

A Series of Distractions

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ABSTRACT

A Series of Distractions

Lisa Sookraj

"A Series of Distractions" is a novella that examines the fragmentary nature of the sentence, the story, the photograph and life itself. Montréal writer Gail Scott refers to works created in the middle space, the in between. This is where my writing exists, between genres and between situational states in characters' lives [stuck between a rock (youth) and a hard place (well-adjusted adults)]. To illustrate the disjointed way thoughts tend to connect under pressure, the prose is interspersed with shorter lines that appear like poetry on the page.

The narrative follows Julie Watt, a struggling young photographer in Montréal, and focuses on her shifting relationships (to herself, her work and her boyfriend Felix). Julie seeks progress in place of redundancy, but while clinging to stasis. As such, the writing often examines moments of 'unplot' - the minute events of daily life accompanied by the inner associations of the protagonist. The writing conveys 'the real' in a charged way, revealing the complexity of situations which seem simple on the surface. A quote from Susan Sontag is fitting: "Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality."

The notion of time and the speeds at which it moves in differing stages of our lives and psychologies is integral to the story, at the heart of which lies uncertainty and anxiety. Theories on photography (from Sontag and Roland Barthes) offer insight as to how Julie views the various aspects of her life, and often, how the author perceives prose.

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To my male counterpart, the character of all characters

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Happy as Stale Candy Can Be

Day 1

The sheets tight around Julie in bed had a straightjacket quality. She imagined sliding under a CAT scan. She liked how the machine looked and wanted to see a picture of blurred light that showed what drugs had done to her brain. The a-z pharmaceuticals and skewdicals from the past few years.

Julie wakes up on Mondays to say it all stays the same. It sits. Stares. Spins round the delicates cycle. It shrinks in the dryer. It's hard to try-er.

She finally forced herself off her futon. Took the Effexor that helped the days pass. In a blur of concrete and asphalt, bright halls and dark rooms. Pills pushed her out the door, helped her forget difficulties like the disappointed mother she'd left behind several months ago. Who never got over the fact her little girl wasn't pretty in pink, but draped in black. Who tried to commit her to a mental institute for smoking pot and destroyed her experimental photo collages. Who stressed that Julie needed a high-paying job to repay her for all the sacrifices (she constantly reminded her) she'd made for her along the way.

Julie stretched until it felt like her arms might unhinge, considering the future, impending and bleak. Brushing her teeth, she doubted her ability to complete her photography degree. Though it was her second semester, she wasn't much better adjusted than the last (which she'd barely passed). So far she'd shaken at the gauche introductions,

scowled at the group work, shrunk at the nude model, less offensive but just as jarring as the bold strippers she passed on her way to class.

But there was hope in Roland Barthes' statement that photography defied the laws of probability and possibility. Julie often thought of Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, which she'd just finished reading for class. As Sontag surmised, photographs "are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing."

*

Felix brushed his teeth vigorously then rinsed twice over with Plax.
Counted backwards from 10. Then forward again.

In the apartment he shared with the two other members of his band Walter Crunkite, Felix was rearranging his room. Wishing that life was as simple as relocating the few possessions he had. Systematically. Folding and placing items in boxes at the bottom his closet. Articles arranged by style and colour, music alphabetically. Four polyester red roses on stainless steel posts. Strategically placed, a pace a part. A diagonal that split the room in two.

It was his first January in Montréal. The harshest winter he'd ever endured. The cold cracked his frail being, left him with foggy glasses and stiff joints.

A spider industriously spun his web in the corner. Motion Felix lacked. He rose from squatting near his closet. Grabbed the broom, swept in long strokes. He remembered how excited he'd been at the prospect of moving. A big city. A hip place for his band's

unique sound to take off. To make a break, to take a break. He'd been naïve. He was learning it would take patience. Practice.

It was, after all, a new culture. Taco Bell drive-thrus replaced by cafés on every corner. The busy bustle of downtown Montréal replaced the vacant streets that wound around the Falt city centre. Felix and his friends had traded in park-benches and river-banks for midnight poutine and hipster bars.

Yet the freedom wasn't as drastic as he'd expected. Back in high school his parents never forced him to do his homework. Never asked where he was. Blowing his hard-earned 7-11 salary on chemical concoctions. Blue Lamborghinis, red smilies. Hair dye and glittery eye shadow. *Wide-leg pants with reflective bits and matching glow-sticks.* He grabbed a pen from the tin on his desk and jotted the line down.

*

As Julie pulled a white collared shirt from her closet, she shuddered at the thought of class in half an hour. Soon she'd have to face her first critique of the semester. She feared her sensitive photos weren't ready for such harsh scrutiny - and though she craved to be, nor was she. Overexposed under the studio lights, late for class thanks to girly drinks, liquefied gemstones shimmering red, green, blue. Her student line of credit splurged on candy and clothing, a new wardrobe, shifting from black to grey and burgundy. She still wanted to be different, but more than ever, to blend in. To normal out amidst the multi-coloured trendsters who Julie avoided when she could. There was much she avoided when she could. Her mother's messages on the machine: "You're not spending that loan, are you?"

Like Felix, she was shy with the new language. She couldn't get it right. She said "bon journée" to shop clerks who replied with silence or "bonjour." Everyone knew she wasn't French by her polite, timid "merci."

It wasn't all bad of course, Julie thought as she rushed into her argyle vest, her grey scarf, her wool coat. Photography truly was a means of finding one's place in an alien world. It helped Julie possess a space in which she was insecure. Declaring and declining experience by converting it to an image. Her Nikon F3 was a device capable of making reality somewhat manageable, atomic. In life, one did not know what the future would hold. But in the image, the subject existed stably.

Global warming made it spring-like mid-winter, and sheer sheets of rain fell from the sky like transparent walls. Julie hurried down the street, skillfully swerving around smitten couples. She was thankful she was no longer lonely. Having someone who occasionally shared her space made her feel a bit saner. After evening bubble baths, Felix gave her back rubs. Her muscles melted under his skilled skeletal fingers, slicked with simulated cherry scented oil. Seated on her behind weighing no more than a 500 page novel: *Felix in paperback, sur ma derrière*, she thought.

*

The phone rang. Felix's father, an agriculturalist in Iowa. His parents moved there to find work shortly after Felix left their home in Falt. He suspected he was about to get in trouble for the parking tickets that were being sent to his father (due to the Iowa plates still on the van that once belonged to him). He cringed when instead his father asked,

“So when are you planning to start University?” Felix didn’t plan on it. Music was his calling.

He preferred warm canola oil, saturated popcorn.

Wasted moments into which he could fall
with a soft chewy crunch.

To him, Poland was full of poverty and poo.

Missouri was full of mud and madness.

Falt was full of drama and drugs.

There had to be more.

The Rockies and rainforests. Sand dunes and icebergs.

After talking around the University issue with his father, Felix sat at his computer. He’d been job hunting for almost a month. Defeated, he knew all there was for English folk was call centre work, like the last position he’d had. He couldn’t handle scamming old people into buying phony credit cards so he quit. But now he was behind on rent.

Though near destitute, Felix’d seen worse. The single room apartment at age eleven, when his family first moved from Poland to Missouri. Felix and his sister had helped their parents with their night job cleaning office buildings. Felix’s father muttered to himself all the while. His mediocre English and heavy accent a burden. His hard-earned PHD useless. *Pieprzyć*. He said and hit the sides of his head.

*

In class, Julie cowered under the K-Mart like-lighting. It hurt her sensitive eyes. She preferred the gentle natural light from the large window at the back of the studio. In 45 minutes or so the sky would be navy-blue. Julie dashed across the room. Held the translucent negative up. Squinted at the faint impressions. Shady lines. Some solid, some soft. *Funny, how things develop*, she thought to herself on her way to the dark room. Yet 'develop' is an inaccurate term according to Barthes. What the chemical action actually develops is undevelopable. An essence. That which can't be transformed, only repeated. Under instances of the insistent gaze.

Julie thought of the process of choosing a subject. Of taking the time to find the best angle, then the brief click. *Shutter, aperture - how romantic*. Immersing the paper, swishing it around, first in the developer, then the stop bath. And finally, the (often inefficient) fixer. A photographer lives for the moment of discovery. When they see what they've given new life to. That which they've taken out of and placed into a specific context. That which they've intimately captured, made flat somehow, forever.

*

Done with job-hunting for the day, Felix relocated to the couch. Sinking into the cushions, the past haunted him. A drowsy dream of slackerism. Drugs in the school bathroom. His friends aging before his eyes. The sensation of cold and hot at once. Bursting bliss that left him low and lethargic hours and months later. His insides continually rushing downwards.

He knew Julie shared this affliction. To cope she sought pharmaceutical solutions but Felix thought they were a sham. So doctors could make commissions. Buy houses in the hills. Maintain their mid-winter tans.

Felix believed that rising from a rut was possible naturally. Though so far he kept falling back in. Pulling himself from the couch. Only to flop back down again.

But like always, he reminded himself he had his whole life ahead of him, plenty of time. He rose triumphantly to grab a beer from the fridge and then relit his half-smoked joint. He practiced a new song he'd been working on. Slammed his fingers into the keys. Swore. Started over.

Minutes later, there was a knock at the door. "Come in."

Julie dragged herself into his apartment that everyone called the stables (the large, decrepit rooms one after the next along the right wall). They both sighed in relief, knowing they would take refuge in each other's arms. Rolling and writhing beneath the Aztec-inspired comforter on Felix's mattress. Since neither of them believed in shrinks, it was their therapy.

*

Though Julie never saw any, the smell of chickpeas always hung in the air at Felix's place. From his barely-there pillow, her eyes examined the ceiling far above. When she was a kid she spent hours counting stucco bumps on ceilings, sought shapes in the spaces to kill time. Now she required a bit more direction. Most focused when practicing

photography. Close-ups of cupboards and carpet. Felix sleeping and shutters shivering and vice versa.

As she lay there, Julie thought not much had changed since she was a kid: monotony extempore. Only now she spent time with Felix. Who sat in the centre of his torn tweed couch, with the same estranged stare, greyish eyes beneath shaggy dirty-blond hair. Felix's cheeks filled in when the Crystal Meth ran out, but the sickly complexion that remained was alluring to Julie. She looked around his large room, with only a desk, a closet, a small table with a record player on it. This minimalism seemed to translate emotionally somehow. Felix was a closed book full of poignant stories that never managed to explain much of his unimpressed continentally-distanced nature. As if a part of himself was still sitting on the street corner in Poland he mentioned every so often. The one he said smelt of shit.

Julie rolled over to gaze at him. She often sneakily took photos of him sleeping. Advancing the film as silently as possible. She slept better having captured the moment. She believed in the photo as proof of presence.

Day 2

Just after noon, Felix was Julie's only customer at the campus bar. Seated there with a free beer and *The Montréal Mirror*, he watched Julie clean up from the previous night's party. From behind the circular bar she told him, "Kids these days smoke formaldehyde-dipped cigarettes." She showed him the evidence before dumping the ashtray's nasty blue-black contents out.

For the first time ever, Felix felt like he was getting old; he didn't know you could smoke formaldehyde. Though up until he moved to Montréal he'd gotten high off of everything he possibly could. Carefree was careless. Like Julie, he'd done acid and Ketamine. Ecstasy and CCB. On MDMA they'd rushed and rolled. On hilltops, piano benches and tiled basement floors.

Felix had always half-wondered if he'd been born into a life of addiction. If it had anything to do with the Chernobyl radiation that had subtly tinted every aspect of his being grey. His hair, his skin, his teeth. Immune system deficiency and frequent hospital visits as a child.

Felix put down his coffee and lit a smoke. His eyes flitted across the dingy bar. Dimly lit like Julie liked it. Overhead halogens turned low.

As he watched her pick up half-empty cups, Felix thought about how they'd started dating. About three months earlier, in the fall. Strapped for cash, Julie had actually considered one of those internet jobs. Pretending to pleasure herself for \$14 an hour. When this distressed Felix, he knew he cared for her in some way. What way that was he still wasn't certain. But he enjoyed the warmth they shared in bed. The brief chats over the crackly phone line to make plans.

Felix saw Julie as a poster girl for starkness. Strangeness. In black dresses, chunky boots and spiral-striped socks. Translucent skin laced with baby-blue veins. Her face was thin and delicate, the pointed nose, pointed chin. Her wide eyes in green contacts. Like Louise Post from Veruca Salt in her slim days. Or Lydia from Beetlejuice. Dyed black hair in a blunt bob.

Felix watched her frail frame heave tables from atop one another. She looked like the quiet little girl who loved loud big SOUND. Love of superstereosound was perhaps the most profound thing they shared. At concerts. Side by side but not touching.

In the DJ booth at the back of the bar, Julie turned off brit pop in favour of post-punk. Neither thrilled Felix. His eyes focused on the stickiness between the tiny grooves of the granite bar top. Forever coated in a shiny layer of rank booze.

*

As Julie sprayed the table tops with diluted cleaner she thought of her present situation. It was the aftershock of a new start, with only half a heart. On the road to evolution, but dawdling cowardly along the way.

She returned to the bar. Poured some vodka into her cold, Earl Grey tea from Java U, stirred it with a straw and sat beside her boyfriend.

“The Smiths again?” He asked.

She ignored the provocative comment and calculated what to say next. Then told him about the cheese bus she saw: The clever “ad that boasted 30 different cheddars.” Julie didn't ever expect it, but on occasions such as this one she got a smile.

Felix said, “I want to be a hitchhiker on the highway of cheese.”

On a roll, Julie continued, “I heard the French fascist government gained more votes right after Dairy Queen stopped offering crème de menthe sundaes. I doubt it was a coincidence.” Felix's face broke into the maniacal grin it did whenever he laughed. Julie

preferred this less common side of him. More often he was sullen. His life had actually been tough. Three countries, five cities and the cultures that went with them.

Julie felt her childhood in Falt paled in comparison. Felt guilty at times for her own maladjustment. Wondered what it was. Her main issues: crippling sensitivity, resentful single mother, slighted self-esteem. Chemical depletion and high-school heartbreak. Barthes said the punctum is the disturbance. The prick. That which can not be named.

*

"Yeah, fascists tend to be irritable," Felix said. Saw Julie stifle a smile. He grew edgy. "What?"

"It's just, it's irritable, but I like how you say it better."

Felix knew Julie didn't like to correct the few mistakes he still made in English, (having spoken solely Polish for half his life). "What did I say?"

"Irritable," she said softly.

Felix mulled the word over.

*

Julie thought of his similarly touching blunders. Confidential when he meant confidence. Called her lingerie a costume. Julie found beauty in accidents. In the blurred lines between art and life, objects and events. The wait for the moment of perfect equilibrium. When reality could be caught off guard. *The in-between moments*, Stieglitz called them.

*

Felix saw a question forming on Julie's face. She asked, "What does your family cook for holidays?" Her head in her hands, on propped elbows, like it often was when she asked about his culture.

Felix now regretted the instant that Feliks became Felix. On the immigration papers. Poland was part of his identity. Julie showed him that with her interest. The excited look in her eye when it pulled away from the lens, before pressing up against it again. With two hands and one eye, she turned him from object to subject. Or maybe it was the other way around?

"We have borscht and carp with this orange sauce. I think it's tomato and cream. And when I was a kid my dad would buy the carp two weeks before Christmas; it'd swim around in the bathtub so we had to shower at Aleksy's place...Then my dad would have to kill it and I would cry and say, 'but papa, it's my friend!'"

"You have such a great memory," Julie said. "Why fish?"

"Tradition. Carp has so many tiny bones you have to be really careful eating it. It's meant to be part of spending time with loved ones."

Julie looked at him tenderly. "That's nice. In my family we just scarf everything down."

Day 3

Professor Rodriguez discussed Sontag's view that the import of "pure seeing" in photography ran parallel to poetry's commitment to concreteness and the independence of language. Both involved dissociative seeing. As soon as the lecture was done, Julie would retrieve her prints from the dark room. Her last set was too dark, so she'd already retaken them once. Multiple takes were tricky; differing moments in time effected the

composition, no matter how precise one tried to be. Fibril light fell in a diversity of ways. Over the torn pieces of bread, the pale nude body, the sheets tangled around the slim torso.

There was no time for Julie to fix her photos because they were being discussed later that class. She tried to swallow but her mouth was too parched.

*

Felix found a decent job. Sitting at a wood desk folding cardboard boxes. Then entering them into an inventory on an ancient Atari PC.

Box after box, the walls held their dry breaths. Cubical calm.

Felix, clad in shirts of barely blue, moss green, or slate grey.

Soft tones and muted textures. Him, muffled like his attire.

With every fold, he dreamt of extravagance. Success. Playing to large packed venues. Japan. Europe. Static distortion and crowds cheering, filling him with new life. Then lazy afternoons sight-seeing. Sipping at an endless supply of Cosmos made with premium vodka. Provided by the record label.

His reality was a stark contrast. Lacking dynamism, he struggled to get his band gigs. His email's sent folder full, his inbox empty. He chugged cheap poor-excuse-for-beers. The only foreign sight, the limbless bums having sex in the corner of the parking lot below his apartment's balcony.

Felix had been practicing and playing shows. Using the Perfect Pitch software to improve his vocal range. Yet still Walter Crunkite had just been rejected from the Pop Montréal festival.

As he folded box 20 of the 25 that were in each pile, Felix sighed and wondered if he should trust his instinct. Was it worthy of being trusted?

He neatly tied the stack of boxes with plastic fasteners. Pinched his finger. Thought of the what would Jesus do bracelet he saw that morning on the metro. What would Jagger do?

Briefly inspired, Felix pursed his lips. Stuck out his hip.

*

Julie somewhat eagerly, but mostly fretfully, shuffled the fresh prints in her hands. She cursed her nasty tendency to produce underexposed images. What was it about the equation that stumped her so? $H=Et$. *H the luminous exposure, E the image-plane illuminance, t, the exposure time, in seconds.* Knowing an equation was never enough.

She was reluctant to use her flash because too much light made subjects, situations, seem harsh. Yet she wanted to capture crevices. The place where things met precisely. Such spaces were inconspicuous by nature, difficult to highlight in the grand scheme of things. She needed a light meter, she thought, breathing shallowly as the critiques began.

*

The day ended. Felix left the office, sped through its maze-like halls. Outside he passed a park full of children playing in vibrant snowsuits. Reminding him of Missouri. His broken English and second hand clothing. Mocked by children in expensive Adidas coats. Felix scrubbed his sneakers every September to make them look new.

