

When God Appears

Johnathan William Wells

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts (English) at

Concordia University

Montréal, Québec, Canada

May 2012

© Johnathan William Wells, 2012

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Johnathan William Wells

Entitled: When God Appears

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (English)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

Kate Sterns Chair

Marcie Frank Examiner

Josip Novakovich Examiner

Terence Byrnes Supervisor

Approved by _____

Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

5 May, 2012

Dean of Faculty

ABSTRACT

When God Appears

Johnathan William Wells

When God Appears is a kind of post-coming of age novel which follows the lives of three twenty-somethings, each of whom are, in their own way, lost. The novel traces the spiritual and religious development of three characters, and delves into the point of view of each in turn.

The novel explores its three major characters through parallelism, the way their lives intersect at crucial moments, and by moving forward and past in time to explore the origins of their present-day uncertainty. Set against the backdrop of rural southwestern Ontario and the city of Hamilton, Ontario in the first decade of the 21st century, the story is intimately concerned with place, particularly the Bruce Trail, where Alex Robinson and Lao Savarin are confronted with the nature of being, of religion, and of trying to find a way to describe their unlikely friendship.

From Alex's experience as a gay young man who discovers the world in an animist fashion, to Lao's deeply Catholic religious experience as a Canadian soldier in Afghanistan, and to Claire Robinson's disillusioned experience working in a retirement home, the novel explores what it is to be a young adult in modern times. *When God Appears* is a novel about seeking, dreaming, and ultimately trying to find one's way in the world.

For my family, my biggest fans, I would like to acknowledge their love and support, which permeate everything I do.

I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the patience, guidance and brilliance of Terry Byrnes, who helped me to see what this story is really about. I also wish to thank Josip Novakovich, Marcie Frank, Nicola Nixon, Kevin Pask, Mary Esteve, Bonnie-Jean Campbell, and Robert Danisch.

This would not have been possible without the assistance, support, criticism, friendship and understanding of my classmates.

This work is dedicated to Jon, whom I'm hoping will understand, wherever he is.

Table of Contents

<i>Part One: Pieces</i>	1
Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	31
Chapter 3	53
<i>Part Two: Alex</i>	76
Chapter 4	76
Chapter 5	86
Chapter 6	105
Chapter 7	116
<i>Part Three: Claire</i>	131
Chapter 8	131
Chapter 9	152
<i>Part Four: Pieces of Lao</i>	171
Chapter 10	171
Chapter 11	189
Chapter 12	202
Chapter 13	210
Chapter 14	214

Chapter 1

Trees flashed by Alex and Lao as they walked the Bruce Trail, following the rocky line of the Niagara Escarpment. Underfoot, the path wound dizzily through trees and over rocks and across small streams. Sunlight filtered through the leaves overhead, sunning them with patches of yellow light tinged with green.

Alex had woken up early that morning, borrowed his sister Claire's car and picked up Lao at his parents' place. They drove north, following the winding route of highway 6 from Hamilton. Lao had a map, and had convinced Alex to attempt a 20 kilometre loop hike. Alex yawned for most of the drive, not used to waking up before dawn. Lao, Alex could see, was wide awake and tense, ready for the exercise.

As they walked the trail, birds chattered to each other, high overhead, safe in their trees. Swamps appeared as Alex and Lao rounded sudden bends, frogs croaking in the morning light, the occasional crane or duck taking flight as they drew nearer to their nests. Lao led on the path, hard-packed earth and exposed limestone, and Alex struggled to keep up.

They spoke little as they walked, a comfortable silence between them, the kind of silence where not speaking was almost a conversation. Alex felt as though he heard Lao saying things he had told no one else; and when he held back a branch for Alex as they hiked through a patch of undergrowth, it was as if a secret had been shared. When they stopped and took long gulps from their water bottles, the sounds of crickets and songbirds

filled the air. It felt as though Alex would have to shout over them in order for Lao to hear. It wasn't that they were loud; it was more that their music felt like their own kind of conversation, something it would be wrong to break.

Lao took more breaks than Alex felt he might if he were walking alone, but they still weren't enough. The only exercise Alex had been getting lately was pushing trays to customers at the McDonald's across the street from his apartment in Hamilton. Now, he took great breaths of the pristine air, feeling its oxygen course through his veins. Light-headed, he almost called Lao to stop, but he didn't want to seem weak.

On they hiked, trudging along the path. Alex lost track of time, and the forest canopy kept him from being able to tell the position of the sun in the sky, whether clouds were racing towards them laden with rain, whether they were nearing any sort of destination or stopping point. Alex's mind slowed as his brain tried to cope with the exercise, the fast pace that Lao was setting.

Even seeming weak no longer mattered to Alex when they reached the crest of a particularly large hill. He stumbled most of the way up, as rocks and roots from trees appeared suddenly in a kind of natural obstacle course the trail set for them. The waters of Georgian Bay opened below him, a greenish blue reaching for the horizon. Alex noted that the trail immediately descended from the rocky outcropping they had just climbed, and went on to rise and fall with each rise of the earth over the bay. He groaned and let his body fall to the ground, the bumpy rock of the ridge softened by huge tufts of moss and soft grasses. He closed his eyes as he lay, spread-eagled, and his mind went blank. He felt the soft and scratchy bed of moss underneath him, almost wet, springy to the

touch. Sunlight tried to stream through his eyelids, and the smell of the forest invaded his body. He thought he heard a whispering in the forest around him.

“You OK?” came Lao’s steady voice from somewhere above him.

Alex breathed. “Yeah,” he said between breaths. “Just need – rest – a moment.”

As his breathing slowed and the sweat that had coated his body began to cool in the soft breeze on the ridge, Alex heard the whispering again. It was the sound of the wind through the leaves. Or branches scraping against each other gently. Or maybe even the sound of growth, of grass slowly creeping upward towards the sunlight, of leaves sprouting from branches.

Alex lay there for a time, aware of Lao sitting restlessly on a rock nearby. Eventually, he sat up, the moss springing up when his weight was released. Lao eyed Alex, perhaps regretting bringing him along.

They stopped for lunch at a lookout point on the next major rise, Lao pushing Alex to keep going, encouraging him silently to climb the last, and tallest, hill. Seagulls whirled overhead, their calls increasing with intensity when they smelled food. Alex and Lao rested there for a while, watching the small waves break on the rocks below them, feeling the hot midday sun beating down.

The rest of the hike was on relatively level ground, winding around small lakes and through old-growth forests. Lao kept a steady rhythm, his boots beating hard upon the softer earth. Alex could see the muscles working under Lao’s clothing. The silence this time was stretched, everything unsaid between Alex and Lao springing up and blocking any attempt they might make at conversation.

As the sun began to fall, Lao's step became quicker, and Alex once again had to work harder to keep up. His skin crawled with sweat despite the cool of the forest shade, and he again became light-headed with the work. The whispering he had heard before started again, more intense this time, as if the trees and growing things were trying to communicate with him. A husky voice seemed to speak, a voice made of many sounds and of different registers. Alex had to strain to hear, and even though he could make out some of the words, he still felt as though the voice wasn't speaking at all.

I heard a story once, the trees told Alex. I can tell you, if you want to hear.

Alex felt the wind change. He looked into the canopy of leaves and branches overhead, seeing them shake and shiver. He heard the whistling through the forest around him. If he weren't so protected, the wind might be tearing at his clothing, pushing him in a certain direction. But the forest held him still.

When the world began, the voice said, shaking and tremulous, although strength was there too, a woman fell from the sky. She bore two sons, your ancestors.

Alex stopped, his legs jelly and his chest heaving. He bent over to catch his breath and cocked his head to the side, anxious to hear.

They were the first human beings born on earth, the trees whispered. They go by many names, but in this part of the world, the twins are called Iouskeha and Tawiscaron. Or, they were called so. Not many are left who know their names.

Lao was on the trail ahead of him, too far for Alex to catch up. He started walking again, but slowed immediately, his stiff legs needing rest, his brain screaming for more air. Alex's tread was soft upon the ground, yet each step threatened to disintegrate

the voices of the trees, the voice he felt all around him. It competed with his heavy breathing, and Alex felt he heard the voice in the spaces between inhale and exhale.

One, Iouskeha, the first twin to be born, had the power to create. He created the plants and the animals and all life. We live because Iouskeha created us.

The voices became louder, almost distinct. Almost human, and yet still wild. *The other, Tawiscaron, controlled the forces of destruction; his destiny was sealed when he burst through his mother's armpit in childbirth, killing her.*

The wind whistled. The birds and bugs and other living things had become quiet, Alex noticed. Nothing but the wind and the trees was speaking now. But the voice at once began drifting. *Tawiscaron lives to destroy, Iouskeha to create. We owe them everything.* The last word, *everything*, floated on the wind for a time, eventually dissipating. The birds and the crickets started singing again, and the wind ceased. Alex had stopped in the middle of the trail, looking up. His face was slick with sweat, rivulets streaming into his eyes, the salt burning. He reached a hand to the top of his head, his hair damp and frizzy.

Lao came around the corner, looking questioningly at Alex. "What are you doing?"

"I thought I heard –" Alex started.

Lao stood on the path ahead, staring. "Heard what?"

Alex shook his head, struggling. "Nothing. I don't think I heard anything."

"You look like you need a break," Lao said, slipping off his backpack.

"No!" Alex said, starting forward. "Not here. Let's walk for a bit before we stop."

“Okay,” said Lao, still peering at Alex. He shrugged his backpack further up his shoulders and started on the path. He looked back, making sure that Alex was still behind him.

Alex followed Lao, walking quickly to keep up. He felt drained, yet with each step, he felt as if he might have the strength to keep walking for miles if need be. All the way to the end of the trail, to where the earth ended and the water began.

Soon evening fell, scattering the rocky path with leaves of darkness. Alex was on his second wind, easily keeping up with Lao, although he thought that Lao may have slowed to accommodate him. They should have arrived at the car before nightfall. Lao, who had organized the trip precisely, seemingly hadn’t accounted for all of Alex’s extra breaks.

Lao had thought to bring a flashlight, and they kept it steady on the path before them, occasionally darting the beam to a tree on the side to spot the white-painted lines of the trailblazers. They followed the bobbing light for two hours in darkness that became so entire that the small flashlight blazed, inking everything beyond its beam. When they came upon the car, Alex slumped with relief against the hood.

“I’ve never seen it so dark,” he said breathlessly.

“I have,” said Lao after a moment. He had lowered himself in a crouch near the gravel-surfaced parking lot.

Alex leaned up off the hood on his elbows and looked at Lao. The flashlight, which had fallen to the ground, scattered light into the forest at their right. Deflected light shone from Lao’s eyes, a level brown, the retinas huge in the darkness. He felt deflated, the hike taking a toll on him he hadn’t expected. He felt small beside Lao, who

was crouched but not resting, breathing deeply but not heavily as Alex was. There was a thin sheen of sweat visible across Lao's forehead, but he wasn't dripping wet. His bearing was upright and tall, stiff almost, as if permanently at attention, even in a crouch. "Tell me," Alex said, wondering if Lao was opening a door, ready to tell Alex out loud those things he had told him in silence.

"What do you mean?"

"Tell me something. About darkness in Afghanistan. I want to know."

"I never thought you were interested in hearing about Afghanistan," said Lao.

"Well I'm not, really, but. . . the dark and all."

Lao racked his brains for a story worth telling, knowing he would only get to tell Alex one. Alex had never seemed interested in the military, in his mission, in the way that Lao had chosen to live his life. He enjoyed his time with Alex because things didn't always need to be said. And any time he had told someone about Afghanistan, they usually never asked about it again. His story was too large to be cut into small, easily digestible chunks.

He looked around the parking lot for inspiration. The sheen of dew glistened in the night. The trailhead, ten feet away, was like a gate to somewhere different, somewhere outside the Niagara Escarpment, outside Ontario. The darkness gathered in the stillness and emptiness there, at the gate, an entrance to where he had been only minutes before.

The story had to be a good one, obviously, but it also had to slant the mission and the military in a favourable light. He had to prove through his story that what he was doing was worthwhile. The task of finding such a story suddenly seemed insurmountable.

“You just – seem different, at times,” said Alex. “Like, times when you’re probably thinking about Afghanistan.”

“I do?” Lao was surprised. He didn’t feel different at those times; he didn’t even think that he thought of Afghanistan often enough to have a specific look.

“Well, yeah, I think so.”

“Oh.”

Bugs made fluttering, buzzing, clicking noises through the night, a chorus surrounding them in the empty lot. There was the only car there. A few stars pricked through a heavy grey obscuring the sky. Both Alex and Lao were breathing normally again, although Lao was still uncomfortably sticky with sweat. Lao dropped to sit on the gravel, crossing his legs.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” said a small voice through the dark. Lao looked up, across the flashlight’s beam.

“No, I do. I’m just trying to think.”

It was the sand; that was what Lao took away with him from Afghanistan. In fact, quite literally: everything he owned was gritty with sand. When he arrived at his parents’ house after his first tour, his duffel bag left small mounds of sand wherever it was set down. The front hall carpet, Lao’s bedroom, the floor mat in the laundry room: all puffed small clouds of sand for weeks after his duffel bag had lain there.

No one asked him about the shooting, the possible killing. A couple of guys asked him about what kind of gun he used, but no one asked about whether he had used it to shoot at people. And Lao supposed that he must have internalized that lack of anything specific as well, because what he brought back with him, and what he noticed when he was there, in Afghanistan, was the sand. Its grittiness, its dusty and insubstantial smell, how it gave slightly under his boots, how it entered everything, even his food, the taste of sand spicing everything. Sand in his mouth, dust in his lungs, grit in his ears and nose and eyes and every orifice, never really gone, even after the longest of showers, even after he had returned back home.

And sand in the landscape: how tire tracks from military vehicles impose a rough geometry to what's essentially shapeless. How dry grass and desert plants consolidate the sand somewhat, making it closer to solid ground than shifting mass. The darker colour of the sand where things grow in it compared to the lighter colour where it is free and bare and shifting. The colour of blood in sand. How the sand hides shrapnel and wreckage, how it cushions bodies flown from blasts. How it stretches, so far, to mountains and grassland and villages.

So this was what Lao kept with him – the sand. Old friends and strangers in bars don't ask about whether he's shot anyone, so he doesn't tell them. They don't ask if he knew any of the men or women who died. Instead, they raise their glasses to "our troops," carefully saying "troops" only, carefully neither endorsing nor condemning the mission itself. Instead, they glance around the room, looking for inspiration.

But there was something comforting about being with Alex tonight, on this hike. He had known Alex since kindergarten, but they had only really become friends until

after high school. Before he left for Afghanistan, he and Alex would drive hours in one direction or another, usually following the snaking line of the Niagara Escarpment and the Bruce Trail, and hike on paths which often held no one but themselves. They would go hours without speaking, simply walking through the bush, climbing rocky hills, following the lines of bushy fencerows in farmers' fields. Hikes with Alex had all of the restorative power of a week-long religious retreat, something he didn't do anymore. Because he felt closer to God on the trail than in a stuffy room somewhere.

But everything came out wrong. Alex's small and untruthful sounding voice in the dark had startled him; Alex wanted a story, and would be disappointed if he wasn't given one. Lao felt like holding back. No one wanted to know about Afghanistan: his mother didn't want to know, his father made shushing noises at the dinner table whenever conversation veered toward anything beyond the niceties of training, friendships, officers whom he admired. Any girls he had met wanted a tortured soul, but someone they could fix. Guy friends wanted nothing beyond the mundane. Lao had told exactly one person outside of the army about what happened in Afghanistan, and that was his priest, during confession. *Bless me father for I have sinned, it has been – a couple of months, at least, since my last confession.* He had paused there and father Hardy prompted gently, *Yes, my son?* And then he let everything go, things he hadn't told his fellow soldiers. He poured everything he could through the screen that separated priest from penitent, and in the back of his mind he worried that there were several old ladies waiting their turn for confession, that he was taking up far too much of the good priest's time. But he just kept going. Soon he was describing a scene in a village marketplace. There was a dead boy in the sand only

ten feet away, *and father, I'm so sorry, but I just didn't want to see, he might have been alive, but he was covered in blood, and I just couldn't go to see if he needed help, I just couldn't look at him* Father, *I had to keep walking because I just couldn't look.* And on the other side of the screen, Lao could see the movement of Father Hardy's head nodding, *Yes, yes, yes, and you are sorry for doing these things, my son?* And Lao couldn't breathe so he nodded, *yes,* and Father Hardy fixed him with a stern stare, *You are sorry my son, aren't you?* The screen, the screen, it was in the way and Father Hardy couldn't see Lao nodding continually, *yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, I'm sorry, so sorry, Father.* Father Hardy recited his prayers of absolution and Lao followed along, hanging on every word. He longed for the release, for his sins to be torn away from his body like wind blowing away a scarf. He wanted them gone, but they didn't leave.

He was told to go and kneel and recite the act of contrition, several Hail Marys and Our Fathers and a couple of Glory Bes for good measure, and finally to go with the peace of Christ. Lao stumbled out of the confessional. He prayed in the third pew back from the altar, kneeling for hours, whispering things into the echoing emptiness of the church. But the prayers he used to recite every night back in Afghanistan no longer seemed proper in a church so far away; the people for whom he prayed and the sins he wished forgiven seemed left in that country, despite everything being closer now that he was back. So he whispered nameless things, words that weren't even words. He used some of the basic Persian he had learned, some of the French he still remembered from grade school, and as much Vietnamese as he could remember his parents speaking. He made up new words with no meanings, hoping God would understand.

But that was the thing: God understood, Lao knew that. He only wished that God would tell him so Himself.

And so Lao, his sins cleansed and his head cleared by the day-long hike through wilderness, felt again the surge of not wanting to hold back. He told Alex about the time that their unit had gotten a distress call from another unit which had gone to a small village several miles away. It was the end of the day and the sun was setting, and they were driving west. The low, dry mountains blocked nothing of the blazing sunset, unobscured by evening clouds. Reds and yellows collided with the windshield of the vehicle, an incongruous jungle-camouflage colour, a lush green racing through the desert grey. Lao sat in the back with a group of other guys, and they were all wearing their helmets and sand goggles and bandanas over their mouths and noses because the sand permeated everything.

Dark descended, slowly at first, long rays of an extinguishing sun reaching. Then the light became intrusive, as if it were only visiting. Long after full dark, heat radiated from the desert floor, a dark sunlight trapped among the grains of sand and struggling upwards.

And as Lao turned his head towards the front, to look out the windshield and see if there were any lights of village nearing, he saw the explosion. Heavy flames flared, too orange and red to illuminate anything, the heart of the fire still too new to fully outline the shape upon which it was feeding.

The vehicle swerved, the men tumbled into each other, and then something hit Lao's head, lights popping before his eyes. A heavy odour of tar and burning plastic, like singed hairs and burning flesh, washed over him; the sound of wrenching metal split the

continuous drone of the vehicle's motor, the flush of fire feasting upon a bloated energy source; and finally, stars winked above him, men shouted as if far off, a faint orange glowed at the edges of his vision, and a sluggish pain pounded in the back of his head, cushioned, if only minimally, by sand.

That was the darkness Lao knew. That kind of darkness that wasn't darkness, the kind of darkness held back by fire and the headlights of a military vehicle. The kind of silence that wasn't silence, silence held back by the muffled shouts of trained, panicked men, the whoosh of fuel catching fire.

The explosion, it turned out, was a failed attempt at the destruction of Lao's vehicle; insurgents had planted a roadside bomb, scrap metal had been arranged in the shape of a broken-down Jeep. It was a strange reddish colour, Lao could see the paint melting in the flames. As Lao watched the scrap metal twist within the flames, he felt as though his name had been carved into the metal. Approximations of his dog tags had been scratched there, his service number, his last name and initials, his rank, his religion, his blood type and RH factor. There it was, everything the state thought fit to describe him should someone find his mangled corpse in a war zone, everything about him was there, in that fire, burning. Or melting, rather. Twisting. Lao wasn't sure whether metal really burned.

"And so what happened?" Alex asked.

"We radioed it in and went on to the village. By the time we got there, there wasn't much going on, so we drove back to base."

"But you saw yourself burning in the fire."

"Well, my dog tags."

Something small shuffled in the undergrowth to their right. Bugs continued to click and buzz.

“I didn’t know they showed your religion.”

“Neither did I, till they asked me what I was.”

Lao lifted his legs to his chest, and the gravel dug into his bottom. The air felt heavy, oppressive. The flashlight flickered and went out. He felt relief, being cast suddenly in darkness.

Night crept further on. Lao sat, unmoving and upright on the gravel. Alex watched him for a while, marvelling at the difference in his friend. They had gone to school together, from Kindergarten right through to grade 12. And for all that time, Lao was the skinny Asian kid with the slightly goofy smile who said things with a directness that often alienated others.

But now, most of that was gone. There was nothing about Lao now that could be called goofy, nothing silly in his careful smile. His muscles strained through his thin t-shirt as he held his legs, his shoulders broad and his neck strangely thick. And while still direct, there was a new measure in Lao’s voice, an evasiveness. He ended sentences with a finality that made it difficult to ask questions, and his voice was solid, deeper than Alex remembered.

“And you?” Lao asked, his voice all Alex could discern of Lao in the dark.

“And me what?” Alex asked, his voice weak in the night air.

“I’ve been gone for ages. You haven’t told me what’s been going on.”

“Nothing, really, Lao. Nothing that compares.”

Alex was about to suggest getting into the car before they became too tired to drive, but he found that he couldn't move. Or wouldn't move. Lao remained in place, waiting for Alex to tell him something.

Sometimes Alex felt a connection to things beyond what he could see, things beyond his control and beyond even what he felt he believed. It was as if the earth was happening to him, instead of his having to discover it for himself. He thought sometimes that he could see the particles in the air, or the molecules that comprised every living thing. Because most of what makes up the world is empty space, the space between the nucleus and the revolving electrons, between molecules, between stars and planets, between people.

But now Alex was lost. He wasn't sure why, or what it was that made him lost; right now, it was simply him. Alex the Lost. He wondered if perhaps it was because he was living in a city. He felt a displacement from the rhythms of life, surrounded by concrete and glass. How the seasons came in straight-edged chunks, winter, spring, summer, fall. Alex felt no in-betweens in the city, no graceful exit of summer into the glorious colour of fall. It was simply hot and sunny one day, and cool and windy the next. He missed the smell of grass and soil beneath his feet, the feeling that all that surrounded him was natural and animal and real. Maybe it was reality that he missed.

Perhaps it was because Alex worked at a fast-food restaurant. He felt like he was slipping away. That it was all too easy to get lost amidst the over-organization of an international chain, to lose himself in between the cut-and-dry. The filling of the cups with a scoopful of ice, pressing the right button on the pop machine, pulling the fries out of the fryer at exactly three minutes, letting the machine beep once, twice, then on the

third time, dumping the basket into the hopper and turning the salt dispenser over only once to let out the exact right amount of salt. Each tray getting one tray liner, the drink at the front, the box containing the burger in the middle, then the fries at the other end. In the little moments between the streamlined rote, perhaps this was where he was losing himself.

Or perhaps, Alex thought, it was simply because he didn't yet know the pieces of which he was composed, what it was that made him him. What it was that gave people life, what kept people going. Was it love? That seemed too simple an answer, and yet love itself is hard enough to find and define.

The moonless night left him feeling oddly alone, despite Lao's being only a couple feet from him on the ground. Alex knew that his being gay made Lao uncomfortable: a tilt of the head, a slight turning of his body in defense, or his strange deafness whenever Alex talked of his boyfriends. Although Alex would usually bristle at the very idea of being accommodating, he somehow felt that the rules were different with Lao. When normally he might play up the gay side of his character and personal life to make a possible homophobe even more uncomfortable, he usually tried to act as neutral as possible around Lao. But then things came out differently.

"I saw Darrel, my ex, last week," Alex began. Lao sat up a bit straighter, but said nothing, his posture still indicating his willingness to listen.

Alex fell in love for the first time when he was sixteen. It felt like love, certainly. Was it a crush? Alex couldn't tell, because as far as he could remember, he never really had any crushes.

But love, the love he felt when he was sixteen, was a curious but very real sensation, and felt much stronger than the term “crush” implied. Alex didn’t know if this was because loving a boy was supposed to be painful, or if perhaps all love is painful. There was really no way to know.

This love’s name was Tom: Tom was tall and skinny and had coal-black hair that fell over his eyes way before it was cool for hair to look that way. He always smiled and laughed; there was always a joke and Tom was always telling it. And Tom was nice: Tom was nice to everyone he met. He laughed along when the cooler kids made fun of the less cool kids, but he also laughed when the less cool kids told lame jokes in an effort to become cooler. He wasn’t the centre of any attention, but the mirthful accompaniment to it. He reminded Alex of the trickster crow figure in Native American legend, a figure they learned about in American history class, a class that Alex took because he knew Tom would be taking it as well.

A problem, and a big one, was that Tom hated “fags.” Hated them, hated them, and Alex could never really figure out why, except that Tom found them disgusting.

“But why do you find them disgusting?” Alex asked, several times, more times than was safe, but he wanted to know. He tried not to be too insistent. Because he wanted to share all of Tom’s interests, but this one would be hard to assimilate.

“I just do,” Tom said, and he shuddered theatrically.

At that moment, the first time that Alex learned how much Tom hated fags, Alex resolved to be a certain person. And perhaps that kind of person is who Alex still is today, the reason why he’s lost. That person was the kind of person that Tom would like, a completely un-fag-like guy. But Alex was trying so hard to become that guy that he

forgot to be anything else. He forgot to create an identity, and instead became defined only by negatives. What Alex wasn't was who he was.

Alex later wondered what, exactly, he was expecting, how he was going to get what he desired. If he wasn't gay, how was he to love Tom? But at the time, he didn't think of it that way; he thought only of becoming Tom's friend, of being near Tom.

One day Alex found himself, completely and felicitously independent of his own scheming machinations, in the same group as Tom for a geography project. They worked together in the library, looking up facts and plagiarizing a helpful University of Arizona website for their written paper. They tried looking up porn under the watchful eye of the dictatorial librarian.

"She's coming," Alex would say, and Tom would jump in his seat and frantically close every window on the screen. He'd look up and see no authority figure in their vicinity and then punch Alex in the arm, laughing.

Those punches, that physical contact, sustained and tormented Alex in his love. He'd drag his chair closer to Tom's on the pretence of trying to get closer to the keyboard. They brushed elbows and Alex's skin tingled. Tom nudged Alex in the ribs when he said something funny. Alex tried nudging too, and his entire being almost shuddered away from his body when he felt the hardness of his torso, the living skin beneath his uniform dress shirt.

The librarian had promised to be away for at least a time, making them swear solemn oaths that they wouldn't touch the computers. As the library doors swung shut behind them, they raced each other to the computer that was hidden from view behind a tall pillar. Tom typed in the address of his favourite porn website. Popups flashed over

the screen, filled with pictures that Alex tried hard to understand in their complexity. Erect penises attached to naked men appeared in one and Tom let out a disgusted sound and clicked that window closed. They both leaned closer to the screen as Tom scrolled down the page, scene after scene of naked women in every possible position and combination. Alex and Tom were side by side, their arms grazing, both transfixed by the scenes before them. Alex glanced down and saw Tom's erection through his dress pants. He smiled a giddily-endearing smile and Alex almost couldn't take it, he was so beautiful. Alex twitched forward, making for Tom's smile. Tom turned his head back to the screen and Alex's forehead brushed against Tom's ear as Alex tried to stop himself going any closer.

Then Tom quickly said, "Shit," closed all the windows, stood up with his binder before his crotch, and leaped towards their study table. He was already seated, betraying his guilt with a gigantic grin when the librarian reentered.

Alex was still at the computer, huddled in the same position in which Tom had left him. He hadn't moved since Tom had stood up. Something had brushed his ear as Tom stood up, and Alex wasn't quite sure what it had been.

The librarian looked curiously at Tom, and asked, "Where's your accomplice?"

Very unhelpfully, Tom giggled nervously, glanced at the spot where Alex was still rooted behind the pillar, and said, "He left." Alex shifted nervously in his chair and felt a warm stickiness, a wetness in his crotch that would betray him. He held humiliation at bay, watching Tom's deep brown eyes, so deep, so brown. . .

"Hmmm," the librarian answered, her eyes narrowed in a searching look at Tom. Again Tom glanced at Alex behind the pillar and grinned. Even though under normal

circumstances Alex would have been angry at Tom for all but betraying his position, Alex melted under that grin. Painfully melted, melted almost in the real sense of the word, as if he were becoming liquid and would never again be able to function according to his original purpose: that he was no longer a human being or an awkward teenager. The librarian took a step towards the computers when the library doors opened behind her.

A group of burly hockey players had assembled there, grinning and punching each other. They pushed the bravest one forward, looking around in case there were any real teachers present. Then he yelled, "Book Nazi, Book Nazi!" laughing and falling back into his friends. They all screamed "Book Nazi!" at the librarian one last time before they fell away laughing, the doors swinging shut behind them.

The librarian's absence this time promised to be longer, and Tom ran back to the computer as the doors swung shut behind her and she chased the group down the hall. Alex was still rooted to the spot Tom had left him in. But cold waves of shame were starting to wash over Alex and he felt suddenly deflated. Without explaining himself, he jumped up, grabbed his binder, slung his backpack over his shoulder and ran from the library, Tom's last laugh echoing in his ear.

Cleaning himself up in the bathroom after running from the library, Alex vowed to be even less like a fag, and to stop mooning after Tom. This was a painful vow; Alex knew that it would mean giving up that insane hope he had been nurturing for the two years of high school that he had known Tom. But it had to be done. For a long time, Alex felt that the day that he vowed to stay clear of Tom was the first big step towards adulthood; but now, painfully alone and lost, he wondered if he learned the wrong lesson,

chose the wrong path, and internalized the wrong secret of adulthood. Perhaps it would have been better to try.

Tom left Mount Forest, and Mount Forest District High School, at eighteen. And like a surprising number of Alex's classmates, he joined the reserves. He was sent to Thunder Bay to go through boot camp and combat training. Alex didn't understand the appeal of either.

Alex was left in town, one of surprisingly few of his high school friends who remained, except the burnouts, the pregnant chicks, the victory-lappers, the losers. Alex guessed that made him one of the losers.

"Stop bloody feeling sorry for yourself, you piss-off," Alex's remaining high school buddy, Darrel, said to him one night. Darrel had the dirtiest mouth of anyone Alex knew. Coming from a religious household, Alex was often shocked by Darrel's curses, especially if he was caught off-guard. As they started to hang out more and more, Alex couldn't help trying to match Darrel's vast vocabulary of profanity, but it often came out sounding wrong. His "fuck"s and "shit"s often lent his words more intensity than he intended, and he ended up feeling small as his huge words hung in the air.

Alex and Darrel were shooting pool at the Mount Royal Hotel the summer after graduation, drinking Coors Light from the bottle and feeling manly and alone. At eighteen they weren't technically allowed in the bar, nor to drink the beer, but Arnie, the owner, owed Darrel's dad some favours. "I haven't left town either," Darrel said. "Shit, get over yourself."

“Yeah. I guess.” Alex was terrible at pool but managed to sink one of his balls. He punched the air and took a victory sip.

“I’m still gonna beat you.” Darrel smiled from under his baseball cap.

Perpetually scruffy, Darrel was his electrician father in miniature. Or rather, now that Darrel was eighteen, not in miniature, but simply younger. His rough curly hair was always kept managed under a baseball cap. His face was rarely shaved, but his whiskers were incomplete across his face. For all his apparent manliness, Darrel was still growing.

Alex still worked at the grocery store that had been his first-ever real job. Now that school was over, he was working full time, days: chatting with the middle-aged ladies who managed the tills, taking deliveries to senile old women who lived in infested apartments, keeping track of stock orders and organizing the basement store room. Alex had been working toward being assistant manager at the IGA for all of his high school years. But now that high school was over and he finally had the job, he found he didn’t want it. He found that it would be preferable to still be a floor boy, a grocery cart bitch, a perpetual shelf-stocker, than to be in charge of those people. He sighed.

“The fuck you’re sighing for?” Darrel said, missing his shot. “Didn’t I tell you to stop feeling sorry for yourself?”

“Fuck off, you don’t know what it’s like,” said Alex, wincing slightly at the intensity of his language. “I’m so tired of bossing around high school keeners and middle-aged losers. You know how hard it is to tell off someone twice your age? I had to yell at Kevin today because he messed up the orders. We’re getting twice as much Beatrice fucking yogurt this week and what we usually order already goes bad before we can sell it all. And I’ve gotta yell at Kevin because Kevin, who’s basically ancient,

doesn't get it otherwise. And when the manager asks me why we've lost all that money, it's my fucking ass, not Kevin's."

Alex fumed. Darrel gave a one-sided smile, his whiskers twitching. He started laughing.

"You gotta yell at old Millie too?" he said. Millie was the perpetual cashier. She gave cookies to children, and both Alex and Darrel remembered her giving them cookies when they were children shopping with their mothers. She was also inept at her job, slow and chatty, as Alex realized when he had grown to teenagerhood and got his first job bagging for the cashiers.

"Fuck, I would die first," Alex said, Darrel's good mood infecting him. He smiled, drank the last of his bottle. "Let's get out of here."

"Fine," said Darrel, as he sank the eight ball. "Let's go."

Having found nothing else to do, Alex and Darrel sat in the baseball dugout in the expansive fairgrounds near the outskirts of town. The spotlights were dark and the field empty. The white-painted lines on the grass glowed slightly in the light from distant streetlights. Alex had smuggled some beer from his father's beer fridge and Darrel had acquired some weed.

"It's a fucking cosmic joke," Darrel said, once they were sufficiently buzzed.

"Yeah. . . What?"

"A cosmic joke, a cosmic joke. That we're the only ones left here. I fucking hate this town."

"Yeah."

“I fucking hate it. You heard from Glenn? He’s having the fucking time of his life in New Zealand, he’s been sending me emails.”

“Yeah. I get those too.” Alex’s vision was blurry. He moved a hand in front of his face and it made a fuzzy arc.

“Fucking sheep probably, that’s what he’s doing, fucking sheep.”

“Yeah.”

“I fucking hate this town.”

“Yeah. You said that.” Alex often felt that Darrel used the f-word so many times that it ceased to mean anything, but in his present buzzed state, it added an intensity that was almost overwhelming.

“Yeah but what I meant to say is – I meant to say that I hate this town, right?”

Alex nodded, following.

“And then I see Mrs. Boyd today after work, you know, Tom’s mom? She’s walkin’ down the street and sees me and stops, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“And I don’t wanna stop b’cause I always friggin’ hated the woman.”

“Me too, fucking... I mean, fucking bitch.”

Darrel raised his bottle in toast. “And then she tells me that Tom’s hating it, hating it at friggin boot camp, reserve, shit whatever you want to call it.”

Alex sputtered slightly in his drink. “What?”

“Hating it! I mean, I hate this fucking town, and Tom fucking misses it! He wishes he was here! She said, she said that he wishes he was home.”

Remaining as nonchalant as he could, Alex asked, “Uh. You haven’t heard from Tom have you?”

“Heard from his mother. Jesus.”

