

Sketches of a Salvaged Soul

A Social Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Sketches of a Salvaged Soul: A social fiction that explores the intersection between the arts and anti-bullying.

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This thesis is written with the hope of addressing the systemic issue and long-term effects of bullying in youth and young adults, and attempts to illustrate the incalculable ways that the Arts and Arts environments are responsible for the alleviation of these effects and the restoration of self-confidence in the victims of various forms of unwarranted aggression. It is my assertion that teachers (ideally, Arts teachers) need to better understand the lived experiences surrounding bullying so that they will no longer be unaware of how to identify and respond to it in their own classrooms and school communities. The thesis in itself is a didactic research-based social fiction that explores key empathic elements of my lived experiences as a student and teacher, informed by the adoption of elements including fictional settings, characters and plotlines, which will allow an interpretative portrayal of bullying within a creative and literary framework. It is my intention to both provoke conversation and empathy, and inspire other teachers to embrace the possibilities of the intersection of the Arts and anti-bullying in their classrooms. By choosing the vehicle of social fiction, I will demonstrate that there is tremendous value in creating work that is informative, entertaining and thus more easily accessible to a wider audience, including students, parents and the general public beyond the academy.

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Dedication

To the love of my life, Alvar who read every word

and

To my family who are in no way represented by the family in this text

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Sketches of a Salvaged Soul: A Social Fiction

My main objectives in writing this thesis are threefold. The first is to address the systemic issue of bullying that has masticated the psyches of our youth, and littered the news media with tragic reports of lives that have been traumatized, or worse, prematurely ended, because of senseless personal terrorization. It is my assertion that teachers (ideally, art teachers) need to better understand the complexity surrounding bullying so that they will be better able to identify and respond to it in their own classrooms and to embrace the possibilities of the intersection of art and anti-bullying in the teaching of their own students.

My second objective is to write, as Leggo (1999) suggests, a rigorous and vigorous expression of my lived experiences as data that, once it is written, will not be relegated to a dusty bookshelf or unopened PDF, but rather be circulated among pre-service arts teachers, current teachers, and perhaps even students, parents, administrators, and the general public so that by reading my fiction, they may learn about the dire need to instill empathy in the classroom (Sinner; Leggo; Irwin; Gouzouasis & Grauer, 2006, p. 1227). This second objective is borne out of the somewhat unsurprising fact that teachers are, in many cases, too busy balancing their professional and personal lives to explore academic research to its full extent (Merridy, 2003, p. 24). I hope to bring my research to wider audiences by composing an entertaining text that teachers will choose to read in their personal time.

The third objective that I have is to meaningfully contribute to the body of research in the field of Art Education, most specifically within the arts-based research trajectory that has been spurred by the literary research of Rishma Dunlop (1999), Pauline Sameshima (2007) and Carl Leggo (2006). By writing my own fictional narrative, I will demonstrate that there is tremendous value in creating work that is informative, entertaining and thus more easily accessible beyond the academy.

To begin, in a review of literature, I found a variety of similar definitions of what constitutes bullying. The fundamental sources state that bullying is any repeated (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006) aggressive behaviour directed at a person who is perceived as being weaker than the individual(s) perpetrating the aggression (Olweus, 1993; Craig & Pepler, 1993). Furthermore, the current definition

provided in the anti-bullying documents at the school in which I am currently teaching defines bullying as:

any repeated direct or indirect behaviour, comment, act or gesture, whether deliberate or not, including in cyberspace, which occurs in a context where there is a power imbalance between the persons concerned and which causes distresses and injuries, hurts oppresses, intimidates or ostracizes. (p.1)

These definitions are based upon the *multidimensional bullying identification model*, which parses the act into two subtypes of bullying: *direct*, which includes physical acts of aggression and name-calling such as “Chubs” and “Fatty”, and *indirect*, which includes behaviours ranging from making faces and inappropriate gestures to purposeful exclusion and manipulation (Olweus, 1994; Marini, Fairbain & Zuber, 2001).

What was not mentioned in the literature, and what I can recall from my own experiences is that direct and indirect bullying are rarely ever separate factors in the world of juvenile aggression, and that there are many circumstances I have witnessed where the line between weak and strong is barely decipherable. It seems as if the research that has been done on this subject compartmentalizes these ubiquitous and complicated issues of aggression into neat little boxes that satisfy prescribed institutional practices of the day, and even the academic readership. Aggression is never that easy to comprehend, as it happens for a variety of reasons. Research also suggests that bullied children can become bullies in later life, a position supported by Patchin and Hinduja (2006) who state that bullying has evolved from a rite of passage toward an expression of pure violence that has consequently spurred homicide, suicide and other such criminal implications for youth. This shows that the bullying is a continuing trend that is present in social scenarios that extend beyond the classroom into the adult sphere.

Cyberbullying, which thankfully was not possible in my generation, is defined by the aforementioned *multidimensional model*, and falls between the two polarities because the perpetrator(s)

exert *direct* confrontational behaviour through the *indirect* spaces of the internet and cellular signals (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Marini, Fairbain & Zuber, 2001) so that there is virtually no escape. A report in 2004 tabulated cellphone usage in youth in the developed world at 103 million users (Selian, 2004). In my recent experience teaching in Montreal, it seems like every person in my class has either a cellphone or a Facebook account or both, and it is rare that students do not at least have access to the Internet. This observation is substantiated by a study that showed that 93% of youth aged 12-17 frequently used the Internet (Lenhart, Madden, Rankin, & Smith, 2007).

Before the technological age, as in my case, victims were granted at least a temporary reprieve from bullying when they left the physical confines of the school environs; but with cyberbullying, the threat moves to non-physical spaces such as social media, gaming, and texts, and is therefore largely unavoidable (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). As proven with the recent tragedy of Amanda Todd, (Hamilton, 2012) cyberbullying plunged was responsible for plunging a typical teenager into a constant and unrelenting atmosphere of hatred and aggression, which leaked into all aspects of her personal, social and academic life. Furthermore, and perhaps one of the reasons Todd's story escalated to the level it did, is that administrators have a more difficult time disciplining this indirect type of bullying because it “leaves no bruises” as evidence (Bickmore, 2011, p. 661), and does not unfold in the physical school environment. This lack of school “ownership” of cyberbullying makes collecting proper evidence difficult, because incidents cannot be defined if they are not reported, and various laws protect the privacy of Internet users (Office of the Privacy Commissioner, 2012; Patchin, Hinduja; 2006).

Statistics have shown that between 10-20 percent of students are perpetrators of bullying (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2001); roughly 14-20 percent of students report being bullied and that six percent fall into the category of being both bullied and victimized (Rigby, 1997). In terms of cyberbullying, a Canadian study conducted by Li (2007) found that 15 percent of students admitted cyberbullying others, and 25 per cent said they had been cyberbullied. Because of the rapid development of technology and flippant nature of social media sites, statistical measurement becomes obsolete rather quickly. From my experience as a student and a teacher, I have noticed that all students are complicit in

bullying situations to some degree, be it in jest or seriousness, or as an instigator, bystander or mediator. Although it can be deduced that not all students are bullies, or bullied themselves, all students are somehow affected by bullying and cyberbullying (Smith & Brain, 2000, Beran & Shapiro, 2005).

It is difficult to go through a day, let alone a lifetime without somehow being involved in this relational power struggle either in a physical or cyber environment. Even though some studies analyze bullying as being a dyadic (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Zijlstra, De Winter, Verhulst & Ormel, 2007), or a triadic (Card, Rodkin & Garandeanu, 2010) relationship, others have stressed that the larger audience of seemingly innocent bystanders (including teachers) are actually involved in bullying situations especially if they do nothing to stop them (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Olweus, 2001). Empirical evidence has shown that it is this apathetic audience of bystanders that has the power to either encourage or eradicate the violence, but unfortunately, campaigns that appeal to the point of view of the bystanders are often overlooked in favour of those that address the bullies and victims themselves (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Hawkins, Pepler & Craig, 2001).

In terms of gender, an examination of the information based on the dyadic relationship of bully and victim in the physical school environment suggests that pre-teenaged boys are more likely to be victims and perpetrators of direct or overt aggression such as physical aggression, while pre-teenaged girls are more likely to be victims and perpetrators of indirect bullying such as cyber-bullying (Statscan, 2009; Carbone-Lopez, Esbensen & Brick, 2010; Rivers & Smith, 1994; Rodkin & Berger, 2008). Another experiment analyzed specific factors, which led to victimization, and the findings determined that boys were targeted because of their age, race and poverty level in relation to their aggressors, and girls were most usually targeted based on their participation in “non-female behaviour” including being perceived as being overweight or too aggressive (Carbone-Lopez, Esbensen & Brick, 2010). And to disprove everything just stated, another qualitative study that surveyed youth found no obvious gender difference between boys and girls being potential victims of bullying, apart from boys being more inclined to better respond to bullying with humour (Beran & Shapiro, 2005). What we can conclude from the data is that the data is largely inconclusive.

Additionally, in minority communities such as the gay community, racially diverse communities and communities including physical or mental disability, the factors that predispose students to bullying and victimization are just as difficult to pinpoint. A number of studies have proven--albeit not overwhelmingly--that bullies are just as diverse as their victims. Studies of those with physical and mental disabilities (Woods & Wolke, 2004), gifted students (Peterson & Ray, 2006), and LGBT youth, (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008) found that because these minority groups had a history of being victimized, they actually had a greater chance of becoming bullies themselves. The failure of the literature to come to any consensus as to what exactly causes people to be bullies or victims leads me to believe that the concept of bullying in itself is highly subjective and reliant on a great many factors that can be difficult to prove through even the best qualitative research, and can also be difficult to research objectively without running the risk of excluding certain sensitive populations.

Based on my own lived experiences being bullied, and my observations of students as a teacher, I found that there are a variety of working hypotheses that researchers and academics have devised in response to the causes of bullying. The *intergenerational* approach, first conceived of over 25 years ago yet still relevant to the current dialogue, suggests that those who bully in the school are, in fact, learning the negative behaviour including racism, impulsiveness, and aggressiveness, from either their parents or their siblings at home (Greenbaum, 1988). More recently, others have contended that bullying is caused in part by youth attempting to gain social capital and status by exerting power over the weak (Rodkin & Berger, 2008; Olweus, 1994), which I personally believe is a better synopsis of the predominant motivation for those who bully, at least in my experience. Bickmore (2010) draws attention to the larger arena of social climate, violence in the media, reduced power of authority, and “ethnocultural heterogeneity” as being contributing factors to increased bullying, which are all factors that I will address in my social fiction (p. 42). An earlier study pointed to the school environment and those present in the environment as having impact on whether or not a student would be a bully, as well as the inherent economic, sociological and anthropological diversity in the school population (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2001). Some believe that cyberbullying is increasing because the cyber-domains

are largely unregulated, unmonitored and create the illusion in youth that they are spaces of absolute anonymity (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; 2008).

Some of the effects of being victimized by bullying and cyberbullying that I know too well include depression, high levels of stress, avoidance issues, low self-esteem, thoughts of suicide, attempting suicide, self-harm such as cutting, lack of interest in school and achievement, absenteeism, and/or drug and alcohol abuse (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2001; Mattani & McGuire, 2006; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). In addition to the emotional and physical impact, I know too well that having been bullied in youth can have a detrimental long-term psychological effect on adults in how they perceive themselves, how they form sexual, professional, and collegial relationships and how they contribute to society as a whole (Patchin & Hinduja 2006; 2008). Further studies have shown that youths who bully go on to repeat these aggressive and sometimes abusive behaviours throughout their adult lives (Espelage, Bosworth & Simon 2001; Olweus 1991, Chapell, 2005). I can tragically relate to these facts, and plan to illuminate in my fiction some of the long-term effects that bullying has on a person over the years.

From my perspective, there are two main reasons why much of the data collection and qualitative methods used to determine the success of anti-bullying intervention programs in schools are limited and largely inconclusive (Patchin & Hinduja 2006, 2008; Pepler & Craig 2011). The first is due to the fact that it is very difficult to measure the abstract concept of *success* (Boyd, 2011; Bickmore, 2010); and the second is that because researchers are surveying primarily at-risk students the results of data collection are skewed by many variables (Beran & Shapiro, 2005). Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt and Hymel, (2001) point out that when academics and researchers attempt to come to a consensus on how best to survey and interview these cultures, it actually causes a more pronounced splintering of opinions. Some argue that the best way to analyze bullying is from the viewpoints of students themselves (Kelley, 2012; Carroll-Lind, 2009); some argue for the surveying of teachers and administrators who have seen bullying prevention programs implemented in their schools; others believe that hardline statistics of violent incidents in various schools are the most telling of how much bullying is present therein. The problem

that I see with most of these attempts at understanding this critical issue is that for every story captured, there are so many that are missed. It is my experience that the worst cases of bullying are the ones that go unreported.

Despite this, the successes that I have gleaned from this cross-section of literature indicate that: a) bullying needs to be addressed as a school-wide, if not country-wide initiative (Behran & Shapiro, 2004; Pepler & Craig, 2011); b) bullying must be addressed over the long-term and cannot quickly be solved with “band-aid” solutions or “add-on” programs (Swearer et al., 2001); and c) pro-active strategies that have the most effective results include less authoritarian approaches, and more organic, teacher-modelling strategies that address the multi-dimensional nature of the problem (Boyd, 2011; Bickmore, 2010).

Teacher training and professional development in how to address bullying and teach students how to build healthy relationships, as well as the practice of offering a wide range of extra-curricular activities were also seen to be successful, but unfortunately are usually the first programs to be eliminated with budget-cuts (Pepler & Craig, 2011; Bickmore, 2011). Furthermore, it was evidenced that the anti-bullying rules at a given school must be communicated clearly and enforced by a strong administration for other, more organic strategies to be truly effective (Olweus, 1993; 1994). Finally, and worth noting is the discovery that classroom bullying has a lot to do with the teacher's management of the class (Roland & Galloway, 2002). These findings point to the impact that I desire for my social fiction: to influence the techniques of teachers by showing and telling them through my story what is at stake in the classroom.

Much of the sparse research done into the teaching of anti-bullying strategies through the visual arts curriculum has either been executed through the primarily qualitative methodological approaches of compiling data from surveys given to students and professionals; interviewing students and professionals, or the observations of students once various anti-bullying programs are implemented (Swearer et al., 2001; Bickmore, 2010). Recent surveys and self-observations of educational professionals have resulted in the push for bullying to be addressed at the curricular level through the teaching of the six different kinds of literacies: reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing and visually representing (Haesler, 2010; Pepler & Craig, 2011). It has been further noted that appealing to a wide range of learning styles such as

dramatics, art and literature, helps to teach anti-bullying behaviours (Darts, 2004; Borich, 2007; Haesler, 2010). In my thesis, I will investigate the relationship between bullying behaviours and arts programs in public schools.

In arts strands, apart from the visual arts, much has been done in implementing anti-bullying intervention programs through the use of drama and interactive theatre in both the school and the workplace (Behran & Shapiro 2004; Carroll-Lind, 2006; Raskauskas, 2011; Haner, Pepler, Cummings & Rubins-Vaughan, 2010; Belliveau, 2004, Conrad, 2006). Music has also been shown to be an effective way of teaching diversity, and in some cases a conjunction of music and theatre has been successful (Haner, Pepler, Cummings & Rubins-Vaughan, 2010). There has also been some work done to attempt to re-socialize bullies, and teach peaceful responses through the vehicle of behavioural arts therapies and psycho-therapies (Forest, 2006).

There is a glaring lack of available material that analyzes the conveyance of anti-bullying and anti-cyberbullying methods through the specific domain of visual arts education. There are however, a few emerging academics who highlight the relevance of the teaching of social responsibility through the visual arts. Darts (2004) advocates for the instruction of critical thinking and visual culture deconstruction techniques in order for students to be able to transform from victims to active critics of the world of images swirling around them. Darts (2004) believes that students should be the masters of their own universes; agents of their own environments and that being critically literate in visual culture will allow them to effect change in their own social microcosms. This attitude, however contentious, marks a movement toward empowering students to be the agents of change, instead of the victims of bullying. With the same goal, Cynthia Bickley-Greene (2007) has launched socially acceptable workshops in teaching peaceful responses to bullying through the visual arts. These workshops encourage students to function as active members of a close community by envisioning pro-social behaviours through art (Bickley-Greene, 2007). Among other useful advice, Bickley-Greene (2007) points to the overwhelming need for empathy in the classroom, which is what my social fiction will illuminate.

Most encouraging is a recently published Participatory Action Research (PAR) project that

applies a Multicultural Social Reconstructionist Framework to evaluate how to teach social acceptance, tolerance and social responsibility techniques through the visual arts in a socio-economically challenged and culturally diverse community setting (Boyd, 2011). This research project was considered by Boyd (2011) to be successful because, among other strategies, she created a safe community of expression, modelled peaceful behaviour, had a clear set of enforceable rules, appealed to all of the six literacies, and embraced to the idea of empathy.

It should also be noted that a charitable organization to counteract violence in Canada, called PREVNET, has been established by leading bullying researchers Debra Pepler and Wendy Craig who have worked at a number of universities in Ontario including Queen's University and York University. This community of researchers works in collaboration with various national and international organizations including *UNICEF*, *The Kids Help Phone*, and *The Boys and Girls Club of Canada*, as well as with students from across the country. The existence of this organization is an indicator of a new trend in bullying and cyberbullying research that actually benefits those functioning outside of academic circles (Pepler & Craig, 2011), and it is this type of organization that inspires me in taking the first steps toward bringing my message to the general public.

The idea of using social fiction to express opinions and research of various eras in history is new to the Academic sphere, but not to English literature. The novels of Henry Fielding, Elisabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens, to name a few, are critical of their current milieus and survey the social problems of England through various lenses. The works laid the ground for later, American-penned social fictions including *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, (1852) *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1885), and *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (1952). Social fiction has only just begun to be used as a vehicle for information in academia, the precursor of which was the use of creative nonfiction. Using creative nonfiction in the academic sphere began in the humanities and social sciences, and was brought to the fore with Truman Capote's (1965) *In Cold Blood*, which was popular with both scholars and the general public, and has since inspired other researchers to translate their findings through creative means.

For decades, theorists and academics have been experimenting with and questioning the idea of knowledge production, and as a result have come up with many permutations of what can be considered arts-based educational research (Barone & Eisner, 2004). Unlike its quantitative counterpart, arts-based research is not so much concerned with the proving, controlling and manipulation of hard-line facts, but rather strives to improve the natural dialogue surrounding educational perspectives and other phenomena (Barone & Eisner, 2004). It is this main tenet that has brought me to specifically to social fiction because it allows me the freedom to use elements of my own personal experience with bullying, skew the detail-oriented truths of names, dates, and settings through fictional representation, and provide a vehicle for the expression of universally oppressed voices that are longing to be heard.

With Eisner's example, I am confidently able to, through extracting threads of my own particular story, simultaneously appeal to the stories of others. In other words, I will take the pain that I have experienced in my formative years, make it into fictional literary art, and address and attempt to salve the pain that others have endured or will endure. I intend to do this through the employment of empiricism, metaphor and “thick” descriptive language (Barone & Eisner, 2004, p. 97) that will engage “the multiple dimensions that constitute and form the human condition—physical, emotional, spiritual, social, cultural” (Cole & Knowles, 2007, p. 60).

Creative nonfiction and social fiction are gaining more credibility than ever in the field of education (Merridy, 2003; Leavey, 2012; Watson, 2011; Schultz, 2006). Apart from writers such as Frank McCourt (2005) and Carol Shields (1987) who have been working in the literary sphere in which they do not necessarily have to “justify” their methodologies, there are innovative and insightful researchers in the field of education who have actually proven that fiction, and social fiction are worthwhile avenues to explore in the expression of research. Examples of the work of these trailblazers include Rishma Dunlop's (1999) novel *Boundary Bay*, Pauline Sameshima's (2007) *Seeing Red*, the collected works of Carl Leggo (2000-2012), as well as the recently released *Low Fat Love* by Patricia Leavy (2012).

In her most recent article, Patricia Leavy (2012) touts the ability of social fiction to be able to enlighten human consciousness, promote understanding, and above all, teach empathy (p.252). This

connection between the literary and the empathic is also touted by Coplan (2004) who cites studies suggesting that creative literary works are better able to engage the psychological processes that result in the feeling of empathy as opposed to mere sympathy or “emotional contagion”, which is the mimicking of the emotions of others (p. 144). Leavy (2012) rejects the opinions of those who do not subscribe to the idea that arts-based research is a viable means of activating empathy; she prefers to side with the aforementioned theorists such as Barone and Eisner (2004) and Cole and Knowles (2007) who have been fostering this method and others for “two decades” (p. 252). Leavy (2012) explains her process and eventual decision to write her own work of social fiction which will, among other things, expose the additional knowledge that she has gained in the study of female body image, and project it toward the masses in an attempt to foster empathy (p. 256).

In “Seeing Red”, Sameshima (2007) constructs a pivotal piece of literature, which blurs the boundaries between the ideas of truth and fiction by contrasting actual ethnographic data with a fictionalized plot structure. By limiting the academic shackles typically placed on the researcher, Sameshima (2007) is able to probe more deeply the philosophical and theoretical ideas normally unable to be expressed through even the best qualitative research (Knowles in Sameshima, 2007, p. xvii). Sameshima (2007) opens up new systems of inquiry, and invites us to explore our own consciousness and inter-relatedness to pedagogy, art, research and love. Her work does not only offer up an alternative, resonate form of the “truth” of being a scholar and an artist educator, but serves as an empathic inspiration for teachers, artists and researchers (Sameshima, 2007). Sameshima achieves this feeling of empathy in her audience by encouraging her readers to interact with varied perspectives to promote “psychological movement” (Coplan, 2004, p. 149). This is the type of work that will inform my own social fiction, specifically the ways in which Sameshima throughout her text is seamlessly able to braid her various ephemeral selves with more concrete research and literature.

Rishma Dunlop (1999) buried the first recognized flag for radical arts based research in educational inquiry with her novel *Boundary Bay*. Dunlop (1999) was able to gather data from the in-depth interviews of five teachers and translate it into a novel that is able to stand on its own as a pure,

pedagogical art form (p. v). Even though Dunlop's (1999) novel is based primarily on the notion of ethnography, I am nevertheless able to draw a lot of inspiration from her methodological process:

At this point, my research methods expanded to include the novelist's use of all kinds of stories, poetry, and links to other texts that moved far beyond my original intention of working with transcribed narratives. As with any work of writing and research, my own narratives of reading, writing and teaching spilled over and intersected with other stories.
(p. 15)

I believe that Dunlop's own words illustrate the uncertainty that is inherent in the process of creative writing. When one sets out to make a literary contribution through unconventional means, one does not know the feckless deviations endemic to the journey, which is true of the process that created this work.

Finally, the work of Carl Leggo (1999) is intensely and even personally important to my own practice. I was completely inspired by his article, "Research as Poetic Ruminantion", in which he writes:

My research is the fruit of leisure, and it bears the sun-washed, moon-drawn, shadow written lines of light where it has lingered. Like the familiar traditions of scholarly writing, my writing includes research, explication, logic, reason, argument, and persuasion, but the ingredients are mixed in unfamiliar ways, in a ruminant, poetic brew of learning sought and gained in the employment of leisure. (p 176)

This passage resonated with me upon my first reading of this text, specifically because it provided me with an example of a voice that I have been searching for in my own research practice for years. A voice that is unafraid, proud and willing to explore new avenues that lead to the idea of alternative forms of knowledge, truth, meaning-making and empathic involvement. I want to create a research space that embraces the light of knowledge and understanding, indeed, a research that does not grow stale in a well-

preserved, lightless environment. A research that has the power to move, the power to inform, entertain and inspire. Leggo (1999) is the glowing luminary that is able to eschew the pre-conceived judgements and terse conventions of the academy and invest himself in research that allows his heart to sing; research that allows him to reach out to the largest available audience for the purpose of betterment; a research that touches the heart and the mind. If I were to take full inspiration from Leggo (1999), then I would argue that the essence of my methodology does not lie in the justification of why I am doing what I am doing, but lies, rather, in the final product, which I invite my reader to now savour and judge for themselves the effectiveness of the art of social fiction.

SPIRIT

The angel dress was too small and it had strained her cheeks as she wrestled it over her head before coming to the cursed dress rehearsal at the church that Saturday morning. She had been specially selected to play the ethereal Angel Gabriel by the Church committee, though at last week's rehearsal she had overheard the priests say in the sacristy that she was the "portliest Gabriel they'd ever seen." She wasn't certain what portly meant, but she knew that it must have something to do with her size. With a red face she listened to them chuckling again in hushed tones at the tightness of her frock as she made her way to centre stage to sing her solo. She sucked in her ever-present belly like her mother had taught her, but it was of no use: the priests continued giggling like a couple of dimwits who hadn't yet tired of the punch line of a known joke. Their thin mouths were infected with the same dumb grin when she read her lines and when she moved from position to position on the stage.

