie.” She insisted on a hug; it

felt like being enveloped by bread dough. Once she'd been let go of, Gwen reached for her bags. "Let me show you both the things I bought today. You'll like this." She pulled out what looked like a miniature blue leather belt.

"What's that?" asked Hank.

"It's a little leash for Lucy, so we can walk her. And look, I bought her a flea collar too."

Anna wondered in spite of herself whether hairless rats could get fleas.

"Let's try it on her." Hank's face held a childish excitement. Anna stood back as they brought out the rat, fitted her with a harness, and allowed her to roam around the living room, taking turns to hold the leash. Gwen picked up the rat and talked to her: "Lucy-bear! Aren't you a good little baby? Hm?" She tilted her head up towards Hank and they grinned at each other.

Anna went back to the table. This time, Louis Riel was fascinating.

She asked for another driving lesson and was refused, despite the glow of rat time. She gulped down Gwen's chicken wings and homemade coleslaw. When Gwen tried to pawn off some hand-me-downs on Anna—old jeans and a faded blue tank top she'd put on too much weight to wear—she politely declined. Gwen and Hank settled on the couch to watch sitcoms, Hank groaning softly about how his back hurt, Gwen reaching out to rub it while he curled like a contented rodent. Anna's skin itched, and this had nothing to do with her 100% cotton shirt.

"You two look so *cute* together," she burst out violently before thinking. Bad idea, Anna, bad idea.

“Do your work,” said Hank.

“No, really, look at you. Attached at the hip. You even have your own kid, never mind that it's bald with a disgusting big tail. Isn't the nesting instinct great?”

Hank lurched from the couch towards her. “You shut up.”

“Hank!” the girlfriend squealed. Her hand stretched out and flopped back like a doll's because he was already out of reach.

“You didn't have to come here!” Her father was near her, his breath steaming in her face, his eyebrows glowering down.

“You're right, and I shouldn't have!”

“Then why did you?” He grabbed her shoulders roughly.

“Hank, stay the hell away from her!”

“You shut up too,” Anna shot at the couch.

“Don't!” His eyes registered the imprint of her sting, his facial features drooping to pathetic. Then he shook her, but not too hard. His hands were unsteady. Anna grabbed them, thrust them off her shoulders (they felt like limp sweaty noodles), whirled and gathered her stuff. “I'm going to the Community Centre,” she yelled, and slammed the door.

Once outside, she had to gather herself before remembering which way to walk down the street, although she'd done this many times before. She looked emptily around the blank-faced apartment buildings and the children playing basketball in one of the yards, faced the wind, then spun and faced away from it, her eyes suddenly stinging.

*What did you think you'd find by going there anyways? Domestic bliss? Yeah, it's there,*

*but not for you. Nothing for you, just rolls of photographic negatives when you try to remember the Mom and Dad and Anna and tape recorder and Liss times, to look at what you want to think you had. The colour photos have dissolved, never mind the moments.*

There was a concert happening in less than a month, and Anna would star in it.

The Community Centre was open and had a slightly out-of-tune piano she secretly liked working with because the sounds were muted. That gave the instrument a mournful quality and, more practically, meant she could play as hard as she liked. There was a phone there, and she called Caroline to ask to be picked up after a couple hours of practice. She was being demanding. Hard to handle. Her mother on the other end sighed heavily.

There was no one in the room but a couple guys her age playing pool, who'd heard her playing before. They'd politely, or apathetically, ignored each other. Anna took out her sheet music and started practising. Then she played by memory. The smallest things could affect her playing. Tension could slow and murk her mind. But after shouting, her arms and pace were free. *Something has broken and maybe it had to. In a month I'll be staring into stage lights.* She gathered the notes like scattered papers. The more she played, the more there was around her.

Chapter 7: Ay-a

*Dear God, are you real? Please tell me if you're real. Say something or do something so I'll know you are.* Anna knelt and clasped her hands in front of the altar.  
*Liss says you're not. But you're listening to me, right?*

From the floor, much closer to the front than she was allowed to be, she could see the hanging Jesus' nostrils. She fidgeted on the wood floor, then remembered not to. She hoped God wouldn't hate her. She did everything wrong. She didn't know how to fix it. And staring up at the statue of Jesus' body parts drooping from the cross, she knew one thing suddenly. That body was useless, dead, and even when woken back up, it walked around for a bit then went right back to die. Those arms stretched out on the cross, the dead doves that were hands, wouldn't save anyone. The body, even in a statue, was too heavy to help or to escape. At Communion that's what they ate and drank, the body and the blood, the things that were heavy, drooped and died.

*Please Dear God, say something.*

The wood pressed dents into her knees. And why shouldn't she fidget? The church was a body too, made from the bodies of trees. The statues were bodies of rock and plaster. The dead saint wouldn't get up. The Mary wouldn't talk. She could see little worn-out lines in the paint on Mary's face. She could see through the saints on the stained-glass windows, see trees through their flat-looking faces and their dead miracle-making hands. They weren't going to be any help either.

She looked up at the organ with an unafraid face. Waited against miracles for it to

make sound. All she heard was the rushing and too-loud laughing outside getting louder, as if twisted through microphones.

*Last chance, God.*

She waited. Maybe she wasn't listening hard enough, or listening with the right part of her. She strained to listen beyond what she could hear. Sat very very still. All that came down was part of Beethoven's Ninth, which she'd been practising, and it didn't come down but spun out from the ears in her mind.

No one was saying anything to her. Her parents, the priest, her Sunday School teacher, everyone would say she was wrong if they found out what she'd done. They'd want her in the booth to confess. If they asked, she'd say a string of prayers by memory. But she wouldn't tell because if there was no one to listen, there was no one to catch her. The hole in her stomach told her that Liss was right. Sitting on the floor and listening so hard she was dizzy, she felt nothing but the building and the ceiling and alone.

She walked out into the churchyard where a story called God wasn't.

The French teacher came again and then didn't come anymore. When she shivered into tears during practice, Laine asked why.

Don't tell. Don't tell don't tell they'll hurt you.

But Laine kept asking. And Laine was different. The church didn't want women to act like men, it wanted them to marry men, and certainly not women. She'd heard Laine had a girlfriend. She kind of wondered what a lady's girlfriend would look like.

So she told everything.

Laine sat and let her cry. She wasn't a hugging person.

“It's hard,” she said when Anna came up, hiccuping. “That happened to me when I was eight. And then I learned about gods in other cultures.”

Laine told her about the Greek gods she'd learned about in school, great humans with superpowers who lived on a mountaintop controlling thunder and taking sides in fights down below. She talked about Glooskap, the Trickster sent by the Creator to help the Mi'kmaq people, who flew with the island Minegoo on his back and placed it in the sea to be their home. She talked about gods from Africa and ancestors from Australia and those who created the Floating World in Japan.

“The Christians only see one side of God, and seeing and listening to just one side can sometimes hurt. Other people see others.”

She wasn't going to say “Liss, you were right.” She said instead, “This grass fort is a mountain.”

“What?”

“This grass fort is a mountain. Like the Greek people had. And our own gods live here.”

“What?”

Anna knelt down in the pillowing grass. The fort was small, its walls were small, it wasn't on a hill, but she pictured it swelling until it took up all the trees along the fence. She pictured a woman on top of it—not Liss, not Anna, not Another Anna or anyone she knew, but someone else she couldn't quite see clearly.

She told Liss about the Greek gods on Mount Olympus, using a thundering voice. She told Laine's stories about gods and goddesses who turned people into trees and deer, and about a man who fell in love with his reflection.

“I already knew that,” said Liss.

Anna was disappointed. Then she thought that maybe, after all, Liss didn't.

“So let's make our own gods and goddesses,” said Liss, acting like it was her idea. Anna didn't mind.

“You know how we have hymns?” she said. “Well, some people have chants for their gods like that. Like singing stuff that doesn't always have words. Laine said.” She felt proud, like an explorer bringing back ideas from a journey or jewels in a box.

“Like what?”

Anna made something up, humming and spreading her voice into an ahhh, shifting slowly up and down in pitch. She spread out her arms until her body was a cross. She felt dumb at first, until power collected in her arms and played her.

“So let's chant like that,” said Liss. “Once we decide on our gods.”

“Yeah.”

“This one's for the thunder god Bojo!” yelled Liss.

It sounded like a clown name and Anna giggled. She saw some bigger kids turn to look when Liss yelled, and was embarrassed but only a little. “Lalalalala,” Liss began and Anna joined in harmony. It didn't sound like they were chanting to a thunder god. Maybe to a dancing god. Not right.

Anna tried the next one. “Oo-ba. Oo-ba.” Liss fell over laughing before she was



able to join in.

The chants took on sillier sounds. “Bla ra ra.” “Hoo oo oo.” They stopped calling out the names of gods and other kids stopped watching, bored since nothing but weird noise was going on and music school kids were used to that. Someone started a boombox and a song about a tattoo was suddenly louder than them anyway. The first girls who'd been looking ran off to join a skipping rope game.

When they ran out of ideas, they started chanting Donanoby spachum. It was a song about peace, but didn't feel any more real than the sounds that meant nothing.

“Ahwahwahwah,” sang Liss after that.

“Ayayayayay!”

“Ay-a, ay-a, ay-a!”

Anna liked that. It had a rhythm to it, like drumming. And it sounded almost like her name. The woman on the hill that was their fort swelled into focus. She was tall with long hair, her face cloudy, and Anna couldn't tell the colour of her hair or eyes. Her body was covered in a pile of glimmering patterned fabrics—red paisley, blue and green mottled velvet, gold striped, transparent and glimmering. All Anna could see of her motions was an ocean of fabric rippling.

“Ay-a's our goddess,” said Anna. She wasn't brave enough to yell it over the playground, but she said it.

“The goddess of what?”

“Of music, of course.”

“Not love?”

“We can make another one for love. Music.”

“OK, the goddess of love is Sava!” Liss spread her arms.

They made gods for good luck, for school, for smartness, for family, for beaches, for trees. They made gods for Anna's house and Liss's house, laughing, and forgot them. Anna was still watching rippling cloth. When Liss suggested they chant again, Ay-a is what Anna chanted.

Caroline was going to be late, so Anna waited on the hill, this time alone and at the highest point of the grass that was turning brown. Higher than the fence, higher than the swing set, higher than the school! The queen of the castle, surveying her lands. She watched the ant people get into their cars and the caterpillar buses crawl out. She felt her jacket grow longer and longer until it draped to the ground. She felt layers pile on top of it until her body was covered. They weren't as heavy as she'd expected. Light enough to move easily. Lighter than her regular clothes. Each piece of fabric that brushed her skin sent a different song into her.

She couldn't help it. She twirled and twirled in the brown grass that smelled like leaves, fasterfasterfaster wobblingneverfalling. Her own power made her dizzy.

Ay-a rode in the car to school. Ay-a stirred marshmallows in her hot cocoa and told her not to be scared on the sledding hill. Ay-a told Anna her hair looked better now that it was almost at her shoulders again and wanted her to put a ribbon in it.

Ay-a had a song about herself that she shared with Anna. *Ay-a, ay-a, stars in my*

*body, stars in my soul. Ay-a, Ay-a, music's my both things until I get old.* Music was body and soul, not some angry God who made rules to hurt people and got hung up on a cross. Music was what could save people. Whenever she heard the organ, the tape player, the piano, Anna knew that.

Anna shared Ay-a's song with Liss. They waited until the hill was clear of people to run from the grass fort and sing it there. Liss shook a tambourine she'd brought from home and they were powerful. But that only happened one time. Liss liked Sava better. "Sava moved into my house," she declared one day. "She made it so my sisters will fall in love with the neighbour boys when they grow up. She made it so the mailman will fall in love with the library lady." She giggled. "I told her to make my birth parents fall in love with me enough that they'll want to find me. She said if I'm good for a whole year, it'll work."

The snowdrifts built little nests on the side of her house. She pressed her ears to these holes and listened. They sounded like the ocean inside a shell or the noise in her ears underwater, only quieter. They reminded her of Ay-a's voice, which she couldn't quite hear the way she could a real person or a song, even a song in her head (since she had to have heard it first for it to be in her head). It was more like hearing the idea of what she wanted to say.

Gods wanted sacrifices. Not just the God in the Bible, but the other gods Laine told her about. It seemed to be a rule. With her mittens, Anna chipped bits of hard snow into animal shapes and offered them to the homes of Ay-a's voice. A cow went into that

hollow in the snowbank, an icy sheep into the next.

As she placed the animals carefully, she prayed for the Christmas concert. Laine had her performing Vivaldi's Spring, a real arrangement, not the easy version. She'd never performed before, not on a stage in front of people she didn't know.

Caroline had her count two hours of practice every day. Usually Anna played longer anyway. One day she was so nervous she played until supper and again until bedtime. She couldn't get in the music. She had to. Her mind kept crawling in one direction, her hands in another.

“Hey, aren't you tired?” shouted Hank.

She wasn't in the music so she heard him. Yes. She was so tired. Thinking that, her body fell forward onto the keys.

“How about I carry you up to bed and tell you a story?”

Anna collected her voice and managed a weak “Yeah.”

Carted up the stairs, she didn't see her father looking back and her mother throwing him a grateful look.

Hank left her awkwardly to change into her pajamas and brush her teeth, then came in without a book. “Once upon a time,” he began, sitting on the bed and holding one of her teddy bears, “there was a troll who lived underground. This troll's name was Grunt.” He wiggled the bear around and made a grunting noise.

At first Anna was thinking about being watched by millions of heads in seats, about playing a smooth perfect season through the room, about screwing up and her hands getting frozen by everyone's laughing. But the story was too interesting. “Grunt's

tunnel was a special tunnel. It had a farm inside. There was a pasture full of grass where the goats lived. And there was a cubby where the mushrooms grew. Grunt collected the goats' manure to feed the mushrooms. Yup, he fed them poop.” Anna cringed.

“Sometimes Grunt's troll neighbours would visit and they would share vegetables and play their loud troll drums and sing their loud troll songs. And they lived like that for years, happily, until one day some *really* loud trolls came into their tunnels.”

He told about the new trolls who tried to take over with their big farm machines and their chemicals that made the other trolls cough. They wanted to buy the farms from Grunt and everyone else. They mowed down some of them with their loud machines. But Grunt and his friends fought back. Their animals fought back. They broke the big machines and used the parts to build barns out of. Luckily, one of the noisy farmers was a lady troll who fell in love with Grunt. She convinced everyone to join the less noisy farmers, to work with tools and animals instead of machines and chemicals, and all the trolls used the rest of the machine parts to make loud instruments they played at Grunt and the lady troll's wedding.

Hank took the two teddy bears he'd been wiggling around and made them kiss each other. “You tired now?” he asked.

“Tell me another story!”

“No, you're yawning. Tomorrow night.” He tucked the teddies next to the pillow. “Maybe someday we'll have our own farm like that. Whaddaya think? Sound like fun?”

“Kinda.”

“Don't worry, I'd take care of the goat poop. You could take care of the garden.

Hey, how about making a garden this summer? Wanna do that? You can decide what to plant where, and we'll go buy the seeds together. Whaddaya think?"

"Sure!"

Anna was happy until her father left. Then the thoughts returned.

Metronome. Hands. Phrase. Pause. Phrase again. Fingers tripping over each other.

Two hours almost up.

Go... a little... faster.

Backstage, Anna's stomach crawled with salamanders. She had on make-up and lipstick for the lights. Her mother had put it on, although Laine had said she didn't need to wear anything. The mirror showed grown-up and beautiful. She didn't feel grown-up and beautiful. All she could see now were the heavy black curtains and the kids behind them and the music book in her hand. Her parents and uncles and aunts and cousins and grandparents on her dad's side were out there, watching and listening to a plinking song. Anna moved towards the wings and spied out. Chen and Michelle were playing a piano duet in their frilly pink dresses. She had on a blue dress with flowers that was just as nice. She wasn't jealous of them now, not at all. She tried to think of Ay-a but the goddess was as silent as any other made-up god.

She tapped her own song on her leg, stumbled, tried again, stumbled again. Her hands wanted to play what she was hearing.

The plinking ended and applause swelled the theatre. The clapping made the stage

floor vibrate, or maybe she imagined that. She heard Laine announce her name.

Right foot, left foot. Step on stage. Hold book tight. Count steps. Don't look out. Look at the way the yellow line across the stage is overlaid by scuff marks. Look at piano. Stand in front of piano bench. Look at Laine's feet in their man's shoes.

No way not to see out, now. Laine's feet a direct arrow. Behind them, a blinded busy space with heads that were all outlines. Blink. Like a painting, not like people. But they were people and they were watching. An animal jumped in her stomach and squeezed her ribcage.

Curtsy, holding the lace at the tip of her dress. Set down and open music book. Sit on piano bench. Wiggle. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. One-two. One-two. Arc fingers over keys.

Begin.

Flowers bounce up right away. Calm down a little. Splay open their petals and nod around. Birds trill from fingers. Begin to stroll down the driveway, purposefully, towards the bus, no, towards the carriage waiting to drive her to the castle. This spring has no mud, only pussywillows and once in awhile, dark clouds. The wheels do not get stuck. Get out in front of the quiet stone, so quiet that entering makes her nervous. Someone sweeps past in tulip-red velvet and she's in a ballroom that is at once a garden where new things poke up pianissimo. She doesn't know who that woman is—Ay-a, Caroline, Laine, Liss? Other women wisp in, dancing. Dance until they all have made a square that faces inward.

Scoot off the bench. Turn towards the painting of faces, the light so flaming white

she can't even see them now. Curtsy. Feel the clapping fortissimo in her body.

She is Anna again, and it is done.

There was more left to the concert, but Anna wasn't scared. She had a lot of listening backstage to do, Liss's violin solo (beautiful), more listening, and near the end Chorus. They all took their places on the risers, used to it. Liss nudged Anna, who caught her nervous face and smiled back. For the Donanoby Spachum song, Anna sang too quietly to hear if she was blending, or even if she was making sound. She wasn't going to be too loud this time. Liss, who was just as dressed up as her—lacy white dress, necklace that looked like pearls—was a beautiful singer as always, her voice reaching the ceiling where the stage lights came down and made them snowblind.

They sat backstage while parents moved out into the lobby. George, a violinist in their class, fiddled with his bowtie. An older student Anna didn't really know walked by, probably on the way to the fountain. “Great performance,” he said to George. George just sat there, still fiddling with his bowtie, looking like a surprised dog.

Liss walked up to him. “An-y-thing boys can do, girls can do bet-ter!” she singsonged.

“No they don't,” said George.

“Yeah we do. Look at Laine. She's a girl and she's in charge of this place. And my solo got more clapping than yours did. I counted.”

“Oh yeah? Well—”



“Yeah, and girls smell better too,” said Anna, making things up.

“Yeah, well, well, we're smarter.”

“Not true. Look at the musicianship here and stuff,” said Liss. “See if you don't believe me. And you smell awful.” Power was rising in Anna with each sentence she spoke or heard.

George's face crumpled.

“I'm a better violin player than you. So there!” Liss darted out into the hallway and Anna followed.

Anna didn't hear it until the roses her grandparents had bought her (Good job, Anna) were brown and dry-stemmed and most of the petals had fallen to the table. Finished practice and walking to her bedroom, she passed her parents'. Horrible sounds came from inside, like animals getting kicked. Not a human kind of screaming. The door was white with nothing on the front, just the plain knocker. She couldn't move. Looking at it. A horse's shriek. Thudding.

She found her feet and ran to her room and slammed. Grabbed armfuls of stuffed animals from her pillow and looked around at the light blue walls with music notes stenciled in a border. Safe safe safe safe safe. Safe?

Suddenly no longer sitting in her safe blue room or standing still inside the halls of time where memories were frozen in pictures with the colours just a little too flat. Spinning upside-down she was catapulted through their painted frames. There was only the hollow beating, beating through her body. Unsteady rhythm she couldn't count into or

out of. No sound at all.

## Chapter 8: The Space Between

Anna and Darien had been hanging out for a few weeks now. She was getting better at the saxophone, and Darien lent her a book of jazz tunes. He tried to teach her to improvise, but she kept freezing up without something concrete to play. “I’m not much better,” he admitted. They went to the gym sometimes and played 21, Darien easily sinking baskets, Anna fumbling. He listened to her practice for the concert, and once she caught him staring open-mouthed. “Don’t let the flies in,” she teased, but she felt softened by his awe. More and more she ate with him instead of her friends. Sometimes Darien asked about them and wondered about inviting them along, other times he didn’t. She craved those moments when the measured quality left their interaction, when one of them burst out with something not witty but blunt, before they had the time to look down and cut themselves off.

At a sleepover at Sarah’s house, she found herself sitting apart from the others. “I got a new eye shadow kit,” said Michelle. “Anyone want a makeover?”

“Yeah, and I’ve got a curling iron,” Sarah enthused. “We should curl Chen’s hair and pretty her up!”

Chen wanted to try on Sarah’s green minidress to complement the makeover, and Irena tried to tighten it around her much smaller body. “God, Chen, you’re so skinny. I’m so jealous.”

“I don’t think this will fit.”

“Here, try this.” Irena snatched a striped halter dress from her own bag. Michelle

brought out a belt to gather it around Chen's waist.

“So, Anna,” leered Sarah, her curly grackle head suddenly bulging into Anna's space. “You're spending a lot of time with this Darien dude. Is it serious?”

“I don't know,” she shot.

“Ooh, Anna's mad,” Michelle singsonged.

“How can you not know? Has he shown any interest in you at all? Has he hit on you or tried to hold your hand or something?”

“That's my business.” A sudden clump of worry sunk in her gut.

“I bet he's gay,” said Irena.

The conversation moved on to the spiked punch Michelle had heard her boyfriend had made at his party, and what colour eye shadow matched the halter dress on Chen. Anna, distant in a beanbag chair, thought Irena must be right. If Darien was straight, his attention would have stayed on Irena instead of her, and he wouldn't keep asking about her friends. Would it be possible to make a gay person straight? Most people were somewhere in the middle of the Kinsey scale rather than strictly at one end, if sex ed had been right. That meant most gay guys could, based on probability, fall for a girl. But she didn't want him to be rough and horny and loud like other straight guys, Michelle's boyfriends and their gangs, who leered at girls in the halls. She didn't want him to leave her and chase Irena.

“Did I tell you I caught Mike making out with a student?”

“Mike O'Hara the clarinet teacher?”

“No way!”

“Yup. They had their tongues in each other's mouths and everything. I wonder if he sleeps with her.”

Chen's hair was half in ringlets. Anna watched the others as if behind a thin curtain, saw their conversation as globs of glue adhering to what didn't matter, their bodies glistening shells. They were moored in a vacant but touchable place, and here she was on the beanbag chair caught in her own inane swirl of thoughts, with nothing to keep her grounded even if the ground, like the other girls', had air beneath.

*I have nothing in common with them.*

That's when a familiar feeling surged in her gut, that of something heavy and profoundly unstill. Gods, her body was starting to shake now. She blinked and a tail of fabric shimmered in the corner of her vision. She was seeing things that weren't even real! She flailed against the surge that was tracking up her neck in spite of her. She didn't want this back.

“Hey Anna,” asked Darien, holding a barely nibbled sandwich, “Is something wrong?”

“Why?” she asked, poking at her emptied tupperware tub with a fork.

“You're just slumped and nervous-looking at the same time. It's a weird combination. You should go look in the mirror or something.”

A flash of glitzy fabric passed and she looked up startled, but it was only a girl's t-shirt.

“It's the concert,” she lied.

“Yeah, of course. I was wondering if you'd get nervous. Would you feel better if you went to practice? Of if we did something entirely different and forgot about it?” He offered a grin, playful but non-expectant. Supportive. She couldn't *stand* how he looked when he smiled. She looked around at the cafeteria instead, a windowless white rectangle with Milk and Canadian Cheese posters on the walls, a couple snack and beverage machines in the corners, a small lunch line and a fridge, identical heads bobbing listlessly at the long rows of tables. They only ate there half the time, and it was still too often.

“Let's go to the practice room,” she said. “But first, finish your sandwich.” He did this in a few quick bites.

She arced her fingers over the piano and the shivers started again.

“Jesus, Anna!”

She tried to take a deep, shuddering breath that didn't go any further than shallow. She thought of the haze of crowd she'd soon sit before. Mostly unseen, while the lights misted and heightened her eyes and the clapping buoyed her. A hundred people's breath hung on her sound. A picture of Anna, pouring herself into music so complete the rest of her life had capsized into that moment, music where the polish was automatic and music the audience poured into and music that spilled out aqueous. Anna Masterpiece #587, the one she'd never be able to draw. But maybe she could be it. No, she couldn't.

She looked towards her audience of one, felt the familiar stab, and tried not to be turned on. But maybe that would help. Maybe it would make her music stronger.

She could.

And her fingers hit the keys for the Chopin, a funeral march incongruous but

made denser by the wanting, more mournful by the impossibility. Her fingers marched on polished ivory, mindless, resonant, heavy-hearted. And then and then and then.

Had she played this well before? She looked up—a mistake. Darien watching made her hands shake until the funeral song broke up into a sick and twitchy too-slow dance. Damn damn damn! She stopped and rested her hands in her lap, but they kept shaking. Her shoulders quivered slightly. Now her body was that danse macabre.

“Are you feeling alright?”

“Yeah, I'm fine.” She was still shivering. Looking at Darien only made it worse. Some dark appendage was shaking through her, with the violence of trying to grasp outward and latch on to another. It was the trembling of a body that needed to crush and be crushed. But Darien was standing a few feet away, holding himself physically distant like he always did. She could not direct her eyes at him, her heavy crushing eyes.

Another spasm, and her mouth dropped open. “Will you play with me?” she blurted out.

“Anna.”

“I mean in the concert.” Suddenly conscious of what she'd said, her cheeks heated and eyes bore further into the floor.

“Yeah, of course the concert. That's what I'm talking about. But that's ridiculous. You already have your program, and who's ever heard of an alto sax playing with an orchestra? Not that I wouldn't love to,” he added gently.

“We could fit you in!” Her eyes flashed up and focused on a face that hazed slightly as she looked too hard.

“No.”

“Why not? Really. It's a chance to die for.”

“I'd ruin it.”

“That's *stupid*.”

“Look, in case you haven't noticed, our abilities lie on drastically different levels. I may be better at saxophone than you because you just started, but on the whole— If I had the same kind of talent you have—” here his tone rose and his hands sliced through the air—“I think I'd be the happiest man alive.”

Anna got a package in the mail from Gwen, sealed with duct tape. She sent those sometimes. This one contained a case of half-used eye shadow in varying shades and a compact of purplish blush. Leftovers.

“Let me see what you got in the mail, let me see!” Caroline hung over her shoulder, girlishly excited. “Oh, makeup!”

“You can borrow some, Mom.” Anna rolled her eyes. “Or you can have it if you want.”

“No, of course not, it's yours to enjoy.” Caroline riffled through the package and spread the contents across the kitchen table. There was a tiny bottle of perfume hidden in the newspaper on the bottom and a few used postage stamps, still attached to scraps of envelope. “To recycle,” said a notepaper note wrapped around them. “Happy birthday.” Anna's birthday was in the summer.

“What's she doing sending old postage stamps?” Caroline pulled out a twist-tied



plastic bag full of gummi bears. Beneath it, a worn-looking brown skirt.

“Betcha your whole salary that rag won't fit me,” said Anna.

“Betcha you're right.” Caroline shook out the skirt and held it up.

“Think it'll fit you?”

“Don't. Even. Think about it!”

The skirt was shapeless and looked like a size 12, at least—something that could fit a Caroline and a half. How did Gwen ever think her hand-me-downs would fit Anna?

“That woman!” Caroline sighed. After a few seconds, she broke into laughter. Anna, relieved, laughed just as loud.

“And she walks a rat on a leash!” Anna burst out, each word progressively funnier.

“And she wears your father's baseball caps to church, you said!”

“And she said soap operas were called soap operas to sell more soap!”

“And she's with my ex-husband!”

“I don't think she's sane,” said Anna.

They collapsed on the table, amused and out of breath.

“I should vacuum,” said Caroline. “But I don't feel like it.”

“Screw vacuuming. Try on some of that makeup.” They giggled again.

“I wonder if any of that would look decent with my blue dress,” said Caroline. “I want to wear my blue dress next time I see Tom. You don't think it makes my chest look too flat, do you?”

“No, of course not. It's better than mine.”

“You'll grow.”

“I doubt it.”

“You know, *could* I use a bit of that makeup? Would you mind?”

“Go ahead.”

“Alright. I'm going to get changed into the blue dress. Tell me if it makes me look fat too. Be honest.” Caroline rushed up the stairs. She emerged shortly in said blue dress, a high-necked navy thing with a skirt that almost reached her knees and a sash around her waist. “It probably needs some jewelry, do you think?”

“Jewelry would be fine, but you look stupidly good, Mom.”

“Not fat?”

“Don't be a moron.”

Mary had taken the plane back, and it occurred to Anna that this was the reason Caroline was more relaxed. Giddy even, with all those dates. She was standing in front of the living room mirror, fussily pushing her hair to one side, smoothing it back, worrying a silver ring on and off her finger. Then she was lightly daubing blush onto her cheeks, lining her eyes, opening the case of eye shadow, hovering with her finger paused above it. She selected the silver. Smoky streaks took shape along her eyelids. Anna wished she'd inherited Caroline's beauty. Makeup finished, her mother tilted her head one way, then another, frowned, adjusted an earring.

Despite her jealousy, there was a soft and surprising flash of affection. “Can I take your picture and sell it to *Vogue*?” she asked, trying to sound playful but feeling too tender to crack a smile.

“Don't be silly.” Caroline took on Anna's tone, too breezy, an attempt at dismissing emotion.

Anna wondered why her mother didn't hug her often. She just didn't, that was all. It wasn't her thing. She couldn't remember having wondered this before, but the distance between her and Darien, who of course was gay anyway, and the apparent closeness between her mom and Tom, who she still hadn't met, brought the question to mind. The space between the two of them was suddenly tangible.

“How old were you when you had your first kiss?” asked Anna. Sure she was past her own, but that first time too she hadn't thought to ask. Her parents had not been sexual beings, then. She felt herself blushing, squirming.

“Anna,” Caroline laughed nervously, “that's kind of a personal question.”

“OK, sorry.”

“Look, you should try out some of the makeup.”

Anna gave in, and went to her room to get her own make-up kit. When she came down, Caroline's was still sitting on the table along with the used stuff. There was a distasteful shade of turquoise in the eye shadow case. If she was going to use makeup from the girlfriend, she might as well use the worst of it. She tried a spot just above her lashes. It looked bold, a graffiti stroke. A familiar thing lurched inside. *Ay-a, Ay-a, stars in my body, stars in my soul.* She smudged it along her eyelids with abandon. Then some purple mascara she'd gotten as a birthday present from Sarah and never worn. Then spots of the purplish blush, which looked closer to a shady rose when on her. Her pulse was racing.

“What are you doing?” said Caroline.