He imagined Julie at her dark apartment. Waiting for him to come over to save her from herself. But he didn't have it in him. Only PB and Nutella sandwiches and some colder than average blood. A heart that would sporadically miss a beat to suggest that time was eager to skip ahead. Like the overplayed CD it was.

When Felix arrived at Julie's apartment, she wasn't back from class yet. But he decided to stay. Showered and stretched out atop her futon. Her bounty of blankets. Too many to count, and one useless sheet. That trapped him when he turned over in his sleep.

He looked around Julie's room of organized clutter. Her purple glass bong. Tea lights and vanilla incense oil. Three photos of abandoned warehouses, two of his angular hip-bones. And six full moons through strange screens. Staring at them could almost soothe him to sleep. If it weren't for their lack of frames, which annoyed him.

He sat up and shifted over to the couch. Picked up his guitar. He felt at home. There was a sense of connectedness beyond simple bolt + screw with Julie. She worried about him. Checked to see if he'd eaten. Offered to make him Mr. Noodles and microwave popcorn, drinks and joints.

*

Julie's critique began. She pretended to yawn and snuck an Ativan in her mouth. Though Prof. Rodriguez commended her work, she found herself focusing on the other comments. *Too dark, too ill-defined* said Jane. *What do the bread crumbs mean?* Asked Alan. Julie did her best to look unfazed, but her eyes narrowed. Her upper lip twitched.

The Prof reminded the class of the assigned readings. Told them to consider Sontag's suggestion that unlike paintings, photos did not sum up, only supplied evidence. Mystery. Photos were secrets about secrets; the more shown the less told.

The long 20-something minutes over which Julie's photos were examined passed. Julie was too shy to defend or explain herself. Then she mutely scoffed at her peers' unoriginal still-lives of fake fruit. The traditional portrait of a mother that looked like it was taken at Sears. Only Alison's stark image appealed to Julie; a black blade on the edge of a candlelit bathtub. A blank canvas on the wall.

As Julie left class, all she wanted was to be held. To lose herself in a matte moment before slumber. But as her strides quickened, her wound worsened. In front of the Hall building on Maisonneuve she impulsively decided she needed a \$2 drink from the campus bar. As she sat on a wobbly stool, she told herself she'd have just one. Even kept her coat on. But soon one became four and it was almost 11p.m. when she staggered home. She swung the door open violently.

*

The door slammed against the wall. Caused it to shake down the hall. To the main room where Felix sat. On Julie's couch, guitar across his lap.

It was one of those nights. After rough classes or shifts at the bar, the alcohol Julie wasn't supposed to combine with her pills induced mad fits. Julie splitting at her seams. She stomped about her apartment. Pulled hair, sliced prints and scratched skin.

She sobbed over flawed photos
and catty comments.

Full of analysis through a negative filter.

Was it neurosis? Psychosis?

A doctor once told her it was right in between.

Maybe that was why she couldn't see
the meds made her crazier than she had to be.

Felix watched her weep in a crumpled heap. Until her mood rubbed off on him, inevitably.

*

Julie saw Felix storm to the bathroom. She didn't know why he couldn't at least console her, sympathize. Maybe he didn't understand the pressure; his music hadn't been subjected to such criticism yet. She rubbed her eyes. Picked herself up from the floor, quickly undressed and burrowed beneath the blankets. She held herself tightly. Craved control. Over frozen moments in chemical prints. Over chaotic emotions. She was ruled by unruly interiority.

*

Felix crept out of Julie's bathroom. Saw that she was already in bed. He shed his t-shirt and jeans and eased himself in. Cautiously caressed her side.

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess," she said.

And just like that, they were forgiving each other. Their tongues entwined. Their fingers feeling.

Julie was electric in bed. They would coil and combust. Turn to dust, then settle around the room. She was warm against his coolness. She purred and bit like a kitten. Not the modern woman she wanted to be, nor the celebrity her mom expected her to one day be.

Julie just wanted someone to distract her. The walls were staining with smoke. The posters of dismembered 80s bands curling at their corners.

*

The sky was dark. The single bright star Julie often saw from her window was in its place, central in the sky. It gave her white walls a bluish hue. Julie nuzzled into Felix's back. The security she had with him was preferable to the lonesomeness she'd faced her first few months in Montréal. She'd yearned for familiarity and stumbled upon Felix. They were from the same small, conservative city, moved in the same circle of friends back in high school. And he seemed like a boy that needed taking care of and to be taken care of by, though it hadn't worked out that way so far.

Julie couldn't help but wonder if sex was her only redeeming talent, perhaps the only thing that kept Felix in her life. He was a super-sexual being, even from a young age. When he was six he got all his friends to swim naked in the sandbox, causing numerous parents to consider him a negative influence.

Julie forcefully tossed the suspicion aside. Ran her hand lightly over the smooth bumps of Felix's spine. His white skin glowing slightly. She had a weakness for his clammy, tight fists that suggested his long fingers still ached to build Lego spaceships. Instead of clinging to Belmont Milds and stroking guitar strings, burnt out in a brown velvet blazer.

Watching Felix sleep moved Julie. There was something so beautiful, so desirable about being unburdened by consciousness. Soon, she fell asleep. Dreamt she went to jail for shooting her potato gun. For shooting just because it was more fun than getting other things done.

Day 4

Felix dreamt of a mouse standing on its hind legs atop his desk. Evilly laughing at him. "Loser!" he squeaked. Tiny teeth chattering. Felix clenched his jaw. Red was all he saw. The room was dripping with it. Like in old horror films. A wash of fake blood. Only instead of pooling on his bedroom floor, it would instantly freeze into a gelatinous mass he would never be able to clean from the creases between each old plank of withered wood.

Felix awoke with a start. As if something inside him had come apart. What was he doing with his life? Was it ever going to be worth all the strife?

He looked at the window beside Julie's bed. Frostbitten with such intricate patterns. He hit the sides of his head.

*

Julie heard Felix groan. She rolled over, pulled his body to her own.

“What's wrong, my love?”

“I know I need to be writing more, but I don't feel like it.”

“Writer's block?”

Then just like that, Felix snapped. “Fuck! I don't want to think about it! You don't believe in me!” He threw the covers and fled. Julie followed wearily.

Over the few months she'd been with him, it became increasingly difficult for her to talk to him about anything serious. She knew he was struggling but he never opened up. On top of that, he was unappreciative. Like when his shitty guitar broke and he couldn't afford a new one, so Julie gave him her mint-condition Epiphone. Instead of thanking her, he complained about the glittery stars she'd painted on the case, as if when she was 15-years-old (and lead guitarist of the all-girl punk band Vilify) she should have had the foresight that several years later her boyfriend would be embarrassed by it.

*

Felix hated it when Julie pried. Pushed his buttons. Caused his circuitry to fry. She tested his patience on purpose. Like his parents, she didn't support his decision to be a musician.

When she accused him of projecting his own insecurity on her, he shrunk out of her grasp.

*

The issue is not being able to put yourself into another person's shoes, even when they're the same shoes you have, Julie thought. She and Felix were as oversensitive as slivered membrane. They were raw nerves. But while Julie was able to admit her own fits and apologize, Felix was unable to. Her eyes locked on him as he backed away. She wanted to stop him. Imagined herself peering through the tiny hole. The comforting shutter-click. Thought of beloved Barthes' comment on the photo's lack of motion. How beautifully he'd put it: "subjects pinned down like butterflies."

To distract herself from the unresolved conflict, she decided to try some smoke art. She'd read up on the technique and knew it was tricky. The key was to use a small aperture and a fast shutter speed, which required a lot of light, which there wasn't in her apartment. She set her digital's flash and hoped for the best. Hung a black sheet from the wall, lit some incense. Watched the smoke waft, gather and then disperse. The simultaneous beauty and sorrow of ephemeral states.

*

Felix was too lazy to walk back to his place so he spent part of the afternoon on Julie's couch. Brainstorming lyrics. While Julie snapped shots of thick smoke. That caused her to cough and Felix to choke. He pinched his nose shut with his right hand. Wrote some sardonic lines with his left. "She won't resuscitate me. She'll suffocate me."

Day 5

Julie sighed as she tightened the tap and wiped first the sink, then the counter like she always did after washing the dishes. She used the pink J-cloth and green apple cleaner she'd brought to Felix's (because he and his roommates always forgot to buy their own).

She hugged herself, her spindly arms useless in defending her from the cunning chill that crept in through the crevices around each of the many bricks. She attempted neutral conversation. "I wonder why I always end up in the one washroom stall with the faulty lock. Crouched, holding the door shut with one hand, I always feel like some stranger creature. Crab-like. You know what I mean, handsome?"

Felix coughed and opened a no-name beer with his grey t-shirt. Leaning against the counter, he looked like he'd heard it all before. The same look that he gave everyone all of the time. Julie was skeptical though; she couldn't imagine where or when he would have heard someone say they felt like a crab on the toilet. How much *could* he have heard when he hardly talked to anyone save for his roommates, when he knew nothing of interiority despite always remaining indoors...

*

Felix cared for Julie like he cared for candy.

She tasted good but the sweetness rotted his teeth.

Her compliments too frequent, too simple to give.

Almost suspiciously linear.

Felix shivered as he took a swig of cold beer.

He wouldn't raise the issue though. He preferred trivial subject matter. Things that floated by, too light to sink. "Remember back in high school when Ryan Foresithe tried to kill himself by holding his breath?"

Julie didn't. Her memory was shot. Felix wandered to his kitchen. Pulled the milk from the fridge. Sensed the last few drops.

*

Julie fired the flash at the end of the exposure. Felix stared right through her; if she didn't know better, she would have suspected something was there behind her. Felix was often spacey. After stretches of awkward silence, she catered to him in that out-of-the-blue fashion that seemed to hold them together. "If there's an afterlife do you think there'll be perfectly cooked bacon there?"

*

She looked so damn introspective, Felix thought. His nose tingled as if about to sneeze. He cringed and shut his eyes. Until the unpleasant feeling fizzled out. Died.

*

Julie hated it when Felix didn't respond. It was as if he wasn't listening or as if he might never have anything to say ever again. But mostly, it made her feel like whatever she said wasn't worth responding to. An insecurity.

She envisioned Felix's body constructed of strewn sticks and such. Her lighting his short fuse with a fiery look. His time bomb top portion ticking away on his trembling structure. She wondered where he found gun powder, how he filled himself with it. Possibly most of all, she wondered where he found the smooth, dullest of exteriors. She'd wondered this for quite some time. Impressed by how it turned every enemy inferior, when there was nothing to be spoken... nothing worth noting.

Julie felt the long exposure. She looked to Felix for something, anything. When the response was nil, no smile cracked, no thoughtful 'hm' offered, she sensed the shutter click with finality. She told him abruptly, "This isn't working, Felix. We both deserve better." Her voice shook because she wasn't sure what either of them deserved. But she was tired of warming his coldness and getting little in return. The Montréal frost bit her too.

Felix said it all by not saying a word. *Not even a look in the eye to say goodbye*, like a line in one of his songs, Julie thought, as she hastily bundled herself with mittens, scarf, boots, coat.

Out in the fresh snow, Julie's streaming tears produced steam. She found herself taking a photo of the wet flakes. She thought of the image as a point of inactuality. That establishes everything as perishable.

Walking down hill toward the St. Laurent metro, only one thing was certain: she wouldn't miss the smell of chickpeas.

Inbetween-er

Reorganize

Where's that passport? Julie asks herself on a humid July afternoon in her Montréal apartment. She's been taking photos for the past several months for the University radiostation's website. Though she graduated a few weeks ago she's been granted extended access to her press pass to take to England in two days, where she'll interview and photograph one of her favourite bands, Yourcodenameis:rockit. Though Julie is the fourth generation of her British family to live in Ontario, her parents met and got married in England while studying there years ago. Divorced Julie's whole life, she's curious to visit the place where they were happiest together.

While rifling through her filing cabinet, the whole heavy frame topples over. Julie scuttles out of the way. The front panel falls flimsily forward, the drawer rolls out onto the floor. Out pours her entire collection of photos taken over the course of her photography degree. In layered meandering piles. Four years of photos taken with her Nikon F3. A record of sorts.

End to Begin

The first image Julie comes across is one of the oldest. The last picture she took of Felix. Her Felix. Her first and last love so far. Taken just hours before she left him. Gobbling the last drops in the milk carton, head thrown back. Rear curtain sync, showing the trail of motion, but keeping the final image of Felix staring at the camera clearly defined. The

other photos she has of him are kept separately, in the keepsake box on the very top of her bookshelf. Out of reach.

The most perplexing photographs are ones like the next image - when it's not clear why they've been taken. Right after she left Felix's apartment (that everyone called the stables) for the last time. The lens covered in fat snowflakes. An image of all white, as if to suggest clean slate.

Subjective

A shot of Julie's blank bedroom wall. For several days after the break up she watched the figurative paint dry on her walls. Smothered with a toxic latex scent. The neighbors must have been renovating.

When she left Felix after months of consumption, the first thing she thought was that she would have more time to focus on photography. It was her purpose. Permanent. But moments later, she realized she'd lost her subject. With back-story, with foreign features. Her Polish prince of sorts, her indie rock non-star.

Faint paths of dried, salty excrement beneath Julie's green eyes. Taken with a macro lens. The third day she wasted on her futon wondering if leaving Felix was the right decision, she knew she had to keep on. Time was passing, first like a Sunday driver, then like pinpricks over her body. She tore herself from the bed. Took a long bath. Asked herself, *could I be my own subject?*

No, she hadn't learned English from Fuzzy Wuzzy the bear like Felix in Poland, nor had she been in a near-death car accident at age seven. But there was the whole possible past life business. At age four Julie drew pictures. Nine little boys that a small central figure struggled to keep under a black umbrella. She pointed to it saying, "That was me. I miss my boys." She was a little girl who had already been a widow, had some stomach operation. Her husband's foot had been cut off by a lawnmower. "He wasn't good to me," she'd said. Things a child her age could not yet understand.

Bar-red

A picture of a perfectly poured pint. Julie became a pro, holding the glass on the ideal angle beneath the tap. Allowing the amber liquid to slide slowly, leaving minimal head. She'd decided to pick up more shifts at the campus bar. It forced her to socialize. She also needed the money, and the free booze. Which combined with her medication made her someone else. Super human. Zipping around on busy nights, wiping tables, pouring shots, picking up trash, stocking and restocking the bar. Emptying ashtrays and wiping up spills and sick.

Julie stood in the centre of the spinning circle several times weekly, and while initially it was nauseating, it grew invigorating. She felt sexy, strong. As liquids swirled the hours squandered. The shaker shook, the ice cubes melted. At times she felt ladytronic. Supersonic. Impeccable and indifferent - the things she'd always wished to be most. She was dazzling. Near-dizzying. How could he resist?

He was Gavin. Her co-bartender. Welsh and from London. But not England, Ontario. And it showed.

The grinning fireball on the bottom of his skateboard's deck. Scratched from sliding across railings and benches. Gavin was like the cool guy Julie never knew in high school. He was an actor. In a shitty toothpaste commercial. She told herself he looked like Johnny Depp but her friend Violet referred to him as "a blind fish that had been kept in the dark too long."

His flat ass in Joe Boxer shorts hung out the back of his low jeans. While he mopped at the end of the night. As Julie looks at the snapshot, she can almost smell the cheap cleaner in the mop bucket, the stale liquor on the bar.

Julie was tempted to pull Gavin's pants down. Threatened to all the time. He laughed and said, "If you do I'll throw out the Malibu! What are you anyway, a Texan housewife?" Julie defended her taste for the delicious coconut rum and clutched the white bottle to her chest. Poured them each a shot. Skateboarding videos he'd brought in played on the projector. Julie's mid-90s alternative rock mix over the sound system.

A photo of herself. Front-lit. Ideal for images void of depth. Flat, like an advertisement. Julie neatly put together. The tight bar t-shirt with the shitty cartoon devil and a magenta mini-skirt that matched the streaks in her carefully styled hair. Her bangs cut on a dramatic angle.

A picture of the black oil-painted door. The grid pattern over the small rectangular windows. A slight glare. If she could retake it she would use her diffuser. The translucent plastic cube that snaps onto the front of the flash, evenly distributing the light. The image

of the door triggers the sensation Julie felt before going in for shifts at the bar. Never knowing what to expect, she got stage-fright. This could be *the* night, she'd think.

On *the* nights, after Julie had shooed the last customers out (ridiculed them for having nowhere better to make out), Gavin would mope rather than mop. Whine about how he was a shitty actor. Though she thought it was true, Julie would console him. He lifted her up onto the cold aluminum counter behind the bar or pulled her onto his lap on the leather recliner in the office.

There was a chemistry between them. The way they watched each other up close and from afar, together behind or on opposite sides of the bar. "I'm not looking for a relationship," he said. Kissed her for 10 minutes. Pulled away. Locked up on his way out.

Despite his claims, he ended up with several girlfriends briefly along the way. Julie's favourite song became "All Actors are Liars" by Canadian math-rockers North of America.

Crutch

Four photos of dainty dots. Differing degrees of sharpness. Taken with a macro lens. On a spring morning. Sunlight struggling through the rice paper shade.

It was how Julie dealt with worries of work, school and lonely self. Sitting unstably, post-teen angst, on the shelf. Pretty pills. Pastel. Paralyzing. Prescribed by Dr. Loopster bi-weekly. Pharmaceuticals in shades of pink of blue. The pills that did that which they had

to do. Felix had been right. For her patterns of worry flurry, there was no quick fix. But she liked to pretend. At least back then.

She'd pour them out atop her white desk. Arrange them in neat rows or mazes. Adjusting the intensity of light. As if time passed over them like it did over her. All the while wondering how she'd feel about them in a couple years. Would they leave a trace?

Regulars

Pictures that exemplify photography's ability to turn any subject into a work of art. Rolph who worked at the Brick, sitting beside Paul, the 40-year-old fat misogynist that tried to exchange the pot he dealt for beer. Both with a bottle in hand. Stupid ballcaps on their heads. Though Julie had plenty of people to converse with at the bar, most of them rubbed her the wrong way.

The prim and proper businessman Alexandre. Solemn when sober, but really let loose after two pints. His tongue hanging from his mouth, ass shaking, palm smacking his thigh. The image distorted with motion. Unintentional yet fitting. A good example of many errors that worked in Julie's favor photography-wise. A slower shutter speed would have froze him inappropriately.

