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**The Dying Art of Conversation**

**Christine Murray**

**A Thesis**

**in the**

**Department of**

**English**

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## ABSTRACT

### The Dying Art of Conversation

Christine Murray

*The Dying Art of Conversation* is the story of a young expatriate writer living and working in present day London, England. Christine Foxton moves to London from Canada after a string of bad relationships. Two months after her arrival, unemployed and alienated, Christine is caught up in an abusive relationship with her English boyfriend, Lucas. Her whimsical and wry narration relates her struggle to escape her violent relationship, first through her writing, a screenplay adaptation of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and finally through a burgeoning relationship with Alex, a man she meets when strolling through Mile End Park. Written in homage to Jean Rhys' book *Voyage in the Dark*, the text makes frequent reference to suicide, drowning, and other motifs from Rhys' and Chopin's novels. The protagonist shares the author's name in a deliberate attempt to conflate writer and speaker, adding to the sense of immediacy and realism created by the present tense narration. This echoes the writings of authors such as Sylvia Plath, Leonard Cohen, Rhys, and Chopin. Their at times confessional work was often freely conflated with autobiography, resulting in speculation which caused Rhys, Chopin and Cohen some difficulty in life, and arguably much intrigue and possible injury to Plath's reputation after her death.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The overall style and structure of this book is loosely based on the early novels of Jean Rhys, especially *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight*. The dialogue in Christine's screenplay is partially excerpted from chapter XXVII of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Particular facts on London's parks are taken from Guy Williams' excellent book on the subject, *The Royal Parks of London*. The published letters of Jean Rhys provided the opening quotation. I owe special and invaluable thanks to Stephanie Bolster, for her guidance and encouragement over the past three years. Also to the many people who agreed to critique early and belated drafts, especially Mary DiMichele, Olive Senior, Roo Borson, Pasha Malla, Susan Briscoe, John Asfour, Lionel Kearns and Emily Anglin. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my parents, Norm and Nerina Murray, for the gift of roots and wings, as well as to my sisters and brothers-in-law: Jacqui, Andrew, Stephanie and Rob, Marisa and Paul. Thanks also to Richard, for field research and Frances, for moral support.

## DEDICATION

Dear Mimi, I miss you so very much. I hope you like my book.

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*It's a weird feeling being told you are impersonating yourself.*

*Rather nightmarish. You think: Perhaps I am! –Jean Rhys*

## PART ONE

### 1.

I feel like drinking a whole pot of coffee. I want to drink until my eyes quiver, until the little hairs on my tongue stand straight up and prickle the roof of my mouth. To drink until that restless caffeinated urgency sinks in and I'm finally able to do something, move forward in a practical and meaningful direction. Out of this damp blue room, up from this damp mattress shoved in the corner. Lying in this bed is always cold, cold, cold and I'm never warm until I sink down into a bath of hot, scaly water.

I fought with Lucas again last night. Only this time when he got angry he pushed my head up against the wall with his fingers on my throat and squeezed just enough to frighten me. That's when I started to cry. It was the first time he was this badly off, before it was just little things and when I started to cry I thought to myself you stupid cow, now he will know you scare easily. Now he'll know you're just a frightened little girl who needs to be held and whispered to and brought out to dinner wearing something fresh and nice.

It's raining today. I can hear the spit-spit sound against the window. It always rains like this in London, but never a good clean rain. No thunder and lightning. No downpours with water swilling over the drains and afterwards the sky clearing and the city sparkling. It rains like watery air, like spray from a fountain, so that you don't get properly wet and you come in from a storm feeling sodden and unsatisfied.

At home the storms come across the lake, building up under rolling black clouds with the rumble of thunder, coming closer until it's right on top of your head. And after it starts up fiery and hard, every time it cracks you want to run for cover and tuck down

low, in tight with someone who is very close to you. Someone you can drink tea with and read books to while the storm goes on storming. It's different here in England where two damp people are not better than one.

I painted this room a stupid Smurf-blue because I thought it would make me calm and happy, but instead it's just blue. "You painted it blue because you miss the sky!" Mom said on the phone and she's probably right. But it doesn't make much difference. Having a room that is blue like the sky is not like having a sky that is blue and in fact blue is a cold colour, a very sad colour and also suppresses your appetite. I'm hardly ever hungry anymore.

Last night we started out by talking about going somewhere. I was pushing for a curry on Brick Lane, or any restaurant, or a movie, but Lucas had other plans. I decided to make it clear that I'd enough of waiting for him to take an interest in me. There's no point in pushing someone who pushes back twice as hard, especially when you are not that strong to begin with.

I used to write when I felt this way. I would spit out poems like eight line manifestos, toil over possible treatments for films I would never begin. Lucas tells me I should get to it, work on my screenplay, but I can't. "I thought you were writing a film," he says wryly. "Don't film writers write?"

But I am not being entirely fair. There are days when Lucas and I are wonderful. He does impersonations to get me laughing, or snuggles me into his neck at night, tight and close. It's impossible to give the right impression coming into the plot right here. Things are not always this way between us, so full of this ridiculous melodrama.

Besides, if I spent as much energy trying to find my own friends here as I do trying to find a job, then maybe I wouldn't be so needy. That's what Lucas tells me, that it's just too much for him, to have me as his big responsibility, with all my issues and insecurities, my demands. "If you would just get your own friends," he said last night, "you wouldn't need me so much, and I wouldn't feel so crowded." And things went on and got much hotter from there.

Today the sky above London is a sheet of paper, a canvas with tree branches sketched on. In the wet breeze from the window I can feel that a change must be coming. It's just the coffee I need, something to make it easier, to make the world move forward again. We haven't got a coffee maker, no one does. Just jars upon jars of instant coffee, and I haven't the patience to sit there, making up one cup after another, one at a time.

While I am lying on the bed, Lucas is out at a pub watching a football game with some friends, until I hear the front door click. He says hello to our flatmate Matt, comes up the stairs and taps at the door.

"Come in!" I say, and when he sees me on the bed I smile with all my teeth. He walks over and sits on the edge beside me.

"I'm so sorry about last night. I've been sick about it all day."

I concentrate on feeling nothing at all, staring instead at the blue wall, the blue carpet, the bathroom roof, the apple tree, but then I get teary again and start snivelling away. "Oh honey, come here, I'm so sorry" he says, opening his arms wide. I fold over into a hug. Squeeze. We rock there together for a while until he invites me to a party at Dave and Viv's place. "It's going to be fun, why don't we go?"

Then I am nodding and clearing up and Lucas is giving me little kisses and we are buying wine and off across town, which is the way life often changes gears. One minute you are stopped at a red light looking out the window, and the next you are moving from one place to another saying, "Now what was all that about, anyway?"

I arrive with Lucas at a three-story terrace in Stratford with our £4.30 bottle of red. It's still early and things haven't kicked off yet. There are voices coming from the kitchen and a few cliques making the rounds. The living room is dark with tatty sofas, an unused fireplace painted white and a calico cat named Hans who rubs himself against the back of my legs, mewling.

"So glad you've come," Dave says, his eyebrows going up and down like a game show host. "And don't you look lovely. How's this old boy been treating you then?"

"Things are great," I say. "Thanks for inviting us."

Lucas squeezes my hand and goes off with Dave, I stay with Viv and a handful of girls she's introduced. Viv is tall with slim hips and a toothy smile. She gabbers while I drink quietly, thinking all the time of my shoes, the way they pinch my toes.

"This one's from Canada," Viv says, gesturing vaguely towards me with one hand, refilling my glass of wine with the other. "And we must invite her over more often. Lucas says you still don't know many people here, is that true?" Viv has a genuine smile, but I find it sinister, the choreographed way she moves her arms. "You must entrust yourself to us. We'll show you around, won't we girls?"

After a while, it's a tall and lithe Austrian named Kat with ruffles of blonde hair who takes me by the wrist and leads me into the kitchen. She suggests we lean up against the wall.

"It's better for watching these people, all these ghastly English girls," she whispers with her faintly British accent. "Look at them. Staring around at each other with their long faces and high-heeled shoes. Just like horses, I always say. Show me an Englishwoman who doesn't look just like a horse."

I laugh but can think of nothing to say. She asks me about Lucas, "How good is he in bed?" But before I can answer says, "I'm with a married man, you know," as if she is proud. "He won't leave his wife and I know it, and so I don't know what to do."

"Does his wife know?"

She shakes her head. "Sometimes I think of telling her. Sometimes I think of leaving him, but then I think, why go?"

"Why go." I say, "Why stay?" and then, "Oh well, then tell me and I'd really like the truth – what do you think of my hair? I'm thinking of taking more off on the ends and at the front, and maybe putting in a little colour? A little red? Lucas has been saying my hair's too dirty dishwater, I suppose it's true."

"I think you are fine the way you are," she says, sticking out her pink lower lip. "And don't you dare change. He'll treat you like a poseable Barbie if you show him just how flexible you are."

After the wine, I am feeling warm and flushed and pretty. Kat leaves, ("But do call me. I need friends like you") and I find Lucas in a bedroom upstairs sitting on the floor. The

room is eggshell white, with cheap art photos framed on the walls of people kissing in train stations in Paris. There is a space in the corner next to two men I am drunk enough to introduce myself to. One of them has a twist in his mouth like a kind of sneer, the other quiet, dark eyes with long curling lashes. I find out he's a painter, the other works in telephone sales, but also sings in a band.

I tell myself I will be still and mysterious, but begin to talk about all sorts of things. The painter has a smile and small, delicate hands that make me feel as though I can talk about snow in Canada, or anything I like and he will listen. My mind settles into my throat, my voice full and eager, the stories unravelling like wool from an old sweater.

Then the telesales man says, gesturing to Lucas, "So, you're with that one, are you?"

"Yes," I say, looking away and pulling my hands into my sleeves, "I don't know."

"I've never liked that guy. But I must have the wrong impression, if he's with you."

"Yes." I say, "I know he can seem different than he really is. Sometimes he makes me crazy, but he's very sweet you know..."

The painter smiles and shrugs his shoulders. "I don't really know him," he says.

"Well," I say. "He's an actor, and he's so worried about how white his teeth are, he parades around in his dressing gown in the mornings for nearly an hour scrubbing away, watching TV, spitting in the trashcan, the sink, wiping the spit off his chin." They laugh. "So it must be love because I don't dump him, even though he's disgusting sometimes." The telesales man looks satisfied. I breathe out slowly. I feel like they are looking at me affectionately, even the artist in a shy way under his long eyelashes.

Lucas comes over to say he's tired and we should be going.

"Why are you like that?" he says in the taxi. "For Christ's sake, that's why I never take you anywhere. You're always embarrassing me. And what possessed you to tell that story about my teeth?"

When I arrived in this country it was not like this. His arms were always around me. He gave me his laminated Tube map, brewed endless cups of tea, introduced me as his new girl, "She's just lovely, isn't she?" Two weeks in, he lit candles in the kitchen, took out his guitar and sang 14 songs, one for each day together. I don't know where things went from there; I haven't been here that long.

All the same, it's the weekends that are the hardest for me, when I should be out, enjoying myself, but my body feels thick and slow as if strings were pulling down on my wrists and ankles. I say to myself, it's not all so bad, just pull it together, but it's hard enough work to lie still and stare at the ceiling and not think about things.



Lucas is kissing me awake. He's tucked in close and already stirring.

"Sweetheart," he says, "You have bruises. I feel so bad."

"What?"

"Shh, sugar. Here," he says, stroking my hair and gently touching my neck. "I just noticed. Little ones. Finger marks, from the other night."

"Oh shit Lucas, are you serious?" I say groggily. So tired.

"Baby, I feel really bad about it. I only saw them this morning."

"I'm OK," I say, I put my hands to my neck and push. "I'm fine. They don't hurt."

"I'm so sorry baby, I'm really sorry," and he is pushing up against me and nuzzling me.

"I'm fine. It's OK. Let's just not get like that again."

"Oh baby," he says, "I'm so sorry," and he takes my fingers away from my neck and kisses them, and then kisses each of the bruises, and kisses me.

I wake up with sunshine across my legs like a sash. Barefoot, I tiptoe towards the door.

"Were you ever a ballerina, love?" Lucas says, leaning over the edge of the bed, watching me pull on my jeans. "You have the most beautiful way of making your way across a room."

"If the floor wasn't always so damn dirty, I wouldn't walk this way." I am often unpleasant in the mornings, even after a cuddle. "And if you were really sorry about everything, you'd clean it up."

“And if you’d forgiven me you’d take a compliment when you got one.” Lucas rolls over and buries his head in the pillow, scrunching the duvet up under his feet. At least things are back to normal. I grab my purse. He turns and sits up. “Hey, where you going anyway?”

“Thought I’d go for the papers, need anything?”

“Not a thing.”

I pull open the front door, and there’s a desk right there. A lovely light brown Art Deco desk inside the gate, its spindly legs spanning the garbage bags as if we were throwing it out. Who had put it inside the gate? I’d been looking for a desk for weeks at the market, picking over each one, saying this one is too expensive, my knees hit the top of this one, or how will I ever carry it home on the bus.

“Matt?” I say, propping open the door. “Is this your desk?”

“Good morning,” Matt says, stepping into his doorway with a steaming cup of instant coffee. “No, that’s not mine. What’s it doing there?”

“Lucas!” I call up. “Lucas, did you buy me a desk?”

A muffled no.

“Can you help me move it inside?” I ask Matt. “I don’t know where it came from.” I start trying to move it myself.

“You want it upstairs?” Matt asks, setting down his cup. We struggle up the steps. “It’s heavy, a sign of quality I think,” he says, grunting and chuckling. “It’s very nice. Why would someone throw this out?”

Lucas sits up in bed, watches us. I stare at the desk, pull over a chair and sit down. Over my right shoulder I can see the apple tree. I scoop my laptop off the floor and put it on the desk. Matt shrugs, turns and clomps back downstairs.

“Where did it come from?” Lucas says.

“You didn’t buy it, did you?”

“Wish I could say yes, but no.”

And right away I think, this means something. This must mean I should be writing. “This must mean something,” I say to Lucas, “My screenplay. This is too weird.” I had spent all these weeks, my laptop teetering on a stack of magazines on the bed, or sitting in the kitchen next to Lucas, trying to ignore his fidgeting.

“I think it means you’re lucky,” Lucas says. “Still, it’s a nice desk. I’m going to the toilet.”

I’ve been working on my screenplay for ages. Lucas hasn’t read it, no one has really, except a professor at my old university who saw part of a first draft and deemed it passable, good in parts. Now, sometimes I work on it, sometimes I ignore it, and I’ve read the book so many times I can just about recite it by heart. It’s an adaptation of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, and the only part I’ve got just right is the part where she walks into the sea at the end, because I haven’t made it anything melodramatic. She just walks into the sea and starts swimming and swimming and rolls into the backstroke and then some fancy camera work follows her eyes to the sky.

Sometimes I like to open it and read the first few lines over and over. Sometimes I re-read the novel, make notes in the margins, underline possible snippets of dialogue.

Then I rent other adaptations when Lucas is not home – *The Great Gatsby, Pride and Prejudice.*

I can't remember a time when I didn't love film. And sometimes when I open the file on my laptop and stare at it, I am so happy and calm and proud that I've written as much as I have, that it's enough for me to close the file again. If I ever finish it I don't know what I'll do.

Only now with this desk – With this mysterious, vagabond desk that appeared outside my front door... It must mean something, it must mean I'm supposed to be working on my screenplay, it must mean I really need a desk, I really am a writer. Someone must have known. Who could have known?

*Oh yes but Christine, say the blue walls, the blue carpet, the clean fresh air coming in through the window and the clicking branches of the apple tree. Oh yes but Christine, we knew. We knew it all along and it does mean something. Something very important indeed.*

"Thank you," I say, looking up at the ceiling, closing my eyes. Then I smooth my hands over the surface of it, feeling its scratches and nicks, the grooves in its edging. It's a lovely desk, with character, I think it suits me. And I am feeling so much better.

Buoyed by the arrival of my desk, I set off for the shops again. I don't go out very often without Lucas (and Lucas and I do not go out very often.) But today I have the impression something cosmic has just happened, and it's not so scary when you set off with a feeling like that. Besides, I know my way around my little life, to the Off License,

the library, I know who sells towels and bedding at the market, where to find light bulbs and that Band-Aids are called plasters here.

Next to that, most of London is still a void to me, like the house next door to a home you can barely remember. The people are difficult too, they don't make it easy to find your way. When you step out of the station into the light not really knowing where to go, everyone is marching in all directions around you, so you know they are quite certain which way is which, and the drumming sound of their steps away from you sounds just like progress. I'm left reaching for my map, wondering where I am and how I got there.

The best shop for groceries is around the corner and under the Green Bridge. Of course there's also the market up the street on Roman Rd. (which really is a road the Romans built) but I prefer the supermarket, because it's impersonal and the prices are written on little cards above the produce, so I know if I'm being cheated. Also, sometimes I get nervous when shopping and drop things, and in the supermarket no one gives you any trouble or makes you pay for it.

Once I was waiting in line with a huge jar of gherkins and when I dropped them they exploded all over everything. The store clerk brought me a new jar and said, "That's alright, love, we all have days like this."

Later that night Matt came home with a jar of gherkins too. "The whole shop smelled of them, and it made me crave a jar something terrible." I said I knew, that I had bought a jar too and then we sat in the kitchen eating gherkins for a while. I bought them in spears, he bought them whole and packed with dill. I don't spend a lot of time alone with Matt. He's doing his Master's in Drama at the Queen Mary campus across the canal, so he spends most of his time confined to his room, studying.

The supermarket is called Budgets, which is part of a not very good chain of supermarkets. It mostly has winter vegetables or potatoes, nothing as exotic as an avocado. I mostly buy root vegetables, because I like the thought of them growing in the cold and dark, and I like carrots because you can eat them cooked or raw.

Today, I pick up the Observer too, and put everything on Dad's credit card. There are job listings on Sunday in this paper, and I've promised myself to apply to ones that don't sound perfect this week, because if I don't find something I'll have to move home and I can hear them say, "Well, you made a go of it, but it just didn't work out," and I refuse to give them the satisfaction. When I moved, I told myself I would make good, fall in love and never go home again. And if I did go home, it would be in a blaze of pride with my finished screenplay, a short film, a handful of reviews that proved my esteemed success. Sometimes I think it will be alright if it doesn't happen for me. Things will be alright.