Cecelia looked down with hatred at the bold, childish gut poking out of the midsection of the dress: tinged off-white with the wearing of countless other Angel Gabriels of previous years who had wiped at it with their grimy hands and sticky fingers. While she waited for the cue to read her lines, she imagined that the dress had once been as spotless as a sacrificial gown and had probably looked lovely on the cute blonde Gabriels of Christmases past. She silently despised these imagined angels: Gabriels without guts, Gabriels with long, slender legs descending from the A-frame skirt of the dress, Gabriels with delicate swells grazing the fabric at the chest just above the golden sash and nothing grazing the fabric any place else.

She had none of these qualities. No budding breasts, no flat tummy, and she could only wish for legs that were two separate entities. Hers rubbed together near to the knee and without pants would chafe and burn in shorts and dresses from spring clear through to mid-fall. In this dress with the winter-white cotton tights painted on her legs below, she looked like a stout mound of snow: a hill of white unwantedness that had been gathered up and pushed to the side to clear a path for the thin people of the world, a mound whose reflection was hard to miss as it clouded the shiny surfaces at the edge of the altar rail and the glossy slate at the back of the organ. Each time she noticed herself, her confidence fell lower.

She didn't want to be the Angel Gabriel in the Nativity play that year. She didn't want to hear the priests, her peers and the entire congregation muffling their giggles as she flapped around the precipice like an obese ghost, holding her arms outstretched as if she were reaching at something she'd never quite grasp. Neither did she want to clasp her hands together over her bulging belly in simulated prayer during the common choruses while the tone-deaf children sang *Noel* in various shades of flatness while she struggled to keep tune in the cacophony.

She had voiced similar, perhaps not as tersely worded concerns to her Grandmother when she had brought up the idea over supper two months earlier, but it was of no use. Her grandmother was a very stubborn, proud woman. She wore a mink to church in the winter; sat in the front row; dropped a heavy envelope into the collection basket, and had the priests over every other Sunday night for dinner.

“Oh, won't you just make the most darling Angel Gabriel. Oh! The whole Church will hear your voice on Christmas Eve. You know singing is like praying twice, and singing at mass on Christmas is like praying seven times. Seven *times* seven times.”

Her grandmother liked to punctuate sentences with the interjection *Oh* as if she was in a constant, absolutely pure state of ecstasy. Like she was coming to a climax of Godly proportions. When Cecelia eventually learned about *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* in the stale history classes at university, she was able to understand the sculpture perfectly though many of her classmates failed to grasp the orgasmic link between faith and pleasure. Later, when she was able to visit Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Theresa* in Rome, Cecelia couldn't help but picture her own grandmother perversely spread out on a marble slab, her underthings rippling and an angel hovering with his arrow poised just over her wanton body.

“But Grandma,” she replied with her cheeks packed with mashed potatoes and her glance locked up in her temperamental Irish eyes, “I don't want to get up there in front of those people. They'll laugh at me like before.” And surely they would. Cecelia's was not the usual fear of a person who hated public speaking, the most common fear in the world she'd been told, even more common than arachnophobia and death. No, she quite enjoyed speaking in front of others, and had gladly volunteered herself for this sort of thing once before: the spring pageant last year in grade six. She'd done a rendition of *Wonderful*

World by Sam Cooke with the lyrics changed to honour the retiring principal and had enjoyed it well enough, until the finale when the spotlight scanned the crowd before her and she saw rows of people with their mouths agape, laughing with their teeth glistening in their jaws like yawning horses. She was singing her heart out and they were in stitches. She still could not figure if they were laughing at her voice, or her weight, or the combination of the two. Whatever the reason, the thought of a church full of Catholics focusing their attention on her again for an hour on the most important day of the year apart from Easter was enough to make the potatoes and side pork go rancid in her belly.

“Oh, Cecelia! They're not going to laugh at you on Christmas Eve. And why would they laugh? You're a beautiful girl. And your voice! Oh, it'd be enough to make an angel weep.” Cecelia's grandmother smiled so hard that the wrinkles beside her eyes deepened.

Cecelia smiled back, in spite of her self-doubt, because she knew that her grandmother was telling the truth about her beauty--at least from an elder's perspective. Her grandmother had lived through the Depression and that was evidenced by the way she kept canned goods and preserves stockpiled in the basement cellar. Cecelia supposed that it was because of these times that her Grandmother's motto was “eat, eat, eat” and a fat child meant a healthy child that did not have to worry about from where the next meal was coming. A fat child meant economic security and stability. A fat child meant that the Second World War had been successful, and the young men that her grandmother knew in her former, grandchild-less life had not died in vain.

As for her voice, she assumed that her grandmother was telling a white lie. A lie that was technically okay by God. Cecelia could not make an angel weep unless it was because his ears were bleeding. Recently she had gotten confident at home and took up the routine of singing loudly in her bedroom using a hairbrush as a microphone. After approximately five minutes, her father cracked the door open and asked her *who was skinning cats in there?* Her father knew how terrible her voice was from repeated exposure, but her grandmother had only heard her sing once at the fateful spring concert last year. As she searched the sea of wide-mouthed horses, Cecelia detected only one proud face in the crowd: her Grandmother's. She was probably smiling because she was hard of hearing.

“Oh, I am going to put your name in the hat at Council, Cecelia. There's a chance you might not get picked, but I'll say a prayer.”

She'd say a prayer? Cecelia knew that she herself would be praying for the opposite outcome, and she wondered who God would favour in the prayer match: the ridiculed child, or the fastidious, wealthy, never-miss-a-Sunday-Mass elder? Cecelia glowered at her grandmother with as much sternness as she could muster considering she was directing the look toward the woman that she loved most in the world and told her not to waste her prayers. Her grandmother didn't respond to this statement, but instead rose from the table with her head bowed and walked into the kitchen to prepare the chocolate sauce and vanilla ice cream for dessert.

When Cecelia left that evening, her grandmother tucked a five dollar bill into one of her hands and a plastic bag full of home made cinnamon buns into the other and smiled and told her to save the money and give the buns to her mother to freeze. Her grandmother was not fond of Cecelia's mother, the woman her son had married who was below his station, but still loaded her granddaughter up with donations. She was always quick to add a few offhanded remarks, which suggested that her mother wasn't feeding the family enough. This made Cecelia uncomfortable, but having to listen to the comments was worth the five-dollar payout.

Once they had finished up the not-so-pleasantries, she wandered down the three reliable stoop stairs, out into the dark October street and quickly found her path along the gravel sidewalk that lined the simple roads of her town. As she was pondering what Bible story she would choose to illustrate for art class the following day, her eyes caught sight of a small group of people rounding the mouth of the short-cut path and toward her onto the street. She was overcome with the same sinking cloud of dread that passed over her body each time she encountered her peers. A dread so strong it gave her the feeling of impending diarrhea. She slowed her pace and perked her ears and tried to listen to the tone of their voices.

She had become very adept at identifying people by the sound of their chatter: it was a skill that she had honed for survival, and it had gotten her out of near run-ins. She was very sensitive since the

spring concert. In the years before that performance, she drifted around school generally unnoticed by the bullies. But, things had changed drastically since she took the stage in front of them all. It was as if her performance had permeated their memories, and when they saw her, they envisioned her alone and vulnerable on a stage, singing like some keener ninny. Now it was as if she circulated the streets and hallways and paths of her life with a bounty on her head. The children attacked her in various ways-- some verbally, some physically—but, thankfully, most of them would just purposely exclude her completely from their lives. Even the people who were once friendly to her would sail by her in the hall, humiliated by her and purposely oblivious of the sleepovers that they had once shared, the secrets whispered under pillows, the laughter and inane jokes.

Unfortunately the approaching wolf pack did not look the type that would wander by in oblivion, and she was unable to identify who they were by the sounds of their low, muffled voices. It was with this thought that she realized that she had the five dollars and the buns in her clenched hands and quickly squirrelled the money away into her secret inner coat pocket while she was still shrouded in the darkness. The group had gotten close enough for her finally to see who it was: the Protestants.

Due to patterns of immigration, their small town, Hillsboro, was composed of two religious demographics: Catholics and Protestants: as if a mini-Ireland had cropped up in the heart of the province, and with these factions came the old feuds long-carried in the hearts and minds of those who had emigrated to Canada so many years ago. Her grandmother, though a loving and compassionate Catholic, absolutely hated the Protestants for what they had or had not done to her ancestors. She'd rant sometimes after pleasant lunches with Cecelia's father and say that the *damned Protestants* were heading the hospital, and they owned half of the real estate downtown. To make things worse, the children were divided along these religious lines and shuffled off to either the Public schools or the Catholic schools where rivalries were further condoned by teachers and administration.

The children of the two feuding factions met under the halo glow of the streetlight like a group of crows swooping in on a bloated mouse. Opposite Cecelia were four boys: a tall one who did most of the talking, and his three stubbier cohorts. She felt at once compelled to kick up her legs and run away from

the sinister group, but they had formed a line of bodies that seemed intent on holding her in their power, so she raised her white, fat face and met them with a pleading half-smile and eyes as big bottles with the thin hope that they might have pity on her.

“Hello! Hello? Anybody in there?” The tall boy grabbed her shoulder and dropped his maw down into her face.

“Must be the quiet type. *Whatcha* got there, *Ugly*? A bag of buns! Is that to get you from first supper to second supper?”

She could feel a fine spray of spittle hit her cheeks each time he spoke, which instinctively made her shoulders and spine hunch up in a standing foetal position.

“*Didjyour* Mommy make those for ya? You won't be eating these, Chubs.” The tallest one snatched the bag out of her stunned hand and the Ziploc was swiftly torn open so that the soft, swirled cinnamon buns were exposed and the group leaned in toward the bread to savour its freshness. Then, as if the whole incident had been rehearsed beforehand, each member of the gang simultaneously grabbed a bun with his slender white hand and each member of the group brought the bread to his mouth at the same time, taking greedy, rat-like bites. When they had tasted her grandmother's baking, each one spat their piece of bun on the unwelcoming cement and the remainder were chucked carelessly onto the adjacent lawn.

She glanced down in sorrowful awe at the strewn buns that her grandmother had baked so carefully for her family: at one second safe in her pudgy hand, and the next, littering the frosty lawn. They looked like bits of vulnerable flesh in the unassuming hum of the streetlight. She stared at the scene and could tell by the pregnant pause that the group was waiting for her reaction, something they no doubt thrived upon, and though she felt like crying fat tears over the gross indecency toward food, she would not give them the satisfaction of seeing her break.

Instead, she raised up her head and shrieked loud enough for the neighbours to hear: “My dying grandmother baked those for me you dirty *Proddies*!!!” Of course, as far as she knew, her grandmother was not dying, at least not any faster than anybody else, and she felt instantly regretful of this lie and for

the fact that she had opened her mouth at all. To tell your aggressors that someone in your family was dying was the new chic comeback for the bullied. And, strangely this slight attempt to fight back must have worked, or the depraved tone of her voice must have frightened them, because the kids retreated slightly as if confused and walked back to from where they came laughing to themselves and uttering insults that gradually diminished as they made their way down the street. She was left alone below the streetlight, surrounded by the culinary victims of the run-in, and shivering from the adrenaline that had just exploded through her fat-laden veins.

When she arrived home twenty minutes later, after backtracking and taking the long way to avoid a dreaded second run-in, her mother was smoking a cigarette and reading a paperback novel by John D. MacDonald. Her father was on the night shift at the plant, and her mom had only to feed Cecelia's sister Norah and herself, so she had finished her domestic tasks early enough to enjoy a light read. Clad in the familiar cast-off cable knit sweater, with a pantyhose leg knotted and fashioned into a headband gripping her thick hair, her mom raised her eyes lackadaisically from her crime fiction, took a puff of smoke, and asked how was Cecelia's grandmother.

"Good," Cecelia shrugged, and dropped her head to avoid the searching of her mother's eyes.

"She didn't send any buns with you this time?"

"No. She didn't get around to baking today. She had a hair appointment," Cecelia uttered, shocked at her own sudden and natural ability to lie. The glutton in her had wanted to pick the buns off the ground and salvage them, but she was afraid that they would only incite her mother to have her explain why there weren't sixteen buns as usual, or why some of them had bits of grass and dirt on them.

"Ah well. Did she give you any money?"

"Five dollars."

"Go put that in your piggy bank and save it for a rainy day," her mother commanded half-heartedly with her eyes still tracing the words in the novel. Cecelia was lucky. Her mother was too involved in the book and the cigarette to truly focus on her daughter's graven face and begin the long circuitous probe to discover what had gone wrong. Cecelia took her chance to flee and bounded up the

stairs to her tiny bedroom in order to be alone.

That night, with confused thoughts and images running around in her head, she drew a sketch out of *National Geographic* of a lion being attacked by a pack of hyenas. The sketch was done in pencil, but for the bloody parts, she soaked the white paper clean through with a heavy-duty permanent marker in dark crimson. When she had finished the picture, she felt somehow cleansed, and was able to go to bed.

Two weeks later, she had almost forgotten her grandmother's devilish plan for her to be a part of the Nativity pageant, and had even come to terms with the lost buns from her brush-in with the Protestants. Recess had finished at St Joseph's Elementary, and after she had put away her coat and hat and mittens, and carefully wiped the snot off her round, rosy face, she skipped to her desk with excitement, ready to commence her favourite subject of the week: Art.

Her teacher was fond of combining the catechism with the visual arts, yet even though the subject of religion was taught every day, the art only fell into a block once per cycle. These fifty minutes were the happiest time of the week for Cecelia, apart from Friday afternoons when she was safe within the walls of her own home watching afternoon talk shows, and farthest away from having to go back to school on Monday. Art class was the only time when she felt like she was a contributing member of the social hierarchy.

Sometimes, if the stars had aligned themselves just so, her classmates would pass by her desk in order to see what she was creating, and some of them would even smile at her--quickly--to avoid being seen by the other more popular students in the class. Her fellow cretins seemed to value her ability to make something from nothing, and she grasped thankfully at these bits of attention before the bell rang for gym and the whole works flipped back and she was once again a mere bottom feeder sucking desperately to the exposed baby toe of the massive food chain that is elementary school.

Her talent in art stemmed from many things, she supposed, if she ever took time to think about her talent at all, which she did not. She had always felt compelled to draw. Certain unrelated things would inspire her to create: the crease of a woman's décolletage peeking out from the top of a chemise; the eyelashes of a baby, the colour of the mountains across the Miramichi river in July near nine o'clock.

To her, these things were divine.

Her father was an amateur artist. He was often commissioned by his co-workers to design caricatures for them to have silk-screened to hats and shirts to commemorate some poor bastard's retirement or commit to legend some childish prank. Her father had a way of portraying people that perfectly exposed their most laughable qualities without compromising their essential features. The caricatures were a bit of fun among adults to generate some extra money or a case of beer, but his true personal enjoyment came from drawing finely tuned pencil sketches of vintage cars, and stately architecture from England. She remembered coming across her father many times, huddled over the drafting board in the winter-chilled, musty basement, completely enthralled in a work of intricacy, as if he was a monk quietly chanting a canticle into the darkness.

Like him, she could also occasionally be found locked in her tiny bedroom with a stack of *National Geographic* magazines and a pencil and eraser that she had lifted from his sacred drawing space when he was working the night shift and she could sneak into the basement without her mother noticing. She would stay awake till her young brain was plagued by migraines brought on by the glare of the hundred-watt bulb glowing from the cheap red lamp that lit her desk. She would spend half of her time searching out the best picture that she could find: sometimes animals or architecture, but usually that of an individual of some nationality completely foreign to her small town existence. In her town the most displaced culture by miles were the Chinese who had migrated to the small valley for one reason or another and barely made up half a percent of the total population. She was intrigued by and aligned with the outsider.

Once the image had been designated, she would go about copying it: making lines, erasing, making lines, shading, and making lines again. If she was dissatisfied with any certain part of her picture, or if there were too many eraser marks, she would dramatically crumple her paper and start again. When she had finished her masterpiece, she would descend the few stairs to the living room, where her father sat watching the television when he wasn't working, and she would show him her handiwork. Sometimes he would admire it and tell her what a good job she had done, and sometimes he'd take it in his hand, briefly

scan the page and thrust it back at her without a remark so he could get back to his TV show. At a young age, it was very difficult for her to tell the mood he may or may not be in when she came to show him her work, but when he was in a bad mood, she would stomp back up to her room and destroy the art that he had rejected, sometimes tearing it into little strips, chewing each one and spitting them into the garbage can.

When the winter had thawed out, and the family relocated to the cottage for the summer months, her normally cold father would on some nights thaw out himself. If the mood struck him, he would take on a teacher's role, encouraging her to draw. He assigned her arbitrary tasks like bottles and hands. When she had mastered drawing her own left hand, her father assigned apple drawing. Of course they had no apples at the cottage in summer. In that time, the apples only rolled down from the farms in the fall when they were supposed to, and not at all times of the year as they did when she was older. The main point of apple drawing, she surmised, was the practice of summoning and recreating images stored in the brain. She had to call up the apple in her mind, imagine the shape of it, how the light was glinting off of it, which way the stem bent.

The apple task was deceptively difficult but she played along because it was known that if her father was in a mood to give apple-drawing assignments, he was also in the mood to tell stories. This process required a dimming of the kerosene lanterns, which meant more difficulty in seeing the half-drawn fruit in front of her, and a general air of seriousness to be adopted by the people in the room, usually just herself, but sometimes her mother and sister as well.

One particular story that occasionally crept back to her even in later years was taken, as her father had told her then, from a book that he had been forced to read in college. This book was based on Dante's *Inferno*, but offered a more modern conception of hell and lacked the damning hubris with which Dante had written. Though her father was not a reader of books, he had a very riveting way of telling stories, a talent no doubt handed down to him from the Irish liars and tall-tale tellers that had sired him and his father and his father's father.

He told his family of a man, an *Orangeman* of course, thick around the waist, the best years of his

life long gone, yet clinging to the hope that someday the dog days would return to him once again. The man still partied and drank like a teenager, and his profession as a lawyer suffered because of his philandering. He was a raging alcoholic and fooled around with whores and was not at all bothered by the fact that he allowed his elderly mother to sit alone in a retirement home for which he paid, yet had only once stepped inside. This character was a bad man meant to be the antithesis of her father. Like the apple she was drawing, she could clearly picture this phantom of a character because of the raw, descriptive language her father used. She appreciated the fact that he did not censor the stories that he told the family. If the story involved whores, then he would acknowledge the fact that there were whores. He would never euphemistically say the *dirty women*, or the *impure*; he would say *whore* quite matter of factually.

She remembered the story's beginning quite vividly but there was a tragic accident that she couldn't quite put her finger on: maybe a drink-induced accidental suicide. The importance of the story lay in the description of the place he woke: a prisoner, alone in a transparent glass prison. He tried and tried to escape, but he was trapped for an eternity in an empty liquor bottle. She supposed that at some later juncture in the tale, the man realizes the error of his ways and repents to at least make it to purgatory, but her father hadn't told that part. To her father, the story was about a man who cared only for himself, and was doomed to a life in a suitable hell because of it. *The End*. Purgatory was not an option. She wondered what it was like to be like the character, so selfish that you couldn't even bring yourself to visit your dying mother.

She often went on tangents like this as she made art both at home and in the classroom where she sat now. Her pencil was fastened to the paper, but her mind was lost in the universe of thought. She had been ruminating on this depiction of a *bad man* in an attempt to hone in on an accurate depiction of the Devil for the Adam and Eve drawing project when there was a polite but firm knock on the classroom door. Her teacher was especially quick to rise from his usual place at the desk to greet the visitor, and had put on his best phony smile, so she figured it must either be the principal or a member of the clergy. When she turned her head to the back of the room, she realized that it was the latter: Father O'Leary,

filling the door with his massive structure and substantial midsection. The teacher gave him a respectful nod, and the priest opened his oratorical mouth and boomed out his reason for coming.

“I’m here to announce the lucky winners of the Nativity pageant draw,” he said, his eyes alight and creased around the edges as the eyes of old priests often are. But, to Cecelia, his crow’s feet were like a niggling map to the past, alerting her to some forgotten detail, and suddenly that detail came back to her like a rush of water when she remembered that her grandmother was going to enter her into that damned draw. *Perhaps she hadn’t*, Cecelia reasoned. Perhaps she had seen the terror in Cecelia’s eyes when she’d mentioned it. She stared back down at her drawing of the devil hoping to somehow be sucked in so she could cover behind the Prince of Darkness. He’d protect her from the superficial pomp of Nativity pageantry. As she was begging heaven and hell to get her out of the situation, Father O’Leary pulled a crisp piece of loose-leaf out of his black trouser pocket and unfolded it carefully, pausing for a moment to adjust his bifocals.

“Now let’s see. Who do we have here? Patrick Macleod. Katie Whitehall...” And then the dreaded feeling came over her, the sort of occult wisdom that one has the moment before their name is called in a raffle or during a school announcement.

“And, Cecelia Murphy! I hope Cecelia can do the same bang up job she did with the retirement of beloved Mr. Barton! That’s why she’ll be Gabriel this year with a solo all to herself!”

She could feel the wave of exasperated sighs pass through the class like a cumulative shiver of disgust, and the boy in front of her turned around in his chair to stick his tongue out and cross his eyes and mouth the word *browner*.

“I’ll come rustle you lot up every Friday at this time,” the priest continued. Ahh, perfect, she thought. During art class. She faced the priest and, like her teacher, put on her best phony smile, even though her heart was crumbling like a heel of stale bread.

After a month of missed Friday art classes--a class easily forsaken her teacher explained after she had complained, because of its lack of importance compared with the core subjects--the full dress

rehearsal was scheduled for the Saturday morning before the Nativity mass. She woke up with the light, showered for an indulgent fifteen minutes, and allowed her mother to comb and set curlers in her wet, knotty hair while she bawled at her reflection in the mirror. She then gathered her things and trudged over to the church with her bulging head wrapped in a scarf, and her halo in a plastic grocery bag clutched in her pudgy white hand. She was wearing her white tights and the snug dress tucked away under the red woollen jacket that her mother had bought for her at Zellers. Her shoulders were stooped, and she must have looked a plump yet oddly brazen jezebel coming over the hill into the wintry white church parking lot dressed in vermillion.

It was snowing a tentative but fruitful December load, and she yearned to run into the field across from the church to play in the fluffy whiteness and forget about the whole fiasco, but her mother warned that she had better not dirty her dress or else. Her mother's grand plan was that Cecelia would walk home when the rehearsal was done, eat a late lunch, and take her hair out of the curlers to primp before heading back for the evening. The lunch provision was extremely important, as Cecelia tended to get cranky when she was not fed, and she had woken up in a foul mood to begin with.

When she yanked open the heavy wooden doors to the church, she noticed quickly that the cotillion choir was already there, made up primarily of dotty cat lovers, who, like many of the priests, had few places in the homophobic small town to direct their supposedly misguided sexuality. The altar boys had also begun arriving like scared, flightless birds scuttling their way down the main aisle and into the back cloister. For having to work so closely with the priests, who to her didn't seem as innocent as everyone made them out to be, she always pitied the altar boys: a group mostly composed of the opinionless children of the wealthy who were forced into piety by their parents in order to keep up appearances. The potential threat of becoming an altar boy almost made her happy to have been born a girl.

Unlike the altar boys, she and the other child actors were not permitted to go back behind the altar into the hidden chambers of the sacristy. They had to leave all of their damp outer things along the edge of the altar in a neat line that resembled a multi-coloured, cartoonish caterpillar. She lobbed her red coat on the ground in a ball, and took her silver tinsel halo out of the bag and placed it on her bumpy, curler-

covered head, making sure that it was not crooked, then mounted the four powder blue carpeted steps and assumed her position at side stage.

She cringed as the other rag-tag bunch of players took their spots: the shepherds waiting like determined dogs in the recess offstage for their tinfoil star cue; Mary in her curtain-tailored, loose-fitting dress; poor Joseph with a precarious, glued on mat for a beard; and of course, Jesus, a Cabbage Patch doll swaddled in what looked like a beige, threadbare rug. Though she was the fattest of the children, and the one who was bound to get the most malicious sneers from the rough crowd, she was somewhat proud of her semi-pristine clinging angel dress with the thin band of gold trim highlighting the bulging descent of her gut.