A black and white grainy print that looks ancient. The result of a combination of Tri-X film and dim halogen lighting. John the smooth chocolate gangsta that was sweet and soft-spoken. He eternally gives the peace sign, alongside his tougher brother. The one that was younger but seemed older. That told Julie, "If a woman buys a man gifts, she wants

him to be her pimp". Her response was, "Just tell her you don't wanna be if you don't wanna be."

Violet

Julie practicing the rule of thirds principle for her 2nd year photography class. A photo of Violet, a poet at the University. Laughing, plastic cup in one hand, cigarette in the other. Her bent elbow sits at the intersection of two lines, the crash point. Out on the campus bar patio, the smell of subtle spring showers struggled to negate nicotine. The shadow is a crucial part of the image, taking up the bottom third and part of the middle one. Larger than Violet who was already larger than life. Julie hasn't seen her then best-friend in months now.

Violet would visit Julie during her shifts. Sitting in the exact same spot at the bar Felix used to, weeks, and eventually years, before. Downing bottles of Molson Ex, Julie sipping on killer kool-aid. Throwing it all on her tab. Half price. Smoking, drinking, chatting. Singing along to Julie's CDs. Sometimes Violet would write or knit without looking. Like a motored machine.

Julie flips through several prints. She had fun putting various things in Violet's disco-diva hair, and taking photos of them there. Fake cob-webs and mistletoe. Streamers and G.I. Joes. While students studied text books in corner booths.

An unflattering photo of Julie and Violet with their arms around each other. Taken by Julie's fellow bartender Shane. He used the autoflash - where the shutter is always too fast, resulting in a black background and ruddy skin tones.

In the image Julie pretends to lick Violet's face. Customers often thought the pair were a couple, with Violet's feisty no-bullshit attitude and Julie's tendency to wear ties. Julie got a kick out of it though Violet found it annoying. But it didn't deter her. All the while, she was there. Julie's savior at the bar. The colour of purplish pinkish bluish. For Julie to look to and laugh with. Bum a smoke off and call her "buddy." To walk with back to their apartments, two blocks apart. Stopping off for cheap Asian eats or diner pie.

Not-so Class-act

Julie's portfolio. On low contrast graded paper. The colour negative film, tolerant of exposure errors, saved her. Structures she passed on her way to class and back. The crisscross beams and blue awnings of Le Faubourg. Pylons around a gaping hole in the road. The rusty pipes in the sewer below. A graffitied lamppost, with a sticker proclaiming "I love cheese!" An overturned mailbox. An unusual crack in the sidewalk. Julie's subjects had seen and heard much; her photos strove to tell their untold tales.

Julie got sloppy with shutter speeds. Accumulated self-doubt. In class she yawned repeatedly. Low on sleep on account of late nights at the bar. In bed by 6 a.m. and up and at 'em by 10. Her Professor scolded her for her shaky hands, told her she should get them checked out. Her peers' bitter comments discouraged her. As did her exclusion from the cliquey shows they organized.

At the time Julie thought she was perhaps just lazy for finding the slightly blurred images suiting somehow. But now she sees some reason - what portrait isn't in motion, even if the subject is still?

Time after Time

Gavin pulling the screen down with one hand, holding his pants up with the other. His firm stomach peeking out from his bar t-shirt. Julie snuck the shot while setting up the projector for the Tuesday night Canadiens game. When he noticed she took it, he scolded her. Like Julie, he was a crabby Cancer.

She remained frustrated with the boy-man. With the air of an actor. A pretense. The good boy. The nice boy. He worked hard to maintain his status. Perfect - in everyone's eyes but hers. He was the 30-something year old that looked 18 and didn't want anyone to know his real age. So Julie told as many people as she could.

Him with a cold fillet-o-fish before the first time they fucked. Him pouring pitchers, flirting with girls, ignoring Julie while she fumed. Forced to competitively find her own subjects. To tempt with free shots.

She attracted her share of men. Too many to count. Photos of cute bisexual boys. Zafir, the half-middle Eastern, half-French film student who came out to Julie's retro night at the bar. Took her for \$60 Korean BBQ. And Thierry who loved brit-pop, had a skunky dog named Farfel and invited Julie on his radioshow.

Some men were more harmful than others. Réal, the Quebécois deppaneur clerk with poor English and childlike smile. Chiseled face, stubbled chin. And hair reminiscent of a squirrel tail. Julie doesn't know why she still has his picture, and slowly rips it into tiny triangular pieces.

Réal was 11 years older than Julie but didn't look it. He didn't look dangerous either. Yet Violet tried to get Julie to reconsider leaving with him that Wednesday night. Drunk, Julie thought he seemed like a gentleman. Violet reminded her, "isn't that what you usually say is the problem?" Which she *had* said, but tossed the notion aside. Filled as she often was after such a meeting, with faith, hope. He enticed her back to his place with promises of a palm tree and primo home-grown pot.

The palm tree was plastic. An hour into their visit, the situation grew drastic. Réal pushed Julie to the floor. Held her down with arms of cement. Tore her shirt open. She screamed and he put his hand over her mouth. Julie bit it hard. Struggled away. Escaped out into the cold, harsh night. Leaving her scarf and hat behind.

A fuzzy photo of a pile of coarse peach coloured powder. She'd crushed and snorted some of her Risperdal. She told herself it'd help her forget. Regret.

Julie skipped classes and shifts at the bar for over a week. Spent time shuffling around the apartment in her slippers. Images of the abandoned, asbestos-ridden squash court on the top floor of her apartment building. The new light metre she'd finally saved up for with her tip money allowed her to explore dark crevices. Goo mites and dust bunnies. Julie shifted them around until they looked like a sad sort of society. Then smushed the soft structures and let them rest in peace.

Whenever a man thwarted Julie, Felix came to mind. Safer than strangers. She flips back to the first picture in her pile. Considers Sontag's statement that photos possess a sense of the unattainable. A pseudo presence. A token of absence. Images of Felix are all that remain. But they lack the way his breath sounded as he slept. The way his brow

furrowed then lifted as he told the story of his encounter with a raccoon at the dumpster out behind his apartment.

As Julie neatens the piles of photos she's flipped through, she wonders how it actually was with Felix. He was her unenthused radiation-ridden boy. That was certain. But did he offer her tokens of affection - like sesame snaps and dollar store shoe laces? Did they share their complex muddle of feelings? She doesn't think so. Vaguely remembers that was why she left him. But still thinks fondly of how he referred to Russians as Bolsheviks. His naturally almost hairless body. The indistinct smell of dairy. Their disparaging similarity.

Practice

Texture, pattern, structural lines. The rough beginnings of Julie's 3rd year portrait project. Ventures through various metro stations when they were empty. Photography was Julie's way of outwitting the world.

It is the ideal aperture, shutter speed and ISO selected that lies at the heart of every successful print, Julie thinks, as she looks at the crisply framed and captured squares. In shades of golden rod to burnt orange. Reminiscent of Julie's first set of 120 pencil crayons.

Unsystem-addict Kicks the Habit

A photo of the keg that exploded in the beer fridge. As if the pressure had been building up over months. Years. Almost three since Julie had started bartending.

A new manager, a typical jock buffoon (who Julie and Violet called the Bone, on account of his bone-headedness) took over. Tried to transform the dingy, hole-in-the wall into a blaring sports bar. Gavin, who became assistant manager, passively let the new boss give Julie the shittiest shifts. With no customers and no tips, despite her seniority and popularity with customers.

The best ones went to the young spring-break girls-gone-wild kinda girl that Julie called New Girl. She refused to call her Christine. Fake-nailed finger twirling hair and pink pout in sparkled gloss. She phrased every dumb sentence as a question. Julie almost threw up. Put on a fake smile, inferno inside all the while.

A close-up of a trail of ash on the bar. Leading to the useless dishwasher. It wasn't an easy decision, but considering her accumulating pile of rushed photos, skewed subjects, Julie knew she had to quit. The dream was over, and it hadn't been much of one anyway.

A drip drop, suspended from the Heineken tap. Within it, a small fruit fly, fermented. Drunk to death. It was a sign. Though at the time, Julie envied what a light weight he was. A brilliant image. Sharp and wet in the centre, the background blurred to splotches of dull colour. She had accurately emulated drunk-vision.

The Belge

A high contrast black and white image printed off Julie's computer. Its corner crumpled. A Myspace profile pict of the tattooed metrosexual drummer, Jean-Francois Ghislain Pauli

(or Jef as he preferred). A self-taken close-up of the Belgian laughing. Saran wrap crinkles at the corners of his big bad wolf eyes.

They wrote massive messages to each other online. He was stunned by the things they had in common. The stars on his wrists, similar to the star on her right one, their love of post-hardcore music, anime and online shopping. He opened up to her. About his formative years in Brussels in an artist commune, paid by the government to live and make music. Then his career as a restaurant owner in San Francisco. And how at age 29, six months earlier, he'd moved to Montréal for his girlfriend, who dumped him when he arrived.

He took to calling Julie his little Falty and she called him her Belgian dish.

Julie went to visit him late one night and was concerned she wouldn't be able to get home on the metro after. She was downtown and he was all the way up in Mile End. He invited her to stay on his couch, but Julie was frightened of what his French separatist roomies might do to her in her sleep for her ultima-Englishness. "Ha , yes, they will torture you with kitchen utensils and yell at you to say their names properly in French!" In the end, they slept in their underwear on opposite sides of his bed. A gulf between them that Julie was not welcome to cross.

Him looking stern. Dictator-esque. He told her about the French right wing government. Fascists on the rise. Monosyllabilized, culturally deprived. Monopolized and prioritized. Like all ruthless world leaders, fighting a battle to win, because it was as simple as making others lose.

Photos of his brilliant drummer-arms. With their vicious network of veins and just the right amount of bone and muscle. White light washed over them from the open window as if the moment was a miracle. In that perfect zone of ever-so-slightly overexposed.

The next image Julie looks at was taken shortly after her 22nd birthday. A neon sign. "Ben's Pizza." When the Belgian ended it there, unexpectedly, saying only, "It just isn't worth it, and by it I don't mean you," Julie couldn't help the crease in her forehead, the clench in her jaw. Boots clunking, she fled the restaurant. Wondering why she wasn't ever quite enough for the men she met.

It turned out Jef was a loser lurking on the ill-ternet, the public hypersphere. People pretending. Living through techniques and systems of unliving. Phony identities, like the fake Billy Corgan who laughs as he accepts messages from devoted fans of the real musician (a madman himself). Looking at his friends' profiles, Julie discovered the Belgian wasn't Belgian after all. Nor was he single. He was engaged to a woman back in San Francisco to whom he planned to return.

A photo of a bench on St.Laurent. With a gingham patterned cone full of uneaten, fancy fries. Luminous spectral bands from the streetlights created an eerie green glow that could only have been remedied with a filter. A late August night, after several Harvey Wallbangers with Violet. Julie impulsively stormed into the Belgian's frittererie, Fritez du Monde. Blew smoke around the non-smoking establishment and yelled, "Well if it isn't the Belgian piece of crap! You're the worst thing to come out of Europe. No, the worst thing on the internet!"

Shadowy prints of barrel-like vessels. Side-lit. Julie and Violet passed an alley where they sat. Violet told Julie what she'd done had taken guts. Julie said, "He's going to think I'm crazy bad, not crazy good. Like I'm bi-polar in a barrel."

They laughed and linked arms. Wove back and forth across the sidewalk, tripping over each other's feet.

Oh Mother

Julie's spotless kitchen floor. After she'd vigorously scrubbed the linoleum of her 3'x3' kitchenette with a steel woolly and pine cleaner. A clean freak like her mother. A nurse who truly believed cleanliness was next to godliness.

After losing the Belgian, Julie was afraid she was turning into her mother already. She thought if she wasn't loved at the so-called peak of her youth, she never would be. Condemned to the same fate her neurotic mother was. *It's all down hill from here.*

A photo taken on Easter weekend, from a hilltop both foreign and familiar. The lawn at the side of Julie's childhood home in Falt. Lit by the full moon. Julie was patient for the long exposure. Breathing in the spring scent of freshly cut grass. The day condensing into late night dew.

She peeked through her mother's partially open bedroom door. Saw her there in her bed, holding onto a pillow as if it were a person. Her body turned and curled to seek the satisfaction of a lump beside her. The illusion of company, comfort. Another warm, blood-filled thing.

Why couldn't one *want* aloneness? Knowingly or un? Julie had wondered. She had no doubt her mother did not *knowingly* seek companionship. She claimed not to. But her body clutching the cushion illustrated an absence she felt. 23 years after she'd kicked Julie's father out. Caught him cheating with another woman. Threatened him with a knife, while Julie developed in her belly.

A photo of a lilac-clustered duvet. When Julie was eight years old she'd found her mother with her hands concealed beneath it. An Elvis movie on the TV at the foot of her bed. Julie wasn't sure what she had caught her mother looking so guilty of. Now, she thinks it's one thing to walk in on your parents having sex and entirely another to have witnessed your single parent masturbate.

Substitution

Dull beige keys on a dusty keyboard. After months of unemployment and relying on her parents, Julie found a job doing part-time data entry. It enabled her to spend more time on her prints. Her grades had dropped in her last semester at the bar, but it wasn't so much the letters she cared about, it was loving her work. It was the one thing (other than Violet) that seemed to love her back.

A photo of herself. Cringing at the camera. Despite Julie's trepidation, Violet encouraged her to submit to a show at Xquisition. She decided to do another series in the metro, but with herself as the focal point, inspired by Cindy Sherman's self-portraits. It was a big step for Julie, who was still in the process of convincing herself she was as worthy a subject as any.

Julie and Violet found a new way to satisfy their thirst for good music and cheap liquor that summer. At Jupiter Room on Thursdays. New wave nights. There were hardly any other people in the place. Besides the bus boy and DJ. Bartender pouring \$2 shooters and \$3 mixed drinks.

The bassy retro-clash that boom-blipped over the impressively large speakers was restorative. The small raised platform they danced on was their stage. Nothing existed beyond it. Least of all, their ravaging loneliness that would munch on them at the end of the night.

Julie remembers when the DJ would play Aha's "Take on Me" Violet would say, "This is such an inspirational song!" Because no one seemed brave enough to take either of them on for very long.

A photo of their favourite fellow dancer at Jupiter room. The Shh Girl. With braided auburn pigtails and bushy bangs that hid her eyes. In a shabby silk dress that hung from waifish body like it was a coat rack. She was only there twice. Swaying her arms as if in a trance. She took Violet and Julie by the hand. When they asked her name she put her finger to her lips as if to say "Shh. Keep dancing." And they did.

Malnourished

Violet and Julie danced until 1 a.m. Barely noticing the rare way the dance floor had filled. Julie's photo smudged with gravy proves it.

When they took a break to get another drink at the bar, Julie saw him. Leaning against the wall. Black on black. His face caught in tiny scatterings of light. He looked pissy. In that goth-boy way that meant he was interested. Perhaps his ferocious appearance was contrary to his demeanor, she'd thought. Maybe he was all soft in the center. Logic based on how boys that played placid had lacked sensitivity in actuality.

Sebastien, or Seb as he went by, was a petite, 28-year-old Jarvis Cocker sort. In a pinstripe blazer and impeccably tailored jeans. DJ by night, website designer for pharmaceutical companies by day. He danced with Julie to her favourite band NewOrder, and sang along. She was completely sold. He could be the one, she thought. But history should have told her, which one? And did any of them go un-regretted? She knew now, no.

Boy-men were skilled in spotting girls who were looking for someone to love. And knew full well they weren't capable of, nor looking for, such said love. But they were suave just long enough. Like Seb, who offered Julie a couple lines of Coke. A lick on the neck, a tender look in the eye. Julie slid into his hatchback. Which sped along the highway to Chateauguay as the sun rose. A picture taken on the bridge. Of water and water. Winking and blinking.

Julie was rushed into Seb's super-suburban home. A tumble about his massive, luxurious bed. When the deed was done, he rolled away and passed out in seconds. But Julie was up all night. Four tiny kittens, starving and seeking nourishment. She couldn't blame them. They tried to draw milk from her nipples, tugging with little teeth. What a cruel man, she thought. Who could splurge on drinking all night with kittens starving at home?

A high-angle shot of the fluffy bundles of sweetness. The next morning, they mewed at Julie's feet, pawing at her legs, looking for something to eat. She kept asking Seb, "Don't you have anything to feed them?" He said they weren't his. They'd crawled in the open window and wouldn't leave.

Seb was quick to put Julie on a bus. Like he would with the kittens if he could. When she emailed him later that day he curtly said he never wanted to see her again. Julie was tired. Of being used never to be reused. She fell asleep stinking of stale sex and soggy with salt water.

That night, she had a strange dream. Surreal stretches of ocean in front and beyond. The tide coming in, with Feliks by her side. Orange and teal swirls. Spiralling splashes that grew upward. Stopping and then starting again. Julie had so many endings she didn't know where or how to start. It was a purgatory state.

"Turn around..."

Violet mid-song, arms spread. The punctum is her open mouth. Struggling to both sing and laugh at once. "Forever's gonna start tonight!" She was obsessed with "Total Eclipse of the Heart." It reminded Julie of the rec centre skating rink she went to as a kid. "I was falling in love, but now I'm only falling apart," crackled over cold speakers. Julie zipped around the peripheries steady enough but could never put on the breaks. She always had to hit the wall to stop.

And it was happening again. Subconsciously taken photos of stop signs and red lights, barriers and police 'do not cross' tape. Julie thinks of Sontag's notion that in a series, each photo is a fragment. The emotional weight is based on where each is inserted.

A slue of far more cognizant images. Marvelously textured. A yarn-encased lamp. A single strand wound round and round. A group of yarned pencils. Violet tried to teach Julie how to knit, but she was more taken by the balls of colorful fiber, twisting strands around various objects. She wanted to reveal the familiar as significant. To present average moments as heightened events.

A photo taken with a 10mm wide angle lens. Violet's rebellious rabbit Beatrice chewing some grass. Last June, Julie started spending less time out and more time in. Sitting on Violet's couch having cocktails. Beatrice perpetually evaded Julie's grasp. So she called her an asshole. Rejection compounded with interest.

A plate of yellow grains. Violet introduced Julie to couscous and they laughed at how dirty the word sounded. They watched *Absolutely Fabulous* and gained eight pounds each. Julie's yearning for a man dissipated, and for the first time, she started to feel content with being single. Julie looked up to her ram-headed Aries friend, as sturdy. Solid wood and not particle board. She'd dealt with an abusive boyfriend as a teen and would never let a man oppress her again.