“Yeah but I mean. . . he hasn’t sent you any emails or anything?” Alex squirmed. “Only I just haven’t heard from him and it’s been like months, hasn’t it? He’s been gone all summer and he’s been in Thunder Bay all this time and he hasn’t come back. Only I haven’t heard anything from him, is all. That’s all I meant.”

Darrel squinted at Alex. Alex squirmed a bit, drank a bit more from his bottle.

“Nope,” Darrel said, leaning towards Alex, his smile mocking. “Nope, I haven’t heard from your boyfriend.” He laughed at his joke, looking around.

Before Alex knew what he was doing, he had stood up. He seemed oddly out of control of his body, and watched, detached, as his right arm swung towards Darrel’s jaw in a fist. Darrel was knocked backward, off the wooden bench and onto the hard gravel.

Standing with his arm still outstretched, Alex seemed to come to himself again, slowly, through the haze of intoxicants.

“Fuck you do that for?” Darrel screamed from the ground. He was clutching his left elbow, which seemed to have broken his fall somewhat. “Fuck. Christ. Fuck.”

Alex felt sorry but a laugh started coming. Soon he couldn’t help himself. He bent over, trying to keep it in. Then it erupted from him. He laughed like a goon, over-loud and not-quite-real, but he found he couldn’t stop himself.

Then his hysterical laughter met pain, suddenly and strangely real. He felt his head turn first, and then the pain in his jaw and mouth hit. Darrel’s calloused fist had

made contact, and Alex felt his jowls shake. He tasted blood. He was too drunk to hold himself up and fell, face-first into the gravel.

“Fucking Christ, fucking deserved that,” Darrel was muttering from somewhere above him.

Alex tried to get up but his muscles weren't responding. He gave a heave and fell back into the dust and pebbles.

A hand appeared in front of his face. “Here, you moron,” came Darrel's voice from above. “Get up. And then you can explain to me why you punched me without warning.” Alex saw Darrel's other hand wipe his swelling lower lip.

Grasping Darrel's rough hand, Alex heaved himself up. He was halfway towards Darrel when Darrel started moving towards Alex. He felt the pulling cease, and the force of gravity pull him back to the ground. They both landed in a heap in on the dusty gravel, Alex hitting his head and small stars popping in his eyes. They both started laughing again, even though it hurt.

Alex was still grasping Darrel's hand. Darrel, who had fallen on his front, raised himself on his elbows to look at Alex lying with his eyes towards the stars. Alex's eyes flicked to Darrel's. Suddenly there was nothing between them, nothing holding anything back. Suddenly there was a clarity that overcame the moment, they both realized it, and they both seized it. Darrel leaned toward Alex and Alex brought his head up from the ground. They stopped inches from each other, each too close to the other to see properly. The blue of Darrel's eyes seemed to pulsate in the dark.

“Shit fucking Christ fucking shit,” Darrel whispered.

“Yeah.”

They leaned in, they broke the distance, those two inches, and kissed. The pressure hurt both of their swollen bloody lips but they didn't stop. Alex breathed through his nose the dusty, musky smell of Darrel; his hands reached towards Darrel's head and took in his surprisingly soft curls, his scratchy face, his fleshy, greasy ears. Darrel pulled his lips away to take a breath, pressing his nose and forehead to Alex's.

“Shit fucking Christ. Fucking shit,” he repeated.

And he kissed Alex again.

The night softened as Alex and Lao sat at the trailhead, the ominous clouds lifting slightly to reveal faded stars. The memory of Darrel hurt Alex physically, sitting like a stone in his stomach as he leaned against the hood of the car, thinking of the right way to tell Lao what happened.

Alex's relationship with Darrel lasted years, clandestine and exciting. After avoiding each other for months after the kiss, Alex and Darrel moved forward in fits and starts. Alex finally got late acceptance to McMaster University, in Hamilton, two hours to the south and the same city where his sister, Claire, lived. He made trips home as often as he could, taking any opportunity to see Darrel again. Then Alex met other gay people – the very idea! – and Darrel no longer seemed quite as magical, quite so complete.

Alex's inevitable breakup with Darrel was terrible, more terrible than either had told anyone. They had foolishly signed a double lease a year after Alex had moved to Hamilton, secure in the knowledge that they would always be together. And yet even as they moved in together, Alex started hating Darrel. He wasn't even sure how it started.

It just seemed that one minute he felt whole, and the next he felt robbed. He felt as though Darrel was robbing him of something, something much more than anything physical, something deeper. When Alex started expressing doubts about the direction their relationship was going (and that was how Alex put it, although inside he was telling Darrel that he was an asshole, that he couldn't stand the thought of putting up with him for another week let alone for the remainder of their lease), Darrel spun off the handle. He kicked Alex out of their apartment that very night, first throwing all of Alex's clothes into the hallway and then picking up Alex bodily from the couch and placing him atop the tower his possessions had made in the hall.

Alex couldn't handle the effect he had had on Darrel, and pleaded with him through the closed door to take him back. After some time of pleading, Darrel opened the door, tears in his eyes, and kissed Alex tenderly, more tenderly than he had ever done. He wrapped his arms around Alex and held him for a full twenty minutes. They moved awkwardly through the apartment, arms around each other, each refusing to be the first to let up on the pressure of the hug, embrace, rescue position, whatever it might be called. Eventually they landed on the bed and their arms came naturally apart, and Darrel kissed him again. He was still crying.

“And then I thought we were just going to lie there and discuss our feelings,” Alex told Lao. “That's what I wanted to do. You might not know it, but Darrel is capable of discussing his feelings. We had some amazing talks over those couple of years.”

But that wasn't what happened. Darrel started kissing Alex harder and rougher. He moved away from Alex's lips and started moving down. He pulled off Alex's shirt, and Alex, caught slightly off guard, let Darrel do it. He let Darrel do everything.

"But I grabbed his head at one point and tried to make him face me. I wanted to tell him that we probably shouldn't be doing this, that we needed to talk. He was still crying, my whole chest was wet with his tears." Darrel shook his head away from Alex's grasp and started crying even harder, making noises Alex had never heard from him.

Darrel was bawling when he lifted Alex roughly from the bed, turned him over, and started fucking him. Alex tried to pull away, he clawed at the sheets. He yelled at Darrel to let him go. But Darrel didn't listen, or he couldn't hear through his sobs.

When Darrel had finished, he collapsed on the floor, his sobs finally slackening, his eyes finally drying. He probably had no more tears left to use. His eyes were red and puffy and yellow and bloodshot, and his whole body seemed smaller, shrunken. But he was still bigger than Alex, who pulled up his pants and turned around and didn't know what to do.

"So I left," he told Lao. "I stayed with my sister for a while before I found my new place."

Lao too seemed shrunken, or maybe just lost for words. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Well. It's nothing like Afghanistan, but it's all I've been thinking of."

Silence stretched again between them, but this time, everything that was left unsaid remained so. The silence this time was pure, entire. The chorus of night bugs remained a simple music, with no meaning behind the sounds.

"We'd better get a move on," said Alex.

The drive home was silent.

Chapter 2

Alex and Lao decided that instead of driving all the way back to the city that night, they would stop at Alex's parents' house in Mount Forest on the way. Alex had known Lao since grade school, but Lao's parents had long ago moved to Hamilton's outer suburbs, along with many others who had followed the auto parts factory that shuttered its doors in the country and moved to Steeltown.

Alex snuck in the back door just as morning light was breaking, hoping he wasn't giving his mother a heart attack. He wrote a note on the kitchen table and hurried Lao down the steps to the basement, where they both ended up crashing on the recliners, late night television flashing on low volume before them. The faux wood-panelled walls pulsed in the periphery of their fading vision, the day's exercise muddying their perceptions and casting a dizzying sleepiness over the room.

Lao felt uncomfortable the next morning, sitting at the Robinsons' breakfast table, being made French toast by a chattering Mrs. Robinson, and feeling as though Alex's parents were trying to figure him out. Lao and Alex were friends in high school, but not close friends, not the kind of friends who met each other's parents. There was a distinct distrust surrounding Alex's parents as they said Lao's name, repeating his last name to each other, (*Savarin? Savarin.*) trying to remember if they knew Lao's parents. Lao couldn't help feeling ill-will towards them when they did this, as his family being Asian could hardly have escaped notice in the small town of Mount Forest, Ontario. He had been known as "the Chinese kid," and his parents ran the convenience store. He couldn't

have been more obvious had he walked in the room wearing slippers and a conical straw hat.

The Robinsons reminded Lao of the things he had chosen to forget: being the one so different from everyone else, the one who had to work at the store on weekends, early mornings and late nights. When his father got the job at the factory and it was just him and his mom running the store, working like crazy to keep everything going, as the place began to fall apart around them. And then Lao had left them, going to Thunder Bay to train for the army, leaving them with a store to run and an unspoken puzzlement, a disappointment, even, of his choice.

There was something else at work, too, though, that Lao couldn't quite place in the Robinsons.

"So, do you go to McMaster too then, Lao?" His name, Lao, seemed to taste unpleasant on Mrs. Robinson's tongue. She over-enunciated the vowel sound, turning it into several muddled syllables, turning his name into one long ahhh-owwww sound, as if she had stubbed her toe.

"No, actually, I'm on leave from the army."

"Oh my!" she said, and seemed unable to say anything else.

It wasn't long before Lao interpreted the Robinsons' eye and hand signals and leading questions. They wanted to know if Lao was Alex's boyfriend.

Lao immediately felt himself blushing, his cheeks uncomfortably warm. And then he worried that his blushing was more of a giveaway than anything, and he blushed even more. The Robinsons probably thought that Alex and Lao had slept together that night; it explained the halting voices calling from the steps in the morning, the nervous

glances Mr. and Mrs. Robinson shared as Lao and Alex had ascended the stairs one after the other. He felt a stabbing need to defend himself. He had ascended the stairs in only his boxers, what was he thinking?

When he first spent time with Alex after he had come out of the closet, Lao wondered about him. What makes someone gay, how on earth a man could fall in love – even be attracted – to another man? He wondered, too, if he had ever said something disparaging about gay people that had hurt Alex before anyone knew that about him. *That* – an entire being, an entire life and lifestyle summed up in a single word, *that*. Because how could you say anything different?

“We slept in the recliners!” Lao blurted. Everyone at the table turned to look at him. Lao faltered. “We slept in the recliners last night – separate recliners, they were separate, different recliners – we each had our own recliner, I mean, you know, *individual!* We slept in the recliners last night. And they were – I guess what I meant to say is that they were comfortable, really comfortable.”

Alex hid a snicker behind his fork. “Yes, we slept in separate recliners,” Alex said.

“They were separate,” Lao murmured, burying his face in his plate, shoveling steaming forkfuls of French toast into his mouth, maple syrup dribbling from his chin quicker than he could wipe it. His face blazed.

“I think we’ve established that,” said Alex, still smiling. His parents looked at Lao as if he were perhaps kind of slow. “Maybe what Lao means to say is that, no, we did not sleep together.”

Mrs. Robinson looked shocked at the mention of sleeping together, and Mr. Robinson was looking resolutely at his coffee mug, although Lao thought he might have seen the thinnest of smiles growing on Alex's father's face.

"I'm glad you were comfortable, dear," said Mrs. Robinson. "Those recliners are comfortable, I must agree." And Lao might have imagined it, but he felt that she was immediately warmer to him, perhaps even relieved, and she piled several more slices of French toast onto his plate.

Mrs. Robinson made valiant attempts at conversation after that, but no one seemed much interested in joining her. Lao's face was still red, his neck uncomfortably hot, and he decided that he would focus on eating as much breakfast as Mrs. Robinson was willing to give him. Mr. Robinson left to work in the barn, patting Lao on the shoulder as he walked by. And Alex? Lao couldn't place Alex. He wasn't speaking, but he didn't look despondent either. A sly smile was still working at the edges of his mouth, and he wasn't eating, simply watching the kitchen as if expecting a show.

Lao wondered if he had offended Alex somehow, but the need to defend himself had been greater. It needed to be said, he decided; it needed to be obvious, to everyone, and especially to Alex, that Lao wasn't interested. Whatever secret hopes Alex might have been nursing, whatever thoughts Alex might have had, whatever Alex might have been expecting, he needed to know that it wasn't alright.

And yet, there was something else. A need to comfort Alex, perhaps, or a wish to make himself understood. But the moment was gone. Mrs. Robinson was in the way anyway, and Lao knew that whatever he said could be taken grievously out of context. So he tried to put it out of his mind.

From the passenger seat, Lao watched the winding trail of highway 6 open up to five lanes as they left Wellington County behind. Claire's car, small yet powerful, outstripped the trucks and puttering vehicles that drove in the slow lane as Alex navigated the traffic easily. They approached the hill, the cut in the rock of the escarpment and descended into the city of Hamilton. The buildings and streets and orderly trees opened before them: the lake and the harbour to the left, the escarpment and the suburbs on the mountain to the right. And before them, the smog and smoke of Hamilton in the summertime. Lao watched as the city grew nearer and nearer as they descended the hill.

Alex stopped outside of Claire's apartment. Her car was a little worse for wear, smelling of their combined odours after the exercise of yesterday, muddied boot prints on the carpets, and crumbs from their fast food lunch littering the seats. Alex didn't seem to mind much, but Lao worried that Claire might be angry. He brushed the crumbs from his seat and looked disconsolately at the prints his boots had left on the rug.

Lao offered to deliver Claire's keys to her. Alex accepted this quietly and left, walking towards downtown. Lao had never actually seen Alex's place, but he knew it wasn't in the best neighbourhood. He thought of offering to drive him there with Claire's car, but Alex had already left. Lao hesitated, thinking he should call after Alex, say goodbye maybe, or a quick thanks. But a thanks for what? For being his friend?

Claire lived above an optometrist's office in Westdale, in what must have once been a grand old home, but was now falling into disrepair. The brick had been painted white, the fluted wooden trim was rotting and cracked. The front porch was lopsided, and Lao wondered how the optometrist got away with having such a shabby entrance to

his business. Lao entered the building and walked up the narrow, creaky steps to the apartments above.

Just as he was about to knock on her front door, it opened.

“About time,” Claire started, but then came to a full stop. She looked surprised, her mouth forming a perfect O.

“Hi,” Lao ventured. He hadn’t seen Alex’s sister since before he had left for Afghanistan. He had only returned from Afghanistan a couple of weeks ago, and reconnecting with old friends had been odd. Most of them still lived in Mount Forest, and Lao had no patience for driving long distances just to sit and listen to someone with whom he no longer shared anything. Alex seemed to have been making attempts at bringing Lao into his circle of friends, but even that was rather tiring.

“Hi,” she said. “Sorry, I thought you would be Alex. I heard someone coming up the stairs.”

She continued to stand there, seemingly mesmerized by his presence. Lao looked around, wondering what to do. He thrust out his hand holding the key. Claire made no motion to grab it, and he stood there, feeling foolish, with his hand thrust towards her. Finally, she took the key and pocketed it.

“Thanks,” he said. “For the car.”

“No problem.” She seemed to be considering something. Finally, she said, “Want a drink?”

Nodding, Lao was about to walk into the apartment when Claire stepped out into the hallway, and, turning, locked the door. She hurried down the stairs. Not knowing what else to do, Lao followed her.

She drove him to a nearly empty bar on Hess Street. It was only early afternoon, and Lao was surprised that even this place was already open. As they took a seat in a worn wooden booth, ordering drinks from a perky waitress, Lao manoeuvred his head into Claire's gaze. She seemed to speak in bursts, from what little he had seen of her today. She hadn't spoken in the car, hadn't explained where they were going or why. Even now, she looked away from him. When he reached the spot where she was gazing, their eyes locked, and she smiled.

"I didn't know you'd still be in Hamilton," Lao ventured. He straightened up, and her eyes followed him. He didn't quite know what was going on, why Claire wanted to have a drink with him, and why she wasn't speaking. "Last time I was home I thought you were taking that job in Toronto."

Claire flicked a hand. "Didn't take it. I thought it would be too hard, you know? I kinda regret that now."

"Why?"

"Work sucks," she smiled. "But you're back now and hopefully things will get better. I missed you while you were gone. I worried."

Surprised, Lao suddenly realized that there was someone back home who missed him when he was gone. Other than Alex, he corrected himself. Or did Alex miss him when he was gone?

The rough floors and dark, unadorned walls of the bar seemed to glisten in the afternoon light streaming through the small, grimy windows. The tattooed bartender looked up from where he was filling a cooler with cheap bottles of beer as the door opened and let in a couple more early customers.

Lao didn't know how to respond to Claire's admission. He felt suddenly guilty for even leaving in the first place, as if all he wanted to do was protect Claire from worry. "Oh," he said.

"Yeah," she answered. Her eyes seemed to Lao as if they were protected from him, heavy-lidded with long eyelashes. Claire watched the table, as if keeping a secret from him. Then she did something Lao did not expect. She leaned over the table, her lips extended, waiting for him. Lao hesitated. Then he leaned forward to meet her.

Claire's sandy blonde hair fell over both of their faces as they kissed; Lao noticed, for the first time, it seemed, that she was slightly taller than him. Her nose, above his own, pushed his head back, and he had to reach upwards to meet her, pushing his chin forward. When she pulled back, Lao had unfettered access to the depths of her solidly blue eyes. He searched her face for something solid he could hold on to, something he could remember later when he was alone: her thin lips, her timid nose, the smattering of freckles along the lower part of her face. He tried to memorize their positions.

Lao had known Claire since grade school. He had mostly known her as the bratty, perpetually scruffy girl who bossed people around on the playground, seemingly unconcerned that this made her unpopular. Her hair, always sandy blonde, always mussed up, always slightly wet with drool because she chewed on it when she was deep in thought: Claire's hair defined Claire. And now he had felt it shield his face on either side. And now, he thought, though still sandy blonde, her hair was anything but grubby. It was beautiful, silky. He wished he could run his hands through it.

Before he left for Afghanistan, a going-away party had been thrown, in honour of Lao. An entire party just for him: it seemed frivolous, wasteful. But Claire had come to

him that night, as he sat on the couch and smiled in a way that hurt his jaw and neck, and she sat beside him, close. So close, too close, she was Alex's sister and he saw her only as that scrubby, bossy little girl. He saw a smudge on her nose, and in a moment of bravery, ignoring his inner voice, he licked his thumb and reached out and tried to clean it away. But it wasn't a smudge; they were freckles. He meant it to be sexy, chivalrous, but the act of licking his thumb and wiping her nose seemed to gross her out. He supposed it was kind of gross.

Claire's expression was sheepish, her skin pulsed red between the freckles on the lower parts of her face. They had retreated from each other, across the table and as far back as the thick wooden benches, rather like church pews, would allow.

The kiss was soft and short, a first kiss, a shy kiss, a nervous kiss. An unexpected kiss.

"I . . . thanks," he said.

"For the kiss? You're welcome, I guess."

He had enjoyed the kiss, and told himself not to question her motives for kissing him; but he was still wondering about her. Claire, Alex's sister, not necessarily off-limits, but never really someone to whom he had given a lot of thought. As they sat there, Claire's confession of worrying about him still in his mind, Lao started to realize that he should have thought about her, that now he would likely be thinking about her a lot.

He looked thoughtful, and Claire noticed the crease in the skin between his eyes. The creases on his forehead.

“Why’d you join the army?” she asked suddenly, reckless. She immediately regretted the question.

The creases in Lao’s forehead relaxed and then rearranged themselves as he raised his eyes. She was painfully aware that, since meeting him on her doorstep, this was the first real attempt at conversation she had made. It wasn’t nerves that kept her quiet. She wasn’t sure, but she felt as though she were searching for something, something different.

He looked like he was remembering something. “I wanted to be buff,” he said, after a while. “I wanted to go through basic training and get strong. I was pretty scrawny in high school.”

Claire said nothing, still regretting her question.

“And maybe it seems kind of stupid, now,” he continued. “Everything. Joining because I was a teenager.”

“So are you having second thoughts? Are you not going back?”

She felt the bar get smaller as she waited for an answer. Their booth closed in within itself, wrapping them in its cocoon. But Lao spoke immediately, taking no time to think, as she had expected him to. “No second thoughts,” he said with finality, absolute certainty. “I’m going back whenever they let me.”

There it was, Claire thought. That something different.

But still, his answers weren’t answers; or, rather, he didn’t answer her questions the way she wanted him to. And there was that extra quality that made her feel that perhaps every word he spoke was ironic or insubstantial. Perhaps it was the curve of his eyebrows, the lilt in his voice. Or perhaps what she sensed was a complete lack of irony;

perhaps he was the most sincere person she had ever spoken to. But she still couldn't let go of the feeling that Lao was making fun of her, somehow, for some purpose.

Claire looked up to meet Lao's steady, direct gaze, his round head occupying most of her vision. He was almost too intense for her; she remembered this, that even as a child, as her younger brother's quiet friend, he was intense. He always seemed to crave eye contact; but meeting his eyes, the whites so huge, the retinas a dark colour she couldn't express – his eyes, so close to his smooth olive face – was difficult. He didn't seem to see more than anyone else, he didn't give her that sense of x-ray vision – it was the opposite. It was as if everything was being pulled into those eyes. She felt as though she might get pulled in, and the thought scared her. What space would she be sharing with his memories, the experiences that Lao must have had?

Lao smiled a crooked smile, and the low light of the bar reflected across his uneven teeth. He was tracing the condensation his glass had left on the wood of the table.

“So . . . what've you been up to?” he asked. Claire kept from rolling her eyes with difficulty. As if anything she could tell him would compare with Afghanistan. She hesitated before answering.

Her style of speaking was expansive. In a sentence she could reference a thousand things that Lao wanted to talk about, wanted to ask questions about. But she still spoke only when she knew he had nothing left to say.

“Working, mostly,” she answered him. “At the group home – the same one as before you left, remember?” Lao didn't remember, but he let her continue. “And I hate my job but I love the residents, you know? I should love it.” She blew her bangs out of

her face. “They’re all seniors, and they’re all mentally or developmentally disabled, the kind of people who need all the help they can get. I spend all day cooking and gardening and reading, helping them do what they want to do. I let them talk to me and I listen. But I have to invoke the gods whenever we’re out walking and have to cross a street or wait at a light. They never remember to stop and look both ways; you always have to tell them to do it. It gets so frustrating that you wish you could just live their lives for them, do everything for them, because everything is so difficult – ”

“Why don’t you?” he butted in. “Why can’t you do stuff for them?”

“Because we’re not supposed to. We’re supposed to let them make choices and live their lives.”

Lao looked at her.

“I should love it. I wish I loved it.”

“But you don’t.”

“No.”

He noticed something almost deadened in her eyes as she spoke, and he wondered what it was that made her job so terrible. She hadn’t explained, she never seems to explain, he thought. He was about to ask her, when he realized that the deadened look, the weary shape her mouth had taken, was because he was making her speak about her job. Again he felt that strange chivalry, as if wanting to keep Claire from ever having to look sad or uncomfortable. He cast around for something to say.

Lao had gone off on a tangent. Claire noticed that he never seemed to want to stay too long on any particular subject, as though worried they might talk it to an early death. He

told her about his parents, how they had called, one after the other, on one of the days that he was in a camp with a working sat phone. “I think that when people are together, they should stay together. You know?” he said.

Claire knew, but she didn’t agree. She said nothing. She felt that she didn’t want to hear him speak any more for a little while, once again worrying that he might turn out to be someone she wasn’t expecting.

“I just really believe in the sanctity of marriage.” His eyes were again pulling at her, and she struggled to look away. “And I know it’s my parents, so I’m bound to sound like a brat, wishing my parents would stay together. But they stood up there in a church, before God and everyone, and promised that they would spend their lives – eternity! – together. And now they’re throwing that all away, like a promise isn’t a promise for them, like a sacrament isn’t something binding, something beyond themselves.” He looked around the bar. “It’s a *sacrament*,” he repeated.

He seemed to have worked himself up, as if he had been preparing that speech for ages, likely ever since the telephone calls from his parents. And although the whole thing made Claire uncomfortable, she was at least grateful – for Lao’s sake – that the speech had been spent on her and not on his parents, the likely intended audience.

“Oh, yeah,” said Claire, searching for the right thing to say and the right way to say it. “Well, I agree that people should stay together and everything, but is divorce really that bad? Sometimes people just fall out of love. Right?” she added hopefully.

“Well, maybe,” he said, and Claire could tell that he was thoroughly unconvinced. “I’m not only talking about divorce. My parents don’t take anything they taught me

seriously enough. Or anyone. I don't think anyone takes the Bible seriously enough anymore."

Claire hadn't known this about Lao, hadn't realized that he was still religious. She tried to find something to say, some way to backtrack the conversation; but as it had been Lao who had brought it up, she couldn't think of a way out.

As a child, Claire had watched, sitting with her parents in the pews of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Mount Forest, as her younger brother Alex and many of Alex's friends, including Lao, became altar servers. It was never something she wanted to do, even though girls weren't allowed in the first place. But they seemed so self-possessed, so *proper*, as they walked about the front of the church in their black-and-white robes, fetching various glass or golden items for the priest to use as he sung his hymns from the centre of the altar. She remembered watching Alex ringing the little set of hand-bells during the longer parts of the mass. She always wondered how Alex or any of the other altar servers knew when to ring the bells, but it always seemed to coincide with Father Hardy kneeling and kissing something shiny on the altar.

And yes, they all attended St. Mary's Catholic school, the tiny sixties-era four-classroom building perched beside the imposing church, portables rambling outwards from the building. But it was because her parents made her go. Everyone's parents made them go to the Catholic school, it was nobody's choice. And after graduation, no one seemed especially invested in going to church, in believing in anything.

It was all very difficult for Claire to take seriously. Any of Claire's friends who for whatever reason remained religious slowly dropped out of her life. And as time went on, after moving to the city and being exposed to hardline atheists and those tender

Buddhist hipsters who pranced across campus, she took anyone who was religious, or, especially, Christian, to be simply ignorant, even stupid, people who obviously hadn't done enough reading or didn't know much about the world. Because how could you live in a world with so much knowledge, so much science and hard, incontrovertible fact, and continue to believe in something which was oppressive?

Despite his intense eye contact, Lao didn't seem to be picking up on any signals Claire was giving, as she shifted in her seat and continued to utter indistinct "ums" and "ahhs" as she tried to think of what she could say. He continued to gaze straight into her eyes. She decided on the truth. "I don't really think the Bible or God or whatever has much to do with anything," she said in a rush, almost immediately regretting the harsh tone her voice had taken.

"Oh," said Lao, uncertainly, as his intense eye contact broke. He sat far back on the bench. "I thought. . ."

"Thought? Thought what?"

"You're – you're wearing a chain with a cross on it." His eyes went to Claire's chest. And yes, right there, between her breasts, was the tiny silver cross that had been given to her by her grandmother, apparently announcing to the world, "Christian men, please look at my breasts, they are holy and I am a virgin and I love Jesus." Dammit.

"Well, I mean, my family's still Catholic and everything, I think I got this from my Grandma for Confirmation." She stopped, considering for a moment how to phrase what she was going to say. "I don't really –"

But Lao had started to speak too. "I wasn't trying –"

Both of them stopped and Claire could tell that Lao was feeling as flustered as she was. But she had started, and she was going to finish, so she plowed on.

“I don’t really believe in any of it – church stuff, God – anymore.”

Lao was still staring at her chest. She wished she hadn’t worn such a low-cut shirt.

“Okay,” said Lao, looking up again. He seemed to be deciding something.

“That’s okay.”

Heat rose in her face and neck. She didn’t want to be forgiven for not believing in God. She opened her mouth to say something but once again Lao had started to speak; this time, he beat her.

“I do believe in it. But it’s not a big thing, really. I’m sorry I brought it up.” The creases on Lao’s forehead seemed to affirm his sincerity. Claire deflated a bit, all her anger and discomfort gone.

“Forget about it. Hey – just because you’re Catholic doesn’t mean you can’t have another drink, right?”

Lao smiled and everything seemed whole again.

As he returned to their table with another couple of beers, Lao felt, finally, freedom. The plane trip had been a long one, the weeks at home had been strained, his parents locked in an uneasy truce. He was trying as hard as possible to keep from remembering, from reliving what had happened while he was away. Afghanistan is another place, he told himself. And now, here was Claire.

Lao didn’t consider himself a nightclub kind of guy, and he avoided the type of place that Claire had taken him to. This bar, one he had never been to before, was in

Hess Village, Hamilton's club district. He hated the dark rooms that smelt both of piss and the fruitiness of those ridiculous colourful drinks. And even though it was only late afternoon and the bar nearly empty, he still felt out of place when he entered.

But the booth they sat in seemed a place out of the natural order of things. His walk through to the bar seemed wrong, seemed oddly detached from the booth where they had spent the better part of the last two hours.

And freedom, yes, it was freedom that he was feeling. It was the opposite of his expectations of home when he sat, stewing, in the plane. His worry about having to live at home with his parents, about leaving behind friends, about being dislodged from the order, regularity, and comfort of the army. But being with Claire was somehow freeing.

"You don't strike me as a beer person," he said to her as he sat down, handing her the frosted mug.

"What do I seem like?"

"A girly drink. Not a ridiculous one, with the pomegranate or watermelon flavours, but something like a Long Island iced tea. Something with a name."

"Calling them 'girly drinks' is ridiculous, plenty of guys drink Long Island iced teas," she said, smiling.

"You know what I mean. Those drinks that have random names that you have to memorize. It's like they're for people in the know. And you seem like someone who's in the know. I just order beer because it's all I know how to order."

Claire looked rather flattered.

—

His tone was carefully light, but Claire knew, she just knew, that there was more that Lao wanted to say. She wished she could pry it out of him, but she didn't know how to make anyone just speak.

“Was Afghanistan just horrible?” she asked, and immediately regretted it. What kind of a question was that to ask? Why would she try to drag something out of him when he obviously didn't seem to want to talk about it? And, perhaps most embarrassing of all, was the non sequitur, the quick move from alcoholic beverages to war, betraying her thoughts, essentially telling Lao that Afghanistan and war was constantly on her mind, all that she wanted to know about him.

“No,” he said after a time. He smiled.

“Oh,” she said, slightly breathless. “I thought it would be.”

He spoke carefully, yet he didn't seem to be weighing his words. It was almost like an automatic answer, and Claire felt that he was pausing for her benefit. “There were horrible moments, but most of the time, I just felt really alive. Or not alive but *close*. Close to . . . something – to *it*.”

Claire watched him.

“Kind of like I was at the centre of the universe,” he said.

Claire almost envied the feeling that Lao was describing, something she didn't really know she had ever felt. She wasn't sure what she thought of the war, or of the army in general, but she liked the idea of Lao, of Lao in the army, of Lao overseas, of Lao as someone whom she could tell other people that she knew someone in Afghanistan, that she was invested somehow in its outcome.

It was almost as if Lao had guessed her thoughts. “It’s not like this is some kind of essential human experience, war – but maybe it is for me.” He paused. “But we’ve all got things that get us going, that get us up in the morning.” He looked at her, waiting for her to share something.

And this, Claire thought, is what you get for asking too-personal questions about someone else. They’ll want something back from you as well.

“I just realized that I don’t even know what you do,” he said. “Or what you want to do. When things go your way, when you’re not working just for the sake of work.”

Claire’s feeling of being close to something different fluttered away. Why had she come here? Why was she talking with Lao? Did she even like him?

Lao’s words twisted inside her. When things went her way. When she got things figured out. When was this going to happen? Claire was at the later end of her twenties and was still working on getting her certifications for becoming a personal support worker, a position she already filled at the group home, but for which she could neither rise in the organization nor quit and find a similar job somewhere else.

She was going to get a university degree, but had dropped out after her first year. She was going to become a social worker or a registered nurse, or something that sounded bigger than anything she currently was. But it never came around. She worked 60-hour work weeks split between a group home in the north end and waiting tables at an East Side Mario’s restaurant on the mountain – both positions that were supposed to be temporary but were now approaching the five-year mark. Her room in the expansive apartment above the optometrist’s office near Hess was also supposed to be temporary, but she had watched roommates come and go for years now. Their stays became so brief

that she no longer took any pains to learn their names. And money was stockpiling in her bank account but she could think of nothing she wanted to spend it on.

So she bought a nice car. She gave extravagant Christmas gifts to her family, relishing the fact that this made Alex angry, Alex who was living on student loans and beyond his means. Alex, who had an apartment all to himself, who refused to move in with Claire when she suggested it because he disliked having roommates, even though the rent was cheap and the kitchen to die for.

But it wasn't the cheapness of the apartment, or her great liking of the optometrist landlord that kept her living there. It wasn't the fact that Hamilton-Wentworth Community Living allowed her to do the job of a personal support worker without her certifications, and it wasn't the fact that most of her friends worked at East Side Mario's and she just couldn't leave. It was simply that she didn't want to move, to pack her belongings into boxes. She didn't want to have to write up a résumé, she didn't want to have to think about job interviews, and where she would be in five, ten, twenty years. About where she would be for the rest of her life. She wanted things to be temporary, she wanted – if it were even possible – for the rest of her life to remain in this same temporary moment.

“I don't really know, Lao,” she said, for the first time answering honestly to this question that people asked her more and more often. Because she didn't know what she wanted to do, what she wanted to be when she grew up. And that feeling felt even more ridiculous when cast against Lao, sitting there with his short hair, defined body, rigid posture – he was in his civvies, but it didn't matter. Claire pictured him in some sort of

camouflage uniform, ready to jump into a salute. It was there, it was all over him, who he wanted to be – who he already *was*.

As night fell, neither wanted to leave the protective sphere of their table, despite the increasing noise surrounding them, the explosion of sensory detail threatening to puncture their space.

Claire had driven Lao to the bar and it was late, too late to catch the city bus to the suburbs. When the bar closed, they climbed into her Toyota, Claire frowning at the crumbs and muddy bootprints on the carpet. They had sat at the table without buying drinks for quite a while, both forgetting about even ordering anything, or perhaps both hesitant to leave their sphere and enter into the normal human world of the bar. But it had been long enough that neither one of them worried out loud whether Claire might not be fit to drive, although both harboured inner reservations. For a while, as she drove the wide streets of downtown and onto the highway, neither of them spoke, both anxious to – what? Proclaim everlasting affection? Explain their eccentricities, their hesitancies, their motivations for saying any stupid thing they may have said? Leave each other and never return? Allow for the very real possibility that their differences were too great? Be completely and totally honest about how weird the night really was? Or just drop everything and start making out?

Neither had an answer and the drive was silent. Claire dropped Lao off at his parents' tiny Ancaster home; the clean windows and overflowing flower beds effectively hid the marriage falling apart within. She cut the engine and got out to walk him to the door. The windows were mainly dark, but a soft light emanated from the window beside

the front door, perhaps indicating that someone was still awake, in a back room somewhere, a television flickering or a small reading lamp still aglow. Lao found the spare key in the brickwork of the wall behind the mailbox, but hesitated before he put the key in the lock. He turned around, facing Claire. They stood awkwardly together on the narrow stoop, but neither one of them made a move. After what felt to both of them like several long minutes, Claire wished Lao goodnight and walked to the car. Lao stood there a moment, watching as the car started, flared headlights, and shifted into gear. Then he turned around and entered his parents' house.