I decide to walk over the bridge (which is really an overpass) on the way back. I cross the street to the steps up, toting my bags of bread and cans and carrots and the paper. It's a wide and low arch with a lemon yellow belly, so that from underneath it looks like a massive slug stretching over the road. They put it there because of all the deaths at this intersection. You can tell people still die here though, every week there are flowers tied to the guardrails and fences with photos and little notes tied on them saying, "We miss you and love you" and that sort of thing. When I moved in Lucas said to always wait for the light, but it's difficult sometimes to believe how dangerous it is. It really does feel as though you can see the cars coming from miles away.

I knew a man who died here. His name was Lee and he worked at a gay men's magazine and I met him at a party where he said he had finally met a man he loved after months, he said, "Months of nothing but leather-trouser-wearing shite shags." He was walking home from his lover's house when a car got him. Whitechapel hospital is just down the road, and he lay there for two days while we watched over him, looking all pink with no bruises, sleeping, but then the scan came back saying he had been brain dead all the time. Probably had been dead since the accident, they said, but they had kept his poor heart ticking. So they unplugged the machines. Lots of things can happen in just two months, especially when you move to a new place where everything that does happens seems strange and important and new.

When you walk over the Green Bridge, which links Mile End Park to Mile End Park, there are trees, grass and cycle paths on it, so it doesn't seem like a bridge at all, more like a park suspended in air. It has a lovely view of the East End and the canal, and steps down to little gardens. This area was bombed out during the war. Up until a few years ago there was nothing here but mud and druggies and chain-link fences and something the tabloids call 'Asian gangs', which means bored immigrant kids with nothing to do. An Asian gang of twelve-year-olds once rode by me on bikes and a kid who was doubling grabbed my breast on the way by and said, "Oh yeah, you're mine honey."

I go down the steps to the little gardens with a variety of small pools and water fountains. It's over-sculpted in a hypermodern way, with benches at different levels so you can look down at the water or across it. There's a young woman walking hand-in-

hand with a little girl, a couple reading the newspaper, and a lanky man sitting across the way reading a book.

I find a bench and watch the pigeons. There's something about city birds I like. Pigeons especially. Lucas calls them Flying Vermin, but to me they are cute little Londoners, wandering the park two-by-two, chattering and bobbing their heads in agreement. The men-pigeons chase the women-pigeons incessantly, cooing and purring at them, saying "prooum, prooum," and the lady-pigeons frantically run away.

I come here a lot. It's just like going out and it's leaving the house, but I'm still close enough not to feel too nervous about things. And the air seems clean and the rushing water makes it easier to think. I'm getting better at having little adventures, but it's hard. All I have to do is open my mouth to know that I don't belong here. And as soon as my words hit the air, singsong and nasal, everyone else knows it too. Then starts up the line of questioning – where are you from, what are you doing here, and for that matter, who do you think you are little girl and what on earth made you think just for a moment that you might belong?

My whole life in London feels like a game of "One of these things is not like the other" except when I'm busy looking up at the trees, wondering if the birds think of London as a forest of telephone poles and chimney tops.

I'm trying to think clearly about Lucas and things, when I notice a pigeon in the smallest fountain pool. It's swimming. Not swimming, it's frantic, flapping its wings, doing butterfly strokes in circles. The other pigeons back away, watch it pull its wings up and sink, again and again, throat pounding in and out. It's not chirping or anything, just



barely audible gasps. I walk over. My god, it's drowning and I don't want to touch it but I don't want it to die.

"Oh shit." I hiss, "Don't die!"

Then the lanky man is beside me,

"What should we do?"

"Save it?"

He reaches over and tries to grab it, but the pigeon jerks away, its head bobs underwater and lolls up. It flaps its wings harder so it's now racing around the pool, flying through water. The man pulls his sleeves up. He jogs over in a jaunty way and catches the pigeon as it goes by. It pecks his hand and he drops it on the lawn. Some guy calls out, "Nice one mate, as if there aren't enough of 'em."

The pigeon is shivering and wet. It struts mechanically like an awkward wind-up bird towards a clump of bushes. We step away.

"Bloody hell," he says, wiping his hands on his jeans. "That was something."

We walk to a bench and sit down.

I think about how I wanted to save the pigeon, but didn't. How if the lanky man hadn't come along, I probably wouldn't have. How I would have stood there thinking about it for too long and then tried to pass it a stick or something. How I would have gone home upset and how Lucas would have said, "Don't worry about it, it's a pigeon for fuck's sakes."

"What's your name?" He says.

"Christine. Yours?"

"Alex."

“Alex,” I say, half-smiling. “I think you’re my hero.”

He laughs. “That’s a nice accent you’ve got. Canadian?”

“Yup, how did you know?”

“I didn’t - always safer to say Canadian though – you don’t offend anyone. Shall we go see how our little friend is doing then?”

We walk over. The pigeon’s feathers are clumped and frayed and it’s shivering, standing still. Three or four male pigeons strut around then mount her from behind, taking turns humping her while she’s frozen there, looking scared.

“They’re raping her!” I say, flailing my arms to frighten them off.

“Fuck.” says Alex. “Would you have a drink with me?”

If I rewind, I can start the film from the moment when Kevin said he was leaving me, which is a stupid reason to move anywhere and an awful cliché, but the truth. And I can watch the whole movie right up to now. I know how I got here, I can see it all happening, cause and effect, cause and effect. The trouble is looking ahead.

But that's always been my problem, hasn't it? I just can't match things up. When I look back in time it's all clear, every moment, and how it connects. But it's the things I do now that I can't match up to the things that might come next. No sense of judgement. No sense of control. One thing happens and the next thing happens and I have the impression it is all being done to me. I'm never the one driving the car. I'm always in the back seat, turned around, staring out the back window, watching the scenes that have already gone by.

Kevin left me perhaps because I was a little bit horrible to him. Always wanting him to be more committed, spend more time with me, love me more, make love to me more. And maybe for other reasons too.

That night it was very cold, though there was not yet any snow. It was late October, there were no leaves on the trees, and we could see our breath, white and cloudy when we went, "Ha, ha" with our hands in front of our faces. We were standing on the street in Chinatown and I thought we were on our way to his place after chicken and cashew nut stir-fry in a bird's nest at Lee Garden restaurant. Spadina smelled fishy and also like those nasty durians, and there were towers of cardboard boxes stacked by the road and empty fruit carts and people walking home drunk and tired on the wide, straight boulevard. The streetcars were going by, like clockwork, fast and screeching and I

thought about what Dad always said, that boys are like streetcars. "There'll be another one along in a few minutes."

Then Kevin said, "There's no real point in us going on anymore, is there? We can't go on like this." So then I thought about not ever getting married (which was an absurd thing to think) and then I breathed in the cold and exhaled the frost like cigarette smoke all over his face and half grinned, and then laughed out loud in just one syllable, like a pop. And he said, "Aren't you going to say anything to me?" And walked away.

It wasn't until later that I found out about her, and the baby, and all the sordid notes of the affair and that's when I fell apart.

So the next bit of the movie is me in countless dingy coffee shops with my friend Salvatore, who would hold my arm and shrug and buy me large slices of cake. Sometimes we went to see sad jazz played at a small club on the East side, and at the end of the night he would take me home and kiss me goodnight on my doorstep, and sometimes if it was snowing, there would be a frozen circle of snow resting on his black curly hair like a dandruff halo and I would brush it off with my mitten before saying goodnight. Sal and I slept together once only and I said, "That was good." And later he accused me of thinking only of Kevin, which was true and I said so. But he was kind.

And next in the film comes three weeks of trying on different men like so many pairs of shoes. Daniel, who my friends set me up with one night, brilliant and terrified of women, who taught me how to poach eggs and look at art so that he wouldn't have to look at me. Tag, who loved music and parties, Frank who loved fighting strangers in bars, others. After that there wasn't much left of me, just little pieces of things I'd done, the

usual personal landmarks that map a city, and some kind of reputation that was neither bad nor good.

And so in the next scene (A chilly December evening: The camera closes in on a family around a dinner table, Christine is trying to balance a mouthful of green peas on her fork) I decide to move to London and to never come back. Mom thinks it's a good idea. Mom says,

“You need an adventure, there's plenty of time to settle down later.”

And so I phone Kevin and tell him I've decided to move far away and never come back, and he says, “England isn't that far, besides, I'll come visit sometime.”

I call Daniel and he says, “Moving will be good for you. Give you some perspective.”

Salvatore says, “Don't go.”

And Jane, lovely Jane, my best friend says, “I know a guy, a friend of a friend out there. His name's Lucas. He's an actor, so you've got stuff in common. You should meet him. I'll introduce you. He's so much fun. You'll love him.”

Cut to London, to the rain and orange curtains printed with tiger lilies in a youth hostel in Hackney that seem to say, *Very damp here, isn't it?* Ah yes, the damp. And my first, real bath because they didn't have a shower, and my first conversation with Lucas, him saying,

“Oh yes, Jane's told me all about you over email. Why don't we meet for drinks... but why don't you come by first and see the flat. I don't know if Jane's told you, but we have a room here for rent. If you like it, you could always live here.” And then the room, my very light room overlooking an apple tree, with the walls I decide to paint blue.

“It’s only eleven in the morning.”

“Yes, well. I just touched a pigeon and I don’t know if you ever have, but it was sopping wet and greasy, and now it’s taking part in some bizarre pigeon mating ritual and now that I’m talking to you, and you seem very lovely, I fancy a drink.”

“I guess I could use a drink too.” He’s nice looking. I watch him out of the corner of my eye, “Or at least a coffee.”

He offers to take my shopping bags and I suggest we walk to Indo, a small pub halfway to Brick Lane.

As we’re walking, he starts up his mumbling tirade again. “No wonder the species is going downhill. Natural selection my arse, if that’s the way it works then I’ve got a lot to learn about dating.”

“I know! And I felt so proud that we saved it too.”

“Well, I don’t regret it anyway. I would have hated to see it die.”

“I’m glad you came along. There’s no way I would have touched it.”

“It was revolting,” he says, “you expect it to feel plump or fluffy, like a chicken, but there’s really nothing to her. She’s just all feathers with a tiny bony ribcage, half-starved.”

“I guess they are starving, the way they scavenge. They can’t eat very much.”

“You’re not supposed to feed the birds, but perhaps we should.”

“I thought you were supposed to feed them. Like in *Mary Poppins*, ‘Feed the birds, tuppence a bag’”

“*Mary Poppins*. Why are all Americans obsessed with that film?”

“Canadian, remember? I think it’s what we think England is like. Really. Like when you arrive it’s going to be all clean and full of bankers and nannies and chimney sweeps and children flying kites.”

“Doesn’t anyone over there watch *Oliver*?”

“No.”

“Probably more true to life.”

“Never seen it.”

“Well, it’s full of crooks, orphans and drunks. And London’s filthy and dark, but everyone still runs around singing. Had you watched it, you might have known what to expect.”

We go on talking like this with silent breaks in between, as if we are very comfortable with each other. And the funny thing is that I do feel very comfortable. Being next to Alex is like swallowing a heavy stone, I feel full and steady.

Indo has a long bar and a nice ceiling with those old stamped-out tin mouldings and round lights that come down low and there’s a big 1930s clock over the front window. There’s a coffee table and two couches underneath it that are good for reading the papers at. We get pints and sit down there to talk. I’ve got my neck snuggled up against the back of the black leather sofa and a sunbeam is coming through the window warming my cheek. I watch Alex. I like that he’s a stranger and doesn’t know how I am, so I can be tough and coy, half-smile at his jokes, say irreverent things, be reinvented.

“So tell me what you make of rainy miserable England?” He says, leaning back into his end of the couch.

"I like it sometimes. When the sun comes out it's like a whole different city, where everything looks shinier, and everyone goes outside and looks up at the sky."

"It's true. Like a million light bulbs going off above people's heads that life's not all about miserable office jobs and practical shoes."

"Yes, that's it."

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for work. I just settled in two months or so ago. Something to do with writing or film."

"What is it you would like to do?"

"I think of myself as a film buff," I say, "but in fact, I'm not much of one. In fact, I'm supposed to be writing a screenplay, but I don't work on it much. How about you?"

"Landscape architecture. Designing rich people's gardens. I wanted to be an artist."

"What kind?"

"A painter, actually, but I wasn't very good at it. I chose landscape architecture because I've always liked plants."

"Green thumb, eh? I'm not too good with plants. I seem to always manage to knock them over, or freeze them, or forget about watering..." I look down. Our pints are empty.

"Can I get you another?" Alex says, getting up.

"I should really get back, I was just going to the shops. My flatmates are going to think I was abducted."

"I'll walk you back..."



“No. Really. I’ll be alright.”

“Well, then, I’d like to see you again, if you would.” He’s looking at me closely. “How about next Saturday? If it’s a nice day, you could come to Primrose Hill, some of us are having a picnic.”

I say he can text me and we program each other’s number into our mobiles.

“Let me know and I’ll, uh, let you know.” I say, shaking hands, standing up. Our eyes move to the window. It’s started to rain, but not ordinary rain: Hard, soaking, driving rain. We shake hands for a little while longer than we should.

“You can’t go off now, it’s raining.” Alex says with a wink, giving my hand a squeeze. His hand is warm.

A few people cram in the door, stepping off the pavement, tumbling into the cafe, laughing and fluffing droplets out of their hair. I look up into his eyes, straight at him for the first time. There’s a rumble in the sky.

“I don’t much feel like walking in this.” What am I doing?

“Have another drink, let’s see if it tapers off.” His eyes lead me down to the couch and I find my seat, disappointed, confused. My mobile rings.

“Where are you?” Lucas’ voice, belligerent. “It’s pouring. I went to Budgets, but you weren’t there.”

“I’m at Indo. Waiting out the rain. Want to come here?” Stupid.

“Not in this weather.”

“Yeah. I’m just...”

“Who are you with?”

“Alex?”

“Who’s she?”

“She... Well, we just met, actually.”

“Hey that’s good, isn’t it? Anyway, see you in a bit? Oh, and pick me up a packet of cigarettes on the way back, would you?”

“Sure.”

“Boyfriend?” mouths Alex while I’m talking. I nod. He widens his eyes, raises his eyebrows slightly. I disconnect. “That follows,” he says, “Someone like you, I mean. Well, you’re still invited to the picnic, before you assume otherwise. Now, let me get that drink.” He moves quickly to the bar while I smile at him in a tight way, wishing I had gone before.

Lucas starts his closer line of questioning when I get home, about Alex, what she does, where she lives, how we met, and it isn’t long until I’m wrapped up in a tangle of white lies. I try to stick to the truth as closely as possible,

“She’s nice.” I say in my most off-the-cuff voice, “You’d like her, she’s funny. Very English.” And “She works in the city, a landscape architect, but she doesn’t like gardening, doesn’t like getting her hands dirty, and it’s all design anyway.” And “I like her. I think she’s my friend. She knows all sorts of interesting things about London, and stuff to do. She’s invited me to a picnic.”

In my memory the real Alex is already splitting in two, becoming a set of boy-girl twins, a blonde wry-humoured witty girl and her tall awkward boy counterpart with those eyes and his rough, long-fingered hands.

I tell the story of the pigeon too, with Alex as a brave woman saving it, and Lucas grimaces at the thought of her touching it. “That’s disgusting, do you know how filthy they are? Full of diseases.”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t have touched it,” I say, “but Alex was so quick, you should have seen her.”

Lucas comes over and slides his hands around my waist, “I’m so glad you’re meeting people now, not so hard is it? It’s going to make you so much happier, living here.”

I step down into the sea that is Oxford Street by day, and it seems the most wondrous place in the whole world, to be walking and weaving in and out of thousands (thousands!) of shoppers with license to spend a little bit of money.

The windows are lit up and full of pretty things, the mannequins are posed like soldiers or gesture like ladies on game shows, and the lights make awkward shadows on the pavement while warm, sweetened air rushes out of the shops. The doors slide open and shut to the beat of the people rushing in and out, and the music seems to be singing to me, everything is harkening, calling out: Come buy, come buy.

And it is just like the old Cries of London, I think, *Cherries-O! Cherries ripe all ripe, round and sound*, just like Gran's framed print on the wall. Only now no one needs to shout it, it's all in moving pictures, in full colour 3D sight and sound, the whole street like a peddler's cry.

I set off this morning on the number 8 bus and rode it past all the stops to Tottenham Court Road station. And all the time I was thinking of my film and my screenplay and writing and how sometimes the world isn't a nasty place at all, but a wonderful place where things are destined to happen and to be alright in the end.

This morning I got a call for a job interview. An editorial assistant position at a film magazine they hand out at movie theatres.

"See," Lucas said as he munched on marmite toast and browsed the Showcase newspaper. "You're always so bloody negative, I told you they'd call up if you kept applying. All you had to do was properly move your arse."

"But I've been moving my arse for weeks."

“I told you e-mail applications don’t count, in this country people like things on paper.”

“In my country we appreciate being able to delete you.”

“Bloody American laziness.”

“*Canadian*, Lucas.” I said. “Anyway, I’m going into town to pick out something nice.”

Shopping is so much more than shopping these days. So many of the stores have DJs in them now, or espresso bars, martinis and massive video screens, so that each one has its own little oasis, plus multi-levels and shop assistants who specialise in dress shoes or handbags. Some hand out hors d’oeuvres as if you’ve been invited to their own little exclusive party, and when trying things on there is always a clerk there to say, “But that must be the one for you, it suits you so.” And so it is just like Italy, when you walk down the street and the men whistle at you, calling out, “Bella, bella!”

It’s when I’m shopping that I most feel like I belong in London, in solidarity with these people pounding the pavement, toting bags. It gives me something to do, like a job, and something to talk about: I can ask for my size in that particular shade of blue, or say, “Please is there any more like that belt on the mannequin in the window?” And later, to Lucas, I can say, “Did you know about the sale at such and such,” or “What do you think of this bag? I got it at...” I can feel as if I’m the right kind of cog in the wheel, not like when I’m at the grocery store, counting my change. When I’m here, I’m not failing. I’m part of it all.

The only nagging thing is that I know I can’t overdo it, because I’m on the charity of my parents on this one, on the plea that I would find something appropriate for my

interview, something that will help put me on my feet. "Look for something that matches, that's versatile," Mom said on the phone. "I wish I could be there with you to help." If I get the job, I'll pay the credit card bill, but if not, I want to choose something of which Mom and Dad would approve.