In her moment of near pride, she noticed in her periphery a quick movement darting out from the velvet-curtained doorway behind the vesting table. She turned her head to the left, careful not to break form, and saw that it was young Sam Lachance, a boy who was in her grade, still clad in his altar boy robes, running full tilt toward the side exit. The cotillion choir silenced themselves immediately and their soundless mouths hung open, formed in the A-shape at the end of *Ave Maria*, and in the same moment the youngest child actors swung their heads around to behold the spectacle. The little lamb called out “Sam!” But Sam was in no mood to stop. He was in such a hurry that he didn't even slow his pace when his wayward arm tipped one of the recently watered white poinsettia adornments off the altar stage onto the shiny marble floor below. He just went right on running and the last thing Cecelia heard of him was the muffled thud of the big old wooden door closing after him.

Those left behind shared a skeptical look between them, but only for a millisecond before the Monseigneur came out from where Sam had run with his hands clutched in supplication like a wanton in prayer. He looked at them with the hazel eyes of a dead snake, bloated and stinking at the edge of some dry desert highway and said, “Samuel will not be joining us for rehearsal. He was suddenly ill.” The small crowd was quelled by the Monseigneur's words, because he was the Monseigneur after all, yet Cecelia doubted his believability for she had never seen anyone run with such deliberate urgency and intent, and she wouldn't soon see it again.

The rehearsal unfolded in the same manner in which it had unfolded for the past six weeks. Cecelia sang her two solos, the priests and the Monseigneur snickered, and the young ones looked at her in awe, though she couldn't tell if they were impressed or horrified. The cotillion choir wished they had her talent, but she would never know their appreciation because they were jealous and treated her with contempt. In the two breaks they were able to take between run-throughs, not one of the lot mentioned Sam, nor thought of him and the earlier commotion was lost amid worries about whether Katie would be able to hit the B sharp in *What Child Is This?* Or if Patrick's matted beard might fall off in the middle of the performance.

She had herself forgotten about the dramatic exit of poor Sam because her mind was focussed on the meal that she was about to embrace after her short walk home. When the choir finally breathed their last notes, she headed to the edge of the altar to fetch her things. Upon approach, it appeared queerly as if her red woollen coat had a hedgehog nestled within its creases, but as she drew nearer, she realized that it was full of soil. During his dramatic exit, Sam had knocked the white poinsettia directly into her jacket! *What nerve. How could she wear it home to her mother in this condition? What would she do?* She deliberated and huffed a big fat sigh at her bad luck and wadded the soiled coat into the grocery bag in which she had ferried her halo, hoping her mother would at least be relieved by the fact that she had not spoiled her off-white dress.

Coat in bag and halo in hand, she left without goodbyes, listening to the reliable wooden door of the side exit thud behind her as she adjusted her eyes to the winter wonderland that had coated the world while she was indoors. Sadly, her sparkling reverie was soon interrupted by the cackles of children her age, presumably laughing at her, as she was the only point of interest on the stark and snowy suburban landscape. She turned her head toward the noise and was crestfallen when she found it was the Protestants again, yet this time in the unforgiving daylight, and she was already shivering in her flimsy angel dress. There were only three of them this time, thankfully: the tall one, another boy with brown eyes, and one girl with short-shorn dirty-blond hair. The girl was about her height, but much thinner, and had a

striking resemblance to the tall Arian, who Cecelia quickly assumed was her brother. The ringleader sensed her stinking vulnerability like a hungry rodent and the ragtag team set in on the berating.

“What do we have here? A fat angel? On Christmas Eve! Hahah. You Catholics and your stupid ideas! You know that Mary is just a regular bitch who got knocked up like anybody else after she had Jesus.” Cecelia squinted at this sudden blasphemy and averted her face to avoid the spittle attached to it, attempting to ignore the situation altogether and walk away home toward her mother without any other messes or mishaps. The group clearly had another plan. The girl her age with the pixie cut and the beady weasel eyes grabbed her shoulder and whipped her around to face them again.

“Just look at her,” the girl's brother chortled, “what I would give to have a camera right now.” As they laughed she could feel her anger rising, driven through her veins by the cold, and the hunger eating away at the pits of her generous belly. The two sensations collided in her headache-addled brain and some deep cranial switch tipped to crazy. She looked with depravity at the bevy of guileless blonds, her eyes fixed in a squint on the girl who had just touched her. She never understood from what dark bit of her soul the next words she uttered emerged, but she did secretly thank her father for teaching her the words to use.

“So what you're saying is that Mary is a whore like your mother?” she asked rhetorically, with her eyes bravely glued to the girl's pointy face, which, as Cecelia observed with a mild grin, twitched into an even more grotesque version of itself after she uttered her phrase. Satisfyingly enough, this was the last image she remembered when she came to her senses moments later on the snow-covered cement, eyes crossed and dazedly unaware of what had just taken place. She could see the backs of the members of the group scattering across the lawns of the houses across from the church in haste, and wondered what she had done to scare them so? Was it the comment about the matriarch of the Arians? Could it be that easy? She could hardly believe that she had used the word *whore* out loud.

Just then she felt a sharp pain in her nose, so reached up to soothe it, and her fingers were met with a hot, slippery substance. *That little rat-girl had punched her! That's why they were running away in haste. The cowards.* She looked down at her off-white angel dress and saw with shame that it was

polka-dotted and streaked erratically in bright blood like a monochromatic Jackson Pollock. She gasped. What would she tell her mother? She would have a hard enough time explaining the coat, let alone the blood-covered angel dress. She looked back at the ground as she stood up from her landing place and noticed that the runny blood from her nose had so pleasingly marked the snow beneath her that it looked intentional and calculated like inked Sanskrit on a white cloth.

“What in God's name have you done to yourself?” her mother shrieked out of concern as Cecelia walked through the backdoor minutes after the altercation.

Her mother had been preparing the stuffing for the next day's feast; the fat loaves of bread were lying around in various stages of dismemberment. Cecelia could smell the savoury spice perfuming the stale bread as it fused with the sharp scent of the Douglas fir tree, plump and well adorned in the corner of the room. Cecelia grimaced in shame at the thought of her offset appearance in this picturesque holiday portrait so bowed her head, and in doing so caught a whiff of her lunch: the Japanese soup with the long noodles that she loved so dear. She looked pleadingly back to her mother but saw that she was already lost, scratching her head in disbelief, a look of horror quickly disfiguring her usually serene face. The scene looked and smelled like Christmas, but felt like hell.

“What are we going to do now!!” her mother yelled suddenly, but Cecelia could offer no such answer other than a vague feeling that perhaps they might as well give up on this so-called “holy” pageant as all of the signs were signalling that she shouldn't take part. But, she knew her mother was too proud for a notion like that. If Cecelia's grandmother had enrolled her to play Angel Gabriel through the Church Council, then, come hell or high water, she would be appearing front-and-centre as Angel Gabriel and she better well be singing the loudest. “Get upstairs to the bathroom, get in the tub, and put the dress in the sink. I'll get the Borax.” Cecelia respectfully retreated upstairs, glad that her mother was too overcome with rage to question what had happened.

While Cecelia soaked the offense out of her in the tub, her mother was hunched over the sink beside her, scrubbing with all of her strength at the soiled dress. “I just don't understand what could have

happened. You're not a fighter. And who would hit a little girl?"

"It was the kids who live across from the school. The *Prodestands*."

"The Protestants! Oh, your grandmother has your head filled with so much hatred. The Protestant-Catholic fight is not a fight for us to be waging. That is a fight of another country and another time."

"But they really do hate me, Mom, I did nothing to upset them." Really she hadn't. She knew that the kids actually picked on her because she was fat and not because of a centuries old religious debate, but she was afraid to tell her mother that. She knew that if her mother heard her complain about her weight again, it would be time for another diet. No coke, no chips, no ramen, no chocolate bars.

"You want me to believe that you did nothing. You want me to believe that some kid that goes to another school approached you and hit you in the nose for no reason whatsoever? Do you think I was born yesterday?" Cecelia was about to confess and tell her mother that she had actually called the girl's Mom a whore perhaps too prematurely in the conversation, but when she looked at her Mother's saddened, stress-filled face, she knew that she could not. The last thing her mother needed was to have a blood stained dress *and* a heathen on her hands.

"Yes, that's what I want you to believe, Mom. I'm sorry."

"Well, let's hope your sorrys are enough to get the blood out of this dress. They can never tell me my daughter's not a bleeder. My god! You'd think they'd cut your head off."

Still fresh, most of the blood came out of the dress and her mother let it hang by the fireplace to dry while Cecelia ate a microwaved version of her long noodle soup, which seemed a perverse thing to be doing at that hour on Christmas Eve. Cecelia marvelled at her mother's stain removal prowess while she sucked the noodles up into her hungry mouth. The only stain remaining was a faded pink heart shape that must have been a blob that folded in on itself as she struggled to get up after the incident. Her mother convinced her that the stain would not be detectable to the crowd and that if the priest mentioned anything to just tell him that the dress had the stain when she got it. The clergy certainly didn't need to know that her daughter was involved in a fistfight on church property.

“And your father doesn’t need to know about this either. Only tramps and army women get themselves involved in fights in this town. But, if this happens again, you better believe your father will catch wind of it, and he’ll hunt those kids down till he finds them.” Her mother knew precisely the right thing to say to ensure that Cecelia would not try this stunt again. Like her mother, Cecelia also knew that it was not wise to get yourself labelled in Hillsboro, and it was not wise to have your father sent out to deal with your affairs.

After she’d finished with the stuffing her mother had another fit when she discovered the soiled jacket balled up in the plastic bag that Cecelia had dropped casually by the back door.

“Honest to god, child. What else is there for me to find? I guess you’ll just have to go without a coat. You’ll be in the car this time so it shouldn’t be too cold.” She cast Cecelia the type of look that informed her without words that she didn’t give half a lick whether she’d be going there donning a fur coat or plain topless, just so long as she knew she was going. “You’re lucky that the bruise on your nose will probably really only blossom tomorrow for the Christmas morning pictures.”

By the time they arrived at the church, the crowd had already gathered. The cars were piled seemingly on top of each other so that there would have to be a magnificently coordinated event that would allow them all to get out of there when the mass had finished. The lax parking rules were attributed only to Nativity mass, as so many families wanted to go to that one as it was the most interesting for the children. Not to mention the fact that the family members who were already three sheets to the wind could commit any drunken gaff without being detected by the gossipy snoots that opted instead for midnight mass so they could avoid the blessed chaos. Midnight mass was the mass that her Grandmother usually opted for, preferring not to be stepped on by the unruly riff-raff of her parish community, but tonight her Grandmother had made an exception.

Cecelia peeked out at the crowd from her final hiding place in the antechamber off left stage where they were preparing themselves. She saw that the seats were packed with rosy-faced people,

sniffing and wiping their children's noses dripping from the cold. The entire building was buzzing with the Christmas spirit that was only possible in those old times before the great technological advancements. The group looked benevolent enough, she supposed, taking note of the beaming smiles that had possessed the people in spite of themselves. It was as if the children were riddled with the disease of glee and it was spreading quickly. Perhaps her grandmother had been right. Maybe they wouldn't laugh.

She looked back to the rabble behind her, all smoothing their hair and picking invisible lint from their makeshift costumes. Joseph had found a better, stronger adhesive for his beard, and Mary promised them that she had been practicing her part all afternoon. Cecelia was obsessively straightening her halo so that it wouldn't droop to one side, and one of the choir ladies told her to stop fooling with it.

With five minutes left till the great performance, when he was certain that the lot of them were clothed and decent, the Monsignor came into the backroom with a final word of encouragement.

"Well aren't you all quite the heavenly picture. Gather round. Gather round. I just wanted to wish you all an excellent performance, and an excellent Christmas with your families. Shall we join in a Hail Mary?"

When the prayer had wrapped up and the amens had been said, Cecelia, compelled by some latent concern for Sam and the events that had transpired earlier, impudently enquired, "Will Sam be back tonight?"

The priest glowered at her for a moment, and shook his head as if amazed that one of them had remembered or even had the nerve to ask. "No. I'm afraid he is quite ill." At this, there was a muddled din of compassion from the students and choir ladies, and, looking desperate to change the subject, the Monsignor added after catching sight of Cecelia's chest, "What in the name of Holy Jesus has happened to your dress?" Cecelia bent her neck and looked at herself, just as shocked as the priest. Her mother had assured her that it wasn't visible, but in the glare of the fluorescent lights it was plain as day. She had a faded bloody heart over her own, which was now pounding audibly beneath the dress.

"The dress had this stain when I got it," Cecelia blurted, her eyes downcast, and her face going

red with the lie. She was doing as her mother had told her.

“I’m certain it wasn’t,” the Monsignor snipped back. “We have those garments cleansed each year. And that stain was not on your dress earlier today. You couldn’t have changed before eating lunch? Greedy, gluttonous child.” Cecelia did know what gluttonous meant because a lunch monitor had once called her that, and that very evening she hauled out the dusty dictionary from its place on the mantle and looked it up, as her grandmother had always instructed. If you don’t know a word, get yourself a dictionary and look it up. As mortified as she was, she knew she would have to endure the insult because involving herself in an altercation with the Monsignor would devastate her Grandmother and infuriate her mother. At least he thought it was food and not blood.

The Monsignor warned that they would have to have a chat with her mother after the mass and then left the room with a flap of his magenta robe. This instigated a line-up of children and choir ladies to make a sort of loose circle around her, and bend over to get a really good look at this stain that had appeared since they had last seen her.

“Looks like blood,” said Joseph, whose father was a butcher and had probably seen his fair share of bloodied things. “What is it, anyway?”

“Um. Grape juice?” she figured a lie in the form of a question wasn’t actually a lie.

“Oh, it’s pretty. It actually looks like a heart,” said Mary, cooing like a lamb.

“You can barely see it,” added one of the kindlier choir ladies, but Doris, the cranky one, couldn’t let the lie pass.

“Are you delusional? It’s stickin’ out like a sore thumb! My God, and I think they’ll be puttin’ the spotlight on ya for the solos.”

As Cecelia was reminded of this detail the group received their cue to begin. Before exiting, Cecelia looked around at the rest of them like a girl about to step out the twentieth storey window instead of onto the blue-carpeted altar of her parish. They acknowledged her with a look of pity, as if they were embarrassed for her, yet there was a discernable smugness hidden like a nugget in their pity: they were happy that it was her going out there with the stained dress and not them.

She did her best to cover the stain with an oddly placed arm bent just so and made her way out onto the altar, third from the front of the line behind Joseph and Mary. When she arrived on the altar stage, she searched accusingly for her mother and her grandmother in the audience, and when her darting eyes located her in the second to last row, she sent her a look of betrayal, as if to say “*You told me this was okay.*” Her mother looked back at her with eyes that replied, “*What was I going to do? Cancel?*” Thankfully, the rest of the crowd was busy picking out their own children or relatives from the players, and both the stain and the death glare she had shot at her mother were so far unnoticed.

In fact, she managed to hide the heart shaped stain under her crooked arm for most of the scenes of the play. When it came time for her to cross the floor and visit Mary she crept in the white *Isotoner* slippers that her mother had bought her on sale, all the while with her arm bent across her chest, and took her stand on the X crossed in tape on the carpet. She watched in horror as the spotlight slowly swooped from Mary’s focus to her, thinking of it as if it were a laser beam that would incinerate her on contact. She was supposed to raise both arms to the heavens as if she was calling God to speak through her, but the palm of her concealing arm was firmly fastened onto her chest to cover the stain, and she looked more like she was pledging allegiance than channeling her Father. She turned her face into the light and began her lines:

“Fear not, Mary. Thou hast found favour with God...” At her pronunciation of the word God, a tiny ripple began moving through the crowd, as if someone had dropped a pebble of comedy into it: smiles began to twitch at the corners of mouths that had before appeared graven and muzzled by the seriousness of the Annunciation. She dismissed the sight of this rolling reaction as sheer paranoia on her behalf because she hadn’t yet revealed the stain, so what in heaven could they possibly have found to laugh about? Like a true soldier of God, she carried on with her lines while the crowd shook before her.

“Behold, thou shalt bring forth a son, and thou shalt call him Jesus...” As she peered out at the crowd from under the glare of the spotlight, she could see that the faint ripple of grins had mutated into waves of perplexity, bewilderment, and crude restrained laughter. The harsh light upon her face had

become a sweaty nuisance now, and she felt prickles on her wide freckled arms below the tight fitting bell sleeves of her dress, but she did not move the arm covering the stain nor the one reached toward the Lord to wipe the perspiration from her limbs. She remained in her position on the X stuck to the carpet below her, and she continued on with the spotlight squeakily swinging between herself and the Blessed Mother in an uncomfortable fit of hot and cold, ice and fire. She searched in vain the depths of the crowd as her mouth formed the scripted words, yet she could not figure out why the people were laughing.

Soon the cue came for her solo song. She almost missed the cue, as she had fallen into a humiliation-induced limbo where nothing was real, and yet nothing was imagined. She had even tried pinching herself with the hand resting upon her soiled chest, but she did not wake up, safe between the pastel flower-papered walls of her bedroom as she normally did when pinching herself. Things continued right as they were, and she felt numb to these things. At one point during the birth of Baby Jesus, she searched the crowd again for her mother and grandmother, and she thought she had caught a glimpse of them in the pew that she had seen them in earlier, but the women now sitting in that seat had their heads down so low that Cecelia couldn't be certain.

The dreadful spotlight returned to her body once again for the solo, and the crowd seemed excited to have a fresh laugh. She caught some of the boys in the front row crossing their eyes at her, and she panicked when she imagined that perhaps, unbeknownst to her, she had lost control of one of her eyeballs, and the cornea had slid like a wayward marble toward the bridge of her nose making her into a permanent freak. The crowd did seem to be staring directly into her eyes as they laughed which made the whole ordeal even more traumatizing.

As she reached out with her plump hand to clasp the silvery microphone that had magically appeared before her, a feeling came about her. It was a feeling that she might associate with that of a dying mouse reaching out with his little arm toward a hunk of pizza crust left in the gutter, knowing that, even if he was to grasp and eat it, it would do nothing but prolong his miserable life for just a few more unbearable minutes, yet he grasps madly at it anyway

Suddenly a mantra was running the wheel in her head. A mantra reinforced by the oddly self-

assuring voice of an older, tougher woman. “Sing it out, girl. What have you got to lose? They’re already laughing.” She looked up at the crowd in desperation, and indeed they were poised on the precipice of laughter. They were frozen in character, and all holding their breath in anticipation of what hilarious stunt would come out of her next. She looked out at them and with every blink she captured another contorted face on a white-framed Polaroid in her mind. She gathered up as many as she could and she stuck each image onto the bulletin board in the back of her head. She had to remember who was there in order to defend herself later.

The organ swelled up behind her, and she opened her pink, youthful mouth to sing:

“Oh holy night, the stars are brightly shining

This is the night of the dear Saviour’s birth

Long live the world, in sin and error pining

Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth”

Though she usually kept her eyes fastened shut while singing, it seemed that each time she dared to crack them open just a sliver, she could see that the crowd was no longer aghast. Their mouths were not hanging open as they were before. Their faces had lost the cruel edge of laughter, and had softened into something that looked almost like, appreciation? Befuddlement? She couldn’t tell. She widened her mouth to sing the crescendo.

“Fall on Your knees! Oh hear the Angel Voices!

Oh night divine! Oh night when Christ was born!

She finished the hymn with a flourish borne from the centre of her being and stepped back to the X that she had mistakenly leaned away from while singing. She opened her eyes wide, somewhat terrified of the eerie silence that had blanketed the congregation since she started the carol, and looked pleadingly into the many faces of the crowd. A church full of parishioners met her gaze with mouths gaping so wide and dark that their heads looked like an assorted box of doughnuts. They were no longer laughing. The children that had earlier crossed their eyes at her also bore a look of amazement. Some of the audience, mostly the elderly, were standing, clapping their heavy hands in utter astonishment, some

even dabbing their eyes with wads of tissue and hankies.

She quietly thanked the Lord for allowing her to get through this travesty, though she could not remember having prayed to him at all; she remembered only the fading voice of the imagined lady encouraging her to go on. In her sudden selfless moment of gratitude, she forgot about the hand soldered onto her chest and she let it drop. She caught herself immediately, but decided purposefully to be reckless, just to see what the next reaction of her adoring public might be, yet there was no reaction. It hadn't been the stain on her dress that had caused them to laugh. She gaped out at them with questioning eyes, but she would not figure out what had caused the ruckus. That is, until she arrived home that evening and her mother commanded her to the mirror so that she could see for herself the deep mauve shiners that had formed around not one, but both eyes.

“Rambo Soprano!” her mother said. And Cecelia couldn't help but to feel amused now that her mother was able to jest about the previously stressful situation.

After the holidays had ended and the students of Hillsboro slunk begrudgingly back to school, Cecelia found herself in a perfect situation that she couldn't have dreamt up any better herself. Mr. Adderly, her teacher, seemed to be under the weather, and as he greeted them one-by-one at the door, it looked to Cecelia that he might be restraining his own upchuck. Any adult would have figured that he had been hitting the bottle too hard the night before; reluctant to bid the holidays goodbye, but the students believed in the culprit “stomach bug” and took their seats.

“We're going to start the day out with art, folks,” said Mr. Adderly, his face wavering in colour between green and grey. The students gasped and looked around the room as if some prank was being played on them. Little Patrick--who also adored art--raised his hand tentatively.

“What's the assignment? Do we have to draw Biblical stories again?”

“I'm getting to the assignment, Patrick,” Mr. Adderly whined, slightly more perturbed than he would have been if not hung-over. “And, no! You will not be illustrating parables. In fact, you will be composing two, no three separate pictures detailing the most important events of your Christmas

holidays. You must have rough sketches of your pictures before drawing them in good. You have until lunch. Maybe longer.” At that Mr. Adderly signalled them to begin with a wave of his hand, sat in his cushioned teacher chair and shook a pill into his mouth from a bottle in his desk drawer. Cecelia was overcome with happiness. Maybe the New Year would be good to her. Her luck seemed to be turning around ever since the travesty that was Christmas Eve. Strange people had been approaching her in all sorts of places: at the grocery store with her mother, on the street while she was walking her dog, and some unknown parent of a kid two years younger than her had congratulated her on her way down the hall that very morning.

As she was internally debating the idea that perhaps good things did occasionally happen to the underdog, her train of thought was interrupted by the boy in front of her who had stuck out his tongue when she had been chosen by the priest for the Nativity weeks before: “Hey!” he said forcefully, and she was taken aback by his bravery in so audibly addressing her. She glanced around the room to see if their classmates or the teacher had noticed him, but the students were consumed in their drawings, and Mr. Adderly had his head down on his desk.

“My grandmother saw you at the Nativity play, singing. She said you were pretty good.”

“Oh, yeah?” She replied, perplexed, wondering if there was going to be some vicious insult attached to this compliment. He continued speaking.

“Yeah. So, I guess that means you are good at art *and* music. Browner.”

“I guess so,” Cecelia bleated, suddenly unoffended by the term that had irked her so much before. She rolled her eyes at the boy with a smile, and dropped her head to focus on the rough sketch of herself singing with two blackened eyes and a faded pink heart on her dress.

SIZE

The bus rumbled down potholed Cresson street toward the newly built high school: the place where Cecelia would be spending the next five years of her life, from grade eight to twelve. Her body bumped and wobbled as the bus powered over the gaps in the pavement, and she felt every ounce of her summer fat jiggling in the horrendous matching poly blend pantsuit that her grandmother had helped her pick out at Woolworth's department store. The suit was a sort of red affair with dime-sized pinwheels printed on it; the top had a mock turtleneck and the pants were slightly flared. Her Grandmother said she looked darling, but she felt she looked like a leper, yet had to consent to buying the outfit because it was the only thing in the store that fit her properly, and the only one her grandmother would purchase.

To distract herself from the garish glow of her clothes and the recurring snickers of her fellow riders, she peered out of the rectangular bus window at the sky and tried to think of the perfect way to describe the colour. *Azure? Cobalt? An overturned bowl of indigo?* The September morning was clinging desperately to summer violet, but chilly, autumn blue was moving in swiftly. She wondered why it was that some things could be huge like the sky and still get credit for being beautiful, and others could be huge like her and be abhorred. She had never gotten credit for being beautiful. Lately, she had noticed that not even her grandmother had been able to squeeze those words from her pious lips, because saying something like that would be much more grievous than a white lie.