Chapter 3

Alex was trying to make something grow in the tough, overgrown flower beds that fronted his building. He asked his landlord if he could use a piece of the beds, and the super had told him to go crazy, “No one cares about that piece a shit. Anything you do there would be a fuckin’ improvement.” So on his next trip home, Alex rounded up the garden equipment he had hated as a child – rake, hoe, shovel, hose, and a small can of insecticide dust. He packed these into an unused hockey bag and made a commotion on the Greyhound bus on the way back, his bag clanking in ways that hockey bags normally shouldn’t.

Endless days of stone-picking, weeding, watering, more weeding, and harvesting, this is what Alex remembered of farming. He remembered resenting his parents, vowing that he would never have a garden when he grew up, that it was too much work for such little payoff. His father planted fields of potatoes and cabbages, which sat and slowly decomposed in their root cellar all winter. The worst of it was when someone, in the midst of making dinner, would call Alex and ask him to grab something from the root cellar. The creaky stairs to the basement, the damp, dank dark that a single bulb on a pullstring couldn’t quite allay. The feeling that someone or something was watching from the corners. He would fill his arms with whatever his parents wanted and run upstairs as fast as he could, slamming the basement door shut behind him. And to make matters worse, he’d get a telling-off from his parents for slamming doors.

But this felt different. This was a project that Alex felt good about. He weeded and raked the small plot in front of the building. He tilled the earth with the shovel, he molded the earth into mounds, he planted seeds in the earth and covered them with a

layer of soil, a slight pat to hold them in, like tucking them into bed. He connected the hose to his kitchen faucet and ran it through his front window, and watered.

When Claire's car pulled into the drive, Alex was wearing a pair of his father's overalls which fit surprisingly well. She stepped out in her high heels, a very thin dress clinging to her frame, and snorted at the sight of him. "So this is what you're wearing tonight?" she called across the yard.

Alex walked towards her. Her smirk irritated him. He wanted to give her a hug or a pat or something, to transfer some of the dirt on his hands and clothes to her ridiculously perfect appearance. He refrained from doing so.

"God, you look like Dad," she said.

"Shut up."

"What happened to 'Mom and Dad are freaks, I'm never touching mud again once I'm out of here'?"

Alex looked around, rather proudly, at his work. The lawn was a mess, clumps of soil strewn everywhere, water from the hose pooling at the natural depression near the drive. But he wasn't looking at the lawn. The small plot running along the brick of the front of the building was pristine, beautiful deep, damp earth in rows, ready for the seeds implanted there to spring up into plants fully formed. "I'm over it," he said, turning back to her. "I want to get muddy again."

"Just as long as you're not planting any cabbages," said Claire. She got back into her car and drove it to the back parking lot. Alex grabbed the hose and tried to spray off most of the mud that was caked on his hands, arms, elbows, and boots.

Claire sat in her car reading a magazine. She looked up when Alex trudged around the side of the building. “Just get dressed, I don’t want to be late this time. They always make fun of us.”

“The Lazy Robinsons, I know,” said Alex, grinning.

A friend of theirs, Jason, had booked a room at Skimpy’s Pub for a private party. A graduation party. Alex hadn’t wanted to go, as it was the graduation party for all of the friends he had made at university in first year. He would of course not be graduating this term. Next year didn’t look good either. That was the problem with dropping out and re-applying on several different occasions. He might never graduate, he thought. It didn’t really bother him that much, but it did sting slightly to know that the people he had started with were so far ahead of him.

Claire was a bundle of nervous energy; Alex could feel it through the drive. He ran his hand through his still-wet hair and gripped his jeans to keep from telling her to slow down, to take her turns more carefully, to keep from braking so sharply. Her hands were in continuous drumming motion, her driving was jerky, stopping and starting with needless zeal. When they arrived, she hung back by the car, her hands a mess, tangled in each other. Alex looked back at her quizzically. She shook her head, telling him to go on.

Skimpy’s Pub was an old converted mansion in downtown Hamilton. Trembling wooden staircases led upstairs from the noisy pub below to the dining rooms above. All the windows were slightly darkened, the walls wood-paneled and chipped, the floor creaking hardwood. The room that Jason had booked for the occasion was large, with a pool table, some dart boards, even a small bar near the doors, with a bartender. It felt like

the kind of thing much older people would do: hold private parties that have their own bartenders.

Several people were already there, milling around, mumbling to their neighbours, when Alex opened the door that proclaimed, slightly rudely, he thought, that beyond these doors was off-limits because of a Private Party. The sign was homemade and bore all the markers of being made and put there by Jason, right down to the supercilious capital p's in the words "Private Party." Alex hadn't been late at all. There were certainly not enough people here for a Jason-party, and Alex wished that he were a bit later, so he wouldn't be forced to make small talk with the few people who were already here, none of whom he knew very well anymore.

It was at least half an hour before Alex realized that Claire still hadn't arrived.

It was ridiculous, Claire knew, to be so worried. She crossed and re-crossed her hands in her lap. She crossed her legs, and then she crossed her arms over her chest, the fingers on both hands crossed, until she was as crossed in limbs as a human being could possibly be, and she worried that she might never be normal again. She relaxed slightly, letting her arms fall to her sides, her fingers untwine and relax in her hand, letting her legs revert to their natural positions, stretched out slightly before her in the car. Her moment of claustrophobia over, she again started fidgeting.

She hadn't seen Lao since she'd dropped him off at his parents' house that night several weeks ago. They had spoken on the phone, short, awkward conversations that culminated in long pauses that stretched so tautly that soon they became impossible to

break. A couple of times she had hung up without even saying goodbye, so odd it would have been to have to break a long, tense silence only to say goodbye.

She wasn't even sure what she was doing. She ought to go up to the party, say something nice to Jason for hosting, promise to host something in the near future that she never would actually follow through with. She didn't need to go up with Lao, as if this were some high school dance that required partners for entry.

She left her car three times, almost made it to the door, and then hurried back into her car, deciding to wait for Lao. She smiled at people she knew who arrived slowly over the course of the next half hour. She mentally tortured herself for having the audacity to – what? show up to a party? Exist?

Alex appeared at the front doors of Skimpy's, sidestepping an early drunk who was neither leaving nor staying, hovering in plain sight. Squinting through the parked cars in the municipal lot, Alex found Claire's car, and his eyes narrowed in concern to see her there. She rolled down the window as he approached.

"Are you waiting for someone?" Alex looked around the lot, as if expecting to see a gallant gentleman arriving in a tux, holding flowers.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"You'll laugh."

"Okay..."

Claire looked at the steering wheel.

"Well, if you feel like telling me whatever it is you're hiding, I'll be inside." Alex looked at her with concern. "Unless you want me to wait with you?"

“No,” she said, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel, glancing helplessly at Alex. “I’m not in need of saving or anything, I’m just nervous.”

“Okay,” he said, turning, and jogged back to the pub.

It had to be carefully timed, Lao knew, the arrival to a party. He dreaded events with large groups of people, especially people he knew. Why did they have to make an event out of everything? Why couldn’t getting together with people just happen more organically? Why, when you meet someone on the street, or in a coffee house, can’t you just have a nice conversation with them at that moment, instead of making promises with each other to have some kind of giant get-together with the old gang, *Let’s get everyone back together again, wouldn’t that be great?*

He figured that a couple of hours after the start of the party was about the right time to arrive. He took the bus from his parents’ place to a coffee shop nearby to Skimpy’s, and waited there until he felt the time was right to arrive.

Walking through the municipal lot beside the pub, the day shortening, light drifting now from behind the mountain, Lao saw someone, a girl, crying in a car. This kind of thing always made him uncomfortable. The right thing to do would be to go to her and help her with whatever was wrong. But it would be strange to just go up to a random girl and comfort her. He decided that since she was in her car, that meant that she wanted privacy. As he was about to turn from the car, the girl looked up, saw him watching, and waved.

—

“I shouldn’t be crying, I don’t know what’s gotten into me,” Claire said. She looked up at Lao, who was watching her, almost warily, through her car window. She felt it was all over: she was officially that awful girl who cries over boys. She used to hate those girls. She still hated them.

Lao made a motion towards the seat beside her. She nodded and unlocked the passenger side door. He walked around the front and sat down with the cursory huff that accompanies lowering oneself into a car. He pulled the door close but didn’t slam it. The inside lights stayed on. Claire watched him the entire time. He moved slowly and steadily, the way he always seemed to carry himself. His gaze placid, his limbs at correct, if a bit stiff, angles, Lao moved as if at complete ease in the world.

He gave her a fatherly smile and Claire’s heart sank. She couldn’t handle a patronizing talk. He opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again. He gazed steadily out the windshield, his eyes fixed on something out there, unmoving. Then he turned back to her, moving most of his body with him. “I didn’t feel like going up there too soon anyway. Let’s just sit for a while.”

Claire nodded, and leaned against him, slightly awkwardly, over the middle console between them. Her side immediately hurt, jammed as it was against the rigid plastic, but she didn’t move. Lao’s hold was comforting.

Jason was telling a story to a group that had naturally formed around him when Alex reentered the grown-up party room. The room finally felt full, lively, and Alex looked around to find someone he knew. The room was full of people from Alex’s various lives;

strange how those different parts of us that we keep so separate sometimes wind up strangely mashed together, he thought. There were people in his year at McMaster University, and there were people from Mount Forest, his life before university, who had moved or were staying in the Hamilton area. There were people from his McDonald's job; he had invited them, but hadn't expected them to actually show up.

Jason Van Bron, medium of height and build with an already-receding tuft of sandy hair, was a friend of Alex's from high school. They were close all throughout grade school, and when both applied and were accepted at McMaster, it was only natural that they should request to be roommates there as well. Jason was more at home in the world than anyone Alex knew. Their first year of university together, Jason knew half the people in first year, pretty much everyone in their residence, and was practically class president of his first-year engineering class. Alex couldn't be called shy, but he wasn't the big man on campus either. He often wanted to be as popular and well-liked as Jason, but he easily settled for being the most popular and well-liked guy's best friend.

However, their paths diverged, fairly easily, as university progressed. Alex was in a general arts program, not for any specific love of the humanities or social sciences, but because he didn't know what else he could possibly be doing. Jason, who had never really shown any interest in or aptitude for science or math as far as Alex could remember, was suddenly determined to become a mechanical engineer, and his marks were, surprisingly, above average. Alex, of course, was secretly gay and longed to tell Jason, for whom he nursed a mild crush; nothing serious, but enough to propel Alex into paroxysms of guilt when he thought too long and hard over the entire thing. Jason was decidedly heterosexual, leaving a string of disappointed girls in his wake in first year

alone. He wasn't especially handsome, but had a magnetism and confidence that attracted not just girls but whole groups of girls. Jason could often be seen at the centre of a chattering group of female admirers in the quad or around campus, completely at ease, as if unaware that he was living the fantasy of most of the guys around him.

When Alex finally came out, Alex and Jason were already moving in different social circles, and Jason wasn't one of the first to know. Rumour spread quickly once Alex released the few favoured of his friends from the bonds of secrecy he had once sworn them to. What seemed to bother Jason most was not the secret that Alex had kept for so long, even while they were roommates, not the lies Alex had told to hide his secret, not the betrayal of sexual orientation; it was instead that Jason had to hear of it from a friend of a friend of a friend. Alex regretted this only slightly. He was high on the freedom of having come out, he was filled with righteous anger that he ever had to remain in the closet in the first place, and he made friends with radical queers who had long, passionate, one-sided debates on the problems with the *dominant hegemonic heterosexual ideologies enforced and encoded within societal norms and values*. He wore tight-fitting pants and shirts and styled his hair in coloured spikes and waves that defied gravity. He screamed at people who said "That's gay" when they meant that something was stupid, even though he had used the expression for years to hide what he had considered shameful. He went to political rallies and discussion groups and everywhere he participated in discussions that put down white heterosexual males like Jason in order to reverse the binary. He came to see Jason as the representation of everything that Alex had hated about himself for so many years, and the representation of the people who were putting him and his newfound community down. It was easy to do

this because Jason was a white heterosexual male who had lots of sex with lots of women and talked about it all the time. Alex wanted some revenge for having to put up with such discussions for years.

It wasn't long before Alex tired of being radical all the time, and began to realize that Jason had never treated Alex the way Alex was treating Jason. At least, the way Alex was treating Jason in his head. He'd never had the courage to call Jason a homophobe; instead, whenever he was ranting about heterosexual men, he imagined he was speaking to Jason. Really, the only slight Alex had performed on Jason was a sort of prolonged silent treatment, a tactic that Alex had known since grade school didn't work particularly well on Jason. He became rather cross when he detected the silent treatment, but instead of pleading with the assailant to speak to him again, as most people, including Alex, would do, Jason would simply go and find another friend to be with for a while.

Things were still working their way out, but Alex had mellowed greatly over the intervening couple of years. He reinitiated the lines of communication with Jason, and they were friends again (or, from the point of view of Jason, still). Beyond one awkward conversation shortly after they reunited, in which Jason, drunk or high, had asked Alex if he ever had a crush on him and Alex had replied untruthfully, Alex felt the line of their relationship had smoothed.

As the night progressed, a group formed around Alex and Jason. Jason characteristically clutched a pint of beer in both of his large hands, and Alex tried to look airy and nonchalant, even though he was enjoying himself. Whenever he was around these people from university, Alex felt as though he needed to play a role; with these people, he wasn't sure anymore what his role was or should be, but he decided to play up

a sort of former-roommate loveable bitch persona. They were reminiscing about a time when Alex pulled a child from the water at the beach. He thought about that day sometimes, knowing that it could have ended differently, that if it had, there would be nothing to reminisce about – it would just be a painful memory. But it was a happy memory for Alex, because it ended the way it did. Jason mimed Alex’s freak-out face, dancing around a bit, exaggerating Alex’s distress on that day.

“And all I can see is Alex’s face. His eyes were so red because he had been smearing sun lotion on his face right before he jumped in the water,” Jason told the group. Alex grinned like a fool. Loving the story, loving the embarrassment, he nodded Jason on. “And he’s basically blubbering, he’s crying because of the sunscreen in his eyes and he’s talking out loud to himself, rocking backwards and forwards a little bit.”

“I was trying to remember how to do CPR,” Alex butted in, his standard response. Jason told this story often.

“But,” Jason continued to the table, “he didn’t need to remember because there are like twelve trained lifeguards standing all over the place and they’re all trying to get to Alex and the kid, but Alex won’t let them. He’s bending over and starts doing mouth to mouth breathing, and he eventually gets light-headed because he’s not taking enough of his own breaths.” The crowd laughs. “It worked, though. The kid started coughing up water and stuff. Then Alex stands up,” and here Jason stood up to mime the events yet again, “sways a little, says something like ‘he’s alive and I’m light-headed,’ and then he falls to the ground.”

Most of the table heard the story before and they laughed before the punch line as Jason, always over-committed, actually fell to the floor in a heap, having resisted even

the temptation to put out a hand to break his fall. Then, from the floor, he kept talking over the laughter.

“And when the ambulance came, they put Alex on a stretcher and drove away without the kid Alex was trying to save from drowning! Alex was just so out of his element, he kept asking the EMS guys if the kid was OK and they didn’t know what he was talking about.”

Alex never really understood what Jason meant by that last part, that he was “out of his element.” He said it on other occasions too; whenever talk turned to his infamous rescue attempt, Jason would invariably say that he was out of his element. Alex didn’t really think it was true. I mean, he thought, I saved the kid, didn’t I? I made myself pass out trying to save him, but still he woke up. Alex remembered the kid waking up, because he puked all over Alex’s bare knees in the sand. He never really thought that “out of his element” was the right choice of words.

But for some reason, it stuck as the way to describe the event. Not only because of Jason, but because of Yannick.

Yannick’s name wasn’t really Yannick. It was Peter Schlutt. But Alex liked to call Peter Yannick, in his mind, and to other people in the know. Yannick was the name of the guy in Alex’s French textbooks who was always getting into trouble ordering at restaurants, applying for jobs, or talking to people in the past tense. Yannick, or Peter Schlutt, was rather small and slight, with severely parted, always wet, black hair. He liked to follow Jason and Alex around campus back in first year. He roomed with a surly football player down the hall in their residence, and could often be seen bobbing around the hallways, poking his head into the various rooms to see what people were up to, so

that he could avoid his own. He had always annoyed Alex, but Jason never really seemed to notice him. Neither Alex nor Jason ever invited him anywhere, because Alex found his presence exhausting, and Jason simply never thought of him. But others of their friends took pity on Yannick and brought him along whenever there was something going on.

What annoyed Alex most about Yannick was that he was a repeater. In conversations, in action, in life. *Yannick est un répéteur; Yannick répète des choses, Yannick répète des phrases, Yannick répète des expressions.* No sooner had anyone finished a story or anecdote than Yannick would start telling everyone the story again.

And, true to form, tonight, as soon as Jason had finished his story, his last words echoing over the tables from the floor where he still theatrically lay, Yannick started telling the story again, but from his point of view. His voice, mellow and precise, took over, his puppy-dog phrasing already grating on Alex's nerves.

“And at that point, Jason had just run over to us to tell us that a kid drowned, and we were like, Oh my god, really? But we didn't know that what Jason meant to say was that it looked like a kid might be drowned and that Alex was trying to save him. No, what we were thinking was that Alex had watched a kid drown, and we were kind of freaked.”

Someone else tried to add what they had thought had happened when Jason had come and hurriedly told them the incomplete news, but Yannick talked over them.

“So I mean, we ran over, of course, and there was a crowd, remember that?”

And Alex sat there thinking, There wasn't much of a crowd, you idiot.

“And when we got there, Alex was screaming something like ‘Does anyone know CPR?’”

And Alex sat there thinking, I didn’t scream, Jason just said that I was mumbling to myself, and I *know* CPR, Jesus.

“And I had turned around to say something to someone else, I think it was Claire, and when I turned around again, Alex was on the ground and the drowned kid was sitting up, coughing!”

Laughs rang through the group, but they were fewer, more forced. Or maybe that was his own interpretation, Alex thought. Maybe Yannick’s version *was* as entertaining as Jason’s, maybe no one else thought that Yannick’s version was completely unnecessary, not to mention inaccurate. But why did Yannick think his version even merited being told? Most of the major events of the story happened outside of his range of vision!

Alex pointedly left the group, stepping over Jason’s still-limp form on the floor, as Yannick started talking again. Just as Yannick’s voice almost melted in the background noise, someone called Alex’s name. Alex looked back to see Jason’s hand reaching out from behind a group of legs. Alex could only see his feet and the bottoms of his jeans; the rest of his prostrate form was hidden behind the legs of the group still around Yannick, which, Alex was pleased to see (although he wasn’t proud of it), had thinned considerably. Alex went back, and grabbed Jason’s hand, and lifted him to his feet.

“You’re going to hurt yourself one of these times,” said Alex, grinning, as they walked toward the bored bartender.

“It’s worth it,” Jason’s voice boomed.

Alex looked back to Yannick. “He’s in rare form tonight. God, I’d like to shut him up.”

“Who?” said Jason, unconcerned. He was looking at a group at the back of the room. “Come on, I want you to meet someone.” He grabbed Alex’s elbow while Alex acted like he was going along only grudgingly.

A very carefully-good-looking man was smiling as someone in the group he was with was doing impressions of someone they all seemed to know. At points the whole group would laugh hysterically, but then hush quickly, as the impersonator seemed to keep going. Everyone laughed except for the man; his smile seemed for the benefit of those around him.

Jason led Alex right to the good-looking man; Alex could certainly say this for Jason, that he was direct. If he were any more direct, he might be described as a freight train, or a bulldog. But he was a level below such names being applied to him; when he pushed a fair-haired girl in an overly-frilly dress on his way to bringing Alex to meet the stranger, he did apologize suavely, as a freight train or bulldog would not.

Alex knew right away what was going on, and he both resented Jason and felt a rush of affection for him. The man’s name was Sam, and he was almost too pretty to be allowed, Alex thought. He was thin, tall, perfectly dressed – casual but not sloppy, and the ripped jeans looked both designer and new – and his eyes were large, softly brown, and expressive. Alex felt a gut-punch when Sam repeated Alex’s name, and his hand, not too rough, not too soft, shook Alex’s.

Sam was obviously gay, and that was obviously the only reason why Jason thought he should be introduced to Alex. A small rush of righteous anger from his not-liking-Jason days surged, but it melted completely when Sam repeated Alex's name in his soft but deep voice. It's incredible how hearing your name spoken by a beautiful person can make you feel. And in complete opposition to the righteous anger, Alex felt the gesture that Jason probably intended, and appreciated him for this. Jason left with an embarrassing twinkle in his eye.

Alex made small talk with Sam, liking him more and more, especially when his otherworldly prettiness began to fade slightly. Alex noticed when Sam smiled that he was almost horse-teethed, that he had some kind of a nervous twitch, and that his dark hair wasn't quite as meticulously and perfectly styled as Alex had at first thought. There was an ungainly scruffiness about Sam that Alex appreciated, a sort of mispresence, or lack of understanding of his place in the world, that made him seem even more like a real person.

Others who were not in the know that Jason was setting them up started talking to Sam and Alex, and eventually a group had formed. Alex cringed when he saw Yannick's head swivel in their direction, and he tensed completely when he saw Yannick bobbing towards them in his peripheral vision.

Alex made to turn away, when Yannick's hand grasped his shoulder, and he wormed his way into the centre of the small circle. Yannick chose to ignore whatever conversation had been in the group before he arrived; he looked straight at Sam, whom he seemed to perceive to be the informal leader of this group (as Yannick was given to hero-

worship), and started talking again about Alex's escapades with the drowning kid at the beach.

Alex watched Sam's face nervously, but Sam was polite, far too polite. He let Yannick talk, smiled at the appropriate moments, but seemed unable to force a laugh at points where Yannick seemed to demand one. The rest of the group provided the nervous laughter, however. At a rare break in the story, Sam turned to Alex and said, "Actually, I heard Jason talk about this from across the room. I think his voice carries more than he knows." He looked at Alex as if sharing a private joke.

Yannick looked from face to face and then resumed his story. He concluded, saying, "He was just so out of his element, so out of his element, eh?"

And Sam responded, "Actually, it sounds like he did everything right. . . except fainting." He glanced at Alex, a half-smile creeping up his mouth. "It sounds like he was more in his element than the rest of you."

Alex's insides swooped, and he actually felt weak in the knees, like what happens in songs or old movies. He had a glorious vision in his head of him swooning and Sam catching him, cradling his head and shouting to the heavens for revenge. Alex's senses were blank for a moment as this vision flitted through his mind and his insides continued their swooping. He came back to the conversation to find that someone had told a joke, and Sam beside him was laughing, a decidedly unsexy laugh, loud and squawky and out of control; he even snorted, and then reddened, hopelessly embarrassed by it. Alex, watching him, never wanted anyone or anything more.

—

“I have a confession,” Lao said to Claire as she leaned against his arm. They had been sitting like this, in the car, he in the passenger seat, and she leaning over the middle console to lie against him from the driver’s seat, for almost half an hour, neither speaking. He felt calm, close, not ready to let the moment end.

Claire, finally dry-eyed, gave a small sniff. “What is it?”

“A couple weeks ago – when we met in the bar –you asked me about Afghanistan.”

“Yes?”

“And you asked if it was horrible.”

“Yes. I remember. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to – ”

“No, that’s not what I mean. What I want to tell you is that I lied about it. Well, I partially lied.”

Claire didn’t say anything, but he could feel a silent inquisitiveness in her body, slightly tensed against him.

“It was horrible. I didn’t make up any of that other stuff – I did feel it all. But it was horrible, yes.”

“But why did you lie?”

“I don’t know,” said Lao, truthfully. He thought about it a moment. “I think, maybe, that I was lying to both of us. I’m not sure if I even knew it was horrible.” He paused. “You’re the first person to actually ask me that. People are always wondering what it’s like, I can tell. But they never ask.”

“So you’ve been lying to yourself? About whether it’s horrible or not?”

“I guess.”

“But – how could you not know it was horrible? How could that be something that you don’t notice?”

“I don’t know.”

They were silent for another long time after that, Lao comfortable in himself, surprised at how good it felt to tell her. She didn’t say anything either. Her body was tight against his, her hair splayed over her face. She was breathing shallowly. He tried to take deep, steady breaths, her head against his shoulder rising slowly with each deep breath, in order to calm her down. Eventually her breathing slowed and matched his rhythm.

It felt like hours that Claire and Lao were sitting there, but the pulsing green digits of the clock on the dashboard before Claire’s nose told her it had only been about twenty minutes since Lao’s confession – for lack of a better word. It wasn’t really a confession, since he hadn’t been purposefully lying, she thought. She felt closer to him, but also afraid that he would pull away.

“You know, my brother and all his friends are in there,” she said, nodding her head at the dilapidated mansion with glowing windows in the left-hand corner of the windshield. “When they get together, they like to tell stories about what they used to do. I’ve probably heard the one about the baby goat twenty times.” Lao laughed. He had been in on that particular story. “Or the one about my brother saving a little boy at Sauble Beach.”

“Yep.”

“And I know they’re more Alex’s friends than my friends, but I like most of them anyway. And that little twerp Jason used to put cowshit on my bicycle seat whenever he came to visit Alex.” She felt Lao laugh under her. “But I feel like, at some moment, it became my job to look after Alex. I mean, he’s always doing something that’s getting him into trouble. I think he’s caused my parents to lose years off their lives. They don’t ever tell the story of when he fell off that cliff near Webster’s Falls cause he was both drunk and stoned and he practically split his head open. They don’t tell the story of when he was unreachable for *weeks* and my parents called me every day to see if I found anything about him, and it turned out he was in Ottawa for that gay rights peace march and then stayed there with those anarchist twats, without telling anyone at all that he was going.”

Lao said, “No, they never talk about that.”

Claire giggled. “Alex brought one home one time. An anarchist, or whatever. Everything he was wearing was ripped and patched and had chains dangling. He jingled everywhere he went. He got super pissed when he stepped in mud when he got out of the car because his shoes were new and special or something, but he acted like he didn’t care, because he’s not supposed to be a capitalist and like buying new things. I think Alex was working things out, because they got super in Mom and Dad’s face, and the anarchist guy, I don’t remember his name – it was something like Jaden or Rolf or something ironic like that – told Dad he was a capitalist pig, and Dad votes NDP like all the time. They tried so hard to be accommodating, but that just seemed to make Alex angrier.” Claire paused, looking at the glowing numerals but not really seeing them. “But that’s the thing. You’re gay, people say you’ve got stuff to work out. I mean, I know there are homophobes and

gay-bashers and stuff out there, but the whole thing just makes Alex so freaking special. I never got any time to work stuff out. I never got to run off with some anarchists.”

Lao’s voice was gentle. “Technically, neither did Alex. He didn’t *get* to run off with the anarchists, he just did.”

Claire’s side had gone numb from the middle console digging into her. At first she didn’t mind the pain, thought of it as payment for being able to rest upon Lao’s shoulder. But now it became too much. She leaned away from Lao, tenderly twisting her body around. “I should have gotten the model with a middle seat instead of this stupid console,” she said.

“Do you want to go inside now?” Lao didn’t sound hopeful about the possibility.

“No.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t want to be in charge anymore. I don’t want to be responsible.”

Lao looked at her. “Is that why you’re here? To look after Alex? To look after everyone?”

“No. Alex is fine now. He’s been fine for a while.”

“Then what? What do you feel responsible for?”

Claire looked into Lao’s eyes and again felt the gravitational pull they seemed to exert.

The night shone. Every light was a halo. The cars glittered, glimmered, drifted from their spots, haphazardly placed in lots and along streets, and stopped at traffic lights, and moving carefully around corners. Alex raised a hand in front of his face and turned it

palm forward. The lines etched in the flesh there converged and softened and sometimes disappeared altogether.

Alex was laughing, happily. Everything was in its place, life was moving on pace, and right now, he was happy. His hand was joined with another; he looked over to his left and saw, blurred slightly, the outline of Sam laughing, emitting a snort, laughing again. Alex squeezed Sam's hand, relishing the touch. Nothing else was needed than this physical contact, this communion with another's hand.

Jason appeared, giddy, in Alex's face. He said something blurry, and Alex stopped him, laying his free hand on Jason's shoulder, and asked him seriously to repeat himself.

“Buses have stopped running.”

Jason fluttered in his vision, and a note of panic from a source completely outside of Alex jolted temporarily in his stomach. But Alex forced it out again, concentrated on the hand in his hand. He looked at Sam and leaned forward to kiss him. Their foreheads knocked, their noses smushed, but their lips found each other, and here it was, their first kiss. Alex wanted to be able to remember it, so he paid full attention to what was going on. He found his hand was exploring the side of Sam's face, his other still holding Sam's, but the fingers clenching, running along Sam's fingers.

It wasn't a very dignified kiss, there were people laughing. Funny how Alex didn't care. His lips tingled, his every nerve ending tingled, everything was building in a giant moment overhead, building, building, rushing. His penis was hard, he pressed his pelvis against Sam's leg. How long was this kiss lasting, he wondered. He had been trying to pay attention so he could remember, but his mind was drifting all over Sam's

body, the electrical pulses from his lips and fingers were slowing his mind even further. He threatened to black out.

And then everything stretched out before him like the creation of the earth. He understood his place in the universe. It all made sense. Stars wheeled. Streetlights fluttered. Sam's mouth, Sam's beautiful, delicious lips, receded. He would remember this. He swore he would remember this.

Chapter 4

Alex didn't see Darrel again for several weeks after the incident in the baseball dugouts. After the kiss, and several other, longer kisses, and a period – brief but long enough to raise doubts – of lying together on the ground, Darrel's hand in Alex's, Alex's head resting on Darrel's bulky shoulders, they stood up, less shaky now, and couldn't look each other in the eye. Alex had gone red in the dark. He could feel the heat pricking from his cheeks to his neck. Darrel's hands were balled and he was shifting his feet as they stood facing each other, not knowing what was happening on the other's face. Then they left. Darrel walked to his parents' house, only a couple blocks away from the park. Alex walked in the opposite direction, back to where his father's truck stood, parked in front of the tavern on Main Street. He unsteadily opened the driver's side door and climbed in, feeling all limbs and clunky, as if he wasn't entirely sure which way was up. He put the keys in the ignition and thought better of it; instead, he reclined the seat as far back as it would go, wrapped his arms around his slightly-shaking body, and slept until first light.

Alex spent the next two weeks working at the grocery store with a renewed fervour. He spoke little; he avoided yelling at Kevin and quietly cooked the stocklists to make the extra yogourt disappear. If anyone had been looking closely enough at the books, they would have noticed the inconsistency, but Alex was considered trustworthy.

He stocked shelves and unloaded trucks as efficiently and quickly as anyone thought possible; he delegated little, preferring, for the moment, to revel in the order and necessity of stocking, counting, cleaning. He picked up extra shifts so he could work through the weekends, watching over the teenagers and grown-ups alike.

Alex didn't really know what he was thinking. When he was alone, stuck in a repetitive task or chore, he tried to examine himself. It seemed impossible. His mind strayed often to the dugouts, to Darrel. But each time the memory was laden with additional meaning and possibility. Often there was someone watching over them as they fought, tumbled to the ground, and then kissed. Alex didn't know if it was his father, his dead grandfather, his priest, God, or someone else. Sometimes the figure seemed to take the form of his sister. Other times, there was no one there but the two of them; and as they lay on the dust and gravel, a life stretched before them.

He knew it was silly, even strange, but Alex hadn't ever been sure if gay men kissed each other. It seemed like such a tender, everyday, normal thing to do: kiss. And yet in Alex's mind, to be gay was to be untender, different, the antithesis of anything he had seen the married adult couples around him do. To kiss – something his parents did – was something life-affirming, loving. He hadn't even been sure if gay men loved.

And yet, he was sure, ever since his first crush on Tom, that he was gay. It was a simple enough realization, but a crushing blow. Alex's first thought about the whole thing was that God had given him everything – a home, a loving family, wealth, opportunity – and to even the score, He decided to give Alex something to make such an easy life that much harder. This thought was still with him. It made being gay something special instead of something deranged, unnatural. And yet it made being gay a burden, a

cross to bear. But, having kissed Darrel, suddenly the burden seemed like something he didn't have to bear alone. It was something he could share with another person, with Darrel.

Alex worked the early shift on the Friday two weeks after what he was now calling "the incident" at the baseball field. He drove home in his father's truck, tired, barely noticing the golden light of one of summer's last perfect afternoons. The trees were in full, glorious green leaf, the wheat and corn in the fields was high and golden. Birds flew in all directions with the flapping of wings, and bugs whirled, every colour. The ditches were full of tall grass and purple wildflowers. As Alex turned into the laneway of his parents' farm, the tall trees on either side flashed by like sentinels.

His parents were away for the weekend, Alex's mother having left meals in various labelled containers in the fridge for him while they were away. Most of the chores were being taken care of by a neighbour, Earl, whom Alex knew was lazy and would save for the following mid-morning. But there was a car in the drive. At first Alex didn't recognize it as he drove down the lane. But when he pulled up beside the ancient maroon Oldsmobile, he saw a familiar profile sitting behind the wheel, its head leaning forward.

"Darrel," Alex called through the open windows of the truck as he turned off the ignition. Darrel looked up and over at Alex. He was still grubby and unshaven, his baseball cap turned backwards in the small car.

"Hi, Alex," Darrel said.

—

They climbed onto the roof of the squat shed that rambled out from the back of the main barn. Leaning against the walls of the barn, their legs angled down before them on the slight decline of the warm steel roof. The rivets in the steel for the most part kept them from sliding down, holding onto their jeaned bottoms.

Darrel had said nothing other than the usual small talk, and was now silent, his head resting against the red wood barn. Alex sat close to him, leaving an inch of space between their thighs, uncertain of how close he should get. He looked out at the view before them, the slowly setting sun yellow and blazing straight ahead, falling towards the trees on the horizon. In the space between, the vast field held golden, flowing wheat, almost ready to be harvested. Birds flew and settled among the grasses, and the insects were singing, grasshoppers and cicadas and crickets chirping endlessly. Alex turned to Darrel expectantly.

“I . . . it’s beautiful isn’t it?” Alex said, turning back at the view before him, but not really looking.

Darrel sighed. “Alex – ”

“Yeah?”

“Alex, I . . . I don’t know what happened the other night, but I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Alex turned to Darrel. “I know, I can’t either.” He felt a swooping in his stomach. He longed to reach out and touch his face.

“Well I don’t know what happened, but I was drunk. And high.”

There was a defensive note in Darrel’s voice. Alex felt suddenly shrunken.

“Well yeah, I was too. But –”

“But what?” Darrel said quickly. “No, wait, don’t say anything,” he said, as Alex drew breath. “It was a mistake, and I don’t think we should do it again.”

“I – a mistake?”

“Yes, a mistake, Alex.” Darrel turned to him. “Do you think I’m a fucking *fag*? Do you think I like shoving dicks up my ass? I’ve got a girlfriend, Alex, and I like fucking her.”

Alex said nothing for a while. “You *had* a girlfriend. You told me you weren’t together anymore.”

