

Story Logic

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Abstract

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My project is a heterogeneous collection of short fictions whose concerns, methods, or influences are, variously, metafictional, feminist, generic (in the sense of “genre fiction”), theatrical, and realist. Through five stories I explore the relationships between reader and character, author and character, and reader and author. I am interested in the ways in which the individuals in these relationships affect each other, and in turn, how the stories are affected by these relationships.

Each story in this collection addresses the nebulous quality and logic of storytelling. Some characters in this collection are at the mercy of their own confining narrative structure, as is the case in the fairy tale vignettes in “Cautionary Tales”, while other characters find that they are able to move beyond the limitations that initially restricted them, as we see in “Summer”, a coming of age story about a girl whose passage into adulthood has been hindered by her own tendency to fabricate details about her own life. In other pieces I play with perspective and explore the objectification that can occur through certain skewed points of view, as is the case in “These Foolish Things” and “Dead Letters”. And finally, in “Nomination” I explore the intricate, intimate practice of naming and the author-character relationship it creates between the name giver and the person receiving the name.

Through this collection I aim to encourage the reader to examine his or her own position and complicity in the fates of the protagonists in these stories. By playing with and twisting familiar narrative shapes, established tropes and the expectations of the reader, I hope to explore how the delicate relationships between author, character and reader affect the shape a story takes and the logic it follows.

For Wendy, Cef, Val, Emily and Noah.

For your patience, encouragement and love, thank you.

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Cautionary Tales

The Intrepid Hero

What you don't know yet is that you were doomed from the moment you felt safe here. Oh, you are so far from safe, my fine predicament. You should have kept the path under your feet at all times. No deviations, no short cuts, just as the stranger in the tavern told you. The paths in this forest are old, mischievous beasts. They serve the forest, and the forest doesn't take kindly to strangers. These paths mean to escape your feet and make you lose your way, just you wait and see.

You have only been travelling for a few days but you're already as limp and tired as last week's lettuce. Some warrior you are. You were so keen to prove yourself, to show everyone that you could become a knight that you picked up and left the village without telling anyone. No more farm, no more early mornings of picking caterpillars off the lettuce and cabbage before the sun comes up, no more carrying buckets from the stream. You want adventures and maidens and and glory! But so far your new boots pinch, your shoulders hurt and you're sweating like your sheepdog before you shave her winter coat in the spring.

You are even panting like her. Too bad your canteen's empty already. But look! A stream! You allow yourself a delighted yelp and race toward it. As soon as your feet leave the path, it veers away and escapes into the dark forest. That was your first mistake, and it won't be your last. Never, *never* leave the path in a place like this.

As you reach the bank, you drop the heavy pack from your aching shoulders and

from it fetch your canteen, an old army thing you got from your father. As you kneel to fill it, you think back on the strange turns your journey has taken so far. The gentleman in the tavern last night was especially odd, with his nervous mutterings and his keen interest in your travels. A little too keen, really. When you mentioned the market you're headed to, he muttered a prayer and pressed upon you a small glass ball.

“Please, good sir,” he murmured, “please find the Glass Weaver's stall at the market and give that sphere to the woman you find there. She will keep it safe in ways that I cannot. My position is no longer safe. They know everything.” His face clouded for a moment, and you examined the little globe. It looked like a normal glass marble to you, and an ugly one at that. It was scratched and scuffed and murky, hardly worth two pennies.

“Do not let appearances deceive you, my boy. It will light your way like no candle or lantern can,” said the man, “but only when you truly need it. In the wrong hands, such light could breach the places man was not meant to find.”

When you turned to ask him how a marble could light your way, he was nowhere to be found. You've kept it in your pocket ever since.

Before this, you've never been to anywhere farther than the neighbouring county, and even then, it wasn't on your own. But it is your time now. You are ready for greatness.

As you strain to reach the hollow in the stream where the water is deepest, the orb tumbles from your pocket into the rushing water and vanishes in the white froth of the stream. You do not notice. You are too busy thinking about how you will get to the

market.

As you sit and quench your thirst and rest your feet awhile, dusk drops around you like a net. The shadows that have been steadily lengthening now threaten to swallow the forest whole. You worry that there may be unsavoury types in the forest – bandits and thieves who would steal the shirt off your back and the boots off your feet if they found your pockets empty. Or perhaps there are bears and wolves that think you would make a nice bit of supper. Yes, it sounds like you had best be on your way. You've filled your canteen and slaked your thirst and hoisted your pack back onto your aching shoulders. You pat your pockets for the orb and the modest collection of coins you've been carrying, but one pocket is empty. You pat every other pocket on your person and find nothing. You search the bank where you were sitting but find only soft, thick grass beneath your fingers. And on top of this, you are now well and truly lost. Every direction you look, the woods look the same. The shadows hug together and the trees lean close like gossipy neighbours waiting to see what you'll do next. The whole forest holds its breath. Nothing moves, no branches snap or leaves rustle. And then, you do exactly what you shouldn't.

You run.

Leaves slash like straight razors at your face and arms and branches and bushes *thwap!* your knees and thighs. A root seems to rise to trip your flying feet but you change direction at the last second, zig-zagging like a hare. You vault over bushes that clog your way and try to push ahead with every step. Your lungs threaten to tear themselves to pieces just to get a breath. If you stop now, you're done for. Stumps make you stumble and as you reach out to break your fall, the ground gives way beneath you and you hurtle

headlong down a steep slope, ankles over elbows. Brambles catch and snag your clothes, tearing to get at the soft, tender flesh beneath.

And suddenly, you're free. The trees thin as they reach the bottom of the hill you just tumbled down. You find yourself on the edge of a field of grain, lush and thick and silver in the moonlight. A stubborn blackberry cane clings to your trousers but you pull yourself free of its grasp. Now that you're out, the forest looks so innocent, so benign. And you... you've never felt so alive!

But don't fool yourself, dear protagonist. This is only the second chapter of this great adventure of yours. This is merely an appetizer. Your author has bigger plans for you than a fight-picking-forest and a lost treasure. Much bigger. In fact, you are to become the basis for an entire trope. You aren't him quite yet, but by the end of the story, you will be a hero. *The* hero. And the only way for you to become that hero is for you to be tested, you see. You will be taken from your family, from your home, from the girl of your dreams who just promised to marry you, and you will be tested. Brutally.

You will rise, and you will fall. And you will rise again, higher than before. So high, that students will study your roller coaster ride in literature classes for years to come and write terrible accounts of the villains and ironies you will encounter.

Enjoy immortality, my friend.

Damsel

The earth quakes with each heavy footfall. It's happening again.

The clay curls around the dragon's feet like a penitent servant. Scorched trees lie at the base of your tower, as do the remains of your defeated valiants: burned and broken and wasted to bone. No one can help you now. No one but he, your knight in armour of the shining kind. A dragon is threatening a princess? Of course he'll come. He always does.

The stories say you have no choice but to call him. Scream for him. You're in distress, he'll come for you. That's how it works around here.

But you know that it isn't out of love that he comes. He's got ulcers upon ulcers because of you. He's so damn scared that he hardly sleeps. He hears your voice in his nightmares, only to wake and find them real. He sweats so much that his armour rusts with him inside it. Because of you, he's been forced to hire a full time blacksmith just to keep up with the demand you put on him.

Yes, you. You watch from your tower as he endures the dragon's fiery wrath and the bone-deep swipes of its scythe-like claws. Your knight's great sword slashes and swoops but the terror evident in his eyes makes you hold your breath and clench those delicate hands of yours even though you know perfectly well how it'll end.

Sure enough, as he lunges forward his sword finds its soft target. It sinks hilt deep into tough dragon flesh. The beast roars mournfully, a great cry of defeat. You've heard it a hundred times, but it chills you still.

Your hero's arm is soon coated in thick, ruby-black blood. Not his. You let out a sob – of relief? Of joy? No. Of duty. Of habit. That sob was written for you.

He wrenches the sword out of the dying beast with no shout of victory or pride. He drags it along behind him through the dirt like a sullen child until he stands at the base of your tower. He used to glare up at you with the most profound loathing. Now he can't even look at you. You have your readership's monstrous appetite for adventure and courtly love to thank for that.

Time to toss your handkerchief. You've done it a hundred times, what's once more? Yet your stomach turns, gurgling as though you've swallowed poison. As soon as it leaves your fingers, the piece of linen perches on an updraught for a moment, as if it is inhaling. And then, it plummets. Lower and lower until a chain-mailed hand snatches it from the air. Your hero. His castle is filled with rooms of linen squares. His days are filled with hate, his nights with nervous anticipation. And once the fight is over, all he can do is return home to wait for your distressed cries. Because cry you will, so sayeth the author.

Cendrillon

A quick recap of that happy ending of yours. Your prince is still as blonde and blue eyed as he was when you first danced with him at the ball. He is handsome as ever, tall, strapping and broad shouldered. Your skin glows like it did when you were sixteen. Your lips are still soft and pink, your waist is still slender and taut. The two of you aren't bad for a couple who are three hundred years and change.

How have you been enjoying the perpetual honeymoon phase, my plucky young protagonist? What's it like being young and lithe and beautiful in perpetuity? Your ugly stepsisters are still ugly, your stepmother is forever bitter and cruel, while you lived happily ever after. Right?

Except, your beloved Prince hasn't done anything since he stood up to your evil stepmother and took your hand in marriage. And marry you he did, but there were no more pages to your story after that. When you first met, he spoke of fighting dragons and monsters and sailing to distant shores to name new lands after you. He spoke of righting wrongs and being a good king to his people, and you fell for him hard and fast. But now he just lounges and eats and has his minstrels play for him all day. If this weren't a fairy tale he would have gained a paunch and be losing his hair by now. But he's your very own personal Dorian Grey, immortalized on pages, and even worse, in children's minds.

After hundreds of years, you are tired of his lounging, bored of his apathy and fed up with his arrogance. His people flounder in poverty while he eats six meals a day and only eats a bit of every dish. He will order a whole swan and only eat a wing. Or he'll

demand a mountain of truffles and then will only eat the one off the top. And of course, no one is allowed to eat what he throws away lest the poor touch what royal lips once touched. Everything is burned. You never realized he actually gets off on decadence and wasteful extravagance. It turns your stomach and breaks your heart all at once. And not for the first time.

By this point you'd rather your sooty old hearth with a bed of straw than the duvets and canopy beds of the castle. Alas. Thank Charles Perrault for the fact that there is nothing you can do but smile adoringly at your supposed one and only love. Hate boils just beneath your perfect, porcelain skin and your hands shake with the ache to smack that spoiled smile off his face. You eat together and your pleasant conversation chokes you. You sleep together, stiff as boards and equally amorous. After all, the story ends at “Happily Ever After” with the happy couple looking dreamily into each other's eyes, not “And they had satisfying sex for the rest of their days.” You are as virginal as you were when he swept you away. Oh, and you think you love those glass slippers? Wait until your foot fetishist fiancé makes you take them off and put them on for three hundred lifetimes.

So beware, sweet reader. Peer too closely into the pages of your book and you may fall headlong into a story of your own. And if you do, take care. You might find yourself living happily ever after, whether you like it or not.

Summer

It is Tuesday, which means I'm working at Thanks-a-Latte from ten to four. It also means my co workers think I'm Jane, the third-year film studies major at Dal. Excitable and garrulous, prone to solo dance parties when the café is empty. As this Jane, I'll take your photo with my heavy old Polaroid, if you're nice. I tell customers and co-workers that Mom bought it for my Dad for his twenty second birthday and he proposed to her later that day.

In reality, I actually bought it at the little vintage place just off Quinpool. It cost me six bucks.

But what they don't know won't hurt them. And it makes my day a hell of a lot more interesting. As *this* Jane I post the polaroids all over the café. Regulars, strangers, tourists, I immortalize them all on film, if poorly. I tell my co-workers that I don't care how bad my photography is – it makes me happy, and that's all that counts. So what if I like black and white shots of the corners of things?

I tell my film school friends that my favourite movie is Jean-Luc Goddard's “À Bout de Souffle” when it's really “Beau Travail” if I'm going to go French. My friend Zoë tells me Goddard is more *fashionable* these days. Fuck fashion. Let's smoke cloves and watch Claire Dennis.

At my bar job in the evening, I am a whole different Jane. This one makes fun of people like Jane from the café, and talks loudly about how many things hipsters have ruined, like amateur photography and classic cinema. Nighttime Jane is all sixties'

glamour model; too much eyeliner and big hair and sass. This Jane claims to like whiskey, while café-Jane will tell you that she loves Cosmos with extra lime. Daytime Jane can't hold her liquor, but nighttime Jane can hold hers better than a guy twice her size. At 5'4" and 125lb, the former seems more believable to most.

I tell people at the bar that it's because I've been bartending since I was secretly only seventeen and I've been getting into bars since fifteen. I say I understand how to drink. Whiskey will get you drunk quickly and the way you want it: wild, wobbly fun, like the camera guy behind your eyes has an inner ear problem. Then water, because if you don't want a hangover, you have to prevent it right the fuck away. Then another shot. Then another water. Now, you switch to beer and nurse it while the two shots kick in. This way, you won't have beerbelly by 11:30, but you get to taste the beer, which is really all you want. Keep drinking water throughout the night. See how you feel once your beer is finished and go from there. Don't just pound back four beers and wonder while you feel gross in an hour.

Or so I say. I don't ever actually swallow the booze.

The truth is, I've been working as a bartender ever since I got to Halifax, but I've never really liked being drunk. Cosmo or Whiskey Sour, it all tastes gross to me. But tending bar is good money, and I soon found that drunk people like to buy the bartender a shot, so I began to use a secret technique wherein I spit my shot into a nearly empty bottle as though I'm chasing it with a sip of beer. Drunk people don't usually notice, and it seems to put them at ease to think that I'm also drinking. But really? I hate the taste of beer, hard liquor makes me sick, every time. I'd rather be stoned, plain and simple.

Sometimes I'd like to tell people the boring truth: I'd rather sit at home and listen to David Sedaris on *This American Life* than go out and get hammered. I was more moved and amazed by David Adams Richards's *For Those Who Hunt The Wounded Down* than I was by Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. Not that they're contemporaries, or comparable at all, I just mean in terms of personal preference. But I could never tell that to my friends in university, Eli in particular. It was his new favorite book, suddenly. I hadn't even heard of Franzen but one day, everyone and their hipster grandmother was talking about *Freedom*. I googled the *New York Times* review and stole a few choice lines from it so that when my friends asked what I thought of it, I could say that the narrative was intricately ordered and yet capacious, but that I found it too Updikean for my tastes. They seemed to be impressed by this.

As the venerable William S. Burroughs says, good enough to steal.

When I finally did read the book, I found the writing so weirdly smug that I only got a quarter of the way in before I gave up. I think Franzen wants us to look down on his characters. He wants us to be glad we aren't them. I hate that. A writer like Richards, meanwhile, gives us the chance to empathize with his characters and to understand them, and that's *way* more interesting to me. But unfortunately, nobody talks about quiet, obscure Maritime writers over a couple of cold ones, while in the Maritimes. Not in my group of friends, anyway.

Not that I see them much any more. They've been eaten by the monster in academy that ate my parents and big sister. When everyone was looking at university handbooks and going on drives to Mount A and Acadia and UNB, I was looking at the

festival lineup and planning a trip to hit a few festivals across Canada over the following year. I tried explaining to my friends why I wasn't applying anywhere – after a lifetime of stupid, lofty academic discussions accompanying dinner like a basket of stale rolls, the last thing I wanted was to sign up for four years of that, but worse. My father lectured us on Lacan's *objet petit a* on Christmas morning. My mother corrected grammar in her cookbooks with a red pen. My sister gave me a new Norton anthology every birthday, which I suspected were hers from undergrad. Even though they'd left Toronto to move to the quiet of PEI, they brought the academy with them. University seemed like a bigger, more pompous version of the home I left behind me when I moved to Halifax.

But my friends didn't get it. Eli chided me for squandering the chance to learn from them and Zoë tried to convince me that I'd be grateful for parents like that once midterms rolled around. But I didn't have midterms rolling around. I couldn't tell them that I got a job at a coffee shop instead of taking “Introduction to Literary Study.” After a while, it just became easier to lie. I told the few friends that gave me a hard time that I got into Dal. I gave them vague updates and swallowed the “I told you so” comments and they left me alone. I've never lived in the cute student housing area with a bunch of Poli Sci majors. I live with a temperamental spider plant and very little natural light in a squashed apartment in a neighbourhood no one would call “cute.”

After seven years here, nearly all of my friends are still in school or just out of it or going back in for a Master's degree. Or maybe they're working at magically awesome jobs they got through the university. Either way, despite trying my best to avoid it, the university life has surrounded me, infecting my friends, one by one. To keep myself from

caving and applying out of sheer loneliness, I piled on the jobs to fill my time and find myself some money. Seven years is a long time, and I get bored easily. I don't remember when exactly I stopped telling people the truth. But all I have to do is remember where I am and thus, who I am on a daily basis, and it's fine.

And fun.

I push the door to the café and make the little bell jingle. Richard is standing beside the cash register and looks up as I come in. He is in the middle of putting on his coat. Good. I couldn't remember if I was working with him or not today and I'm relieved not to be. He's been a bit of a dick lately.

“Hey, Jane,” he says, sliding into his blazer. He's too dressed up for a café job, even for a supervisor. He's always too dressed up.

“Hey, Dick.” No one calls Richard “Dick” but me. He always makes a sour little face when I do it, so I do it a lot. I think this is why I'm never scheduled with him, which is fine by me. He's making my favourite face right now, in fact. “Big plans for this evening?” I ask. “Wild, daring, Tuesday night plans?” Dick glares.

“Nothing much. Drinks at Sable with a few friends, you know.” Sable is what happens when Halifax tries to be New York. Oil-slick curtains, little nooks with tables but no chairs, so everyone stands. Thirteen dollars for a Cosmo. It suits Dick to a tee. For all the showy confidence and supposed style, they're both arrogant, self-promoting and profoundly uncomfortable to be around. It brings out the snark in me. Only Dick knows Vindictive Jane. I give him my best shark's grin.

“How delightful. Can I come?”