That morning her lack of beauty had already been pointed out at the bus stop by some boys with whom she was well acquainted: a couple of regular tormentors from elementary school. There was the bigger one with the crooked nose, and the skinny one with wide-set eyes like some sort of guppy: a feature that was a common indicator--as she would later learn--of children with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. But at that time she was oblivious to the faults of others, being wholly concerned with her own perceived hideousness. The boys pointed and laughed when she arrived to the little dirt strip that served as the bus stop in suburban Hillsboro.

"What in hell is she wearing?" one of them announced cruelly to the other in a voice well above a whisper, attracting the older students' attention to her plight. Heads turned and soon the whole line of

teenagers was giggling, with their backpacks heaving over their shoulders and their hands slapping their foreheads and knees in revelry. She could not believe that it was happening again. This was supposed to be her clean break from the prison of elementary school and the pain that went along with it, but it had become apparent that there was no escape. As they uttered the old, familiar insults, she drooped her head and pretended not to hear them, even though she processed every word like a stinger through the heart.

“Fat cow!”

“Tub-o-lard.”

“Ugly.”

As the bus thudded along, nearly at its destination, she obsessed over their insults and looked down at the parts of her body that she wish she didn't have. First she caught sight of her inner thighs. They rubbed together so badly that she felt compelled to cut them off. She wasn't sure how she'd do it, or with what weapon. *A breadknife? A quick zip with a chainsaw?* Something serrated that would cut through the fat quickly. When she was done with the thighs she'd whittle her arms with a paring knife, slice off her belly with a fish knife, and her love handles with a steak knife. She fantasized about removing hunks of her flab so often that it had become a sick pastime that she knew could never tell anyone about.

Lately she'd become specifically concerned with her inner thighs because the boys usually called her *Thunder-thighs* and said that they could smell bacon when she walked around. She had only recently figured that the two separate comments pointed to the same bodily defect. She understood full well what *Thunder-thighs* had meant, but when they said that she smelled like bacon, she assumed that they were saying it because she resembled a pig. But, one evening in August she was pondering over the insults that were on repeat in her head, and it occurred to her that they said that because they believed her thighs to be cooking each other with friction as she walked. She thought of herself as a human pork product that fried itself when it moved. *Fat cow. Tub-o-lard. Ugly. Thunder-thighs. Sizzling Bacon.* The insults piled up in her head.

When they finally arrived, she flopped out of the bus and onto the fresh pitch outside of the high

school and looked at the triangular apse that rose above the entrance to the school's main gallery. She read the sign perched below: Saint Casimir's. As she passed over the threshold and into the school, she momentarily anticipated every mood of every morning that she would pass through the entryway, and all she could envision was her own corpulent face frowning a bit more every day.

She resisted the overwhelming urge to skitter away from the place so that she could seek a safe shelter. Perhaps hide out in a neighbouring yard in an inconspicuous shed for the rest of her days. She figured that eventually she would be found, shrunken and hiding in her makeshift safe house, her eyes unaccustomed to the light. They'd offer her food and water, but it would be too rich for her malnourished body to handle. With the daydream of escape playing in her mind, she made her way deeper into the building and slumped toward her homeroom according to the schedule that had been mailed to her residence two weeks before.

Attached to that schedule was an invitation to the Open House Barbeque that had been held a week before the school year began as a way for the newbie grade eight students to socialize before they were mixed in with the hordes of other students. She expressed interest in attending as soon as she read the schedule, but her mother had warned her about the pitfalls of the event, as if her intuition indicated that it would be a failure for Cecelia. But being the stubborn child that she was, Cecelia resisted, wanting to be a part of the action, at least for the advantage of orienting herself in such a huge building so she wouldn't look like a wayward fool on the first day.

Her mother dropped her off at the barbeque at 6:00 pm sharp, as the invitation decreed, and she wandered into the building for the first time with the other wide-eyed students, her stomach doing nervous flips. It wasn't long before she had pinpointed a group of girls that had attended her elementary school. The girls had typically avoided her in the past, but Cecelia hoped that maybe they would be more open to accepting her now that they had all matured and were turning a new page in their academic careers. Her legs rubbed their way over to them in the snug cargo shorts that she'd wedged herself into for the evening. As she approached the group, one of the prettier girls had made eye contact with her, and Cecelia gathered the nerve to speak.

“Do you guys mind if I join you for the tour?” She squeaked. The queen of the group turned around at this statement and looked at her with pretty, creased eyes and a wide smile. Cecelia could not have imagined such a welcoming response.

“Suurrre. We would love for you to join us.” At this Cecelia’s heart rose up to her throat and was pounding so fast that she thought it might jump right out of her mouth. Maybe things would be better in high school. Unfortunately, the queen had not yet finished speaking.

“Yeah, we *would* love for you to join us, but we don’t want the other kids here to think that we are losers like you.”

Cecelia nodded at this pronouncement as if acknowledging to herself that she was, in fact, a loser. *Clearly*. She slunk away, her legs still rubbing together, and disappeared, map in hand, into the corridors of the strange school. It was during this time of lonely wandering that she was able to locate her homeroom so that she would not be frenzied on the first day. When she had the location memorized, she hid out in the Girls’ bathroom until eight o’clock, electing to miss the barbeque that she’d been so excited about, not wanting to have to stuff her face in front of her persecutors.

The bitter taste for high school that the barbeque had left her with was still fresh in her mouth on this first day of school. *Thankfully I haven’t seen any of them yet today*, she thought to herself, her mind re-grounding itself in the current moment. *I’d take a bus full of boys over them*, she decided, knowing all too well that the teasing of boys was much less hurtful than the half-sarcastic, sugar-sweet exclusion of pretty, young females.

She sat at her homeroom computer station, and began analyzing her classroom surroundings like a young spy, praying to whomever would listen that by some miracle no one from her past would land in her homeroom: Typing and Word Processing. The stark, windowless room was organized so that each chair faced a computer rather than the teacher, a seating arrangement that ran contrary to the typical style in every other classroom she’d ever seen in her elementary days. She surveyed the room with an inborn disdain, narrowing her eyes at the clunky boxes and beige keyboards attached to them with grimy curled cords. There was not a poster, not a trinket, nor any sort of other decoration to be seen on the walls. She

had an inexplicable dislike of technology, but all of the adults in her life were pushing the importance of becoming tech savvy in order to prosper.

She was one of the early birds, anxious to slip within the realms of teacher supervision. In spite of her horrific outfit, she kept a low profile in her God-given position at the back of the room and watched as the other kids entered, one after the other. There was a general sense of disillusionment and tentativeness as they traipsed in like animals recognizing the impermeability of the jail into which they've been coerced. Summer had made them wild again for two fleeting months. They all had a conspicuous look to them with their new haircuts and spotless clothes, yet the pink, freckled stain of the sun was still fresh on their cheeks. Her classmates were clearly the types who enjoyed the great outdoors, all bikers, runners, and soccer and softball players.

Her mind wandered again from the teacher and his cursory introductions back to the sweet freedom that she had experienced in the summer, though she had spent the majority of the season inside the walls of her cottage. It had been a particularly bright summer, and her mother was convinced that the sun was contributing to teenage onset skin cancer, so much so that she had Cecelia checking her body for melanoma in the shower. When she was allowed to emerge from the cottage on overcast or rainy days fancying a dip in the river, it was on the condition that she would swath her bathing suit body in oversized T-shirts. *Just in case.* Her fairness was a curse that might also have contributed to her laziness and natural dislike for sports.

She passed her time inside doing many non-physical activities like playing cards with her sister, making up dramatic skits, and by engaging in a variety of different crafty exercises that they found in the *Big Book of Cottage Fun* that they had unearthed at a Victoria Day garage sale. One day she'd instruct her sister how to make a layered jarful of different shades of sand, and the next they were making their own candles with melted *Crayolas* and wicks made of heavy-gauge wool soaked in oil. Sometimes their craft sessions took a definitively high-brow bent and the two of them would find themselves sketching the river with bonfire charcoal on birch bark, or painting with brushes made from clippings of their own hair fastened to a stick and dipped into tiny jars of crushed gooseberries, mud and crushed grass.

She smiled as she remembered her summer, but quickly realized that in that moment that she was now farthest away from next summer. *Now I'm here*, she sighed to herself in pity, and her mouth settled back into a frown.

Although it didn't appear as if any of the girls were in her class, she would nevertheless have to readapt to this dangerous environment, made much more frightening than her last school because of its magnitude. She had transitioned from a place of two hundred students to two thousand, where there must have been at least ten times more bullies. She would have to relearn the pathways and shortcuts in order to avoid run-ins with the enemies who might be lurking around any corner. She could already feel the tenseness in her shoulder blades which she could only presume were sunk somewhere deep in her back fat.

By the time lunch rolled around, Cecelia was congratulating herself that she had managed to blend into the back of her first two classes. By some strange luck she hadn't seen any of her former classmates at all, which she attributed to the fact that they were too dumb to be streamed into the advanced classes that she had been earmarked for since her performance on the grade six government exams. She was doubly blessed because the kids from the other schools who *were* in her classes were too involved in their own personal dramas to look at her for at least the first couple of weeks of school. *I might just be all right*, she thought to herself as she let the combination lock slam back onto her locker with a clink and headed in the direction she thought the cafeteria might be.

As she approached the entrance to the food hub that was alive with the chattering of pre-teens, she swooned at the smell of French fries and at the same time was struck with an undeniable feeling that something bad was about to happen. She moved closer to the action and saw that the entrance was barred by a group of girls. Though they had changed their apparel over the summer and gotten modern hairstyles, she could still identify them as being the cool clique that callously rejected her the week before, at the barbeque.. She looked at them, congregating into a circle of protection, and wondered how they were managing their day, having been mixed into a situation where there were other popular girls from other schools with whom they had to compete.

Despite her aversion toward this nasty group, she was feeling bold and quite anxious to get into the caf, regardless of who was blocking the entrance. Her mother had begrudgingly given her five dollars to spend on her lunch that day, because Cecelia was too embarrassed to bring her usual paper bag consisting of a white bread and peanut butter sandwich, a red delicious apple and two chocolate chip cookies knotted into a mini baggie. She wanted to see what other tantalizing options were available to her beyond the lunchroom doors. She triumphantly stepped through the jamb and into the huge, grey, sterile room, but soon realized that the throng of girls was part of a much bigger line that wrapped to the back of the room.

Before she had time to reorient herself onto a new path, a protestation arose from the clique.

“No budding fattie!”

“Yeah. Wait your turn!”

Cecelia whipped her head around in terror, not sure if she really wanted to make eye contact with the girls who had just called her out. She had been doing such a good job at blending in, in spite of her outfit. *Was she so foolish to think that she would make it till the end of the day without being spotted?*

“Ugh. Have you considered that the *skinny* girls have to eat first, you monster? I mean, we’re *starving*.” And given this comment, Cecelia had to agree. They were looking especially thin this September. It was as if they had entered into a diet pact over the summer so that they would have a better chance of conquering the slightly less thin popular girls from the other schools.

“Yeah, you’ve probably got enough fat stored on you that you could hibernate for the winter,” determined another, rather viciously, even for one of them. She thrust her noble chin up at Cecelia’s hulking body and turned to the rest of her coven for approval.

They now started laughing in unison like mad, tittering birds. It was a demented sound to hear emanating from the bodies of little girls. Who thought that such cute waifs could feel hatred the way that they did? She backed up in defensive mode, wanting to crawl into the smallest pore of the grout between the bricks in the wall. She watched as a viewer of a horror movie witnesses the plot spin out of control into the path of utter, assured destruction. She was positively helpless, standing like a red rube in the

warpath of the skinnies, looking like her head might soon detonate.

Though she had no solid recollection of actually moving from her awkward place within the doors of the caf, she nevertheless found herself minutes later, wandering halfway down the hall and out the side door of the school into the nippy September air. She stumbled on the concrete basketball court, but soon regained her footing and located a place on a grassy patch beside an elm tree to collapse, out of view of all of the exits as well the wide, woodsy path where the tough, older kids went to smoke.

She rested her heavy head against the oddly comforting corrugated elm tree trunk and immediately lost herself in a train of thought so deep that it took the aching of her empty tummy to summon her back to her senses. She was hungry, and found herself pining for the plain old bagged lunch she had denied from her mother. She wished she hadn't asked her not to prepare it. She decided at that moment that she would never venture into the mouth of the beast to buy cafeteria fare again. It was much too dangerous.

Half an hour later she heard the futuristic sounding *blub-blub* of the warning bell that signalled five minutes to class. Not wanting to be late on the first day of school, she rushed into the building toward her locker, flung open the door and consulted her schedule for her next class: Art, Room 294. She was relieved. None of the popular people took art.

The only classes that she had attended so far that morning were in the five hundreds, even though the school was only one level. She seemed to remember from poring over the map that each wing of the labyrinthine school was devoted another generation of numbers. She ambled away from the door through which she had just entered, and turned corner after corner, until she found the two hundreds. When she located 294, she felt as if she had crossed the entire building, darting this way and that, trying to avoid potential threats.

Upon entering the art class, she had forgotten about the migraine induced by lack of food. She was instantly struck by the splendour of the room and found that there was already a substantial group of kids in there, bumping into each other like stunned chickens trying to find the most adequate place to sit. They had a difficult time functioning in a seemingly free environment that wasn't pre-arranged and

assigned. They were accustomed to the teacher instructing them where to place themselves, when they could use the washroom, when they could answer questions, when they should keep their mouths shut. The teacher in this room was standing self-assuredly by the door, like a statue of Frida Kahlo, but twice as stunning and without the facial hair. Her arms were cocked at her hips, and she stood bemused and beaming at the newcomers.

Cecelia, having waited for this moment of independence since she had begun her schooling in kindergarten, predictably headed to a desk at the sheltered back corner of the classroom. By the time she nestled into her seat, all traces of the headache she had been suffering had disappeared. Once there, she had a better chance of checking out the teacher that they were to have for art that year. She admired her, and felt that she had the qualities that Cecelia imagined an art teacher should have. Her hair was as black and glossy as a primo Halloween witch wig, and it hung over her shoulders to her chest in two straight-cut swatches. Her skin was not a colour that was common in Hillsboro. Cecelia searched her head for the appropriate label for her complexion, and settled on *golden bronze*, but she could not pinpoint her country of origin. She looked Egyptian or Indian or Greek.

Cecelia could tell that the teacher had an aura, and so did the classroom. Cecelia took her time to let her eyes wander deliciously around the room. There were an odd arrangement of vintage posters of Dali, Kahlo, Velasquez and Magritte covering the high parts of the walls where prying hands could not reach. Of them, Cecelia's eye settled indulgently upon an image of a smoking pipe with *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* penned below. Her French wasn't grand, but she knew, probably before the majority of her classmates, that the translation was 'This is not a pipe.' It was her first time seeing the piece, and she was inspired immediately to create a painting of herself in all of her fleshy glory with *Ceci n'est pas une tub-o-lard* written below.

Her eyes continued to engorge themselves upon the carefully thought out details of the room. Lining the windowsills sat knobby stone carvings of crouched humans grabbing their knees and papier mâché masks of grotesque faces. Spreads of drapery in varying gauges and textures were placed strategically around the room for sketching, and colourful feather mobiles hung from the ceiling. The

blackboard was so crammed with scotch-taped newspaper articles and small cut-out paintings and magnets and other eccentric images from the art world that there was hardly any room left for chalk writing. For this, Cecelia was relieved. She had spent her school days thus far copying notes from a board, and she was ready for something new.

It was clear that, in this room at least, the image was boss: high priest of the other modes of information. The niftiest things of all, and the most eye-catching, were the three easels standing near the kiln room displaying what Cecelia supposed were the teacher's own works. She took her time analyzing the arresting abstractions that, when placed together, functioned as a separated triptych. The teacher had combined the colourful Aboriginal/Canadian style of Norval Morrisseau with an almost seedy, gothic Spanish-like flavour. Stair climbing, skull-bearing spiritual creatures peered from the canvas and their empty eyes bore into her own as if they were watching her with intent. The muted primary-coloured characters were punchy against a dismal wash of drippy blacks and coffee stains, as they rose from the depths of a dank cave, ready for a sordid party. Cecelia's immediate love for her teacher grew even stronger when she opened her mysterious mouth to speak once the herd of students had fallen into their desks.

"Ola," she called with exuberance, and her voice was melodic and spicy. The edges of her consonants curled with the most exotically wonderful accent she'd ever heard. Yet, even with this new piece of evidence as to this young woman's nationality, small town Cecelia could still not yet figure it out: *Greek? Egyptian? Filipino?* It was hard to place an international accent having never really left Hillsboro.

"Welcome to grade eight art class, students. I hope this year will be the beginning of a long career in the arts for all of you!" The teacher unclasped her hands and enthusiastically scrawled her name upon the board.

"My name is Miss Esperanza!" She said while re-clasping her hands in front of her stomach with another smile. *She's doling those smiles out like candy*, Cecelia thought, and smiled herself. It occurred to her then that neither of her other teachers had grinned that morning. Before meeting this teacher, she

thought that perhaps high school would be a place of seriousness, absolutely devoid of joy.

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this. In fact, they specifically instructed me not to tell you this in Teacher’s College, but, here it goes: This is my first year teaching!”

This fact was already apparent to Cecelia and it now made sense why Miss Esperanza was still grinning. She was idealistic and still full of hope for the profession of teaching. Old teachers had lost their desire. Sometimes you could see traces of the young teacher in the worn out one, if you looked closely around their rooms for remnants of a poster or two, or an inspirational sentence, hand-written in ornate penmanship, but wrinkled over the years, stuck to the wall by the door; but mostly older teachers had lost their joy.

“My name is Miss Esperanza!” she repeated as if she had anticipated that a foreign name such as hers might be somewhat difficult for the small town students to grasp. “This year you will live art!”

Cecelia smiled for the second time that day and felt the warmth of refinement and the secure feeling of protection radiating from the teacher. She wished she had no other classes. She could learn what she needed in the art class, and the others could just melt away. After the gorgeous teacher had completed her spiel, the class engaged themselves in creating fancy nametags that they were to stick to the fronts of their desks. While they worked, Miss Espe, as she told them to call her, circulated the room, passing each one of them with a smile and a whiff of spicy-sweet perfume.

She found herself to be exhausted from stimulation after the art class. She muddled through the last period, Math, her least favourite subject, but was blessed yet again by the fact that none of the cool girls were in her class. She snoozed in the back, not quite sleeping, but not quite awake. She was dreaming of the scenarios that might unfold in her new favourite class over the year. Would she be able to impress Miss Esperanza with her art skills? Would she be able to win her respect? Would she be the favourite? She longed for some kind of recognition from the teacher to make up for her non-entity status with her peers.

On her lonely walk home from the bus stop at the end of the first day of high school, the optimism that she had known after the art class had fled from her heart. The boys that had persecuted her

that morning had given her a few parting words to dwell upon for the evening as she descended the bus steps, and at that point she had begun doing calculations. There were about 280 school days in a year, yet she would only be spending a quarter of them in the Art class. It then occurred to her that the class only ran for *one* semester, and after January, she would be receiving a whole new schedule, which would replace the Art class with physical education. Her mind started churning on these newly realized facts, and the year ahead seemed like a chunk of time that she was chipping away at with a toothpick. When she reached the backdoor of her house, she was mired in utter gloom.

As an adult, she would remember her first days of high school as the time that she had come to her first realization that perhaps life was not worth living. She was supposed to be starting a new trajectory that deviated from the stinking sphere of self-pity that she'd fallen into in elementary school, but she could not even pretend to imagine herself enduring five more years of being the butt of every fat joke. She imagined the girls and the boys who had made fun of her earlier that morning and wondered what they were trying to accomplish? She already knew that she was *different*. She compared her body with the little bodies and knew that none of them had the curse that she possessed. She *was* fat, as they said. *Fat cow. Tub-o-lard. Ugly. Thunder-thighs.* They made jokes, but she knew the truth. She had to look at herself in the mirror every morning.

She wondered what it would be like to grow up pretty like Miss Esperanza: the cool yet innocent teacher who had probably never seen the scale tip beyond 130 pounds. Miss Esperanza knew nothing of the horrors of the world, and the inherent evil of teenagers. Miss Esperanza was a happy adult because she had had a blissful youth, sheltered within the bubble of beauty and thinness, but Cecelia seemed to be damned to a cycle of rejection and sadness. There was a tiny feeling of jealousy of the lovely teacher rising up in her belly, but Cecelia quashed it, and chose to admire the woman instead. She had too much jealousy to contend with as it was.

Cecelia realized that in her cloud of depression she had wandered through the living room of the still empty house and had trundled into her bedroom. She took off her hideous jumpsuit and crawled into the welcoming bed. *There has got to be another option,* she thought as she drifted off to sleep at the ripe

hour of four in the afternoon. Her last thought—or first dream—was a fantasy about being able to watch her own funeral to see who might attend. *Her family?* Obviously. Even the ones who had to be there just cause they were her cousins and aunts and uncles twice removed. *Her elementary school teachers?* They always admired her for being a nerd. *Miss Esperanza?* They had just met. *But her classmates?* That was a tough call. She knew that if any one of her classmates had the nerve to show, they'd be doing it only to get a day off school.

That night in her sleep she lived through a complex saga with many threads unravelling from the spindle of an idea upon which she couldn't clearly focus. She saw her own future laid out before her like one of Miss Esperanza's paintings: a series of abstractions, eerie blended darkness, imagined feelings and swipes of bold colour. She saw herself changing into what she wanted to become. The thinner, more beautiful version of herself. The version that people would notice in the halls. The version that people might actually acknowledge. A bold colour emerging from the shadows.

She woke up the next morning with the sound of the cooing mourning doves. It was time for her to face another day. Her anxiety formed a rock in her stomach, and for the first time in all her days, she couldn't eat her Fruit Loops and milk for breakfast. The lack of hunger stimulated her and made her feel like she was in control. By the time she had reached the bus stop, she had developed a clever system for change. She just wouldn't eat. *That was it!* She couldn't count on others to change, but she could change herself. *No breakfast. No bagged lunch. Definitely not cafeteria food. Nothing but water.* At night she would permit herself one of two options: a small bowlful of cucumber salad or a baked potato with salsa, two meals that she had seen her mother resort to while crash dieting. *No butter, no dessert, no soda, no nothing.* And when she was done eating, she would pop two Gravols and hit the sack.

A month passed without much notice for Cecelia. She had successfully implemented her weight loss plan, and every day, she went through the motions. *Legs to the bus stop. Legs to the school. Legs to the classes. Legs to the library.* When it became too cold to sit under the elm tree outside, she would spend her lunch alone in the library, motionless but for the calculated movements of her drawing hands. Art was the only subject that kept her wanting to be alive. For now she endured the insulting calls in the

hall, the insidious laughter of the girls, the boys making grand pointing gestures, but she was determined to lose weight, and she was determined to succeed in Miss Esperanza's class. She substituted her lack of friends and her lack of nourishment with time spent honing her creative abilities.

Every day after school, she enforced the system that she had devised for herself. She fixed herself a pitifully small helping of food and went off to bed before anyone had even arrived home from work. She weighed herself twice a day, once in the morning and once at night, and at the end of September she had lost a full ten pounds. She looked in the mirror to try to see where the weight had come from, but she seemed to herself like the same old Cecelia. She pinched the clinging baby fat around her neck and strove to see her clavicle poking out below it as did on the other girls, but ten pounds weren't enough to produce this effect. *I must lose more*, she thought to herself.

By the first couple of days of October, her parents were beginning to ask questions. In fact, her mother had called a family meeting, something Cecelia thought only happened in Friday night sitcoms. The meeting was held on a Saturday morning, and Cecelia was informed of its happening before she had a chance to get out of bed. She joined her family at the kitchen table still clad in her pyjamas, and once there, dragged her eyes side to side over the faces of her parents, wondering how they were going to admonish her for choosing to sleep her life away. She saw that the two of them looked bewildered and frightened about what they might have to do next.

"Cecelia. I was upstairs last night making your sister's bed, and I noticed that there was no light coming from under your door."

Cecelia shrugged with diffidence and her mother continued.

"We passed off the not-eating as a phase of your teenaged life. Girls crash diet, but we had no idea that you were going to bed at five o'clock every night. We thought you had been doing your homework or drawing in there."

"Is it the drugs, Cece?" Her father blurted abruptly, interrupting her mother, and a concerned look tensing up on his face. "Just tell us if it's the drugs."

"I mean, nobody loses that amount of weight without a drug addiction, or at least some kind of

deathly illness,” her mother reaffirmed. “Maybe we should schedule an appointment?”

“I just want to lose weight and be beautiful,” said Cecelia, surprisingly honestly, and it felt so good to be up front with her parents that she continued. “I’m sick of being a tub-o-lard.”