“Well shit, Alex, just because we’re not together anymore doesn’t mean I’m a fucking queer!” Darrel stood up on the roof, his shoes slipping slightly on the smooth metal. “Is that what you’re saying? That you’re gay? You’re a fag?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying,” said Alex, his heart hammering. “I’m saying it’s not only my fault that we –”

“We didn’t do anything,” said Darrel through gritted teeth. He towered over Alex, looking ready to punch him. “We didn’t do anything, and you should forget about it.” Darrel climbed down the roof, jumping into the tall, knotted grass in front of the shed, kicking at the tangles around his feet with unwonted force. He started walking toward the driveway.

Alex slid down the roof and jumped into the grass where Darrel had been only a moment before. He landed hard, and reached out for Darrel’s shoulder. “Darrel, just wait.”

Darrel threw off Alex's hand and started walking faster. He rounded the corner of the barn and Alex lost sight of him, running to keep up.

"Wait, Darrel, just wait. Maybe it wasn't an accident. Maybe we should –"

Darrel had turned around. "Maybe we should what? Be *boyfriends*? Jesus, Alex!"

Alex felt a rushing in his head, as if everything was moving too fast. Darrel stalked away, running towards his car. "Wait! Darrel, just wait! I – I..." He couldn't think of what he could say to stop him. The setting sun cast long shadows. Alex was running, but Darrel had already reached his car. Alex's shadow hadn't yet reached the car when it roared into life. "Darrel – Darrel!"

The Oldsmobile careered backwards, turning in the drive, and came straight towards Alex. He stopped running. The car stopped ten feet away from him. Alex ran up to the driver's side window. Darrel's arm was visible. Alex reached for it, his nails grasping at the skin of Darrel's arm as the car pulled away in a flurry of gravel as the wheels spun faster than the car could fly. Darrel's car was gone, driving down the long gravel laneway, and screeching to a halt once it reached the road. Then, in another flurry of screeching wheels and flying gravel, the car turned left onto the road and roared away.

When Alex was nine or ten, he came home from school, after a soccer club practice, to find his father in the kitchen preparing dinner. He was wearing his wife's apron, a red-striped crisp piece of cloth that fit him strangely, the fabric billowing out uselessly in the chest. The Beatles were playing loudly, and his father was singing along to "I Am the Walrus" as he chopped carrots and potatoes fresh from the cellar. The smell of frying

onions wafted through the house, alongside the tarnished, burnt smell of some old food still stuck on the red-glowing stove element.

Alex had been learning about place value and negative numbers that day, and the unusual idea of negatives and incomprehensibly huge numbers was still running through his head. On the drive home, his mother fussed over Claire, in the front seat, who had scraped her knees during her own soccer club. Alex, alone in the back, tried to count the hydro poles that lined the highway and the concession roads they took to get from town to the farm. He lost count somewhere over 200.

“Dad?” said Alex as he entered the kitchen.

His father looked around and smiled, finishing with a “coo-coo-ca-choo,” and then turned down the stereo on the counter. “Come over here and peel some potatoes, will ya?”

“Okay.” Alex liked peeling potatoes, but he tried not to show it. He knew that chores weren’t supposed to be fun, but he couldn’t help enjoying the feeling of the peeler, and the way the potato peels flew from the newly-clean potato and into the sink. He was a slow peeler, often put to shame when both he and his father peeled at the same time, his father’s long strokes impossibly fast, his potatoes skinned in half the time it took Alex to skin his own. Whenever Alex asked how his father did that so well, he always answered, “Years and years of practice.”

“Dad,” said Alex, as he dumped the load of potatoes into the sink, a series of dull thuds echoing. “Is it possible to count to a billion?”

“Hmm,” said Alex’s father. He was busy with the carrots, already peeled, chopping them into perfectly round slices with a large knife.

“Mrs Adelmauer said that it would take a looong time to count to a million, and we learned that a billion is a thousand millions.”

And so, for the remainder of the dinner preparation, Alex’s father counted to a billion for him. He started counting by tens, and when he seemed to be getting short of breath, somewhere around five thousand, he started counting by hundreds. When he was halfway to a billion, he switched to counting by thousands, and by the time dinner was sitting steaming on the table, he was done.

Listening to his father, Alex felt the impossibility of numbers, such huge sums sitting above him, powerful and incomprehensible and, ultimately, impossible to define. Infinity stretched before him, that unsaid non-number at the root of his father’s counting. It was almost too much, and numbers haunted him the rest of the night like a fever dream. The crushing power of figures billions and billions of times larger than anything he could imagine; and the weightless and formless nothing of small numbers, negative numbers, that ultimate zero which had no meaning.

It was like a voice telling him of his placelessness, his vast hopelessness in the order of things. He needed an order, he needed a reason to exist among so many things impossible to imagine and impossible to define. His mother told him that God existed among the numbers, that everything followed a pattern. That God was like a circle, with no beginning and no end. But this, too, seemed orderless, a chaos that proved the lie of God’s existence. Because a circle is just a drawing on a piece of paper; and the circle had to have been drawn by someone. And that person started the circle, in space, in time; a pencil marking a line upon a paper. The starting point may have been the ending point,

as it is for a circle. But someone had to start it. And, he thought gravely, the thought scaring him a little, someone had to end it, as well.

In winter, snowmobiles blazed across the field to the west of their house. They came like the buzzing of a particularly annoyed bee, reaching a crescendo of noise, but once they passed, the sound changed, more like the sound of a lawnmower puttering from a great distance. Alex watched them from the window in the upstairs hallway, where he could just see the trail of white over the tops of the trees growing beside the house. They buzzed and pattered by at all hours, but particularly in the evening. When it grew dark, the noise they made seemed to intensify in the winter cold, their single headlights piercing as they came, the red taillights glinting in the night as they left.

When Alex was old enough to drive his father's ancient snowmobiles, he followed those tracks, and eventually made new ones, tracing circles and figure-eights in the back fields, far from the windows of the old house that seemed like prying eyes. The noise of the machine seemed intrusive in the otherwise quiet, but the long, continuous drone made the experience almost like meditation, a break from the violence of one's thoughts.

He had long since stopped believing in God, in those things that people said couldn't be explained through anything but faith. His parents still dragged him to church, his teachers still explained the Bible and all of God's works in religion classes. But Alex knew, with a faith all his own, that the circle he had seen his mother draw in the air was just a circle, the church with all its decorations just a building, the crucifix that hung in their living room above the old fireplace just a bit of wood. This was when the trees

started speaking to him. And at first, Alex didn't listen. But as time went on, he started noticing the strange reverberations in the air, almost like sound. Sound but not sound, that was how the trees spoke to Alex.

Chapter 5

Only two weeks after Darrel had stormed away from Alex's home, Alex had to leave it too. The acres and acres of field and bush and farmyard that Alex remembered from home were put to shame by the vastness of the McMaster University campus, by the sheer number of people and buildings and interesting places in the city of Hamilton. Ethiopian restaurants, grocery stores that were open all night long, nightclubs with bouncing music that stayed open late, and so many people, more people than Alex could ever know. Leaving home was painful in its own way, but he almost forgot what he had left behind in the grandeur of what he had found.

Alex's first year of university blazed by; he did poorer in classes than he had expected, but he managed to fit in better than he had ever imagined. He had never exactly been unpopular in high school, but he was never part of the in-crowd. He participated in sports when the mood struck him, and band as well, but he never pushed himself to try harder in classes, or to go to the dances. There was never anyone he was interested in asking.

But university turned out to be full of people so different from the people he knew in high school, and boasted classes that actually sounded interesting and exciting. He roomed with his best friend from high school, Jason Van Bron, and simply made friends with whomever came across his or Jason's paths.

On a trip home, Jason drove Alex and two of their new university friends, Randy and Yannick, down the winding trail of highway 6 to Jason's parents' house in Mount Forest. Alex and his friends used to tease Jason slightly in high school for being "rich,"

something that aggravated Jason most uncharacteristically. His family wasn't especially wealthy, but they did have a largish house on the outskirts of town and an in-ground pool, making his place a favourite for get-togethers. Jason had some kind of homecoming party planned, over-the-top as always when it came to Jason's plans, and his parents were away for the week.

When they arrived, Jason didn't even unlock the front door. All four of them ran around to the backyard, stripped to their boxer shorts, and jumped into the pool. The ride was long, they were sticky and sweaty from the sun bounding off of Jason's black Jeep, and the sun was still high in the sky.

"Tonight is going to be epic," Jason informed Alex as they floated in the pool.

"As long as you've got some chicks coming, Jason," said Randy, just as he hopped from the diving board and splashed into the pool. As his head bobbed to the surface, he said, "We're used to university chicks, you know? You hicks even got girls up here?"

"Haha!" said Yannick, even his laugh already grating Alex's nerves. "You guys even have any girls?"

"No, we prefer sheep," said Alex, kicking water at Randy as he spluttered.

"Gonna be tons of chicks, Randy, seriously," said Jason. "Tons." Turning to Alex, he said, "And I've been told that a certain somebody's back in town."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Jenna's back in town," he said slyly.

"Who's Jenna?" asked Yannick, while Randy catcalled, making smooching noises.

“Just Alex’s on-again-off-again girlfriend,” said Jason. He turned to Alex, who was still bobbing silently, his arms and legs spread-eagled in a dead-man’s float. “And you’ll be pleased to know that right now it can be on-again. She’s dumped McMurrin, and she knows you’re single too, Alex.”

“Great,” said Alex, smiling hard. Jenna Lawson was indeed a girl whom Alex had dated in high school, but it was mostly for show. They didn’t even kiss. Alex wondered what kept Jenna in the relationship when it must have been painfully obvious that Alex wasn’t interested. And he had completely forgotten about her after Darrel, had rarely even thought about her until Jason brought her up at this moment.

By ten o’clock that night, Jason’s parents’ house was full to bursting point. Jason’s terrible top-40 music pounded, the patio doors flung open, and the pool a sea of bodies and splashes. It wasn’t so late yet that the lawn was full of groping couples, but inside the house, there was already a heady scent of sex in the air in the living room as people started making out on the couches and on the floor. Jenna had arrived with a group of giggling girls all wearing cowboy hats. She found Alex with Jason in the kitchen, handing out drinks and watching the operation of the keg.

“Alex!”

“Jenna, hi.”

“I can’t spare your man right now, Jen,” said Jason, the huge smile he’d had all evening still lifting his face, as if he couldn’t conceive of any other expression. He gave her a hug after Alex and said, “He’s my co-host for tonight. But you’ll have him soon enough. What’s your drink?”

Jenna stayed to talk for a time, but left to dance in the darkened dining room, where the stereo was still pumping the generic, thumping music.

Alex was starting to feel uneasy at how quickly Jason's party was deteriorating into something they wouldn't be able to control. The Van Brons weren't really Alex's favourite people, and Jason often complained about his parents. Alex felt that he should probably be worried that some irreparable damage may be done to the house or their possessions tonight; but he found it hard to care too much when Jason seemed anything but uneasy. But there was still a chance that they would get into some trouble.

"What's up there?" said Jason, his head inclined towards Alex, pointing at Jenna.

"What do you mean?"

"I *mean*, you fag, that Jenna was totally coming on to you, but you totally blew her off!"

"I've been helping you!"

"You know what I mean. She wants you, man. Seriously, you need to go for it tonight."

"Jeez, you take her if you want her so bad."

Jason smiled even larger. "No way, man. Too many others are interested in the J-dog."

"Gross," said Alex. "Next time you say J-dog, you owe me a buck."

"Whatever. Don't go for it if you don't want to. But seriously," and here Jason thrust his pelvis forward and backward to great applause from the kitchen, "why wouldn't you want to!"

Alex sat with his old group from high school; they were spread out on the grass in Jason's yard beyond the pool. The music was quieter, and there were fewer splashes from the pool, but the party still raged. They could hear Jason from inside yelling something and an answering cheer from his admirers.

“Big man on campus, eh?” said Tom.

“Better believe it,” said Alex.

Alex savoured the chance to catch up with everyone, but felt strange at the way their paths were diverging. He and Jason were the only guys from their high school group who had gone to university. The rest were in community college or working, some still living in town. He wanted to avoid seeming superior in some way, because he was going to university, so he downplayed all of the excitement of the year. There was another thing, though. This was in the person of Darrel, who had arrived around midnight, alone, scrubby from work and wearing the same baseball cap he had been wearing less than a year ago when Alex knocked it from Darrel's head in the baseball dugouts. Now he was sitting, picking grass absently with one hand, across the circle from where Alex was lounging, rather drunk, in the grass.

There was a lull in the conversation, and those who were still sitting up lay back on the smooth lawn. Then the bimbo that Tom had brought as a date spilled her plastic cup of beer all over the two of them, and they got up, half grumbling, half laughing, and headed for the house.

“Anyone want more beer?” Tom asked as his girlfriend grabbed his hand and tried to lead him away faster.

“Yeah!” called a couple of people. Tom didn’t seem to be listening. “Fuck it,” said someone. Everyone but Alex got up and headed for the house. Darrel got up too. “You coming?”

“I think I’ve probably drunk enough for tonight,” said Alex, still lounging on his back. Every time he blinked, the stars seemed to shimmer in the thin darkness of the backyard.

“Yeah, probably,” said Darrel. Alex didn’t see him leave. He stretched his arms and legs and sighed.

The grass was cool to the touch, and felt almost as if it were wet with dew, but as Alex ran his fingers through the fronds, no moisture clung to his skin. Alex listened to the noises around him, the hyperactive screaming, the playful splashes of water in the pool, the low murmuring of voices, the deeper thumping of another song on the stereo inside, all undercut by the sounds of night bugs and frogs croaking in the creek beyond the borders of Jason’s backyard. He had been to parties like this all year, Jason dragging him along sometimes, other times at Alex’s own insistence. But he couldn’t help the feeling that everything really was changing. It was more than the changes he had already witnessed in his relationships with his old high school friends. It was more than the secret he was still keeping from them. It was that he knew, at some point, it would be over, all of it. He felt – he knew – that once everyone knew he was gay, everything would be different.

And it’s true, he thought, this future difference wasn’t entirely a bad thing. Alex was starting to crave conversation and flirting with people who were different from the

people at the party around him. He wanted to become a different kind of person, the kind of person who would fit in with a different kind of people.

A flash of indistinct light followed a subtle flicking noise beside him. “Want a cigarette?” came Darrel’s voice in the grass beside him.

“Sure,” said Alex, and he turned his body to his right to see Darrel lying a couple feet away in the grass, a lit cigarette in his proffered hand. Darrel lit another one and they lay there in the grass, sending smoke straight up into the sky from their reclined mouths.

“School seems to be going well,” said Darrel. “You and Jason became some kind of party animals or something.”

“Yeah,” said Alex, taking another drag from the cigarette. The lit end flashed in the half-light.

They sat in silence for some minutes, the cigarettes diminishing in smoke and ash that fell on their reclined bodies. Darrel lit two more, handing one to Alex.

Alex felt clearheaded suddenly, as if nothing in the past year since he had seen Darrel had happened. “Are you seeing anyone?”

“No,” said Darrel shortly.

Alex steeled himself. “OK. Cause I’m not either.”

“Alex, I know what you’re trying to do,” said Darrel, his voice hardening. Alex felt more than saw Darrel shifting in the grass.

“Just wait.” Alex sat up, his eyes fixed on Darrel’s. Although his face seemed to be hardening, his eyes seemed as vulnerable as ever, liquid clear. “I keep thinking of what I should have said when we were sitting on the shed. And you drove away.”

Darrel said nothing. But he didn’t leave either, didn’t break eye contact with Alex.

“And I still don’t know what I should have said. But. . .”

“But what?” said Darrel, his eyes narrowed.

“But I wanted to. . . do something. Do this.” Alex lowered his head until his nose was inches from Darrel’s. He felt as though he had never wanted anything more than to kiss Darrel right now, but he also felt that he needed to do it the right way. He leaned in closer, his nose brushing Darrel’s, and almost reached his lips. But Darrel turned his head slightly. Alex’s lips brushed the side of Darrel’s face, where his mouth reached his stubbly cheeks.

Alex leaned his forehead against the spot where Darrel’s lips had been, feeling the bristles on his face, the soft skin there, the warmth of him, breathing in his smell. A smell almost like hockey, like the ice and the stands and the locker room. He felt jolts through his chest and stomach, he felt his face reddening.

“Jesus, Alex,” said Darrel softly. Alex felt him say it, felt Darrel’s jawbone move beneath his forehead, still resting on the side of Darrel’s face.

“OK,” said Alex. Tears seemed to be stinging his eyes suddenly, and he cursed himself. He lifted from Darrel’s face and wiped his nose on the sleeve of his t-shirt. Darrel turned his face back towards Alex’s on the grass.

“Don’t,” he said simply.

“Being stupid,” said Alex, sniffing and wiping his eyes with his fist.

“No, you’re not.”

Alex sat and Darrel lay there for a while in the grass. Alex couldn’t look at Darrel, but he couldn’t turn away either. He thought he heard his name being called from the house and he looked up.

Before Alex knew what was happening, Darrel's face was rising from the ground towards his. Inches from each other, Darrel closed his eyes and opened his mouth slightly. Alex reached down, closing the space. He felt the tingle of Darrel's lips for a second.

"Yo, faggots, what're you still doing on the grass?" called a strident voice. Darrel grunted, cleared his throat, and stood up within a second. Alex watched Jason striding over, several girls clustered around him, through the space between Darrel's jeaned legs. Darrel's heavy workboots shifted in the grass in front of Alex's nose.

"I've got someone for you to meet, Darrel, come inside the house." Jason had arrived, looking for a moment, questioningly, at Alex on the ground behind Darrel.

Alex sat up, winded, and avoided looking anyone in the face. He stared at the grass between his legs. Above him, he heard Darrel making excuses, saying something about having to work early the next morning. When Alex looked up again, Darrel was moving across the yard, his fists deep in his pockets. Alex wished he would turn so he could see Darrel's face, know what he was thinking. But all he could see was his unruly curly hair poking from underneath the same red baseball cap.

"Well you're not going to poon out on me, are you Alex?"

Alex sighed at the ground, and then finally looked up. Jason's eye was twinkling. "Hell no," Alex said with effort. "I'm yours."

The house was emptying; some people were setting up tents and sleeping bags in the backyard. Jason had reserved his older brother's room for Alex, Randy and Yannick, but when Alex trudged upstairs to see if maybe he could escape what remained of the party

and lie down, he found the door closed, and some faint moaning coming from inside. Frustrated, he sat on the carpet and leaned against the door. The moaning and slapping sounds from behind the door increased in volume and frequency.

He couldn't shake the feeling that there was someone watching him; a presence that seemed to be following him, behind him, above him, all night. Even when he was alone, like right now, he felt as if he weren't alone at all, as if someone was there with him, whispering things in his ear to make him feel loved. The presence had intensified when he was alone with Darrel earlier on in the grass. What had before seemed benevolent had become gross, angry, omnipresent. He had felt a hovering, like a mass of black wings fluttering.

The sound of someone climbing the wooden stairs reached Alex. Soon, Jenna's head poked around the corner. She had lost her cowboy hat, and her long blonde hair flowed over both of her shoulders. Alex hadn't noticed earlier that she was wearing some sort of evening dress, beautiful dark blue and flowing, accentuating her curves, the pleats moving like waves in tandem with her own movements.

Alex had known Jenna since kindergarten. Most of her life, she was the sort of skinny, knobbly kid who was all limbs, her dirty blonde hair and smattering of freckles accentuating the slight look of dirtiness or dustiness that hung about her. Alex had hardly noticed when she turned into a woman. Her skin, so acne-prone and oily as a young teen, was now smooth and expertly made-up. Her hair, he noticed, was no longer dirty blonde, but died a shade of glorious white gold, and it suited her well. And she filled out her dress nicely, her breasts pushed high, perfectly round and visible. Alex never really

understood the sexual appeal of nice breasts or thin waistlines on women, but there was an unmistakable sexiness in her curvy figure, a definite appeal to her pouting lips.

“There you are,” she said, smiling. Her teeth were straight and smooth and surprisingly visible now that her braces were off. Alex smiled, genuinely, back.

“I was hoping to get a bit of rest, but my room is in use.” In answer to Alex’s words, a particularly long moan punctuated the otherwise quiet of the hall.

“Can I sit?”

“Of course.” Alex made room for her to lean against the door with him on the carpet.

Jenna sat down gracefully, the blue dress fluttering over her crossed knees. She leaned her elbows on her legs and looked at Alex, her hazel eyes reflecting the scattered light.

“You smell like smoke.”

“Yeah. Sorry. Darrel was here.”

“Yeah, I saw him.”

“If someone offers, I can’t resist,” said Alex, grinning.

“I know.” Jenna’s voice was lowered, with the hint of a whisper.

Alex felt suddenly strange. He had never been attracted to girls, even though he had dated Jenna in high school, and even, at Jason’s insistence, had made out with a rather pretty girl at a party in residence. He had found kissing her rather like enjoying a good book or a fine meal – it was nice, it was pleasant, and there may have been distant stirrings of sex appeal, but never anything definite. Rather like a pastime, something to do when you’re with someone and you can’t think of anything else to do.

But no girl, no woman, had ever before trained her eye and her whole arsenal of sex appeal on Alex as Jenna was flashing at him right now. His mind worked foggy and slow, and he felt trapped, wrong, yet unable to move, unable to look away. Jenna reached out and took Alex's hand in hers, softly yet in control, and put it on her waist. She moved in closer and kissed Alex on the mouth. Alex didn't know what to do; so instead of moving away, instead of calling it off, he reached out, hesitantly, and ran his hand over her left breast. The give of her flesh was strange, beautiful, soft, different than he expected. His hands explored her body, the shape of her, so different from his own, so different from a man's. He returned her kiss with vigour.

Once again Jason came to break the mood. He thundered up the stairs, yelling something to somebody, but this sensory data came late in Alex's mind; he was too busy in the moment with Jenna to understand much of what was happening outside. Jason came running around the corner and almost tripped over Jenna and Alex in the hall. They broke apart quickly, Jenna smiling sexily, unabashed. Alex felt waves of shame coursing over him. His every sense seemed deadened, and he didn't hear whatever exclamation Jason let loose, nor Jenna's sly reply. He stood up quickly, ran his hands through his hair, and without saying anything, ran down the stairs, out the front door and into the cooling night.

There was a time, not even that long ago, when Alex would have given anything to kiss Jenna Lawson and to enjoy kissing her to the exclusion of all others. He prayed to God, to Jesus, to the Virgin Mary, to his dead Grandfather, that he not be gay. He tried to imagine scenes of him kissing a beautiful girl in the hallways at school, like he saw some

of the more popular guys do. He spent much time and effort trying to imagine wanting to share a bed with someone like Jenna, while easily fantasizing about perhaps going camping with someone like Tom and sharing a sleeping bag. He tried to block out images of the boys he knew and liked, and tried to think about the feel of a girl's body, what lay in that nameless horror between her legs.

But the more he tried, the more he prayed, the more he realized that what he wanted was not to be straight. He didn't want to be straight at all. He found no appeal in the body of a woman. He didn't want to be a girl, either. He was excited with his own body, thought that two men together was infinitely more desirable, more real, than imagining a man and a woman together. What he wanted was to be gay, but for being gay to be okay. This was what he hoped for now, now that he thought he knew himself, the ins and outs of his sexuality, his desires, his fantasies.

So why, then, was he just kissing a girl, and why did he enjoy it? It wasn't the same as with Darrel, he thought, not at all. With Jenna, it was more exploratory, more a sense of adventure: diving in, wondering where each path would take him, trying things on for size. With Darrel it was much more about desire, about the feeling of wanting him, and the even better feeling of feeling Darrel want him. Sure, he enjoyed being wanted by Jenna too, but was that because of the possibility of touching her, of having sex with her? He didn't know. Or maybe he did know, but the whole thing threw him into a confusion. It seemed ridiculous, unfair, that as soon as he had discovered himself, had come to terms with the truth of who he was, that the possibility of heterosexuality that he had discarded years ago was now coming back to throw another wrench in things.

He wasn't sure where he was going. Or even why he was going. He had promised to help Jason clean up after the party, had told him he would stay for the night. And he didn't really have anywhere else to go; it was too late to just show up at a friend's house, and his parents' house was miles away in the country. He was too drunk to drive, and besides, he had no car with him. Where he was going, why he was going, he didn't know. He just let his feet carry him as he thought.

The night grew colder and colder. The wind picked up and made Alex shiver in his thin t-shirt. He thought he should probably turn back; Jenna was likely gone by now, and he could sleep on the couch. But instead, he saw the fairgrounds ahead of him, the soccer fields, the baseball diamonds. He jogged the rest of the way, a couple of blocks, and came to rest in the dugouts of the closest baseball diamond, the same one he had been in with Darrel less than a year ago. He was panting, and his head spun slightly, but the booze was being worked off; it had been hours since he had last taken a drink. His stomach felt wobbly and knotted, and he wasn't sure if it was because of the alcohol or because of what had happened that night.

He threw himself onto one of the wooden benches and looked up, through the chain-link separating him from home plate. He wasn't sure how late it was, but it was as dark as it gets in town, with all the streetlights ablaze; the moon was high in the sky, almost full, its light blocking out most of the stars. The spotlights that usually shone over the playing fields were turned off for the night, and the park was completely deserted. Somewhere, far away, a dog barked, and another one answered. He heard the sound of a car driving by on a nearby street, unseen, and then nothing. All was still and silent.

—

The house was a mess. Someone had pissed on the living room carpet. There was an errant shoe stuck in the ceiling fan in the dining room. Empty plastic beer cups were strewn throughout the yard, the floors, and all available surfaces in the house, stuck on bushes and in trees, and floating, peacefully, in the pool. One of the toilets had overflowed and water was seeping from the tiled linoleum of the bathroom to the carpet of the upstairs hallway. Nothing was in the place it should be, and everything stank of stale beer. Jason was beside himself with glee.

“I told you it would be epic, didn’t I tell you it would be epic?” he said, grinning, as he and Alex lugged out the soiled rug to the deck to hose it down.

“Pretty epic, yeah.” Alex wrinkled his nose as Jason doused the rug with the hose, water spraying in every direction from the surface of the sodden carpet. Its patterns oozed together as it darkened with water, a small puddle forming on its surface once it was soaked through.

Alex wandered aimlessly about the yard with a trash bag in one hand, grabbing every bit of trash he could find. Squashed beer cups littered every square foot of his vision.

He had returned from the dugouts to find the house, finally, mercifully, quiet and seemingly empty as the first glimmer of light lit the horizon. He was frozen with cold and wrapped himself in an old winter coat he found in the front closet. He wandered through the rooms, stepping carefully, looking for any free surface on which to spend the next several hours before he would have to wake and help clean up the mess. The living room floor had been full of bodies, almost as if a bomb had gone off, had the bodies not

been shifting, snoring, breathing heavily, filling the room with the warm heat of too many mouths exhaling. He descended the basement stairs and found Jenna curled tightly with a boy Alex didn't recognize on the dilapidated sofa in the rec room. He turned and quickly and quietly tread back up the stairs. He eventually found an empty room, Jason's father's study, that had a small leather loveseat that didn't look particularly comfortable for sleeping on, but he wrapped himself tighter in the winter coat and curled up on it, falling asleep almost immediately.

The cleaning took all day, perhaps hampered by the fact that Alex, Randy and Yannick had stifling hangovers and were moving at half their usual pace. Jason, on the other hand, seemed wound up like a toy racecar, and he buzzed around the house, chattering and laughing, as if the wreckage strewn about them was some sort of badge of honour, living proof of the awesomeness of his party.

After a trip to the beer store to drop off the empty keg and a handful of bottles, Jason and Alex didn't feel like going back to the house, which was still being cleaned by Randy and Yannick.

"Hey, would you mind driving me to Darrel's place?" Alex asked. It wasn't perfect, going there with Jason, but he wanted to see Darrel as soon as possible. Through the haze of headache and hangover, Alex's mind cycled between Jenna and Darrel all day as he cleaned. Jenna had left early in the morning without saying goodbye, and Alex was quite grateful of that fact. But he wanted, needed, to see Darrel, who, as chance would have it, had also left the party without saying goodbye.

“Sure thing,” said Jason. “Maybe we can recruit him to help out cleaning. ’Course the asshole left early, something about work. He never really seems to like these parties.”

“Well they are a bit intense, Jason.”

“That’s why they’re so fun,” he grinned.

Darrel still lived with his parents and brothers in a small house in the older part of town, the neighbourhood where Alex’s grandmother and many of her friends lived. They pulled Jason’s Jeep into the sunken drive that led to the basement garage; Darrel’s maroon Oldsmobile was parked there in front of the garage door.

Alex walked up the cement steps to the front door. All of the blinds in the upstairs windows were closed. If he hadn’t seen Darrel’s car in the drive, he would have guessed that no one was home. He rang the bell and waited. He rang it again. From inside he heard a clatter of feet pounding up the stairs. The door opened. Through the screen door in front of it, Darrel stood, in a t-shirt and striped boxer shorts.

“Thought you had to work today?” Jason called. He was leaning against his Jeep, but had seen Darrel through the screen.

“Got it off,” Darrel said. His voice was scratchy, like a growl. He rubbed his eyes, as if he had been asleep.

Alex waited. “Can I come in?” he said, when Darrel did nothing but stand, squinting through the screen door.

“Yep.” He stood back and Alex entered.

“Jason coming?” he asked, looking around Alex as he held the door.

“No, I said I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Oh,” he said, and shut the door. They were on the landing; upstairs was dark and seemed deserted. From downstairs, Alex could hear the whine of a television.

Darrel looked at Alex, his face a mask. His eyes were red, his stubble even more pronounced than usual, and his mouth looked grim.

“I just –” started Alex.

“Shut up,” said Darrel, and he grabbed Alex’s face on both sides with each hand and leaned in and kissed him. Alex stood on his tip-toes to reach, and wrapped his arms around Darrel’s body. The kiss seemed to last forever. Darrel tasted like stale cigarettes tinged with a certain sweetness. His whiskery face scratched Alex’s like rugburn. Darrel’s eyes seemed to be running with moisture, but they didn’t stop. Each breath brought Alex even closer to Darrel, as if he was discovering him, exploring him, becoming him. He didn’t want to stop. He reached a hand down Darrel’s boxer shorts, half expecting Darrel to turn away, shout and scream, or bite him like a wounded animal. Instead, Darrel moaned into Alex’s mouth and started undoing Alex’s pants. Alex grabbed Darrel’s t-shirt and yanked it off of him, momentarily losing the connection to his lips. Once the shirt was free of his head, Darrel leaned his forehead against Alex’s and said, his voice a low growl, “Come downstairs.”

Alex didn’t need telling twice. He watched Darrel for a moment as he grabbed his discarded clothes and walked naked down the stairs. Alex pulled up his jeans, forgetting the fly, and adjusted his t-shirt before opening the front door and calling to Jason, telling him to leave.

“What do you mean?”

“Just – just go, I’ll meet you later.”

“Well what are you doing? Maybe I’ll wait with you guys”

“No, Jason, seriously, please, I’ll just walk back”

“What’s this about? I thought you just needed to talk?”

“I do – we do need to talk. It’s just gonna take a bit longer to talk than I expected.”

“Well fine, but you guys can talk at my place, you know. Tell that bugger to get dressed and we can all go.”

“No really, Jason, it’s fine, just go, and I’ll meet you later.”

Jason considered Alex. Finally, shaking his head, he got back into the Jeep. “Fine, whatever. Just don’t be too long, we’ve still got those steaks to grill up tonight. Bring Darrel when you’re done – whatever it is you’re doing. There’s enough.”

“K, I will.” Alex didn’t watch Jason leave. He closed the door, about to go downstairs, reconsidered, and turned back and locked it. He heard the Jeep honk twice before he was down the stairs and into Darrel’s waiting arms.

Chapter 6

Alex spent the rest of the week at his parents' house, borrowing the truck as often as he could to drive to and from town to see Darrel. Darrel apprenticed as an electrician and worked strange hours, sometimes long days as he traveled to some new factory to put in the wiring, or sometimes days short enough to give him and Alex an entire afternoon and evening free to do what they pleased.

And when Alex had to leave to go back to the city, he thought of nothing but Darrel on the long drive down, Jason pestering him with questions about why Alex didn't spend any time with him over the week, about what he and Darrel were doing. Alex ached with feeling for Darrel and wondered if Darrel felt the same. It gave him a kind of rush to think that maybe Darrel didn't care that Alex was gone; he felt angry and betrayed and then realized that he had no reason to be so.

As the summer wore on, it became clear that what they had was a secret. It wasn't a relationship, really, mostly a secret that they kept together. Alex would catch a bus to Mount Forest whenever he could, and Darrel would drive down to Hamilton occasionally, and they'd spend all of their time together in secret, not going out, rarely leaving the bedroom.

Months and months passed in this way, and Alex was torn between the pain of continuing to keep Darrel a secret, and the pain of starting to realize that he didn't really have anything in common with Darrel other than the secret. He even started to realize that he didn't really like Darrel. Their conversations became circular, Darrel going on and on about how much he didn't like gay people, how he didn't want to be one of them. And when Alex came out to his friends and started going to gay bars and gay parties and

gay discussion groups on campus, Darrel became even more vehement in his distrust of anything gay. Alex continued to keep Darrel a secret, even as he started hanging out with the radical queers who dressed in outrageous costumes and went and marched in front of the Parliament buildings holding placards with racy slogans. Alex told no one of his and Darrel's secret, but it was less Darrel's continued pleas to keep their relationship hidden, and more Alex's increasing shame that he continued to be with Darrel.

And then there was the breakup. Only months after Darrel finally moved to Hamilton to be with Alex permanently, Alex went from not really liking Darrel anymore to outright hating him. But it was all inside. Alex didn't or couldn't tell Darrel that he hated him, and so he lied, every time they were together. He held to an impossible hope that Darrel would somehow magically pick up on any slight hint and realize that Alex didn't love, didn't like, couldn't stand him anymore. But Darrel didn't read Alex's mind; and perhaps he couldn't. Alex wanted to believe that two people who were close could know what the other was thinking if he thought it hard and often enough. But perhaps that kind of thing didn't happen, or perhaps he and Darrel just weren't that close.

It was in these moments that Alex thought more and more of the first person he loved, Tom, back in high school. He imagined Tom's face, Tom's jawline, Tom's deep, dark hair, Tom's deep, dark eyes. After his and Darrel's breakup, Alex imagined himself locked in a twenty minute embrace with Tom, he imagined Tom's tears falling to his chest, he imagined Tom taking Alex in his arms and kissing him deeply, softly. He imagined Tom turning him over on the bed, and Alex doesn't protest. He imagined Tom leaning over him as they make love, Tom's hair falling before Alex's eyes, Tom's

smooth cheek reaching to touch Alex's cheek, a rough kiss, and then an explosion of physical emotion.