*Putting on makeup. What does it look like I'm doing?* But Ay-a wouldn't let her toss out that answer. She spurred Anna to open the expensive citrus spice perfume she saved for special occasions and daub it liberally behind her neck and at her wrists. She felt solid and daring. Ay-a was back, dressing Anna in shimmering gold in her imagination before Anna could stop her. Ay-a the silly creation of her childhood. Maybe not so silly. Silliness didn't feel like this. She took some eyeliner and traced to the side of her right eye a reckless swirl.

“You look like a circus clown.”

She gave herself a critical survey. She didn't look normal. She didn't look like a clown. She looked like a young bizarre rock star. A canvas that stared in defiance. A warning sign.

*Darien, I'm coming,* said Ay-a in her head. Her voice was warm and cocksure. Alright, so everything was innuendo, thought Anna. Ay-a, ignoring her, said *Beauty, you'd better believe you have a chance,* gripped her shoulder and gave her a shove. The music in Anna's head was a Surrender song, one of their forays into rock.

“I'm going to play my saxophone,” said Anna.

“Your clarinet solo's in just a few days. And there's the piano concert. I don't want to worry about you.”

Anna swept her makeup and the girlfriend's—hell, it was hers now—into her makeup kit. She took a breath, strode up to Caroline, and set a hand on your shoulder.

“Nothing to worry about. I'm on it.” Caroline's shoulder was worryingly thin, but warmer

than she'd expected.

*I live on my own terms*, said Ay-a as Anna dressed for work at Kelly's. She wore a nice sweater and cords and decided to bring along her mittens since the forecast predicted flurries. Make-up should be formal if she wore it, she'd always assumed. But there was no *rule*. Her hands were on the turquoise and then it was on her eyelids, and thin lines underneath like a liner. Bright red lip gloss. *Next thing I know, I'll be going to work naked*. She did feel like a layer had been peeled off. She loved being seen onstage, admired for her music, but that was a kind of attention she could control. With rocker make-up on, she'd shed her usual armor of invisibility. Her boss's brow crinkled as she entered the restaurant, and customers stared at her more today, now that she was a look along with the sound.

“Hey baby, can you play a Mozart song?” called out a man over his plate of roast beef with a side dish of canned peas and carrots. So she was a “baby” now? She wasn't sure she liked that.

She played her own things most of the time but had once played Moonlight Sonata when a co-worker yelled out asking her for it, and word had spread that the Kelly's pianist could play songs by ear and take requests, as long as they were songs she'd heard. She 'd since held a grudge against the Moonlight Sonata for what it had led to, as she wasn't hugely fond of the schmaltzy pop tunes people sometimes wanted her to play. Surrender was alright on days she hadn't already played their stuff, but once a sentimental couple had requested “My Heart Will Go On”--a song from years ago, romance long ago

aged to stale cheese. Of course, she'd done it.

She liked Piano Concerto 5 and launched into the first movement, wishing the restaurant smelled less like fries with the works. This was what it was to be an entertainer, she supposed, instead of a musician.

Sarah liked the turquoise eye shadow and doll-spots of dark rose on her cheeks. “Sex-ay!” she sang out.

“I dunno, honey,” said Irena. “I'd tone it down a little.” The lurch in Anna's gut took note to make it brighter. Laine grinned during their lesson. Darien didn't comment, but seemed to stare at her a little more.

The girlfriend came with Hank to the concert. Caroline didn't bring Tom. Why was she so secretive? Was she shy? Ashamed that even in this town some miles from her own where everyone know everybody's business, people she knew would see her and find out she was dating? It wasn't too big of a scandal, Anna thought. So many parents divorced now, and how long did they bother waiting?

Ay-a was unfortunately silent. Anna tried to imagine her talking but it was her own voice, not Ay-a's, that resulted. *That's alright, Anna, you'll do fine with the solo* sounded hollow.

Stage lights. Crowded together in chairs in sweater vests. Irena and her perfect breasts in hers. Thought of Darien behind her, involuntary. Look back and he's too busy scanning his music, serious shadowed face too drawn in to look up. Rustling pages. Requisite tuning. Raised baton.

Rest. Rest. Rest. Rest. Wait. French horns sounding. Wisp of flutes. Long tones for a few bars. And continue. And continue. Follow the notes on the staff paper, follow baton, stay tuned to Irena, and continue. Band song feels like a drone and she's not sure why. Caught in a hive of bees and nothing more.

Play the solo. Mild earthy clarinet sound, finger pads trilling rapidly. Michael O'Hara a dot in the audience, never Mike and probably looking proud. She's done, they're clapping.

She knows she can't connect her mind and fingers. Keep on playing like nothing is unusual. Finish the O'Hara song and start the circus-like march. Then another. And another. And another.

“Anna, your technique was great,” said Mr. Haslam afterwards. His penguin eyes aglow. No lying in his countenance. Anna felt herself a shell.

“Hey, congratulations.” A wrapped square pressed into her hand by Darien's larger, warmer one. “I've got to leave with my dad before he causes trouble, but you were amazing. See you tomorrow.” He moved towards the exit.

Anna recovered her breath. “Thanks,” she said when he was too far away to hear.

She tucked the box into her bag with her music folder so Caroline wouldn't see it. Opened it at home, behind her closed bedroom door flashing warning signs that reminded her to peel the tape with care and not tear the bright blue paper. It was a box of chocolates. A very small one.

*Dear Liss,*

*I'm going to start pretending to write you letters that I'll never actually send you. Maybe this is stupid. But I don't care. I'm not going to cross anything out. I hate my jobs. My mom's acting like she's my age now that she's got her Tom, and she's hotter than me too. No wonder she's getting laid. And you see, there's this boy. He's probably gay. ~~I still wonder sometimes if~~ I don't want to hope too much, but I want to believe in the hope that I have anyway. Because I've fallen in love, again. You know what that's like. I bet you're with someone now. ~~I wonder what would've happened if~~ You're another one of those people who's hotter than me. And has better luck. But I shouldn't say that because of course I'm lucky to have my musical talent and blablabla as people keep reminding me, even though I didn't grow up with those teaching tapes like you and your sisters did. And even though I've gotten too old to be a real prodigy anymore. Or maybe I still am? I wish I was. But music isn't drawing me in the way it used to. It used to be a perfect world that I basically lived in. Yeah, you know this already. But I had my nice life for the most part, until I realized how wrong it was between my parents without me knowing it. It let me just be completely into the music and it was a miracle thing, practice was never boring or a chore. Now it is a lot of the time and instead I get addicted to... other things haha. People said I did a good job on my solo but it didn't feel like it at all. Anyway, I wish I knew what you were up to in your magical life (something brilliant, I'm sure) but I'm not going to write you a real letter and I don't even know where you are if I did want to send one.*

Anna sat outside in the schoolyard, her felt jacket buttoned. It was leafless and



getting colder. That morning there'd been frost in the yard where the garden used to be. She didn't want to wear gloves but the air was slowly numbing her hands, so she dug the thin gloves out of her pocket and put them on. She watched the little kids in the side yard play skipping and clapping games and push each other down the slides. There were more little kids playing king of the mountain out front. Grass forts had dwindled now that the grass was brown and snow was anticipated. Out back, a circle of older kids were playing anime card games beneath a pine tree, groups were meandering across the grounds and loitering with their backs against the school, a couple was making out in a corner. She'd watched these things forever. She wondered what it would have been like to have gone to different schools as she got older, for elementary-age kids to be a source of nostalgia rather than a screaming physicality a few feet away. She didn't feel connected to these kids and their games. Of course, she hadn't been.

Ay-a had walked this schoolyard. Her varicoloured shimmers of fabric had trailed the yards of browning grass, her feet never visible. Anna was going to be a real musician soon, a real concert performer. Going to see if the prodigy luck that had tailed her so far would hold. True, she was off or clumsy sometimes and had to polish her pieces, but it was her facility people like Darien liked, the way things came too easy. Like having a bowl of chocolate ice cream and a spoon placed in front of her and having the instinct to eat. It felt a separate thing from her, a fluke that she could play so well, an accident of genetics that her pitch was apt and her fingers could move fast. Anna was a spectator to this with her want and fear and scalding need to be alone.

Things that seemed immovable ended all the time. Her parents had ended. Liss's

attendance at Pine Grove had ended. After all these years, faced with the need to sit among an orchestra and play for real, Anna wondered if her fluke would end. And what if it did? Would the work she put in too lazily be enough? It wouldn't. She was either going to luck out as she always had, be caught by the net that protected her, or she was going to fail. She tried out the idea of failure but couldn't visualize it. Its hovering elusiveness disturbed her. It was there, there, there. But what, exactly? Something she knew but couldn't believe in, something she couldn't touch.

But what if Ay-a knew how to meld with the keyboard? What if her bones were unbreakable, her substance unmeltable? Anna had never thought these things, but they were true. Ay-a didn't wonder. The goddess that had once stood tall seemed smaller today, her hair a dark cascade against copper skin. A surge of joyous disturbance rose in Anna. The part of her that wondered about failure watched this and tried to analyze.

Ay-a and failure stood on two sides of the playground. Wagner swept between them, splendid.

Caroline was out again, and it was by pure accident that Anna discovered the tapes, looking around to see if the old, overfull, underused part of the video cabinet had anything she hadn't watched or would want to. She never looked there, and doubted it. There were old Barney tapes, a few documentaries about sustainable agriculture and opera and some fancy dollhouse, videos labeled "Anna piano age 5," "Anna piano recital age 7," "Anna learning clarinet." She took out "Anna piano age 5" and turned on the old VCR. A tiny girl with chipmunk cheeks sat on the piano bench in this same living room,

the TV fuzzing grey bars across the screen. Her fingers, tiny and perfect, trickled over the keys in *The Waltz of the Flowers*. Hank walked across the screen and she felt a pang. Even back then, the piano was in tune—the younger Anna had made sure of it. Her older self waited for her fingers to slip. They did not, even at the end of the piece where the child's motions seemed for a moment uncertain, then recovered gracefully. Anna felt a flash of hostility towards that girl.

Before putting the tape back, she rummaged behind the front row to see if there was anything else interesting. More home videos, documentaries, old musicals—and crammed in the very back, some DVDs she hadn't seen before. She wondered what they were.

*Cum to the Doctor's Office.*

Oh. My. God.

Caroline had porn. Her mom had porn?

Unpleasant imaginings of Mommy-and-Tommy replayed in her mind. The question of whether her mother masturbated on the sofa, and when on earth she'd find the time. Perfect blackmail material, if ever needed. Disgusting, but she had to watch this.

The camera fell on a Photoshop-smoothed man and woman in stilted dialogue about a doctor's checkup. A cut and they'd left the waiting room. The woman lay prone on the sterile-looking white bed of an examining table, naked, her round breasts too obvious. Soon the man was naked too, still talking about check-ups and proper pelvic function as he climbed on top. They were long-limbed rubber things. They reminded Anna of beached whales. The man inserted—close-up on pucker and tube sliding inside—and

they were bouncing. The penis went up and down at a silly rate. Boing, boing, boing. The woman panted feebly. Anna felt her cheeks go red. Her eyes were stuck to the screen.

She watched a young gay couple. One of the men was built like Darien. Rather, he was the same height, and had the same angle to his jaw. It wasn't much. But it was enough to transfix. The other man put a stethoscope to his bare and likely shaved chest. The camera tracked both their muscles' still contours. The other guy had a tattoo and wasn't bad looking either. The build of his biceps reminded her of Ed—she *had* to stop thinking of guys she knew! The stethoscope came off, Ed's hand reached to stroke Darien's cheek, and their lips locked. Slow-motion kisses, and Anna's hand had moved to her own cheek, unconsciously. The tiny details of their faces as they moved, the forehead creases, blinks, the sound of breath, the same angle to his jaw. She couldn't stand it. Her head was a whirl of crescendoing cadenzas, measures running prestissimo, too fast to recognize, electric. It was the first time something new had crossed her musical synapses, if this was new. Was this something in her possible, uncovered? But then they were fucking, and buried under the grunting bicep man, the slimmer guy's resemblance to Darien was obscured. And then it was back to some stupid guy and girl again.

Her mom wasn't going to be back that night. She'd practised enough. She paused the DVD and went to the kitchen to microwave herself a bag of popcorn.

“My mom watches porn,” she said to the potted African violet on the windowsill. “Can you believe it?” The violet didn't return her incredulous laughter.

Of course she didn't say anything about the porn. Part of her was ashamed at her

discovery, at tangible evidence of her mom's sex life, at her occasional enjoyment between the revolted giggles and the distraction of popcorn. If Caroline knew Anna had found the porn, she'd probably guess Anna had watched it. All the better to keep it secret, since there were other nights Caroline would be gone, and other tapes. Might as well watch it, urged a sly voice. Maximum value. Fun for the whole family!

But there was the concert to contend with. Five-year-old Anna from the home video could have done as well, she figured, as she was doing now. Nerves messed her up. Her fingers ran too heavy or too light. "You have other things on your mind," said Laine. How's your sex life? Anna thought to say, but didn't. Laine naked with a stethoscope was a disturbing, if not entirely unappealing, picture. And she was pretty sure she found herself blushing around Darien, inadvertently picturing him kissing a guy who looked like Ed. She wondered about the music she'd heard, pictured a score labelled *Doctor Porn Symphony!*, but her usually great musical recall failed this time.

Ay-a was in her, and those old desires singed more than ever. Which was, when she thought about it, encouraging. If she wasn't dead, her music wouldn't be either. The next time Caroline was gone, she resolved to practice all night.

"All night?" asked Darien. "You serious?"

"Yeah." She found herself glaring at him. "Hey, you wanna come over?" Another outburst, Ay-a's doing. The damn invented goddess was saying things without her permission. This wasn't good.

"What?"

"When I'm practising. Or something."

Foot. In. Mouth.

Ay-a cheered her on.

“All *night*? I don't think—” he paused, and his face darkened. “Maybe I will. Would be nice to get away from my place. If it's OK though, I might have to bring a sleeping bag in case I get too tired.”

“No need, we've got a fold-out couch you can use.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

She introduced Caroline to Darien in the car. “My friend from school.” They shook hands, she thought, with too much politeness, but Darien seemed too mild to arouse Caroline's suspicion. Not that there was anything to suspect. Caroline insisted on taking his coat to hang in the closet, and cut him a flower-shaped spread of apple slices on one of the fancy plates while he answered questions about his saxophone playing, favourite musicians, and where he'd moved from. Then she drove away.

Coolly, Anna tidied the counter. There was so much to do, stray dishes to put in the dishwasher, crumbs to wipe, a tiny smudge she had to clean up. She was suddenly embarrassed of the house that Darien was looking around curiously. The pictures on the walls were too pretentious. The kitchen too chaotic. The living room furniture too high-backed and cold, sterile as if unlived in. Darien was quiet while she cleaned. She thought, I'm acquiring Mom's nervous tics. She didn't like it.

“Are you going to practice now?” Darien's voice seemed cold, cutting as it did through the silence, its first words coming like a scold.

She felt trapped by this, and words clamoured forth about everything else. “Hey,

have you ever had a garden in the spring? We used to have one all the time til Dad moved out, and I miss it. Even though the raccoons ate the corn and the carrots never got very big. I think I'm going to plant one this year again.” She hadn't thought of doing that before, but in that moment it seemed extremely important that she plant one.

“Oh cool.” He was distracted—just what Anna had wanted to happen, without realizing it.

“And you know what's hilarious? I found some DVDs in the video cabinet—”

“And?”

“They were porn! My mom has a porn stash!” She wanted to swallow her blurring tongue and melt into the flowered floor tiles. But Darien was laughing loudly.

“Your mom? I don't believe it!”

“Look, I'll show you.” She'd misstepped, but had to go through with it now. She led him to the video cabinet and pulled out the discs. “See, it's stupid doctor porn.” She was too caught in her own discomfort to notice the way he shifted nervously and his eyes rolled elsewhere around the room. She had to keep moving. She put the DVD in, feeling something frantic in her chest. They settled on opposite ends of the couch with a few feet of space between them. This tape was a new one, and it began abruptly with two blonde women necking. Their panting was heavy, their smacking obvious. Black lace lingerie clung to their contours. The camera closed in on their lips, dewed over, dancing wetly. *Was this what we looked like—? A pair of women and their tumbling hair. We could have been so glorious.* Anna froze. Make one move and she would shiver. Her stomach churned. She didn't want to remember.

Ay-a was there as the dark grabbing thing in her. There was no separation. She needed. Her gaze lurched towards Darien. The space between them hurt.

His body was strangely tensed. Sitting erect. Ha ha.

*Turn off the movie. He's uncomfortable, and it's rude.*

*Grab him.*

*He doesn't want you.*

*Yeah right, Liss would say. If I were her, I'd just reach over and find out.*

Carved jaw, shadow of hair, downcast eyes. Valkyries crescendo.

If she didn't do something right now to break the insufferable space, she would have to damage something. Take angry bites from her upper arm. Kick the garbage can as hard as she could. Put her fist through the TV screen.

*If you don't act now, you never will. Disturb the space.*

She lunged across and traced an S on his cheek. Her movements were abrupt and hungry. She swept an arm around him and pressed her lips against his cheek, and kept them there shaking, and pressed them to his lips. She bent her body to his and held herself there. Felt his chest against her breast, raw skin under shirts. Didn't wonder about him but bent for another kiss, and his lips kissed back. Her tongue broke into his mouth and did not surprise him. He was breathing heavy as a surfaced diver gasping with his head above water. Their hands roved across each other. Strange places like the underside of her arm tingled. Was this what drugs were like? She was insatiable and being sated, the sensations half excitement, half relief. There was an incredible lightness with that distance gone. She gulped it down. She came away to pull off his sweaty shirt. She traced



and kissed the contours of the muscles underneath. He did not touch hers, so she pulled her own shirt over her head. She hesitated in her embarrassingly plain cotton bra, then unhooked it. Shirtless, she curled against him. If Darien heard the porn stars' gasping, if it worked as background stimulation, she wouldn't know. For her all that surrounded them had ceased to exist.

So she didn't notice the door opening, or Darien's eyes going wide, or the voice calling "I forgot the cake, Tom and I were going to have it for dessert." She noticed Darien pushing her away, then she was face to face with Caroline, gape-mouthed, watching her shirtless daughter making out with just-a-friend on the couch, with one of her own porn tapes grunting on TV. She shrunk back.

Darien was the first to speak. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm extremely sorry. We haven't done anything wrong."

"Get your hands off my daughter!" This was redundant, as his hands had left Anna minutes ago.

Anna was frozen, but Ay-a reacted. Indignation flared through her still-present shame. Anna brusquely pulled on her shirt and stood up in front of Caroline. "Look who's the pot calling the kettle black."

"That's different. We're, we're, consenting adults, and we've been seeing each other for awhile!"

"So are we. And you don't know what else we've done."

"You'd better not be having sex at this age."

"Who said anything about sex?" Her hand flew to her hip. "By the way, those are

good porn tapes.”

Caroline stood there gaping like a goldfish. Anna felt Ay-a solidly behind her, a flare in her near-black eyes. She pressed a palm to Darien's shoulder. If need be, she would protect him.

## Chapter 9: Garden of Moments

Anna was nine when time caught her knowingly. She made a list of it afterwards in her journal.

*Location: Classroom*

*Time: Recess, ~~approximately~~ approximately 12:15 PM*

*People in the room: Nobody*

The room was empty as a slate, everyone else having chewed up or packed up their sandwiches, made a game of slam-dunking Baggies in the garbage can or in a crumpled hoop around it, and stomped out booted into the snow. Anna had two bites of ham sandwich left and couldn't decide whether or not to eat them.

Liss leaned over and kicked her. "Let's go!" What would happen, Anna wondered, if she sat there and said nothing?

"You can put your sandwich away! You don't even like ham, you said so. And I have to tell you my dream."

Sit there and say nothing.

Liss stared for a long moment.

Say nothing.

"What's wrong with you today?" Liss whirled around, made a lurching motion, and grabbed the arm of Sarah Gates. Anna heard her say, "Come on then, let's go build a fort." Sarah looked surprised only for a minute. She was a head taller than Liss, and followed her quickly. Anna watched the two girls walk out to the hallway, Liss's skirt

flouncing from speed.

Two bites of sandwich. Maybe three if she ate them small. That would make it last longer, this moment she was alone in the classroom, paused between decisions.

She saw kids out the window having snowball fights and playing tag. She saw Liss and Sarah walking arm in arm. She could stay in this empty classroom all recess and do what she wanted. Imagine she was in another world, and keep the quiet to herself. Sneak into a practice room like the older kids and play the piano. Go join Liss and Sarah at the fort they'd said they'd make.

Or she could get up, go out, and leave them.

She looked to the shelf beside her where there was a pile of scribblers, the class's English journals waiting for the teacher to correct them. Anna's was in the middle, with a dark purple cover. She looked at the thin book submerged in the pile of everyone else's writing as if it didn't matter. It would matter. It *would*. She would remember it forever. She would be grown up and look back on the pile of scribblers on the white shelf and this moment when she was nine would be alive for her and she'd be inside it again. She was in this present now, and she was in the present of her future, looking back. She couldn't see what the future was, what she was in the future, but it was there in the room. She was 15 and remembering, 25 and remembering, 65, an old lady, and still remembering. She saw the purple cover and was remembering it forever. She'd decided to write about her Life's History in that journal. She pictured moments she had and hadn't written about as capsules spread out in a garden. Each contained a flower or a few. They were translucent but she couldn't touch what was in them unless she got close and put herself inside the

glass. On an unfilled green expanse the flower-filled capsules looked like tiny paperweights or bell jars, even flying saucers. Inside were tulips, forget-me-nots, lilacs, roses, daylilies, trumpet vines, morning glories, lupins, wisteria. The capsules were a little frosted, like sea glass, making the spaces inside look like they held mist and the flowers were touched with the tiniest shards of ice. She wasn't sure if they quite touched the ground. She'd never seen anything this beautiful. This moment of the purple scribbler would soon be enclosed in its own capsule, and she'd be in another clump of flowers. But she saw the garden spread across the spaces where the desks sat. All the moments were alive for her too now, present.

There was the time when Caroline had started her job outside the house. "I'm not used to working with *people*," she said. "It's been so long." She had a habit of chewing on her lower lip whenever she was about to try something new. Stirring the batter the first time she tried carrot cake, "à la homemade" she said in a voice like the Tide commercial lady's with a smile that looked stretched, she bit at a flake of mouth skin. She had a tub of lip balm that smelled like pine needles that she put on her lips every night. "Axle grease," Hank called it, but Caroline bought Anna some and made her put it on too. Anna wondered what her mother's lips would feel like if she didn't use that thick smelly gel.

"I don't want to go to work tomorrow," Caroline said, knitting some white thing or maybe it was the colour called eggshell or cream, Anna's eyes couldn't tell the difference. She remembered a dream where mothers had compound eyes like giant horseflies, and she was frozen in their kaleidoscope stares. The knitting needles clicked too fast. Caroline

slipped a stitch and fumbled to rethread it. “I haven't worked outside home for years. I barely remember what it's like to have a boss. I don't—Can't think, can't think. Anna, you ever get so you can't think?”

Anna couldn't think then, so she said “Yeah.”

“It can't be so bad, it's just going to be sitting in a little booth and translating what I hear people saying. I've known French all my life. I was never any good at public speaking, but it's not really public speaking. I mean, what's the worst that could happen?” She grinned, as if the sentence were a blanket to hold onto.

“Everyone could hate it. People could laugh.” It was a game. “All the lights could go out,” said Anna. “And—the chandelier could come crashing down and crack your head open.” Suddenly Anna was in the dream, stilled by the leer of compound eyes.

“What's the worst that could happen?” Caroline said it again, not as a question but as an answer. But Anna was staring out the window—snakes could sinew their way across the grassy lawn and muscle through the window, one would brunt its way into the fridge where they would find it tomorrow curled like a baby, the fridge a hollow pumpkin with only crumbs left, and another would drape around her mother's neck like a scarf. She'd walk to the presentation forgetting it was there, and along the way it would chew at the flakes on her lip, leaving poison gel for her to lick. Another would get into Anna's stomach while she was sleeping and lay an egg—

“The worst thing,” Caroline repeated, with a smile that didn't flicker like the commercial lady's. The knitting was scrunched up on the sofa. She puckered her lips—tasting something milky—no, whistling. Now she was a bird maybe in her feather-white

dress. It was an old song she'd sung before, something about up on the mountain or was it down in the valley? Anna didn't get what she was whistling about.

There was the moment when Hank stomped into the house with his face crumpled. Uncle Theo, Aunt Bet and the cousins were over. The boys brought their Nintendo and sat playing it on the couch. Anna had asked to play and been handed a game controller shaped like a chunky boomerang. "Press Start," said Todd, and someone must have pressed Start because the screen had gone from one with boxes where you picked your character to one where the characters were walking around on a platform. She was the princess, she thought. She couldn't figure out which buttons on the weirdly shaped Nintendo controller made the cartoon princess on the screen do what. She hammered A and B and moved the joystick wildly, and Princess Peach kept moving but she couldn't figure out what was moving what. The boys seemed to be pressing all the buttons at the same time, their hands were that fast. Hers were supposed to be fast hands but they were clumsy on the joystick. A giant plant with a red top and white spots was walking towards the characters, swinging its leaves back and forth and snapping the red-and-white jaws of the head-thing where a flower usually was. It was like one of those plants that ate bugs in real life, except that it was huge and seemed to have teeth. The boys yelled at it as they banged on buttons, and Mario and Luigi advanced punching. "Piranha plant! Yeah! Kill that thing!" Anna didn't know where Peach had gone. She pounded on the A button, as if that would do something. Suddenly there was a sound of cartoon chomping and the plant had eaten her princess. That's when Hank came in.

His feet were dirtclouds and his breath like a horse's after running. He disappeared quickly, like Peach. Something was wrong, signalled the noises he left in the air.

Anna heard the grown-ups talk that night while she sat pretending to review her music theory homework. Something about what an idiot his boss was and the lousy job market and what to do now. He spent a month around the house before getting hired back for a lower-level inspection job in the same department. His face must have been clouded for some of that time, but Anna remembered jokes about the Unemployment Trolls coming to live in the basement and the taste of sausages on the grill.

There was the day when Liss came over to Anna's home forest. Anna belonged in the forest, navigating root systems under the moss, breathing pine. She showed Liss the clearing where she'd kept a stash of all the fallen branches and called it her wood collection until she decided she was too old for that and she couldn't think of a use for a wood collection anyway. On a pale grey rock overlooking a tiny hollow, she'd come since Sunday School started and stood holding onto the dogwood branch that leaned overhead, looking to the sky and praying. Our-father-who-art-in-heaven-hallowed-be-thy-name, it used to be. Now it was Ay-a. Ay-a, help me get a 100% on my Social Studies test. Ay-a, please make sure the audience likes my playing. Please make Laine happy and please don't let my mom get mad at me for finishing the cookies. Ay-a, please make me beautiful and strong and give me a voice like Liss's, even though I know you won't. Anna had to show Liss the rock and tell her how she spoke to Ay-a. She didn't tell her what she prayed for.



Through the carpet of moss she led Liss to the cat tree, the one old oak with a low trunk that she could climb most easily. She'd named it that because she could clamber right to the edge of the largest branch the way a cat could, lie stretched on her stomach, and observe the goings-on below, forest movements and lawn with a postage stamp garden and tiny house, with eyes she imagined saw everything. On the ground she was smaller and didn't know as much, but she could always climb back up.

“Come up here,” she said, and Liss followed her easily through the branches, a darting smaller body. Anna perched on the edge of the widest spot and Liss's face poked out behind through leaves and their speckled shadows. Anna was high with the knowledge that here, on her own land, she was the leader. Liss settled behind and pressed her hand on Anna's shoulder.

“Look,” she said. “We can see everything.”

“That's why I go up here,” said Anna.

Liss's breath came in thinly, quickened. “There's a little river thing. There's the house, way over there. Look how little the trees are! This is the perfectest thing ever.”

Anna didn't know what to say. She'd wanted to be the one to point things out. But Liss grabbed Anna and pulled her towards her. “This is some kind of magic, isn't it?”

“The magic that puts us above everything else. Like flying without moving.”

“It's *our* magic,” said Liss. “And we should do a ceremony.”

Anna let excitement run through her and inhaled the smell of pine. Liss placed her left hand over Anna's chest, and with her right, guided one of Anna's to her own. “Do you promise we'll always be in each other's hearts?”

Anna shivered—there was a certain horror-movie excitement in the idea of their making vows—and felt epic. She pressed her hand to Liss's, which was holding it. “I promise. Do you promise?”

“I promise.”

“Forever and ever?” asked Anna.

“Forever and ever. Do—”

“Shh,” Anna hissed. They sat very still while a squirrel with its wind-up motions moved inches from her knees.

“Now we need to make a sacrifice.” Liss's voice spiked higher.

“Not the squirrel!”

“No, stupid. We'll make a man and burn it, like they did in the old days. Only not a real one. C'mon, let's get down from the tree.”

Liss climbed down first, and Anna followed. “Is there anything we can make a man with?” asked Liss on the ground, kicking a sapling. Anna wanted to tell her to stop, but Liss started walking towards the house and she forgot. She thought of Hank's old clothes, but those would be missed.

“I think we have some garbage bags in the kitchen. And we can probably use rags and duct tape. And permanent marker for the face and stuff.”

Caroline walked in on Liss taping together a stomach and arms and Anna drawing the most scary-looking face she could imagine. The eyes bulged over sharp eyebrows, and the mouth snarled.

“What are you doing?” asked Caroline.

“Making a scarecrow thing,” answered Anna. She didn't want to say “a man,” because that would get laughed at.

“Oh, want a hat for it? Some clothes?”

“Yeah.”

They got to pick from a box of Hank and Caroline's cast-offs brought out from the closet. Liss wanted to give it overalls, a vast checked shirt, and a baseball cap. That was the only kind of hat Hank ever wore. Anna grabbed one of Caroline's instead, a floppy felt beige one with a ribbon around it. “That's too girly!” said Liss. “Are you crazy?”

“You picked everything else.”

Anna wondered where Liss was going to put the man, but Liss had another plan first. She waited until Caroline had gone to her bedroom, and asked, “Where are the matches?”

Anna hesitated, trying to picture burning on the lawn. An image from a nightmare came to mind—the house on fire, red tongues flicking out.

“Don't be a chicken. Where?”

Liss started looking in furniture, rummaging through cabinets. She went to the telephone table, where Anna knew they were kept, and the top drawer opened with a creak. “Found them!” Her voice held the same wild excitement. “Follow me and bring the man!” She ran catlike to the door.

Anna carried the scarecrow out to the forest where Liss walked. She lifted it (it was awfully light) into the clearing with the pale grey rock and dogwood tree, just steps away from the cat tree. The place had light splintering down bright enough to drench

them, and the ground was red with long pine needles. “Here's where we'll do it,” said Liss, and pointed to the rock.

“But this is a sacred clearing,” said Anna. To herself, she called it the Prayer Land.

“Perfect,” said Liss.

“But we can't wreck it!”

“That's what sacrifices are for. They destroy things so the gods can make better things grow from them. Better things like you can't even imagine better.”