The moment of sheer bunny panic that floods his face like high beams is better than a birthday present.

“But you're... you've just started here and... I'm afraid not, it's... well it's...” he says, looking anywhere but me.

“Terribly exclusive? The party of the season? Oh, *please* let me come.”

He gives me an eye but I give him one back, and nobody gives mean eye like me. He ruffles like a startled chicken and starts to back toward the door.

“Jane...I've really got to go. Have a nice night,” he says. He makes it to the door in two giant steps and then is gone. The door chimes with his delectable exit. I exhale. Now, I can work.

I check my phone to see who I'm working with. I always write it down when I copy my schedule into my phone, so that I'm prepared for a difficult shift, like one with Richard. But I also do it so I know who I am, every day. I work with Makayla today. I have to be careful about what I say around her. Mak knows Eli and I've known Eli since I moved to Halifax from PEI after high school. And he's the only one who knows that unlike everyone else in our group of friends, I didn't go to university or college. This is a bit precarious because Eli knows that, but Mak doesn't. She, like the rest of the staff here thinks I go to Dal for film and believes that I'm originally from Wolfville, Nova Scotia, not PEI. If she and Eli were to chat about me, some little white lies might surface and I'd get some awkward texts. So I don't talk about school much at work. The fewer the balls in the air, the easier it is to juggle them.

“Hey Mak,” I say, as she makes the door jingle a few minutes later.

“Hey, doll! You just get on or are you on your way out?”

“Just got on.”

“Sweeeet.” Her face explodes with a smile. “I was scared I was closing with Richard tonight.”

“Yeah, me too. I don't work with him at all this week, actually. I couldn't deal with him tonight with the shit he's been pulling lately.” I pile my hair into a topnot and secure it with the elastic that is always either in my hair or around my wrist. It's getting so long; it nearly reaches my lower back now. Dick is always hounding me to put it up, though, lest a stray bit of blonde find its way into someone's soup. Mak follows suit and attempts to tame her wild mane of black curls into a bun.

“Oh really? What's he pulling lately?” She gives me a classic movie star wink but I ignore the weird innuendo.

Now here's where it gets complicated. I can't just tell Mak that I made a massive mistake in confiding in him the other night and told him that I'm not really a film major because then she'd know too and that's a wildfire I don't want to chase. I shouldn't have told him but I'm a sucker for late-night chats at the ends of quiet shifts. There was nothing to do, nothing to clean, so we just sat around drinking our “famous” pecan pie lattes and chatted. For once, he was talking to me like a normal person instead of the usual: like he's a stock broker from a 90's movie and I'm some ignorant kid. But that night, for once, he seemed genuinely interested in how I was doing.

“What do you want, Jane?” he asked as I was cleaning the espresso machine.

“What do you mean?”

“From your life. What do you want? From yourself, for yourself... you know, what are you looking for?”

“Direction,” I said, without thinking. “I wish I knew what the fuck I wanted to do.”

“Yeah?” asked Dick.

“Yeah,” I said. “I kind of feel like I'm just...I don't know. Treading water? A skipping record?”

“Wow, those are some cliché metaphors, right there.”

“I know, I know.”

“I thought you were really enjoying third year?”

“Third year?” I asked.

“Yeah. I thought you said your classes were going well. And I thought you had some work lined up for the fall at the Neptune Theatre....”

“OH! Oh.Yeah. Right. Well... here's the thing. I'm not...not actually entirely enrolled in school.”

“Huh,” he said, then smiled an ugly little smile. “Don't worry, Jane, lots of people opt out of a useful university degree and successful adult life in favour of... life experience.”

I wanted to punch him. The smile resurfaced a few days later right when he mentioned to Mak that she and I were part of what they were calling the “jobless generation” and how it was impossible to get any worthwhile job without a Masters degree these days. He looked at me then as if to say, “Oh but that's right, you don't even

have a B.A!” and then smirked for the rest of the afternoon. I don't know why this is so amusing to him. Maybe because it's the only thing he's got on me. Either way, it's getting old. I wish I could bitch about all of this to Mak but when she asks what that was all about I say instead, “I made the mistake of telling him that I bombed a paper. He was less than sympathetic. You know how he just digs the knife in a little when he finds a tender spot?” I make a stabbing motion with my fist and Mak nods.

“Oh yeah. I cut my bangs too short the other day and he picked up on it right away. But instead of asking me about it he just complimented me on my haircut in the snidest fucking tone. Seriously, I wanted to punch him. And then he pointed it out to all of my regulars. 'Doesn't Makayla's haircut look *great*? I think her bangs suit her so much?' He's such an ass.”

As the shift wears on, we gush about our upcoming weekend and the mood lightens considerably. As of Friday, it will be time to hit Evolve, the oldest and the biggest of the new wave of Maritime music festivals and I can't fucking wait for it. Three days of the best music I'll hear all year, of seeing my friends again, of getting to do mush without worrying about being weird and shroomy at work the next day. Five stages, the best parties, the most incredible people on the east coast and just...everything. It makes the long, empty winter worth it.

I could be anywhere this summer. I could be in Montreal, enjoying the jazz in June or in Winnipeg at the folk fest. Hell, I could be at Burning Man or Bonaroo if I felt like going to the US, but I choose to be in Nova Scotia instead, all riled up for the peak of the summertime Maritime music festivals. I've got my little two-person tent tied onto my

ugly little balcony to air it out and I've Febreezed the shit out of my sleeping bag. Every year I tell myself I'm going to get it steam cleaned or something so I don't have to sleep in a cocoon of old sweat and synthetic lavender smell, but I never do. I've got a ride with Eli in exchange for gas money and a promise that I will spend any down-time back-combing and rolling his dreads between my palms so they get nice and tight again. Works for me. I still have to go grocery shopping. I remember my first year, 2004, I just brought junk food and lemonade and hated myself. I've learned over the years that if you intend to dance for ten hours, you've got to come prepared. Fruit, protein, veggies. Lots of water and comfy clothes. Festivals are just like life – all you gotta do is survive 'em and you'll have a blast.

“What d'you think you're going to do for each day?” asks Mak.

“Well I really want to be on E or Molly for LongWalkShortDock, and that's Friday night, so I guess it'll be pills for Friday, Mush for Saturday, because I really want to be tripping when That One Guy hits the stage. Sunday, maybe joints and a tiny bit of Molly? Like, half a pill? Take it a bit easy.”

“Sounds like a beautiful plan.”

“What about you?”

“Aciiid,” says Mak with a giant grin, and she leaves it at that.

“Sweet.” As our shift wears on, I think about what I have left to do: groceries, pack my clothes, get everything together to squeeze into Eli's car. Mak and Eli will have more stuff than I do, I think. It's going to be tight.

It feels like a year passes while I wait for Friday to arrive. When it does, I greet it

with bleary eyes and a fuzzy head after almost no sleep. I never have trouble sleeping and yet last night, I just couldn't sleep. I feel discombobulated when Eli comes by at nine with Mak curled up in the back seat, already fast asleep. I play a game of Tetris with the contents of the trunk and then grab shotgun. It's a two hour drive to Antigonish and we fill it with old jam band favourites from the early Evolve days – Slowcoaster, Burt Neilson Band, Wassabi Collective, and my personal favourite, Fugato, one of the only PEI bands of the era that could really keep up with the new wave of mainland jam bands.

“Man, 2004 was such a good year,” I say, as Grand Theft Bus' “Patio” fades out. Eli's little shitbox of a Civic might not have A/C but it has a badass speaker system. I think he's been tweaking it and improving it since I met him. Neither of us can stand shitty stereos. I don't need fancy food or brand name clothes, but I'll be damned if I'll subject my music to crackling speakers and sub-par bass.

“Was that the last year that Shoreline was still around?”

“No, year after.”

“Oh. OH! Oh man, so that was the really—”

“Really good one? Yeah. The one before a bunch of asshats gatecrashed.”

“That was such bullshit. Way to ruin the only good festival on PEI.”

“I know, right? Like, way to ruin it for everybody else. It was good while it lasted, though. Man, remember Alpaca Balaclava's set? Such good banjo punk. They smashed a watermelon at the end of the jam and it made the stage so fucking gross!”

“Yeah, yeah! And they were only like, the second band on stage too, so it was gross for a while.”

“Haha, yeah! Craig's shoe stuck to the floor at one point but he kept playing with the one shoe.”

“And remember Bruce? In the massive Energizer Bunny costume at Mulley and the Bench Kids set?”

“Oh fuuuuck. That thing was brutal by the end of the festival. He was like a leprous monsterbunny, man.”

“But he kept going!”

“Yeah, thanks to Molly, though, not batteries.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I can't wait to see everybody, man. We've got lots of catching up to do, everybody's been so busy.”

“We were sad you couldn't make SunSeeker.”

“Yeah, me too. But it was either go there or to Evolve, and there's just no contest. SunSeeker's still in its toddler stage.”

Eli nods. We are silent for a few moments.

“So,” he says finally, “I haven't seen you in a while. What's new?”

I sift through the stories I've told people lately – I've got an internship at the Neptune Theatre? Nope, too easy to check up on. I'm seeing a sculptor who introduces me to people as his muse? Too awkward to explain. A book review of mine is being published in *The Coast*? Nah, he's one of the few friends of mine who would actually check that.

“You know, same old, same old,” I say.

“And how's that treating you?”

“I've been working a lot. *This* is the high point, really, this weekend. Then it's all downhill from there.”

“Aw, don't say that. There's still Folly Fest at the end of the month and Dunkstock in September.”

“Yeah, but by that point everyone's thinking about school already. August usually feels like the week after Christmas. Nothing much to look forward to for a whole year after this.”

Eli says nothing to that, and after a few minutes he not-so-subtly turns the music back up. We get there before the gates open, but already there's a line of cars stretching nearly a kilometre down the road. It is hot in Eli's little purple-grey Civic and it makes my head pound, but I don't want to open my window and let in the dust. It seems to take us forever to get in. Wish I had slept on the drive like Mak, who wakes as we arrive, rested and fizzing like soda as we approach the gates at a crawl. Dust clouds float over the parking lot like lost children, looking for someone to cling to. I listen as Mak and Eli buzz about the bands they're most excited for, but it's like they're talking underwater. Their enthusiasm seems far away, unattainable. I'm usually pumped right about now. It's probably just the long drive. I'm sure I'll hit my stride soon.

Mak and I jump out and grab our bags from the back while Eli waits for a parking space. We head for the hill. Mak is bouncing and smiling and saying hi to everyone she sees, whether or not she knows them. She asks a girl with waist-length blonde dreadlocks if she is ready to Evolve and the girl just high-fives her and gives her a grin before continuing on her way. I am not so smiley. I'm beyond sweaty from the steamy

car; my shirt is sticking to me already. My bag digs into my shoulders and the big hill to the camp ground seems steeper this year.

But as we crest it and I see the sea of tents and people, that burst of adrenalin kicks in. That familiar euphoria surges through me, making my chest tight with glee. This is it. This is what I live for. We find our tribe – a mix of my Halifax crew and a few PEI friends from high school. I love how seasoned my crew of friends is at festival going. After years of unpleasant surprises and “If only we had brought _____” moments, we've learned our lessons. A massive yellow flag with the words “You're Home Now” painted on it flies above the tents. Ben and Zoë painted it a few weeks ago and found a perfect pole to attach it to. Too many nights have left us wandering through the sea of tents, missing a great jam on stage because we couldn't find our site. Now a tarp and poles lie beside Ben's tent, ready for setup at the slightest hint of rain. The coolers are stashed and chained together, lest some bro on the hunt for free beer tries to make off with one while the tent circle is empty. That only needs to happen once and you'll learn to come prepared the next summer. Waking up with jelly legs and a hangover is bad enough, but not having any food to wake up to is the worst.

Mak and I immediately set up our tents and the crew shifts things to make room for us. There's no point in waiting – it'll be way harder setting it up in the dark or once you're on something. That's why little two-person tents are awesome. You don't have to share with any wandering friends and it takes no time to put up, unlike Ben's giant ten-person monstrosity. Once they're up, we set up our nest-beds so we can just fall into them when we can't dance any more. Once everything's set up and stashed, we can finally relax

and smoke a jay with our tribe. There are a few people I haven't seen in years, others weeks or months. We settle into a circle and crack beers as multiple joints are rolled. Eli strolls up just as Ben's lighting the first one. He scootches over to let Eli join us.

“Eli! Good to see you, man. What's up?” he says.

“You know me, man. Rocking steady, shooting heavy.”

“Good man.” Ben turns to me. “And what about you, Jane? What have you been up to? I haven't seen you in *months!*”

Ben is right, it has been months. About twelve. I saw him at the last Evolve and that was it. I don't bother lying about what I've been up to, since he wouldn't remember anyway.

“Oh, you know. Work takes up most of my spare time. I try to catch as many shows as I can in between but it's been a quiet winter. How about you?”

Ben launches into how hard the fourth year of his degree is going to be, and how he wonders if economics is really for him. But at least he's got that paid internship lined up for September, right? Things could be worse.

Indeed. What *could* be worse is having the same conversation with all your friends for the next hour. What are you doing these days, Jane? Oh, still working a bunch of minimum wage jobs that have nothing to do with what you're interested in doing? That's too bad. And you have no idea what you'd rather be doing with your life? Oh, how frustrating that must be. I'm looking into grad school/moving to Toronto for a fellowship/running a magazine just like I always wanted to. I'm at the top of my class and will be leaving school with a prize that is worth more than you make in a month with

three jobs. But whatever. No big deal.

Maybe I'm not being fair. My friends aren't that bad, but when you get them together...I don't know. It's like they speak the same university dialect that my parents speak, always analysing, criticizing and referencing obscure shit that doesn't clarify anything. I think smoking is just making me grumpier. Everyone else is laughing and relaxing into the afternoon.

“Want to go mushroom hunting?” I ask, nudging Eli. “I want to get everything found and paid for before I really settle in.” Really, all I want is to get out of this circle. I just want to relax but *everything* is annoying me, right now – Mak's bubbly laugh, Ben's cigarette smoke, Zoë talking about how easy it was to get the grant for the documentary she's been planning. I have nothing to say. Who wants to hear anecdotes about café life or stories about my shitty customers? Eli looks around at the circle. I can tell he doesn't want to go. Finally, he nods, making his brown dreads bounce and wobble. He pushes himself to standing. I follow suit.

“We're going shopping. Anyone else coming?” he says. All we get are lazy headshakes. Buying drugs at festivals can be tricky. You don't get a lot of assholes at these little festivals, but you can never be too sure. You won't get anyone trying to sell you aspirin as E, or anything, but you might get really speedy E that isn't worth the cost and will leave you grinding your teeth like an angry cartoon character all night. Or, occasionally, worse. Much worse. So a while ago they brought in a drug tent for people to bring their purchases to get tested to make sure everything's safe. Some years the festival has been more pill heavy, others there's lots of mushrooms and acid around. Last year you

couldn't find pot anywhere. This was a pain in the ass because the big festivals are where everyone tends to stock up for the summer. One big raid in the Maritimes and hookups dry up overnight, but Evolve, Sunseeker and the other main festivals bring people in from all over the country and it's usually a good place to get decent smokable at a decent price, since everyone's selling. Last year, though, a quarter was going for \$80, which is seriously insane.

Eli's got a buddy coming down from Montreal though who apparently has a beautiful selection of strains, so we keep an eye out for him.

“Look for a top hat. He said he'd be wearing a top hat,” he says, but this doesn't exactly narrow it down. Evolve brings all kinds, but mostly you've got the typical hippie kids, neo flower children in flowy skirts and worn Phish t-shirts. That's pretty much what the original Evolve crew looked like when Joe MacEachern and Jim Dorey started the whole thing back in 2000 – just a bunch of Maritime hippie partiers who loved music and camping in fields. But the older it gets, the more the festival brings in the kind of people I have no patience for: the girls who just come to tan, to get noticed, to try to dance like they're in a club instead of in a field, surrounded by sweating, laughing stoners. The bros who get hammered and spend the night falling onto tents and trying to buy beer off anyone who doesn't give them a wide bearing. The kandi raver high school kids who don't bother to look into the drugs they're taking and wonder why they feel so awful when they drink a bunch of beer after taking two hits of E. It didn't used to be like this.

“There he is!” shouts Eli and dashes off through the crowd. I follow him, weaving around a guy in a giant California Raisins costume. Like I said, this festival attracts all

kinds. I find Eli on the other side of the raisin talking to a skinny guy with wild hair that is trapped under an old top hat. As I join them, he removes it and sets the captive free.

Blond-ish curls toss in all directions.

“Jane, this is James. James, Jane.”

“Hey,” says James, shaking my hand. I expect him to be French, coming from Montreal, but his accent sounds very familiar.

“You're from Montreal, right?” I ask.

“I live there, yeah. I'm from Fredericton, though.”

“Ahh, Freddy! Good stuff. Is this your first Evolve?”

“Yeah. I can't really believe it. I didn't expect it to be so big.”

“It didn't used to be,” I say, looking around me at the sea of tents. “It's kind of exploded over the last few years. I liked it better when it was smaller. It was more intimate, you know?”

“Montreal has lots of festivals but nothing like this. No camping, just music in the streets.”

“That sounds awesome, actually.”

“It is! This though...,” he says, exhaling heavily. “This is something else.” We look at the crowd with a moment of reverent silence and then Eli claps his hands.

“Right! What have you brought us, man? I am so sick of the sock drawer weed I've been finding this summer. Tell me you've got some fun stuff?”

“Indeed I do. Why don't you step into my office?” He gestures toward a big red tent behind him and Eli and I duck down to crawl into it. James follows us in, zipping up

the door but leaving the window screen bit open. From a backpack he pulls two big Tupperware containers, one with a little leaf drawn on the front in Sharpie, the other with a little mushroom.

“What are you looking for, Indica or Sativa?” he asks, making Eli break into a massive smile.

“Man, I've missed you. Dealers in Halifax don't even offer the choice. What do you have for Sativas?”

“Wait,” I say, before he can launch into his selections. “Remind me which is which again?”

“Sativas are more up. More energizing, more mental. Indicas are more relaxing, based in the body. Just remember: Indica – In-da-couch. A very lazy, heavy high.”