And so I'm hunting for something versatile, clothes that I can wear as separates out, maybe even to the picnic next weekend, though I'm not thinking of that out loud, not admitting it to myself. But if I were, I'd be wondering if Alex's friends were the kind of people I'd want to spend time with, and if we will, Alex included, become good friends. I'd be daydreaming about a day, maybe in the future when we are all hanging out in someone's kitchen and Lucas is meeting them for the first time and is liking them. After that, maybe we wouldn't have to spend all our time with his friends, who are snide and fake and horrible. Though Kat was nice at the party, and those guys in the corner seemed OK.

I buy an A-line skirt, black with white embroidery, a cute little jacket, a black cardigan with pearl buttons and some cheap tops for underneath, a camisole, a t-shirt for casual wear, a proper button down and a second skirt, a red one, because it's on sale and looks good on me.

Then, as it gets dark, I am getting back on the bus with my shopping bags, and walking up to the top level, and finding a seat and leaning my head against the window, watching the lighted streets go by, and the black cabs and people on bicycles and men on corners in front of pubs raising their pint glasses and laughing.

In my mind's eye, I watch the opening of my film. The man in his hammock, his head lolling, the parrot cawing, the warm sea air rustling his newspaper while the credits

roll and we are listening all the time to the sea. The waves are whispering, "O-cean, o-cean." Perhaps I should have Edna Pontellier say that. But maybe first I should change Edna's name. To Jean perhaps? Virginia? Kate? Christine? Colette? Anais? May?

"Where have you been?" Lucas calls out of the kitchen. "I thought you'd be back ages ago, I even cooked supper but it's cold now. You bloody ruined it as usual, and you didn't answer your mobile when I rang either. I don't know what's fucking wrong with you sometimes. I don't know why you can't be normal and phone people when you're running behind schedule."

"I fell asleep on the bus... I bought lots of stuff," I say, still sleepy, trying not to let him ruin things. "Do you want to see?"

"What, you mean what Daddy bought you? Daddy buys everything, doesn't he? I hope you get this job. It's sick the way you take advantage of everyone who loves you. You take everything, don't you? Why don't you just put those bags upstairs and then come back down and eat the dinner I made you. It's cold anyway, but maybe you can fry it up. If you can spare the time."

"I'm sorry, Lucas," I say, walking over, going to hug him. "I didn't know you were making me dinner. That's really sweet." He steps away.

"Just go upstairs."

"OK. Look, I'm really sorry. OK?"

"Just go upstairs, Christine." He turns away, "God sometimes you disgust me."

He walks into the bathroom and closes the door. I stand there for a minute and then plod upstairs and drop the bags. I think about how ridiculous Lucas is, how ridiculous he

sounds. It's like a bad TV movie of an angry person. I try to think about the interview, the new clothes, but it's gone out of me. The bus ride and the shops, those first scenes of the screenplay all seem as far away as home.

I can hear the rain spitting outside like the peppering of insults. The desk stands there, its austere legs spread over the blue carpet like a proud crab. *Why don't you come write a little something?* It taunts, *Oh, yes I know why, because you're a stupid little girl who never finishes what she starts. I don't know why I bothered showing up here... You're all talk with no guts. All dreams and not a drop of anything interesting. You're a used lemon at a seafood restaurant, cut in half and all squeezed out. Aren't you? Answer me!*

*Shhh*, says the rain getting harder. I get up to take off my coat and shake out my hair.

O-cean, I think, trying to get things back. O-shhhh-ean...

*O-cea-it*, says the desk, *O-shhh-it*.

Lucas is still in the bathroom, door locked. I tap it with the toe of my shoe.

"Lucas?" A little harder. "Lucas? Come out. I didn't know you were cooking. Come out." No answer. "Lucas?" I lean my head against the door, and then start kicking it, first at a knocking pace.

"What's your problem?" I hear through the door. The vibrations of my kicks jiggle the skin on my cheek. I kick harder. "Christine? What's your bloody problem?"

"Why do you have to be like this," I say, "Why do you have to make things shit all the time, you make me feel so shitty. And for nothing. Nothing nothing."



“What? I can’t hear you. What the fuck are you doing?”

“I didn’t know, I was shopping. I was having a nice time and I come home and you’re freaking out at me. Why do you have to be like this? Why do you have to ruin everything?”

“Christine? Christine! Stop pounding!”

“Why won’t you let me do anything? You say you love me, but you are such a fucking asshole.” I smack the door with hands and clonk the top of my head and the noise is so loud in my ears, I almost forget about Lucas. Then it is just me and the door and knowing how pure it is to hit something really hard when you are angry. I carry on until I hear the flush and the swift, efficient sound of the lock click back. Then I get very scared. Maybe Matt is home? Please will Matt walk in?

In my dream I am sitting on top of a very tall hill waiting for Alex. Around me there is nothing but hill, just like in a story book – a cartoon of a hill with tall grass, two flowers and one tree and nothing but a moat of clouds when you look down. I am so high up, I think maybe I could see the sea.

I'm reading a book that is making me aroused in a disturbing way when a shadow casts itself across the page and I look up. He is tall and wrinkled and is wearing a black sweatshirt with the word "Suzanne" printed across his chest in white.

"Leonard Cohen?" I say, "Do sit down."

He's not the young Leonard Cohen, he's the California monk with grey stubble on his face and on his scalp, twinkling eyes and his mouth set in neither a smile nor a frown. We are the only two people here. It's windy.

"Nice day for a picnic, innit?" he says, taking his seat. He has a woman's voice and a cockney accent.

"I'm reading your book," I say. "I don't like it."

"Those were the ravings of a crazed man," he replies, stroking the grass with an open hand. "A life's questions are written in a book the way the sky imprints itself on the sea..."

"Why do you sound like that?" I lean in. "Has something happened to your voice?"

I get very close. He has the right morose look, the curl of lips, the roundness of his nose, eye shadow, mascara...

"You're an imposter!" I shout, and the man looks over.

“Does it matter?” he says and runs his hand up my thigh. His hands are rough. I shiver. That’s a give-away, Cohen would have soft hands.

“I think so,” I say. “In fact, I think you’d better go.”

He gives me a look as though he’s impressed, takes his hand off and dissolves. At first I am triumphant, but then I’m alone on the hill and very sad.

In the morning, I talk to Lucas and he apologises and so do I, for ruining dinner, banging the door, hitting me. Sometimes things get blown out of proportion for the two of us and we lose all perspective, etc.

In a new place you can sense decorum drifting about in the air, like a smell, in a way that lets you know just how to behave. And to me, London smells like a lady who saunters into a restaurant and takes the best table without waiting to be seated. And when the waitress says, "Pardon me?" she simply places her order, asks for a glass of Chardonnay and a bottle of mineral water, as if she honestly doesn't notice the waitress gawking over her like a codfish. And the waitress is so stunned you can see her thoughts clicking over before scurrying back to the kitchen as if all's well.

That's why I'm not too worried about being late for the interview. I smear on make-up as fast as I can, but there's not much else I can do. Besides the tube makes everyone late anyway, and if I walk in with a certain confidence, I have the impression they may even be impressed.

It isn't like that in Toronto. Rich or poor neighbourhood, the whole city is laid out in egalitarian grids, with stern Victorian brick houses scowling in a friendly way under gingerbread-peaked roofs. Everything is 90 degrees due north, due west in a way that says, "Be sensible," and "To the back of the line please, you'll all have your turn." It's the way England is supposed to be but is not.

I plan on being friendly, chatty but pensive, clever. I practice my interview smile in the mirror once or twice. Then I roll on my best black stockings, the pair with only one hole, high up on the thigh where no one can see.

"Visible panty line," is the first thing Lucas says when I step out of the bathroom, ready to go. I step back in and roll down one leg of the tights, take off the panties - my lucky grey ones with the pink edging, and slip them in my handbag.

“That’s better love, now good luck. But how could they resist you, beautiful.

Your new clothes look great.” Lucas is in full supportive mode.

“Sure, they always love us colonial girls don’t they. The minute I open my mouth they’ll know I’m not one of them.”

“Your accent’s hardly unheard of... They’ll be charmed by your little ‘outs’ and ‘abouts,’ just as I was...” Lucas hooks his arm around me and curls me in.

“Don’t muss me, it took me ages to get my hair like this.”

I walk in the drizzle under my favourite black umbrella from Gran, and for a moment when I close my eyes, I can see myself walking in the drizzle in my new outfit with these shoes and I think I look presentable, good even. I do this all the time now, split myself in two. Sometimes when I am walking along, I watch myself walk along instead, as if I’m both in the film and watching the film or both with Lucas and watching someone else with Lucas...

When I watch myself on security videos, that makes the splitting thing even worse. There are cameras all over London. When I walk into the Tube, I look up and see the screen and there I am, staring the other way. I always expect to meet my own eyes, but I’m always gazing off to one side.

Then it gets very complicated, because the security cams make the splitting multiply in my head. I’m split in two, then each of those twos are split into 32 twos, or however many cameras I see, there are so many. When I start to think about it, I see all these images orbiting around me with nothing at the centre of them, just the space between all the pictures of me trying to see myself, but I’m staring off somewhere.

When you think about this over and over, even if you're sitting in a park staring into lucid pools of water, you can see how easy it would be to drive yourself stinking mad. How easy it is to grow sick of yourself, to wish that there were no pictures of you on any screen, anywhere. If only there was a centre of things, instead of all that mess, just one picture of you on a good hair day in your favourite shirt, looking serene.

Afterwards, standing in Hanover Square underneath the vast grey sky, I take a deep breath in and out. I have that closed up feeling you get after a string of days indoors. The sky seems so excessively high, the world so big.

I think about the interview: That woman with her dulcet voice and neutral eyes, her perfect pronunciation and the manner she had, sitting back so comfortably in her chair, the way interrogators do when they want you to relax, to carry on without thinking.

I was calm at least, unflinching under her hard stare and thin lips. She looked just like all the other HR people in the world, frizzy squirrel hair and a pointy nose, "The better to sniff you out, my dear."

When she asked if I was permanently settled in England, I should have said yes, but I felt she would never believe me. Too much experience with Australians, South Africans, all of us thinking England will be what? Home? Did we really believe it was our mother country, the birthplace of our culture, instead of this stodgy cesspool of history? Bah, I think. Bah.

I shrug off the interview. A job would be nice with money on the side for spending, but if I don't get it I can go home. The thought relaxes me. Only a plane trip from home, I think, anytime I like, I could just go home.

It's stopped raining. I turn my mobile on. Two text messages: One from Lucas, saying, *So?* And one from Alex, *Hi it's your pigeon friend, rmb r me? Picnic Sat. 1pm. Prmrse Hill. Pls say you'll b there. Would like to c u again.*

I phone Lucas. "How'd it go, babe?" and tell him everything. "Sounds like it went pretty well. Anyway, your luck must have rubbed off, I've got an audition tomorrow..."

“That’s great, Lucas. What play is it?”

“A modern adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* – isn’t that just perfect?”

“Ha. Listen, I’m going to walk around a bit now that I’m in town. Maybe take in a museum. Is that OK? Have you got plans?”

Lucas says he’s going to practice his audition monologue with Matt at the local pub. I tell him I won’t be home late.

I decide to have a wander through Soho, maybe find a coffee shop. I call Alex from the street.

“Hi, it’s Christine.” I say. “Do you remember me?”

“What do you mean... I just texted you, didn’t I?”

“Oh.” I giggle, stupid. “Yeah.”

“So, where are you?”

“I’m in Soho, looking for coffee. Any suggestions? I think I’m lost. I never know where I am!”

“Can you name a street?”

“Sure, I’m at... Argyll and... almost Oxford St.”

“Have you ever been to Carluccio’s?”

“No. Is it near here?”

“Near enough. They have proper cappuccinos. I should think you would appreciate that sort of thing much better than the average English person.”

“There is a lot of bad coffee here.”

“I know - we’re completely hopeless. So, easiest way or shortest?”

“Easiest please.”



He gives me directions while we chat. He's on the street too, on his lunch break.

"Work is terribly dull today. Are you at Great Titchfield yet?"

"Yes, just got there."

"Turn left and walk to the second street... So, will you be coming Saturday?"

"I want to, do I need to bring anything? I'm at the second street..."

"You should see a blue sign about now, one shop front over to the left, see it?"

"Oh my god. What are you doing?"

Alex is standing outside the café, two take-away cappuccinos in hand.

"Do you take sugar?" I hear him say before hanging up.

I went to counselling a few times during my undergraduate degree. I was taking an elective psychology course, and I started to think that it wouldn't hurt to talk about my problems, if I had any. I was dating Kevin too, and he was in counselling, and I wanted to understand, to be supportive.

One thing that kept coming up was the miscarriage – the one Mom had when I was four or five years old. I had thought about it a lot when it happened, but never really talked about it since. I remember having my hands on Mom's belly, and her saying there was a baby in there and asking what I thought it was going to be, I said a girl. And then I remember Mom saying that the baby wasn't coming. But all these memories sometimes feel too cliché, as if they've got mixed up with movies of children with their hands on tummies, that sort of thing.

Mom had explained that God had decided it wasn't time – the baby wasn't ready yet. That the baby had to go back to God, because God needed her and that God knew best when babies were ready and when they weren't ready, and we weren't meant to understand, but that we could pray. I remember thinking maybe God figured out that I wasn't ready to have a sister, that I was nervous. I prayed.

I had nightmares for a long time afterwards, a reoccurring one about a baby in the oven. I was watching the baby bake just like I used to watch cookies or muffins. It looked like a loaf of bread, but it had eyes on one side. "She's done!" I kept telling Mom, but Mom stood over me, shaking her finger, saying,

"Not ready yet! Keep watching."

Anyway, in the dream I get bored and frustrated – the baby isn't even moving –

and leave the room. Later on I find Mom crying in the kitchen. "She's ruined," she says, and there's my sister in a tin on the kitchen table, all perfectly finished on one side, but grotesque on the other. A mix of burnt bread and half-baked dough.

I tell this story to Alex while we're sitting in the park. I'm not sure why. We're in a beautiful, green square with cappuccinos, only the square isn't square, it's round. Spring sprouts are popping up all around even though it's only February. There is a dark, tall hedge to block out the noise of traffic on the roundabout, and an ornamental fountain of cherubs frolicking in water. I was feeling dreamy sitting there, just staring at those heavy stone babies. It was surreal, so comfortable with this man I hardly knew, I was so ready to have him listen.

"Did the counsellor say what the dream meant?" He's sitting on his grey jacket because the grass is damp. We are leaning back on our arms, his hand near mine.

"Do you know I can't remember? I remember other conversations. She said I was afraid of change. That I seemed to want the world to stop sometimes or skip ahead. That I have issues with control."

"Do you think that's true?"

"About stopping the world? Maybe. If a moment is really nice and I'm very happy then I very much want to make it stop right there. But doesn't everybody?"

"The world does stop on its own though. Little stops. Like right now."

"Yes, because we're relaxed and we're in a park. But I think she meant wanting to stop time when it's flying by and things are happening. To stop it so I have time to take things in. And I think that might be true. Sometimes when too much is going on I just

can't get my head around it. I lose the plot, forget what's important. She didn't really make it out to be a big deal though, she said I probably just need more time than the average person, to digest."

A redheaded girl closes her book, stands and drops her empty plastic sandwich box in the garbage. A couple kisses, then walks to the gate. It must be nearing two. I drain my cappuccino, now cold. "Thanks for the coffee," I say, snapping out of it. "It was really good."

"Christine," says Alex.

"Alex."

"Do you think you did well, in your interview today?"

"I think so... I hope so."

"So if you get the job, we can do this everyday?"

"Maybe." I laugh. "Why not?"

When Alex says goodbye, he gives me a hug. I am surprised by how solid he feels. I'm also surprised, riding home on the tube, by how little he actually said. When he sat there listening, it was as if my words didn't dissipate in the air or waft towards him in a sound wave, they travelled straight into him, as if we were not so much talking but sitting there thinking together. He seemed so real. My exceptionally solid, genuinely nice, surprisingly wonderful new friend.

Matt's room has that unmistakable boy smell, but is fairly tidy with the exception of random stacks of library books and plays. I linger in his doorway saying hello.

“Where’s Lucas? I thought you guys were hanging out?”

“Dave rang up. He said to tell you he’ll be late.”

“Did you get your pint at least?” he nods and returns to his reading. “Is that for school? How’s school going for you?”

He looks up, sceptically.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing.” I look around his room casually. On top of the hutch in his room there’s a large watering can, but we don’t have any plants. “What’s that for?”

“I’m getting back at the landlord – for not finishing the bathroom. There was a bloody ant farm in there this morning.”

The bathroom was supposed to be replaced months ago, but it’s so far just been excavated. There’s a muddy hole in the floor exposing some pipes and a wooden board straddling the gap as a bridge to the toilet. I’ve almost stopped noticing it. There’s advantages – lately Matt’s taken to cleaning the bathroom by covering everything with Cif and using the handheld shower to spray all the muck into the hole in the ground.

“Can’t do that in just any bathroom,” he likes to say.

“With a watering can?”

“Not the can, that’s just to hold the water.” Matt closes his book. For a minute I don’t think he’s going to explain, but then walks over to the mahogany desk. “Come here,” he says. “This is Tony’s hutch. He left it in the flat, said I could use it. It’s an antique.”

“It’s nice.”

“Very nice. Do you know what’s the worse thing you can do to antiques?”

“Scratch them?”

“Too obvious. Water damage, I looked it up on the Internet.” He moves the watering can aside and runs his hand, palm open, along the wood. “I’ve been slowly pouring a bit of water on it, in the same spot, until the bathroom gets done.”

“It doesn’t show.”

“I know, it happens over time, so I can’t be traced. Here, feel how it’s a bit damp? Over time, when he takes this back, he may notice the veneer coming off in that particular spot, or a funny drying pattern.”

“You’re crazy,” I say. “How will that get our bathroom done any quicker?”

“It won’t,” he grins, “But it makes me feel better. Especially after showering in that mudhole.”

His twisted logic makes sense. It doesn’t feel right to be handing over that much rent every month for a bathroom in which several garden-variety slugs have taken up residence. After a shower, sometimes water gets into the dirt hole and worms poke their heads out, gasping for air.