“A tub-o-lard? Who calls you that?” Her father’s look of concern intensified but when he realized by Cecelia’s own sour face that she wasn’t in the mood to recount her terrible tales of bullying, he was quick to refocus the discussion.

“Well, it’s plain to see that you have lost some weight, but if you are losing weight because you are doing drugs, Cecelia, I just don’t know what I’ll do. You’re fading away to nothing before our eyes.”

Cecelia rolled her eyes at her worried father and shook her head more out of embarrassment for him than of herself and her current predicament, being confronted by such a ludicrous claim. She hadn’t noticed any substantial change in her physical appearance in spite of what the scale said. She still had thunder thighs, her arms still jiggled.

“I’m obviously not on drugs,” she replied in truth, though, of course, she wasn’t counting the Gravols she’d popped every night since the first day of school. “I don’t even have friends that would be able to get me drugs. I don’t have friends at all. I just haven’t had any appetite lately. Must be the stress of high school.”

Her parents seemed sated by this admission. A look of thankful resignation came over her mother’s face. She seemed contented that she could cross this concern off her list of worries. Her daughter was losing weight, thank god, and she wasn’t using drugs to do it. Cecelia ignored this look because she could not yet handle the idea that her parents were as anxious for her to lose her extra pounds as she was. Weren’t they supposed to accept her no matter what size?

“Well, I don’t care what your diet plan is, you are going to eat your grandmother’s Thanksgiving meal next weekend, or you’ll have a real reason to be stressed. One thing is dieting, and the other is starving yourself,” her mother cautioned, and Cecelia nodded her head in accordance.

Of course, Cecelia’s parents didn’t know that she was, for the most part, starving herself. Her mother had been reliably preparing her bagged lunches, day after day, and Cecelia had been tossing them

into the trash at school on the way to the library, uneaten. The first few times she had done it, she felt a pang of guilt, but now it had become a part of her routine, a part of the ceremony of her new eating disorder.

Before she knew it, it was the last Friday before Thanksgiving, and she was in Art class finishing the lingering details of the self-portrait assignment that was due at the end of the period. She had spent hours on the work, and was actually satisfied with it. It was Picasso-esque, but not in an unoriginal way. She had enough of her own style to ensure that Picasso was just a reference. Hers was much more bizarre. She was using a Sharpie to add thin, pointed lashes on some dead eyes floating at odd angles to each other in space. When she had completed that task, she would have to perfect the teeth of the mouth that was suspended in nothingness in the corner of the page.

Because of the assignment and her desire to impress Miss Esperanza, the last two weekends were spent holed up in her bedroom, not eating, and attempting to become reacquainted with her most despised subject matter: her self. When she had begun the preliminary sketches for this work, she found quickly that she had immense difficulty finding her own face in a mirror and looking at it in its totality. She spent hours in front of the glass looking at her body, but seldom analyzed anything above her rounded shoulders or her meaty upper arms. She focussed in on her eye, or the fat cheek blocking her eye, or the droop of a double chin below her jaw line, but she could not see her expression all at once, just in offensive parts.

Tired and traumatized by trying, she had begun to envision the daring things that she could capture besides her face that would also represent her and impress the audience. She had a flash of bold inspiration and she quietly asked Miss Esperanza at the beginning of Monday's class if she could diverge from the rules. Instead of attempting to represent herself, she wanted to paint a realistic pile of shiny packaged pork products like bacon and ham and sausage and fat and call this her self-portrait. Miss Espe returned this strange request with a look of profound sadness mixed with empathy and shook her head slowly, no. She did however provide some gentle suggestions. She recommended that Cecelia stop

thinking about how to see her face in totality and to start to portray it as she saw it in sections. This exercise allowed her to free herself from the painterly block, and had led her to reimagining her entire process as a representation of forms in space.

When the period bell rang on that final Friday before the holiday, she edged toward the front of the room to present the perfected painting to her teacher. Though she would never admit it to friend or foe for fear of being branded a brown-nosing loser for the rest of her days, she felt saddened at the fact that she wouldn't be able to see Miss Espe or be in the breathtaking art room for three whole days instead of the usual two. For this reason, she dawdled behind the rest of her classmates so that she might be able to spend just a minute alone with her teacher without running the risk of being late for her next class. After all the other dunderheads had drained out, she unveiled her masterpiece with a showy wave of her open palm and quickly looked up at her teacher in order to gauge her true reaction.

What she saw was a look of recognition, admiration, and pride. Almost the same look that Cecelia used to acknowledge the great Miss Espe. Cecelia cocked her head at this genuine response and Miss Esperanza opened her mouth to congratulate her.

"This is quite well done, Cecelia!" she pronounced. "You see what re-envisioning your work has done for you! Now you know the secret. You take your problems, your sadness, your stress, and you rework them until they are beautiful works of art like this. That's how to overcome everything."

Someday, Cecelia would reanalyze this statement, but at the moment, it was just a bunch of words. She didn't understand the full clout of what her teacher was trying to intimate, but she pretended that she knew. Miss Espe was looking at her now with eyes that seemed to acknowledge and soothe every ounce of pain that Cecelia had ever felt. In fact, Miss Espe had changed the way she looked at Cecelia since her question about the alternate pork product work that she had wanted to do. It was as if she had had an epiphany about what made Cecelia who she was, and she could now see past her somewhat unappealing exterior into her soul.

"You know, Cecelia. We all have our own personal struggles. You probably think that I don't have any worries because I am an adult, but I do. Your parents have worries, and the people that you

encounter in this school who you might think look perfect all have something that pains them. It is these worries that we have, these pains, which make us who we are. It is how we overcome our pain that matters. And you have found your way. Art is your way.” At this Miss Espe smiled and motioned her slender hand toward Cecelia’s self-portrait.

“You might just be right, Miss Espe,” Cecelia agreed and indulged herself in one lingering moment standing near to her teacher and absorbing her perfume and her warmth, revelling upon her rich accent which seemed to still be echoing in the room. Cecelia had never been spoken to like an adult in such a way as Miss Espe was speaking to her now. She had never been told something so deep.

She had to break from the spell of standing with her beloved teacher because she had Math class to get to, and that teacher was a stickler for lateness, but she felt compelled by some unknown impetus to stay with her teacher. She felt strangely that Miss Espe needed the presence of somebody. She felt that Miss Espe might feel desperately alone. But, the silence between them had changed quickly into awkwardness, and she was at a loss of how to evade school for the remainder of the day, so she said what came naturally.

“Have a great long weekend.” She deliberately didn’t say Thanksgiving because Miss Espe had already confessed to the class that she did not celebrate Thanksgiving; in fact nobody below Texas did. Miss Espe was from Cuba. Land of the really free, as she once told them, though no one seemed to know what that meant, or even where Cuba was, only that it was a lovely land of sand and sea.

“And you as well, Cecelia. I hope that you partake in this great traditional meal that I have heard so much about. You should be fattening up for the cold, cold winter.” With this statement she winked at Cecelia, and she knew that that was an acknowledgment of the weight she had lost, and also a motherly admonishing suggesting that she should be eating more. Cecelia had never been told before that she might need to gain weight, and she liked it.

As usual they would be going to her Grandmother’s house for the big dinner that she’d been dreading since her mother had reminded her of its impending occurrence. They’d have the whole spread:

turkey, dressing, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, Brussels sprouts, carrots, bread, salads, gravy, butter, salt, pepper. It was a veritable heaven for those who enjoyed eating, as she once had. The intoxicating smells of cookery embraced Cecelia and her family as they entered her Grandmother's house at the early hour of two in the afternoon. They ate holiday meals early so they could slowly savour the spoils and ensure a respectful amount of discussion before they all had to leave. Her aunt and uncle and cousins had to venture back to the big city the same evening in order not to miss some athletic practice the following day.

Her grandmother was finishing up the trimmings in the kitchen, as the adults got politely hammered in the guest living room. Cecelia and her sister joined the cousins in the basement for a game of cards. She tried to focus on the game at hand, but was not greatly anticipating the impending meal. *How was she going to fake eating?* She was a renowned eater. It was as if she carried some sort of invisible overeaters medal around her chest and year after year she had to live up to her reputation. The whole family would be watching for her to succeed, egging her on. *Sure you can have one more turkey wing, Cecelia. It's Thanksgiving, have two slices of pie!* She superficially despised her entire family for being such flagrant hypocrites.

Eventually, they were summoned up for the meal, and as they congregated around the children's table, Cecelia took a few moments to reacquaint herself with her five cousins. There was Sally, the hockey player, and Brendan the slalom expert, and three other younger ones that were born in Irish succession, whose names and sports she could never quite sort out. Cecelia had been made the default head of the children's table although her cousin was technically older than her by four months. With Cecelia's former girth, she carried an undeniable leadership role, like the largest ape in a shrewdness.

When the plates were placed before them, she looked doubtfully at her food and it occurred to her that she had been forced into a situation where she would at least have to polish off her point as to not arouse suspicion. A thought that had been creeping around at the back of her mind eventually showed its shameful face. She'd been starving herself to this point, but now she'd have to cross into new territory: bulimia. Before it was a concept that she had heard only in the confessional pages of the teenaged

magazines that she read, but today she would actually be engaging in the dark sickness. Her heart sped up and she envisioned herself bent over the toilet. There was something undeniably glamorous about the act of purging food. Something altruistic. As if sensing her distorted thoughts, Cecelia's grandmother approached her, and hovered over her with a ramekin of cranberries.

"You'll have to have double servings today, Cecelia. You seem to have lost a bit of weight. Now just tell me if you are in need of anything else and I'll bring it over to you," said her grandmother, never failing as a hostess.

"I think we'll be fine grandma, you've done enough," Cecelia said, hoping to shrug her elder off so that she could commence the food intake. Her grandmother was used to her having a healthy appetite, but now Cecelia was suspicious that her father might have tipped grandma off to her new eating habits, or lack thereof. She had already been planning her occasional escapes to grandpa's bathroom, which was just off the living room, so that she might quietly purge as much as she could, claiming frequent urination because she'd had too much diet soda.

As they tucked in to the meal that had just been set before them, Cecelia's oldest cousin leaned to her across the table's corner and whispered that if Cecelia were to turn sideways she might disappear. Cecelia smiled at this ruse, knowing that it reeked of sarcasm, but knowing also that it was a small victory for herself: the first time her cousin had said anything half positive about Cecelia's physique. Usually she laughed brutishly and referred to Cecelia as not being the "athletic type." Cecelia affirmed this insult time after time, happy that, while she might not be an athlete, she at least had an intelligent mind, which was something that most athletes did not have the luck of possessing, in her opinion.

She diverted her attention from her cousin, and refocused it on the worry of the evening: her meal and how she was going to tackle and remove it from her system. The sight of it made her belly heave and brought a gag up into her throat. She lost touch with her whiny kinfolk and imagined happy things like wide empty spaces and soothing music as she made a show of eating potatoes and turkey as she had done last Thanksgiving. She heaped spoonfuls of dripping fodder into her maw, and her family watched on happily. She interspersed bites of food with gulps of soda, and in no time, she felt her belly bloating up

and excused herself from the table.

Inside the bathroom, she took care of her business with two fingers shoved down her throat. The soda made the food move quickly out of her mouth and she watched with squinted eyes as it rushed down into the toilet. She believed she had maintained some sort of quiet dignity in her upchucking, so she flushed, rinsed out her mouth and headed out the door rather proud of herself for not allowing food to remain in her body for any longer than ten minutes. On her way back from grandpa's bathroom, she suddenly had the feeling of light recklessness, and a spinning sensation had begun whirling outward from her belly, which caused her forehead to prickle up.

She woke up on the linoleum floor of the hallway with the mixed shapes of faces dancing above her in a circle. She'd fainted. Her body couldn't handle the tease of food that was almost instantly rent from her belly, and it had rebelled on her.

"God dammit, girl. You are going to give us all a heart attack," said her grandfather who wasn't much of a talker but who was clearly alarmed by her tumble. Soon she was lifted by a bunch of hands and brought to the dining room where a cold cloth was pressed against her forehead. For the remainder of the evening the family sat vigil, interspersing bites of their own food with instructions for her to feed herself. They cooed and talked and made a calm environment and ensured that Cecelia kept her food down.

The following Tuesday, she had somehow managed to overcome the drama from two nights before, though it had meant a stern talking to from her grandmother about unhealthy weight loss, and a promise that she would diet, but stop the silliness of starvation. She returned to school with a grin upon her face. Since she had dropped some weight: 15 pounds now, even after the holiday food, she hadn't lately been pestered by anyone. It was as if she had shed her former cloak for a new one that was more effective. She passed by the girls who had once relentlessly tormented her, and they barely took notice because she could fit into a normal dress size. The old sins of obesity no longer registered on their bullying radar. They had turned their attentions to the other poor girls who suffered the pudgy curse, or

the ugly curse, or the curse of masculinity.

She endured Tuesday's boring morning classes so that she could work her way closer to her Art class and see Miss Esperanza after a prolonged hiatus. When she approached the door after another lunch spent alone in the library, she sensed that something was awry. There was a group congregating by the classroom door and their heads were hanging low. She quickened her pace, anxious to see what the problem might be.

"What's going on?" she asked to anyone who would respond in the small crowd once she had reached them.

"Nothin'..." The boy who replied studied her obviously concerned face and reconsidered. "Well, if you wanna know, we have a supply."

"A supply? Miss Esperanza didn't say she'd be absent today," Cecelia felt somewhat betrayed by this lack of admission of important facts. Had their personal conversation on the Friday before the holiday meant nothing?

She poked her head into the classroom to investigate further the rather harsh pronouncement of her classmate, and soon discovered that he was right. Instead of the comely, foreign artistic acolyte, there stood a withered old woman with a permanent wrinkled pout mark on her moustache from sucking on cigarettes. She looked even more off-putting than she might have if she were not covering for the most beautiful teacher in the school. Cecelia was revolted, and quickly lurched her head back out the door before the imposter was able to turn to notice her.

"What was that thing?" she asked the boy whose name she did not yet know, delighting in her own unkindness. She appreciated the power she had to utter mean words at some other victim instead of having them thrown at her. The new boy looked at her as if shocked that she even had the nerve to speak aloud, and then smirked at her humor.

"Yeah. Quite the change from Miss Espe."

"Well, do we go in or skip class altogether?" Cecelia implored of the other teenager, secretly hoping that he would not suggest that they skip, because even if she might have lost some weight, she was

still a brown-noser, who was desperately afraid of the principal's office.

"If we skip, she'll have the principal after us in no time. And for what? Cause we had a supply teacher for one day? I mean, Miss Espe could be hung over, or have food poisoning, or maybe she had to take care of her kid. If she has one, I dunno. Let's give Miss Espe the benefit of the doubt and stay for today."

"I know. It's probably a sick day...but I feel, I don't know. I feel weird about it." Cecelia took a moment to digest the possible reason her teacher might have for not being there, and realized that she didn't really know anything about the woman. She felt guilty for not asking Miss Espe what her plans were for the long weekend. She was so determined to impress Miss Espe and join her on her elevated pedestal, that she hadn't considered her on a human level as a woman who might have children, or a husband, or even as a wild bachelorette who liked to party.

"I feel kind of weird, too," said the kid, looking her in the eye. It was then that she realized that this probably would not have been someone she'd be able to talk if she hadn't lost a substantial amount of weight. *Or would it?* As he waited for her response, she reconsidered her judgement of this boy, and thought that she might have been wrong about him. She had a real phobia of talking to others for fear of rejection that she pretty much avoided people all together, which probably made her appear intimidating or standoffish, but this boy seemed genuinely happy that the two of them were conversing.

"What's your name?" she asked him with a confidence that felt alien but nevertheless delightful.

"Michael. And you're Cecelia, right?" Her mouth dropped open in shock.

"You know my name?" she asked.

"Yeah. Miss Espe did attendance out loud every class. It's not hard to figure out people's names when you pay attention, silly. Actually, I've always kind of wondered about you." At this he paused, and Cecelia felt shy.

"The bell's about to ring. Should we go in and face the beast?" Cecelia was so thrilled by this unexpected alliance that she forgot for a minute that her favourite teacher was missing.

In the end, they were both right about the weird feeling that they had. The days passed like dying

dreams and Miss Esperanza never returned to them. Many rumors circulated the school of her sudden absence: she was single and with child; she had to return to Cuba to settle the estate of her dead father; she secretly hated her students and had to flee the country to escape them. Cecelia took the latter as her own personal opinion, and had begun to resent her former teacher. *How could she leave me? I mean, sure, leave the rest of the class, but me?* She felt duped out of the only class in her day that brought her joy.

This feeling worsened each time she dared look into the vapid eyes of her new teacher. Cecelia's artworks had taken on an even darker tone since the departure of her favourite. Now she was pressured to *explain* the use of her gloomy and graphic imagery. The supply teacher that they pulled in for the short term was not an art teacher, but rather a physical education teacher who wanted to be promoted to full time. She didn't appreciate doom and gloom, but loved sunshine and rainbows and kittens. She wore sweatpants to class and had a whistle hanging between her non-existent breasts. *"You are not HER!"* Cecelia often caught herself wanting to shriek at the replacement teacher, even though it wasn't the teacher's fault for being the poor soul that had to follow an amazing first act.

A week after receiving the new teacher, Miss Espe's dejected students dragged their feet in on a fateful Monday morning and discovered that all of the decorations that Miss Espe had so carefully arranged had been savagely removed from the room. Their safe place was now a crime scene. Bits of string still hung from the ceiling where the mobiles had been. The statues left only their bulbous imprints in the settling dust. The strange collection of posters had been hastily pulled down and their tape bandages clung to the walls at their former corners. It was unknown to the students whether Miss Espe herself or someone else had taken down Miss Espe's things, but Cecelia was certain that Miss Espe would have been more careful with her prized possessions.

The students were already feeling the emptiness of her vacancy, and this act tipped them past the point of utter stinging rejection. The ones who didn't have the option of dropping or swapping the course, which included her and Michael, were still cleaving to the decorations as if they were talisman of hope, which held the spirit of their teacher. The posters and statues and paintings were the things that

might make her come back; the things that she lived in, and spoke to them through no matter how many miles she was away. But now there was no hope for Miss Espe. She'd either come for her things on the weekend to avoid her students, or the new teacher had torn them down, tired of living under her oppressive shadow.

The year that her teacher disappeared was the hardest for Cecelia, but some good did come out of it. She met Michael, who became her only and dearest friend. When they first started having lunch together in the cafeteria, he wondered why she only had a banana or a piece of fruit to eat, and eventually goaded her into eating the entire contents of the brown bag that her mother sent her with, instead of throwing it in the garbage. Her weight plateaued at a reasonable number, one she could live with anyhow, and the girls who once tormented her forgot who she was. All was quiet on the school front, but Cecelia's heart ached to see her teacher once again and ask her how someone as amazing as herself could so heartlessly abandon her students.

SEX

His shame was swollen, and she sized it up with narrow eyes that betrayed both derision and ridicule and doubted that she would be able to swallow it whole. At seventeen, she hadn't seen many of these slug-like extremities so close up, and this one was so enormous that it looked plasticized. She wasn't sure why she had agreed to come to the apartment, but as she surveyed the scene, now partially obscured by his appendage, she wished she hadn't. Empty beer bottles littered the floor. Ashtrays overflowed with white-tipped cigarettes, bent in all manner of ways like broken fingers. A yellow-tinged poster adorned the wall by the door depicting a dreadlocked, squinting Bob Marley and was emblazoned with all the different terms for marijuana: *Ganja, Spliff, Thai Stick, Hoonie*. The words lost meaning as she read them, and the entire situation suddenly seemed ridiculous and juvenile. The lazy line of smoke coming from the incense stick burning in the corner did a poor job of covering the acrid stench of bong water, cigarettes and the sweat of sex.

She remembered now the painstaking measures she took to choose her clothing and accessories and to put on her make-up that afternoon. After modelling the options and ignoring the prudish advice from her sister, she had gone with the white, low-cut linen blouse that had the little cork buttons at the neck and floppy linen ties at the shoulders to make peep-hole sleeves. To match, she chose the wooden platform sandals with the beige criss-crossed leather holding her red-toenailed feet in place, and then teetered on them in the oval mirror in the bathroom as she painted her eyelashes black and her lips glossy pink. She thought she looked quite the picture, but her mother dropped a snide word on the tightness of her chocolate brown cords on her bottom as she hoofed out the door to the Olds to pick up her new but older love interest. Instead of engaging in a battle of wills, she decided to keep her mouth shut, hoping her mother would realize on her own that this was the modern fashion of a seventeen-year-old girl.

Cecelia was only mildly apprehensive when they pulled into usual make out spot: the gravel parking lot below the apartment. The lot was a familiar space for the local teens, and to herself, because of its clandestine location behind the Mom and Pop stores that lined the main street that was supposed to be the flashy shining tourist destination of Hillsboro, but from the back looked more like crooked,

decaying teeth. The lot was popular because the design of it was such that a car couldn't crest the hilltop entrance without being detected by those below. This design flaw gave any potential perpetrator enough time to stop whatever illicit activity in which she was engaged, pull herself together, and beat it back home through the narrow alley that led to the main street. It was also popular because of the apprehension that the police had about accidentally picking up the son or daughter of one of the town's privileged class in that lot, and this fear caused the cops to avoid the space altogether.

She was not one of the town's privileged classes, but she easily attracted them with her fair skin and certain brand of classy charm that was a regurgitated rumination from the heyday of her grandmother. Sometimes the boys from school who fancied Cecelia could convince her into a roll down to the lot so that they might kiss and touch her in the plush comfort of her parents' second-hand Oldsmobile. But that was all. She knew that touching and groping was the expected activity for a girl her age to evade the nagging questions of lesbianism or frigidity, but to go any further would send the rumor mill to churning in the other direction. She was what the boys called a tease, and as they groped her in the dark, she preferred to consider the graffiti adorning the brownstone building surrounding the lot, so that she wouldn't get too worked up and mistakenly go all the way. Besides, she still had a lot of hang-ups about her body-image, though she had lost a lot of weight from the painful days of grade eight, and she wasn't comfortable with anything more than a bit of heavy petting.

She had nearly memorized the markings on the walls: colourful and frantic in places and perfect cut-out stencils in others. In some sections the artists used spray paint, and in others it was clear that someone had used a bristled paintbrush out of a big bucket of wall paint. The drips that cascaded down from these marks looked somehow deliberate as if they were executed by the steady hand of a vandal who was not afraid of being caught. To her, the graffiti was the unbridled underground language of the town. The bold voices of the teenagers, who like her, had found themselves frustrated and trapped in the carcass of the smallest city in the province. She pictured lithe young miscreants climbing up on an improvised ledge like ninjas with their materials balanced in their hands and mouths in order to set their thoughts and visions onto the brick walls with impunity. Generations were represented. Bands ranging from Pink Floyd

to Def Leppard to Radiohead printed one on top of the other in the jungle of colour.

Her favourite of all the graffiti that she'd seen in the alley was a bit of poetry written with a two-inch brush dipped in plain white wall paint. The phrase was done high up on the edge of the low-rise bank building and read, "The sky became mad with stars." It was neatly rendered in thin capital letters and though it was only a string of simple words, it evoked in her mind a striking image of a sky full of stars; the universe; the galaxy, and accentuated her meaninglessness within these chasms of totality. She felt as if a satellite was gradually focussing in on her from space, framing the continent, the country, the province, the city, the alley, the Oldsmobile, and her inside. It was this worthless speck of dust feeling she had that would inevitably cause her to recoil from her conquest and not want to be touched anymore. At this point she would politely ask her companion to get out of the car. She shifted into drive and head back to the bungalow on the East side of the tiny town.

But he was different from all her previous conquests.

She picked him up at five on a Thursday at the Hillsboro bus station that doubled as a Laundromat for the welfare recipients on the less affluent west side of town. He was waiting outside of the wide window of the establishment with his legs crossed just so and a cigarette in his hand, behind him a short stack of dryers spinning their loads. He looked so cool, like an updated James Dean, except without a motorcycle. He told her the previous night on the phone that he had a "delivery" business but no car, and that required him to take the bus up and down the highway each day, and so she obliged. He seemed to have a lot of luggage for day tripping, however, but picked up his canvas hockey bag with ease as if its contents had been emptied. He tossed the bag into the trunk of her car and then smoothly opened the door to the Olds and took his seat.

She was abashed, and turned pink, unaware of what kind of conversation to make with this near perfect stranger with a musky smell and sandy hair. He lit up a cigarette and so did she, then cautioned a shy look toward him for some sort of verbal cue.

"Can you head to the lot? Do you know where that is? It's been a long day for me. I need to relax," he said and she nodded her nervous head and went there without a word.

