

Cinema L'Amour

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ABSTRACT

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Cinema L'Amour is a novella about escape explored through my characters' obsession with the legendary escape artist Harry Houdini. *Cinema L'Amour* is set in a Montreal theatre of the same name, where Houdini is rumoured to have been performing when he received a fatal blow to his abdomen in 1926. Once a vibrant vaudeville theatre but currently a porn cinema, Cinema L'Amour is the centre of this novella; it is where the characters come to know one another and Houdini, and it is where the present meets, and mixes with, the past. *Cinema L'Amour* achieves temporal depth through the characters' engagement with Houdini and through the two parallel story lines—one historical, one present-day—that structure the novella. The contemporary story line is about a group of characters who plan a Houdini tribute show on the anniversary of his death, while the second story line is an account—sometimes factual, sometimes imagined—of Houdini. All of the characters are escaping something in *Cinema L'Amour*, whether physical restraints in the form of ropes and chains, or emotional impediments, like memories or fear.

Cinema L'Amour

By: Allegra McKenzie

The first time Claire saw Cinema L'Amour, she barely registered it and, when someone asked her about it later, she would claim she hadn't noticed it at all. Two hours earlier, she had stepped off a Greyhound bus, carefully, watching her step, as the bus driver instructed her to. Looking up, her eyes followed the severe lines of towering buildings until the straight lines began to curve, and she had to look down. She had no idea what direction was north, what was south. It bothered her, even though she realized it didn't make a difference because she had nowhere to go. Bodies rushed by her, and she let herself be knocked from side to side until there were too many bodies and she found it hard to breathe. The people around her were like a current and she decided to let them push her along with them. She did not know how to swim, but she had watched the river in front of her house enough to know that being swept away would take less effort than standing still. Besides, there was a history in her family of being swept away by currents. She figured it was something she could probably do well.

Soon she found herself walking uphill. Maybe she was acting on an age-old impulse to reach higher ground. On a map at a bus stop she found the red star that showed her where she was standing. *Vous êtes ici*. She was heading north up Saint-Laurent, a street that cut the city in two like a spine, the side streets branching off like ribs. She passed strip clubs, sex shops, Chinese restaurants, clothing stores, and pizza places boasting 99 cent slices. As she climbed further north, the grime lifted from the buildings and the cracks in the pavement grew smaller. She passed hair salons, optometrists, pharmacies, and apartments packed together in old stone buildings with

brightly painted balconies, some with more paint peeling than others. She passed wrought iron staircases that curled like tendrils of hair. She was passed by angular people, who strode by her with such confidence she felt like shrinking into the shadows of the alleyways.

And cars—they roared by her, they honked at nothing in particular, they cut each other off, they double parked. Drivers leaned out the windows to curse at each other in both official languages, and sometimes a potent combination of the two. From other cars, music spilled into the air then, like smoke, evaporated as the cars drove on. She obeyed every traffic light. She waited obediently for the little white walking man to urge her forward before crossing the streets, even as everyone else breezed by her, ignoring the red hand and only briefly glancing at the oncoming cars. They seemed to be able to calculate the exact speed of the cars, of their own pace, and of the distance from curb to curb to arrive at some precise window of time through which they could pass, all without breaking their stride.

She was starting to get hungry, but she didn't want to stop. She didn't know what she was looking for, but she thought that if she was going to find it, she would find it here, on this street with everything. She climbed. She crossed Napoléon, and had to push her way through a shockingly long line at Schwarz's Smoked Meat restaurant. Brown bundles of meat hung from the windows. People stood patiently behind each other, smiling in the sun.

“Excuse me,” she said softly. “Je m'excuse.” They didn't seem to hear her. She walked as quickly as she could through the crowd.

Then she was at another intersection, but this time the street crossing Saint-

Laurent was cobblestone. It was right before she turned the corner to stand on that cobblestone street, which she discovered later was called Duluth, that she passed Cinema L'Amour: a grey brick building with dark windows crossed by metal bars and covered by posters advertising porn movies. The door was set back a bit further than those of the neighbouring stores, and she barely registered it. Later, she would think back to that moment when she would have plodded by, and wonder if maybe she had noticed more than she thought. Surely she would have taken in the two bright yellow signs with their red lettering—one was horizontal above the door, and the other, larger and vertical, was visible from blocks away, whether you were looking up or down Saint-Laurent—but at the time, though her eyes were wide, they were tired. Also, her feet hurt, and they were pulling her towards those cobblestones. She sighed with pleasure when she felt the uneven ground beneath her sneakers. It was not gravel, it was not dirt, it was not grass. But still.

Duluth was lined with restaurants, cafés, a small fruit store, a tiny bakery, and, directly across from her, a bar with red flowers tumbling over the wrought iron railings of its second-story terrace. People were drinking wine and laughing in the late summer light. Large copper bowls of yellow flowers lined the street. A woman walked by with high brown boots and an open sweater flapping like ochre wings behind her. The terrier at her heels looked up at Claire, showing her amber eyes. He sniffed her leg before the woman pulled him away, and Claire had to tell herself that, no, it was not possible that he wrinkled his nose at her.

Claire stood beside the building on the corner. The side facing Duluth was white, but covered mostly by elaborate graffiti and dotted by one bright red door. Colours

swirled at her. Noise, too. She felt suddenly as though she had been living in this city forever. That it was burying her, and that she would never again see open spaces; that silence was a distant memory. She lowered herself onto the stoop in front of the red door and closed her eyes. She started counting her breaths. The traffic noises receded; the high laughter slipped further away. She leaned back against the red door and continued counting.

“Hey!” someone said, and she jerked her eyes open. “Hey, are you okay?”

She looked up and saw a tall, thin man standing in front of the sun. She squinted up at him, but he was back-lit and so she couldn't make out the features in his face. His legs were long and gangly, so were his arms, and his hair stood up like a bunch of new shoots.

“Did you faint or something?”

“No.” She moved to stand up, but he put a hand on her shoulder, keeping her gently down. She stiffened and he removed it quickly. “Sorry. I didn't mean to...Don't get up. I think you fainted.”

“No, I didn't.”

He sat down next to her. She shifted to the far edge of the stoop, to avoid touching him, but also to see into his face. He looked a little older than her; she would guess mid-twenties. He had a large nose and heavy eyebrows that didn't exactly meet in the centre, but seemed to want to. His lips were thin but very pink. He wasn't unattractive, but he wasn't exactly attractive either. There was something shifting about his face as though, if she looked away it would change and she wouldn't recognize him when she looked back again. Maybe it was the placement of his features that made them

seem impermanent, as though they hadn't fully decided to stay put. Maybe his eyes were too far apart; maybe that was what made her want to look away from them. She moved her gaze to his battered green Converse sneakers. He wiggled his feet. She looked at her hands—small, with chewed nails.

“So, are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You look pale.”

“I'm always pale.”

They sat silently beside each other and Claire wondered why she didn't get up and leave.

“What's your name?”

“Claire.”

“Claire what?”

She didn't answer.

“Okay.” He crossed his long legs in front of him. “Don't you want to know my name?”

“I guess.”

“Aaron. Double A, r-o-n.”

“Okay.”

“Ellis.”

“Pardon?”

“My last name is Ellis.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“You speak French?”

“A little.”

“Where do you live?”

Claire didn't answer, and Aaron shifted again, this time bringing his knees up to his chest.

“Sorry,” he said. “That wasn't supposed to sound creepy.” Claire picked up her bag and stood up.

“It did, though, didn't it?”

She swung her bag over her shoulder. “I've got to go.”

“Okay.”

Claire walked a few steps down Duluth and noticed the shadows were lengthening. The sun was not as hot as it had been just a half hour ago. She realized that darkness might come on suddenly here. The sun would set behind the buildings and they would throw enormous shadows over everything. She forgot that there would be streetlights. Her throat constricted and she placed a hand briefly on it. Her fingers were cold and clammy. She had nowhere to go. She turned around. Aaron was still sitting on the stoop, watching her.

“Um.” She took a step back towards him. He waited. “Do you know where I can find a hostel?” She had decided to stay in one for the night. She had never stayed in a hostel before. She imagined them as crowded, dirty places; the thought of them made her skin crawl, but there was nowhere else she could think of to go.

Aaron seemed to read her mind. He wrinkled his nose. “A hostel?”

“Yeah.”

“You've got nowhere to stay?”

“I just need a hostel.”

“They're dirty places,” he said. “Full of horny travellers.”

Claire sighed. Her shoulders hurt, her legs felt like lead, her skin was grimy with sweat and city dirt.

“Look,” she started, but Aaron interrupted her: “How long are you here for?”

She shrugged. “For a while, I guess.” He waited, so she added. “I think I just moved here.”

“What do you mean you think you just moved here? Don't you know?”

She shrugged again. Her mother, Anne, had asked the same question a few days before: “Don't you know? Don't you know how long you'll be gone?” Claire had shrugged then, too. Anne had also asked where she was going, and Claire had mumbled, “I'll call you when I get there” because she wasn't sure yet where “there” would be. Now, at least, she had the answer to one of her mother's questions: Montreal. Anna's concern would have passed by now anyway. Most of her maternal feelings were short-lived, pushed aside by the ever-constant sadness and regret she let spread inside of her like a fungus on a dead tree in spring. It took up a lot of space; there was never much room for anything else to grow.

“But you're staying,” Aaron said now.

Claire nodded.

“Well that's great!” He leapt up and was suddenly standing directly in front of her, looking down into her face with an intensity that made her take a step backwards. His eyes looked deeper in his head when he smiled. There was a small gap between his two

front teeth.

“We have an apartment for rent.” She felt his eyes searching her face, as though he were trying to memorize her. But his eyes darted so quickly from feature to feature, it was more like he was frantically trying to find something he had lost there. She looked away.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll introduce you to the landlord.” He was full of sudden, excessive energy. He moved with rapid, jerky movements and she moved away, if only to avoid being whacked by one of those long arms he didn’t quite seem to be able to control. “Come on,” he repeated. When she stalled, he assured her: “It’s legit. I swear.”

“I don’t know,” she said, and sat down on the edge of one of the planters. She looked down at the yellow flowers. She thought of the yellow bag she had seen just a few hours ago in the Ottawa bus station. Her neighbour, Hank, had dropped her off there.

“I’ll come in with you,” Hank had said as he pulled his pickup off of Kent Street and into the full parking lot of the Greyhound station.

“No. It’s fine,” Claire said quickly. “You’ll never find parking.”

“We’ll circle around for a bit.”

But Claire didn’t want to circle around. She wanted to go in alone because she didn’t want Hank to know that she had no idea where to go.

“C’mon Claire, I’ll help you carry your bags.”

“I just have the one.” She grabbed her bag from the floor and hoisted it onto her lap. “Really,” she said quickly. “I’m fine.” He opened his mouth, but she hopped out of the truck before he could speak again.

“Thanks for the ride,” she said through the passenger window. She always left the

window open, regardless of the weather, but Hank had never commented on it. He just accepted that that was something she needed to do, just as he now accepted that she had to leave, and that she didn't want to tell him where, exactly, she was going. It was not a lack of concern on his part as much as it was a deep respect for her privacy, and that was why she loved him. Hank was leaning across the seat towards her, his stomach impaled on the gear shift, the seat belt straining across his chest.

“Tell Marise I'll call soon.” She knew it would be Hank's wife, Marise, who would be waiting by the phone, not Claire's mother, Anne. When Claire called her mother to tell her where she was and that everything was fine, Anne would likely forget to pass on the message to Marise. She would have to call them both.

Claire had walked purposefully to the front door, but as soon as she got inside the station, she faltered. She sank down on a cold wire bench and hugged her small bag to her chest. Then she did what she always did when she had no idea what to do: she made something else decide for her. She closed her eyes and thought, I will get into whichever lineup has a yellow bag. Yellow because of the bumper sticker Hank had on his truck: “Pray for me, I drive the 105.” The 105 was the snaking highway they had taken to get to Ottawa. The bumper sticker was blue with yellow lettering. She opened her eyes and scanned the lines. A young man near the front of the Montreal line had a black and yellow bag. There it was; she had no choice. She was momentarily pleased—her system always worked. She came up with a condition and the world would answer, telling her what she should do. She used it for everything. Last week she had told herself, if I see a red-winged blackbird today, I will buy quiche for dinner. If I don't, I will buy shepherd's pie. The shepherd's pie had been delicious. Now, her system had told her something else: go

to Montreal.

She took a deep breath and walked over to the self-serve ticket machine. She figured she could pretend to be a student; she was the right age. It would only cost her twenty-six dollars. She turned and watched the last of the line file onto the bus, then quickly bought a ticket.

“Wait,” she had called, running to the gate. The driver was wearing a florescent green vest with reflective tape crossing the back. He took her ticket from her clammy hands.

“Terminus?” He grabbed her bag and flung it into the compartment under the vehicle.

“Oui.” She paused for only a second before climbing the three stairs into the dim light of the bus.

That was why, when Aaron told her about the apartment, her eyes darted to the yellow flowers. She could be in Toronto now; she could be on her way to North Bay. But someone going to Montreal had been carrying a yellow and black knapsack, so she was here. She studied the yellow flowers. Then she thought of the shadows growing longer, of the grime on hostel sheets and the bodies of people she had never met breathing beside her, taking her air.

“I guess I could just look—”

“Great! Come on.” Aaron started walking away, but he turned around abruptly and raised a hand.

“Actually, maybe you should stay here.”

“Why?”

“Just sit on the stoop again. I'll get the landlord.”

She moved from the planter back to the stoop.

“Don't move, okay? I'll be back. Two minutes.” He turned and trotted awkwardly to the corner. “Two minutes,” he repeated, holding up two long fingers. “Stay here.” Then he disappeared around the corner onto Saint-Laurent.

As soon as Aaron was out of sight, he broke into a jog. It only took him a couple of seconds to reach the door of Cinema L'Amour; it was just around the corner from where he left Claire. He put his hand on the familiar grimy handle and pushed. The dim light of the lobby enveloped him, and it took him a second to see Sylvie perched on her high, red stool behind the counter.

“Hello Sylvie. Can you tell me where Tom is, please?”

Sylvie raised one perfectly manicured nail while she finished counting a stack of bills. He was always a little surprised by the tattoo she had on her left index finger and thumb, no matter how many times he saw it. It was a ruler, or the lines of a ruler, that she could use while sewing. She could just make an “L” shape with her hand instead of bringing out a tape measure. She claimed it was more accurate, in addition to being less hassle. About the fact that accuracy would be compromised by the distorting effects of ageing skin she said nothing. Aaron wouldn't have thought of her as the tattooed type; the rest of her was so pristine. Her slender arms were raised a little, her elbows crooked, and Aaron couldn't help but think she looked like a bird. What kind, he didn't know because he knew the name of only three or four birds, but she had the same thin, fragile bones as a bird, and her red silk shirt hung down off her shoulders like wings. She shuffled the bills into a neat pile and slowly put them back into the till, all without

looking at him. Sometimes Aaron wondered what it would be like to reach out and ruffle her. Just put his hand into her shiny black hair and mess it up. Other times, he wanted only to stand near her and watch her smooth, unhurried movements. He had no idea how old she was. She could be forty. She could be fifty-five. Some days he guessed as young as thirty-five. She wasn't exactly young, but he couldn't think of her as old either. She was strangely well-preserved. Her clothing looked like it may have been in style once, but he couldn't quite tell when it would have been. And as far as he could tell, it wasn't exactly out of style now either. But it was always unruffled, impeccably cared for. It fit her perfectly. Her perfume smelled like a hundred years ago, and yet she was still attractive, in a strange, misty kind of way. She didn't seem to care about the passing of time, possibly because it seemed to have such little effect on her. Usually Aaron thought that was cool, but now, with Claire waiting outside, he wished she would pay just a little bit of attention to the passing minutes. He could have just rushed by her. He knew Tom was probably in his office; he didn't need to ask Sylvie that. But there was something about Sylvie that made him ridiculously polite. If someone else had been sitting at the desk, he would have just called "Hey!" on his way past. But Sylvie, even though she hardly paid any attention to him, seemed to demand that he stop and ask her permission to pass.

Sylvie closed the till with a metallic scrape, followed by a loud, bright ping. She looked up at him and smiled, and he didn't think about ruffling her hair anymore.

"Hi Aaron," her voice was as smooth as usual. Silky, but strangely deep for such a petite woman. "What were you saying?"

"I'm looking for Tom."

"He's in his office," she said. She smiled. "Like he always is."

“Thank you,” Aaron said, and managed to walk until the doors to the cinema closed behind him and he was out of Sylvie’s sight. Then he broke into a run. The cinema was between features, so it was dark and silent, the screen hidden behind a thick red curtain. He veered left and climbed the back staircase two steps at a time. As he reached the top, he could hear female moans coming from Tom's office. He knocked on the door. The moaning continued. “Oh,” the voice cried.

“Tom!” He pounded with his fist. “Tom!” The moaning stopped abruptly.

“Yes? Enter!”

Aaron pushed open the door. Tom was sitting with his feet propped up on his metal desk. He was leaning back in an old office chair with his hands folded on his yellow silk vest, which was stretched tightly across his abdomen. On a large screen in front of him a man’s ass and back were visible between two long, high-heeled legs, which were sticking out at surprising angles. All around the office were tall, metal shelves packed with DVDs and old film reels. There were papers scattered across the floor. The dying light from outside was barely making it through the filthy windows. There were old coffee cups on the desk and a couple of Chinese take-out containers. Old posters lined the walls, some advertising burlesque stars from the 1950s, and others old porn films. There was one large, metal cabinet locked in the corner of the room. Aaron always wondered what Tom kept in there. Of course, he could have easily picked the lock, but some locks he chose not to open. Tom was staring blankly at the stilled image in front of him.

“They're all the same,” Tom said with a note of despair in his voice that made Aaron pause, momentarily forgetting that Claire was outside waiting for him. Tom’s face had been drooping lately, as though he simply didn’t have the energy to hold all his

features in place. Aaron wondered if he should reach out and touch the man in some way. Put his hand on his shoulder or something. Is that what men do? Or would that be strange? He stayed in the doorway, but softened his voice a little.

“Aw Tom, not everyone feels that way.”

“They didn’t used to be like this.” Tom gestured vaguely at the old posters.

“I know, but—”

“When this place was The Pussycat...” he trailed off. He ran a plump hand through his hair, which was so black everyone was sure he must dye it. Tom sighed and Aaron took that opportunity to pull him back from the brink of his reminiscing.

“Tom, I think I found someone for the show.”

It worked. Tom swung his short legs to the floor, and his soft face solidified into a look of pure eagerness—his drooping, half-closed eyes opened wide and there was a flash of light in them Aaron had not often seen. His mouth took shape, too—it jumped suddenly into a completely unreserved smile, exposing little Chiclet teeth.

“Really?”

“Yeah, she's perfect.”

“Small?”

“Yeah, super short. Skinny.”

“Little lips? Like little rosebuds?”

“Uh...” Aaron frowned. “I dunno. I guess?”

“Oh well, that doesn’t really matter. But she's small?”

“Yes.”

“Small enough to fit into a box?”

“Yes, I told you, yes. And besides, if I can fit in—”

“But you don't know about the lips.”

“No, I didn't notice.”

“But she's pretty?”

“I dunno. I guess she's okay. Does it matter?” Aaron had found Claire pretty, but he was not sure if everyone would agree. He often had different tastes than most, and he was starting to lose confidence in his ability to judge by any normal standards.

“No, no. I guess it doesn't. No.” Tom paused. “But she couldn't be ugly. She's not ugly, is she?”

“No, she's not ugly. She's fine.”

“And you think she'd be amenable?”

“Sorry?”

“You think she'd, you know, go along with it.”

“I dunno. Maybe. She needs a place to live. I told her about the apartment. She's outside right now.”

Tom yelped. He pushed himself up from his chair, which squeaked in protest.

“Why did you leave her out there? Why didn't you bring her in?” He rushed past Aaron and started scuttling down the stairs.

“I thought she'd get scared off by the cinema,” Aaron said as he bounded down after him. Tom's short legs could move surprisingly quickly when he wanted them to. “I thought you might want to wait to tell her what kind of place you're running.”

Tom stopped abruptly on the stairs and Aaron pulled hard on the bannister to avoid crashing into him. “Ah, yes. Right. Of course,” Tom said pensively. “Good

thinking.” He continued down the stairs, then stopped again. “But, you know, I won’t be running ‘this kind of place’ for long.”

“Right,” Aaron said. “Sorry.”

Tom stopped again when he reached the bottom of the stairs and turned to look up at Aaron, who had decided to keep a bit of distance between them during the rest of the descent. Tom’s face softened into a wistful expression. “I hope she has those little rosebud lips, though. You know the kind? Bess had them. That would be so nice.”

...

It was late at night, after a show. From the whirl of costumes and lights and props and adoring fans, Bess Houdini stole a moment alone with her husband. The crowd had met him outside of the theatre and carried him home on their shoulders. She was astounded not by their adoration of him—she understood what it meant to adore Houdini—but by the expanse of his smile; she wondered if she would ever see him so happy again. Then, in the space between one day and the next, in the few moments before he slipped into sleep, she put her hand on his face and said, “Me now.” He traced her lips with his fingers, and she liked to think that they forgot the feel of cuffs and chains in the seconds they lingered on her face. Liked to think that his mind, too, forgot all but her.

The next morning he woke up with a new idea for a trick. He sketched it on the edge of his newspaper as they ate breakfast. After he had gone—planting a wet kiss on her cheek, whistling an unidentifiable tune as he bustled around the front hall, hollering a last “Farewell!” before he slammed the door behind him—she studied the drawing. It just looked like a large rectangle, with a man lying inside. But he had written *ICE!!!* beside it, with an arrow pointing to it, and she understood he would like to escape from a block of

ice. It would be a miracle, she thought, as she picked up the yellow dishes from their breakfast. The audience would love it. She stacked a bowl on top of another and told herself that the idea came to him while he slept; that when he touched her skin, he just touched her skin. And that nowhere in his mind was he frozen.

...

They found Claire where Aaron had left her, sitting with her knees pulled up to her chest. She was resting her cheek on the sleeve of her sweater.

“Claire?”

She stood up to meet them and Aaron noticed the faint lines the folds of her sweater left on her cheek. They seemed so private to him, those lines. He moved to put his arm around Tom's shoulder, but left it hovering a few inches above instead, then used it to rub the back of his neck. Why was it that he felt some kind of preventative force field around everyone he moved to touch?

“Claire, this is Tom, the landlord. Tom, this is Claire.” Aaron thought of his mother then, and of her graceful introductions. She gave first and last names, occupations, mutual friends, interests, all punctuated by her crystal laugh, by the light, cool touch of her hand on your arm. By the time she was finished introducing people, they felt like they were already friends.

Tom reached out and took Claire's hand.

“Enchanté mademoiselle,” he crooned, and bent to kiss it. Aaron cringed.

Claire drew her hand away and rotated it at her side.

“So, Aaron tells me you need a place to live.”

“Yes, but, I haven't really started looking yet.” Her voice was thin, wispy, like she

was breathing more than speaking. Both men leaned in a little to hear her, and she leaned back in response.

“Well, we'll save you the trouble, my dear. We have an apartment that would be just perfect for you. You could move in immediately.”

“Well, I'm not sure—”

“Just take a look at it,” Tom insisted. “It's right behind you.”

“In there?”

“Yes. Just through the red door. Third floor,” he said in a singsong voice. “Shall we?” Tom held out an arm. “Après vous.”

As Claire stepped inside the door, Aaron hissed, “Why do you keep speaking French?”

“It's charming.” Tom beamed at him, then followed Claire's slight figure up the three flights of steps.

Aaron stood at the doorway while Tom ushered Claire through the small apartment. It had three rooms: a fairly large bedroom, living room, and a small kitchen. Claire followed him through the rooms, but kept glancing at the doorway, wishing Aaron would move away from it and leave it clear. Aaron, mistaking her glances for curiosity in him, puffed up with pleasure and beamed at her.

“Look,” Tom was saying, “the kitchen has a yellow floor!”

The entrance to the living room was a large circular doorway without a door. The room was painted turquoise and it had windows all along the two walls facing the streets. She liked the windows. She walked across the room and opened them. The apartment was on the corner of the building, and so it looked out over Saint-Laurent and Duluth. Tom

promised Claire she would see beautiful sunsets every night. Except for when it was cloudy, of course; then she wouldn't see them, but no one would, so that didn't really count. She could also see the mountain from her window. The lighted cross would be lovely at night. The bedroom had two large windows looking out onto Saint-Laurent. It was painted a soft blue. The bathroom was small but clean with tiny octagonal tiles on the floor and a slightly cloudy mirror over the sink. There was a frosted window above the bathtub. It would be at shoulder-level when she stood in the shower. There were two taps in the little sink: one cold and one hot. There was a little front hallway and Tom was explaining to Claire that she could get a nice boot rack to put there in the winter time.

“I don't know if you have a lot of boots, but if you do, then a boot rack would be a good idea, don't you think?”

The apartment was mostly furnished. It had a double bed, a small kitchen table with two chairs, a coffee table, and an old couch.

“Do you have a lot of boots?”

“Sorry? No, I uh...No.”

“Well, if you need anything else, I'm sure we have some old stuff lying around somewhere we could lend you.”

“I have a rug,” Aaron piped up from the doorway. Claire just looked at him.

“A rag rug,” he said, and shifted to his left foot. “Red. It's red.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Look at these cupboards, Claire!” Tom called from the kitchen. “You could fit a lot of food in here! Cereal, cans, what else? Granola bars, sauces, tea. I bet you like tea.” He paused and laughed, “These cupboards are so big, you could fit yourself in them!”

Claire cringed, but Tom didn't notice because he had turned to the kitchen window.

“And look at your nice kitchen window. You could put a plant here on the ledge. Look, you can see into the bar across the street. Reservoir. That's what it's called. It's nice. Lots of pretty people there. Look, they have nice plants, too.”

“I don't have a plant,” Claire said.

“But you could get one. There's a place just a block north of here. And grocery stores. There's lots of those around. Aaron will show you the good ones.” He raised his voice, “Won't you Aaron?”

“Yup. Sure. I live right below you. I'm the janitor here.”

Tom took Claire around and around the small apartment and she followed obediently. It wasn't a bad place. It was clean. It was small, but it had lots of windows, and once the two men left, she knew it would feel more spacious. As she looked, the light outside began fading faster and the room dimmed. She watched the shadows out of the corner of her eye as Tom listed what seemed to be every business in the neighbourhood. He told her about the laundromat, the bakery, the dollar store, a café where you could play chess—did she play chess?—the pharmacy. She watched the shadows slink across the floor to where she stood. They enveloped her little bag, they licked at her toes. She could say no, but then where would she go? She looked around the living room once more, then told herself, if this man says the word “water” in the next few minutes, and if the rent is cheap, I will stay. If he says “fire,” I will leave and find a hostel somewhere. Eventually, Tom told her the water pressure was good; she could check if she wanted. Then he told her the rent would be \$600 a month. She could afford that. She had saved up enough money from her job at Pete's Hardware to cover the first two months. She nodded

yes. Both men beamed at her, and she smiled warily back.

Then she was alone in her new apartment, the key throbbing strangely in her hand, the light gone now, and the world uncertain, somehow unstable, blurry and soft like it may not hold its shape.

The darkness hung heavily over the city that night, thickened by the clouds that rolled in. The streetlights came on, but they didn't seem to do much to the inky darkness. They didn't clear it; they just painted it a different colour.

Someone walking up Saint-Laurent would have passed a three-story building of grey brick on the corner of Saint-Laurent and Duluth, its south side pressed up against Cinema L'Amour. There were only two lights on in the building: Claire's and, underneath that, Aaron's. Cinema L'Amour's bright yellow signs were on, and the people leaving the cinema were briefly illuminated under the glow. It made their faces look jaundiced before they faded quickly into the night. The curtains on Claire's third-story window were drawn, but you could still make out a thin shadow, moving restlessly from room to room. Below her, Aaron's curtains were open, his window too. He was half-sitting on the window ledge and looking out at the street below him. He was playing with something metallic. It went clink clink in the night. If the passerby looked closer, he would have noticed that Aaron was playing with a pair of old-fashioned handcuffs. He lifted one of the larger rings, then lowered it into his palm. Lifted it up again, and lowered it down. He seemed unaware that he was doing that, but he did it again and again. And above him, the thin shadow paced, and would not sleep that night.

Inside the cinema, the last of the clientele shuffled through the lobby, past Sylvie, who did not meet their eyes. When the last man left, Sylvie stood and walked to the front

door. She turned the open sign to closed, and she locked the door. The more time she spent here, the more she realized how little locks could promise, but she always locked the door anyway. She stood for a second looking out at the street. She wrapped her thin fingers around the metal bars on the door, but only briefly. Then she dimmed the lights and watched the lobby transform. It was almost uncanny what a softening of light could do: the fake plant looked real; the red velvet ropes lost their shabbiness, their clasps glinting in the dim light of the streetlights; the women in the posters faded on the walls. The women on the DVD covers disappeared, too. None of them had red hair, a detail that pleased her. There had been one DVD with a pale, red-headed woman with green eyes, but Sylvie had tossed that in the garbage in her second week, guessing correctly that Tom wouldn't notice it missing. He seemed to be noticing less and less. She had only been working here for a few months, but in that time she had watched his boyish enthusiasm being replaced by something else. Pushed out of the way by something heavier: he was dreamier than she had ever seen him, and every movement he made seemed to be full of longing. Some days he could still manage to summon his old jocularitas, but it seemed to be getting harder for him. She understood that—how hard it was to move lightly when you were full of longing. With one last look at the lobby, Sylvie slipped through the red padded doors into the cinema.

Tom was there, like she knew he would be, sitting in the sixth row, staring up at the screen. There was nothing playing on it. It was a white expanse that he was losing himself in.

“Tom,” she said softly, then again, louder, when he did not move.

He looked up, and his eyes were slightly cloudy. He was gone already. He would

stay here all night, but for him, it would pass like a few minutes. When Aaron came early in the morning and found him there, Tom would blink and wonder how it was that time could flash by so quickly.

“Do you want me to close the curtains?” she asked, although she already knew the answer.

“No, no,” he said, and took her hand briefly in his. She liked to keep her distance from people, but she let him touch her hand. She allowed herself a few tender moments a day. Too many and the aching would resurface, but too few and the coldness would take over, and once that happened, it was hard to remember what warmth felt like. For a man heavy with longing, slowly slipping away into a world she was only starting to understand, she could spare some tenderness. He patted her hand in a way that made him seem like a very old man, although he had only just turned fifty.

“I’ll just be a few minutes,” he said. She squeezed his hand, then laid her other hand briefly on his shoulder before walking back up the red carpet to the exit of the cinema.

She paused briefly at the top of the theatre, and looked at the red seats cascading down to the stage. Along the stage, there were footlights. Sylvie couldn’t imagine any other theatre in Montreal still used old footlights. She had to admit, it really was a beautiful building, especially when the low, red lights smoothed the cracks in the walls, and concealed the stains and bare patches on the carpet; when the shadows hid the exposed wiring hanging down from the ceiling where brighter lights had once hung. She thought of the theatre as an ageing woman who used to be beautiful, and so needed to continue to be so, but could only manage it now in inadequate light. In that way, she supposed, it reminded her of herself. She had always noticed light—falling in love with a

lighting designer had that effect on you—but lately, she had been paying particular attention to a certain kind of cruel light; she was becoming an expert at carefully manoeuvring herself to a place in the room that would be kinder to her crow's feet, to the deepening lines around her mouth.

Regardless of the lighting in the cinema, Tom would never notice the cracks. He had spent his entire life in the cinema, and so was too deeply in love by now to notice anything that he did not want to see. It was a stubborn kind of love, and the kind Sylvie had only felt for a woman, but she could see no reason why it would not also be possible to feel it for a building. In fact, the more time she spent in the theatre, the easier it became to ignore the cracks and stains. Sometimes it took her a few minutes to remember that they were there. It was like forgetting that Nat's teeth had coffee stains on them, or that her thighs were dimpled and often red. Sylvie told herself to be careful, and she made a conscious effort to see the streaked paint, the crumbling mouldings, to smell the mildew, the dust, and, often, the urine. Increasingly, she was failing to notice. Sometimes, it looked just perfect, and that scared her because she knew that it wasn't. That nothing could be. She turned abruptly and left.

Tom did sit in the cinema all night. After Sylvie left, he sighed and nestled deeper into the plush red seat. His favourite in the theatre: sixth row back, smack in the middle. It was so soft, the velvet so smooth. He relaxed his arms, his legs. His body tingled with the familiar pleasure of knowing that you are exactly where you want to be and that you do not have to move. He smiled. And as always, the years washed over him, making him momentarily forget the time of night. Then, he forgot whether it was day or night. Next he lost track of what month it was, then what season, and, finally, blissfully, what year.

...

Before Cinema L'Amour was Cinema L'Amour, it was The Pussycat, one of a chain of adult movie theatres started in Los Angeles by David F. Friedman and Dan Sonney, who cited Woody Allen's *What's New Pussycat* and the Santa Monica Boulevard burlesque club *The Pink Pussycat* ("A stage full of the most exciting girls in the world!") as inspiration for the name. The first Pussycat Theatre opened in the spring of 1966 on South Hill Street, Los Angeles, but soon, there were dozens more and, eventually, the chain found its way into Canada. The Pussycat theatres showed adult films, but they were a different kind of adult film than what Cinema L'Amour would show. The Pussycat screened soft pornography with names like *Satan was a Lady*, *Mona the Virgin Nymph* or *The Miracle of Love*. The films would share the bill with vaudeville acts and live burlesque shows with beautiful shiny women like Lili St. Cyr or April March, who was called the "First Lady of Burlesque" because of her elegance and because with her dark hair, pale skin, and far-set eyes, she could, barring her profession and the setting one would find her in, be mistaken for Jackie Kennedy.

The Pussycat appealed to a respectable, fairly-well educated public who were expected to get the references in titles like *Femmes de Sade* or urgings like "Take a trip down thru the history of love on a Freudian Freeway of Time Travel!" It went for alliteration: *Sex Constant Sex* would be advertised next to *Scoundrels of Sin* or *Sex with a Stranger*. It went for biblical allusion: *Pleasure Plantation!* ("Nothing grows here...but a Garden of Human Evil!") or *Eve and the Handyman* ("in riotous blushing colour!"). It covered its publicity with leaping pussycat girls and exclamations of "Ooo la la!"

...

Claire spent her first full day in Montreal inside her apartment, unpacking her few belongings, making a mental list of furniture she would have to buy, kitchen supplies, too, and little things, like coat hangers and a soap dish. She thought about writing out the list but didn't. Instead she lay on the floor and looked at the ceiling, listened to the alien world outside, thought of home and of her mother sitting alone in the darkened living room with the light of the television flickering over her face. Even on those rare occasions when Claire had sat down beside her, Anna had been alone.

Claire's father, Peter, fell through the ice before Claire was born. He had been trying to rescue his dog, which ended up surviving the freezing cold water, but not her mother's anger; a few days after Peter died, Anna shot the dog with the gun Hank used for killing groundhogs. It was her last flash of energy before she sank into the lethargic gloom that Claire would come to know so well. Apparently, she had been different before Peter died. "A real firecracker," Marise had assured Claire. "She used to run across the field to come tell me something. Something little, like she'd seen a robin's nest, or she'd heard a funny joke on the CBC, something like that. Just running, scaring up all the swallows in the field. Running just 'cause." Marise had laughed fondly at the memory, but Claire couldn't even picture it; it was so far from the mother she knew, who barely managed to make it to her part-time job at the post-office just down the road, and sat every night in front of the television, its light glinting off the dozens of framed photos of Peter she had plastered over all the walls like tiles. Sometimes, without turning her head from the screen, she would say things to Claire: "Your father had hair like that" or "Your father could have been an actor, you know. He had the right proportions," or sometimes, quietly, "He used to laugh like that. With his head back. Just like that." Claire tried to

piece together an idea of her father, but she found she couldn't because it seemed that he was changing over the years. He got taller, funnier, braver, more successful, more romantic. He laughed like one actor, but then the next week he laughed like another. She would never really know who he was, because the man Anne had loved, who Claire might have loved, was being buried in fantasies.

Claire spent her time in her room, or sometimes on the sagging front porch, drawing. She drew birds. They were accurate—she copied them out of *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds: Eastern Region* that she had found at a garage sale. She was working her way through it, and planned to draw each bird in it. There were five hundred and forty eight colored photographs. She was on two hundred and forty three: the black-necked stilt. It mattered to her that she did not exaggerate the birds; that she drew them exactly as they appeared in the book. Then, like those old-fashioned scientific drawings, she would label the different parts of them; put arrows to their wings and write, in careful cursive script, “wing.” She spent the most time on their wings. She would draw the pattern on each feather. She would hold her breath while she drew those tiny details to avoid any wavering, uncertain lines.

She took out her sketchbook now and continued on her drawing of the black-necked stilt. Its legs did look like stilts; they were longer than the bird's entire body. She didn't like that even if she copied it exactly as it appeared, it would look like an exaggeration. As she drew she listened to the noise outside her window. At first, she didn't bother to pick out individual sounds; she just took in the hugeness and messiness of it all. She thought about closing the window, but the heat, even in September, was too oppressive. She focused on separating the sounds: delivery trucks idling at the traffic

light below her window, their engines bellowing and sighing as they started up again on a hill; cars honking; brakes squealing; people yelling to each other in French, in English, in both; and *Like a Virgin*—very loudly. Claire snapped shut her sketchbook and knelt in front of her living room window. There were four thrift stores directly across the street: “Friperie St Laurent” with a bright green and purple sign; “Rokokonut” with a zebra print sign; “Kitsch n’ Swell” with a leopard print sign out of which was sprouting a three-dimensional fake moose head; and “Cul de Sac,” whose sign actually did look like a green and white cul-de-sac sign, although Claire wondered where, in the city, there would be a dead end. It seemed to her that there would always be somewhere else to turn here. Wasn’t that the point of cities? She studied the stores, trying to figure out which one insisted on blasting Madonna on repeat from speakers above the door (they all had speakers above the door). The more she looked, the more it seemed as though the moose head was the culprit. Why, she thought, does there need to be four second hand stores in a row? She had always thought of cities as new places, where people came to forget about the past. Why, then, would they buy old clothing? She would eventually discover that Montreal was full of these stores; that Montrealers were deep in a love affair with the past and happily wore other people’s cast-offs, which they proudly called vintage. She returned to the floor and eventually slipped into a half-dream in the gradually changing light, listening to the noise of her new city and comparing it to the sounds of home: the crows in the maple tree outside her window, and the silence they cried into.

...

In 1792, Boulevard Saint-Laurent, nicknamed “The Main,” was declared the dividing line between Montreal’s east and west ends. To the east is French, to the west,

English. All street numbers stop and start at Saint-Laurent. Addresses end in Est or Ouest (St. Viateur Bagel, for example, is located at 263 St. Viateur Ouest). But Saint-Laurent is more than a dividing line between Montreal's "two solitudes"; it is the street on which everything meets. It is a confusion of cultures, languages, architectural styles, and businesses. Here you will find narrow brick buildings housing small entrepreneurs beside Roman-style buildings that would look at home on grand avenues like the Champs-Élysées. You will find flashing neon next to Beaux-Arts pillars. You will see Jewish tailors next to Greek restaurants; you will smell Portuguese roast chicken and then, at the bottom of the hill, find yourself in the red and gold bustle of China town. You will see trendy boutiques sprouting up beside long-standing landmarks like Schwartz's Deli.

During prohibition, Montreal's night life boomed, and much of that nightlife was found on Boulevard Saint-Laurent. It was considered by some to be a dangerous street, with its secret gambling houses and erotic shows ("Every night," Mordecai Richler writes in *Son of a Smaller Hero*, "St Lawrence Boulevard is lit up like a neon cake and used-up men stumble out of a hundred different flophouses to mix with rabbinical students and pimps and Trotskyites and poolroom sharks.") During the day, in the bustle of businesses, restaurants, community centres, galleries, and cafés, you may not notice the clubs waiting with darkened windows and barred up doors for the night, but at night you cannot miss them: they have lineups at their doors, and music flooding out their windows. You can dance to any kind of music on Saint-Laurent; you can slip into any scene.