“What a strange secret life you have in your room, you’re like a mad scientist or something.” Matt smirks, looking both proud and sheepish. “Let me make you a cup of tea,” I add, feeling brave. “I’m about to make one for myself.”

I move around the kitchen, filling up the electric kettle, getting the cups, pulling out tea bags. I get the milk, sugar and a new box of tea biscuits I have in my cupboard and plonk the lot on the kitchen table.

“Cheers,” Matt says. “Thanks for the tea.” He reaches over to take a biscuit.

“Matt, uh,” I say, pausing to take a few sips. “I know you must hear a lot in the house, you know, when Lucas and I are fighting.”

“I don’t consider that to be any of my business.”

“We’re trying to work things out, you know. I think things will be better.”

He stares across the table at me.

“Look, I won’t say that I know why the two of you are together. You don’t seem to have much in common, and the way he talks to you sometimes, and the way he... you aren’t exactly the happy couple, are you? But it’s none of my business what you do. And Lucas is my friend. I’d really rather stay out of it, to be frank.”

“Things aren’t so bad between us, it’s just complicated. Sometimes I just get all worked up.”

He sighs. “I wouldn’t know what that’s like, I don’t presume to know what your relationship is about. And I simply would like to just get on with living in the house, if you know what I mean. I have to live here too.”

We sit quietly for a moment, and then to clear the air, I say,

“So are you very busy, with school I mean?”

“Not too bad. Just two courses this term.”

“What in?”

“Contemporary politics and theatre, and Russian drama from 1830.”

“Any good?”

We drain the rest of our cups this way, operating on the surface of things.

*You're getting ahead of yourself*, the desk mutters grimly after I walk upstairs and into my room. *You make one good friend and you think the whole universe is on your side. You're good with proverbs, what's that one about Rome?*

Yes, yes, I think, with a deep sigh. I open the window wide to let some air in. A room is much less lonely with the window open. Even though you're still inside you feel more a part of the world with the noise of the street and the rustling of the trees. I walk over to the desk, open my laptop and switch it on. While it's booting up, I look out at my apple tree, last fall's apples rotting on the ground. They still draw the occasional magpie or sparrow. In our wild back garden the stinging nettles are already springing up, soft and green.

Over the back fence and across Grove road there's a circa 1960s apartment building. The windows are small and the bricks, awkwardly new. On the top floor, a bald man with smallish-looking eyes is leaning out his open window with a cigarette. From this distance, although I can't be sure, he seems to be staring at me. Alright look, I think, what do I care? But after a while it starts to bother me, so I smile gregariously and wave, and he backs away from his window. I start to wonder when Lucas will be home.

I've started working again at the part of the screenplay where Edna is to be seduced by Alcée Arobin. I haven't been able to write it properly. I don't know how to convey in words her small struggle to resist and her strong urge to lose herself with this most inappropriate lover. He's not interesting, but she falls under his spell anyway, because he is powerful and sexy, he can surround her, flatter her, rescue her. It's hard to make him look both desirable and not desirable.



I try to think about how Lucas seduced me, but it's not very helpful. There was a moment after we kissed when I thought, that was just like trying on a hat. You look in the shop mirror, and you stick it on your head, and you can't tell whether you look stupid or charming, and unless you have an honest friend there to comment on it, you really won't figure it out. But for Edna, it couldn't have been like that. For her it was more desperate, like her final swim in the sea, all passion with your head going under, so exciting you've forgotten to breathe, and when you finally remember it's a nose full of salt water you get, and you're done for.

Sometimes when I'm with Lucas I feel that way, but not so much like drowning. When I was a little girl I used to dip below the surface of the lake. Underwater it's so quiet. If you let your breath out bit by bit in bubbles you can sink right down to the bottom. There are weeds, and a limestone base with cold spots where the springs are and warm spots where there's no current. When you're almost at the bottom, you can fold your legs underneath you and open your eyes and sit and watch the fish go by. If you do it with someone else, it's called having a tea party, but there's no name for it when you do it alone. When I am lying in bed with Lucas sometimes I feel that way. Safe, but not safe. And the whole world passing by, staring with those cold fish eyes.

## PART TWO

### 1.

There's a workman here named Tim with wild grey hair cutting tiles in the bathroom. The screeching, whistling, sawing sound has me cringing all over the house and it's not long before a headache starts up, a slow, dull thump in my ears. I think of Matt with his watering can, but know of nothing I can do for revenge.

I decide to leave the house around noon, tiptoeing past my desk without letting it utter a word. On the walk to the tube I shut my inner eyes tight so that I can't watch this part of the film, like when my parents used to say, "close your eyes," during the romantic or violent bits on TV. I tell myself I'm through with watching this movie. I'm sick of analysing my position, my place. It can't be nearly as much fun as not worrying about whether you're happy or unhappy, and besides there's no such thing anyway – it's all some kind of mental trick. In the end there's only the feeling of being stuck somewhere, bored and sick of yourself, and the satisfaction of doing something about it. That's all I'm trying to do today.

This time I make a real conscious effort to not look at the security cameras, to make myself invisible, so that this day has no imprint on film and Herr Director won't notice me. Today nothing will register. I have made myself that promise, so when I pop out at Oxford Circus at 12:30, I am a fresh, uncharted island, an empty gap on a map. For all the world knows, Christine is at home, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, and this Christine is a newborn babe in the big bad smoke, as blameless as fresh fallen snow. Resurrected. Reinvented.

I briefly enjoy a private screening of my alternate day, the one I will tell Lucas about when he gets back from his audition. A bored, quiet, zombie-like Christine lies on a damp bed in a blue room staring at the ceiling contemplating the sounds of bathroom repair. I let Christine exist like Schrodinger's cat-in-the-box, an invisible, hypothetical me who is both and neither dead and/nor alive.

I think of all of this while deftly texting a message to Alex – *Surprise! I'm downtown again today, want to meet for lunch?* Walking through that salmon-stream of Oxford St. by day. I don't have to wait long for a reply. My phone vibrates in my pocket while I'm standing outside Miss Selfridge's staring at a mannequin – she is dressed in a gypsy skirt and a pale blue angora sweater that shows just enough of her collarbone to be flirtatious. *Same place/same time*, says Alex. A shiver sobers me up before I push that old Christine back down and remember to not think. No thinking. No thoughts. Not thinking. You may get frightened and go home, and is that where you want to be? So stay put. Don't think.

This time I reach the coffee shop first and I go in and order two cappuccinos to take away with half a teaspoon of sugar in each. I blush when he sees me on the sidewalk.

"Hello there," he says as if we are old, special friends. "What brings you into Soho today?"

"Lunch," I say casually. "The bathroom's under construction, and I thought of where I'd rather be."

He is all smiles. "Well, I'm starving. Can I take you to Mr. Harris'? He makes the best sandwiches..." As we set off up the street, he adds, "You look very pretty today, by the way."

Mr. Harris' is a tiny deli that sells toasted paninis. Mr. Harris is the man behind the counter in a white apron, standing in front of photos of his shop throughout the years. He's Italian in spite of his name and speaks with a thick accent. Alex and he exchange words about the weather before he takes our order. I let Alex choose both sandwiches and we make a pact to trade halves.

"Do you have someplace in mind to eat these, or can I show you my favourite park?"

"Lead the way, I'm hopeless downtown."

"This way, then. And I think you'll like this walk."

We make a series of lefts and rights, the streets all exactly alike: restaurants with striped awnings and sidewalk cafés, small shops with tidy window displays. There's a store for handbags, an art gallery, a store that sells frames for paintings bought at the gallery, so many niche shops that I wonder at how the city can sustain all this. I think of four or five people per day in each shop multiplied by all the shops in London plus tourists and I think of London the machine and me doing my part by eating a Mr. Harris' sandwich.

Alex says that before they cleaned it up, the buildings here were all black with the soot of coal fires, instead of this pale yellow brick. A city of devils transformed into a heavenly one. Alex was so in awe of it when he moved down here from up North two years ago. "So we are both a bit out of place," he says. "Though this is my home now." He asks about my family, my life at home, but I say,

"Oh no, I spent the whole time talking yesterday. Now it's your turn."

"But all I really heard about was your ex-boyfriend and your dream, that hardly counts as insightful information."

"OK, then why don't you tell me about your ex-boyfriends and dreams."

"Ex-girlfriends you mean?"

"Just checking. And I want a story of equal or greater value, before I tell you anything else."

"On one condition: Afterwards the ball's in your court, and I get to ask you whatever I like."

Alex's dream is about a squirrel and a coffee machine. "We're walking through the park and we pass this squirrel holding up a cup as if he wanted a coffee." It's strange because there aren't many squirrels in London. His Mom and Dad are there too and Alex asks them for a pound coin. He starts up the machine and the squirrel gets so eager he gets tangled up between the cup and the stream of coffee and is so badly burnt that he dies right there in front of them. "It seems funny now," Alex says when he sees me smiling. "But in the dream I was sad."

"What do you think it means?"

"Well, there's a follow up to the story. I told Mum about it, and she said when I was very young I had a hamster. One day we came home to find it dead. Apparently I kept saying it only needed a drink. I kept trying to give it water so it would wake up. Mum thought maybe my dream was about that, maybe I was thinking the water was part of the reason it died."

Alex leads us onto a thin snaking pedestrian-only avenue that passes under archways, tunnels through a pub, between streets and alleyways. "This is Newman

Passage,” he says matter-of-factly. “Do you know it? It’s famous because of its connections with the Bloomsbury group. Virginia Woolf was one of them.” The lane is very narrow with rickety cobblestone paving and converted gas lanterns. It’s surprisingly busy, the sort of street only a Londoner would know.

“You know, our dreams aren’t too dissimilar, when you think about it.” I say.

“Both first experiences with death.”

“You did say equal value.”

“It’s so bizarre that we’ve carried these images around in our heads for so long. You think small children won’t be scarred by anything like that, but it stays with you in this weird visual way... I mean, do you remember that hamster at all?”

“I remember the hamster and that it died, but it’s just as you said before, you don’t know if sometime later in life you were told you had a hamster, or saw a picture of it, so that memory isn’t real at all.”

We pass through a gate into a thin modern park with a trellis for climbing roses and a see-saw and jungle gym. I’m having a look around when a voice comes singing into the park, first a low tremulous note with deep vibrato, then the notes ascend into a scale of rich operatic tones. I look to Alex.

“It’s from that house there. A woman giving singing lessons. Do you like it?”

I nod.

We sit on the see-saw and slowly heave up and down, eating the sandwiches while listening to that disembodied voice mingle with twittering birds and cooing pigeons. Soon it’s time for Alex to go. We make plans to meet at the station tomorrow for

the picnic. I linger in the park until the lesson is over, then make my way back to Oxford St.

On the double-decker bus ride home the trees that line the street brush their branches against the upper windows like fingers stroking a big red cat. It sounds just like the trees back home during storms when the wind is rough and branches whip against the house in a way that makes you jump but also makes you feel safe. They smack the walls and windows and it suddenly becomes clear the house can hold its own, and after that there's nothing left to be afraid of.

“It’s a small role, one of the servants, but pays good money,” Lucas says, rambling on to Matt and me about the play. “A year run. And the best bit is, I’m going to travel all over the country! Let’s celebrate – How about dinner? You too Matt.”

“I’ll be spending time with Tchekhov,” Matt says. “But congratulations and have a drink on me.” He tosses a pair of two-pound coins onto the table.

I put on my red dress, the one Lucas likes to see me in and I make up my face in a sober way, with dark shadowing around the eyes and heavy lipstick.

“You look great,” Lucas says, wrapping himself around me, “My favourite dress.” He leans back and kisses me on the nose and cheek.

The walk up Grove Road towards Victoria Park is deserted and dark. We cross the bridge over the canal. The water barely moves beneath us and there are hardly any stars in the sky. London outshines everything.

Lucas is talking in an actor-ish way about the interview and his monologue and what was said afterwards and how they offered him the role.

“I’m so happy for you,” I say, but it comes out flat. “It’s a very small role, but it’s a start.”

“Oh baby, you’ll get that job, you’ll see. And then we’ll both be happy.” He talks about all the travelling he’ll be doing, “A week here, two weeks there... but that’s not what’s worrying you pet, is it? You’ll miss me, but you’ll get along just fine.”

“But we’ve never been apart, not since I arrived here.”



“Hey... We’ll manage. It’s a great opportunity for me. Besides, I’ll let you travel with me some of the time. You could see a little more of England.” He stops on the sidewalk and holds both my hands.

“I’m going to miss you,” I say. “It’ll make me crazy. I wish you weren’t going. I don’t know what London will be like when you’re away. Matt and I don’t even talk, and you won’t be able to call if you’re moving around all the time. You’re the only thing that’s mine in this whole stupid place.”

“Tut tut cherie and brighten up baby.” Lucas often does accents to cheer me up. “Wait and see how you feel after a nice dinner. You’ll feel better... You’ll see.”

The pub is clean, wood-trimmed and typical, with large windows onto the canal. There are large framed blackboards with the daily specials neatly printed in chalk and a wide mirror behind the bar in which the shining beer taps, wine bottles and patrons are all reflected. I see the front of the bartender and the back of the bartender all at once and it reminds me of that French painting of the barmaid at the Folies Bergère – the woman’s face and how unusual it seemed to see both sides of her at once.

It’s an organic pub with French-themed food such as pigeon and they also brew their own beer. We arrive first, as Lucas wanted to greet our guests. Seated in the upstairs dining room, Lucas orders a pint of lager for each of us and a bottle of red for the table.

“That should get things started,” he says, leaning over to give me a peck. He has that hungry look for spending money one gets when they haven’t had money for a while. I’m brightening up. “See I told you,” he says. It feels nice being with him in a mood like this. It feels like the first time we’ve shared a celebration, although that can’t be true.

Dave arrives with Viv. "I was wondering whether you would come along tonight," he says to me. "I'm sorry you couldn't make it last night."

"Last night?" I say, looking to Lucas.

"Yes, to dinner. Lucas invited you, didn't he?"

Lucas squeezes my hand firmly under the table. I feel a tingle on the back of my arms and do the no-thinking trick.

"I'm sorry... of course he did. It's just, since the party I've... not been very well."

"Oh no? Lucas didn't say. What's the trouble?"

"Oh nothing serious, anyway, I'm better now."

"Well, Viv made the most excellent dinner."

"It was just pasta, you didn't miss much. Hardly excellent. Does anyone have a light?" Viv pipes in, waving an unlit cigarette around from the elbow. "You should come round for one of our poker nights instead," she leans in towards Dave's lighter. "We're having one tomorrow night."

"Anyway, Christine's got plans with some new friends tomorrow night, don't you?" Lucas prompts.

"Yes, a new girl I met in the park. For a picnic," I say. "But maybe I could come next time?"

"A picnic at night?"

"Yes, it's, a new thing... Less... ants." They laugh.

"Well come by afterwards, if you can." Dave adds. "We don't bite you know."

They change topics and I shake the conversation off as fast as I can. It's just this good time I want. To party with Lucas, to prove I can do this, be warm and bubbly

among beautiful people, to eat good food in a real restaurant and go dancing in London and live like people with a little money do. To be flowing and elegant and chatty and witty and free, and please to not be the stiff, obnoxious American in London.

More friends stumble in, including Kat from the party who strides in vivaciously and sits down beside me. I'm so happy to see her again. I finish my pint and reach across the table for the bottle of wine to fill her glass and mine, but I pour too quickly and the stem teeters and red droplets splash out onto the table.

"Easy now," Lucas says quietly and I have to bite my tongue in order to feel calm again. I smile.

"So clumsy," I say to Kat. "But how are you? How is everything going?"

"I broke up with him," she says. Her yellow eyes are crinkled up at the corners, but she is smiling with resignation and defiance. Her mouth is painted a pale mauve and her hair smells minty and sweet. "He calls me everyday, but I'm not going back. I asked him to leave her and threatened to go and he said he wouldn't. I can't back down though, can I?"

"When did this happen?"

"Just two days ago, but I don't care. I have a few new men already," she leans back, drinks the whole of her glass in one shot, raises it to the others and says aloud, "I'm here to get drunk. Who's going to keep my glass full?"

"I'd be honoured," Lucas says, standing to take the bottle. I watch him mock bow from the waist as he fills her glass.

"What a lovely man you have," she says, nodding to Lucas and sipping.

"Yes," I say. "Sure."

The conversation turns table-wide to talk of politics and weather, pop stars and music, concerts, clubs. The food arrives and leaves. Lucas tells the story of his audition, his eyebrows going up and down in excitement, he pops out of his seat at one point to describe his feeling of triumph. It's a physical comedy thing, and the table titters. A haze of wine settles over me. I squint at Lucas. He looks very far away, like a child. Lucas as a kid of eleven or so, smack in the middle of the ugly stage. He's jumping up and down, in and out of his chair saying, "Look at me! Please look at me." I start to feel a little ill.

"Excuse me," I say to no one in particular and head to the bathroom, pausing to ask directions on the way. In the stall I stare for a long time at the pattern of the floor tiles. Four white, two grey. I think about when I first saw Lucas. When I walked in and he looked so handsome with his eyes all twinkling and shining black and when he turned around and I saw his strong lean body sidling down the corridor ahead of me and I thought did you see that? Did you see the way he looked at you? You could have him, he could be yours and you know it. And then you'd have those eyes looking at you all the time, making you feel tall and proud and pretty like a woman on top.

It's pathetic to cry in bathrooms. But that's just me, a great mishmash of clichés: the move to London cliché, the screenplay cliché, the 'I'm-not-so-sure-about-my-boyfriend' cliché, the friendly-but-dull Canadian cliché.

I do love Lucas though. I love him with a crazy love. A he-is-my-everything love. Sometimes we fight and we make each other crazy, so what? And in what relationship do fights never happen? If Kevin never hit me it's not because he didn't want to, he just had that part of him under control. And what of Alex? Alex is nothing, he doesn't even really exist for me. And he's not about to love me like Lucas does.

I dig into my purse, pull out a pen and scratch C.F. + L.S. onto the wall. But then I think about the other girls at our table coming in so I lick my thumb and rub it out. I do love Lucas, I do. I'm afraid I'm losing him because I'm floating away like a balloon. I'm floating away from Lucas the way a balloon floats away from a child in an amusement park. Then I'm in a big blue void looking down at him so small and thinking, did I ever know you? You mean nothing to me. I am nothing. I need to get away from you so I can be something again. You make me so heavy and tired, Lucas. I'm hardly even breathing anymore. And then a big bird comes along and pop! I go straight back down, lying on the bed deflated until Lucas pumps me back up with his compliments and kisses and love. I raise my pen and draw a picture of a balloon with a long string attached, then draw a happy face onto the balloon, two dots and a curving satisfied smile.