“Good reminder! Cool, okay, go on. Whatcha got?”

James goes through his selection, answering questions here and there, letting us smell and look at the strains he has available. Eli gets a full seven of Sour Diesel and I buy a 3.5 of Jean-Guy, a strong up, and a 3.5 of Bubbah Kush, a good relaxant. I also buy a few grams of BC Blues for Saturday. I never start a festival on mushrooms because it messes up the flow of the three days. I'm sticking to the game plan I told Mak : MDMA for tonight, mush for Saturday, beers and joints to wind down on Sunday. When Eli ducks out to go stash his new stash, I ask James if he's got any Molly I can buy for tonight.

“Sorry, I don't do pills. Too synthetic for me. There's a guy a few tent circles away from here that is selling though. Did you know that in about four hours, Ecstasy has used up most of your stored serotonin?”

“Yeah,” I say, scrunching my nose. I'm not in the mood for a lecture.

“You could take more Ecstasy at this point, which a lot of people do,” he continues, seemingly oblivious of my tone. “However, this usually doesn't work. You can't just take more ecstasy to regain the ecstasy feeling. Why? Because the ecstasy feeling is really a "serotonin feeling" and you currently don't have enough serotonin left, so you're essentially running on fumes. And then, it could take anywhere from two days to two weeks to fill your reservoir again, since you're refuelling yourself as well as making enough for later.”

“Gee, thanks,” I say, annoyed by this point. “You remind me of those high school scare tactic videos. 'The Agony of Ecstasy' and all that bullshit.”

“Sorry, that came off a little preachy. I didn't mean it like that...look, pills are fine. I just....” He shrugs, looking uncomfortable.

“It's okay, you don't have to—”

“No really. Look. I....” He spreads his hands, as if looking to them for some kind of answer. “I like facts. I like them so much that sometimes I forget that not everyone prefers them to small talk. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it in a damning way.” He looks at me a bit like a worried beagle and I offer him what I hope is a reassuring smile.

“It's fine, really. I'm... I'm a bit on edge today. I'm not sure why.”

“Well, I think I might have a solution to that,” he says, gesturing at the bags of weed that are overflowing from the Tupperware container at our feet.

It is early yet, so we lounge and roll joints and talk. It's easy with him. Too easy. I accidentally tell him that I'm a theatre major. This isn't one of my regular random lies, it's

one of the rare ones I wish were true. I used to act in high school but I think I was pretty mediocre. I got lots of tertiary parts – the unnamed sister with one line or the hysterical townswoman – but never anything that actually tested me. I never got to see if I could be any good. I shouldn't have told him that I'm a theatre major. Why did I say that? James knows Eli, and if this comes out, I'll have sooo much explaining to do, I start to ease the conversation toward our respective cities instead.

“I love theatre, of course, but I love jazz even more. We have a little jazz festival here – nothing like Montreal's, of course but—”

“Hey, Montreal's isn't anything like Montreal's. It used to feature real jazz, not nu jazz or swing jazz or fucking Nikki Yanofsky. Hell, The Lost Fingers even played a few years ago and they're nowhere even close to jazz.”

“I don't know them. Are they any good?” I ask.

“Not if you're looking for jazz,” mutters James. “The Ottawa Blues Festival's no better. You're more likely to see George Clinton and Parliament than Buddy Guy.”

“Isn't Buddy Guy dead?”

“Yes, but that's not the point,” he says, taking a joint from me. He smokes it delicately – one little puff, two, three. Then the smoke trickles out of his lips as lazy as can be before he sniffs it back up. Jesus. The boy can French inhale.

“Anyway, yes. We have great festivals. Nuit D' Afrique, Les FrancoFolies, Folk Fest on the Lachine Canal. There's a Baroque festival some time in June. Then there's Just for Laughs, Fantasia, and Pop Montreal. And those are only the ones I can think of with a head full of smoke,” he says, passing me the smoke in question.

“Sounds like it's impossible to be bored. Sounds nice,” I say.

“Yeah, but we don't have anything like this,” he says, gesturing around us.

“Osheaga's got nothing on Evolve.”

“Yeah, but then it's dead here all winter. You guys seem to party all year long. People here go into serious social hibernation at the end of October and don't surface until May. My friends look like little white grubs at the first party of the spring.”

James laughs. He props his head on his backpack and his feet on a cooler.

“Yeah, I guess we do know how to make the best of winter in Montreal. We have Igloo Fest in the Old Port and skating at park LaFontaine and Nuit Blanche. Do you guys have that here? Its a night where everything's open all night, even the metro.” I take a last drag and pass it back to him. Maybe I'm just really baked, but it seems like while his hand moves, to take it, everything else about him is incredibly still. Not tense, though, just... contained. It's like he's a dancer, isolating his movements, holding everything in tight. But the hand that passes me the joint is as languid and lazy as a body after sex.

Don't think about James after sex. Concentrate.

“We even have a summer-long firework competition between a bunch of countries every week,” he says. “They launch them in the Old Port.”

“Whaaaat. Amazing! We only have them on Canada Day and they're like five minutes and really crappy.”

“I know, right? You should come some time. I bet you'd love it, “ he says before blowing a messy smoke ring and passing the joint to me.

“I know I would. I barely have any French, though.”

“That doesn't stop the students. You can live downtown and never need French.”

“Fuck off. Really?” I take a puff and attempt a smoke ring. I get a cloud of smoke, instead.

“Of course. Mind you, there's a downtown in every city. If you came to Montreal I'd take you to Hochelaga to watch the fireworks. You can see the whole city from the rooftop of my building.”

“Well then, I might just have to come some day.” I give him suggestive eyebrows that were meant to be cheesy but I think he takes them as genuine because he looks very serious all of a sudden. Oh dear. Classic, Jane. Prepare to die of awkwardness in three... two... one...

“Well now that you mention it, I do need a new roommate come September,” he says, ploughing a hand through his hair. This jars me. I thought he was about to give me the, “Well, I've got all this weed to sell so... I'd better get going...,” line, not an invitation to live with him. Who *is* this guy?

“The first month is paid, even. My old roommate gave me basically no notice whatsoever that he was moving out.”

“What? That blows.”

“Yeah, he got a sweet job offer in Vancouver but only if he could be there the following Monday. It sucks, but I told him we'd be cool if he paid his half for August while I looked for somebody new. I guess his new gig's gonna pay pretty well, and he figured that was fair, so... yeah. Free place to stay in Montreal?”

My chest tightens suddenly at the thought of just picking up and going. My gut

instinct is to say yes, but I have so many lies tying me down – my family thinks I'm at Dal, studying film, and so do some of my friends. Others think I'm just working my café and bar jobs until my internship at Neptune starts in September. How would I explain picking up and going to all of them?

“That sounds... amazing. But I've got a job and I've got school... you know. Stuff.”

“I hear ya, stuff gets in the way. Anyway, give it a think,” says James with an easy shrug. “Let me know by Sunday if I should stop looking. As long as you can pay the rent and you don't light things on fire, I'm sure we could cohabit,” he says, and takes the joint.

“Really? That's all it takes to be your roommate? No unreliable pyros?” I snap my fingers. “Just my luck.”

“Honestly, even if you were late with the rent but didn't burn the fucker down, I'd probably let you move in. I love my place but there's no way I can afford it on my own, cheap as it is.”

“Even selling this stuff?” I ask, nudging his box of pot with a toe. He shrugs and takes the warrior's puff – the last toke before you hit the joint's filter – before grinding out the joint on the sole of his shoe.

“That's not my usual job. A buddy of mine sells this stuff usually and wanted to come this weekend but his sister chose to get married tomorrow. He's fuuucking pissed to be missing such a good lineup, but he said he'd pay for my ticket and give me all the weed I can smoke in a weekend if I can sell this whole box by Sunday. I wouldn't, normally. Selling freaks me out a bit but it's been a slow summer for work.”

“And what do you do?”

“This and that. Right now I've got about five jobs.”

“Five! Jesus. I thought three was bad enough.” His eyebrows jump at this.

“Bad? I love it! I get to do different things every day, all the time. I make enough to survive on, and that's all I need. What could be better than that?”

“Tell me about them,” I say. I want him to keep talking but it's getting too hot in here. I unzip the door and crawl out and spread myself out on the grass. The air is cool after the pot-perfumed greenhouse of the tent. I lie in the thick grass, and somewhere, on some stage bass begins to pound. It sends a pulse through the ground and into me, thudding in my chest like a heartbeat. Ah-duh-duh-duh-duh Ah-duh-duh-duh.

“Well,” he says, crawling out after me, “That depends on the day.” I turn and watch him extricate himself from the red tent. He's all limbs, I realize, as his shirt rides up his back. Not quite skin and bones, but lithe, like a soccer player or an antelope or something. It's been a while since I saw a beautiful boy without his shirt on.

“And on the time of day,” he says as zips the tent door shut. “On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, from ten to three I work at the Belgo gallery. The artists like to have someone sitting in on their vernissages to answer questions and provide info about the artists.”

“What's a vernissage?”

“An art showing. Like, an artist will leave their stuff up for a month or two and people can come in and look at their leisure. I'm the guy who answers their questions.”

“Cool. What else do you do?”

“Well,” he says, “I tend bar at Biftek on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the day,

because everyone hates the day shift. No tips. Fridays I garden for this lawyer in the Plateau who is too busy to learn to garden and to take care of said garden.”

“What's the Plateau? Is it a real plateau? I thought Montreal had a mountain in it?”

“It isn't and yes, it does. The Plateau is a trendy neighbourhood and the Mountain isn't really a mountain. It's a big hill.”

“Oh.”

“Then on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays in the evening I'm a waiter at a little place in Hochelaga called Madame Bolduc. It's like a little neighbourhood diner, but it's not a chain, or anything. It's awesome. Mismatched stuff all over the walls, handwritten menu, bottomless coffee. All day breakfast kind of place, great food. I kind of love it.”

“Nice. I love diners,” I say.

“Me too. Especially ones with bottomless coffee. I love just... sitting in diners, you know? I could sit for hours, nursing a cup and a bowl of soup and read. Or write. Or sketch. Anything's possible in the right diner.”

“Totally! See? Fuck. Nobody else gets it. It's kind of... what's that word? Liminal?”

“Yeah. Liminal space. In between kind of place, right?”

“That's it,” I say. “I don't know why I love them so much. I guess... they're kind of peaceful.”

“Well, not all of them. I don't love Cora's, or any of those big, ugly breakfast chains. Well... except in Quebec.”

“Really? Quebec has redeemed chain diners?”

“Yeah, for sure! There's one called Belle Province. It's not as cool or unique as Bolduc but it's still pretty damn good.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Bottomless – *amazing* – coffee, for one. But not like, fancy amazing, just solid, tasty coffee, you know?”

“Oh yeah, when it's just right, diner coffee is perfect. It's weirdly good.”

“Absolutely,” he says. “Now, if you want reaaaaaally good, high end coffee, I'd take you to Myriade down near Concordia for a perfect, fair trade latte. But for a regular, nice cup of coffee, I'd take you to Belle Province. It's probably just Folgers or something but you know, these guys have been working in the all day breakfast industry for so long that they just *have* to know how to make a good pot of coffee.” James' whole face is shining now. Who'd have figured I'd find a kindred spirit diner-wise at Evolve, of all places. “And they serve it in those like, classic white diner mugs.”

“I've walked out with a few of those before,” I admit.

“Me too!” chirps James.

“And the bland pancakes and the white toast?”

“Ahhhh! The only time I ever eat white bread and fried eggs is when I'm hung over, and at Belle Province. But they're fucking perfect.”

“And you just stay there until your headache goes away and you have energy again because you've probably had like, an entire pot of coffee over the course of the afternoon,” I say, giggling now.

“Because diners are fucking *awesome!*” says James and raises a hand. I high five

it.

“Okay, so, that's four, what's your last job?” I ask.

“Saturday afternoons I pose for a painter named Jean. He's doing a series of famous literary characters and I'm his Dorian Grey,” he says.

I'm not sure what to say to this, because I only vaguely know who Dorian Grey is. I remember the name from some high school English class but that's all I can recall.

“That's cool. Must be hard to sit still for so long.”

“Not really. It's a little like meditating and Pilates at the same time. I've been learning to tighten my core without holding my breath. Once I realized how key that was, it became way easier to stay still.”

I also don't know what Pilates is either, other than something Jennifer Aniston swears by on the covers of the *People* and *US Weekly* magazines that people leave in my café. I'm saved from admitting this by Eli, who returns after long last.

“Hey! What are you guys still doing here? Holy Fuck is on the Yippee! stage right now! You coming?”

“Oh shit, let's go!” I say, scrambling to my feet, but James doesn't move.

“You go ahead. I've got some selling to do.” I nod and turn to go but he calls my name. I really like the way he says it.

“I hope you consider Montreal. I think you'd fit right in.” I smile all the way to the stage and it has nothing to do with the pill Eli just gave me.

~

I don't know what time it is, but the sun's up. People are milling about. Some, like

me, haven't slept yet. Others crashed at a reasonable time so that they will be well rested for the big Saturday schedule, but not me. I'm still up, but just starting to wind down. I've lost track of how long I've been dancing. I ignored my new friend's advice and have been rolling on Molly since I left him. I pretty much just stayed at the Yippee! stage all night. Band after band hit the stage and rocked my socks off over and over. After Holy Fuck! ended suddenly I found myself surrounded by my crew. Everyone was there: Zoë appeared behind me out of nowhere and Ben made his way to find us front and centre. Eli to my left and Mak to my right. Familiar, smiling faces everywhere.

And then, we danced.

It was perfection with a capital P. ManMan tore up the stage and the crowd surged together, a swaying, waving, writhing beast. Nobody pushing or shoving or punching. There were no mosh pits, no bottles thrown or fights picked. *This* is why we come to Evolve every summer – to find a way to come together for three days and, with the help of music and drugs, connect profoundly with the hundreds of festival goers around us. To Evolve beyond our worries, our jobs and our day to day lives. To pursue joy, wherever we can find it.

The crowd moved together like a current, riding the ebb and flow of music that never seems to stop. One band became the next and the next. We breathed together, filling lungs with the sweet summer air and exhaling all of the shit, all of the stress and the sadness and the baggage of the year up until now. And as the sun peeked over the horizon and made the sky blush, we were born anew; still the pile of twenty-something hippies with happy hearts that we were when we arrived, but now with squeaky clean

starts to the year.

This is our New Year, not the cold, miserable date a few days after Christmas.

This is when *we* make resolutions for the coming year. I will fear less, hope more. I will talk less, say more. I will buy less, dance more. I will find adventures wherever I can. In the light of the morning, these plans felt... possible. Nothing feels possible at the end of December.

I didn't stop dancing until the third encore by Luther Wright and the Wrongs. It ended in a jammy scrum of chords that made the crowd howl in delight. Once the musicians began to pack up, we turned around and made the pilgrimage back to our tents. I could hardly stand after a full night of dancing, so arm-in-arm with a blissful Eli and a grinning Mak, I trundled up the hill toward the tent city.

Once we're setted back in our tent circle, we have wake-and-bake despite the fact that none of us have slept yet. My Molly has long since worn off but the joint buoys me into a state of over-tired, contented delirium. I've been lying here looking at the sky, has turned the colour of the pinkest, most succulent cotton candy I can imagine. I wish I could just reach up and pull a bit from the sky and pop it in my mouth. It would so hit the spot right now. Something light and sweet that takes no effort to eat, because... Jesus. I can't move *anything*. My legs feel like waterbeds, making me wobble every time I put any weight on them. Even my arms are tired. I roll myself into my tent and squeal in delight to find the bed-nest I made earlier. I kick off my shoes and close the door to my tent and then collapse. I have a feeble thought of taking off my pants but suddenly nothing matters but how soft my pillow is.

~

Somehow, it is dark when I wake up. This doesn't make sense. It was light when I went to bed. The sun was rising. How can it be *dark* now?

I inch my aching legs out of my jeans and into a pair of shorts. It feels like someone's taken a hammer to my highs and calves. I'm out of festival shape – since I missed Sunseeker last month, I'm not used to dancing for ten hours straight, yet. I stumble out of my tent to find a massive sky of stars above me and what appears to be Saturday night in full swing.

What. The. Fuck.

How did this happen? Did I really sleep for... how many hours is that? When did I go to sleep? How long after the sun rose was I up? Was it six am? Or ten? I try to remember who I've missed. If it's this dark, it's probably around... eight thirty? Nine? Oh man, so I've probably missed Do Make Say Think, Medeski Martin & Wood, maybe, Vaseline Philosophers most definitely. And Chali 2na. I've been listening to him since I was sixteen, since I first discovered Jurassic 5. I used to say his name out loud a lot because it made me sound like Katharine Hepburn. For years I've wanted to see him and now I've slept through his fucking set. God damn it. God *damn* it! Why didn't anyone wake me?

Whatever. Maybe they tried but I was dead to the world. I've done that. I go too hard my first night and I'm genuinely unwakeable the next day. Wouldn't be the first time. There's no one around the tent circle. I duck back into my tent to change my shirt and find my mushrooms. I've got some catching up to do. As I'm rummaging for them,

something occurs to me and gives me a sharp squeeze in the gut. What if nobody noticed?

What if they didn't even realize I was missing?

Ohhh fuck. I'll never forgive them for that.

I make my way from the tent to the circle of food trucks at the other end of the festival grounds. I find Eli waiting in line at a taco truck. He gives me a big smile until he sees the look on my face.

“Jane! Hey... shit. Did you just wake up?”

“You forgot me? Everyone forgot me. What the hell, Eli!”

“I'm so sorry, man. You crashed around ten and I did too and then everybody rallied around two so and I figured you'd just sleep for another hour or so.”

“I didn't get much sleep on Thursday. And I thought you'd wake me. Thanks for having my back, man.”

“Jane, I'm not your fucking babysitter. Jimmy Swift did an impromptu jam with OKA this afternoon and then things got going and I lost track of who was where. I figured you were at another stage,” he says. “I'm sorry you slept in, but you know how it is.”

“No, I know how it used to be. Used to be we were tripping buddies, Eli. I thought we kept an eye out for each other.”