But it wasn't Tom's face, it was Darrel's. After Darrel threw him out and Alex pleaded with Darrel to let him back into the apartment, Darrel grabbed Alex in the tightest embrace he had ever felt. He and Darrel danced around the room like a four-legged, confused baby. Alex had closed the door, his arm awkwardly reaching behind him. They stood there for a couple minutes, locked together, Darrel's weeping face on Alex's shoulder. Then they moved through the apartment, Alex directing, first to their small kitchen where Alex tried to turn off the stove with one hand behind his back, Darrel's teakettle screeching steam. They lumbered into the living room, their combined balance precarious. Darrel wasn't saying anything, so Alex started saying, chanting "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Darrel would hiccup and Alex would apologize, Darrel would stumble as they moved locked together, and Alex would say *I'm sorry, so sorry*. Then Alex would stumble, and Alex would say *I'm sorry*. Darrel clung tighter and Alex apologized, Alex let up on the pressure for a moment, thinking it was time the hug ceased, and when Darrel didn't let go, Alex said *I'm sorry, so sorry*. He started to believe it was true, that he was sorry, that it was his fault, and that made Alex cling even tighter, some tears finally stinging his own eyes. Alex tried to imagine their physical bulk combining into a single being, the hard chest squeezed against his own melting into his.

And then when they parted, finally, on the bed, Alex felt more alone than ever. And then when Darrel started fucking him, he felt even more alone. Darrel wasn't trying to become one with Alex; he was trying to fill Alex with himself, trying to claim Alex for

himself. Perhaps, Alex thought, Darrel possessed pieces of Alex now that are no longer his, pieces of Alex belonging to Darrel, and who knows what Darrel will do with them.

In that embrace, which for so long Alex had ascribed to Darrel, perhaps it was all Alex's doing. Perhaps that embrace was Alex holding on to Darrel to keep him from falling. Perhaps Alex was trying, in the only way he knew how, to save Darrel. From what? Alex didn't know.

After living with Claire for a couple of weeks, Alex found a small and cheap apartment above Barton Avenue, where from the windows of his apartment he witnessed what turned out to be two aggravated assaults and one probable suicide, in addition to other random acts of violence that never seemed to make the papers. He kept going to school part-time, and started working at the McDonald's across the street, coming to hate the transients and welfare families who graced the restaurant at all hours. He stopped going home much, even though Mount Forest was only a twenty-five dollar Greyhound trip away.

Alex spent months thinking about the night of their breakup, wondering what happened. It was so quick, so intense, so violent, so unlike anything Alex had ever experienced. He even wondered if maybe he enjoyed it when Darrel took him and used him. He didn't go home after that, telling his parents that he was too slammed with schoolwork. But the thought of seeing Darrel made him feel queasy. It wasn't the pain of seeing an old flame. It was the possibility that Alex would see himself mirrored back in Darrel's grey eyes.

—

After Jason's end-of-university party, Alex started seeing Sam. He revelled in the freedom of having a relationship in the open, of being able to go to restaurants and movies and bars together. Of being able to be open with his friends.

But the budding relationship was put to an unexpected test only weeks after Alex met Sam. Sam took Alex out to a nightclub to meet his friends. Alex was excited about meeting Sam's friends, wondering what they were like, wondering if getting to know them would shed some light on Sam himself. Sam picked Alex up and they drove to the club, a filthy little hole called Phil's that Alex would have avoided at any cost had he been the one choosing the location. Everything about it, from the outside, and confirmed on the inside once Alex walked in the front doors, screamed drunken university girls dancing on tables, the perpetual smell of cheap beer, stale and fresh, and the necessity of the gang of burly bouncers standing around the entrance, trying to act nonchalant.

They found Sam's friends near the bar, and Alex was immediately relieved. There were three of them, and two wore heavy glasses. They were nervous but approachable and it quickly became obvious that they were nerds. Alex was just starting to have fun, laughing at their silly jokes and trying to touch Sam as much as possible without being too obvious, when the crowd on the dance floor parted for a second, and through the maze of people, Alex saw Darrel.

He tried to act as though nothing had happened, but it was like the music had become quiet and oppressive at the same time. He started sweating and forgot to laugh at one of Sam's friend's jokes. He forgot all of their names and couldn't hang onto the thread of conversation through the noise. He tried to keep himself from looking across

the dance floor, but he continued to do so compulsively, occasionally catching a glimpse of Darrel sitting on a stool, wearing a dark ballcap and an unreadable expression on his face. One time, he thought he saw Darrel turn his direction; he could have sworn that they locked eyes, but Alex looked away quickly, and the next time he looked up, Darrel was looking somewhere else.

He tried his hardest to reenter the conversation with the group around him, but he felt winded, as if he had lost the stamina required to carry on a conversation. He sat nursing his beer and put his arm around Sam. In the middle of one of Sam's friend's stories, he grabbed Sam's face with both hands, turned it towards him, and gave him a big sloppy kiss.

However, eventually Alex couldn't ignore Darrel anymore. He muttered something incoherently to Sam and his friends and started staggering through the crowded dance floor. His head spun, his limbs moved awkwardly in every direction. He bumped a couple of people on the way, mumbling apologies behind him, and then his way was suddenly blocked by a group of impossibly-well-dressed girls with their over-muscled boyfriends in tow. They started dancing and gyrating as if they were being filmed for MTV. Alex shoved his way through the group, trying to keep an eye on his destination. Darrel, still across the room, was sitting on a barstool facing the crowd, and his hand seemed to be in that of the woman beside him. She was really, really pretty, her long straight-dark brown hair falling over her bare shoulders.

Finally extracting himself from the crowd, Alex swayed and grabbed Darrel's shoulder for support. Darrel looked only mildly surprised to see Alex clutching him.

“Darrel, hi! Introduce me to your date,” said Alex. Darrel was stony-faced, his red baseball cap pulled low over his eyes.

“I’m Alex, by the way,” he said directly to the pretty girl. He shook her hand, his arm limp. It was somehow much, much worse that the girl was pretty.

“Tracy, this is my friend Alex,” said Darrel, not looking at Alex. “Alex, Tracy.”

“Nice to meet you,” Tracy said, flashing her teeth.

“And the others?” Alex asked, looking around. Darrel was surrounded by men who looked just like him: big, broadshouldered, scruffy, unshaven, an unmistakable look of hick about them. Alex probably knew at least a couple of them; they were all obviously from Mount Forest. He didn’t look at them enough for recognition.

“My friends.”

“So you all came down for a night on the town, eh? That’s sweet,” said Alex.

A muscle in Darrel’s jaw moved. The men around them didn’t really seem to be listening to the exchange. They talked in low voices, sipping beers, nodding at the dance floor occasionally, pointing out the hottest girls. “Didn’t think this was your kind of place, Alex,” Darrel said.

Just then, Alex felt a hand alight softly on his shoulder. He turned around, seeing Sam there behind him, looking quizzically at Alex. Alex turned back to Darrel and Tracy. “What kind of place would that be, Darrel?”

Darrel said nothing. Tracy looked uncomfortable. Noticing Sam over Alex’s shoulder, she introduced herself.

“And do you know my boyfriend, Darrel?” she said.

Sam said, “No, I don’t believe we’ve met. Darrel.” They shook hands, firmly. Darrel looked gruff. Sam turned expectantly to Alex, but when Alex did nothing but sway slightly, looking at Darrel, Sam said, “And I’m Sam.”

“Nice to meet you, Sam,” said Tracy, looking between him and Alex.

“Sam’s my date,” said Alex loudly. He turned around and kissed Sam on the mouth, grabbing the back of his head. He turned back to face Darrel and Tracy triumphantly. Sam sheepishly wiped his mouth.

“Oh,” said Tracy. “Um... and Darrel’s my date.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” said Alex.

Nobody said anything for a while, Sam and Tracy looking embarrassed and confused, Darrel staring stonily at the dance floor, Alex still swaying, eyes fixed on Darrel.

Alex felt a surge. Turning to Tracy, he said, “I’m happy for you, Tracy. I didn’t think Darrel was the kind of person who took his dates out anywhere. I always thought he preferred to stay at home and mope around the house.”

“Yeah, I’m lucky, I guess,” said Tracy, looking sideways at Darrel.

“And you?” Darrel said. “Shouldn’t you be at some sort of fag bar?”

“We can go there if you like,” said Alex. “You’d probably like it.”

Darrel stood up, his eyes finally burning in Alex’s direction. “I wouldn’t be caught dead at a place like that.”

“No, just caught sucking dick, right?”

“Why the fuck can’t you leave me alone?” Darrel was inches from Alex’s face.

Alex smirked, looked Tracy full in the face. He turned back to Darrel. “That wasn’t what you were asking me the night you fucked me.”

“Shut up.” Darrel’s voice was low.

“And you begged me to stay with you.”

“Shut up, Alex.”

“And you cried like a little sissy fag.”

Darrel looked dangerous, and Alex felt Sam pulling his arm, saying, “Let’s just go outside and cool down, Alex.”

Alex shrugged him off. “You guys want to know a secret?” he asked. Nobody said anything. Darrel’s friends caught the scent of an argument sprouting and watched them curiously.

Darrel sat back down on the stool, looking back at the dance floor, seething.

“The secret is that Darrel fucked me, and he liked fucking me.” Alex was close to tears now. He turned to Darrel, who still avoided his eye. “What was it you called me when we were in bed? Do you want to tell them, or should I?”

Darrel said nothing.

“You see, the truth is that Darrel’s as much a fag as I am, but he won’t admit it.” Sam’s hands were on Alex’s shoulders, keeping him steady. Darrel’s friends looked angry, intimidating. Alex threw off Sam a second time and turned away from the group, fighting his way back through the crowd.

The cool night air hit him like a wall as he extracted himself from the doors of the club, the bald and muscled bouncer watching him as he stumbled over a crack in the

sidewalk. Tears were streaming down his face and he felt winded, like he had been punched in the gut. He doubled over and closed his eyes tight.

That wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. In Alex's mind, flashes of a giant brawl had formed. He saw Darrel rushing to hit him, a blazing, red anger lit in his face. He saw himself punching Darrel in the jaw, breaking his nose with another fist, and then standing on Darrel's limp form when he hit the floor, proclaiming to the entire club that justice had been served. He saw himself screaming at Darrel, accusing him of everything he needed to be accused of. Instead, he had acted like a baby, had started crying and called Darrel a fag in front of his friends. It was the worst insult he could think to hurl at Darrel. Wordplay, it was all Alex could use to hurt Darrel when he wanted to crush him, to make him hurt, to make him bleed, to make him scream out.

Hands were reaching out to him, he felt them on his back. He stood up straight, still feeling winded, his face still wet. Sam was there, and, making him even more ashamed of himself, Alex saw Sam's confused-looking friends there as well.

"What the hell was that about, Alex?" asked Sam.

"Nothing, just – nothing," he said.

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah. You guys go back inside, I'm gonna call it a night." Alex put an arm across his belly, still feeling like there had been the impact of a punch there. He started walking towards the bus mall at the centre of downtown. There was a shortcut he knew from the club, along a dirt path that ran beside the construction site beside them and down a little-used flight of concrete steps to a parkade. Sam grabbed his arm and tried to stop him from going any farther.

“You’re not really in any shape to go off by yourself,” he said to Alex reasonably. Alex felt ashamed that Sam was still here. He wished that Sam hadn’t witnessed what had just happened. He wished that Sam would just go and leave him to feel disgusted with himself for everything that had happened. He turned away from Sam and tried to leave.

“No, don’t,” started Sam. When Alex kept walking, he said, “Fine. We don’t have to go back in, but at least sit down for a moment.” He guided Alex in the direction of the stairs, meaning Alex to sit on the top step. Sam guided Alex to the railing and tried to make him step down. Alex swayed in the air, feeling as though he might fly. The steps before him loomed like a long hallway. As Sam guided him, Alex suddenly had a thought. He whirled around to face Sam.

“You know – ” he started.

“Alex!” said Sam, just as Alex swayed in the air, took a step back to steady himself, and felt the world falling away. The ground wasn’t there to support him. He felt a shock in his leg as it finally hit the hard step, but there was no stopping him now. He felt the world slide in slow motion around him, and soon the pavement was up, and the stars were down. He had a brief glimpse of Sam’s face, illuminated by a streetlight, before he tumbled into the dark.

Chapter 7

They had been walking for hours. Alex's new hiking boots thumped hard on the dirt path, and the new hiking clothes he had worn kept him relatively dry despite his sweating. He was panting less than he had on previous hikes, and managed to keep up with Lao for the most part. He marveled at the difference, at how quickly he had changed. His deep breaths no longer made him quite so light-headed, and his legs, now used to the long hikes, felt strong and powerful, not weak and rubbery. The trail took them up and down the gentle rock formations of the Bruce Peninsula, winding around outcroppings and swamps and lakes, ascending to the tops of the magnificent rocky hills, almost mountains, or what could be described as mountains only in Ontario. Lao kept up a steady rhythm in front.

Alex couldn't count how many times Lao had called him up over the past months to propose another hike. Alex almost always went, changing his shifts at work, blowing off any other responsibilities, changing plans with friends he had planned to meet. The weeks seemed to be broken into how many hikes they could go on, rather than the names of the days or the schedule at work. There were no weekends or hump days, just days in between getting together again to hike, driving for hours, or hiking the more civilized sections of the Bruce Trail that ran straight through Hamilton.

Near midday, they reached a quickly-moving stream, swollen with water from the unseasonable late spring rains. There had once been some sort of makeshift bridge, but most of it had been washed away; all that remained was a mostly-submerged skeleton of roughly nailed two-by-fours. They stopped to consider the crossing.

Lao studied the map. "I think it's Sheldon Creek," he said, squinting at the paper.

“Creek, yeah right. Try *river*,” said Alex.

“Well I don’t think it’s supposed to be this big,” Lao answered, pocketing the map. He looked up and down the stream. “That way,” he pointed to the left, “is Sheldon Lake, where the stream empties, so it’s likely only going to get bigger from here. And that way,” he pointed to the right, “is some sort of swampy area.”

“Well, let’s try our luck with the swamp.”

They marched upstream, going much more slowly this time, with no trail blazed to lead them. They staggered over fallen trees and through thick brambles of raspberries and burdock. On either side of them, the land grew higher, like a canyon, softened by the endless evergreens and birch growing right out of the mossy rock.

“You know,” said Alex, “I’ve been thinking about death a lot lately.”

“You don’t say,” came Lao’s voice from ahead of him.

“No, really. Claire bullied me into seeing a counsellor after the whole Darrel incident, when I fell down those stairs. He asked me if I was feeling suicidal.”

Lao turned, his eyebrows raised.

“Well, I’m not! But I guess they have to ask everyone that.”

Lao said nothing, turning back around. Eventually he stopped, looking up the slope beside them. “Well, I think we’re going to have to climb,” he said, his hands on his hips.

“Why?”

“This is narrowing out. Up further, the water comes right up to the side of the rock, see? If we want to keep going upstream, we’ll have to climb these rocks and hope that things level out.”

“Alright then,” said Alex. “Up we go.”

Lao grabbed onto a fallen tree that lay against the side of the rockface and climbed expertly up, dusting himself off once he was standing on the top of the mossy surface of the rock. Alex looked up in wonder. “Jesus, you have to show off like that?”

Lao called down, “Any time now, Alex.”

“Goddam army training,” Alex muttered to himself, trying to find a foothold on the tree. He felt wobbly and uncertain, and grabbed at the side of the hill. His arm was still tender from where he had landed on it after falling down that flight of concrete steps. The rock was dirty and wet and slippery beneath his fingers. He heaved himself halfway up the rock face, with his good arm, suddenly aware of the drop beneath him. He scrambled the rest of the way up as quickly as he could, landing on the moss at the top in a heap on his stomach, heaving and puffing. “Jesus...”

“It’s not even that high, Alex, that’s a twenty foot drop at best,” said Lao.

Alex looked up, ready to retort, when he saw Lao laughing. “Yeah, yeah, mister I’ve-seen-worse,” he said. “I can’t even climb a rock wall at the gym, I’m actually pretty proud of myself.” He looked down at his muddied front and his scratched fingers. “Well, proud enough. Don’t take any pictures, and I’ll remember myself climbing this more gracefully.” Lao offered a hand and pulled Alex to his feet. “Thanks,” he said.

“Don’t mention it.”

They continued their trek upstream, easier now that they were free of the brambles and tall grasses of the riverside. After a short time, they came to a large open area. The roaring sound of falling water grew as they approached. They had found the swamp Lao had seen on the map; but what he hadn’t seen was that the swamp emptied

into a soft waterfall broken by errant stones. They walked up to the edge of the water, peering over the waterfall, watching the lazy water of the swamp suddenly rush into a stream and then course over the edge of the falls.

“Well it’s nice and all, but it doesn’t look any easier to cross,” Lao said, looking around.

“What about beyond the swamp?”

“Can’t see from here, but we could try.”

“Well, let’s try, because I don’t feel like walking all the way back.”

“Alright then,” said Lao simply, and he set a course, working his way along the banks of the swamp. “So you were telling me about death,” he said, looking back at Alex.

“Right, yeah. Well, I told him I wasn’t suicidal, but I don’t think I really care if I die. I mean, I’m not hoping for it to happen, but I don’t think it’s something I’m really afraid of.”

“That’s stupid. Everyone’s afraid to die.”

“Even you?”

“Of course.”

“But I mean, you’re in the army and everything. You *could* die.”

“I’m not in the army so that I can die, that doesn’t have anything to do with why I’m in the army.”

“Yeah, I guess. I just mean that, right now at least, it’s not such a big deal for me.”

Lao was silent for a moment. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“OK, well it’s like – when we were hiking a couple of weeks ago, back in Hamilton, just walking around Webster’s Falls, remember? And there was that really

steep incline that we walked up, beside the railroad tracks. And it would have been so easy to just fall backwards. And then, when we were at the top of the ridge, and we could see the view of the entire city, remember? There were no guard rails or anything, just this big naked spit of rock jutting out. It would have been so easy to fall – not even on purpose or anything, but just to fall.”

“Yeah.”

“And when I got to the edge, I felt the wind swaying me a bit as I stood there. And it was an exhilarating feeling, being up there, over the city. But I thought, you know, I could just take one step forward, and I would fall. And it’s a really steep drop. I might survive, I might not; but probably not. And all that went through my mind was: not today. I wasn’t thinking, Jeez this is scary, I should step back. I wasn’t scared, and it’s not bravado or anything. I wasn’t thinking that I wanted to die, just that there was the possibility, it was there, it was open, but just – not today.”

Lao kept walking in silence.

After several minutes, he said, “I don’t know what that means, Alex.”

“Well I don’t either, I guess that I’m just not that afraid of death.”

Lao seemed thoughtful. “Did you tell the counsellor this? Maybe you’re mentally ill.”

“Ha, yeah right, that would make my parents happy. A gay schizophrenic possibly suicidal son.”

“It would explain a lot.” Lao laughed.

“No, but I did tell him, sort of. I mean, I thought a lot of this after I talked to him. But I told him about how falling down those stairs didn’t scare me the way getting hurt

used to scare me. I kind of took it in stride, which made me kind of nervous, so I told him. And he was an idiot, he said it had something to do with – me being an atheist or something.”

“What?” Lao stopped and turned around.

“I know, eh? Like that has anything to do with anything,” said Alex, coming to a stop.

“No, you told him you were an atheist?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because I am.”

Lao squinted into Alex’s face. “Since when?”

“I dunno, it’s not like official or anything, God can still send me a sign if He wants to. But I’ve never really believed in any of that stuff, not since. . . well, not since I was little.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Lao. He took off his backpack and sat on a rock. Alex, grateful for the break, took off his pack as well, and stretched out on the mossy ground.

“Well I know you still sort of believe in that stuff, so I never really talked to you about it. Besides, there’s nothing to tell really, I just don’t believe in it anymore.”

Lao took a drink from his water bottle, looking thoughtful. “Nobody ever tells me stuff like that, because they know I still go to church.”

“I guess we don’t want to offend you,” said Alex.

Lao thought for a while. “I *am* afraid to die, I’m afraid all the time.” He took another long draught from his water bottle. “I’m afraid that my family will die, that my friends will die, that everyone else around me will die. But I’m really afraid that I’ll die.”

Alex watched him from his spot on the ground.

“There were a bunch of times in Afghanistan that got pretty hairy,” he said. “And all I could do was pray. Please God, let me live.” Lao looked around him, studying the plants, the trees. “I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t have anyone to pray to.”

“Yeah,” said Alex, not because he understood, but because he felt it needed to be said. “So. . . do you like, pray every day?” he asked, curious.

“Yeah. Didn’t you?”

“No, I never really got the whole praying thing. Even when I was a little kid and still believed in God and Jesus and all that, I felt stupid talking to someone who wasn’t there.”

Lao looked Alex full in the face, slightly incredulous. “Well – I mean, He *is* there.”

“Well I couldn’t see anyone.”

“Just look around us,” said Lao, his face bright. “It’s everywhere. He’s everywhere.”

Alex laughed. He hadn’t seen Lao this excited about anything in a while. “Yeah, I guess I understand that. But I just don’t see anything but what’s there. The trees, the rocks, the water.”

“But the trees, the rocks and the water *are* Him, those are Him! He’s not hiding underneath them, they’re Him, He’s right there in front of our faces!”

It was almost sad watching Lao speak with such certainty. Alex wasn't sure if he was sad for Lao or sad for himself. "Yeah, I guess that's why it's your belief and not mine, Lao," he said quietly. "I don't see that."

Lao smiled. "That wasn't meant to be a sermon. I got carried away."

"No you didn't. I know." Alex smiled too. "Does this mean we can't be friends now? Is the universe going to explode, now that a Catholic and an atheist are friends?"

"I think we can risk it," said Lao.

"Good. 'Cause I'm lost, and if you left me right now, the bears would find me and eat me and I'd be dead."

"I looked it up, there aren't many bears around here," said Lao. He zipped up his backpack and replaced it on his shoulders. "Coyotes, though. And wolves, the guidebook said. And this is supposed to be prime habitat for Mississauga rattlesnakes. They're endangered, so if you see one, don't step on it." Lao started walking. "Also, you could get bit."

"Great, glad I asked," Alex muttered.

They kept walking, finally finding a crossing upstream from the swamp. They hopped across on slippery rocks, finally making the other shore, and then started the long trudge back downstream to the trail they had left behind.

"When I was a kid," Lao was saying, "I used to see God's face in the mirror sometimes. I'd be looking in the mirror, and it would be me looking back, and then all of a sudden, it would be God's face there instead. Looking back at me."

"What does God's face look like?"

“I don’t remember,” said Lao. He was silent for a while, and Alex let the matter drop.

Lao remembered that face in the mirror, but he couldn’t describe it. Certainly not out loud, certainly not to Alex. It was almost his own face, but different. Somehow he knew it was God looking back at him, those times, in the mirror over the bathroom sink.

And yet he hadn’t seen God’s face since. The last time he looked in the mirror and saw a difference there, saw God, he was six or seven, certainly no older than that. Maybe that’s what I’ve been doing, Lao thought. Seeking. Everything up until now, and beyond now: what I’m doing is seeking. He so desperately wanted to find Him again, somewhere, anywhere. Lao knew He existed, he knew that God was there, but he hadn’t seen him. He was missing. It was difficult to know why, or where he had gone.

It was the eyes most of all that were different, in the mirror. Lao hated how he looked in the mirror, his eyes especially. He remembered the kids calling him “slanty-eyed,” but his eyes weren’t slanted, really. They were simply close to the skin of his face, too close. A Mongolian eye-fold, he had learned. But he wasn’t Mongolian. He was Canadian. Or, if it must be said, Vietnamese, but he neither spoke the language, nor knew very many other Vietnamese people. He felt, when playing with the other kids as a child, and when hanging around with others as an adult, that he looked just like them. That he looked – not white, not of European heritage – but simply alike everyone around him. It was only in the mirror, or in pictures, when he realized that he looked different.

Lao worried, sometimes, about God. What God would say to him when he finally died, when he crossed over and had to account for his life. Should he have told Alex to

find God? Would he be responsible for Alex not reaching heaven? And yet, of course it was more complicated than that. Alex, and all the other people around him, were good people. They did good things, they lived their lives according to God's plan, more or less, whether they knew it or not. Would God account for such things? He must, Lao thought. And yet, maybe it was as simple as he had always been taught. Maybe the rules were there for a reason.

Rules keep people alive. This was one of the first things he learned in basic training. We follow the rules because we must; because if we didn't, it would be chaos. If a superior officer tells us to do something we think might be a bad idea, we listen to him anyway. We push aside our inner voice and listen to the voice outside of us, the one who knows best, the one who is looking out for us.

A fat bee buzzed on the forest floor in front of him, and Lao carefully stepped around it. They still hadn't reached the trail on the other side of the stream that they had gone so far out of their way to cross. Lao suddenly remembered a Saturday long ago when he had thrown a bag of trash into the dumpster at the back of the store and disturbed the hive that had been growing steadily that summer under the rusting eaves. He was in his early teens, self-conscious about his face, and he was already so different from everyone else in high school. Its one redeeming feature, the smooth and unblemished skin that stretched over his high cheekbones and up to his black hair, was starting to sprout its first angry splotches of acne, disfiguring him even more. Several bees had zoomed from the hive, pelting him like tiny war planes, leaving great stings on his nose, forehead, cheeks and neck. He had pulled his shirt up over his face and ran into

the store, battling the swarm buzzing all around him as more bees emerged from the battered hive.

His mother bathed his face in tomato juice and tweezed out the stingers. Lao just sat there, behind the counter, ignoring the bells on the door tinkling whenever a customer entered or left, and let his tears fall silently down his disfigured face, washing away the juice in long swipes. Red welts bloomed on his arms; some bees had even wriggled into the space between his jean bottoms and socks, leaving their stings to itch at him there too. The pain, the soreness around each welt, the need to scratch, the involuntary shivering of his body as it fought off the poisons, none of this mattered. Lao sat there as his mother steadily worked over his welts in between serving customers, dreading school on Monday.

That Sunday, as he and his father sat in church while his mother ran the store, Lao wondered whether God had sent the bees, if he was being punished. Looking back, it was certainly a characteristic question a fifteen-year old boy would ask. But Lao still wondered, now with less drama perhaps, if it was God's doing. If the bees were emissaries, if everything that happened to him happened because it was willed so.

Lao stumbled back onto the trail by accident, almost walking past it. A white blaze on a large maple tree far off to his right made him stop, and he suddenly noticed the trace of the trail, the hard-packed earth different from the forest floor. He acted as though he had seen the trail all along, letting Alex think that he was better at tracking than he actually was. He liked the way that Alex seemed to look up to him, the way that Alex always let Lao lead and set the pace, and even choose most of the routes.

He remembered visiting Alex as a kid, on his parents' expansive farm fifteen minutes from town. Alex took Lao and some other friends on paths he and his father had

made through the forest, and he remembered Alex telling him that he spoke to the trees. They had laughed, then, but Lao had seen on Alex's teenaged face a truth.

And now, as they walked, Lao looked back at Alex. He was looking up, at the leaves and branches overhead. Lao couldn't tell, but Alex seemed to be listening to something that Lao couldn't hear. Cocking his head to the side, Lao strained his ears. But the only sound he heard was the chirping of birds, the wind through the leaves, and, maybe, the distant roar of the small waterfall they had left behind.

The last of the afternoon light was just retreating behind the trees when they finished the loop and arrived, sodden and soaking with sweat, at the car.

"Claire will kill us if we stink up her car," Alex fretted.

"Well it's either stink it up or leave it here and walk home," said Lao.

"You're right. But can it please be your fault? I'm always in the doghouse with Claire."

Lao smiled but said nothing.

They stripped off their boots and socks and rain gear, Alex's feet feeling strangely light once in his regular running shoes, the heavy hiking boots no longer holding them down like magnets to the earth.

They had again decided to stay overnight at Alex's parents' house on the way, a two-hour drive from the trailhead.

"Okay, so this time," Alex told Lao as they drove, "you don't need to worry about what my parents think about you. They have been thoroughly briefed by Claire about my escapades with Darrel and my apparently broken heart. Also, I think they know about

you dating Claire. And if they don't, I'm going to tell them, because I never get to tell them anything good."

"She told them? Everything?"

"Well not everything, even Claire doesn't know everything," Alex said quietly.

They were silent for a moment. "No one else?" Lao asked.

"No one else."

"I'm sorry," Lao said.

"Sorry? What are you sorry about?"

"Your apparently broken heart. Sorry about that."

"Oh. Thanks." Alex felt the gesture Lao was making. "Claire guesses more than she knows about the entire thing. I think she's made up some sort of fantasy life of me and Darrel. It was nothing, really. Just, whenever I'd come home, I'd see Darrel, too." The evening light cast long shadows as they drove, the setting sun popping behind the occasional tree. "I think I'm more bummed about Sam finding out that I'm a total ass than I am about Darrel anymore."

"Yeah," said Lao. Alex could tell that Lao knew he was being overly casual, and he was grateful that he didn't call Alex on it.

As they drove on, Lao squirmed in his seat, trying to adjust his position. He took off his seatbelt and put it on again, and then changed positions again. Alex looked at him sideways, for he was acting most unlike Lao. Even before he had joined the army, Lao had always had a military bearing. He stood erect, he fidgeted little, he held his chin high off his chest. When Lao again undid his seatbelt so he could change positions, Alex said, "Can I help you with something?"

“No, it’s just…” He didn’t finish.

“Just what?” Alex asked, bemused.

“I want to ask you something. Related to what you said about your parents.”

“I was teasing you.”

“Yeah, I got uncomfortable last time, I know.”

“I really didn’t think anything of it.”

“No, that’s not it. I was just wondering – you know – if – ”

“If what?”

“If you ever – ”

“It I ever what?”

Lao took a deep breath. “If you ever did – think about me – that way.”

Alex laughed. He looked over at Lao, and saw relief flooding his face. Lao smiled too.

“No Lao, you can rest easy,” said Alex.

“Oh, okay. Good – I mean – not that I – I mean, if you did, I wouldn’t – but I’m glad that you – I mean, I wouldn’t have asked, but I was wondering.”

“Jesus, it’s okay, you don’t have to worry.” Alex tried to think of the right way to say it. “No, I didn’t – I don’t – think of you that way.” He tried to sound firm, to make sure that the truth he was telling would be taken as truth. “I mean, it’s not that you’re not – like, any girl would be lucky – well, not any girl, Claire would be lucky – I mean, *is* lucky – ”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

The silence stretched out tautly.

“I’m feeling really awkward right now,” said Lao, with his characteristic honesty.

“Um, yeah, so am I,” said Alex, laughing nervously.

“So let’s just settle this so we can move on,” said Lao.

“OK. Good plan.” Alex thought for a moment. “I, Alex Robinson, do avow and affirm – that I do not have any sexual feelings for you whatsoever – although I do think you are a great guy, and I can go on if you are feeling insecure.”

“No, that’s sufficient. Thanks, Alex.”

“No problem.”

It was like they had signed a contract. After that, Alex found their conversations friendlier; they were each less guarded with their thoughts, and eventually, a couple of hours later, they were able to laugh at their awkwardness, laugh at Lao’s discomfort, and laugh at the idea of a possible love triangle involving the two of them and Claire. Alex had really never felt so close to another human being. He had never let his guard down like this before, and as they walked, laughing and hitting and teasing each other, into the back kitchen of Alex’s parents’ house, Alex felt a safety and comfort he had never thought possible.

Chapter 8

Claire couldn't clear her head. She needed something, or something was missing, or something wasn't right. She didn't know what it was, so she left her apartment and started walking.

And that was why she ended up at Lao's place, waiting in the hallway outside his apartment door for the courage to knock and look Lao in the face for the first time since . . . well, since things had gotten crazy, since she had decided to back off a bit. But there was always something about Lao that she liked, as if she were closer to something real. Claire knew that she scared Lao; and while men had long since ceased to scare her, she was always unsure of herself when she was around someone who looked at her the way Lao did. With fright, yes, but also with reverence. What do you do with reverence?

But God, their breakup. She wondered, now, why she even fell in love with Lao in the first place. Or maybe that wasn't even true. Did she actually fall in love with Lao?

It was only a couple of months, really, that they had been together. He had returned from Afghanistan in early spring, they moved forward in fits and starts, and then she had decided that it wouldn't work. Now, the humidity and heat of late summer invaded the hallway in this cheap building Lao had moved into. It seemed impossible that they hadn't been together through all seasons, that it had only been spring and

summer. It felt like years, as if seasons had come and gone, as if they had seen so much together.

She cleared her throat and lifted her fist to the door before she could stop herself. She really shouldn't be here, she really shouldn't be doing this. But she knocked anyway. It opened only after a while, Claire waiting impatiently and worrying that he had looked out the peephole and had decided not to let her in. Lao had been sleeping, he was shirtless and in boxers, and she could see the impression of his penis underneath them. She got that punched-in-the-gut feeling that accompanies seeing someone whom you realize you must have right away. Without waiting for Lao to inquire as to her presence at his door at 2:50 in the morning, Claire walked into him and kissed him as hard as she could. She tried to put as much sexiness and desire as she could into the kiss so that Lao would get the hint. He tasted a little like sleep and salt and his breath streamed richly into her nose.

Lao kissed back. He was a good kisser, Lao. She remembered moving him into his new place, this apartment, after he left his parents' house in Ancaster. Everything was still new then, weird and scary and awkward and new, but when she dropped the last box on his new floor, the old, stained carpet giving a bit too much under its weight, he had come to her and kissed her, right there. She was sweaty and her hair clung to her wet forehead and cheeks in ringlets, but Lao was sweaty too. It was a perfect moment, a perfect kiss, something she wanted to recapture. But now, as hard as she was trying, it just didn't feel the same.

Claire pushed him into the apartment and shut the door behind her and went back to kissing him, breathing hard. Both of them were breathing hard and trying to kiss and

trying to press their faces into each other. Breathing in the smell of him, sweaty and acrid, Claire felt that gut-punching feeling intensify. She pushed past the feeling that this was wrong, that nothing felt the same as before. She pushed him onto the couch and freed him from his boxers. He was hard, and when she grabbed him, he let out a gasp.

Tearing off her clothes, Claire bent her head so aggressively towards Lao's that their foreheads bumped and it hurt a little. She bit his lip and started moving downwards.

Lao tried to pull her back up. "Slow down," he whispered into her hair. He tried kissing her on the nose and ran his hands through her hair. *Too soft*, she thought, and she burrowed her nose into his, pushing his head back to the couch. She grabbed his hair roughly and pulled a little. Again she started to move down.

"Slow down, this isn't a race," Lao squirmed. He made to sit up a bit to look into Claire's eyes. "You're beautiful," he said, smiling.

"Shut up and fuck me." Claire kissed him hard again, biting his lip as she pulled away, trying to give a smouldering, sexy look, trying to tell him what she wanted. She pressed her entire body into his, feeling every part of him press against her.

"I love you," Lao whispered into her ear, and he ran his hands through her hair again, but again it was too soft, too gentle, it felt like he was petting her or something. She tried to ignore what he had said, rolling her eyes a bit and biting his ear. She grabbed his hands as they continued their petting and made him grab her hair in fistfuls. When she let go of his fists, her hair dropped and she felt his hands on either side of her face.

They were kissing again, and Lao broke away to whisper, "Well?" Claire blew the hair out of her face, smiled mischievously, and grabbed his penis to shut him up.