As she crested the top of the hill minutes later, she heard the familiar popping sound of her car tires on the gravel and naively assumed that this scenario with this mysterious man would play out the same as the times before: she would be in control, and she would end the situation before it compromised her reputation. But, when she stopped and shifted the gear into park, he reached out and opened the passenger door and set his right foot on the gravel, and the regular routine that she had practiced with the other boys was shattered.

“Uhhh? Where are we going?” she asked, dumbfounded.

“Come on, babe,” he crooned to her in a voice that was mockingly sensual. She knitted her brow and a hard frown came about her mouth at the idea of losing the upper hand in this planned yet impromptu meeting. She liked to be in control of these situations. The familiarity of her car and the graffiti allowed her to guard herself against the sexual acts in which she did not want to engage.

“That’s my place,” he retorted in a cloyingly ironic voice as he pointed vaguely to one of the hole-in-the wall apartments rising over the back alley. “It’s more comfortable than your car.”

“You *live here*?” She sneered at him with her eyebrow cocked up in amazement. She could not hide the fearful disgust smeared across her face. The setting had changed, and with the change, she had lost control. It was odd enough the way he had courted her at her part-time job as a cashier at the burger restaurant. He was too old to be in school, but was still under twenty, or so she thought. The very idea of a teenager with his own place in Hillsboro was an anomaly. He cleared his throat as they ambled toward the rickety iron fire escape that lead to the back door of the second level of the tenement.

“Yeah. I live here. My Mom’s dead, and my Dad and I don’t really get along. He pays for the place so he doesn’t have to look at me,” he admitted with a mix of pride and shame and sadness.

Her pity for him caused her to follow him up the fire escape to the shabby white apartment above the abandoned drug store. She had been so excited about a casual make out session with a gorgeous bad boy, but this situation was quickly unravelling. With each step on the iron stair she cringed at the obnoxious thud he made as if he was purposefully climbing a stairway to heaven, but when the door opened on the scene his steps were finally silenced. She immediately looked at the floor and grimaced at

the sundry-stained beige carpet responsible for the silencing, and was unsure of whether or not to remove her shoes, as she would be expected to do in any proper environment. She didn't want to catch athlete's foot or planter's warts from a carpet that was spawning another generation of disease. He seemed to sense her disgust and told her with a snort to leave her precious shoes on. She considered running, but didn't want to blow what might be a future relationship with someone as cool and handsome as him.

He strode across the cramped kitchen to the living room where he occupied an old groove on a corduroy sofa that was older than the two of them combined and bent to roll a joint on the squat, glass coffee table. The table held a criminal line-up of bongs & hookahs: some of blown glass purchased at head shops, some hand-crafted out of plastic bottles for Pepsi and honey. She wasn't into paraphernalia, especially stuff that had been sucked on by countless other derelicts who might be carrying Hep C or other terrifying viruses. She looked with disdain on this scene of drug use, which on any other day would have struck her as harmless and expected, a rite of passage for a teen, but now that it was just she and him in a strange apartment on the main drag, and no one on the planet knew where she was, the scene was sordid and ominous. She had found herself in what her mother would call a flophouse.

When he had baptized the joint, he turned to her and stuck it boldly between her chapped lips as if her mouth was his own commodity. With a flash of a lighter shaped like a frog he had it lit, and she was inhaling a deep haul. Her eyes unhardened a little and the tingles came up into the back of her head, her heart slowed to half time and a touch of a smile moved across her dry mouth.

While she was taking her second pull, he asked her if she liked violent movies. She lied and told him no with a giggle that seemed right for the situation. He asked if she liked *Pulp Fiction*, and she lied again claiming she hadn't heard of it though she'd seen it three times. He slid the videotape ever so sexily into the VCR, and leaned back on the itchy sofa and draped an arm around her shoulders. Suddenly paranoid, she thought momentarily that he was a snake, but she caught a whiff of distinctly human body odour emanating from his cotton-covered armpit and determined that he could not be a snake after all.

It wasn't long before the situation had evolved. When the joint had burned out he offered her a beer, which she accepted though she thought beer tasted more like a punishment than a treat. And she

was sipping on it when he made a crude remark to the effect that he had something better for her to drink from. She was initially confused as to what he could possibly mean, but understood that he was talking about his penis when he unzipped his jeans.

“You want me to give you a blow job?” she asked nervously, thinking that of course he wanted a blowjob, because that’s what older guys want. She consciously scolded herself, remembering that older boys had more experience, and were not going to be contented with a measly grab in the back of her car. By the time she had finished mentally berating herself for asking such a stupid question, he had produced his semi-hard dick and it stood at floppy attention, protruding from the open mouth of his fly.

At first inspection, it seemed somewhat appealing, a challenge. She thought that maybe, since it was her first foray into the land of oral sex, that she might like it; she might even do such a good job that he would become addicted to her, and would have to see her again. But now that the thing was jammed haphazardly in her mouth she was repulsed by it. When he roughly yanked her hair in order to better angle her onto it, she felt the lurch of the gag reflex, but did her best to swallow it back. *How had she gotten herself into this situation? What was she now? A slut?* She didn't want to embarrass herself by mentioning it to him, but she could not willfully deny the smell of spoiled tuna sandwich wafting up from his shame into her nostrils. Nor could she ignore the sheer magnitude of it as it grazed her teeth and migrated over her tongue like a fat beast rushing down an ever-narrowing hallway. Every thrust brought her lunch closer to her mouth.

Suddenly each detail of her environment was sickening. She could feel each grain of the carpet embedding themselves into her bare knees. She could smell the fetid, thick air charged with smoke and sweat and whatever was congealing in the long unwashed dishes piled on the dysfunctional stove, not to mention the ever-present whiff of his fishy dick. She could hear peppered gunshots and the muffled chatter of *Pulp Fiction* the volume of which he had turned down nonchalantly as she put the thing in her mouth. And she could taste all these things in an uncanny circumstance of synesthesia, and her tongue felt thick with the weight of her senses.

Her hair was wrapped up tight in his fingers now and he was moving her head carelessly as if it

was not attached to an actual person, back and forth, back and forth, the rhythm in tune with the thud thud thud of her own heart breaking. In order to reduce the trauma she was experiencing she focused on feeling in all parts of her body. She began to repeat the lines of Jack and Jill. *Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water, Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after.* Her English teacher had recently told her the meaning of that rhyme though she was sure he knew nothing of what it was like to actually be the mid-nineties interpretation of Jill, administering her first full blown blow-job in the dank cave of a flophouse.

When Evan finally came to his weak end after her fourteenth recital of the nursery rhyme, he yanked her so deep over his massive outgrowth that she thought she could feel the tip of it in her stomach. His hot bleachy liquid shot down her throat, and just as instantly as it hit her fleshy pink insides, her body betrayed her and reverse peristalsis kicked up its rejection, sending the sperm and her meagre lunch back up her throat. Though she tried to muzzle the spew, her repulsion was at a point that it could not be stifled.

Still revelling in his one-sided orgasm and blissfully oblivious to her obvious disgust, he pulled his now lifeless slug out of her face and she instantly puked her still-warm stomach contents all over him. Two semi-digested whole-wheat toasts laced with white thick liquid decorated his crotch and soaked into his tawny pubic hair. She wouldn't soon forget the look of him sitting on the couch like a deflated clown with a crotch full of spew, nor would she forget the words that came out of him as she refocused her eyes to properly see the ejaculated mess in his crotch: strands of it caught like a spittle spider web in the fine hairs that led up to his belly button.

“You stupid slut!” he screeched, adding extra emphasis to the first syllable of stupid so that it sounded like *schtupid*. He looked down at himself in agony and his stomach heaved with an audible gag.

“Get out of my house you stupid bitch!” He gagged again, but she was still high and dumbfounded at the events that had transpired in the last thirty seconds to really care.

The daft look of her in that moment must have set something in his head or in his hand to snapping, and he leaned up from his soaking mess on the couch and hit her hard across the face with the

force of someone slapping a well-earned five dollar bill down on a bar counter.

“I said get out! You baby bitches don’t even know how to suck cock! That’s the last time I go for one of you easy sluts!”

The contact of his loud wet hand on her face frightened her out of her stupor and she stood from the kneeling position in which she was still poised, her legs wobbly as a fawn’s in her platforms. She took a moment to smooth out her linen blouse and cords, thankfully unstained by vomit, and then she looked down with loathing at him on the couch. He returned her look with a hateful stare that warned her without words that he would go on abusing her if she gave him half a second.

Instigated by the thought that he might hit her again, a switch flipped in her heart and her blue eyes lit up with the fires of hell. She would not let him have the last say in this situation. She wouldn’t be humiliated this deeply and be doomed to spending the rest of her days thinking of the unwarranted slap she had received that time she gave oral sex for the first time. So, in an effort to somehow right the wrong, or at least salvage the situation for memory’s sake, she calmly summoned from the depths of her belly the last remaining bits of lunch and ejaculate, aimed with her lips at the no longer mysterious and no longer cool older guy and spit a lovely wad of gelatinous liquid onto his face, just below his left eye.

“Missed a spot!” she professed boldly as she turned on her platform heel toward the door, not hesitating to catch his response. Her mind was on fire with contrary thoughts and the weight of what she had just done, but one thought had made itself louder than the others. *Get out!*

She fumbled with the greasy doorknob and nearly fell down the thirteen steps, but she made it out of the apartment and back to her lonesome silver Oldsmobile waiting in the empty void of the parking lot. She used the black remote to unlock the doors and once inside the car she allowed herself another thirty seconds to rub her cheek where she’d been hit. She clutched her head and massaged her temples attempting to regain sense after such an awkward an abstract event that had still not registered as being real. When she opened her eyes, she caught “The sky became mad with stars” somehow unchanged at the top of the old building. Now she knew that she wasn’t a worthless accidental blip in the universe, she was responsible for her fate, and to prove it she fired up her car, and squealed up the hill with the Olds’ pedal

grinding into the floor.

Her father sat on the red-stained back porch wearing a pair of cut off work pants that showed the pockets, and was sipping a glass of beer watching her mother hanging clothes on the line. Her mother was conserving the pins so that the garments hung shoulder to shoulder in a united front. Cecelia was momentarily distracted by her troubles by the fact that she hated when her mother hung the clothes out to dry instead of using the dryer. Her jeans would be solid and starchy for sure, and feeling that scratchy texture on her legs first thing in the morning was enough to determine her mood for the whole day.

But she was already in a mood, and she took a mental moment to compare the light, sunny feeling she had before she went out with the sexy, older boy, with the feeling she had now which was one of a profound emptiness, as if the semen that had spent a brief time in her belly had dissolved her essential organs. She wasn't alone in the universe, she *was* the universe: her insides a black hole of indescribable nothingness. In spite of this hollow ache, she composed herself, dressed her face up with a look that said there was nothing wrong, and attempted to bypass her parents without a word.

"You're home rather early," her father blurted with a grin, which was mostly induced by beer.
"How was the library?"

"Ugh. It was fine," she lied, remembering the ruse she had used to get out of the house in the first place. "I couldn't find the books I needed, though. Small town libraries suck."

"Oh. And what sort of books were you looking for?" Her mother always nailed her with a question of this sort to see whether or not she was fibbing. Thankfully, Cecelia was much quicker than her mother.

"I'm doing an independent study in Art on the theme of the redhead, and I was hoping to find books on Toulouse-Lautrec for my inspirational artist. We have to write a whole essay on some artist we admire."

"What's a Toulouse-Lautrec?" her father chided, knowing that it drove Cecelia nuts when he played dumb.

“He’s an artist. A deformed artist, who had a fascination with redheads,” she explained.

“Oh. I see,” her father replied.

She felt slightly guilty for having to lie to her parents, but they still believed that she was the old Cecelia. The one who was too self-conscious to attract boys, and too well behaved to even consider fudging the truth. They were wrong. She had to lie if she was ever going to outgrow her reputation as a pudgy wallflower and make a mark in the world.

“Well, I’m gonna head to bed. Tomorrow’s a school day,” She slammed the patio door as she went into the house and stomped up to her room. Her parents looked at each other with raised brows wondering what at the library had put their daughter in such a foul temper, but dismissed her behaviour as a usual teenage mood swing.

The next morning she walked to school in a fuzzy cloud of sleeplessness with a pair of hard, scratchy jeans on. Students her age no longer took the bus though it was available to them. Sometimes she could convince her mother to take the car, but she hadn’t even felt like speaking to her parents that morning. It was nearing the end of May, and the cold wet ground breathing into the unusually humid spring air created a haze that set the perfect scene for her dazed confusion. The bags under her eyes were drooping low, and she strained to remember her schedule for that day. She knew Art was second period. *What the hell was first? What day was it? One or Three?* The new provincial rotating day system was not something that she was able to figure out even at this stage of the year, and the lack of sleep compounded her general confusion.

She drifted like a thin banshee past the healthy throng of teenagers smoking and swearing by the entrance to the high school. Though they were all staring at her, she took no particular offense and passed through the garish orange doors of the building and on toward her locker. From the end of the hall, she could see that there was a paper stuck on the door of number 556: her own. The sight of the hopeful paper brought her closer to clarity as she giddily anticipated a love letter or letter of friendship from a possible new admirer at the school. She thought for one foolish second that the previous night’s mistake might easily be erased by someone else; a new boy to occupy her time and thoughts. Maybe even

someone serious that would see her till the end of the summer.

When she arrived she saw that the note was none other than a post-it inked with a foreign scrawl. She squinted her tired eyes and tried to decipher the crude sketch. It bore a drawing of what looked like a cavewoman puking on a very poorly rendered penis protruding from the corner of the small yellow square of paper. In her exhausted state she couldn't accurately process the pictogram or its connection to her, so she folded it twice in haste and pocketed it in her scratchy jeans for later inspection. She then took a cautionary glance around the locker-dwellers and darted into Economics, which was thankfully just across the hall.

Inside the classroom, she sat at her desk an instant before having to rise again for the morning's national anthem and prayer. By the time Amen was said and she was able to take her seat, she was invaded by the worrisome idea that perhaps everyone in the room was aware of the horror that she had endured the evening before. She rationalized this terrifying thought and told herself that it couldn't be possible. If there was one positive point to the actions of the previous evening, it was that the boy no longer attended St. Casimir's, and she had assumed that he no longer had friends there either. She convinced herself that she was just sleep-deprived and paranoid as a result.

Suddenly compelled by instinct, she swung her head over her right shoulder and caught some mousy girl she had never bothered to learn the name of subtly pretending to puke in the lap of the boy sitting next to her. The boy receiving the imaginary vomit had the most mischievous look on his face as if he was both appalled and excited by this pantomime. She shuddered as his eyes fixated on hers and squinted like those of a tomcat ready for action. She suddenly and soberly realized the gravity of the situation and sunk in her chair, heavied by humiliation. Cecelia felt her face cycling through every shade of red, and her mind matched it with guesses and hypotheses as to how anyone could have known about last night. It was only twelve hours ago that she had stormed back through the gate of her house.

After spending an inordinate amount of time shuffling his papers, the lesson began with the shaky unnatural voice of the teacher, and Cecelia tried her best not to peep around at the other students in the class though she couldn't help imagining the sorts of embarrassing things they were doing behind her

back. In defence, she hardened her face into a cold stare, and began to relive with horror the events of the previous night. The posters, the weed, and the way everything had so swiftly devolved into a scene of squalor and shame. She analyzed and reanalyzed the scenario beginning to end and tried to figure how so many people had a relatively accurate portrait of what had happened to her. She worked herself so deeply into a trance of recurring memory and guesswork that the bell had already rung and the nasty, chastising students had left the room when she came to her senses. She realized that the Economics teacher was approaching her with a strange look on his face.

“Everything all right Cece? You had me startled there for a minute. Looked like you were sleeping with your eyes open.”

Cecelia tilted her head up at him in response and saw that his eyes were creased with concern. She was so displaced by paranoia that she indulged herself in the thought that perhaps even her teacher knew of the events of last night, and he was himself embarrassed to be alone in the room with her. Perhaps he had been privy to the sickening re-enactment of the students gesturing to her shame. She caught herself, knowing that she was on a slippery slope that might result in her own insanity, and reminded herself that teachers were never in the loop of the seedy underworld of teenagers. Of course there was no way he knew. The look he had was one of genuine worry, not enlightenment. If anything, he was probably under the impression that she was sick or at least hung over.

“Everything’s fine,” she winced at him. “Gotta head to my next class now.” She jumped up quickly from her desk chair, grabbed her books and scrambled out the door so as to avoid any further awkwardness and unsettling paranoid delusions.

After navigating the now treacherous halls filled with human-shaped statues of disapproval, she shuffled into the Art classroom with that all too common feeling in her belly. The feeling from the early years of high school. The feeling that everyone had simultaneously turned against her overnight. The feeling that she had just shifted from being accepted to rejected. *Surely she couldn't be the only person in high school who had sucked off an older guy. Maybe the only one who then puked in the lap of the older guy, but not the first to give a blowjob.* Her shame and paranoia were mounting to alarming levels,

causing her such distress that she thought her bowels might give and cause her to have another humiliating situation of unpermitted bodily functions to deal with.

“Hey Cecelia!”

Her body shook at the sudden acknowledgment, frightened of what the next words would be out her indistinguishable comrade's mouth. She tentatively raised her heavy head and saw that it was Michael summoning her. Finding success with one ally, her blood pressure eased, and she had the nerve to risk a cautionary glance around the room. She swung her head around and noticed to her surprise that no one was paying attention to her whatsoever. Just a bunch of innocuous desks packed with the colourful freaks that typically make up an art room: the one with the Mohawk cut; the mismatched kid who obviously didn't care about appearance; the one always decked out all in black; the flawed uber-Christian who painted only horses, and Cecelia's tiny group which was composed of herself, Michael and two other guys. Her heart slowed to racing, and she slowly was able to comprehend that she had entered a safe space.

She pulled up a stool seat with her buddies and faced Michael to see what criticism he had for her. He was smiling, and his grin was like a beam of light, beckoning to her to avoid the collision course that her confidence had locked in on.

“Are the rumors true, Red?” He looked at to her imploringly, his eyes like chipped saucers. She nodded in return.

“I'm afraid so,” she whispered, and as she confirmed the truth, the heads of her other two friends turned as if on swivels.

“No way!” they gasped in unison, their mouths gaping open like dogs waiting for a treat. She baited them with silence, and took her sweet time in telling them the horrifying details of her evening in a whispered hush so the other students wouldn't overhear. As she told them, she was careful to make empathy-winning eye contact, and as she was doing so, she took her time in analyzing each one of their faces to see if they were casting aspersions.

“Do you think anybody in here knows?”

“Oh, Red. Everyone knows,” said Michael. “The difference is that the people in here just don’t care. I mean these kids have done much worse. Puking on someone’s penis is soft core in their books, believe me.”

Michael was a long time pal now, one of her few steady friends. He was slender, tall and attractive, not to mention being the coolest person she had ever met. He had the best taste in music, literature, and art; he knew everything about Van Gogh, Picasso, Man Ray, even Frida; he smoked pot and liked drinking red wine, which no one her age, including herself, had the nerve to savour. Michael’s artistic expression was in the form of stylized comics with beautiful, narrow nosed characters, and Lichtensteinesque voice bubbles that spelled out various bits of wisdom, like “You catch more flies with honey,” or “Nothing worth having comes easy.”

The other two boys in the group were not as close to her as Michael. Leo was a wild spirit, with unruly black hair that flopped around his crystalline eyes. Most would consider him to be quite attractive, but there was something about him that disqualified him from Cecelia's list of crushes. It was rumoured that in science class, he would scratch his big, mopy head and shake out his dandruff onto a black binder. It was also said that he kept a list on the inner door of his locker of all the people who had done him wrong. One day in art class he swore he would have his vengeance upon ‘the list people,’ as he called them, before graduating. Cecelia wasn't sure of the validity of these rumours, nor of the sincerity of his death threats, but it didn't matter much to her because she had a good rapport with him. Leo drew characters of his own invention with ink, and when he finished certain ones, he’d prick himself with the exacto knife and smear his blood into the black and white image. The teacher never noticed.

Greg was the other member of the fabulous foursome. He was a mystery to everyone in the art class, and probably more so to everyone else in the school. He was tall and solid, had a *Bic* razor shaved head, and was covered with tattoos of skulls and weapons, which gave him a definite edge over the redneck jocks that populated St. Casimir’s. In truth, most of the student population had probably never even laid eyes on the guy. Greg was proud to say that the only class he ever attended was art and when he was there he invested every ounce of his concentration into his masterpieces. He could draw anything you

asked from his head or from a picture, but he mostly made sculptures with mixed materials. One morning he brought in a purloined mannequin head and proceeded to cover it with an array of metal bolts and nuts and disks that he produced from his battered messenger bag. By the time he had put the hot glue-gun down, his piece looked like the cyborg child from the public service ads, the one who could put its arm back on.

By this point, Michael, Liam and even Greg were staring at her as if for the first time.

“I guess you are finally becoming a woman, Red. I am sort of proud.” Michael giggled, and the other two boys laughed along with him.

“I’ve always had a weak stomach,” she kidded, now feeling released from her own worry. “I didn’t think I would have to explain myself at all. I was hoping to just forget that nightmare. I just can’t understand how everyone found out so quickly.” She wrinkled her nose, still wondering.

“You know how fast news travels in this hellhole,” Michael replied. “Your so-called classmates are the bastard children of generations of gossipy hicks who are forever yapping on the party line. And didn’t you know that barf dick’s little brother goes here. He’s in your Economics class. You must have really pissed him off to go tattling to his bro.”

Cecelia smacked herself on the forehead. She couldn’t believe that she had forgotten the brother. *Of course!* Now that she had confirmed from where the initial story had broken, she could logically envision the teenaged population of Hillsboro spreading her secret over the telephone and in whispers in the school hallways. She was happy that her weirdo friends in art class were not of the same species. They and precious few others at the school had the bit of intelligence needed to prevent them from being brainwashed by the reigning mentality that fossilized Hillsboro. Most of the day she felt oppressed by the views of her backwoods classmates and their uncouth parents, to whom she had to feign politeness during the evenings at the burger restaurant. But when she was in Art class, she felt like she belonged among the enlightened ones. Only kindred spirits took visual art after it was no longer mandatory, and these kindred spirits weren’t of the judgmental sort. Like Michael had said, her classmates had done far worse than her. But she was a girl and at Catholic school, girls are supposed to be chaste or do a good job of pretending

they were.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it though, Cece.” Michael consoled. “There will be a new rumor next week, and your puking incident will fall off the radar. I’m sure of it. And what’s the shame in being a slut with a gag reflex? I’m sure it happens all the time.” She marvelled at Michael’s sincerity and noticed a jovial grin on his face. It was as if her shenanigans were more entertaining to him than shameful.

“Michael’s right,” Greg chimed in, surprisingly unfazed by her acknowledgment of the truth. “Someone new will do something just as embarrassing soon, and until then you just have to grin and bear it. Don’t act like it affects you. They are like dogs. They can smell your fear and they want to feast upon your humiliation.”

Cecelia nodded her head in agreement, and felt the warmth of camaraderie move over her being. She looked again around the room and saw that the dynamic of the class was the perfect antithesis of the vibe in Economics. The teacher wasn’t yammering on centre stage, and the students were blissfully enveloped in their own works, painstakingly sketching and planning, some painting, others creating quick forms out of clay. Cecelia’s ears perked and a grin touched the corners of her lips. She felt at home. *Safe*.

Thankfully their teacher had lost her energy by that point in the school year, and she treated the 75-minute period as a sort of drop-in center where students could work on the long chain of independent studies that she assigned as they occurred to her. She didn’t take attendance, and she didn’t answer questions, she resigned herself to one of the corners of the room and worked on her own projects close to the classroom window. She glowered at the students if they ever approached her for a question or general advice, so they didn’t. Surprisingly, this current disciplinary tactic was probably the most effective in dealing with the motley crew of teenagers under her tutelage. Her lack of presence actually made art class better.

Cecelia asked her buddies what they were doing for the final project, wanting to return to the regular pace of things.

“I’m doin’ tattoos,” said Greg.

“My theme is death,” said Liam, and Cecelia smiled, unsurprised.

“I’m gonna focus on graffiti,” said Michael, and Cecelia instinctively raised her eyebrow.

“Graffiti? That’s not your usual,” Cecelia chided, thinking of the comic style on which Michael liked to focus. “But, if that’s what you are doing, then you should know that there’s some amazing graffiti in the lot. There’s this one on the back of bank that you should see. It’s not a picture. It’s just words. It says, “The sky became mad with stars.”