A Ringolo on Violet's finger. She was going through some immigration issues and was maybe going to have to move back to her hometown of Philadelphia. So Julie kept proposing with Ringolos. Offering to live with her and pretend to be her wife.

A dim photo of Violet looking excited outside of McDonald's. The 3 a.m. post-bar rush. Violet grew furious at the cashier because they'd been standing for over 30 minutes in a line that wasn't actually a line. The whole place was in an uproar and Violet challenged them all. A brawl was about to occur and Julie only tried to calm her, to get her to leave. But then Violet pushed her and said, "Fuck you."

Shortly after, the spats they had become like those of lovers, because essentially they *were* a couple. Without the physical attraction, the sex. Just the best of friends without benefits.

At the end of the summer before the final year of Julie's program, Violet finally met a decent guy and became distant. Then absent. Julie couldn't help but feel injured, even jealous. Especially when Violet moved in with her shabby Kurt Cobain-esque boyfriend Claude from Ile Perrot. Julie missed her non-official girlfriend though she knew it wasn't fair to. Just when she'd finally gotten comfy she had to move on.

Looking at the final image of Violet, happily in love, playfully pulling on her ragamuff boyfriend with rosy cheeks, Julie realizes how much she misses her friend. Resolves to call her when she returns from her trip. Try to make amends. The photograph is after all, linked to resurrection.

From Delay to Fast Focus

A multitude of photos. The same ones that hung at Xquisition. It was Julie's first real show. She was there all alone. But contrary to the response she feared, those in attendance were far more supportive and appreciative of Julie's work than her

competitive classmates. It gained her respect. She was offered the well sought-after position at the campus radiostation for her final year.

Julie shuffles through the prized prints. She'd juxtaposed herself with refuse bins, cheap seats, tiles that could be shiny if only someone took the time to care for them, and floors that had been tread over. And over. The blur of the metro in motion. Julie's shadow against walls, in tunnels. Concrete halls. She used a zoom outburst to give the impression of velocity as the camera moved towards her.

Julie's focus shifted to where it was meant to be. And like her camera, she'd never functioned so highly. The turn around was rather hard and fast. Whiplash. After years of madness, twirling around bars, sliding across floors, falling down stairs and weeping herself to sleep, it all came to halt as if she'd slammed on the brakes. As if she'd maybe learned how.

A photo of a medical bracelet with Julie's name aside an empty rocks glass. That had once been full. First Violet left her. Then her liver failed her. A pain in her gut like nothing she'd felt before. She was finally up front with her doctor about mixing her SSRIs and anxiolytics with booze, and tests showed that her liver would only heal if she could stay sober for awhile. She had to wipe the residual traces of substances (and lack of substance) from her life.

She really had no choice. With her graduation fast approaching she needed to start thinking of her future. And there was no one to fall back on. Only her mechanical device. That wonder of modern technology with its shutter-click.

Situate

The phone rings, and Julie is brought back to the present. A telemarketer. She tells them to take her off their list. And as she hangs up, she reflects on all she's hung up, on all she's picked up. Thinks that Barthes' definition of cameras as "clocks for seeing" is apt.

Julie's been lonely for the past year, but with new confidence she attends concerts for free, taking photos of live bands for the radiostation. She sifts through the pile. A picture of the lead singer of Shitty Shoes, sweating and spitting at Sala Rossa. De:Vice dancing to his own beats at Café Esperenza.

Her time at the bar served a purpose, Julie thinks. Having improved her social skills, she was brave enough to contact Yourcodenameis:rockit's manager to arrange meeting them in Newcastle. She now gets along with whoever she has to, including the obnoxious girl at the University's darkroom (who talks loudly on her cell phone all the time). She allowed Julie to develop her prints for her "Gradations of Grey" series - her upcoming show at the S.A.T. Objects shaded according to their associated positive or negative values. A black pill bottle. A white roll of film. A charcoal amaretto sour. It will be Julie's first solo show. And one of the images has been accepted for inclusion in the next issue of *File* magazine.

She puts her toppled filing cabinet upright. With some effort. A bit of a lift, a push, a pull. Places the drawer back in its place and fastens the flimsy front carefully on. She will have to reinforce it later, she thinks. As she puts the neat piles of photos back in their slots, she feels proud of her collection. Work that has not only earned her the degree that hangs on her wall, but is also worthy of being displayed in galleries. In addition, she's

eager for the position at *Binge*, an indie rock mag that gives new photography grads exposure. Julie's signed a contract with them for the max they allow, one year. Upon her return from England, for the first time, Julie will be paid for her photographic skills.

She places the most recent photos she's taken in the front of the cabinet. Julie's image in negative. In positive. In the same spot, with different faces. At different times of day.

What's most gratifying is the sense of designation in place of resignation. Some might say Julie's life is "picture perfect" now. But as a photographer, she doesn't believe in this saying. Error is a crucial part of any art. Of any practice, including that of being.

She turns around and looks behind her. She's missed something. A red envelope. She looks inside. "Found it!" Her passport.

Perspective

Julie sits in her cubicle. Clickclick sendsend, emails come and go. Off goes some gun powder. Off goes some toxic green goo. The title 'Coordinator of Transportation of Dangerous Goods' always gives people the false impression that her job's exciting. Really it's just the best non-telemarketing English job she could find when her contract position for *Binge* ended. Julie doesn't come anywhere near liquid nitrogen or ammo. The only sparks and ignitions are the ones that go off in her brain.

Her eyes travel to the animated clock in the bottom right corner of her computer screen. Tick-tocking. Counting down the moments sitting at her desk until lunch. To make small talk about the weather, the weekend, the stapler. Counting down the moments 'til the bus at the end of the day. Then sandwiched amidst the sour smell of sad employees from warehouses in the Cote de Liesse district. Then counting down til the metro. Slotting in dinner, a shower, some brief love making. Dividing time up like a pie sliced for the most serious of dieters. Leaving just a sliver left for enough sleep to manage to get up the next morning. The days are on repeat. Each day is the same only different in name.

Julie started working full-time almost a year ago to keep up with her rent and student loan payments. The interest accumulating like the rusty leaves on the ground. Julie wants to pick them all up, place them back on the trees, see if the interest will follow suit.

On her lunch break she goes through the mail she'd picked up on her way out of her apartment. Bills, and to her surprise, an envelope from her father in Toronto. Her biggest supporter. "You've always dreamt big" is the only note, along with an old piece of lined paper with Julie's neat, childish print. It was an assignment from exactly 10 years ago, a prediction of who she thought she'd be. She's astonished by how naïve she was,

or perhaps how cynical she's grown since. She had predicted she would have been both a writer and a photographer (her father had just bought Julie her first professional camera). That she would have large homes in Paris and London, an amorous, successful husband, a hot tub and two Persian cats.

Julie feels unsettled but then assures herself that ultimately she's better off now. A realist. She wouldn't get a Persian cat because she knows they have breathing problems (due to the cruel manner in which they've been bred). She's been to London but wouldn't want to live there (on account of the cranky crowds, the fries that taste of fish and the standing-room-only pubs). She may not be a pro photographer yet, but she is proud of her talented boyfriend Felix. For over two years he's been the Pole to which she clings. That keeps her from wafting away on a strong northwesterly wind.

*

Julie's former dwelling was a 2nd floor studio; the only view was a concrete building. For years Julie never knew what the weather was up to. Now the sun floods in and fades out through her apartment's unobstructed window on the 13th floor. Countless shades of day and night. Julie is able to see Montréal from its very centre-ville to its blurry edges. A thin, translucent border that can just be deciphered, but threatens to disappear entirely if the wind decides to shift or a plane to fly by. The border is bitten and broken up by buildings jutting up like piles of corrugated boxes, and sharp dagger points of distant churches. Copper crosses so mint green they seem as though they've been intentionally painted that way.

Since arriving home from work, Julie's had a snack (16 minutes), washed the dishes (12 minutes), studied French (35 minutes), picked up groceries (45 minutes) and two loads of laundry are spinning in the dryer. The phone rings and it's her good friend

Alison, who she met in class at the beginning of her photography degree, before Alison switched her focus to drawing and painting. She works part-time doing customer service for an online metaphysical store and has her own line of 'salvage-wear' jewelry.

"What's new?" Julie asks as she lies down on her bed.

"I made some button earrings yesterday but I still need to design some better packaging, pitch the line to some new stores."

"I bet they'll love it. Your stuff is so unique."

"I'm zonked lately though. Ryan never helps with shit. And thanks to his gaming-addiction he hardly talks to me and won't leave the apartment to look for work. I might break our engagement."

"Lack of communication is the worst." Julie thinks of how Felix used to be the same when they'd first tried dating six years ago. "He'll snap out of it. He's just in a phase," she offers. Wonders who isn't? Just then, Felix comes in the door. The sun streaming in the window hits his blue topaz eyes. Julie lets her friend go and tells her they'll talk later.

"Hey darling. What's up?" Felix kicks off his shoes and sheds his coat. Approaches Julie and leans in to kiss her.

"Not much. Wasn't expecting to see you. How was work?" Felix works at Le Petit Saucisson 25 hours a week and spends another 30 hours at his apartment that doubles as a jam space and recording studio for his band Walter Crunkite.

"Well you know Friday evenings, intense. But before my shift I finally sent our demo to Lil Lion and Saboteur."

"Awesome."

"How about you?"

"Nothing new." She remembers the laundry waiting in the dryer. Checks her watch. It's 8:22. The dry clothes have been ready for two minutes. She runs up to the

elevator with the basket, fills it and returns. Felix helps her fold her clothes while sharing bizarre tidbits from the msn.com page. Pointless knowledge, but she's impressed all the same.

"There's this woman with internal testes where her ovaries should have been."

"Wow."

"And this treeman that they think just needs some vitamin A. And they're saying that anti-perspirant leaves aluminum balls in your armpits."

"Really?"

"I saw this too-fat Asian baby. People are pissed at the parents. And did you know that corn syrup solids make you want to eat more?"

Julie kisses his cheek. Admiring his self-education, having also taught himself to play the guitar and piano. Her lips stick for a moment and she thinks of how an elephant's trunk is so flexible and sensitive it can pick up a pin.

She pushes Felix onto the bed. Their tongues twirling. She savours the sensation of his fit figure beneath her. His hands across her back, then settling on her buttocks. As they roll around the bed, like roasted peppers their clothes peel from their bodies.

24 minutes later, Julie lifts her head from Felix's pale, hairless chest. "I wanna smoke a bit. Do you have some?"

"Uh yeah. I just picked some up today. It's in the left pocket of my pants."

Julie rolls out of bed, lifts Felix's jeans from the floor and rummages around the pocket. She finds the dime bag. "What kind is this?"

"Donkey balls."

"Ha! You're kidding me!"

She sits on her couch and packs her bong. She draws her breath in. Sees Felix coming down the hall, watching his business flop about. He heads for the fridge, takes a

swig of milk. Julie is too lazy to blow the smoke out the window like she usually does; she allows it to hang in the air.

The phone rings in that way that it only does when someone is down in the lobby.

"Hmm, I'm not expecting anyone." She apprehensively answers it. "Hello?"

"Hello kiddo, it's me."

"M-mom?" Panic registers on Julie's face. She rushes to the window, opens it and starts to fan the smoke out.

"Are you going let me up?"

"Uh, yeah, sure."

Felix looks just as concerned. "It's your mom? What the fuck is she doing here? She didn't tell you—"

"No she didn't fucking tell me! If I knew she was coming I wouldn't be standing here naked with you in a room that stinks of weed! I'm in huge shit if she realizes I've been smoking all these years. I told you she almost put me in rehab for it before."

Julie rushes around. She places the bong under the sink, lights a candle, struggles into her dress and a sweater. She fixes the blankets on her bed, hides Felix's toothbrush in the cupboard, throws his clothes at him and puts a piece of gum in her mouth, muttering, "Fuckfuckfuckfuck." The demonic wind moans from the windows in her living room as if it has had a hand in the arrival of the unexpected visitor.

Felix tries to console her. "It doesn't smell like smoke in here."

Julie continues to fan the air; Felix doesn't know how sensitive her mom's nose is. The dreaded knock finally comes. She takes a deep breath and opens the door with a smile. "Mom, what are you doing here?"

"Phew! It smells like an ashtray." She bustles into the apartment, down the hall to the living room.

"Uh, Violet stopped by on her way home from work today." Julie's mom knows Violet is a smoker and doesn't hold it against her. Violet after all, isn't her daughter.

Felix sits on the couch with his hands in his lap. He stands up to greet Julie's mom, "Hi Ms. Watt. Nice to see you."

"Good to see you too, Felix."

"So, how long are you in town for?"

"Two nights. I'm going to see my brother in Dorval tomorrow."

"Why don't you come to my place for dinner after?" Felix blurts out.

Julie's eyes flash like an aggressive cat's. "Actually, I thought we could go out for dinner."

"Don't be rude Julie. I'd love to see Felix's place. You're a chef, right?" She scans Julie's apartment as if for evidence. Julie cringes at the thought of her mom in her bed.

"Well, garde-manger."

"Would you like to join us for dinner tonight?"

"Can't. I have band practice," he lies.

"Awe, that's a shame. Well I'll just use the restroom and we can head out."

Julie pushes Felix into her kitchenette. "Can you change my sheets? Leave with us, wait a bit and come back?"

"Sure."

"And what the fuck was that dinner business?"

"Sorry. I guess I'd like to show her you're not in such bad hands is all."

Julie is touched. Her tone grows compassionate. "Felix, you don't have to prove yourself to her."

*

Julie takes her petite mom, with short, dyed-brown, grayish hair and orthopedic shoes to the Thai place on the corner that she always feels badly for since they never have any customers. While they await their food Julie notices how in her mother's company time slows in the least desirable of ways.

"So how is that loan coming along? Is it paid off?" Her mom uses her napkin to wipe the condensation beneath the two glasses of water on the table.

"I told you, I'm working at it." Julie makes just enough to cover her interest.

The waiter interrupts with their salad. A bed of spring greens with slivered apples and almonds. Julie's mom says, "Apple without cheese is like a kiss without a squeeze."

"Huh?"

"What did I always tell you? You need a good job with benefits. And it's not —"

"It just takes time."

"You know my family wasn't well-off so I had to put myself through nursing school."

Julie rolls her eyes. Her mom fails to acknowledge the fact that Julie's grandmother made her other children send part of their wages to her so she could study abroad, leaving little money for their own educations.

"I wouldn't have helped you with your tuition if I knew it wasn't going to result in a better salary. Like Cheryl's daughter. Why don't you apply to that ad agency she works at?" Julie's mom doesn't understand that she just wants to build her portfolio, share her art with the world and make a name for herself. Open her own unpretentious gallery one day.

"It's not easy to get a job here," Julie mumbles.

Between chews her mom says, "You don't have forever and it'd be nice to get something back for all I've done for you. You'll send me a on a trip when you make the

big bucks, right?" She picks up a stray piece of apple from the table and wipes the minuscule spot it's left.

Julie sees herself as the pressure cooker on her mom's stove, the top spinning, steam swirling. It was only a matter of time before the damn thing would blow. Cover the walls with her mother's British stew. Potato beef and dumplings, the only sign of their heritage other than their last name and her mother's occasional odd phrase, picked up while she attended a prestigious nursing school in London, where she met Julie's father. According to Julie's aunt Marlene, her mother chose England hoping to out-do her rival, her older sister Cathy, whose career choice both she and Julie's grandmother saw as reckless (though Julie wonders if her mother was actually jealous of her aunt's passion, her bravery). Cathy was a painter. She did portraits and eventually made a small salary giving private lessons and Robert (the man she 'lived in sin' with) worked as a banker. They both died in a train accident shortly after Julie was born.

*

The next day, Julie and Felix spend a few hours cleaning Felix's apartment (that smells like the dead mouse that's somewhere in the walls). Then they make dinner. Pasta with walnuts and blue cheese, puff pastry with pesto and sundried tomato and an arugula salad.

At 6 o'clock sharp Julie's mother arrives.

"Oh. This is a nice big place you have."

Julie winces. But she's grateful that Felix's roommates are nowhere in sight as they sit down to their lovely meal. Julie's mom is impressed with Felix's gourmet cooking skills.

"Have you thought about going into culinary arts?"

"No. I need time to work on my music."

"Well, it's always an option."

"Yeah," Felix says then changes the subject. "Did you see the work Julie did for *Binge*? She took this great photo of my band." He nods toward the image Julie took of Walter Crunkite, hanging on the kitchen wall in a cheap plastic frame. The three Falt-ites Julie knew from high school looking a bit shabbier, a bit older. Leaning against the exposed brick wall of their apartment. It was the photoshoot that brought her and Felix back together after nearly five years apart. It always makes her think of the notion that one photo implies there will be others. Each proof a piece of an ongoing biography.

Julie's mom offers her explanation. "Well you know, the angels always work. I always ask them to take care of Julie and they always do."

Ms. Watt is a devout Christian in the worst sense; she believes that televangelists are good and homosexuals are bad. A dream she had one night years ago convinced her she had a guardian angel. Though many of her neighbors in Falt have had break-ins, she refuses to lock her doors.

"Which reminds me, I was at the mall the other day and there was this beautiful blouse on sale but I couldn't find my size. I looked throughout the store and when I came back to the first rack I'd checked, my goodness, there it was! The angels made it appear for me!" She puts her hand to her chest. Then wipes some crumbs from the table.

Felix's eyes grow wide. Then he tries again, "What about Julie's exhibit that got a good review in the paper back in March? That's no small feat."

"I pray for her everyday."

Similarly, when Julie tries to boast about Felix (which she has many times) her mom is lukewarm, "As long as he can make a living off it."

"He does all the writing, booking, recording."

"Julie used to get all the pots and pans out of the cupboard and bang them around. It was such a racket."

"Sounds cute," Felix says as he raises his glass of wine to his lips.

"I preferred when she wanted to become a teacher. I think it was her nutty Aunt Marlene that brought out her artistic side."

"At least dad believes in me." Julie tries to control her tone. Checks the clock. 12 minutes have felt like an hour.

"Oh, your father," she sighs and turns to Felix. "When Julie was young she used to cry and cry when she'd have to go visit him and his mistress in Toronto because he never wanted her." Julie doesn't correct her mother as she is no longer a child and knows this was never true (if anything, her mom was the one who didn't want her).