The door goes swoosh as someone comes in. I slip out when she's safely locked in her stall and check each part of my face for smudges and my teeth in the mirror before leaving. Standing back for the whole picture, I hear the mirror say, "Oh, there you are stupid, I'd thought you'd gone. Why have you come back and what are you looking at, anyway?" That's when I realise I'm drunk, very drunk perhaps. So drunk that I know everything will feel differently tomorrow. I'll wake up with a hangover and everything will go on tickety-poo as Gran used to say. Tickety-poo, tickety-poo.

As I approach the table, I see Lucas leaning over my chair, his nose brushing Kat's thin white neck. He sits up, turns to me and says, "There you are. Still breathing then? I thought you might have fallen in and drowned... I was just smelling Kat's perfume. You should too."

I look to Kat, but her eyes are open and blank. "I can write the name of it down for you if you like," she says. "It was a gift, probably expensive, from that ex and fool of mine." Then she laughs in a reckless, melodious way, pausing to refill my empty glass.

The night goes on in a blur of taxis and dancing, thumping bass, scattered light, Viv's dark hair brushing my cheek as she makes banal conversation, the occasional flash of Lucas and Kat leaning into each other in a drunken and not entirely innocent way. At some point I figure I must be angry or tired, and so I find my coat and stumble out into the street without saying goodbye, and in my own way I'm proud that I can still muster that much dignity. I can't remember where the closest mini-cab dispatch is, so I make my way home on a bus that smells of cigarettes and vomit. I cry in a confused way and rub my eyes, smears of mascara on my fingers. The people on the bus politely turn their heads.

In my dream I'm at Exit Motel, a club Jane and I used to go to years ago. It's an upstairs dive hidden away in the Annex. In my dream, the bar is as dark as I remember, except for a dim, cold light coming from behind the stage. I'm staring at that light and it grows brighter and bigger until it's a single blue flame licking and twitching, towering high above the dance floor. "Fire!" Someone shouts, "Fire, run, fire!"

The dancers panic. They climb on top of each other's shoulders, link arms and run towards me in a human wall. I can't move but it's OK – they pass through me as if I am nothing but smoke and air. Then they go out and I'm alone and the blue flame is dancing towards me. It's so very hot and my throat is burning dry and I can feel my eyeballs drying.

Then Kevin is there. He picks me up in a bear hug and drags me to an open window. Outside, it's as cold and quiet as death, everything white with snow. "We'll jump together," he says. "Though we may perish," and at that moment he looks just like a pirate, eye patch and all. We hold hands and jump and a cold updraft pushes us over a rooftop and onto a fire escape. Then it's no longer the same night – we have travelled back in time. In a flash I'm reliving the night Kevin and I made love on a fire escape in the snow. The dream begins to mingle with memories and I lose track of where we go from there.

I wake up to an empty bed. Lucas has slept in the other room. I try the door, but it's locked. He's still in there when it's time for me to go. This is not the first time. I leave a note to remind him about the picnic. I feel surprisingly alright, all patched up with coffee and orange juice and my new determination to not be a thinking person anymore.

Alex meets me at Chalk Farm station. "Hello there," he says with a quick hug. We exchange talk of the weather, analyse the clouds. He leads me up a steep hill, away from the multicoloured streets of Camden.

Lucas brought me to Camden once. I remember its psychedelic second-hand shops, the lingering population of leftover punks and ravers hanging out by the canal locks. We cruised through the market together, hunting through the racks of used clothing. The odour of human castoffs lingered over the T-shirt racks under old brick arches damp and stained with mould. Lucas was looking for a leather jacket to wear to an audition for a theatrical version of *The Outsiders*. He tried them on one by one in front of a greasy, spotted mirror with two thumbs up and his lip curled like Billy Idol. He got mad when I laughed at him. "You don't take my career seriously, do you?" he whined over his shoulder.

"Welcome to the other side of the tracks," Alex says after a pedestrian bridge over the rails deposits us in a neighbourhood of white-fronted houses and an avenue of patisseries and tearooms, bookstores, gastropubs, florists and boutiques.

When we reach the gates of the park at the foot of Primrose Hill, there's a massive patch of daffodils. So many I can compare them only to dandelions, only these



grow as high as tulips, and their colour is not so mustard, but gentler. This yellow is to dandelion as spring is to summer.

“They always seem to spring up overnight,” Alex says, watching me stare.

“So that’s normal?”

“Every year, about this time.”

“It’s crazy. It’s like that Wordsworth poem.” I say, laughing.

“I know the one. We studied it in A-levels.”

“I always thought he was describing something unusual, a fantasy. But really I guess it was common.”

“Much like snow in Canada?”

“That’s why writers shouldn’t travel,” I say, “Nothing bloody ever translates.”

“What about your screenplay, then?”

“I supposed that means I’m screwed.” I say. “It’s probably awful anyway. It’s set in Grand Isle, near New Orleans. I spent a week in the city when I was 15, so I don’t much know what I’m talking about.”

“Can’t you move it somewhere else?”

“It’s an adaptation.”

“But people change details like that all the time. Isn’t Bridget Jones just a Jane Austen novel?”

“Minor detail, huh? Anyway, what do you know about books?”

“Oh, I’m not as illiterate as all that, just because I’m a glorified gardener,” he says. “Besides, my father’s an English teacher, you should have seen my summer reading lists as a child.”

“So what are you saying, I should change the setting to London?”

“Well, you’re starting to know this place, aren’t you? And didn’t you say it was about her finding herself in a foreign environment? Well you’re finding yourself here, right?”

“Look buddy, I’m already found.”

“Oh are you?” He says, half-smiling. “I’m sorry. I’m not. Not by half yet.”

Partway up the hill, Alex points to a gang of people sprawled out together. He starts introducing me, everyone smiles and waves and when I take my seat at the edge of the group this girl named Elaine leans over and says, “Well, we’ve all heard so much about you,” in a way that is not malicious at all. She has sweet dimples in her cheeks even though she’s very thin, and her skin is as pale and translucent as a fish belly.

There are plastic cups and bottles of wine, biscuits, cheese, cherry tomatoes and a baguette along with some round things called scotch eggs, mini pork pies and a large bunch of red grapes all spread on a maroon blanket over the grass. They’re chattering, Elaine and this other girl whose name I can’t remember, telling me stories about how they met Alex. Some of the group, Martin, so-and-so, Pete, Sarah are sprawled out listening to an mp3 player plugged into speakers and flipping through the Saturday paper. It is peaceful.

From our vantage on the hillside we can see the whole city, spread out like figures on a London supermarket cake. I can see St. Paul’s, the Battersea Power Station, London Eye, BT Tower, Canary Wharf and the Gherkin that demarcates the East End –home.

“A badly mowed lawn, they call it,” Elaine says of the view. “Those tall buildings spread out at all different heights.” Elaine met Alex at uni where she studied architecture. I ask her why it’s been built up this way. “It stems from a zoning law that protects sight lines to St. Paul’s, to make sure we can see the dome from here. People have been trying to get it changed for years.”

Alex moves around a bit, saying hi to different people, then comes and sits down next to me, raising and lowering his eyebrows as if to ask if I’m OK, if I’ve met everyone. I nod, pick up the Review section and sit back.

“Don’t let’s read,” Alex says. “Let’s talk.”

“About what?” Pete says, looking up. “Why are you always trying to make conversation?”

“Because conversation,” Alex says sarcastically, “is a dying art.”

“And what, pray tell, are the living arts, Alex?” Elaine says looking over, as they begin to discuss art, music. But whatever Elaine has to say, Alex’s ploy has worked. Most of us put down our papers and join in, jabbering. Pete grumbles that he would rather read the paper on a nice day than get into some heavy nonsense talk. The other girl, next to Elaine, saying how people only ever seem to talk about the weather these days which is fine by her, but her argument is funny because just then the weather itself puts its two cents in, spitting rain in agreement.

I help pack up our things and we trudge off to Alex’s house, which is not far. It’s the top flat of a white and crumbling Georgian terrace. His apartment is small and spread out, spanning three floors joined by a darkened staircase. We climb up to the top floor to the kitchen and sitting room. A set of balcony doors let in the last of the day’s light, the

misty sky ominous over the surrounding rooftops. Everyone gets settled with drinks or tea, and someone turns on the TV and everyone is talking over it and I say to Alex, “So, do I get a tour?”

He shows me the other bedroom (“It’s Daniel’s. He’s never home. A journalist”) and a small storage room and the bathroom and lastly, his room, overlooking the long, narrow gardens of his neighbourhood. His bedroom’s an addition, jutting out from the regular pattern of attached townhouses, and two of the walls are lined with windows. Through the small panes speckled with light rain are tall walled-in trees, rosebushes, spice gardens, patio furniture. It’s so quiet it’s not like London at all. The bed has a fluffy white duvet, and his desk is mostly clear with the exception of a computer and a small model of a park under a clear plastic cover.

“My final project... for school” he says, removing the lid. We sit down on the bed and I take it onto my lap. It’s a tiny square with pinkish model trees in plastic – cherry blossoms. There are a few modern looking seats and benches at different levels and a small square duck pond. Tiny pigeons are everywhere, even in the trees, and the people are sitting and talking to each other. None of them are touching, just sitting at arm’s reach half facing each other: a small model of a man reading a book, a woman with her head looking to the sky, and two people on the grass. Parked model cars, all in white, line the outskirts of the park.

“It’s amazing.” I say, reaching out to touch the little people, the fuzzy trees. “I feel like it’s... of real people or something.”

He looks at me, then unsticks one of the model pigeons and places it in the miniature pond. “Now it’s of us,” he says.

I smile, touching the model, and he starts touching me. My hair, lightly, moving it back behind my shoulder. I feel him leaning forward. I am frozen here. And then he gives me one, light kiss at the base of my neck. Just one, and then he sits up straight, not apologetically, but as if to let me decide.

My eyes are still fixed on the park: this still life of model citizens with pigeons. There's something about those two people sitting on the grass as if they are both together and apart. I want to sit in this moment. This moment where we are nothing but two people in this room with that kiss in the air: his kiss question. I wonder how long he will let us stay here, in this moment between levels, between scenes.

Maybe I want to talk to Alex about things, about the real things that are going on. But maybe I don't want him to kiss me, not now. Maybe not ever again. Maybe if he knew everything about me I would like him to kiss me. But now I don't know if I can talk about it anyway.

"I suppose we should be getting back."

"OK," I say quietly. "No. I mean, can we wait?"

"Yes." he says gently, nervously.

"Alex, I..." Fuck. "Really need a friend right now."

"We are friends."

"I mean, I just really need a friend."

"And I would be happy to just really be your friend." It sounds so affectionate, so sincere.

"Really?"

"Yes."

“OK. So let’s go back up there and never talk about anything awkward ever again.”

“Sounds perfect. Come on, before they start talking about us. I have a proposition that everyone stay for dinner and we order from the Ethiopian place around the corner. Can you stay?”

“I’d like to. But first I should, uh, call home.”

“Go ahead, I’ll be upstairs.” He gives me a quick awkward half hug. “I get it, you understand, I’ll restrain myself and I’m sorry, about before, if it was the wrong thing to do. I like you.”

“It was nice. It’s alright, it’s just that I can’t, OK? I... don’t want to.”

“Yes.” He stands up. “Come on up when you’re ready.”

Alex leaves, taking the stairs by two to the top floor. I breathe out slowly. Why does he have to be so very nice? I fumble for my mobile, scooping it out of my pocket, but for some reason I can’t bring myself to call.

I linger in Alex's room for perhaps longer than I should. The mushroom smell of wet earth and flowers comes in through the open window. In the garden below, a fat cat lounges on a patio table, sheltered under an expansive sun umbrella. There's pitter-pattering, and the twitters of so many birds safely perched in one of the trees, *singing in the rain/ Just singing in the rain/ What a glorious feeling/ I'm...*

I glance over Alex's uncluttered bookshelf, practical titles such as *The Royal Parks of London*, but also a handful of novels: *The Baron in the Trees* by Italo Calvino, *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy. The CDs are more eclectic, Pavement for rainy days such as this one, Blondie for chopping up vegetables, The Stone Roses for nights in, David Bowie. Two photos hang in clip frames on the wall: Elaine grinning goofily over a pint of beer, Alex on a beach someplace sunny, up to his ankles in sea.

Upstairs, Elaine is on the phone with the Ethiopian restaurant. She puts her hand over the receiver, "You staying?" and makes a slight alteration to the order. Everyone else is settled on and around couches, chatting intermittently. I worry that Alex might feel weird or uncomfortable, but when I go over and sit beside him he looks at me with friendly eyes and pokes me in the ribs to make me smile.

The night passes much like the day, with food and conversation. Elaine asks me about Lucas, about my life, Pete talks about Canada and his trip across the country a few summers ago.

"Canadians," he says, speaking to the whole group. "You won't believe how bloody sanctimonious they are. They go on at length about how different they are from

Americans. I couldn't spot the difference between Canada and the US. Both so patriotic, both riddled with McDonalds and Wal-marts. What do you say, Christine?"

"There are subtle differences," I uncross my arms and lean my head to one side so that I don't look defensive. "Or at least there are differences that may seem subtle to a foreigner like you. It's like Southerners versus Northerners over here. They're all the same to me, but they aren't the same to you." That shuts him up, especially when everyone nods along with what I say.

When the party breaks up I'm the last to go, but only because Alex says goodbye to everyone else first.

"I'm so happy you came," he says, helping me on with my coat.

"Me too."

"I hope you don't feel uncomfortable about before. It must have been obvious from the start that I felt something for you, and at least now it's out in the open. It won't keep you from hanging around, will it? Everyone likes you."

"I'm guessing they won't like me much when they find out I don't... that I rejected..."

"Forget it," he interrupts. "I won't say a word. And besides, they already know you have a boyfriend. Just because you're not interested in me doesn't mean we can't be friends."

He opens the front door. The dark streets of Camden buzz and whirr with traffic. I think of this busy street, those peaceful gardens behind. A shiver of rain is still falling, but the clouds have dispersed around the moon. "Look up," I say. "So big and not-quite round, isn't it shaped just like a cat's eye?"



“Christine,” Alex says, stepping out onto the front stoop. “I really like you as a friend. I don’t want to be nothing at all.” He looks desperate. I reach for him instinctively, my arms straight up and thin just like a little girl’s. He folds me in.

“I am your friend, Alex.” I say. I lift my head to plant a kiss on his cheek, my mouth puckered and closed, then untangle myself and walk away.

I've got the job. Lucas is beside himself with congratulations. Packing for his first tour away, he says everything will be different now. "We'll both have money, we can go out more. Our biggest problem was being skint. Now we'll spend all our time in restaurants. You'll see. When I get back next week..." I can tell by the way he folds his clothes and firmly places them in the bag that he believes what he is saying.

"Let's celebrate now," I say, mostly because I hate goodbyes. "We can go to the Orange Room for Pad Thai."

Lucas says he would love to, but there's far too much to do. "We're leaving first thing in the morning – we've got that show at a primary school in Wales. Have to work on my lines too."

"Give me a break, Lucas. You only have a handful."

He gives me a warning look.

I go to my room and open my laptop, but that red-shirted man is at his window again with his cigarette and his eyes like two beady vacuums of light. It's him that keeps me from working, him and the fact that I just can't get anywhere with Edna lately. I'm at the point where she's changing by imperceptible degrees, awakening her mind and body, stretching like a tiger before the pounce. I can't think of how to show all this from the outside. I can't rely on make-up directions or a wardrobe switch. Her voice has to change, the words she uses, the way she addresses her husband.

I decide to go to Budgets and walk up and down all the aisles. I treat myself to the more expensive bag of mixed lettuce, a bottle of balsamic vinegar, a piece of salmon, an organic lemon, a dark chocolate bar and orange juice, not from concentrate. Waiting to

pay, I text Alex about the job and he writes back straight away, *Congrats! Lunch or drinks this week? Ring me.* I feel something like confidence, something resembling hope creeping into me the way a mouse tiptoes into a pantry. Maybe Lucas is right, maybe things will change now. It's impossible to say. And up, up, up goes my little balloon...

Lucas is in my bed when I come upstairs. "I thought we could celebrate in other ways," he says, tossing his already dog-eared photocopy of the play aside. The skin of his chest is the colour of lightly browned toast, taut and well cared for, exfoliated, moisturized, perfumed with a musk-meets-vanilla scent. It's been some time since he's slept in my bed. Not since that night with Kat, anyway.

"I thought you had too much work to do."

"I'll practice my lines the whole time," he folds his arms behind his head. "A good test of whether I know them or not. Come here."

"Maybe I should shower first?" He reaches out, winds the fingers of one hand around mine, pulls me down with the other.

"Maybe you should stop talking," he says, putting his mouth on mine.

Dan is the most junior sub-editor, gay, friendly, with a slim build and an Astroboy helmet of hair and Irene is the associate editor, with a frisky Irish accent and a face straight out of a painting by Klimt. There's one of a pale freckled woman with angular shoulders and a shock of black crimped hair, hard face smiling over a pink fleshy body.

In the painting, Klimt's figure stares down at you as if she is alive, her luminescent gold background a simple consequence of her beauty. You look at her and you think that even if she walked into the dingiest pub, the wood panelling and ashtrays would start to shimmer under a layer of gold leaf.

We're at the pub for lunch because they've insisted on getting to know me, "So buy yourself a drink and some olives for us to eat," says Irene, who is sardonic, a straight-talker, out of tune with her precise looks. Dressed in a slim-fitting white blazer, low-cut blouse, straight trousers and pointy flats, she teases me, imitating my accent, "You sound so happy, the way your voice jiggles up and down. Yur a hya-ppie Canaa-dian."

I don't say much about it, but Dan starts to tell me how envious he is of my great adventure. "I want to move to New York exactly the same way as you moved here, if I can work up the nerve and the money." He goes on, saying I must be so brave, with such strong character. "But of course, if you're as pretty as you are moving to a new city must be easy, all the boys fawning over you..." And Irene agrees.

"Yeah right, as if," I say, "You're the one who's so stunning, Irene."