"Fuck me," she breathed into his face, and started moving down again.

“Claire, what’s going on?” Lao pushed Claire back a bit and again put both hands on either side of her face, gently, and tried looking into her eyes. “This is great and everything but. . .”

“God, Lao, just go with it.” Claire again breathed in the smell of him, pressing her nose into his chest. She grabbed his arms and tried to make him be the man, be the one with the dick and the sex drive. She put her mouth around his hard penis moved up and down, savoring the scent that felt forbidden, reveling in the fact that she was doing this to him as he was struggling to pull her off.

Lao grabbed his arms back. “What’s gotten into you?” he said, pulling her head up to the same level as his. “What is this, does this mean we’re – ?” He stood up off the couch and Claire slid off of him. He backed to the wall, looking at Claire’s naked body on the floor. Actually, he wasn’t looking at her body, Claire realized. He was looking at her face.

“Fine, you wanna do it standing up?” Claire smiled and got up and tried to get to Lao again. He put out his arms and forcibly kept her at arms’ length.

She dodged around them, grabbed Lao, kissed him. He didn’t seem to be resisting anymore, was returning her kiss. She spent some moments placating him in this manner, and then she turned around, putting her hands on the coffee table, her ass in the air behind her. She pushed backwards into Lao, feeling his body, waiting for him to enter her. She was tingling with the smell of him on her face, with the expectation of filling the punched-in-the-gut feeling with Lao. She waited.

“This is great and everything Claire, but what’s going on? I have a right to know.” Lao had snatched his hands back and had moved out from behind her.

She suddenly felt like a fool, bent over as she was, waiting for him. He didn't come to her, he didn't want her. Her body, only seconds before coursing with desire, now coursed anger, turning quickly into frustration.

Claire sighed. She turned around and sat on the coffee table and bent her head onto her arms in her lap, her hair falling over her face. She had never felt so frustrated.

"Umm, Claire?" Lao crouched in front of her. She got up and started gathering her clothes. Frustrated, yes, she felt frustrated. Frustrated, disappointed, unwanted, rejected, humiliated, dirty, gross, sexless.

"No, don't go! I want to do this, I just want to know why." Lao scrambled after her.

Claire had already slipped on her jeans. She couldn't see her underwear anywhere amongst the mess of Lao's apartment. Disappointment and resentment coursed through her.

Lao grabbed her arms to keep her from opening the door. She raised her hands in front of her face and backed away.

"Why? God Lao! I wanted you to fuck me, didn't you get that?"

"Well yeah, but. . . I mean, everything that happened. I just. . ."

Claire couldn't stand him looking at her in the eyes like that. The memory of just a few moments ago made her shiver with humiliation and indignation and regret.

"I can't believe this. I just wanted a good lay, Lao, and you happen to be a man. Well, you have a penis, at least."

Claire was madder at herself than she was at Lao. He looked like a puppy dog standing there. Why did she come here? What was she expecting?

“No, you don’t mean that. What about us?”

Claire opened the door. She was still breathing hard from the sexual adrenaline that had been coursing through her body; reality hadn’t caught up with the punched-in-her-gut feeling yet. It was obscene, but she still wanted Lao badly. She had to leave before she let her body give in to that again.

“I shouldn’t have come here, I don’t know why I did.”

“Don’t go. Let’s talk about it.”

“God, Lao, what’s there to talk about?”

He started to get angry. “How about the fact that you come in here and try to have sex with me. And then get angry and leave before we even have time to say hello and goodbye?”

“Goodbye, Lao.” Claire stepped into the hallway barefoot.

“You’re not wearing any shoes.”

“I could only find one.” She started walking, and inadvertently glanced at him over her shoulder. He was still naked but obviously no longer aroused. Claire was still heaving but was trying to hide it. It felt like trying to hold in a sneeze. “If you find the other one, don’t tell me, please. I’ll buy another pair. They were getting old anyway.”

“You only have one pair of shoes?”

Trying to hide the fact that every particle of her body was screaming at her to run, Claire walked as slowly as was possible considering her beating heart and the surge of power coursing through her limbs.

“Claire,” he called.

“I’m not going to talk to you about this,” she called back.

“Claire,” he pleaded.

She said nothing.

When she reached the stairwell, she made sure the door had swung shut behind her before she ran down the stairs, stubbing her toes and jumping the last four, bruising her feet on landing.

The fresh air of night at 3 am hit her face, and she finally allowed herself to breathe fully. She felt drenched and dirty and spent. She continued heaving, bringing in huge gulps of the night-time air. She thought wryly that she had at least avoided the walk of shame that she would have had to endure had she stayed at Lao’s until morning. That morning she had to work the 6 o’clock shift; she wouldn’t have had time to go back to her place to change. She would have had to walk past Lao’s early-rising elderly neighbours, who although old were not naive.

Tears had started streaming down her face, and although her destination was home, she couldn’t help pacing a little bit at intervals, trying to find a way to let out that energy, the feeling of rejection and sexual frustration. She ran her hands through her hair, pulling the wet strands from off of her cheeks.

And although she was angry with herself, she was even angrier with Lao. Why couldn’t he just give her what she needed, and why did he need so much more?

Claire had not been able to get to sleep when she had finally returned to her apartment, her tender bare feet screaming, and she found herself regretting that she hadn’t endured at least one extra minute at Lao’s to find her other shoe. She watched TV infomercials for a time, tried to read a book that a friend had recommended to her, and eventually ended up

spending most of the time playing with her cat Hugo as she lay dazed on her couch. 5:30, the time she had to leave in order to make it to work on time, came and went before she realized that the sun had risen, and that she was at least an hour late for work.

Glenda, who had worked the night shift, was furious when Claire rolled in at 7:30 wearing a pair of little-used and uncomfortable shoes from the back of her closet. Glenda had a pretty plumb job, though, so Claire wasn't too concerned. Working the night shift at a group home meant that Glenda basically had nothing to do but clean up from the previous day and help any resident who happened to wake up. And yet it seemed that she still never got her entire job fully completed before the morning person arrived, which meant that Claire routinely did Glenda's cleaning and paperwork for the few hours of peaceful morning before the residents had to be woken up, given baths, given breakfast, and generally taken care of for the day.

The other morning shift staff member was usually scheduled to arrive at eight, and most of the morning stuff before getting the residents up had to be completed before then. It was the weekend, so Claire knew it would be Matt, the eighteen-year old student with an easy manner she found irritating and slightly condescending, who seemed to treat his job like a résumé-padding "experience" before he went to Harvard or Yale or whatever Ivy-league American school he had gotten into. Claire couldn't really remember. She liked Matt well enough, perhaps in large part because of his wide-eyed enthusiasm for work she found to be mainly a chore, but was put off by his unhidden desire to become a rich American doctor, lawyer, executive, or whatever made the most obscene amounts of money. She was also put off by his eagerness to make the most of

his limited time at the group home. It made Claire feel like she was working at a pit stop and not a destination.

All of Glenda's work, which was somehow still uncompleted even though the woman had an extra hour and a half to do it, had to be done in the next half hour. As Glenda left muttering about twenty-something burnouts keeping her from her home, which Claire knew was populated only with cats who knew how to use human toilets, Claire lay on the couch in the break room trying to ignore the pulsing in her temple and the workload ahead of her.

The next thing she knew, a pair of deep blue wide-set eyes loomed over her, and a deep but tinny voice said something she didn't quite catch, likely that she needed to get up. So she had gotten some sleep after all, she thought.

"God, you look terrible," Matt said to her when she sat up on the couch. Claire knew her hair would look like straw and that she had probably been drooling. She wiped her mouth and looked around for her purse to find a comb.

"Mm'okay."

"Coffee?"

"Oh my God, Matt, I couldn't love you more." She took the proffered cup in her hands and took a sip. She was still too tired to completely control all of her muscles, and took too big of a sip and felt her tongue burning. She also slobbered some hot coffee down her wrinkled shirt.

She noticed that Matt had gone slightly red around the ears. He gallantly declined to notice her staining shirt. "Shall we get going? Maurice is whining, I heard him when I came in."

Claire hopped off the couch as best she could and took another gulp of coffee. To hell with it, she thought, my tongue is already burnt anyway. She shotgunned the scalding coffee and felt her throat blister slightly. It was going to be a great day.

It was perhaps hard to admit now, but Claire had started at the retirement home with the same wide-eyed enthusiasm that consumed her teenaged co-worker Matt now. It hadn't taken her very long to lose the enthusiasm; it wasn't even very long before she lost the idealism that prompted her in this direction in the first place.

Ultimately, she thought, the group home wasn't the problem, despite its many issues. The problem was that the group home was now how she defined herself in relation to everything. She was the chick who worked at the group home, the one with a big heart, the one who did things others couldn't handle. She even defined herself by her job in relation to Lao, saw his devotion to the army as a similar kind of life-affirming and selfless path. They both worked in service to their fellow human beings, they both helped the helpless. Claire pictured Lao rescuing starving children and mutilated young women from mud shelters in Afghanistan, and felt a kind of harmony with her own work helping those who were oppressed by their own minds, by their aging and deteriorating bodies, the people at home who needed saving just as much.

Most of the men in her life (and this was one of the first times that she had considered them men, not guys or dudes or boys) were interested in money, in finding themselves, in protesting and fighting the power, in poetry and Keats and Shakespeare, and also other men. Claire didn't think that she was given to generalizations, but she did think that, for the most part, men were selfish. Working at a retirement home was

Claire's way of telling the world that she was *not* selfish, in fact selfless. The pay was poor, the hours long, the conditions not ideal, but she was doing work that needed to be done, work that was infinitely more important than business or law or academia or politics or any of the other paths that people her age chose. But Lao, Lao too was selfless.

After Jason's party that they didn't go to, way back at the very beginnings of their relationship, Claire fell asleep on the middle console in her car, her head still resting on Lao's shoulder. He didn't move, didn't say anything, didn't clear his throat or adjust his body or call out to his friends in the night who were leaving the bar. When she awoke, everything was exactly the same inside the vehicle; Lao was still in the same position beside and underneath her. The car had grown cold in the night, and she shivered slightly, but Lao was unmoving. She wondered if he too had been asleep, but his eyes were open and steady. She tried to read them, but she couldn't. She wasn't sure what kept Lao there, for so long.

Light had started to break on the horizon behind them, the night receding on the now-empty lot. It must have been hours and hours that they had sat in this car, but Claire still didn't want to leave. She clung to Lao as the world brightened.

He offered to drive her home and she accepted, not thinking at the time of how he would get from her place to his parents'. She was sore and stiff from sleeping at an odd angle, and she curled up in the passenger seat while Lao took the wheel.

"I feel the same way, sometimes," he said, as they drove along the city streets. It was the first thing he said that didn't have something to do with the practicalities of their situation. She didn't understand what he meant. Lao glanced at her and saw her

perplexity, and elaborated. “About what you said about Alex. About feeling responsible for people all the time.”

He was carrying on the conversation from the night before as if there had been no interruption. Claire searched her brain for what they had been talking about, but she had mostly forgotten. It didn’t help that she was still foggy and fuzzy-headed from waking up sore in a car after only a couple hours of sleep. She didn’t say anything, and let him speak.

“People think that’s why I joined the army sometimes,” he continued, speaking to the windshield. “They think I’m trying to protect everyone.” He adjusted the rearview mirror, fiddling with it until it was right. His hands were at a perfect 10 and 2 position on the wheel. He signalled early when he changed lanes or turned, and accelerated and braked slowly, smoothly.

“But you’re not?” Claire asked.

“No. I might be if there was anything to protect people from.”

Claire considered before answering. “You’re protecting us from ourselves.”

“Maybe,” said Lao.

The silence stretched, but Claire wanted to hear more. He was going somewhere with that thought, he had something he wanted to say, but now he wasn’t saying it. “So why are you doing it?” she prompted.

“I’m doing it for myself, Claire,” Lao said, serious now. “I’m not some selfless guy running out into the world to save people. It’s selfish.”

The city lights flashed by the window, the sky a grey mask. Claire watched as barely-visible clouds scuttled across the horizon, over the escarpment. “Just because you did it out of selfishness at first doesn’t mean that it’s still selfish,” she said.

“True.”

“Are you going back?”

“You already asked me that.”

“Right. I guess I still find it hard to understand why you’d want to.”

“Yeah,” said Lao. She wondered if she hurt his feelings.

Claire waited for as long as she could before she called Lao again. It turned out to be a full 24 hours after he had driven her to her apartment. She had offered him the use of her car to get home, but he declined, telling her that the buses were probably already running.

“I was just wondering – if you wanted to get together again,” she said after Lao had picked up the phone and said hello.

“Yeah, yeah I do.” He sounded excited, Claire thought.

“Good. You doing anything tomorrow morning? I have to work in the afternoon, but we could get together before then.”

“Well, yeah. It’s Sunday.”

“So?”

“So... I’m going to church,” he said.

“Oh, right.”

There was a long pause on the phone. “You want to come with me?” Lao asked, as if he were summoning courage.

“Oh! Um.”

“You don’t have to, but it’s what I’m doing tomorrow, you could come too.”

“Um. Okay, I guess. I haven’t been to church in a while.”

“It’ll be good for you then,” he said, a smile in his voice, although Claire couldn’t be sure of that.

“Well okay then.”

Lao’s parents were quiet and smiling, saying barely a word to Claire as she greeted them and they entered the church. She wasn’t sure why they weren’t saying anything, if perhaps their grasp of English wasn’t great, or that they chose to show deferential reverence by being silent on the Sabbath, or if they simply didn’t like her. Or maybe they were still fighting. But she drew in close to Lao as they walked down the aisle of the church, stopping at a pew halfway back and genuflecting before filing into the row.

Claire couldn’t remember what the protocol was for genuflecting. She watched Lao’s mother and father as they went before her, cursorily kneeling with a hand on the pew and a quick sign of the cross. But Lao took his time, bowed his head as he knelt, stayed there on one knee for a couple moments. He made the sign of the cross and then brought his hand to his mouth, seeming to kiss it. Claire wished she had worn dress pants instead of the floaty skirt she had chosen, which threatened to blow up around her waist as she descended into the half-kneeling position. She rocketed back up before the dress could betray her, and slunk into the space Lao had left for her on the pew.

The only church she had ever been in was St. Mary’s, back home. Her parents had insisted on going every Sunday until she and Alex were in high school, and then they

seemed to have decided that was enough. They quickly became Christmas and Easter Christians, and Claire easily forgot most of the recitations, even much of the Lord's Prayer. It wasn't until the very moment she was in a church with Lao that she regretted this lapse. She worried what Lao would think if she wasn't able to get through most of the mass. She thought she might stand out like a beacon in the church, a fraud.

But this didn't happen. Most everyone around her only mumbled responses, barely anyone sang the hymns. Lao's parents said nothing, opening their mouths to soundlessly word the responses, keeping their lips pressed firmly together whenever singing was required. Lao's mother grunted whenever she had to kneel, placing her hand behind her to grip the seat to stay upright; it was the only sound she heard from either of them. It was only Lao who responded with gusto, who sang the hymns with a surprising clear tenor, who crossed himself and looked serious during the prayers.

Claire looked around her as she did as a child in St. Mary's. This church was relatively new, probably built in the sixties. The pews were still made of hard wood as with older churches, but the décor around her seemed strangely softened. There were no bleeding Jesuses, no crying Marys, no self-righteous Johns, no statues at all. The altar was adorned with a simple huge wooden cross, nothing else. No fluted columns, no frilly structure housing the host. The mezzanine held an electric organ; no brass pipes were visible, no lofty testament to the power of sound. It felt like a church, certainly, with that feeling of ritual and beyond-the-necessary; but less designed to inspire terror, less a place of worship. It felt like a place of prayer.

After the service, Lao's parents took them out for brunch, an apparent ritual in itself. They sat in a bright diner, Lao's parents having a closed conversation of their own in the booth, sitting beside Claire and Lao. It felt almost as if she were alone with Lao.

"How was your return to Catholic service?" Lao asked her quietly.

"Fine, I guess."

"I'm glad you came." Lao had a brightened, almost holy quality about him this morning that she had rarely seen before. His eyes seemed larger, and the creases on his forehead cast his face in a perpetual expression of wonder.

"I wasn't sure about it at first," Claire admitted.

"I know. But I'm glad you decided to come."

Their meals arrived; Lao doused his entire plate in syrup.

"It felt," started Claire after a time. "It felt like a place of prayer."

"Yeah, I guess it is," said Lao, his mouth half full, syrup dribbling down his chin.

"Different from St. Mary's, you know?"

"Yeah, it is different. I like it better here. It feels more like God's house."

"I guess." Claire dug into her omelette, taking small bites.

Lao's parents were looking through the dusty windows beside them.

"I just think – watching you today – that I never really learned that kind of thing," said Claire hesitantly.

"What kind of thing?"

"Praying. You looked so reverent, so . . . believing. So faithful. When you prayed."

Lao looked at her, his eyes once again reaching with the same gravitational force into her own.

“No one ever taught me how to pray, is what I’m saying.”

“It’s not something you need to be taught, though,” said Lao.

“Yeah. I suppose not.”

Claire wasn’t really sure when it started. She kept calling Lao and he kept answering. She knew it was official when their friends started calling them Lao-and-Claire, as if they were a singular unit, people who couldn’t exist without the other. She enjoyed being in a relationship (finally, a relationship!), but couldn’t decipher Lao’s intentions, his feelings, his opinion on the matter. Their first official date, the night after he had taken her to church, was almost perfect in her mind. Lao was a gentleman, he laughed and smiled and agreed with everything she said.

But as Claire told Lao everything, things about herself that were probably too private to share, Lao remained a locked box. She knew he was religious, but she didn’t know if he was always super incredibly one hundred per cent sure that God existed, or if he worried about the damage that religion had done to the world. She knew in what things he was certain, but nothing of his doubts. He spoke of the army and Afghanistan freely and openly, more than she could have dreamed. But it still seemed oddly one-sided, an almost cheerful account of what must have been at times horrendous. No one has such certainty, she thought. Why was he hiding his doubts? Was he hiding them from her, or from himself too?

The next date was not so stellar, however, and Claire glimpsed the side of Lao that she felt he must have been hiding from her. Lao was depressed about something, angry at his parents for something he wouldn't elaborate on. Of course it wasn't always easy to tell Lao's state of mind, even the basic emotions like happiness or depression were difficult to spot. So unlike most everyone else she knew, especially her family. Alex, who bounded into the room when he was happy, was an open book. Her parents would yell and scream when they were angry, saying terrible things, but it was all for the release. They would kiss and hug and coo over Claire and Alex, and over each other, once the fighting was over. Lao, on the other hand, was always meticulous, always rigid in posture, his chin always held high. He betrayed nothing of what was going on inside except a slight lift when he was happy, a slight pout when he was sad. And other, more subtle emotions were impossible to observe, even more so to anticipate.

On this third date, Lao had arranged everything like on the second: there was a reservation waiting for a nice dinner in a nice part of town; he was well-dressed and had obviously cleaned his parents' car; but the reservation expired, the gleaming car sat empty.

Claire knocked on his door at what she judged to be the appropriate time – ten minutes after the time they had agreed upon – expecting Lao to spring open the door, expecting to once again be whisked off her feet and treated to an expensive meal. But it was a different person who opened the door. It was depressed- and angry-Lao, and this was her first meeting, although far from the last. It took him a full minute to answer the door, and when it opened, it revealed Lao, looking normal, the same as always. But still

different somehow. Lao was wearing nice clothes, but he was dishevelled and tousle-haired. Claire waited for him to say something, but he didn't.

"Um. . . we were on for seven, weren't we?" asked Claire, eyeing Lao's wrinkles and standing clumps of hair.

"Yeah."

She got little else out of him. Claire stayed for half an hour, trying to figure out what was wrong, but got nowhere. Eventually she left in a huff, deflated and quite disappointed but overall angrily curious as to what could have produced such a change.

For a reason she didn't know herself, Claire tried another date with Lao, which turned out to be marvellous. Suddenly they were dating, and no one wanted to put a label on it, but weeks passed and Lao continued to be generally wonderful. Wracked with self-doubt over whether Lao felt for her the same way she felt about him, she was surprised and relieved when Lao asked, squirming slightly in his seat over dinner, if they were boyfriend and girlfriend. That was it. That was how it started.

The night that they had officially decided that they were more than dating, that they were together and exclusive and every other label they could apply, Claire and Lao had sex. She had no idea what his views on premarital relations were, if he had ever had sex before, if he wanted to, if he would even be able to without getting some kind of commitment first. But after the declarations, they kissed on the edge of her bed, and Claire felt a thrill of excitement. She knew, even before Lao said the words, what he was going to say.

“Let’s have sex,” he said. He didn’t waste words, Lao, she thought. It was one of the more endearing things about him, that he got right to the point. But it also made him even more of a puzzle to her. How could he be so blunt about some things and so quiet about others? But this was clear enough.

“I wasn’t sure if that was allowed,” she said

“I’m allowing it.”

Claire felt a twinge of anxiety underneath her desire for him. “Are you sure? You know I’m not really religious, but you are.” She didn’t want him to change himself just for her. Well – that wasn’t true. She did. But she didn’t want it to be too obvious; and she worried that Lao would be guilty in the morning if they did something that went against his morals, and she felt that the guilty Lao might be difficult to take.

“It’s okay,” he said. And that’s all she got.

It was Lao’s first time, and that made Claire feel kind of dirty. She couldn’t explain why exactly it made her feel dirty, but she didn’t like being the experienced one. What she wanted was for Lao to come to her and tell her that he was going to fuck her, and ask her one question: if she wanted to be on her back or on her knees. But what Lao wanted was different. Lao wanted to be as gentle as possible, he wanted to whisper things into her ear and run his hands through her hair. He wanted to take things slowly; he wanted to feel every part of her body before he entered her. It took so long that Claire lost any desire she had and had to fake it.

The next time she told him explicitly what she wanted. His ears went red and he tried valiantly but every time he was on the right track he had to stop and ask if everything was okay, if he was hurting her, if she wanted him to stop.

So Claire faced a choice. She didn't want to be so shallow as to break up with Lao simply because he was bad – or, perhaps, hopefully, not yet very good – in bed. And she was really starting to like Lao. She loved kissing him, she loved sitting on his couch with him and watching terrible movies, and she loved sitting in his parents' garage reading a magazine while Lao worked on his car. She loved being around him, and she wondered if she perhaps even loved him. But every time they made love she was left even more unsatisfied than before. It reached a fever pitch, and Claire was almost hopping with the desire for Lao to do something right.

Claire never made a choice, which she supposed meant that she chose to stay with Lao. They relaxed on the lovemaking, and suddenly, that seemed to do the trick: Lao got better – slightly, slowly – and everything became more pleasurable. She still wasn't sure how Lao reconciled the sex with his religion, and the more she asked, the less he answered. She eventually decided it didn't matter.

Chapter 9

The Robinson family had lived in the Mount Forest area for generations; Claire thought, sometimes, that perhaps she was robbing her ancestors of their right, of their connection to the land that they cleared with nothing but an axe. She had moved away, Alex had moved away, so many others had moved to cities and towns farther south. And they were fiercely Catholic, those ancestors. Generations had insisted upon marriage within the faith, on service to the community and to the church, and her parents had continued that tradition, taking her and Alex to church every Sunday, making sure that they went to the Catholic school instead of the public.

Claire's ancestors helped to build St. Mary Catholic Church, both times. The first, a simple wooden structure; and the second, red-brick and imposing, built upon the foundations of the original one, destroyed by fire. At the very centre of the church, over the pews about halfway back from the altar, there was a wooden grille in the ceiling that Claire remembered vividly, a living dark that peered behind the latticework. Long services on Sundays found a very bored Claire, barely a head taller than the hard wooden pews, gazing at the dark far above her. While her father mumbled along to the service absently and her mother held a struggling baby Alex, she explored that dark behind the grille. It seemed a thick dark, an absence of light unlike anything she had seen. Claire imagined that it was from there that Jesus and God were watching the Mass; Church was God's house, after all, and He wasn't visible sitting anywhere among congregation. When Claire learned about babies, that they grew inside their mothers and were then born into the world, she also decided that unborn babies, their souls not yet residing in their mothers' bellies, were floating around up there in the dark with God and Jesus. It wasn't

a happy picture, really, not a heaven of clouds and blue sky and white-robed angels and saints. It was a mindless floating in the dark, an eternity of waiting to be born, or an eternity of waiting after death. For her grandfather was up there too, Claire knew; he wasn't buried in the Catholic cemetery across from the chicken hatchery on the outskirts of town. His soul, and likely the souls of all others who had died before and after him, were watching Claire, looking down from behind the grille, floating in that present dark.

When Claire was small, her grandfather would pick her up like she was a small sack of grain and place her on his expansive lap. They sat at the kitchen table, great baskets full of stuff from the garden overflowing onto the plastic tablecloth. Grandpa would dump half a basket of berries he had picked onto the table and then sort through them, picking out the bad ones, and placing the good ones into bowls that Grandma would pick up when they were full and parcel them out into old milk bags.

Grandpa's garden was humongous, and he grew everything that Claire knew could be grown. Black currants, red currants, gooseberries, blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, blackberries; and he would go out into the bush and along the sides of the road to pick wild raspberries, elder berries and cranberries. Claire liked to help, although she was likely more of a hindrance. Grandpa patiently showed Claire how the stalky ends of the currants had to be trimmed off before they could be cooked or frozen, how the stems of the gooseberries and blueberries had to be picked from the fruit. Claire would laboriously pick away all of the stalk or stem of a certain berry and then pop it into her mouth. Her favourites were the black currants, so sweetly sour and juicy. Her least favourites were the gooseberries, which made her face scrunch up with the tartness. But

she still ate them, and when her face scrunched up from their taste, Grandpa laughed his big booming laugh, emanating from his great belly against which Claire sat.

Now the garden grew wild. The earth, which had seemed so deep and black when Grandpa laboured over it day after day, now grew weeds, grass, and the rambling asparagus which hadn't been cut back. Queen Anne's Lace popped through the soil in places, the sight of which always made Grandma sigh. Grandpa had nothing but contempt for Queen Anne's Lace, and seeing it growing in another's field meant that the farmer wasn't working hard enough.

Most of what Claire remembered from the funeral was that the carpet was thick and plush, and that one only had to rub one's shoes across it a couple of times to give someone an electric shock. It reminded Claire of the electric fence that Grandpa had kept around his garden to keep out the critters, the fence that Alex had several times grabbed, just to see what would happen, and had received a startling shock of electric current through his clenched fist holding the wire. Claire would run to help him as he started crying, still holding the wire, and then receive the same electric shock through her own body when she grabbed him.

In the room where all the adults were standing, Claire wasn't tall enough to see inside the box that held her grandfather. All she could make out was the round rise of his belly, uncharacteristically clothed in a black suit. It seemed odd to her that he was being buried in a suit, when Grandpa always wore overalls. She supposed that dying was a formal occasion; after all, Claire was made to wear an uncomfortable dress with frilly, scratchy fringes and a collar that dug into her neck, making her feel like she couldn't breathe.

Adults had been looking down at her and her brother all week, some of them explaining soberly what death was, what had happened to Grandpa. She felt annoyed and confused, and wished they would all just go away. She wanted to play with her cousins, who had come for the funeral, but she wasn't allowed to have fun. She was supposed to be quiet and calm, but how could she? No one was doing anything, everyone was just standing around in their suits and dresses. While Alex shuffled around the room giving people shocks from the carpet, Claire dawdled beside the coffin, gazing up at the sad faces above her, until her father had to take both of them outside.

At night Claire started having bad dreams that she could never remember, but she woke up feeling sick and frightened. She would lay awake, staring at the ceiling, and tried to imagine God welcoming Grandpa to heaven. Claire felt sorry for her grandfather, because she knew that he wouldn't be able to pick berries up in heaven, where all you did was float around and talk to God and Jesus. He wouldn't even be able to wear his overalls, because he had been buried in his suit. Claire hated God then. Why couldn't Grandpa be comfortable? Why did he have to wear his suit in heaven? Claire knew how uncomfortable formal wear was. She decided that she wasn't going to die, if that was what heaven was like.

Claire was the first to leave home for university, and she cried when the time came to say goodbye to Alex, to her parents, to her old room and her favourite barn cat she would secretly let into the house against her father's wishes. But she felt that her chance had arrived; it was time to put into action what she thought she needed to do to make the world a better place.

Her first job in the city was at a large retirement home in the outskirts of the city. The building was old and dilapidated; the entire place had the feel of neglect. She soon realized that the neglect she felt didn't only apply to the building and its furnishings. She saw staff members abuse the residents, and talk openly of wishing that some of them would just hurry up and die. She was unused to working in any kind of large organization, and had no idea how to report the abuses she witnessed. But she soon realized that the management was as neglectful as the staff.

Claire buried herself into her work. Some of the residents called her names, some of the older gentlemen pinched her ass when she tried to help them into bed. Many would scream and shout and say horrible things, things she had never heard anyone say, not even on TV, not even from the mean girls in high school bathrooms. Many were racist, homophobic, misogynistic, but it didn't matter. These people were victims of their deteriorating brains and bodies. They lashed out because they couldn't blame anything else.

But the staff, who hit the residents, cursed at them, ignored their cries for help, and withheld food and recreation and anything else that might make their lives sunnier, they were the problem. Claire didn't know what to do. She complained to management, she tried contacting various government agencies, but she didn't know how to do any of it. She didn't know what the consequences would be, for herself, for the residents, for their families. The only solution she could find was to be there as often as possible to keep the bad things from happening. She dropped out of school and worked full time, sometimes working twelve-hour shifts every day for weeks.

Nothing got better. Claire burnt out. There was no other way to say it. She started lashing out at the staff as much as they were lashing out at the residents. Eventually she got fired, but her fight didn't stop then. She contacted as many levels of government as she could, she contacted the media, she even considered hiring a lawyer. It was only when she completely ran out of money and had to ask a friend for a loan, because she found the thought of asking her parents for money too embarrassing, when she realized that nothing would change, nothing would get better. She had to think of herself, which was what her friends had been telling her for months – no, years. Years, it had been, she realized suddenly one afternoon. How had it been years?

She found a small group home for developmentally disabled seniors, diligently doing the research to make sure it was friendly and supportive. She tried her hardest to forget the other retirement home, to forget the people there who still needed her help. She was hired on a temporary basis, the home requiring her to take courses in order to be fully qualified. But she didn't take any courses. She wanted to be able to leave at a moment's notice, to be free and never look back. She didn't want to get attached, or to feel as if she owed anything. Claire's manager kept dogging her, and Claire kept making up excuses. Eventually, no one seemed to care anymore, and Claire worked quietly and efficiently, more years passing. But she was always waiting for the moment that would inevitably come, the moment when she would need to bolt.

Several months after Claire decided that Lao was indeed her boyfriend, they sat together in his new apartment watching TV before she had to go to work. Lao seemed moody, but it was still impossible to tell. Maybe he was moody, maybe he was happy, maybe he was

remembering something that hurt, or maybe he was just tired. His parents seemed to be returning to normal; he no longer got those strange phone calls from them one after another. But it was possible that he could be angry for another reason.

“I’m going to miss you while I’m at work today,” she said during a commercial.

“Me too,” said Lao. She wasn’t sure if he meant it.

They didn’t speak for a while, watching the mindless television shows, nothing good on because it was midday.

“When my parents first had an ultrasound of me,” Lao began, not looking at her, “I was actually two babies.” Claire looked at him, wondering what made him think to say this. He went on. “My parents thought I would be twins. I guess the other one died, or I ate him or something, because only I was born. . .” He paused for a moment, thoughtful. “Maybe that’s what’s wrong with me,” he said finally. “I’m only half of a person, and the other half died.”

Claire frowned. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

Lao shrugged.

“Do you feel like you’re only half a person?”

“I don’t know,” said Lao. “No.”

Having nothing else to say, Claire said, “It’s weird to think of another Lao being around. Your twin.”

“We probably wouldn’t have liked each other anyway,” said Lao, smiling. His heaviness seemed suddenly lifted, and he turned to her on the couch, leaning over and kissing her. She giggled.

“I want you to meet Gwen,” she said, changing the subject. “She’s this really cool old lady at the group home. She’s told me so many outrageous things about her life, I think half of them are untrue. But she’s so cool, I think she was born about sixty years too early.”

“OK,” said Lao.

Claire looked into his eyes. “Really? You want to meet her?”

“Yeah,” said Lao. “I want to see where you work.”

Sometimes the informal nature of the group home annoyed Claire; staff members often thought it fine to bring their kids and let them play in the basement while they worked. They would leave for long lunches or breaks, or even bring their friends to the break room and have loud, laughing conversations with them. It was unprofessional, but Claire was also aware that they worked at a home, not an office, not a usual place of work. Perhaps being professional was the wrong way to be in a group home. The residents lived there, it was the only home they knew.

So she didn’t worry too much about bringing Lao to meet one of the residents. At a more professional place, it probably wouldn’t be allowed. Confidentiality agreements usually needed to be signed, the residents’ primary caregivers usually needed to be informed. And visitors usually needed to be okayed by a manager, or at least mentioned in the weekly staff meeting.

Gwen was sleeping when Claire looked in on her, so she took Lao to the kitchen and they sat down at the table. Claire should have been doing paperwork or cleaning or

something, but she was happy to simply be with Lao. They held hands and talked absently, and Claire laid her head on Lao's shoulder.

An old woman eventually shuffled into the room. Claire had her eyes closed as she rested on Lao's shoulder, but they popped open when she heard Lao offer a stiff hello. It was Gwen, and she was still in her pajamas. Her housecoat hung on her withered frame, the belt dragging on the floor behind her.

"So this is your boyfriend I've been hearing so much about," said Gwen, her wild grey hair fluttering as her head bobbed and shook. Claire stood up and helped Gwen to a seat at the table.

"Yes, Gwen. This is Lao."

"Hello Lao," said Gwen, her voice wobbly, a twinkle in her eye. Her hands shook as she compulsively straightened her robe and smoothed out the wrinkles in her pajamas.

Claire bustled around the kitchen making Gwen's lunch, not entirely sure anymore if she should have brought Lao. She should be facilitating a conversation between them, she thought, but she didn't know what they might talk about.

"I got married for the first time when I was sixteen," pronounced Gwen, pointing a finger at Lao. She smiled a wobbly smile as her head shook. "Then again when I was twenty."

Claire smiled. "There it is again," she said loudly, so Gwen could hear. "I never know when to believe you."

Gwen's face took on a mischievous aspect. "So when are you two tying the knot?"

Claire's insides dropped and her face heated. She didn't know what to do with her hands, and she turned her back to the table. She couldn't look at Lao.

But she heard a smile in Lao's voice when he said, "I don't know, Mrs. – Gwen. I haven't proposed yet."

"Get a move on!" proclaimed Gwen. "She's a pretty girl! You don't want to lose this one!" She laughed a throaty, wobbly laugh.

Claire couldn't move, her back still turned to the two of them as she stood in front of the stove. That word Lao had used, "yet." Yet?

No, no, no, this wasn't temporary, this wasn't in the plans. She still needed the option of bolting, she still needed that safety valve. What was Lao saying?