Just then the door bursts open and in trudges Felix's roommates, puffy-eyed and smelling of Pabst Blue Ribbon and Camel cigarettes. "Oh, hey," Mike says scratching his head in that way Julie found somewhat cute in high school, but annoying seven years later.

"Hello there fellows," Julie's mom says authoritatively.

"Uh, Ms. Watt, these are my bandmates, Ricky and Mike."

Without looking to Julie or Felix for the go-ahead they both sit down and help themselves to massive portions of the meal. Felix opens his mouth to say something but nothing comes out. Julie's pulse increases.

The phone rings and Mike answers it in a phony voice. After Julie's mom says, "I do that sometimes too, pretend to be someone else for telemarketers."

"Only it wasn't a telemarketer, it was the landlord," Ricky says with a chuckle. Which stops when he catches the vicious look on Julie's face. Julie's mother looks unimpressed.

The meal continues, the roommates drinking heavily to deal with the awkwardness of being in the presence of what they refer to as a 'real adult'. Ms. Watt's eyes count each drink they down. The unmoving clock on the wall is more accurate than ever.

During dessert, Ricky and Mike talk to each other as if the rest of the guests aren't present. Blueberry cake flying from their mouths. Mike mentions that Felix drove drunk a few times when they toured The States. Julie has to restrain herself from lunging across the table.

"I... Well I never would now. And I wasn't that drunk," Felix looks apologetically at Julie, then her mother.

"Sorry Felix," Mike says with a smirk.

Julie's mom gets the same stern look on her face that she used to when she'd caught her daughter lying or sitting on a young man's lap. Julie wilts. *She* feels like the drunk driver. Felix squeezes her thigh under the table. They both give up on their desserts while Ricky and Mike have finished their seconds.

"Nice to meet you," they say leaving the table. And Julie's mom dutifully returns the comment.

*

On the metro ride home, Julie mother scolds her, "I don't think those boys are the best crowd for you to hang around. They seem like a negative influence, like those yucky people you hung out with in high school. I don't know where I went wrong." Little does her mother know, these *were* the same people, though she never expected to be friends with them again. They were the worthless bonus 'gift' that came with Felix.

"You should know better now," she says, shaking her head. "I want you to be careful. I worked hard to raise you and now that I'm not here, God is always watching you." This is a familiar threat.

Julie misses her dad, an atheist. She wishes he'd been there more than just on weekends and Wednesday evenings, though she knows this was all he was allowed. She wishes he'd been there to balance her mother out. Make her happy. Like she looks in the black and white photos from their honeymoon. Her mother standing between two cars in Berlin, in a miniskirt and knee-boots, an umbrella overhead as the rain poured around her. Appearing more thrilled than Julie has ever seen her. A special glimmer in her eye that has been dulled by hard work and loneliness. Julie spent years being angry at her father but now wavers between sympathy for her mother and wishing she'd given him the second chance he pleaded for.

Back at Julie's, the Watt women dress for bed without a word. Before sliding beneath the covers, Julie's mother says what she often did when Julie was a teen, "Let's not go to bed angry. I love you." She pulls Julie close in an almost violent, affectionate way. A forceful kiss on the cheek.

*

Julie's mother leaves the next afternoon. Felix comes over to Julie's place that evening and apologizes for his friends.

"I wish you'd said something to them." Julie sits beside him on the couch with her arms crossed.

"I don't like being the bad guy telling them off."

"You should really get over that."

"I know. I'm sorry." He massages her shoulder with one hand. "Wanna come to a show with me?"

"When?"

"Soon."

"You prefer to fly by the seat of your pants, eh?"

"What does that mean?" he asks aggravated. "Fly by the what?"

Julie is pained by the rare instances that make Felix insecure about his foreignness. Though he's come a long way. The red vest with the Polish coat of arms that he proudly wears on stage. The "Roland" on his keyboard changed to "Poland."

"It means you like to live spontaneously, without a plan in advance."

"But...how?"

"Well you know, sayings often come from something old and obscure and we keep saying them but we don't really know why they mean what they do, just that they do."

"Well sorry for not understanding," Felix says curtly, "Polish sayings actually make sense."

"Sayings that make sense, makes sense."

"Like the saying about spanking; 'it's not glass so it won't break,' or if something's a mess 'it's like plums in the ass.'"

"That's like the one I came up with, remember? Life is full of shituations!"

Julie lags behind while Felix bounces down the stairs. She thinks of him as her Polish prince, or more realistically perhaps, Polish peasant. There is something of a farm boy in his tobacco-and-tea-stained teeth. The front one's discoloured crack, a shade darker than the rest. And the checkered shirts he often wears. But he has the attitude of a city boy. Blissfully breathing in the toxic fumes as soon as he hits the street. Taking the strippers and drunks, the crazies and punks all in stride. Julie admires his tolerance.

When a SUV stops only inches away from them as they cross the street, she rushes across, scowling at the driver, while Felix strolls unfazed.

He withdraws some money from the Scotiabank and says, "I only have like \$20 for the next week."

"It sucks that we're broke."

"I know. But it doesn't help to worry about it."

"Not thinking about it isn't any better."

"Don't be negative, OK Julie?"

"I'm not negative, I'm realistic."

"But you *just* worry and I hate to see you that way," he grips her hand. Julie accepts the sentiment.

As they continue, the counting down recommences. After 14 minutes of walking they stop to have pizza for 16 minutes then walk the remaining 18 minutes to their destination. As usual, the show is in an intimate, somewhat crowded space. A low-ceiling window-less loft. The headliner is Pom-Pom War. Reliant on keyboards and effect pedals, laptops and unheavy metals.

Julie sucks hard on the straw of her double rum and coke, observing the young scenester girls in their stylish outfits. Oblivious to the fact it won't always be shiny, second-skin leggings and vintage tank tops. Strands ironed on acute angles, layered diagonals.

Julie misses her former high-maintenance self. No more neon contacts, no more magenta streaks. Instead her hazel hair has grown long and she ties it back plainly. Gone are the days of massive boots and pleated skirts. Her once well-defined face is still sharp at the nose, but round everywhere else.

Felix's lean figure pulls off skinny jeans well, but tonight he wears the early 90s t-shirt that Julie is certain her dad owns too: a print of an abstract painting of a cyclist and

some triangles in fluorescent colours. Felix has his own strange take on what's in. Predicting old-man-in-Florida pastel plaids will be the next trend.

Julie pulls her digital camera from her bag and takes a photo of the female singer of The Swamp Sex Robots. She looks bizarre in her foamy white costume; she's supposed to be a plate, and her band-mates are a fork and a knife. She growls into the mic fiercely. Julie joins the other concert-goers, moving ever-so-slightly to the beat.

Felix mingles adeptly with members of another band, in oversized sunglasses, in v-neck Ts with their curly chest hair creeping out. Selfish phonies that won't go to Felix's shows though he thoughtfully attends theirs. Walter Crunkite's music falls between niches, with stand up bass, electronic beats, guitar and keyboard. No genre in particular, though someone once called it 'crunk'. Danceable rock, collagey and complex. Sparsely-attended shows - their sound perhaps too sincere for the superficial scene.

Felix's attempts at including Julie in the conversation fail. She tells him she's going to get some air and makes her way down the stairs and out into the crisp November night.

On the curb sits a slim, long-legged lad. Not the typical hipster, he looks like something from a Victorian novel. Or some sort of business man. He wears an ash-grey dress shirt, black pants and a charcoal cardigan. Urban camouflage for the modern man in perpetual hiding. He almost blends into the sidewalk, the pavement, the dark night. In his hands he holds a vintage camera, an Argus C3. His pale face is attentive as he removes the film from it and places it in his camera bag. Sifts through it for more. His dark chestnut hair is slicked down. Smoothed to the side, with an immaculately straight part, bangs sitting right above his brow line. *What precision, Julie thinks, no wonder he's a photographer.*

He looks as though he may be scared away easily, so she coughs announcing her arrival. "That's a lovely camera you have there."

Though startled, he looks her straight in the eye. "Thank you," he says with a French accent.

Julie pulls her Nikon from her bag for a moment and shows it to him, "I'm a photographer too. Mostly digital lately."

"It's less clunky than this old thing," he says, standing and carefully brushing his behind. He pats his hair, centre to left, and then around the back.

"But real photos... they're more permanent by nature."

He seems to like this comment and stretches out his hand as if meeting a potential employer, "I'm Simon."

"I'm Julie."

"So what kind of photos do you take?" He shifts his weight from one foot to the next. Pulls the sleeves of his cardigan over his hands repeatedly.

"I'm influenced by cubism. I've done a lot of collages and urban portraits that convey the complexity of industrial structures."

"Of course, like Coburn."

"Yeah. I love conceptual photography too. Atget and Chris Jordan's new work."

"Ah yes. He turns troubling waste into beautiful images. Have you been in many shows?"

"Some portraits that I developed using gum bichromate were at the V.A. gallery, I had a solo-show of unconventional still-lives at the SAT a few years ago. For the last Nuit Blanche I did some Dorosz-esque work using Mylar and plastic bottles. Oh, and a few of my old powerline collages were at the BelGo in March - one made it onto the *Burn* website. How about you?"

Simon pats his hair the same way he did before, pulls his sleeves down again. "I worked with albumen for awhile. I took a trip to Rochester and photographed Kodak's acetate building for *Blindspot*. I wanted to document the places film is produced, since

it's on a decline. I've had a few shows at the SAT too. Right now I have a bunch of anaglyphs at Vox and I'm working on a series using the blue-print process for the Urban Image show that Gallery 44 is doing soon."

"Blue-print is such an underrated process. I love the hues. Photographic technology has come a long way but at what cost?"

"Advancement is aligned with deterioration," he says with his eyes on the sidewalk.

"The worst thing about new technology is how the waste ends up in digital dumping grounds like in Ghana."

"I know. Women cooking circuit boards to recover the tiny amounts of gold." There is a sad pause then Simon delves into his bag and proudly pulls a Vacublitz from it. "You might appreciate this."

"Wow. That's an original flashbulb!"

"Yes. It was my grandfather's."

"Felix bought me a Sashalite... Felix's my boyfriend. He's a musician. I'm here with him tonight."

"Ah, I see," Simon says. Looking into the distance.

"I should get back inside."

"Me too. I'm photographing my friends' bands. For now I freelance but I'm saving up to open my own studio."

"Wow, that's great," Julie says insincerely. Her Anglophone state has prevented her from finding freelance work.

"I'm pretty close, but for now I'm still at the pet store at the Atwater mall. I'm there four days a week." Simon nods at her and his eye spasms. The two reenter the venue. Julie watches him position himself at the foot of the stage snapping photos and sighs. She feels compelled to take a few more pictures of her own.

The blaring electro is excellent. She reaches Felix's side and he puts his arm around her. Julie enjoys herself as they dance to the music. But as the last band finishes up and the crowd pushes in, she suddenly feels claustrophobic. Uncommon for the number of shows she's attended. The salty smell of twitchy indie kids makes her nose itch. She yawns. A glance at her watch tells her it's almost 12:30. The clock ticking on counting down the minutes and hours till the night ends, then it's time to wake up and return to tedium.

Felix holds her close and looks down at her. The expression on her face lets him know she wants to leave. He takes her arm and leads her through the mass of young, thriving bodies. Out on the street the wind is brisk and the two shiver, pulling their similar pea coats tight. Felix tells Julie, "In Poland we don't have Bigfoot, we have Coldfoot," referencing the rheumatism that plagues his bones. Julie finds this sad, but guiltily, endearing too. Like the neck cone Felix's dog Crumb had to wear after having a mysterious bump removed from his bum. As they walk towards the Mount Royal metro, the only sound is that of brittle leaves scuttling across the street. Their rubber soles on the sidewalk. Descending into the stuffy warmth of the station, they pass an ad for steak. Julie feels past her prime.

*

At her mindless job the next day, Julie thinks back to how she ended up at the dangerous goods office. After her contract with *Binge* ended, she spent months searching for something creative. Then she gave up. She'd been relieved to find something, anything, content enough to stay in Montréal, in her first stable, fulfilling relationship.

But today she finds the monotony particularly numbing. She gets up to go to the washroom, an excuse to pass the window in the hall. Looking out across the rooftops

she misses capturing the world with the lens her eye feels naked without. Her 35mm camera hidden beneath booklets of office policies back at her apartment. She no longer frequents the forums where she used to converse with other photographers because she has nothing new to share. And seeing others progress makes her anxious. She feels out of touch. She hasn't submitted to any shows in over nine months and her only solo show was over three years ago. Until today, she hasn't realized this fact. It weakens her.

After splashing some cold water on her face in the washroom, she calls Felix.

"I wish I didn't have to work this crap job. I want to check out those sites by the canal, get submitting again. But now that I'm caught up in this full-time job I have no time or energy."

"Just be patient. Like my friends say, '30s are new 20s' and lots of artists don't really make it until later in life."

Julie doesn't know how he can shake it off so easily. "But even you said, they say when you hit 40 you're still 40. So how can that make sense? You don't go from 20 to 40. It's not logical."

"Is everything in life logical?"

"Well no... but I hate not accomplishing anything new. I don't have the excuses the young have anymore."

"You're still young. It'll all work out, ok?"

Whenever he asks this Julie honestly feels it is ok. "Thanks, handsome. Maybe we can check out that factory with the back wall knocked out. Near that place you played."

"Oh yeah. In Griffintown. I can meet you when you get off work. I'll bring your camera."

*

Julie and Felix take the metro to St. Henri and trek out to the forgotten factory. Felix has fun helping Julie make piles of splintered wood. A stream of scrap metal. The setting sun illuminates them perfectly, a dandelion yellow glow. Julie tries out some new techniques and feels in her element for the first time in months. As always, photography provides a relation to the world that feels like knowledge. Power.

She feels reassured and plans to send some of her new photos to the Gallery 44 exhibit Simon mentioned or maybe to *F-Stop*. She's particularly proud of how she rendered some chipped paint on an old piece of machinery; with the perfect settings she was able to make the pattern look like amoeba. She thinks of a possible title for the image - "a beautiful day for urban decay."

On their way back, they stop at a copy shop to print some flyers for Felix's upcoming show at Café Chaos. He's designed it, with a caricature of a Godzilla-esque Walter Cronkite in tattered clothing, smoking a large spliff and trampling buildings.

Back at Julie's place, they make a delicious meal together: bruschetta loaded with goat cheese and mango milkshakes for dessert. In the evening, Felix calls his parents in Iowa. Julie is in awe of his bilingualism as he speaks to them in Polish. The words sound at home in his mouth and fall perfectly off his tongue. She'd like to learn the language but Felix often emphasizes how difficult it is. Julie believes him since it took her 10 minutes to properly say the name of his home town, Szczecin, right. Julie can only properly say *kurwa* - pronounced more like *koorva* - which translates to 'ho' and also 'fuck.' Felix told her this while they both laughed at a Polish rap video.

Felix's mom's name is Katarzyna, she is a painter and 'a moonchild' according to Felix. Julie loves her little girl voice. Her accent is heavy and when she gives Julie her recipe for borsch and the cottage-cheese filling her Feluś loves in his crepes, Julie has to politely ask *excuse me?* several times. She repeats herself with careful emphasis that

usually doesn't make much of a difference; Julie finds this touching somehow and a big smile creeps across her face, and in turn, Felix's.

Later they drink vodka-and-apple-juice in dollar store glasses and watch a BBC documentary on Tourette's syndrome. Felix can't help but laugh when the British man yells, "my mother is a bloody hippie!" At the end of the night they make love; on the floor with its chafey, basement carpeting, on the crumby couch with its warped legs, and then they retire to the squeaky defunct futon, missing a few of its 12 ribs. By the time Julie finally looks over at the clock it's 12:10. She hasn't checked the time in over seven hours; it's a record.

Julie listens to the water speeding through the pipes in her bathroom. Heading from one place to the next. She thinks of the assignment from 10 years ago. Thinks of how though the shutter on her vision may have been stuck, it was only briefly in the grand scheme of things. At this junction, she feels poised to function. To frame and capture. She looks over at the inspirational post-it note Felix put on her wall when she had a sinus infection last week. A quote from Keith Richards: "I cure myself of everything just by being me." But Julie's mom would never believe that he's actually a positive influence on her. Julie curls up to him. Sniffs at the smooth skin of best friend, catfriend, Polishfriend and boyfriend all rolled into one smooth dough, smelling faintly of milk.

Hold

Felix has a set of keys to Julie's apartment; he always tries to sneak in and catch her up to some exciting mischief that she's never up to. She shouts a greeting as she tosses some chopped veggies into a hot pan.

The smell of onions sizzling makes her mouth water, her eyes pleased with the array of green, red and yellow peppers swimming in sesame oil. Felix finds her with her tongue hanging from her mouth. Though she's gained weight over the past few months, he never acknowledges it. And when she refers to herself as 'chubby' he says "Hey, that's my girlfriend you're talking about!"

"How was your day?" He asks from the entrance to Julie's small kitchenette. She turns around as he steps into the square space and hugs him.

Instead of the same old dizzy click-click send-sending of confirmation emails at work, Julie has news today. A big shipment of Uranium hexafluoride has forced Julie to work overtime for the last few weeks. Causing her to grow progressively more resentful of how long she's allowed herself to settle. The photographer's organ is not the eye, but the finger. That which is meant to trigger the lens not worthless emails. No longer concerned with sending out as many confirmation messages as possible, Julie's been slacking off. Checking out her favourite photography blogs. Submission calls from some of her favourite magazines, *Fraction* and *Deep Sleep*. CRTL Lab is looking for work for their next show and *Aperture* has announced their annual talent call. The winner gets great exposure, an exhibit at the Aperture Foundation in New York and \$5000. Julie sees it every year and never has time to consider submitting. While checking out *Web Urbanist's* feature on abandoned places, she stumbled upon a list of phobias in a sidebar. Autophobia - fear of being alone. Atychiphobia - fear of failure. Consecotaleophobia - fear of chopsticks. Pgonophobia - fear of beards. Phobophobia -

fear of phobias. Julie was curious as to what hers is called. The phobia of losing her potential and skill. The closest she got was Chronophobia - fear of time.

"Today my boss called me into his office and told me my recent performance reports are all bad. Instead of pretending I give a shit, I was honest - you know, how back in the fall I planned to start shooting more and still haven't had time. So he said 'if you don't want to be here I'll have to cut back your hours, or cut you entirely.'"

"Wow. That's shitty."