Everything piles up on Saint-Laurent, including the present onto the past—except the past does not stay buried; rather, it slips into the present until you cannot separate the two.

...

All locks have weak points. Knowing that is the first step. Then, you have to figure out what kind of lock you are working with: a simple lever lock? A pin-tumbler? A wafer? Once you determine the type of lock, you can start looking for its weakness, and once you find that, you can open anything.

Aaron had spent ten years studying locks. Since he was thirteen, he had been opening and closing them, learning their principles. He knew all of the tricks: where to hide tiny bits of metal on his body; how to make a copy of a master key; how to open a pair of handcuffs with a girl's barrette; that you should push your arms forward when being cuffed to give yourself extra room; that you should spit on your wrists beforehand; that you should wear loafers, not lace-up shoes. But most of all, he knew that all locks had their weaknesses. The trick was to always remember that.

Handcuffs always look impressive, and of course, when you're locked up in them and have never before thought about how you might escape, they feel impressive too. Even when you were used to it, as Aaron was, they could still rattle you. Aaron looked down at his arms and the six cuffs climbing their length, and tried to fight away the twinge of panic he always felt when he was handcuffed like this. No matter how many times he successfully escaped from handcuffs, it was hard to forget that their purpose was to restrain you and make you powerless. He swallowed. Today, the usual flash of fear was harder to ignore because this time it really mattered if he escaped or not. He was not worried about never getting out of the cuffs—Tom would let him out if he couldn't get out himself—he was scared that if he failed, he would not be allowed to be the Houdini act in the Halloween show.

It was the beginning of summer when Tom and his much younger cousin Patrick had told Aaron they were planning a tribute show on the anniversary of Houdini's death. Aaron knew then that he needed to be Houdini in that show; that everything in his life had been leading him there. Houdini had been performing at the cinema when he received the blow to his abdomen that, three days later, would kill him. Ever since Aaron started learning about Houdini when he was twelve, he had wanted to be closer to him. As close as he could be to a man who died in 1926. That was why he was living above and working at Cinema L'Amour. How much closer could he get than performing some of Houdini's escapes on the same stage he had performed on right before he died? In a building that seemed to be locked to the past. Aaron had offered to be the Houdini act right away. He had told Tom and Patrick all about the different escapes he could do. He told them he'd been practicing them most of his life. Patrick, though, had insisted on holding auditions. So that was why Aaron was standing, cuffed, on the stage of Cinema L'Amour, terrified that he would fail to escape.

There was a man standing beside him. He had introduced himself as Lane. Aaron stole another quick glance at him. He was short and muscular, just like Houdini. It unnerved Aaron that Lane had the exact same body type as the man they were both trying to imitate, while Aaron had the opposite. Aaron shifted his gaze to the audience, where Tom and Patrick were sitting. Patrick's full lips were stretched a little in a smile. As Aaron looked at him, Patrick leaned back, extended his long legs, and folded his hands behind his head, sinking his fingers into his thick blonde hair. He was probably looking forward to seeing this little guy beat Aaron. There was something about Patrick that made Aaron suspect he would enjoy seeing his disappointment. Aaron shook his head, trying to

clear away any thoughts of Patrick and focus on the task at hand: whoever could free himself fastest would get the spot on the show.

“Ready?” Tom called from the audience. Aaron and Lane nodded.

“Wait,” Patrick said suddenly, and leapt onstage. “I forgot to check for hidden keys.”

“That’s supposed to be done *before* we’re cuffed,” Aaron said.

“Better late than never,” Patrick said. He stood in front of Aaron, so close Aaron could smell his soap. It was scented with some kind of spice, maybe cloves.

First, Patrick put his fingers in Aaron’s hair. He was surprised at how soft it was. There was no way a key would stay lodged in there, but he still checked, just to be sure. Next, he patted Aaron down. This was to make sure Aaron had not taped a key to his body. He considered taking off all the cuffs so that he could take Aaron’s shirt off and look for the key, but that would take too long. He would have to rely on touch this time. With his fingers he conjured up a mental image of Aaron’s thin chest and waist. He was bony, and had hidden no key. He felt down Aaron’s legs next, noted the lack of muscle, and, when he reached his feet, got him to kick off his shoes. Aaron did. Then Patrick peeled off his socks. He lifted one bare foot then the other. There was nothing hidden there.

“Fine,” Patrick said. “Nothing.” He turned away from Aaron and stepped on his right foot. Aaron inhaled sharply, but otherwise did not make a sound.

“Sorry,” Patrick said.

While Patrick inspected Lane, Aaron tried to forget his throbbing toe, and the fact that he had never wanted anything so badly in his life. To focus, he thought of keys and

locks and of the happy metallic click when he sprung them free. Finally, Patrick returned to his seat and Tom called out “Away you go, boys.”

Lane and Aaron strode to either end of the stage where they had placed two makeshift magician cabinets—two portable clothes racks draped in old sheets, Aaron’s red, Lane’s white. They disappeared behind them and Tom took out his over-sized pocket watch from the pocket of his purple vest.

“Ready, Set...Go!”

Tom drummed his fingers on his knee as the two young men struggled behind their bed sheets. He was slightly annoyed that they wouldn't do it out in the open for him to see—he was the driving force behind this show, after all. Not to mention the owner of the theatre—but they had insisted. It was how Houdini did it, so that was good enough for him. He loosened the top button of his vest, wondering absentmindedly if he should lose a few pounds before the show. He had a near-perfect wardrobe, but it seemed to be fitting a little snugly these days. Of course, he had always been round, and it worked well for him. People seemed to respect a bit of a paunch. He fancied it gave him an air of success.

“Tic, toc, tic, toc,” he called out. “If this was a show people would be getting bored.” He was looking down at his vest, tugging at it, and so did not see Aaron step out from behind the curtain. Aaron stood there for a second, then alerted Tom to his presence with a soft, “Um.” Tom looked up to see him holding the six handcuffs in his hands. They were all closed as though he had simply squeezed his wrists out of them. His wrists were red, but not bleeding.

“Now how—” Tom began, but Aaron smiled and shook his head.

“Come on out, Blaine,” Tom called. “We've got our Handcuff King!”

Aaron laughed. "It's Lane," he said, but Tom shrugged. He was glad Aaron had won. He liked the idea of keeping the show close. Aaron worked here, and so Tom thought of him as part of the family. He saw no need to open it up to strangers, but Patrick had insisted they have auditions, and he didn't like to say no to Patrick.

Lane stepped out from behind the curtain. His wrists were raw and there were still five cuffs on them. There was a slash of blood cutting diagonally across his wrist and up his arm. He kicked the only pair he had managed to get off towards Aaron.

"This was rigged," he said. Tom blinked empty eyes at him, and Aaron smiled meekly before hopping off stage, shoes and socks in hand. He walked up the aisle towards the door.

"Aaron Ellis!" cried Tom in his best booming voice. "Cinema L'Amour's very own Handcuff King!" His solitary clapping echoed in the empty cinema. Eventually, Patrick joined in.

Aaron paused halfway up the aisle, turned and offered a clumsy bow. He could barely stop himself from running and laughing. For once in his life he had won something. Of course, maybe he shouldn't be surprised; he had been practising escapes for ten years, but he had still somehow imagined he would lose. Especially to someone who so closely resembled Houdini.

When he pushed open the door to the lobby, Sylvie looked up from the front desk.

"So?"

He didn't know what to say. Should he say, I won? I beat him? I'm in? It's me? He hadn't had many occasions like this. He grinned stupidly and she laughed.

"Good news?"

“Yes.” He smiled harder. “Yes.”

...

“Ehrich, I don't understand why you need to have *red* socks.” Cecilia Weisz had been saying that for as long as it had taken her to knit her son a pair of red socks. She was now finishing the toe on the second sock. Ehrich was standing in front of her, bouncing on his bare feet.

“All the other boys are happy with grey socks, black socks, navy blue socks,” she continued, “but you want red socks.”

“Yes,” Ehrich said. She looked cross, but she always looked cross, and there she was with red wool running through her fingers. “But I am not like other boys.”

Cecilia looked up at him and arched her dark eyebrows. Her clicking needles were silent while she considered him. Then she turned back to her knitting.

The next day, Ehrich kissed her when she handed him the finished socks.

“Go on,” she said, and swatted him away. “Big boys don't kiss their mothers.” But he kissed her again and she allowed herself a small smile.

Ehrich pulled on his new red socks. Cecilia had made them extra long like he had asked, even though she complained about the cost of the red wool and how she might have made his sister a pair of mittens with the rest of the ball. “I don't understand why you need your socks to reach your knees,” she had said. But she knit them long anyway.

Ehrich admired his new socks in the small, smoky mirror in the hallway. He was wearing a white undershirt and shorts with a long-distance ribbon pinned to his left breast. He liked how bright it was; he only wished he had more medals to display alongside it. Even this one he had trouble keeping; when the authorities of the race had

found out he was under-age, they almost revoked it. They should have given him an extra ribbon for being the youngest to ever win that race. Ehrich breathed in deeply to puff out his chest. He put his hands on his hips, extended one leg, and turned slightly to the side to view the effect. It was then that he caught sight of his father in the mirror. He was standing at the end of the hallway, looking at Ehrich with the same conflicted expression he always had: a painful blend of disapproval, distraction and remorse. In the clouded mirror, he looked like he was very far away—from a dream, or a different world. He smelled like cabbage and never smiled. He spoke Hebrew, Hungarian and German and everything he said sounded like a warning. Ehrich bent to tie his shoes. When he straightened again, his father has gone. With one more kiss for his mother, he hurried to meet Sam.

As he ran across Milwaukee, he imagined his pumping legs looked like a blur of red. He imagined newspaper headlines: Ehrich Weiss Beats Record for Fastest Nine-Year Old in the Country! He forgot, then, about his father and the slope of his shoulders as he stood in the dim hallway. Ehrich Weiss Astounds President Chester A. Arthur with Outstanding Athletic Ability in All Sports!

When he reached the park, there was a small crowd standing around, mostly family and friends of Sam, who had organized the five-cent juvenile circus of which Ehrich was a part. It was his debut in show business, and he was the star of the show. From a nearby tree, he prepared to swing from a trapeze while Sam paraded below him holding a hand-painted sign reading, “Ehrich, Prince of the Air!” It was a perfect summer day, and the air was soft as he glided through it, his red legs flashing at the audience below. He flew, he spun, and the audience applauded and cheered when he landed lightly

onto the ground. He took a deep bow.

...

In his book *On Deception*, Houdini describes the typical magician as “generally at heart a lonely type who resorts to tricks at a young age to compensate for a lack of social confidence.” When Aaron read that for the first time, he had had to admit, he pretty much fit the bill. It was true, he had initially started doing magic tricks as a way of getting his parents’ attention. After a while, though, he stopped caring about that.

Aaron’s parents, Nick and Rebecca Ellis, were rarely home; they entrusted his care to their housekeeper, Rosa, whose name Nick often forgot, despite the years Rosa spent in the house. Eventually, Rosa stopped correcting him when he called her Rhonda, or Ruth or, most embarrassingly, Daisy. “I knew it was a flower,” Nick would say when Aaron corrected him. Rebecca always remembered Daisy's name, but she did it in the same way that she remembered her mother-in-law's birthday, or a neighbour's favourite flower, or that Nick's partner's wife was allergic to shell-fish. It was with a sense of professional duty and pride. Her memory was one of her tools, used alongside her tact and her restraint, to keep her world running smoothly.

Nick and Rebecca went out in the evenings, and Aaron used to stand behind his mother as she put on her earrings in the hallway mirror. She never caught his gaze in the mirror, but as they were leaving, she would press her cheek against his, a gesture he was sure she only did because he would place himself in the way and wait. His father would sometimes ruffle his hair, but mostly when they had visitors. Aaron hated when they had dinner guests. Inevitably, he would make some kind of blunder, like knock over his water glass or give a one-word reply to a question. His mother’s pale face would ripple with

disappointment, and his father would look at Aaron in the same way he looked out the window when he had planned a golf game and woke up to find it pouring rain.

Aaron discovered Houdini in the Westmount library when he was twelve, and for a few blissful months his magic tricks amused his parents and their friends.

“Bravo!” they could call when he pulled a rose petal from behind his mother’s ear. They would clap and laugh, and he would beam back at them and bow. At night he imagined himself accepting some kind of magician’s award on stage. Award for Being The Best Magician In The World, it would be called, or something like that. Lights flashing, the crowd cheering, his parents gazing up at him, his mother dabbing at her eyes, his father clapping louder and longer than anyone else in the room.

The magic tricks lasted for about a year. Then, as Aaron read more about Houdini, he fell further under his spell. He could not stop thinking about him. He was never satisfied by how much he knew about Houdini. It was a hunger he had never felt before, and he let it guide him through his days. He had found a path through his life that he had not known was there. It just opened up, like magic, and all he had to do was follow it. It was Houdini’s trajectory he was following, which meant he had to move on from magic tricks to escapes, just as Houdini had. He stopped imagining awards galas and his mother’s teary pride; started thinking instead about locks, keys, chains and ropes. His parents were not as supportive about his escapes. One day he locked himself to the bannister and found he could not escape. When his parents came home and found him there, Rebecca placed a hand on the bannister and leaned heavily on it, something Aaron had never seen her do. No one spoke for a few minutes. Then, she turned to Nick and in a voice that Aaron had to admit was impressive in its evenness said, “Please call a

locksmith. One from outside the neighbourhood. St. Henri would be best.” Then they left him there. Eventually, he heard the doorbell. His father answered the door.

“What’s the problem, sir?”

“The problem,” his father said, “has locked himself to the bannister.”

The fights started then, the urging to make friends, do well in school, go to university. “I forbid you to sit around all day chained up like a criminal,” his mother would say, but Aaron had stopped listening by then. He found he no longer needed their support or attention; he got all the affirmation he needed from the numbers on his clock telling him that he had reduced his time by a third on that last pair of handcuffs, or from the books he read and re-read about Houdini. When he moved out at seventeen, he got the courage to do so by imagining Houdini, twelve years old, hopping a train to join the circus. In a postcard, Houdini assured his mother he would be home “in about a year.” He signed it, “Your truant son, Ehrich Weisz.” Instead of running away to the circus, though, Aaron hopped on a metro and took it east across the city to Cinema L’Amour. It wasn’t difficult to convince Tom to hire him. Tom, he found, was already acquainted with Houdini.

“I would like to work here,” Aaron had said.

“Oh? Why?” Tom frowned at him. “Because you like pornos?”

Aaron shook his head. “Because I like Houdini.”

Tom grinned. “Well!” he said and clapped his hands. “Can you mop floors?”

Aaron had never mopped a floor in his life, but he nodded vigorously.

...

Huber’s Palace Museum on East Fourteenth Street in New York was an L-shaped

complex, five stories high, spanning five city lots. Outside the front door hung a yellow and red sign with bright blue lettering: “Admission 10 cents. One Million Natural, Historical, Oriental, National Antique Curiosities. One Million. Admission 10 cents.” In *The New York Herald*, an ad for Huber’s dime museum promised “the resort of ladies and children for wholesome entertainment” (a lie, since dime museums were only one step above beer gardens) and “a million rare curiosities” alongside “continuous stage performances by a carefully selected company from 1 P.M. to 10 P.M.” Inside, five thousand square feet of glass cases displayed oddities. You could see Jo-Jo, the Dog-Faced Boy, or Baby Bunting, the Smallest Living Horse.

In the theatre part of the museum, Ehrich Weisz, who had by then changed his name to Harry Houdini—Houdini in homage to the great French magician Eugene Robert-Houdin, and Harry as an American version of his nickname, Ehrie—was stepping onto the platform.

“Your attention towards this end of the hall!” the barker cried. “Here you will find a clever young man; he will mystify you if he can...Houdini! Look at him!”

For the few people who obeyed the booming voice and turned their heads towards him, Houdini made a flower bloom from his buttonhole. There was a faint pattering of applause. Some of his viewers wandered away from him to peer in at the flea circus. Houdini pulled a handkerchief from a candle flame. He made playing cards fly from his fingertips. At the end of his performance, he held up a twenty-five cent pitchbook entitled *Mysterious HARRY HOUDINI: TRICKS Requiring no practice or special apparatus.*

“In here you will discover such secrets as how to pull a tape through your neck!” Houdini cried. “Also, how to hurl battleaxes *at* but not *into* an assistant standing before a

board, setting the handles on fire for a finale! Learn the secrets of the trade for only twenty five cents!”

Some people would have bought the book, only just at that moment, the barker announced a sprinting contest for fat ladies and the crowd was drawn away. Houdini wandered away from the theatre and watched the beautiful Thardo killing rabbits with rattlesnakes, then allowing those same rattlesnakes to bite her. She smiled and did not die. The crowd cheered. He watched Little Egypt belly dance, then a bohemian glass blower make spheres of coloured glass bloom from his lips. He wandered by “Dante’s Inferno,” a series of waxwork figures of sinners, suffering in the gas lights. There was Jay Gould, the robber baron, and Henry Ward Beecher, the clergyman-turned-adulterer who was accused of practicing free love. Beecher was holding in one hand the jewels that he carried with him and stroked when he was upset or tired. The jewels were doing nothing, however, to soothe him in Dante’s Inferno; his face was contorted in a terrible expression of pain. Houdini wandered past the performing monkeys and into the Chamber of Horrors, nodding at Admiral Dot, then at Major Atom, before passing the pinheads, Siamese twins, and other human oddities lining the hall. It was so easy for them, he thought. They were unique just by standing there. They never had trouble keeping crowds around them. He, on the other hand, would have to work harder to stand out. He had tried to be a freak once. He had dressed up as Projea, the Wild Man of Mexico, but some fool in the crowd had thrown a piece of raw meat at him. His left eye had stayed swollen shut for three weeks.

He was wonderful at magic—he practiced card tricks as conscientiously as Paderewski practiced the piano—but there were so many magicians. They made it hard

for him to shine.

...

After winning the challenge, Aaron sprang up the stairs to his apartment. He paused for a second outside his door then raced up to Claire's apartment. Outside her door, he paused again, then ran back to his apartment and emerged a minute later with a red rag rug. Then he clumped back up the stairs. Before he could change his mind, he knocked on her door.

Inside, the sharp, immediate sound of knocking jolted Claire to a sitting position on the floor. She had fallen asleep, and opened her eyes to find it had gotten dark. When she opened the door Aaron thrust the rag rug into her arms.

"It's too empty in here," he blurted by way of greeting.

"Thanks." She held the rug by her side and could feel bits of dirt in the fabric. He hadn't cleaned it before giving it to her.

"You haven't left your apartment today," he said.

"How do you—"

"I live downstairs."

"Maybe I left when you went out."

"I was in most of the day, too. I just went out, though. I—" he stopped himself from telling her about the handcuff challenge, about how he had won. Tom had told him not to tell Claire anything yet.

"Well." Claire looked out the window. She was disturbed that he had noticed that she had not left the apartment, but also embarrassed. She didn't want anyone to think she was some kind of shut-in, someone like her mother whose world had shrunk and shrunk

until it was contained within the walls of their tiny, grimy house. For a fleeting moment she hated herself, despised the pale girl with the stringy brown hair who would move three hundred and twenty five kilometres away from home only to lie on a wooden floor and sleep. She tried to imagine what Aaron would see: a wide-eyed creature, trapped in this tiny space; the only thing in this city standing still, staying quiet. She promised herself she would leave the apartment tomorrow, maybe even tonight, even if it was only to walk around one block. She would start with one block and slowly increase until she had walked around the entire city, made it her own.

Aaron was looking at her intently. “Whoa. You look strange. I didn't mean to scare you. I just noticed because the stairs creak a bit.” He paused. “I've got excellent hearing.”

“Sure. I'm sure you do.”

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds. The only sound was the creaking of old floorboards as Aaron shifted from one foot to the other. He wanted to show her the cinema. More than anything right now, he wanted her to see it. Tom had said not to say anything about the show, but he hadn't said not to show her the cinema. His recent victory made him bold, and before he could think better of it, he asked, “Why don't you let me show you something?”

“Show me what?”

“You should see the inside of the cinema you live above.”

“I live above a cinema?”

“Well, above and beside. You would have passed it yesterday.”

Claire looked at him blankly.

“You don't remember?” It was strange to him that someone could fail to notice

the cinema. It was the center of his world.

Claire shook her head. "I don't think so."

Aaron shrugged. "Well, do you want to see it now? I work there. I've got the keys. Well, it's still open, actually, but if it wasn't I could get us in anyway."

Claire was suddenly embarrassed for him for the things he chose to boast about: that he has keys to the building he cleans, or that he has excellent hearing because he can hear his neighbour in a building as old as this. Who is proud of those things? She looked away.

"Come on," Aaron urged. "It's one of the best buildings in Montreal. One of the oldest, too, and it looks exactly like it did when they built it in 1914." The way he said 1914 made her think, again, of how wrong she had been about cities being happily new. But, she had to leave the apartment; she had just promised herself that.

Outside, Claire paused to look again at the exterior of her new apartment building. She looked closer at the elaborate graffiti spreading out from the red door and across the white brick wall. Claire's idea of graffiti was based on the scrawls teenagers painted under the Dudley Creek bridge at home (Tim wuz here; I love Danny; Fuck this town), but here, there were blue and red swirls, tiny silhouettes of a flock of birds, and a woman's face, enormous and sad with close-set eyes. There were thin metal rods built into the brick and jutting out slightly to make a kind of ladder.

"That's your fire escape," Aaron said when he saw Claire looking up. "See, that's your kitchen window up there on the third floor."

Claire imagined a fire and herself inching down this iron ladder. She would climb out of the smoke and flames and down through the flock of birds and stare straight into

the eyes of the morose woman.

“Tom gets me to grease up the rungs, though. I put oil on them every week. He thinks it'll stop the kids from climbing up there to get on the roof. It's nasty black oil, messes up their hands. They still go up there though.”

Claire raised her eyebrows and Aaron shrugged. “Just keep your kitchen window closed at night. And hope there's not a fire.”

When they turned the corner, Claire stopped short outside Cinema L'Amour. “Oh,” she said when she saw what kind of cinema it was. “Oh. No.” But Aaron pretended not to hear her protest, and, still energized by his victory over Lane, swept her into the dim light of the lobby.

The bars on the door were bad enough, but the darkness of the lobby made her palms begin to sweat. She knew it was stupid, but she half-suspected she would never get out of this place. She concentrated on adjusting her eyes to the surroundings. The first thing she saw was a large counter, behind which sat a middle-aged woman, still beautiful in her pale blue sweater and white silk scarf. Beside the woman was a large popcorn machine, half-full of bright yellow popcorn that Claire guessed was probably months old because the room didn't smell at all like popcorn. It smelled like rosewater and mildew and plastic. Around the woman hung posters advertising porn films, and on the wall opposite the woman, a wall was lined with DVDs. Claire didn't look closely, but one glance was enough to tell her that they were pornos as well. Claire's first thought about the woman was that she did not belong here. But then she wondered where this woman did belong, and she did not know.

“Hello Claire,” the woman said in a voice that managed to be both deep and soft.

“Hi,” Claire squeaked back. She didn’t ask how the woman knew her name.

“Claire, this is Sylvie.”

Claire managed a smile before she turned to her fingernails that suddenly seemed too long, and began picking at them.

Sylvie stepped from behind the counter and walked over to them. She took Claire gently by the chin and lifted her face so that Claire was forced to look into her eyes.

Sylvie studied her with a small, gentle smile on her lips.

“Hmm,” she said.

It was not a totally unpleasant feeling having this elegant woman touch her with her cool, smooth hands that smelled like rose water, but Claire was relieved when Aaron laughed nervously.

“Sylvie?”

“Hmm?” Sylvie mumbled, then returned to her stool behind the counter. She opened her till with the ping of an old bell. Her voice followed the tone of the bell and was brighter when she said, “I’m just closing up. Would you two like to go inside?”

“Oh, no. No, thank you,” Claire said quickly. “No, I have to get going.”

“We do, actually,” Aaron said, and Sylvie nodded at him as though Claire had not spoken at all.

“Well, just lock up if I’m gone when you come out.”

“Sure thing.”

She turned to Claire. “Nice to meet you, Claire.”

Claire managed a slight nod. Aaron took her hand and gently pulled her towards two large, red padded doors at the end of the lobby.

“And Claire?” Sylvie called. Claire turned to face her. “Welcome,” Sylvie said. She paused for a second then, as though her welcome needed clarification, added, “to the building.”

Inside, the cinema wore a mask of disinfectant, but underneath that stinging smell lurked others: unwashed clothing, sweat, cologne, mildew, even urine. As soon as Claire stepped inside, she felt a shift. Later, she could not think of how to describe it except to say it felt like falling on ice: one minute you are walking, carefully, in a straight line, but then, suddenly, you are on the ground, looking up at the sky. It happens so quickly that the time in between—the time when you are falling—is somehow gone. Place shifts too, is turned upside down, and instead of looking forward, you are looking up. That was how Claire felt, standing in the cinema for the first time. Except that it wasn’t winter and she was standing still.

First, Claire located the two exit signs. Then, she stood at the top of the room and let it settle over her: the concoction of smells that lingered despite Aaron's scrubbing and spraying, the low red light oozing from the elegant wall sconces and puddling onto the floor, the rows and rows of plush red seats, the horseshoe balcony, the elaborate mouldings curling and twisting on the high ceiling, the soaring arches above the screen. There is too much red, she thought finally. The seats, the carpet, the lights. At home there was the maple tree beside her window that turned red in the fall, but its leaves were set against the grey sky above, the dull, dying fields spanning out in front, the black crows screeching from its branches. Here red piled onto red until the richness of it made Claire feel full and slightly queasy. She made a conscious effort to slow down her breathing. To push back the feeling that the walls, the stale air saturated with too many smells, were

pushing in on her. That she was falling.

The room felt crowded despite the empty seats all around her. If she believed in ghosts, she would think this place was haunted. Claire moved to sit down in the back row. She wanted to close her eyes and count her breaths, but Aaron stopped her.

“Wait,” he said, and led her down towards the front of the cinema. Then he unfolded a magazine. He placed it on one of the red velvet seats.

“There. You can sit down now.”

Claire paused then lowered herself onto an issue of *Sex Abuse!* Aaron had grabbed on their way through the lobby. The paper made a slight crinkling sound under her weight.

“Do they actually—?”

“I clean this place well. But you never know.” He smiled down at her, his head framed by red light and his eyes dark, like the raccoons that rooted under her porch at home.

“Give me ten seconds.” Aaron turned and hurried toward the back of the cinema. He seemed even more energetic now that they were inside; he disappeared into the darkness faster than Claire would have imagined possible.

While she waited, Claire looked ahead of her at the large, white screen, lit up with small pale lights along its bottom edge. There was a stage, with lights running along its edge too, but those were not lit. She thought about how, in a few hours there would be women on that screen, undressing and moaning and bending and clutching and all those other things, but for now it was clean, white, empty. Aaron had promised her he would not show her any of those kinds of movies; he had another movie he wanted her to see.

Claire's gaze drifted to the high ceiling. In the center there was a gaping hole with wires hanging out of it, like tentacles venturing out of an underwater cave. The other light fixtures looked like breasts and Claire imagined an enormous woman, lying down above her, placing her perfect red breasts into those perfect round holes in the ceiling. Or maybe they just look like lights, she thought, and not at all like breasts. In any case, they were inadequate lights and only illuminated the edges of things, not the details. The red carpet may have been dirty, may have been stained, but the light didn't let you notice that. Claire looked at her own hands and could not see the three freckles on her wrist that she used to connect with pen to make a triangle and only sometimes a heart. Things are not real here, she thought. Or, they are not like they are outside. Maybe that is why they come, creeping in out of the bright, white light of day to sit in front of the screen in these soft red seats and slip their hands down their unbuckled pants. Claire shuddered and was grateful when Aaron ran back down the aisle towards her as the screen started to flicker black and white. Claire expected him to sit down next to her, but he rushed past her to the front of the cinema and drew a piece of black fabric away from a keyboard. Aaron pulled a stool out from underneath the keyboard and pressed a button to turn it on. When his hands were placed on the keys he turned to her.

“I've been working on this all summer. I haven't shown anyone yet.”

He began playing a fast-paced Ragtime song and, when Claire looked away from him, she saw “Harry Houdini!” written in white cursive script across a black screen. Aaron played only slightly better than her third grade teacher, Mrs. Melbourne, who had eagerly appointed herself accompanist to any sing-along despite the fact that she could barely play. Aaron's fingers were long and thin, but he lumped notes together that should

be played alone. But the song was simple and soon he eased into it and he bent forward over his keyboard while clips of Houdini flashed across the screen. Claire remembered a book she read as a child. It was about a parrot called Harry Houdini that could talk, play chess, and was constantly escaping from its cage. Oh Harry! eleven-year old Jason would cry, You've done it again!

“The Club Cabin” Aaron called over the music. “Samuel Emmanuel Duguay. 1903. Composed here, in Montreal!” Talking and playing was too much for him; he fumbled a note. Houdini writhed on the floor of a cell in a straitjacket.

“Watch Houdini, not me!” Aaron said when he turned again and saw Claire studying him. He was sitting in the shadows, dark hair flopping into his eyes, long legs kicking and jerking under the keyboard. Aaron's shoulders lifted then fell, lifted then fell, as his fingers raced up and down the keys, mostly hitting the right ones. On screen Houdini sat entirely still as three men wound two large coils of thick rope around his body. But then he too was thrashing around in the chair, kicking off his shoes, falling onto the floor, loosening one rope then another. The film clip was sped up and Houdini wriggled at top-speed. What a frantic little man, Claire thought. But then he got free and Claire tilted her head and leaned forward as he walked out of the frame, walked as though he had not just been tied by endless rope.

“The Club Cabin” was a short song and Aaron played it over and over while the footage of Houdini's escapes flickered across the screen, black and white and lifetimes ago, and yet, strangely immediate. Some clips appeared twice. He jumped, handcuffed, off a bridge. Then he was hanging upside down in a straitjacket from a tall building, bat-like. He squirmed around and was blown, slightly, by the wind. It went on and on—the

escapes, the plink plink of the piano—and Claire felt as though she was on a merry-go-round that would never stop. Aaron and Harry spinning her around and around until everything else was blurry—the theatre, the city, her past. Spinning her so quickly that even the puffy face of her mother began to fade. And her mother’s eyes, gone too. Anne’s eyes had been sad for as long as Claire could remember, but then, about a year ago, they had lost even that sadness. That was when Claire had started structuring her days to avoid her mother’s blank stare. That was when she had started to think about leaving.

The music stopped and the video clips stopped and the screen went completely white. After a few seconds Claire began to clap.

“Wait.” Aaron began playing again, this time a slower, even simpler song. And on the screen, Houdini was no longer writhing around in blurry clips of ancient footage; he was staring out at her from photographs. Aaron didn’t tell her the name of the song this time, and he stopped moving around so much. He sat staring down at the keys as he played and as Houdini scowled out at her over the starched white collar of his dress-shirt and the cheerful tips of his white bow-tie. His lips were pursed and made-up like a woman’s and his eyebrows were contorted into sideways S-shapes. Aaron was playing clumsily, tripping over notes but seeming not to notice. The song was halting, slow and, Claire was surprised to find, almost beautiful in its blundering sincerity. An older Houdini leaned against a table, hands in his pockets, gold watch chain lying across his stomach, eyes looking past her. The song was a waltz; it went up and down, up and down, one two three, one two three. The last photo was of a mostly-naked Houdini, bent over but with eyes raised to the camera, wearing only polka-dotted underwear, thirteen locks and their interconnecting chains. Aaron played the last note. Claire’s hesitant clapping echoed a

little in the otherwise silent cinema. Aaron stood up and managed an awkward bow.

“He performed here, you know. Right before he died.”

“Oh.”

“He died because of his trip to Montreal. He got punched in the stomach when he wasn’t prepared. Three times. Ruptured an appendix. People say it happened right here.”

“Do you believe that?”

Aaron looked puzzled. “Of course I do.” He paused then leaned towards her and lowered his voice when he said, “Do you know I’ve probably walked around this theatre thousands of times.”

“Well, you do work here.”

“Right, and so if you think about it I’ve probably stepped in the exact same spot as he did. Because he stepped somewhere and I’ve stepped everywhere.”

“Right.” Claire didn’t mean to draw out that word, but she did.

Aaron forced a laugh. “Anyway.” He threw the black fabric cover over his keyboard. He yanked on a corner of it, straightened it too many times, hiding any trace of the instrument underneath.

When she got up to leave, Claire was surprised to find that she was a little unsteady on her feet. She told herself that was because the floors were slanted, there were too many seats, and the lights were dim. But maybe it was something else. She found herself thinking of her footsteps on top of Houdini’s as she walked slowly to the door and, when she pushed it open, of the way he flung his arms wide whenever he escaped. She wasn’t sure she had ever flung her arms wide in her entire life.

At first, Claire did not see Patrick standing in the lobby of the theatre. He was

leaning against Sylvie's counter, but Claire was looking past that to the door, thinking about Houdini. Sylvie had gone home. The lobby was dark except for the streetlights coming in through the window and pooling on the floor, criss-crossed by the shadows of the window bars.

Claire jumped when Patrick cleared his throat.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to scare you."

"Hi Patrick," Aaron said from behind Claire. He did not introduce her. Patrick nodded briefly at Aaron, then smiled at Claire, exposing teeth that Claire could tell, even in the dim lobby, were perfect. No one with bad teeth would smile that widely. He walked right up to her and kissed both her cheeks. For the second time that day, and for the second time in her life, a stranger touched Claire's face. She stiffened. Up close, she could see that his skin was smooth and tanned, and he had faint smile wrinkles around his light green eyes. His blonde hair fell in curls over his forehead. And when he moved—like when he came towards her and bent to kiss her cheeks—he did so effortlessly, as though he were operating under different laws of gravity than the rest of the world.

"Nice to meet you, Claire."

"Hi," Claire mumbled. It crossed her mind briefly that he knew her name, but she didn't ask how or why.

"Patrick's Tom's cousin," Aaron said.

"Really?" Claire found it hard to believe that the two men were related in any way. They didn't look alike. Not even a little. Patrick was tall, lean, and golden, while Tom was short and round, and looked even rounder in his extravagant, brightly coloured

outfits. Also, Tom was middle-aged, but Patrick looked like he was only in his mid-twenties.

“Really,” Patrick said, and laughed.

“Do you work here too?” Claire asked.

“No, I’m a student. Medicine, at McGill. But I’m helping Tom with a little project,” Patrick said that brightly, in a way that made Claire want to help too, or at least know what the project was, but Patrick also made her shy, so she just said, “Oh.”

“We’re all doing it,” Aaron burst out. “It’s this thing we’re all doing together.”

Claire and Patrick just looked at him. Finally Patrick smiled. “Right,” he said. He turned to Claire. “Well, it was really nice to meet you, Claire.”

She nodded.

“I hope I’ll see you around.”

She nodded again.

“So,” Aaron said when Patrick disappeared onto the street, “you’ve met Patrick.” He told himself to relax, but the flush in Claire’s cheeks agitated him. He told himself to just leave it alone, but he wanted to make her look at him and talk to him and smile at him and forget Patrick. She fidgeted with her hair and could barely look at him. Her eyes slid to the front door through which Patrick had disappeared. Why was everyone so easily charmed by Patrick's good looks? Men straightened up in his presence, women visibly softened. Was it just beauty? Was that all it took?

“Come on,” he said with more roughness than he intended. “I’ve got to lock up.”

...

Two years after The Pussycat Theatre chain began, a man named Vince Miranda, owner of Walnut Productions, bought a fifty per cent share in the cinemas. Miranda shared Walnut Productions with George Tate, a hulking man with a silver tongue and finely tailored suits, who Miranda loved and who loved Miranda in return. The story goes they met because they got into a car accident and, since neither Miranda, who owned a theatre, or Tate, who owned a restaurant, had enough money to pay for the damages, they simply went into business together. Perhaps they fell in love first. Maybe it was after.

It was Miranda who made the Pussycat Theatres look the way they did. He spent millions redecorating them, or maybe he simply waved his magic wand and the theatres were transformed into the stuff of Hollywood dreams: red carpets, gold and crystal chandeliers, beveled glass, exquisite oil paintings of nudes gazing out from lavish frames, and mirrors to reflect the guests, assuring them, you have every right to be here; do not feel ashamed. "I don't want this to be a raincoat rat hole," Miranda had said. And sure enough, no one would think of hunching into their raincoats when they entered the cinema. They walked in with fashion sense and without shame, men and women alike. Miranda even led them in once, proudly, on an elephant. People bought merchandise with the eventually iconic Pussycat logo: a leaping Miss Pussycat, complete with black underwear, boots, mask and ears. Passersby bought popcorn from the concession stand that opened onto the street. Only the lucky got to attend Miranda's lavish parties, complete with ice sculptures, buffets with hundreds of dishes spanning impossibly long tables, margarita fountains, and live music to dance to. And beautiful women. Though his heart belonged to a man, Miranda was always surrounded by beautiful women.

...

The cinema was closed on Mondays. On Tuesdays, Sylvie arranged the videos in alphabetical order. Tom had never asked Sylvie to do that, but she did anyway, every Tuesday. It seemed like the right way to begin a new week, although there was not usually much organizing to be done. Some people bought DVDs, but the videos were not the main draw for the cinema. Most of the clients barely glanced at them. Cinema L'Amour's clients were the kind of people who, for whatever reason, preferred to see pornography on a big screen. If they wanted to watch videos at home, they wouldn't pay to come here. Sylvie didn't know much about pornography, even after working at Cinema L'Amour for the summer, but she did find it strange that people still paid ten fifty to come here when they could download it for free at home. She had never gone into the theatre while a movie was playing, but she didn't imagine the men (because it was mostly men who came) came for the company of other men. Tom never showed gay pornography. She didn't really care, though, why they came. She didn't think of them as all that crucial to the cinema. And even though the building had been showing pornography since 1969, she didn't really think of it as a pornography cinema. The pornography was just an awkward phase in the cinema's development. Claire, though, had noticed the pornography. Sylvie could tell that she had by the widening of her eyes when she had first entered the lobby. It was hard to tell if Claire was the type who would be able to move past the exterior layer of the cinema. Time would tell.

Sylvie picked up *Bra Busters* and placed it beside *Bubble Butt Belles*. Who thought of these names, she wondered absentmindedly. Her mother had loved words. Sylvie's father had wooed her with Sijos, Korean love poetry written by Kisaeng, the Korean equivalent of Geisha. After they were married, he continued to woo her. He used

to write out those same poems and hide them around the house for her to find. Sometimes Sylvie would come across them by accident. She would quickly put them back, and for the rest of the day feel as though she had stepped somewhere she was not meant to step; that she had tracked mud across a beautiful room. When Sylvie's father died, her mother continued hiding the poems for herself. By the time she died, the poems had been hidden in every conceivable place in the house: in drawers, cupboards, pockets, shoes, pots, bags of rice, boxes of tea. The same poems, over and over, and Sylvie wondered, what was the point of hiding them for yourself? Where was the surprise? The paper was practically see-through when Sylvie's mother died, and Sylvie had been afraid to touch them. Afraid that the poems would just vanish in her hands because they were not meant for her. For the rest of Sylvie's life, scattered lines from those poems reached her unbidden, but they were not unwelcome. The poems were mostly about longing. It was as though her father had always been longing for her mother, even as they shared a house, a life. There were many ways in which Sylvie differed from her parents, though when it came to falling in love, they were the same: they fell once, and then never again. Her mother had told her, true love is loving only once. When Sylvie's mother was dying, she made Sylvie read her one poem. The same one, again and again:

My body, in its withering, may become a lovely swallow.

Under the eaves of my loved one's home I'll build my nest of twigs.

After dusk I'll fly aloft and glide gently to his side.

Over and over Sylvie had read it, until she imagined it must be inscribed somewhere inside her. And yet, here she was now, standing in Cinema L'Amour telling herself that, yes, *Bra* should come before *Bubble*, because "r" comes before "u." It didn't

bother her, though, because the ridiculous titles were not inscribed inside of her. She knew they would never flash in her mind like the Sijos did, silver and flitting like fish in a stream. This was partly because the titles were so absurd, but also because she was no longer open to being inscribed upon, by words or by anything else. Sylvie finished organizing the shelves, and had just sat down behind her counter when Tom, Aaron and Patrick came in.