“Dude! You pouted for most of the drive, you got bitchy as soon as we sat down and dragged me away from the tent circle to go drug hunting, then you squirrel yourself away with my drug dealer until I come to remind you that there's a fucking music festival on, and that you might be sad to miss it.” He scowls and takes a step ahead as the line

moves. “Oh, and I found you some Molly and you never thanked me or paid me back, so how's that for being a good tripping buddy, Jane?” His brown dreads bounce as he shakes his head and scowls.

I forgot about that. I tell Eli as much.

“Yeah, there's a lot that's forgettable about you these days, Jane. You're never around, you always get that look on your face when I ask you what you've been up to. Like you're picking and choosing what you tell me. I don't even know what you do, anymore. Last time I swung by where you said you worked, they said they'd never heard of you. So don't give me this bullshit about being a bad friend when you've been a ghost for months. Hell, the last few years. If I invite you to a party with school friends of mine, you get all resentful and make snarky comments about what a waste of time university is. We get it, Jane. You feel left out. But before you climb on your high horse, let me tell you that you don't exactly make it easy to include you. You treat everyone around you like it's our fault you hate your life.”

Eli steps ahead. He is the next in line at the counter. I do not move up with him. I want to say that I don't hate my life, but I'm not sure that's true, so I walk in the opposite direction as Eli. I don't look back when he calls my name. He only does it once. He doesn't follow me.

Fuck him. I don't make it difficult, they make it difficult. What do they expect when they invite me to things where everyone just vomits up theories by Foucault and Derrida instead of their own fucking ideas? Who wants to listen to that all night? But maybe that's what a degree really gives you, that perfected academic self-righteousness.

That stupid fucking lofty tone that makes them think they can say things like, “That's so post-post-modern,” and pull it off. I should just drop all the lies one night and talk about my collection of minimum wage jobs after they've finished quoting the impressive bits of their research papers at me. Or maybe expound upon my love of “middlebrow” thrillers? It might be worth it to see the girl who spent the whole night talking about her huge SSHRC cringe, as though I've expressed a love for toxic slime instead of Daphne du Maurier.

Fuck this noise. Fuck them. Fuck your SSHRC grant.

I pull one tinfoil-covered ball out of my pocket. It is warmed and melting on one side from the contact my thigh. Two grams of mushrooms mixed into melted chocolate and then chilled. Just what I want – giggling, distractions and funky visuals. I unwrap the ball and pop it in my mouth. Forget it. They don't even *know* me. Half the shit I've told Eli, I made up. The truth is, I don't like red licorice. Scotch still tastes like chemicals and feet to me, whether it's Jameson or a bottle that costs two hundred bucks. I love old BBC episodes of Sherlock Holmes and secret late night grilled PB&J sandwiches on rye bread, but none of that ever seems as interesting as the shit I can make up.

I need something to do while my mushrooms kick in. I hang out at the sunflower stage but there's some weird trance dub-step shit and it gives me bad vibes. The gnarly WOMPWOMP of the dubstep is everywhere. I can feel it buzzing under my skin, or maybe that's the first thrill of the drug. Even as I make it to the rave tent I can hear it in the distance, hounding me. The tent is hot and packed but I stay a while because the heavy electrical beats almost drown out the rogue dubstep. The dark mass of bodies

writhes around me, a pit of upright snakes. After a while, I can't stand it, the sliding of sweat-slick skin against my own makes me sick. Time to leave.

As I leave the tent, troops of goosebumps raise hairy spears against the sudden assault of a cool breeze, making me shiver. I look at the sky. Overcast, hiding the moon. The clouds look like curdled milk. Gross. I head to the main causeway. It winds all the way through the tent city, from the swimming hole at one end of the festival grounds to the bottom of the hill at the other, where the main stage is. If I stay on the path, I won't get lost. And right now, that's an important priority, as details in my surroundings are starting to skew. I pass a tiny, adorable girl selling cookies along the thoroughfare through the tents while her companion winds bright yellow hemp around a limp dreadlock. Her dreads must be babies; they're hardly knitted together yet but with some hemp wound around them, some wax and some attentive backcombing they might be ready in time for next summer's festival season. Her hair couldn't have been much longer than shoulder length originally by the looks of it, since a pineapple of hair has sprouted from the crown of her head. I don't like it. Hair shouldn't be fruit shaped. She hands me a cookie with a giant smile. There's a scrap of white lace tied around her wrist.

“Every tenth person gets a free cookie!” she says. She has a Russel Stover candy tin filled with cookies. There's a steady stream of people passing her and I wonder whether she's actually counting or if I look like I need a cookie.

It's gotten darker since I went into the rave tent; the clouds have moved on with the help of the wind and the soft yellow-pink glow of the sun has slipped below the horizon, leaving it an expanse of ink and diamond dust. Shadows pantomime against the

walls of the tent city and fire spinners and hula hoop girls are out in full force now. A funky bassline comes from somewhere behind me and I dimly recall that the Drama Mamas are on now, somewhere. I don't want to dance right now. Shouts and laughter volley over the tents like beach balls but the press of people around me on the causeway makes my skin itch. I try to sit and be buried by the thrum of drums, but sitting amongst the pockets of drum circles just makes my head pound.

Everything feels tight; my skin, my scalp, the air around me. The music on the closest stage is something weird and thrashy. I try to go in the opposite direction from it but there are a bunch of fire dancers in my way. I weave around them but their fire seems to follow me, licking at me like I taste good.

“I am not fire food!” I yelp and dash around a girl spinning a flaming baton. I hear a confused “What the fuck?” as I make my escape. Only twenty feet away is the big hill that has the main stage at the bottom. Space.

But somehow I've managed to get turned around and I find myself back where I was with Eli near the food. To get to the hill I'll have to shove my way through the madness that is the food area, which lies between me and freedom. Booths and food trucks form a kind of corral, keeping all the hungry drunks and stoners in one place. I plunge into the sweat-slick mass of people. All the people I push past seem to wear the same blank expression. The waiting expression. They wait in line for food, just like they waited in line in their hot, dusty cars when they got here. They waited all summer for this fucking festival and they're still waiting. I hate waiting.

I eject myself from the other side of the corral with a triumphant shove and barrel

directly into a mobile hat rack.

“Jane! Hi!” it says as I scramble to my feet. I realize after a moment that it is in fact skinny James in his top hat, not a hat rack. He offers me a hand and I take it.

“Hi,” I say, trying not to make eye contact. I don't want to see another one of those blank faces. Also, my pupils are probably massive. “I was going to the hill,” is all that I can manage. I move away from the crowd of people and the smell of grease and toward the crest of the huge, grassy hill. The far edge of the festival. From here the water in the distance looks like silver silk. The wind went to bed when the sun did and left the fields around us and the water below still and silent.

The grass wriggles under my feet, each blade curling in on itself and uncurling as millions of its siblings do the same all across the field. It feels like it would carry me wherever I wanted to go, if I let it. Away from the skipping record of my life. I spread my hands wide and feel the grass beneath my fingers. I clench handfuls of it in my fists.

“Breathe,” says a voice. I think for a moment that the grass is speaking to me, but then a cool hand rests on mine and I turn to find James attached to it. He gently pries open my fingers and coaxes my hand to release its grassy prisoners.

“Breathe, Jane. Come on, from the belly.” He leans back and takes a deep breath, filling his stomach first, then his chest. I do the same, settling into the cool grass as I exhale.

We lie there for a bit, just breathing. The fizz in my veins wanes a bit, the pounding in my head eases off. The chill of the dew soothes my skin and after a while, it stops feeling itchy and tight.

“So,” says James, breaking the silence. “Why don't you tell me about your night?”

I don't want to admit that I've spent the last few hours pouting and freaking myself out and the rest of the day sleeping. I can feel the lies sprouting on my tongue, the old instinct kicking in.

“Well,” I say, “I guess... my night started when I caught Kimchi Mama at the Stay Awhile Stage around five. Then Barracuda Breakdown came on and I danced to them for a bit, but they only played a twenty five minute set.”

“Really? That's bullshit.”

“Yeah,” I say, hating how easily the lies come. “Their guitarist broke a string and then something else went wrong and it took awhile to fix. They were only given a forty-five minute slot too, since they're new this summer.”

“No, I mean, that's bullshit. I watched their whole two hour set.” The truth hovers there, precarious as a bubble. I don't have the slightest clue what to say.

“So, since we both know that isn't what you did this evening, do you want to tell me what you really did, and why you look like you're about to have a heart attack?” He rolls onto his stomach and looks at me. I roll onto my side to look at him. The noise from the stage feels very far away, as though it's only him and I on this field.

“I ran,” I say. The truth tastes strange in my mouth. Or maybe that's just the mushroom chocolate aftertaste.

“From what?”

“Everything. Eli tried to tell me the truth and I pushed him away.”

“Why?”

“It's easier to lie.”

“And how's that working out for you?”

“It sucks,” I say, before I can stop myself.

“Go on,” says James.

“I get stuck in my own lies. I can't do the shit I've always wanted to do because I've told all my friends that I'm great at it. If I start trying to do it now, they'll know I'm full of shit.”

“What would you like to do?” asks James. “If money were no option, what would you spend your next six months doing?”

“Oh man,” I say. “I'd learn to surf, make homemade pasta, like my mom used to. I'd love to go skiing on a *real* mountain. Maybe on the West Coast. I'd love to festival hop across North America, too. Not just have festivals every summer but all year long.”

“Then why don't you?” asks James. “You could have moved at any time in the last seven years. Have you stayed in Halifax for seven years? For this?” he says, gesturing at the festival around us. “From what you've said, it sounds like it's not enough for you any more. So why don't you leave?”

“What would I do? I've spent the last seven years becoming a really good waitress and a decent bartender but other than that, I've got nothing I can take anywhere,” I say. “I should have gone to school with everyone else.”

“Jane, your friends are getting degrees that will make them so specialized, they'll have to follow the jobs to wherever they're offered. They're at the mercy of their own education. You know what every city in the world has?”

“What?”

“Bars and restaurants. You can work anywhere, Jane. Sure, it's meagre, but it's a life, and it would be *yours*, not one dictated by what your friends are doing. What have you got to hold you here? A good summer lineup next year?”

We say nothing for a while. Hey Rosetta! is jamming away on the main stage below us. I wonder if I could do it, just pick up and move to somewhere I've never been. At the thought of it, I get that little “squeee!” feeling behind my sternum, the kind I get when I've got a crush. The kind I get when James looks me dead in the eye and holds my gaze until I have to break away. The dew falls during our silence. The crickets try to harmonize.

“Listen,” he says, spreading his palms flat. “I need a roommate, you need an escape plan. September's rent is paid at my place, so why don't you come and see the city? Bus tickets are super cheap, and if nothing else, you'll be getting a change of scene *and* you'd be doing me the favour of keeping me company while I look for a new roommate if you decide not to stay, which is also totally fine. What do you say?” he says, sticking t a hand out to me. “Sound like a plan?”

I think about what Eli said.

I think about my exorbitant rent and my dying spider plant and my tiny apartment.

I think about the quiet feeling of dread I get when the summer ends.

I think about the beautiful boy lying beside me, offering me options. I take his hand and shake it. He grins and shakes it again. He reaches around to the little backpack he's brought and opens it to reveal two cans of Keith's. He cracks them both open and

hands a foamy one to me. Even though I hate beer, I take it and raise it to him.

“To new beginnings?” I offer.

“How 'bout a new chapter, instead?” says James. “At least that way we don't have to scrap all of this and start over.”

“I'll drink to that,” I say, nudging his can with mine. When he holds my eyes this time, I don't break away until he does.

The End.

Dead Letters

After a year of a quiet, empty home, Elliot couldn't take it any more. The silence. It crept into the spaces she left, the spaces they used to fill with laughter and little talks and so much love. Retirement didn't seem as boring as he feared it would be with Mary by his side. She had been his favourite person for fifty years and, somehow, she made everything better. Even the banal things, the chores and grocery shopping, were better with her strange observations and her silly little jokes. He saw her for the first time in a cinema when he was twenty. The year was 1960 and she was alone and nestled against the wall, entranced by the screen. He was more compelled by the tiny nuances in her expression than anything in the film, and so he watched her face for an hour instead.

But now the year was 2010 and Mary was gone, and the world was strange. Elliot didn't like it very much any more. Too many people were sick and everything was so expensive. Food tasted a little like plastic, these days, and the school where he worked was filled with computers that made it difficult for him to keep up with the younger teachers. He hit seventy and found that he could not get through the day without struggling with one computer or another. The school's administration gently suggested he finally look into retirement, and so, with a heavy heart, he did. The world had been passing him by for years now. Like a rock in a river, the world coursed around him, flowing by in a blur of technology. With Mary by his side, he had been able to tolerate it, but liver cancer took her away from him. Losing his job had been bad enough but losing Mary on top of that was more than Elliot could bear. He clung to her as tight as he could.

Every day, he begged God to keep her alive. God answered. Mary Bellows fought longer than the best case scenario her doctor had offered her, which was six months, give or take. But in the end, she wasted away despite Elliot's prayers until finally, she was gone.

In his now bountiful amounts of time alone, Elliot shuffled around Montague. Elliot could remember what Montague was like before it was bookended with Tim Horton's at one end of town and a MacDonald's at the other. It used to be a gentle little place that was good for raising kids and getting by. It was so pretty here, the way the sun set over Montague river. But now there was a hotel down by the waterfront and there are always too many people at the old gazebo he used to go to with Mary. He proposed to her there, long ago. She had looked at him with such hope when he put the ring on her finger that it broke his heart a little to think about it. But now, teenagers have painted their big, ugly scribbles in black spray paint all over it and he could barely recognize it. No respect, this generation. No respect.

It made him sad to sit around and have lonely meals by himself. The empty kitchen table haunted him. To distract himself he read *The Guardian* every morning, but soon that made him sad too. Every day, things got worse. Headlines like, "P.E.I. town fears fire was hate crime," or "Proposed new highway set to run through arable fields and untouched woods in Bonshaw," made him feel scared for his little home. In the year since Mary had died, it started crowding in, all this sadness. So when he saw an ad in the paper for a "mail sorter" he applied right away. He wanted to do something mindless. Something he could get lost in. He needed to not think, just for a little while.

The young man on the phone sounded confused when Elliot told him that he

wanted the job.

“I'm calling about the mail sorter position,” said Elliot. “Have I called the wrong place?”

“No,” said the man. “It's just that... well, we only just put that ad out yesterday and frankly we weren't expecting an answer so quickly. You- uh... I guess you could come in for a... sort of..interview?”

“Of course, of course. When would you like me to come in?” Elliot asked.

“Uh... whenever? I don't... ahh... I should ask my manager, probably. Can I get your name and number and he'll call you back?”

“Very well,” replied Elliot. “My name is Elliot Bellows, 838-5955. I'm *very* interested in the position.”

“Right,” said the man, and hung up.

Two days later a man called from the post office and asked Elliot to come in for an interview. When Elliot arrived, the man in charge seemed to recognize him.

“Didn't... didn't you used to work at the high school here?” asked the man as he shuffled letters like a deck of cards.

“Yes,” said Elliot. “I had to leave. The technology was... ah, well, I've never much liked computers much, you see.”

“And now you... *want* to sort mail?” asked Leon.

“Yes,” said Elliot.

“Alright,” said Leon, his round face scrunched. “How 'bout we try you out for a few days and we'll go from there. Come on, I'll show you to your station.” He looked

wary, but perhaps that was just Leon's default expression. Elliot sensed he was glad to see the position filled. And Elliot could see why. The Montague post office was hardly PEI's largest post office, and the number of dead letters that arrived every week was few. At the bigger offices in Charlottetown, Leon explained, the dead letters sometimes had to be culled by the week or month, depending on the time of year. However, since Montague was so small a town, they did not amount to enough for someone to deal specifically with them on a regular basis, explained Leon. So, the dead letters got chucked in a bin for years and years, with no one going through them. The previous manager of this post office discovered a whole room full of them six months ago and promptly quit and disappeared. Word is, he's hiding out at his winter home in Florida until all this gets cleared up.

“That,” says Leon, “is where I come in.”

Leon was transferred from Charlottetown to Montague in the chaos because he was the assistant manager at one of the branches in town. Plus, since he lived smack dab in between the two towns, he was an ideal candidate. Leon was livid. He had spent his whole life trying to get away from Montague and all he'd managed was a tiny apartment in town, but it was enough. Until now. His boss told him it was only until they found a proper replacement but they never did. And so Leon found himself rather in over his head, and in the shuffle, the dead letters were forgotten. Until last month, when they were trying to reorganize and discovered the room filled with boxes and boxes of them. So when Leon placed an ad in the newspaper in a bit of a panic, he never expected anyone to apply on the first day. Especially not someone who was so excited about the position.

“This is your station,” said Leon, opening the door to the dead letter room. There were no windows, just four walls that the fluorescent lights bleached a sickly yellow colour.

“Where should I start?” asked Elliot.

“Wherever you want. Organize as you go. And try not to bother me,” replied Leon. He turned and slammed the door behind him. Elliot was left alone with the boxes.

He began with basic categories: unreadable address, non-existent addressee (God, Santa, etc.) and missing addressee and/or sender. For weeks, he sorted, and his categories grew. The letters for God filled up the box more than letters to the Easter Bunny did, and Elliot felt there should be separate boxes for both, but he was running out of boxes. He decided to ask Leon for more organizational materials to help the sorting process.

“What kind of materials?” asked Leon.

“Well now, it would be nice to have stackable plastic bins to put the letters into rather than those old beaten up banker's boxes. And maybe some labels and pens.”

“You're not allowed to buy anything for the post office. I'd have to be there to pay for them,” said Leon, looking meaningfully at Elliot and then at the clock that was showing five minutes to noon. Elliot smiled gratefully.

“That would be such a great help - and the sooner the better. Thank you!” he said. He couldn't understand why Leon scowled at him as he left. When he returned, Leon brought him stackable bins, markers, labels and pens. He then disappeared into his office with his lunch and did not come out for the rest of Elliot's shift.