"I actually like the idea of part-time. That's what I initially wanted anyway so I could build up my catalogue, start a website. Get submitting again. I'd just hate to have to ask my parents for money."

He kisses Julie on the head then walks to her living room several paces away.

"Just think positive, babe. You've got that interview tomorrow at *Imagion*, so soon you'll be getting paid for your photos. Just focus on good stuff. Like a litter of puppies. Or that rat that loves the cat."

"How about your day?" Julie asks, turning back to the stove. Adding some more oil to the pan as she stirs.

"Still haven't gotten that damn raise they promised. But I did finish recording *Wake and Bake*. It took me almost a month though."

"Did you hear back from either of those labels you sent your demo to?"

Silence save for simmering settles in and she knows Felix's on her computer.

"Whatcha reading?"

"Steve Pavlina's blog. He's talking about his polyamorous relationship."

"First you tell me he's talking to spiders, now this? Because you wouldn't kill that spider I have two bites on my leg," she says shaking her head. Pavlina is Felix's main non-musical influence. The ultima-positivist self-help blogger, with dorky haircut and airbrushed image and eyes like crystal balls.

“He claims he’s grown closer to his wife, so maybe it’s better than if he’d gotten divorced and left her and the kids.”

“Ya it’s better to be running around with multiple women. If you did that I can guarantee we would *not* grow closer.” She adds soy sauce to the pan and it splatters. She wipes it up.

“You know I’d never do that to you. And I think it’s natural for humans to stick to one mate. We’re made that way.”

She’s caught off guard by this but shouldn’t be. Felix’s been nothing but committed to her. He walks over to her and slides his arms around her waist from behind.

“There was this ugly baby that was looking at me on the bus,” she tells him.

“I thought you hate kids?”

“This was an exception, like how I’m a cat person but like pugs. I was mesmerized by this baby’s ugliness.”

“What do you have against kids anyway?”

“I guess it’s the parents. Way too many people go and make kids just as a selfish experiment to see how they’re gonna look and what they’ll turn out like. Meanwhile there are all these kids that need homes.”

“Yeah but if you adopt, one day your kid is gonna wanna go look for their real parents. Won’t that be tough?”

“Sure, but not as tough as some biological child-parent conflicts.”

“Ha, you’ll change your mind, Julie. You wouldn’t wanna have mine?” He takes two glasses out of the cupboard.

“/f/ I wanted one, which I don’t and most likely won’t ever, then yeah I’d have yours.”

“Well what are your reasons?”

“For one, the awful, disgusting pain of childbirth - remember I saw that film by Stan Brakhage and was traumatized? Besides that, there’s all the expectation and disappointment stuff. Blame and denial. It’s a lose-lose situation.”

“So basically you’re just talking about you and your mom?” He raises his eyebrows as he pours first vodka then apple juice into the glasses.

“It’s not just that.” But it mostly is. Her mother claimed the source of Julie’s craziness was her creativity, yet growing up, Julie saw evidence of her own depression and anxiety (the salty stains on her mother’s pillowcase, her frustration, resentment and inability to relax). She denied her issues, believed that she was strong for distracting herself with religion, while Julie was weak for confronting hers with therapy and drugs.

“Well I’d worry a bit about what our kids would turn out like too. We’ve both had bouts of depression.”

“Yeah but you were one weird child and you’ve still turned out pretty great.” She lifts the lid off the rice cooker, breathing in the jasmine aroma.

“It’s true I’ve come a long way from typing out the bible in my Sunday best at age 10 to using the same one to store my drug paraphernalia in high school. I’ll never forget the look on my mom’s face when she found it. She said she knew that Satan had taken me,” he laughs while taking a sip of his drink, which dribbles down his chin and onto his teal and white checkered shirt.

“Ha! Well it would seem he’s given you back. You’re far from evil now.” Julie wipes the juice from his shirt with her finger. Then takes two blue glass plates from the cupboard. She spoons the rice onto them and Felix pours the stir fry on top.

Outside, Montréal is frozen in that February way. The sky whitish-grey before the sun sets and tints it pink and peach. Julie lights a candle. A chair upstairs scrapes across the floor and something like a marble falls.

Felix sits at her triangular table. Every time Julie's eyes focus on his face it's what Lacan termed *la Tuche*, the Occasion. The Encounter. The Real. What Barthes called the desired object. Adored body. She looks forward to a tale of his childhood in Poland; they often follow this look on his face. A look she's envious of.

"In Poland we found a landmine once. We played around it for a few days," he says between mouthfuls. He has a massive mouth but manages to chew his cud fervently and talk at the same time without being offensive somehow.

"No adults cared?"

"Not that I remember. We used to play in bunkers too. It was kind of scary."

"No kidding. Where was your mom?"

"She was working a lot. And I was a sickling. For years I had to go get steroid shots in my asscheeks. One nurse said I was the worst case she'd seen since the war."

"How old were you then?"

"About six. It hurt when I sat on Santa's lap that year. I'll show you the picture next time you're over, my face is hilarious! Polish Santas wear pope hats," he laughs between chomps. "What about you? No memories left after all those drugs?"

"You managed to keep yours well."

"Yeah but you were taking stuff with the intent to forget."

"I just wanted to forget my late teens I guess. All the esteem shit, my dysfunctional relationships. But I'm really kicking myself for it now. I'd like to remember my childhood."

"You do recall some things?"

"Very little." She shuts her eyes and sees nothing.

"That kinda works in your favour. They say the most devoted picture-takers are people who lack memories."

*

After dinner, Felix posts his band's upcoming show on Facebook while Julie sits on the couch with her drink. She rearranges her portfolio and looks over her resumé. Nervous for her interview tomorrow - the first photography position she's come across in months. Outside the sky is dark and the view to the edge of the city is dotted with orange and white lights of varying degrees of brightness. The Five Roses sign blinks red, splotches of it black, covered with snow. In the distance little specks like sparklers move across the Champlain Bridge, a steady stream of cars to and fro-ing. It makes Julie queasy. The notion of time always marching forward, and never back.

Felix enters her field of vision. Distracts her with his erratic, dramatic dancing. A bizarre combination of rave and Russian styles. She's more of an 80s new waver, with very little arm motion and a bit of a slouch. Felix teases her. Calls her a granny and impersonates her with a move that looks like it could be the next big thing. Any move Felix pulls looks impressive to Julie.

"Where does the time go?" she asks.

"I don't know. I try not to think of it."

"Maybe the same place lost emails and documents go. Never to be found." She pictures data and segments of time, suspended in space. Sucked into spinning abysses. Felix joins her on the couch and spit shines his glasses. Julie offers him her spray.

"Nah. This is how we do in Poland." he says with the fresh-off-the-boat-immigrant accent he likes to jokingly adopt.

Julie laughs. "But if someone offered the Polish spray and a microfiber cloth, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't turn it down. It's not a matter of pride."

"No. We no need dat." He spits again then wipes the glasses with his shirt. "Dis is how my *babunia* did it."

Julie smiles at his distinctly-Felix nature. Easily contented thanks to a life strewn with poverty.

"I told my cousin 'Polish donuts are the best. Once you have a Polish donut there's no going back; it's all Polish all the way!' And she said she'd use that in her speech at our wedding."

"Ha! You know if we got married, I'd have to do the interior decorating for our place," he says mock seriously.

"What, because I wanted to just lean the mirror against the wall instead of mounting it?"

"Exactly! You're too lazy."

"I just don't feel the need to invest too much effort into my apartment because I know I'll have to leave it sooner than later..." This is something Julie has to tiptoe around.

"You have to live in the now, Julie. You never know what'll happen."

"But I'm concerned about the future more than I've ever been before. If I don't get the job tomorrow I have to think about moving. But it's scary to think one day after I'm gone you'll be seeing someone else."

"Well you're the one who's going. I'm not telling you to go! You don't have to," he snaps, his square jaw smacking against itself.

"I don't necessarily want to, but I do have to. There's little here for me, save for you."

"Well then why don't you just go now?" He rises and paces the room, but soon plops back down beside Julie. Nuzzles the space between her neck and shoulder and says, "Sorry." He pulls her to her feet and puts on Depeche Mode. She can't help but dance.

Felix comically drops his pants and gyrates like he imagines male strippers do. Amused and inspired, she stealthily grabs her camera off her bookshelf. Points and shoots. One with a fast shutter speed to freeze the action, one with a slow speed to capture the motion. Julie adores the way photography allows her to pretend there's no

such thing as an end. She wonders if Sontag's theory that photography is not just passive observing, but a way of encouraging what is going on to keep on happening, is correct.

Felix pushes her arm down. "I love you, you know."

"I know."

And as he carries her to bed, her worries melt away. Because there's no other way for them to melt.

*

The next day, Julie leaves the office early to rush off to her interview.

The head of *Imagion*, Jean-Francois Lesage, tells her despite her minimal experience, he's impressed with her portfolio. "I like your black and white work. C'est classique, non?"

"Oui...I like the crispness, and so much can be captured in shades of grey. Life itself is composed of so many shades that lack pigment."

He nods. But then the inevitable question comes, "How is your French, Miss Watt?"

She can feel the warmth as if she's standing near a baker's oven. Beads of sweat form near her eyebrows. Her \$60 Mexx shirt (that she got on sale for \$30) sticks to her back. "Oui, mais juste un petit peu." A line she's used far too many times for it to be considered respectable anymore.

"I see. Well thank you for coming in. Your work is lovely. But really, we need someone bilingual. Good luck and get in touch with us if you learn the language."

"Thank you Mr. Lesage. I understand." And she does. All too well.

*

Julie takes the metro to her old friend Violet's office on Des Pins, where she works for a small bi-annual poetry magazine called *Line Breaks*. They walk over to La Distillerie on Ontario Street, their favourite spot for fancy drinks at decent prices. From across the bar, they impatiently watch the bartender shake up Julie's electric Blue Hawaii.

Violet seethes, "I hate my job. The bosses are so disorganized and never listen to my ideas though I pretty much run things. And working with other peoples' poetry makes me want to work on my own less." To cope with this, Violet's taken to drawing angry pears. Pearapy, she calls it.

"I know you're bitter and that it took forever for you to get promoted. But I would kill to be you," Julie says, imagining what it would be like to do what she loves for a living. "Now that you've got experience, maybe you can start your own magazine?"

"Maybe. But since the pay is crap I haven't been able to save any money. Since Marc lost his job I've been paying for everything."

"I hope he finds something soon."

"I'm thinking of going back to Philadelphia."

"What about Marc?"

"He said he'd go with me. Though the way I feel about him being unemployed lately I don't know that I want him to. He wouldn't even do his resumé in French. I had to bug him and he complained I was nagging him."

"But he's freakin' French!"

"I know. It's like he's still..."

"Young."

The waiter comes by. After some deliberation, Violet gets a drink called Word Up with Chartreuse and raspberry pureé and Julie orders an apple martini.

"I didn't get the job at *Imagion*."

"Was that today?"

"Yeah. And I can't stand the office much longer."

"I really am lucky to have my job."

"You *are*. And crap with your bosses, well you'd have that in any job. I'm telling you... if I were you!" She shakes her head before downing the remnants of her drink.

"You're right."

"Sorry. I know your job has its downsides, but it's awesome you get to work with poetry and that Alison gets to make her jewelry. I just feel defeated."

When the drinks arrive, Violet and Julie croon over their beautiful appearance. Between sips, Julie takes some photos. Possible images for *Fraction's* still-life issue. She takes her time adjusting the aperture and shutter speed. Then relishes the feel of the button beneath her finger. A shot of the bartender muddling a mojito. Violet posing mid-cheer. Several conceptual close-ups of the spiral of green apple slices on the stick placed in her martini. She takes a picture after eating each slice, to illustrate time's relentless melt.

*

When Julie gets home, she doesn't feel like eating. She calls Felix instead. He asks how the interview went and when she proposes they go for a walk up Mount Royal, he knows the answer. As they wind their way to the top, Julie tries to stick to pleasant small talk. But then two bare-legged Barbies (pretending to be warm) slam into her without apologizing. She says "Montréal is fucking cold and so are the people." Felix takes any diss on the city personally, so he rolls his eyes at her.

Julie tries to focus on the positive, the snow covered mountainside glowing as the sun sets behind the clouds, casting the scene in slight shadow. The chocolate branches that appear to be sugar encrusted are completely still. The flawless white that shimmers around them should be calming, but the snow only reminds her of how soon it will be summer, then winter again. Just in a blink. Time creeping by quickly like a millipede with his feathery cloud to float on.

"I'm sorry about your interview."

"At least they liked my work."

"I'm glad you see it that way. But I know how you feel; our last show got a bad review in *The Mirror* today."

"Shit, that sucks. Try not to let it get to you," she says sympathetically and puts her arm around him.

"It just made me feel like I'm getting nowhere."

"Don't think that way. You're talented. And it's just one dumb guy's opinion."

"I know. It's not just that; Mike left the gas valve on again and if I wasn't home he could have died and the kitchen floor looks disgusting though I just mopped it last night. Cleaning up after them is starting to get to me after all these years."

It's about time, Julie thinks to herself. She stops him in his tracks and places her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes seek out his, which are blue-grey in the dim light.

"You know I'm going to have to look at jobs in Ontario now."

He sighs unenthusiased, but takes her hand as he continues walking, the snow crunching beneath their feet. "All I'm saying is don't make me feel guilty for what might happen. I *want* you to stay."

"But it's a two way street, Felix. Couldn't you come with me?"

"If I go my life is over! If I go the band will be over, after all the years I've spent."

He frowns and looks to the sky for patience.

They reach the top of the mountain and scan the panoramic view of the city. Distinct edges of buildings blurred by fast-falling dusk. Felix looking for his place, Julie looking for hers. "Couldn't you just tell the guys you're thinking of going and see what they say?"

"Look if I tell them that, they'll hate me!" A violent puff of smoke comes out of his mouth as he shouts this. The couple several feet away from them blatantly stare.

Felix takes a deep breath. "I came here with a goal and I can't go back without accomplishing something."

Julie thinks of his band's depressing Montréal shows. Late time-slots in empty venues despite Felix's efforts at promotion. "But what if you could make it back in Ontario? You have a fan-base; you're like mini-celebrities. And look at Greg, his album's gotten tons of great reviews since he moved back to Fall."

"I'd rather be a small fish in a big pond any day."

"Well, what about Toronto?"

"I won't find rent as cheap as mine is here," he says shuffling his feet in the snow.

Julie reflects on his living situation. She doesn't equate luxury with happiness, but his place breeds stagnancy. The static clock on the wall. The only progressive movement comes from the mice - slowly taking over. Dotting the cupboards with turds.

"But cheap, shitty apartments exist everywhere, Felix."

"No way," he says with finality.

She sighs, exasperated. "I must go, you must stay. It's kind of hard not to perceive the end is near. I'm not sure we're the kind of people that can handle a long distance relationship. You and I, well, we need to be able to hold each other. We need to be held." She grips his arm.

The first breeze of the evening rattles the branches. As they turn and start to make their way down the mountain, Felix says hopefully, "I wish you wouldn't worry about it so much. Maybe you'll still find something."

"You know it's impossible to find a steady photography gig here. I've been looking for years. And it's what I've worked hard to—"

"I've worked hard too! But I didn't go to school, so it wouldn't be much easier for me to find work there." He looks dejected.

"You're one of the smartest people I know. And you'd get paid more to do the same chef stuff without the language barrier." As they cross the street two men in puffy coats and skinny jeans illustrate Julie's point; French fills their ears. She reminds him, "You're good at it. And what about your friend Jake? He went back and now he runs the kitchen at the Cornerstone."

"It's not what I want," he says through clenched teeth, and after a several seconds adds, "Let's not think about it. It could work out, you know?" But she doesn't. Since both their minds seem made up. She shuts her eyes and sees them as two cars, speeding side by side for several seconds, then parting ways. Driving to disparate points on the horizon.

*

Felix tells her about his mom's recent art exhibit in Iowa while he does a sketch of her face. She finds it hard to sit still. The flickering lights on the distant bridge, perpetually in motion, make her dizzy. Felix notices and puts down his sketchpad.

He leads her to her bedroom. They kiss and it's exquisite as always. The lonely wind moans from down the hall. The bathtub faucet drip dripping, its rhythm almost a song. They make love and Felix is asleep and purring in minutes. Snug against her back, his arm around her.

The clock ticks its electronic tick, counting down moments 'til an inevitable end. A shiver seizes Julie's insides, holds her breath hostage. She entertains the thought of cutting Felix's arm off, keeping that piece of him around her forever. It doesn't seem unsound to her; it's an innocent enough intention. She shifts and almost rises to get a knife from the kitchen. But it's only a fleeting thought. A deranged one at that. Julie knows there's no way to hold on to things. Even if she kept his arm, it would only be an arm. And even it wouldn't stay the same.

*

The next morning, Julie looks at job postings. *New Angle*, an instructional photography magazine in Toronto are hiring for an entry level position. She emails them her resumé and three days later receives a reply asking if she can make it to an interview in another two days. She responds and books her bus ticket home. Then calls the office to ask for half a week off. She's granted a whole week, but informed she will only be working part-time when she returns. Instead of despairing over the financial stress she may soon face, she jots down ideas for the Space/Place exhibit at CTRL Lab.

Later, she makes a big pot of pasta and loads it with Alfredo sauce. Eats it all and then calls Felix. She tells him she'll be gone for a few days. He tries to be supportive, but his voice quavers. Hers does too. Nostophobia - fear of returning home.

*

Julie takes the cheap Megabus to Toronto for her interview at *New Angle*. Things are going well until Mr. Denheim, assistant editor of the magazine says, "Now, I notice you don't have much new work here."

Julie's heart bounces around like a bee between two window panes. "Overtime at the office has been rough and on the weekends it's just chores and I've done some photos recently but haven't developed them yet."

"Well I do like what you have here; I believe in your abilities." He smiles, adding, "It's not up to me. But your chances look good."

*

Julie hops on the bus again to visit her friend Celina, her first friend to have purchased a house, near Falt. Celina nurses the elderly, but writes poetry and music in her spare time. She has a smooth, sweet voice, like a down to earth girl from the country, which she is, having grown up in Blue Mills. Where she was almost hit by lightening once, while riding her bike past the lone tree in an otherwise vacant field.

Julie tells her about her conversation with Felix. "If he broke up the band I think the other guys would be relieved. They've given up and moved on to their own projects. His friend Eduardo who just got signed is moving to Toronto and always asks Felix to write and do vocals for him."