“No.” Anna's hands were on her hips, tight. The man was on the ground, between dogwood and pine in a puddle, Caroline's lovely beige hat spilled off.

“We've gotta do it.” Liss propped the man up against a pine tree. Anna couldn't think fast enough to move. She watched wide-eyed while Liss struck a match and held the flame to its body. It didn't take at first, so she threw it down and struck another one. Anna heard rustling, and the stink of burning garbage bags mixed with the sweetish smell of burning sap. They watched flames creep up and lick plaid cuffs to black and shrink the crinkling figure.

The fire was slow until suddenly it was everywhere, lapping against the tree. The pine was burning! Anna yelled and ran to Liss. Stop, stop, stop, she thought, but all she could do was scream. Liss stood in front of the increasing carnage, still, with fire reflected in her eyes.

Caroline was running towards them with fear in the lines of her face. Her old hat was still on the forest floor, untouched.

There was the hour when Anna gave a recital in a blue evening gown made for a nine-year-old that shimmered like night. She wasn't afraid of the stage after so many times on it. Laine was in the wings, having introduced her, and smiled when she looked back. She walked forward to the piano bench and stood a minute looking down at the smooth wood-and-ivory box of sound. She turned and curtsied into the lights. She turned back and sat.

Initial notes came in a fast trickle. She was in the music the moment her fingers landed. Her arms roved, and her back rocked slightly. Anna belonged here. She belonged wherever sound was easiest for her.

But music, the kind with clear tune and rhythm and pure shivers—was it ever easy?

Her hands knew because they'd practised . They traced the paths they'd followed many times until their tracks were left. But then came the hard part, a cadenza too fast for her fingers. The thing she'd practised over and over and often couldn't play at the right speed.

There were the seconds time froze up. Her fingers were about to trip. Her index to fall on the wrong key. Her ring finger to stumble after when it was supposed to come first.

Come on, Anna. Come on. Come on.

Her ring finger came first. Then her index. Not on the wrong key. Enough to the left to land on the right one. She kept the tempo, or thought she did, and was back in a slightly slower section. Breathe.

That's when she understood she couldn't fail.

There was something about her that kept the music together, and when she finished, she curtsied to sound that came like an ocean. After, Aunt Bet handed her a package of chocolate chip cookies and leaned over. "You're a prodigy," she whispered to Anna, "but don't let your mother know I said that."

There was something inside her like an ocean. She nestled into it. She wanted to live inside the place that endless music came from. Where music was every bit of everything alive, felt with senses she didn't have but would if it was truly her world. She couldn't quite get to the point of feeling it like she wanted to. But out of everyone, maybe she was the only one who almost could.

She was in another capsule now, staring at her dark purple English scribbler in the pile. She could walk away. She could leave Liss who always picked the games and always told her what to do. They weren't tied together. She, too, could find someone else to spend recess with. Could do whatever she wanted.

She found Chen in a corner, rolling a snowball. She wondered what Chen was making, and if it would be alright to ask. Other kids and even married grown-ups had more than one friend at a time. Other kids knew how to make friends. Anna didn't really know how to do it. Chen looked up and over at Anna. Anna looked away. She should walk off. It was rude to stare. But she looked back up and kept watching. Chen looked at her again and she quickly pretended to be staring at the snow-covered slide.

Chen walked over slowly. "Hi," she said.

“Hi,” said Anna.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing. What are you making?”

“A really big snowman. Wanna help?”

Anna stood there. “Can I?”

“Yeah. You can make the middle.” Chen went back to rolling her snowball, which was still small enough to fit in Anna's arms. Anna bent down in her snow pants and packed a tiny ball. The marks left by her gloves made it look prickly. She rolled it until it looked like a log, with Chen pushing the bigger snowball beside her. She looked at the cracks along the snow, then flipped it around and started rolling the other side. It was almost like trying to roll a box, until it got rounder. By the time she finished the middle, it was as wide as a garbage can. She and Chen packed the bottom ball in with snow. Chen kept wanting to add extra, until it looked like the snowman was wearing a skirt. They hoisted the middle on top and packed around it. “It's better this way,” said Chen. “It won't fall off and it doesn't have the big lines between the snowballs. It looks more like a real person, see?”

She started on the top, and Anna offered to look for things for the arms and face. She found a couple branches by the hill, some smaller bits of stick for eyes, mouth and nose, and some fallen pine branches she stuck on top to make bushy green hair. She had to tiptoe to reach, and her boots sunk into the snow. One boot got snow down it, so she sat down and tried to shake it out while the clump of crystals melted on the liner and her cold foot.

“That *is* a really big snowman,” said Chen. Anna looked around and agreed. She couldn't see any bigger ones, just a few little ones here and there, along with forts all around the perimeter of the fence that looked like flimsy marshmallow constructions, forts that looked like castles with slides, a snow bear and a tiny snow dog. Anna grinned at the snowman. She liked that the hair was her idea, and that Chen hadn't minded it at all. It was nice not to be bossed around.

“I want a fort like that,” said Anna, pointing to the castle.

“Me too.”

The next day when Liss asked her to come outside with her, she said she was going to make a fort with Chen. They worked on the fort for the rest of the winter while Liss made one with Sarah. They stopped going to each other's houses. When her mother asked if she still liked Liss, Anna shrugged. She almost stopped noticing Liss's soaring voice in chorus, too busy talking with others or trying to memorize the words or daydreaming herself in some heaven beyond the ceiling. She almost stopped minding when Liss got the solos, and in sixth grade she stopped having to take chorus and could pick a music history class instead. Besides, she had her own performances. In school concerts she was often asked to perform pieces, and she had recitals in front of clapping faces. She'd started playing clarinet the year after her break with Liss, and although it was less natural for her to play something that had her breath as well as her fingers involved, she was getting the First Clarinet pieces in band in no time. She liked owning her own small instrument that she could carry around and take care of. She played the organ at church and occasionally at weddings. It was the only thing she liked about church



anymore, and the stuffy loudness of the wedding ceremonies was enough to make up her mind that she'd never get married. She started to shave and bought some bras and got her period. Chen brought posters of muscular actors to school and showed them to her, giggling. "Don't you think he's cute?" She couldn't see why cute was important. She was too consumed with nightmares about growing giant breasts and gorilla leg hair and getting pregnant, and ones about the yelling that went on in the house, mostly when she wasn't in the room but increasingly when she was. She wasn't normal enough to care about something like *guys*, until Ed who sat beside her in the new music history class grew a few inches and his voice stopped creaking and she started noticing him.

She was thirteen when she and Liss were partnered up for a Social Studies presentation. They had to choose a country to research and present on to the class. Liss wanted to do India because she looked like her birth parents might have come from there. Or one of them might have. Maybe. They went to Anna's house and searched for curry recipes on the internet. "If we feed the teacher, he'll love us," said Liss. She looked around the office, where there was a Degas print and a painting of island lupins, but stacks of Hank's papers had come to overflow their drawers and puddle in untidy heaps on the floor. "This place has changed." When Caroline brought snacks and suggested they take a break, they turned on the TV and watched a blooper show. They laughed as cats fell out of boxes and football players wiped out on the grass. A kid went to blow the candles out on a blue-frosted birthday cake and his face fell into the frosting. Liss snorted. Anna laughed louder. Liss shoved her and she shoved back. "So why don't we hang out anymore, again?" Liss asked.

They made up an India Rap and got an A on their presentation. It was another memory encapsulated in the Garden of Moments. They fell back into inseparability as if there had been no time out between it.

## Chapter 10: Suspension

At fourteen, Liss came onto the playground humming a Rita Deviant song. Her hair was tied like Rita's, in an untidy ponytail, and she wore a small chain that dangled from her jeans. Over those, a ragged tan vest over a black t-shirt. She'd used a lighter to burn a few holes in it. Anna was a head taller than her now, and hopefully fully grown. She didn't like being taller than some of the guys, although Ed was certainly taller than her. Maybe Liss was fully grown now too, fierce and low to the ground.

“I don't know what the hell they're thinking in English class,” said Liss, collapsing onto the grass. “As if the parts of speech are somehow things we'll need to know in real life. Yeah, I can just see us in the concert hall going 'That's a noun, that's an adverb,' can't you?”

“Better than math,” said Anna.

Liss snorted. “I can't wait to get my license. The day I do, I'm gonna buy a car and get outta here.” Her long metallic earrings clinked as she gestured.

“Where are you gonna go?” They'd been over this before, and the answers changed.

“I told ya, I'm going to Nashville. They record all kinds of music there, not just country. I'm sure there's a band there that would have a spot for my talent.” She tilted back her head in mock arrogance.

“Country Western Fiddle Player,” said Anna.

“Hey, there are some pretty sweet combos. Not everyone's as narrow-minded as

the mainstream.” She picked a blade of grass and stuck it between her teeth. She whistled through it. Anna moved her science textbook from lap to grass. She'd taken it with her to study for the test next day, but it didn't seem likely she'd get much studying done.

“You should hear the music I'm gonna make someday! It'll be like nothing that's existed before.” Liss leaned forward, causing light patterns to shift across the top of her head. “People will listen and it will do something amazing to them.”

It already does, thought Anna.

“It'll make them laugh and scream and dance 'til they go mad. It'll make them furious. It'll make them know things. It'll make them want to change this pathetic plastic video game of a world. Break it apart and put a new one back together in its place. Rita's got that,” said Liss. “*You* know. She's got the soul and she does things to ya. Who needs drugs and all that other stuff when music can break and make you like that?”

Anna didn't get the power in Rita Deviant's songs. For her they were, like many others, mildly energizing and fun to dance to. They had a thumping bass beat, some funky techno sounds, admittedly good electric guitar, and the lyrics were often silly, at best mediocre. Liss's softer voice sang them better than Rita's grating one. She began a song right then.

*I'm gonna ache I'm gonna take until the break of dawn*

*We're gonna shake we're gonna quake we're gonna get it on*

Here the music broke into instrumentals, guitar screeches and low percussion moans to mimic sex, for a full minute and a half. Liss simply tapped her knees and made some “Danananana” sounds, then went back to singing.

*I'm so hot like you'll never see, hot like you'll never be,  
like honey in the club and all the guys are flies.  
I'm the star of the human race, gon' take this club to outer space,  
and what you're gonna see you won't believe your eyes.*

“I had a dream I was Rita last night,” she said afterwards. “It was the best thing in the world.”

“What happened in it?”

“I was onstage singing and playing guitar and, well, it was like one big orgasm.”

Anna wondered if Liss had had an orgasm. Probably. She certainly hadn't. Maybe most girls would have by now—she had to look that up on the internet.

But Liss was continuing the dream, the curve of her cheeks glazed in light that came over the hill. “I was making out with people, all these people. And we ended up in this place with an indoor pool, and realized we were surrounded by mirrors, reflecting us in a million directions. You shoulda seen what I saw in those mirrors. Sexy as hell. Rita Deviant, a million times, right there, reflected from my own body. Imagine seeing *that*.”

Anna was still picturing Liss making out with “all these people”—men in suits, men with tattoos, boys smelling of concert sweat, svelte boys like Ed who carried agenda books and played the piano beautifully. In the mirrors they were multiplied to hordes. And there was supposed to be a pool, wasn't there? She visualized some of the men in lawn chairs, others doing the backstroke and front crawl and butterfly, having splash fights and paddling around on pool noodles. Liss looked as Liss always did—small with a wavy ponytail, and unlike Rita Deviant who wasn't all that interesting. Some dark energy

rippled off of Liss like heat, but that wasn't unusual. Two men were wrestling in the water. They had perfect muscles, being figments of imagination.

“Anna,” said Liss, “why aren't you saying anything?”

She was embarrassed. Liss tried a few more prompts at conversation, then settled into Anna's silence. They sat there people watching on top of the hill.

Irena strode by, Michelle beside her, both in tight jeans and cute jean jackets.

“Preps,” said Liss from their vantage point out of earshot. “Sell-outs.”

“They're not so bad,” said Anna.

“Speak for yourself. They're like walking magazine ads. It's that sort of conformity that's ruining the world.”

Anna could see her point, but she liked Michelle's vitality. And she and Irena sat next to each other in band, and she'd heard songs that Irena composed a few times. Once Irena had given her a piece she'd written for clarinet, signed with a small plump heart on top. She'd played it in her room in the half-light of evening, and it had made her shiver. She didn't trust these girls, but she couldn't look down on them either.

“And look, there goes Lover Boy!”

Liss *would* notice Ed before she did. Luckily she hadn't spoken loudly. He was talking with Jacques, a shorter guy in glasses. He was middling height himself, thin, but looked athletic, and the front of his blond hair was always gelled forward. When he played the drum kit or bass drum or other big percussion, it swung around a little as his whole body got into the rhythm. He was studious but not a quiet person, always cracking jokes in class. Half the time they were some twist on the subject matter, so no one

minded. Walking past one day, she'd seen him caricature their science teacher's jowls and too-short pants. Another time she'd noticed a comic strip involving a boy in a baseball cap, a girl with breasts, and a bug-eyed squirrel. "Great drawings," she'd said lamely, and he'd smiled. She had taken to drawing her own cartoons in the margins of her pages, hoping he would notice, nervous he would criticize because she, unlike Ed, was no artist.

"Are you going to do anything about him, or are you just going to keep staring forever?"

Anna shrugged.

"Come on, at least ask him to dance at the next dance. You're cute. You'll get him for sure."

He was too good for her. But he had smiled. Once in theory class, they'd watched a video about composition and his eyes (clear blue, she knew) had kept flicking back towards her, and each time she'd seen them, she'd looked down. She couldn't remember anything the video had said. But she'd probably been reading too much into the looks, or what she thought were looks. It was like a conspiracy theory—think about it, and you start seeing signs everywhere. Anna pictured herself striding up to Ed in the gym when strobe lights refracted dancers and music blasted from speakers. "Hi." "Hey Ed." "Hey, wanna dance?" She couldn't do it. Ed didn't notice her at dances, and no one else did either.

Still, she bought magazines at the corner store, plastered with smiling famous faces and neon pink headlines: *How to Get His Attention!* *What Men Are Really Thinking!* She hid them in her backpack from her mother, who probably wouldn't have

cared but Anna didn't want to take chances, and read them in a tent beneath her sheets. The only thing the tent was missing was a sign to signal Keep Out. Because she was too old for that, she started collecting Danger signs to put around her room. Falling Rocks. Caution: Men at Work. The weirder, the better.

She was reading an article with a garish orange headline about how to decipher guys' body language when Hank lurched through the door, smelling of sweat. She heard him pause against the wall and could tell he was wobbly. The light through her window had dimmed to sepia.

“Where were you?” Caroline called out from the living room.

“With friends.”

Don't argue, thought Anna. Don't argue!

“What friends?”

“Oh, you know.”

Was that a slur in his voice? Was it?

It would be two weeks before she stood in front of Caroline and yelled towards him, instincts wanting to shield her mother with sound. Two weeks before she took a stinging hand across her face. She reeled and white spots fuzzed her vision, mold spattered through the house. She dreamed of wrestling her father off of his armchair and pounding him against the wood floor over and over. The grimace she'd see.

Her playing grew frantic. She tended to the scar like a perverse medal. She ran her fingers over it before the regional music festival in rhythm to her pieces. She won at the



regional and then the provincial music festival in her age division. In the car on the way home, she pressed her trophy to the reddened spot on her cheek and was soothed by the lingering sting.

“Don't tell me you're going to do it.”

“Yeah, Chen, I think I'm going to do it.”

History class, the most sedate, was when all things monumental happened. In the arrangement of desks in threes Chen sat on one side of Anna, Liss on the other, both watching her intently. She looked down at her paper and scribbled a heart. Another, interlinked. Then another. 1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria assassinated. Start of war. Heart, heart, heart, heart, heart.

“He likes you,” said Liss. “How can he not like you?”

“What, did you ask him?”

“Of course I did. In gym class. He said you were hot and he's craazy about you.”

She grinned.

Anna felt her shoulders tensing. Heart, heart, heart was all well and good. Nothing frightening in the imagined, in the clearly impossible idea of someone like him liking someone like her, someone nothing like Liss, someone with her cage of timidity and her confusion and her flat chest and the dusting of pimples on her forehead. But the thought of Ed, standing in front of her— Ed, in the flesh—

And in a mental flash they were cross-legged in front of a river, grass on their calves, the sky dipped in gold and auburn, holding between them one of those two-dollar

too-sweet trifle cups from the school cafeteria. Their spoons dipped towards each other. They leaned in as they inhaled the cake and pudding in their bites. The bushes around them were lilacs, and it was quickly getting too dark to see the purple. A voice much like her mother's was singing, *Je veux vivre dans ce rêve...* Their spoons touched. Their noses brushed. He could move closer, could lean in and kiss her. Not that she knew what a kiss was like except from watching. Not that she'd been touched much, ever, at all.

Chen leaned across in front of Anna, frowning. "You're lying."

All had happened fast. Liss was blinking.

"That's right, you're lying. Ed's too shy to call someone hot."

"You'd know," said Liss under her breath.

"Tell me you made that up," said Chen.

"OK. I did make that up. But Anna deserves him, and I know he'd like her."

Unsure whether to feel unnerved or encouraged, feeling instead some suspended mix of them, Anna tore a sheet of paper from her notebook.

"You're going to do it!" Chen squealed.

"Shh," said Anna.

"I guess we should be doing our work."

But Liss was whispering, "You go get him."

Anna wasn't one to chase people, she thought to herself. She wasn't one to chase anything. Piano and music school and recitals and concerts and awards were things that just happened. There had been that one active agent in her that one time, a goddess or something. But did she do anything truly assertive?

She wrote across the top of the paper.

*Dear Ed,*

*Hey Ed,*

*Do you know you have beautiful eyes?*

*Hi, how are you?*

*I was just wondering what our homework was for*

*Roses are red, violets are*

*I admire your study skills*

“Ooh, study skills,” grinned Liss.

“I think there are going to be a lot of versions of this note,” said Chen, trying not to smile.

*I just want to tell you I think you're*

*I just want to say I*

*You're an awesome person*

*I think I really like you*

“Put x's and o's at the end,” said Liss.

“No,” said Chen, “you don't want to sound too eager.”

Anna tore out another page and copied out the lines she thought were the least awful. She signed the note with simply *Anna*.

What to do now? Leave it on his desk during a bathroom break before class? Then she'd have to find a time when he was gone, since he was usually early. Someone else might see the note on the desk, though, and everyone who came early would see her

putting it there. He'd show it to his friends. Maybe his friends would see it first. That would be no good. She felt the steam of embarrassment invade her at the thought. She needed someone who would swear him to secrecy. A messenger.

“Hey Liss, could you give my note to Ed?”

“Sure thing!”

Liss and Chen beamed at each other. Their looks passed in front of Anna as if she wasn't there.

“Be careful on your mission,” said Chen.

“Trust me, I'm good at this.”

Anna fingered the crimped edges of the paper she'd used to start drafting her note. She bent a corner. Then she crumpled the whole thing. Liss slipped out after class with the note hidden in the fold of her palm.

She couldn't concentrate on her homework, her clarinet playing, her supper. Her mind replayed the incident a week ago when she'd run into Ed in the hallway. “Hey, have you read that chapter on Handel?” she'd asked.

He'd paused to answer her, and his friends had paused with him. They didn't exchange looks, so she must have just come across as a classmate asking about homework. “Not yet, I'm half done.”

“Isn't it great?” she'd blurted out.

Great? It hadn't been great. It had been boring. It was Ed. Ed was great. Ed was why she couldn't think straight.

His blue eyes had looked decidedly confused. “It was alright.” And she'd started giggling. Giggling! Her cheeks had flushed furiously, and she'd had to run away.

*Hey Anna,*

*Thanks for the note. I'm sorry but I'm dating someone else right now.*

*Hope you have a great day! :)*

*Ed*

Another Anna would have found out who Ed was dating. Liss, who had kindly not looked at the note until it was delivered, wanted to. She wondered aloud if he had made that up. “Maybe he's just not ready for a girlfriend yet,” she mused. “Or maybe he likes guys.” Another Anna, after finding out the girl, would have tracked her down. Or would have convinced Ed, by her sheer musical genius and grace on the dance floor and slender long-haired beauty (Another Anna was always prettier), to forget that girl and pursue the more desirable woman.

Anna read and re-read the note. Anna pressed it behind the papers in her binder pocket. The square black letters almost hurt her eyes. Anna tasted imaginary trifle. Anna cried.

“Screw Ed,” said Liss in the cafeteria a couple days later. Anna couldn't forget the note, and she wasn't helping by lecturing on the theme. “Or rather, don't screw him. He doesn't deserve it, and I'm sure he'd suck anyway. 'Hope you have a great day'- what a tactless thing to say to a woman you've just turned down! And the *smiley* face! Way to

make it even better. Yeah, I bet he's gay. That's such a gay thing to do, don't you think? Forget that Ed moron. I bet he doesn't even know what a clitoris is!" She said this loudly, and Anna was certain people heard. Anna mashed her heated face into the table so she couldn't see who was looking, and they couldn't look at *her*.

"Anna," said Liss sharply. "The problem with you is you're repressed. We need to fix that." She set her face like stone. Her This Is Important face. But Anna wasn't intimidated, not like she would have been when she was younger.

"And how do you plan to fix that?" she asked.

"I plan for us *both* to fix that. The first step is to get you comfortable with yourself."

"I am." It wasn't quite true. She knew that even more than Liss did. But she was brave. She'd dared to write that note, something so many girls wouldn't. And she had the one outlet. When she melted into her music, she was comfortable. Her self, her skin, all blurred into the moment.

"OK, if you're comfortable with yourself, I dare you to chase down Ed and ask him about that note."

"No!" A shock ran through her.

"See? You aren't."

"It's not up to you to tell me who I am and who I'm not."

"I didn't say anything about who. I'm talking about how comfortable you are. Tell me this: would you be comfortable stripping in the schoolyard?"

"Would you?"

Liss's This Is Important face flinched and froze. Her jaw was slightly open.

“I said, would you?”

“Of course!”

“OK, then I dare you to do it.”

“Tomorrow.”

“I'll be there to make sure.”

“You know, we'd probably get into trouble with the school. We could get kicked out or something.” She was looking at her lunch bag, fiddling with the clunky chain around her neck.

Anna relented. “OK. But don't blame me for not being comfortable if neither of us are, and don't try to change me.”

Too late, she pictured Liss stripping by the flag pole. Bare limbs like copper branches. Ed pausing to swivel his head and watch her. A close-up on his eyes, awestruck.

She pictured herself stripping by the flag pole. A gangly tangle of too-white limbs, boys pointing and laughing. Ed's face was one of revulsion. He turned away. Chen saw her and yelled, “What do you think you're doing?” Liss saw her and this look overcame her—hurt? Defeat?

She was glad neither of them was going to strip in the schoolyard.

But the next day, Liss was back with a Cosmo magazine. “You need to be more in touch with your sexuality is what I think. If you're this prudish, don't you think you're already behind?” She nodded smugly. Sex Positions to Maximize Her Pleasure! read the

glowing pink letters.

“Have you ever . . . had sex?” Anna whispered to her.

“Oh, lots of times,” said Liss at full volume. “With friends, with teachers, with cousins, with Johnny Depp. It was all in my head, of course. You should try it.”

Anna had, sort of. The idea of an advancing penis had been mildly horrifying. But there was some warped excitement embedded in the revulsion, which she couldn't quite admit or understand.

“What's the point of knowing sex positions if you're not going to do them in real life anytime soon?”

“Oh, they're great fantasy material. Also good to know for the future. You never know when your eyes and someone else's will meet and bam! It'll hit you.” She smashed a fist against her palm.

That was moving rather fast, she thought. Had Liss even kissed someone before, either? She and her fantasies were getting ahead of themselves.

“I know what we can do to get you sexier!” In excitement, Liss had risen halfway out of her seat.

Anna pushed around the leftover bits of salad in her tupperware tub. “What?”

“We should be a band! A duo, actually. We can make punk music and stuff, like Rita. You know people in these groups have to be sexy or they don't stand a chance.”

Punk had never been Anna's thing. And stand a chance for what? There was no way the two of them, fourteen years old, would get a record deal.

But Liss would listen to none of that. “What should we call ourselves?” she asked



as she doodled on her napkin. The picture was crudely done, but recognizable. Ed would have done it better. She slapped the thought away. It was a skull in the shape of a heart.

Fracture lines ran down the middle, and it was grimacing. Anna related to it.

“The Beast Beat. What do you think of that idea?”

“Um, I dunno. Is that supposed to be our logo?”

“Sure. I like it for us.”

“Me too. But it doesn't really go with The Beast Beat.” Anna examined it. A broken heart and death, compactly intertwined. “Heartstroke!”

“*Heartstroke?*”

“I dunno.”

Liss's eyes were strange to gaze into. They were open and dark, the irises just a shade off from the pupils, two nested-doll discs it was hard to tell apart. They had a frozen quality. In that moment they were fixed dead forward, directed at Anna but staring at some mental space located right through her.

“Suspension,” said Anna.

“Suspension, I like it!” Liss began to scratch the name above the heart-shaped skull in pointed letters.

Playing in a duo could be interesting, especially in a new genre. Different from band, youth orchestra, and piano duets with Laine and other students. Violin and piano, thought Anna. Or keyboard, it would probably have to be keyboard. Those were strange instruments for punk. They didn't have a drummer. They didn't have a bass. They didn't really have a guitar. Liss had taken a few lessons and could play it passably, but she

couldn't rock out enough for a band. A lot of teenagers at school were in bands, and some were already good. A couple of folk music girls liked to sing in Gaelic under the tree out front. Another group played pop and soft rock covers out back, and little kids would gather around them at recess to make requests. Some skater kids regularly reserved the furthest practice room to rehearse their ska. Five students with a beautifully keening vocalist had recorded a CD and were touring the East Coast. They'd gotten lucky. It was like Liss had said about her and sex—the two of them were starting late, they were behind. But that was stupid. They were already musicians, and this would just be for fun. She tried to imagine what Rita Deviant's songs would sound like with Liss's violin in the background. Abrasive lyrics. A soaring melodic sear. Add her piano for softness, sounding a purposefully arrhythmic rhythm. She played with the components in her head. Switch to keyboard, play with the electronic settings to get more bass, make the violin shriek to sound more punk, throw in some riffs off the blues scale. This could work. This could sound awesome.

They were in the smallest practice room, the one with the stack of sound equipment in the corner. Their favourite. They'd been shying away from it lately, but now they'd run back with the fervour of a new idea. Anna had an electronic keyboard plugged in. She sat on a chair behind it, facing Liss who was perched on a tall speaker, and she filled the other girl in on her thoughts about sounds.

“You're amazing! How do you think of all this stuff so fast?” She found herself caught between a cotton t-shirt stuffed with Liss's small breasts and a series of spiky

bracelets poking into her back. Liss had jumped off the speaker in much less time than Anna had thought of those sound ideas. She was a tight hugger, and held on for a moment longer than most people.

Part of Anna didn't want to answer. She liked being called amazing. "I think I'm just lucky," she said. "Really lucky that I can think like that."

"But you don't really compose, do you? You haven't?"

"No."

"Maybe you should."

Anna thought of Mozart. She'd heard people compare her to him as a kid, when the music she heard sieved directly through her ears to her fingers. But at the ages she'd been playing by ear and sight reading, he'd had symphonies syphon powerfully through him. Where did they come from? She'd never had access to that place. OK, she'd heard some bits in scarce strong moments, mid-leap running through a field of lupins, thinking of Ed, in the afterglow of finishing a concert. Such music seemed to spill from the fibres of the air, sourceless. Maybe it was just stuff she'd heard before and couldn't remember. She wished there was a magic way to tell, but she didn't think it was. That didn't matter, though, because the sound passed through her as ghostly as it came, since her once-amazing memory had weakened now that she had a big repertoire. She couldn't remember it to compose, like others did. If she wanted to do what Mozart had done so much younger, it was already too late. He'd been one of the elect. Was she? The word prodigy swam in her mind. Had he somehow made himself that way? Could she?

Liss seemed to notice she'd gone quiet. "I have some lyrics for us. Sort of. I'm not

sure how good they are.” She hunched in on herself and spoke in a small voice. There was a folded paper in her hand. She looked reluctant, embarrassed. Not a Liss-like look at all.

“Let me see.”

Liss hesitated, made a wavering motion towards Anna and away, and finally held out the paper. She didn't pass it over, but stood with it sitting on her outstretched palm.

Anna took it.

*It's been so many years since I was swept outside your door.*

*You gave me life. I demanded so much more.*

*I needed shelter, money, song.*

*You couldn't give me that for long.*

*So you threw me down on the world like acid rain.*

*I was taken where I'll never see you again.*

*Chorus:*

*I'm still awake, watching out the window.*

*When will you come? I am waiting still.*

*Expecting you. When will I hear your voice again?*

*Memories can't tell.*

*I hope you wish me well.*

*There probably are a lot of you, a family's a must.*

*Are you reeking in the rot of you, or smothered in your dust?*

*Do you think about me ever? Have a number you could call,*

*hanging on your stocked-up fridge's door? Yeah, NOW you could have it all.*

*Are you sitting stoned in front of your old TV?*

*Someday I'm going to find you and someday I'm going to see.*

“We need to add to it,” she mumbled. “You think it's OK?”

Where had she learned to write like that, with taut lines and feeling hissing out? Liss was a composer, thought Anna. A real songwriter. She felt as though she'd swallowed cough syrup.

“It doesn't sound punk,” she said, hoping to channel some of the medicinal taste through her comment.

“Oh, screw genres. We can just be a whatever band.” Anna watched to see if she flinched at all. Yes, there was a barely perceptible squint as she spoke.

“How do you sing that?”

And Liss's voice was rising in an anger Anna had never heard in all her rehearsed singing, in all her Rita Deviant impressions. Her shrunken presence expanded with each syllable. She was pacing the practice room, slicing its musty air, and finally her body and voice were knives windmilling wildly. By the end she was gasping, her hair askew. Anna waited until she'd calmed down before speaking.

“Hey, it's about your birth parents, right?”

“Please don't think I'm lame.” Liss had shrunk again, was not-herself.

“Why would I think you're lame?”

“I've never met them. I've never known who they are or where they're from or anything. Not that it's a big deal or anything.”

“Yeah. I get that.”

“No, I don't think you do.”

*I wish I had different parents* flashed through Anna's mind, but she wasn't cruel enough to speak it aloud.

“Let's try to put music to it and stuff.” As usual, she searched for the easy thing to say, attempted to keep the peace.

Liss paused. Anna was aware of a trumpet blasting in the practice room beside them, even though the walls were supposed to be soundproof.

“Alright, let's do it,” Liss finally said. She bent to pick up her violin and place it beneath her chin. Anna positioned herself behind the keyboard. She felt the melody Liss had just sang nudging at her fingers, but ignored the itch, waiting until Liss had begun.