She hurriedly finished Gwen's lunch, ignoring whatever else they were saying at the table. Then she grabbed Lao, called to her co-worker Matt, who was hiding in the break room for some reason, that she was taking a break, and ran outside.

"I think you should go, I think you've upset Gwen," she said as Lao followed her down the steps from the front door. He had been smiling, about to say something, but his face immediately cleared. He wasn't frowning, he wasn't smiling, his face wasn't doing anything! Speak to me, Claire silently implored of that face. It was a mask, it was hiding something; but what?

"OK," he said quietly.

"It's not your fault or anything, I just shouldn't have brought you here, it's not really allowed. It's my fault, okay?"

"OK," he said again.

"Lao, I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

“I don’t know. I just am.” She pushed Lao down the sidewalk a little bit, and he walked away.

Claire didn’t call Lao that night after work as she usually would have done. Instead, she drove to the grocery store and bought several boxes of cookies, a tub of ice cream, some frozen pizzas that were on sale, and a small, expensive box of candies. She gorged herself in front of the television, watching movies from her small DVD collection, mostly romantic comedies that made her cry, pausing and rewinding *Dirty Dancing* several times to watch the love scenes, and almost losing it completely at the end, which she watched twice.

She called in sick early the next day and then realized that she was trapped in her apartment with nothing to distract herself. She wished she had to work, she hated that she didn’t have the excuse of a good long shift to keep her from doing some living. But she couldn’t go in either. Trapped in limbo, she decided to spend the day on herself.

She cleaned a little, cleared a space on the carpet of her living room and put on an exercise video. She stretched and pivoted, raising and lowering her arms and legs; she used cans of condensed tomato soup for the weights that the ridiculously fit woman on her TV told her she needed for several of the exercises. When she needed something heavier, she managed to balance an old textbook atop the back of her hand, but grew frustrated when it kept slipping off as she raised her arms. She ended up, sweaty and frizzy-haired, sitting on the carpet, her back to the couch, watching the women execute the moves perfectly and endlessly on her TV screen. She hated them. She hated their smooth blond hair, she hated the fact that they kept smiling, she hated that their teeth

were so white, she hated that their bellies were so flat and smooth. But she continued to sit there, watching these women move in every possible direction and angle, their brows only modestly moist, their smiles still fixed, their spandex tight and flexing over their zero-body-fat forms.

She was startled out of her toxic, murderous thoughts by a knock on her door. She tried halfheartedly to get up, but it didn't work the first time. She tried to lift her hands above her head but found that all of the soup and textbook-lifting had actually worked, and her arms stopped, stiff, as if they had hit a solid glass wall, inches below the couch's seat-rest that she was trying to grab to hoist herself upward. Slightly encouraged, she lifted herself ungainly upward with her legs, and moved toward the door.

Looking through the peephole, she saw two very well-dressed young men with identical short haircuts standing in the hall, each holding a black binder. She didn't open the door but continued to watch as they knocked on her neighbour's door. The neighbour, a recent immigrant from somewhere in the Middle East whom she had still not met, opened the door. The men started speaking to him, and Claire strained to hear their words.

“...like to talk to you about our Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God and humanity's personal saviour.”

Her neighbour didn't seem to know what to say.

“Do you attend any church service regularly, sir?” asked the one closest to Claire. He was quite good-looking; they both were. They were solid and blond and smooth-skinned and clear eyed and they exuded that quality of good health and sound mind and

in-tact spirit that seemed so universal to the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses she had seen.

Her neighbour answered something seemingly inconclusive. The Mormons pounced, taking their opportunity. They launched into the truths revealed by the Bible and the proper way of living extolled in the book of Mormon, peppering their speech with Sirs and speaking with such earnestness that Claire almost felt sorry for them.

It was fascinating for Claire to watch them at work on someone else; for years she had walked past their favourite corner at Main and Leland when she lived near the school. She was used to their unceasing questions and stamina, and was very well acquainted with the pained, disappointed looks that gripped their faces when she refused to continue speaking to them, as if they were watching her soul already burning in the fires that awaited her. She had never thought to respond to them with anything but refusal and dismissal, and was strangely jealous of her neighbour, who had these men so enthralled at being allowed to speak their piece. She made light of it to her friends or anyone she complained to about the Mormons, but in truth their disappointment cut her like a knife. She resented the fact that they thought her doomed to hell, and she hated knowing that there were people out there, people whom she had met personally, who were convinced that she was a sinner, unclean, and would unquestionably be denied entry to heaven.

And as she watched them, she thought that maybe she was wrong about it all. Here she was – sweat-stained and depressed and surrounded by clutter, obsessed with the increasing inches of fat creeping into her belly and thighs and upper arms and ass, not knowing how to pass a regular day without work or Lao, and a thorough unbeliever– and there they were, clean, neat, fit, handsome, and content in their knowledge of the world.

She was sure that nothing kept them up at night. They didn't find skin tags or moles uglying up their bodies, they didn't have a roll of fat at their stomach when they sat in a chair, they didn't look in the mirror and hate everything about what they saw. Because what they saw was God when they looked in the mirror. God doesn't give Mormons skin tags or moles or rolls of fat at their bellies, God doesn't allow Mormons to become depressed about their boyfriends. Maybe they were on to something, these Mormons. Perhaps, a more cynical part of her brain thought, it was just good advertising. She wondered what they did with the ugly Mormons – she certainly had never been accosted by one.

The exercise tape was still playing, the light dance beat almost lost underneath the “And one, and two, and three”s of the smiling beauty queen. Claire turned to see them on their sides, raising their legs. Surely, she thought, no one exercises for this long; it had been hours since she had put in the DVD. Everything in her apartment looked doubly ugly after watching the Mormons through her peephole. She wished she had cleaned up better before, because now she felt too sore to do anything.

She flopped on her bed, on her front so she didn't have to face any of her possessions. As she blew her frizzled hair out of her face, she saw, still sitting on her bedside table, the small New Testament that Lao had left there. She suddenly thought that he had left it there on purpose, in some attempt to sneak some Christian morality back into her. While she resented this, thinking about Lao in the context of the conversion-minded Mormons softened him for a while, and she reached out and picked up the little black cloth-bound book.

There was a message in the front: the book had apparently been given to Lao by their old priest at St. Mary's, Father Hardy, whose handwriting was loopy and direct. Claire remembered Lao telling her that he had enjoyed being an altar boy as a child. She figured this was some relic of that, some gift given for his service. She wondered, randomly, it seemed, if the priest had abused him.

Lao had underlined specific passages throughout with light pencil, and there was the odd asterisk or question mark in the margins. Reading the underlined passages, Claire had a strangely pained feeling, almost like she wanted to cry. It seemed so personal, almost invasive, to be reading these passages that he had so carefully underlined. But despite this, the underlined passages separated her from him so fully and completely that she saw no future with him, together, anymore. His path seemed, through the map of these Bible passages, to diverge fully and completely from hers. This, more than anything else, proved to her how much she didn't understand him. How much she didn't know about him, what he thought, what was going on in his mind.

She closed the book and hid it behind the box of Kleenex on her bedside table, and tried to sleep, tried to ignore the wetness in her eyes and the deadened feeling that had invaded her chest.

Claire spent the next few days in a work-centred haze. She didn't call Lao, and Lao was never the kind of person who just picked up the phone in order to talk. She didn't know what to say to him, how to tell him that it wasn't going to work.

But it ended just the same. She arrived at his place one night after work, exhausted and still stinking of old people, but resolute. She told him she had to back off

for a while. And Lao just sat there and said “OK,” over and over again in answer to anything she said. After a while, she left. Lao’s face was still a mask. She couldn’t read his eyes; she still felt as though she might fall into them. She couldn’t even read the creases on his forehead, his one tell; even those he seemed to have managed to control. He was simply blank, neither happy nor sad. It was almost insulting, Claire thought. She had cried over him, and he couldn’t even frown.

After months of not seeing him, she began to wish it hadn’t ended the way it had. So every night she tried to build up the courage to see him, and every night she backed off. Until that one fateful night. When she arrived and then tried to jump him, when he refused her. Refused her. She never felt less sexy, less worthy of human company.

The next day, walking home after another long shift in the briskness of an unseasonably cold summer afternoon, Claire tried hard not to think of Lao. She walked into step behind a man who had just left the office building down the street from the group home. He was very good-looking from behind. She loved the sweep of his hair, a dark brown that glinted slightly under the slanting fall sun. He was wearing a stylish coat of the kind that Claire liked, cut at the waist in such a way as to accentuate a trim figure. This was exactly the way that Claire chose her own clothes, coats in particular, with that cut that at the back showed the thinness of her waistline despite the bulk that a parka necessitates. It worked better on him, she thought.

Her eyes were of course drawn to his butt, really, a very nice butt, which was moving side to side in step before her. She became entranced as she walked along, watching its progress, the way it held up the legs and directed their movement, ensconced in a tight pair of dress pants. The way it was like the pivot point of the entire body, how

it seemed to show off how well it worked when it was directing the movement of a walk. Staring at the butt in front of her, Claire again thought of Lao.

She was startled out of her trance when a familiar voice said, “Hey.” She looked up and saw Matt, her enthusiastic teenaged co-worker, wrapped in a spring jacket with nothing else to hold back the cold, smiling at her as he jogged up to meet her. The butt continued to move before her eyes like a dream, like a metronome that she needed to keep time, not only the rhythm of her steps, but of her breathing.

“Saw you walking, thought I’d keep you company,” Matt smiled crookedly at Claire.

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” said Claire. “Um, what were you doing around here anyway?”

Matt turned slightly pink, the way he sometimes did in her company. “Actually, I was coming to see you. Or like. . . just walk you home or something, I just. . .” He seemed flustered. “I was kind of in the area, so erm. . . I thought I might see you.”

Dammit, Claire thought, don’t do it like this. Dammit!

Matt looked anxious. “So?”

“So, let’s walk me home, I guess,” Claire answered. She plastered a smile on her face, but couldn’t quite muster the energy to pretend that she thought this was cute. To this point she had thought Matt’s crush harmless, kind of cute, rather flattering. But things were getting real, and quickly.

So she remained silent, and they walked a block or two in silence. Matt seemed to be expecting, even wishing for some condescension, for Claire to exclaim at his puppy-dog cuteness. Thoughts started to curl like smoke through Claire’s head. Suddenly she knew that she liked how this was progressing, and was suddenly worried

that this moment of possibility would be ruined if she made a misstep. She pushed Lao out of her mind, telling herself it was over. Over for good, over forever. She just needed to tell him. But she would worry about that later.

“So are – are you working tomorrow?”

“Yeah. It’s gonna be terrible.” She had almost gone on, had almost said that what was terrible about it was that she had plans with Lao afterwards. But it would be best not to remind anyone of Lao at this moment, she thought.

“Sucks,” said Matt, looking at his feet.

Claire’s building loomed before them, and Matt seemed to be steeling himself. Before he could speak, a neighbour passed them and said hello to Claire. The interruption seemed to throw Matt off his mark, and he again looked like he was building up to something in his head.

They reached the front doors. Matt and Claire turned to look at each other. Matt opened his mouth to speak, but Claire cut him off, saying, “Wanna come up?”

“Uh. Sure, yeah! I do. Yeah, let’s go up.”

Upstairs, standing in the hall outside Claire’s door, Matt said, “I like you.”

“Oh. O.K.”

“Well you invited me up, so.”

“Yeah, I invited you up.” She wasn’t going to help him get there.

“O.K. Um, can we go inside?”

“Yes.” She didn’t move, she just looked at him.

“Umm. . .”

“Yes?”

Matt swayed a little in the air between them. Then he leaned in and kissed her. She breathed in his skin, his breath, sweet and dark with something like cinnamon. And that heady scent of man, of sweat and strength and sex. She leaned into him and kissed back, and he grabbed her head, and she bit his bottom lip. He let out a deep breath and pushed her into the door, pushing his body into hers, grabbing both of her arms. She broke her right arm free and fumbled with the doorknob behind her back and they tumbled in the apartment. She saw the businessman's butt walking in the air before her, marking time. Lao came, unbidden into her mind, and memories of their lovemaking, so passive, so weak, overwhelmed her. She breathed in the smell of him and said, "Fuck me, Matt, just fuck me and fuck me and fuck me."

Matt breathed back into her face in assent.

Part Four: Pieces of Lao

Chapter 10

Alex and Lao's next hike took them on a section of the Bruce Trail that ran along a country road. Alex had planned this journey, studying Lao's maps, estimating the amount of time it would take.

"Sorry about this," Alex said. "I looked up this section, and I thought it was mostly cross-country, but I guess we've got to walk along the roads to get from section to section." Tall maples lined the paved sideroad they walked along, cows grazing in the fields beyond the orderly rows of trees. They approached a farmhouse on their right, an old beige-brick century-old building with an Ontario farmhouse gable in the front, additions from various decades rambling out from the main building. A red-painted wooden barn stood close to the house, surrounded by tall grasses. A large yellow "Farmers Feed Cities!" sign was tacked to the side of the barn. As they came closer, they saw children playing, scurrying around in the front yard, and then stopping to watch the travellers curiously from their safe patch of lawn.

"Don't worry about it," said Lao absently, watching the children, taking in the rustic scene. "It reminds me what I'll be fighting for. What I'm fighting for."

Alex looked down, uncertain of what to say.

The trees were in glorious full leaf, just about ready to turn. Some smaller, struggling trees were already orange and yellow. Wildflowers – yellow bunches of trefoil

and lone buttercups, orange stands of Indian paintbrush, purple tangles of wild alfafa, and white stretches of Queen Anne's Lace – sprouted in every direction. Bursting cattails and milkweeds overflowed from the ditches on either side of the road. The grass in the fields was high, and everything smelled of life: of pollen and seeds and freshly mown grass and manure and soil green. Like the subtle smell of a green leaf crushed in one's hand, as it releases its clear juices as its veins are broken: the smell of life, of Ontario in late summer.

And it was obvious to Alex that what threatened the landscape around them wasn't halfway across the world, buried in fallout shelters, the smell of desperation mixed with the smell of gunpowder. That people buried in foxholes with nothing to hold on to except their god were no danger to this place. And the stones that lined the road on either side as they walked: some of these used to be foundation stones. They were cut square and laid upon scarred earth by people dead and buried for hundreds of years. Not even their houses stood anymore. Lichen, moss, grass, and the roots of trees are stronger than any rock placed by a man. The order and symmetry thrust upon the landscape was fleeting, temporary at best. What fight, what slaughter, could undo that?

When Alex was in elementary school, he learned about acid rain. How the factories and smelters in Northern Ontario were polluting the clouds, and how the rain that fell from those clouds was toxic. How the rain found its way into lakes, concentrating the poisons, until the lakes were lifeless. And yet, lifeless, the lakes appeared clear, pristine, perfect. What was beauty, then, Alex had wondered. If beauty was death, the death of a lake, how could we trust our eyes?

Alex and Lao climbed a fence stile and left the road, following the dirt path. The sun beat down upon them, even through the leaves of the forest. The heat became stifling.

They came to a footbridge across a deadened stream and decided to take a break, each taking long draughts from their water bottles.

“Your sister,” said Lao suddenly. Alex turned to him, wary. He was worried the subject would come up, and truthfully, he wasn’t sure which side he was on. “She’s like you.”

“How so?” asked Alex cautiously.

“She doesn’t believe. In anything.”

“Oh.”

“But not like you,” said Lao, continuing, considering. “You believe in things, you’re just an atheist. You just don’t believe in God. Claire doesn’t believe in God, she doesn’t believe in truth, she doesn’t believe in. . . in love – she doesn’t believe. In anything. At all.”

“I’m not sure if that’s true. . .” said Alex.

“It is.”

“Listen,” said Alex. “I know. . . that it’s hard. And to be honest, I kind of have to be on both sides here. I mean, she is my sister.”

“Yeah, I get it,” said Lao, glaring at the trickle of water that was the stream.

“I just – I just don’t know what to say here. I can’t defend her, I can’t defend you, but I have to – defend both of you.”

“She showed up at my apartment the other night,” Lao said.

“What?”

“It was two in the morning and I hear knocking. So I get up, and it’s Claire at the door.”

“What did she want?” Alex asked carefully.

“I don’t know. I never know.”

Alex glanced around. “I mean, why did she come? What did she say?”

Lao grunted. “It doesn’t matter. She left ten minutes later.”

Alex didn’t know what to say. Lao seemed to be considering something as he stared at the forest floor.

“It’s not just Claire,” said Lao.

Alex waited.

“It’s everyone. No one believes in anything. In life, in love, in God.”

There was really no way to answer this. Alex had started to get tired of Lao’s simplistic way of seeing things. “Maybe it’s because it’s really hard to believe in things. And we don’t all have your courage,” he said. That word, *courage*. Alex didn’t know if it was actually courage.

But Lao looked less spiteful. After a time, he said, “It wasn’t going to work out anyway. We’re too different. She’s in a different place. She’s older than me.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

“And it’s been a long time coming. Pretty much from the beginning, it was already over.”

“You think?”

“Of course. I’m not kidding anyone. I was just there because she was someone who was interested.”

“Lao,” said Alex gently. “Lots of people could be interested.”

“Yeah,” said Lao. “I guess.”

“All right,” said Alex. “Ready to get on with it?” He indicated the trail ahead. It ran up a dirty slope.

“Actually, no. Let’s go back. I’m not feeling it today.”

“Not feeling it? You’re Lao fucking Savarin. I’ve never known you to ‘not feel it,’” Alex said.

Lao laughed, the cloud lifting, the sun shining again, his face bright. “No, really. I’ve got a date.”

“What?”

“A date,” said Lao, and he looked quite pleased with himself. But did he? The sun shining through his face was strange, a different kind of brightness from anything Alex had seen before. Or maybe it was a trick of the forest light.

“You were just moping about Claire! And you’ve had a date this entire time?”

“I wasn’t moping.” Lao hiked up his backpack and turned back on the trail from where they came.

“So?” asked Alex.

“So what?”

“So aren’t you going to tell me who it is?”

“Some girl,” said Lao. “You don’t know her.”

“Some girl!” said Alex. “What’s her name? How did you meet? How did a date come about? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m telling you now, and her name is Susan. We met online.”

Alex could glean little else, despite his continued questioning. “Well, have fun, I guess, and be safe. You never know who you’re going to meet online.”

“I think that’s more appropriate if you’re meeting a man,” said Lao. “I saw her on webcam, we talked. I know what she looks like. I think I could handle her if she turned out to be crazy.”

“Well you seem pretty prepared,” said Alex. “Except for one thing.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He pulled out a square foil-wrapped condom, and handed it to Lao.

“What’s this?” Lao asked, taking the square package.

“Always practice safe sex. My priest told me that – or someone did, I can’t remember.”

Lao threw the condom back at Alex. “Gross. I don’t want your condom,” he laughed.

“Well it’s not like I’ve used it,” said Alex.

“I’ll know it’s from you,” said Lao. “Besides, I’m not going to have sex with her. She might be dangerous.”

“Hence the condom, buddy.”

“Very funny.”

It was strange, but Lao suddenly seemed in a better mood than Alex could remember seeing him. He had been morose and sulky for most of the week, even for most of today’s hike; it had been at the stream when things had changed.

—

Lao suddenly had difficulty thinking clearly, and the hike wasn't doing his brain any favours. He huffed and puffed as he never had before as he hiked the trail. The hike was Alex's choosing, and it was even fairly tame. Mostly it ran through fields, some hilly bush, and along roadways. Why was he so tired?

He just needed to get back home, back to his apartment. But even that wouldn't work. Claire's shoes, her underwear and socks sat in a neat pile on his coffee table. He had meant to return them, but how could he approach her?

A fly buzzed past his face, and then he walked straight into a swarm of lazily gliding gnats. It was like the sand all over again; they flew and whirled all around, they buzzed right into face, worming their way down his shirt, flying in his ears, nose, eyes and mouth. He spit some out, but the act of drawing in breath to spit just brought in more gnats.

It was so dry; or, actually, not dry at all. The air was humid, oppressive. But the creek, it was just a trickle. The path, so dusty and cracked. Not like the mud they had hiked through, not like the trails that wound around swamp and lake and waterfalls. He had to get out of here. He felt thirsty, he felt the lack of a water source. But he remembered his water bottle. It was there, swaying with the rhythm of his steps, attached to his belt. He grabbed it and took a long draught as they walked. It did nothing to slacken his thirst. He drank again, emptying the bottle.

Finally, the trail found the sideroad. He looked left and right, forgetting which way they had come. He stumbled over the fence stile and through the ditch and up onto the road. Solid ground. Pavement. He could feel the heat trapped there radiating through

his boots, warming his feet. Alex was beside him. They walked, Alex leading, heading southwest. They had come from the southwest, he remembered that now. He saw Claire's car winking in the sunlight about a mile down the straight, smooth road. A destination. He could see it.

The same farmhouse as before drew up, on their left this time. Of course it was on their left. Last time, they had been walking the other way. It was fine. Everything was in its place, no need to worry. The children were still there, still playing. They watched Lao and Lao watched them. Their faces changed. He looked away, and then looked back. No, of course their faces hadn't changed. They were still smiling, inquisitive. But then they changed again. Into something formless, something horrible. He looked away. He kept walking, Alex beside him. Finally, they were past the house. He would never go back.

"You drive," he told Alex when they reached the car. "I'm tired."

Alex said something. It was probably a quip about how Lao was never tired. It was probably meant to cheer him up. Thank god for Alex, he thought. But if he only knew – Lao was always tired, always. Always, always. The word started to sound strange in his head as he repeated it, always, always. It ceased to make any sense, ceased to have any meaning. He imagined printing it on a piece of paper, its letters precise and distinct. *I have to keep the word*, he thought. *It can't change. I have to keep it.* So he kept it. As Alex drove home, saying the odd thing that Lao didn't hear, he pictured that word, always, spelled in neat letters on a sheet of paper before his face. It was there. He would protect it.

—

That night, Alex awoke to the sound of his phone ringing. It was Claire, her voice in a state he had rarely heard before.

She rambled on, not letting Alex speak. She told him about how she had showed up at Lao's place the other night and tried to have sex with him.

It was a little more than Alex could take, hearing about his sister trying to have sex with his friend. But it was obviously bothering Claire, and he didn't want to be the guy who prudishly set his own wishes ahead of the crying girl on the phone.

"I don't know what I did, I don't know why I did it," she was saying.

"That doesn't matter now," said Alex, grasping at straws.

"He said he loved me," she said, a snuffle in her voice.

"What?"

"He said he loved me."

"Oh." Alex didn't know what to say.

"I think he wants to keep going out. I remember him talking about taking me winter camping in Algonquin Park."

"He's going back to Afghanistan soon, I thought," said Alex.

"No, no," said Claire impatiently. "That's not happening anymore. I just had no idea that he still cared for me."

"He was just talking to me about how he's thinking about what he's fighting for. I think he's going back," said Alex.

"Alex," Claire said, her voice taking a tone that sounded an awful lot like their mother's when she was angry. "I told you that's not happening, they're not letting him

back. Didn't he tell you? No – never mind, we're not talking about that. It doesn't matter. He told me he loved me, Alex, he told me he loved me.”

“Well maybe he meant love in a friendly way,” said Alex. He wanted to talk more about Lao, but he knew his sister. Their conversations were always dictated by what she wanted to talk about, and she could be subtly persuasive or bull-headed; but either way, she usually got what she wanted.

“Alex, his clothes were off at the time.”

Alex cringed. “Still.”

“Maybe,” she said, although he could tell Claire was unconvinced.

“Why'd you go over there if you didn't know that he still liked you?”

“I don't know, I don't know!”

“Maybe you still like him,” said Alex.

“No, I don't.”

“Are you sure?”

“I'm sure, Alex.”

Alex paused. “It just seems like you went over there for a reason.”

“God, you too?” she almost screamed. “I wanted sex, Alex, that's all I wanted.”

“Great,” he sighed. “I don't think I'll ever be able to get that out of my head.”

“Grow up,” she said, although she sounded mildly appeased.

“Just calm down. Stop worrying. It'll be alright.”

“I don't understand how you can do that, Alex. All I do is worry.”

Alex sighed. “I know. But just try not worrying for a little while. See how it feels.”

“I will, if you try worrying for a little while to see how *that* feels.”

“Pass,” said Alex.

Claire sniffed. “Yeah. I can’t really picture you worrying anyway.”

“It’s going to be all right.”

“Yeah,” said Claire. She sniffed again and then said goodnight.

Weeks passed and Alex didn’t see Lao. He supposed it was because things were going well with Susan.

Alex wanted to fix whatever it was that was going on. He wasn't really sure when it was that things took such a turn. He wasn’t seeing Lao anymore, and not for any reason he could think of. Claire was looking for a hookup. Lao was still in love with her. Alex didn’t understand any of it.

So he arranged to have a gathering. He wasn’t nearly as good as Jason at arranging people or parties, but he managed to get enough people out to a bar in Westdale on the appointed night. He had to practically drag Claire along when she found out that Lao was coming too. But for some reason, Alex felt that things would get better, return to some sort of normalcy, if everyone was together, in the same room, and able to see how ridiculous everything was.

Jason arrived with some people Alex didn’t know, and he fell easily into reliving memories with Jason for the benefit of the group. Alex was laughing and signalling to the bartender to buy another round when he looked over at the table he had abandoned when Jason had arrived. Lao and Claire were sitting there, with a couple other people who looked uncomfortable. Claire had her cellphone out and was busy typing furiously into the lit screen. Lao was glaring in the opposite direction. Their body language proclaimed ambivalence, arms crossed, legs crossed, heads turned, eyes averted.

Alex prepared to act contrite as he left Jason and walked over to the table. Before he arrived, Claire looked up from her phone, shot Alex a warning look, and then left the table. Alex watched her go. He walked up to Lao.

“Wanna get out of here?” he asked, hoping Lao would say no.

“Yes. Definitely,” said Lao. Alex sighed and grabbed his coat from a chair. He said goodbye to the people he had invited, promising to return soon, but knowing that he probably wouldn’t.

Outside, the air was warm and breezy, but a hint of fall bit at the edges. The trees on the smooth lawns of the large houses lining the streets were half bare, orange and yellow and red leaves weighing lightly on the branches. Darkness gathered, clouds lifting to reveal an indigo sky slipping into black. Alex and Lao walked down the sidewalk, going nowhere in particular, saying nothing at first. Alex looked sidelong at Lao, his perfect military posture betraying a slight tilt of the shoulders, a drifting down of the neck. He walked with easy steps, and again Alex pictured Lao in uniform, finding the t-shirt and jeans and sneakers he was wearing to be all wrong, somehow.

“I’m sorry,” Alex started. “I thought – maybe – if I got you and Claire in the same room, that things would work out.”

“Don’t be sorry,” said Lao simply.

They walked, on and on. The imposing houses of Westdale retreated. They walked along Main and across the highway. The violent wind from transport trucks whipped at their bodies, ruffling their clothes and their hair. Alex noticed what was different about Lao: his hair. It was longer, it blew in the breeze. The usually severe

buzzcut around the sides had lengthened, and the top was long enough to fall over his forehead.

When they reached the edges of downtown, Alex turned onto Bay Street, intending perhaps to reach the harbour, to watch the gulls and the geese, the soft waves and the sailboats returning to the marinas. Or maybe they could keep going and walk through the industrial district, past the steel mills and yards and chain link fences of the east harbour. He felt as though they could walk forever, perhaps reach Niagara Falls by morning, or New York City in about a week. He felt as though he would never get tired, never need to stop for anything, food, water, or bathroom. He would survive on air travelling through his lungs, on the ground beneath his feet, on the constancy of Lao Savarin walking in step beside him.

But as they crossed the train tracks and neared the harbour, Lao took over the direction-making. He turned into a park Alex had never been to. They walked through the grass and along the paved pathways, watching the late joggers and cyclists criss-cross through the welcome greenery. Behind them, the stacks of the steel mills loomed, and before them, the waters of the harbour approached. Lao stopped when they reached a thin beach of sand and tiny stones. They watched a train travel slowly through the trees and small rocky hills across the bay. As the last whistle blew and the train receded, the world seemed suddenly quiet but for the soft lapping of small waves at their feet. They were alone in the increasing dark. Alex wriggled his shoes into the half-wet sand, watching the small waves almost reaching his feet.

—

If they were going to write a story about his life, Lao thought, what would they say?

Would they use words like “noble” and “brave”?

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” Alex said beside him.

“Yeah. I know.”

“Have you been okay?”

“Yeah.”

They stood there for a long time as the dark finally took over. The lights of the city brightened behind them. Across the bay, light streamed from streetlights into the water, shimmering on the moving surface. Neither Lao nor Alex had moved as the world changed around them.

The story wasn’t complete. There was so much left. Lao marvelled at Alex, standing there placidly beside him, content, for the moment, to let the water reach his shoes, to burrow deeper into the sand of the beach. Lao needed so much more.

“I think I’m going in,” he said suddenly.

“In where?”

“In the water.” Lao walked back to the edge of the sand and took off his clothes, throwing them on a bench. The cool night air felt wonderful on his skin. He felt like he was receding, going back to the origins of man, crawling back into the ooze of creation. He ran naked towards Alex and splashed into the water, finally diving once the water level reached his knees. The cold hit him like a shock, but he revelled in the feeling, how the cold not only touched his skin, but his entire being. His insides were cold, his brain was cold; he felt as though he could even feel each hair on his head screaming with the

cold, right down to the very ends. Even his soul felt cold, his mind. The person who he was. He called out to Alex, barely visible on the beach behind him. “You coming?”

“No way!” he heard Alex call back. “You must be freezing!”

Lao didn’t answer, but just paddled around. The night washed around him, the darkness bleeding into the water, as if everything were just one colour, black. The beach was poorly lit, and he could barely see Alex, who seemed to be dancing around a little bit, trying to make out Lao’s head in the dark water. He supposed that he must be barely visible.

“What the hell are you doing?” he heard Alex scream.

“Swimming,” Lao called.

Alex wished the park was better lit, but the closest streetlight was far away, behind some trees that lined the sand. He couldn’t see Lao anymore, just the ripples in the water reflecting light from where he was swimming. He started to panic, great jolts ripping through his chest. He had felt this way only once before.

“Come back!” Alex yelled. He peered desperately into the dark, but saw nothing.

“Lao!” he screamed again. He walked back and forth on the sand, willing his eyes to see, to peer into what couldn’t be pierced by human eyes.

He took off his shoes and socks and stepped a couple of paces into the water. The cold jolted up his spine and his feet screamed. It was like icy needles on his skin everywhere the water touched it. He couldn’t imagine immersing his entire body into the icy water. As he stood there, however, his body began to adjust, began to accept the coolness of the water. Perhaps it wasn’t so bad.

When Alex screamed for Lao again, there was still no response. Alex couldn't even see ripples shimmering in the water anymore; it was still and silent, cool and black. His panic increased. "Lao? Lao! Are you still there?" Again, no answer.

He ran back to the bench and pulled off his shirt and jeans and then sprinted towards the water. He called, "Lao!" one more time. Just as he was about to splash into the water, he heard a gurgling noise and a splash and saw a head appear like an otter above the surface only a couple of feet from where the sand bar fell off.

"What?" came Lao's voice from the dark.

"Jesus Christ," Alex said, drained and suddenly exhausted. "You scared the hell out of me. I was about to go in after you." Alex leaned over, hugging his almost naked body in the darkness. He started to shiver involuntarily, despite the still-warm breeze coming in from the city.

"Well don't go in," said Lao, rising from the water as he walked toward land. "It's cold."

"I noticed."

Alex grabbed his shoes and walked up to the bench, pulling on his clothing, very thankful that he hadn't needed to get wet. His mind was still pulsing with the panic that had invaded his body only moments before. He found himself trying to remember how to do CPR, leaning the victim's head back, quick breaths, counting, putting your ear close to the mouth so you could hear if they were breathing. Lao arrived at the bench dripping and shivering. He pulled his clothes onto his wet body and shook his head, sending water flying in every direction.

“Jesus, you must be cold,” said Alex, not knowing what to do. He rubbed Lao’s arms, dripping wet; his skin was cold and firm and goosebumpy, and Alex felt tremors as Lao began shivering uncontrollably.

Lao’s lips looked blue in the low light of the beach, and his usually olive skin was a frightening shade of white. Alex grabbed his phone from his pocket and called the first person he could think of.

When Claire arrived at the gates of the park, she took one look at Alex and Lao sitting on the bench, both shivering, and gave an enormous eye roll. However, she said nothing, bustling to the trunk and pulling out her emergency blankets. She wrapped one around Lao and it was almost immediately soaked through. She was about to wrap the other around Alex when he waved her away.

“Give it to Lao. I’m fine.”

“But you’re shivering.”

“It’s mostly sympathetic.” And it was true. Alex had tried to dry Lao off, had tried hugging him with his body to keep hypothermia at bay, but Lao had shrugged him off. So Alex watched him instead, bringing him to the bench at the front of the park, and sitting down beside him to watch. Alex couldn’t remember much of his lifeguard training, but he thought he could remember the signs of hypothermia. He tried remembering what to watch for. As Lao sat there, dripping on the wooden bench and shivering, violent tremors rumbling through his whole body at intervals, Alex watched, and started shivering too. The night was warm, but a cool breeze blew in off the bay, and the rustling of the trees behind them made Alex feel as though he too were dripping wet and shivering.

“Ugh, I can’t believe you swam in the harbour,” was all Claire said as they drove home, the heat blasting on Lao as he shivered in Claire’s second emergency blanket.

Chapter 11

When they returned from the lake, Lao dripping and sodden, huddled in Claire's blankets, Claire turned on the lights in her living room, illuminating the shabby furnishings. Lao changed into some of her clothes, as gender neutral as she could find; her clothes fit him perfectly. Claire had invited everyone from the bar over to her place, and as they arrived in twos and threes, the group seemed to act as a living unit, leaving Lao in Claire's room and moving soundlessly to the living room.

Alex sat on the carpet, his arms wrapped around his knees. Sometimes it seems as though everyone disdains the furniture and they sit on the floor instead, knees pulled to chests or legs sprawled in every direction. Everyone arriving sat on the floor too; no one had suggested they do so, they had simply sat. Alex savoured the essence of childhood he felt released with the act of sitting on the floor, as if only weeks, not years, separated him from schooldays sitting cross-legged on threadbare classroom rugs, hand pumping the air in silent supplication to be called upon by a tall and ageless teacher.

And sitting on the carpet, Alex suddenly had a vision, more than a vision, a feeling in his chest and limbs of movement, a whipping through his hair, a rush of impulses behind his nose like the feeling of being punched. The vision was of the earth, as if everything was perched on the back of a cosmic primordial turtle, ancient and ageless, alive and restful and endlessly swimming through space. What was keeping us here, Alex wondered. Why didn't we just float away, get caught in the slipstream breaking over and under this vast living thing pulsing beneath us? And then, as if thought became action, Alex almost felt as though he was in danger of floating from the ground

right then and there, as if a lack of concentration on the laws of gravity would result in slipping from the earth's surface.