And so, Elliot spent his days sorting the dead letters. There was a box for illegible

mail, for letters with unreadable handwriting or water damage that obscured the address. Sometimes the carriers had just been too lazy or in a rush to make the effort to read it, and if Elliot could make out what it said, he would write it clearly beside the original, circle it and toss it in a box to be sent back out. Other letters could not get to their addressees because they no longer lived at the listed address and did not leave a forwarding one. These were often sent back to the sender, but if there was no return address, or if *they* no longer lived at *their* address, Elliot was allowed to open them. The justification was that sometimes people used stationery with their addresses at the top, or others included the new address in the letter. And thus, a loophole was born. This loophole let Elliot open the doors to these other lives and look around a little. Initially, he felt bad, like he was stealing something from them. But as the weeks went on and he reminded himself that this was his job now, he began to relax and enjoy it. It was thrilling, even, that little peek into the dramas of others. And while some contained good news – the births of babies, the finishing of degrees and such – others contained such tragedy that they reminded him that while his loss was sad, there were many, many things that could be worse.

If the letter did not contain the address, a few things happened. If there was something of value in the letter, and it could not be forwarded to anyone, the item was sent to be auctioned off. If there were neither valuables nor a forwarding address, Elliot was supposed to put the letters in a bin to be burned. But as the days went on, he developed favourites. Letters from little girls to Santa or God broke his heart, confessions from kids to their parents did too. Flowery love letters made him sad, but they were often

some of his favourites.

He began a pile of the letters he wanted to read again, beyond the cursory look for a forwarding address. He didn't mean to take them home, but as he was hanging his coat up upon arriving home one night, he found that day's stack tucked away in his pocket. He set them on the table beside his great old wingback and went to make himself a cup of tea. When it was ready, he brought it in and set it down on the same table. He picked up the letters. The first one on the stack was the first he put aside, that very first day. Elliot didn't mean anything by it, he just wanted to look at it again when he wasn't in the rhythm of his work. It made him stop and wonder about it, and that was worth putting it aside. It was written on a piece of paper from a note pad from an American motel and had a photo and a torn bit of map paper-clipped to it. The photo showed a little boy with impossibly blue eyes. The map showed somewhere in New Brunswick, Elliot wagered. The note said:

Britta,

The boy in the photo is Sioux.

As of June 2nd, 1986 he will be three years old.

He still doesn't know you, or that he has a mother.

I'm selling the car. Whatever anyone will give me for it.

If you can, find me. You know where I'll be.

I ache for you.

Love, always,

Thirty Nine Cents

Elliot had never known anyone with numbers for names but whoever he was, Elliot liked him. He liked the sparseness of the letter, the honesty. But it also made him sad. On the one hand, he wished that Britta, whoever she was, had gotten this letter. But on the other, this is what he loved most. The little windows and doors and keyholes that the letters opened into other lives for him, for just a handful of moments before shutting again.

His own life was so quiet that it was nice to have something new to think about rather than the same old routine: eat, read the paper, putter around, usually try to fix something or other. He rarely finished any of his projects or read the entire paper. Lunch, the same thing as yesterday: cold, thick-sliced ham sandwich with lots of mayo and no lettuce, because Mary wasn't around to scold him. Then he would do a bit of gardening. Mary would hate to see her marigolds get choked by weeds. Then a few hours of reading, a nap, and supper: more sliced ham. Then he would watch a bit of hockey or news. Most nights, both of those things managed to break his heart – the Canadiens had recently lost to the Bruins and the news was always filled with terrible things. Most nights he fell asleep in his favourite chair until around one a.m, when his back would start to ache enough to wake him up. Then it was up to the big empty bed for the rest of the night. Thankfully, he was usually sleepy enough by this point that the bed's empty vastness wasn't as daunting and sad as it was when he went to bed earlier in the evening. Then the next day at seven it was the same thing all over again. After a year of that, he was happy to do anything but sit still.

Work had been good to him. His very, very favourite discovery so far was a love

letter to, among other things, his very home, this little red island. The letter was sent to London but without enough postage. It got bounced back to PEI. Somewhere along the way, something must have spilled or splashed on it, making the return address unreadable, so it ended up in Elliot's hands. It read as follows:

Vee,

I had my feet in the Atlantic today. I nearly went swimming. It's never so cold that I'm not tempted to just jump in. I love the feel of the cold attacking my skin and then that beautiful cool that it turns into as my skin adjusts. You know me. Something is missing in my life when I'm away from the water. I love coasts and I hate being landlocked. There's something utterly freeing about standing on a cliff while the water crashes beneath you. One might think for a claustrophobe like me, it would be the opposite; running out of land would be the worst feeling of all, but it's not. Maybe that's why the only other place I've felt at home is on an island in the middle of the country. Even so, walking along the canals or wandering the Old Port isn't quite the same as standing on the very edge of an island, looking out over the Northumberland Strait. I still love it but it's good to be back on this little red sand bar that I've called

home for so long.

And yet. And yet.

I miss my best friend. She's back in Montreal, working, loving, being her radiant, inspiring self. It makes me more than a little sad being here without her. It's weird to come back without her. She's my comrade, my confidante, my partner in crime. I miss the way she looks at me and smiles, like we're part of some fantastic conspiracy, just the two of us. I miss the way she speaks, the way she can switch into perfect, fluent French that is more natural and accomplished than any other anglophone I know. I've stopped thinking of her as one; she's a Montreal girl now. So am I, to an extent, and yet we're both PEI kids at heart. Right now I miss the way I can hear the smile in her voice even if I'm not there to see it.

And I miss my boy. He's on the other side of the world right now and something just behind my sternum aches when I think about him. I miss his cat eyes and wide smile and the way I fit perfectly just under his chin. I miss the smile that he saves for only me. I miss the timber of his voice, the way it sounds when I'm curled up in that perfect nook beneath his chin. I miss the way he says my name.

And I miss you, sweet sister. I miss our big talks and the way your eyes smile as much as your mouth does. I love how much you look out for me but I hate that you're so far away. London sounds amazing and I know you'll fit right in, but I can't help but wish we lived in the same place. The ache is there, always. No matter where I am, I'm always missing someone. Especially you.

Keep safe and strong, babe. I hope I'll see you soon.

Love and fresh strawberries,

Mara

It made Elliot very sad to think that this letter was in his hands and not in those of this Vee person, but secretly he couldn't help but be glad to have it. He loved seeing PEI through the eyes of this girl, this Mara. The great coming home that everyone must experience if they are to truly know what home means. That, Elliot believed, was the true meaning of growing up, of leaving your home so that you could grow tall enough to get a real perspective on where you come from. It could be tragic, but for her it seemed to be a relief. It pleased him that it still pleased her to come home to this little place, that the island hadn't disappointed her yet.

The months wore on and Elliot made his way steadily through the boxes of dead letters that had stacked up. He asked to have his hours extended and began to work every day rather than part time. Leon was so impressed with his progress that he said yes

without a fight. These days Elliot was coming home only to eat, sleep and read over the joys and dramas he found in the letters. However, Elliot was better at his job than he ever expected. At the rate he was going, he would have nothing left to open by Christmas. This made him terribly sad. He had come to love the ritual of examining the letters, determining whether he had reason to open them, the little thrill that he got when he decided yes, he did. Lately, however, he had begun to open letters that he didn't have the right to open. Ones he could read the addresses of that the carriers hadn't been able to, letters that rightfully should be sent back out. Somewhere in a corner of his mind, Elliot knew he shouldn't. But it was like getting to read the most interesting chapter of a book and then closing it. Strange, maddeningly curious, but thrilling, most of all. Like test driving books.

He tried to go more slowly, to stretch the job out as much as he could, but despite his efforts, Elliot did in fact finish his last letters by Christmas. By this point, he had a sheaf of favorites as thick as a novel. He had certain ones he liked to read over and over, looking for clues as to how the fight might have ended or the trip to Russia went. One such letter read as follows:

Kendra,

I called you after the debacle. I promise you, I did.

You're calling bullshit, I can hear you right now. Bullshit,

you'll say. But I did. You never called me back. Not that I

blame you, of course, but it would have been nice to know

you survived Tuesday's living room-sized apocalypse without too much damage. Kael says he's sorry. About the green Jell-o, and how it found its way to your couch, but he also says that you two are now even.

I *knew* this would get messy. A couch for a couch and the whole world has to resort to second-hand futons.

So, yeah. Don't tell me I didn't warn you. I did. When we first started all this, I told you: my room mate is crazy. Do not make him mad. Do not eat his yoghurt or use his frying pans. And whatever you do don't get *anything* on his couch. If you tangle and wrangle with him, you will regret it and you will lose. Every battle.

I asked you to lose the red lipstick and instead, you lose me. And, more to the point, your lovely new couch that you bought in brazen white. Was it all worth it, these guns at high noon with my crazy room mate?

I hope so. I'll miss you.

Yours,

Brian

What drama! A feud over a sofa, of all things. Elliot read it over and over, wondering how the fight had transpired. These youngsters did everything on computers

these days, or on those dreadful cellphones everyone was always on. The aftermath of what ever happened must have been awfully strong indeed, if this Brian had to resort to sending a letter by post to establish a discourse with his lady friend.

Other letters, he read once and never again. Elliot felt it would be wrong to read these ones over and over. Tender love letters, pleas to God. He felt for those folks most of all when he read them, and wished deeply there was some way he could return them, but there would be no pilgrimage to get the letters to where they needed to go. No, all he could do now was give the words on the page some sympathetic eyes to read them.

And so he did. He took home more and more letters as Christmas approached, confessions and requests and goodbyes and good news. Nobody missed them. He felt bad at first, but the idea of all of those lives being burnt was too much. Burnt! He had no interest in the trinkets and gifts he came across, and without fail put them in the big safety deposit box every day to be picked up for auction. But the letters, those were the real treasures. There were some that surprised him. The things that came out of his sleepy little town! Often he felt like he was deeply out of the loop. Popular culture was lost on him. This strange letter, for example, made no sense to him:

Liv,

I always wanted to be the character you play in *Stealing Beauty*. That film is everything I ever wanted; Tuscany, Tuscany, Tuscany. Sexcapades. Being 19 and tall and slim and impossibly, hauntingly beautiful. Smoking

secret sexy joints with Jeremy Irons (sigh) and just looking at people with giant eyes all the time. Instead I got to be 5'3" and round in places I shouldn't be round. Elbows, knees, neck. I have never been to Italy. I had never been outside of Hamilton, Ontario until this year. I didn't think my life could get more boring until my mother remarried. Now I live in Murray Harbour, Prince Edward Island. Needless to say, I do not have sexcapades. Liv Tyler, I hope you've enjoyed being your magnificent self, because it is clear to me that no one else can come close to being as awesome as you. Liv(e) it up.

Yours,

Georgia Kennedy, age 19

It was addressed: "Life" with no return address. Elliot had put it aside. He wanted that one for his collection. He collected ones that mentioned PEI, or ones that interested him. This one checked both boxes. For the most part, though, he found bills, or flyers, or bank statements. Sometimes, he found love letters and thank you cards. But today, Elliot found hate:

Craig,

I'm writing this on paper because if I send you an

email, you'll just delete it. I want you to know that I found out that you've been using my credit card when you stay over here. Jesus Christ, Craig. Have you been dating me for my money? And if so, did you seriously think it wouldn't get noticed? Did you think that because I come from this quaint little island that I don't know what online banking is? I see you, every time you stay over. 3am, 4am, buying things. Betting on things, thinking I don't see. You have spent \$30,000 over the last year, Craig. It was my personal fucking credit card. Of course I saw. I don't know what makes me more angry: that you honestly think I'm that ignorant or that you seriously just don't care. Both possibilities scare the shit out of me. Prepare to pay back that money and to have your ass handed to you in a beautifully wrapped package, Craig Arsenault.

See you in court.

Jeanette McKinley

Elliot knew the McKinleys. Everyone on Prince Edward Island knew them. They were one of the big farming families of the Eastern end of the Island. They shipped potatoes all down the East coast. The best restaurants in New York City used the McKinley's potatoes, or so the slick advertisements claimed on TV. This letter was

written on the stationery of the family company. Heavy, creamy paper that felt good in Elliot's hands. Deeply embossed, beautifully printed. Whoever this fool Craig Arsenaault was, Elliot pitied him. The McKinleys were a strong family. Thirty thousand was a drop in their family bucket, mostly likely, but they would not take kindly to such a slight to one of their own.

It made Elliot's heart race, all this news. It was a far cry from his quiet days alone at the house with the persistently sad newspaper. Here, he had responsibility again. He missed having things to do. For example, this kind of letter had to be sent to the police immediately. It might be needed in an upcoming court case between Miss Jeanette and this Craig fellow. Elliot placed it in a special envelope and wrote a little note for the police officer on the receiving end.

This may be needed in an upcoming court case.

Please forward to the appropriate court file.

After four months and three weeks, Elliot had done it. He had organized the dead letter room. He had gone through the boxes and piles of dead letters and made sense of them. And now, much to his dismay, Elliot was not needed any more. The regular mail sorters could sort the dead letters now. Leon promised he would call if ever they needed him in the future, but for now he would have to let Elliot go.

It was the end of his shift, and usually Elliot checked the whole office to make sure everyone had gone home, so that he could take home the letters without worrying about being caught. But it was his last day, and soft, dreamy snow was falling, making Montague look like a little town in a snow globe. Elliot couldn't wait to get home, fix

himself a cup of cocoa, watch the snow fall, and read his treasures. When he first started to put letters aside, he bought a few nice photo albums to put them in. Now, he was onto his third album. These last few letters would really polish off his collection, he thought, as he tucked his last acquisitions into his coat pocket.

“Elliot?”

Leon stood with one hand on the post office's front door and holding his keys. He was looking at the sheaf of letters in Elliot's hand.

“What are those?” he asked, “and where are you taking them?”

Elliot looked at them, then at Leon, then at the letters once more. He didn't know what to say.

“Elliot, are those... are you taking people's letters home?” he asked, his voice rising slightly. Elliot said nothing. His mouth didn't work. The papers began to shake in his hand.

“Elliot, opening and reading someone else's mail is a federal offence,” Leon whispered, even though they were the only ones left in the post office. “The loophole that lets you read those letters is... is very strict...very...,” he said, as a look of panic invaded his face. “Oh dear. Ohhh dear. I'm going to get in so much trouble for this. I didn't even *want* to work out here, I was perfectly happy in town. I could walk to Tim's from work to grab a coffee, I could see my girlfriend at lunch but *noooo*, buddy decides to move to Barbados or some fuckin' place and they 'suggest' I volunteer. And now *this*.” His eyes widened. “Is it the valuables? Quick, tell me *exactly* what you stole.”

“No, no, I promise, I never stole anything valuable,” Elliot said. He felt like

crying.

“You could go to prison!” yelled Leon. His round face was purpling.

“I... I was lonely,” said Elliot. Leon stopped pacing. Elliot continued. “This was fun, is all. I liked reading the letters, Leon, that's all, I promise. It's been... quiet since Mary died.”

“But this is illegal,” said Leon, reaching out and shaking Elliot's hand and the letters he held.

“What if... what if we did nothing. What if... if I just quit, nice and quiet and we say no more about it. That way,” Elliot started to say “I won't have to go to jail,” but he knew Leon pretty well by now, and he knew the only thing that mattered to him was Leon. “That way you don't have to turn me in. No trial, no paperwork.”

Leon looked tempted.

Elliot continued, encouraged. “I promise, I only brought home letters that were headed for the furnace, anyway. Please, Leon, I'm so sorry. But this can end here,” said Elliot, his voice shaking. “I'll go. Please.”

Leon looked at him for a long time.

“Please,” said Elliot again, quieter this time.

“Go,” said Leon, not looking at him. “Don't come back.”

It took Elliot a whole day to stop shaking, another to be able to leave the house. He barely ate. He just stared at things for a while and listened to the white noise of shock that occupied his mind.

What had he done?

For the next few weeks he tormented himself with guilt. He went over and over in his mind the moment when he looked up and saw Leon staring down at him with the letters in his hands. It felt awful. He tried to shake it from his mind, but it stuck like a nightmare.

And yet, he ached to go back.

The familiar routine, the thrill that came with opening the letters, he missed that. He wished he could go back again without Leon being there to catch him again. The fear of being caught kept him from acting on that wish, for a little while, at least. But after a few weeks of the quiet at home, Elliot's fear turned to ire, and his ire turned to bitter resentment.

Why did Leon have to intrude like that? Elliot had been doing his job, and doing it quite well, thank you very much, until Leon came along. He should have minded his own business and everyone would have been just fine. This was all just bother without any need for it.

As the days went on, Elliot became more and more convinced that he had done nothing wrong, and that Leon had over-reacted. By his third week away from the post office, Elliot couldn't take the quiet any more. He missed his routine dearly, and being trapped in the house with nothing to do was clearly not a viable option for him anymore. He decided to make a run for it.

He would sneak in, grab as many of the to-be-burnt letters as he could carry and haul them back home. Here at least he could try to recreate the experience of his Dead Letter Office at home. He knew everyone's schedule. He would sneak in on a Wednesday,

when Jim was working. Jim never locked the back door and no one but Elliot ever knew, because only Elliot and Jim worked Thursday mornings. It would be easy as pie.

And it was. Elliot found the back door unlocked and no one around to catch him in the act. He made his way to his familiar DLO and pulled out the bin of sorted letters that would be burned if no forwarding address was found in the letter. It was still full. Jackpot. Elliot opened the laundry bag he had brought to take the dead letters home in. He began to fill it, and tried not to think about what would happen if he were caught. Would he go to jail? Was there any hope of a happy ending for him here?

As he shoved a handful of letters into his sack, something caught his eye. Familiar handwriting. He fished the envelope from the bag to check. A letter from a neighbour, perhaps, or a cousin of his from the North Shore? Elliot had lots of cousins up near Basin Head, maybe one of them sent him something and got his address wrong.

He did not expect to find instead a letter with Mary's tightly curled handwriting on it. Nor for it to be addressed to "God."

With shaking hands, Elliot opened the envelope. He ripped it carefully along the flap, careful not to mar her handwriting with a tear. He extricated the paper inside and began to read.

He sat there for some time after he finished reading the letter.