The first line came a cappella. Then Liss's violin sound swept down stridently, as if it had realized it was behind and came running after in fury. Only then did Anna feel free to join. She improvised unthinkingly, incorporating some of her earlier thoughts—bass tones, blues scale. It was a melodic combination. She'd never heard pissed off sound so pristine. She threw back her head and hurled herself at the keys. Her eyes connected with Liss's, which were narrowed but warmed at the contact. Tendrils of Liss's sound circled spires of Anna's. They were really doing this. They were in it.

Finished, they were breathless. Anna held out her hand for a high five. A tiny static current passed between their fingers.

“You're amazing,” said Liss.

“No, you're amazing.”

“OK, we both rock.”

“We should play our school music together too,” said Anna. “Why haven't we been doing that?”

“Yeah, why haven't we been doing that all the time? We suck!” Liss laughed and Anna joined her.

Anna tried to remember her keyboard improvisation on the piano at home. B flat—no, B—no, what had it been? She banged out a couple chords in frustration. That didn't sound bad. Maybe she could add a similar chord sequence.

“What are you playing?” asked Caroline. Anna hadn't noticed her entering the room. Her tone did not sound approving.

“Liss and I have been inventing some stuff together. We've started practising our repertoire pieces together too.” Best to add that, since her mother would approve. They had a few songs in common, and Liss had bought a book of piano-violin duets. They'd started combing through, scoping out the best ones. Playing together added a new electricity to the air. Anna didn't even think of Ed that much now. Only when she saw him did a pang go through her.

Laine liked her Beethoven renditions, and had suggested the idea of a solo

concert. She hadn't yet told anyone. Part of her had filled with giddiness, another dread. She'd screw up. She couldn't screw up. She never had. Little slips, but nothing that couldn't be glossed over. No, she'd screw up. Her luck, whatever spell that made her a prodigy if she'd ever been one, had to run out at some point. One of these days, warned the familiar surge in her gut, she was going down.

Caroline's sigh interrupted her thoughts. "That's great. I'm glad you can share your music with someone." She paused. "Would you mind folding the clothes when you're done?"

"The clothes can fold themselves!"

Dammit! Where had that come from? She was just caught up in the secret possibility, had let panic invade her chest when she thought of failure.

"Anna, what are you being a smart aleck for?"

She looked at Caroline across the room. Really looked at her. Her mother leaned against the gray cabinet that held her tapes and CDs. The wood was worn, and so was the expression on Caroline's face. There were creases in her forehead and purplish half-moons below her eyes. Strands of hair had come undone from her ponytail.

Anna heard Hank shuffling papers in his office, cursing under his breath. Her father hated his job. He hadn't been promoted since he'd found the new lower-level position, and he missed the extra salary. And her mother . . . her mother was so tired. Her head, always held straight, had fallen slightly to the side, and she leaned it against a hand.

After practice, Anna would set the table, then try to finally read through Liss's gift. In her room, the Cosmo magazine blinked neon. Sex Positions to Maximize Her



Pleasure!

“I'm sorry,” she said.

## Chapter 11: Tell Me Everything

Once again, they were in the cafeteria. Anna had extended her hand across the table, and Darien's two enclosed it. His thumb traced circles in her palm. She wanted to close her eyes to most fully feel the tingling, and she wanted to keep them open to take in the angles of his face.

“So,” said Darien, “are we dating?”

Anna found herself beaming stupidly despite her trepidation. “Do you want to be dating?”

“I kinda wished you'd asked me that question a long time ago.”

“Why didn't you ask *me*?” she shot.

“I didn't think you were interested.” There was no hint of irony in his tone. She realized he really hadn't been able to tell.

“I was trying not to be obvious.”

“Well, you sure did a good job of that!” She liked his grin. She could imbibe and get drunk off his grin.

He noticed her pause, and the air between their bodies grew tentative, as if seeking some meaning to fill it.

“I've never had a girlfriend before.”

“Me neither. I mean, a boyfriend.” With a lurch in her stomach, she wondered if she'd given herself away. But Darien didn't seem to notice.

“So what d'you wanna do?”

Anna found herself blushing and looking at the table. Damn, had things even changed?

“Wanna go play basketball or something?”

In the gym, Darien continued to lecture her on her shots. There was detachment in his tone as he explained and demonstrated a proper arc. Things between them weren't any different. No, they were. Did she feel different? No. Yes. The pressure of wondering had lifted from her chest.

The space didn't disappear right away, nor did the awkwardness between them. But it was no source of embarrassment anymore when Anna, shooting hoops, tripped over Darien's foot. They kissed in the parking lot in front of the buses and felt daring. A love unquestioned, unmocked, publicized, smooth as something in a movie. Sometimes Anna thought it was too easy. They didn't speak of the shirtless episode they knew had gone too fast. But gradually they eased around each other, helped by the knowledge that neither felt the space had to be there, that it could be crossed at any time and neither one would mind.

It wasn't hard to live in a love-drunk haze. She was used to infatuation being miserable, constricting, but now she felt as free and high as beach air. There was only ever one doubt—why did he even like her? But she couldn't linger on that for long, as new onslaughts of giddiness swept up to replace it.

Everyone noticed. “You're such a cute couple,” said Sarah, spying them holding hands on the way to the music room. Beside her, Irena scowled.

Laine noticed. “Anna, you're happy today.”

“Yeah, kinda.” Her smile widened.

“Good for you. Well, try not to play that funeral march allegro.”

She could understand Sarah better now, Sarah who had dated Kyle a year ago and bothered everyone at their lunch table with grinning singsong questions.

“Anna, guess what?”

“What?”

“I have a sexy boy-friend! Anna, guess what?”

“What?”

“I have a sexy boy-friend! Anna, guess what?”

“Shut up.”

“I have a sexy boy-friend! Michelle, guess what?”

She, Anna, was above that sort of gushing. Then she caught herself telling Chen, “He's so wonderful! He always listens to me, and you know the way he holds his head when he looks at you?” Noticing, she slapped a palm to her forehead. Then she continued.

“Are you finding time to practice for your concert?” asked Chen.

“Sure, at home.” That was a semi-lie. Last night she'd only played an hour, then leafed through her old stash of magazines about What Men Really Want and The Ten Best Orgasm Tips. Caution, announced a sign on the wall, but she ignored it. Men at Work, blared another, and she giggled at potential dirty connotations. Yield. Go Slow. Everything sounded sexual.

Separated parents typically split their duties, and while Anna and Caroline both preferred for her daily life to be conducted at her mother's, there was one thing Hank mostly took care of—driving lessons. Anna's seventeenth birthday was approaching that winter, and soon she would get tested for her license. After the concert. Caroline had asked if Anna wanted to put off her driving practice to focus more intensely on her music, but she would have none of it. Already Chen and Michelle, Irena and Darien were driving unsupervised down the highways and back roads of the island. Only she had had to be driven to the latest party at Sarah's. She almost didn't envy those who'd taken driver's ed, who'd had to sit after school in a classroom watching videos of computer-generated androids doing shoulder checks and making left hand turns instead of reviewing the driving rulebook in the solace of their own home. But she envied the freedom they had to sear down the roads to the mall, to a boy's house, to the beach, across the province or even into another.

“Buckle up,” said Hank jovially, although he was the only one still in the process of attaching his seat belt. “Be careful backing up the driveway. Blah, blah, you know that.”

Anna scanned the road behind her as she reversed, mirror glancing and shoulder checking nervously. She hoped the car wasn't wiggling too much. It didn't seem to be nearing the grass, and no one else was in the short driveway that led to her dad's apartment parking lot, so she was fine. She waited until the road was clear before reversing onto it and shifting into forward. She sped up as a blue car appeared in her rear view mirror.

“Can we put some music on?” Caroline never let her, not wanting her concentration interrupted.

“Sure. Just keep your eyes on the road.” Hank said this lightly, as if he didn't have reason to be bothered about it. Anna was scanning routinely. She turned the radio to a classical station, her mother's usual and the one she set as her alarm in the morning when she didn't use a CD. The road was only mildly busy, not the highway yet. Along the road were the usual generic apartment buildings, bland storefronts, the occasional city tree shedding its tanned or reddening leaves. She was grateful the steering wheel didn't tend to slide like the one on Caroline's car. Hank and Gwen's vehicle was new and rather box-shaped. It was less responsive than Caroline's small car, less gas-efficient, but could reach higher speeds. Its sturdiness made it more likely to survive an accident should one happen, and Anna had certainly had nightmares of her foot slipping and the car rolling breathless into a guardrail, a vehicle, a logging truck. She would wake with her breath caught in her throat, half-choking while the imprint of a car in her dream memory collided with the car in front of it and vaporized, leaving a terrifying image of hollowness in place of the hard jolting sensation of a crash.

But the nightmares were lessening, and her parents were trusting her more. Slowly, she was trusting herself more too. It helped that the Darien situation was sorted out—infatuated, yes, but without the tension of waiting. The music, too, was calming, a chamber quartet that Hank probably hated. Anna turned onto the highway. Driving with Hank was nice because he didn't give much direction—turn here, merge there—or destination. There was no grocery fetching at the end of a driving practice. Hank would

offer a few suggestions, but she usually chose her own turns and destinations. Now she drove aimlessly, just to feel like she was heading somewhere. She relished the acceleration. The yellow lines and passing zone dashes scrolled frantically before her.

“So I hear you're dating someone?” said Hank.

Anna started. “Where'd you hear that from?”

“Yer mother. We do talk sometimes, you know.”

Her concentration had been lost for a second. Realizing she'd drifted towards the center line, she corrected.

“So what's he like?” her father asked.

“Great. Funny. He plays saxophone.” The words sounded pathetic, nothing like Darien's enfolding, excitedly jarring presence. No description could encompass him, but hers seemed particularly stupid. She realized Hank would make some pun out of saxophone, and he did.

“Sounds like a sexy guy!”

“Oh, Dad.” Her groan was as automatic as Hank's driving instructions.

“Well, I'm glad you've found someone. It makes life a lot more worth it.”

*Oh, cut the cheesy Hallmark crap.* But that was the sort of thing she said to her mother, not her father. She had edges she walked around both, but her father was a touch more dangerous. Why was she thinking of this instead of Darien? Or, for that matter, the road?

They were approaching the listless-looking abandoned mall with a kite on the sign, and further down, the bustling Wal-Mart, which Hank pointed to. “Want to practice

your parking?”

She wanted to continue scrolling down the highway, listening to the music she'd tuned out. And the car was under her control, so she could. Instead she said “Sure” and signalled her intention to turn into that ugly Wal-Mart's parking lot. She had little trouble installing herself in a space. “What now?” she asked. “Do you want to go in?” The car was still on, the music still playing.

“Do you?”

“There's nothing I really wanna get.”

“Well, Gwen said she wanted pectin for apple jelly, if you don't mind. You can wait here if you want.”

“No, I'll go in.”

They walked past a middle-aged couple dressed in garish orange and pink. The woman's backside was broad, and both their stomachs protruded. By the door, a scruffy-haired boy was trying to tug a teddy from the grip of his tiny pigtailed sister, who was squalling. “Shut up!” yelled their mother, a scowl wrinkling its way across her blank face. “And Taylor, you let go of that bear! If I ever catch you stealing Amy's toys again, you're grounded.”

She didn't catch Taylor's reaction, as they were walking past shelves of Christmas candy laid out early. She trailed her father past the jewelry section, past the headgear and women's lingerie, through the low lukewarm store air, towards the rows of food packed neatly in cans and bags. For what seemed like an eternity already, Darien's image had floated to mind in boring moments like this. Her grocery trips had been spiced with



arousal, lending a purposeless directness to her step. But these fluorescent lights were baking her. She felt them dull her senses. She struggled for a snatch of music, a glimpse of a gaze, a thought. Maybe she'd see something funny happen, something she could tell Darien about and they could laugh at together. But the idea seemed pathetic. What did love have to do with a place like this?

She'd put down her saxophone to pick up one of the old magazines from Liss, one she'd hidden among the dust clots under her bed. *Blow-his-mind Blow Jobs*, page 167. *Reading ahead, are we?* Ay-a grinned. She was always amused. Anna hated her mockery. She tried to summon the goddess's face and visualize herself punching it, but Ay-a's old nebulous features had given way to Liss's narrow ones.

Another Anna hesitated, then punched anyway. Her fist met laughing smoke.

A knock.

Anna shoved the magazine back in its musty place. Her mother's porn stash was no longer secret, but she at least would maintain what she could of her dignity.

Caroline pressed a strand of hair back. She looked towards Anna, then down at her wrist where she fingered an elastic band. "Hey Anna?"

"Yeah?"

"I've been thinking—wondering if you'd like to meet Tom."

An upsweep in her mother's voice, followed by a heavy sigh. Anna was glad she wasn't holding anything. She would have dropped it.

"Of course. Yeah. I'd love to meet Tom."

No sarcastic remark this time. Just a dumb, hazy near-repetition of the phrase and name she'd been wondering about since he'd first been mentioned.

“I'm thinking of inviting him for supper. Does . . . would Saturday work?”

Anna calculated her schedule. She and Darien had a date on Friday, she was playing at Kelly's on Sunday, but she had nothing on Saturday. “Yeah.”

“Great. How's the piano coming?”

“Good.” She'd been taking a break from it tonight. She'd taken a break yesterday too.

*You said you'd get around to it. Ay-a* tossed her net of hair, laughing again. *Sure you're taking a break. Uh-huh, you so-called prodigy, I believe you.*

She waited as her mother faded back into the kitchen, then stared down her wall. Truth is, Ay-a, she thought, I just can't think about it anymore. It's Darien, and is he thinking of me right now, and does he like me, and will he call, and how do I know it's me he likes and not Another Anna he sees instead? The music just isn't coming anymore. It's like the thoughts have pushed it out, and whenever I put my fingers on the keys they're too heavy to play right. I'm not there. I'm just so tired.

Even in the practice room, Anna was aware of the acuteness in the weather—the constant throb of rain, the wind's terrible song, the unwarmed air pressing in through the threads of her sweater, unhelped by the coldness of the saxophone that hung heavy on her neck strap. They'd gone through the B flat blues scale, the E flat scale (C for altos- E and then E flat, not straight to F, she always had to remind herself), a chromatic scale for the

heck of it. They were playing the twelve bar blues. She kept up the accompaniment, tapping her foot, while Darien soloed. She watched his cheeks puff slightly as he shrilled a crisp high G. A sound that could stare down crowds. His sneakers were fraying at the bases. She thought to nudge his foot with hers, but would that be practical when she was tapping to keep the beat? Was that a squeak? No, only the wind. Suddenly Darien was looking at her. There was a stillness between them as she lost track of the notes she was supposed to be playing. She wanted to pour into him like music, but his gaze was no more accessible than a pane of glass. For a moment she couldn't think, then she realized with the calm of a return to logic that he was signalling her turn to solo.

“Guess where I was last night?” Sarah held court between Anna and Michelle.

Michelle leaned across the Dusty's table. “Tell us.”

“In the backseat of a caaa-ar! And I bet you can't guess what I was doing.”

“No way!”

“Yeah way! My cousin was up and he brought his hot friend Steve. He's 19 and in college, and Oh God. He wanted to take me for a drive, and one thing led to another, you know?”

“You're making this up,” said Irena. Her head was held deliberately too high, and an instant of uncertainty tugged at her mouth before settling into an expression of firmness. Anna pictured Sarah with her legs spread on dark leather, a lithe muscled guy from one of Caroline's porn videos hovering over her. She grimaced. If only brains had a Delete button!

“I hope you were safe,” said Chen, wide-eyed.

“Well, duh. He had a condom and all.”

“So you went all the way for real,” said Irena.

“Did you check?” asked Chen.

“Well, uh, yeah. Anyway, it was reeeally good.” She grinned her grackle grin.

“How many times did you come?” asked Michelle.

“Michelle!” Irena shot.

“Come on, I wanna hear the details! How big was he?” She giggled. “What position did you do it in?”

The salt-spotted fast food table was a circle of faces tittering, blushing, leaning, frowning, each expression legible beyond their words. Irena: You're going too far. Chen: You'd better be taking care of yourself. Sarah's face flickered indulgent pride like a mask, which fell now and then to reveal a stricken look. She was surrounded, and even Anna felt the nausea of a world spun out of control too fast. Michelle's fist was clenched around her burger, her body straining towards every word that fell to her from Sarah's mouth. Ay-a stirred inside her, leaning even further: Tell me more. Tell me everything.

Gwen called inviting Anna to dinner but (she sighed internally with relief) she was working at Kelly's that night. A valid excuse to avoid the happy couple and their rat. At the table beside her piano bench (she broke to drink from a glass of water) a woman in an ill-fitting sweater set and pearls snuggled against a man whose profile looked like the side of a cliff, jagged with a jutting nose. He had on old jeans and a jacket with elbow

patches. Her hair was curled carefully, maybe permed, and her neck was too long on a narrow frame. Their chairs were pulled together to enable physical contact. She tickled the goatee on his chin. He moved to give her a brief peck on the cheek and squeezed her shoulder. They looked about the age to start having kids, but they didn't have any with them. Maybe they doted on their pets instead. There were certainly kids at the table beside them, a black-haired boy and girl thumb wrestling and a baby shrieking in a high chair. “Shh,” soothed their squat black-haired mother, trying to jostle the baby into calm. “Shh.” The father was looking about the room, attention darting, tension in the lines of his face. There was a toy train on the floor beside the family, a plastic thing in primary colours. A man sat alone at the next table, poking at the remaining canned peas on his plate. He sat slumped, and his motions were timid. His hair was salt and pepper, his shirt flannel, his belly modest. Maybe he owned some of the same DVDs that Caroline kept in the cabinet. A few months ago, Anna might have kept him in mind for a caricature. She wondered what that past Anna would have found funny.

This year, a new design of band sweaters was in. Irena and Anna waited for the Smalls to be unpacked from their cardboard box. Mr. Haslam held up sweater after sweater, navy cardigans with gold lettering—Pine Grove Senior Band—and an eighth note below it. These were replacing their former dull blue sweater vests. This eighth note looked perkier, cartoony.

“Did I tell you about the music book opportunity?” asked Irena.

“I don't think so.”

“Oh, well, Michael told the CEO of Treble Learning, this company that makes music books, about my composing, and he showed him some of the stuff I wrote, and guess what? They're interested in having me contribute to the music books! They have to see if they have the funds before they offer me anything for sure, but if they do, they're going to give me a paid contract and everything.”

“That's awesome.” Anna's smile felt like wax. Well, at least she had tonight with Darien (now chatting with Paul in the back) to look forward to. And she had her concert.

Darien's hand-me-down Toyota lurched down the rutted dirt road to the beach. The grass in the ditches beside poplar and spruce was browned and iced over lightly. Darien had a Miles Davis CD in. He had an MP3 player like Anna and her friends to listen to at school or when walking or filling idle time, but he liked the old-fashioned way better, he explained—CDs had better sound quality. “And my dad has an old record player I like to listen to. The Beatles, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Cat Stevens, all that good stuff. The album covers are awesome. You should see them one of these days. The faded colours really make you think of how long this music has lasted. It's kind of amazing that we can still listen to the exact same sounds that were around before we were. And some of the designs are pretty spectacular. Joni did her own art, the flower paintings and stuff. And she taught herself to play guitar—invented her own tunings, can you believe that?”

“Old music's the best,” Anna agreed, thinking of her mother's tapes. On current radio, Rita Deviant had been all but forgotten, and her replacements were worse.

“They were so innovative. The 60s, 70s, they were like golden ages. God, I wish

we could just make a time machine and jump in there and go back to when these people were creating and be part of that.”

Outside the window, lawn ornaments ranged in front of a yellow house—a row of sunbonnet girls, a deer curled up beside a dalmatian, a painted boy emitting a yellow arc of pee, plastic pinwheels turning.

“Why can't we create stuff like that now?” asked Anna.

Darien fell silent, his gaze out the window. The car felt emptied of something. Anna thought, it wasn't because of the Wal-Marts and the lawn ornaments and the weather that stayed grey and brown and dull for longer before resting into a proper snowy chill. There was plenty of new beauty evolving, if people knew where to look. Some of Surrender's stuff. Irena's little pieces. The bands that met in practice rooms and later went on tour. The sounds that filled Pine Grove every day, if you let your preoccupied mind be sensitive enough to hear them. It used to be that every note she heard from the tape recorder or the piano or her mother's mouth was an entity with weight, leaving an impression in her brain. Even a jingle on TV—she remembered more ads from her childhood, sound by sound and word by word, than she knew of the modern ones. She was hearing much less, now. Could she have played by heart what Miles Davis had just played on the CD? Probably not.

And Darien. What was it that had made his shoulders slump? She wanted to hug him. She was too shy. Her arm hovered in the air between them for a minute and settled in her lap. The small trees along the road that she used to see as big trees had blots of darkness coming out between them. At the end of the little road, she could see the slate

blue line of water.

“I used to love coming to this beach,” said Anna. “It’s easy to catch hermit crabs, and the water gets so warm in the summer. My dad and I went clam digging here a few times.”

Spires of goldenrod in the ditches had dried and iced over. The marram grass was bent.

“I like how hardly anyone comes here,” said Darien. “It’s not like the big tourist beaches.”

“Or even the one with the little river by my place,” said Anna. “I used to collect sea glass there, but someone else was always doing the same thing, and there were kids running around and people swimming.” She talked to build something between them, to fill something, to make up for their hesitance in touching. “Ever notice how beaches attract the cheesiest colours? It’s always something too bright, like neon orange swimming trunks and lime green umbrellas with little smiling starfish on them. And there are all the bad smells like the sunscreen and beer that get in the way of the salt air. The beach would be so much awesomer if it weren’t for the stupid things the people bring.” She realized she was talking like her mother.

Darien parked at the end of the little road. Neither made to leave the car. Her friends’ date stories played in her head like a slow-motion film. Michelle’s fingering in the abandoned mall parking lot by moonlight. Sarah’s fucking with the older cousin’s older friend. Even Irena had had an episode, once, where they’d both jerked off, although she wouldn’t share the details. Chen had looked around and retorted, under her breath but



fiercely, that she'd masturbated on a Greyhound bus trip. Sarah had laughed in surprise and set down the curling iron to high-five her. "There was a hot guy in back of me," Chen had admitted. "He was asleep, but I pretended he was watching."

Looking from one stubborn shining face to another, Anna had felt less daring than Ay-a wanted her to. She'd told about finding Caroline's porn, about inviting Darien over and taking off shirts. "I'd love to see what's under that shirt," Irena had said.

"Ever feed the sea gulls?" Darien asked, interrupting her thoughts. It took a moment for her mind to settle, and she had to replay his words to know what he'd asked her.

"Sure, on picnics."

"Well, I brought some old bread."

He pulled a bag from the trunk. They set their sneakered feet to sink in the sand, and he split the contents of the bag between them. The beach's remaining grey and white birds flapped around them, squalling. The ocean was so slow this time of year that it was almost still.

"Here, catch!" Darien ripped a chunk of bread and tossed it towards the water. The birds took off, two battling at each other when they reached the food. One grabbed and gulped, thrusting its head back while the bread lurched down its gullet. Really, thought Anna, they were as loud as the bad colours that people brought to the beach.

They took turns tearing the bread and sending the gulls into a frenzy. Darien's movements were simple and sure, not at all like his approach to Anna. She was almost glad when the bread was gone.

They walked towards the ocean, past rows of shell-specked pebbles frozen in place, crunching dried seaweed. Anna grabbed a stick and wrote into the hardened sand, “A+D” inside a heart. “Let me have a turn,” said Darien. Underneath the heart, he wrote “4ever.” They walked towards the waves, which were grey and scarcely lapping at this time. Their capacity as heat sinks had long since been exhausted.

“I’ll take my shoes off and run in the waves if you will,” said Anna.

Darien looked down at the sluggish foam-frothed ripples.

“I don’t really want to.”

“Me neither.”

Why didn’t he ever call her beautiful? He wasn’t one to say that sort of thing, maybe that was all, but she wished he was. He’d put “4ever” underneath the heart. So, no running hand in hand being sliced by those miserable waves, freezing and not caring. Would she have him forever? She wanted to own him, to trickle in through his skin and devour him from the inside. *Make a move. Don’t move.*

They sat on a large knobby log and leaned into each other. Darien was the first to kiss, and they continued.

Caroline had the lace tablecloth on the table, the good china out, and Callas the bird was cheeping loudly. The Moonlight Sonata was on the CD player, of all the cliches she could’ve chosen. It reminded Anna of work at Kelly’s, which didn’t sit well with her stomach. Caroline had put in some effort, but wasn’t ostentatious. It struck her that the effort was for her, Anna, instead of for Tom—a sort of pantomime of decorating for a

special guest, when Tom had surely been over to a less-than-perfect version of the house when Anna was out.

“I think that's him.” Caroline trotted to the window and Anna, who hadn't heard anything, followed. A dust brown pickup truck was pulling into the driveway. Caroline was at the door while Anna watched the passenger clamber out. He was . . . teddy-bear shaped. He had on some kind of collared brown shirt over jeans. His gait was slow and rolling. Not the sleek officious translator Anna had expected. Not any kind of male Caroline. Not the type she'd expected her mother to date.

And he disappeared from view, and the door was opening, and Caroline fountained into his arms with a gushing greeting. Anna didn't catch what they said to each other. It was the movement that resonated. In an equally fluid gesture he wrapped around her. She huddled in his arms as if used to snuggling there. They fit together like puzzle pieces. She caught sight of eyes, Tom's facial expression so soft Anna felt like her vision must have gone blurry. Melting. Yes, they were melting. Everyone was melting. She didn't like to think of herself that way. And Caroline, when had she ever melted?

It was Caroline who separated herself from him. “Tom, I want you to meet my daughter Anna.”

“Pleased to meet you.” He stuck out a pretzel-dough hand and bowed slightly in her direction. Her grip was firmer than his.

“Nice to meet you, too.”

“Gosh, you look like your mother.”

Anna stuttered: “Well, well, thank you.” What was that supposed to mean, if she

looked like the person he wanted to screw on a regular basis?

“I've heard good things about your piano playing.”

It was up to him to keep the conversation going, it seemed. But Caroline interrupted: “I hope you can make it to her concert next month,” and started chattering about the orchestra and the dinner of marinated salmon she'd made for them. She led Tom to the sofa, where they snuggled again and Anna sat unconsciously straight-backed in the rocking chair. He rambled about his niece who was starting to play piano, and the little songs she insisted on playing whenever she could find someone to listen. He reminded her of her father. And, a little bit, of Darien.

## Chapter 12: Family

“You tell her.”

“No, you fucking tell her.”

Anna clutched her clothes pile harder in reflex, and stopped halfway up the stairs to listen to the yelling. The painting along the staircase was of a woman standing on a dock, facing a sea of high crests that had always reminded Anna vaguely of horses, white dress and taffy-coloured hair torn back by wind. The clouds were heavy and the watercolour had blotted in certain places, making what should have been subtly darkening storm spots look like clumsy blurts of ink. On the distant rocks (a thinly painted brownish jut) stood a lighthouse. It too was grey, thin and spired as a narwhal horn. Its beam was watery, and there was no reflection.

“I thought we'd agreed it would be you.”

“Hey, this was your idea. And you're the one who gets to keep the house. The least you can do is explain yourself to your own kid!”

“Shut up. Just shut up.”

“No, you shut up!”

She heard the thud of something solid against the wall, then Caroline's shriek. Had he pushed her?

She couldn't move.

She was darting up the stairs, heart overheated. She was pounding on the door. The clothes had slipped from her grip and were crumpled in all directions on the floor.

“Come in!” Caroline's scared voice.

“Oh, Jesus,” Hank groaned as she stepped inside. Caroline was leaning against the wall, her hair undone. Hank was standing with a fist dangling by his side, as if he didn't know what to do with it. The covers were a mess, the floor littered with the quilt and pillows, the bureau with papers. Both parents were breathing heavily.

Anna took three steps into the room, walking deliberately around a pillow. Anger flared up in her face. “So what's up? What do you guys have to tell me that's important enough to fight about?”

Her parents glanced around all corners and angles of the room and even at each other, almost allies in their fright, but their glances happened at different times and didn't connect.

“Your mother wants us to get divorced,” said Hank.

“I thought we'd agreed on this.”

“Yeah, but it was your idea.”

“So that's it,” said Anna. “Why couldn't you just both tell me some nice, peaceful time, like over supper?”

“Well,” said Hank.

“Well, we were going to,” said Caroline.

“That's OK. I heard it was Dad who was moving out.”

Before they could answer, she found herself running to her room. One door slammed behind her, then another, and she pummelled her pillow like a toddler. She felt like swearing, but only strangled sobs came out. She was crying, and she sounded like a

chicken dying.

It was usually Liss who led them to the practice room, but this day Anna took her by the arm and steered. She pressed Liss against the wall, only realizing afterwards what her anger had made her arm do. “I need to escape this.”

“What?” Liss was startled.

“My parents are getting divorced and I wish I had some other place to live while they fought and yelled and banged around and figured out what the hell they were doing. What the *fuck!*” She wasn't one to swear much, and the words felt like fire in her throat.

Liss wrapped an arm around her. “Dammit, that sucks! But calm down. It'll be OK. It's not like they got along anyway. It'll probably be better to keep those beasts in separate cages, ya know? So there's no real reason to be upset.”

“I know. I don't know why I'm upset!”

“No, it's normal. Probably something weird happens to your brain chemicals when you're shocked.”

What was lost anyway?

She felt loss.

What was there to regret?

She felt regret.

“I wish I didn't have to stay in the same house as them while they figure out how to, how to, take this parents thing apart!”

“Hey, listen. I bet you don't. You can come stay at my place until your parents

have everything sorted out.”

Anna looked at her earnest face. “You've got to be kidding.”

“You know my mom, she'll say yes, and my dad will have to agree.”

The tension was slowly trickling off her. She breathed in thirsty gulps, and some remote voice in the back of her mind wondered why she'd been so upset.

“Liss, I think I love you or something.”

They moved Anna's suitcase into the spare room. “Bounce on the bed,” said Liss. It was covered in a faded blue quilt, a square boat in the middle of a very practical lake of bureaus and night tables and stacked transparent boxes of wreath making supplies from the classes Liss's mother used to teach. There were none of the decorations that Caroline would have lavished on a room.

“Would your mom be OK with that?”

“Of course!” Liss clambered onto the bed beside her. “This one has the best spring in the house.” She bounced a little to demonstrate, her dark hair floating and falling. Anna laughed and bounced a tentative bounce. It was a springy mattress, definitely, better than the ones they had in hotels. “Come on, you've gotta try harder than that!”

“I feel like I'm on vacation,” said Anna.

Liss grinned lazily, bouncing on her knees. “Welcome to the time of your life.”

They somersaulted and wrestled until Liss had her pinned down. Anna, struggling in the clamp of her wrists, was breathing so hard her lungs hurt, looking up at a face that was childlike and stubborn and pitiless. A sudden laugh burst out, and they fell all over



each other, giggling.