“Did you see her?” Tom asked Sylvie. It took Sylvie a second to realize they were talking about Claire.

“Yes.”

“And?”

Sylvie looked away from the three men as she considered the question. She thought again about Claire’s wide grey eyes, and whether they would be capable of seeing something other than what was in front of her.

“She’s perfect, don’t you think?” Aaron blurted. He turned to Tom and Patrick. “She’ll be perfect,” he said, as though the force of his conviction could shape their opinions.

“He asked Sylvie,” Patrick said, keeping his eyes on Sylvie. Aaron sighed.

Sylvie asked Patrick, “Well, did *you* see her?”

Patrick nodded. “But you’re the expert.” The expert at making people into other people. Of using cloth and paint to disguise someone so well that even they might begin to forget that it was a disguise.

“Yes,” Sylvie said finally. “I think I can do something with her.” She didn’t add, because I can do anything with costumes, but she knew it was true.

“Yes!” Aaron cried. Tom giggled and clapped his hands. Patrick smiled. They had found their Bess.

...

Houdini met Bess in Coney Island in 1894. He was performing on the midway with his brother Theo, who later adopted the name of Hardeen. In between tasting Aunt Jemima pancakes or riding George Ferris’s 264-foot bicycle-wheel-in-the-sky, people could see The Brothers Houdini, “The Modern Monarchs of Mystery!” They did the same card and magic tricks Houdini had performed in dime museums, only this time they had added a spectacular finale: Metamorphosis. Houdini would be locked in a large steamer trunk then, in three seconds, change places with Theo, who had been standing outside the trunk but was now discovered inside the locked trunk. They drew large crowds with that trick.

The Brothers Houdini shared a stage—or, more of a platform, really, that gave a little when Houdini walked across it, giving his stride an embarrassing bounce that he never quite forgot—with dancing monkeys, reclining fat ladies, and freaks like Sally and Sara the Siamese twins, or Eleanor, the Armless Wonder. With Eleanor, Houdini had become close. He admired her ability to do things with her toes, like light a cigarette and play the violin. He also admired her long legs and her long blond hair that, one night, she had asked him to tie back for her with a green silk ribbon. The day before he met Bess, he had visited her in the caravan she shared with Sally and Sara and drank water while she sipped gin from a straw. He was there to give her an account of the progress he had made with his toes.

“I’ve learned how to pinch fairly well,” he told her.

“Have you. Let's see.” She lifted her leg up and placed it on the table.

He took off his shoes and socks. He raised his leg. His feet looked stubby and hairy next to her long, thin ones. He moved his toes to her thigh, just above her knee. Before he squeezed, he let his toes linger on her skin. He could feel the scratchiness of her fishnet stockings, but her skin, in between the holes, was smooth. He pinched her.

“Ouch.” She moved her leg away instinctively, then grinned at him. “Not bad.”

He had left a red mark. For a fleeting second he realized he might like to lean down and kiss it, but she had already gotten up and was looking out the window.

“It's cloudy,” she said. “Maybe it will rain.”

Eleanor was wrong; it did not rain. The clouds that had settled over Coney Island like a grey version of the cotton candy it sold were blown aside to reveal the sun. When Houdini first saw Bess, she was standing on a stage in mid-afternoon sunlight, singing *Sweet Rosabel* with The Floral Sisters.

“*Rosie, sweet Rosabel,*” the four women sang. All together, without harmonizing, with voices soft and high, like children's.

“*I love her more than I can tell.*” Houdini moved closer to the stage. These women stood out in a place like Coney Island. They swayed back and forth, joining arms as they sang, and looked out at the crowd. They seemed to look at everyone and no one at the same time. Smiling. The song dipped gently.

“*O'er me, she casts a spell. My little black-eyed, sweet Rosabel.*”

Houdini tried to figure out what it was about these women that made them so irresistible. They were attractive, but it was not only that. They sang fine, but there was

nothing exceptional about their voices. But perhaps that was it: in that sea of freaks and wonders, they were normal women, and for that reason, they were extraordinary.

Even during the day, Coney Island felt like night: mysterious, closed-in, filled with tricks and dark creatures—Eleanor was not the only one; there were more: Fred, who had no arms or legs, just a torso and a head, but who could still light a cigarette as quick as anyone; Clarence, who swallowed swords and fire; Leonora, who stuck her head in the lion's mouth; freakishly strong Al; and Boneless Bella, who could twist her body into positions both beautiful and horrible. And, of course, there was Houdini himself, whose fingers moved like lightning to pull cards from behind people's ears, rabbits out of hats, goldfish out of thin air.

Yet there they were, in the midst of all of it: these four women, singing sweetly, gently swaying. They were the type of women who would emerge from modest white houses on a sweltering day. They would look fresh and cool and would step lightly onto the porch that would not creak under their weight. They would wave small white hands at you, beckoning you up to them, while holding a tray in the other hand: tall glasses of amber iced tea, beaded with moisture, ice tinkling gently. Oh, it would taste good, that tea; wonderful. Come in out of the heat. The coolness of the glass. Houdini smiled.

Later that day, Houdini was walking through the midway, feeling invigorated by the ten mile run he had just completed, when he heard Theo calling his name.

“Harry!” Theo called, laughing. “Harry!” He was pulling someone behind him. Houdini saw a small hand clasped in Theo’s. Then Theo broke through a cluster of spectators calling out, “Sorry, sorry, excuse me!” and Houdini saw the girl behind him. She was laughing, too. They stumbled up to him, breathless, their faces flushed. Pieces of

the girl's dark brown hair had come out of her bob, and they hovered around her small, pale face. She looked up at him with enormous mahogany eyes. He recognized her instantly as one of the Floral Sisters. The smallest one, who sang on the far left side of the stage. She looked just like an elf, Houdini thought. The prettiest little elf.

“Harry,” said Theo, still panting, grinning. “Harry, meet Bess.”

And then Theo stopped smiling. He could not say why; maybe he felt a slight shift in the air. A breeze on a breeze-less day. Maybe he could somehow see on the faces of the two people standing in front of him the years flashing by. All the years they would spend together flickering over their features: there they were on stage together, holding hands and bowing, grinning at a cheering crowd; on the road together with Bess' head leaning on Houdini's shoulder, bouncing up and down a little to the click click of rail ties; Bess binding Harry's bloody wrists with white gauze, the red seeping through, and her soft tsk tsking the only sound in the room; years of boisterous love notes, addressed to “Winsome Wilhelmina,” “Beatrice Beautiful Houdini,” or “My precious lump of sweetness,” and signed with “a trillion, billion kadillion million, kisses” or “Sincerely the rube who is stuck on you”; a sigh in the night, and the rustle of soft sheets; Bess handing Houdini a plate of fruit for his breakfast—“Young man, your breakfast is ready”— while her cages full of bright canaries, all called Houdini, chirping behind her; a 25th anniversary party with illuminated fountains flowing with rose water, and on the tables that seated the two hundred guests: orange blossoms, sweet peas, roses, and orchids; Houdini boasting about his petite, but fierce, Bess: “all my fights when she thought I was right she was alongside, helping me load the machine guns”; but then a backstage punch in Montreal, Canada, and a little white-haired widow calling Harry's name in candlelight,

whispering “Rosabel, believe”; and rain pounding on a hotel roof on Halloween, signalling the end: “My last hope is gone. It is finished. Goodnight, Harry.”

“Are you okay, Theo?” Bess tugged on his sleeve. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.” She laughed and the two men laughed with her because her laugh was so high and bright that they couldn’t help but join her.

Eleanor the Armless Wonder never married. She was not the marrying type. Instead, she had a life-long love affair with Count Orloff, the Human Windowpane (“You can see his heart beat! You can see his blood circulate!”). She liked that his whole anatomy was visible when he sat in the sun: there was his heart, secure in his chest. Over the years, she heard about Houdini. She could not escape that. He was everywhere she looked, where anyone looked. In newspapers, newsreels, on the lips of everyone she knew. In 1906, a typical conversation began with, “How many times have you seen him?” There he was, wriggling to dizzying heights with his tiny wife by his side. Escaping again and again. And although she traveled with the show, she never felt like she went anywhere. She heard about him using his toes in his escapes; about how he had been tethered then lashed in front of a loaded cannon, but escaped in twelve minutes by kicking off his shoes and using his toes to untie the ropes. When she heard those stories, she tried not to think of those toes on her skin, of the mark they left behind. She never knew that in his diary he pasted articles about an armless artist who could paint with his teeth. When she woke up thinking of him, she turned to her sleeping Orloff, and in the morning light, watched his heart beating in its glass chest. Pa-dum, pa-dum, it went. “How many times have you seen him?” people asked, but she watched Orloff’s heart instead.

After a three-week courtship, Harry and Bess were married on June 22. They honeymooned in Coney Island, a holiday Bess described as “cheap but glorious.” Of their life together, Bess said Harry Houdini showed her “the greatest tenderness imaginable.”

...

After Patrick, Tom and Aaron had left the lobby, Sylvie thought about Claire. She did not look that much like Bess right now, but she was the right size, and Sylvie had a great amount of faith in what the right makeup, clothing, and lighting could do. Bess herself had been aware of that. She had sewn her own clothing, using a gold thimble which she kept in a pure silver case, both items gifts from Houdini. She had trunks overflowing with dresses and hats. On her birthday Houdini noted in his diary, “She is 44. Looks and acts like 24.” A fellow master of disguise, Sylvie thought. She respected Bess Houdini. She wondered if Claire would be able to do her justice. If Claire would even *want* to do Bess justice. But, Sylvie thought, people could surprise you. Claire might be perfect. And, besides, Houdini needed a Bess, and Claire was the closest thing they had. And Claire would agree to it, Sylvie was certain she would. She knew this because she knew that everyone had something they wanted to forget. Once Claire learned that this cinema was a place where you could forget, then she would stay. Sylvie knew from experience that this place was better than most for forgetting because Houdini was here, waiting in the wings, and he could make anything disappear. He had made an elephant vanish once. What better proof than that?

It was one of Sylvie’s favourite tricks of his. It was at the Hippodrome on New Year's Day, 1918. Houdini called the elephant Jenny. She was said to be the daughter of P.T. Barnum's Jumbo, the 7-ton elephant, one of the largest in captivity, who was killed

by a runaway circus freight train. Jenny was not as large, but according to Houdini she was, and, depending on the day you asked him, she was even larger. He had had a costume made for her, Sylvie appreciated that: a baby blue ribbon around her neck and an enormous wrist watch on her left hind leg. “She is all dressed up like a bride,” Houdini told the audience, who howled when Jenny gave him a kiss in exchange for a sugar cube. “Now we know the cause of the sugar shortage!” Houdini quipped, and the wartime audience laughed again. It took twelve men to wheel out the cabinet into which Jenny would be led and then, two seconds later, out of which, to the delight of the audience, she would fail to reappear. In a letter Houdini wrote after the show, he boasted, “A creature weighing over 4000 pounds vanishes in full glare of the light!”

Sylvie didn't need an elephant to disappear, but she did need her memories to. And over the weeks she had been working at Cinema L'Amour, she could say, cautiously, that they might be starting to. Sylvie was replacing those memories with thoughts of Houdini, and with preparations for the show. Once Claire learned that this was the way to forgetting, she would stay and be Bess. She might not know it yet, but she was going to be drawn in somehow. When Tom and Patrick had approached Sylvie about being the show's costume designer, it was practically the last thing in the world she wanted to do. And yet, here she was. She had also not expected to be drawn to Houdini, but here she was, practically an expert on him, thinking about him more each day.

The first time Sylvie saw Tom and Patrick she was in her shop on Mary Anne, just off Saint-Laurent. She had been sorting through a glass jar of buttons, relishing the way they slipped between her fingers when she plunged her hand into the large jar. When the bell over her door rang, she looked up. Patrick, tall and golden, walked in first as

though he belonged in a sewing store. The summer light was slipping across the floor and he stood in a pool of it and smiled at her. He took a sip from the cardboard coffee cup he was holding loosely in his left hand. She immediately dismissed Patrick as a man who would not need adjustments on his clothing. He was mannequin-build and she imagined everything he found in a store would fit him perfectly. Then came Tom, short and round with large eyes peering all around him. He would be the one who needed a specially made suit, or some adjustments made on a shirt or pair of pants. He must have to hem all of his pants.

“Hello,” she greeted them. “What can I do for you?”

Patrick smiled at her. “Oh. We're just looking.”

Tom nodded vigorously.

“Okay, well, I'm here if you need me,” she said, and thought, what a strange thing to say to a stranger: I'm here if you need me. Of course that wasn't true. You should never promise anyone that, especially not a stranger, if you wanted to avoid being turned into a liar.

She had stayed behind the counter as they wandered around the store. They were quiet, as most people are when they enter a small shop like hers. She didn't mind. She appreciated the stillness of her small room. It was packed with all of her things. She had shelves built up every wall to house her fabrics, buttons, ribbons, and lace. She had a wall of colourful thread that she had arranged so that one colour bled into the next: light yellow to ochre to burnt orange to red and so on. At the bottom of the rack were the shades she liked least: greys and blacks. She had lined up small glass jars of buttons, those also displayed according to colour. The lace she displayed on large rolls. She had

them arranged by size, but she was starting to think it might be better to display them according to colour, like the thread and buttons. When Tom wandered over to those he looked over at her and smiled.

“Hey,” he said, “these look like film reels!”

Once, when she was here alone at night and had been overcome with thoughts of Nat, she had taken a hold of the ends of the lace and pulled. Pulled and pulled until she was standing in a nest of different colours and sizes of lace. Now what? she had thought, and she never did that again.

Every day she had tried different ways of forgetting, even momentarily, about the emptiness that had opened up in front of her and inside her and all around her when Nat left. But it wasn't exactly emptiness because emptiness was nothing, and this feeling was something: it was painful. Sometimes so painful she doubled over and clutched her stomach as though it were some real, physical ailment with a cause she could identify: food poisoning, maybe, or ground-up glass slipped into her food. It had been worse at first. It was a little better now. A calmer phase of loneliness was mercifully taking over. It was the same kind of feeling following a violent stomach ache: the exhaustion, the emptiness, but the relief that the worst of the pain is gone. But there is also the suspicion that it may not be. But it has to be, because there is nothing left inside of you to throw up.

She had to be careful not to let her thoughts find Nat. Every day she fought to forget her red hair, and her pale skin with freckles like sparks from that hair. Sometimes she sorted buttons, thread. Sometimes she sewed herself elaborate clothing that she would never have an occasion to wear. That seemed to work the best because it took her quite a few days to finish something, and it took all of her concentration. Then, measurements

and seams took over her thoughts. She loved those days when she looked at her needle drawing through heavy silk and that was all she had room for in her mind. She sometimes wondered if her mind had grown smaller as a result of her loneliness. After so many months of thinking of just one person, one feeling, maybe she had limited her thoughts to one single track. But she didn't care, because it meant that when she focused on a project that was all she could think about. She didn't care as long as it gave her a break from Nat. Most recently, she made a top covered with green, silver and aquamarine sequins. The base of the shirt was ivory silk. The silk was soft against her skin, but invisible under the sequins. She looked like a fish when she wore it. She shimmered in the light. The only problem with those projects, though, was that she still made measurements with the tattoo on her finger, the one Nat had encouraged her to get. Whenever she looked at it, she could see it on Nat's skin, measuring the distance of her jawline, of her lips, of her hip bone, of her toes.

"Your sign says you also sew?" Patrick had asked, and Sylvie dropped a button. It rolled on its side towards Patrick and he handed it to her. His smile made her pity the women his age. They wouldn't stand a chance.

"Yes. Alterations, sometimes custom items. Do you need something like that?"

"Well, we actually need a lot of things like that," Patrick said.

"Yes," said Tom. "We need costumes!"

"Quality costumes," added Patrick. "That fit perfectly."

"Oh. Costumes." Sylvie saw her hands on Nat's shoulders. She was pinning in the sleeves to the costume Nat, as the lighting designer for the theatre company they both worked for, had not needed, but that Sylvie had insisted on making for her anyway.

Sylvie's mouth was full of pins and Nat was trying to make her laugh so that the pins would fall out of her mouth and she could kiss her safely.

"No, I don't do costumes anymore," she mumbled.

"Anymore?" Patrick asked. He took a step closer to her. "So you know how?"

She hadn't answered. Instead she turned her attention back to her jar of buttons. She had already fished out all of the yellow buttons. She was now searching for orange.

"There's one," Tom said, and pointed to the bottom of the jar.

"Thank you."

The two men watched her plunge her hand deep into the jar.

"Woo hoo," Tom said softly when she retrieved it.

"Oh, shit!" Patrick exclaimed. He had dropped his coffee cup on the floor. "I'm so sorry," he said, and bent down to pick it up. "There really wasn't much left in it, but, ugh, really, I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry," Sylvie said, and wet a rag in the small bathroom at the back of the store to wipe it up. Patrick took the rag from her, apologizing again as he mopped up the coffee.

"Here, let me rinse it out," he insisted, and disappeared into the bathroom.

Eventually, after trying a few more times to convince her to make them costumes, they left, dejected, but still courteous, Patrick apologizing one final time for spilling the coffee. He must not be used to mistakes, Sylvie thought. He seemed so embarrassed. The little bell above the door rang brightly as they closed the door behind them, and Sylvie was left alone again.

...

Houdini always performed in a black frock coat, white dickey, white bowtie and a stiff, high collar. He would stride onstage rolling up his sleeves. Later in his career, he had a special frock coat made with short sleeves. This was to show the audience that he had nothing, literally, up his sleeve. It also had the added benefit of showing off his muscular forearm and adding to the carefully-cultivated informality of his stage manner. Quoting his namesake Robert-Houdin, Houdini declared that a magician is but an actor playing the part of a magician.

...

After they had decided that Claire would make a good Bess, Tom skipped up to his office. It was really happening, he thought. They had their Houdini, they had their Bess, and they had the whole vaudeville show to go along with it. Hot dog! he thought, and shook his hips. Finally, he would replace the porn with magic and mystery. Turn it back to the way it was. The décor, though, he would only take as far back as The Pussycat days. He appreciated Vince Miranda's taste, and knew it would fit with the rest of the show. He'd bring back the red and gold wallpaper, the beveled glass. He'd even bring back the chandelier! His father would not have been pleased, but Tom shoved that thought away. His father was dead. Had been dead for a year. Tom had waited that year out of respect, continuing on as his father would have wanted him to, but now he was doing what he wanted to do. What the cinema wanted him to do. Everything was falling into place. Claire was the last piece, and she had finally arrived, and just in time, too, because the show was less than two months away.

...

Martin Beck was born in 1868 in northern Slovakia, which at that time was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He sailed to America at the age of sixteen with a troupe of German actors. He worked as a waiter at a Chicago beer garden before becoming the vaudeville tycoon famous for founding the Orpheum circuit, a chain of theatres running from Chicago to California. Martin Beck gave vaudeville class: he put up his performers in the best hotels, he did not overwork them, he made sure the acts were clean and professional, and he studded the shows with stars—he once booked Sarah Bernhardt for seven thousand dollars a week. Also, he built what many consider to be vaudeville’s shrine: the 1, 749 seat Palace Theatre in New York City. From 1913 to 1932, when Beck started showing movies, if a vaudeville performer got to “play the Palace,” he knew he had truly made it. Also, Martin Beck is famous for making Harry Houdini a star. While Houdini eventually outgrew Beck, Houdini’s brother, Theo, maintains that “Although many persons claim to have made Houdini, all credit should go to astute Martin Beck.”

By 1899, Houdini had been playing in dime museums, first with Theo as The Brothers Houdini, then with Bess as The Houdinis, for six years and still he had not made it. He and Bess moved back in with his mother. He wrote that things had become “so bad” that he “contemplated quitting the show business.” He sent out a sixteen-page catalogue for “Harry Houdini’s School of Magic” in which he tried to sell egg bags, card swords, and the secrets to his tricks, including Metamorphosis. But before he quit, he had to fulfill some prior commitments.

It was in St. Paul, Minnesota at The Palmgarden beer hall that Houdini met Martin Beck. He was a short, fleshy man whose bright eyes flashed at Houdini from behind his pince-nez.

“Here now,” he said. “They say you can escape from these.” He held out a pair of cuffs and Houdini held out his hands.

The telegraph Houdini received on March 14 and which he carefully preserved for the rest of his life, except to scrawl across the bottom “This wire changed my whole Life’s journey,” read: “You can open Omaha March twenty sixth sixty dollars, will see act probably make you proposition for all next season.”

“I will book you to top notch,” Beck promised. “I have laid out the plan for you very carefully. My aim especially is at present to make a name for you.” Beck delivered: in fourteen months, Harry Houdini was a star.

...

Claire slept badly after seeing the cinema. She spent most of the night in between sleeping and waking, where things were not real, but they were not exactly dreams, either. There were crowds of people under her window running, yelling, laughing, singing, spinning, walking along telephone wires, jumping so high they could swing from lampposts. By the morning she had come to the conclusion that people in Montreal were shifting and shiny. In the country, people were solid, and you knew who they were. Marise, for example, moved around a lot, but she moved heavily, and you always knew where she was by the creaking of her old floorboards and by her tuneless humming. When she smiled, her flesh erupted in a web of deep creases, starting at the corners of her small mouth and her dark brown eyes, and spreading until they covered her entire face. It was the exact same each time she smiled. Every week she drove to the library and came home with tape cassettes, and later, when they got a CD player, CDs. Every week she played a new album. She played it every day for a week and then she got a new one and

played that every day for a week. “Frig,” she would say when she stubbed her toe on the leg of the couch that stuck out into the hallway, but she never got around to moving the couch, and she said “Frig” every time she bumped into it. But here, Claire thought, there was nothing like that you could count on. She was sure that everyday things shifted a little. Even the buildings she could not count on. She half-expected to wake up and find the four thrift stores gone, packed up overnight and rolled away. And the cinema, she imagined it could disappear even faster. She might walk by it tomorrow and see an old lot, and, if she asked, people would tell her a theatre had never been there. They would just shrug when she held up a scrap of red velvet, and asked them, What’s this, then? What’s this?

But when Claire looked out her window, everything looked sharp and bright. The stores were still there, and so was the cinema. She walked the length of her living room a couple of times before reaching for her phone. She bounced it once, twice, three times in her palm as though trying to guess its weight. She called her mother. It was early enough on her mother’s day-off that Claire knew she would still be in bed and would not answer. She heard her own voice on the answering machine, telling her she’d reached the Robertson’s, and to please leave a message.

“It’s Claire,” she said to her recorded voice. “I’m in Montreal. I found a place. Everything’s fine. I’m fine. Please don’t worry. I’ll call again soon.”

Claire hung up the phone and slid down the wall, hung her hands limply over her knees. She stared ahead of her at her shoes sitting to the right of the door. She thought she may have paused for a second too long before she said “I’m fine.” She studied her shoes,

wondering if there might be just a few pieces of dirt from home left in their treads. It would be stupid to turn them over to check.

But she did check. When she was getting ready to leave the apartment, she turned them over: no black dirt, just grey dust. She didn't know how she was supposed to feel about that. She tied tight bows in the laces. She straightened up and locked the door behind her.

To reach the street, Claire had to walk by Aaron's apartment. As she was descending the stairs she heard music coming from his open door. It was the same type of Ragtime piano music he had played in the cinema, although this time it was obviously a recording; it was smooth and flawless. She tried to tiptoe by but the music stopped mid-song and he poked his head out. He did have excellent hearing.

“Claire!”

“Oh, hey.” She was aware that she was tensing her shoulders, practically lifting them up to her ears, and she tried to loosen her muscles. She couldn't help feeling that something had happened between them in the cinema. Like they had fought or cried or told each other disgusting secrets. Or like Aaron had undressed in front of her and although she wanted to, although she should have, she didn't turn away. Instead she sat there slightly repulsed, disturbed, but also compelled to watch.

Aaron was smiling at her. He had something brown stuck in his canine that triggered a reaction in Claire's stomach. All she did was watch a movie. All he did was play piano. And badly. She felt embarrassed for him about the disgusting piece of food in his teeth. So embarrassed that she wanted to squeeze his hand, and for a brief second even thought it might be a good idea to reach up and pick it out with her fingernail. But

that thought made her stomach heave and she had to look away. She glanced at the stairwell. It was dark brown, recently swept, inviting. She rubbed her tongue over her own teeth, trying to think what could be stuck in them.

“So, whatcha doing?”

“Oh, just going to meet a friend.” That's a lie, she thought. Why did I just lie? Why not tell him I am going to get groceries? Apples, bread, cheese, milk, peanut butter, Shreddies. There was nothing secretive about Shreddies.

“Didn't think you had any here.”

“Oh, well.”

“That's cool.”

“Yeah.” There was a pause in which she adjusted the strap of her bag and shuffled, preparing to go. The stairs had black rubber treads on them, held down by shiny silver bolts and Claire wondered how the bolts stayed so shiny. Did someone polish them? Each bolt? Four per stair? Three flights of stairs?

“I'm just taking it easy today. Just doing my thing.” Another pause while he waited for her to answer.

“And what's your thing?”

“Well, today I'm working on my silhouettes.”

“Your silhouettes.” She forgot to make it a question and it fell flat, unimpressed, but Aaron didn't seem to notice.

“Yeah. I'm doing one of myself today, but—” his face lit up, “I could use another model.”

“Oh, no, I—”

“Well not today. And don't answer now. But you should step inside for *one* second and see what I'm doing.” He was rubbing his fingers together. It was subtle, but Claire realized it was making a soft, silky sound that had been the background to the entire conversation.

“No, I really—”

“Okay. Well.” Aaron looked down and extended a long arm to scratch the back of his neck. Claire wanted to turn and go, but she was struck by the length of his arm. His limbs were so far away from his core, she thought. They gave the impression of existing apart from his chest, his narrow hips, his bony shoulders. They seemed to float around him, out of his control. She had a dream once about a flooded forest and she remembered it now as she looked at Aaron—pale and pliant, wavering in the bizarre current of their building.

“Well,” he repeated, “if you're not coming in...” He began to close the door, and smiled sadly at her through the shrinking opening between them. He was not a threat, she thought. He was so thin, and his skin was so clear, so white. She imagined he would have very blue veins. Or maybe they wouldn't be any bluer than anyone else's but under his papery skin, they would be more prominent, seem more exposed. For some reason, that made her feel secure.

“I guess I can come in for a few minutes. I don't really have anything else to do.”

“Your friend?”

“Right. Well, I'm early.”

Aaron's apartment was only slightly different than hers. Claire's was a corner apartment looking out over both Saint-Laurent and Duluth, but his only faced Saint-

Laurent. He had half the windows that she had. They stood in his living room and Claire took in the light orange walls, the ragged, dark blue couch, the brown tweed chair with pale wooden arms, the frayed yellow rag rug in the center of the room. The rug he gave her was much nicer than the one he kept and Claire looked away from it quickly. She was surprised, though she was not sure why, to find a windowsill full of healthy-looking plants. But she was not surprised to find his walls covered with posters of Harry Houdini.

“You sure like him.”

“Houdini?”

“Yup.” She looked closer at the posters. He only had four—one on each wall—but they were large and intense and seemed to take up more space than they actually did. Claire moved to stand in front of a close-up of Houdini. It was so close that his forehead and chin were cut out of the frame. His wiry hair was also not visible except for the piece by his temple, which she noticed was streaked with white.

“That's an older picture of him,” Aaron explained. “He would have looked like that when he performed here.” He walked out of the living room and into the kitchen. “The silhouettes are in here.”

The kitchen had a large wall to the right of the door on which Aaron had hung a piece of black velvet. Pinned to the fabric were white paper cut-outs of a man's profile. At first glance they looked like the same person: a male looking off to the right, but as Claire moved in closer she picked out subtle differences. One's lips were thinner, one's hairline started further back.

“That's me.” He pointed to a silhouette. “And that's Houdini.”

“So he posed for you, did he?”

Aaron raised his eyebrows, a sullenness settling over him, his shoulders drooping slightly. But then he smiled, and said, "I've just looked closely at him a lot. In the film clips, in photos. I know the shape of his face."

"Right. Sorry." Claire wondered why she felt so terrible, hated herself for that slight shoulder sag. She wanted to make him smile again, so she said, "You have the same nose," even though they didn't.

Aaron beamed. "I know. I've noticed that too." Suddenly he was beside her, looking closely at the silhouettes.

"Different hair though." His shoulder was almost touching hers and she caught a slight scent of mildew mixed with laundry detergent. She knew that smell. He had probably left his clothes in the washing machine for too long. It was a warm, damp smell and although she moved away, she felt her tense shoulders finally relaxing. She looked at him again. He was not threatening; he was odd but not that odd. He did his laundry, he forgot about it, he smelled like something she could identify; he smelled pleasantly forgetful.

"During the early 1900s silhouettes used to be a big deal. Street artists did them. Kind of like portraits for poor people? They did scenes too but I'm not that good yet." It was true; Claire could see the shakiness of the cut lines, the tiny bump on a nose that shouldn't be there, the hesitant brow, the solid, clumsy block of hair. She looked at Aaron's hands. They were large with long fingers. She could see why he would have trouble; she could see how uncomfortable it would be to mash those long fingers into the scissor handles.

"So, I guess you wish you were born in a different century."

“Naw, this one's okay. Although, I guess if I lived back then I might be able to meet Houdini. You know, maybe I could have even worked for him. Taken care of his equipment or something. Maybe even gone on stage and helped tie him up. He used to get audience members to do that. If I just went to one of his shows, maybe, and raised my hand when he asked for volunteers or—”

“Right. Well. No harm in dreaming about it I guess.” What a thing to wish for, she thought. She tried to picture Aaron in her hometown, thought of him telling people about his dream of meeting Harry Houdini. People would laugh at him. Over their cans of Molson, from under the brims of their carefully curved baseball caps, they would peg him as a queer. Enthusiasm would be the end of you there. Aaron would never survive, showing so much of himself, especially because what he had to show was so different from what everyone there would appreciate. For the second time today she felt embarrassed for him, even slightly protective.

When he led her back to the front door, she saw what must be his bedroom door at the end of the hallway. It was open slightly and she glanced inside. The walls were dark red. She saw a bedpost, the side of a dresser, and a pile of chains hanging from a hook in the wall. Aaron was holding the front door open for her. The chains were thick, shiny, just hanging there. There was a heavy-looking padlock dangling from one and she felt, suddenly, as though the weight of that padlock had been dropped into her stomach. She shouldn't have come in here. What was she thinking? She didn't know this man, didn't know this city, didn't know what he did with those chains. So what if he had long thin arms and pronounced veins? Very blue veins would not prevent him from tying her up, maybe even strangling her. So what if he smelled like laundry soap? Even psycho killers

washed their clothes. At home people owned chains. They used them to pull each other's cars and trucks out of mud or snowy ditches. They put them on their tires when the roads were icy and they needed extra traction to drive up and down steep hills. They used them to lock up their barns tightly, to chain shut their fences, to secure their sheds, to tie up their dogs. But Aaron has no shed, no truck, no icy roads, no dog. He had paper skin, fragile limbs, and chains in his bedroom. She walked briskly out the door.

“Thanks for coming.” Aaron said as she hurried down the hall. She nodded but kept going. “Let me know if you want a silhouette done!” She heard him call as she was walking down the stairs. Brown stairs with black treads, recently swept, such shiny bolts. Aaron's voice, hungry and thin, followed her down, curled around her head like tendrils of smoke that blow away but stubbornly left behind their scent.

Aaron stood at his open door for a moment after he heard the door to the street close shut. He should have closed his bedroom door. She wasn't supposed to see the chains yet. It was too soon. Now he may have ruined their chance. And she would have been perfect: she was short and thin, and with a way of walking that made her look like she belonged somewhere else, to another place or time. She had adopted none of the put-on sloppiness that most young people did in an effort to look casual, at ease. She moved carefully, slowly, and she always looked like she was about to turn and leave you, and so she made you feel lucky for every moment that she stayed. He had also noticed that she was constantly looking away from you, towards doors and windows, and her attentiveness to exits made him think of Houdini.

But he had scared her away. Of course, he could have just explained that the chains were only for the act. But that was not the way he imagined telling her about it.

They were supposed to draw her into their world slowly and carefully so that when she got there, she would want to stay. He would not tell Tom about this. Or Patrick.

Especially not Patrick. He had never seen Patrick angry, but he sensed that there was anger under that smooth surface, just waiting to emerge. Aaron imagined that just like everything else with Patrick, anger would surface with ease.

He walked back into his apartment and into the living room. He sank onto the couch and stared up at a poster of Houdini. He closed his eyes and imagined what it would have been like to be on stage with Claire. Sylvie would have dressed her. Maybe in a Little Lord Fauntleroy outfit like the one Bess used to wear. Claire would have walked towards him slowly, as though she had all the time in the world, and the audience would have waited, giving her all the time she needed. It was the anticipation. It was always the moment right before something that Aaron loved. He remembered when his parents started leaving him home alone, without Rosa. He would walk around the house slowly closing all the curtains as his parents disappeared down the long driveway. Then, he would erupt: he would run and sing and dance and slam doors and jump on the couches. Finally, he would bow once, deeply, before falling into bed. The audience would have felt that same expectancy, watching Claire move slowly across the stage towards him, carrying in her arms the nest of chains that she would use to tie him to his chair. Then her small fingers would slowly chain him, and he would feel their coolness when they brushed his skin. And he would see the excitement in her eyes; see that she, too, loved Houdini. Then she would stand back and watch as he began.

...

Shortly after signing with Martin Beck, Houdini performed in San Francisco. Beck had promised to promote him, but Houdini would rather promote himself. He publically dared the police station to tie him in such a way that he could not escape.

He stood before four hundred police officials and patrolmen who had come from across the country to see him escape from their restraints.

“It is impossible that he will succeed,” whispered one policeman to another. But this policeman had travelled from Washington just to make sure.

“It will be good to remind the population of the security of our irons,” said another, but the cocky grin on Houdini’s face made his voice sound fainter than he would have liked.

Four detectives covered him in metal. They used four varieties of their strongest handcuffs, three of which employed double springs, and two pairs of leg irons. Finally, they used another set of handcuffs to fasten the leg and arm restraints together, which forced Houdini into a crouching position that, according to one Los Angeles reporter made him look “trussed like a turkey at a Thanksgiving shoot,” and to a Buffalo reporter, like he was “in danger of tearing up the floor with his nose.”

Seven minutes after Houdini disappeared into his cabinet, he stepped out. He held from his right hand a chain made from the handcuffs and leg irons, which he had linked together. His wrists were swollen and bloody, but he was smiling.

...

Claire felt better once she was outside. She walked along Duluth, away from Saint-Laurent, and after a few minutes, her heart returned to its normal rhythm. That was

when it occurred to her that Aaron probably wasn't a dangerous psychopath; he just really liked Houdini, which, although maybe a little crazy, probably wasn't dangerous.

She reached a Metro grocery store, and in its bright maze of aisles and its crush of people, she almost forgot about chains in her attempt to buy her few things and get out as quickly as possible. At the cash, she reminded herself that she would run out of money soon. Minimum-wage savings wouldn't last very long. She would have to get a job. She spoke clumsy French—they had had to learn it in school—but not enough to work in anything but the service industry. She gave herself a deadline: in two days I will hand out résumés. And I will take the first job that is offered to me. Even if I get three offers, I will take the first, regardless of what it is. She took Napoléon on the way back, instead of Duluth, so she had to walk a block up Saint-Laurent, and pass the cinema, to reach her apartment. She was making a mental list of jobs she could apply for, and was so lost in her thoughts of grocery stores, cafés and clothing stores that she almost bumped into a short man in front of the cinema. She mumbled an apology. It took her a few seconds to realize that it was her landlord, standing outside the door smoking a cigar. His shirt was red and his tie was striped red and white like a candy cane or a circus tent.

“Whoa there, Claire Bear.”

“Claire Bear?”

“Sure, it suits you.” Tom wrapped one thick arm around her shoulder and drew her close. “Don't you get it? It's like Care Bear only—”

“Yup. I get it.” She pulled herself free.

“So, how're you settling in?”

“Fine.”

“That little Aaron not giving you any trouble, I hope.”

“What do you mean?” She asked. Tom just laughed and adjusted his tie. His fingers were pudgy. He had crammed rings onto three of them.

“Relax, Claire Bear, just making sure all my tenants are getting along. It's like a family here, you know. One big family.” He winked at her. “Come on inside for some sorbet.”

“Excuse me?”

He took her arm and used his free hand to push open the glass door, talking the whole time, which prevented her from making excuses to leave.

As he ushered Claire inside, Tom had to remind himself not to tell her about the show. He wanted to just ask her straight out if she would be their Bess, but Patrick had told him not to. Patrick said they should wait a bit before asking her to be involved, get her to spend some time in the cinema, get used to the place. What was the word he had used? Prime her. That was it. They needed to prime her. But the show is so soon! Tom had protested. But Patrick said if they asked her now, she'd just say no, and they'd lose her. Tom thought that was ridiculous—who would say no to performing in a cinema like this? In a show like theirs?—but Patrick had insisted, and Tom hadn't felt up to arguing. Besides, Patrick seemed to know how these things worked: when Sylvie had refused at first to make them costumes, Patrick had said, “Just wait a bit. You never know, she may just change her mind.” Sylvie had joined them eventually so Tom supposed Patrick knew what he was doing.

“My father used to buy the sorbet for us,” Tom said now to Claire. “Even when he retired, he'd still drop it off here for something to do. He never really retired, actually; he

just said he did. He died a year ago, but I keep bringing it now.” The door swung shut behind them. “It's excellent stuff, you'll see. Fresh as anything you'll ever taste. One time I found a seed in the mandarin kind. Imagine that, a seed.”

It took Claire's eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dimness of the lobby, but then she saw Sylvie perched behind the desk, a purple flower tucked behind her ear. She was wearing a silky cream dress that plunged at the front, exposing delicate collar bones. In the dim light her dress and skin were the same colour, and it would be possible to imagine she was sitting there naked.

“Hello Claire.”

“Hi.”

“Look what I found outside: A Claire Bear.”

“Yes.” Sylvie tucked her hair behind her ear, adjusted her flower. “I see.”

“She's come for some sorbet.”

“I'll get it out.”

“Good girl.”

“I stopped being a girl quite some time ago, Tom.”

“But you're still as pretty as one” he winked at Claire. “Isn't she?”

Sylvie was always amazed at how quickly Tom's mood could shift. He had shuffled by her only moments before, completely dismal, with his cigar hanging limply out of the corner of his mouth. Now, here he was, prattling away and practically bouncing around Claire with excitement. It reminded Sylvie of the way he had been when she had first started working for him. It made her feel lighter, and like smiling was not such a difficult thing.

“Don't answer, Claire. Don't encourage him.”

“Prettiest girl I've ever seen.” Tom said, then, continuing in a sing-song voice,
“Sylvie, Sylvie. Smells like roses. Skin so silky silky. ”

“Are those song lyrics?” Claire asked.

“Mango!” said Sylvie, and placed a white tub on the counter.

Soon they were all eating mango sorbet, and Claire had to admit that, yes, it was the freshest she had ever tasted.

“Watch out for seeds!” Tom laughed at his own joke and Claire turned to Sylvie who smiled apologetically.

“Now,” said Tom, “what are your plans?”

“My plans?”

“Yes. Aaron told me you don't leave the apartment much.”

“He told you that?”

“I told you Claire Bear, we're a family here. We're just looking out for you.”

“Oh.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Sylvie said, closing the lid of the white container. She bent gracefully and placed it in a small fridge behind the counter.

“Well, I'm going to start looking for jobs.”

“Aha!” said Tom. “Now there's where we can help you!” He dropped his dirty spoon on the flecked, laminated counter, leaving an orange puddle, and began to walk around the room. He walked with his short arms extended, as though to say Behold! Instead he said “Voila!” He walked by the racks of porn movies, passed under the posters of porn stars, stopped at the door leading into the cinema, put a hand on it briefly, gently,

and then continued his tour of the room. Midway through his tour, he stopped abruptly at a rubber plant, frowned, and used his thumb to rub a speck of dirt from one of its leaves.

Sylvie leaned towards Claire and whispered. “He's proud of this place. He's trying to show it off for you. Please look impressed.”

“I don't understand.”

“He's offering you a job, Claire.”

“He's just walking around the room.”