"I'm sorry. I know how hard it is to date a musician. Especially those guys. I started getting my panic attacks when I lived with them." Julie met Celina when they first moved to Montréal; back then Celina was dating Felix's bandmate Ricky.

"I'm glad you have Curtis now. He's a keeper."

"Yeah..."

"He cares for you." Julie looks around Celina's home. A cozy cottagey place. Celina's silvery-grey cat Vapour roaming the halls. The gluten free pancakes Curtis made for brunch sit on a plate on the table he built. Garlic chives and lavender bushes will bloom in the garden soon.

"I know. But we rarely have sex anymore so he feels like a brother sometimes. That's one thing I miss about Ricky; I even think of running back to him."

"Ricky treated you like crap and flirted with all your friends. You're way better off with the life you have. A job where you help people and your own home. Security - I'd prefer that over a good sex life."

"You're right. But we rarely go out thanks to my anxiety. I miss the days back when I could socialize more. Drink. Feel young. I feel boring."

"You're not! But I'm going to miss drinking too if I move home."

*

Back in Falt, Julie calls Felix and tells him about her interview. He has his own news: "The guy from Saboteur called. They're gonna put us on a sampler and if people respond well, we may get chosen for a deal with them!"

Julie tries to sound excited for him, and in a way of course, she is. But her selfish side is sullen. Still she asks all the appropriate questions, pleased that he may finally get the recognition he deserves.

"We're gonna play a few shows to promote it, a loft in Mile End and then we're gonna drive over to Vermont."

"How's the van?" Julie worries (as she always does when Felix drives anywhere for a show) about the shoddy state of his van she calls the Beast of Burden.

"Still breaking down, but as long as I keep it running it should be ok."

"Do you have money if anything happens to it?" She asks carefully.

"Not really."

Instead of commenting in a way that may seem critical, she changes the subject.

"I went to see Curtis and Celina's place."

“Ah, a taste of how the 'real adults' live,” Felix says almost sarcastically.

“Actually, their place is really nice. And a home isn't such a bad thing to want, is it? I want that for myself someday.”

Felix says nothing. He's not the sort to make promises. Julie both loves and hates him for it.

When she gets off the phone, she pulls out her digital camera. Reviews the last photo she took of Felix, lost in a musical moment. A snowy Sunday, just after midnight. Slightly out of focus due to the slow shutter speed, the only light supplied by small, purple chili-peppers that hung from the ceiling of the cave-like venue, Zoobizarre. Felix's mouth open, half-shut eyes directed at the camera. Julie thinks of the how photography is alleged to be a means of acquiring a subject. Interfering with behavior. But she isn't sure how.

*

Julie breathes in the spring air that has abruptly turned to summer. Yesterday it was 0 degrees in Falt, seasonable for early March, but with the sun beaming down today it feels humid and around 20 degrees. She sits on the sloping back lawn of the home she grew up in. She has witnessed it grow green in just four days.

She looks over two perfectly manicured backyards, to her old nursery school teacher's home. She spies something in the middle of the empty lawn; a door frame with nowhere to enter from or exit to, only the skinny pane. A sliver of somewhere.

Julie feels a spark. Rises from her spot on the plaid picnic blanket and steps toward the fence, camera in hand, wishing she had her tripod. To take advantage of the 'skylight', diffused light that allows for saturated colour and minimal shadows. She photographs her subject off to the right of the frame, the wooded area at the foot of the

lawn in the far left gives the images a fantasy-feel. They'll be perfect for CTRL Lab, she thinks.

The buds have swiftly started to sprout on the bare branches. Julie looks up fondly at the tall, thin birch trees that line the fence at the end of the property. It's a windless day, but Julie imagines the sound of the breeze rushing through the pale grasses and tickling the small leaves that flickered white and green, turning front and back. The sound of birch leaves was the soundtrack to Julie's youth. When it was especially windy, before and during storms, Julie would look up at the frail, flexible trees that would whip themselves to and fro, as if suffering from some sort of hysteric attack. They would bend over the house before snapping backwards over the train tracks. Julie spent hours watching those trees. She always worried that one day one or more would fall and crush her house.

The sky suddenly grows dark. Clouds rush in angrily. It looks more like a severe summer storm is on the way rather than a serene spring shower.

As she walks through her childhood home, she feels like a tourist. The space is foreign after the years she's been away. The once rich, dusty rose carpet has faded to a pastel pink. Its cushiony texture worn down. She opens the kitchen cupboard her mom keeps the medicine in. Her eyes scan the bottles of pills to battle hereditary problems. High cholesterol and blood pressure levels. Julie thinks of how her mom overworks herself at the hospital at age 60. Weak knees. Low on sleep. Julie wants more time to repair their strained relationship. To give back. Regretful of how she didn't do more for her grandmother who helped raise her. Haunted by the memory of the green grapes she'd peeled for Julie as a child, and her thick gnarled toenails that Julie was too scared to cut as an adolescent.

As she casts her eyes on the clutter of tacky figurines in the glass cabinet by the dining room table, Julie knows moving home is the right thing to do. The big bungalow

void of life. The upstairs full of new things, untouched piles of purchases in plastic bags. A basement full of old things, belongings her mother has long forgotten about. Caked in dust, in crumbly, yellowed boxes. Julie suspects she buys more and more to regain the sense of fullness that was once there when Julie, her brother Andrew and her grandmother shared the space.

Julie finds herself cross-legged on her bed as she had been countless times growing up. The familiar sound of rain striking the roof and trickling out the gutters. Her mother has taken over her bedroom. When she visits she hangs her shirts on her aluminum Ikea bed frame and is unable to squeeze even a single pair of pants in the closet. Nor the white wardrobe that's crowded the room since she was 13; the one she's always been forbidden to use. Her mother has also filled all the drawers in Julie's dressers and bags of miscellaneous crap she bought on sale, potential gifts, socks, soaps and lotions are crammed between dresser and wardrobe, wardrobe and wall and in bins beneath Julie's bed.

Julie wants to tidy the mess, but her mother has told her not to. Now that her mother has grown lazy with her cleanliness (because there's no one to blame for the mess but herself) Julie has become more of a neat freak than her. She dusts all the surfaces in her room and goes through her bedside table's drawers, trying to make whatever little space she can for her inevitable return home. She finds it hard to part with rocks she painted at church-camp, her collection of smooth glassy bits and rough granite clumps. The pet rock she got in grade five. Her cousin Sonia called it "Roadkill." She wonders what her fascination with rocks had been. Maybe that they were hard to break. There's little a rock can't take.

Her mom appears in the doorway. Julie looks up. "So I was thinking, you know all those old blankets in the basement bathroom closet?"

"What about them?"

"Well most of them are gross, and we never use them. Maybe we could get rid of some to make room for when I come back."

"We'll see about that."

"What if I just get rid of some of them for you?"

"Don't you touch those blankets! They're for visitors."

"We never have that many visitors. And you have tons of new—"

"I said no!"

"Where will I put all my stuff?"

"Your room."

"My room's full of your things. You'll take care of at least that, right?"

Her mother gives her the silent treatment.

"Look, I want to move back, keep you company, help out. But still the move will be hard for—"

"Those drugs you did really screwed up your brain!"

"I was freakin' 19! And it wasn't them that screwed me up anyway!"

"Maybe you should find somewhere else to live!"

A few hours later her mother half haughty, half sheepish, comes into Julie's room.

"Let's not go to bed angry. Your bed is always here."

But a bed is not a room, not a home per se.

*

Outside the rain continues to pour and the wind is so strong the storm proof windows shake. Around 11 p.m. *The Nature of Things* comes on CBC. A troubling episode about the changing seas.

Julie falls asleep to the sound of ice pellets pinging off the window and with the unforgettable image of pollinating hard corals in her mind. If the oceans acidify further they won't be able to reproduce anymore. The breeding process is miraculous: Using visual sensors corals detect when the moon is full, on the same night at approximately the same time each year, and only when the water is just the right temperature. Little peach bulbs spew forth a delicate mist (such spectacular sperm, Julie thinks). The eggs are balls of soft light. They loosen from their pit-like pods and float like swirling stars of a constellation. The sperm and eggs come together and the parents may never see each other, nor their offspring; they are unable to let each other down.

*

"A tree fell on the house!" Julie's mother wakes her.

"What?"

"It was a tornado last night... That door on Alison and Dave's lawn shattered against the fence."

"A tornado in March? How can people deny the earth is changing?"

"It only fell on the garage," her mother says. "The lord always takes care of us. But you know, to be safe we should cut the rest down." Julie shudders at the disquieting thought; the border at the base of their lawn bare. Metathesiophobia- Fear of changes.

Julie's mother drives her to the bus station to catch the 8:00 a.m. departure. On the way there she tells Julie about the next pointless purchase that's invited to take up space in her home that Julie's not welcome to.

"It's a time-eating clock. A giant grasshopper eats the seconds as he goes around, doesn't that sound neat, kiddo?"

Viewfinder

Julie shuts her eyes. Sees the North Pole ice cap shrinking. The mirror that cools the sun replaced by the dark oceans that absorb it. Female ocean creatures become masculinized. Predator squids multiply. Cold water kelp forests, oyster beds and coral reefs die off. Marine snow, a blizzard below. Baby octopuses climb up ship ropes to escape low oxygen waters. Hypoxia. The 22 tons of CO₂ dumped daily into the oceans acidifies the essential water bodies 30 times faster than ever before. The seas grow purple with sulfur bacteria, the sky grows green. A mass extinction. Ferocious floods and fires. The tipping point after which 'runaway climate change' will start.

Julie jolts awake and looks out the bus window at the passing fields. The natural light is clean, the sky bright white. The mother of all softboxes, perfect for environmental photography. It makes Julie regret all the days, years, she's been stuck indoors. Her interest in industrial structures as subjects seems to have drowned in one of the floods of her dreams, or perhaps burned up in one of the irreparable forest fires. The tornado that occurred abnormally early in the season has triggered a change in Julie. She yearns to record the disappearing world.

*

Julie walks from the bus station to Felix's place. When he opens the door she leaps excitedly into his arms.

"How's it running?" Felix says as he lowers her to the ground.

"What?" Julie's eyes tracing the thick black frames of his glasses, which he's had since high school. The large boxy lenses make his bright blue eyes look smaller than they are.

"In Polish *how's it going* translates to *how's it running*, and they say it's running like blood from the nose." His face breaks into the massive smile Julie has captured on film countless times. A surreal stretch of teeth.

"Weird. The Polish sure do have a lot of sayings involving bodily fluids."

"They also say dog's blood."

"What the heck does that mean?"

"It's kind of a like a swear word. Like, *fuck!*" He throws his hands in the air, mock-angry. Julie laughs.

The other members of Felix's band gradually join them in the living room. Mike rolls a joint while Ricky sits on a stool, in his typical hunched position. He reminds Julie of a troll with his bulbous nose and widow's peak. And the foul odor that emanates from the socks he wears for weeks.

Felix puts on some ironic music. Dance Mix '94. Big Shiny Tunes. He tells everyone that Right Said Fred recently came out so they decide to watch the video for "I'm too Sexy." Everyone feels good for gay and fabulous Fred, sporting bondage outfits and fishnet vests too tiny for his bulging chest.

After, Ricky asks Julie, "Did Felix tell you we're gonna start having shows here?"

"Where's everyone gonna fit?"

"We're gonna clear everything out of the living room and throw out this old couch," Mike answers.

Julie's brow furrows at the thought of the already un-homey space void of furniture. "At least you can make some money for all the rent you guys owe," she concedes.

"Nah, we're not gonna charge cover," Ricky says.

"We're gonna sell beer," Felix adds, "but just enough to cover our costs and to get us all drunk."

"You'll be in shit if the landlord finds out. He could kick you out." Julie knows she sounds like a killjoy but doesn't care.

"How would Monty find out?" Felix glares at her.

"Someone might complain."

"The only old people around here are that Asian couple next door."

Julie feels sorry for them. She used to yell at her brother for playing music loudly when their grandmother was trying to sleep.

"What about the broken balcony? If someone drunk falls off it they could die or sue you."

"They wouldn't sue us, they'd sue Monty. And we'll block it off," Felix says.

Julie bites her tongue. She retires to Felix's room. Undresses and crawls beneath the deteriorating comforter on his mattress. One of the only things in the long, high-ceilinged room, painted a washed-out cantaloupe colour.

Felix comes to bed a few minutes later. "We never got to talk about your trip. How was it?"

"I really hoped I could reconnect with my mom, but she doesn't want me to move back."

"How can she be so mean? What about *New Angle*?"

"I should hear from them within the week. Even if I don't get it, I'm going to have to move so it'll be easier to go to interviews."

"That's good... I guess."

"I'm gonna ask my cousin about staying with her. It'll be tough though; she's a neurotic 34-year-old virgin." She seeks refuge against Felix's body. Clutching him, she breathes in the sweet and sour scent of his sparsely-haired armpit. He remains still for a second, then hits the sides of his head.

"Now that our song's on this compilation I need to get my shit together in case we get signed. I've been working on this album for years."

"Maybe you need to set a deadline."

"Yeah but working with deadlines limits the work. You just rush to get it done and not as well as it could be."

"Well you have to finish it someday. It's driving you nuts."

"It's like you don't want my band to make it so I'll move with you! I don't know that I'll ever leave here and I don't believe in planning. There is no 'forever.'" His eyes are wide like an irate animal's.

"You'd prefer a girl with no concept of future? That doesn't talk about her feelings?"

"So, what's wrong with th—" He stops himself, but the damage is done. He rolls toward her, looks regretful, but fails to utter an apology. Julie evades his advances. When he sighs and turns over bitterly, she kicks the blanket off and gets dressed in a huff. Makes as much noise as possible as she leaves the room, dragging her luggage behind.

*

The next morning Julie's not scheduled to go in to work so she sleeps in. When she finally gets up there's a message on her machine. *New Angle* lets her know she didn't get the job, but that they'll keep her resumé on hand. She spends a few minutes checking for other photography jobs online, compares the zero in Montréal to the five current possibilities in Toronto.

She slowly cooks and eats a big breakfast. Turkey bacon, French toast, Cream Earl Grey with lots of sugar and yogurt with blueberries. Then she takes a long shower,

allowing the stream to massage her strained muscles. The scent of imitation grapefruit fills the room.

As Julie towels off, the phone is ringing. It's her seemingly-psychic cousin Sonia. She invites Julie to stay with her in Hamilton whenever she's ready. Julie thanks her for the offer and tells her she'll probably be there in a month. After she hangs up, she calls the office. Gives her two weeks notice to the receptionist. The contents of her stomach shift.

*

Julie takes to the street with her Nikon F6. Hoping to capture her surroundings now that her departure is imminent. But as she waits to cross the road at the corner of Atwater and Ste.Catherine, she finds herself distracted and wanders into the pet shop that Simon, the charming photographer she met back in the fall, works at.

She spots him at the back of the store, in his grey collared shirt. When she reaches him and quietly utters his name, he looks up like the beige rabbit he cradles in his arms. Both of their noses twitching.

"Oh— Hi."

"It's Julie, remem—"

"Of course," he says, "from the Swamp Sex Robots show. You liked my Vacublitz." Julie smiles at how Vacublitz sounds with his French accent.

Simon puts the rabbit down and pats it on the head three times. "Just Chloe left." He carefully picks up the next rabbit, which he holds in precisely the same manner, stroking its fur the same way.

"It may sound odd, but I'm a Cancer and I feel akin to sea creatures. I can't even eat them. And lately, I just feel afloat."

"I've got just what you need," he says patting the rabbit three times on the head and placing it beside the others in the cage.

"What's that patting you do there?"

"Oh... I'm a bit OCD. Thankfully, I've found that photography and working with pets are two areas where I can actually apply my uh - disorder." He looks irritated with himself as he leads Julie over to a small tank.

"This is an Equadorian crab. They're a bit picky, but they're worth the trouble. They deserve just as much love." The pained look that crosses Simon's face suggests he's thinking of himself. He lifts the lid off the tank and rolls his sleeve up symmetrically.

"He needs salt water in his tank, so we sell this stuff called Instant Ocean." He scoops the blue crab up and places it on the aquarium lid. Julie examines the quivering crustacean.

"If I have to move someday, will he be OK?"

"Crabs are very adaptable. They've been around for 400 million years and they live in some of the harshest conditions on earth. In those hydrothermal vents in the deep sea. Do you know what this is?"

"Yeah, with the poisonous smoke stacks. I thought it was amazing they found life there. I didn't know there were crabs though." Julie sees her astrological creature in a new light. As an inspiring, appropriate mascot. She looks at its eyes, grey commas that jut from the top of its body, and then at its tiny 5th leg that holds its shell in place.

"Well, Simon, I think you've sold yourself a crab!"

"I'm not much of a salesman. I'm glad to know he's going to a good home. I give them the best life here I can," he casts his eyes around the store with a sense of duty and pride.

"I can tell," Julie says and Simon's cheeks grow rosy. She sees the slender young man as delicate, innocent.

After ringing her purchases through, Simon grows fidgety. He takes a pen from his pocket and tears a piece of receipt paper from the cash. He writes down his phone number, hesitantly saying, "Julie, you know, if you're ever not with your boyfriend anymore, I'd really like to take you out."

"That's very sweet but—"

"Since I lost Mel I've wanted to value someone right, to adjust for someone. With her I couldn't do that." He speeds around the store again to check that all the animals are content; he bends at the waist, stands up straight, then on his toes, then over a pace and repeats.

"What happened?" Julie asks, following him.

"I was late all the time because I had to recheck the lights, the fridge, the stove, the lock. I was supposed to help Mel put up some curtains but on the way there I saw these flowers. And I had to find the right one for her."

Julie thinks this is terribly romantic.

"I know that sounds nice. Everyone says that," he says without looking at her, his accent growing more pronounced, "but it wasn't. I was deranged. The perfect flower doesn't exist to someone like me! But I examined them all anyway, for symmetry, for consistent colour. I was too late and when I got there she'd fallen off the chair she was standing on. Broke her hip."

"That's awful."

"I'll never make that mistake again." He looks her in the eye and hands her the slip of paper with his number on it, their sweaty palms tickling each other's. They both shudder.

A part of Julie wants to reach out and pull him towards her. To dishevel his perfectly parted and slicked down hair. While another part feels despicable for the urge. But she can't help but wonder if she's wasted her time clinging to her relationship with

Felix. Could she have invested in someone willing to go the extra mile for her, no matter which direction it happened to be?