They went to the playroom where the toys had long since been replaced with a yoga mat and exercise bike, a karaoke machine, a stack of board games, and the twins' transparent boxes of jewelry making supplies. The walls were still full of jottings and doodles, years adding to years, the twins Katie and Cassie and their friends having picked out a corner to write down a list of "*THE HOTTEST GUYS*" now that they were twelve and thought themselves grown up. Liss had corrected some of her own childhood spelling—"School is garbage." Between a set of initials and a heart-petaled flower, Anna saw a drawing of a blue box with pipes sticking out, the castle she'd tried to sketch in first grade.

"Write your name on the wall," said Liss. "You live here now."

"Anywhere specific?"

"Nah. Just pick a place."

She looked for the family members' signatures. *CASSIE MAC*, she found in pink polka-dotted block letters beside the list of guys. *KaTiE MaCkInNoN* was written underneath, even larger, in green. The twins had tried to make their signatures look different, Katie slanting her letters where Cassie rounded them, but the writing still looked alike. *Liss MacKinnon* was written in scrollwork cursive in the top right corner of the living room, a foot removed from any of the other writing. She must have stood on a chair to get it there.

*Anna MacKinnon*. She couldn't write that. *Anna Stern*. *Anna K. Stern*. *Anna Caroline Stern*. *A.K. Stern*. Which sounded most like a professional musician? She

wished she had a symbol, some mark to leave to distinguish herself. She settled on scrawling her usual signature, *Anna Stern*, in the white space by the right corner which was relatively undecorated. She drew a Yield sign with a quarter rest in the middle, and beside it, Suspension's heart-shaped skull.

“Hey, sweet, you're doing the logo,” said Liss. “I drew one over here.” She pointed to an almost identical drawing with *Suspension* scratched above it, and the lyrics *I'm still awake, watching out the window*.

“Cool,” said Anna insincerely, because Liss's logo looked better. But that was a dumb thing to care about. Liss finished off her stylized violin with an arrow through it, and they went into the kitchen where Cassie was feeding the dog.

Liss's mother set out some cheese and crackers. “How was your day at school?”

“Good,” said Liss, helping herself to a chunk of marble. “Mr. Rue was really nice to me today.” Mr. Rue was her violin teacher. “He brought in brownies and said my vibrato was getting masterful.”

“How wonderful,” said her mother.

Did he hug her too? Anna wondered. She'd seen him pull his arms around Liss as she went to leave her lesson once, his eyes aglow in their folds like a patient father's. Liss had fit in them just so.

Cassie looked up from beside the black dog gulping from his food bowl and said, “When do you think you'll be ready to do a concert?”

“Pretty soon, he says I'm ready. You're going to come, right?”

Cassie regarded her sister with round eyes in a round pink face. She was a sturdy

girl, her hips beginning to curve, blond hair clipped just above her budding breasts which were already the size of Liss's. "Of course! And if Katie wants to skip it to hang out with her dumb boyfriend, I'll drag her out!"

Something had begun to twitch in Anna. She wasn't supposed to be hurt, but there had been a thrill to being the only student in her year asked to perform her own concert. Liss too? Now the idea was suddenly commonplace, tawdry, deflated. Liss stood with a floaty grace, and Anna was diminished.

"Laine thinks I'm ready for a concert too," she said, out of stubbornness.

"Oh, awesome!" said Liss. "We should ask if we can do one together! We could play some of the duets we've been working on at the end, and we should see if we can talk them into letting us do my Acid Rain song."

Anna watched Liss's mother pour herself some orange juice, which she did briskly. Cassie washed her hands and settled at the table with a plate of crackers. She might be a bold talker but her motions were shy and tentative, her hands making the smallest softest rubbing motions under the spray of water.

"What do you think?" said Liss.

"Yeah, I'll ask Laine."

She thought of flaking out, but it wouldn't be fair to Liss, who dared wonder if they could play one of their own compositions. Something in her liked the idea of being associated with such a piece of sparking originality, even if it was Liss's originality.

They finished their cheese and crackers. "We should probably practice now," said Anna.

“Aw, honey, take a break,” said Liss's mom, swooping to squeeze her shoulder.

“Yeah,” Liss chimed in, “you're on vacation, remember? One day off won't kill us!”

Anna stared into her empty plate as if some answer would show itself in the cracker crumbs. It was hard not to think of her father, stumbling on the stairs and yelling with a murky voice that wasn't his. It was hard not to think of her mother, leaning against the stairway, holding her head. It was hard not to think she might be hurt right now, there might be blood and it wouldn't be the first time. If there was, it was difficult to think of whether he'd meant to cause it.

“I know what we should do,” said Liss. “Remember the good old days when we watched *Titanic*?”

“Oh God!” Anna laughed in embarrassment. They'd gone to the theatre during an on spell of their on-again, off-again friendship and gushed over Leo DiCaprio's face on the screen. They'd made a plan to go to Hollywood and kidnap him and kiss him like crazy, which was about as far as their girlish imaginations wanted to go. What was the other thing they'd wanted to do, marry him together and have a honeymoon on the water where they'd all drown holding hands?

“We had these goddesses and stuff back then,” said Anna, “didn't we?”

“Oh yeah! I think I remember chanting.”

“I had the goddess of music, and you had Saya, the goddess of love. No, it was Sava, mine was Ay-a.”

“Yeah, now I remember.”

“And we tried to burn an effigy at my place.”

“That was fun.” Anna felt again the stab of fear, saw again the flames reflected in Liss's eyes, and her mother running. “We made everything epic back then,” said Liss.

They had, hadn't they? Anna remembered the pale grey rock and her prayers holding the dogwood branch, the clearing she'd called the Prayer Land, lying on the cat tree, their practising together, Liss's prayers to Sava to be loved, and the swish of Ay-a's glittery clothing on the hill. “I wish we still thought everything was magic.”

“You know,” said Liss, “why the hell not? Why not resurrect the goddesses?”

“Could we believe in them now?” Anna heard her parents' shouting, saw their stricken faces, the distress etched into them far more real than Ay-a had ever been.

“Couldn't we?”

Liss's grin lit like fire across her face, transforming it.

She stepped briskly to the video cabinet and put on *Titanic*. They watched under her patchwork quilt, a medley of crimsons and yellows. Lovers on the screen who hadn't yet met. “Why are you watching *that* old thing?” asked Cassie passing through the living room.

“Because we want to,” said Liss.

“Whatever.” Cassie shrugged childishly and retreated to her room.

The dog came to curl between them, and Anna scratched the ruff of fur behind his neck. Liss's mom came with a bowl of chips. Liss's dad came home from his late shift, took off his boots, grabbed a glass of milk and meandered to her parents' room, a quiet furtive creature. Liss stood on the far arm of the couch and flung her arms out in mimicry

of Jack and Rose. “I'm flying!” she said. Her shadow formed a cross against the wall.

“I wish humans could really fly,” said Anna, “not just in airplanes.”

“But of course, if you get to fly you end up dying, like Icarus did. I wonder what it would be like to know you were going to drown,” Liss said, and her muscles assembled themselves into a brave face. The image of Liss's corpse drifted to mind, emptied, rotting among kelp. Fish swam over to nudge and nibble her sightless eyes.

“Sava would protect their souls,” said Liss. “She always guards those in love.”

They were having too much fun with their solemnity to giggle. Grand images scrolled across their minds—Sava underwater, Ay-a on the deck, folds of fabric melded into music flowing like the ocean. The dog jumped off the couch and they edged closer, holding onto each other like survivors. Anna was enveloped in a rush of heat, a throbbing that was almost painful, an itch she didn't want to go away.

After the credits hit the screen, Liss changed to a music channel where Rita Deviant was strutting in front of an alley while her song played in the background. It was something straightforwardly major-key about stalking all the shadows, thick with electric guitar and percussion. Rita's black-dyed hair hung over her face in a jagged bang. She wore way too much eyeliner, Anna thought, and she was glad that Liss didn't. Her hips swayed, one-two, one-two, jangling a chain at her pocket, too sassy and perfect to be unchoreographed. Behind her, two shadowy men exchanged something under their coats.

“Anna, don't you just want to be her? Don't you want to have those sexy hips and move that way?” Not waiting for an answer, Liss took up a pillow and sang into it like a microphone. She swayed her hips as she did so, pausing now and then for a dramatic

sweep of arm towards some immaterial audience: “*In the shadows all the talk is behind closed eyes, secrets and lies.*” She paused for the backup singers on TV to hiss “*Secrets and lies*” in a generic breathy bass tone meant to sound sinister.

The beat picked up, becoming dancy. Liss grabbed Anna's hand, tossed the pillow to the couch, and swung her around. Anna let herself be carried by the motion. Round and round went the plush blue room, the couch with the gold and red quilt on top, the smiling blond family photos with their single dark face blurred into streaks.

They strolled arm in arm towards the smallest practice room, Liss carrying her violin case from her locker. Liss opened the door briskly and froze. Anna peered over her shoulder, straining to see what she was looking at. Then Liss tried to close the door, but Anna had already caught a glimpse of Ed with Louise, a flute player from a year below them, pecking at each other's necks. Louise paused to look up, a giggle cracked out, and Ed's eyes flicked towards them just before the door closed.

“Did you see—” Liss began.

“Yeah.”

“That preppy Louise kid, I can't stand her. They deserve each other.”

“But Ed is *nice*,” said Anna, feeling hurt in the pit of her stomach.

“Wasn't too nice of him to write that tactless note to you. Listen, you deserve better.”

Ed's lips on Louise's pale neck. Blonde Louise with her logo jacket and painted nails and what looked like C cups. Anna wouldn't have wanted to be Louise at any other

time. The girl's smug look was too polished, solid, lacking the ethereality that Anna craved. She was the type who'd win the beauty pageants and stay in town and have kids and dogs and a boring job and make regular hair appointments into her old age. Ed was quirky, sparkly, an original. But maybe all guys went for Louises, no matter their own degree of interesting. Hateful world, as Liss might say. Hateful laws of attraction. And why couldn't she be a Louise, now? Why couldn't she own that popular veneer of effortless pep? (She was awkward, her motions skirted around things, they didn't swagger. She was a t-shirt and jeans girl, solid colours, mostly plain. She didn't have Liss's style, or her mother's. She—)

They got a keyboard from the music room and went into the practice room next door.

At the meeting with their teachers, they'd demonstrated some of the duets they'd been working on—some Beethoven sonatas, some Mozart, an Antonin Vaclav piece called Poème—and given a vigorous run-through of “Acid Rain”—Anna nervous, Liss seemingly fearless with her tone that never wavered.

“Well, you two seem independent,” Laine had said, not quite smiling. She never seemed to *really* smile like other people did, but Anna could read into her. “With all the music festivals and auditions and competition swirling around here, a joint concert might be a good thing for this school, don't you think?”

“That 'I'm still awake' song doesn't exactly have the professionalism of the rest of the repertoire,” Mr. Rue had objected.

Laine had gazed at him straight on. “Why not?”



“Well, because, well . . .” he cleared his throat. “You girls are talented songwriters.”

So the concert was on, and their month would be spent in practice, as if there was anything new in that.

Anna couldn't sleep in the spare room with the black gauze of shadows on the wall swelling to her parents' sizes. They formed a cinema of the macabre, spindly arms waving at each other, malformed legs kicking. A dog yelped somewhere on the street. A branch clicked against the window with rhythmic gusts of breeze. Click, clack. Click, clack. Anna thought of the distorted sounds of objects launched across the room, of boots on the stairs. If it would shut up, if only it would just *shut up* . . .

She tried to count in time signatures. One-two-three, two-two-three, three-two-three. One-two-three. It had worked as a kid, the blank rhythms soothing in themselves. Now, without music, the concentration dulled her mind into depression. And the only songs that would play themselves in her head fully, when she tried, with the richness of every chord and instrument and inflection and crescendo, were Hank's country and Rita Deviant and that stupid Moonlight Sonata which she'd heard and played too much to love anymore.

She couldn't sleep.

Maybe if she got something to drink, she'd be more rested. What was the path from the bedroom to the kitchen? There were no night lights left on, like there were in her place, so it was way too dark in the house to be able to tell. She felt her way around the

hall, bumping into—ouch, what was that—the sharp edges of a telephone table, and stubbing her toe on a corner. The house was eerily quiet. Everyone else was probably sleeping, and if she tripped she'd probably knock something over with a huge crashing noise and wake them up. Bats could swoop through the window and glide past without being noticed. Someone stealthy could probably enter through the window without being noticed. Damn, she'd forgotten about that step to the kitchen. There was a tiny bit of moonlight here, so she could kind of see the outlines of cupboards. Were those cups or bowls on the bottom shelf? Should she turn a light on? She wasn't even thirsty. Not worth it, to figure out how to get a drink that she didn't even want, that would just make her need to pee in a few minutes and keep her up that much longer. She should just go back to the guest room, maybe read from one of the boring school books she'd brought. She wished she had an eraser to use on her spin-cycle mind. She wasn't supposed to be here; she was essentially an intruder in this house.

Was Liss asleep, and if so, what was she dreaming of? Liss liked to stay up late. It might not be too late for her to still be lying there with her earphones on and maybe her notebook open. By this time Anna was standing in front of her door; she knocked. A rain of footsteps and the door opened, and there was Liss in the black t-shirt and cloth gym pants she wore for pyjamas, hair tousled, MP3 player in her fist. “Hey,” she yawned.

“Hey. Can't sleep.”

“Tell me something new. Me neither.” Liss sprang onto her bed and spread herself out. Anna lay down beside her.

“Life sucks,” said Liss, “oh . . . 97.5 percent of the time.”

“Parents suck,” said Anna.

“Yeah, a hundred percent of the time.” They laughed darkly. “But you know what's embarrassing? I can't stop thinking about my real ones.”

“Your birth parents.”

Liss was quiet for a minute. Her birth parents had never been something she talked about, not since they'd been very little. This was the first time she'd brought them up since she'd shown Anna the “Acid Rain” song, and something sunk in her face. She seemed to draw into herself and shrink against the pillow.

“Yeah. It's so stupid.”

“No, it's not! Not at all. If I had birth parents, I'd want to find them too. To see if I could find something greater.”

“Not just that, but they probably have traits I have and don't know about. We're all like our parents, but if I never meet them, there might be some parts of me I'll never know about because they got hidden growing up with *these* parents. I want to know the truth about who I really am.”

A familiar flame of envy lit in Anna. Liss could be the kid of great artists who'd abandoned their accidental offspring because their music was so much more consuming. She could be the illegitimate daughter of a foreign diplomat. She could be descended from Asian royalty. She could be anyone, anyone! “Well, I know that I'm like my parents,” she said instead. “I've got my dad's fat face and my mom's flat figure. I've got my dad's laziness and my mom's need for everything to be perfect. I get mad like my dad and freak out like my mom. I have everything all figured out about me. Put them in a

blender and I'm what you get. It's *so* great to know who you really are.”

“But they never understood you, did they?”

“Well, of course not.”

“So you're not really like them.”

“But Liss, see, maybe parents just *don't* understand their kids. And maybe there's only so many ways that people in the same family can be alike. And what if you find out they're horrible? What if they're murderers? Will it change you, to know that there's violence written in your genes?”

Liss's gaze was unyielding. “I'll change no matter what. I want the truth. I can take it. Besides, how many people are murderers? It's statistically unlikely.”

“You'll change because you can follow the patterns in yourself back?”

“No, I'll change because I'll know the story. It's about fucking time! People who know the truth are always superior to people who don't.”

Anna disagreed—only their knowledge was superior, not always what they did with it. But maybe she only wanted to think that because she hadn't stayed to find out every granular minute of the truth that was taking place between her parents. Sometimes the truth hurt. She wasn't as strong as Liss. She didn't want to be stuck between her yelling, hitting, hurricane parents any longer than she had to. But fuck Liss and her coddled life and functional family—what did *she* know about pain?

“And in two years I get my license,” Liss was saying. “And I'm outta here. I'll track down where my parents live. I'll find some way to make the adoption agency spit it out. And I'll see if I have any brothers or sisters I don't know about. If I do, I want to meet

them.”

Anna couldn't look at Liss. The natural place to look away was the door in front of them, and on it was a mirror. All she could see in it was the moonlike mass of Hank's face under her own thick hair, like a version of her father in drag. A few bits of Caroline were poking out—the nose, the chin—but subsumed by the bulk of her father's. She tried to salvage a feature that was only her own—her tawny eyes, those were hers—but the mirror was too far away to make out their colour, and from the bed they looked close to the colour of Hank's. How to rip her father out of herself when he was the baseline?

“Wouldn't it be nice to have a perfect family?” she burst out, and was surprised at the venom in her voice.

“Yeah. That's one reason I want to find them.”

“Wouldn't it be nice to be able to create your own family and your own place in it?”

“I wish.”

“What would it be like, Liss? If you could?”

The excitement between them was back again. Liss leaned towards her fiercely.

“All artists. No preps. All genuinely brilliant. And of course you'd be in it.”

“You'd be in mine too,” said Anna. “You're the closest I've ever had to a sister. And we don't know many genuinely brilliant people, do we?” Liss shrieked with laughter, like Anna'd known she would. “We can be our own family.”

“Who else would be in yours?”

“Well, Ed would leave that preppy Louise and marry me.” She giggled a little, and

blushed at the image of him kneeling in front of her, a diamond-decked engagement ring glinting from its case. With one hand he took hers and bent to kiss it. Her whole body was quickly growing flushed with heat.

“Shut up about Ed.”

“It's my fantasy, you asked.”

“No, I mean it. Shut up.” Liss stuck one earbud of her MP3 player into her right ear and the other into Anna's left. She clicked through the tracks until Ride of the Valkyries was searing in her eardrums. “You should come with me on the road trip. I'll introduce you to everyone as my sister. And we'll find someplace to live far away from here and make music.”

“Surrender will make an album and put on concerts.”

“Everyone will adore us.”

Liss, fierce-eyed in her Rita Deviant gear, was lending Anna courage.

“And we won't have to call on the goddesses for help,” she said, picturing the two of them under stage lights so bright they were absorbed, merging together, expanding in an ever-growing plasma until they fireworked above the audience. “We'll *become* goddesses!”

Liss flung an arm around Anna, pulling her in. Her face came so close its eyes blurred together. Anna shut hers in reflex and tasted sugary lip gloss. A soft pillowlike surface moving, then saliva. A wet tongue lunging in her mouth, coiled and slithering. The air was a hothouse. She couldn't breathe properly. A lurch of guilt in her stomach. A flare of heat. Her tongue stirred into motion and pressed back. Stage lights glittered

behind her eyelids.

The fantasies spun into an ever-richer ritual. They felt themselves drawn tighter, their eyes focused like searchlights across the dinner table, one humming the first few bars of a piece of music as they passed in the school hallway and the other continuing. Anna thought she had never known such delirium, the kind that preoccupied all attention and desire. They made fun of their homework and practised and wrote small songs, they cuddled and kissed, and most of all they told each other what their lives would be like once they ran away. One day they were living out of a hostel in Florida and performing concerts on outdoor stages under the palm trees. Another, they met Liss's parents in Nepal and studied at a Buddhist monastery, where they reached enlightenment and became pure strains of music ascending to the sky. They spent their nights this way while Hank and Caroline went to court, worked out settlements, ate dinner at separate hours, and avoided each other as if the house was a battlefield. At least that's what Caroline told her they'd done during that time, later, when they talked about it.

## Chapter 13: Jump

In Anna's dream she walked into Darien's room. It was meticulously tidy, with posters of Dylan, Miles Davis, and Joni Mitchell on the cream-coloured walls. Wooden furniture, no real piles of anything. A record player and a stack of vinyls in one corner. A music stand in another. Darien was sitting in a neat wooden chair in front of his neat-wooden desk, straight-backed, serious-eyed, looking ahead. Anna watched from multiple perspectives, but he couldn't see her. Her sense of self was hazy.

Anna felt a hot hand on her shoulder and Ay-a lurched up behind her, as tall as the ceiling, chains clinking between the folds of her many-layered gown. From this angle, her nostrils were flared and terrifyingly visible. She opened her lips which were coated in strawberry lip gloss, and words oozed out from them—"Move the furniture!" And suddenly they were on the bed naked, and as they dove at each other Anna could see from the corner of her eye that everything had changed places. The night table had gotten half stuck into the bureau and the lamp was floating upside-down. She was too hungry for that to mean anything. A heat wave rippled outward from them, visible in stippled light.

Anna knew it was stupid to take dreams as signs. She and Liss had analyzed each other's dreams—Liss's driving a tour bus to LA suggesting a desire to escape while remaining in control and exercising power over others, Anna's giant spiders eating a piano denoting a fear of success. Once she'd dreamed of going to school in an evening gown and diamonds—Liss had said she needed to be bolder.



There was a half hour break between the end of school and concert band. It wasn't hard for Anna to go to the pharmacy down the street, not physically. She walked the entire length of the store, scanning every sign, and walked back again. There it was, in a row she'd missed—Family Planning. Everybody was looking at her, the matronly woman with her shopping cart full of party favours, the short balding man with beady eyes holding a pigtailed toddler's hand, the modelesque couple in their twenties leaning into each other's space as they walked without seeming to notice they were doing it. She should just go home. She was a poser, a wannabe, a kid doing what kids weren't supposed to do. But this was what her friends had done.

There were so many kinds! Blue packages and pink packages and purple ones that reminded her of packs of gum. Extra Large. Sensation Increasing. Ribbed for Her Pleasure. She'd had no idea the condom selections were so extensive—or so expensive. And beneath them, the bottles of lube. As hearsay would have it, she should probably get some of that too. She picked up one of the cheaper bottles, turned it around, watched the tiny bubbles that swished inside, set it down, sighed, and picked it up again. Condoms. Many small coloured boxes dominated by letters. She picked a box with spermicide. You couldn't be too careful. She grabbed the closest reasonable big thing she could find—a soft green polka-dotted bath towel—to throw over them in the shopping basket. She imagined herself explaining the purchase to her mother: *You can't have too many bath towels. Or: It's for swimming in the summer. Or: Here, Mom, I bought you a towel, I thought it was cute.*

They couldn't really be watching her as she walked towards the counter. Surely

they were just regular, non-suspicious people going about their regular, non-suspicious shopping business. Straight back. Brisk pace. Try not to look suspect. Breathe faster, shallower, than usual. What was the point of buying these things? It was stupid, because they'd probably never get used. Would Darien ever make a move? She didn't have the strength to lunge out of herself that way, did she? She was in line behind only one person, a man in a tuque with a pack of gum. There was another person behind her, and yet another joining the line. Oh god, they were going to see the package, the bored-looking teenage clerk was going to see the package, she couldn't hold her head straight or keep herself from looking at the scuff marks on the floor, they'd judge her from the frozen look on her face, and the condoms and lube were a stupid impulse buy, tokens of wishful thinking, they would never get used anyway. They were permission givers.

“Hello-how-may-I-help-you.” The clerk sounded as bored as he looked.

“Hello,” Anna mumbled to the counter. The boy bagged the items with no comment, and Anna was grateful. She looked at her watch—almost late!—and ran across the road to school. *Dear Ay-a, please let no one ask me what's in these bags.* They didn't. They were all parading onto the stage to practice, while Anna jammed her clarinet together without greasing any of the cork and had to readjust her reed during rehearsal because she'd tightened it askew. She joined her breath to the others in a German hymn, striving to blend her tone with Irena's, straining upwards and out of herself in a sacrificial smoke of sound.

It had been a long time since Anna could play Chopin's Marche Funèbre

straightforwardly. The lugubrious chords brought to mind the first time she'd used her proximity to Darien to fuel her playing. The impossibility of reaching out and touching him then, and the heaviness of wanting to, had fed the progression of grief. There was something too appropriate about being turned on by a funeral march, something that turned her thoughts to the sinister. Sex Ed lectures droned in the notes. Warnings against teen pregnancy. Handouts with grotesque photographs of genital warts and Herpes sores.

She waited a couple of days to test her courage and commitment, glanced at the solid and unerasable box of condoms, waited, walked through those school days with cement in her stomach, and finally faked sick and made it to the school nurse's office. "B-b-birth control," she stammered when asked. The nurse squeezed an inflatable sleeve around her arm to test her blood pressure, then simply smiled with a cool semblance of warmth and scrawled a prescription. Back to the pharmacy, standing taller as she waited in line for her prescription, repeating to herself that she'd been brave. Damn, it really wasn't difficult to get sex supplies. There was a lot to think about, a lot of steps to get there, but sex as a reality was seeming frighteningly more easy as she took each one. She pictured Sarah getting fucked by the older cousin's older friend, some beach-blond guy who looked like a muscular Ed, grunting as he pushed against her in the leather of the back seat, her collarbones sweaty and mouth twisting. Salt breeze seeped through the semi-open window, and the wildness in their faces looked like freedom.

She couldn't talk at dinner, couldn't muster her usual sarcasm. When Caroline asked what was wrong, she said "Just worried about the concert," and was left to the wide room of her fears where Darien gravitated to her, gentle in touch and coyote-eyed. She

tried to tune out Callas' cheeping, then realized she'd forgotten to feed him.

Her friends certainly talked about sex enough, but she couldn't drag her secret desires from their gaping windowless room and speak them. Especially not to Irena, who still looked Darien over sometimes. She spent lunch hours with Darien, and couldn't look at anything on Caroline's computer that might make her suspicious. All she had to read about sex were magazines, but she read them repeatedly, scanning for hints.

Ravel's *Jeux D'Eau*, trickling and tripping, fairylike under her fingers. Water games, Caroline had translated. It was among both their favourites on the concert program. She'd played this as a child from one of the tapes at Christmas, looked up, and found herself lifted by relatives' watching faces. Christmas lights illuminated them, inhuman, glowing golden as ornaments. She'd felt warmed and absent.

The music was so light it unmoored her. It wasn't emotionless lightness, not as she played it. There was an almost unbearable sincerity in the music's desire to empty itself. Much density in the strident notes. A few darker gushes. Light reflecting on the ripples, manifold shades of gold and blue unfanning. She played the little river by the beach, the one where she used to collect sea glass and still sometimes did, that tiny hesitant body that staggered into the ocean's gush. She sped up and played a crash. And here she was supposed to slow down, go playful again, but the notes were rushing and rushing and her hands flickered out of control.

Warmth. A pressure telling her, slow. Darien had pressed a hand to Anna's collarbone. A voice that was a heat sink: "I'm worried about you."

Anna let out the ragged breath she'd been holding and tried to compose her

features. “Just nervous for the concert,” she breezed.

The practice room was a cell of inhuman whiteness. She wanted him, she was oppressed by the wanting, she was afraid of him. She needed to go to the water. No matter that it was ice. There was water stirring underneath. Not thinking, she leaned in fiercely.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“No plans, really.”

“Want to go to the beach?”

She seized and kissed him before he could answer.

Bundled in scarves and parkas, they walked deliberately on the ice. The sand had a thin covering, although only tiny blots of snow had stuck. There were fewer sea gulls and no people. The nearest houses, pastel building blocks that they were, stood far enough away, and the drop to the sand was far enough below the marram grass, that no one could spy on them. The sky was an unforgiving tint of bright ice blue.

“What do you like about the beach in winter?” Darien asked.

Anna didn't know what to answer. Clinging to Darien's gloved hand with her own, she liked the warmth but wasn't sure if she liked the beach right now. It was too bleak, and she'd come here because she needed something alive! Sterile as the practice room. Vast and unwalled as the room in her mind where Darien gravitated to her and their two desires clenched.

“I was hoping it would be warmer, honestly,” she said.

“Me too. It's freezing out here! I kinda just want to go back to the car.”

Anna's gaze darted to his face. Was there a hint at something? “Yeah, let's go to the car!” She was crazy to think that. He wouldn't want to.

They staggered back over the beach ice, walking fast but clumsy in their care not to trip. Darien turned the car on, activated the defrost, and a wave of warmth flushed their bodies. Some jazz came on—Spinning Wheel, a rendition that was clear and bluesy. Anna clambered into the back seat.

“What are you doing?”

“Come on,” she motioned, “it's easier to cuddle.”

Darien broke into a small smile.

The Valkyries were mustering in her head again. Fuck those Valkyries, she didn't want them there!

Their hands were roving pretty far. They'd mapped out much of each other's bodies, all the safe zones. She reached over.

“Anna—”

He was definitely hard.

She loved his nervous deliberateness. His luminosity. The interruptions in the timbre of his breath.

“We shouldn't be doing this.”

“Oh, come on.”

She grabbed his hand, moved it to her, and he didn't seem to be complaining. She stroked him like she'd practised, on vegetables stolen from the crisper.

The car was their room, a closed zone, artificial. They could make it what they wanted.

“I have some, uh, some stuff in my bag,” she said after awhile. “If we want to go further.”

Darien gaped.

“I’ve started taking birth control and stuff.”

“Jesus, Anna.”

“What, haven’t *you* ever thought about it?”

“Well, of course, but Anna—it’s going to hurt, you know that?”

Anna was impatient. She’d waited, she’d planned, she’d wondered and doubted and sat around plenty enough already. She wanted to grab, demolish, be destroyed, she wanted something to happen, and she wanted it *now*. “I want the pain.”

“You sure?”

“Just fuck me,” said Ay-a, her eye glinting over Anna’s shoulder.

“Just fuck me,” she blurted out.

Maybe it wasn’t the best thing to say. He couldn’t exactly fuck her while she was rummaging for a condom in her backpack and they both still had most of their clothes on.

She hadn’t thought it would hurt that much. The world had contracted and gone white. She hadn’t even looked when he’d come. She didn’t know whether it had taken one minute or five minutes or five hours. She’d squeezed her eyes in pain.

Darien’s arms are closed around her. She feels their log-like weight on her back,

but she scarcely feels her back. She is Ravel's *Jeux D'eau*, a lightness seeking desperately to escape itself. "Anna, are you OK?" OK. What is OK? His voice reaches her muffled as a canned laugh track.

Open your eyes, Anna. Somewhere there's a person called Anna. Not here. Not now. This car could be a room. It could make them what it wanted. What's on the radio. White static. She can't hear a note. Open your eyes open your eyes. White static in the outer world.

In the inner world, capsules like bell jars or flying saucers spread out in a garden. Each contains a flower or a few. Irises, buttercups, carnations, dahlias, strawflowers. Translucent, closed to her touch, she has no hands to touch them. A green expanse iced over. The ice choppy. Bullet holes in some of the glass. White static inside. Inches separating all from ground.

Frozen beach. Frozen time. A capsule for the Garden of Moments.

Beautiful.

"Am I beautiful? Am I sexy?"

"God, Anna, is that even a question?"

Open eyes. See Darien. Darien. Here? Right? Give up and see nothing.

"Am I as beautiful as my mom?"

"Are you as beautiful as your *mom*?" Incredulous laugh track, but the next question spews forth.

"Am I as beautiful as Liss?"

"Who the hell is Liss?"



“Nevermind! Justnevermind!”

Faces, shapes, returning as haze. A sense of legs.

“I’m going for a walk.”

“Anna—”

Find something called a car door and throw it open and run and run and run and run and breathe and don't breathe and breathe cold and heat core and sweat and slip and land on her ass and not feel it and look up and sky is cold. Be cold with it. Ay-a, black curls drenching gold-embroidered fabric, swoops down like a Valkyrie, howling: “You betrayed yourself!”

Leave me alone, Ay-a, I don't want you!