“I know this man.”

“So!” Tom said, when he had made it back to the desk. His face was flushed and he was grinning. Claire had to admit there was something appealing in his eyes: they were small but bright. Filled with a faint but undeniable glimmer. She wondered if it was excitement, or joy, or mischief, or something else entirely. It was right there, though, on the surface for her to see.

“So, what do you say? We'll start you part-time, see how you do.”

Claire opened her mouth, her refusal already formed, but then she remembered her promise to herself. She had to accept the first job offered. She had told herself that. She had no choice.

“Okay.”

“Wonderful!” Tom cried and clapped his arm around her shoulder again.

Sylvie smiled at her, then, before Claire could pull away, reached out and touched her cheek. Her fingers lingered there for a second, then she tucked a strand of Claire's hair behind her ear. Claire smelled the rose scent again.

Sylvie knew Claire was only saying yes to the job, but she knew that was the first step, and soon Claire would be saying yes to much more. She felt grateful towards her, tender, and, inexplicably, a little sad.

“You can start by dusting that plant,” Tom said.

“But,” Claire said. “One thing?”

“Anything,” Tom gushed.

“Please don’t call me Claire Bear?”

“Okay, okay, whatever you like.” Then, because he couldn’t help himself: “How about Beatrice? Can we call you Beatrice?”

Claire stared at him blankly. “No,” she said, “sorry.”

...

Before Cinema L’Amour was The Pussycat, it was Le Globe. Built in 1914, Le Globe was named after Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre in London, which was destroyed by fire in 1613. It was built in the Beaux-Arts style of architecture that originated in Paris but was dominant internationally during the second half of the nineteenth century. Its architectural themes were drawn from the periods of the Italian Renaissance, with the purpose of adding dignity to public buildings. Le Globe had all of the architectural features characteristic of the Beaux-Arts style, including the flat roof, the symmetry, the incorporation of sculpture, and other Classical details, such as, balustrades, pilasters, carved garlands, and bas-relief panels. Le Globe was built to accommodate both live performances and the projection of film.

Considering that Saint-Laurent was called the immigrant gateway to Montreal, and was populated by an impressive array of cultures, all speaking different languages,

Le Globe offered performances that did not rely too heavily on language. Vaudeville was perfect. People could enjoy music, dance, strongmen, performing animals, magicians, or silent films. However, also considering that Saint-Laurent was, according to Mordecai Richler, the “aorta of the Jewish ghetto,” Yiddish theatre and films were also popular at Le Globe.

Motion pictures were introduced into vaudeville shows as early as 1896; however, they were simply added attractions, and were sometimes used to clear the house between shows. However, their popularity rose and the time allotted to them in a typical show increased until, with the arrival of talkies in 1927, they swapped places with the actual vaudeville show. Eventually, a viewer coming to Le Globe to see a full-length motion picture could expect to see added attractions of vaudeville.

...

The theatre opened at eleven in the morning, and Claire had to be there at that time to start her training. She would work alongside Sylvie for a week, and then she would take three shifts a week. The shifts were twelve hours long, and it occurred to her that Sylvie must not have a life outside of the theatre. She wondered where she lived, where she slept. She always looked fresh, clean, well-rested, but she worked twelve-hour shifts, six days a week.

Outside, the heat was oppressive. Summer was hanging on, going out with a heat-wave. Her apartment was sweltering, but outside was no better. Claire was already sweating when she entered the cinema. Sylvie, on the other hand, looked fresh and clean, as though she were not even aware that the world could get so hot. A bead of sweat might surprise her.

“Good morning, Claire.” She was wearing a satin kimono-like dress. Navy with light blue plum blossoms, buttoned up to the top of her slender neck. Her nails were freshly painted: they shimmered white with the slightest hint of blue—the colour of the inside of a clam shell.

“Good morning.” Claire felt under-dressed in her jeans and T-shirt. She had put on some silver hoop earrings, but, standing in front of Sylvie, she realized that was not enough. Sylvie looked her up and down. She did it very quickly and if Claire hadn’t been watching and waiting for it, she wouldn’t have noticed.

Sylvie quickly took her through her responsibilities. She had to make sure the money in the cash register was balanced; that she had enough change in the till; that the snacks and Kleenex packets were stocked; that the videos were arranged neatly on the shelves, alphabetically. Then she had to unlock the door to the cinema. Once she turned on the lights, she had to walk up and down each aisle to make sure Aaron hadn’t missed anything in his early morning cleaning. She had to climb the narrow flight of stairs up to the horseshoe balcony. She had to check the VIP booths too. Then she had to unlock the front door, and put out the sandwich-board sign advertising the day’s double feature. Today it was *The Sex Files* and *Pretty Tied Up*. She had to make sure the sign saying “Couples Free on Tuesdays!” was straight in the window. Finally, she had to flip the sign on the door from “Closed” to “Open.” When she was doing that, she noticed a small addition to the otherwise regular open sign: there was a bracketed word: (wide).

“Open wide? Gross.”

Sylvie studied her face, then shrugged. “You’re going to have to get used to that kind of thing.” That’s funny, thought Sylvie, that I never noticed that.

Soon after they opened, the bell rang over the door, and a middle-aged man walked up to the counter.

“Single feature and a bag of peanuts, please,” he mumbled as he put down a fistful of money: a crumpled five dollar bill and a bunch of change. Sylvie glanced quickly at the pile, then slipped a ticket across the counter and placed a bag of peanuts next to it, all without speaking. The man nodded, and disappeared into the cinema.

Sylvie told her the clientele would not be a problem. Most were men, but there were some women who came in too, although they usually came in with a man. They just want to get inside as quickly as possible, Sylvie said. They’re not interested in bothering you.

On Claire’s third day, Sylvie turned to her when the front door swung open.

“Your turn,” she said, and bent lower over a book she had been reading. The man barely looked at Claire as he walked up to the counter.

“One please.” He placed a ten-dollar bill and two quarters in front of her and walked into the cinema. Claire didn't even get a chance to notice the colour of his eyes or any detail on his face. One by one they came in, usually with the exact change. They paid, then disappeared into the darkness of the theatre, the red padded door closing softly behind them. Some stayed only for one movie, some stayed all day—ten fifty was the price, whether they wanted to stay for a double or a single feature. One bought some licorice, many bought Kleenex. Above the rack of small Kleenex packages on sale for a dollar, someone had put up a poster. It was black with “You won't cry, but bring tissues” written in white block letters.

Sylvie talked to Claire when she was explaining something about the job, but

otherwise she did not make conversation. She read, or she sewed. Sometimes she wrote and sketched in a little brown book that she kept angled away from Claire. When she bowed her head over her books or her sewing, Claire could actually sense her slipping away, as though she were taking physical steps away from her.

Sylvie was making sketches of costumes for Claire, stealing glances at Claire when she thought she wasn't looking. Claire's dimensions seemed right. She studied her face, and worked out how she would make it look a little rounder with make-up, how she would style her hair. It was all possible. Eventually, Sylvie had to admit that the only thing she was missing to make Claire into a Bess lookalike was proper lighting. She could sew the perfect costume, apply the perfect makeup, give her the perfect hairstyle, but Claire would just look like Claire unless she was standing in the right light. Costume designers always worked with lighting designers. It did not work without that partnership. She snapped her notebook shut. See, she wanted to tell Nat. See, I need you.

On the fourth day working with Sylvie, Claire started to find the silence uncomfortable.

"So," she began, and Sylvie looked up politely from her little brown book, keeping her spot with one hand

"When did you start working here?"

"About four months ago." Sylvie smiled and returned to her book.

"How did you get the job?"

"Oh," said Sylvie, and smiled again. "It just happened. You know." Claire didn't know, but she let Sylvie return to her book uninterrupted. She would have to bring in

something of her own to do. Maybe that was how Sylvie worked here so calmly and apparently happily; she didn't have to look around her at all the posters and videos because she was so absorbed in something else. Claire decided to dust the plant again. Tomorrow, she would bring her sketchbook.

Sylvie watched Claire dusting the rubber plant. She knew Claire was only trying to make conversation to pass the time, but Sylvie hated that kind of conversation. Still, she found herself answering Claire's question in her mind, as though that would somehow make up for evading it out loud.

After Patrick and Tom had left the store that first day she met them, she forgot about them almost instantly. It had been happening more and more. People disappeared into a fog soon after she met them. If someone had asked her who came into the store, she might have remembered, but she had no one to ask her those questions, so she usually just forgot.

When she left, she walked home along the side streets. She liked to avoid the lights on the main streets. She liked to convince herself that she was comfortable with shadow; that she could walk along happily without light. Still, she dreamt of Nat that night. She didn't remember the particulars of the dream, but she woke up clenching her pillow with one of her mother's Sijos drifting around in her mind: *How about a kingfisher quilt and a mandarin pillow? Having faced cold rain today, Why not melt in her bed tonight?* She pictured a pillow case embroidered with mandarin ducks. And Nat's orange curls snaking around the colourful ducks, becoming the waves on which they swam. She knew you could not take dreams with you once you broke the surface of waking, but for a few desperate moments she tried to force herself back to sleep to

recover it.

Sylvie skipped breakfast and walked early to the store. It looked normal to her from the outside, but when she opened the door, she smelled it: water. Her store had flooded overnight.

It turned out she had forgotten to turn off the water in the bathroom sink. The plug had long ago lost its chain, so it usually sat just beside the faucet. Sometimes it fell into the sink. Sometimes Sylvie plugged the sink on purpose: to wash out her tea cups, or sometimes rinse a pile of dusty buttons. Sylvie supposed that was what must have happened: she had left the water running in a plugged sink. How impossibly stupid. When she first saw the water covering the old floorboards and the wet stains creeping up her flowered wallpaper, all she felt was exhausted. The tips of the rolls of lace were dipped in the water. If it weren't so heartbreaking, it might look pretty in that way ruined things sometimes did. She did not cry, because she was not the crying type. She just walked slowly through the store on legs that felt liquid, and ruined her new ivory satin shoes.

A few days later, she had been sitting on her stoop, absent-mindedly playing with a piece of ribbon, rolling it around her index finger then unrolling it. She did this over and over. Sometimes she wound it so loosely it would slip off. Sometimes so tightly her finger turned red, then purplish, until it was almost the same colour as the dark lines tattooed on it. Whenever anything bad happened, she blamed it on Nat. It had gotten so easy after all of this time to take her anguish and place it on her shoulders. I was thinking of you, and costumes, and so I flooded my store.

“Are you open?”

She looked up. It took her a few seconds to realize she recognized the young man standing in front of her.

“I was in your store a few days ago. With my cousin? The little guy?”

She remembered then. The ones she had told she wouldn't make costumes for. He was alone today. He was licking an ice cream cone, his other hand in his pocket.

“Oh.” She frowned. “That was your cousin?” That struck her as impossible.

“Yeah, I know,” he said with an easy smile. “We look nothing alike.”

She looked down at her ribbon again.

“So,” he said eventually, “are you open? I wanted to look at some of your fabric again. For the costumes.”

“No,” she sighed. “There was a flood. I...” She stopped, not trusting her voice to remain steady.

Patrick sat beside her. Not too close, but close enough that she could feel the heat coming off of his arm. It was almost comforting. It had been a long time since she had felt another person's body heat. Even on a sweltering day, in a distant part of her mind she welcomed it.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” he finally said.

“Hmm.”

“How much will the repairs cost?”

“Too much.”

“You mean, you won't re-open?”

“No. I don't think I will.”

He didn't speak for a few minutes. Then he asked, “Can I give you my number?”

Just in case you want to reconsider our offer. To make costumes. I know you said you didn't want to, and there's no pressure, obviously, but it's just if you need another job, you know, now that...." He trailed off and she couldn't help but feel that his silence was one of commiseration. She was not used to feeling as though someone understood her sadness, but somehow with this man, so beautiful he would probably never know any deep sadness, she did. They sat in silence for a while and then he pushed himself up off the step and placed a piece of paper beside her. It was a piece of torn loose-leaf, and she wondered briefly whether he always carried around scraps of paper with his number on them, but she let it go.

"See you," he said, and walked away.

A couple of weeks later she called Patrick. Her store was in a trendy area and it wasn't as badly damaged as she had first suspected. She could have fixed it, but whenever she thought of it, she felt so tired she could hardly move. She got a good price for it and walked away. She was not even sure Patrick would remember her, but when she identified herself on the phone, he said of course, of course, and gave her an address.

She had walked by Cinema L'Amour many times—it was not very far from her shop, and it was near a cheap grocery store she liked—but she had never imagined she would be brought here and expected to go inside. It looked so forbidding, with its bars and dark windows.

"Why did you bring me to a porn theatre?" she asked Patrick when she met him in front.

"Well, it's a porn theatre *now*, but it won't always be."

Patrick told her then about the plans he and Tom had for the theatre. About how

they wanted to fix it up, turn it back into the theatre it once was.

“And what kind of theatre was that?”

He leaned in towards her, his eyes wide and clear blue, his mouth twitching in a smile. “Vaudeville!”

At that moment, Tom opened the front door and beamed at her. He was dressed in a yellow suit jacket with a red shirt and burgundy pants. The terrible combination made her smile. Maybe he was colour blind.

“Hello!” Tom said. “Come in, come in, come in.” He held out a short arm and she let herself be shepherded inside. They did not linger in the lobby. They didn't even introduce her to the girl sitting at the ticket counter, flipping so quickly through a magazine Sylvie would be amazed if she was seeing, not to mention reading, anything.

“This way, this way,” Tom said, and before she knew it they were leading her through a red padded door and into the darkness of the cinema.

Once the door had shut behind them, they told her in hushed, excited voices that the great Harry Houdini had performed here and that they were going to put together a show in his honour. Both men's eyes sparkled as they spoke, but the intensity of Patrick's eyes made her look away. The show would have all kinds of vaudeville and circus acts, they explained, and it would also have an escape artist, just like Houdini.

“And what we need you for is costumes,” Patrick said. “You see, we've got all kinds of acts lined up. We've got a contortionist, a strong man, a sword swallower, a burlesque dancer—a really tasteful one, I promise.” Unbidden, Sylvie's mind flashed images of the costumes she could make. Something tight and flexible for the contortionist. Something she could move in as though she were not wearing anything at

all. Something black so she would look even thinner than she must be. And the strong man—didn't they used to wear some kind of animal print? And the sword swallower should look dashing, like a real gentleman. And the burlesque dancer would get long, thick ostrich feathers and clothing with Velcro or snaps so she could flick them off easily. And the escape artist—she didn't know very much about Harry Houdini, but from somewhere in her mind, she dragged up a fuzzy image of him almost naked, just wearing chains. Maybe there wasn't much she could do for the escape artist.

When Sylvie agreed to make costumes for them, Patrick grinned and Tom laughed and clapped his hands. It was the costumes that got her. They always did.

“You'll love it here, Sylvie,” Patrick said with such earnestness that she started to think that she might and with that thought, a weight began shifting on her chest. It did not lift, but it shifted, as though restless; finally turning over in its stubborn sleep.

“The only problem is we're not quite ready yet,” said Patrick. “We're still gathering the performers, planning it, that kind of thing. In the meantime, we're running the theatre as usual. We work on the new plan at night.”

“Oh.”

“I don't suppose you have enough money saved up to, um, not work for a few months?” Patrick asked.

Sylvie had the money from the sale of her store, but she didn't want to dip into that. She was thinking of it as a kind of retirement fund, when it came to that.

“No.” Besides, what would she do with herself? Where would she go every day?

“That's fine,” said Patrick quickly. “We can employ you here in the meantime.”

“Here?”

“Yes. It's an easy job. You can sell the tickets.”

“It looks like you already have a ticket seller.”

Patrick looked at Tom, then shrugged.

“We're not too attached to her,” Patrick said.

“I don't even remember her name!” Tom assured her.

When they were back on the street, Tom took her hand and pumped it up and down. When Patrick shook her hand, he held it tightly. “One more thing,” he said. “You'll have to do a bit of research for the job.”

She frowned. He was still holding her hand in his. “What kind of research?”

“You need to know about vaudeville. Also, side shows, dime museums, that kind of thing. But most importantly, you need to know about Houdini.”

The warmth of his hand was making hers sweat.

“Well, I guess I would have to anyway to make the costumes.”

“But you need to know more than just the clothes they'd wear.”

“Why?”

Patrick looked slightly puzzled for a moment. “I don't know,” he said. “I don't know exactly why except that we want you to.”

“We'll supply the book,” said Tom. “You just have to read it. You can do it here, while you work.”

“Fine,” said Sylvie. It took less energy to be swept along with these men than to resist them. She also just wanted to be able to release her hand. It occurred to her this was the first time since Nat that her sweat had touched anyone else's skin. When she agreed, Patrick released her hand and grinned at her.

“Start tomorrow?” Tom asked.

She nodded. Why not?

That was almost four months ago, and Sylvie had not yet been asked to make a single costume. She had been planning them, though, and would be ready when they asked her. She took great pride in her costumes; she knew it was what she did best. And soon she would be able to show them, because she suspected that now that Claire was here, they would begin in earnest. Claire was the last to arrive, but she finally had. She was standing over in the corner, innocently dusting a rubber plant with no idea what she was getting into.

...

Vaudeville, popular in North America from the early 1880s to the early 1930s, was an amalgamation of the concert saloon, Yiddish theatre, minstrelsy, freak show, dime museum, burlesque show, theatre, and circus. Some say vaudeville was born when Tony Pastor staged the first “straight, clean variety show” in New York City on October 24, 1881. It had no alcohol or bawdy material, and it encouraged a mixed-gender audience by providing gifts of coal and ham. Vaudeville soon became the heart of American show business. It was second only to churches and public schools for the largest gathering places in the nation.

A typical vaudeville show consisted of ten to fifteen unrelated acts, including musicians (popular or classical), dancers, trained animals, magicians, lecturing celebrities, acrobats, jugglers, female and male impersonators, one-act plays or minstrels. The acts were short and they had to be unique.

Benjamin Franklin Keith was a former circus barker who ran the largest and most

respectable vaudeville circuit of its day: the Keith's Circuit. Many consider him to be the "father of American Vaudeville." Keith introduced the twelve-hour continuous performance, which meant each performer would appear two or three times, but which also meant that people could come at any time to see a show, and they could leave at any time. In "The Vogue of the Vaudeville," an article that first appeared in *National Magazine* in November 1898, Keith explains the reason for the continuous performance: "It matters not at what hour of the day or evening you visit, the theatre is always occupied by more or less people, the show is in full swing, everything is bright, cheerful and inviting."

...

Tom and Patrick walked into the cinema around noon that day, Patrick holding a brown paper bag in one arm. He put it down on the counter, saying, "Hope you two like peanut chicken."

Claire decided that no matter how good the food smelled, she would not be able to eat it in front of Patrick. She would get sauce on her face, or she would choke. Her throat already felt thick with him standing there.

"Thanks," she said. "I'll save it for later."

Tom leaned over and whispered in Patrick's ear. It was an unsuccessful whisper; Claire heard exactly what he said: "Now?"

"Are you busy tonight?" Patrick asked Claire.

"Yes," she said instinctively.

"No, you're not," Tom piped up. "Sylvie told me."

It was true, Sylvie had asked her yesterday what her plans for the week were, and

Claire had admitted that she didn't really have any. She made a mental note to stop telling Sylvie the truth. Sylvie bent lower over her book.

“We're having a kind of party. In the cinema,” Patrick said. “Please come.”

“You have to come. It's part of your job,” Tom said. “We'll call it a team-building exercise or something,” he continued. “Does that sound about right?” he asked Patrick.

“Maybe we should call it extra training? Professional development?” Patrick said. He winked at Claire.

“Yes, yes,” cried Tom, clapping his hands. “I like that.” Turning to her, Tom forced his face into a serious look. “Claire, you must attend the meeting tonight. It's professional development. I, as your boss, insist.”

“It's settled then,” said Patrick. “See you in a few hours.”

Claire's mouth felt dry so she just smiled. The two men walked back onto the street, Patrick's long arm draped easily over Tom's shoulders. Claire picked at her fingernails. When she looked up, she caught Sylvie watching her from over her book. Claire turned away from her, only to discover that Aaron was standing in the corner by the door to the cinema with his mop and bucket. She had no idea how long he'd been there. Why were people always watching her here? How did they just appear out of nowhere like that? Her face felt hot, but she resisted the urge to move her fingers, which were icy cold, to touch it.

Aaron stared at her for a second longer, then smiled by way of greeting. She seemed to have gotten over seeing the chains in his apartment, and he was glad about that. But judging by the blush, the chains had probably been replaced by Patrick, and that did not make him glad at all.

...

Pass through marble pillars and under arches and the gaze of gargoyles into a lobby of white and green marble, burnished brass and large plate mirrors. Sit, if you like, in a leather upholstered chair if you are waiting for a friend. If you have time, you may write someone a letter on the Keith's stationary fanned out in front of you on a small oak table. Otherwise, drop your ticket into the chopping box at the door of the theatre. Find the best seat you can under the gilded proscenium arch, the white and gold balconies, the hand-painted ceiling. Smell the floral displays. There is an equilibrist on stage, balancing on a stack of chairs. When he finishes his act, you may clap, but do not do more than that because if you do, a uniformed usher will approach you with a silver tray. He will hold the tray out to you and you will pick up the card that is lying in its centre: "Gentlemen will kindly avoid the stamping of feet and pounding of canes on the floor, and greatly oblige the Management. All applause is best shown by clapping of hands."

Twin sisters with wide brimmed hats piled with artificial roses sing a song about love; Foxy Grandpa shows his grandsons a thing or two about cutting loose on the banjo; seals ring bells and balance balls on their noses; trick cyclists ride in circles on their back wheels; a man in a fur coat keeps a silk hat, an open umbrella, and a small wad of paper in the air with his right hand; a gentleman lectures on "The Arctic Moon," a relic of the Greeley expedition; a miller and a chimney sweep hit each other with bags of flour and soot; two men wrestle and try to ride a frantic mule; a baboon in a white shirt and black tie plays the fiddle before placing a cat on its head to rollerblade around the stage; strongman Eugen Sandow poses in tight trunks and high-laced sandals; three actors present a one-act play about jealousy and murder; a magician pulls an endless strand of high-

quality silk scarves from his hat; a woman sings *Ave Maria*; Georgia the Magnet, a weight resistor, resists being pushed off her feet, and, as a headliner, Harry Houdini, The Handcuff King, escapes in two minutes from a pair of leg-irons crafted during the Civil War that took his assistants six minutes to fasten.

...

Claire stood in front of her small bedroom mirror. She was supposed to be downstairs for the party by now. Or, as Patrick said, the “kind of party,” whatever that meant. She brought her limp hair up into a ponytail, sighed, then let it fall loose around her shoulders. Even though she had washed it that morning, it looked greasy. She brought it to the side, then to the other side. Finally she pinned it back with two red bobby pins and turned her attention to her clothing. She was wearing jeans and a red t-shirt. That would have been fine at home, but not here. She thought of Sylvie's outfits, she thought of Patrick's bright eyes. She pulled a handful of the fabric at the back of the shirt, tightening it around her body. It was a bit of an improvement; at least that way you could see she had a waist, breasts, even if they were only barely there. If she knew how to sew she might fix it.

A sudden sharp knock on her door made her jump. Her eyes reflected back at her in the mirror widened. She had never realized how pathetic she looked when surprised. She thought it must be Patrick, and she tugged savagely at her limp hair, but when someone called her name, she recognized Aaron's voice and relaxed a little.

“You're here,” he said.

“Mmm hmm.”

“So, are you coming down?”

“I’m coming. I was just...” She waved her hands around vaguely and looked towards her bedroom.

“Nice barrettes.”

“They’re bobby pins.” Claire removed the bobby pins and put them on the small table by the door. “They hurt my head.”

“Okay.” He waited a few seconds. “So, are you coming?”

“Now?”

“Yes now. Everyone’s already there.”

“Who’s everyone?”

Aaron sighed. “I can’t say. Patrick wants to introduce you. You’ll see. Come on.”

Claire realized she had forgotten her key on her dresser. When she went to get it, Aaron reached down and picked up the two red bobby pins. He slipped them into his pocket before Claire returned.

...

How to Open Smith & Wesson Model 100 Cuffs with Bobby Pin

1. Peel away plastic covering ends of bobby pin
2. Open bobby pin (bend into straight line)
3. Put end of flat side halfway in keyhole of cuffs and bend to side to make “L” shape
4. Remove and bend short part of “L” into a smaller “L”
5. Insert short bent end into lock and bring down towards edge of cuff (this releases ratchet which opens jaw of cuffs)
6. Replace bobby pin after three uses

...

The lobby was empty, but filled with music muffled by the cinema's red padded door. The music was loud and low and vibrating. Claire and Aaron walked across the dim lobby to the door. Aaron placed a hand on it to push it open, and the music stopped abruptly. When they stepped into the cinema, it was silent. Claire and Aaron paused in the darkness at the top of the theatre, looking down to where a group of people were clustered in front of the lighted stage.

"She's here," someone whispered.

Gently, Aaron pushed Claire forward. She shuffled down the slanted, red-carpeted aisle until she reached the group of people.

No one spoke. There were six people in front of her, and Aaron beside her, but they stood so close together, their overlapping bodies made them seem more numerous. At first glance, there was a head of bright red hair; a thin, swaying torso; a pair of enormous breasts; a thick, veined arm; a tight, smooth face with no expression. And six pairs of eyes that did not seem to blink as they looked her up and down.

Then Patrick appeared from backstage.

"Claire!" he called, and jumped down to drape a long arm around her shoulders.

The people in front of her blinked, then shifted, then finally smiled at her.

"Everyone," Patrick said, "this is Claire."

One by one they stepped forward and introduced themselves: Valérie, who, with a husky voice, spoke English with a French accent that came and went. She was plump, almost fat, and beautiful, with long black hair, red lips and smooth, pale skin interrupted by a silver piercing on her right cheek, where a dimple might be. Owen was enormous,

his body thick with muscle and flesh. He had small, pale blue eyes and hair so blonde it looked white. He had tattoos creeping out of his shirt, up his neck and down his arms. Only partially revealed, they were unidentifiable. Celeste was standing beside Owen and was as thin as he was thick. She ground the toe of her old-fashioned lace-up ankle boot into the carpet and offered Claire a smile that involved only her thin lips, not the rest of her face. Xavier had dark, unfocused eyes and he swayed a little when he was sure he was standing still. He insisted he be called by his full name, which was also his stage name: Xavier Winters. Heather's eyes were restless and did not settle on any face for long. She fiddled with the coins and dice and keys she kept in the deep pockets of her old woolen pants. Kate had bright red hair with dark roots showing along her part. She sipped from a silver flask that, although she never had extra money to spend, she had had engraved with a "K" wrapped in flame.

"Well," said Claire when they had all introduced themselves. "Nice to meet you." When no one said anything, she cleared her throat. "Well," she paused. "I'd better get going, I—"

At that moment, the door slammed open, and Tom padded down the aisle.

"Sorry, sorry," Tom called as he ran. "I'm late! Sorry!"

When he reached the stage, he was out of breath. He beamed at the group standing in front of him. "Hello!" He looked around again. "Hello, hello, hello!" Everyone crowded around Tom to greet him. Valérie kissed his cheek, Kate teased him about his little man vest, Owen gripped him in a bear hug that lifted him off his feet.

"Put me down, you lout," Tom said through giggles, his legs kicking.

"All right," called Patrick. "Let's start." The group split up then; some sat in the

first row of the cinema while Valérie and Owen climbed onto the stage. Owen pulled himself up by the arms, while Valérie took the stairs.

“Claire?” Patrick said. “Can you sit maybe four, five rows back? In the middle? Everyone ready?”

“Wait!” called Tom. “I’ve been working on my speech. I’d like to give it a whirl.”

“Of course,” Patrick said, and gestured to the stage.

Tom bustled up the stairs, patted Valérie on the shoulder, and took center stage. He cleared his throat. He closed his eyes, breathed in deeply, then, as he opened his eyes, cried, “Welcome! Welcome, fellow Houdinites, to the first ever Houdini Tribute Halloween Show at Cinema L’Amour!” He looked down at the audience. “That would be a good moment for you to applaud.” They applauded.

Tom had written the speech in his office, and had been practicing it all afternoon, but he was tired from his grand entrance and was having trouble remembering what he wanted to say. It was supposed to be quite long. He paused, blinked, then decided to skip straight to the conclusion. It was his favourite part anyway. “Prepare to revel in the past! Prepare to turn away from this cold, modern world, and, under the twinkling chandelier,” he paused to point up at the exposed wiring hanging from the ceiling, and Claire shifted uncomfortably in her seat, “honour the golden age of vaudeville!” He lowered his voice to a dramatic whisper when he said, “Houdini was killed in this very room, and on this night, the anniversary of his death, we will pay tribute to him.” He raised his voice again: “We will bring him back!” Tom raised his arm, with his hand circled around an imaginary glass. “To the greatest entertainer who ever lived: The Man No Chains Could Hold, The Genius of Escape, The Supreme Ruler of Mystery, The Handcuff King: Houdini!”

“Houdini!” they all cried. Tom bowed deeply.

By the time he got back to his seat, Tom was exhausted, but beaming. He settled in and waited for the show to start. About half way through, he would fall asleep.

First, Valérie took the stage. She cocked her hip and raised her left arm.

“Music, please, Handsome.”

Patrick disappeared backstage. A few seconds later a sweet jazz line floated on stage. Then, Valérie began mouthing the spoken intro to Eartha Kitt’s *I Want to be Evil*. “*I’ve posed for pictures with ivory soap,*” she mouthed. “*I’ve petted stray dogs and shied clear of dope.*” As she mouthed the words, she walked slowly around the stage, making exaggerated innocent faces—pouts and wide eyes—and pretending to play with a feather boa and. “*My smile is brilliant,*” she continued, flashing the audience a toothy smile. “*My glance is tender. But I’m noted most...*” She stopped in the middle of the stage and shimmied down to a crouching position, “*for my unspoiled gender.*”

Though she was tall and broad, Valérie moved like rubber—durable, but supple. When the horns came in and the song picked up, she began to dance. She bent over, she swayed back up, she lifted her arms and rotated her pelvis. Her piercing flashed under the stage lights. She offered the audience an exaggerated wink as she made the motions with her hands of removing her clothing. She was wearing black yoga pants and a red tank top but she did not take those off. “*I want to be evil, I want to be mad,*” she mouthed. “*But more than that, I want to be bad!*”

“She’ll take most of her clothes off in the real act,” Patrick whispered. Claire jumped. She had not noticed him slip into the seat beside her.

“Sylvie will sew her costume. It’ll have Velcro and stuff to make it easy to take

off. I think she'll probably stick with red and black, but she'll probably have gold pasties."

"Pasties?"

"Oh, yeah. You know." Patrick pointed to his nipples.

"Oh," Claire said.

"She'll probably have some feathers to hide behind then throw off. Or maybe just a feather boa, I don't know."

"I want to be nasty. I want to be cruel. I want to be daring. I want to shoot pool!"

Valérie mimed shooting pool, but she bent down lower than she needed to, and brought her arms in close, to push up her breasts. *"And in the theatre I want to change my seat..."* She cupped her hand as though she were about to tell the audience a secret. *"Just so I can step on everybody's feet!"*

"So?" Patrick asked.

"I've never seen a, um, stripper before," Claire said eventually.

Patrick laughed. "Oooh. Don't say that to her. No, no, no." He laughed again.

"She's a burlesque dancer, not a stripper. It's not the same. Make sure you don't make that mistake in front of her. She seems sweet, but she'll rip your head off if you call her a stripper."

The song slowed down, and Eartha Kitt drew out the syllables as she sang, *"I want to evil! Little evil me. Just as mean and evil as I—can—be—!"*

The song ended with Valérie standing with her legs spread, her arms raised, and her head thrown back as though she were howling. Everyone clapped. She blew kisses and bowed again and again.

...

In 1868, P.T. Barnum brought Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes to America, and Lydia Thompson, the original blonde bombshell, introduced America to Burlesque. Lydia Thompson's biographer, Kurt Gänzl, credits her with "giving general popularity to a superior brand of girlie show with comedy which has remained popular ever since." The Blondes dazzled American theatre-goers with their extravagant props and their saucy costumes. They danced, pantomimed, sang, improvised, told risqué jokes, cross-dressed, and pranced around in revealing clothing, like pink tights. America loved them. They were the most popular troupe in New York during the 1868-69 theatre season. What began as a six-month tour turned into a six-year stay. Not all the British Blondes were actually blonde, but they claimed to be, and American woman began bleaching their hair, an act for which, pre-Blondes, they would have been shamed. Reporters saturated their newspapers with tales of the voluptuous Blondes, who they dubbed the "250-lb beauties," admiring such things as their shapely lines, and their enormous appetites, which they compared approvingly to those of large men. Of course, there were critics. Actress and feminist Olive Logan called them "brazen-faced, stained, yellow-haired, padded-limbed creatures," while Wilbur Story, editor of the *Chicago Times* dared call them "bawds" and "ladies of the evening." In response, Lydia Thompson went to Story's home with her husband, Alex Henderson, her publicist, Archie Gordon, and one of her Blondes, Pauline Markham. While the three held Story, Lydia, pale with excitement, horsewhipped him.

...

Owen went next. He strode to center stage holding a metal rod and a telephone

book. He let the rod fall with a clatter to his feet.

“2007,” he said, holding the phone book above his head. With growl, he tore it in two. He flung the book halves to either side of the stage. He took off his shirt. His chest was covered with tattoos of plump female acrobats in mid-flight. He bent one leg in a lunge and flexed his arms, which swelled one acrobat’s left thigh. When he made his pectorals jump, another acrobat’s breasts heaved up and down. Then he turned around to reveal a large bull’s-eye spanning his entire back.

“Celeste?” he said, and Celeste appeared from backstage with a fistful of darts.

“Oh,” Claire said. “She’s not—”

“Shh. Not now.” Patrick spoke without looking at her. His eyes were fixed on Owen. He bit his bottom lip.

Celeste threw five darts into Owen’s back. With each one he flinched slightly, but not enough to notice from the audience. When the darts struck him they quivered a little. Two fell to the floor after a few seconds. One stuck directly in the center of the bull’s eye and Celeste offered the audience her strange, tight smile. She pulled the darts out of Owen’s back just as she had thrown them: with cold precision, and not a hint of squeamishness. She slipped to the edge of the stage and stood, partially concealed in the thick velvet curtain. Owen faced the audience.

“And finally,” he said, and raised the metal rod. At first nothing happened, but then his arms began to shake, he let out a deep moan and slowly the rod began to bend. He brought the ends together, creating a heart. Celeste slid up beside him and he hung the heart around her neck. He picked her up and placed her on his left shoulder and strode offstage.

...

Eugen Sandow was the most perfectly developed man in the world. Born in Prussia in 1867, he became the father of modern bodybuilding. He started his career as a showman. Producer Florenz Ziegfeld, although better known as “the glorifier of the American girl,” managed Sandow. It was Ziegfeld’s suggestion that Sandow add to his weight-lifting, chain-breaking routine a series of “muscle display performances” during which Sandow simply stood on stage in “plastic poses” to exhibit his perfect muscular development. Audiences loved to watch him onstage, in photographs, or in short films, wearing small, tight trunks and high laced sandals, flexing every muscle in his body. Sandow strove for what he called the Grecian Ideal. He spent time in museums, measuring the proportions of Classical Greek and Roman sculptures. He built himself to match these proportions exactly. He was the first athlete to have such specific dimensions in mind while training. Eventually, he branched out, forming the Institute of Physical Culture, an early bodybuilding gym, and organizing the Great Competition, the first major bodybuilding contest. He also made money off various physical culture publications, such as *Sandow’s Magazine of Physical culture*, or his instructional books *Strength and How to Obtain It* or *Sandow’s System of Physical Training*. He sold exercise devices and dietary products. He was appointed, in 1911, Professor of Scientific and Physical Culture to King George V. He died from a stroke at the age of fifty-eight. Dudley Sargent, a renowned Harvard University physical educator, concluded, after examining Sandow in his prime, that Eugen Sandow was the finest specimen of manhood he had ever seen.

...

“Next,” Patrick called. One by one, they took the stage. Celeste contorted her body in ways both impressive and grotesque. She stared at the audience most of her act with a taunting smile, daring them to watch as she bent over backwards into a bridge, as she pulled her legs around her head. She did not need a costume to show that she was meant to be a spider.

Heather juggled five bean bags, then four batons, and finally three knives. In the air, the knives glinted. One clattered to the floor.

“Shit,” Heather cried, and stuck her finger in her mouth. Patrick leaned forward, but did not get up. He waited a few seconds before calling, “You okay?”

Heather nodded. “They’re not as sharp as they look,” she said, but kept her finger in her mouth and walked offstage.

Next, Xavier Winters walked on stage. He cleared his throat.

“Sword swallowing began in India as early as 2000 BC as an ascetic religious practice of the Fakirs. From there, it spread to China, Greece, Rome—”

“Um, maybe you don’t need the preamble?” Patrick asked gently.

“It’s context,” Xavier Winters said. He looked hurt, but he stopped talking and swallowed a long, thin sword. Next, he took two swords and swallowed them together. “A Sword Sandwich,” he said. He swallowed a wavy sword. Finally, he swallowed a shorter sword and, when he had it completely inserted inside him, bent over and took a deep bow.

By the time it was Kate’s turn to take the stage, she was drunk.

“Kate, let’s get to you next time, okay?” Patrick said. She was about to protest, but Patrick cut her off. “It’s getting late and we want some time to party after, right?”

Kate shrugged and grinned at Heather.

“But we need to see our escape artist first. He’s the main act, after all. Claire,” he said, “could you help Aaron get set up?”

“I...” Claire began. She swallowed. “I, um. I don’t know what to do.”

“He’ll tell you. He just needs a second pair of hands.”

“Why doesn’t someone else—” she began.

“Claire’s going to help you get set up,” Patrick called to Aaron.

Aaron didn’t look surprised. He just nodded.

“Go on,” Patrick said, pushing gently on Claire’s shoulder. She followed Aaron up the stairs then stood half-turned away from the audience as he went backstage. It seemed like ages, but he returned after only a minute or two with a long coil of yellow rope.

“We’ll just do one today. We’ll start with an easy one.”

Aaron was uncharacteristically calm on stage. All of his nervous energy was gone, replaced by careful movement. It was as though something bulky has been stripped away from him, leaving only clear focus. Claire remembered coming across a skeleton on Frank and Marise’s land. Everything had been stripped away then, too. Just the white bones left, and she had had to ask Frank what it used to be. A squirrel, he said, but she had never quite believed him.

“Here,” Aaron said, and handed her the rope. “Tie me up.”

She looked helplessly at him, but he was staring straight ahead. She turned to the audience, but she couldn’t see anyone because the stage lights were shining directly into her eyes. Did they turn them on brighter? She imagined Patrick leaning back in his seat, staring at her. She thought she could hear whispers, giggles. She wanted to shield her

eyes, but considered it carefully first and realized she was sweating so much that she might have dark stains under her arms.

“I,” she began, but her voice cracked and she fell silent. Still Aaron wouldn’t look at her. She tried again, this time in an urgent whisper: “I can’t do this.”

“Sure you can.”

“I don’t know how. I mean, I don’t know any knots.” Her fingers felt fat and immobile. They were slick with sweat.

“Come on, Sweetie,” Valérie’s voice rasped out at her from the darkness beyond the blinding lights. Claire wiped her hands on her jeans. She pictured herself stepping towards Aaron, and then she did step towards Aaron. Slowly, she imagined each movement before she did it. In that way, she managed to crouch down and pick up the rope.

“Start at one end of the rope and work your way to the other. Tie as many knots as you want like. Tie any kind you want.”

Claire crouched on the ground and began tying Aaron’s ankles together. She tied knot after knot. Slowly, the yellow rope climbed up his brown corduroy pants. His legs looked like ground wasps. She skipped his waist; simply looped the rope around that section and began tying knots again when she was past it. He glanced at her briefly, then, and met her eyes with a look that didn’t really say anything, only that he had noticed she skipped his waist.

“Hurry up,” Aaron said eventually. “The audience is getting bored.”

She tried to tie faster, but dropped the coil of rope.