"She is, isn't she," says Dan with a sigh, and Irene pretends to yawn in a here-he-goes-again way. "I call her my gem, and if I had to say which gem, I'd say jade, because

she is so cool she must be coloured green. And nothing too precious besides, because she doesn't act like what you'd expect from a ruby or a pearl, and she's certainly not a diamond in the rough, unless by that you mean a diamond drunk and out on the piss..."

"Thank you Dan, don't know why I keep you around... Don't worry, you'll learn to ignore him."

Alex asks me for a drink after work. We meet in front of the Nike store at Oxford Circus. Standing in the doorway, I watch the crush of suits and skirts getting on busses, disappearing into the tube, that after work buzz in the air and the sound of a thousand conversations going on at once. I feel just as London does tonight, a cross between exhaustion and exhilaration, with all the things I had to learn today running through my head the same way all these Londoners are running along the street, ducking into pubs, kissing each other hello. The job was easy, even if a bit hectic and I like that pair, their quips over lunch: The Dan and Irene show.

Alex is looking frazzled when he arrives, "All kinds of meetings today and a design deadline, we've been working hard. It's the busy season coming on... How was your first day?"

I tell him about work. He seems a touch distracted, not quite focussed on me.

"I meant to ask, we have a bunch of plants we're getting rid of, you wouldn't happen to have a garden?"

"I do. Overgrown with stinging nettles and shaded by an apple tree, but a garden none the less."

"Do you want to make it over with some plants? I can help."

“My own landscape architect? Of course we’ll have to do it when Lucas is away. It would just be a lot easier.”

“I understand,” he says. “Look, have you been to this place? The beer is cheaper here, and I’m waiting on a paycheque...”

Alex is quiet. He takes big gulps of his pint and stares out the window. I feel a bit squirmy.

“Everything OK?” I say, “Is everything fine about the other night?”

“Of course it is,” he says. “I completely understand about that. It’s just work and... Look, do you mind if we just have one tonight? Think I’d like to turn in early.”

Just then a group of old men strikes up some tuneless pub song, shouting drunkenly like a parody. It’s too loud to talk. Alex shrugs and grins. I lower my chin to the table and stare into my pint, waiting for the noise to stop. Fizzy bubbles gather along the base of the glass then float up one by one, just like my silly balloon.

“Well, thanks for the drink,” Alex says at my bus stop with a smile and a shallow hug.

“We’ll see you for lunch tomorrow?” I say. “Same time and place?”

With Lucas away so often, things between us are so much better, perhaps than they've ever been. When he comes home, we have nights out to dinner, nights in with movies, trips to Spitalfields' market on Sundays. He buys me things: a new handbag, a brooch, fresh cut flowers or an organic quiche. And sometimes when we are holding hands, walking between home and someplace new, I am so happy. I can see no reason why we can't go on like this forever.

We keep in touch over email when he's away. He reports on the success of his trips, the size of the audiences, teases me about his teenage fans. I tell him stories about Dan, Irene and Alex. He says I'm becoming a real Londoner, *All you're nites at the pub...* I've discovered grammar is not Lucas' strongpoint.

*Dear Irene,*

*My boyfriend is a terrible speller and it's ruining my sex life. Please see attached forwarded email.*

*Your fan, Hartbrokin.*

*Dear Hartbrokin,*

*Live is ful of comprimysis. If you trooly luv you're boyfreind... What bollocks, he's an idiot. Dump the bastard!*

*Lurve, Irene.*

Irene and I email back and forth a lot, even though our desks are kitty-cornered. She's heard the whole of everything about Lucas, Alex and me. She reserves her judgement on

the affair in a you-make-your-own-bed sort of way. But she doesn't mince words about the violent bits. I didn't mean to tell her about that, but the words fell out one night when she pressed a little deeper about why I was so unsure about Lucas and me. She was chalking the whole thing up to my cold feet, a commitment phobia or my secret feelings for Alex, and she wouldn't believe me when I said that wasn't it. I never respond the right way to challenges, always end up defending myself, and at what cost.

She invited me over with a promise to add, "a little zing to that blah mane of yours." Irene is all about self-improvement. She's always trying something new, from photography to flower arranging, in a way that makes me admire her.

Sometimes, after a few drinks at the pub, she tells me she thinks I'm adorable and puts her hand on my arm and looks up at me with soft, maternal eyes. When we are together, I find I am always checking her over like a porcelain teacup, to see if there is a fissure or a chip in her impeccable facade, something that will let me know if she's really all there underneath, if she's safe.

But on the whole it's easy going, my life at work beside her, being her friend, because for all her ornamental perfection she is sharp and clever. And I have the impression it's OK to feel plain when you are standing beside someone who's not. It's like being under a weeping willow on a hot day, where it is cool and a little dark and peaceful to look out through the waterfall of branches sweeping the grass.

I told Irene about Lucas being violent. She didn't use her snappy voice, but said, "We've all slipped off the edge one time or another," quite cautiously, easing her way around the topic. "Have the two of you had a chat about it? If you think it might happen again, or you're afraid, then likely it's time for you to leave, you know." The way she



said that made me all panicky and flushed, and then flustered because I didn't want to be flushed in front of her. "Oh lord, I've upset you," she said leaning in, "come then, let's get started on your hair."

So we went into the bathroom together and she wrapped a towel around my shoulders and seated me in the bathtub while she snipped her hair back with a few bobby pins and got everything ready. Working away, picking out and painting small pieces of hair, she started asking me things the way a doctor does before he sticks the needle in, saying, "Now, what's *your* name?"

"Did he hurt you?"

"No. Not much. Just scared me really."

"Is it escalating?"

"I don't know. It's over now I think. It hasn't happened in a while. And it was never all the time. Things are pretty good now."

"You know what you sound like. If someone else told you all this, what would you say?"

"I know. But I think it might be all sorted out anyway. Really."

"And Alex?"

"Oh, we're just friends, you know? I know he likes me, but he knows I'm committed to Lucas...."

"Time to rinse!" Irene said then, "I'll leave you in here while you shower. Use the pink bottle of shampoo." And at that she was out the door and I was alone in her small yellow bathroom with its matching bud vase of daffodils and neatly arranged dish of smelly soaps.

The result of her dye job was only a very little bit different, but a definite improvement, those thin stripes of sunshine in my hair. Lucas and Alex both thought it very fine.

Alex comes over on the appointed Saturday with a borrowed car full of shrubbery and flowers and some spice plants he bought as a gift. Lucas is in Liverpool and Matt is out for the day, or so I think until he strolls in while we're unpacking the car.

"This is my friend, Alex," I say when Matt looks him up and down, seemingly dumbstruck. "We're doing up the garden, want to help?"

"I wouldn't bother if I were you, it's full of nettles..."

"Alex is a landscape architect. And we've got gloves."

"Suit yourselves," Matt says, nudging past and closing the door to his room.

After we've moved the plants and bags of soil out back, Alex walks around the garden while I gather up our ramshackle selection of garden tools: A spade with a broken handle, two shovels and a jagged-toothed rake. I like the way Alex looks in his big green rubber boots and oversized coat, a bit like Paddington Bear.

"Before we dig all this up, we should have a look at what's here, if you're interested," he says. "There's some old roses over there, too stressed to flower but salvageable. Not wild roses either, so there must have been a garden back here once..." He stabs two makeshift yard sticks in beside the rose plants, tying them up straight with string from his pocket, "I'll do a better job later, this is just so we mind where they are."

With Alex's help, I begin to notice all sorts of things – small plants fighting their way up: sprouts of grass, clover, wild thyme. He names our weeds: Oxtongue, Shepherd's Purse, Fat Hen. I ask him to write the names down so I'll remember them and he laughs. Fingering the leaves of the hedge that demarcates the end of our property, he shows me two different species of plant, Beech and Hazel, mixed in with the Hawthorn.

“Were we supposed to weed those out?”

“Not at all,” he says, picking off some dried shoots. “A hedge is just a living fence, a boundary wall. It’s interesting to count species because that way you can date the plant. You’ll usually find one species for every hundred years, which means this hedge is over two, possibly three hundred years old.”

I can see Matt watching us through the kitchen window, stirring his instant coffee. I try to think of whoever planted this hedge, the person who built this row of houses. What were they wearing? Why did they want a boundary to make this in and that out? I think of Canada, a whole country not yet two hundred years old.

“Where do we start?” I say, pulling on a pair of dish gloves and tucking my jeans into my socks. Alex sketches out a plan for the garden, then shows me the piece of paper.

“This alright? It’s simple, but we don’t have a lot of plants here.”

“Anything’s fine, really. I trust you.”

We start up a frenzy of digging. Hammering in with my foot is harsh work, despite the damp soil. In patches of nettles, I work at pulling up the dense carpet of roots while Alex chops with his shovel. We throw all the weeds into a pile to dry out, even though the sun back here barely dries laundry. We make another pile of rotting apples, near the tree.

“Even after all this, there’ll likely be more nettles to contend with,” Alex says. He shows me how the roots spread out under the soil, poking up to form new plants to further their take-over operation. “They’re the Starbucks or Wal-mart of the plant world,” he adds and I roll my eyes.

The dirt at back of the garden, where the weeds are most dense, runs deep enough, but as we move closer to the house, my shovel unearths crumbling bricks and smashed dishes. I find an old red marble, a large round stone, a long bone. I hold up the bone to Matt in the kitchen and he comes out to see.

“It’s rubble,” Matt says. “From the war.”

Digging farther than three inches becomes impossible.

“My god, there’s just no dirt here.”

I start making a pile. Blue plates, yellow china, glass shards, bricks and fragments of brick. Our backyard full of dead things, dead houses.

“I had a feeling we might run into something like this,” says Alex.

I knew our street ended early – that the park was where my street used to go. I knew the Palm Tree Pub that sits in the middle of the park was attached to two long rows of houses that were long gone. I knew there were once factories along the canal. I didn’t think, where do houses go? Where does rubble go? But of course, those stinging nettles crept over it, forced us to keep our distance while they made dirt, erased time.

“Do you think anything will grow here?”

“I think so, if we clear some of this out,” says Alex. “The plants I brought should be fine.”

Matt goes into the house and brings out a double-lined bin bag to put the china shards in. I pick up the red marble and put it in my pocket.

“And we could keep the bricks,” I suggest, “for a spice garden fence?”

Matt joins in for the planting. I clear a foot square of soil near the house and make the spice garden, planting basil, parsley, sage, rosemary.

“Are... you... going... to Scarborough... Fair,” Matt sings.

“Damn, I don’t have any thyme.”

“Haven’t got the time, why, it’s a quarter-past three...”

Alex and I politely snicker. I’m happy Matt’s having a good time. He even helps Alex with the larger shrubs while I’m busy with some bulbs and flower seeds.

When we are finished, Matt makes three celebratory cups of impossibly milky tea and we survey our handy work.

“It looks better,” Matt says.

“Lucas’ll be surprised, huh?” I say, “Thanks so much Alex.”

Then Matt drains his cup and says, “Well, that’s it for me then. I’d better get back to my books.”

Alex and I stay in the garden for a while, watering the rose plants and the spices, making a makeshift bench out of some of the larger bricks and an old board. It isn’t too comfy but it’ll do. While we are sitting there, quietly beside each other, two blackbirds fly in and start picking out the worms and grubs we’ve brought to the surface. One stuffs so much in his beak, I’m sure he’ll choke.

“I might as well tell you,” says Alex. “There’s this other... girl. Hanging around.”

“Oh,” I say. “Who is it?”

“Just someone I met a few weeks ago at a party, before I met you, you understand. We kissed, and now she’s calling, wanting to hang out a lot, and I suppose after meeting you, she just doesn’t seem very interesting. But I guess since things aren’t going to happen with you... they aren’t, are they?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Well, I guess I should try to move on then. But I’m not very enthusiastic.”

“What’s her name?”

“Dawn.”

“It’s a very optimistic name, isn’t it?”

“The beginning of a new day?”

I swallow hard. “I think it’s a good idea. If you have a girlfriend, then we really can be friends, can’t we?”

“I don’t want *her* as a girlfriend, you understand,” he takes my hand. “It’s probably a bit too much like emotional pressure for me to talk like this, but you seemed to be noticing the other night that I was out of sorts, and....”

“I don’t know what you want me to say. You know I’m with Lucas.”

“Do you remember when I told you about my dream?” he says.

“The one about the squirrel?”

“You said if I told you, afterwards I could ask you anything I liked.”

“OK.”

“Does that still hold?”

“I guess so,” I say. “Though I don’t like the idea now....”

He pauses. “How are things between you and Lucas? I mean... what are things like between you two. They must be good, if they are better than the way they are between you and me.”

“I thought you said you didn’t need to know these kinds of things about me. That you were happy with the way things are. With us together, you know, just really good friends.”

"I'm not a machine. I'm bound to have feelings some of the time. And I really don't believe we're just good friends. Do you?"

"I don't suppose I have the option not to answer?"

"You do."

"I'm not going to then, OK? I'm really happy with the way things are."

"I don't think I'm being unfair."

"No, I'm the one being unfair, but to be honest, I don't care. I don't want to be anything but unfair."

"You could just tell me things are amazing between you and Lucas, that he's everything you've ever wanted, that would satisfy me."

"You wouldn't believe it. You'd keep clinging on to me as if all these days in the park were something sacred, as if I was your destiny or something. This isn't a Jane Austen novel, Alex, and besides I don't believe in that crap. I thought you were smart enough not to either."

"God, I'm sorry I asked. I've never denied that I'm keen on you, and I didn't set out to be. You're the one who's so vague about everything. This isn't a game for me."

I don't say anything to that. I'm watching that blackbird hopping, twitching its head this way and that. I'm thinking of Chinatown on a Saturday, parked cars everywhere, some left in the middle of the street, the sound of Mandarin haggling, catfish drowning in shallow buckets and crabs crawling over each other, holding their claws in the air. Once I saw an escaped crab on the sidewalk, heading South. "It's going the right way," I'd said. "It's heading for the lake!"

"Maybe I'd better go?"



“Don’t be stupid.” I say. “Don’t leave.”

“If you like,” Alex says. “Whatever you like.”

We’re quiet after that, but on the inside I have two simultaneous feelings running through me: The more distracting one makes me want to crawl out of my body and run away, leaving my skin and bones to collapse on the floor. Alex would pop off the bench, thinking me dead, and gather up my rumpled body like so many folds of cloth.

The other feeling makes me want to take Alex to some quiet little room somewhere, a room just like his, white with large windows that let in the rain. I would tell him all about everything that’s ever happened to me. I’d rest my head on his pale hairless chest, my long hair spread out over his pillow. I’d start with when I lost my first tooth and then unfurl the plot of a film about me, ending with the night Lucas beat me up worse than usual.

I daydream this, but the real thought of moving my body closer to him, of taking Alex upstairs by the hand, makes me miss Lucas profoundly, in a way I haven’t missed him before.

I walk Alex to his car. He gets in and rolls down the window.

“Thanks so much for the garden, Alex. I had a great day,” I say.

“It was fun,” he says and looks up at me, miserable.

I push myself into the car and kiss him. A deep kiss. A real kiss. Jammed up against the window frame.

“Don’t give up on me,” I say.

I step back and he starts the car, giving a short sad wave as he goes. I feel a mild flutter around my heart, like a bird beating its wings against my ribs.

In my mind's eye, I watch Alex perform that short sad wave over and over, his car shrinking as he gets farther away. By the time I close the front door, Alex is no bigger than a crocus. The bird in my breast is settling down now, tucking her head under the feathers of her wing, as if she thinks only of sleep.

*This is your life, Christine, says the house, this is the real you, not the one you had back there for a minute.*

*It doesn't matter, the desk whispers as I come into the room. You can keep it going. Alex will hold on, he'll be your friend and you'll have things with Lucas, just as you planned. That's what you've wanted, what you've said all along.*

I feel tired. An every-inch-of-me tired. Aching arms from digging, heaviness. I would think about everything, but it's too much. What time is it? 8 o'clock? No matter, it's as if the director has already faded this scene to black. *We're done with you for today, Christine, Herr Director says, clucking his tongue paternally. Bright start tomorrow, why don't you get some sleeps?*

The blue of my room soothes me, cool and fresh as midnight. I undress, take the red marble out of my pocket and place on the desk. Stretching out under the covers, I think of the sound of water. I imagine the waves of Lake Ontario, the pungent smell of seaweed in the spring, the water licking around the oval stones of purple shale that line the shore. One calm day I swam far out in the rain. A thousand drops rebounded off the surface of the water, travelling up to the level of my eyes.

## PART THREE

### 1.

It's amazing how quickly I fall into the rhythm of my new life. Alex and I meet almost every day for lunch and sometimes again after work with Dan and Irene, or Elaine, who also works nearby. There are many nights when I let Alex kiss me, long and tenderly, before I get on the bus.

Last night, I invited Alex to a Wong Kar Wai double feature, *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*. With my new job, I can see any number of films at half price. Alex held my hand through both films and didn't shift around in his seat like so many do. It was cozy, sitting there in the dark, stuffy closeness of the cinema. I thought about movie theatres all over the world, all exactly alike. Rows of seats, a red curtain, the grey flickering light of a movie screen.

I imagined Hong Kong, opening night for this film, Kar Wai in attendance at a large cinema downtown. I followed the crowds, stepped off the foreign chattering street, walked up the red carpet into the theatre, suddenly claustrophobic and sad. Wouldn't it have been better to have stayed outside, with the sky overhead and the smells of a new strange place?

Afterwards, Alex took me to Mash for a drink, which is just the sort of bar you bring someone foreign to impress them. It's white with rounded corners and modular furniture, the whole place shaped like an elongated orb. There's an expensive restaurant upstairs, but downstairs you can only order small pizzas or salads, which is what Alex did when he saw that I was getting drunk too quickly.

"I'm sorry," I blurtered. "I'm an embarrassing drunk."

“Sorry for what? You seem perfectly well to me.” Alex said, winking.

And then it struck me that we were perhaps becoming something more than friends, and I didn’t really mind so very much.

“Maybe I’m just polygamous by nature,” I say to Irene and Dan. We’re at the pub after work. Alex is busy tonight. “I really don’t want to choose between them. Things seem more... balanced this way. I swear I’m in love with them both... or something.”

“It’s not fair to the boys though, is it?” says Dan.

“Ah, well, boys haven’t always been so fair to me.”