Joints tense from falling and frustration. Not turned on, so far from turned on, still sore from impact, thud, thud, thud, and dissatisfaction. What had she done.

A glimpse of the real world, Darien running through sand towards her, his clothes like hers pulled sloppily back on. Rutted frozen sand, white-coated ocean.

Anna frozen where she'd fallen. Blinking. Making the effort to blink.

Come back to yourself, Anna. What was Anna. A tape player that unleashed a fountain much faster than any real fountain moved. A scary wooden box that she could coax sound fairies from, remaining like a smell even after they were gone, changing the air. Anna used to be music.

Her mind had always swarmed with songs. She could slip in and summon one at need, the melody, the accompaniment, the counterpoint, the whole blend of tones for one thing if not another, even if the only things that would come entire at times were

mechanical marches and staid pop. That was her!

Now, white static. Walls and walls of it mashing into each other. Sound? Sound?  
What is sound? Where is it?

A pulse without even a rhythm. A cold that has frozen her in place. A panic with  
snake coils that choke her.

No sound!

She is six years old, standing on the edge of the dock at the Marina, watching sea  
gulls quarrel and a jellyfish float out of season. The wind beckons. She wants to fall  
into the water, to be swept into its gradually churning power, to erase herself, and she  
leans. From a distance comes her father's voice: "Don't jump!"

She jumps.

The hurtling displacement of air around her is horrible.

Darien's arms around her. Darien's lucid eyes. Fall leaf brown, with shades of light  
unfanning.

"I told you we shouldn't be doing this, Anna. We've hardly known each other for  
very long, and at our age—it's just wrong."

"But we wanted to."

*(I wanted to.)*

*(What the hell was I thinking?)*

"You're too good. I shouldn't have let my stupid animal wants take over. I

shouldn't have hurt you like that.”

He was talking nonsense! It had been her wants, not his, that had lost control. Hers. Couldn't he see that? Was he blind? Did everything have to be *his* fault, even the blame claimed and owned? Didn't she have power?

“I mean I—I fucked you.”

Part of her was in shock, smarting from the pain. Another part was warmed by the word, in a way that also kind of hurt.

“I don't think we should spend time together anymore,” he said.

White static. No sound.

“I mean, I'll be there for you if you need anything, if you want to talk things out—”

*The History of Opera.* A heavy red-bound book from Caroline's shelf, with pages edged in the colour of sulphur. She read one sentence.

Read another.

Empty marks, flying past like scenery from a car window.

Checked the clock. Five minutes.

She'd been reading the same sentence over and over again.

She went alone to the piano at lunch. She yelled at Sarah and Chen when they tried to follow. No Darien to tell her the three things she was doing wrong and twenty she was doing right. Don't think about that.

The notes of Ravel's Presto came thud, thud, thud. The sensation of being fucked, a ghost body intruding in hers. She had to stop. Her hands went around her back, and she cringed at the contact. Intruders! Shake them off.

She wished she played a subtler instrument than the piano. Maybe the harp. There was only so much beauty she could draw from a run or a crescendo; the sound of banging forte or fortissimo notes was so absolute. It must have always been like this. Why hadn't she noticed until now?

Or the violin. She should have learned to play the violin. And singing, of course. The human voice was one of the world's most subtle instruments, injected with human emotion in its natural state. The piano in front of her was a hard black box.

Laine's face wore a hard look. "Anna, listen to me. I know a concert is a hard thing. God, I used to not be able to perform without being so nervous that I had to throw up before going onstage! OK, so that's probably more than you wanted to know, but. The point is, it's hard for everyone. I know what happened last time and how hard that was for you. And I know you haven't been feeling well lately. But every concert is a new start. And this is a debut for you on a new level. You'll be out there with an orchestra. You've worked so hard for this. And I'll be there for musical support, I guess you could say. And of course your family will be in the audience. I know you can play yourself proud. Have you ever thought about what you're going to do afterwards? You've only got the one year of high school left. There are opportunities, Anna, scholarships—if you do well at this,

your future will be made incredibly easier—”

Irena held up a contract to all who would pay attention. “They accepted my songs. They're going in the music book!”

“No way!” said Chen.

“I can't believe you!” said Sarah. “Let me touch the paper.”

“Our friend the musical genius,” said Michelle.

“Congrats, but I doubt any of us are surprised,” said Darien. He and Irena had been chatting last lunch hour, and Anna deliberately sat on the opposite side of the table from him. Not too close, but close enough to watch. She fumbled with her fork and a clump of pasta fell onto the floor. Clumsy! Idiot! She bent to pick it up before it occurred to her that she should have just let it be.

Another thing she wasn't supposed to do, but Anna had drifted so far from 'supposed to' that she wasn't ashamed to crouch watch. Dammit! He was definitely hard.

Anna tried to rehearse the sounds in her mind. She'd been trying since that day she didn't want to think about. That day she'd been abandoned in a world without music, unless she turned some on or played some, in which case she could hear but it wouldn't permeate. The sound was an external thing that glanced off her without entering. Her blood was cold.

She clutched her music scores to her dark red evening dress, its clean lines a mockery of her recent transgression. When the conductor motioned, she staggered out in

a thin pair of glittering heels. She never wore them, and hadn't mastered the art of walking in these things. It was a new stage, the public one where she'd watched the symphony orchestra perform, watched Laine perform, but never stood on until the dress rehearsal. The auditorium's black velvet seats were tiered in row upon row, and the balconies were vast, and with the blue-white lighting so bright she couldn't tell how much of the space was full. She knew from dress rehearsal that the sound carried richly. From the other side of the wings, Laine in her usual black and white tailored suit strode crisply to the other piano. Between them were rows full of orchestra, musicians in black adjusting polished flutes and heavy cellos. A few glanced at her as she passed—one face bored, another curious, one smiling in encouragement, one reverent, one inscrutable. Some looked in their 30s, others were grey-haired, all much older than Anna. She sat in front of hers, the smaller of two grands. There was a vase in front of it, with a single spire of white gladiola.

The orchestra swelled with sound. She heard it reverberate across the tiers of seats through the air and up to the vast ceiling, a distant call, and she was cold to it. Her entrance came, she knew it, she felt no compulsion. Her fingers fell. She could do this by rote. She'd practised so many times. The good thing was she felt no fear. Yes, she'd practised. She'd hit a point where her hands were as functional as machines.

On through the Beethoven, while the orchestra hit peaks of joy and the melodies from Laine's side were something she recognized through her numbness as beautiful. On through all the Chopin. Marche Funèbre's hollowness was hollower than usual. Ravel—the Presto was perfectly on tempo. She played a bunch of songs and didn't think about

what they were. Until Jeux d'Eau. With the fountaining of notes, a crush of physical pain hit her insides. Darien advancing towards her. Eyes and body shut tight. Darien cutting her off. Darien blaming himself and refusing to listen to her, the true culprit. Darien hard under the table while Irena talked about her music book contract. What was wrong with her fingers? The presto became prestissimo became speed and fingers tripping and aspiring lightness thudding crashing everyone was wondering what she was doing everyone was wondering what she was doing

Freeze. Carnival of the Animals, now. Pause while the string chickens screech back and forth. Pause while the aquarium fish glimmer. Play while the fossils rattle. Now the pianists, she and Laine and their scales, the most absurd animals of them all, butts of the orchestral joke. Up and down and down and up, infernal. No cares about speed. Let it pound. Let madness sound.

Imagine hesitant clapping.

“That newspaper reviewer's an idiot,” hissed Chen. Anna had never seen her friend looking as angry as she did now at the beginning of History class, curling a paper into a tube in her hand and whacking it against her desk. “Don't listen to a word he says. He doesn't know music, and he doesn't know what he's talking about.”

“What newspaper review?”

“Oh, you didn't see it, in The Islander? Some snob critic totally trashed your performance. He doesn't know what he's talking about.”

“Let me see that.”

*A lacklustre performance—Stern fails to deliver on her earlier promise—technically proficient and detached—as a solo act, she is underwhelming—Ravel's Jeux d'Eau descended into mayhem—a consummately skilled performance by Winters.*

“Anna, you're great. Don't listen to what anyone says.”

“I wish I could believe that. I *fucking* screwed up!” Her eyes stung. Tears welled and stuck and wouldn't fall.

“We all have bad days.” Anna was too limp to resist Chen's hug. She sat there cradled while her friend timidly stroked her back. She wanted to cry, but her eyes were frozen, the tears suspended.

“I can't go back and change it.”

“There will always be other concerts.”

“Will there? Will there after this? After I did so absolutely horrible?”

*After what happened with Darien?*

And suddenly, implausibly, she felt a sear of arousal. She wanted sex, and she wanted it badly.



## Chapter 14: I Cannot Pass By

The light was fading outside the picture window. They'd spent all afternoon practising the Poème piece as they should—meticulously, in sections. “Polishing,” said Liss, “like with rags and spit.” They went to the kitchen and brought back plates of grapes and store-bought maple cookies, and mugs of milk.

“You guys always have cookies around,” said Anna.

“What, is that weird?”

“No. Just not used to it.”

“Well, in my world we'd always have cookies.”

The sky was now a dark electric blue. Bands of curly-edged pink splayed brightly across it, like furrows in a spring field. A Mozart violin concerto—Anna couldn't even tell which one, she'd heard it before but she didn't keep track of them all—wafted down from upstairs. It was either Katie or Cassie playing. All three girls had been trained with the tapes, and all three sent to music school. Anna was caught up. It was a lovely song, melodic, buoyant, played with lightness and skill. Exactly the type of thing to cuddle on the couch and listen to. She liked the calm, but there was nuance missing. It wasn't Liss's playing.

“I remember one time thinking that music could carry you up to the ceiling or the sky,” said Anna. “Or something like that. I don't remember it very well.”

“Who says it can't?”

And their fantasy game was off again. “I bet we can play ourselves to Heaven,”

said Anna.

“The goddesses will be waiting.”

“We'll play the Poème piece, but this time, with our—our souls embedded. We'll play good and evil merged together.”

“We'll squeeze all the power in the world into the music.”

“We'll become demons. And gods! And embody something with so much power that it transcends light and dark, and turns them both into something even above them. Pure beauty that lives only for itself.”

“This can be our practice run. We'll try on divinity. And when we get onstage for the real concert, we'll call it to us and own it.” It seemed that Liss's very skin glittered.

“Ay-a. Ay-a. Stars in my body, stars in my soul.”

Their hands brushed together, then Anna resumed her piano and Liss her violin with an urgent understanding of what they were doing. Their gazes went timidly towards each other, and they felt very fragile. Anna saw her own emotions etched in Liss's face.

She played the opening notes. Trickle and sway, and Liss came searing in. So quiet. Keen behind the volume's small space.

They stood in the wings, facing each other. The dark red velvet curtain was almost up. Laine and Mr. Rue had both whispered reminders and were now chatting to the side of them, Laine's hands chopping the air, Mr. Rue's undulating, his mouth crinkled. He was half a head shorter than she was, and the wavy ginger hair on his actual head was thinning.

*Liss, remember not to overdo it with your vibrato. Anna, watch your tempo and don't show off too much. You guys be very careful with the Acid Rain song; you know it's unconventional.*

“It's our stage now,” Anna whispered.

They waited for the bus at the end of the gravel driveway, bundled up. Katie had on a soccer team jacket from her boyfriend with leather or suede elbows and “Logan” monogrammed on the back, Cassie something white with faux fur trim on the collar, Liss a buttoned black trench, and Anna some boring brown polar fleece thing. Liss was the shortest, and Anna the tallest by far.

“Liss, you gonna get a car when you're 16?” asked Cassie.

“I don't know why you'd care.” Her tone was chilly.

“So we don't have to bother with the bus. Duh.”

“You really think I'd drive you both?”

“We've taken the bus for seven years,” said Katie, rolling her eyes. “It's getting, you know, boring.”

“You just say that cause Logan's on the other bus,” said Cassie.

“No, I just wish we were old enough to drive and Logan had a car.”

Black, silver and red streaks of car spit past. Anna wondered briefly if any of them had cool vanity plates, the sort of ones she'd add to the sign collection she wanted to embellish. She couldn't see from the side of the road. A school bus flashed by but it wasn't theirs.

“This bus takes forever,” said Cassie.

Katie broke into song, barely under her breath:

*Oh the water is wide*

*I cannot pass by*

*But nor have I*

*The wings to fly*

*Give me a boat*

*That will carry two*

*And two shall row,*

*My love and I.*

Her voice was naturally velvet-textured, soft and lazy. There was something smoky about it compared to Liss's crystal clarity. A mezzo-soprano, like Caroline. Cassie kicked at stones and looked bored.

“Katie,” said Liss.

“Yeah?”

“How about you decrescendo a bit more. That'll make your crescendos sound that much stronger.”

“I'll think about it.” Wariness and interest mingled in her voice—*Don't go telling me what to do* blended uneasily with *Thanks*.

“That was really good,” said Anna. Oh, wonderful, she sounded like a parent. *Really good*. And late with her compliment, too.

“There's the bus,” said Liss.

“Yeah,” said Cassie, “cause we really couldn't tell.”

The school bus flicked its amber lights and heaved to a stop. It was arrhythmic, a huffing creature of bass. They got on, the bus driver nodding, the engine churning, the kids in twos and threes in their patched-up seats vacantly staring at them, at the neighbours' houses out the windows, in no direction specifically. Katie and Cassie went to the back, on separate sides. Anna and Liss had outgrown that. They took a seat in the middle. Liss pressed her hand into Anna's. The weight of it was comforting. Anna wondered at the fact that Liss, fierce beauty of eighth grade and singer with a voice of crystal, wanted to touch her in public. She felt an impulse to lean in for a kiss, but she couldn't. Not on the school bus, she thought but maybe she couldn't simply because she was Anna and not her braver friend. While she was wondering, the teasing began.

“Lesbians!” same sing-song voices from the seat beside them. “Lesbos! Lesbos!”

“Ooh, they're in love!”

“Gross!”

The taunters were boys and girls in grades below them. Their reaction was stupid, but a lump formed in Anna's stomach in reflex.

Liss turned and shot the kids a smirk, then bent to kiss Anna. She was filled with dread mingled with that now-familiar fluttering.

“Katie, Cassie, your sister's a lesbian!” someone yelled to the back of the bus.

Anna felt sick.

The Poème was gentle, intimate, the violin and piano notes drawing closely

towards each other. They couldn't turn to look, each intent on her own music, but they felt each other's presences, magnified. Each had a shadowy figure spreading outward from her body, growing like spilled ink. Around Liss, Anna sensed the figure softening. She grew curves, and quivered like water. There was a scent of cinnamon and vanilla, although that might have been coming from the kitchen. The figure fell like a pillow over all the hard things in their environment. Sava, the goddess of love. Nothing was immune from her touch.

Liss stepped out beside Anna at the piano. Anna watched her curtsy. They'd agreed to wear all black, and Liss's sleek dress cut off asymmetrically above her tiny knees. The claps were a drumbeat, summoning them into purpose.

The oversweet smell of cookies rose in the Tuesday evening kitchen. Anna walked in to find Katie reading at the table, pausing intermittently to glance at the stove. She had a cookbook in front of her, with yellowed pages and a brown stain in the middle of the one that was flipped open. Cassie sat across from her with a math book, but her attention was focused on the cell phone she was using to text. The twins were dressed determinedly differently, as always, and Anna observed their outfits as if taking notes. Cassie had on a denim skirt and pink flower-print silkscreen tee, Katie an oversize brown hoodie over jeans and the sun-painted guitar pick on a string that she always wore. Anna was beginning to suspect that Logan had given it to her. Katie's hair was much longer than Cassie's despite her more tomboyish style, and she had no bangs. They were both

pretty in a youthful, wide-eyed, curving way.

Katie looked over at the kitchen clock and got up to take the cookies out. Cassie, finished with her texting, followed.

“God, these smell good. When can I eat one?”

“Um, let them cool down but—” Katie's head bowed.

“Don't tell me you're going to give them to Logan.”

“Some of them, yeah.”

“Everything you do is for Logan. Everything you talk about is Logan. I'm fucking sick of you.”

*You need to get over Logan Disease*, thought Anna—that's how Liss would put it if she was in the room, and if she cared. Logan Disease seemed perfectly sensible, though, kind of like Ed Disease. God, she'd seen him and that despicable Louise French kissing in front of the buses, in full view of the first graders! And their hands moved over each other like snakes! But she and Liss, now—how did any of this make sense?

“Yeah, well, I'm sick of how you always tell everyone what not to do,” said Katie.

“Well, Liss—”

“—does that too. I know. But she's—”

“—not as bad as I am. Yeah, sure.”

“It's true! At least she tries to help! You just complain all the time.”

Liss sauntered into the kitchen—she must have heard her name. “Hey, cookies, I hope you didn't burn 'em too bad. Are they cooled down yet?”

“I think so,” said Katie.

Liss grabbed a chocolate chip cookie and bit. Cassie and Anna followed, but Katie went to get her parents before eating one herself. Of all the young kids to acquire a boyfriend, thought Anna, Katie seemed an unlikely one. What was her secret for attracting a guy at such a young age when Anna had no luck at a reasonable one? She heard a slobbery noise. The black dog had snuffled into the kitchen and was begging, letting its tongue loll out. Surely its pants were exaggerated. Anna couldn't have explained why she wanted to strangle it just then.

A figure rose up out of Anna. Ay-a was different than she had been in childhood, no longer a glimmering hug of cloth around her but a figure that felt faintly sinister, a pianissimo humming in a minor key. Anna couldn't make out the goddess's details, as she was intent on the music issuing from her fingers in soft, glimmering runs. The goddess was an emanation from the piano, an auditory entity rather than a visual one, and also an emanation from Anna because when she played there was no separation between the small skin-bone-and-muscle body and the larger wood-and-ivory body. The sounds were in her chest, winging outward. It was a simple piece, but the intentioned playing granted it a serenity that made the hairs along her arms prickle. There was something unearthly, even cruel in such composure. She flicked a glance at Liss's sharply cut frame, and the demonic perfection of the music was confirmed in its lines. They'd entered a realm where entities weren't just blurts like the humans scattered on earth, but musically arranged, every improvisation in their being drawn from rules of math and emotion.

Anna glimmered, and Ay-a was the echo and the source. She felt a dance of power



in her nerves, ordered and electric. Liss had been playing more softly but now she crescendoed. The pillowy energy of Sava took on smoke and pain, keening with the hurt of a mother whose entire body still wanted to cradle a lost offspring and whisper in accelerando that it would be alright, it would be alright, as if speaking to an empty space would somehow help them both. The urgency blazed out of her. Anna felt flames close in like those that had charred their long-ago effigy. This time she wouldn't douse them. The way of the brave, the way upward, was to hold on, hold on, while the singe overtook her.

It was during the first of Beethoven's three violin sonatas, Op. 12, No. 1, that something snapped. The zing of the stage lights had dulled to a lull as Anna's attention was drawn by the piano. She was playing along as she'd practised so many times in that bland white room, she was dipping cozily into the music like she dipped her hands into hot sudsy water when washing dishes, she was breathing, she wasn't thinking of much. Then Liss's sound arced sharply upwards, jarring her. Radiant, it in a masterful vibrato. Anna's fingers remained on the keys, playing their part in rote. Notes fell like a light rain, but Liss soared beyond them.

Liss was the star, Anna mere accompaniment. She wanted to ascend, but she had to play her part and only hers, or ruin the art of it. They echoed, they conversed, one mild tone stroking the other. *Are you with me? Is this good? Is this so good it's evil? How long 'til we reach pure beauty? We're getting closer. Or are we just playing silly games, wishing silly wishes we should've grown out of?*

Fugue. Caroline had said that in French, it meant running away. *We will run 'til we reach a place where we can become what we want to be, won't we?*

The stage had been that place for Anna, before. Now Liss was outrunning her. Her body strained for escape.

*I'll run away. I'll run to a place so far you can't catch up with me.*

And Anna was playing in solemn, churchy tones, playing deliberately over the violin. No one was there to tell her to blend or shut up. Liss couldn't tell her that either. Onstage, she was an equal inventor of the rules. *I will give praise from the wood this piano is made of and the rivulets of blood pumped through my body and the tension in my muscles pressing the keys and the strings of my vocal chords that have deferred to a stronger surrogate. I will be more devout than you can.*

“How are things going at Liss's?” Caroline's voice sounded tinny over the phone.

“Good,” said Anna, who couldn't have gone into detail about her disappointment over Ed and being left out while Liss, Katie and Cassie argued without malice and the thrill of their practices and late-night conversations and her occasional nightmares if she'd wanted to.

“You and Liss are still getting along?”

“Of course.”

“Good, I was worried you wouldn't be able to spend so much time together without fighting. Are you practising much?”

“Of course. How are *you*, Mom?”

“Oh, not the best I've ever been, but I'm alive.” She giggled wildly, as if this was some great joke.

*Good. I'd been worried you wouldn't be.*

Anna couldn't bring herself to giggle along. She hoped that didn't bother her mother. “What have you and Dad been doing, exactly?”

Anna thought she heard a small sigh.

“Ironing out the details of the separation, who's going to live where. I think I'm getting the house so your dad can move closer to work.”

“Oh, good. I want to stay with you then.”

“Yeah, of course you will. I mean, I guess it would be good for you to visit your father sometimes—”

*Hopefully he's not hurting you. I won't hold my breath.*

“Yeah, of course.”

Liss was sitting on the piano bench, violin beside her, not playing but looking towards Anna and tapping her fingers in her lap.

“I should probably get going soon.”

“Yeah, yeah, I hope you're having fun over there. Call me anytime if something's bothering you or you want to come home.” The weariness in her voice made it clear that she'd rather Anna not call. “Take care of yourself and do your homework on time and make sure you eat enough.” She sounded like a caricature of a mother, rhyming off what mothers were supposed to say.

It wasn't technique, exactly, that served as music's ladder upwards. It wasn't the labour of polish, which added to the beauty of a well-played piece but couldn't fashion a core that wasn't there. It was the interplay of complex sensations and desires, concentrated in a single ever-changing point. Whether it involved a solo voice or an orchestra, a simple melody line or chords and fugues and counterpoints, good music converged. It might be storming all around you in whirls of wind and rain and hail, but you could follow it—subconsciously was the best way—to the pulse at the centre.

Anna no longer felt a presence; she became one. She was soft and bitter, and so was Liss, and there was no Anna and there was no Liss. The goddesses lived in a place beyond their perception, but a place that could be reached. Their music breathed, and all the muddiness and sparkle of the notes they'd practiced dissolved. Their state was pre-instinctual. Growing ever more intent, they reached convergence, and it seared.

But in the din of the stage lights, Anna was thinking of how Liss embodied the substance those lights tried to imitate, and how much *she* wanted to be that substance. She upped her game and Liss upped hers in response, crescendoing, blazing from herself.

One. Then another. One. Then another.

A few minutes into Acid Rain—what were the audience members thinking, taken from classical to a punky vocal hybrid?—Anna on the keyboard threw herself into an improvisation, riffing off the blues scale, her shoulders swaying, head tossing unthinkingly. Boldly, she looked to Liss. The smaller girl in her black dress was staring out at the glare-obscured audience, rapt, determined, and then she caught Anna's look.

Turning to stare back, her foxy features went fierce. Anna couldn't read them. Hostility?  
Hard admiration? Liss opened her mouth to sing.

*There probably are a lot of you, a family's a must.*

*Are you reeking in the rot of you, or smothered in your dust?*

*Do you think about me ever? Have a number you could call,*

*hanging on your stocked-up fridge's door? Yeah, NOW you could have it all.*

Anna felt something crush in her. The desire to outshine weakened to the thinness of paper. This grieved anger lit like lightning, flashed out her fingers in memorized and new configurations. Each key on the keyboard was a small receptacle, holding not a flower but an animal preserved as if in amber—scorpion, grass snake, rat. Convergence sounded once again.

Anna had one more night at Liss's before moving back. They had a few weeks at least before Hank would be moving out, but Caroline had given her a chain of excuses to return before admitting with a break in her voice, "I miss you." Liss had her happy dog and her happy sisters who finished each other's sentences even when they were fighting and looked up to her even when she criticized them. Caroline had a house too big for two and a husband she was negotiating a divorce with. So she had to come home.

In Liss's bed that lazy Saturday, snuggled shoulder to shoulder in pyjamas, they listened to all of Beethoven's symphonies in a row.

"I can't wait 'til I meet my birth family," said Liss. "I hate my family here."

"I don't think you do," said Anna.

The crowd filtered out to the sound of Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries played dimly over the loudspeaker. People gathered and dispersed, clouds gathered and dispersed as the Valkyries, long-haired women fierce in golden armour, burst forth. It seemed appropriate. Liss grabbed Anna's shoulder.

“I felt like Rita Deviant up there.”

“Really? What about the goddesses?” Anna half-joked.

“Yeah, them too. But more, you know, sexy.” She laughed, suddenly nervous, and looked down at her feet. This was strange. Maybe she hadn't caught the competition, or the moment of convergence. What *had* she got from the concert?

“*You* were sexy up there.”

Anna gaped.

There was an urgency in Liss's voice. “We always talk about those things, but I was kinda lying when I said that Ryan and Josh were hot. Even with the movie actors.” She stuttered, but burst on hotly. “You're kind of the only person I've thought that about.”

“Not even Rita Deviant?”

“OK, maybe her. But she's a girl too.”

“Well, yeah.” Anna could think of nothing interesting to say along these lines. She was surprised by none of this, yet she remained surprised by the concert. “Do you think we made it to Heaven on that stage?”

“Of course we did.”

Anna asked, Liss answered. Liss seemed so sure. Anna had been sure at some

point, but hollow in the absence of sound and tension and stage lights, she was left suspecting that the magic had been imperfect. Something was always lacking.

Liss seemed satisfied as her arms enclosed Anna's shoulders. She leaned inward—  
*Lesbians! Lesbians!* What did it mean if she kind of liked Liss and still kind of liked Ed at the same time?

In the wake of the kiss, Liss's voice quavered: “I love you.”

Anna couldn't assemble her thoughts, couldn't untangle them, froze on the spot. Her eyes shut tight, stayed there, squinted open and blinked.

“No,” she said.

“But don't you—”

*You love her. You love her. You love her?*

“No! You don't know what you're talking about!”

“I don't see—”

“I don't want this!”

She unfroze and felt a crumbling around her eyes that signalled oncoming tears. Her pulse beat way too fast. Her feet took off underneath her.

“Anna, wait!”

But as she ran through the halls, she heard Liss's parents cornering her. Her own parents hadn't found her yet.

Anna's feet are pinched in brown flats with little crinkles around the openings that don't match her black tights. The strobe lights in the music room sound like insects. There

are cardboard boxes stacked in the back left corner. Laine is not in the office. Anna's left knee bone is pressed against her right inner knee. There is a sound that may or may not be a mosquito. The bathroom is down the hallway, to the left. *Love?* There is a strident reason to be here. Beethoven over the loudspeaker pulls emotion like children pull taffy. Anna distracts herself by noticing the smell of her lipstick. A janitor comes into the music room every day but there are still footprints on the floor which is covered in little uncolourful speckles. Anna wears a black ribbon in her hair from the concert. *Love is too serious.* At a restaurant one time she'd heard a lady with a giant powderpuff for a purse say it's a good thing hair ribbons had gone out of fashion since her time. Taffy pulls are violent. The lighting is much brighter than the stage lights. There is an aftereffect on Anna's brain, a roll of musical negatives. The room takes twenty long strides to walk across. Liss had worn strawberry lip gloss, a birthday gift from Anna. Anna has paced back and forth. *Ay-a, Ay-a, stars in my body, stars in my soul.* The violin case is open in front of her. She really needs to pee. *Liss too high for her to follow.* There is very little shadow cast with all this lighting. There are twelve beige freckles on her right arm. Muscle belonging to something else inhabits it. *Anna running away.* The air tastes like lukewarm water. She has never owned a dog or had a sister. In a taffy pull you yank with sinewed arms and still the candy strings apart apart apart apart. Someone could build a bridge from taffy if the material was strong enough. *Liss running across that bridge, towards her.*

Liss's violin, marbled wood luminous as eyes. Her foot's proximity. *Liss outshining her.* An inch between sole and polished body. *Liss so satisfied.* Hesitance.



*Liss's lips touching her, Liss's gifts untouchable.* Impact before she realizes there's been impact. Hideous cracking sounds. Again, again, *encore*.

There is a sense of cold grandeur in Anna's eyes. In the keys of every piano are scorpions, grass snakes, rats. Anna is made of piano keys. The violin is on the floor and the pinchy flat of her right foot is through it and touching the uncolourful speckles. The music room has windows but they're high and hard to see through. Anna's pulse is doubled where the veins stick out. Beethoven is a musical negative. Everyone had loved them. Past is a negative sometimes set to music. The violin is in two main pieces with a hole scrunched in the middle and assorted splinters. The violin is back in the case on the shelf. It has a name on it. Adrenalin has Anna's veins alight. Liss now owns two halves of a violin. The splinters would be hers too but Anna has picked them up and thrown them on top of the lint and pizza box in the garbage. A piano is too big to stomp through. *Love?* She shudders. A splinter is lodged in Anna's index finger just below the nail.

## Chapter 15: Terminal

It was the end of June. Anna and Darien waited at the ferry terminal from Vancouver to Vancouver Island. The air was invigorating in this small bubble world of blue haze and glass. They weren't attached to much land here, and the huge glass buildings between which lines of trucks crossed were islands of their own.

The break between them didn't last long. He'd seemed happy enough to take her back, and let her cry in his arms more than a charitable number of times.

“Did you and Irena do anything?” she asked, the worry a knife in her gut.

“No,” he said, and she really wanted to believe him, but couldn't be sure. In weak moments she was reminded of this.

But she wanted him back no matter how much she'd been hurt by his insistence on break-taking. Was it love? Was it wishful thinking?

“We shouldn't—I shouldn't have sex with you. All it does is hurt you, and god, Anna, you're too good to do that to.”

He looked across at her with some distant, goofy, sideways glance, as if she were a statue. A stone thing too beautiful to touch like you'd touch someone flesh-and-blood. She felt neglected.

He was hard, as if that was any consolation.

But she didn't speak of sex again either, because she wasn't sure how she'd feel about a repeat.

When he mentioned going West to work for Uncle Matt and Uncle Parker at their cafe in Tofino that summer, Anna had been jealous.

“You could come too. They're looking for people to hire.”

“Really?”

She'd never simply picked up and taken off. She'd never really thought of it—but people could just leave their routines, their lives, travel across the country or the globe and do something else. The idea felt like high tide waves against her heels. She was young, she had nothing better to do, and nothing that obligated her to stay yet another summer on the island. Nothing!

“Wouldn't you rather go to Montreal?” Caroline asked. “You could stay with Aunt Louise. They have more jobs. Maybe you could learn a bit of French. Do they even have a piano at this restaurant?” Not there, Darien assured her, but they had one in the house. Her interest in music had been lacklustre after the concert anyway. “You'll get it back,” said her friends. Caroline tried to push at first, but when she noticed that that just made Anna eat half as much and stay up into the night doing little of anything, she took to saying “Sometimes these things take time,” and spoiled Anna with salmon and a new dress.