The others talked and laughed quietly, and Alex meditated. He had never meditated before, really. He had tried it a couple of times, but the feeling of being alone in a room, with nothing but one's thoughts and oneself made him feel lonely. He preferred instead to look deep inside himself when there were people around, as if he might need someone to pull him back from the brink if he wandered too far.

The sounds around him changed, shifted. The laughing and murmuring of his friends became something deep, a living sound of physical form, giant and gentle. Above this, beyond the usual pains and stiffnesses of the body and the hard floor beneath him, there was a voice. And the voice spoke.

It said, When the world began, a woman fell from the sky.

Alex knew this, he had heard it before. The clouds broke, a hole appeared – the first hole in the sky appeared and a woman fell through it. You called her Sky Woman, said the voice.

Alex tried asking the voice questions. But he had no mouth, he had no larynx. He didn't exist, he was simply presence alone, drifting somewhere far from anything.

Your ancestors told this story sitting around fires, the voice whispered. *In the beginning, they'd say, before there was ground or fire, there was only water and cloud.* You sat listening then, humming your ancestral tunes as the storyteller's voice commanded the dark. This was your beginning.

Sky Woman fell, she fell for a very long time. She was naked, her hair streamed in the wind. And as the story was being told, Alex felt as though he could see her, falling,

a limp form caught in a slipstream. She might have called then to whatever was left above the clouds. Her loved ones might have watched, horrified, through the hole, as her body receded into the new.

And the waters shimmered; in those days, the water was endless, the voice said. Alex could see the waters, rippling in the ancient breeze. He felt every inch of his being, the formless thing of which he was made, ripple with the urge to jump into those waters. To pull bodies from water, to save people from drowning. But something awoke in those waters. Something else drifted through what was here before there was anything. An animal, a giant animal that lived in endless waters. You called him Great Turtle, said the voice. His mind was sluggish and his eyes opened for the first time, and it was painful. This was the first pain the world knew.

Alex, from his position in the stars, reached out his hands to feel the earth, the floor, the hardwood and the rug beneath him. There was something alive there, something there that has always been.

Great Turtle looked up with new eyes, floating on endless waters. He saw the first hole in the clouds and he saw Sky Woman falling, majestic in her fall. Great Turtle stretched his ancient joints and called for help, the world's first call for help. You understood this then, said the voice. That worlds begin and end with cries for help.

Alex wanted to help Great Turtle, but he didn't exist yet; this happened before existence. But others answered his call. Great Turtle watched as thought became presence and presence became life. Animals shaped in the air before him, as if drawn in blueprint upon the sky. So many animals there were, with wings and gills and fleshy feet:

everything, created. Great Turtle sent them off to find something, anything, that could help falling Sky Woman.

Something strange happened then, the voice said, sometimes in a whisper and sometimes in a great scream. Surrounding the new creatures was an eternity of water, an eternity of cloud; but something else was born on that day. Animals returned to great turtle from their flying, diving, swimming, floating, and nosing through all that existed, empty handed. All were accounted for except for Muskrat. They waited for Muskrat to appear, but he didn't. They waited a long time, wondering.

But then something bobbed on the surface of those endless waters; it was Muskrat's shaggy fur. The animals rolled him onto his back, and watched his impassive face curiously. Muskrat's tail bobbed to the surface, then one of his paws; it was closed, holding something. The animals looked at each other; in an eternity of water and an eternity of cloud, what was there to hold?

Great Turtle floated. The other animals reached for Muskrat's paw and pried it open. And there it was, that something strange that started everything: a clump of soil. Muskrat, in his hurry to save falling Sky Woman, reached for something at the bottom that didn't exist, and grabbed ahold of it. And he brought it to the surface.

They spread the soil on Great Turtle's back and there it was, the world. Soil became earth. New things grew in that earth, green things. Birds fluttered in trees, rodents dug through the new earth towards Great Turtle's shell. Sky Woman fell to a newly created earth. She drew breath, alive, and walked among creation.

In his position among the stars, Alex felt the weight of ancient grief. He felt tears sliding down his nonpresent face. What you too often forget when you tell this story, the

voice said, is that your beginning started with an ending, the world's first death. Once the earth had been prised from his paw, Muskrat floated, bobbing on the surface of the endless waters. He floats there still.

Alex awoke like the great drawing of a breath. Faces were turned to him, some curious, some laughing. He had fallen asleep, his head drooped to his chest while he still held his knees in his arms. He blinked in the sudden bright of the dim living room. Without saying anything, he arose and left the room. He walked down Claire's creaky hallway to the light streaming from her open bedroom. Lao sat on her bed, his hair still damp, his form slightly limp, his gaze focussed on his lap.

"Still wet?" Alex asked.

"Yeah."

Alex sat on the bed beside Lao, leaning against the wall behind him.

"Was it a religious experience?" Alex asked. "The lake?"

"I hadn't thought of it," said Lao. "But maybe."

"Baptism, new life through cleansing waters."

"Yeah. It fits."

"Well, it's either that or a bout of temporary insanity."

"The two are probably related," said Lao, his expression difficult to read.

"You don't mean that," said Alex quietly. "That's the kind of thing I would say."

Lao was quiet for a moment. "Yeah, you're right. I didn't mean that." Lao leaned against the wall too. Their legs splayed out in front of them, Lao's clothed in Claire's brown corduroy pants. He wiggled his bare toes.

“I think I had a religious experience, just now,” said Alex.

“Oh?”

“I was meditating, and then I was somewhere else. I felt it. I really felt the wind on my face, and I heard the sound of the stars.”

“The sound of the stars,” Lao repeated, looking forward, as if off in the distance.

“Yeah. It was cool.”

“Sounds like it.”

Alex leaned his head against Lao’s shoulder. He felt peaceful and hopeful and wanted to stay that way for as long as possible. He felt Lao speak through subtle movements in his shoulders.

“I wish I could have a religious experience.”

“You’ve probably already had your share,” mumbled Alex. The same sleepiness of before seemed to be overpowering him, in this warm room, the comfort of the bed beneath him, and the comfort of Lao beside him.

“No, I haven’t,” said Lao. “I want to hear the stars.”

Alex said nothing.

“I want God to talk to me. He’s never talked to me, and I talk to him all the time.”

Alex felt his eyes sliding shut.

“I want to hear the stars,” Lao mumbled.

“You will,” said Alex, before he drifted off to sleep.

The next day, Lao was gone.

At first, no one seemed to notice. He seemed to have told different people conflicting reports as to his whereabouts before he left. His parents thought he was spending a couple of weeks camping up north. He had left a message on Claire's answering machine telling her he was reporting back to Petawawa; he didn't explain the way the army worked, simply that he was reporting. Claire knew so little about the army that she accepted this as a part of life. He told his other friends something in between, camping, the army, various army bases scattered across the country. The only person he didn't tell he was leaving was Alex.

Claire told herself that she didn't care, while Alex tried calling his cell, leaving messages. But there was no response. Claire figured that it was because Lao needed to be alone. Lao was different from Alex, Lao needed alone time, and Alex didn't understand. Not just an hour here and there; he needed weeks, long bouts of being alone.

Claire didn't worry about Lao, but she worried about Alex. Alex couldn't be alone, not even for a day. He would pester her with calls while she was at work when he had no one else to be with. She endured the calls because she understood Alex's need to connect, to be with people. But she understood Lao's need to be alone too. She understood that connecting with someone, that connecting with other people, is the hardest thing in the world to do.

For this reason, Claire admired Alex more than she would ever tell him. Alex was perhaps the bravest person she knew. Alex connected, he liked being with people more than anything else. He unashamedly told people when he was lonely, that he needed to be with them. But what's harder than connecting with someone? Displaying every inch of yourself, letting someone invade your being. It was a wonder that anyone

connected with anyone else when she thought of just how difficult it truly is to know someone.

She flirted with the idea of telling Alex about her escapades with her teenaged coworker Matt. She wondered whether she should tell him that they'd had sex, that Matt was only seventeen (or was it eighteen?), and that she felt like she had somehow taken advantage.

Her temporary moment, her ability and need to bolt, was now compromised. She had told herself that she wasn't going to get close, that everything at the group home had to remain there and not interfere with her private life. It became difficult to tell, at times, which was her real life: her work life or her private one. And time with Lao, that had been an eye-opening experience. Not about Lao, it didn't really have anything to do with him. But about her. Her real life needed to be her private one, she just couldn't pour more of herself into the people she worked with.

She didn't tell Alex that she had walked Lao back home to his apartment the night he had gone into the harbour. He was still wearing her clothes, and was silent for most of the walk. She felt the strange inconsistency, of Lao walking like a soldier in her clothes, even as she knew that something was different within him. The creases on his forehead had returned, once again telling her things his mouth or his eyes wouldn't.

It was like she was walking beside herself; Lao was wearing her favourite pair of corduroy pants. She realized suddenly that he was going commando, that she of course hadn't lent him any of her underwear. Her favourite pants. But they were Lao's now. She definitely wasn't going to ask for them back, not after they had seen so much of Lao, more than she ever wanted to see of him again.

Finally she felt the need to speak, to break the silence that she hadn't been sure was comfortable or strained. "I remember thinking, once," she said, "that the army was all over you. What you did was who you are."

Lao didn't respond, but turned his head slightly in her direction as they walked.

She smiled. "You look very pretty tonight."

"I never thanked you for the clothes," he said, smiling.

"Don't mention it."

They kept walking. Lao's place in Ainslie Wood grew closer.

She accompanied Lao up the stairs to his apartment, painfully aware of the last time she had been here. She kissed him on the cheek and left him alone in the hallway. Her last sight of him, as she turned her head walking down the hallway, was of him fumbling with his keys. His neck was straight, his posture perfect.

She started crying as she walked back home alone.

Before he could feel indignation that Lao had told everyone else that he was leaving except Alex, seemingly forgetting about him, Alex felt guilty. As more weeks passed without a word from Lao, he thought of the last time he had seen him, on Claire's bed before he fell asleep. When he woke up several hours later, Claire had been shifting him from his sitting position, piling her blankets around him.

"Where's Lao?" he had asked.

"He went home about an hour ago," she said softly.

Alex couldn't sleep after that. Claire slept in the bed beside him and he tried to be as still as possible, to keep from tossing and turning as he wanted to. It was for no reason

he could see; simply that the peace that had overwhelmed him before when he was with Lao was gone. He worried that Lao had maybe interpreted his leaning his head onto his shoulder as something other than platonic, which it wasn't. But as much as Alex thought he knew Lao, he was sure there was more to him than what he chose to display to the world. Alex often wondered what Lao thought about homosexuals, being Catholic and everything. Lao refused to speak of it, in his own way. He had a way of shutting down a conversation before it started, as if he could read minds and interpret the awkward pauses that precede a potentially awkward conversation. Alex wasn't much of a worrier, but he did worry about what Lao thought of him. Because Lao never told him, never seemed to tell anyone.

“You didn't sleep much, did you?” asked Claire the following morning.

“No,” Alex said.

“What was it?”

“Just a different place, I guess,” said Alex.

“That's bull. I know you, you can fall asleep anywhere, anytime.”

“Yeah. That's true,” Alex admitted. “Usually.”

Claire bustled around her kitchen, seemingly making coffee. That was the thing with Claire, Alex thought; she bustled, she was always bustling, even when doing something as simple as making morning coffee. She projected an aura of busyness, as if everything she did was important. Alex let her have this quirk. He knew that most of what any of us do is supremely unimportant. But he didn't know whether Claire knew this, or if she did, if she accepted it. He wondered what horrific impact it would have on

Claire's psyche to realize, utterly and completely, that most of what she did wasn't important, even something as simple as waking up in the morning and making coffee.

"So, you and Lao –" Claire started. She seemed suddenly stalled.

"Yeah?"

"Um – you and Lao are becoming – close."

"God, I'm so tired of having this conversation!" Alex flared. "Just because one of us is gay doesn't mean we're fucking! How many times do I have to tell people this?"

Claire looked taken aback. "That's not at all what I meant."

"Oh," said Alex, still feeling fired up. "I'm – I'm sorry. It's just – I don't know how much Lao can take it. He's pretty decidedly straight, you know that. I don't want him to think I'm – you know..."

"I don't think he thinks anything," said Claire softly. "I'm sorry, that wasn't what I meant."

"Yeah. What did you mean?"

"Well, just that you're friends."

"Yeah, well, we've been friends since grade school."

"I just mean, closer friends. Than before."

"Yeah?"

Claire paused. "How is he doing? Since the breakup?"

Alex suddenly wished she had thought he and Lao were fucking. He had no idea how to talk about this to his sister. "Umm..."

"I just mean, last night was kind of weird."

“Oh, that. I don’t think that had much to do with you, Claire.” Alex immediately regretted saying this. What was the proper etiquette here? Would Claire prefer that Lao was really broken up about the breakup, or would it be better if he was doing fine? Was the truth the right way to answer, or a compassionate lie?

“Oh,” said Claire simply. It was impossible for Alex to interpret.

“Come to think of it,” said Alex, suddenly realizing he hadn’t talked to Claire about the breakup, “how are you doing?”

“Me? Oh, I’m fine.”

“Really?”

Claire poured two cups of coffee, setting the sugar bowl on the table before them. “I’m fine. I’m sad that it didn’t work, but. . . Lao’s all wrong for me, I’m all wrong for him. It’s better it ended sooner than later.”

“I’m sorry,” said Alex, meaning it. He tried to recall ever having this type of conversation with his sister. Usually conversations between them involved Claire helping Alex, or, more usually, Claire telling Alex what to do. The role reversal, although slightly uncomfortable, was thrilling for Alex. He felt suddenly grown-up, competent, and he liked the way it made him feel.

“It’s OK,” said Claire. “I’m glad he’s got you as a friend, though. I don’t want you to feel guilty about that.”

Alex, who had at first felt guilty, but in the intervening weeks hadn’t even considered the possibility that he might be betraying Claire, looked uneasily about him. But Claire smiled at him, possibly divining this, probably knowing more about what Alex had been thinking than he had himself.

“OK,” he said.

Chapter 12

Lao stood on the street corner not knowing what to do. The lights changed, the little white man glowed and told him it was time to walk. A countdown started in red beneath the man. He should go, he should cross the street. But his feet, solid on the pavement, felt stuck there. The countdown receded to zero and the red hand popped up again, flashing, then solid. Now he must wait. The lights changed again, the white man appeared, and the countdown started, but again he didn't walk. Where would he go? What kept him here, what kept him anywhere?

He had a couple thousand dollars in his bank account. The airport wasn't too far away, he thought. Maybe he'd fly to Afghanistan, see it all again. Or maybe somewhere else, somewhere new and different. The lights changed – it was time to go – time was almost running out – time to stop. He waited. The lights changed again. Time to go. But no – his feet remained rooted to the spot.

The afternoon sun hit his eyes as it broke around the building above him. Marking time. The sun descended. The lights changed, again and again. People filed past him, walking in one direction or another. He watched them, almost envious of their resolve. This was their moment to cross the street, and they did it, quickly, without thinking. But directions mean everything. Where you go, how you get there. It was nothing so simple as not knowing which direction he needed to go; it was having the resolve to go there.

A thought hit him, and then left. He forgot. He wished he could remember what the thought was, because he felt as though it had some meaning, some purpose. Maybe it

had something to do with his resolve, with which direction he should take, with which little white man he should follow across the street.

A rush of colour and windsound. Flashes of blue light. Alex sees Lao and then Alex is Lao. There's a chair suddenly beneath his feet, and rope stretches to the ceiling – but no, this dissolves, the air seemingly deciding that what Alex glimpsed was untrue. The world of a city near water opens up, pastel colours radiate from Alex's centre of vision; in the corners of his eyes he can just see the vibrant colours of real life, but every time he turns his head, shadows follow his eyeline, colour recedes in value. The street suddenly populates, buildings sharpen in focus on either side. A playing field sits empty of children, litter collects in chain-link corners.

Alex's head turns violently away, focuses on one head across the street, his gaze fixed magnetically. Lao stands there, looking in a store window. An eternity of standing, and then Lao walks without starting to walk; he's getting away. Alex pushes through the crowd but they're walking against him. Lao's hair is visible for seconds before it disappears and the air shimmers. Matter recedes and Alex becomes thought alone, drifting. Unawake but not asleep, he can't close his eyes because he has none.

Arrivals was crowded with tourists with too much luggage. Lao waited for his duffel bag to pass on the carousel, but he could only see through a gap between two large people before him. They spoke to each other in German. He saw slivers of luggage glide by, entering through the wide hips of the woman on the left and immediately exiting through the belly of the man on the right.

Lao imagined he could speak German. “I haven’t seen him for years, it seems,” he translated the woman’s lyrical German.

The man’s was harsher. “Last time anyone saw God he was stomping around Cuba.”

“Well I feel a little betrayed.”

“He’s a busy guy. Got a lot on his mind, I would think.”

The woman sighed noisily, from her throat. “He was looking so much older last time he visited, remember that? Lines around his eyes I hadn’t seen before. More than I could count.”

“Well he’s getting on in years, it’s true. I just can’t imagine a world without him though, can you?”

“I don’t want to think about it.” The woman shivered and pulled at the short sleeves of her t-shirt, as if trying to coax them into lengthening down her arms. Lao shivered too, feeling the inordinate air conditioning being pumped into the high-ceilinged room. He cocked his head when he saw a greenish bag pass through the narrow gap before him, but he missed it. “Want a piece of gum?” the woman asked the man.

“Nein.”

Another airport, another place in time. Another plane. Lao followed some route predetermined; he couldn’t figure out what it was that made him buy those last few tickets. His bank account was probably empty by now, but that didn’t matter, really.

Lao stepped through the sliding doors of the airport and real weather finally hit him. He felt as if he could finally breathe a full breath. The air conditioning in both

airports and the plane had started to intrude upon his senses with its sheer impossibility. The cool air had screamed at Lao, "I am not real, I am not real!" He'd felt infected, barraged. But now, in what must be afternoon sunshine, Lao felt somehow closer to truth, somehow more real.

Funny how once something is decided, everything else falls away. There, that's the wind off of the ocean, he thought. Ruffling the trees in the breeze; small, struggling saplings poking through the pavement in orderly intervals, every bit of energy going towards supporting the leaves that still hung precariously from their branches. They're not doing well, these trees. So different from the ones in the forest, the ones that popped through rock, the limestone of the Niagara Escarpment. Lao pictured the towering oaks and maples and beeches, majestic and green of leaf, their branches reaching to canopy the forest floor. The dappled sunlight that still managed to poke through the chinks in the armour, the chickadees and jays and sparrows that alighted in their hiding places.

The wind picked up, howling along the sides of the airport buildings, careening through the vast parking lots. As Lao waited for a taxi, he felt the wind pushing him forward, pulling at him, ripping his hair from its natural position on his head.

It is done, he thought. Everything has been decided. No loose ends. The water beckoned, its salt reaching his nostrils. Soon.

Alex awoke and felt a hot sun on his face. The blinds on his windows were down, the light outside was small. But he'd felt it.

He sat up in his bed and checked the alarm clock. 5:14. Too early, he thought. He must get some more sleep. But he couldn't stop himself from throwing back the covers

and hopping out of bed. The air was cool, the light in his apartment grey. He walked to the bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror over the sink. A tousled-haired Alex peered back at him, rather confused in the grey morning light, his pupils large and dark, his mouth drawn tight. He picked at the stubble on his chin and thought he might not shave today; for some reason, the thought of wetting his face and slathering shaving cream all over it repulsed him. The thought of water. Something hit Alex: his dream, the hot sun on his face. He felt something last night, there was something important in that dream. If only he could remember it.

He ran his hands through his hair, thinking. Water. Tap water running down into the sink, water soaking his skin, running his razor under the tap water to clear it of the foam and tiny hairs from his face. No, that wasn't it. It was more, much more. Lots of water. Drenched, submerged, waterlogged. And a taste, impure, not like the water from a tap. Alex wet his dry tongue, trying to taste whatever it was in his dreams. It started to fade away again, though. He had to hold onto it. It was important.

Salt. That was the taste. Saltwater.

Alex sat on the side of the tub, trying to think. But it was like trying to catch smoke in his hands, it just disappeared. Clearing itself into the thin air of his mind. Spreading into nothingness. Something about Lao. A foreign city? No, it's gone. All Alex could hold onto now was that it had something to do with saltwater, the ocean. And something else. . . something else.

Alex stood up and glanced at his face again in the mirror. He started. It wasn't Alex looking back at him anymore, it was Lao. Or, at least, it had been Lao. Now it was Alex again, but there was something strange about that face, something more sinister than

before. Alex immediately thought of how Lao used to see God's face in the mirror. What did God's face look like? How did Lao know it was God? Did it speak to him, or just look back at him with his own eyes?

Alex gave the mirror a hard look but it didn't reveal its secrets. A trick of the low light, Alex decided. He stumbled back to his bedroom and collapsed on the bed. He really needed to sleep.

But he didn't. Alex tossed and turned for a couple of hours, continually telling himself of his dire need for sleep. Tomorrow (or, rather, in a couple hours), he would be working. For himself, working as an entrepreneur. The word sounded ridiculous when he thought of what it meant in real life: an entrepreneur of lawnmowing, of digging around in soil. But still. His first contract job started tomorrow, an office building in an industrial park on the outskirts of town. There was no reason to be nervous, and he wasn't, really. He was simply aware of the need to do a good job. His first day. His first day of his new life.

Lao watched the sky from his spot on the sand. White sand, so fine, almost like dust. The clouds seemed bigger here, puffier, as if holding more water over ocean than over land. He felt the violence in those clouds, the possibility of storm and siege. And the violence in the ocean too, right there lapping on the beach before him. Everything has the power to tear, rend, and destroy.

He was committed, still committed, he kept telling himself. But where was God? Why wasn't he intervening? He's watching, always, everywhere, even this beach on a far corner of everything that is known. Maybe God was laughing. At him, at everyone.

At the war, at the sight of children dying and men clothing themselves in bombs. At what was going to happen, here, in the waters. So far from Afghanistan, but just as dead as those who were blown to pieces by roadside bombs.

The sun started on its setting course; how different from back home, where trees and hills and buildings block the descent. Here, the sun sunk right to the flat line of the edge of the earth. Lao imagined it roiling and hissing as it submerged, slowly, under the waters of the ocean, sending out sparkling banners of red, orange, pink, and purple.

And still, no one showed up. No Angel Gabriel, no Holy Spirit, no burning bush. Nothing.

The waves made a deadening sound as they crashed, one atop of the other, on shore. The sound increased until there was nothing but the sound and the wind and the new dark. Wind tossed his hair, clung to his clothes, flapped his shirt around his body. He stood up from his place on the sand and stretched out his arms. He walked a few paces until he felt the rhythm of the cool waves wash over his toes. Nothing reflected on the waters; the moon hadn't risen, the stars didn't shine. The darkness overwhelmed him.

Alex started the summer with grand plans, which scared him somewhat. His grand plans often had a way of going awry. He quit university, maybe for good this time; but there was always time to apply for fall courses. He had taken a job with a landscaping company, a small business started by a friend of Jason's. They mainly did commercial work, mowing the small patches of lawns around office parks or industrial buildings on the outskirts of town. A bit of raking, weeding of the flower beds and pruning bushes and trying to keep the struggling sapling maples alive. He relished the time outside, the

time surrounded by earth and plants and mown grass. The blisters on his palms from the steady work. The sun beating down on him, as if bringing him life through chlorophyll the same way as the plants he was taking care of. He imagined himself green-tinged, sucking the nutrients through the yellow beams of light. Digging his feet through the earth searching for water like roots, depending on nitrogen levels, the proper type of fertilizer, enough rain, enough light, proper weather.

Halfway through the summer, his boss, Steve, whom Alex was grateful was older than he was, if only by a couple of years, told him that if Alex wanted it, the business could be his. Steve was moving on. The very thought stunned Alex: that he could be in charge; that someone actually trusted him to succeed; that there was the very real possibility of failure; but mostly, that it turned out to be something that he really wanted, once he was made aware of the possibility.

As summer turned to fall, Alex said yes to Steve. He picked up books on running a business, he asked his parents for the money he needed to get started, and he told no one else about what was going on, in case he might fail. His first day as the boss was exhilarating, but when he went out with his friends afterwards, he carefully mentioned Steve, making sure there was no doubt in their minds that Steve was still the boss, still the big guy running things. Because Alex didn't see himself as a big guy, as someone who ran things, as someone who could be trusted with any ounce of power. He was a worker bee, a team player. Or so he had always thought of himself.

Chapter 13

Taking Alex aside on the very first day of high school, Lao, with his characteristic directness, asked him if he noticed how big the forearms were on the guy sitting in front of them. It wasn't a gay thing, it was a jealousy thing. Lao wanted to be huge, he wanted those forearms. He wanted that chest, he wanted what he called man-breasts: thick and tough and hard and appealing to the ladies. He was just a skinny Asian kid with stick arms and stick legs and a concave chest. Alex didn't quite remember why that bonded them, but after that, they sat together in class, despite having little to say to the other.

The drive to Ottawa was long, and Alex spent the time trying not to think of Lao. Claire drove, going much too fast, swerving to avoid transport trucks and slowing down considerably when she thought she saw a cop or a speed trap. Jason and Yannick sat in the back, their conversation sober, although Yannick seemed gleeful that Jason was finally paying the slightest bit of attention to him. Jason seemed as though he wasn't entirely sure to whom he was speaking.

When he was buying a new suit the day before, Alex had decided that he never understood Lao; that was obvious now. He wondered if Lao ever understood him. It wasn't as though he was difficult to figure out, Alex thought. Was he complicated? Complex? He didn't feel hidden or closed off. But there were probably things that perplexed Lao. Or maybe they had bonded because Alex was an open book and Lao was indecipherable.

What most people didn't get, though, was that their silences were comfortable. Alex often felt that he knew Lao most when they were silent. When they walked for hours on their hikes without saying anything; when they sat together in the bar drinking

cheap beer and looking nowhere; whenever they were together, the periods of silence outnumbered the periods of speaking, and the silences were by far the most comfortable. That was what people didn't get, Alex thought. Most people think silence is awkward. But it's not.

Alex watched with fascination, outside in the bitter wind and cold of the Beechwood National Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces, as the soldiers folded the flag and handed it to Lao's mother. They fired shots into the air. They looked freezing cold, wearing no parkas, nothing to cover their ears, and only thin white gloves covering their hands. Standing at attention, not allowed to move, to jiggle in the cold, dance on two feet to hold back the clawing wind, the penetrating cold of Ottawa in November.

And all Alex could think of was young, high school Lao saying, "I want breasts, man, huge breasts."

The mourning party was assembled, standing under a tent that had been set up near the gravesite. There wasn't room for everyone, and Alex, Claire, Jason and their friends stood at the back, at the mercy of the elements. Claire took Alex's hand in hers and leaned her head on his shoulder. She said, "I'm sorry about Lao. I'm sorry about your friend."

The inside portion of the funeral was interminable. Perhaps it's a symptom of being a priest or a minister, but Alex felt that he protested too much. Alex still wasn't sure exactly what had happened to Lao; no one had told him, Lao's family wasn't speaking. All he knew was that Lao was in Cuba and had drowned. From what he had heard, it was likely deliberate. And it also seemed that nobody really knew why, except

for the obvious explanation of post-traumatic stress disorder. The minister shed little light on the situation.

Instead, he repeated that he knew that Lao was in heaven. The minister knew that God understands. That what soldiers go through in war causes pain. That Lao's pain was finally over, and that he was with God. That we cannot always control our pain, that often our pain gets the best of us, that Lao's pain was the result of a horrifying war, and that Lao at least did wonderful things with his life before it was cut short. That he had been bringing freedom to the most marginalized people on earth. That he believed that what he was doing was the right thing, and in God's eyes, that is worthy of all of the rewards of heaven. That Lao's family deserved to be proud of him. Lao was with God, the minister was certain of this. Certain, certain, he was so certain of this. Lao's pain was over, one way or another, the priest was certain of this.

Alex wasn't certain, and he couldn't believe that anyone could be so certain of anything, much less something he didn't see, didn't know to be true beyond faith. Alex barely believed in the sun, which shone down day after day, lighting the world, as much as this minister believed in heaven, in the passing of Lao's pain. Alex didn't even know if he believed in Lao's pain. He knew that Lao had periods of darkness, of the sun hiding behind clouds or something even more aggressive in Lao's mind. He knew that there was so much more to Lao and what he brought back with him than met the eye. He also knew that Lao was his friend, loyal and stoic and proud, a man whom Alex looked up to.

But after the service, when he turned to Claire and his friends as they walked back to the cars, he saw in their faces a similar certainty which he had seen in the minister. It scared him, it angered him, it made him feel belittled and betrayed and wrong, simply

wrong, wrong about everything. He almost spoke to them, but the placid cemetery surrounding them seemed to demand silence. The tall, twisted trees, devoid of leaf, the smooth lawns, the simple headstones in endless rows, the mourners, in their best and blackest clothing, walking soberly to their vehicles, hands in hands, heads on shoulders, they all spoke of Lao. Not only Lao's resting place, but his being, his soul. It had invaded this space.

"He's in a better place," Jason told them once they were in the car and trying to find their way through the foreign Ottawa streets.

Alex held back.

"Yes," Claire answered. "The minister was right. That was so moving. I'm glad, in a way, that his pain is over."

Alex held back.

"It was a beautiful ceremony," said Yannick.

"Yes, it was," said Claire.

But it wasn't beautiful, Alex thought. It was an ending: it was dirty and awful and crazy.

Chapter 14

Leaves. Rock. Trees. Earth. Sky. As Alex walked, everything wheeled overhead and underfoot. The trail and what was visible from the trail was all that existed, all that could exist. What else was there, really? People, towns, cities. Deserts, bogs, swamp, endless wastes of pavement. These didn't exist, Alex decided. Nothing but the trail, nothing but putting one foot in front of the other.

Let me tell you a story, Alex said to himself. Come, sit on this smooth rock that borders the trail, and listen.

But the story didn't come. The narrative didn't exist yet. It was as if he stood on the edge of everything; and the world stretched before him like a vision. He saw his life laid before him like a path wandering through pastures. Trails shot off in all directions like rays of light, and he wanted to follow them all, to see where they led over this hill and that hill and out of sight. As if the world hung there before him on a thin golden chain, and all he had to do was reach out and touch it, and lives would change, cities collide, earthquakes rumble and mountains grow.

The Bruce Trail wended through the city, above the city and below it, following the snaking line of the escarpment. He left the trail as dark came, coming suddenly upon the strict order of city streets. Above, the late trucks rumbled on Sherman Access, pinpoints of red and yellow light streaming from Hamilton Mountain.

He felt as if a city loomed only several feet above him, a vast, bright presence, its outline thinly traced in the expectant emptiness. Not Hamilton, not the city on the escarpment above him or the city smouldering beneath his feet; something else, something greater waited, above the city, waiting to be breached.

He kicked at pebbles with his shoes. Streetlights blazed, singing, in tandem with his steps. They seemed superfluous, ancient. Relics from some time past remembrance, like indecipherable totem poles stretching from the earth, evenly spaced and in smoothly straight lines. Even their light seemed ready to be forgotten, on the threshold of disappearing forever into a void. It seemed impossible that so many lights were brightened for so few people. Alex walked, seeing no one. The windows in all the closely-spaced houses were dark. The light from the streetlights was entirely for him, for Alex. The city of Hamilton was extending its cheery nighttime hand in welcome; it seemed to be thanking Alex for finding a use for its light.

Alex focused on the crunching sound his sneakers made on the light stones carpeting the asphalt sidewalk. It was such a still night; he could hear every sound. The crunch of stones, every step: crunch, crunch, crunch. He felt hypersensitive to movement and sound, everything around him swirled with sensory detail, deadened. Ghosts of windsound swept down from the mountain access road above him, trucks located in space and time only by their sound.

As Alex walked, God walked beside him. They were quiet for a while, neither saying anything, simply content in each other's company. God wore great sandals on his feet, his skin remarkably smooth for one so old. His robes were completely white and flowing, and his head, well above Alex's own, was difficult to make out. Where his face should have been, there was only a blur and a whirl, as if the air had become solid and softened there, perched on his nose and eyebrows.

"I don't believe in you, you know," said Alex, looking straight ahead. The street would end soon, a large building surrounded by chain link approaching.

“I know,” said God, simply.

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate everything you’ve done.”

“It’s hard to believe,” said God.

“Actually, no,” said Alex. “I think it’s easy to believe. It’s hard not to believe.”

“That may be true,” said God, seeming to give it some thought.

As they reached the end of the street, God commanded the chain link fence to separate, allowing them to pass through. The steelyard was well lit with spotlights and completely empty and silent.

“The thing is, Alex, I should probably tell you. You don’t have much time. None of you. It’s all ending.”

“Yeah, but what’s time to you?” said Alex.

“It’s difficult for me to understand,” admitted God. “You’re temporal creatures, I’m not. But as far as I can tell, the time is short.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“You tell me. You’re the prophet.”

“I don’t want to be a prophet. I’m an atheist. I don’t believe in you.”

“Well, I’ll leave it up to you, then.”

“Maybe it would be for the best,” said Alex. “If no one knew that the end was coming.”

“Maybe.”

“You’ve been telling people the end is near for thousands of years,” Alex reminded God.

“Has it really been that long?” God sighed.

They stopped in the shade of an outbuilding, outside of the glare from the spotlight.

Alex hesitated, wondering how to confront the man who towered beside him. “Why didn’t you talk to Lao? Why didn’t you help him?”

God remained evasive, shifting his weight. “That’s not something I’m comfortable sharing, Alex,” he said.

“Didn’t you love him?”

God thought. “I’m not sure love has much to do with it,” he said.

“I would have saved him,” said Alex in a small voice.

God said nothing. The night darkened.

“Can you tell me when at least?” asked Alex. “When is the world ending?”

“I can’t.”

A dog barked somewhere. Alex watched the smoke issuing from the stacks.

“What will happen afterwards?” asked Alex.

“Another thing I cannot tell you.”

“You haven’t been a lot of help tonight.”

“Nor have you, prophet.”

“I’m not a prophet.”

God smiled. Alex wasn’t sure how he knew this, seeing as his face was obscured; but he was sure there was a smile hidden there. “I hope to see you again, Alex,” said God. And then he was gone.

—

Walking through a small park that sat next to the steelyard, Alex scooped up a fistful of earth from a flower garden and let it rest in his hands. Everything that exists exists because of this substance, Alex thought. Earth, soil, dirt. The clump he held was damp, deep dark and full of life. He felt the potential for a tree to grow, right there, through the clump of soil. He saw it rocketing towards the sky and sending out branches and leaves in every direction. He felt its roots shoot out and burrow into his skin, wrapping around his limbs and searching for nutrients, for groundwater, for the stability his body would provide, for beetles and worms and creeping, wriggling things to tickle the tiny hairs growing from each branch, worming through the entire architecture colonizing Alex's body. He felt the potential for growth, for plants that feed entire species.

Alex kept walking along the city streets and back to the Bruce Trail. He felt Lao walk before him, navigating, choosing the way through the trees. He let the soil drop from his hands, but didn't wipe off the black residue it left on his palms. He felt the earth becoming him, seeping into his skin, and helping him become the person he always felt he could be.