"Elliot?" said a voice above. Elliot found Leon looking down on him once more. Leon must have been working late; a satchel and a coat were under one arm. A set of keys dangled from the fingers of the other hand. Leon looked at the laundry bag and shook his head. It seemed as though he was gearing up for another big rant, but stopped when he

saw the tears on Elliot's cheeks.

Without a word, Elliot handed the letter to Leon, who glanced at it and then began to read aloud:

Dear Lord,

Please help my husband. He is killing me.

I know that isn't fair, Lord, since it's truly the cancer that's killing me. But my Elliot, the love of my life is keeping me here when I should be with you. My time is over but he will not let go, and I cannot make him. Please, Lord, tell him that it's alright. Tell him I love him and will see him again, but there is somewhere I must go where he cannot follow.

I beg of you, stop answering his prayers that I will stay with him a little longer. I cannot bear it any longer.

Your humble servant,

Mary Elaine Bellows

Leon put the letter down and turned to Elliot.

“How long did you ask Him to keep her alive?” asked Leon.

“Two years, six months and four and a half days,” murmured Elliot.

Leon let out a low whistle. He folded the letter and placed it in Elliot's hand.

“I'd call the police, but I think that this is all the punishment you need right now. Don't let me find you here again, Elliot.”

Elliot shook his head. He waited until he heard the door close. When it did, he exhaled a sob. He sat in the dark surrounded by the letters he had once found so precious. He did not want any more borrowed lives. His own was more than enough for him, now.

The End.

These Foolish Things

“There are only five apartments in the building,” says the landlord. “I live twenty minutes away, so if you need something fixed, call. There's an older guy in apartment number one, a college kid lives in number two and number three is empty. Then it's you and Mr. Yuja upstairs. You two share a wall, and I'll warn you, he's had a few complaints. Let me know if he's getting too noisy and I'll come and yell at him.” He holds out the keys and his card.

“Okay,” I say, and take them. “Thanks.”

~

Throughout my move I haven't heard a peep from my neighbour – or anyone in the building - and I can't help but wonder what my landlord meant about the noise. But tonight, for the first time, I hear him. It's like he was just waiting for me to get settled in. Now that I am finally out of my boxes and curled up in my big red papasan, he starts to play. At first I think he is someone's radio, a tinkling piano in the next apartment. But there are no voices, no jarring commercials. He is so quiet that I wonder if he is actually somewhere in the distance. He wanders along the keys like he is deliberating on each note before he plays it, as if weighing the consequences.

I sit against the wall our apartment shares, and listen.

It is like being pulled by the tide, in and out of myself. The more he plays, the less I can breathe. His hands are so sure with every note. There is no doubt, no fumbling, no clanking wrong notes. His fingers are where they should be at every moment. I have been

playing piano my entire life and have never had such confidence in my hands.

There is a wholeness to his playing. His hands work together without competition. The left hand's harmonies are so solid that the right hand builds a world on the foundations the left lays down. Towers and structures of music grow out of his fingertips and soar high above the keys.

Then he begins to slow down until finally he suspends the notes, pedal heavy and agonizing until I think something inside me might snap like a tightened guitar string. But then he lets himself tumble into the next movement of the piece, and I fall with him.

The notes never end. Their freefall becomes the next progression, discordant for a moment and then it resolves, so perfectly it actually makes me gasp. The hands on the other side of the wall pause just long enough for me to grab a breath before they plunge on. The bass end continues, steady as always but suddenly there are hard treble chords hammering away in the middle of this once-gentle piece. Out of nowhere, it feels huge. The sound of it grows, fills his apartment and spills over into mine. For lack of my own set of keys, I go to my desk and begin to play along on the scuffed Ikea surface, trying to match him note for note.

Together, we rage.

I imagine him swaying at his piano as I do at my pretend one, eyes closed. My body is carried by the swoops and swells of the music and I let myself become lost to it. He pushes faster and faster. I stop holding my body up, for once forgetting about my mother's constant nagging about posture. It feels like we're in a storm; the music is everywhere.

But then suddenly, he is slowing, winding into a conclusion as gentle as its beginning. I exhale and come back to myself. I haven't gotten lost in a piece like that in ages. It feels, somehow, like coming home.

I wish I could play like that. Like him. I mean, I could probably play that piece if I tried. With some practice. I recognize it now. Think it's called Ancora. I've never played it specifically but I've played other pieces by Ludovico Einaudi. But that power, that haunting... quality to it, I've never gotten to that point; all I can do is play all the right notes. How does he manage to make me want to laugh and cry all at once?

I have to meet this guy.

I try to imagine what he would look like. Tall, stately. Long limbs, perhaps. Elegant. A cocky grin, probably. Anyone who plays that well deserves a cocky grin. I imagine what might happen if I knocked on his door. I'd introduce myself, then maybe I'd compliment him on his playing. He'd thank me, invite me in, offer to play something. He'd have a classic Montreal apartment - long hallway with high-ceilinged rooms shooting off on one side, like mine. He'd take me to his studio room and show me his piano and I'd ask, "Is that a Bösendorfer?" Cool as anything. He would be so impressed, he'd let me play it. He'd be even more impressed by how I play.

Yeah, right.

~

Unfortunately, I don't hear much from him after that for a few days, and I don't have the guts to go over there without a reason. I keep hoping to run into him in the laundry room or in the entry way where the mailboxes are, but no such luck. On Tuesday

however, I find a letter to a “Mr. Logan Yuja” in my mailbox from the Montreal International Musical Competition.

Curiouser and curiouser.

I brush my teeth and put on jeans instead of PJs and then I go out, cross the hall and knock on the door of number four. I wait. Silence. Then, shuffling. A lock, unlocking.

“Yes?”

His hair is black and greasy and lank and his eyes seem to be drowning in the deep blue that pools beneath them. I'm right about the length of the limbs, but I didn't anticipate that there would be so little flesh on them. His faded black t-shirt hangs on him like it would on a hanger.

“Yes?” he says, again, this time more pointedly.

“Hi! Sorry, but this came for you but in my mailbox,” I say. The words come out in a jumble. “I'm your neigh- I'm new – I'm your new neighbour. Frankie Mackelroy.”

“Thanks.” He grabs the letter from me, nearly ripping it in half. Before I can start my carefully constructed segue, he slams the door in my face. I wait for a moment, shocked. When it doesn't seem like he will be opening the door with a good natured “Just kidding!” I turn back to my own apartment. From somewhere inside his, I hear a muffled “WHOO!” I wait another moment, hoping he might open the door and let me in on his victory, but the door remains closed. I retreat inside my own apartment.

~

I rarely see him in person but I hear him almost every day now. Sometimes he is playful and reminiscent of Sonny Clark or Glen Gould. Other days he is heavy and

brooding like Rachmaninoff. Listening to him brings me back to the albums my mother used to play while she made supper when I was little. She used to listen almost exclusively to 20th century pianists and subsequently, so did I. I had my favourites among them - Brendel, Horowitz, Kempff, Zimerman. They inhabited me. The notes crawled under my skin and burrowed deep, calling my hands to the keys. As a teenager I stole scores from my mother's music portfolio the way I might have filched cigarettes from her purse, and when I was sure she had gone to bed, I would take her place in the den and practice until I was falling asleep at the keys. I wanted to be good, and, supposedly, practice made perfect. Except in my case, practice made average. Programmatic. Sufficient. I am no prodigy. I can practice and practice but maybe I'll only ever be as good as my neighbour is on one of his off days. If I'm lucky.

When I graduated high school, I went to St. Thomas University. I needed something else to be good at, besides piano. Finally, I got to see what normal kids my age were doing instead of practising for concerts and competitions. I made friends, met boys, dealt with roommates. But four years and one dry degree in Communications later, I thought I would at least be more employable than I was without it. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be the case. I thought us millennials were “the jobless generation.” If that's the case, why does everyone seem to be finding work but me? I scan the paper every day for jobs and check Craigslist or Kijiji for somewhere that needs one of me: I can make little videos or “write” a letter using audio clips instead of a pen and paper. I can do a really cool Power Point presentation and I can build you a website. I can read reports, think critically, edit and do basic audio-visual stuff. Unfortunately, I think that

describes most of my generation and all of my graduating class.

So now I'm back in Montreal, which was home for about a week, once upon a time. Hopefully I'll find more options in this city, even if my French is rusty. I haven't found a job yet, but my neighbour makes it easy to be stuck at home, applying to job postings and writing cover letters for positions I know I'll hate. After a few weeks, I begin to notice a routine forming on the other side of my wall. Early mornings are usually something light and jumpy, presumably to warm up his fingers. He usually starts before the sun comes up, unless he's been up and playing all night, in which case he's into weird modern stuff by this point. It's not really my thing. I prefer his usual routine of starting quietly at first, bubble-light notes that float through the walls and nudge me awake. My bedroom is right beside his piano, so he wakes me up nearly every day. But it's always a nicer wake up than the one my alarm clock will give me a few hours later.

By mid-morning he usually goes silent for an hour or two, then returns with a resounding chord that usually signals the opening of an opera. There have been times when I have left to run errands and have returned to find he's still on the same piece. My favourites are his early evening feather-light run-throughs of Vivaldi's "Spring." The rapid thrumming of hummingbird-like notes flying around on the other side of the wall makes me smile every time he plays it. I ache to be able to play the way he does, like his fingers are riding a cushion of air that lets them glide over the keys without stumbling or missing a grace note. He was born to do this.

I was born into the piano, but was not born to play it. My mother was a principal pianist for the New Brunswick Symphony Orchestra during my childhood, and filled in

the spaces in her life around me with music. It couldn't have been easy, trying to keep up with her work for the symphony and raise me all on her own. Rather than hiring a babysitter, she brought me with her to the practice hall a lot. The plush, red velvet seats became my playground, the jungle backstage was my home. I never met my father, but I had lots of surrogate ones at the theatre. Surely ten dads are better than one, I often told myself. I had Eric, the bouncy young bass clarinetist; Cairo, the light technician with the Santa beard and the chuckle to match; George, the sassy young usher who could charm grumpy old ladies in sixty seconds flat. And of course, there was Zeus. He was the conductor for the orchestra. His name was actually Theodore Tunkit but he looked like Zeus to me, with his wild white hair and his vicious, decisive gestures. He commanded everyone's attention and with it he conjured the most beautiful music I have ever heard in person. Coming home always felt a bit anticlimactic after a symphony rehearsal – or even worse, a performance night – and more than once I found myself wishing I could live in the theatre instead with my ten awesome pseudodads.

I started playing when I was six, little things at first, then graduating on to Moonlight Sonata and other clichés. The clichés seemed to stick, and I developed a fondness for the obvious greats – Vivaldi, Mozart, and so on. In my teens my repertoire suggested a full on obsession with Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," something my mother seemed embarrassed by. By this point it was becoming clear that I was not the piano prodigy she had hoped for. My playing was programmatic – I could play the piece competently enough, but that was all. I had no feel for the keys, as much as I loved them. That never kept me from playing. Neither did my mother. I don't think she could have.

When I found a piece that lifted the hair on my arms, I needed to learn it. Being able to play the music helped me to understand it, to fully appreciate its technical and emotional topography. Vivaldi called to me. The “Storm” movement from Summer wouldn't let me sleep until I could play it off book. Winter's tension-heavy epic sorrow tugged at my heart and Spring's bubble-light frivolity made me smile, but nothing got under my skin like Summer. I played every moment I could. I drilled and practiced until I could play the movements with my eyes closed. The piano became an extension of myself, a place I felt comfortable returning to. Like there had been a rope, tight with tension that slackened when I returned to my instrument.

But it wasn't until she took me to see a ballet rendition of *Amadeus* that I truly fell in love for the first time. It coincided with me hitting puberty like a wall. Suddenly all of Vivaldi's delicate extended notes were chased out of my head by Mozart's moody Requiem. As hormones I couldn't understand began to inhabit my body I reached out for something huge, something encompassing to learn. “Lacrimosa” was everything to me for most of high school. I'm sure it looked like an emo cliché to anyone passing by, the loner in the practice room playing the heavy, ominous piece over and over, but it fulfilled me like Summer had, but even more so. I got so good that my mother began to think she had been wrong about me, that perhaps I had natural talent, I had just needed the right inspiration to wake me up. She was so inspired, she decided to leave her job at the symphony and move us to somewhere with a bigger scene and higher profile teachers. I said goodbye to my few friends and followed her. I had private lessons and did nothing but practice. But when she registered me for a competition in Halifax in my final year of

high school, we were faced with the truth. While my rendition of “Lacrimosa” sounded good in our den, with proper acoustics and surrounded by real talent, the prodigies and the miracles, I wasn't remarkable. It became evident that piano was simply not my calling, that I was not one of the Logans of the world. We moved back to New Brunswick only six months after we moved away. I stopped playing after that. I couldn't bear the way it soured my mother's smile, like my playing left a bad taste in her mouth.

~

I've discovered that life is terribly boring when you're broke and in the wrong part of the city. All my friends live in the Plateau or Mile End and St. Henri is apparently *not* the scene this year, so I still have to go across the city just to see anyone. When I first moved back to Montreal last year after I finished my degree, St. Henri was where everyone wanted to live. Cool old apartments, messy loft parties, summer afternoons in Park Sir George-Étienne-Cartier. I finally moved to St. Henri this year, but it seems I'm too late. Everyone's gotten tired of shitty landlords and rising prices, so they've migrated to the Plateau – which is just as expensive, but prettier. So it's just me down here. And Logan's playing. And when Logan's out, I listen to the United Steel Workers of Montreal. Playing their piece about my *quartier* makes me feel a little better about the move. Gern's raspy growl and the citygrass style suits my scrubby little neighbourhood to a T.

It's been over a month since that first and only encounter of ours, and I'm ready to take another crack at introducing myself to my neighbour. I can't help but be curious about him. After the mail incident, I was so curious that I did some light Googling on the competition that the letter was addressed from: The Montreal International Music

Competition. I used to dream about winning it when I was a kid. Super hard to get into it, much less win it, but even competing in it can get you the kind of exposure and networking and job offers that you just don't find anywhere else in Canada. And judging by the triumphant shout I heard after he slammed the door in my face, I'm guessing it was a letter of acceptance. I'm so jealous, but glad for him, too.

In the evenings these days, he plays things I don't recognize, things I think might be his own creations. The achingly beautiful things that come out of his piano sneak in under my door and through the cracks in the walls and haunt me in the best way possible. Living beside him is like being a kid again, music under my skin, exquisite and inescapable.

But lately his pieces end with a crash, hands slamming down on keys, angry endings to the raw pieces he's unleashed. Sometimes he screams. I'm a bit worried about him. I decide to use this as my opener, as I don't have any mail of his to start a conversation with. Sure enough, a discordant crash of keys resounds on the other side of my wall and I take this as my cue. I knock on his door and wait. It opens and the thundercloud that fills his face threatens to shoot lightning at me if I come too close, but I take a breath and begin anyway.

“Hi. Remember me?” Cringe. Ugh. Great start. “I'm your neighbour, Frankie.”

“It's too loud, is it? Fine, I'll try to keep it down.” He begins to close the door, then pauses. “Don't go to the landlord if I'm too loud? Just bang on my wall and I'll shut up.”

The door starts to close again and I blurt, “Wait!” The storm cloud returns, hovering in the narrow opening the door allows.

“I... is everything okay in there? Sounds pretty... intense.”

He says nothing.

“I don't know why you stopped. It was sounding really good before you—”

“Yeah, thanks. I'm kind of busy so if you don't mind...,” he says, and starts to close the door.

“I play too. Piano, I mean. I used to. I mean, I probably still could.”

He looks like he wants to sneer and say, “Good for you,” but it seems he's just too tired to do it. The ire seems to leak out of him, leaving him deflated and leaning against the door jam for support.

“So you know how insane it is to prepare for a big competition, do you?”

I think about the terrible, polite applause after my performance and I wince. Even after all these years.

“Hell yeah. It's like preparing for a triathlon, except with music.” He nods. I wonder if the limb I'm about to go out on will hold my weight.

“Listen, can I make you a cup of coffee or a sandwich, or something? You look dead on your feet.”

He glares at me for a second before his shoulders slump.

“That,” he says, taking a laborious breath, “would be nice.”

He follows me to my door and I open it, leading him into the kitchen. I gesture toward a seat at the island in my kitchen and then I put the kettle on. From the fridge I grab an armload of sandwich makings and after settling them on the counter, I go to work. I extract a few slices and close the bag of bread back up. I smear garlicky hummus

on the bread, layer spinach, sliced turkey, and Dijon, cut it diagonally and hand it to him.

He looks from it to me.

“That was faster than I expected.”

“Thanks! I worked at Subway in Fredericton all through high school.” He doesn't seem to find this to be worth pursuing and takes a bite from the sandwich. I start to make the coffee.

“So what's with all the screaming and banging?”

“Competition. Writing a piece for it. Not going well,” he manages between chewing.

“How do you take your coffee? And what competition is this?” I ask, even though I know exactly which one it is.

“Black. And it's the Montreal International Music Competition. Every year there's a focus on piano, violin or voice, and this year it's piano.”

“You have to submit original work as well as compete?”

“No, but there's a competition for best short composition, and if you win they let you perform your original piece.”

“And that's... good?” I ask. It feels weird to play dumb. I'd love to gush to him about the competition but I can't let him know I Googled his mail.

“Exposure is always good.”

“So why the anguish?” I ask as I set the bodum of coffee down in front of him, and a mug. I know perfectly well why he's anguished. In my research I've seen the long list of compulsory pieces to play, the progressively more brutal rounds, the high stakes.

It's enough to give anyone a case of the screams.

“It's just... so much. I just fucking want it so much and it's paralysing me. I can't write, I can't sleep.”

“How long've you got?”

“Until the end of May.”

It is currently the 30th of March. It might seem like a long time, but the list of compulsory pieces he has to learn and perfect is a mile long. Add the stress of composing on top and he looks like he might have a heart attack.

“So you're freaking out because you don't know all your material?”

“God no. I can play that stuff in my sleep.” He bites the sandwich with emphasis. He chews, swallows and looks at his plate “I can't... I haven't been able to write. I'm trying to finish this piece I want to unveil when I win and I can't and it's killing me.” He does a full body huff and tosses the remains of his meal onto the plate like a sullen child.