“Look how much rope you still have left to use.” It was true; she was half-way up

his body, but she still had most of the rope left. She started looping it around him and making fewer knots. When she finished, Aaron breathed out deeply. Everyone cheered. They are mocking me, she thought. Because it had taken her so long to do such a simple thing, and she did it like a timid robot, faltering, mechanical. She looked at Aaron, because his was the only face she could see, and he nodded at her.

“Thank you.”

“Come on back, Claire,” Patrick called. “It’s Aaron’s turn now.” Gratefully, she scurried off the stage.

When she sat down next to Patrick, he put his hand briefly on her knee.

“Well done, Claire.” He sounded so sincere, she smiled. When he smiled back she felt a wave of warm calm wash over her. She sunk back a little in her chair and they both turned to watch Aaron get out of her ropes. He wriggled, and turned a little red. His light blue shirt began to darken in places with sweat, but soon, after kicking off his sneakers, he managed to get his feet free. He wriggled for a while longer, then stepped free of the coil of ropes. He bowed deeply and when he straightened back up, Claire was glad to see his unguarded smile was back. Patrick didn’t cheer as enthusiastically as the others, but he clapped a little.

...

“The whole secret,” wrote Houdini in *Magical Rope Ties and Escapes*, “lies in the fact that it is quite impossible to tie a man while in a standing position, with such a length of rope, so that he cannot squirm out of it with comparative ease, if the tying BEGINS AT ONE END OF THE ROPE and finishes at the other.” He continues: “It is the experience of all who have used this tie, that the first few knots are carefully tied, but after a time it

will be found that the rope is being used up very slowly, and they will begin winding it around the body and making very few knots.” Finally, he writes, “If the committee begin to make more knots than suits you, it will be well to swell the muscles, expand the chest, slightly hunch the shoulders, and hold the arm a little away from the sides. After a little practice you will find that such artifices will enable you to balk the most knowing ones.”

...

After Aaron’s escape, they gathered at the front of the cinema. Tom had excused himself, congratulating them on a wonderful first rehearsal, but saying it was time for him to go to sleep.

“You guys were awesome,” Patrick began. “Kate, we’ll get to you next time, okay? You were all great, except...” he trailed off. He turned to Aaron. “Aaron, I know you got out, but,” and he smiled apologetically at Claire, “no offense to Claire, but, that wasn’t exactly the hardest escape, right? Ropes are fine, but you need something more. Agreed?” he asked the group. They mumbled a bit, nodded slightly.

“Here’s what we’re going to do. You and Claire meet me here tomorrow night and we’ll figure out some new ties, okay?”

Aaron shrugged. “Fine by me.”

“Great.”

“But,” Claire began. “I don’t know if I want...”

“Come on, Claire. Just tomorrow,” Patrick pleaded. It surprised her a little, how quickly his face could fall. She breathed deeply, then shrugged. His face brightened just as quickly as it had fallen, and she was back in its warmth.

“Okay,” she said, and everyone cheered. Kate pressed the flask into her hand and

Claire took a tiny sip. They all cheered again. Owen cried “ta da!” as he pulled two full bottles of whisky out of his bag. The cheers got louder; got so loud and enthusiastic that Claire couldn’t help but be pulled along.

The night went on, then, in swirls. She had gotten drunk a few times at home, but drinking there had always been cold and uncomfortable: people drank under bridges, in their parents’ musty basements. Here the lights were low, the room was red and rich, the faces before strange and magnetic. There were no baseball caps shadowing faces but leaving exposed red ears; there were no thinly plucked eyebrows or dirty white parkas with matted fake fur circling pale, carefully bored faces. No cigarette smoke, no dark wood basement siding, no beer fridges humming, no one raiding freezers for frozen pizzas or pogos. Instead, there was Celeste, draped over a seat beside her, showing Claire her beautiful lace-up boots, telling her she could try them on if she wanted; there was Valérie leaning over her, spilling breasts out of her tank top, pinning up Claire’s hair and commenting on her cheekbones; there was Heather trying to teach a giggling Aaron how to juggle with her bean bags; there was Kate laughing as she tossed her shoes in their direction, wanting them to juggle with those instead; there was Owen, leaning over to Celeste, looking enormous beside her, placing his palm against hers to show her just how small she really was; there was Xavier Winters talking to Patrick, so concentrated on what he was saying that he did not realize that Patrick was not listening, because there was Patrick looking at her. Nodding absent-mindedly to Xavier Winters, but smiling at her. She was happy then, with the whisky running through her in that old room that felt like a dream, and those people, who felt like they belonged in that dream. And Patrick, the most beautiful of them all, offering her flashes of his white teeth, of his sparkling

eyes. No man had ever offered her that before. Eventually Kate got one shoe from each of them and Heather juggled them all: Aaron's green Converse sneaker, Owen's enormous white basketball shoe, Celeste's lace-up boot, Heather's yellow ballet flat, Kate's skateboarder shoe, Valérie's stiletto, Patrick's black sneaker, and her own tattered grey sneaker with its stripes that used to be red. Claire stared at the moving circle of footwear. They seemed to last forever up in the air, spinning between Heather's hands, connected. In reality, Heather actually only managed to juggle them for a few seconds. When she dropped them, they all booed and laughed and Kate jumped on her back until they fell into the pile of shoes. Later, Claire would remember that spinning circle of footwear and think, for a fleeting second, that they had cast some kind of spell on her, binding her to them.

Claire drank too much. The whisky turned heavy inside her and pressed down, so that she felt pinned to her seat. It became increasingly difficult to move her head to follow the bounding conversation. Laughing took so much energy. Eventually, her eye lids began to droop and although she managed to keep them open for a few more minutes, they eventually sank closed. She passed out in one of the red seats. She did not notice when Patrick leaned over and picked her up, when, one by one, laughing, the others kissed her forehead, only Aaron shaking his head, no, and backing away. As Patrick carried her to the exit of the cinema they all sang a lullaby to her that increased in volume and somehow ended in howls and laughter and arguments over the lyrics.

Claire woke up when Patrick put her down outside her door. He was holding her up so she was half standing. He shook her a little.

“Claire. Wake up. You're home. Where's your key?”

“Hmm?”

“Give me your key.”

She groaned. She wanted to go back to sleep. Right there, right on the plastic mat outside her door. She had been having perfect dreams. Red dreams with swirls of light.

Patrick sighed. Her key was probably in the pocket of her jeans. He could reach in and get it. He would probably be justified in doing so. Instead, he reached into his own pocket and with a quick glance to see that she had her eyes closed again, drew out a key. He put the key into the lock and her door clicked open. He picked her up again and without looking around her apartment, walked directly into her bedroom. The streetlight outside slanted in between the slats of the blinds. He placed her gently on her neatly-made bed. He thought about closing the blinds to block out the stripes of light, but he liked the way she looked, lying there in a cage of light and shadow. He locked the door behind him on his way out.

When he got back to the cinema, everyone was drooped in their seats. Laughing softly, but no longer as rambunctious. He flopped down beside Valérie and put his head on her shoulder.

“Handsome,” she purred, and rested her head on top of his.

“Sleeping Beauty get home all right?” Kate asked.

“Mmm hmm. She’ll be perfect, you know,” he said. “Once she gets faster, once I teach her a few things, she’ll be perfect.”

“She’s the right size,” added Aaron.

“She’s cute, too,” said Xavier Winters. “Or will be, with some help from Sylvie.”

“Kind of mousy,” said Owen. “Not my type.”

“Well, she’s not a beauty,” said Valérie. “But Bess wasn’t either. Not really. Just petite, nice clothes. We’ll dress her up. She’ll be fine.”

“But Bess was lively,” Owen said. “She was a firecracker.”

“She’s just shy,” Aaron said and his voice was so sharp they all turned to stare at him. Patrick noticed the pale blue veins darkening on his neck.

“She’ll loosen up. She’ll be fine,” Aaron added softly.

“He’s right,” Patrick said. “Besides, we’ve got no one else.”

...

They were performing in Buffalo when Bess suggested a trip through the mist to Canada.

“Just for the hell of it!” she said. Houdini said he wasn’t sure. She rented a limo anyway, and ushered Houdini and one of his assistants, Dorothy Young, into the backseat.

As they drove by Niagara Falls she opened the windows.

“Feel the mist on your face!” she cried.

She leaned out the window, and Houdini tugged on the hem of her dress to pull her back inside.

“Careful,” he said. “I can’t lose you.”

“Oh, you never will,” she said, and patted his knee. She settled back into the seat.

“Do you know, Dorothy, what I was doing when Houdini first laid eyes on me?”

Dorothy did, but she shook her head no.

“I was singing,” said Bess, and she began to sing *Sweet Rosabel*.

“*Rosie, sweet Rosabel, I love her more than I can tell,*” she sang, and Houdini joined in. Their voices carried out the windows and into the misty darkness. “*O’er me,*

she casts a spell, my little black-eyed sweet Rosabel.”

They ate a late dinner in Canada. When they had finished eating, Bess took a sip of her champagne and turned to Dorothy.

“Do you know what I say? Let’s get a bottle of liquor and see if we can smuggle it back home!”

Houdini’s coffee cup clattered into its saucer.

“Are you mad?” he snapped. “Are you crazy?”

Bess took another sip of her champagne. “It’s just a bit of giggle water.”

“Do you realize the publicity we’d have if they caught us smuggling hooch during prohibition? Do you want to ruin me?” He stood abruptly and walked back to the limo. Before she left the table, Bess drained her glass of champagne in one long sip.

“You’ll have to excuse him, Dorothy,” she said, “for being so incapable of fun.”

...

Patrick stayed in the cinema all night. First he paced, then he sat. The rehearsal had gone well enough, he supposed, but he could not fight down the feeling that it was not enough. He wanted something different, not this jocular, clumsy show they were putting on. Kate’s boisterous laugh would start to wear him down soon, he knew. Not to mention what he strongly suspected would turn out to be her drinking problem. He never drank. He had seen his share of destroyed livers in medical school. The problem with most of them was that they did not think enough about their bodies. What effects alcohol had on them, for example, but also how strong and perfect their bodies could actually be if they only tried. They were not pushing themselves hard enough.

Aaron’s rope escape was pathetic. Anyone could have escaped those ties; no one

would pay to see lanky kid squirming around in loosely tied ropes. Aaron, especially, would have to push himself. If he wanted to be Houdini in the show, he would have to work as hard as Houdini had, physically and mentally. Houdini escaped from maximum security prisons, from dozens of handcuffs, from straitjackets. He had trained himself to do things no average person could. At fifty-two years of age, only months before he died, he had stayed in a coffin, submerged in a pool, for an hour and a half. An hour and a half! And here was Aaron, so pleased with himself that he got out of some ropes that were barely even tied around him. And Claire—she fascinated him, moving around like she did, afraid of everything, as though if she moved too quickly, or without thinking about it first, she would shatter. He would have to work with her, too. Maybe tell her, hey, you won't break. Or, maybe he could just show her that. Both of them would need to be pushed further, need to learn to face the things they feared. Houdini believed you could control fear; he stuck needles through his cheeks to prove it. They all needed to realize: normal people did not pay to come watch other normal people bumble around on stage. They wanted to see people using their bodies in amazing ways: tying yourself in knots, breathing fire, swallowing swords, bending metal, bursting free of chains.

And then there was the other side of abnormal: the terrible, the frightening, the grotesque. That was what the show was really missing. A freak show. It was all in the balance: the wonderful, inspiring acts of physical strength and grace, showcasing the best the human body can achieve, seen right alongside terrifying deformities. It was almost like looking at different rungs on the evolutionary ladder. Patrick closed his eyes. He had been trying to avoid thinking about how badly he wanted a freak show, because he knew it was impossible in 2012, but he found it hard, sitting here alone, to put it out of his mind

any longer. He sighed deeply and, although it was uncharacteristic of him, just gave in.

Outside the cinema, a man lures you in with promises of “Monstrous marvels! Chambers of horrors! Human oddities you will never believe!” At the entrance of the cinema, you are greeted by two people of no discernible sex. At first you think they are male because they are so tall and thin, without breasts and hips, but their faces, painted completely white with red lips and perfectly drawn, black, arched eyebrows, are so fine they must be women. They gesture you inside before you have the chance to look for a bulge between their legs. Inside it is dark. So dark that you have to hold on to a velvet rope to feel your way down the aisle. There are tiny lights running along the floor, and by them you can make out the dark shapes of the audience, but just barely. Eventually you manage to find a seat, but it is not easy, and it has taken a few tries, a few stumbles in the dark, a few apologies that are ignored. By the time you sit down, you are rattled.

The band starts up. At first you are bombarded by a loud jumble of sound that almost pins you to your seat. Slowly, you begin to pick out a staggering beat, a dark and sluggish melody line. It is a waltz, but it is not a bright, up-tempo waltz; it is warped, off-kilter. It is coming to you from an old record player. Part of the chaotic noise that assaults you is the scratching of the old needle on the damaged vinyl. Someone walks onstage. The man is short and ugly, stooped and scowling so he looks even worse. The man is an amalgamation of Patrick’s idea of a turn of the century side show caller and a pitiless professor he had for Physiology of Blood at McGill. The man is wearing an old suit and bow tie, both worn and dirty. He clutches a silver tipped cane in his skeletal hand. He scowls at the audience and waits. Slowly, so slowly you don’t realize it is happening, the music has been growing quieter. When the man opens his mouth, you

expect him to have to bellow over the noise, but he speaks softly and you are surprised to find that you can hear him. There is something menacing about his voice; it is low in volume, but it is sharp, too, and dripping with derision.

“You are lucky to be here,” the man says. He does not call them ladies and gentlemen. “My name is Professor Bowes. You are about to witness sights so monstrous you will not be able to look away. You will gasp and cry out in horror, but you will not be able to look away. You will feel embarrassed that you are here, because this is 2012, and we do not do these kinds of things anymore. You will not boast to your friends that you were here. You will not tell them what you saw. But these human curiosities will haunt you for the rest of your lives. You are about to visit a place so far from here, and now, that you may not be able to find your way back home again.” The music screeches to a halt as the needle is ripped off of the record. Professor Bowes leans forward ever so slightly and whispers hoarsely, “But, if you are ready, I will take you there.”

As soon as he utters those last words, the feeble lights go out, all at once, plunging the room into complete darkness. At the same instant, a clip of a black and white movie starts playing. It is projected onto the curtain and the folds in the red velvet distort the images. The picture is so warped it takes you a second to realize what is being played. Some in the audience will recognize it as the climax in Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*. Others will see a beautiful, blond trapeze artist being pursued in the mud and rain by a swarm of mutant humans, their arms, if they have them, reaching up to grasp her. As the clip plays, the trapeze artist's mouth opens in silent screams. The curtains are jerked open, warping the images even more until they are barely recognizable on the wall of the stage and on the faces and bodies of the people now walking slowly into view.

They march out in a slow, straggling line-up, all the archetypes of a classic freak show: the giant is there, the dwarf, the snake charmer, the dog-face boy, the pinhead, the living skeleton, the glass eater, the rubber man, the human windowpane, the human painting, and the fat lady.

The dog face boy steps forward. He has long hair all over his body, except his feet and palms, because he suffers from Congenital Hypertrichosis Lanuginosa. The presence of only four teeth is a result of his partial adontia, which often accompanies the Congenital Hypertrichosis Lanuginosa. But Professor Bowes does not inform the audience of that. Instead, he tells the audience that he found this dog-face boy in the woods of Eastern Russia.

“He was scrounging for berries. He had a small club that he used to kill small animals. He ate them raw; ripped them open with his teeth, of which he has only four.”

One by one the freaks step forward from their huddled group and Professor Bowes tells their story. The glass eater eats glass. The human painting removes all of her clothes to demonstrate that she is completely covered by tattoos. They are arranged to suggest clothing: with sleeves of tattoos that end at her wrists, and the ones on her legs ending at her ankles. Circling her neck is a tattooed décolletage. Next, the fat woman and the human skeleton, who seems closer to death than he does to life, come forward together, holding hands. Professor Bowes tells the audience that they are married, and they kiss.

The fat lady is short, not much above five feet, and she weighs over six hundred pounds. She has Cushing’s disease: a hyperactivity of the cortex of the adrenal glands, which can be fixed, now, by simply removing those glands. She has all the signs of

Cushing's disease: the deposition of fat at the base of the neck—the "buffalo hump"; the moon face; the extreme truncal obesity. Her bust is 85 inches across, and her upper arms have a circumference of over two feet.

And on it goes until Professor Bowes walks abruptly off stage and the lights slam shut and the audience is left in the complete darkness with the taste of a nightmare on their tongues. It takes them a while to leave, partly because they cannot not really see, and partly because they are afraid to face the world again. But when they finally get out into the lit-up streets and find their way home to their warm, bright houses, the first thing they do is go straight for a mirror. Then, standing there in front of their reflections, they smile at themselves and think, thank God.

...

"We didn't lie to you, Folks," the side show caller cries at the beginning of Tod Browning's *Freaks*. "We told you we had living, breathing monstrosities. You laughed at them, shuddered at them, AND YET, but for the accident of birth, YOU might be even as they are."

...

The next day, Claire woke up with a headache, fully dressed on top of her blanket. She remembered everything about the night up until she fell asleep downstairs. She even remembered falling asleep. How the cinema seemed to close in around her like a thick red velvet blanket, into whose folds she let herself be held. But how did she end up here, back in her apartment? She got up abruptly, cringed as a rush of blood hammered at the front of her skull, then walked to the kitchen for a glass of water, the first of the dozens she would drink that day. She located her key in her pocket and blushed at the thought of

someone reaching in there to retrieve it, then slipping it back in after unlocking her door. She had a feeling it must have been Patrick who brought her home. Embarrassment gripped her. It was worse because she felt so physically ill. Unbidden, thoughts of stupid things she may have done or said burst into her mind like flashes of light. Had she told them about her home? About her grungy little house? About her mother who was still grieving for a man who died twenty years ago? For the rest of the day she took Tylenol and cold showers and waited for the sheepishness to pass. As the day wore on, however, she noticed a happier feeling seeping into her. The fact remained she had been included last night. She had not sat at home, alone.

Aaron heard the stream of water from Claire's showers, staggered throughout the day. He tried not to imagine what she might look like in that cascade of water, but he did. After the third shower, he left the apartment.

"Forget something?" Sylvie asked when he entered the lobby of the cinema. He had been there earlier in the morning to clean.

"No."

"Oh."

"Where's Tom?"

"Upstairs."

"Hm," he mumbled, but didn't move. He leaned against her counter. She had been reading that Houdini biography again. Either she was an extremely slow reader or she was reading it for the second, or maybe even third time. He thought she was supposed to be sewing costumes while she worked, but he didn't say anything. She had her finger in between the pages and with her other hand, she tapped impatiently, but apparently

absentmindedly on the counter. He knew she probably wanted him to leave her alone, but he didn't want to. Where else would he go? He was too distracted by Claire in his apartment, he had already cleaned the cinema, and he didn't want to face Tom's dejected look up in his office where he was probably screening some new porno with a name so ridiculous it would take all of Aaron's will power not to laugh. It didn't occur to him that he had the whole city outside of those doors; that he could have done anything there.

"So," he said. "Why didn't you come last night?"

"Oh," Sylvie said lightly. "I didn't think you kids would need me for the rehearsal. I'm not actually *in* the show. I'll have plenty of time to make the costumes."

"Don't you have to measure us or something?"

"I'll have plenty of time," she repeated with a small smile. Aaron amused her. He was like a child in the way he switched so quickly between breathless excitement and all-consuming dejection, or between recklessness and worry. Patrick switched quickly, too, but his changes seemed to run deeper than Aaron's. If Aaron was disappointed or frustrated, it never lasted long and some joyful enthusiasm would be close by, ready to take over at a moment's notice. Patrick's fluctuations, however, did not make her smile.

"Tom fell asleep half way through the rehearsal."

Sylvie shrugged. "I guess he was tired." She opened her book. She smiled gently at Aaron, who looked at her for a minute before getting the hint.

"Oh. Sorry, I interrupted your reading."

"Oh, no. Not at all," she said, but she was already lowering her head to her book. Her black hair fell like a veil over her face and Aaron was gone and she was alone with the book. She was rereading the part about Houdini's mother, Cecilia. Every few days,

she liked to reread that part.

At first Sylvie didn't really like Houdini. When she had first started reading the biography, she found him crass, competitive. A short, stocky man who would do anything to get what he wanted, namely, attention. She didn't like how he boasted, how he could never bow out of anything gracefully. His thirst for fame was tacky. One of his friends claimed he would murder his own grandmother for publicity. He was so American to her, and she meant that in the worst possible sense of the word. She struggled through the biography because it was part of her job, but she did not enjoy it until his mother died and then, suddenly, Harry Houdini became human to her. It was because he had loved his mother so much. It was to her that he turned for approval; it was for her that he made so much money; some might argue it was for her that he became the great Harry Houdini. "I am what would be called a mother's boy," he wrote. "If I do anything, I say to myself I wonder if Ma would want me to do this?" In 1907, in Rochester, he performed his first manacled bridge jump. He threw himself, handcuffed, off of the Weighlock Bridge into the filthy canal. He could have died. It would have been easy to die in such a situation. Yet, in his diary later, all he wrote was "Ma saw me jump!" It sounded a bit absurd, this overwhelming love for one person, but Sylvie understood: Houdini's mother was the person by whom he measured time and space. He was close to her when he was at home, or he was far away from her when he was touring overseas; he saw her just yesterday, or he had not seen her for two years. And when she died she left him adrift in a world that he had never learned to measure by anything other than her. When she is gone, where are you when you have always either been near to her or far from her? What is near and far when she is gone? Houdini wrote to his brother on black bordered stationary, admitting

that Cecilia's death left him bewildered. He wrote, "I am so lonely that I don't know what to do properly." Sylvie knew that feeling well, only she did not have it with her mother, but with Nat, and she had not died, only left. A couple of lines from a Sijo came to mind: "My dreams range the miles to him/ and return weary of travel." She did not know where Nat was, and so it was no wonder that her dreams of her left her exhausted. She was adrift without her, searching for the point against which she would measure her life again. Without her, space was endless and exhausting, and so was time. She closed the book and decided she would go to the next rehearsal. Inside the cinema, she would feel better. She would watch them rehearse the show, think of costumes, and forget.

...

"Well, now you'll have good luck," Cecilia Weisz said, kissing her son. The *Kronprinzessin Cecilie* was looming in front of her and behind Houdini, who was about to board. It was the last German liner to have four smokestacks. Her capacity was 1,741 people, eight less than Beck's Palace Theatre in New York. A first class ticket cost \$2,500, while a third class ticket cost one hundred times less. Cecilia urged her son to get on board; this was not the kind of ship that would wait, even for Harry Houdini.

"One more kiss," Houdini promised, and embraced her again.

The smokestacks filled the air with steam. It was like the ship was sighing, and, despite the paper streamers blowing brightly around them, it made Cecilia melancholy.

"Ehrich," she said in Yiddish, "perhaps I won't be here when you return."

"Ma, you always say that when I go away."

It was true; she did always say that, but he was always gone for so long, and you never knew when God might take you.

The ship blew its whistle and Houdini leaned in to kiss her cheek again. She batted him away with her black-gloved hands.

“Get along, in God’s name.”

To the people standing around them, Houdini quipped, “Look, ladies and gentlemen, my mother is pushing me away from her!”

“No, no,” she said, and pushed him towards the ship. “Return to me in good health,” she said. He reached the deck and turned back again to wave.

“And bring me back some warm woolen slippers!” she cried. “Size six.”

Houdini was on his way to perform for the king of Sweden, at the palace in Stockholm. He had just performed for the princes of the royal family when, at a press conference, he opened the telegram informing him of his mother’s death. She had suffered a stroke, which, before killing her, had paralyzed her and prevented her from speaking. Houdini fainted at the press conference, then woke up weeping.

By telegram, he made a request of his family that went against all Jewish tradition, but they obeyed, and did not bury Cecilia until Houdini made it home to see her one last time. He noticed she had a spot on her cheek and that she looked very small. “Dainty,” he said. He placed a pair of size-six woolen slippers on her chest, and stayed beside her all night. She was buried the next day in Cypress Hill, next to her husband, with her slippers.

The next month, he sailed for Europe again. He wrote to his brother Theo: “As big as this steamer really is my heart hangs over its sides and reaches and ever will reach Cypress Hill.”

...

Claire did not have to work that day, but she found she didn't want to be alone. She thought about going to find Patrick, to thank him for taking her back home, but she realized she had no idea where to find him. He would have to find her. That evening, she descended the stairs to Aaron's apartment.

They sat in his living room, Claire on the couch and Aaron on the floor, leaning against the opposite end of the couch. Before he sat down, though, he took a pair of handcuffs and a thin piece of wire from the window ledge. He tucked the wire behind his ear and looked at her. Claire got up and went to the window.

"Last night," Claire said. "I drank too much."

Aaron shrugged.

But it wasn't just that she drank too much, Claire thought. She tried again. "Last night was just weird."

Aaron shrugged again. "You'll get used to it," he said, but then told himself to stop speaking. He was not supposed to tell her that they had plans for her.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything." He bent over the handcuffs and took the piece of wire from behind his ear.

"What are you doing?"

"Practicing," he said, and began trying to pick the lock. As he worked he talked to her. He told her about Houdini because he couldn't think of anything else that he wanted to say. He told her Houdini hid pieces of metal on his body that he would use to pick his way out of handcuffs, out of prison cells, one time out of a prisoner train heading to Siberia.

“Where would he hide them?”

Aaron shrugged. “There are a few theories. Some people think in his mouth, some in his hair. He had thick, curly hair, great for hiding things in it. I couldn’t do that. Mine’s thinner, and straight. Some people say he carved out a little groove in the bottom of his foot.”

“Gross.”

Aaron shrugged.

“You’d do that?”

“Already working on it,” he said, and started to remove his sock. Before she told him to stop, that she didn’t want to see, Claire caught sight of a bandage on the bottom of his foot. She looked away.

“Do you ever wonder if you’re taking this a bit far?”

“What?”

“This...” she paused, not sure what to call it. “This *thing* with Houdini.”

“If you want to do something well, you’ve got to do it all the time.”

She didn’t answer.

“Don’t you have something like that?”

She frowned and looked out the window. She made a mental list of the things she did. She drew birds; she took care of her mother, until she didn’t; she heard increasingly exaggerated stories about a man who mustn’t have been that great if he was crazy enough to kill himself to save a dog; she went to school and tried not to be noticed; she spent all of her energy trying to make her days uneventful, and her mother’s pain padded and not so immediate; at night she made ridiculously close and useless examinations of the sky as

it darkened, and, when she couldn't sleep, when it lightened again.

When Claire turned back from the window, Aaron was looking at her. He had forgotten about the cuffs in his hand. A casual question had changed Claire's face into an expression of bewilderment and misery. He felt himself blushing at having provoked such a reaction. He was always saying the wrong things, or, even if he said something fairly benign, he would say it to the wrong person, at the worst possible time. He put aside the handcuffs. Then he picked them up again and held them up to her because he didn't know what else to do.

“Want to try?”

Her eyes when she looked back at him were unreadable, and he thought, there are some things you could not unlock, no matter how hard you tried.

To his surprise Claire shrugged and sat down next to him on the floor. She took the cuffs from him and listened patiently as he explained the basic mechanisms of a lock, and told her how, with just a piece of wire, you could spring them free.

...

There are many reasons for Harry Houdini's fame, one being the mystery that surrounded him. The day after his death, the *Long Beach Press Telegram* wrote, “Houdini Keeps His Secrets: Tricks Go to Grave with Magician.” About how he came to be interested in picking locks is one of those mysteries. Houdini was never clear, not because he didn't talk about it; rather, he talked about it too much, and changed his story depending on the occasion. “My ancestors were locksmiths and I followed the calling of a professional locksmith for some years,” he stated. In another story, he claimed he knew how to pick locks because his mother knew how to bake delicious pies: “No matter

where she hid the pies, I always managed to discover the hiding place. And so she tried locking them up. But I opened the locks without any difficulty. That is how I began my career.” Finally, in another account, a horse stepped on his hand when he was nine, which sent him to the hospital where, to fight off boredom, he opened and closed a pair of double ratchet cuffs a warden had used to bring in an insane man. “The click of the lock amused me,” he declared.

How Houdini learned to actually open the locks, he never explained. He collected hundreds of locks and took them apart to see how they worked. All he would say is that the secret was his “photographic eyes” that allowed him, upon seeing a lock, to see “a vision of the key, just like photographed in my mind, which was of much importance to me in preparing for the opening of the lock.” In an interview with the *Keith News*, Houdini answered the question of “The secret of your power lies in the fact that you are probably the most expert locksmith in the world, does it not?” with “Practically, yes. There is no fake about it. I can open locks, that’s all.”

...

The next day, Claire was sitting at the counter, drawing, when Aaron came bounding in.

“Hey,” he said.

“Have you been running or something?” He was breathing heavily.

“Yes,” Aaron replied. That morning, Patrick had appeared at the cinema while Aaron was finishing cleaning. He was holding a pair of running shoes in his hand. “Let’s go,” he had said, and would listen to none of Aaron’s protests. They ran up the mountain. Aaron did not tell Claire this, because he didn’t want to admit that at the end of their run,

he had bent over and vomited. Patrick had not said a word, just stared at him before walking away.

“I have a question for you,” Aaron said now to Claire.

“Okay.”

“Well, maybe it’s more of a request.”

“All right.”

“Actually, maybe it’s sort of like a job?”

“Just ask,” she said with a sharpness in her voice that she did not intend. It bothered her that she was able to speak so sharply to him, and no one else. There was something about his frenetic energy, his bounding enthusiasm, that made her want to smother it, just a little; it was an impulse she was not proud of and that she couldn’t quite understand. She just liked him better when he was calm. But he didn’t seem to notice the sharpness, and barrelled on.

“We need posters. Advertisements for the show.” He and Patrick had discussed it at the beginning of their run, when Aaron still had enough air to speak.

“So?”

“So. You draw, right?”

She looked down at the sketch book that was lying open in her lap. She was still working on the black-necked stilt. She was starting to hate its ridiculous neck.

“Sylvie told me you draw.”

She nodded.

“So, can you draw us some posters?”

“Oh, I don’t know how to do that.” Because I only copy birds out of books, she

wanted to add, but was embarrassed to admit the limits of her skill, the limits of her imagination.

“Let’s see.” Aaron reached out and took the book. “Look at that, a bird. It’s nice. You’ll be fine.”

“Aaron—”

“Besides, you’re the closest thing we’ve got to a visual artist around here. And we can’t afford to hire someone.”

He turned the page in her sketchbook before handing it back to her. She looked down at the new blank page.

“Time to switch gears.”

She looked up at him.

“No more birds,” he said, and smiled at her. When he was halfway out the door, he called over his shoulder, “Maybe have some sketches for tomorrow?”

Claire considered forgetting Aaron’s request. Just not doing it. But, half an hour later, Patrick came into the lobby, holding a yellow folder under his arm.

“Ah, the artiste. I’ve got something for you.” He laid the folder on the counter. “Curious?”

She just looked at him, so he opened it. It was filled with prints of old Houdini posters and playbills. One by one, he rotated them to face her. They looked at them silently for a few minutes.

“I guess there’s one commonality that you might want to copy.”

“What’s that?”

“‘Houdini’ written in huge block letters. And a lot of superlatives. And

exclamation marks. And underlining.”

“Oh, and I almost forgot,” Patrick said as he was about to leave. He pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket. “Here’s the rest of the info that needs to be put on the poster. Aaron and Tom made you a list.”

When he left, Claire opened the paper. It was written in a messy scrawl.

1. Location: Cinema L’Amour (Where he was punched!)
2. Time: 8 pm
3. Date: Halloween (Anniversary of his death!)
4. Cost: \$20 (A great deal!)
5. List other performers, too: Owen Atlas (not actually his last name, but pretty good, hey? You probably know already, but Atlas held the world on his shoulders...), Va Va Valérie (Like Va Va Voom!), Hannie Oakley (Like Annie Oakley + Hannah. I (Aaron) like that one best), just Xavier Winters, and I haven’t thought of names for the others yet...

At the end of the note, Aaron wrote, “Claire, the names have not been approved yet. Maybe wait to put them in...” Then, on the next line, he wrote, “But do you like them?!”

Despite herself, Claire smiled. She looked through the posters again. She made a list of the phrasing:

1. CINEMA L’AMOUR PRESENTS...
2. GRAND SPECIAL NIGHT!
3. THE WORLD FAMOUS SELF-LIBERATOR!
4. THE SUPREME RULER OF MYSTERY!

5. THE BIGGEST, COSTLIEST SHOW EVER GIVEN IN (Cinema L'Amour)!
6. THE GENIUS OF ESCAPE!
7. WILL STARTLE AND AMAZE!
8. VAUDEVILLE'S GREATEST ACT!
9. ALSO STARRING...
10. THE GREATEST ENTERTAINER OF ALL TIME!
11. HANDCUFF KING AND PRISON BREAKER!

That night, after work, Claire rushed back upstairs to her apartment. She took out the posters and began drawing. When she discovered she needed more images than the posters Patrick had given her, she raced down to Aaron's and demanded that he lend her his posters. He looked at her sleepily.

"Why don't you just draw here?"

She shrugged. "It's better upstairs."

He sighed and took down the posters, rolled them into a tube.

"Here you go," he said through the tube. She felt a spark of irritation. Why couldn't he just hand her the posters? She took the posters from him and raced back upstairs. At 3 am, she turned her clock away from her. She found it was not so hard to draw something. It was like the birds. You just looked at them for long enough and you could change them into lines. It was not so much drawing that she was good at as it was seeing. She thought about her mother and how she used to look at things and not see them. She studied Houdini's face and mapped it onto the paper in front of her. There was something intimate in drawing his jawline, of shading in the parting of his lips. The only problem she had was capturing the intensity of the eyes. In one she actually tried drawing beams

coming out of his eyes, but she crumpled that up and threw it into the corner. She drew Houdini but then she also drew pictures of handcuffs. There was one poster she tried to copy with a drawing of a young Houdini standing in the center of the image. He was wearing a black tuxedo with his sleeves rolled up to accommodate the five handcuffs encircling his arms. His ankles were also chained. He was bending forward slightly as though the chains on his arms are pulling him down, but his gaze was unflinching and impassive. The background was bright red. Circling the poster were disembodied hands wearing handcuffs. There were eight pairs of hands, four on each side, for the eight different models of handcuffs displayed in the picture. At the top, it said, "Europe's Eclipsing Sensation" and underneath that, in huge block letters: "Houdini" and under that, in slightly smaller letters, "The World's Handcuff King and Prison Breaker." At the very bottom of the poster, under Houdini's feet, was a quotation: "Nothing on earth can hold HOUDINI a prisoner." She tried to draw the hands in the poster, but found they were not clear enough to copy well. She tried using her left hand as a model, but that didn't work either. She knocked on Aaron's door again. It was starting to get light outside. After a few minutes she knocked again. He opened it, wiping the sleep out of his eyes.

"Claire," he whined.

"I need another favour."

"It's late. Early. I don't even know what time it is."

"You need to model for me."

His eyes lit up and he smiled a half smile. "Hmm," he said. "I seem to remember asking you the same question once upon a time."

She sighed.

“What did you say again?”

“Aaron, come on, it’s for the show.”

He laughed. “Okay, okay. I was having weird dreams anyway.”

“Oh,” she said, “that’s surprising.”

When Claire finished the sketches for the posters, she brought them to rehearsal.

Patrick studied them for a few horribly long seconds. Then, his face broke into a grin and he looked up at her.

“Awesome,” he said, and she soared; her heart took off and dipped and dived overheard. He passed them around to the rest of the performers, who echoed his appreciation, and Claire thought her heart would never come back into her chest, where it belonged.

“Those are my hands, did you know,” Aaron said proudly. Celeste got him to hold up his hand next to the picture.

“I never realized you had such long fingers.”

“They’re very pretty,” added Valérie.

Aaron blushed. “They’re not *pretty*,” he insisted.

“Oh yes they are,” Kate jumped in. “What do you wash them in milk or something? Feel how soft they are.” They all laughed and grabbed at Aaron’s hands, which he held above his head, half-heartedly protesting.

“Alright,” Patrick said. “Let’s get to work.”

“Feel them, Patrick,” Valérie said, giggling.

Patrick glanced at Aaron’s hands. They were long and white, fluttering at the ends

of his long, thin arms, over his tousled black hair. His voice was rougher when he said, “I said let’s get to work.”

They drifted to their seats.

“These posters are great, Claire,” Patrick said. “Really. We’ll get copies made soon. Any other ideas for advertising?”

Xavier Winters suggested an article for the Montreal Gazette. He could write a brief, but quite thorough, history of Houdini. Valérie said she would tell everyone who came into the restaurant where she waitressed.

“I could get them to promise to come instead of leaving a tip?”

“No, no,” Patrick said with a laugh. “Don’t do that. But spread the word for sure. Everyone has to spread the word.”

“I’ve got some ideas,” Aaron said. “Stolen from the best self-promoter who ever lived: Harry Houdini himself.” He cleared his throat. “First, a straitjacket escape from outside a newspaper office.”

“I’m not sure you’re up for that yet,” Patrick said, and everyone murmured their agreement.

“Okay,” admitted Aaron. “Maybe not yet, but I’ll work up to it. Anyway, I have other ideas. Second, jump off the Jacques Cartier bridge, handcuffed.”

“Honey,” crooned Valérie, “we can’t have you killing yourself.”

Aaron sighed. “All right, all right. I’ll work up to that, too. But here are some we could do right away. We all carve the bottoms of our shoes.” Everyone just looked at him. “Like a stamp. That says Houdini? You guys didn’t know he got people to do that? Anyway, then when we walk around, we end up stamping his name all across the city. We

step in paint first, of course.”

“Of course,” said Patrick, and Owen started to laugh.

Aaron ignored them. “And the next thing we do is hire seven bald men to—” Kate hooted, and Aaron had to raise his voice. “To paint letters on their heads. Seven letters H-O-U-D—”

“We know how to spell his name,” Patrick interrupted, but Aaron continued, glaring at Patrick as he finished: “I-N-I. They sit in a café, or maybe a park bench would be better, with hats on, and then when people walk by they take off their hats one by one.” He mimed a man doffing a hat.

Everyone was laughing, and Claire had to join in. Aaron turned red.

“I see why it’s funny, but he did it. For real, he did it.”

“Let’s stick with the posters for now,” Patrick said, and so they did. Aaron never got to hire his bald men, never got to make stamps out of their shoes.

...

When Houdini was rising to fame, advertising was becoming a source of entertainment in itself. It was an art Houdini studied carefully. He owned a well-used copy of Henry Sampson’s *History of Advertising from the Earliest Times*, and went out of his way to befriend people like circus press agent Kit Clarke, who is said to have invented the alliterative advertising paragraph. He had a file box labeled “Advertising Schemes,” in which he kept such things as ideas for booklets on “How to Bring up Children.” “Bring them up to see Houdini performances!” the inside of the booklet cried. He produced a Houdini mascot for children and a decal that they could stick on their windows. He also borrowed the advertising techniques of circus leaders, who would

plaster an entire town with posters to announce their arrival. Houdini called this “mammoth advertising.” In a seven-month tour of England, he used up 36, 000 advertising sheets. A German newspaper called him *Der Napoleon der Reklame*, the Napoleon of advertising, while Houdini called himself “the best advertised man that ever crossed the Vaudeville stage in Europe.” He routinely ran full-page ads which screamed his name, underlined, in bold capitals, with at least one, but usually three, exclamation marks. He did not shy away from hyperbole: “ONE OF THE GREATEST MAGICAL FEATS SINCE BIBLICAL TIMES,” one ad cried. His colorful lithographs were truly works of art that showed him triumphing over a host of oppressors: chains, bars, menacing police officers, robots, even giant green monsters.

...

The next thing on Patrick’s list was costumes. It seemed to be on Sylvie’s mind, too, because when he walked into the lobby the next day, Sylvie looked up from her book.

“I’m ready to measure them,” she said.