“Yeah, I think I know that one,” said Michael, rubbing his chin in a thoughtful way. “But, I prefer the accidental one. Someone wrote Pink Floyd on the white brick of the pharmacy as a reference to *The Wall*, and then ten years later someone writes Glass Tiger close enough to ruin the whole *Wall* effect. It’s symbolic of the degeneration of the music industry.”

“I’ve noticed that too. Who the hell has enough energy to walk to the store to buy spray paint in order to write Glass Tiger on a wall? I mean, Glass Tiger is a pissant compared to Floyd. Floyd has never even heard of Glass Tiger.”

“Don’t get upset Greg. It’s just a case of people leaving their marks. And bad urban upkeep,” said Cecelia with a twinge of a smile.

Everything had reverted back to normal. Content with the situation, she kept one ear on the boys’ conversation, which had diverted to a general discussion on which bands were the best, and who they might include in a super band of their making if they had a choice of anyone, living or dead. Eventually she lost track of their individual arguments and focussed instead on her own work.

The day before she had begun the first piece in her redhead series. She had gessoed and covered her Masonite board with an ivory acrylic, and added precisely placed smudges of shadow: the beginnings of the interior of a bathtub. Today she had to paint the drain and the faucet in a silvery white. She figured on Monday she’d add the piece de resistance, an orange-red pubic hair caught in the drain. She congratulated herself on her cleverness, yet knew that her teacher wouldn’t be so thrilled about her interpretation of the theme. Cecelia had lately been having trouble expressing herself when it came time to explain the reasons why she did what she did in art class. She knew that her teacher felt like she was

mocking the whole class, but she was just doing what she was compelled to do to clear her head. Her artistic expression had little to do with anyone else.

As she ruminated on the picture she got to thinking about the deeper concept behind the redhead series. She would have to formulate the argument for her idea now so that she could explain it in the later essay. *What would she do beyond this piece?* She needed five. *A pube caught in the drain was one thing, but how would she carry that sort of raw message throughout the entire series?* She ran through ideas for paintings along the theme. *A redhead walking the streets? A ginger prostitute? A redhead engaged in fellatio? No, that was pornographic. Was pornography art? Was she a slut?* Her mind was scribbled with confusion again. Though she was trying to forget, her mind was wandering a circuitous path always ending on the events that had occurred the previous night. Events that would not have occurred if she hadn't been so stupid as to want to impress somebody so much, just because they were cute and a couple of years older.

She remembered playing in her grandmother's cucumber garden when she was much younger. She turned back the corner of one of the broad leaves and there, hiding on the other side, was a big, fat, slimy slug. She shook and as a result the frail leaf deposited the thing into the black soil and it slunk off back to the shadows behind the lattice and bean vines. His dick reminded her of that thing, oozing about the garden where it had no business being. She felt positively reviled now, thinking back. *Traumatized.* She realized that perhaps her mental anguish hadn't actually sprung from the fact that her schoolmates were aware of what had happened, but rather that the event had happened mostly against her will. What was it about her that made her compromise her own principles just to be accepted? Was it her history of rejection?

Suddenly Cecelia was struck with a new idea for her art project. It wasn't the redhead that she was concerned with. Hair colour was a flimsy theme that said nothing. After the incident last night, she was suddenly more concerned with the parts of people that made them disgusting. She wanted to explore the rift between the body parts that were acceptable to parade around in public, and the parts of people that were kept hidden, like the slug slinking away into the shadows. She would paint usually clean spaces

with some glaring remnant of human exfoliation: hair, nails, false teeth, something gross, something personal and natural, but unwanted. Unappealing. She smiled contentedly and resolved herself to leave at lunch. She couldn't handle the day beyond art. Without her art room allies, she would be ripe for more humiliation.

When the lunch bell rang, she bid adieu to Michael and the gang, bypassed her locker, walked straight past the office, out the front door, past the narc and down the long streets back to her home. Her parents were at work and it was too late in the day for the lazy secretary to call home, so she knew she'd get off scot-free. Plus they didn't usually bother calling the homes of smart, well-behaved kids because they trusted them not to lie. *Little did they know.* She flopped on her bed shortly after letting herself in to her home with the secret key, and kissed the world goodnight at 12:17 pm on Friday afternoon.

He was alphabetizing his vinyl in his basement room when he caught sight of her platforms flopping over the grass outside the subterranean window. He was startled by the sight, but had the sneaking suspicion she'd stop by all evening. He dropped the zipper fly-adorned collector's edition of *Sticky Fingers* onto his bed and bolted toward the stairs to greet Cecelia before his parents could. Their simple Catholic sensibilities would be unable to comprehend the sight of a girl in platforms and a short dress showing up unannounced and alone late Friday night in May, the blessed month of Mary.

When he made it to the landing, he listened carefully and detected that his parents were engrossed in a sappy Hollywood movie, and hadn't heard Cece's clomping wooden footsteps on the driveway. He held in his negligible belly and slid silently out the cracked back door, and closed it molasses slowly to avoid sound. There she was, clad in a blowsy floral dress, sitting on the rocking swing that hung from his carport. She was like a breeze swaying to and fro: smoking a cigarette with a look of disappointment on her face.

"What's the trouble, Red?" he asked, falling like mad for her drama.

"You know what the trouble is, Michael. You know it well." She looked up from her cigarette with eyes like marbles soaked in oil, glistening in glow of the motion-sensor light that his parents had just

installed to deter intruders. He was compelled by the teenaged beauty of the moment so reached into his vest and removed a joint from a silver case that he always kept in his chest pocket.

“Do you want to smoke this with me?” he asked, with his hand outstretched, bearing the treasure that he had procured. Cecelia’s eyes lit up at the prospect and reached out greedily for the blunt. Michael gasped for effect.

“We can’t do it here, Silly. My parents are still up and all the windows are open. Come, follow me.”

He took her hand and led her down the gravel sidewalk toward the elementary school that they had both attended for the majority of their young lives without really knowing each other. When they rounded the corner to behold the place that they frequented so often as children, they both paused to take a mouthful of air. They stared in bathetic awe at the modern church with the high rows of clambering bells, the squat, utilitarian box of a primary school hiding in its shadows, and the hundred-year-old elms that flanked the property like sentinels bearing a tragic message. The sight was worn into the backs of their eyeballs the same as a film penetrated by the light of the projector too many times.

They looked at each other with the same thought in mind and jogged, giggling to the playground behind the school, ascending the rope ladder to the sheltered section of the climber with the wooden siding that they had played on and fallen off in the old days. They sat staggered, yet facing each other with their backs supported by the walls and their legs propped up on opposite sides. From their position they could see the night sky, yet the stars were partially marred by the buzzing lights that lit the concrete playground. They could see the blue neon that traced the perimeter of the cross perched high on the apse of the church in which they had separately endured many a mass, many a nativity, many a yawn and feeling of unease. Their whispery voices were dimmed by the cheery noise of a softball game being played boisterously a couple of blocks away.

Michael lit up the joint and passed it immediately over to Cecelia, sensing her need of relaxation. She took a deep toke, and felt the sparkly numbing feeling crawl up her spine into her brain. She exhaled with a hefty sigh and watched the smoke pass over the image of the cross. Sacrilege, she thought, lustily.

“Did you know that on the way to your place tonight, I was passed by a car load of bitches making rude gestures and retching sounds?”

“Well, it coulda been worse. If you hadn’t taken off at lunch, it could have been a busload of kids laughing at you. I mean, the whole school knows! And now probably the whole town knows.”

“Yeah, and they’re all too stupid not to care. I mean don’t these people have their own lives? Don’t embarrassing things happen to them?”

“Cecelia. You are aware that you reached the new low point of embarrassing, right?”

Cecelia shrugged her shoulders and threw her head up to the sky too exasperated to listen to Michael.

“Did you hear me? You really make it hard for me to be your friend with behaviour like that. But I’m still your friend.” Michael paused. “And you know who’s not stupid like the rest of them? Me. I don’t care what you do in the privacy of some dump, as you so tenderly refer to it. And I don’t care what degenerate you want to fool around with and then barf on. Your mating rituals are your business.”

She knew Michael was joking and she broke down in nervous happy giggles, and beaming at the fact that he was making light of the situation; surprised that another human would have the nerve to joke about her quandary. She peered into Michael's glossy eyes and realized that his was one of the only pair of eyes she’d seen lately that she could look straight into. He was absolutely benign. His love was unconditional.

Cecelia was so captured by their complicit gaze that she had an involuntary inkling to go in for a kiss. But just as soon as she felt it, she restrained her whim, knowing that it was both unnecessary and wrong. There was not a sexual relationship, and she chided herself for thinking it. Why did she have to seek out sexual gratification from all boys? She figured they had ignored her too long.

Michael had the same feeling, unbeknownst to her, and he restrained himself as well. He thought about the act and considered the true motivation behind it. Did he want to kiss her because he had an undying attraction to her? Did he want to kiss her to fill a pause? Did he want to kiss her at all? No, he decided, and pulled his head back.

“Let's do something crazy,” he said flamboyantly, trying to distract her from the agony of the moment. “Let's do something absolutely wrong.”

“You better not mean something sexual!” she flirted, ironically. Considering her recent history with men, she felt the need to check.

“What do you mean by that, Cecelia?”

She cocked her head skeptically, imploring him to tell her more, but he would not.

“Ah, Michael! Why can't we just stay here? Smoke some cigarettes. Okay...I know you don't smoke cigarettes, but you could watch me.” She had been made lazy by the dope and was in no mood to go gallivanting, especially with the prudish locals on her track.

“C'mon Cecelia. Baby steps.”

She acknowledged his request, so he took her by the hand and they descended the wooden ramp of the climber, went back along the verdant path that smelled like spruce and soil, and were soon staring at the red door of his parents' house.

“Wait here for a minute, Red,” Michael uttered as he disappeared back into his home.

She was surprised that he hadn't invited her in, and waited without knowing for sure if he would return. She lit a cigarette and by the time she butted it out, he reappeared with a cloth shopping bag full of mysterious solids. She secretly hoped that it wasn't filled with bottles of booze, not because she felt she couldn't drink them all, but because she had to work the next morning at the restaurant, and doing that job in a hung over state was next to impossible.

Without words, Michael motioned for her to follow him. His lips were drawn tightly closed and it was clear that they were to be quiet. He pointed toward his parents' bedroom window and she saw that the glass was turned wide open to permit a welcoming breeze from the warm late-May night. She did her best to muffle the sound of her wooden platforms on the driveway, and finally had to resort to walking on the lawn at the non-verbal behest of Michael. In fact, she had to use the yards of the neighbours as well. Being the only child, and thus, the only hope for the future of the family, Michael was much too afraid of his parents finding out that he wasn't exactly the innocent Christian they thought he was, and only

allowed her to speak and trod upon pavement again when they had cleared three blocks.

“Isn’t it a gorgeous night?” Cecelia asked Michael in earnest when she was able to speak again.

She couldn’t help feeling inspired by the evening that was charged with the hopeful, fresh aroma of spring. The tulips and daffodils in the suburban gardens had closed up for the night, but she imagined that she could still smell them on the air.

“It’s always gorgeous with you around” Michael declared and threw his arm around her shoulder playfully.

“How far can you walk in those things?” he asked, motioning his chin toward her impractical footwear.

“As far as I want. These are more comfortable than sneakers. Where are we goin’ anyway?”

“The lot.”

“The *lot*? You know I can’t go there. That’s where *he* lives.”

“He’s homeless?”

“No! Do you think I would get intimate with a homeless?”

Michael shrugged.

“Ugh! I wouldn’t! Jesus! He has his own place.”

“I know, I know. The dump! Are you planning on avoiding the place for the rest of your teenage existence because you barfed on a guy?”

She looked at him vehemently and shook her head.

“Well it’s up to you. You can head home. I’ll go with or without you. I have to for my art project,” he asserted, knowing that his careless attitude would entice her to come for certain.

Cecelia fumbled around in her head for another excuse, but the only one that kept appearing was that she didn’t want to run into her botched conquest again, but that excuse was too weak by Michael’s standards. She dreaded being alone with her thoughts so she followed him towards downtown, wondering all the while what was in the bag that was clinking and rattling with every step.

After they had descended the hill into the parking lot, the two of them stood side-by-side facing a

blank wall, their shadows squashed beneath them by the glare of lights mounted above the back door of the butcher shop. As she risked a sheepishly cautious gaze up to the older boy's apartment window-- which was blessedly darkened for the evening, Michael rested his cloth bag on the ground before them, bent, and methodically removed what she soon realized were spray paint canisters.

“What? Spray paint? I thought you had booze in that bag! My mouth was all set for some vodka or wine or something”

Michael looked up at her from his squat position with an exasperated smile.

“It's for my project. Plus, I don't think booze is the best option for you right now, Missy! Alcohol is a depressant. We don't want you jumping off a bridge.” She looked away from Michael and wondered if somehow he was a party to her secrets, her feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, her occasional compulsion to just give up and end it all.

Michael then pointed to the black window at which she had just been staring.

“Is that where your fella lives?”

“Don't call him that!” she shrieked, and then laughed in spite of herself. “Nothing about that situation made him my fella! I reserve that term for gentleman only.”

“I don't even want to think about how he reacted to your vomit on his most prized possession. Do me a favour and don't ever tell me. It would anger me too much.”

But it seemed too late to deter his anger because one flailing second later Michael had kicked the bag of paint over and the cans rolled into themselves with a clamour on the pavement. He obsessively picked up and straightened the cans again as she watched on, frightened by his uncharacteristic rage.

“You know what!” he called into the night, kicking the cans over again, this time more determined. “Screw variety! I feel like using just one colour tonight. I'm in a red kind of a mood.”

Cecelia looked at the walls that surrounded them on three sides of the lot and nodded her definite approval; thinking of the striking contrast the red would have, especially on the unadulterated white walls.

Michael whipped his head toward Cecelia and motioned with his hand toward the bag and the messy array of upset paint beside it, inviting her to join in.

“What colours are you going with?” he questioned, on the ready to hand her whichever shade or tint that she needed.

She recoiled in shame, her confidence at an all-time low.

“I don’t want to mess it up,” she explained. “Paint is permanent, you know. And if I screw it up, then I’ll be known as the chick that not only puked in a guy’s lap in the lot, but also as the chick that left the hideous tag in the lot. And all the kids’ll come down here and see it as the commemoration of my lost innocence and they’ll point and laugh.”

“That’s rather paranoid. No more pot for you. C’mon. You’re an artist, Red. I’m sure you’ll think of something,” he said handing her a can of black. “Be bold.”

Her mind raced with a thousand plans for her huge concrete canvas, but she settled on only one. Once the idea had formed solidly in her mind, she set to work on the wall with black paint, then a bit of purple, pink, and white. Her hand moved in smooth swoops over the area she had chosen. She took time to pause between her colours, allowing the paint to dry underneath before adding the next layer. The process was so soothing she lost track of time, and her worry, and Michael.

When she had added the final detail, she stopped to admire her handiwork, something she was shocked that she was actually pleased with, but she felt miffed at the fact that Michael hadn’t yet acknowledged her stunning artistic genius. She turned to locate him and realized that he had disappeared from sight. She swung her head around and could eventually gauge where he had gone by the sound of the spray paint clattering and hissing around the corner in the alley. She followed the noise and happened upon Michael who was finishing up not a graffiti mural, but rather words that were neatly painted in a style that was suspiciously familiar. She analyzed the tall thin characters and it hit her.

“You’re ‘The sky became mad with stars?’”

“I’m afraid if I tell you that, I’ll have to kill you,” Michael joked.

Cecelia’s mouth was agape, and as she stood there dumbfounded, she attempted to figure out the rough date at which she had first seen her favourite phrase, to clarify if it had been him.

“But it seems to me like that graffiti has been there for years. Surely you haven’t been at this for

years?” Michael shrugged his slender shoulders offering her no clue, no affirmation. In the lingering silence she took the time to calmly read aloud the two lengthy but neatly printed lines of text.

“‘Who wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts.’ That’s beautiful Michael. Did you come up with that yourself?”

“No. It’s from *Howl!* Alan Ginsberg mean anything to you?” At that point in Cecelia’s life, it didn’t actually mean anything to her, but she was embarrassed to confess her ignorance to Michael, who she respected so much.

“Oh. Well it’s perfect for Hillsboro. It’s not really art, per se, but I love it. I’m gonna park down here if I ever come back with any boys. Just so I can look at this.” She looked at the words again, memorizing them. She felt like she wanted to access them at any time, even when she wasn’t here. They seemed to perfectly encapsulate the false feeling of being a ‘free’ teenager in such an isolated small town.

“Aw shucks!” Michael chuckled sarcastically. “I feel famous. What did you get up to over there? I heard a hell of a lot of spraying.”

The two of them migrated back over to where Cecelia had set up camp, and as they approached her bizarre image, Michael gasped audibly.

“What is that?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

The two of them stared at the perfectly rendered image that Cecelia had sprayed on the wall. Their eyes were filled with the four foot pinkish face of a girl with reddish hair. The face in itself might have appeared typical. The type of thing any first timer might want to imprint on a wall, but what set this image apart was the action in which the girl was engaged. Her cherry lips were open wide, and springing from her mouth was a multi-coloured fountain of vomit complete with chunks and spittle and gathering into a painted puddle below.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asked, knowing full well that it was an image that she had to paint in order to symbolically own the situation that had occurred.

“Isn’t it horrid? But definitely fitting. I figure I just needed a good cleanse. This image has been

clogging my brain for a day now. I'm gonna leave it here where I found it, and move on." She reached into her purse and pulled out her pack of cigarettes and proudly lit one up, still admiring her grotesquely beautiful work.

He saw her standing in the alley floodlight looking almost philosophical with her cigarette in hand and her face partially shadowed. He tried to deny it, but the feeling rushed over him again. It felt like true love with one missing ingredient. He watched as she shifted her sight from the hideously perfect painting of a vomiting ginger nymphet to the dark window of the one who misused her and her graffiti made sense to him, more sense than what he had inscribed on the wall. Without words, she had summarized the meaning of the lot. What was it other than a semi-private outlet for beautiful people to commit the disgusting, the illicit acts that adults didn't want to acknowledge. The less than glamorous expressions of sex, drugs, underage drinking, fistfights and rock and roll, and she had just painted the mascot: the queen of the underground shamelessly puking for anyone to see. Her insides made beautiful.

A cigarette or two later, the two of them headed back up the hill because they figured it would be the fastest way home.

SAVINGS

The dreaded freshman fifteen was proven true within the first six of weeks of university for Cecelia Murphy. When she arrived home for the Thanksgiving holiday after an interesting and transformative month and a half away, her parents gasped, being under the impression that she was finally rid of her extra poundage since the early high school anorexia experiment and the regular practice of dieting that had happened as a result. She would have to have been blind not to notice that when her parents saw her, her mother's eyes widened, and her father's mouth, but they quickly and politely caught themselves, hoping not to insult their child five minutes after she had returned to them. Sadly, her father couldn't resist making a comment of some sort, being the naturally curious man that he was.

"What kind of a meal plan have they got you on out there at that school? I thought artists were supposed to be starving," he said, trying to put the point delicately and nearly jovially as he held out his hand to receive her overstuffed, cumbersome backpack.

"Hello to you too, Dad," said Cecelia.

Cecelia's mother detected the rejected ache in her daughter's voice and jumped on damage control before she herself was able to greet Cecelia.

"Damn it, Sam! You never comment on a woman's weight. I'm sure she'll lose it by Christmas," she said with a scolding tone. "November is the poorest month for students. Besides, you put the same amount on when we started college, honey, don't you remember? Except yours was a beer gut." Cecelia's mother turned her attention back to Cecelia. "It isn't a beer gut is it?"

"I don't like beer," Cecelia said without emotion.

She wasn't lying. She preferred sweet white Zinfandel now, which she'd been told was *not actually wine* by the one person of the opposite sex that she had managed to make a brief connection with while away: Charles. Regrettably, since her encounter with him, misery now spelt d-r-i-n-k instead of f-o-o-d for Cecelia. How was she to know that the two vices packed the same amount of calories? She had of course noticed in the weeks leading up to the jubilous return home that her clothes were snug and the mirror had shown a fuller face, but she was hoping the change wasn't significant enough for her parents

to perceive.

Upon disembarking from the bus and seeing the somewhat disgusted reactions of the people who had made her life possible, she felt at once catapulted back to her teenaged angst years, and her high school feelings of resentment of her parents returned to her, but she quickly dismissed this dismal feeling for the sake of everyone involved. They didn't need a fight now. This was supposed to be a joyous occasion. In her absence she resolved to take a more subjective approach in her interactions with them and tried looking at them as if for the first time.

Her father seemed older; the grey had finally overtaken the black hair around his temples, stiking out in wiry little tufts from the underside of his ball cap, and a bulbous belly was poking out from beneath his T-shirt. Her mother was homey but hokey in her powder blue *Crocs* and ankle socks with Capri pants. *One wouldn't see that outfit in the city*, thought Cecelia critically, but was instantly slapped by an uncomfortable pang of guilt. *Had university already taught her to judge her small town folks?*

She recalled going off to of university with a frown and tried to re-envision her parents as she had seen them on that day in order to adequately assess whether her opinion of them had actually changed. It hadn't been the most memorable goodbye, not like the ones in commercials for laundry soap and *Canada Post*. In fact, she had been downright austere even for her moody self. Her father had booked a weekend off work to transport his first bird out of the nest, and her mom planned an extended bonding road trip with a semi-fancy hotel stop in between driving stints.

The quest in itself was fuzzy and sweet, but the minute they stepped onto campus, Cecelia's socio-emotional barometer shifted toward anxious. She was silent as they unloaded her belongings from the rental van even though the mood on campus was light and energetic with charged excitement and din of the hundreds of students crawling about. Cecelia was quick to notice that none of the other students had their folks following them like submissive puppies, and hers seemed to stand out that much more in comparison. She desperately wanted to bid them adieu at the minivan, but couldn't bring herself to do it because they were eager, and she needed them to help ferry her few things up the stairs.

She hadn't recognized what the problem was exactly when she was living it, but she realized

now, standing awkwardly with them at the bus station, that she had been embarrassed of her parents on that fateful day. And was she to be blamed? Her past was so full of failed starts, mostly due to the way she looked and her resulting insecurities, that she wanted very badly for the first day of post-secondary education to be successful. At school, she was hundreds of miles away from any former bully or rumor or reputation, and this distance had spurred fantasies about easily making friends; but with those two squares tagging along, it seemed like that might be impossible.

Cecelia continued to relive the first day of university in her mind as she and her parents pushed their way out of the bus station toward the family's only car, the now beat up Oldsmobile that she had driven in high school.

"What do you think your roommate will be like?" She remembered her mother asking in the stairwell to the low-rise dorm, balancing Cecelia's box of art supplies as she gingerly mounted each step, careful not to fall out of the fancy low-heeled shoes that she had bought to impress the 'big city fashion plates,' as she called them.

"Whoever it is, I hope you two will be friends. You'll need a friend in a city like this," said her father with a tinge of worry to his voice. He was a skeptic of sprawling cities, and a greater skeptic of leaving his eldest daughter alone in one. There were too many "others" as he liked to call them, weirdos with weird customs and even weirder head coverings. He liked the safety of Hillsboro and the feeling of knowing everyone in town, even if that meant that everyone knew all about *you*.

"Well, I guess time will tell," Cecelia snapped, still overcome with burning shame. She watched them mount the stairs and walk down the hallways looking for the number to Cecelia's room. They were sore thumbs in this new context. Their words sounded like the droning teacher from Charlie Brown, and she was developing a tension headache.

When they finally reached her door, she opened it tentatively and was happy that the mysterious roomie had not yet arrived so at least she wouldn't have to deal with introductions. Her parents bumbled in and set her boxes on the floor. She stood back a moment, surveying the longish rectangular cell; it was just big enough to ensure that the residents did not kill each other out of over-familiarity, but small

enough to ensure that the university got its money's worth cramming in the kids. She chose the right hand side of the room and began unloading her things, feigning obliviousness to her parents who were now standing in uncertain poses behind her, waiting for an acknowledgment or instruction. They had now picked up on the mood that Cecelia had suddenly adopted.

"Well. What should we do now?" her mother asked, still hopeful that she'd be included in the adventure. Cecelia turned her head around like the girl from *The Exorcist* and glared at them.

"Thanks a lot for the drive and for carrying my things, but I really think it's time that you should go. I've got to figure this out for myself."

Her parents were noticeably stricken by this announcement that came so sharply out of Cecelia's mouth that it almost cut her own lips. They stood, dumbstruck for a minute or two, waiting for Cecelia to recant, but she did not, so they left in silence with their tails between their legs and the tears gathering in the corners of their eyes. She heard each dejected thud as they slunk down the dorm hall and back out to the Oldsmobile, and felt a rush of what was a mixture of pain and relief to be rid of them.