“When you win?” I ask.

Logan shrugs.

“Listen,” I say, bringing over my own extra-creamy coffee. “My favourite music teacher used to say that there's no such thing as writer's block. It's just panic. Sheer panic that keeps us from doing the work.” Logan's scowl loosens a little.

I continue: “And you know what? I think that makes sense. I read a book a few years ago that backs that up, sort of. It's about what drives us. It said that we are not innately a carrot-and-stick inclined society, we actually do things all the time just for the sake of doing them. Learning an instrument, for example. The reward is learning it and

getting better at it.”

“For you, maybe. Not for me.”

“Sure for you! Listen. I stopped playing piano after high school because... I was mediocre. No. I was good, just not great. I had no feel for it. Yet my mother signed me up for competition after competition only to watch me not even place. But when I went to college, my roommate had a guitar. Long story short, she gave it to me and honestly... it kind of changed my life. I thought I couldn't ever come back to music but this opened a door for me I didn't really expect.” I slurp my coffee and swallow the breath I've been holding. It makes a weird bubble in my chest that makes breathing uncomfortable. I try to ignore it as I continue.

“I picked it up pretty quickly. The novelty of something that didn't come with tons of pressure made me come back to it over and over. My point is, you're not blocked, you've just got blinders on. All you can see is the prize because you're so close to it. I thought I'd never play anything again until I found Rosie, but there you go.”

“Rosie?”

“The guitar.”

“You named your guitar?”

“Yes. It's a long story.”

“Tell me,” he says toasting me with his coffee. “I could use a distraction.”

“Well, in the first semester of uni— ”

“Where did you go? And for what?”

“St. Thomas in Fredericton for Communications. It was pretty boring for the most

part, but one night in the very first semester, my roommate caught her boyfriend cheating on her and she promptly dropped out. He sent her a bunch of presents including a beautiful jazz guitar, for some reason.”

“What?”

“I know, right? She wasn't even remotely musical – she couldn't have told a guitar from a bass, so I don't know what possessed him. But all's fair in love and sweeping apologetic gestures, I guess. Anyway, she burned everything but I couldn't let her torch the guitar. She told me I could have it if I cared so much, and then she took off.”

“Wow.”

“I know. Turns out Rosie's a Peerless Cremona Archtop. These babies run over two grand, but I don't think she knew that when she wanted to toss it on the bonfire.”

“Jesus.” Logan is silent for a minute, then glances at me. “Could I see her, maybe?”

“Of course! Hold on a minute,” I say and head toward my bedroom. I pull the case from under my bed and open it. What I haven't said to Logan is that I'm also pretty mediocre on guitar. Or that I'm struggling to come to terms with the fact that maybe I'm just not meant to play anything. Some people have a feel for things – snowboarding, dancing, particle physics. You can see it in the way their bodies move, just as you can see when someone is just not built for it. There are those of us who can practice and practice and be decent, but never gifted the way Logan is. Never remarkable. But again, that's the prize. If I shoot for the prize, I'll fail every time. I need to remember to play just because I love it.

I take the pretty little jazz guitar from her snug bed and hold it for a moment. It's been a while. A selfish little part of me had hoped that something would click with her, that the suspended chord inside me would resolve and I would find *my* instrument in Rosie. That's why I named her. I had hoped she would be a muse and inspire me, show me what I was missing. But she never did. I haven't played in a long time.

“Logan, meet Rosie,” I say as I enter the living room. I hold her out to him. “She was my closest friend throughout undergrad.” Logan receives her like he might a newborn, tender and nervous. He coos appreciatively at her flamed back, her graceful lines, her elegant F holes.

“Jazz guitars are my favourite,” says Logan, softly.

“The body's maple and the fretboard is ebony. Oh! It's probably out of tune! Here I'll—” I say, reaching for it and Logan pulls away from me. Just a little.

“Can I try?” he asks, but it doesn't feel like a question. I nod.

Then he starts to tune. He doesn't do any of the usual tricks, matching one string against another and such. He just cocks an ear toward where his fingers grip the neck. In moments, it's perfectly tuned. I take it from him and say nothing. He doesn't need any more compliments. I run through a few chords and can't help but notice it never sounded this good after I tuned it, even with my electronic tuner. Damn.

“So, I can show you some scales, or I could just teach you something right away so you've got something to really practice,” I offer.

“Sure.” He's smiling a little now, a tender seedling of a smile. It's the first one I've seen on him since I moved in.

I decide to show him how to play “House of the Rising Sun” but a super pared down version. I'm sure he'll come back to me in a week having mastered a much more intricate one. Once he's got it kind of down, he turns to me.

“Frankie, could I bring Rosie home for tonight? I think you're right. It might do me good to have something different to play.”

I'm not sure what to say. I know I should say yes, but something stops me. Why do I suddenly want to keep Rosie all to myself?

“And hey, as a thank you, you can come over and play my piano, if you like. You said you played, right?”

“Wow. Really?”

“Yeah, for sure! I mean, not right now, but....”

“Of course, of course,” I say. “You're busy. But I'd love to come over sometime. Actually, here – my spare key. Since we're neighbours now, it makes more sense for you to have it. That way, you can drop the guitar back here if you're done with it, and I can come play your piano, if I feel like it and you're not home.”

He looks less sure about his offer now, but he takes my key and pockets it anyway. He takes a ring of keys from his pocket and works one off it.

“Here. My spare's somewhere at home. I'll find it and put it on this later,” he says, shaking the ring.

I remember then that he'll need the case and I return to my room to get it. When I come back, he doesn't register my presence. He's looking at Rosie like she's some manic pixie dream girl come to save his poor tortured soul in a hipster summer blockbuster. My

stomach does a weird sort of flop. I set the case down beside him and he stirs.

“Thanks. And thanks for this, Frankie. You're my new favourite neighbour.” He smiles. He smiles, a smile all for me, and I melt a little. Then he opens the case, sets Rosie inside and snaps the brass clasps shut.

~

That is the last I see of either of them for over three weeks. I even knocked on the door once or twice, to ask if I could try out the piano but he doesn't respond. I miss Tortured Logan. Inspired Logan no longer plays the piano and I can't hear the guitar through the walls. I miss my daily musical interlude. I also can't help but feel a little jealous. It's like Rosie had it in her this whole time, this power to give, this spark, and she saved it for him. I've had her all these years and not once did she help me out. But him, man. He's high in the sky. Where I used to hear anguished sobs, now I hear delighted giggles and “Yes. Yes!” from the other side of my wall. Not that I want him to be miserable, I just wish I could be inspired like that. Renewed.

Thankfully, I don't have to sit around my apartment anymore. I got a job! It's not much, but it's a start. I'll be editing documents for this branch of a non-profit and maintaining all their social media stuff – their website, their Twittiverse, their Faceblargh, the whole nine yards. It's a little over minimum wage but not much. These days you can't do much with just a BA. I kinda have to take what I can get.

It's a while before I hear or hear from Logan again. I haven't seen him in the building or heard a peep from his apartment in weeks. Today I am making chocolate chip cookies to celebrate my first paycheque and suddenly there is a massive crashing chord

on the other side of my wall. My glasses shimmy and clink. What follows is a frantic chase scene of two hands over the topography of 88 keys (97 if he really does have a Bösendorfer). With low, ominous bass chords that threaten to overtake the right hand with the left, he begins to play. The right hand only makes tiny grace-note yelps here and there until the next bar comes and it delivers a tumble of notes that chases the left all the way down to the far end of the piano. But then the left charges back, pushing the right hand higher and higher. He plays like this for hours, until I have to go to work. He is still going when I get back just after ten. I sit in my apartment, in the dark, and without taking my shoes off, I sit and listen to him play. He's less frantic now and I realize he's lost the strained, structured quality he had when I first moved in. His playing is smoother, more nuanced. It's a nice change that I didn't know he needed. I'll bet this is Rosie's doing. He's found his muse.

I go over the next day and knock on his door. Nothing. I try again. Nothing. I know he's home. I bet he smells like a t-shirt on its third day of being worn and has bags under his eyes big enough to take on vacation. As I raise my fist to knock again, the door ducks out from under the assault of my knuckles to reveal Logan as I've never seen him before. Clean clothes, washed and shaved and... smiling again. This time, it's a relaxed, contented kind of smile. Huh.

“Hey! What's up?” he says, sounding like a bad impression of a frat boy.

“Lots, you?”

“Same. I guess you can tell that I'm playing again. Was it too loud?”

“Yeah, actually,” I say, surprised at the bite in my own voice. “I have a job now,

so can you keep it quiet at night? I have to get up early.”

“Oh wow, congrats on the job! Come in, come in, tell me about it!”

This, I wasn't expecting. I follow him inside.

“Come, through here.” He disappears into a room, leaving me alone with Logan's living room. It is furnished with generic Ikea furniture but still feels empty. There are no photos of friends or family on the walls, just certificates from a series of competitions he has won. I recognize the names of some, others are new to me. I go through the door he disappeared through and find myself in his bedroom. Aside from a massive bed, it is barren. Immaculately clean, unadorned. There is an open door at the far end of the room and I step through it.

I find myself in the shiny black presence of the Bösendorfer.

Logan is sitting on the bench. He beckons for me to sit beside him.

“Frankie, I owe you a thank you for lending me Rosie. And as promised, I would like you to meet Humphrey,” he says, gesturing to the expanse of gleaming black and white in front of me. He slides off the bench to give me room.

“Humphrey?” I say, running a hand over its smooth surface.

“Yeah. Long story, I'll tell you sometime. But for now, play!” He steps back a few paces and crosses his arms, waiting.

I feel lost. It's too much – what could I possibly play on such a beautiful instrument with these rusty fingers?

As if they have a life of their own, my hands settle on the keys and start to play the first thing I can think of and the last piece I played in competition: Mozart's

"Lacrimosa."

As I play, I feel familiar dread pouring in all around me. This feels worse than the competition – I'm brutally out of practice and still as average as I was when I last performed this piece. I can feel my body tensing up. Playing for my mother used to make me as nervous as I am now. I used to clench my jaw until I gave myself a headache. I haven't given myself one in years but I can feel one coming on now. I'm getting major déjà vu here. I remember the dim hope in my mother's face every time I asked her to listen to a piece I'd been practising, only to watch it die by the closing bars of the piece. Logan's face confirms it – a strained, but polite smile pinches his face, like he can smell something foul but is determined not to let it show. My mother's face wore the same one the whole drive back to New Brunswick the day after the competition. That silent, terrible drive.

“Mmm,” Logan says, tightly. “Very nice. I've always loved Mozart.”

I tell him I have a headache just so I can get out of there. He offers Tylenol but I say I've got some at home. He sees me to the door with a double kiss and an uncomfortable “thank you” and “good night.”

~

As the competition approaches, Logan is anything but quiet. He plays all day and, sometimes, I suspect, all night. I Google the compulsory work again and understand why. The rounds are ruthless and the sheer amount of music you must learn and know perfectly is pretty staggering. For a first prize of thirty grand, I guess it has to be. As I listen to him rehearse and compose, I begin to miss having something to practice. There's

a meditative quality to it that I used to love. You can totally submerge in rehearsal mode to the point where nothing outside exists. Just you and the music.

And then somehow, it's here. The competition. Round one and all its madness. I invite Logan over for a sandwich the night before the big day. I expect his cheekbones to be jutting out below his eyes but he looks healthy, radiant, even. He is calm and relaxed as he settles down at my table once more.

“Thanks for this, I've just run out of groceries,” he says before taking a bite. He seems so centred. He even makes eye contact when he thanks me, which is a first.

“So,” I begin, carefully. “Seems like Rosie helped you out.”

“Yeah man, you were so right! She was just what I needed.” This admission makes my stomach flop like it did before. But why? Why does this bother me so much?

Is it him I want, or her?

“It's been so long since I tried to learn an instrument... I think this is the first time it's been fun, you know? I forgot all about my piece and my block and just devoted myself to discovering her.”

“Great,” I say, not meaning it but wanting to.

“And when I went back to my piano a few weeks ago, it was... I don't know. It was like my mind was quieter, or something. I've been writing ever since, it's unreal. All thanks to Rosie.”

The rest of the conversation happens on mute. I watch Logan's lips flap as he extols her virtues and nuances and then he hands me his empty plate and I show him the door. I think I say “Good luck tomorrow,” but I'm not sure.

He wins. He wins everything. Of course he does. He wins the \$30,000 first prize and the “Best Performance of The Compulsory Canadian Work” prize and the “Radio Canada People's Choice” prize as well, both of which award him \$5, 000. No one's done that since Nareh Arghamanyan, the Armenian genius, and unlike Logan, she didn't win the composition prize on top of all that. The ceremony is almost embarrassing, he's on stage so much. The coverage is live on the CTV website and I wait for the end, when he gets to place his piece, the one Rosie inspired.

When it comes, it brings me to tears. Not sobs, just silent, rolling tears. It is perfect.

Listening to it feels like the first day I heard him; his hands know exactly where they're going and they go places that don't exist anywhere but on sheet music. The topography of notes is wild, uncharted, exquisite territory and Logan explores it with his fingertips. There is a moment of breathless silence before the thousands in the audience jump to their feet in unison and fill the hall with the thunder of clapping hands.

He calls me from his hotel room at midnight. His voice slides around in his mouth, lubricated by champagne that costs as much as my rent, no doubt. I guess he deserves to celebrate. I just wish I felt happier for him. Or do I? As he tells me about how Jean-François Rivest shook his hand sombrely and told him that Logan had renewed his hope for this generation of pianists, I start to taste jealousy on my tongue, bitter as bile. Next he tells me about how Jacques Lacombe bought him drink after drink at the bar while Francis Perron tried to pick his increasingly inebriated brain. Louise Andrée Baril told him that she'd better watch her back with him around, if she wanted to keep her job.

Apparently she winked at him. Whoop-de-fucking-do.

I lie in bed, the possibility of sleep now falling away as he piles on the names and stories about people I would love to meet, and many that I don't even know. Somehow, that's worse, the fact that not only is Logan exactly where I would kill to be in life, but he can rattle off names of composers and arrangers and conductors like the names of the Beatles. And all night long the classical equivalents of Paul and John fought over who got to buy him the next drink, and the next, and the next.

“And I'd never be here, if it weren't for you,” he says, biting down on the words to keep them from slurring. “If you had never shown me Rosie, I'd never have written that piece. She's amazing, that lovely little—”

I hang up on him mid sentence. I turn off the ringer and shove the phone under my pillow. Fuck him. Fuck Rosie. Fucking hell.

Now thoroughly awake and pissed, I pace my apartment in the dark. Where does he get off, calling me in the middle of the night to fucking gloat? And then, he has the nerve to thank me, but just for being the middleman who brought him and Rosie together. Not for listening to his bullshit, or for checking up on him, or for making him sandwiches. For introducing him to his muse. My muse, damn it.

I grab my keys from the table by the door and go out into the hallway. I find Logan's key, placed on a special, separate ring. He won't be home until tomorrow. The competition paid for a swanky hotel somewhere on Sherbrooke, I'm sure. He's probably out drinking, lording his winnings over the other geniuses. I unlock his door.

I hunt for her. She is sequestered in the corner of the living room, behind the chair,

as though he intended to hide her from me. As though he knew it would end this way. I pull her case out onto the floor as roughly as I want to, my pulse racing now. The latches pop loudly in the silence. We are alone, she and I. I pull her slowly from her case, her form familiar in my sweaty hands, and light as ever. It takes almost no effort at all to lift her above my head like a baseball bat.

She betrayed me. She could have reassured me, told me, “Yes, you are supposed to play something, just not piano.” But no. She gave her gift to him, behind my back. I imagine breaking her broad, beautiful back in one smooth swing onto the armchair. I imagine her draping herself over it like a desperate femme fatale for a moment before I yank her upright and slam her against the floor. I can almost feel the impact of the crunch of guitar meeting tile, hairline fractures racing under my fingertips like electricity gone wild. If I wanted to, I could know what it would feel like to have her crumple in my hands.

But why?

I set Rosie on the couch and take a few deep breaths.

Once my heart slows, I make my way through Logan's bedroom, to the practice room beside it.

I find the big, black Bösendorfer sits in the middle of the room, a sleeping giant. It gleams. I walk around it, looking at it from all angles before I sit on the worn wooden stool in front of it. My palms sweat just looking at it. I remember the look on Logan's face, the look so like the one my mother used to give me.

With one finger, I press middle C. The warm rumble that answers me raises the

hairs on my arms. Gingerly, I play a major chord. Then I settle my left hand on the bass end and begin to play. Chords tumble forth and my hands find their footing, stumbling only a little. I don't know where the music is coming from – except for the other night, I haven't touched keys in years. I play for what feels like hours. When I finally stop, the sound of clapping makes me turn toward the door.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. Logan is standing in the doorway.

“You hung up on me and sounded mad. I don't like it when people are mad at me,” he says. He looks like a drunk, sullen school boy. After a moment, he adds, “You can really play.”

For once, I agree.

“This big guy just brought it out of me,” I say, stroking the piano's gleaming surface.

“Just like Rosie did,” says Logan with a lopsided smile.

“Yeah,” I say, “Just like Rosie.”

The End.

Nomination

At first glance, it seems like the rumours about this place aren't true. A nosy tourist would find nothing here but a small village full of happy people with curious names. There's Draelo, the old, cranky butcher; Morli, the baker who delivers hot bread every morning to each house; Vastagar, the fishmonger who hauls fresh fish in from the coast. But ask around and you just might hear about a very old lady who lives alone, where the trees of the forest meet the first few houses on the edge of town. They say thick white smoke pours from the chimney at all hours, all times of the years. They say she just came to the village one day. No one knows where she came from. They say all sorts of things.

Some folks around here call her a wise woman, but everyone in the village calls her Maman. Her wisdom is an old, strange breed, and her talents are many. But what the rumours around here speak of, and what the villagers come for, are the names she cooks to perfection in her big black pot.