"Thanks for all your help, Simon." To prove how grateful she is, she kisses his cheeks. This is excusable because, although Julie's not French, Simon is and it's a customary practice in Québec. Simon's white face turns pink. His marmot-like eyes bulge, meet Julie's briefly then dart away.

As she turns to leave, he says, "I forgot to tell you, my friend inherited some money and he's going to back my studio. I'll be quitting here in a couple months."

"Congratulations. I'm moving so I can find work too."

Simon looks surprised. Rue crosses his face, but he manages to transform it into a smile. "Good luck to you then."

"Thanks. You too." Julie's stomach stirs. Some bile rises. It is her first goodbye.

She heads home and sets up her crustacean's tank. Thinking of how its placement on the bookshelf in her apartment is only temporary. She looks out her window at her beloved view of the city. *What will I ever do without my Montréal view?* The river in the distance. The silhouettes of mountains, sharp steeples. Softened by haze. Julie pictures her apartment bare. Piles of packed boxes. Her stuck in a stare. The walls move out while the future closes in. No more late-night poutine to console her. No *depanneur* on the corner.

Julie glances at her watch. There's still time to do some shooting.

*

The sun is out a bit longer these days. Julie thinks of how the leaves breathe in carbon dioxide in spring/summer, breathe out in winter/fall. No wonder she feels low on oxygen. She takes the metro to Parc Drapeau. Hoping something will elicit a new

concept to explore in depth. She needs an epiphany. Her purpose is that of every artist: To not only capture what is, but portray it as something more. Inimitably.

As she walks along the path that winds its way through the park she finds herself particularly drawn to the sky. A landscape that is ever-present though constantly changing. Immense and inescapable. It will make anywhere Julie ends up somewhat familiar.

She crouches to get the right vantage point, zooms in carefully, remembering that only 90-95% of the shot shows up in her viewfinder. She brings her device to her face. Delights in the familiar form and weight in her hands. She presses the shutter as always, with great care. The clouds lay just barely visible at the bottom of the frame, the gradient shades of grey sky gradually shift from a faint silver colour to a deep lead. A plane unexpectedly flies through the shot and appears as a streak of light. A scar. That begins as a slit, cut from a sharp knife, and grows slightly fatter in the centre as it heals.

Julie pictures herself in Hamilton. Unable to have a drink without seeming like an alcoholic to her banal cousin, wiping the counter Julie's already wiped, complaining about her beautiful home, her impressive income. Julie knows her cousin will lack sympathy for the loss of her love, her friends, replaced by meaningless small talk with yuppie neighbors. Straining to smile at their cookie-cutter kids with nearly-white hair, with twinkling eyes, with shrieks and squeals all day and all night. Their whole lives in wait, with nothing at stake.

Julie's breath shortens. Splotches fill her field of vision. She lowers herself to sit on the pebbled dirt, her body tense and trembling. A panic attack. The first of many to come, she imagines. Commuting to Toronto and back, stuck in traffic, stuffy seriousness. The businessman beside her thudding his head against the back of the bus seat in front of him. She takes several deep breaths and the splotches reluctantly dissipate.

*

At the corner of Maisonneuve and St. Matthieu Julie bumps into her good friend Allison.

"Fancy meeting you here," Allison says and the two hug.

"What are you doing in this neck of the woods?"

"Just on my way back to St. Henri. I got my necklaces into a new store up on Mont Royal."

"Awesome."

"Yeah it looks promising. It's this place that specializes in recycled stuff. Wanna join me for a croissant?"

They sit in the back room of Le Croissanterie. The bust of Chopin in the corner, fake flowers glued around its base. Julie and Allison give their order for two café lattés, one chocolatine and one almond croissant to the cranky Middle Eastern woman that looks half her age. They overhear her talking to one of her regulars. Expressing resentment towards her husband for the decades she's been stuck working in his dark café.

Allison tells Julie her wedding plans; she recently got engaged to her boyfriend of 11 years.

"You'll be my first friends to get married. I'm gonna cry."

"That's not very like you."

"I know. It's just lately I can't help but wonder how much Felix loves me. Ryan's kicked his videogame-addiction and is getting certified to be a technician so you guys can get a house in Ottawa. Marc's gonna move to the states with Violet. Raffi's moving with Lauren from Toronto to shitty old Falt of all places! And Andrea and Ryo always

knew they'd move to opposite sides of the world for each other. They're going to Japan. And last night out of nowhere Felix said all this discouraging stuff."

"Try not to take it too hard. He's just stressed that you're leaving. And his music means a lot to him. As a creative person you can relate, right?"

"I just think he should have a time line, you know? He's been in this band for nine years. He needs a plan for what he'll do if they don't get signed to Saboteur, you know, if doesn't all work out. Lots of worthy bands never make it."

"Men hate planning," Alison says before blowing on her latté.

"And I pretty much stuck around here doing that shit office job to be with him. I feel like I already made my sacrifice."

"He's just not ready yet. You're not quite either. You've just got something you really care about pushing you."

"I'm nervous about moving. I dread it."

"It won't be easy but you should be excited you can get back to your work. You really want this."

"I know. But what if I find a relevant job and still don't have time to do my own thing?" Julie pulls her soft, sticky croissant apart.

"Maybe a conventional job isn't what you really want. Maybe you need an alternate plan, something you can look forward to. Have you thought about moving somewhere else?"

"That'd be nice." Julie's been so caught up in her fears about leaving she hasn't stopped to consider there might be a more desirable option. "If I could leave for something less dull, more certain, the pain of what I'm leaving behind might seem more worthwhile."

Allison nods approvingly, but Julie shakes her head in response. "Right now the only option is living with my cousin in Ontario. I need a place to stay while I save some

money, pay the interest on my loans. At least I have Celina there. I don't want go through all this alone."

"If there's anything I can do to help, just let me know."

*

When Julie returns to her apartment, Felix is waiting for her. As she takes off her shoes, she hears ice crack and jingle in a glass.

"What are you doing here?" She asks hostilely as she approaches him.

"Making you a drink," he says as he hands Julie a brandy snifter of deep yellow liquid. Her favourite liqueur, Galiano. He leans forward and presses his lips to her unresponsive ones.

"I'm sorry about last night. I'm afraid of the thought of you leaving. And the forever stuff, I didn't mean it. It's just that my parents are miserable together, like they stay together for something other than love. My mom told my dad recently she doesn't think he's her soul mate and that she married him for financial security."

Julie lets her guard down. "I understand you haven't had the best examples."

"My grandparents slept in separate locked rooms and my grandma said she didn't want my grandpa buried anywhere near her. She had an Armenian lover that was taken away to a concentration camp."

"That's really sad... but my parents have hated each other my whole life and I still have faith in lasting love." Julie pulls Felix close. The rhythmic sound of his heart syncs with the shhhh of the water running in the pipes in the bathroom down the hall. A familiar song. That's made Julie feel safe for so long. She gradually withdraws.

"I didn't get the job, but I am going to move in a month." Her insides squirm like grubs crawling all over each other. Each time she makes this assertion, the reality becomes more certain.

Felix looks injured. "Maybe we can still try to see each other. It's only six hours by bus." But Julie knows that without a concrete plan it's unlikely, especially with the way their finances are. Felix sees the hopeless expression on her face and says, "Let's do something nice. We need to make the most of the time we have. I'll take you on a date. We never do that. And I'll pay."

Julie looks unconvinced and says nothing.

"We're having that show at my place tomorrow night, but what about Sunday? Pick you up at 7?" He tucks her hair behind her ear.

"Ok." Julie says, turning away from him. This is not the long-term plan she's looking for, but she appreciates the effort. She takes a few steps away, toward her bookshelf. Looks to her crab for strength. Wishes he could tell her what he inherently knows as a crustacean.

"What, are you trying to replace me?" Felix jokes from behind her.

"It was an impulse buy," Julie explains. She doesn't regret it, but she does feel guilty at the thought of Simon. Especially when Felix hugs her from behind.

*

Sunday evening rolls around and Julie sits waiting for Felix. She tries calling him several times, but to no avail. She waits up crossly and eventually quite concerned. Has a couple drinks then watches a documentary on bees. Some of them get drunk like her and others, like bouncers, keep them out of the hive. Around midnight, she tries Felix one more time before falling into a fitful slumber.

The next day, she goes to work. Clickclick sends confirmation emails. Calls Felix another four times and finally reaches him on her lunch break.

"What the fuck happened to you?"

"Someone got out onto the balcony."

"And?"

"Well what do you think? You gave me shit for it before it even happened," he says as if to blame her.

"Someone fell."

"Yeah. Dislocated his arm, sprained his neck, fractured a couple ribs. And he's pressing charges."

"I thought you said it would be Monty that would be in trouble?" She says derisively.

"Well, I was wrong. And he's pissed now that he knows we were throwing shows. Thinks we were making money. We need to come up with what we owe fast."

"So basically everything I said."

"Yes!"

"Everything you ignored." Julie's voice gets progressively louder.

"Look Julie, what do you want me to fucking say?"

"Say why you didn't call me sooner. Say why you let me down. Say why you won't grow the fuck up!"

She slams the phone down and goes to see her boss. Tells him she's feeling sick, which isn't a lie.

*

Back at her apartment, Julie paces with so much momentum she worries she might accidentally motor through the window. Smack the pavement and splatter.

She calls her friend Celina back in Ontario to vent.

"He's so immature. And if I can't rely on him now, what about in the future?"

"You already know what I think. Those guys will never change. That's why I left Ricky years ago."

"It's true."

"You've gotta think about what's best for you."

"I know."

She thanks her friend and hangs up the phone.

*

Julie puts a new roll of film in her camera. Makes her way down to the Lachine canal. She looks up at the sun and thinks of how it shrinks five feet every hour. The Sahara desert expanding half a mile South every year. Lush areas of rainforest vanishing. Of her own surroundings about to vanish from her life. She from theirs. Surrealists reasoned that since the world was impossible to understand, they would simply collect it.

Julie takes photo after photo. Driven. The whir from rotating the rings around the lens. The thrill of getting the settings just right. She's reminded of when she'd finished her photography degree, her most prolific period; she'd worked on series' constantly and sent them to galleries. The satisfaction of seeing her work on walls and in print.

She realizes that she's been most successful on her own. Aided only by her magical device that records the world in rays of light. Solitude seemed to be a prerequisite to this particular thrill - her passion as precedence. Sontag said possessing a camera is akin to lust. A self-devouring project. Julie sees that Felix has been too; her attraction a distraction. From the future that neared. The future she's feared.

In this moment of clarity, the sun beaming down on her, Julie also recognizes how her mother has gotten to her. Causing her to view life in a way that's been unnaturally safe and realistic, two things creativity are often stifled by. Julie considers the fact she may not need a paid position right away in order to advance. What she must do is find herself. Through losing herself. Not in concerns with or of others, but in the infinite photographic possibilities in wait.

As she passes the same buildings she's passed countless times near her apartment, Julie thinks of how the desire to take photos is aligned with the desire for new experience. She recalls the excitement she felt after graduating, on her trip to England. Capturing the sense of having been there. In a new place. Olive trees can live up to 1500 years in the right location. Julie wonders if it's the same for humans. Perhaps she might thrive better elsewhere.

*

Back at her apartment, Julie looks at artist residencies online. Her friend Lauren, a sculptor, enjoyed the one she did in Rome. Julie puts aside the question of the logistics of the potential plan, and compiles a list of three possible options in the UK; programs that provide accommodations, studio space and access to dark rooms for a nominal fee, and that give artists opportunities to network and display their work in local galleries.

Looking at past and present residents, Julie sees she has a ways to go yet. Though many of the artists are young they've had their work featured in more exhibits and magazines than she has. She knows to compete she must plan, generate and submit as much work as possible. She thinks of what she's already got, gets the rolls of film from before and during her Falt trip together. The images she took of her apple

martini for *Fraction*. The one of Violet and a few recent ones of Felix for *Deep Sleep's* memory theme. The mysterious doorframe in Falt for CTRL Lab.

She plans to pursue the *Aperture* contest; the deadline is in nine weeks. She needs to come up with two insightful series. She also decides to try for the Lindhoff young photographer award; the prize includes \$10 000 worth of photography equipment. Now that Julie is unemployed, there is nothing stopping her. Though money remains a nagging issue in the back of her head as she rushes to the lab with her film.

*

When Julie's father calls that evening she tells him what's on her mind.

"England sounds like a fantastic idea! Your ancestors would be pleased that you're getting back to your roots."

"It's a bit impractical though. I can't really afford it."

"Forget about that. I think what you're saying is you need to do this, am I right?"

"I think so. But I need some time to prepare and I already quit my job."

"Why don't you stay put for another couple months? Then if you need to, live with your cousin for the interim. After that we can take some funds out of the RRSP that was supposed to be your wedding gift one day."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. That money's for you and I bet you'll find a gallery in England you can work at; you don't need to know French there! Go with the flow, Julie. The rest will figure itself out."

Julie thanks her father for his offer and takes his advice. She finds an artist residency program that begins in November, nine months away. It's located in Cambridge, where her great grandparents lived. She looks at the requirements and

despite the stiff competition, she's confident that with the unique artistic vision she has to offer she has a chance of securing one of the 12 spots available.

She clears her desk and starts to conceptualize one of the two series she'd like to create. The sky will be the focal point. She'll place her camera on a tripod near her window, set the timer at 30 minute intervals. Capture the thousands shades of day and night that pass over the city she will soon leave behind. The images will highlight difference and sameness. The passing of time. The cyclic, incremental shifts of the sky as aligned with those of the individual. No two moments precisely the same. She decides to call the series "Infinity." If successful, it could reclaim her place in the photography community. And eventually she could have her own gallery. Her dream. No longer hidden beneath irrelevant pamphlets or clouded by worries of lost love. But in her sights. Still at a distance, yet closer than ever before.

*

The next day after work, before entering her apartment, Julie hears a guitar and knows Felix is inside. He hears her open the door and calls out, "Stay over there!"

"What is it?" she asks as she slams the door.

"Just don't look over here. Oh, and close the light." Julie flips the switch but ignores his warning. As she nears, she sees him draw one of the curtains.

"Hey, I said wait!"

Felix has made dinner and a cake. Candles dot the room and reflect off the walls. A striking bunch of exotic flowers sit in a vase on the kitchen table.

"What's all this?"

Felix takes her hand and draws her eyes to his. "I thought I'd give you dinner and a show," he says. Julie's gaze finds its way to her window. The sun sinking swiftly. The sky glows flamingo pink, sliced up with lavender cirrus clouds. A seagull passes.

"Look, Felix. I appreciate this. I appreciate...you. But we're so different now. We want different things. And, well, I'm not going to move to Ontario anymore, not for long anyway. I'm going to try to make it to the UK in a few months."

He staggers backwards as if he's been pushed. Julie instinctively reaches out to grab him. But misses. His back smacking into the wall.

"We can't keep each other safe anymore," Julie says, her eyes starting to water.

"I guess I deserve this," Felix's shoulders slouch.

"It's not about that. Well it kind of is. I still love you, but this is what we both need. Not the pain of an end, just the beginning of focusing on what we're meant to. You might get that deal with Saboteur and I need to progress too."

"I can't change your mind?" He looks terrified. His eyes red, his faced scrunched.

"You can't." Tears speed down Julie's cheeks, fall off the point of her chin and travel down her neck. "I can't expect you to change or abandon your music to come with me." And for the first time she actually believes this.

They clutch each other and fall to the floor. When they finally compose themselves and help each other up, they both need a drink. They finish in only a few gulps.

"This is gonna be a lot sadder now," Felix says, looking resigned. He gestures for Julie to sit on the couch and she does. He steps away and presses play on her computer. Picks up his guitar and stands in front of her, a few paces beyond the coffee table. He's taught himself how to play along to her favourite song, "Ceremony." The last Joy Division song, recorded live 16 days before the end of Ian Curtis' life. It became the

first NewOrder song. Tragically lovely. Signifying ends and beginnings. Loss and flexibility.

"Heaven knows it's got to be this time," Felix sings the key line of the chorus.

Julie reaches for her camera. Selects burst mode to capture several images in succession. Enamored with the sense of control the act allows her, while in life she must walk away with the camera, leaving Felix behind. She thinks of how Sontag saw the photograph as respecting things the way they are - unchanged. The photographer complicit in what makes the subject interesting. Worth photographing.

He strikes the final chords. His body droops, his eyes downcast. Julie walks over to him. "Thank you. It was beautiful, Felix." As her lips undulate over his, her mind races but not in a panic. Productively. A new mission. The profound concept she's been waiting for, the second series she needs for *Aperture*. Environmental portraits of her and Felix. Him in his element, making music; herself reflected in mirrors, taking photos. Reacting to the environments they're steeped in, tied nicely into her desire to venerate all things natural.

Megan Cump's nature portraits come to mind. Statements on rebirth, memory, presence and absence, nature and psyche. Julie visualizes her and Felix in fog, in dispersed sunlight, in moonlight on Oka beach. She sees her idea as the perfect synthesis of her past and present concerns; bringing portraiture and the environment together in a novel way. The project will also immortalize the final piece of her and Felix's shared biography. A sense of dissolution. An homage to what they've had and to where they're each destined to go.

Julie is eager to start. Instructs her subject to sit on the couch. She adjusts the focus of her camera, mesmerized as always by the sight of the aperture, a set of fine blades adjusting. As she stares into the centre of the diaphragm, she imagines all the light rays travelling parallel to each other through the passage. Let in by one set of glass

lenses and let out by another. She sets the aperture to a large f/ratio to diffract light and soften the image. She places her camera atop her tripod.

For an ambient white glow she pulls the makeshift softbox Felix helped her build from behind the couch. Julie has always been a fan of slightly fuzzy photos which give the impression of something half-remembered as in memory. Imperfect. Real.

She sits beside Felix, facing him and he turns to her. They fall into each other's eyes as they have many times before. Julie uses the remote shutter release to take the picture. After, they both blink and stare. Processing the image the camera has. The proceedings of the world briefly suspended and dismissed. The present turned to past. The past turned to pastness.

Feet scamper across the floor in the apartment above. Something like a marble falls - Julie will never know what it is. The water whooshes through the pipes in the bathroom. Beyond the window, the world goes on and on and on. Cars zip home on the Champlain Bridge in the distance. Inching along. Constantly in motion, while somehow remaining the same. Sirens squeal as they head to some sort of catastrophe. The sky grows darker by measured degrees like it always does. Like it always will.