“But not *these* boys. Much as you’d like to, you can’t blame them for the faults of their brethren.”

“Why *are* you staying with Lucas?” asks Irene. “I still don’t quite get that.”

“I don’t know, because there’s something there. We’ve shared a life, we live in the same house, you know.”

“I think it’s because you’re afraid of what he would do if you left,” Irene says.

“Oh he’s not that bad really,” I say. “Besides, things are different now.”

“Then you’re afraid of change, like you said,” adds Dan, “Or are you afraid of being happy? You would have to take life into your hands, you know, be your own boss, make a choice, maybe you’re afraid of that. No one is going to settle this for you.”

“And have you thought about the fact that you may lose both of them?” asks Irene, “What if Lucas finds out?”

“I don’t think it would matter, losing them both,” I say. “It would be easier, perhaps, than having to decide...”

Lucas comes home from Liverpool with gifts. "Such great shopping up there," he says. "You would have loved it, baby. There was this great sample sale where I found this, it's from a Scottish-Japanese designer."

He holds up a multicoloured kimono-esque wrap top. It's pretty. The print is geometric, the material synthetic, but very soft.

"Wear it tonight," he says. "We're going for dinner with Dave and Viv."

"Do we have to Lucas? I've had enough of eating out. Why don't we stay in and cook tonight. We could invite them over here."

"We're going," he says. "Get dressed."

We walk over to Brick Lane, to an Indian restaurant, wood-panelled with big murals of women riding unicorns, rice fields, dragons, and a huge portrait of a distinctly Bollywood Princess Di.

"Everyone goes here for Diana," Lucas says.

I want to sit under the painting, for luck, but that table is busy tonight. A mixed group of friends are settling into those seats, smiling excitedly, stripping off their jackets, unwrapping the beers they bought at the Off-License next door. The waiter whisks over with a bottle opener and clean glasses.

Another waiter holds a finger up as he passes with a steaming tray of curries, the smell oppressively aromatic. He returns momentarily and leads us to a seat directly opposite the mural. From the bench, I have a perfect view of Diana's sad smile, silently blessing the curry-eaters beneath.

Dave and Viv are late as usual. Lucas orders papadums and we munch on them until they arrive. They welcome Lucas home, ask about his latest trip. He pulls two Livery Bird keychains out of his pocket.

“Brought you these,” he says with a laugh. “Brought Christine this top, do you like it?”

“Very lovely,” says Dave. “Isn’t it.”

“Anything interesting happen?” Viv says, settling into her chair.

Lucas starts up as soon as our food orders are in. “Opening night,” he says, adding his characteristic dramatic flair to every word. “And the theatre was so hot, the sweat was pouring off. My hands were so damp that my prop book slipped right out of them. I caught it in mid-air but from the audience’s reaction I knew they had seen. I cleared my throat, and in my finest Shakespeare accent, ‘Madam, I didn’t know this tome was of the jumping variety.’ The crowd roared!”

“The director was impressed,” Lucas finishes. “He said I’m perfect for a part in a Wilde play he has in mind to direct.”

“That’s wonderful,” says Viv. “Now, Christine, what have you been up to lately. Lucas tells us you have a new job.”

“Yes, it’s great.” I say, “At a cinema magazine. The work isn’t hard, but it’s varied and fast paced, a lot of chasing copy and images. I’ve made good friends there with my co-workers, Lucas says I’m always at the pub. Oh, and last weekend we dug up the garden at home, me and my new friend Alex.”

“You did?” says Lucas. “I didn’t know that.”

“You’ll have to see when we get home, it looks lovely. But it was bloody hard work. Oh, and we found two old rose bushes out back, and I learned that our hedge is over 200 years old. Isn’t that incredible that a hedge can be as old as a house?”

“Unreal,” says Dave. “Where did you learn that?”

“Alex is a landscape architect. He... There... were plants leftover at her office from a thing. Anyway, we put them in our garden.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t remember, is Alex a girl or a guy?” asks Dave.

“A girl.” I blush. “She’s very nice. Not gorgeous or anything, but friendly and very smart.”

“Well, we should meet her too,” says Viv. “You still haven’t come to one of our poker nights, next time bring her along. Oh, I’ve forgotten to ask, have either of you heard from Kat lately?”

“Apparently she’s gone wild,” adds Dave. “Dating all sorts of people, three and four-timing. The other night, one of them stopped by her place unexpectedly and bumped into another. A massive row broke out. She dumped both of them right on the spot, but then she had to lock herself up in her room they were so angry.”

“Serves her right,” says Lucas. “To be found out, I mean.”

“What would you do, Dave,” asks Viv coyly. “If I were seeing someone else?”

“Drop you like a stone, and call you a fool for losing me.”

“And you, Lucas? What would you do?” I mimic.

“I’d kill you,” says Lucas. “And then I’d kill him.”

When visitors turn up I always feel a bit like I'm in the zoo. My guests are graduate students dressed in safari shorts, here to observe just how I'm living. They peer over the fence and take notes, reflect on my unnatural habitat, then leave for home feeling better or worse off than me.

It's Tuesday when I receive the email that my best friend Jane, the one who introduced me to Lucas in the first place, will be coming for a visit, "Just for one night, I'm catching a plane on to Dublin in the morning. Booked a stop over to see you."

Jane has a bit of a round belly and is the only woman I know who can be described as jolly. But today she has that annoying habit travellers get of leaning back and laughing at everything she sees, as if I have nothing at all to do with her or where she's from. Look at the funny ostrich, that delightful exotic animal, why doesn't it bury its head in that sandbox? Still, it is nice to see her, and she is very excited to see me, but disappointed that Lucas is out of town.

"How is it between you two?" she asks, her accent stronger than mine. "You never call, so I had to track you down. Everyone's wondering what you're up to over here..."

When I tell her everything, except the violent things, but including some bad enough stuff, she smiles and laughs in a loving way. "But that's just you to feel that way. You've never been happy with what you've got, not in your whole life. And you never do anything about it either, that's the funny part."



That makes me angry, and I don't say anything for a good few minutes, mulling it over. I go into the bathroom and stare at the smaller hole in the floor, a trench with new pipes running through it.

It's after saying goodbye to Jane, getting a little choked up too, that I see that what she said might be true. That scares me, because when you realize everything in your life has really been your fault all along, you realise you really must do something, which of course is what you wanted to do all along, but now you really know for sure. Now you have no choice, because you know that you can choose. Thou mayest be happy, or thou mayest not. And you are unhappy, so fish or cut bait, as Mom used to say. Shit or get off the pot. Slice into that worm and sink that hook, or for God's sakes stop complaining.

“There’s something I’d like to show you,” Alex says. “Especially tonight. Do you know it’s been exactly two months since we first met?” He walks me away from Buckingham Palace, over Pall Mall into St. James’ Park. There are big trees and grass and lawn chairs set out, all matching, “you can rent them,” he says. “To sit in.”

We look over the side of a bridge to see the swans, the white and black ones, and the many kinds of ducks. “See that little bird, the awkward-looking black one – that’s a coot. They really love it here.”

He tells me all the swans in England are owned by the Queen. “Do you see the tags on their feet?” he says. “There’s a law that only the Queen is allowed to eat swan, and only once a year.”

“Does she ever?” I say.

“I don’t think so, I don’t think people would approve. But this isn’t what I wanted to show you,” he says, leading me along Bird Cage Walk, around the bend to a little lake with an island in the middle. Perched on two large craggy rocks are five or six pelicans with their long funny beaks and floppy necks. “This is it,” he says. “A gift from the Russian ambassador, three hundred some-odd years ago.”

They’re nipping at each other, wobbling their necks, lounging in a way that makes me laugh. “What in the world are they still doing here?” I say. “Surely London is not their natural habitat.”

“I don’t think they can leave,” he says. “I’m fairly certain their wings are clipped.”

“So,” I say, “if one of those fall in, are you going to rescue it for me?”

“Silly. Those birds can swim.”

Alex walks me to the bus stop, holding my hand as if we are Hansel and Gretel in a forest of Georgian buildings and winding streets. I'm tipsy, after the park we went to the pub and toasted the day we met.

I look up at the streetlights, the windows, storefront displays. They seem tall in places, squat in others, as if I'm seeing the whole world through a special lens that makes some stuff skinny and other things fat. I tell this to Alex and he gives me a kiss on my cheek. He says, “I love the way your brain works, Christine. Sometimes I wonder if we really live in the same world.”

I tell him how I've been working on my screenplay lately and how easily it's been coming, as if I'm following the crumbs of the story down a path, and that I'm not even sure it's about Edna Pontellier anymore, I think it might be more about me.

“Just like you said, a girl, finding herself somewhere.”

On Oxford St., I see the cameras and try to do the splitting thing in my head, but when I look closer it's not the same picture anymore. I see some kind of Venn diagram, the outer circles filled with names, Alex, Lucas, Irene, Dan, Kat, and where they all cross over each other there's CHRISTINE in big block letters, and the colour of my space is black.

When we get to the bus stop, Alex says, “My friends tell me not to see you anymore.”

“Why?” I say, “Who?”

“They say you aren’t going to ever leave him. That you’ll keep stringing me along. That you’re trouble.”

“Am I trouble?” I say. “What did you say?”

“I said that I like you. That I trust you. That I feel good when you’re around, and I think you’ll figure this out eventually. That sometimes I feel like a character in some teen melodrama. But for some reason I don’t really mind that much.”

“What about Dawn?”

“I never saw Dawn again. Didn’t I tell you that? There wasn’t any point. I never did like her.”

“But all those nights you were busy?”

“I told you I had work, why would I lie?”

The bus arrives, Alex releases my hand, gives me a kiss before I go. The bright red routemaster rocks back and forth as double-deckers do, so it feels more like a train than a bus.

Well, what did you expect, Christine? Alex to jump on the bus after you, follow you home, challenge Lucas to a duel, demand you to make love to him or else? Alex to pin you down like a butterfly, smack you across the face, saying, “It’s Lucas or me, baby. And I’ll kill him if I have to.” Nobody is going to let you off that easy.

The bus winds its way past St. Paul’s, its cupola lit with yellow light. I think of St. Paul’s right here beside me and St. Paul’s from Primrose Hill. Then I think of those sight lines Elaine told me about, beelines from St. Paul’s to parks all over the city. I draw a map in my head that looks just like the flight path diagrams you find in an airplane seat pocket. St. Paul’s in the middle with lines spread out all around it like a firecracker.

INT. PONTELLIER HOUSE – LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

EDNA PONTELLIER reclines on a lounge chair in front of the fire. ALCÉE AROBIN stands over her.

E. PONTELLIER

One of these days, I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think – try to determine what character of a woman I am, for I swear I don't know.

AROBIN

Don't think, what's the use? I can tell you what manner of a woman you are.

E. PONTELLIER

Oh, yes. You will tell me that I'm charming and adorable. Spare yourself the effort.

AROBIN

I shouldn't be lying if I did.

E. PONTELLIER

Tell me, do you know Mademoiselle Reisz?

AROBIN

The pianist? I know her by sight. I've heard she's partially demented.

E. PONTELLIER

She seems perfectly sane to me. Only she says queer things in a bantering way, you don't notice it at the time, but you find yourself thinking about it afterwards. For instance, when I left her today, she put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, "to see if my wings were strong," she said.

AROBIN

I'm told she's extremely disagreeable and unpleasant.

E. PONTELLIER

She said, 'The bird that would soar above tradition and prejudice must have strong wings.

It is sad to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth...'

AROBIN

Why have you introduced her now, when I desired to speak only of you?

E. PONTELLIER

Oh speak of me if you like, but let me think of something else while you do.

I run into Kat on the street during evening rush hour. Lucas is away and Alex is busy and I'm excited to work on my screenplay tonight. I can see Edna, or is it me? Edna, as an impersonation of myself, I think. Anyway, Edna is deliciously happy, rushing through the streets of New Orleans to the bedside of Madame Ratignolle, who is at that very minute giving birth. She has just left Robert, her true love, in her new little house, the one she calls the Pigeon House, and she has just kissed Robert on her sofa, and she was all passionate and brave about it for a woman of her upbringing and her time.

Before going out the door, she receives a letter from her other lover, Arobin, but tosses it aside, as if she feels nothing for him now, as if Robert is the moon and Alcée is the sun and this very moment is the night of a solar eclipse. Alcée is the light shining behind Robert, setting him off so that his outline becomes blinding, literally so. And if Edna wanted to see Robert properly she would have to cut a little slit in a piece of paper, just as her teacher taught her long ago, so that she could look up and watch that planetary dance.

Kat is pleased to see me. She looks slightly more wan than usual. Her hair is frizzy and coming out of her chignon, standing out like a lion's mane. I say that I've heard she's been having trouble lately, that I hope she's alright and she tosses her head in a mechanical way,

"It's alright," she says. "If you play life as a game, you're bound to lose once or twice."

"It's a shame," I say, but I'm with Edna in my mind. I'm wearing her bustles and stays, running past carriages and cars. "I hope you'll be happy again soon."

"Have you forgiven me then?" she says quickly, intently, her blue eyes running over my face. "For that night. I've been meaning to call. I was drunk, I can't believe I stayed at your house, with Lucas. I've always liked you. I felt awful. You must have been so angry, I expected you to bang down the door when I heard you knock in the morning. Instead there was just that note on the table. So strange. It made me feel so much worse, seeing you write so cheerfully like that. *I've gone to a picnic, it said. Have a nice day...* Just like that. I didn't understand," she says. "How you could be so strong?"

"Oh," I say. "It was nothing," and I step into the crowd passing by. Downtown London is good for moments like these. If you step into a rush of passers-by and let them carry you along as if they are both pushing you and pulling you, snorting and swaying like horses, saying "hold on, we'll all get there quicker if we push together," you can leave someone behind pretty quickly. I'm quite sure it looked like magic to Kat, staring at me with her fish eyes one minute, wondering where I've disappeared to the next. I'm beginning to like this city, beginning to understand its tricks.

Do you know what it's like being me? It's like being in a big old house with the windows all shuttered up. You wander from room to room looking for an open window, and the light coming in through the cracks is driving you mad, absolutely stinking mad. And the shutters are not locked, you could open one at any time and let the sunshine in like a floodlight, but it just doesn't occur to you. It seems impossible, even though it's as easy as sliding up the window and flinging them open. You think to yourself, I must remember to find someone to do it for me. I must ask someone to open these windows, only I have no phone and there is no door.

I will not say that moment on the street with Kat was precisely when the shutters came unstuck, but thinking back, I suppose it made me see how my brain was already more or less unsticking. What has my recent happiness been but a series of mental locks coming loose, then suddenly a window thrown open on my brain. That day, it was as if London itself lay down at my feet like a lion. I had the impression the city was finally on my side, not Lucas' or Alex's city any longer.

I meant it when I said I would not mind losing them both, I did not lie. But it became clear to me today perhaps why. I can still see that Venn diagram, where I'm the one in the middle. What does the whole world revolve around if not me? And if I move, shouldn't the whole universe move with me, the way a camera lens points someplace then someplace else and it's all part of the same film. So what difference does it make, if the director is in London or at home, if he is always there behind the lens? As long as there is the same director, the film is the same. Even if the eye of the camera is focused on Alex or Lucas, the I behind the camera is still me.



And so I decide to tell Lucas. I plan to tell him on Sunday when he gets in from his trip. I am already packing my things and have arranged to move them to Irene's. I have told Alex this does not mean we will be together, that I need time, a friend, space. That things will be tricky for a while. "I have a lot of feelings wrapped up in all of this," I said. "And I'm not convinced these feelings are about you. Do you understand?" And Saturday night I will throw a party. A party in the garden to celebrate my going away, but no one, except perhaps Alex, Matt and Irene, will know exactly what the party is for.

When I close my screenplay file, backing it up on disk, all set for the move to Irene's place, *The Awakening* is nearly completed. There is just the moment before the ending to write, just before her final swim. She will come back to find that stupid note from Robert, his, *Goodbye, because I love you*, and then will decide to go back to Grande Isle, to that magical place by the sea. I am planning it all in my head while I ready the house, write my final rent cheque, buy a copy of *Loot*, the renter's guide, change the household water bill out of my name.

Alex borrows his friend's car and helps me relocate all my things.

"Are you sure you'll be OK," Irene says as we are turning to go. "Maybe it's best if you just do this over the phone?"

"I'll be fine," I say, though my hands are cold and twitching. "I'll have my mobile with me at all times, you can call. But you are coming tomorrow, anyway, aren't you?" I ask, "To the party?"

"I'll have to see," she says. "I'll let you know."

We leave Irene with my boxes and head home. There is still the faint smell of earth and plants in the car. I roll down the window a notch and let the greasy air of the

city whistle in. I watch the streets of the East End go by. Dilapidated movie theatres next to new condo developments, firetrap housing, housing estates, student residences and remodelled Georgian homes. A neighbourhood being made over, erased, resurfaced.

“Do you need any help, for the party tomorrow?” Alex asks, watching the road ahead. “Have you told Matt about it?”

“I have.” I say, tilting my seat back a little. I’m tired and stiff from lifting boxes. “I told him about moving out too. He seemed almost pleased by the news. As if he’s thought for a long time that Lucas and I would end this way. He’s hardly spoken to me since.”

“Do you want me to come over early?”

“No, there’s no point. It’s not going to be anything special. I was thinking of making some mulled wine in case it’s chilly outside, and some sangria because the ingredients are almost the same.”

“I’ll pick up the red wine then,” he says as if to himself. “And come over just a bit early, to help.”

We stop outside my wide, white front door. I look up at this old house, its large windows and sober face. I remember the first time I walked through that door. Lucas was so proud, showing me around like a rich landowner, as if each room belonged to him.

“Do you mind if I don’t invite you in?” I say, leaning over to give Alex a kiss. “I think I’ll need my sleep tonight.”

“Irene’s right about being careful,” Alex murmurs and I laugh.

“Why is everyone so worried?”

“Because you’re laughing and smiling, as if you’re operating in a dream, but this isn’t a game, you understand. It won’t be a game for Lucas.”

“I don’t think Lucas will care, really. If he truly cared, we wouldn’t have come to this. And he isn’t a complete monster. What would you do if I left you?”

“I would probably cry like a sappy bastard,” Alex says. “But I’m not him.”