Hank liked the idea better. He had some second cousins she could look up, and gave her the addresses of Joe who fished and Ellen whose family ran a motel.

“Take these,” Caroline told her the day they'd left, and pressed a pair of yellowed notebooks into her hands. “Vacation reading, if you're interested. Don't let anyone see them.”

She was curious, but Darien's presence absorbed the greater part of her. They flew to Vancouver first because he wanted to visit his grandparents, who lived on one of those fancy streets of shingle-roofed pastel houses with flowers spilling across the yards. Anna found herself scanning them for clues—the grandfather's height, the grandmother's way of looking downward. How were they like this boy she was dating? When the grandmother said to Anna “I hope you like meat loaf” with a slight tint of smugness in her voice and the grandfather coughed into the big white napkin on his lap and rambled for over an hour about how he'd grown and pruned each of the bonsais spread around the house on tabletops, on windowsills, on bookshelves to a very attentive Darien, some part of her interpreted each gesture as a previously unrevealed hint at Darien's character. They'd had a cat but she had died, and there were pictures of her on the jelly cupboard beside the family photos. The grandfather dabbled in abstract painting in his retirement, and had a few canvases spread around the house. The images were coloured boldly and looked to Anna like garish mountains and tapeworms spiralling in on themselves. Their record collection was impressive—mostly folk, jazz, and crooning.

“I hope you don't mind sharing the guest room, is it alright?” asked the grandmother.

On separate sides of the bed, neither initiated contact. “I'm sorry my grandparents are kind of embarrassing,” said Darien, who had his arms crossed over his chest.

“They're not!” said Anna. “They seem pretty cool.”

“Oh, good.”

“I can see where you got your artistic side from.”

“Gram used to sing.” He sounded a bit embarrassed.

“No way! I wonder if she'd sing for us.”

“Please don't ask.”

Part of her wanted to reach across to him, and part of her was sobered by an old thought. “Sometimes I feel like we're all just made up of parts of our family. Just some repetition of a theme that's been around for a long time. So it's interesting to meet someone's family and see if you can spot the themes.”

“Well, yeah, that's how genes work. But they're not necessarily that interesting, and it's not like we don't choose what happens in our lives. And look at my crazy dad compared to these sane people. I can't think that anything fatalistic has decided what we are and where we'll live and what we'll eat for breakfast. Wouldn't it just be hell?”

“But can you know yourself without knowing your family?”

“Of course,” he said.

“Everyone has bad days, bad concerts,” said Laine.

“But this one was awful! I ruined everything!”

“Do better next time.” Laine was gentle and brusque, in that way she had of being both.

Anna was quiet, and the sun filtered in diffuse shafts across the many-speckled floor.

“Is there anything you want to talk about?” Laine's hands navigated an imaginary circle in the air.

“Not really.”

“You know I'd be glad to talk, if there ever is. Growing up is, well, it's not for the faint of heart, let's just put it that way.” Her chuckle was hoarse, half stuck in her throat. And Anna felt herself loosen at the seams, felt that terrible sense of grasping and falling, that uncertainty of being solid.

“Look, I was trying to play music and I wasn't even there. I can't even feel anything. It's like I'm frozen.”

“Yes, that's happened to me before.”

“I've wanted to cry all this week and I can't!”

“Well, look, here's what I think. Whatever's bugging you, wait it out. Don't dwell on it, don't forget it. At some point you'll be into your music again, but don't let yourself get too far while you're waiting. And don't give up. You can't afford to.”

Laine's gaze was sharper than the swathes of sunlight—high beams arresting her.

Timid curiosity flushed over Anna. She was a little afraid of her teacher, even now, but that was a wall she pushed through whenever it was visible. “What happened that made you not be able to feel things?”

Laine's face clouded suddenly. “Relationship crap. Isn't that the usual?”

Anna started skipping practice sessions. She found herself spending hours she'd meant to sit in front of the piano leafing through something she pulled from the bookshelf—*The Opera Encyclopedia*, or *Art of the Italian Renaissance*, or *Theories of Practical Translation*. She still played most days—ran through scales and arpeggios, polished a difficult section of one of her school pieces with all the interest of scrubbing

the floor, scouring an already uninteresting surface over and over in circles. She couldn't play anything just for herself. The thought was like eating dust. Caroline worried, but she was also bringing Tom over to the house. Anna started checking her weight on the scale. She'd lost five pounds without even trying, and she told that to Chen with a lilt of pride in her voice.

“Anna, you don't need to lose five pounds. You're too skinny already.”

The ferry was many-decked and broader than the ones Anna was used to that would carry her parents and herself to New Brunswick on rare weekend excursions growing up. She hadn't set foot on a ferry since the bridge had been built. She and Darien ran immediately to the top deck, where the sharpness of the air assaulted her. There was nothing else like gusts of breath infused with conifers and water salt and a strangely tinted cleanliness that smelled just this different from home, nothing in the world.

“I'm so glad we're getting away!” She threw an arm around him.

“I'm not sure how much of a getaway this is. We'll have to work regular hours.”

He returned the contact.

“Some travel companion you are,” she grinned.

It was colder out here than she'd expected, and the wind hurled her hair around her face. She pulled away, unrolled her jacket from her backpack, and shrugged into it.

“The view out here's amazing,” said Darien. The ferry was travelling across a bowl of water sunk among rounded mountains, sheer green. The water was dappled where the sun fell on it, and a rich opaque blue where it didn't. The waves were small and

regular, tiny folds in fabric. “It never gets old.”

“How often do you visit here anyway?”

“Well, at my grandparents', sometimes for Christmas. Tofino, I've only been maybe four times.”

The top deck was one to race and pace on. They made their way around it several times. A mother's two small children stood by one railing, their jackets billowing. “We're flying!” she heard one say, and the other answered, “Don't be stupid.” “But look at us, we are!” She wanted to take the older sister who was about to protest again and shake her. She turned on her MP3 player and lost herself in the musk of a cello.

Multicoloured packages of lights were the first signal of the island's towns. The green approached, and eventually a muffled and officious loudspeaker voice warned them off the ferry. Anna looked around the waiting crowd, wondering which faces would turn out to be Darien's uncles, and two men came to pummel him on the back. One of them looked a bit like him, an older, homelier variation—lanky, sharp-featured, with thinning carrot hair that tufted upwards. His partner was stocky with big arm muscles, widely spaced eyes and soft lips that gave him an incongruous look of innocence, and a round, shaved head. They wore cargo shorts and T-shirts—the thicker man's was striped.

Clasped to the thinner uncle's shoulder, Darien grinned shyly.

The stocky uncle turned towards her and stuck out his right hand. “I guess you're Anna? Good to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too—what should I call you?”

“Just Parker's fine.”



His handshake was gentle and certain.

“Oh, Anna!” The other uncle, Matt, had spotted her and she was swept up in a hug. It worked, she thought, because their proportions were similar. It was a nice change from being enveloped by the bulk of someone else's body. “Darien's told me so much about you!”

“Same with you,” said Anna, although she had in fact needed to prompt him to get much information. They'd married a year ago, bought a small trailer just outside of downtown and close to the water (which everything was on Vancouver Island, just like on P.E.I.), and turned it into a restaurant named The Breaking Wave Cafe, which they always just called “the cafe”. Anna couldn't think of any married gay couples she knew. P.E.I. was pretty closeted. She'd met Laine's girlfriend at a few concerts, a quiet wispy thing, but they were both women and they weren't married. How would these two live? she wondered, which really meant, how cuddly would they be?

“You play three instruments, is that right?”

“Yeah, but the clarinet's more for school, and I don't have my own saxophone.” She should have just left it at “Yeah”—why would he care?

“It'll be nice to have some musical people around,” said Matt.

“Oh, come on, you play the piano,” Parker interjected.

“Yeah, badly!” They both burst into belly laughter.

The car they left in was a boxy brown Volvo whose radio crackled as they drove over hill after hill. Matt in the front passenger seat flicked through the stations trying to find one that came through clearly, stopping now and then at something that caught his

interest and laughing out, “Hey, this is good!”

“I don't think so,” said Parker when a snatch of an aria came on. Anna didn't get to hear enough to recognize it, and she might not have recognized it anyway.

The next “this is good” was a call-in show with some guy who called himself The Love Guru. The caller had a heavy Indian accent and said he was calling in “to surprise my wife.”

“How did you meet?” asked the self-proclaimed Love Guru. “Did you just fall in love? Or did someone introduce you to each other and then you just kind of fell in love?”

“You hungry, Darien?” asked Parker. “And Anna?”

“Actually, I am,” said Darien. Anna was glad he'd said it first.

“There's a McDonald's coming up if you want to stop for lunch.”

Seated with their burgers, the uncles discussed the attitude of the teenager who'd served them (“They need to find some friendlier cashiers. I hope it's not a chronic scowl”), the preparation of the food (“Those fries sure took awhile,” “At least they put the right labels on all the burgers,” “Good thing we don't have to label ours,”) and the restaurant's general atmosphere (“Some dirty tables over there,” “First lesson for you two—never leave a dirty table dirty”, “We're getting new curtains at *our* cafe”).

“You see, Anna,” said Matt, “all restaurant people are like this. Soon enough you'll find yourself taking notes on everyone else's customer service.”

“I've worked at restaurants and never cared that much what people at other restaurants did.”

“Ah, but that's because you have no investment in them. At our cafe, everything

gets personal pretty quickly.”

The uncles, she could tell, were invested in everything, and their interference was something of a thrill.

Matt's next “this is good” was some insipid dance music that must have been made a few generations ago. Anna thought about turning to her headphones, and was surprised to realize she didn't want to. She could listen to her own music anytime. She was enjoying this bad music. Its poppy crackling was a novelty. The soundtrack to a new kind of freedom!

The uncles lived in a small wooden house within walking distance of their cafe, and they took Anna and Darien to see the cafe first. “Here she is,” said Parker with obvious pride. It was smaller than any restaurant she'd worked at before, a quaint wood-shingled place with a blackboard full of menu options, heavy wooden tables and benches meant to look more rustic than they were, and a long skinny kitchen. Blotchy abstract paintings decked the walls. A sign outside read “The Breaking Wave Cafe”, and sported a painted wooden cutout of a wave in primary blue. Another wave decorated the chalkboard where the menu and daily specials were written.

“Isn't it beautiful?” Matt grinned.

“Yeah, nice place,” said Darien.

“And we're going to have a couple more workers here, Bob's girl Jackie from out of town and Kelly from down the road. They're just a few years older than you two.”

“Isn't Kelly the girl we met last time we were up here?” asked Darien.

“Oh yeah, you did run into each other, didn't you?”

“She was the one who gave the guided tour—'And on the left, gentlemen, are a bunch of magnificent garbage cans!’” He smiled, bemused.

Anna went to look around the kitchen. There were stacks of bowls, a shelf full of batter-spattered cookbooks, and two chunky fridges. Everything smelled like dishwater and faint whiffs of edible things—cucumber, ketchup, curry. Something felt both bland and unsanitary about it. It didn't have the greasy over-order of some of the places she'd worked, but it wasn't Caroline's kitchen either—it didn't have a warm vibe. *Is this just because I'm away from home?* She wondered. *I'll probably like it eventually. Or at least put up with it. Gotta have a job.* Most of her friends were working regular sorts of jobs too, but Irena had gone to a composing camp in New York. She wondered how Liss spent her summers these days—probably in an even snazzier fashion. She didn't want to think about that.

The restaurant spilled out onto a porch a short walk from the beach. The sand was pale grey like ground-up stone, and the uncles threw handfuls at each other. Anna took off her shoes and stepped into the foam-licked water.

“The waves are different here. Less fierce.”

“That's just the day,” said Darien.

“I love how we're right next to it.”

“Yeah.”

“It's a prime spot for attracting customers,” said Matt. “The beachfront.”

“We should probably take your stuff to the house now,” said Parker.

Anna lapped up the landscape as they drove. Silver sea, rain-laden sky, long fields of yellow grass and wildflowers and finally their small house tucked among them. They carried their suitcases past a fireplace and canvases of incoherent swirls into the spare bedroom. “I take it it's alright if you share a room,” said Parker.

Darien looked to Anna. “Of course,” she said.

After a supper of organic black bean burritos and berry coleslaw—restaurant food, Matt assured them—Darien chatted with the uncles while Anna wanted nothing more to collect herself, to savour some quiet in this world of new. She took the notebook her mother had given her and settled in the overgrown meadow that passed for yard. It looked like a diary, in a neater version of her mom's slight curly handwriting. One entry per day, she decided, to make them last for more of the visit. She didn't want to miss Caroline, but she did, a little. With grass prickling her knees, she began to read.

*I met some men at Jana's place today. They were having a barbecue, and one of them wouldn't touch the meat but had made a pizza and grilled it. His name was Henry but he asked me to call him Hank. The other men were Ahmed, Chris, and I forget the third one's name. Oh well. Hank had muscles like a farm worker and longer hair than the others, which was thick, honey brown, and curled past his shoulders. As soon as we met he began to lecture me on ethical farming practices. “I'll only eat meat if it's given space to roam and hasn't been fed chemicals,” he said. “I have nothing against eating animals. We're omnivores, after all. But animals are meant to roam around, right, not to be cooped*

*up in cages.” I said that was a great idea and I wished I had thought of it, and of course I don’t eat much meat in the first place. “Same goes for plants,” he said, “no pesticides. There’s nothing wrong with a few spots on our food, but there is something wrong with poison in it and the atmosphere. I’d love to have a little farm someday with none of that stuff.” He told me about a book he owned called Diet for a Small Planet and said that I had to borrow it. He has a bit of an accent, of the friendly Eastern sort, and inclines his head when he talks; a boyish gesture. Jana tried to flirt with him but I was pleased to note he didn’t pay her much attention.*

*The pizza, by the way, was delicious.*

Kelly, a petite blonde firecracker, greeted them all with hugs. “Matt, Parker, how are you! Darien, good to see you again! Anna, it’s so great to meet you!” Anna felt thick breasts press against her stomach.

Jackie’s arrival a few minutes later was signalled by a trudging sound, then an unusually loud thump of the door. Kelly threw her arms around the sturdier girl’s neck with the same vigour, and there was no confusion over her name because Kelly yelled it so loudly.

“Workin’ in the restaurant all day,” said Jackie. “I can’t wait.” She had a voice naturally devoid of any intonations of surprise; Anna thought she was being sarcastic, but it wasn’t clear. Her hair was long, tousled, and foggy brown. She had on cargo pants. Not bad-looking, not badly built, but she carried a sense of heaviness that had nothing to do with her size.

“Movies tonight, anyway,” said Kelly.

“You bet.”

“You guys should come too!” Kelly made a sweeping gesture taking in Anna and Darien. Jackie didn't smile, but had she smiled once yet?

“OK, first thing.” Matt clapped his hands. “Breakfast on the deck. We'll show you what we can do, then we'll show you how it's done.”

“Whatcha make?” asked Kelly. “Your waffles with blackberry awesomesauce?”

“It's not called awesomesauce,” said Parker.

But the waffles, organic pumpkin muffins, cream-topped berry salad and freshly squeezed lemonade were as awesome as Kelly had predicted. “I can't believe how much food they make,” Anna whispered to Darien, feeling foolish enough that she hoped not to be overheard. “Are they always like this? Do they *live* at their restaurant?”

“Well, they kind of always *are* like this. It's not always cooking, but they always find an obsession and do pretty much nothing else. It's scary.”

“Hey, what are you two lovebirds whispering about?” Kelly leaned in their direction, grinning.

“Don't interrupt,” said Jackie, her sarcasm a touch more obvious this time. “It's bad manners.”

They were given orientation. Parker and Jackie would do most of the cooking, Matt the managing, and Kelly would lead the wait staff. “As for you two,” said Matt, “you're floaters. You'll do mostly waiting when the customers are in, and various other chores to keep the place running.”

There weren't many customers there the first day, and Anna knew how to wait tables. She'd done it before. Smile, notepad, plate-balancing, routine. She mostly did the needed chores in her own corner, but could hear Matt and Parker, Jackie and Kelly and occasionally Darien as they bantered. *Mine*, she thought fiercely when she heard Darien chatting with the other girls, but she tried to check her impulse—it was ridiculous to be jealous because her boyfriend was talking to their coworkers.

Lunch and supper had the lush flavours Anna would come to expect, the restaurant felt more spacious than the first day, the music they put on to clean up was jazzy and peppy and genuinely fun, and Anna followed Kelly and Jackie and Darien over to Jackie's place in a sunny daze, making sure to seize her boyfriend's hand. “Hear that brrr-r-r sound?” Jackie pointed to the woods, which were taller, redder, fresher than the ones on P.E.I.. “It's an orange-crowned warbler. You can see it on the tree over there, that greenish speck. We've had one that ate from the hummingbird feeder at our place. Oh, look, it's cocking its head at us!” Anna couldn't see a thing.

In the pillow-filled living room of Kelly's airy open-concept home, the girls grabbed bags of chips and put on a road trip movie Anna had heard of but not seen, then a romantic chick flick. The plots were cliché, and the girls made fun of them at moments. “Sure we're all going to end up happily married in the end, once we've stolen back our boyfriends from the supermodels,” Jackie quipped. “Suuure.”

At this time at home, Anna would have been practising. Darien must have been thinking along the same lines, because during their post-movie chatting he glanced from the piano in the living room to Anna and back and said, “You guys should hear Anna



play. She's amazing.” He gazed at her with the awed look that he only wore when contemplating her music.

“Oh, what do you play?” Kelly asked.

“Just classical pieces and stuff.” The idea of playing here felt heavy. She hadn't practised for a couple days during the trip, and she liked the lightness that brought, the lack of worry.

“Cool.” Kelly sounded appropriately less interested, and the conversation moved to other things.

A green path home. A fresh rain that smelled like rebellion. That night she pounced on Darien, and he was more than happy to reciprocate.

*We were riding the ferris wheel and right on top he pulled something out of his jacket pocket and handed me-----a box! ~~And it was really~~ Now of course I knew what that size and shape a box was for but I feigned surprise. I really wasn't expecting it now. I took off the silver ribbon slowly, carefully, and the ferris wheel was going way too fast for me to enjoy it how I wanted to and I didn't see the ring while we were right on top like Hank probably wanted, ~~more like almost at the bottom~~ but it was beautiful. It had a small faceted diamond. The small ones are the best kind because if they're faceted right they're all fire. I could have cried.*

*The carnie was an old guy with tattoos, puffing on his cigarette, such horrible things for your health!, and his squinty little eyes didn't notice us as we kept on going for another free round. Above the people-dotted fairgrounds, above some of the pigeons even,*

*the motion a slight transcendental wind. I'd like to believe it was our love that made us invisible to the ordinary world.*

Between erratic work hours—the restaurant and cleanup often went late, and Matt saw it as a matter of course that Darien and Anna would show up at odd hours when called on to take care of random chores—and outings with Kelly, Jackie and their friends, it was a few days before Caroline got hold of Anna on the phone. She asked about Anna's work hours, Anna's diet, Anna's health, Anna's practice habits (she lied), and went on at length about all the music programs and scholarships she should be looking into and activities she should be doing to improve her chance of admission, while Anna tried to imagine the woman lecturing her as a lovesick college student atop a ferris wheel.

She felt guilty enough to play for both the uncles and the girls that night. Approaching the piano, she felt the dread she'd been running from settle over her like a heavy coat, even though she'd done this all her life. She plucked the keys emptily, but the others couldn't tell the difference.

“Beautiful,” said Parker.

“That was awesome,” said Kelly, and she turned to Jackie. “Did you see how fast her fingers were going?”

And Darien grinned at Kelly and back at Anna, warmly and distantly in that Darien way.

They had one day off a week, sometimes two, on top of the evenings. One Friday night when it wasn't raining, the four of them left the uncles and headed for the beach.

Tucked out of sight in a cave among the cliffs, Jackie rummaged in her backpack and pulled out a bottle of Malibu.

“We're underage,” said Darien, waving it away from himself and Anna. “We shouldn't have any.”

“Stiff ass,” Kelly slapped him playfully.

“Hey!” his protest took the same light tone.

“I don't care about you,” Jackie shot Darien a look, “but *we're* playing truth or dare. And if you won't take the dare, you have to take a drink.”

Cliff shadows cut various angles across the group's faces. A pair of sea gulls squalled by, one in pursuit of the other.

“You first,” Kelly pointed to Darien. “Truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

“OK—have you ever questioned your sexuality?”

Darien paused a moment. “Yeah.”

“And?”

“Well, I wondered when Uncle Matt came out of the closet. I scared myself trying to look for any crushes I might secretly have on boys and wondering if that's why I thought sex was so awful when I was 12 or something, but I guess I was just too young to be interested in it. I can't think of any times I've really been interested in a guy, even though I've looked for them a lot. I guess guys just aren't hot enough.” He tried for a weak laugh.

“I beg to differ,” said Kelly. She took a swig of the Malibu. “What about the rest

of you guys? Anyone questioned?"

"Yeah. Straight," said Jackie.

"Not me," said Kelly. "I like girls sometimes. Actually—swear not to tell anyone, OK? But I made out with one of my female cousins before."

Anna caught Darien staring at her goggle-eyed.

"I've made out with a girl," she said. "I used to have a sort of thing with one. We didn't go that far—we were young and all."

"You never told me that!" said Darien.

Jackie and Kelly looked at her with a new respect. "How was it?" Kelly asked.

She shrugged. She felt that familiar sense of guilt engulf her. Inhaled.

"Do you like girls?" asked Darien.

"I guess I do, sometimes. Yeah."

The sea gulls kept flapping past. The waves continued their placid wash inward. Kelly grinned, and Jackie and Darien looked on with friendly neutrality. It was the first time she'd said it out loud.

"But don't expect a threesome anytime soon, *Darien*." She kept her voice teasing and winked clumsily as her hand latched onto his wrist; winking wasn't something she did very often.

"OK, your turn for a truth or dare," said Jackie. "Darien, give her the question."

"Truth."

"What's the most scandalous thing you ever did?"

Anna wasn't going to mention the broken violin or making out shirtless to her

mother's porn, and she couldn't think of anything else terribly scandalous. "You," she pointed to Darien.

"Cop-out!" said Jackie.

"OK. Um, I shoplifted some bracelets from the dollar store once." She also wasn't going to mention that Sarah had egged her on, and she'd felt bad about it for a week.

"Somebody needs to loosen up," Kelly nudged her. "OK, my turn! Can I get a double dare?"

"Double dare," said Jackie, "um. Go skinny dipping."

"Ooh, good one!"

The girls peeled off their clothes and arced towards the water, their bodies smooth as dolphins, their hair quickly darkening as they submerged and reappeared. Anna remembered her long-ago conversation with Liss about stripping in the schoolyard and both their reluctance. Another Anna, a freer Anna, would have joined them if she'd been dared to and laughed as she splashed back and forth, maybe kissed Kelly unsuspectingly, but Anna wasn't sure if she could. There were some boats not so far in the distance, but the girls didn't seem to care. If anything, the element of exhibitionism egged them on. Back in the cave they made a display of their bodies, shaking shining droplets from their skin with each infinitesimal pose.

Awhile into the game, Kelly invited Anna and Darien to a friend's party that night.

"I'll go tell my uncles," said Darien.

"Your uncles won't care." That seemed true enough.

Anna followed Darien to the party and found herself half wishing she'd stayed

home. The room was dim and crowded with shadow puppets, raucous human shapes she could only partly see. Techno dance music blasted from a speaker somewhere, and a string of lights shaped like chili peppers surrounded the room. The carpet smelled of spilled beer. She was introduced to people whose names were promptly sieved through her brain, crammed between crowds who squashed past on either side, and soon everyone she'd come with was out of eyesight. A guy named Michael or Mitchell or something like that, tall with tattoos on his arms, was asking where she was from and how she liked Tofino and pressing a glass of sangria into her hand. She wanted to say she was too young to drink, but thought of Jackie and Kelly naked in the water. Why not? Why the hell not?

Some of the red drink spilled on her shirt. She found herself too conscious of the stain, of her t-shirt's black plainness amid a sea of sequins, of her tiny tripping steps next to Michael or Mitchell's big confident ones. Voices jostled, and it was harder to notice people. Michael or Mitchell was encouraging her to drink faster, grabbing another drink when she finished the first, and gulp after gulp poured down her throat. She felt dazed, dizzy, sleepy, but her eyes were too numb to close. They moved towards the dance floor where singles and couples swayed, their bodies dripping before her eyes like paint. A hand grabbed her forearm, tightened wrench-like. She found herself being spun. Michael or Mitchell's breath came at her, rank with beer. She reeled away.

“You OK?” his face was further off again, at a safe distance.

“I have a boyfriend.”

“I'm sorry. I had no idea. Wait, how old are you anyway?”

“Sixteen.”

“What are you doing at a party like this?”

The speakers crackled some electronic noise. The chili pepper lights were blurry.

“I don't know!”

She bolted. There were more people dancing, and in the next room, couples sprawled on couches. The time went somewhere she didn't know, and she opened her eyes on the floor.

“Hey kid, you wanna join the game?” It was Jackie. “We're playing Sociables.”

She didn't really want to. Thoughts of going home to her house in the P.E.I. woods, of crashing in her familiar bed, beckoned her. Then she realized that she wasn't even on P.E.I. anymore.

She sat up with a drink between two guys who looked much older than her. Jackie was the only one she recognized in the circle around the spread-out cards. There were too many people, and the rules were confusing. Girls take a drink. Pour some alcohol into the King's Cup in the middle of the circle. Make up a rule—no names, no pointing, take a little man off the rim of your cup every time you take a drink, give each drink you get to the player beside you. Everyone but her seemed to be laughing.

At last they were done. The smell of beer was getting to her. She needed some fresh air. To the door, into the sweet-smelling outside, past more groups and couples huddled around the porch, smoking cigarettes, smoking weed, entwined. There was Kelly, and in her arms—

No. Yes. No. No!

She and Darien's arms moving like snakes. Their faces pressed together.

*I'm sitting on the ferry, about to make the crossing to the Island. A lot has built up to this. It's the first time I have been on such a boat, and I have never been on the water for as long as I will have been once we're over. There are two decks, a small restaurant with sandwiches and other take-out items except that of course there is nowhere to take them out to, and a video arcade where you can play some game with grainy blue polar bears. I don't like the way this thing tips around. Most of our belongings have been sent already and are waiting in the house.*

*I had a dream in which the baby was a raw skinless blob and another in which it was a genius and yet another in which it was a frog. I know I shouldn't be worried, realistically, except that my stomach has inflated into a sloshing cast-iron blimp with something kicking in it, and nausea has taken over my morning routine. My body has morphed itself into the container for another being. How could I not be worried?*

*If the child is a boy, Hank wants to name him Robert after his father. I suppose that would be a fine name, like Robbie Burns. If it's a girl, I wanted Carmen but he hates it, so we settled on Anna. Whoever it is, it's thumping on my belly as the boat is thumping on the waves. I hope to avoid getting sick. Hank arranged to have his sister's piano transported to the house. I'm grateful to her. When we get there I will play it every day, and make Hank sing along with me. He has a better voice than he realizes, a lovely rich tenor. Now if only he could paint! Then he would be truly perfect.*



Accusations of cheating. Apologies. In the cafe, Kelly laughing and Darien brightening at her approach. Anna's suspicions had been right all along. How could she have done nothing? How could she have done anything?

“What do you like about her?” she dared to ask. And Darien, as always, was honest.

“She's so laid back. I can relax around her.”

“She makes you relax, you mean.”

“That's not a bad thing.”

She forgot entirely about practising. The piano was a despicable black box blaming her whenever she looked, so she didn't. The bed was difficult to sleep in.

Technically they were still together, so it hurt when Kelly bounced in with some anecdote about her friend escaping the police and swung an arm around Darien's shoulder.

“Leave him alone,” shot Anna.

“Oh, he doesn't mind. Do you?”

Darien said nothing.

*This is it! Our house is cramped with every kind of box imaginable. We spent hours figuring out how to set up the bookshelves. As for the island itself, the spaces are wide and you can breathe. Hank showed me all the varieties of trees in the woods behind our yard. There are poplars, red maples, sugar maples, spruce, white pines, white birches, lindens, and I don't remember what else, but the variety is astonishing as is their*

*smell. The yard is overgrown with clover, thistle, and dandelions that have gone to seed. Hank pointed out some chamomile plants growing in the driveway.*

*I met Hank's sister Bet. She is a darling little creature with the same hair as his and bones like a swallow's. Her husband Theo is large and friendly, if a little childish, and they have a kid of their own. He makes so much noise! I wonder how I'll manage this. Hank's brother Jeffrey also dropped by with some firewood.*

*The piano is beautiful, with foliage carved into the wood, albeit a little out of tune. Well, I will find a tuner.*

*My mother called today. "What are you doing, Carrie? Come back home!" I don't let anyone call me Carrie anymore. If they can't manage Caroline, then Carol will do.*

She worked sullenly, talking to no one. She was an excellent waitress, industrious and precise. And within a month she typed up a resume and spent her days off walking it around to other cafes. She found a hostel and looked into the rate to stay there—reasonable. She had enough saved up. She got a call back from a little yuppie place by the water called Cafe Omega. She wore her best to the interview—a sleek black dress and a red silk scarf she had nabbed from Caroline's room. There was a piano in this cafe, and they were interested in her as a musical entertainer as well as a waitress.

“How long can you stay on for?” asked Max Adler at the end of the interview.

She thought of school, of Laine, of her failed concert and how little she really wanted to go back to trying, of home and expectations and the revulsion of spending another year at school with the Boy Who'd Cheated! On! Her! Here it was an especially

nice day in an especially nice town, with enormous trees and a walkable centre and actual things to do. Ay-a's voice sang *Freedom! Possibility! You can be anyone you want here.*

She found herself answering, “For however long.”

## Chapter 16: Convergence

Anna wasn't around to see Liss cry, although she must have done so. Maybe she didn't realize the damage until she got home and, much later, opened the case to practice and found splinters. Maybe she knew right away, from the change in heft. Maybe her parents were there when she opened the case and shrieked, or stood quiet and weighted as marble. Maybe they weren't.

Anna made up her mind to step lightly around Liss the next day, to mention nothing, to put on her best unaffected face. But Liss caught her shoulder in the locker room, and Anna spun around to face a set of narrowed eyes.

“What were you thinking, breaking my violin like that?”

“I—”

“If you don't love me, you should've just told me so!”

Anna's mouth moved in dumb flapping gestures.

“It cost so much money. You have no idea how much it'll take to replace. And the memories, and the sound quality, and everything, I worked with it for years, it was mine, you know what, I think you're crazy.”

“Look, I don't know what happened to me, I'm—”

“Sorry? No, you're not. You hate me.”

“I don't!”

Did she?

“You know what, Anna, you fucking genius who thinks she can get away with

everything? I don't want anything to do with you anymore. Fuck you.”