On hazy summer nights, the air is thick as syrup and it carries the smell of the names down to the village. The older folks claim that they can guess what kind of name it will be just by the smell of it. Rosehips and cloves, the warmth and softness of old flannel and some strong, black tea will give you a sturdy, comfortable kind of name: a hardy Haron, perhaps, or a sturdy Stort. Clean linen and fresh-cut grass and a dash of quiet, mid-afternoon sun might make for a demure, delicate Maerynn but add a little white pepper and a hint of jasmine in there and you'll get instead Yahaia, all effervescent charm

and easy joy. Maman remembers every name she's ever made, every person she's shaped. She holds each one inside her memory like she holds onto dreams that try to slip away in the morning. She has vaults deep inside her, shelves stocked with the names of folks who have come and gone, folks still to come and those lives she watches over at present. Although she shares no blood with them, she is mother of many.

The lives she is currently watching over are all sweltering in a wave of early August heat. The villagers stand around like moored boats, aimless and apathetic in the heavy humidity. Their faces are slack and glazed. The long summer days leave deep shadows on the lawns. Dark stains creep along the walls with aching patience and slip in through open windows and old screen doors that never quite close properly. No one notices. One night, shadowy hands slip around the slender neck of a sleeping child, and squeeze.

The parents come in the morning with the boy. Maman remembers him. She named him Elio ten years ago because he felt like a spark in her hands. There was a light inside this one, small but so strong. Usually his spark was burning bright; he had a showman's energy about him. She often saw him at the market with his mother, selling cabbages to anyone and everyone who passed his stall. That big smile and those bright blue eyes under the messy mushroom cap of brown hair made him irresistible. He was always juggling cabbages, balancing them on his forehead for a laugh, promising "Two for one! Two for one!" But tonight, the boy who is set before Maman is almost a stranger to her. Hollow-cheeked and pale, Elio looks like he hasn't slept in days. He gazes into space until she eases her old bones out of her chair and onto the floor in front of him.

“Elio?” she asks. At the sound of his name, the boy looks at her but says nothing. She turns to his parents. “How long has he been like this?” she asks. They look at one another and the mother answers first.

“Just this morning, I think,” she says. “He was fine when we put him to bed last night.”

“And what worried you about him?”

“He didn't come down for breakfast. I called for him and... nothing. When I went to see what was wrong, he was just lying there.” The mother bites her thumbnail. Her husband paces runs a hand through his silver-streaked hair over and over.

“He's usually up with the sun,” he mutters.

“And then?”

“Then...,” says the mother, “then I sat down on the bed beside him. He didn't even look at me. When I asked him what was wrong, he looked... confused. Like I was speaking a different language. Like he could hear me, but he couldn't understand what I was saying.”

Maman takes the little boy's hands in her big, soft ones and finds them cold.

“Elio?” she asks. “Can you hear me, little one?” Dull eyes look back at her. Their colour has slipped from summer-sky blue to dishwater grey. His mouth is slack, like a melted smile.

“Elio, can you tell me if anything strange happened last night? Did you eat something funny, child? After you went to bed, perhaps?”

“We won't be cross, I promise,” says the mother.

“Or did you maybe hit your head? A little bump on the head can go a long way,” says Maman. The boy is as limp as a puppet in the big blue chair. After a moment, he sighs deeply, as though profoundly tired.

“Perhaps it would be best if I spoke with him alone,” says Maman, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Just in case he did eat something he's not supposed to. He mightn't say it in front of you two, so if you could step out for just a moment....”

“Of course, of course,” says the mother, scooping up her shawl from where it has slipped off the chair. She catches her husband as he wheels back toward her to complete the circuit he has been pacing and with a solemn nod to Maman, she steers her husband out to the old porch and shuts the door behind her.

Maman squeezes Elio's hands. She tries to hold him in her mind, the idea of him. She remembers how he felt the day she met him, only hours after he'd come into the world. That tiny life in her arms. But as she looks into his little face now, she sees only darkness. Shadows seem to congregate around him in places they don't belong; the hollows in his cheeks are new. They give his once-darling little pumpkin face the impression of a rotten, sagging Jack-o-lantern. He is wasting away to nothing before her very eyes.

“What are you?” she says to the shadows. She feels them all around her now. They skulk around the periphery of the lamplight like hungry dogs.

“What do you want with this boy?” says Maman. Her voice is hard now. She straightens her old shoulders from their usual stoop and squares them, even though the ache of it blooms like a bruise. She does not let go of the cold little hands.

“You have no business getting all up inside this little boy's head,” she continues.

“What do you want from him?”

Elio squeezes her hands then, hard. His eyes shoot open.

“The time has come,” he says, looking at her. There is a hollowness to his voice, a resonance that doesn't belong to him. And the eyes. They are far too cold to be Elio's alone. There is something terribly familiar about them. About all of this.

“The time for what?” she asks.

“For an end, and for a beginning.”

“If there is to be an end, then let it be mine alone. Leave this child be.”

“The young one is merely a vessel. It is of no importance,” says Elio. The shadows creep closer.

“Bite your tongue,” growls Maman. There is an edge hardening in her voice. “He is a child of this village, and this village is mine to watch over, which makes him a being of the utmost importance.”

“But I have come only for you,” whispers Elio. “Salut, Maman.” Then, as if a lamp has been lit, the shadows disperse back to their corners and little Elio collapses into Maman's lap. His mother pokes her head in.

“Is he alright?” she asks.

“I think... yes, he's sleeping. Come,” Maman says, as she gathers the boy in her arms. His breathing is ragged and he is as chilly as a January morning.

“What happened?” asks the father, hair wild from nervous hands.

“I am not sure,” says Maman. “Let me think on it. This seems familiar, somehow,

but I can't quite place it. Take him home, put him to bed and come to me in the morning. He is not well.”

~

When they bring him the next day, he does not make eye contact, even when Maman says his name. His slight frame slumps and curls in on itself, shoulders rounded, head lolling. He says nothing. He does not even sigh.

Maman ventures to the porch, where the parents sit. They seem less worried than yesterday. The father is still and his hair is tamed. The mother holds his hand and gazes at the little garden that sprawls in front of the porch. She seems to be smiling. This too, seems familiar.

“It's as I feared, he's much worse,” says Maman, breaking the silence.

“Who's worse?” asks the mother.

“Elio. Your boy?”

“Oh yes! Where is the darling?”

“Why, he's inside. You... just brought him to me.”

“Did we?” asks the father.

“Why... yes. You were concerned. He does not respond when I speak to him.”

“Who?” asks the mother.

“Elio,” says Maman, now thoroughly confused. “Are you both quite alright?”

“Of course! We're just enjoying your lovely view,” says the mother. The father smiles and pats his wife's hand.

“But your son....”

“Oh yes! Where is he? Little scamp, always larking about.”

“He's inside.”

“Oh good. Having some lemonade, I suppose,” says the mother, pleasantly.

“Just the thing for a hot day,” adds the father.

“I... I shall just check to see that he is well,” says Maman. She opens the old screen door and shuffles inside. She does not quite know what to make of this. She returns to her parlour to find Elio sitting on the edge of the seat of the large blue armchair. He is staring at her with cold eyes.

“Why are you doing this?” she asks the shadows that cling to him.

“What *am* I doing?” asks the little boy. He is less Elio and more shadow than he was last night. Darkness eats away at him everywhere – along the jaw, behind the ears, under the eyes.

“You are taking something most precious from him,” says Maman. “I can feel the tear where you have tried to rip it out. Why? Why would you do this? Of what use is a little boy's name to you?”

“A name is power,” say the shadows with the little boy's mouth.

Maman snorts. “How little you know, shadow man. A name is life,” she says. “It is everything a being is and knows. Everything they are, in one word. You are stealing this poor boy's life right out from underneath him and I will not have that in my village.”

“Then save him, Mother of Many. If you can.”

Elio crumples suddenly into the arms of the chair, puppet strings cut. Maman places a blanket over him then turns slowly and shuffles into her dim little kitchen, trying

to recall what all went into her pot the night Elio was born. Fresh clover and spring rain, to start with, wasn't it? Then a spicy nasturtium leaf or two for that showy quality about him. And the first peach of the season to keep him sweet. If she can make his name again and give it to him, it might stick and banish this shadowy interloper.

She finds the jar of carefully collected rainwater on a high shelf, put there to remind her to be sparing with it. It was a dry spring this year and it will be a long while to the next one.

She takes a jar of clover from the cupboard. She picked the clover in its prime in early summer and placed in oil to preserve it. She adds it and a dash of rain to the big black pot that hangs from the fireplace, then starts a fire underneath it. After a bit, she adds a chopped peach to the pot and stirs it with her long wooden spoon before shuffling over to fetch some fresh nasturtium leaves from her window box. She chops them up fine and adds them to the mix as it starts to bubble. She stirs it, taking tiny sipping sniffs of the steam that spills over the top of the pot. It smells... off. Something is wrong here.

“That smells delicious,” calls Elio. “Is it ready? I want some!”

Maman didn't know he was awake, much less hungry. He sounds so like his former self that she has to go to the parlour to see him for herself. He looks like the sweet boy in the market again, if a little tired. He smiles at her. She could almost believe it's only him in there, if it weren't for the eyes.

“Almost,” she says. “I just need one more thing.”

“I don't think it needs anything. I want it now. Can I try it now?”

“It isn't ready,” says Maman. She's sure there's something else. It's on the tip of

her tongue.

“I want it now,” Elio says, frowning now. “Give it to me!”

The water bubbles behind her, filling the room with a sweet, spicy smell. But there's something missing. Something... warm. Maman can't quite remember. What is it that his mother always smells like? Nutmeg? Cumin?

“Cinnamon!” Maman exclaims, flinging open her cupboards. Elio slumps in the chair and glares at her as she measures out just the very tip of a spoonful of cinnamon and sprinkles it into the pot. The boiling water fizzes up for a moment, and then settles into sudden stillness as though the fire has gone out. It is ready.

But Maman is nervous. In all her time as name maker for this village she has never had a child lose the name she gave them. She has never seen a child lose its name and she does not understand why the shadows have taken this one, or why now. She ladles the solution through a fine strainer into a tall glass, so no bits of clover or peach pulp or leaves remain. She lets it cool while she places lids back on jars and jars back on shelves.

Elio glares at her as she approaches with the glass. He is furred in shadow. She sits down in the chair opposite his, grateful for the rest. Her old hips ache.

“You must drink this now. It will help.”

“Why would I want your help?” asks the little boy. “You don't even know what I want.”

“You are a selfish, cruel thing that has crawled inside of this sweet little boy. I do not know what has made you so angry to do something so atrocious, but he has nothing to

do with it.” She sits the glass on the reading table between them. “You will drink this and you will give him his name back. And then you will leave him be and never return. Do you agree?”

Without a word, the boy reaches for the glass, keeping his eyes on the elderly lady before him. He raises it to his lips and takes one big gulp and then another. And then, after a third, he lowers the glass and spits the mouthful onto her shoes.

“No,” he says, mouth dripping.

As Maman bends to wipe up the mess on the floor, the boy slumps in the chair once more. She tells his parents they can take him home, but that they should bring him back to see her tomorrow night, at midnight.

“Bring who back?” asks the father.

“At midnight?” asks the mother.

Maman writes it on a piece of paper and tells the mother to put it in her pocket. The couple then walk off the porch without waiting for the little boy. He follows them, head bowed.

After watching them disappear around the bend of the long lane that leads to her house, Maman closes the door and returns to the kitchen. She sits in the squeaky old chair that lives beside the fireplace and stares into the flames for a while, until it is nearly midnight. Then, she rises stiffly and shuffles over to her cupboards once again. She opens them and begins to pull jars and containers that look gigantic in her tiny, wizened hands. Out come little cloth bags from the shelves of foxglove and nightshade and dried black currants. Squid ink a fisherman from the far shores gave her in exchange for a strong

name for his daughter. Promises forgotten, betrayals made. Secrets told in the dead of night.

Black smoke pours from Maman's chimney. Only Lerin, the oldest man in town remembers when the smoke went black last.

“It was the day Maman came to us. A stranger walked her to the edge of the village and then he disappeared into thin air. She was an old woman even then!” says Lerin to anyone who will listen.

All that night and all the next day, the smoke pours from Maman's chimney. The villagers take it as a bad sign. She does not leave her kitchen until midnight, when Elio's parents knock on her door once more. When she lets them in, the mother seems agitated, the father, annoyed. She shoves the note requesting their presence into Maman's hands.

“I found this in my pocket this morning and couldn't remember how it got into the dress I wore yesterday,” says Elio's mother. “Would you care to explain how it got there?”

“I gave it to you last night,” says Maman. “Do you not remember?”

“Last night?” asks the father. “But last night we... we....”

“You brought Elio to see me. He was worse than he was before.”

“Who was worse?” asks the mother, frowning.

“Elio. Your *son*,” says Maman, turning to the little boy who is standing behind them. His mother looks at him, narrowing her eyes for a moment. She regards him with vague recognition, as though he is someone else's child whose presence she has forgotten until just now.

“My son,” she says, unconvinced.

“Please, I must speak with him alone. Will you wait here?”

“Wait? Here? Absolutely not. It's past midnight! We only came to figure out what this damn note meant!” declares the father. “We're not sitting around here any longer.”

“Please, just wait...,” says Maman but they are already off the porch and slipping away into darkness. Maman sighs and goes back inside. Elio is sitting on the edge of the big armchair, waiting for her. He sniffs the air.

“Have you have brought me another disgusting tea to drink?” he asks with a smile that is too old for his face.

“No,” she says, setting a glass on the table in front of him. The contents are a dark, murky grey. “I am tired of fighting with you.”

“What is this, then?” asks the boy, glancing at it and back at her. She settles into her own chair with heavy sigh.

“It is a white flag. I'm giving you what you want.”

The boy chuckles.

“Foolish old woman. You think you know what I want?”

“I'll bet you I do.”

“You're on. What are the stakes? What's on the table?” asks the shadow with the boy's mouth.

“The only thing worth anything – life.” Maman leans to push the glass toward him and the light finds her face. Suddenly, she looks as old as they say she is, bone tired and grey. But after a heartbeat, she sighs heavily, sits back and is swallowed by shadow once more.

After a moment of silence, the boy reaches for the glass. He drinks it slowly, watching her face for evidence of treachery, finding none. He tilts the glass a little higher to get the last few drops of the concoction and Maman sighs again, more satisfied this time than tired.

The silence hums around them. For a moment, nothing moves.

Then, one by one the shadows begin to rise off Elio like steam. As the darkness slowly peels away, Elio comes back to himself. The bits of shadow float up and hover near the ceiling. Suddenly, there is a *snap!* as the last of the grey pulls away from Elio and he slumps. Maman manages to catch him before he hits the floor and settles him back into the chair. Meanwhile, the shadows fall to the floor and pile there. Slowly the pile takes a form. A human form. In moments, there is a man curled at her feet. His clothes are ragged; an old tuxedo jacket, tails and all, but fraying wherever it can. A battered top hat sits skewed on his head. His feet and chest are bare. The cuffs of his trousers are torn at the calves and hairy with stray threads. His skin is the blue-black of a starless night sky.

“Whaa?” says his mouth as it tries to fit itself around the words that are starting to occur to it.

“Easy now. Give it time,” says Maman, patting him gently on the shoulder. The man takes a breath, lets it out and takes another before he tries to speak again.

“What... what have you done to me?” he asks. His voice reminds Maman of summer thunder.

“I gave you what you came for. I gave you a name.”

“What I came for?” asks the man. He examines his palms, then slowly places

them on his face, feeling the stubble and warm skin there.

“What you came for, what I came for, and what countless others have come to this village for: A title on a blank page. Life.”

“I do not understand,” says the shadow man.

“You tore yourself from the darkness because you were hungry for purpose. You thought you wanted Elio and his name, but he was only bait. Just an incentive to pull you from the shadows and bring you to me.”

He tries to stand but stumbles, foal-like, on new legs. He takes a deep breath.

“What do you want with me?” he asks Maman. Eyes burn red-black like living coals beneath a heavy brow.

“It is not what I want, my friend, but what you want. You wanted a name, a shape and a purpose. I can give you those things,” says Maman, with a nod to the murky glass.

“Welcome to the world, Umbra.”

“Umbra,” says the shadow man, tasting the name. He pushes his face into his palms and smells them. He exhales.

“Umbra,” he says. This time, it is a statement.

“Yes,” says Maman. She takes his hands in hers and helps him up off the floor. Standing, he is taller than any man she knows. He is lanky and long, like a shadow running along the ground. He smells of black currants and nightshade and summer evenings.

“You were right and you were wrong about names, my friend,” she says to him.

“They have a power to them, that's for certain. But they are not meant to be used like

weapons, or eaten like apples.” She looks up at him, holding one of his huge hands in both of hers. “A name is the space that promises to hold everything you are to become. All I can do is shape it, like clay into a bowl. It is yours to fill. Mine is full now – I have had such a life I am fairly brimming over with it. But I will give you the third thing I promised you, with everything I have left.”

“You have given me a name and a shape, Maman,” rumbles Umbra. “You have given me everything.”

“And now I will give you purpose: watch over this village. Care for the people here and name them as they come into this world.”

“But I know nothing of naming, Maman.”

“Nonsense. You spent three days in the mind of a child who was born and raised here. You have known the very best of people – the optimism, love and hope of that child, and his love for his home and family. You know the secret places where you can catch frogs and the best field to watch shooting stars in. You know what it's like to love the smell of homemade jam made by your mother, and the feeling of a tight hug in big arms. You know that the water tastes better here than it does in the next county over and that people smile here, a lot. You know what it means to love this village. You will be a perfect guardian.”

“As you were?” asks Umbra softly.

Maman's smile is gentle and sad. She takes a deep breath, squeezes his hands in hers and sighs. She seems to deflate a little, while Umbra sits up a little straighter, but the nervous tension has slipped from his shoulders. Maman lets go of his hands and slumps

slowly back into her chair, back into the shadows.

Umbra stands. There are no more questions. He takes familiar steps over to the massive expanse of shelves and cupboards and nooks and crannies that hold the ingredients that she has been collecting for years. Before opening this precious pantry, he turns toward the fire, a “Merci” on his lips. But the chair is empty, except for a shadow curled up in one corner of its blue seat.

The End.