He turns off the car. There is very little light now, but I can still see my hands in my lap, the joints of my fingers. I wonder if we are born with wrinkled knuckles, or if we get them from bending our fingers over and over. Do the creases form while we are still in the womb? Do we flex our fingers while we are still being formed, without knowing what our hands are for?

“I do feel like I’m in the middle of a dream, Alex,” I say. “It’s as if at some point in the past few weeks I found a light switch inside me that I’d never noticed before and switched it on. All at once, the whole world was illuminated... in all its pretty stupidity... so funny it made me laugh. And I felt happy. And now that the switch is on, there’s no turning it off. I don’t want to turn it off.”

Alex leans forward and rests his forehead on the steering wheel. His eyes are closed. He looks worn out, arms at his side, his shoulders dropped, face turned a little away from me.

“Oh Alex, the party will be fun anyway,” I say, planting a fresh kiss on his cheek. “You’ll see.”

I wake up under an old blanket in a bedroom as empty as the day I first saw it, except the walls are, of course, still blue. Otherwise, it is a monastery room now, just a narrow bed, chest of drawers, bookshelf and the impertinent vagabond desk I've decided to leave behind.

After all, the desk appeared outside the front door, so it could have been meant for any one of us. And besides, my screenplay is almost finished now, and lately I've taken to bringing my laptop to work, setting it up in a garden during my lunch break, tapping away in between sips of cappuccino, Alex quietly reading by my side.

I like the idea of Matt using this desk to compose some opus, or of Lucas staring miserably at the desk, moving it into his room, keeping it as a memento of me. I've found a new breed of maliciousness inside me, though I wonder if it will go when I finally go, if it's just a kind of fuel I've developed to help me get through this. But I like the idea of not being nice any longer – not being so bloody *Canadian* anymore. This new, essential, boiled down version of me, all stomach and heart and lungs. Human, not even female, alive.

I buy supplies for the party at Budgets, some wine, juices for mixing drinks, ingredients for the sangria and mulled wine, crackers, fruit and some cheese. I like parties where the host has grapes and some sliced up cheddar to nibble on, a triangle of brie. Even if you don't eat any or everyone else brings chips, you feel more chatty, more grown up with real food sitting there.

After that, I visit a few apartments. The last one offers me the place and I say yes. I describe it to Alex before the party, we're in the kitchen getting things ready.

The flat is yellow. The kitchen is goldenrod, the livingroom, grapefruit, the bedrooms are pale lemon and the bathroom, a bold canary. Any person who would willingly buy four different shades of yellow paint must be certifiably insane. I say this to Alex and he laughs, and at that moment I like him very much.

Everything about the flat says that it's an in-between place, transitory. The occupant who is leaving is a New Zealand social worker who is moving home in a week. I'll be living with an Australian radio announcer named John who owns the place. John works the overnight shift, so he sleeps during the day and is out of the house by 6pm. He's also missing his right index finger. When we shake hands on the deal, I'm surprised by the size of his genteel, three-finger-and-thumb hand.

On the walls of the living room hang Monet prints, six in all including one of the bridge and two of water lilies. They are all tilted this way and that, but there's a reason. The Bethnal Green rail station is across the road and trains go by every fifteen minutes.

"It makes the windows shake and the television go fuzzy," John says. "But you won't notice it after a week."

I tell John I like trains because they remind me of books set in dismal prairie towns where people dream about getting away.

"Books," says John. "Then you'll like our bookcase. When my Dad retired from teaching he gave all his books to me." The large bookcase, flanked by two ancient-looking carpet chairs, is stuffed with classics and criticism.

John tells me everything that's wrong with the place with such honesty that I trust him right away. He even explains why the fridge and microwave are in the living room –

“The kitchen floor squeaks over your room, but I’m hungry when I get home. This way I won’t wake you.”

Rent is due at the end of the month, maximum stay is for six months because John wants to sell the place and buy a nicer house. If we get on, I’ll have the option to move in there. My room is a half basement with French doors to a sunken terrace. It comes with everything I need. I can move in next week.

“It’s all just fine for me, I said to John, and please choose me to move in because I have to escape an abusive boyfriend and I’ve met someone new. He gave it to me right away.” I tell Alex. “I like the fact that I’ll hardly ever see him. It’ll be just like living alone.”

Alex agrees, and points out that without a contract, I can find another place if I’m unhappy.

While he finishes preparing the drinks, I start gathering up all the used jars and tins I can find in the cupboard and recycling box. I wash them, half fill them with water and drop a tea-light candle into each one. Alex lights them and carries them outside to the garden, arranging them around the plants, digging them into the soil. I hang strands of miniature Christmas lights from the clothesline.

As dusk settles in, it’s a fairy’s garden I have, the light from our lanterns as soft as fireflies in a jar, my clothesline a Milky Way of stars. I leave Alex to tidy the kitchen and I rush upstairs to change.

Although it feels like the grandest party in the world, I can see, looking around, that in fact it's quite small. Irene and Dan, Alex of course, and Kat, so surprised to be invited. Elaine, Pete, Viv and Dave too. Two of Matt's friends from school are here, Emily, with black-rimmed glasses and red curly hair, and Claire, a large mouthed girl with an accent I've never heard before. Pete seems particularly interested in her.

We are all talking, mingling over the table of fruit and cheese, but the garden is the star of the party, the icebreaker with which every conversation begins. If you stand near the spices, there is one smell, and near the campanula blooms another. Even the apple tree seems romantically craggy tonight, its stature aggrandised by the flickering shadows. The air is fresh, but not too fresh, especially with a cup of mulled wine to hand.

"This is so great," Kat says, her eyes shining, absolved. She has already half made friends with Elaine. "What an absolutely perfect party. Any occasion?"

"I may as well admit it," I say, feeling warm and happy, Irene and Alex by my side. "It's my birthday today. I even bought a cake."

"What a secret! You bitch," shrieks Irene, "How many years?"

"Twenty-five."

"Well then: To this tottering old git, everyone," Dan says, raising his glass, "May you live until at least 26."

It all goes on like this, friendly as a dream, until Lucas comes through the back door into the garden. Alex has his hand on my lower back just then, but takes it off quickly when he feels my spine freeze.

"Your name is John," I say to him quickly. "You're a radio announcer..."

"My name is Alex," he says.

I walk over to Lucas, who is already talking to Viv and Dave. He looks tired, surprised, not entirely unhappy.

"Hi honey," I say, and give him a kiss on the cheek. "I decided to have some friends over. How was your trip?"

"How come you didn't tell me about this fancy soiree?" He says snidely.

"Last minute decision," I laugh. Viv and Dave are still.

"You've become spontaneous," Lucas replies.

It's when we're in my room, my empty room that he explodes.

"What the fuck is going on... this party? Where's all your stuff?"

"I didn't think you would be home until tomorrow," I say calmly. "I'm moving out. I invited my friends over... I was going to explain everything."

Lucas is moving around the room dumbfounded. "Is this about someone else?" he says. "You're leaving me, and you throw a fucking party?" We hear a twitter of uncomfortable laughter bubble up from the garden below. Lucas bolts the door to my room. I back away, but his hand still catches my face, sends me reeling to the floor. A kick to the hip sets me moving again, scrambling backwards and up against the wall, panting.

"Stop it, Lucas, please."

"Talk then." He shouts, smacking me clear across the face.

My lip bursts, raw, taste of blood. "This is no good. Lucas. Stop. I need to go."

"What did you say?" Hits me again. "How about you start with how you're leaving me and you're having a party?"



"It's my birthday. I didn't know you'd be home," I try moving for the door. He grabs my shoulders, shoves me back against the wall.

"It's your fucking birthday? Oh God, I can't believe my friends are out there. You bitch. You're doing this in front of my friends? In front of my fucking friends?"

"Lucas," I say. "Please stop."

"I love you," he says. "I thought we were bloody happy now. You slag. You whore."

"There's no one else. There's nobody. Everything's OK. I'll stay. It was just a bluff. I love you. I'm sorry. It's just my birthday. It's OK."

I look into his eyes, face quivering. We are frozen here, in tableau. He lets go, steps back, sits down on the bed. A dramatization of a man, but my heart beats fast, breaking. And I hurt. My cheek hot, lip tingling. He lowers his head to his hands.

What is the next scene, Herr Director, Herr Scriptwriter? Cut to the next scene where Christine is happy, Christine is safe. All I want is to think everything will be all right. To be wrapped up in strong arms, the wet air coming in through the window, tickling our faces as we sleep.

The window... I bolt for it, force up the pane and skitter over the bathroom roof to the edge.

"Christine!" Lucas yelps, hurrying behind.

"Help me down!" I shout into the garden, but they move too slowly, turning their heads.

The sudden pressure of Lucas' hands on my back feels almost tender: two half-moons where, if I were a bird, I would have wings. It's the last thing I remember: his hands on my back, and the wrinkling of Irene's forehead as I fall.

So you want to know what I do next, my dear reader, bruised, beaten up, a little broken. You who are reading this, whoever you are, wherever: On the subway, at work, in your comfortable home, dipping into my thoughts as you please.

You've imagined me in your mind and there you sit reading over my shoulder from your safe remove, the voyeur, a peeping tom. Why don't you go ask someone else what I should do next, some pop psychologist, some television self-help guru while I wait, frozen in time on the other side, in my dangerous parallel life, the room across the hall.

Do I make you laugh? Because I'm pathetic, because I am writing this from somewhere else, some unimaginable space removed from you, pouring out my heart in desperate ecstasy? Do you not see the irony of it all? I seem to be the director of my future in this story, and yet I am only the court reporter, taking down the facts of the case. I made the choices before, and now I look over them as I take them down, no way to change it. No way to edit what has happened, what has gone before.

Even if this were fiction, although nothing is entirely a fiction. Fiction is a twisted account, an impersonation of the truth. But even if I do not, at this moment, exist as you would like me to, is it not perverse enough that you want me to exist? To be ticking on right this moment in front of your eyes...

All the same I will tell you what comes next, if only to preserve my own sanity. To bring this story to a pause, to a moment where I can take a breath, write it out and look back and say here, and here, and here is where I went wrong, and here is where I went right. So that through the lens of fiction I can find myself and look closely and say,

why didn't you just jump into the Thames? Why didn't you just jump when you were standing on the bridge looking down at the rushing water going under you, at the city lights of London stretched out in front of you like a Monet painting. The abandoned barges and tourists boats and the sad, sad march of citizens over the bridge. The sad, sad sound of footsteps pitter-pattering away from you.

Was it because you were too strong to give up, too scared? No, it was because the bobby came along, in his stupid hat and black shiny boots and said, "May I help you miss?" in a way that made you laugh because you heard, "may I help you miss," as in 'help me miss the water?' And you said,

"I don't think so, bobby-on-the-beat, once I go over and down there's no hope of missing the water, thank you very much. And it will take so many people to find me in that dredge. It will be murky in there. It won't taste very good, but it will be peaceful, quiet, safe."

And if you had died, no doubt someone would have said, "I'd like to think it was not that she did not want to go on living, but that she had lived enough..." and someone else would say, "I can't respect anyone who takes the easy way out." But you didn't die and so you are both noble and stupid, just like Edna swimming into the sea. Oh ho, she got the better of them, that's right, and they got the best of her.

Anyway, that all happened long before now. That was after the very first time Lucas hit you. And you walked through London, through the city to the bankside, trying to decide what to do.

The bruises had made their fresh and strange appearance in the morning, and so you snuck out of the house and took the Tube downtown. You walked randomly, turning

left and right, over to the south bank, strolling past bookstalls, buskers, galleries, lawns, skateboarders and sidewalk cafes that made you think of Paris, romance.

It felt so lonely. You can't invent loneliness like that, being dislocated from the touch of things, at the sight of so many people. Millions upon millions everywhere, and you and your sad, stupid shell of a body, just one of so very many. You didn't feel ready to walk up to anyone, didn't even know for sure if you could do that here. How does one meet anyone when the city is big, big, big and you are so small, a dot on a sidewalk from the planes flying by overhead.

Anyway, when you are on the inside of a situation it doesn't look the same. You start going in a certain direction, the car is pointed that way, and there is no designated U-turn sign, and there are lots of cars coming up behind you and beeping. And there's no way to stop going in the direction that is leading you so clearly in the direction in which you are already going.

And how can you make a decision about something when it has only ever happened once? Lots of things that seem scary at first turn out to be alright in the end.

I explain all of this to Alex in the emergency waiting room of University College Hospital. Alex drove me here in hope of a shorter wait. I can see by the weariness in his eyes that he doesn't completely understand what I say. It's impossible for someone on the outside of a box to see things from the inside. You can call out, saying, "The walls are moving towards me, I can't breathe."

"But nonsense," the person outside the box will say. "I can see those walls from here. Be sensible."

And besides, for Alex I am a strong one, a smart and pretty one, not an Alice in Londonland. Christine is a woman on a great adventure, writing a screenplay, juggling hearts. She likes cappuccinos, quiet days in the park, pigeons and learning new things.

I have a broken arm, two broken fingers, a dislocated shoulder and stitches in my head. My split lip hurts when I smile. I am not so very pretty now. Alex stays by my side through the whole night and next day, and all the time he is kind and gentle, solid. I put my arm out to touch him without fear that my hand will go straight through.

But I see too that he is not always strong or OK. In the ambulance, I saw him cry over me, his face concerned, crumpled. He was not like a child watching over a dead bird, curious, the way Lucas peered over the roof, down at me.

We walk towards the zoo, Alex and I, through the ornamental gardens of Regent's Park, the sculpted hedges and giant urns spilling over with pansies and tulips. I ask Alex if they plan how a garden grows, if they think of how the plants will get bigger, press up against each other near the end. What of the colours, can a garden be garish or is nature always beautiful to the eye?

He leads me down to the muddy towpath along Regent's Canal. From here you can see the wild boar exhibit free of charge, and the bird sanctuary, a giant mesh tent fifty feet high. It is here that I learn peacocks can fly.

Lucas calls me on my mobile. Alex and I sit facing the gazelles. Lucas says, "I know I've hurt you and I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I know" into the phone. The gazelles use their long arched horns to scratch their backs like old men scratch their heads and Lucas says, "Is he there with you now? Please say you're not with him now."

"I'm alone," I say, "I'm on my way home, just getting on the Tube. I have to go."

It is very early in the morning. We left the hospital in the dark, but now the sky is pale and airy and the birds sing so loudly that it's almost a joke, like a chorus of cell phones ringing. A jogger along the path stares as he goes by.

"I guess I must look frightening," I say to Alex, gesturing to my cast, my beaten head. "But the painkillers work well."

We walk towards Alex's place, past Primrose Hill. I see our picnic on the grass, reading the Saturday papers, with a view of all of London at our feet. The top of the bird sanctuary too, where pigeons and magpies like to perch. The birds inside fly up and chatter to them.

We don't climb to the top of the hill this time, we walk instead to a shop with a red awning where Alex buys two cappuccinos and an organic dark chocolate bar and hands me one square at a time. I try to suck but end up crunching. We pass a green pub with a gold trim all shuttered and locked up tight – the light glints off the block-letter sign because the sun is already above us, rising up bright in the stark sky.

We are not too talkative, it's been a long night, and an ache is starting up in my shoulder and my arm. But I'm not ready to go to sleep yet. If I stop, lie down, I think I might lose myself somewhere. It's better to keep moving. Don't let the dust settle, Christine, push the film into the new day.

I turn down Chalcot Road on a whim and Alex says, "That's the wrong way you're headed" and I smile because I know.

"I want to smell the pinks!" I'm so tired that I'm delusional, or maybe I'm trying to impress him, the way he casually points out flowers, saying these are nasturtiums, this is a French tulip, this is wild chamomile, my mother's favourite tea.

The houses are painted white here, but also lemon, rose and mint and their windows hang like paintings as if London is a room, not the world all around.

"Some of the houses have morbid facades," Alex says and I say,

"Yes but that yellow one with the black door is saying O! Like a Victorian in her underthings," and Alex smiles and kisses my head.

"How are you feeling?" he says, "Are you feeling alright? We can talk about it some more, if you like."



Across the street in a tiny square, the cherry blossoms are in bloom, falling from the trees like snow. I walk over to let the petals fall on me, a shower of pink softness while I stand still, drinking this warm slug of coffee.

"It's like the huge snowflakes you get in late winter," I say to Alex. "When it falls in clumps as big as a nickel, and hits your face soft like a feather before it melts."

"I've never heard of anyone who misses snow like you do," he says. "People say it's too cold here."

"It's not the same cold." I say. "When it's cold there you don't smell anything. The smells are all frozen up in the snow and ice. The air is clean. You feel clean all over."

"Spring must be beautiful. Is it anything like it is here?"

"No," I say, looking all around. "It is beautiful here in spring and the season is so long. I never knew England could be so beautiful."

"It's the end of spring now," says Alex. "Once the cherry blossoms fall."

"That's a shame," I say, "I think it was the spring that made all this seem easier." We sit down on a low park bench. "The flowers and the trees and the parks full of people and the big white sky. Working to earn our lunches in the park, those moments of green and light, with our £2.70 cappuccinos, the foamed milk heated up until it's both, I don't know... wet and dry."

Then I see the pink house with the blue historical plaque.

"Oh, who lived there? Can you read it from here? Your eyes are better than mine."

“Sylvia Plath,” Alex says. “Poet, Lived Here, 1960-1961. Have you read her work?”

“Yes,” I say. “Isn’t that funny. Yes. I happen to be quite a big fan of hers.” And I am quiet for a few moments, watching the light move in waves across the house. “I wonder if this is where she put her head in the oven,” I say. “It was sad, the way she brought it all to an end.”

I stay at Alex’s house that night and it’s surprisingly easy to do, like taking off one set of clothes and putting on another. He gives me one of his old T-shirts to sleep in, but I can’t settle. My arm hurts and I cry instead and talk about how I love Lucas, even though he’s a bastard and even though I know there’s no going back to him now. Alex makes endless cups of tea until my throat is dry and cracked and my eyes ache like I’ve been swimming underwater. He tells me stories to settle me down, about his family, growing up, his younger sister and brother. He doesn’t treat me like an invalid, doesn’t look at me like I’m broken or undone, and that gives me strength. He makes me feel as if it’s alright to be like this. And almost all the while he is talking, Lucas is phoning my mobile. The ringer is off, but I can see the light flashing again and again with his silent call. For a while Alex and I watch it ringing. Then the battery dies and there is no charger. Not long after that I fall asleep.