Her gesture of dismissal was like her sister Katie's, tentative. It was meant as a statement, the first syllable hurled, the second trembling into a question mark. The trembling held all the venom she could throw, and it stung that much harder because the weakness too went into Anna's blood. She deserved it. She deserved much worse, she told herself as she trudged to class with her head down, passing Ed and Louise with their fingers entwined. Just because Liss had—

Chen was the only one Anna told. Anna had always been closer to Chen than Liss had. In confession, she guilted herself over and over again, laying it on so thickly that all Chen could do was tell her to ease off, that Liss would be fine, that no, she wasn't a monster, that everyone goes crazy when they're upset sometimes.

Liss only really talked to Anna once after that, although Anna often tried to initiate conversation and caught the smaller girl looking towards her a number of times. Liss was as loyal an enemy as she had been a friend. They spoke when Liss told her she was moving away.

“I'm going to find them, too.” Anna knew she meant her birth parents, the ones she thought of as her real family.

The dreams took shapes that Anna didn't want to remember.

*My mother took me to my first opera when I was only five. Louise was nine, and I got jealous whenever she got taken to a performance and I had to stay home with the babysitter. Mom remembers it being Tosca. I do remember her explaining that day that*

*the lead singer was acting the part of a made-up singer. The stage was impossibly glamorous—churchyards twined with ivy, castles with golden pillars, men in capes and the woman with a long red dress and jewels nested in her hair! Louise remembers me saying they must have cost billions of dollars. And the music! I'd heard these sorts of sounds only on the record player. Mom and Dad sometimes hummed around the house, Louise sang little ditties, but until that day I didn't know real people could sing like that.*

*In the car ride back I sang all the arias I could remember, inventing nonsense words. I knew nothing about operatic ranges yet, and my baby soubrette voice tried its best at the baritone parts. As I'm told, Louise wanted me to shut up but Mom told her to let me keep on going. I must have heard "Shut up" a lot in the following months.*

*I would never have been a Maria Callas anyway. My voice was too weak, and even at McGill I had trouble with the deeper chest tones. Professor Roslin would say, "Pretend your gut is a big balloon. Suck in breaths until it expands." No doubt it has never occurred to Professor Roslin that it's impolite to compare young women to balloons.*

*There is no opera company on P.E.I. The best I can do is listen to tapes on repeat, plunk at the piano with my swollen belly, and sing to the ceiling. I do it all the time.*

Seventeen. Eighteen. Nineteen. Twenty. The years trudged by in 4/4 time, and stasis was easy. It started with mid-July to August at Cafe Omega, a move into the hostel with Jackie's help, a refusal to answer any of Darien's messages. She called Caroline from her new number, and Caroline worried but there was nothing she could do, said Anna,

now was there?

The desire to go back to school never did return. She drifted from Cafe Omega to Cafe Sunlight, playing piano and sometimes clarinet to audiences as discriminating as the one at Kelly's, waiting tables when she wasn't entertaining. The routine wasn't so different from music school. There was one main difference—no one expected her to be extraordinary. No concert audiences, no critics, no Laine. No grand pianos or church organs, only small uprights that needed tuning.

There were scholarships, Caroline reminded her. Laine missed her. She was letting her potential stagnate. Did she not at least want to finish high school, for god's sake? Did she have any dreams? Any regrets? Ever? She could do a GED, and it wasn't too late to take up music seriously again.

When Anna let her guard down, hearing those things cut her, but she didn't let on that she cared. No one would know that Ay-a showed up in dreams sometimes, a ludicrous figure in too many coats, scolding in a voice that was an ice-laced variant of Laine's, or Another Anna sat in front of a baby grand with inspiration pouring tide-like from her fingers, her rapt face too perfectly stonelike and distant for Anna to connect. Her ideal was present somewhere in the realm of mind, but she couldn't live under its weight.

She told none of this to Gary, a young chef at Cafe Sunlight who asked her out dancing a few weeks in and spent the night correcting her steps. Gary was six years older and an inch shorter than Anna, woodchuck-shaped with a beautiful thatch of black hair, charming, decisive, and unimpressed. He seemed to know everyone in town, and he wasn't even from there. He liked Anna's playing but they'd gotten that out of the way

before the dating even started, and he clearly preferred her in bed to onstage. Anna wasn't sure how she felt about that. His room was full of unfolded laundry, and he complimented Anna on the shape of her lips, the way the waves of her hair fell over her collarbone, the slow way she laughed. He waterskiied, grew bamboo and avocados and sweet potatoes and a few spindly sprigs of marijuana, and read people's tarot cards and tea leaves although he wasn't sure if he believed in them. He was everything Darien wasn't.

After a year of dating, they moved to Vancouver where they worked, then got fired from The Red Geranium Cafe two weeks in. "The manager's a nutcase," shrugged Gary, and he proceeded to get them jobs at a daycare some friends had started. Anna found herself diapering and undiapering squalling infants, spontaneously singing as she shuttled kids around the room in an attempt to keep attention, eating child-sized portions of the same mushy lunch she spooned into some little one's mouth, and retelling Hank's troll stories to kids who were supposed to be napping on their mats. Gary was the charismatic one the kids all loved, but she was the first to cuddle whenever someone cried. During nap time little Kendra sobbed regularly for her parents, and Anna took her on her lap and stroked her forehead and sang all the lullabies she knew, until one day Kendra crawled onto Anna's lap of her own accord. Caught in a tenderness she wasn't used to knowing, Anna found herself wondering how she'd do as a mom, what it would be like to pack Kendra's lunch and send her off to school each day, to tuck her in and drive her to soccer practice. To live with Gary in a little house on the outskirts of town, to adopt a cat and a younger sibling for Kendra, to keep the house gleaming and well-stocked, the yard landscaped with tangles of hollyhock and nasturtium and a little herb



garden and a fish pond, and cook meals that everyone would eat. Another Anna would never have entertained such thoughts, her fingers lighting into a flawless Debussy. This Anna who might have been was lithe and elegant and lived in a studio loft with leather couches. Maybe she even had a chandelier, although probably a cheap one. Anna faced this woman and wondered.

Gary left her after a year and a half to go back to university in Guelph. She found a job at The Blue Spot Cafe and moved in with roommates who filled the rooms with smoke fumes and kept neglecting to put the garbage out, then another set who held anarchist meetings in the living room, before deciding that she'd rather live alone.

By twenty, Caroline and Tom had gotten married, Hank and Gwen had gotten married, and Anna was working at The Green Staircase, a small Vancouver restaurant that served organic foods and held live concerts three nights a week. She became a manager and concert coordinator. Her own artistry went unwitnessed, but her taste was quickly respected. She took to listening to a local indie radio station, and found some acts that the cafe-goers and staff all loved. She emceed the shows and watched from a seat near the stage as the band members' bearing expanded in the spotlight and the audience applauded.

“Does it ever bother you,” Caroline asked, “to invite all these professional musicians in and hear what they're doing and not be involved in any of it?”

The “No” caught in her throat, too much of a lie to surface.

After that conversation, she took to tuning and playing the piano at the community centre on weekends. It wasn't the same thing, but it was an outlet and a

pressure-free performance venue. Sometimes the kids playing pool or arcade games would meander over and sit to listen. Word got around of her Sunday afternoon concerts, and a small crowd of youngsters would gather from time to time.

It was on one such occasion that a small boy's mom came along and laid a hand on Anna's shoulder after the show. "You could be a concert pianist, you know."

Anna tried to hide the shot of emotions through her. "I've thought of that."

Thought of that, before Liss had left and Darien had left and Gary had left. It had been too long since she'd been full, so she'd left too. There was no room for her in the pictures her imagination used to conjure.

*Anna, you quitter, you loser.*

Outside of work she took to dressing with studied elegance, maybe because she knew she'd never be one of the pointy-hooded, sweatpant-clad, dreadlocked strangers who navigated the few parties she attended with such vexing relaxation, and maybe because Caroline wasn't there, Hank and Gwen weren't there, Irena and Sarah weren't there, so there was no one to set any standard she cared about, to live up to or to rebelliously let down.

This day she returned from the Salvation Army with a silver jacket that cinched around her waist and a pink-tinted cameo brooch that she stuck through the collar. She turned on the radio and rummaged through her closet to see what would match the jacket.

The music caught her while she was half-in and half-out of a pink blouse and dark grey pencil skirt. The guitar chords were harsh and raw, the percussion thunderous, the backup vocalist's voice a husky rasp, yet the lead vocalist's notes were glass. It wasn't

often that Anna heard such contrast. She felt stones spill down her back and ice water pour right through her.

*I lay under the morning and I said it was a gift*

*The sun was all full-frontal and the grain fields all were lit*

*The mysteries were there and almost earthbound, almost snow*

*Say, what are those mysteries? I'd really like to know.*

*Pretend it's something regular like Coca-Cola and Alka-seltzer*

*Love's a shorter word than fucking but it takes a longer while*

*Poke on some lip gloss. Try to feign a smile.*

*Can't you see I'm not a real-world runner?*

*(Maybe I am)*

*Gonna play that hurt like thunder*

*(Maybe I shouldn't give a damn)*

*In a dream I took the ferry to an island by the coast*

*It was press'n'sealed for tourists, a retirement home for ghosts*

*And I found another lover but I had to catch the plane*

*And as I ran I saw you sitting on a stone, your face like grain.*

There was something uncanny about that particular mix of harsh and fragile, especially

the lead vocalist's breaking-crystal sound, but Anna couldn't place her *deja vu*.

There was a commercial, then the announce spoke: "That was 'Grain Field' by Felicity and Grace. Next up, we have the lovely Isabelle Peters with 'Forgot is Not a Word'."

Felicity and Grace. Anna wrote it down to look up later. They'd be great to bring to the restaurant.

*Today the sun was low over the garden, the beans ready with another crop to pick, the zucchinis and tomatoes nearly ripe, and I discovered I could hit low B. Yes, my voice fell with ease, the chest tones resonant, almost as if I were a mezzo-soprano. No more struggle. No more cringing at my choked attempts to reach. I tried the low end of the scale a second time, then a third, to check if it was a fluke or if I'd heard wrong. But my sense of pitch is not known to fail, and today was no exception. I have that note now. It's real.*

*As soon as Hank got home from work, I called him over to listen. He nodded.*

*"Very nice."*

*"But don't you get it?"*

*"Yeah. Your singing's great."*

*An unreasonable anger swept through me. I didn't want to have to explain. I wanted him to get it. I'd complained about my vocal range before, so he should guess what I was on about, right? But of course I couldn't assume that of someone. How was he to know one note had changed if I didn't tell him? Yet I felt so tightly wound in response*

*to his apathy that I could have hit him.*

*“I can hit low B now!”*

*One note. It sounded pathetic, his enthusiasm insincere. “Yeah, I heard you singing. You're great.”*

*Felicity and Grace announced the website banner, and beneath it a CD cover of a globe engulfed by an ouroboros, a glossy serpent biting its own tail. In the pallor of the globe were two women's faces in profile, facing each other. It was difficult to make out much apart from their beauty.*

*About Felicity “Liss” MacKinnon*

*About Grace Bear*

*Discography*

*Tour Dates*

*Photos*

*Blog*

*Contact*

*Dear Liss,*

*This is Anna from school. Remember me? I heard your song 'Grain Field' on the radio and loved it without realizing it was you. Congrats on your awesome band and your CD!*

*When I say I'm stunned by your music, I mean it entirely. I'm working as concert*

*coordinator at a restaurant in Vancouver called The Green Staircase that has live shows three nights a week. I'm wondering if you and Grace would have any interest in coming up and doing a show. We have a stipend we could offer. It would be amazing to see you again after all these years. Let me know if you're interested or want to talk it over further, and even if you don't, it would be great to hear from you and hear what you're up to.*

She paused. Love? Xoxo? Sincerely?

*All the best,*

*Anna Stern*

*ANNA!!!! God, I've wondered so many times what happened to you, gone looking for you online, everything, but you just disappeared. It sounds like you've got a cool job. How ever did you end up in Vancouver? It's a brilliant city, but everything you do is brilliant. As for me, I ended up in Ottawa and Grace and I started making music together and then seeing each other. I kinda went rogue after I left school. Finished high school at a lame public school, but did my music on the side. There's so much to tell you, but we should save that for in person! We'd love to come up—in a month? Would that work?*

*xoxo*

*Liss*

Grace was statuesque with a sweep of black hair, a cape-like coat and a painted-

doll face, and Anna saw her before she saw Liss. Click, click went her heels on the airport floor. Then Liss caught up with the luggage, a suitcase and a hockey bag, and twined her arm through Grace's. She wasn't quite the elfin creature Anna remembered. Her face had filled out a little, grown womanly, and her dark berry lipstick matched her girlfriend's. She'd toned her style down but maintained some rough edges—she walked in clunky platforms, and her denim jacket was artfully frayed with buttons and zippers in odd places. Her stride was brisk and purposeful as always. Her hair was the same as the fox-faced first grader's, sobbing on the swing.

Anna had little time as an observer to this picture. Liss had already broken away, dropped suitcases, run forth with hair flaming, and arms were wrapped around her and breath was warm on her neck. She smelled a faint tang of citrus perfume. “Anna!”

“Liss!”

“My god, I've missed you so much. You have no idea.”

An unexpected clutch in her throat prevented her from answering.

“Tell me everything about your restaurant.”

“Well, there isn't much to tell, really. It's a little organic place downtown, decent food, we grow our own herbs, and we have concerts three times a week. I think I already told you that. We've had some good groups come up, like Sahara Soundscape, CrossWiseEyes, Lily Alvarez—”

“I love Lily Alvarez!” said Liss. Grace stepped next to her and stared pointedly. It took Liss a minute to react.

“Anna, this is Grace. Grace, Anna.” She turned to Anna. “I've told her all about

you.”

Anna wasn't sure she liked that. Coolly, they shook hands.

“Nice to meet you,” said Anna.

“Likewise.”

What type of person said 'Likewise'?

“So tell me about your music.” Anna tried to talk to them both together.

“It's an amalgamation,” said Grace. “Folksy lyrics, sound influenced by punk and metal as well as some classical, vocal mix inspired by some strands of Gothic opera—”

“Basically anything we find interesting,” said Liss.

“Liss is the lyricist,” Grace butted in, her voice like the cinnamon spread Anna sometimes slathered on toast. “I do guitar and bass as well as playing with various synthesized effects.”

“Great,” said Anna. “Should we take a cab to my place?”

“Actually, we have a friend in the city we're going to be staying with,” said Grace.

“We?” said Liss. “You can stay with Julian if you want. I'm staying with Anna.”

Grace sniffed quietly. “Take the hockey bag, then.”

Liss had them wait until Julian had arrived with his glossy shades in his sparkling blue car, leaned in to kiss Grace on the cheek (Liss bristled), let Grace and Liss mash lips together while staring aside at the parking lot, and driven off, man and woman looking like a movie still.

“My place is small,” said Anna. “I hope you don't mind it.”

“Of course I won't. It's not like we live in a castle or anything.”



They piled into the backseat, the hockey bag shared between their laps, and ignored the cabbie. Their knees' skin met easily, but the space of years hung dust-like between their minds.

“Grace didn't used to be like this,” said Liss.

Anna looked out the window and wondered what to say.

“It's like the music's gotten to her head. The popularity's gotten to her head, and she thinks she can get away with anything now. You were never like that.”

“I was, actually.”

“No way.”

“Maybe in a different way. I *did* used to think I could get away with anything. Then I learned I couldn't, and gave up, I guess. I'm not one of those people with the will to be good.”

“That's bullshit.”

“You have to care more. You have to want it more than anything.”

“Of course not! You only have to want it *enough*.” She looked toward the window where a beach bloomed at the feet of the skyscrapers. “God, Vancouver's beautiful.”

“Look at you, Liss. You didn't give up. That's because you have it. I just don't.”

“If you keep talking like that, I'll kick you.”

“Tell me about everything you've been up to.”

“Just music, basically.” Suddenly her face brightened. “Oh, I didn't tell you—I found my family.”

“You did?” Anna exclaimed.

“Yeah.”

“I knew you would! Wait, we're almost at my place.”

“K, I'll tell you there.”

In Stanley Park the trees engulf her. They are nothing like the spindly maples and modest spruces of the woods behind her P.E.I. home, although they hold the same dust of wonder the small trees did in her childhood. Elephantine—she rolls the word on her tongue. Canada geese and their tenderly awkward goslings, babies grown nearly parent-size, waddle away as she crosses the little bridge. A couple looks to the water where a swan flexes muscular wings. The man has a camera out, and they're too intent to notice Anna, to wave. That suits her fine. Closer, she sees they've propped a tiny rubber duck on a stone and are snapping its picture in front of the swan.

Through a marsh forest where all around the ancient trees' feet is leaves and rustle and rising. Then higher, drier woods. The Atlantic woods had once been sacred, but now their trees are dwarves. Real trees have furry masses of needle spreading from reddened trunks. Real trees are marked by height as sentinels of skyline.

She wants to find a place to sleep out here. There are rotted stumps she can fit inside, and the ground is hallowed with red needles. She almost yields, thinking she'll wake up to some nosy morning kid—*Mommy, Mommy, there's a lady in the woods!*

“I don't know what I was looking for,” said Liss, her feet dangling over the arm of Anna's secondhand turquoise couch. “But whatever youthful idealizations I had about my

family. . .” her voice trailed off.

“Did you go on a road trip or what?”

“No, I found out through the adoption agency once I was eighteen. We sent some letters back and forth, and I met my mom and dad at different times. They were never married. I was born because of an affair.”

*Groceries. Supper. Anna to bed on time. Mop floors. Clean bathroom. Mow the lawn, or make Hank do it. Ten more documents to translate (I hate this job). Why am I wasting time writing in here? I must remember that it's not a waste of time, but an investment.*

*There may have been other opportunities for love, had I waited, or other circumstances in which Hank and I could have lived happily ever after and both pursued some measure of our dreams. Caroline Stern, lyric soprano, singing Juliette or Carmen before a sold-out crowd. My sister cheering from the front row, my father, and even my mother. Sometimes I wonder what could have happened if I'd remained in Montreal. Maria Callas used to practice five or six hours a day. I hardly have the energy to practice one.*

*Luckily Anna seems to like my singing, although she's not much of a singer herself. Her pitch is good, as far as I can tell from a kid, but she mostly hums and claps. She bangs out fancy rhythms with pot lids and that toy zebra of hers, and she wants me to have a tape on all the time.*

*I'm not committed for life, necessarily. Things change. Who knows how long Hank will even have this job? And the idea of packing up a suitcase and Anna with it and*

*jumping aboard the ferry never to return, while laughable, seems not inconceivable.*

*When it comes to doing right by your dreams, a life is a long time.*

The blackberries grow along every stretch of path, wicker shapes offering fruits the colour of bruises. Anna must eat four dozen. She reaches for the highbush blueberries, just as tall, and plucks their tiny globes. Then more blackberries, those omnipresent plants that always have something to offer.

Liss's mother was Mi'kmaq and worked at a grocery store in the reserve. Her father, an Indian immigrant, had worked his way up from waiting tables to selling TVs. They met at a party; he was ten years older and married.

“They were Indians of two different kinds,” said Liss. “That's the joke my mom made.”

They passed the bowl of chips back and forth, each scooping a handful.

“Each has their own little life,” said Liss. “He has his Indian wife and kids, all very nice and polite, and she has her Mi'kmaq husband and a couple boys who wanted me to play video games with them. It was fun, but strange. I asked them all if they were into music, but none of them are hugely into it.” She crunched some chips. “You have no idea how great it is to see you.”

One of the buildings in the park has been rented for a private party. On the porch, couples in tails and tulle canoodle to twenties dance tunes, until the speakers begin an

incongruous rush of pop. A week ago Joel White, the lead singer of Surrender, died of a drug overdose, and Anna has been hearing this song all over town.

*I'll be standing here when remembrance stains your mind*

*I'll be standing here when the beaten paths unwind*

*I'll be standing here grown half dumb and almost blind*

*I'll be standing here and I won't be hard to find*

*And I promise, this I promise, I will never*

*Never move since I'll be standing here forever*

A gesture of honour, but this version is a bad remix by someone she can't identify.

At the outdoor theatre, singers stomp and screech. They chant what sounds like the same few lines, stridently over and over again.

“Things aren't going so well with Grace,” said Liss over her fifth glass of wine. Anna had their CD on, perhaps inconsiderately. Liss's hair sprawled across the couch.

She stirred, and her foot knocked against Anna's. They giggled. Anna thought of pulling away, but Liss's foot came on top to pin hers down. Liss's face looked soft, and Anna felt the urge to cup it, to trace the outline she had often wished her own to have.

“Sometimes I wonder—” Liss began. “You remember how we used to cuddle and such?”

“Yeah.”

“Ever wished we could take back what we had then, and take it further? Ever wondered what it might've been like?”

A heat and fear she hadn't felt in years seeped through her. *I wonder what would've happened if—*

“What about Grace?”

“Grace doesn't matter. We haven't fucked in months.”

“I've never really . . . done anything with a woman before.”

“Good.” Liss's typical ferocity. Possessive? Anna fumbled uselessly with her wine glass.

“There are a lot of pillows on my bed that we'll have to get out of the way.”

The sky lingers pale at night, through the rose garden with its tidy rows, around the forest-bound Beaver Lake which has been so invaded by water lilies Anna doubts any beavers could fit and laughs at the mallard ducks and ducklings which paddle, just barely, between lily pads. Her MP3 player has been on since she got—not lost, but temporarily misplaced. Wagner speeds her stride. *I am marching towards a purpose, towards a clearing in the sky . . .*

Liss was trapped beneath her, a small animal breathing out animal noises. Her hips jolted upwards as Anna tried to keep to the same spot. Her rhythm was erratic, Liss's frantic. Her hands reached clumsily to stroke Liss's sides, trace her ribs. She wanted to

meld to the figure on the bed, to possess her, and this was as close as she'd ever been. Liss's transport frightened her just as it aroused. She wished all those articles on sex had had something useful to contribute to this situation. There was no way she was any good. And as Liss shivered and she felt the smaller girl's skin against her warm and trembling, a sympathetic tremor passed through her, suspending thought.

Supposedly it was difficult to satisfy a woman. That wasn't the case with Liss, tremulous as a sound wave, who then went at Anna fiercely. She'd been waiting years.

Anna alternated between closing her eyes and opening them to look down at Liss's envied hair.

Anna presses herself against the rubber of a swing in the playground, hands to chains, and arcs skyward.

Liss's smile was fresh and slightly timid. Anna tried to grin back, but her mouth stretched into a yawn.

“Tired?”

“Exhausted.”

“Where should I sleep?”

“Isn't that obvious? Unless you want your own space—the couch folds out.”

“I just thought you might not want me in the same bed. You know.” After so many years, Liss was deferential and uncertain around her. The initial excitement had run its course, the hormonal highs had faded, and neither knew quite what rhythm to adopt

around the other.

“I don't mind. I mean—I don't mind at all!”

Liss got up and walked over to the African violets on the windowsill. “Nice plants.” They both snickered; the words were ridiculous. “Do you think we could sleep in the same bed and manage to keep our hands off each other?”

“So what?” Anna was hit by another surge of heat. She tested her reactions. She didn't regret this, yet.

She was woken that night by a quiet whine: “When am I gonna see her?” Anna looked over. “Liss?” she whispered. The smaller woman's eyes were closed, her body still, and she seemed quite asleep.

A gaunt man stands at a garbage can with bags, long-haired in an old vest and jeans. She calls out a hello, and he reciprocates brightly—“Hello, how you doing.”

“Great,” says Anna. “It's a nice night to take a walk.”

“Yeah, we're lucky to have this park. It's quiet. I get away here as much as I can, even when I'm not doing this—” he waves the bags—“just to get away from the noise of the city. We're really lucky.”

“Yeah, we really are.” She nods dumbly.

Anna moved from her emcee perch in front of the microphone to a wooden chair in the front row, between a middle-aged man whose dreadlocks coiled to his waist and two generously bosomed teenagers in tank tops. Onstage, Felicity and Grace faced each



other. The sound began with a long throbbing note from Grace's throat. Liss put violin to chin and stroked out a tremulous hum. Her vocals joined with Grace's, and the taller woman's electric guitar riffed after. Liss's gaze toward Grace blazed in that familiar, unexpected way, and Anna tried to decide which was more astonishing—Liss when coming, or Liss when caught in the song. She had to conclude they were equal. Grace returned the gaze with what seemed even from a distance to be parallel heat. Layer upon layer, they built.

*I found a little daisy tucked among the morning dew  
It was looking white and perky and a little bit like you  
And I pulled the petals singly as I sang an old-time song  
Loves me, loves me not, until the petals all were gone.*

An interplay of complex sensations and desires, storming the audience, concentrated in a single ever-changing point. Whatever the strife in their relationship, Liss and Grace's musical harmony was perfect. Growing ever more intent, they reached convergence, and it seared.

The audience bloomed into clapping. A multitude of hands moved in all directions and Anna was falling between them, the floor dissolving beneath with no one and nothing there to catch her.

*Today I was witness to the most extraordinary thing.*

*Anna's growing up fast, and she wanted to help stack wood. I let her for awhile, then told her to go inside because the poor thing looked exhausted. When I went to check on her after a few minutes, she'd somehow hoisted her little body onto the piano bench and she was plunking out the notes of Bach's Flute Sonata in E. She tried once, sounding things out, then played the song a second time from pure memory. The melody was nearly faultless, with rhythm and dynamic shifts in place. I'd heard of this happening with others before, but I've never seen the like, and not even my dreams had dared imagine this from Anna.*

*She didn't want to leave the piano after that. It was Sonata, Sonata, Sonata, in tunnel focus. I wonder how long that will last! Hank had the nerve to say she looked like a piano robot. I admit her fervour didn't seem quite human, but that's probably just because it came as a shock. He joked (was he even joking?) that I'll get sick of it soon. I dragged her to supper and out to the garden—the child needs breaks—but she's at the piano again as I write this. I don't think her aptitude is even the most amazing part. Watching her fingers fly (I'll have to teach her proper technique, she's all over the place), music erupts for the sheer joy of it. Her playing is not just technically perceptive, but lush and fiery. Her body bends into the music. I can see she's smiling.*

Dark descends abruptly. The sea below street, sheer turquoise in the lights, makes a violent lapping sound. On P.E.I. the trees were narrow and beaches vast; in Vancouver the two are reversed. Here there are only waves, interrupted by stone steps and a slim branch of sand. She climbs down, shucks off socks and shoes, rolls up jeans, and runs.

With each footfall the soft grey sand absorbs her soles. She stops to scrawl a signature in it between countless others blown half inscrutable, *Stars in my body, stars in my soul*, and watches the waves lap until the letters are smoothed over. They might as well never have been.

“What are you going to tell her?”

“Grace? She never has to know.”

“Do you even love her?”

“I do, or at least I did. But I loved you first,” she hissed across the coffee table.

“And I still love you!” Her face twisted in a mask-like grimace and she was fourteen and closing in on Anna, lust-eyed and frightening. “Do you hate me for saying that?”

Water closes over her ankles. The chill shocks just as the lapping soothes. For no reason, Ay-a springs to mind. The very concept of the goddess seems trite. Another Anna stretches in her plush armchair, takes a sip of Daquiri. Ay-a stands apart on an arm of sand, cloth-covered—Anna has never seen nor imagined the body underneath—and small as a jellyfish. Anna presses a hand to her own face because nothing else feels real enough to touch.

“Just come with us! We can have three people in the band.”

“I can't just up and leave.”

“Why not?”

“And Grace would be furious.”

“She'll get used to it. Or we can just leave her and have our own band. We'll be better anyway.”

“How would that even work?”

“How does any band work?” Liss leaned forward with sudden violence and clutched at Anna's wrist. “Look, Anna, it's been forever since I've wanted to be with you! Last night was so amazing I can't even explain it. I saw you, Anna, and I saw that I'll never be able to let you go. You've got to agree that there was something not normal going on. I mean, come on, you felt it. It wasn't just sex or anything like that. It was like our old concert, is what it was. The—the—”

“Convergence?”

“Yeah, exactly! A convergence at last of something that had been building up for all those years. And that's how I know I can't leave you. We have to stay together. If it's so true and real it can't possibly be wrong.”

Part of Anna wanted nothing more than to close the very small distance between them, to clutch Liss against her, ravage her mouth, and refuse to ever let her move. Part of her wanted nothing more than to take up music again, to feel the delirious joy of the spotlight again, to live and collaborate with this woman who still made some of the most striking sounds she'd heard from a human being. To make something of herself. To claim the heated, warped, fierce loves, artistic and human, that had trailed her since childhood.

Had she run from Liss for the same reason that Darien had left her? It was so much easier not to be tied to someone whose talent made her marvel—the weight of that,

of love and hate and envy and desire distilled, was too much to hold.

So she'd left Liss and the music, both, and was leaving them again. Much as she loved it, music belonged to Another Anna, a human prism refracting centuries of sound. Those who worshipped it couldn't see her through it.

*Could* she go back?

“Anna, say something!”

Her memories were shadows cast by the trees at night, or the ephemeral play of light between those shadows. The time when music had been everything existed somewhere in its own small capsule, irretrievable, so distant from the present it might never have happened at all.

Another capsule held Felicity and Grace, their gazes blazing in perfect convergence, their music complete between the two of them and searing outward. Anna knew good music when she heard it, and she knew her own truth as surely as Liss knew hers—it was a thing she could never bring herself to destroy.

“I can't,” she said.

There is a highway right above the beach, but the railing hides Anna if she stays close to it. A shape on a tiny rock island in the water looks suspiciously like a person, but it must not be since it hasn't moved since she got there.

She watched Liss and Grace, Felicity and Grace, climb aboard the plane. She stood on the asphalt and waved. The plane took off and she kept waving until it was a

speck in the clouds, then invisible, and her arms ached. Her eyes would ache often afterwards.

She waited a week, then made an appointment at the clinic. She went to the forest, climbed to the end of a half-fallen trunk that reminded her of the cat tree of her childhood, and prayed in gratitude when all the STI tests came back negative.

*What if someone catches you?*

Muscle follows intent, stunningly instant. Stripped, she arcs above the water and she's in, dog paddling, back floating, tasting salt, the cold no shock, the blood in her body warming as turquoise envelops her and towers glint their lights from the opposite shore and suddenly there's sound she hasn't heard. It washes over her with the current, piano chords shimmering. Fountains, raindrops, tiny flowers falling from their domes. She catches them. Naked beneath the road and spinning and possibly watched, she catches every bit, to remember.

Scores of drops shake loose from her skin. She pulls underwear and dress on over sand-scraped limbs. She doesn't know if this piece is truly original, truly hers, and that isn't the important thing. The important thing is its existence. Fragile but insistent, if she gives it her attention, she has something to preserve.

Climbing the stone steps, she plans. She will buy some new music books, learn some new pieces to practice, see if this town has a place for another musician. She will look into programs to get her GED, and maybe someday into scholarships. She will take out her purple notebook and do her best to jot down the melody, harmonies, call and

response.

A blue heron flaps dripping through her path. She walks along the night road wearing unseen salt and sand stigmata. She has been walking for five hours straight.