That night, Sylvie stood on stage as one by one the performers walked up to her to be measured. She had a pencil stuck in her bun and she took this down to record their measurements in neat columns in her brown notebook. For short measurements she used the tattoo on her finger, touching them gently with her smooth skin. For longer ones she used her tape measure. It was an old one her mother had given her. It was a tarnished silver cylinder with a small button you could press to draw the tape back inside. There was a small loop that she had passed ribbon through— black ribbon, so it would match with everything—which allowed her to wear it around her neck. She pulled it out quickly

with a satisfying slipping sound, then stretched it across the bodies one by one. When she registered the number, she would let it go and it would snap back into its case. It dangled with a comforting heaviness around her neck as she recorded the measurements. She kept an impassive face as she worked, only raising her eyebrows slightly at the size of Valérie's chest and then again at the smallness of Xavier Winter's throat. She had assumed it would be wider.

As Sylvie worked, the crowd was quiet. Gone was their usual boisterousness. Maybe the costumes made them realize how fast Halloween was approaching. Or maybe they were nervous at having their bodies measured on stage, in front of everyone else.

"Please don't flex," Sylvie had to say to Owen as she was measuring his arms.

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"I can't help it."

"Please try."

By the time she had measured everyone, she knew they would need better lighting. There was a row of lights above the stage, hanging from a balcony rail, and footlights along its edge, but all the footlights were burnt out, and only a few of the lights above the stage still worked. Standing under those lights to measure the performers, she knew they would not be enough for the show. Shadows were dangerous, she knew. Used incorrectly and they could lose an audience; regardless of how good the show was, dim lighting could make an entire audience fall asleep in just a few minutes. The realization that she was going to have to do something about the lighting made her stomach sink, but she knew it was inevitable, and she was a little surprised she had not realized this before.

The show would not be the same without proper lighting and, most important to her, her costumes would not be the same. She refused to have her hard work ruined by the absence of a proper lighting designer. She lifted her chin stubbornly and decided that she would do it. She could do this without Nat.

When they had been measured, the performers left. Sylvie, Tom, Patrick and Aaron stayed behind.

“What about Claire?” Sylvie asked. “Why isn’t she here to be measured?”

“Well,” Aaron said, “she doesn’t really know yet, that we, um, need her.”

“She hasn’t agreed to help yet,” Patrick added. “Because we are waiting for the right time to ask her.”

“Well, you better ask her soon,” Sylvie warned. “Because I need some time to make her costume.” She was realizing how little time they had. She would have to work nights.

“Patrick will ask her,” said Tom. He had also been measured, though he wouldn’t be on stage. Patrick would introduce the show, but Tom would be part of it nonetheless. He planned on greeting people as they came in. He planned on saying things like “Welcome! Welcome to our humble establishment!” He would even try to sneak in a “Step right up!” He wanted a gold suit, but Sylvie had talked him down to a gold vest. The suit then, he insisted, should be red. He wanted bright red, but Sylvie again convinced him a dark red would be better. “Carmine,” she had said, and he liked the way it sounded so he nodded, yes, though he had no idea what shade that was.

“Why Patrick?” said Aaron. He tried to lift his voice into friendly curiosity, but he sank lower in his seat when he heard his question come out as a petulant whine. Sylvie

raised her eyebrows.

“Because people say yes to Patrick,” Tom said, and Aaron knew that he was right. That it was as simple as that.

“Well, ask her soon,” he said, and stood up to leave.

“It’s all under control,” Patrick assured him. He would ask the very next chance he got. He had noticed just the right amount of longing in her eyes when she watched the other performers laughing and talking together. Also, he had noticed the way something seemed to fall away from her face when she looked up at him, like a thin layer had been lifted, and she was showing him a little more than she showed anyone else. She trusted him. He knew that look, had seen it many times before. And there was also something else that was happening. She moved differently in the cinema than she did before. It was a subtle change, but he was looking for it so he had noticed it as soon as it occurred. It happened to all of them. At first, people moved hesitantly, jerkily, but the more time they spent in the cinema, the more comfortable they became. Comfortable, but at the same time excited. Claire had stopped looking at the posters in the lobby and she had stopped noticing the men she sold tickets to, but when those men opened the door to enter the cinema she looked at that. She looked at the door until it closed again, and then she stared at it just a few seconds longer. Like all of them, she wanted to be inside.

Patrick dropped in on Claire at the beginning of her next shift. He leaned against the counter.

“How much do you know about the show we’re planning?”

She shrugged. “A little.”

“Well, you’ve seen us rehearse. You know the acts.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what it’s all about?”

She offered him something in between a nod and a shrug that he assumed would be the closest he would get to a yes, but he told her everything anyway. How they all thought it was time to return the cinema to the place it once was.

“Imagine what it looked like new,” he instructed. “Imagine the red carpet redder and thicker, the walls smooth and freshly painted, and a beautiful chandelier hanging from the ceiling.” He piled on the details, layers of them, until Claire found she could imagine it. She could even smell the newness of it: the fresh paint, the new carpet smell, and the absence of age. Gone was the scent of urine that sometimes assaulted her when she first walked in, of the layers of grime and dust.

“And the audience,” Patrick continued. “Imagine families in there, nice respectable families. It was the highlight of their week to come here. They looked forward to it. Imagine a roomful of excited people, of all ages, excited, happy, just bursting to see the show.” Claire couldn’t help but smile at the thought of the cinema full. It would have been so different then from what it was now—this scattering of lone men, their excitement palpable, but of a different kind; a kind that, when she really thought about it, disgusted and scared her. Then Patrick described what a typical vaudeville show would look like, and she found that she could not imagine that, but pictured instead the rehearsal she had been to. She imagined Valérie, Kate, Heather, Xavier Winters, Owen, Celeste. But when Patrick started to describe Houdini’s act, she didn’t think of Aaron; she thought of Houdini. It was strange how easily he came to mind. How vivid he was in her thoughts. It could be she pictured him so well because Aaron had showed her those films

and photographs of him, and because she had drawn him over and over the night before. But she found she could even imagine what his voice would sound like, and Aaron had never played her any recordings. She was not even sure such a thing existed, but she could hear him speaking loudly, slowly, clearly.

“Claire?” Patrick interrupted her thoughts and she turned to him. “Will you join us? Be our Bess?”

She hesitated only slightly before nodding, yes.

The next few weeks passed quickly. When Aaron thought about the show, he pictured it as a train full of people, leaving a station. Claire was late arriving, but when she did show up, she ran beside the train, holding her hat on her head with one hand, waving at them with the other—Wait for me! The train was moving slowly and they grabbed her hand and pulled her up to them. Once they had her safely inside, the train picked up speed, charging out of the station in a blast of whistle and steam. It would not stop until they reached their destination. Their destination was temporal, not physical, and they sped towards October 31st without looking back.

Patrick took charge, but he did so so naturally, no one objected to it, or really even noticed. As the owner of the cinema, it was supposed to be Tom’s project, but he was too unreliable to be in charge of much. Some days he could barely contain his excitement that it was happening, while other days he was completely dejected because it was not happening fast enough, or because he had a feeling that it might never happen; that something terrible might get in the way. His nerves got increasingly frayed, and most days he found it easiest to retreat to his office until the cinema was empty and he could sit

in it alone and dream.

At first, Patrick held rehearsals three times a week, but he soon increased that to every second night, and then, as September turned into October, every night. No one thought to complain. He did not apologize for taking up their lives with the rehearsals, and so he gave them no room to accept or reject it. Besides, they were not thinking about their personal lives anymore; they were thinking about the show. Every day it took up more space in their minds. Houdini occupied their thoughts like he occupied the cinema—as a memory that increased in clarity until you began to lose the distance that usually separated the real from the remembered. It was almost as though when the performers closed their eyes, they were closing red curtains; when they woke up in the morning, they were turning on the stage lights. They thought of everything as a performance. When Valérie dropped her change at the dépanneur, she bent down then swept up with the coins in her hand as though she were dancing. A man behind her even applauded. Heather juggled everything: oranges, keys, her brother's abandoned bottles of anti-depressants, Kate's tampons. Kate picked up Houdini's book *On Deception*, the first book she had read in five years, and copied out some quotes on her bedroom wall: "No performer should attempt to bite off red-hot iron unless he has a good set of teeth!" Sylvie, too, started to slip into the welcoming dream of the cinema. In the few groggy moments when she first woke up, she found herself thinking of Cinema L'Amour, not Nat. Those were triumphant mornings, and she gloated over her latté on the way to work, her mind spinning with lace and sequins and buttons and thread.

Claire was being pulled along, too. Every night, she, Aaron and Patrick stayed in the cinema after everyone had left to practice the escapes. Aaron and Patrick patiently

took her through all the knots she would need to know. They taught her how to make a skeleton key out of a piece of wire. Aaron told her about all of the different kinds of locks, all the different ways of opening them. And each night ended in Claire watching Aaron get free. She always left with a feeling of relief, of space, of limitless possibility. She always left the cinema alone; Aaron and Patrick stayed later. She assumed they stayed to practice more tricks, but she never asked them exactly what tricks they practiced. She never thought of it. She was thinking only about the happy click the handcuffs made just before Aaron took them off his arms. She was thinking about the praise they piled onto her. About what a good assistant she was. And about Houdini's footsteps in the cinema, and how she might just be walking on top of them.

One day, Claire came home to find a note taped to her front door. She recognized Aaron's messy scrawl. "Hi Claire. Can you come down to my place at six? Exactly six? Please and thanks!"

At 6:00, Claire walked downstairs to Aaron's apartment.

"Aaron?" Claire called quietly and tapped on his door. It was open a crack and she made sure not to knock hard enough to push it open. She didn't hear anything so she called his name a little louder.

"Come in! Come in!" he called, and she pushed the door open.

"In here!" he called, and she followed his voice to the bedroom.

"God!" she exclaimed as soon as she saw him. He was lying in bed completely wrapped in white sheets and tied to the bed with yellow rope. Only his head was visible. His hair was wet and his face was an unhealthy white, almost as white as the sheets. The yellow ropes snaked over his wrapped body and disappeared under the bed. Claire

walked hesitantly into the room. She stood at his side. His face was drenched in sweat. He was shivering. Claire thought she was used to seeing Aaron tied up, but this felt different. Usually, she just tied his wrists and ankles, and she did that fairly loosely. This, though, was a full-body restraint, and it looked painful. It also disturbed her that he was tied to a bed, or maybe it was that he wasn't in the cinema.

“Aaron, what are you doing?”

“I'm not doing anything right now,” he snapped. “I can't fucking move.” She stepped back.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...” He sighed. “I just really wanted to be able to get out of this.”

“Who did this?”

“Patrick. But I asked him to.”

Claire tried to fight down the whiney question that was surfacing in her throat, but it came out anyway. “Why didn't you ask me?” Wasn't she supposed to be his assistant?

He didn't answer.

Claire looked him up and down. The sheets were soaking wet, the ropes too. There were a few puddles around the bed and a large red mop bucket sitting at the foot of the bed.

“Why are you all wet?”

“It's part of the thing.”

“Patrick tied you up and threw cold water on you?”

“It was hot water. But now it's cold.”

“Okay.” She paused. “Well, where's Patrick, then?”

“He left.”

“Oh.”

“That's why I asked you to come down at six. You know, in case I couldn't...” He looked away, as far as his bound neck would allow him. “Shit.”

“When—” Claire started but Aaron interrupted her.

“Look, Claire, I don't need all these questions, okay?”

“Of course. How stupid of me to want to ask questions.” Claire raised her voice, suddenly angry that she was here, being made to feel like she was the weird, annoying one, when obviously it was him. And, if she was going to be honest, angry, too, that she had been left out.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. The light outside was fading, but Claire didn't move to turn on the lamp. Finally she broke the silence.

“Your mattress is going to get mouldy.”

He took a deep inhale and exhaled slowly. When he spoke, his voice was calm.

“Would you just help me out of here?”

She knelt beside him. She looked him up and down once then crawled under his bed to start working on the ropes. They were swollen with water and she struggled to untie the knots.

“I can't get them undone.” She called up to Aaron.

“Keep trying.”

Finally she managed to work one free. Then she lay on her back. She was lying directly under him. She placed her head where his head would be, and she looked up at the slats under the bed. She still had two more ropes to untie, but he could wait. She

imagined him right above her, silent and helpless in his wet cocoon. The floor was dusty. She felt tired, suddenly, childishly so, and she could have fallen asleep under the bed with Aaron lying quietly above her.

“How's it going down there?”

“Fine.”

“You know, I know you stopped working.”

“What?”

“The ropes are still. I can tell you stopped untying them. Can you do the next knot, please?”

“Sorry.”

She shifted under the bed and started on the second knot. She wished she had fingernails. Wished she hadn't chewed them all off.

“Couldn't we just cut them off?”

“Those are good ropes, Claire.”

“Oh.”

Eventually she undid the last knot. She crawled out from under the bed. The ropes still lay across Aaron's body. She picked them up. Her fingers touched the sheet he was wrapped in. It was clammy and cold. The corners of the room were dark, but the air was glowing strangely in that way it does right before the last of the light is sucked out of the day.

“Now what?” Claire asked.

“The sheets.”

“Can you sit up?”

“No. I can’t bend at all.”

“Well, how am I supposed to...”

“Just roll me, I guess.”

She reached out tentatively and placed her hand on his shoulder. She pushed gently, but he didn't move. She knelt beside his head and used both arms to push him onto his side. Even after tying his wrists and ankles all those times at rehearsal, she still found it strange to touch him, especially in his bedroom. She tried limiting her touch to his shoulder, but that only moved the top half of his body, and she ended up having to hold his shoulder with one hand as she used her other to push on his waist. Once he was on his side it was easy to push him over onto his stomach. She knelt on the edge of the sheet so that as he moved, it peeled off him.

“I can't brth,” Aaron mumbled and Claire quickly rolled him onto his other side.

“I can’t roll you again or you'll fall off the bed.”

“Oh.”

“Try standing up. I'll help you.” With only a slight hesitation, and a deep inhale, she wrapped her arms around Aaron's chest and dragged him slowly, clumsily, until he was lying sideways across the bed.

“Now what?”

“Um.” Claire studied him for a while. To get him standing up, she would have to touch him much more than she had been touching him up to this point. It was just the sheet, but for some reason, she couldn't get the thought of his body underneath the sheet out of her mind. His skin would be cold and wet. She imagined it might look like the skin under a recently removed Band-Aid. All white and puffy, soft and damp. She suddenly

longed to run out of the room and leave him there. Patrick would come back for him. Besides, it was his fault for putting himself in these situations. Why should she help him out of it, when she wasn't even the one who had put him into it?

“Claire?” he said as though he had read her mind, “I appreciate this, you know.”

She sighed. She took a deep breath and inched her way onto the bed. She took hold of his shoulders and, half-lifting him, half shimmying herself forward on the bed, she wedged herself underneath him. His torso was now in between her legs. She hooked her knees over the edge of the bed and pulled with her legs to move them both further to the edge. Eventually, she got them so that his legs were stretched out with his feet on the floor. She stayed behind him, sitting with her legs spread over the edge of the bed. She had her arms around his waist. The room was silent. She could feel him breathing against her. Her heart was pounding—from the physical exertion—in her chest, against his back.

“Okay. On three I'm going to push you up. Use your legs. Try to get your balance.”

His voice was strangely quiet and thick when he answered. “Anything you say.”

“One. Two. Three.” She shoved with all her strength and managed to get him almost standing. But then he wavered dangerously, and even though she stood up quickly and threw both arms around his middle, she could not stop him from falling. Attached to him as she was, she fell too. They lay next to each other on the floor, slightly stunned. Then Aaron began to laugh.

“I'm sorry,” he wheezed, and for the first time in a long time, Claire started to laugh too. She found once she started, she couldn't stop. And every time she thought she was about to get herself under control, she would look over at Aaron in his cocoon and

start laughing again. He looked so ridiculous.

“Okay,” he said eventually. “I’m freezing. Please get me out of here.”

She rolled him across the bedroom floor, peeling the sheet off as they made their slow progress. She got the first sheet off.

“God. The bottom sheet, too?”

“Yeah. Patrick’s pretty thorough.”

It was almost dark by the time she reached the end of the last sheet. It was so much like a bandage that she half expected to see a gash in his skin when she took the last bit of sheet away. Instead, it was thin Aaron in a white T-shirt and sweat pants, shivering next to his stripped bed, standing in his pile of wet sheets. As soon as he was free, he wrapped his arms around himself, and for the first time Claire wondered about his family—did he have one? They had both stopped laughing.

“Thanks.”

“Sure.”

Claire turned and walked out. When she left, Aaron paced his room. That night he took a hot shower and slept on his couch. He slept terribly. His legs were too long. Sometime in the middle of the night, he moved to the floor and looked up at the ceiling. He pictured Claire's living room directly above him. The rag rug he had given her, and maybe, because it was a warm fall, her white curtains over an opened window, shifting.

...

Houdini only performed the wet sheet escape a few times. It wrenched his muscles too much; he claimed it was “dangerous to [his] health.”

Insane asylum attendants surrounded him, winding white sheets around him so

that when they were finished he looked like a mummy. Only his head remained uncovered. Next, they tied him thoroughly to an iron hospital bed. Finally, they doused him in twenty buckets of hot water to make the sheets and knots shrink. “It was the most realistic challenge I ever presented,” he claimed. He did not disappear behind a cabinet, but struggled in full view of the audience. It was not a good trick: it was much harder than it looked. He had to strain his muscles and contort his body into the most painful positions. “The audience never knows whether the stunt is hard or easy,” he complained. In the end, it was really not worth the effort.

...

One night, after the other performers had gone, Patrick said to Aaron, “All right, Houdini, you’ve got your Bess now. Why not try their most famous trick?”

Aaron shrugged. “Why not?”

“Claire?” Patrick said.

They spent the next hour telling Claire about Metamorphosis. Out of all of Houdini’s tricks, they said, Metamorphosis depended most on speed, agility and, most of all, teamwork. Claire nodded, although she did not really consider herself to possess any of those qualities. But as they told her about Metamorphosis, she found she wanted desperately to possess those qualities because of all the tricks, Metamorphosis really did seem like magic to her.

...

In the center of the stage stood a magician’s cabinet, about seven feet high and ten to twelve feet wide. The cabinet had three solid walls and an open front across which a curtain could be pulled. Also on stage was a large steamer trunk. It was a regular trunk

made of wood and with a clasp, but it sat on wheels and there was a row of holes near the bottom to let in air. When Houdini strode onstage, with short steps that he somehow made look long, he was wearing a tuxedo, but it was a little too large and, though most people in the audience would not have been able to tell, there was a smear of egg yolk on the left breast of the jacket. But, he had a red carnation in his lapel, and was walking with his arms raised, beaming, so that was all anyone saw. With only a little preamble, a little boasting, Houdini called for Bess, who moved in tiny steps towards him. My big wife, he said. Har har. He placed a hand briefly on her arm, and she smiled. Then he opened the trunk and invited an audience member to come and inspect it. Wait, he said, why not three people? Why not more? I have nothing to hide. He handpicked five men from the audience. The men stamped around, knocking on the sides of the trunk of the cabinet, bending over, peering in, gesturing to each other, emitting self-important grunts. One took the sides of the trunk and moved it a little on its wheels. He shrugged. Another stuck a couple of fingers in the air holes, swatting down a surge of panic when he thought one finger might be stuck, then said gruffly once he had wriggled it free that it looked fine to him. One reached into the trunk and produced a large, black flannel sack. Aha, he said, but Houdini assured him that was part of the act. Houdini took the bag and stepped into it. He held it around his waist like he was about to begin a potato sack race.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he cried. “You are about to witness the supreme cabinet mystery in the world! Just think this over, the time consumed in making the change will be THREE SECONDS!”

Two assistants rushed on stage and brought the sides of sack over his head. They tied it with cord, then, with ceiling wax sealed the knots. The assistants lifted Houdini

into the trunk, then, after looping it with ropes that they tied in tight knots—they grunted and strained and turned red to show how tight they were—they padlocked the trunk shut. The audience volunteers inspected it all and nodded their approval at the tightness of the knots, the security of the padlock. The assistants wheeled the trunk into the cabinet. When the assistants snapped the curtain of the cabinet shut, Houdini rapped on the inside of the trunk and hollered so that people could be sure he was still in there. Yankee Doodle went to town, he sang. Riding on a pony. It is donkey, actually, but no one minded the error because it was Houdini singing. Then Bess raised her arms and called out to the audience: “Now then, I shall clap my hands three times, and at the third and last time I ask you to watch CLOSELY for—the—EFFECT.” She disappeared behind the curtain of the cabinet and the audience listened to the claps—ONE, they chanted, TWO, THR... They did not finish saying Three because they forgot to, or maybe it was too hard to say three, with the long “e” sound at the end, when their mouths were open in large, astonished “o”s. Houdini had whipped open the curtain, and was standing on the trunk, which was still tied, still padlocked, and in which the audience assumed he would still be crouched inside his flannel bag. Quickly, he jumped off the trunk and gestured impatiently to the two assistants, who rushed forward and untied the ropes, unlocked the padlock, flung open the lid of the trunk to reveal a small form tied in the black sack. Houdini reached in and helped the form in the sack to her feet. He cut the ropes with a small knife the assistant handed him, and Bess’ tousled black curls appeared, then her bright eyes, her triumphant grin. Holding Houdini’s hand, she stepped daintily out of the trunk as though she were stepping out of a carriage. The crowd went wild.

Later, Houdini sat down at his cramped desk, piled high with his biographies of

magicians, old playbills, notes and diagrams for new tricks, and a scattering of props (a deck of cards, two large silver rings, a woman's silk handkerchief), and scrawled in his diary: "THREE SECONDS! Created a sensation! Act Wonderful."

...

But before they were able to perform Metamorphosis, Claire had to learn how to escape from handcuffs.

"Don't worry," Patrick assured her. "We'll teach you."

The first time Patrick and Aaron cuffed Claire, they made the mistake of doing it upstairs, in Aaron's apartment. During the day, outside of the cinema, everything was harsher; you were less likely to forget who you were. After Patrick clicked the cuffs closed, they all sat for a few seconds in silence. Claire lifted her wrists and shook them lightly. They clanked. Both men watched her. She looked down at her hands. They seemed very far away from her body. Panic gripped her then. Her eyes widened, her breathing turned shallow. She stood up abruptly and started pacing. She walked like one of Hank's foals. Her breath was coming out quick and shaky. As she walked, she shook her hands. Maybe, Patrick thought, she is just trying to think of a way to get out of the cuffs. She was not. She was fighting away the feeling of having the room close in around her. She was fighting for air, for space, for light. She tried to think of the vast fields at home, of the day she and Marise had flown a kite out there, how high it was, how relaxed on the ups and downs of the wind. But the image lasted only a second and she was staring again at the walls and the windows that were barely open. She was thinking of the city, of how close it pressed around her, and of the hydro lines that crisscrossed overhead, a net over it all. She was thinking of how, even if she were a bird, a kite, she would not be able

to fly away because her hands were pinned together and she was too scared to even open her mouth to protest.

“Claire?” Aaron said softly.

She shook her head quickly from side to side. She swallowed. “Let me out.”

“We just put you in,” Patrick said.

“Let me out.”

“Claire, what’s the point of putting them on if you don’t try to get out of them?”

Patrick said, but Aaron shifted uncomfortably. He hated to admit it, but it was more than worry for Claire that was making his heart plunge as he watched her panicking. It was sadness that she would not be the one. She could not be Bess Houdini if she was afraid of being handcuffed. She must be claustrophobic, and that was the last thing an escape artist could be. And he had liked her; he had really liked her. And he was embarrassed because he sensed that he might stop liking her now, and what did that say about him? He picked up the key from the table, and sprung her free.

...

It started with a handsome Egyptian fakir named Rahman Bey. Bey could hypnotize animals (“Har, har,” laughed Houdini. “There is as much hypnotism in this as there is lack of liquor in America!”), and, in a cataleptic trance (“What a lot of bunk,” Houdini cried), could be sealed in a coffin and buried under sand for over eight minutes. Finally, when Bey made the headlines in *The Times* (FAKIR SEALED IN CASKET ONE HOUR) for staying in a sealed zinc casket for thirty six minutes and then underwater for another twenty four minutes, Houdini stepped up. He wanted to prove that he could do the same by mere physical endurance and bravery, not by some supernatural ability.

“Now that Bey claims to be a super-normally gifted human being,” Houdini said, “I am compelled to go after him.” In the *Evening World* he promised “to remain in any coffin that the fakir does for the same length of time that he does, without going into any cataleptic trance.” Houdini was fifty two. For three weeks, he underwent vigorous physical training. He lost weight, exercised, and worked on getting his lungs “accustomed to battle without air.” He offered to donate his data to the U.S. Bureau of Mines, coal companies, ventilating engineers, and any manufacturers of mine safety equipment.

On August fifth, he ate a light breakfast of fruit salad and coffee.

“Only half a cup, please,” he told Bess. “Too much and I may get nervous. Not from fear, mind you, but excitement. And too much coffee.”

Bess poured him his half a cup.

“I don’t like seeing you in a coffin,” she said.

Houdini sighed. “I do not like that it is a coffin, either. I do not like to think of the day when I will be in a real one.” He stood up and kissed her. “We will not think of that today.”

The Houdinis made their way to the Hotel Shelton, which boasted “one of the most magnificent and costly swimming pools in the country.” They walked past the potted palms, across the tiled mosaic, into the crowd of friends, physicians, tinsmiths, and newspapermen, most wearing straw hats. Houdini noticed that it was too warm.

The coffin for the challenge was a gray box of galvanized iron, six and a half feet long and two feet wide and high. It held 34,398 cubic inches of air. The physicians present estimated that one could survive for three, maybe four minutes on that air.

Houdini stood beside the coffin, inhaling and exhaling deeply for a few minutes.

“I am filling myself with oxygen,” he explained. He stripped down to a pair of brown trunks, a white silk shirt and a wrist watch with a radium dial. He took a few more deep breaths and stepped into the coffin. There were portals on the lid that were kept open as workers spent eight minutes soldering the coffin shut. There were two wires running inside the coffin: one for a signal bell, the other for a telephone.

“Ready?” an assistant asked. Houdini nodded, and watched the portal close shut.

Once the coffin was lowered into the pool, eight assistants stood on it to keep it submerged. Every once in a while, they shifted it to move the air around inside. The only time he ever felt fear during the ordeal, Houdini said later, was when one of the assistants fell off the coffin, almost overturning it.

“What’s the big idea!?” he cried into the phone, and lost some air because of it. He was afraid the coffin would start letting in water, and he would drown. Near the end of the hour and a half he spent underwater, he noticed that there was indeed a little bit of water seeping in around his shoulder.

As the time wore on inside the coffin, Houdini grew warmer and warmer. During his practice runs, the temperature inside the coffin had stayed at eighty degrees; now, it rose to ninety nine. He was sweating. He could taste metal. He started breathing heavily, then panting. But he shifted himself to the other end of the coffin where, he guessed correctly, the air was cooler, and got a second wind. After an hour and twenty eight minutes, he started seeing yellow lights. His eyelids began to close and he told his principal assistant, Jim Collins, to bring him up at an hour and a half, exactly, because he worried he might fall asleep before then.

When the portal was opened, he felt a surge of physical elation: “a relief all over my body,” he explained. The whole coffin seemed to balloon outwards with the air coming in. Tinsmiths ripped the coffin open, tearing the metal casket like one would a sardine can. Houdini was drenched with sweat and, according to witnesses, “deathly white.” The *New York American* wrote, “Houdini’s stocky figure was trembling and exhausted when he was pulled from the casket. This was ripped open with knives and pincers by the six workmen in frantic haste.” But when the physicians rushed forward and took his temperature and blood pressure, they found they hadn’t really increased all that much. Houdini’s temperature had risen from 98.6 to 99 degrees, while his blood pressure went from 141/84 to 162/42.

“There is no invention to it, there is no trick, there is no fake; you simply lie down in a coffin and breathe quietly,” Houdini said later. “The important thing is to believe that you are safe, don’t breathe deeply and don’t make any unnecessary movements.” To the Bureau of Mines, he said what killed miners trapped underground was no more than fear and exertion. “Fear causes more such deaths than lack of air. No human being can live without air, of course, and I am no block of marble. But by taking shallow breaths and conserving the small air supply it is possible to live, you see, an hour and a half in a space with only enough oxygen to sustain life five minutes, according to physicians.”

That evening he would not eat.

“Just a bit of soup,” Bess coaxed, but he shook his head.

“Everything just tastes like metal.”

When he rose to go to bed, she tucked herself under his arm. His knees were weak and he could not take the stairs alone.

...

Claire thought that she would quit the show after she couldn't escape from the handcuffs; didn't even try to get out of them. She considered not going to work that day so that she could avoid Aaron and Patrick, but she found herself pulling on her sneakers and walking downstairs. While she was working, she thought, this may be my last shift, but at the same time, in a part of her brain she was trying to ignore, she knew it wasn't. When the end of her shift came, she picked up her bag and was ready to march outside and go straight home. But the other performers started trickling in and like a leaf in a current, she was swept along. Once in the theatre, she thought firmly, I will not get up there. I will tell them all right now that I don't have what it takes to be an escape artist, or even an escape artist's assistant. But the rehearsal started, and as she watched each performance, she started to forget about the feel of metal on her skin. She saw instead: a dragon breathing fire; a man as strong as Hercules; a woman who juggled guns like a real cowboy; a man with a throat as long and straight as a sword. By the time Aaron walked onstage, she was eager to get up there too. She wanted, for once, to be a part of something that wasn't small and fearful. The show unfolding in front of her was vibrant and bold, with performers who dared try impossible, impractical, and stunning feats. It felt like a dream, and in dreams, you can do anything. In dreams, if you concentrate hard enough, you can push back walls, you can throw off ceilings to reveal the sky.

"I want to try again," she said, standing up. Everyone turned to look at her. She caught Aaron's eyes, and blushed under the force of his smile.

The next day, Sylvie took Claire aside and said it was time to make her look like Bess. Claire had by then seen a photo of Bess, and found her not quite as beautiful as

people said, but Aaron assured her that for that time, she was gorgeous.

After her shift, Claire sat on a hard wooden chair in the middle of the stage, trying not to jiggle her foot as Sylvie held her face in her hands and studied her.

“Hm, okay,” she said once, but otherwise did not speak except to tell Claire to hold her head straight or to close her eyes. Tom came in at one point and sat in the front row of the theatre.

He felt wonderfully peaceful, watching Sylvie move gracefully around Claire, who was sitting perfectly still, as strands of light brown hair fell to the floor around her. Sylvie’s large silver scissors made a pleasing snipping sound, and they flashed at him in the light, winking. He knew everyone was getting energized by the upcoming show, but he found that he was getting dreamier. He still had spurts of energy, but they were getting shorter, and less frequent. The dreaminess was pleasing to him, though, and he attributed it to his age, even though he was only 50. He felt himself slipping into a lovely, pre-sleep stage where your thoughts are soft and flexible, and dreams are close at hand. It was so easy to close his eyes and see Owen making hearts out of piping, or Celeste bringing a foot over her head, and the muscular Houdini, performing miracles before his eyes. The two worlds—the real world and the dream world—were rubbing against each other in his mind. He thought of them as soapy bubbles, fragile, quivering, as they bumped into each other. Soon, they would either merge or pop. He watched them lazily, just as he now watched Sylvie painting black dye into Claire’s hair. He liked the look of Sylvie’s hand on the side of Claire’s face, steadying her. Sylvie’s nails were painted a shimmery peach to match her dress, which was creamy-looking with small peach blossoms dotting it, and they matched Claire’s skin. With her other hand, Sylvie painted until Claire’s now-short

hair was piled on top of her head, black and wet-looking. While they waited for it to set, Sylvie began plucking Claire's eyebrows. Claire protested, claiming she wanted them left alone, but Sylvie placed a hand quickly, softly, onto Claire's mouth and plucked them anyway. Claire looked straight ahead and did not protest anymore.

They left Tom alone when they went to the bathroom to wash out the dye and dry Claire's hair. Tom stayed in his chair and closed his eyes. There he found Vince Miranda looking down at him from an elephant. The elephant was wearing a purple velvet vest.

"Hello there," Miranda said. "How would you like a ride on my elephant?" He offered Tom his hand. "Did you know, from up here, you can touch the stars." Miranda pulled Tom up beside him, and together they stood on the elephant's back and reached up. Tom used both arms, and found that it was true: his fingers were brushing stars. Only, when he looked closer, they weren't stars; they were crystals in a chandelier.

"Oh," he breathed. "I'd rather that than stars anyway."

Tom opened his eyes when he heard the performers arriving. When everyone was seated, Sylvie appeared on stage. She had a streak of black dye on her finger. She was smiling.

"Everyone," she said, "I would like to present... Beatrice Wilhelmina Houdini." When Claire appeared, there was a slight pause, a skipped beat, as they took her in.

"God damn!" Owen breathed.

"A spitting image!" Xavier Winters murmured.

Despite herself, Claire grinned. She stood in front of them the way Sylvie had instructed her to. Together they had looked at a photo of Bess, and Claire stood now in that same pose: her hands behind her back, her left leg extended, her left foot pointed, her

weight distributed on her right leg. Her head she tilted a little to the right, and she smiled a little, with no teeth showing. Sylvie had modeled her after a young Bess Houdini. She said Claire looked too young to be Bess at any other time but the 1890s or maybe, with some heavier make up, into the 1900s, but even that would be stretching it. Claire was wearing gold shoes with straps and no heels, pale pink tights, and a loose peach blouse that she tucked into rose coloured bloomers. The costume looked authentic, but it was Claire's face and hair that took everyone back. Her long light brown hair had been replaced by a short, dark, bob. It was parted in the centre and Sylvie had curled it around Claire's face. Her eyebrows were thinned out and painted black in inquisitive arches, and her lips were dark red.

“Rosebud lips,” Tom breathed. He turned to Aaron, “She gave her rosebud lips.”

“Yes,” Aaron said without moving his eyes from Claire's face. “Yes, she did.”

It was because Claire stood there and let them stare at her that they finally noticed the main difference, and that was in the way she carried herself. She was calm on the stage, under all those appreciating eyes. She smiled a secret, confident smile and they got the sense she could not be shaken, regardless of what they said or did. This tiny girl had risen somehow to a place they could not reach, to a place where she was blissfully alone. Claire smiled at Patrick as he walked up the steps towards her. He took her hand and kissed it.

“You look perfect,” he said.

Sylvie, though, was watching critically. Claire does not look perfect, she thought. She was noticing how the few lights overhead flattened Claire's face and made her look too thin.

Patrick, still holding her hand, led Claire back to the audience. Once she was seated next to the others, they seemed to remember it was just Claire, and they crowded around her. Kate pulled gently on Claire's hair.

"It's the real deal!"

"Let me feel."

"Wow, look at those eyebrows. Did she dye those too?"

"God," Valérie said with a smile, "to have that tiny figure. How do you not just break in two?"

"Can I have your shoes?"

Aaron watched from his seat. Curiously observing how Claire blushed and smiled and didn't look like Claire at all with her short dark curls, her old-fashioned mouth.

"All right," Patrick said. "Let's get going." He turned to Kate. "You start this time?"

Kate bounded on stage. Before she started, she turned to where Sylvie was sitting a little apart from the group.

"I'm next, right Sylvie? You'll make my costume next?"

Sylvie smiled, and Kate's breath turned to flame.

When it was Aaron's turn to take the stage, he winked at Claire. She touched her hair briefly before following him on stage. He held out three pairs of handcuffs. She took them from him without hesitation. The metal felt cold, but fine, in her hands. She cuffed him firmly to the chair as though she had been handling handcuffs her entire life.

"Nice work."

"Thanks." Her voice, high and light, surprised her. They grinned at each other,

before she pulled the curtain of the cabinet closed. Only a few minutes later, he emerged. She felt something lifting from her chest when he dropped the cuffs onto the floor. The others must have, too, because they cheered louder than they had for every other act.

“Best time yet!” Kate called, looking up from her watch.

Aaron extended his hand and after only a second’s hesitation, she took it. He lifted her hand above their heads.

“Take a bow,” he said, and they swooped down towards the floor together, then snapped back up.

After the show they cuffed her again and again, and in the cinema, with its opening into the past, she felt no fear.

...

“We are just two young people, roaming around trying to make an honest million,” Houdini said of him and Bess. He left her love notes every morning.

Adorable

Sun Shine

of my Life

I have had my coffee,

have washed out this glass,

and am on my way to business.

Houdini

“My darling I love you”

...

Tom was in his office when he heard a soft knocking on his door. He looked up,

startled, from his accounts book. Only Patrick and Aaron ever visited him up here, and they never knocked so lightly.

“Come in,” he called.

The knocking continued. He sighed and pulled himself up from his chair. When he opened the door, he was surprised to see Sylvie standing there. She had never been up here before. The lobby was her domain, and she seemed out of place upstairs. He smiled warmly to mask his surprise and embarrassment at her seeing him here, with the papers and DVDs piled high around him, the old paper coffee cups, the empty Chinese take-out boxes. He got Chinese from a place east on Mont-Royal with a papier-mâché dragon head bursting out of the wall. He used to walk there for dinner and sit at the counter, watching the cooks throw handfuls of vegetables into their enormous woks, after swiping them with large brushes doused in oil. Now he ordered in, but he always imagined the dragon as he ate. And, apparently, he forgot to throw away the containers. He bustled around the room now, mumbling apologies about the mess as Sylvie waited at the door.

“It’s fine,” she assured him, but he found he could not stop cleaning. He kicked over a teetering pile of DVDs and they skidded over towards Sylvie. She picked up *Great Big Tits 6* and handed it to him. His embarrassment didn’t make sense to him; she sold these videos, and tickets for their screenings, every day, and yet when he took it from her, he could not meet her eye.

“I need to talk to you about the show,” she said.

“Is there something you need for the costumes?”

“Well,” she said, “it’s related. But it’s something else.”

He waited, a paper coffee cup in either hand.

“Have you thought about lighting?” she asked finally. “About lights.”

“Lights?”

“Yes. More lights. The ones you have are burnt out. There is too much shadow on the stage. People in the back will have to strain to see.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought—”

“People will fall asleep.”

“Oh,” he chuckled. “No way.” That was crazy, he thought. Who would fall asleep during their show?

“And you need different colours of lights,” Sylvie continued. “And you need to replace those footlights. Houdini would have had footlights. If you want it to look authentic, you need them too.” At first, she had found it difficult approaching Tom about the lights, but once she started, she found she couldn’t stop; she spoke with an urgency that sounded sharp to her but that she could not alter.

“Can’t you see it’s too dark? Can’t you see that Claire needs a pink light on her? The yellow one you have makes her look sick. Didn’t you notice the bags? The skin?”

“I, um...” He tried to remember what Claire even looked like, but he found he couldn’t, and the thought panicked him. “Maybe I should go see her right now,” he said, and placed the cups back where they had been, on the corner of his desk.

“It’s not about Claire. It’s about the lighting.” Sylvie had a note of impatience in her voice he had never heard before. It stopped him from reaching for his jacket.

“Lights make things visible, Tom. They shape the performers. They create mood, atmosphere. They accent the costumes.”

Tom blinked at her, his eyes vacant, and she wanted to shake him. It was difficult

for her to come here and ask for light, when everything about it made her think of Nat, and here he was, making her repeat herself over and over again. She missed Nat, suddenly, and so strongly she reached out and leaned against the door. How easily Nat could have explained this to Tom. With a few gestures, a few carefully selected, but casually delivered, words, Tom would be nodding in agreement. You've got to paint with your lights, Nat would say, as though that made all the sense in the world. The stage is your canvas and you have to paint. You should only have shadow when you want a shadowy scene. You have to have the power to dissolve the shadow. People breathe easier when they know the shadows are intentional and that they will not always be there. They may not realize it, but it's true. Here, she would say, angling herself beside you. She would extend her hands. You have to divide the stage in squares, she would say, moving her hands to show you. It's the McCandless method: divide the stage in squares—acting areas—then light each square with two fixtures, one light in front and one in back, one warm, and the other cool. Stand there, Nat used to tell Sylvie, placing her in the centre of the stage. You're in a square there. Don't move, she would say, and Sylvie would stand as still as possible as Nat ran up to the lighting booth. Then the lights would turn on and Sylvie would be doused in pink, morning light. Yellow light would join the pink and she would be standing in late afternoon light. Orange would signal the beginning of a golden sunset, of the kind of light that glowed, leaped out at you. Eventually, Nat would create a blue wash and place her in twilight. Walk around, Nat would call down to her. I'll follow you. And Sylvie did. And Nat did; she guided the moon. Always, it ended with blackness, and Sylvie would wait, hearing Nat's footsteps coming towards her and then feel her hand pulling her close. Are you tired? She would ask. You've just lived a full day.

Tom was staring at Sylvie. She took a step towards him. She didn't have that much more energy. She would give up soon. She tried one last time. If it weren't for the costumes, she would not have come.

"Xavier needs red light."

"Xavier Winters, you mean."

"He needs red light. Don't you see? Red light on the sword would make it look almost bloody."

Finally, Tom's eyes lit up and he smiled. "Ah," he said. "That's clever." He looked at her with new understanding. "Tricky," he said, and grinned. Then, the rush of excitement he had felt dwindled, to be replaced by a more familiar sense of being overwhelmed. How would he do all those things Sylvie was talking about? Where would he get the lights, first of all? Who would he call? How many would he need? How much would it cost? What kind? Are they all the same? He sat heavily into his chair, which pivoted a little on its wheels under his weight.

"You know what?" he said. "I think you need to talk to Patrick. Tell him I approve. I give you my stamp of approval." He brought his hand up into a fist when he said that and made a motion Sylvie imagined must be him stamping the air.

"You need someone to operate the lights," she said finally, very quietly. "You need that, too."

"Oh," he said, and looked at his hands. They looked very old. Since when had his veins been so blue? "I don't—"

"I'll do it," she said, and he looked up at her gratefully, and thought he had never seen a prettier woman than Sylvie. Someone with so much grace. She shut the door

quietly behind her when she left.

For the rest of the day Sylvie stared at, but did not see, the wall of films in front of her. Instead, she saw Nat laughing first thing in the morning, her eyes small from sleep; she heard her curse when she burnt her hand on the element; she saw her unbuttoning her shirt; she smelled her grapefruit shampoo; she felt the weight of her arm on her waist at night.

But when Sylvie sank into a red seat at the rehearsal that night, she traveled back to a time before Nat existed; to a time when there was magic strong enough to seduce her, and true enough to stay with her even after the lights went out. She forgot about the smallness of her life, then, and her conviction that she would always be alone. All of that slipped away into the shadows as Sylvie studied Celeste bending and twisting in the costume she had just finished for her. Her eyes felt remarkably keen. She could count the sequins she had sewn on. She could see the details in the stitching that she knew should be impossible to see. She watched carefully, making note of a tiny bare patch under Celeste's left rib that would need two, no three, more sequins. The sequins did not need to be sewn everywhere; only on the places Celeste curved in her act. As she bent over backwards and her rib created a ridge, the absence of a sequin to highlight that ridge made Sylvie blush. How could she have missed that spot? She looked around to see if anyone else had noticed and was surprised to see that they hadn't seemed to. She memorized the place, and then two more, and clasped her hands together to keep them from fidgeting.

"I need that costume back," she hissed, when Celeste finally sat down in front of her. Celeste nodded absently, leaned back into her seat and closed her eyes. She could not

stop thinking of spiders. All the time, she thought of their long legs, of the quick way they scurried over their webs. Of their vicious precision. She knew nothing about spiders, but still she thought of them. The black kind especially, and always their thin legs. And sometimes of the way those legs crumpled inwards, curving against their bodies, when they died.

Kate was wearing the costume Sylvie had presented to her, and Sylvie watched intently as she took the stage. This one she was particularly proud of, but Kate moved in it awkwardly; she was not used to the gold high heels, the long skirt with the slit up to her thigh, or the way her breasts hung over the top of her sequin shirt. Each part was necessary, though, and Kate would have to get used to it. Sylvie would make her walk up and down the cinema until she could do justice to those shoes. The dress was supposed to be the dragon wings: a green satin membrane with thick wires for bones. The shirt was a green tank top that Sylvie had covered with large sequins, mostly green but some yellow and gold. She found a long necklace, strung with small gold medallions that she wound three times around Kate's neck. Kate was also wearing long green gloves, made from the same material as the wings, and large gold medallions as earrings. Sylvie would have to touch up her dye job: dark roots were showing against the red hair. She did not do it tonight, but for the actual show Sylvie planned to circle Kate's eyes with gold dust and give her enormous fake eye lashes. Kate had beautiful large eyes, but she had the kind of body, Sylvie could see, that was barely contained in its casing of youth; in a few years, her soft flesh would expand, and she would wonder how that could have happened.

At the end of the rehearsal, Patrick took the stage.

"I've got a surprise for you," he said. He had a large package at his side, wrapped

in layers of delicate white tissue and tied with silver and gold ribbon.

“Whose birthday?” Kate asked, but Patrick didn't answer, and the others didn't say anything either. They were all looking at the package. It was not a box; it was a little floppy, like the thing inside was made of fabric, but folded into a square.

“It's mostly for Aaron and Claire,” Patrick said. He held the package out. “Claire? Will you do the honours?”

Claire looked at the package. She did not know why, but she felt uneasy. She did not really want to open it, but everyone was looking at her, so she walked onstage. She knelt beside Patrick and he passed her the package. She held it in her hands for a second, surprised at how heavy it was, because it was definitely fabric of some kind. Except, there were also some hard bits on it.

“Come on,” Patrick urged. Claire looked out at Aaron, who was sitting at the left side of the second row. He shrugged. She pulled the curled ends of the bows and they slipped open easily. The ribbons she placed in a nest beside her. The tissue paper was not taped, and she peeled it off sheet by sheet. It was a straitjacket. A thick canvas straitjacket dotted with shining buckles, laced with thick leather straps.

“I'm not wearing this,” she said quickly, but did not get up and walk away. Instead, she felt the rough canvas between her fingers. She fiddled with one of the metal buckles. Someone must have polished it. It was very bright.

“Don't worry,” Patrick assured her, “Aaron will be wearing it. You'll just have to help dress him in it.”

Aaron was smiling. He was seeing Houdini, hanging upside down from his ankles outside a newspaper building, struggling briefly before freeing himself. Spreading his

arms, the canvas making them look like wings. And everyone below him cheering. The crowd was so large all Houdini was seeing was a mass of black, grey and white. Jackets and hats and faces looking up at him. And the sound of clapping and cheering felt to him like a net of sound that was holding him up there, preventing him from falling.

...

On August 1, 1916, the Acting Chief of Police of the Atlantic City Police Department wrote Houdini a message: "I the undersigned, hereby challenge you to allow me with the assistance of two of my officers, to strap you into a regulation strait-jacket, then lash your ankles together and in this position I would like to suspend you in mid-air, head foremost, from any high place you designate. The object of securing you in this manner is to prevent you from making use of your shoulders, so as to assist you in effecting your escape. It is also understood that if you accept my challenge in the event of any accident occurring to your-self I am not to be held responsible." Houdini wrote back: "Houdini accepts the above challenge. Test will take place Wednesday morning at 11 o'clock sharp. Houdini will be swung head foremost from the tower at Keith's Theatre on the Garden Pier Positively Rain or Shine!"

...

Later that night, Claire, Aaron and Patrick stood in the centre of the stage and looked down at the straitjacket in front of them. "Well," said Aaron, but did not move. His recent daydream of Houdini triumphant above the crowd was slowly being edged out of his mind by thoughts of maniacs, of tiny barred windows, metal doors, and white padded rooms with no escape. He studied the straitjacket, registering the strength of the buckles, the thickness of the unrelenting cloth.

Patrick picked up the straitjacket by the shoulders and jiggled it. The buckles clinked. It was unsettling how it looked like the straitjacket was dancing. A grotesque dance, an impossible dance, because there was no flesh inside the jacket yet, just the idea of it.

“Well,” Aaron repeated, and reached out to touch the jacket. He took the fabric in between his thumb and index finger and rubbed it, as though he knew something about material and was appraising the canvas; as though he could look up and give Patrick an accurate thread-count. Eventually, with more effort than he would have liked, he focused his thoughts on the clip he had seen of Houdini hanging from the outside of a building. He saw the hands passing him along, steadying him against the slight jerk of the winch that was pulling him up. He saw him ascending. He saw him hanging there, arms pinned to his side, swaying, dark against the pale sky. Then he narrowed his thoughts even more until he was thinking only of the instant Houdini freed his arms and they swept away from him, opening up in a gesture of victory, of liberty, like he was embracing the air.

“I’m ready,” he said, and took the straitjacket from Patrick. “Claire?”

Claire nodded. She did not feel ready, exactly, but she felt compelled to stay. Patrick held out the straitjacket and she took it, for the second time surprised at its weight. She wondered where Patrick got it. It looked used, the leather straps were worn, the fabric yellowed, and yet the buckles looked newly polished. She tried to imagine Patrick in his apartment, or house, or wherever he slept, carefully polishing the buckles. His room would have smelled like silver polish. About his thoughts while he polished, she had no idea.

“I don’t know how to put it on him.”

“It's the opposite of an actual jacket. It buckles up the back,” Patrick said. “I'll run you through it for the first time.”

Claire stepped towards Aaron, who put out his arms in a gesture that was off-putting in its immaturity. He looked like a helpless child.

“Put his arms in the sleeves,” Patrick said. The sleeves were almost twice as long as Aaron's arms, and they were sealed at the end with a leather cuff so that they resembled long canvas bags more than sleeves.

“Cross his arms across his chest and bring the ends of the sleeves together at his back. Good, now buckle them tight.”

Next, Claire turned her attention to the leather straps that ran across the jacket and ended in buckles that, when fastened, would close up the back of the jacket. It was like Aaron was being circled by four leather belts that she was buckling behind him. First, she buckled the leather collar. He had to bend down so she could reach the buckle.

“Aw,” said Patrick. “Nice touch.”

She did up the rest of the buckles along the back.

“Claire, they can be pulled tighter than that. Really yank it. And exaggerate it for the audience. Pretend it took all your strength. And Aaron, grimace like she's hurting you.” Claire pulled as hard as she could.

“Ow,” yelped Aaron. “She is hurting me.”

“Good!” Patrick said, circling them. “Very good.” Then, “One final strap,” he said, and Claire looked with dismay at the last strap and buckle hanging down between Aaron's legs. She could see that it was meant to be a crotch strap.

“Maybe we don't need that one,” Aaron said when he noticed how her face fell.

He blushed and thought how much nicer it would have been if her face had not fallen so drastically. How maybe she could have concealed her horror just a little better. How she might have turned her face away so he could have imagined a different expression. “No one will notice from the audience,” he said. “She can just leave it.”

“Are you kidding? Of course they will. You've got to do it, Claire. If you don't take this seriously, your audience won't either.”

“Fine.” Claire knelt down quickly, fed the strap into the buckle and yanked it tight. Aaron inhaled sharply, but didn't say anything.

“Well done,” Patrick said when Claire stepped back. He was grinning, his eyes large and bright as he stood beside her and studied her work for a few seconds. “Very well done.” Then he smiled slyly at Aaron. “Your turn.”

Aaron had practiced with a straitjacket before. When he was a teenager, he used his allowance money to buy one from a magic shop, but it was flimsy. The fabric was light and flexible, the straps were not real leather, the crotch strap was omitted, and the suit itself was too big for him, all of which made it easy for him to escape. This straitjacket was small, made with thick canvas and leather straps that were so tight he could feel them cutting into his flesh. His mother had found the straitjacket in his closet and thrown it out without saying a word to him about it. He only knew it was her because he came home while she was in the kitchen, stuffing it into a plastic bag like it was a living thing she was trying to subdue. Once she got it tied into the plastic bag, she reached for another and stuffed it into that as well. She did this with a third bag, then a fourth. Finally, she put it in the kitchen trash bin and tied that bag up as well. She never took the garbage to the curb—she didn't even know what day the garbage truck came

by—but she brought that bag out, holding it away from her as though it were leaking, even though, the day before being garbage day, there was nothing much in the bag besides the straitjacket. Aaron watched her silently from the door, and never said a word to her about it, just as she never brought it up with him. That she went through his closet while he was out he also never brought up, but he thought of it the day he finally moved out.

Still, even though he had only escaped from an easy straitjacket before, he knew the trick. It was not, as many people assumed, a matter of dislocating your shoulder. Houdini just spread that rumour to discourage imitators. It was about how you held yourself while you were being tied. The trick was to inhale deeply, expanding your chest as much as possible. You were also supposed to flex your arms and hold them out from your body a little and, if you could do so without anyone noticing, grab the fabric on the inside of the sleeves. Then, once you were tied, and you let go of the fabric and relaxed your arms and lungs, you would have gained yourself some extra wiggle room. The other thing to remember was to put your stronger arm, in Aaron's case his left arm, on the top when you placed your arms across your chest. Also, never let your arms interlock; always keep one firmly over the other. Then, to start your escape, you move that stronger arm, with the help of slack you created for yourself, over your head. It is still a struggle to get it over your head, and it could take several minutes. Too long, though, and the pain will set in. You have to simultaneously bend your neck and lift your arm as much as possible to bring it over your head, which will bring the sleeves to your front. Then, using your teeth, you undo the buckles of the straps binding the sleeves together. With your arms free, you can undo the crotch strap. Of course, your hands are still inside the canvas bag-

sleeves, but you have enough room to use them, despite the cloth casing. Then you can undo the straps along your back. Finally, you step on your sleeves to pull yourself out of the jacket. You sort of back out of it and there it is, under your feet.

Aaron knew all these things, had studied them and tried them out before his mother found the straitjacket, but the problem was, as Claire had moved around him, frowning in concentration, her small fingers fiddling with the buckles, hovering over him here and there, he forgot to inhale deeply, he forgot to move his arms out a little, he forgot to pull at the fabric of the sleeves. He even forgot to place his stronger arm on top of the other. He stood there like an idiot as she interlocked his arms, noticing not that they were being tied in a way that would make it nearly impossible for him to escape, but that there was a paper cut on her thumb. And when Patrick said, "Your turn," he realized that there was no hope of him escaping. Idiot! he thought, and looked helplessly at Claire and Patrick, who were gazing at him expectantly. He knew he should ask Claire to re-tie him, to start over, but he was too embarrassed to admit why he had forgotten how to be tied: he had been too busy noticing that Claire had a faint line at the corner of her mouth. Thinking, someday that will turn into a deep wrinkle and she may grow to hate it because it will mean she is getting old. But for now, it is nice, that line, lying across her skin like a faint pencil line you drew by accident in a book you only borrowed.

"What's the problem?" Patrick asked and Aaron wondered if there actually was a mocking tone to the question, or whether he had built up his dislike for Patrick enough that anything he said became an insult. And then he wondered if he would dislike Patrick as much if he was a homely guy. If people didn't so obviously stare when they first met him. If Claire didn't.

“No problem,” he said, and began struggling uselessly. With his first movements, he forgot all about Claire's paper cut, her tiny wrinkle; thought instead about stamping down the panic that was rising up inside him, flooding his limbs, making him sweat, which was making the fabric tighten.

Insane asylums used to be like prisons. No one understood mental illness. Terms like depression, anxiety disorders, or schizophrenia were far in the future. And because no one understood mental illness, they feared it. They chained lunatics to walls, they roped them to beds. Some doctors tried explaining the mystery of mental illness; it is caused by religious excitement, some said. Sunstroke, insisted others. Novels, cried some. The patient has lost their morals was a common assumption. They need to be disciplined severely if they hope to regain those morals, that self-control. The straitjacket was supposed to help a patient regain self-control. Aaron, though, was quickly losing his. With each minute Aaron was trapped in the straitjacket, his awareness of his surroundings diminished. It was as though the shadows in the corners were expanding, creeping towards him like a slow flood of black water. First he lost awareness of the door of the cinema, then the exit signs vanished, the chairs disappeared next, then the corners of the stage, the curtains. Then Patrick disappeared. Finally, Claire. He was alone. Trapped in a self-embrace, the pain in his arms ratcheting up every few seconds. He knew his blood was pooling in elbows, making them swell. He knew the muscles in his back were cramping, his hands were going numb. He knew when he eventually got the jacket off he would find abrasions on his skin.

And then. It was impossible, and yet there he was, in a cell. Impossible, yet there were the howls, the cries of lunatics exactly as out of a nightmare, the dirty walls, the

doctors' fear of the inmates visible in their flashes of cruelty. And he was looking out of a tiny window, his face crossed by iron bars. He was not insane, he was just there. He could not remember how he got there, but he was there, and the walls were real, and the babbling maniacs, too. Then he heard a voice speaking words so carefully enunciated he knew it must be Houdini. Aaron heard Houdini saying something he had written in a book, but in that moment, he forgot that he had read it, and was convinced that Houdini was speaking to him, not comforting him, but simply confirming what he already knew: "The word straitjacket alone conjures up to the mind pictures of violent maniacs and thoughts that tend to gruesome channels."

Also without realizing it, Aaron began enacting the description Houdini wrote of the first time he saw someone restrained in a straitjacket. He struggled, he rolled around on the floor, he strained every muscle, he tried in vain to get his hands over his head, he tried "in every conceivable manner to free himself." As Aaron struggled, he dripped with sweat. "The more he struggled," Houdini said slowly, "the tighter his restraints encircled him, and eventually he lay exhausted, panting, and powerless to move."

Finally, Patrick let Claire untie Aaron. Then he told her to go get some rest. He promised to clean Aaron up and make sure he got home all right. When Claire left, Patrick gave Aaron some time. Then, for the rest of the night, he made him escape from the straitjacket, again and again. Eventually, Aaron fell asleep in it, and Patrick let him go home.

Claire heard Patrick bring Aaron home. It was hours after he said he would. She could hear the shuffling on the stairs, Aaron's door opening. She thought she heard a soft groan, but she couldn't be sure. Then she heard Patrick leaving: his steps on the stairs

were light and quick. He let the door to the street slam behind him. Claire looked out her living room window in time to see him turning the corner onto Saint-Laurent. He was half-walking, half-jogging, holding the straitjacket under his left arm. It could have been the light, but she thought she could see blood stains on it.

...

“Stop it!” Bess cried. “Just stop it, Harry.”

There was water all over the floor. Bess stood in the doorway of the bathroom and felt with her bare feet that the water was freezing. She tightened her robe and hugged her chest.

“It’s alright Bessie,” Houdini said. He flicked water at her. “There’s a doctor present.”

It was true; Doctor Thomas was sitting in a wooden chair beside the large sunken tub in which Houdini, in a pair of trunks, was reclining. He was trying to look relaxed, but his skin was white and he was shaking. It was seven in the morning.

“More ice, I think.” Houdini said, and Doctor Thomas added ice. The temperature dropped to fifty-two, fifty-one. Bess stormed downstairs. Forty-nine. Houdini called for more ice. Doctor Thomas refused to add more ice when the temperature reached forty-eight.

Bess, pacing among her canaries, heard yelling, splashing, and the Doctor’s hurried footsteps on the stairs.

“He’ll kill himself this way, Mrs. Houdini,” he called over his shoulder before slamming the front door.

Upstairs, Houdini dumped the rest of the ice into the tub. He let out a muffled cry.

He was having trouble breathing. His lips were tinged blue around the edges. He was shaking, and almost dropped the thermometer into the tub. It registered thirty-six degrees.

“Get out! Get out!” Bess cried from the doorway. She raced across the tiles and plunged her hand into the tub, yelping as she did so. She pulled the plug. “Get to bed,” she said, and helped Houdini to his feet. “You’re shaking like a leaf.”

“It’s a personal record,” Houdini said through chattering teeth. “I feel good, Bessie. You know I only feel good after a cold bath.”

...

For the next two weeks, they practiced every night for hours. Claire lost track of time. She imagined she slept sometimes; she remembered falling into her bed, exhausted, only to be woken a few hours later by a flapping of wings in her stomach, by a feeling that she was missing something when she was not downstairs. But sometimes she wondered if those flapping wings were nerves, and that she was terrified about what she would find down there. In either case, she could not sit still in her apartment. She would race down and find Aaron, pacing the lobby, waiting for the movie to finish, and Sylvie sitting behind the counter, barely noticing them as she squinted at a piece of fabric that was transforming into a fantasy under their eyes.

When Claire worked, she fiddled with a pair of handcuffs Aaron had lent her for that purpose. She timed herself. Then she cut that time in half. She practiced until she could no longer feel her fingers. She showed Aaron, who nodded and said, “Good. But halve that time if you can. Remember, they switched in three seconds.” When she was not fiddling with the lock, she exercised her fingers, moving them in a way she didn’t realize a pianist would move them until one of the customers asked, “You a piano player

or something?” She understood why Aaron had tried to play ragtime piano, had tried to cut delicate lines with scissors. It was all a part of training his fingers, as well as readying his mind. Of turning each finger into a slim instrument of precision. Only, lately, he had abandoned all of those other activities. His focus was palpable. It was only about escape now. Even the way he moved was different. He didn’t jerk around so much. He didn’t waste any energy.

They raced with time. Claire working on cutting down her time with the locks, the rest of them racing against the calendar. They pinned a calendar backstage. It was one of old pinup girls Valérie had given Tom. After every rehearsal Valérie crossed out that day with her coal black eyeliner. She circled October 31st with her reddest lipstick.

Claire never practiced at home. She somehow knew that up in her apartment, the metal would sting again, the walls would close in, and she would turn into a whimpering girl who was afraid of the river, whose mother never cleaned their grimy walls. But in the cinema she felt different. Like she was careening quickly away from something she was happy to leave behind, but also towards something that was still not apparent to her, something that crouched in front of her somewhere, gathering strength in the darkness to meet her. When you escape from something, Patrick told her one night, always keep in mind what you are escaping to. From dark to light, from confinement to freedom, from obscurity to fame, from poverty to wealth. Houdini, for example, escaped from the darkest jail cells, then walked out into the light. He did it naked, too, Aaron had added. Imagine that.

...

One cell Houdini escaped from had held Charles Peace, the nocturnal burglar who killed when he needed to, and once, because a woman made him want to. Houdini described him as “the greatest criminal London ever had.” He was a short man who was always assumed to be twenty years older than he really was. His father, a wild animal tamer, had lost a leg, but Charles was only missing a finger, and to disguise that identifiable trait, wore a fake arm with a hook on the end. He collected birds and made picture frames. His tools, though, consisted of a skeleton key, two pick-locks, a portable ladder, a revolver and a life-preserver. He was imprisoned twice before his final imprisonment, and tried to escape both times, first with a smuggled ladder and tin saw, which he used to cut a hole in the ceiling of his cell; and second, by jumping out of a moving train. Both times he failed. He believed in both God and the Devil, but claimed to fear neither. Before he was executed, he ate sausage and asked for a glass of water, which he did not receive. He loved a woman called Susan Grey, her eyes like sea foam, light grey and shifting, who betrayed him to the police, and still he loved her.

February 25, 1879, was a frigid day, and Charles Peace was a man who had always complained of being cold. In the freezing air, his neck broke and his feet swung, and he died instantly, in the split second before darkness thinking of who knows what: his mistress' grey and faithless eyes, his tiny caged birds, the men he killed, his wife who maybe he had loved at one time, hell, heaven, his children who he was sure he loved, a lit window seen from the darkness of an alleyway, or maybe the too-salty taste of sausage on his tongue that he would never be free of.

Over twenty years later, Houdini walked naked and willingly into Charles Peace's death row cell and stood calmly as the police triple-locked the door. They gathered his

clothing into a soft bundle that they triple-locked in the neighbouring cell. The gate leading to the cell block they secured with a seven-lever lock. Further down the hallway, behind a desk, they sat to wait over hot, bitter tea, laughing at the young American who thought he could escape from one of their death row cells that had held their most famous prisoner. One of the quieter policemen snuck extra sugar into his tea, and, sipping, wondered if Houdini could sense the previous occupants in the walls of the cell. He suspected, but did not say out loud, that the final moments of a man's life must be heavy ones, ones that take a while to dissipate. He would never allow himself to be locked in there, where men like Charles Peace had passed their final days. It would bring you too close to them, and he was almost certain he would be able to feel them in the damp stone walls.

The policemen's tea was still hot when Houdini walked up to them, fully clothed. He smoothed his suit jacket and grinned at them.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “Might I recommend further security measures for these facilities.”

He smiled again, his eyes dancing, and walked away from them. While the other policemen sputtered at each other and raced into the cell to see if they could discover how Houdini had made his escape, the young policeman with the sweetened tea watched Houdini's back as he strode down the hallway. About half way to the end, Houdini stopped and gently shook himself. Then he brushed off the sleeves of his jacket and inhaled deeply. Apparently satisfied, he continued walking, then disappeared out the door to where crowds were waiting in the sunlight to applaud him.

The thing is, Houdini didn't think at all about Charles Peace. Didn't think about his caged birds, his murders, his missing finger, his broken neck. He thought about the sunlight and the fresh air, and the adoring crowds. "This feat has been described in almost every newspaper," Houdini wrote in his diary later. "Makes me one of the most noted foreign performers in England. Every illustrated paper has my portrait."

...

One night, when Patrick, Claire and Aaron gathered to practice, Patrick told them he would do the tying up this time.

"Why?" asked Claire.

Patrick shrugged. He wanted to test Aaron to discover how deep his resolve went; where it stopped, when it encountered fear. Everything eventually came up against fear. Ambition, love, even obsession could be stopped dead by fear. Patrick needed to find that point in Aaron. And he wanted to test Claire, too. To see how far her commitment ran, and whether her own fear would get in the way. Or her compassion.

"Claire," he said, "I need you to just watch tonight. It will help you to see another method of restraining someone. Everyone does it differently. Oh, and you can keep track of the time. Okay?" he asked, looking from one to the other.

"Sure," Aaron said. Claire nodded.

"All right," said Patrick, getting up. "Let me just get my materials." He disappeared backstage. Aaron and Claire sat silently beside each other while they waited for Patrick to return.

They heard Patrick returning before they saw him; a rattle of metal preceded him. When he walked back on stage, he was holding a bunch of irons, chains, handcuffs and

padlocks in each fist. They clanked together as he walked. The padlocks dangled heavily from the chains, like fruit on a metallic vine. The veins in Patrick's arms were popping from the effort of holding so much metal.

“Wow,” said Aaron, standing up. “I didn't realize you had so much, uh, stuff. Old stuff, too. I didn't know you could buy those irons anymore.”

“I looked around. Found them especially for the act.”

“That's commitment.”

“I'm committed.”

“Right.” Aaron turned and smiled at Claire. “I guess we'd better start.”

“Come get your timepiece,” Patrick said to Claire. She walked to the edge of the stage and he dropped the chains with a crash.

He laughed when she jumped. “Oops.”

Then he crouched down so their faces were level, and brought out a large, old-fashioned pocket watch. He held it by the end of its delicate chain and let it swing gently in front of her face. She put out her hand and he placed the watch in her palm, then, without letting go, lowered the chain into her hand until his hand hovered right over hers. The watch and its chain were cold, but when he touched her, his hand was hot and dry.

“All right, come on,” Aaron said, scrambling up onto the stage. “Stop wasting time.”

Patrick pulled an old, wooden stool from the shadows on the side of the stage. He placed it ceremoniously in front of Aaron, who sat down in it, facing Claire.

Patrick walked over to his pile of chains. “This might take a little while, Claire. So why don't I tell you a story while I work?”

She shrugged.

Patrick bent over the mess of chains and started pulling them apart. He had to speak loudly to be heard over the rattling of his hardware.

“Let's go back to the 1890s. It's our favourite time around here. There was this man called Eugen Sandow?” he began. “He was a strong man. Had a perfect body.” Patrick paused with a large padlock in his hand. He absentmindedly fingered it as he thought. “People loved him.” He placed the padlock beside him, and turned back to the other locks and chains. “See, he came around at a time when people were starting to get into fitness. The concept of physical conditioning only really started at that time.” He turned to Aaron. “Did you know that?”

“Nope.”

“You should take off your shirt,” Patrick said, and reached for another padlock. Aaron slowly peeled off his sweatshirt, then his T-shirt. Claire wanted him to put them back on. She had an urge to drape him in a blanket. Looking at his pale chest made her uneasy. He hunched over, his skin folding a little over itself. There was no fat on his body, but there was not much muscle either. She felt a tingling of irritation towards Patrick, though she couldn't say why.

“You see,” Patrick continued, “people were worrying about being lazy. All of a sudden, they weren't working on farms or anything. They had sedentary jobs. Sitting around, or standing on a factory line. They worried that they were getting feeble and tame.” He looked Aaron up and down. “Feeble and tame,” he repeated.

Aaron sighed. Patrick chuckled.

“Sandow got famous for these 'plastic poses' he did on stage. And he did look kind of plastic. Nothing soft on that man. People loved it. One guy, his name is William Hodgson, he really loved it.”

Aaron’s face fell.

“Hodgson was a scrawny kid. Son of an Anglican preacher. Small, skinny. Probably got picked on at school. You can sympathize, hey Aaron?”

“Aw, cut it out, Patrick.” Aaron shifted as though to stand up, but Patrick sprang easily to his feet and was standing over him before Aaron rose.

“All right, sorry. I’m sorry,” Patrick said, briefly laying his hand on Aaron’s bare shoulder. Aaron took a deep breath and seemed to settle lower on the chair.

Patrick picked up the first set of irons, working quickly now. They were thick, metal bands. The pair Patrick was holding was larger than some of the other ones in the pile. He clamped those onto Aaron's biceps. The others were for his wrists or ankles. Aaron flinched a little as the cold metal touched his bare skin. Patrick wrapped Aaron's upper arms in the irons, then pulled a chain through the holes to tighten them. He took one of the hefty padlocks and ran the shackle through the links in the chain, securing it tightly behind Aaron's back. He did this roughly, and Aaron inhaled sharply. Patrick didn't close the padlock yet. Aaron's shoulders were drawn back, a result of his upper arms being pulled towards one another behind his back.

“There,” said Patrick. He knelt down in front of the nest of metal again. “So, Hodgson. He was inspired by Sandow. Started doing judo and bodybuilding to bulk up. He was the obsessive type. You know, got fixated on whatever he was doing until he did it perfectly. Really anal. He had this germ thing. He'd wash his hands after opening letters

because he was afraid of the germs sent by mail. His hands were always red. Anyway, when he started exercising, he really started exercising. And he read a lot, too. He researched physiology. Took out medical text books from the library. Studied the human body until he knew exactly how it worked. A bit like me, in that way.” Patrick smiled. He continued his measured sorting of the chains and cuffs.

“Soon, he was big like Sandow. He wrote articles for Sandow's magazine and opened his own bodybuilding school. It is called 'W.H. Hodgson's School of Physical Culture'. He even got hired to condition the local police force. And on October 24, 1902, at the Palace Theatre in Blackburn, England, he had a little run-in with Houdini. It was the 25 pound challenge. Houdini used to tell his audiences that if they could cuff him in such a way that he couldn't escape, he'd pay them 25 pounds.” He picked up another set of irons and a padlock dangling from a chain.

“So, Hodgson took up the challenge. He knew the body so well.” As he spoke, he clamped another pair of irons on Aaron's upper arms. Now, Aaron was covered in metal from his armpit to his elbow. The chain made a cold, sliding sound as Patrick pulled it through the holes in the irons. He yanked the chain tight behind Aaron's back in the same way as the first. He slipped the shackle through the links of the second chain so that both chains were held by the padlock. The padlock clicked shut. Aaron took a measured inhale. His face was set in a determined grimace.

“Maybe you should loosen those a bit,” Claire said.

“You haven't heard the rest of my story,” Patrick said.

“Aaron, are they too tight?”

He glared at her before answering. “It's fine, Claire. It's practice.”

She kept her eyes on Aaron, but he avoided her stare.

“So, Hodgson took up the challenge. He brought up six pairs of irons onto the stage. And then he tied Houdini. First, he put on the two arm bands, just like I've done here. Then, he took a pair of handcuffs.” As he spoke, he picked up a pair of handcuffs from the floor. “And used them around his wrists. The trick here is to bring the wrists forward so that the arms are being pulled in two directions.” He yanked Aaron's wrists forward and brought them as close together as they would go. Aaron let out a muffled groan.

“See, Claire? The chains are pulling the tops of his arms behind him, and the cuffs are pulling his wrists forward. Makes it pretty hard to move. And escape.”

“Aaron,” Claire said, but Aaron shook his head and didn't look at her.

“He put two cuffs on Houdini's wrists. Just to be sure.” Patrick clamped another pair on Aaron's wrist as he spoke.

“They're too tight,” Claire protested, standing up. “His wrists are turning red.”

“Claire, it's fine,” Aaron said, his voice sharp. “Sit down.”

She hovered over her chair for a second, then lowered herself back into it. Patrick bent over the diminishing pile of metal and picked up a pair of leg irons.

“Now,” he said to Aaron, “if you could just kneel down.”

Aaron did as he was told, and, in a motion that looked almost tender, Patrick placed a hand on his back to help him down off the stool. Aaron bowed his head just a little, which was enough to make Claire blurt out, “I have to go.” She stood up. She kept a hand on the arm of her chair and leaned on it. The two men looked at her, but they did not urge her to stay or encourage her to go. They just looked at her.

“I have to go,” she repeated, then walked up to the exit.

Patrick and Aaron didn't move until they heard the door slam shut. Then Patrick turned back to Aaron, who was kneeling in front of him.

“Mercy?” Patrick asked.

“No.”

“Good. Let's continue.”

Patrick picked up a pair of leg-irons. Those he looped through the chains holding Aaron's arms together before locking them to Aaron's ankles. Now Aaron's arms were directly beside his ankles in a style Patrick informed him was called a hogtie.

“Great,” grunted Aaron. His hands and wrists were throbbing. Patrick hopped off the stage and took a seat in the front row.

“Best of luck,” he said.

After about ten minutes of struggling, Aaron could no longer feel his hands.

“You need to loosen these,” he gasped.

“Do you know what Hodgson said to Houdini when he complained? He said, ‘This is a contest, not a love match, if you are beaten, give in’.”

Aaron didn't answer. Patrick watched as a bloom of red appeared around the cuffs, and crept outwards across Aaron's white arms. It was like dropping ink in water.

After another few minutes, Patrick cleared his throat. “Would you like to know something else?”

Again, Aaron didn't answer, simply grunted as he tried to pull his wrists from the cuffs.

“I’ll tell you. When Houdini finally got free, his hands were blue. He had welts and gashes from doing exactly what you’re doing—trying to wrench his hands free. One reporter said it looked like a tiger had clawed him. But? The crowd went wild, absolutely wild, when he got free.”

“Okay, you know what? Let’s call it a night. Let me out.”

Patrick’s voice was deflated when he said quietly. “You give up?”

“Well, just a few more minutes,” Aaron said.

After a few more minutes, Aaron said, “Let me out.”

By this time, Patrick had moved from dejection to frustration at the limits of Aaron’s skill.

“You need to practice. It’s a mental thing as much as it is a physical thing to escape. You need to go there, Aaron. Why are you so afraid?”

Go where? Aaron thought. Fuck you. But he didn’t say that. He was trying to fight back the terror biting into him, as the chains bit into his skin. And then Patrick was standing, was turning away from him, was walking out of the cinema. Was actually walking out of the cinema.

“Hey!” Aaron called. “Hey!” Then he was alone. He let out a frustrated sob when he heard the door click shut.

“Fuck,” he hissed. “Fuck,” he said louder, but he didn’t say it again because in the empty cinema his voice echoed too much. Besides, every movement he made, even if it was simply inhaling enough air to curse, created a sharp line of pain up his arms, through his back, down his legs. It was like a trail of gasoline suddenly ignited, and the pain, like fire, raced.

He was not sure if Patrick would come back. He knew him enough to be wary of the hardness that ran just below the surface, but he didn't know how deeply that hardness actually ran. He supposed he'd find out soon enough. He closed his eyes and tried to find Houdini in his mind. Houdini had been in this position before. He was tied like this over a century ago. And he got free. From everything, he got free. That was why Aaron loved him so much that he would give up all of himself to be him. Aaron found him in the dark theatre; the memory of him became a brightness, a warmth, a comforting hand pressing down on his blurry panic.

Aaron searched through his knowledge of Houdini to find the part he needed. He didn't think of the way Houdini charmed audiences. He didn't think of his fun tricks, the lightness of some of his performances, like the happy miracle of Metamorphosis. He thought instead of the nightmares he escaped from. He would take something awful—chains, straitjackets, torture devices, even an electric chair—that were used to violently subdue someone society had rejected, and then he would jump free of it. Aaron always imagined him leaping out of those restraints smiling, like a comic book superhero, having taken the most terrible inventions of the human mind and tossed them lightly aside. Aaron tried to visualize himself springing free from the chains, but somewhere, from deep in his mind, where all of his research about Houdini lay, a fact emerged that he could not push away; when Hodgson tied Houdini in this same way, the doctors said that a few more minutes of compression might have paralyzed his arms.

Claire was upstairs in her apartment, pacing the floor. She thought of herself lying, asleep, in Patrick's arms, her head leaning on his chest. He was carrying her up the stairs and she looked so small in his arms, and she slept so deeply that night. But that

image disappeared and she saw Patrick as he had been just a few minutes ago: a focus so straight and cold he had barely registered her leaving. She hadn't recognized the cold burning of those pale green eyes. Before, they had sparkled; just then they had glinted. Then she thought of Aaron and his pale chest, his arms circled in metal. He must be so cold, she thought. It was still fairly warm outside, but those chains must be cold. She was shocked, as she was when she saw him in his apartment, at the vulnerability of his skin. So white and delicately veined. It was not the kind of skin that was meant to be clapped with handcuffs. Suddenly, she found herself running down the stairs and out onto the street. She did not know what she would find in the theatre. Maybe she would find an empty stage, both of them gone home, everything fine. But maybe she would find something worse than that, and she did: Aaron was lying on his side, his hands almost blue, the bright stage lights making him look even thinner and paler than he usually was. She ran down the aisle. There was a trickle of blood running down his right wrist. He was half facing away from her, but when he heard her steps, her breathing, he craned his neck and looked at her. It took a few seconds for his eyes to focus on her. When he smiled, it was a languid smile.

“It's you.”

“Yeah.”

She knelt beside him, her hands hovering over him, darting through the air over his body.

“I don't know what to do,” she said.

“I think Patrick left the key on a seat.”

After Claire found it, she knelt beside him again.

“Well, this is embarrassing,” he said. His voice was subdued. He cleared his throat and lay his head down on the ground. Claire began opening the padlocks. The cinema was silent but for the clinking of metal.

“Tell me about Houdini,” she said. Anything to break the silence.

“Naw,” he replied. “Another time.”

She removed the last arm-iron.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yeah, but it’ll be fine. See? The colour’s coming back.” Together they sat and watched his skin. It was like watching a mood ring change colour: from blue to purple to red.

“Come on,” she said, and stood up. Aaron moved to gather the chains.

“Leave them. I’ll come back for them. You need to get cleaned up. You need to sleep or something.” She felt an uncharacteristic need to give him orders, and she watched herself take control as though she were sitting in the front row, watching this scene unfold.

“I’m fine.”

“You need to bandage up those hands.” She passed him his shirt and he moved to put it on but cringed when the fabric touched the raw skin around his wrists.

“Leave it off until you clean up those cuts.”

He didn’t listen, and sucked in a sharp breath as he passed his arms through the fabric. It was worth the pain to be covered again.

Claire followed Aaron into his apartment. She didn’t know anything about first aid, but she guessed they would need to wash his cuts. Aaron found some alcohol in his

cupboard and she poured it over his wrists. He sucked in air and vigorously tapped one foot.

“Mm,” he grunted and looked up at the ceiling. She held onto his forearm because she sensed if she didn’t, he would pull it away from her. Then she wrapped gauze around his wrists. She did this slowly and they both stared, strangely transfixed, as the white fabric circled his wrist, cocooning it until his cuts were hidden from view.

“There,” she breathed.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah.”

They stood in his bathroom for a few seconds more, neither speaking. He could see his face and her profile in the mirror. He could feel his wrists throbbing and little burning spots on his forearm where she had clutched him.

“You should get some sleep,” she said finally.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“Thanks again.”

“Sure. See you.”

Then she was gone, slipped out somehow past him into the hall and out the door. He sat down on the edge of his bathtub. He looked at the whiteness of the bandages. Eventually he went to bed.

...

The device was called a sanguaw. It was presented to Houdini by a group of Cantonese seamen, who assured him it was used to punish criminals in China. To London

newspapers, it was a “torture machine,” which made Houdini “a student of Chinese torture schemes.” In fact, Houdini had hidden in his home office an envelope called “Chinese Tortures” in which he kept a photo of pirates decapitated by Chinese officials, and a series of snuff shots of a woman tied to a stake, having chunks of her flesh hacked off.

The sanguaw was a rack made of wood. It was a partial “V” shape that did not end in a point, but was cut off closer to the middle. It looked like a cart, with the narrow end resting on a wooden base. At the top, there was a cross beam. Straps and chains were attached all around the device. Houdini insisted that two physicians be present to ensure that he was not in fact being strangled or tortured.

London’s Oxford Music Hall was a lavish hall of gold, blue and pink décor. Four Chinese men in long pigtailed carried the sanguaw onto the plush and golden stage. Houdini stepped up to the dark wooden structure and allowed the four men to bind him. First, they crossed his legs and secured them together with a leather collar that they then attached to the chains at the base of the sanguaw. Next, they fastened his neck with chains and attached that to the crossbeam. The distance between the two points forced Houdini to stand on his tiptoes. Next, his hands were belted then chained to the sides of the structure. He was being pulled in all directions. One newspaper described it as a position “of a criminal who cannot stand because his feet are crossed and chained, who cannot sit because the chain round his neck, nailed to a beam over his head, prevents stooping, and who has to depend for support on his manacled wrists.” Houdini was stretched in a way a body should not be stretched. Whatever movement he made caused the chains around his neck to choke him. However, he eventually managed to slide his left foot out of his shoe.

A reporter described this as being done “with a strain which must have been agony.” Once he had removed his shoe, he had more space within the circle of chains around his feet, and finally managed to pull them free. This accomplished, he pulled his lower body up with his manacled wrists in a perverted form of a horizontal bar routine. His body shook with the exertion. The leather belt around his wrists cut into his flesh. He lifted his legs over his head and wrapped them around the crossbar. Then, with his teeth, he freed his hands. It took a number of small pecks to achieve this. Each nip he took wrenched his sides and his wrists, which started bleeding. When he had released his right hand, he used it to undo his left. Finally, he unwound the chains from his neck. In total, it took him fifteen minutes to escape. The audience was practically hysterical when he stepped free. They applauded and cheered and would not let him leave the stage. He bowed again and again.

...

Claire fell into bed as soon as she closed and locked the door to her apartment. She crawled under the blankets fully clothed, and tucked her hands in between her knees to stop them from shaking. Eventually, she felt the day slipping away. In her half-sleep she thought of it as strands of toffee: thinning as they were pulled, eventually turning as fine as spider webs. A soft knocking jerked her awake. Her heart hammered.

When she peered through the peep hole of her front door, she saw Patrick. She leaned her back against the door, the hammering in her chest not slowing down at all. She let out a shaky sigh. Her hands followed her breath and began to shake too.

“Claire?” he called, his voice soft, almost a whisper. “Claire, I’m sorry it’s so late. But I really need to talk to you. Are you there? I just need five minutes. I was just at

Aaron's. Everything's fine. We worked it out. Everything's fine," he repeated. "I just want to apologize. Are you there?" She breathed deeply. Then she opened the door.

"Thanks for letting me in."

She tried not to look into his eyes. She turned away from him, saying "It's late," as she walked into the living room.

"I don't even know what time it is. I'm sorry. I just wanted to apologize for earlier. What happened down there, it must have been weird for you."

"Your chains are still down there."

"No, I got them. "I guess I just missed you guys. Aaron told me you came back for him."

"Yeah."

"It was nice of you, but..." he walked over to where she was sitting on the couch. He sat down next to her. The couch was old, with worn springs, and his weight created a depression that she couldn't help sinking into so that their thighs were almost touching. He placed his hands on her arms, just below her shoulders.

"But, Claire, listen to me." He waited until she was looking directly into his eyes. "I was coming back for him. I would never have left him there. Like that." She could sense his sincerity as he said that, and she felt a wave of relief wash over her. She wanted so badly to believe him.

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise." Patrick moved his hands to hold hers, and gently squeezed before letting go.

"I better go," he said. She was too tired to stand, and when she heard the door shut

behind him, she simply leaned over, closed her eyes, and slept.

The next morning, Tom stopped short as he entered the cinema. He knew the building so well, was attuned to its air. He could walk around it blindfolded, sensing the presence of objects by his memories of them and by the parting of the air around them. Today, something was different. He wandered around the room, stopping when he noticed a watch lying beside a chair in the front row. He pocketed it. Later, he would forget that he had it, and it would almost surprise him when he emptied his pockets at night. On stage he stopped again when he noticed four drops of crusted blood beside a small stool. He stared at them for a moment. Something was shifting in the cinema. Something was happening. He was not sure if he should be glad about this, or if he should be terrified. He wondered briefly whose blood he was looking at, but, strangely, his mind didn't let him dwell on that. All he could think was that, after all these years, it felt as though the building was waking. Rising up from whatever sleep it had been sleeping while his father filled it porn. He picked up the stool and carried it backstage, walking slowly, warily, because of the new energy coursing through him. The feeling surprised him and he walked slowly so that it wouldn't overrun him. But he also felt ready, and more awake than he had in a long time.

“What went on here last night?” he asked Sylvie a few minutes later. Sylvie shrugged.

“I think something happened here.”

“Really?”

She was wearing pink today, light pink and white satin shoes. She liked pink and white together. It reminded her of cherry blossoms and the Korean flower festival her

father had told her about, but never taken her to; of a dress she had as a little girl; of frosting on cakes she would never eat, but that she liked to look at.

“We need to talk about those costumes,” Tom said. “How are you doing with them?”

“Fine,” she said. “They’re coming along.”

“You need to be faster,” Tom said. “Everything needs to be faster.”

“All right.”

“Can you work on them nights? Do you have anything else on at night?”

She almost laughed. “No. Nothing on. I’ll work nights.” She always assumed Tom knew about her small, quiet life; would not need to ask if she had plans at night because she never did. Although, thinking about it now, she realized he had no real reason to know; they never talked about their personal lives. She had no idea what he did when he was not in the cinema. She had no idea where he lived, if he had a family, if he had friends, how much he slept, what worlds he visited at night. Maybe, like her, he liked to walk in Parc LaFontaine. Maybe they sometimes crossed paths, both so lost in thought they passed as strangers. She supposed they still were strangers, in a way. She was tired, suddenly, and sad. She wished she were wearing different colours: dark strong colours so that she could get through this day.

“Are you all right?” Tom asked. “I’m sorry if I sounded harsh. I didn’t mean...”

“No, no,” she assured him quickly. “It’s something else.” She managed a smile, a pink and white smile.

Tom went directly to his office and called Patrick on his cell phone, something he had never done before. The energy of the morning was draining from him, and he was

slipping into the hazy state he had become so accustomed to. He had to use that energy before he lost it, and the only thing he could think about was the chandelier. Maybe it was because he had been looking at a photo of April March last night. In the photo, she was dripping in silver and pearl jewellery, and her pale skin was so smooth and bright, it looked like it was lit up from the inside.

“Patrick?” he asked. He could hear chattering and laughing in the background.

“Yes.”

“It’s Tom. Where are you?”

“Oh, hi Tom. I’m at school. Between classes.”

“Well, I just wanted to say something.”

“Okay.”

“I want to buy a chandelier.”

“All right.”

“I’m going to do that today.”

“Do you want me to come?”

“No, thank you.”

“All right.” Patrick paused. “Well, good luck, then.”

“Thank you,” Tom said brightly and hung up the phone.

Patrick stood for a second, looking at the phone in his hand.

“Hey, Patrick,” a girl said as she walked past him. He looked up and smiled, calling back “hey,” but leaving out her name because he didn’t remember it.

As Tom walked to the lighting store, he thought about how the city was getting

darker. As fall set in, it was getting colder and darker. He supposed that happened every year, but somehow this year he felt it more. His chandelier would light everything up. And the people who came to the show would love it so much—the show, the cinema, the chandelier—that he would never have to show another porn film again. He imagined walking around his office with a black garbage bag, firing in one film after another. He imagined doing the same in the lobby. Then he imagined ripping the posters down, one by one. Or, maybe having Patrick rip them down; he was taller and better at those kinds of physical things. But Tom could hold the garbage bag. Then he and Sylvie could go shopping for new posters. They could put up whatever they wanted. A big poster of April March with her glowing skin and pearls. A poster of Houdini, of course. More than one, and big ones, looking down at them all with his funny thin smile and sparkly eyes. And they could take a picture of all the performers in the show, all dressed up and smiling under the beautiful big chandelier, and they could blow that photo up and they could all sign it and someday someone would pay a fortune for that picture so that they could point to it and say, that was the beginning.

Tom used his own savings for the chandelier. He spent an entire day wandering around a light store being followed around by an increasingly exasperated but then eventually resigned sales clerk. “Oh, look at that one,” Tom would say, as though the clerk, like him, were seeing it for the first time. “Look, little globes. Little light globes. How nice. I wonder. Hm.” Eventually the clerk showed him the biggest, most expensive chandelier. Tom stood under it for a long time, his neck craned, his eyes sparkling in response to the crystals glittering overhead. It looked like a three-tiered wedding cake, hanging upside down above his head, held together by delicate gold chains. Round, warm

lights dotted the edge of each tier, while round crystal beads looped down from them. The same kind of crystal beads were encasing the large light, filtering it, turning it to sparkles as it passed from the bulb to the room. Tom turned to the clerk and asked breathlessly if he could possibly turn off all the other lights in the store to get the full effect of the chandelier.

“Well,” the clerk said, looking around. It was a store that only sold lights. There were hundreds of them. He sighed. “Of course,” he said, and walked through the store, turning the lights off one by one. Tom kept looking at the chandelier, and with each light the clerk extinguished, it grew brighter and more magnificent. When the clerk turned off the last light—a glass Tiffany lamp in the front window—Tom gasped. His chandelier was perfect, hanging up there like a moon, orbited by little crystal stars.

“I bought a chandelier,” Tom said an hour later when he burst into the lobby of the theatre. Sylvie looked up from some leopard fabric she was sewing.

“That's good,” she said and smiled before turning back to the fabric. It was thicker than she would have liked; it was making it hard to hand sew the seams. She could use her sewing machine when she got home, but she found she was rarely home these days. Rehearsals went late, and then she found herself wandering longer through the streets than she used to. Staring for hours at the illuminated fountain in Parc Lafontaine. She would watch it turn from blue to green to purple to white. White was the nicest, she thought. Clean and bright. Silvery. All light is coloured, Nat had told her. White light is just a mixture of all the colours.

“Wait till you see it,” Tom said. “It's...” He raised his hands above his head, in what Sylvie assumed might be the approximate size, or maybe even shape, of the

chandelier. “Oh,” he said through a happy sigh. “You’ll love it.”

“I’m sure I will.”

“You will, you will,” he said. Then he went upstairs to his office. After a few minutes sitting at his desk, he fell into a deep sleep. When he woke up, he remembered dreaming of shiny things, of white light and swinging strands of crystal beads. In his dream he lifted his arms over his head and everything sparkled and was warm.

That night, Patrick told Claire that they wouldn’t need her for the next few nights.

“But what about Metamorphosis?” she asked.

“It’s looking great. You guys will be fine. Just keep working on your part on your own. Aaron and I have to come up with a few more escapes.”

Claire looked at Aaron, who nodded in agreement.

Just like that. They didn’t need her. She tried not to let it bother her, but sitting alone in her apartment, she could not take her mind off of what they would be doing. What trick they would be rehearsing. She ran through Aaron’s repertoire in her mind. It wouldn’t be Metamorphosis; they needed her for that. All of the other tricks, she realized, Aaron could do without her. She had gotten better at tying ropes and chains, so she supposed Patrick decided she didn’t need any more practice at that. It made sense, but she could not stop thinking about what might be going on in the cinema.

Later that night, when she heard Aaron come home, she went down to see him. That began what would become an unsettling guessing game they played each night. Patrick and Aaron rehearsed alone. When Aaron opened his door, she took in his tired face, the abrasions on his wrist, the blisters on his fingers, and could tell they had been

working on rope ties. The next night, his hair was wet, his skin was pale, and he was shivering, and Claire could tell Patrick had made him stay under ice water for as long as he could stand it. It was useless to have him do that, she knew. Houdini only did that to train for his underwater escapes and bridge jumps. Or for the Chinese Water Torture Cell. They didn't have one of those—they could never afford it—and as far as she knew, Aaron wasn't planning any bridge jumps. Aaron just shrugged. “I guess I'm just getting into character.”

...

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Houdini said, striding on stage of the Circus Busch in Berlin. Three assistants dressed in purple velvet suits trimmed in gold brocade glided on stage behind him. They each carried a brass water bucket.

“I take great pleasure,” Houdini continued, “in introducing my latest invention, the Water Torture Cell.” One of the assistants pulled aside the gold curtain of the magician’s cabinet to reveal a large glass tank, much like a phone booth, sitting on a waterproof sheet. Beside the cell, a glistening axe waited in a woodblock.

“Although there is nothing supernatural about it,” Houdini continued, “I am willing to forfeit the sum of \$1, 000 to anyone who can prove that it is possible to obtain air inside of the Torture Cell when I am locked up in it in the regulation manner after it has been filled with water.”

While Houdini was speaking, his assistants disappeared offstage, only to reappear moments later wearing fishermen’s oilskins and rubber boots and carrying brass stepladders. Houdini invited a committee of audience members to examine the cell while he rushed offstage. He reappeared in a robe. By then the assistants were busy filling the

cell with water. One filled the brass buckets from a hose. He passed the bucket to the second assistant, who, standing at the foot of the stepladder, handed it up to the third assistant, who poured it into the tank. No one wondered why they did not just put the hose into the tank and fill it that way, without the added step of the buckets, because they were too preoccupied with the rising water level or with watching Houdini throw off his robe to reveal his muscular physique clad only in small blue bathing trunks. When the cell was full, the assistants held up the lid, which included a stock for Houdini's ankles.

“Here,” said Houdini, pointing to the two holes. “My ankles will be locked in here. My feet are size seven and a half, by the way, and I will be unable to extricate them unless one of my assistants unlocks the stock.”

He lay on the ground and the assistants opened the stocks, put his ankles in them, then locked them shut. From a rope descending from the ceiling, they attached the lid of the cell, and slowly so as not to break Houdini's ankles, they raised him into the air. When he was suspended directly over the cell by the ankles, he took a deep breath and clapped his hands. The assistants began to lower him into the tank. His body displaced the water, which sloshed over the sides of the tank. The tank was barely large enough to fit him; his head touched the floor, his hands he had to cross tightly across his chest because there was not enough room for them at his sides. His shoulders touched the glass. Finally, a steel lid with holes for his feet was placed over the top of the cell and padlocked shut. One assistant grabbed the axe while the other pulled the cabinet shut. At the same time, the orchestra began playing “Asleep in the Deep.” They played it slower than it was meant to be played, which gave it a nightmarish quality.

One minute later, Houdini sprang from behind the cabinet, arms wide. An

assistant yanked back the curtain to reveal the Torture Cell, still padlocked shut, still full of water.

One reviewer described the audience reaction as overwhelming. “To say the applause was deafening is putting it too mildly,” he wrote. “The audience rose as one body and cannonaded with their expressions of approval.”

“I guarantee you, he used his powers of dematerialization,” one man claimed as he left the cinema that evening.

“No, no,” said another. “It was simply a trick. But a very clever trick indeed.”

“Did you see his forearms?” one woman whispered to her sister. “Goodness, did you see?”

...

When Claire was at work, she would thumb through the Houdini biography Sylvie had started leaving there for her to read, and found all of the open challenges Houdini had accepted. Following an advertisement crying “HOUDINI’S World-wide reputation is at Stake!” Houdini would escape from a series of increasingly bizarre items supplied to him by different companies. In Chicago, he escaped from the world’s largest and strongest envelope. In Philadelphia, he escaped from a giant football laced with brass chains. While Aaron was downstairs with Patrick, Claire would run over the list of escapes in her mind. Escape from a nailed up packing case. Out of a large paper bag. Out of a willow hamper. Out of a mail bag.

“We’re just working out some new escapes,” Patrick told her when she asked him how long they would be practicing alone. “There’s no point in teaching you how to tie him up when he may not even end up doing that trick. Once we’ve narrowed it down,

we'll bring you back in, teach you the new escapes.” So she waited. Chained to a ladder.
Chained to steel-rim tires. Nailed in a coffin.

One night Aaron opened the door pressing a piece of gauze to his forearm.

“What happened?” she demanded.

He shrugged. “Patrick missed.”

“Missed what?”

“The nail slipped a bit.”

“The nail?”

“Yeah, he found an old door in the alley. He wanted to try nailing me to it. Well, you know, not *me*, that was a mistake, but drive in nails around me then loop chains around them.”

Claire stared at his arm. The blood was seeping slowly through the gauze.

“But, you know, it's actually a good one. We might keep that one for the show. It could work.”

Claire moved her gaze up to his face. His eyes were wild and bright.

“I hope you know how to hammer in a nail,” he said.

The longer Claire stayed away from the cinema, the stranger it all seemed. She found herself wondering, for the first time since she moved to Montreal, what the rest of the city did with their time. She realized with a start how small her world was here. It was almost as small as home.

There also seemed to be a widening gap between her and Aaron. When she looked him in the eye, she had a feeling he had stopped seeing her. It got worse with each night.

And, in a way, he had stopped seeing her. Every escape he made brought him closer to something he had always wanted. And the feeling he got in that instant before escaping, when he *knew* he had done it, was strong enough to make him forget about everything else. Even Patrick stopped bothering him. They both had the same goal, anyway. Patrick was helping him push himself further than he might have on his own. He needed Patrick to push him. He even started to feel grateful to Patrick. Together they talked about Houdini's escapes; together they brought them back to life. Aaron still liked to see Claire, but it was a distracted feeling of pleasure when she came over. It was not like that time when she had put him in the straitjacket. He was no longer thirsty for the details of her face. He would never put her face above the details of an escape again. Also, each night she seemed to worry more, and he hated the way she looked when she asked him, "Why would you do that?" or "You should be careful." Didn't she know those were questions Bess would never even think of asking Houdini?

Patrick noticed a change come over Claire as well. She seemed sharper now. There was an impatience to her, a lack of reverence for her surroundings. She paced the lobby when she worked. She stared out of the door, through the bars to the street. Sometimes her eyes locked on a person walking by, and she would follow that person with her eyes until he disappeared around a corner or into the crowd surging around him.

One day Claire asked Sylvie again how she had ended up working here. Sylvie sighed and told her that her store had flooded the night after she met Patrick and Tom. When Claire pressed her for the details, Sylvie admitted to leaving the water running with the sink plugged.

"It was so stupid," she said.

Claire studied her face.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Are you sure you left the water running?”

Sylvie just looked at her. “Yes,” she said eventually. “Yes, I am.”

Patrick decided it was time to bring Claire back. Before she leaves us, he thought. Before she forgets why she should stay. He had thought that giving her some space would be a good idea; that it might make her eager to participate again. Also, he worried that he had overstepped some boundary of hers the night of the Hodgson escape. He wanted to keep pushing Aaron, without driving Claire away. He sensed Claire would not have lasted through all those nights, all those escapes they had been trying lately. But now, he feared, he may have lost her anyway.

“Hey Claire,” he said when he walked into the cinema.

“Hey.”

“We need you again.”

“Sorry?”

He fought down a burst of impatience. He looked down at her lap. She was drawing in her sketch book. It was the Montreal skyline as seen from the lookout on top of the mountain. She must have gone up there, he thought irritably. It's my fault I didn't occupy her more.

“We need you for rehearsals again. We've got it narrowed down to a few escapes. We need you to learn how to tie Aaron up for them.”

“Oh.”

“Plus, we need to keep practising Metamorphosis.”

“Yeah, Okay.”

“The show’s in a week!” he said. “Come tonight?” No no no, he thought. No we are not losing you now.

Claire nodded, but she looked distracted, and it took all his effort to smile at her warmly.

A few hours later, the chandelier arrived. Tom put a sign up on the door of the cinema. “Closed today/tonight for very important business. Please come back tomorrow.” He called Sylvie in, even though it was Claire’s shift.

Large, silent men strode in with scaffolding that they assembled in a remarkably short amount of time. They were men Tom's father had known. They were not part of a union, so they came at night. They asked for cash and they didn't tell Tom the existing wiring was meant for a much smaller light than the one he had just bought.

When the workers left, Tom spent a few minutes standing below his chandelier. He spun in a slow circle. When he burst into the lobby, he found the performers grouped around the counter drinking beer and eating stale popcorn.

“It's ready!” Tom cried, and smiled as they rushed by him into the cinema. He smiled wider when he heard their oohs and aahs. What a wonderful group of young people, he thought happily. What wonderful taste they have.

“I don't think it's possible to look bad under this light,” Celeste said, looking at everyone's face in turn. She looked at her hands, rubbed her arm, then turned to Owen.

“How's my skin look?”

He shrugged. “Perfect.”

“Yours too.”

“Money well spent, Tom,” said Xavier Winters. “It adds a touch of class. Of je ne sais quoi.”

Claire was looking up. Looking up and getting lost in the soft light, and the tiny crystals hanging down like bits of ice, tinkling, very softly, overhead.

The show came together quickly after that. The lights Sylvie ordered arrived, and were installed. She got everyone to stand in the centre of the stage, then she turned them on all at once. They were blasted with light. For a second they were shocked, then they started to laugh.

“My eyes! My eyes!” Kate cried. Sylvie shut them all off, then, because she couldn’t help it, and because she couldn’t see a reason not to, she slammed them all back on again. The second time the lights came on, they noticed how grimy the walls were, how chipped the paint. Some of the plaster was crumbling.

“Yeesh,” said Heather. “I guess we know what the next step is.”

Tom insisted on red and gold, and they closed the cinema again. Tom convinced one of the workers he had hired earlier to lend them his scaffold so that they could paint. When they finished, the red was rich and intoxicating, and the room sparkled because of the gold.

...

“I think you are getting old, Harry,” said Bess, reaching out to touch the white hair around his temples. “You work too hard.”

Houdini sighed. He was sitting in an armchair with his legs up and his head tilted back. Bess was standing in front of him. She kept her hand on his cheek.

“Maybe” he said. “But what else is there for me to do?”

Bess started and her hand, which had been stroking him, was still.

“But...” she said. She frowned. “You can do anything.”

...

They decided to hold their dress rehearsal on the anniversary of the fatal punch. It would have made more sense to do it the night before the show, but they couldn't ignore that night of the punch. It was the night Houdini started dying.

...

Houdini came to Montreal in 1926. It was part of a tour he was making from Rhodes Island to the Midwest. He would pass through Albany, Schenectady, Montreal and Detroit. In Albany, he fractured his left ankle performing the Water Torture Cell. He continued the tour without that trick, hobbling around onstage with a splint and a leg brace. On October 18, he arrived in Montreal. On the 19th, he lectured at McGill University, on invitation from the psychology department. He looked exhausted, and sick, but still managed to stick a needle through his cheek to prove that you can control fear.

Three days later, Houdini was in his dressing room at Le Globe, now Cinema L'Amour. He had performed there the night before. Now, he was reclining on a couch, posing for a McGill student named Samuel Smilovitz, who was drawing a portrait of him. Houdini was exhausted. Smilovitz remarked later that he looked like someone “much in need of a long, carefree vacation.” The muscles of his temples and his mouth were twitching. He talked about fear again, and said he had endured being imprisoned in a coffin simply by conquering his fear.

It was then that a first-year student—Whitehead—walked in. He was over six feet

tall, bulky, and handsome. He spoke with an exaggerated Oxford accent. He and Houdini chatted, Whitehead asking him question after question about mysteries in the bible, plots of detective novels, and then, suddenly, he asked, “Is it true, Mr. Houdini, that you can resist the hardest blows struck to the abdomen?”

Houdini stared at him. Then he stretched out his arm. “Look here,” he said, “feel the muscles in my forearm. Did you know this very forearm was featured in the *St. Louis Dispatch*?”

“Would you mind,” Whitehead said, “if I delivered a few blows to your abdomen, Mr. Houdini?”

There was something in Houdini that would not let him say no. He had risen to every challenge put before him his entire life. It was what had made him famous. And he did not say no to Whitehead, either. He accepted the challenge, and was moving to sit up, to prepare himself, when Whitehead bent over him and delivered blow after blow. Smilovitz described the punches as “terribly forceful, deliberate, well-directed.”

Eventually Houdini raised a hand and mumbled, “That will do.”

Later, when Smilovitz handed Houdini his drawing, Houdini remarked, “You made me look a little tired in this picture.” He paused. “The truth is, I don’t feel so well.”

The rest of his performances in Montreal were punctuated by trips to the couch every chance he got. He was in a cold sweat.

He arrived in Detroit with a temperature of 102. By the time Houdini went onstage, it had risen to 104. He collapsed at intermission, gave the rest of the show, then collapsed again at the end.

Houdini’s appendix had ruptured, and he was suffering from peritonitis, an

infection of the membrane lining the stomach and surrounding organs.

The day he died, he told Bess to “be prepared, if anything happens.” This meant, be prepared if I die, but it also meant, be prepared to honour the pact we made: that he would try to contact her from the grave. Their secret code, so that she would know it was him, would be “Rosabel, believe.” They didn’t really believe, either of them, but they desperately wanted to.

His final words were to his brother: “I can’t fight any more.”

The headline for October 31, 1926 in the *San Francisco Chronicle* read: “Death Chains Balk Houdini in Battle to Break Shackles of Grim Reaper.” In a memorial notice Bess placed in *Genii* magazine, Houdini peers out of a photo. His right hand is raised, as though he were outside a window, about to rap on the glass to be let inside. “Eyes of Memory Never Sleep,” is written underneath the photo.

...

Before the dress rehearsal, Patrick jammed Aaron’s handcuffs. He wanted to see Aaron think on his feet. If something happened during the real show, he needed to know Aaron would be able to handle it: to put aside the panic, to keep the audience entertained, to figure out what to do. And he needed to see that Claire would help him. There was a famous story about Houdini and Bess. Patrick was not sure if it was true or not, but some people said when Houdini was stuck one time and could not get free, Bess came on stage and kissed him, and through her lips she passed him the key. He needed to know that Claire and Aaron were as resourceful, that they would think like that, like a team.

Sylvie was going to be up in the lighting booth this time. She had watched the show, had prepared her lighting plan. Tonight was the night to test it with the performers,

and with costumes.

They had divided the show in two: all of the variety acts would happen before intermission, and Aaron and Claire would have the entire second half of the show to themselves. The first half of the show went smoothly. Sylvie lit first for visibility, second for atmosphere, just as Nat used to. She bathed the stage in a deep blue wash, then she made a low warm light creep from the side until, by the time Kate appeared on stage, the warm light dominated. She followed each performer with the spot light. Just like Nat, she held the light in her arms. Such power, she thought. She felt her blood coursing through her as she looked down on them all. Her costumes were perfect. She lit them exactly as they should be lit. She made the gold embroidered swirls on Xavier Winters' black velvet jacket shimmer as he threw back his head and placed the tip of a sword in his mouth. He bounced up and down to shimmy it down his throat. When he drew it out again, she lit the blade with red.

They stopped for intermission. They all babbled and giggled. They, too, had felt the effect of the lights. They felt like real performers. A few minutes later, Aaron and Claire took the stage.

Later, they would all think back and wonder what, exactly, had happened. Some would remember Aaron and Claire performing a few tricks before it happened. Others would maintain that it happened right away after intermission. Some would like to forget that it happened at all.

Sylvie had decided that for Claire and Aaron, she would use simple lighting. The footlights, mostly, because that looked most dramatic, and it was the most authentic. She would also use the lights from the balcony rail directly overhead. And she didn't want to

change the colours and the position of lights as she had with the others; that looked too modern, somehow, for Aaron and Claire. Just white light, and still.

For the first escape, she sat up in the lighting booth, but with nothing to do, no spotlight to hold in her hand, no dimming to take care of, she started to think of Nat up in a box like this one, while she had been down below. From up here everyone was smaller. Had Nat lost that feeling when she descended again, or had she always thought of people, and Sylvie, as smaller than herself? Memories slipped into Sylvie's mind, then, that she didn't realize she had. You wear too much makeup, Nat had said once. Look at all the gunk around your eyes. With her thumb she had smudged one of Sylvie's eyelids. Sylvie had left the dark smear under her eye for the rest of the day to prove that she wasn't vain, but she thought about it all day. The next day, Sylvie's face was clean and bare, but Nat just said, Yikes. You tired? A day after their fifth anniversary, Nat had insisted she wanted to go out with her friends alone. She was firing her keys and wallet into her shoulder bag when she stopped and looked at Sylvie. And don't wait up, she'd said, as though that would be the most pathetic thing in the world.

Sylvie looked down again at the theatre. She could see everything from up here. Everything looked clearer. She realized, then, that she had been hanging on to a memory of someone who didn't even exist. The Nat she had been missing wasn't really the same Nat who had left her, so suddenly, for another woman, with a clipped and heartless goodbye. Sylvie had fought away any negative thoughts of Nat, had convinced herself that Nat was the only person who could make her happy. Then she had turned to another absent person—Houdini—to try and forget. When someone was not there, standing in front of you, you could think anything you wanted about them.

She looked down at the theatre. They were all in love with the ghost of a man. What a sad group of people, she thought. What would Houdini think if he could see them? He hated imitators, had spent most of his life fighting with them. He had said once, “I want my show to be the best of its kind whilst I am alive. When I am dead there will not be another like it.” She left the booth.

She sat down beside Tom in the audience. She studied Claire and Aaron on stage and noticed Aaron had scabs on his wrists, and a small one around his Adam’s apple. His sleeves were rolled up and she could see bruises along his forearms, and some appearing out of the neck of his dress shirt. Why had she never noticed that? It was the lighting, she supposed. The stark, simple lighting revealed it all.

Sylvie stood and walked up onto the stage. She walked straight up to Aaron and picked up his hands.

“You poor boy,” she said, and kissed his wrists.

“Sylvie!” Patrick cried from the audience. “What are you doing?”

“It’s okay, Sylvie,” said Aaron. “It’s fine. Can you just...” He placed his hand on her back and pushed her gently towards the side of the stage. As she walked off stage, she heard Patrick calling, “Everyone, just ignore the interruption.” She looked back to find Claire watching her, and she remembered the tone of Claire’s voice when she had asked, “Are you sure? Are you sure you left the water running?” Sylvie turned away from Claire and reached the end of the stage as Patrick called, “Keep going, Claire. Put on the cuffs.”

Then two things happened at once. Sylvie reached the edge of the stage and leaned against the wall, nestled a little in the red velvet curtain. She looked up, and could

have sworn she saw someone up in the lighting booth. Her weight on the curtains shifted them, pulled them further than they had been towards the side. At the same time, Claire clicked the handcuffs shut. Sylvie left the theatre, then. She did not care about the show anymore.

Kate noticed the fire first. The curtain had caught. Sylvie had shifted it enough to touch the footlight at the far left of the stage. Kate opened her mouth to yell, and the curtain went up in a whoosh, as though she had breathed that fire. At that same instant, Aaron realized Patrick had jammed the cuffs. He was handcuffed to a chair. Claire gripped the back of the chair and stared at the fire leaping higher beside them.

“Oh,” she breathed.

The lights on the far end of the rail exploded, raining down sparks. The sparks broke the spell, and the performers began to scream. They scrambled out of their seats. They ran for the exit signs. Patrick lunged for a fire extinguisher, but when he pulled it off the wall, found it had expired long ago. He raced for the lobby. He would call 911.

Tom had not moved. He was sitting directly under the chandelier, looking back and forth from the red light of the flames to the white light of the chandelier.

“Claire,” Aaron said in a hoarse whisper. “I can’t get out.”

She looked frantically from him to the wall of flame. It was licking the ceiling now, curling with the carvings of vines they had just painted gold.

“Yes you can,” she said. “You do it all the time.”

He had trouble speaking because his voice kept cracking, and he found he could not stop swallowing. “They’re jammed,” he managed. More sparks rained down. They landed on the carpet and some of the seats. Ash began swirling around them. Thick pieces

of burnt curtain were being blown in every direction by the currents of hot air.

“Tom!” Claire cried. “Tom, help us!” But Tom was standing up, moving slowly away from them to the right side of the theatre, away from the fire.

“Tom,” Claire sobbed, but he just wandered along the wall, feeling the mouldings rising to meet his fingers. The smoke descended on Claire and Aaron and they began to cough.

Outside, Patrick had ushered everyone into a frantic group on the sidewalk.

“Stay calm, stay calm,” he was saying. “The fire trucks are on their way.” Sylvie was out there too. He had found her in the lobby, packing up all of her things, getting ready to leave. He had pushed her outside, but now, she turned to him and asked, “Where are the others?”

“You started the fire,” he said.

Sylvie just looked at him, then walked past him to the front door. The fire had not reached the lobby yet, even the smell of smoke was not immediately detectable, but she felt like the room, the whole building, was throbbing. The lobby was dim and tense and more like a dream than anything she had ever experienced before. She pushed open the door.

Claire had to admit later that she thought about leaving Aaron. She thought of her father, and how he had so stupidly thrown away his life. But Aaron was not a dog. There was something stubborn rising inside her that would not allow her to just let someone die. She started dragging the chair across the stage, away from the source of the fire. But by now the fire was everywhere. And the smoke was moving just as quickly. It was stinging her eyes, blurring her vision, and sending tears down her cheeks. In between coughs she

struggled for breath.

“Don’t bother going to the stairs,” Aaron said. He coughed. “Just push me over the side.” She did, and when he fell to the floor, with the chair pushing down on him, he fractured his ankle.

“Shit,” he cried. Claire jumped down beside him. Down there, on the floor, it was easier to breathe. She took deep breaths.

“Tom!” she called again. But Tom was far away from them.

“Claire,” Aaron said, and she looked back at him. “You don’t have to...” but he trailed off. He found he could not tell her to go.

That was when they saw Sylvie running down the aisle towards them, her straight black hair whipping around her face, and her arms out in front of her, as though she were trying to break a fall.

Slowly, they dragged Aaron to the exit. The back of the room still had not caught, but the fire was spreading, and the smoke traveled even faster than the flames. The front row of seats was alight; each seat had a separate fire. They looked like a row of candles before the fires joined and you could no longer see beyond the flames.

Soon they found they could not breathe. They got right to the door, but not outside it, when Sylvie stumbled. Claire did too. She struggled for air, but she couldn’t find any.

Tom, meanwhile, was standing under the chandelier. All great theatres end in fire, he told himself. Then the lights in the chandelier exploded, shattering the crystal beads. They rained down on him, touching first his outstretched hands.

...

Bess tried for ten years to contact Houdini. Every year, on October 31st, the anniversary of his death, she held a séance and waited for “Rosabel, believe.” The last séance took place on the roof of the Hollywood Knickerbocker Hotel, where they had celebrated their silver wedding anniversary, and which he had filled with so many flowers.

In the 1956 broadcast of the 1936 event, the leader of the séance intoned, “Houdini, are you here? Are you here, Houdini? Please manifest yourself in any way possible. Take from this earnest gathering any strength that may be necessary for you to use.” He urged Houdini to speak through a trumpet (“Lift it! Lift it! Speak through it! Speak! Speak, Harry”), to levitate the table (“Lift the table, move it up! Rap on it! Spell a code!”), and ring a bell (“Let its tinkle be heard around the world!”). He urged him to manifest himself “for the love of a little silver-haired widow.” He went on, his voice rising and cracking with emotion. Finally, he fell into silence. Eventually, Bess spoke.

“My last hope is gone,” she said. “I do not believe that Houdini can come back to me, or to anyone.” Her voice was brittle, but resolute. “Ten years is long enough to wait for any man,” she said. She paused. “Goodnight, Harry.”

Then, it began to rain. The sky had been clear only a few minutes before, but suddenly it clouded over, and with a low rumble, it opened up and drenched them all. A magician friend said later, “Houdini was too big of a man to come back and shake insignificant little bells, or to toot horns. Harry Houdini was a dynamic personality! Harry Houdini was a man of great ego! Harry Houdini was a man of great force! Harry Houdini, if he could return, would not have returned as a horn tooter, but perhaps as something dynamic, as something great, as something forceful. Perhaps as a drop of

heaven's rain.”

...

Claire, Sylvie and Aaron were discovered only seconds after they passed out by the door. Firemen lifted them out. Later, those men would tell the story at the bar. About how they found a skinny guy, all dressed up and handcuffed to a chair, a middle-aged woman, and a tiny girl wearing bloomers, all lying there, almost asphyxiated. You never know in this city, they said. They didn't talk much about the remains of the man they found in the centre of the theatre, lying there with the iron frame of a chandelier on his chest, and little shards of crystal scattered all around.

Tom's funeral ended up being on Halloween. No one commented on that. They didn't really say much to each other at all. After the funeral, Claire, Aaron and Sylvie stood outside Cinema L'Amour. The fire had not reached the front, so the signs were still there, as was the lobby, but you could see that behind there was just a charred frame of a building. It was blocked off with police tape. Ribbons, Sylvie thought. And she could see Tom in her shop, touching a roll of lace ribbon crying, "Hey, these look like film reels!" They could have slipped under the police tape, but they didn't want to. There would be scraps of red fabric and crystal beads scattered all around.

...

In the New York Broadway Playhouse, the curtains were about to be lifted. The lights dimmed, the chattering of the audience hushed to excited whispers ("I've been waiting a decade to see him"; "I have seen him twice already. You won't sleep tonight, I promise you that"; "I will have to pinch myself"; "What do you suppose he'll do?")

The curtains were quilted with ribbons Houdini had received. Mostly they were

from European theatre managers for record-breaking receipts. At the far left corner, however, was one for Ehrich Weisz for placing first in the Milwaukee ten-mile run. No one noticed that one, and it disappeared into the red velvet folds of the rising curtain.

“Ladies and Gentlemen!” Houdini cried, arms open, beaming. He basked in the lights and the adoring applause. He closed his eyes for a few seconds and listened. This, he thought. This is it.

The show was called *HOUDINI*. It was three acts, two and a half hours long, and it ushered in the year of his death.

The first act of *HOUDINI* was called “Do the Dead Come Back?” Houdini spent an hour exposing fraudulent spiritual mediums by demonstrating how they fooled trusting, grief-stricken people into believing they were communicating with their loved ones when really they were listening to a series of raps or taps or toots that the medium managed to produce despite being tied up. “It takes a flimflammer to catch a flimflammer,” Houdini said.

The second act, called “Houdini Himself, in Person,” consisted of escape acts that had made him famous. He terrified and amazed the audience with the Water Torture Cell, then invited Bess on stage for Metamorphosis. He introduced her as Miss Beatrice Rahner, which was how he was introduced to her in 1894 when she was only eighteen.

The final act, simply called “Magic,” consisted of more tricks and illusions than Houdini had ever presented. He pulled a rabbit from a hat. “To prove that I am a magician,” he said. He made a bare rose bush bloom with brilliant red roses. He picked a few and tossed them into the audience. “My Bessie loves flowers,” he told them. “She loves the way they smell.” He pulled out a fishing rod and caught live goldfish, plucked

them right out of the air. These he placed gently into a large crystal bowl, where, for the rest of the act, they flitted and shimmered beside him. He made an amber lamp disappear from a table and reappear on another. He pulled yards of hand-painted silk handkerchiefs from a glass bowl. As he pulled, they turned into flags, and he pulled until he had produced every flag in the world. An assistant rolled out twelve ornate iron bird cages housing twelve songbirds. Houdini made them all disappear. “What a pity,” he lamented, “because they sing so beautifully.” He made them all reappear.

“Watch now,” he instructed. “Watch carefully: the flight of time.” He threw five ringing alarm clocks into the air. They vanished. Then, they reappeared, hanging from watch chains at the other side of the stage. Then, the watches expanded to the size of snare drums, and the theatre was filled with their deafening ticking.

“You cannot escape it,” Houdini called. He bowed, and the crowd rose to its feet as one in applause. He bowed and bowed again, turning as he did so, so that everyone in the room imagined he was bowing directly at them.

Usually, Houdini left the stage before the applause died out. This time, he waited. When the crowd finally fell silent, he walked to the front of the stage and stepped right over the footlights. He leaned out as though he were about to leap into the audience.

“When there is nothing more left of Houdini,” he said, “please, may you think of me as having done something to entertain you.”