Cecelia busied herself unpacking until her roommate eventually did show up, about an hour later, unlocking the door confidently and drifting into the room on her own with a hefty duffel bag draped over her shoulder. Cecelia was immediately jarred by her appearance. *You don't see people like this in Hillsboro*, she thought. The strange girl weighed no more than one hundred pounds soaking wet, and her spindly legs looked like those of a praying mantis. She was clad all in black which accentuated her anorexia, her arms were bare of clothing but covered in a multitude of shocking tattoos, and her face had bits of metal attached to far too many places, in Cecelia's somewhat prudish opinion.

"Hey! You startled me," said Cecelia, hoping that this lie would cover up for the fact that her jaw was hanging down to her chest.

Cecelia wanted to laugh out loud at this terribly shocking and somewhat off-putting roommate that she had landed, but remembered her own hardships and realized that from the general perspective of the opposite sex, being plump but kind of cute was probably more of a curse than being skinny and ugly, so this girl was actually above her on the hierarchy of attractiveness. She instinctively thought about a

bumper sticker that she had seen once on a car that had driven past her family home. It said, 'No fat chicks.' She remembered seeing the sticker and wanting to be anything but fat. She would have even chosen ugliness over chubbiness. At least ugliness was subjective.

"Hi! My name is Cassandra," the girl said, jolting Cecelia out of her reverie, "but everybody calls me *Cupcake*."

Cecelia recoiled slightly. The way the girl said *Cupcake* with an ounce of ironic sourness was enough to make vinegar of Cecelia's insides. Not to mention the fact that she looked nothing like the type of person who would eat, much less be thought to resemble a cupcake. She wondered if the stranger had ever eaten *anything* in her life.

"Yeah. I'm probably not going to call you that." Cecelia responded truthfully. It was a day for being blunt, first with her parents, and now with the girl that she had been elected to live with.

"That's okay. Cassie works too."

"Can I ask why your nickname is Cupcake?"

"Yeah. It's kind of stupid actually. I had a bad haircut as a child. A bowl cut actually. It looked like my head was topped with chocolate icing. I guess the name kind of stuck."

Cecelia nodded her head. *She's not glamorous, but she'll do. In some lights, she almost makes me look better.* She wondered about what would happen if the people she encountered could hear her inner monologue. Cassie. Her parents. *I'm downright mean. I could shatter people with my unkindness.* Sometimes she felt as if she could not muzzle the interior track of hatred that seemed always to be running in her head. After years of having the worst insults thrown at her, she had a library of terms that she could use to rip others apart. While she never actually used any aloud, she took a sick enjoyment in maligning people in her mind. It felt powerful knowing she had something prepared as a retort should anyone insult her. She realized then that she hadn't spoken in some seconds, and in the same moment felt her belly growl. She looked up at Cassie or Cupcake or whoever she was and tried her best to be a friendly roommate.

"So Cassie, what do you think they've got to eat around here?" she asked.

Cassie smiled a grin of relief, realizing that Cecelia might not be the bitch she came across as and motioned with her arm for Cecelia to follow her to the campus mall.

From that point on they were improvised friends. They were not of the type that either would ever associate with in the real world, but they soon found that—at least in their cases—opposites attracted. They took their meals together; shared cigarettes; dished about their classes and the people in them, and, most compellingly, they shared personal details about their lives. It wasn't long before Cassie confessed that she was not an anorexic as Cecelia had first suspected, but a bulimic. Cecelia shared her own tale of struggle with an eating disorder back in grade eight, and their friendship became even more deeply entrenched. Two united by perverse body images.

When she and Cassie weren't eating, smoking, doing their work or lolling around on their beds mindlessly watching soaps, Cecelia attended her classes like a studious first-year. She even braved the world on Tuesdays at 8:00 a.m. to make it to her 8:30 Art History lecture on time. She attended despite the fact that the class was comprised of what felt like hundreds of students and her head would neither be counted nor missed. She attended because she was dazzled by student life, and to be a real student meant that you had to attend classes and sop up as much of the pedagogical liquid that the professor was able to spout. Unfortunately, whatever her Art History professor was spouting was about as exciting as slow-drying concrete and twice as hard to absorb.

As far as Cecelia could ascertain after only a few weeks of student life was that the problem with the class had nothing to do with the time at which it fell, nor with the curriculum in itself. In fact, the content that the teacher was presenting at that ungodly hour in a darkened, impersonal amphitheatre was actually quite intriguing. What made the class disinteresting was the professor's teaching style. He had been cursed with a particularly monotonous voice that sounded like a small boat motor that stubbornly refused to engage. He droned on and on, reciting dates as if dates were the meat of the lesson. What he failed to understand was that as fairly ignorant first-years, the students, in many cases, could not even image dates out of the century that had just passed. He taught them as if they were stuffy academics like himself, and expected them to be as well versed in eras and epochs as he.

It looks like Professor Boissoneault was born in the the Mayan era, she thought cattily one morning as she chugged her coffee, attempting to stay awake. *He should have first-hand accounts of the goings-on of that civilization!* Unfortunately, the insults that she loved inventing for the prof were usually short-lived because Cecelia would inevitably drift off to sleep before she was able to properly parse what was wrong with the academic.

To balance out the jam-packed mega-lectures, the students were invited to the more explanatory and only slightly less boring tutorials, which occurred twice a week and also had an optional attendance policy. After presenting herself at the first tutorial, she decided to skip these altogether, favouring the activity of flipping through her textbook in her dorm room over listening to some half-baked student teacher ramble on about the Dark Ages, repeating verbatim the dried out theories of the prehistoric professor. But lately she'd been attending because she suspected that her student teacher had given her *the eye* when she'd snuck in to get the handout for the first essay.

She was sometimes off about situations of perceived crushes. She remembered one time in her life when she'd made a fool of herself for thinking someone else had given her *the eye*. The awful day in early high school that she'd summoned every bit of her nerve to ask Billy from English class on a date, after she'd lost her weight. He'd denied her flat out, which was bad enough for her fragile ego to bear at that stage in her life, but what made matters worse was what he said: "You might have lost a bit of weight but you're still a loser." She never quite recuperated from that assault to her confidence. Even when she became cuter, thinner and less insecure in her later high school years, she would refuse to make a move with any prospective love interests. She vowed that she would never intentionally hunt out heartbreak again.

When she arrived to the tutorial that day, she moved gracefully but nonchalantly into the room, hoping to catch the teacher's attention with a calculated yet casual flip of her hair, but the move was too deliberately subtle for him to notice. She blew past and sat in the front row, centre seat. This ploy was completely out of character as she was more of a back of the class dweller and had been since high school, but in this case she didn't want to be obscured by the other pretty young ladies who were also

ving for his attention. She knew how these giggling adversaries viewed the student teacher, like a jewel that they could put into their shiny, young adult crowns, a conquest that they could brag about to their jealous girlfriends over coffee. These ladies were a different strain from the ones with which she saw in her Catholic school in her desperately small town.

But why do I like him? She wondered to herself, knowing that a guy like him was certainly not going to impress someone like feminist literature major Cassie, her only friend on campus. After little deliberation, she decided that it was for the mere fact that he had looked at her. Alas, that was all she needed, somebody to appreciate her even for a moment so that she could prove to herself that maybe she could flourish both academically and sexually in the big city. Her high school rejection had manifested itself into a pitiful desperation on her part. She felt like she needed the admirations of a man to justify to herself, that she was a regular, daresay somewhat attractive person like anybody else.

Still, her passive-aggressive, but cowardly tactics were somewhat shameful, even to her. She would hate to admit it, and hoped her fellow students hadn't noticed, but she had dressed up for this pathetic occasion, sporting one of her most revealing shirts, which was actually only a scoop neck, but still flattering on her slightly doughy freshman body. She'd pulled it on that morning in the half darkness of the dorm room, hoping not to wake Cupcake with the light. Cassie would have certainly read an Electra complex into the fact that Cecelia was dressing up for an older man in a sacred position of power. Thankfully, Cassie's classes didn't get going until past eleven. *Outspoken women have won the right to sleep in*, Cecelia thought, and laughed to herself.

Though she tried to attract his attention, the student teacher paid her no mind as she sat proud as a peacock in the front row with her notebook poised at the ready. He seemed more interested in queuing up the slide projector and ruffling through his notes. She wondered if she had imagined his supposed attraction as she analyzed the clothing he was wearing: a delicately knit wool sweater with a plaid shirt poking out from the neck and the bottom with a pair of black narrow-wale corduroy pants. His look was casual, yet somehow refined. She hadn't seen anyone in her town dress with this type of care, and she wondered momentarily exactly how much TA-ing paid.

Just then, the teacher greeted them all with a curt good morning, and the class progressed unceremoniously. The reassuring click of the slides moving one to the other lulled her into a state of calm though she was bubbling over with excitement. She sat obediently, and watched the recapped images from the previous lecture, listening to the duller students ask inane questions. *The smart ones don't talk, they listen*, she thought, confabulating her own aphorism, which justified her muteness.

First year Art History was a survey course that was meant to teach the newbies enough of the basics so they wouldn't come off as completely unworldly in their other first year classes. It was a way of shielding the tenured professors from the sad reality of the mental capacity of each new batch of students for long enough to teach them something that they sure hadn't learned in high school. After a stint in Ancient Civilizations, they moved over the course of the month to The Italian Renaissance. The Renaissance didn't particularly move her. *Too beautiful*, she thought. *Not enough pain. Not enough raw feeling*. While she admired the art movement for the skills demonstrated by the artists of that time, there was something integral missing to the compositions; something bleak and deranged, that she supposed was not a motif that was vogue at that time.

She was scanning each slide with apathy until they reached the slide that she miraculously remembered from the earlier lecture as being *The School of Athens*. It must have popped up before she drifted off to sleep in Professor Boissonneault's lecture. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed one of the keeners raise his hand high above his head for effect. He disrespectfully failed to wait for the teacher to acknowledge him before speaking out.

"I was hoping to hear a bit more about this this one," he said with a nasal whine and continued. "I'm a double major: Art and Philosophy so this naturally appeals to me." At this he looked around the class for recognition, completely ignorant to the fact that not one of his fellow students actually gave a damn, and thus were not impressed by his haughty admissions. *Narcissists don't care for other narcissists*, she thought to herself.

"This is the famous *Scuola di Atene*, one of four frescoes painted by Raphael in the Vatican," began the object of her affection with a bravado that assured her that Mr. Clarke, as he referred to himself,

was a person who was confident with what he was preaching. She raised her eyebrow in anticipation of what beautiful thing he might utter next, but the arrogant keener interrupted him again, rudely.

“Yes, yes. I am aware of what the professor told us at lecture. I take *meticulous* notes. What I want to know was if you know who all these philosophers are? I mean I can pick out Plato and Aristotle and Socrates, *obviously*, and I think the one in the back is Heraclitus, but how are we to know the rest?”

Cecelia breathed an audible sigh at the seemingly petty concerns of the drippy philosopher-want-to-be. *Why should they care about the personages in the fresco? What did it matter who's who of the dead men in a painting that didn't resonate beyond an uninspired viewing of the old boy's club?* She wondered how her crush might handle this impolite response, feeling sure that he had no idea who any of them were.

“You must be a philosopher, because you pose a very good question...one that cannot readily be answered. When Raphael painted these images, he had reference points, but unfortunately for us, he did not provide a legend that explains the images. Some art researchers have compiled a list of who they *think* the philosophers may be, but it barely covers half of the men you see before you. This type of question may very well lead you to a thesis down the line; however, and with your self-professed philosophy background, you might be just the person to delve into this research.”

The fledgling academic seemed sated by this quick and well-crafted response, and Cecelia marvelled at how the teacher had tactfully admitted that he had no idea and then cunningly distracted the student from his lack of knowledge with an appeal to the student's own ego. *Now, that's a teacher,* Cecelia swooned. *Maybe I should be attending more of these tutorials.*

Before the projector skipped along to the next image, Cecelia took a quick scan of the *School of Athens* for her personal memory bank. After having to look at it for so long, she eased her harsh instant opinion of the work. *It has a certain discordance uncommon to the others,* she thought. She analyzed each face and wondered just why there were no female philosophers among the crowd. *I suppose females were not allowed to think back then,* she said to herself, still blissfully unaware that most of her studies in art would revolve around the thoughts and actions of men, with a couple of arbitrary chicks sprinkled in

for good measure.

Reaching the end of this chain of thought, she did just what she had been conditioned to do throughout her young life as a female. She turned her attention back to the cute male in the room, hoping to detect any glimmer of acknowledgement, which so far had been nil. She took the time to analyze his finer features and attempted to pinpoint his age. She settled somewhere around twenty-five. She herself was nineteen, and she didn't see any problem with a six-year age difference. It seemed like all the girls—and women, for that matter—had had steady boyfriends who were older, at least by one or two years, this included her mother, and a lot of other women in her extended family.

Besides, the prestige of dating someone older than her Mr. Clarke symbolized an acceptance into this intriguing world of art and academics that seemed in these first few weeks completely out of reach to someone like her: a simple hick from Hillsboro. She couldn't help but notice that she had none of the refinements of the other ladies in the room. It was as if academia was linked directly to wealth. The girls were splendidly done up with perfectly coiffed hair and makeup, and waxed faces, which seemed odd for what were supposed to be poor students. Actually, nothing about them even remotely signified the fact that they were students like her. Many of them came in jingling key chains to fancy cars, stuffing them into bags that would have cost Cecelia half of her tuition for the semester. She was definitely the odd ball.

Much to her dismay, the class ended without a wink of attention from the teacher. She tried not to focus on the feelings that had pervaded her early teens, and tried even harder not to compare herself to the other girls, but the self-defeating thoughts that ate at her ego like battery-acid slammed into her anyway. *You suck. You are ugly. You are still fat. Nobody could ever love you. You are unrefined.*

As she gathered her things, she countered her negative thoughts by remembering how proud of herself she was for managing to get that far in her education. The first in the entire family who had gone to university, other than her grandmother who went to teacher's college, but that wasn't quite as impressive. She remembered being showered with praise from her family when they had heard the news. There was opportunity in the big city, as scary and foreign as it might seem. There was hope in further

education. But as she took one last look at the tutorial room, she wondered if there was hope? She was here. She was dedicated. But, there seemed to be one element missing. There was something telling her that she just didn't fit the part.

She managed to slip out before she had any more time to feel the sting of an imagined rejection, and the emptiness that was rising up to meet it. She'd almost cleared the door when she heard a dreamy, masculine voice call out to her.

“Hey! You!”

Though it was undeniably Mr. Clarke who was yelling down the hall. She refused to turn her head around to see if the call was for her. She'd be devastated if he was calling out to another girl, a more thin and beautiful girl with a jingling keychain and smooth limbs and a waxed face.

“Wait! Wait! Are you Cecelia Murphy?”

“Ya,” she responded, diffidently before turning her gaze back to acknowledge the T.A. When she did, she noticed that he had managed to catch up to her and was mildly panting from having to jog.

“Wow! You're a hard one to catch. Do you mind if I walk with you. I'm going across campus for a lecture.”

“Um. Okay.” She muttered with a falsely vapid smile, even though she was actually on her way to her painting class, which was just upstairs in the same building. She was so shocked that he was even speaking to her that she was willing to set her own schedule aside and follow along like a trusting lamb, cooing after all his words as they walked the green square of grass at the centre of the cluster of academic buildings.

“Hey! Don't you want to know why I'm talking to you? You are a strange one. So silent.”

“I guess.” She probably seemed to be an insolent bitch, but no one of his intellectual calibre had ever spoken to her before, and she was afraid she might betray her small town ignorance should she open her mouth to speak.

“I just wanted to commend you on the essay you wrote. Honestly, for a first year, it was quite succinct.” She permitted herself to smile at this, thankful that she knew what the word succinct meant,

though not many of her fellow Hillsborians would have.

“I liked it so much that I even brought it to the professor. Doubt he read it though. Guys as old as him are too busy writing their own books to read any of the first year tripe. But, hey! I guess that works out well for me. That’s why I’ve got this fancy ass job!” He smiled a toothy grin of self-conceit, but Cecelia couldn’t help but notice how oddly the words fancy ass rolled out of his mouth, as if mild swearing was a stretch for him. An affectation.

He continued to talk while Cecelia grasped around in her head as to what was so grand about the essay she’d written, an obvious comparison between the overtly religious Book of Kells to the cheaper illuminated letterings in secular Fairy Tales. She had written it last minute—as she was prone to do—after a night out at the campus pub with Carrie, and most of what she had written was induced by sleep deprivation and lingering alcohol. She was impressed that her lack of effort might have netted her a reasonable mark. Her high school teachers had told their classes that sliding through University with no effort was impossible.

Just before they parted ways he asked her if she might like to accompany him downtown the following night to a vernissage, where after they might ‘grab a bite to eat.’ Though she was too overwhelmed to actually process the significance of this proposition, she gushed a mushy, nearly sickening, “*Of course,*” and turned nineteen shades of scarlet, impressed that he hadn’t wanted to talk to her only because her writing.

On her way back to the class that she was meant to be attending before her salacious side trip, she mused on the fact that she’d never before attracted a man who appreciated her nerdiness or her creativity. *Or my writing,* she thought giddily. The few men who hollered after her in Hillsboro were more interested in her body after she lost the weight, of course. And the odd ones who were interested in her when she was portly—which mainly consisted of older men honking at her on the streets—well, they were into big and beautiful she supposed. But never had she been able to lure such a big fish with her mind. It was almost unfathomable.

“Late for your favourite class, Cecelia?” Her professor announced, having stopped dead in the middle of what seemed to be a heated lecture, flustered by Cecelia’s lack of respect.

“Um. Yeah, sorry, I slept in.” Cecelia felt the stab of guilt that usually penetrated her when lying to people that she revered. The heat rushed into her cheeks for the second time in an hour. Painting *was* her favourite class, and she had confessed this to her teacher Sonia after the second week of school when they’d developed the beginnings of a friendly professional relationship. Cecelia’s other professors seemed so distant and cold and *boring*, but Sonia seemed genuinely interested in what Cecelia had to offer. She said she liked her ‘rural perspective,’ whatever that meant. Cecelia supposed it had something to do with why she never felt like she belonged in any of her classes.

“Cecelia. I would like to see you after class, if I may,” Sonia declared in front of the whole class just before she launched back into her mini-lecture on impasto.

Cecelia nodded, but was perplexed as to why the prof would need to see her and why she had felt the need to call her out like that. She was not in high school any longer, so why was she being so closely monitored and admonished about being a few minutes late. In the past, other students had come in late to class, citing car trouble or the pressing responsibilities of part-time jobs and they had gotten off without a hitch. *Maybe having a rural perspective is not all it’s cracked up to be*, Cecelia thought to herself, smirking.

Sonia continued along with her lecture and concluded by announcing that the theme for the second major project was “large scale.” That was it. *Large scale*. Her teacher continued to berate the first years by telling them that the paintings they had done to get them into the university were so pitifully small, which she guessed was because the lack of supplies at the public schools. She said it was time to move to the big leagues.

“Live large. Paint large,” she kept repeating under her breath as the students busied themselves with some preliminary sketches.

Cecelia lost herself in imagining the many ways that she could capture the theme while still being

original and provocative, but her mind wandered away from her, across the campus green and over to the graduate Arts building, back to Charles. Her pencil was moving, but not much had been realized upon the page. Sadness was always a main motivator for Cecelia's art and she was too elated by the earlier developments in her social life to consider drawing anything besides her and Charles' initials in a big, chubby heart. She hadn't noticed the time until her fellow students started filtering out of the class. Soon enough the only two left in the room were herself and the professor.

“Cecelia, I was impressed by your first project. You have such an original eye. I haven't seen anything like it in years, but there is something I have to speak with you about. I hope you won't take it in the wrong way.”

Cecelia knitted her brow, anxious to hear what she possibly could have done wrong in her first assignment and surprised that this confrontation had nothing to do with her lateness, as she had originally thought.

“Your first painting was done on cardboard, Cecelia, and, please tell me if I am mistaken, but your paints, they weren't from the dollar store were they?”

“Yeah,” Cecelia muttered, still relatively unsure of where this conversation was heading. She wasn't quite catching her teacher's drift. In her mind, unconventional tools showed innovation and true craft.

“Some students take that approach on purpose, to make some sort of point about the ability to create with anything. But, that is not why you do it. Am I right? You do it because you have no other option.” Sonia's face was wrinkled with genuine concern.

Something started bubbling in the pit of Cecelia's bilious glands. A remote, never before examined burning that stemmed from an inadequacy that lay buried much deeper inside her than her issues with weight, and sexuality and confidence. Something was rising from a well that she knew was inextinguishable. The inadequacy that her teacher was now hinting at seemed to be a forever problem that could not be fixed with a crash diet or a cute boyfriend, something that she hadn't measured too much when she was in her hometown where everyone seemed relatively equal and where everyone worked for

what they received.

“I make use of what I have, Sonia. I had no idea that what I was using was inadequate. I thought I was being clever with unconventional materials”

“I see this is a touchy subject, Cecelia. I don’t mean offense. I guess I would just like to see what you would do if you had high quality materials. Don’t you have a budget for your art supplies?” Sonia looked at her as if she was puzzled by Cecelia’s existence. As if not having hundreds of dollars extra a month for over-priced oils and brushes was incomprehensible. Cecelia supposed she could call her mother and ask for a bit more money, but as it stood, all the money she received was coming out of a line of credit from the bank in Hillsboro.

“Books were a bit more expensive than I was anticipating,” replied Cecelia, honestly but smarmily, growing quickly tired of this line of questioning, which frankly was making her feel slightly less than human. She thought of her earlier sense of inadequacy when she compared herself to other women, and now she was being compared to other artists. “The Art History text alone nearly broke the bank.” Cecelia had put on her defensive voice, and felt the hair rising on the back of her neck.

“Do you need a bit of assistance, Cecelia? I can make you a bit of a personal loan, just for canvas and half decent paints. I think you really have something.” The teacher smiled, warmed by the satisfaction of benediction. “And you don’t want your classmates to snicker at you during the critique.”

Cecelia couldn’t believe how quickly her bubble had been burst. The man of her dreams had just asked her on a swanky date, and now she was being offered charity by a professor who thought she was poor. At one moment she was sitting in a figurative palace, and the next she’d been foisted out into the gutter.

“Thanks, but I don’t need your help. I can afford canvas. It might not be the top of the line, but I don’t think that makes a difference if I have the talent. I don’t have seventy-five dollars to spend on some of the things the other students come in here with, and I don’t have three hundred to spend on so-called ‘good’ paint. I’m putting my parents into debt as it is.” The other students in the class would never be offered such disgraceful charity. They could all afford the best, extracting the cost of their supplies from

their limitless bank accounts. She was always coming up short. Living on borrowed money. And her teacher had caught on to this inequality.

“I’m sorry to be so defensive, Sonia. I guess I just never imagined myself as one who needed charity.”

Not knowing what else to say in this situation, and feeling that she might have reacted to the offer in an inappropriate way, Cecelia whipped around and left the professor alone in the vacant art class. The final communication between them was the lonesome sound of Cecelia’s echoing footsteps clop clop clopping away.

On the evening of the big date, Cecelia was darting around the residence room like a nervous chicken with Cassie squealing at her from the opposite bed ordering her to try on different accessories to match her outfit. She had never seen Cassie so excited, and reconsidered the idea that Cassie was such an ardent feminist. *Maybe there was some hope for her yet.*

She looked again in the mirror at the ‘new’ outfit that she had picked up at the Salvation Army when she was looking for discount canvases after her reprimand for being poor. It had caught her eye from across the store: a Seventies brown tweed skirt suit that had flecks of multi-coloured wool interspersed in the sandy fabric. When she tried it on in the cramped change room, she found that by some miracle the suit fit perfectly, almost as if it had been made thirty years prior, just for her. The cut was perfect for her tall body, and was forgiving of her slightly wider than average waistline. She considered herself lucky when she noticed that the price was only \$9.99. She had found a \$2 canvas to boot. Not large, but respectably medium-sized and had never been used.

“Not those bracelets, the other ones. The tortoise shell ones.” Cassie directed. “Hair down! You don’t want to look like a librarian.” Cassie was on fire. “That shade of lipstick? Really?”

A knock on the wooden door startled them both from the last minute preparations, and Cecelia moved toward it with a light bounce to her step.

“Hi Charles,” she whispered as she swung the door open using the voice that she had been

practicing all day. He greeted her with a huge smile, genuinely happy to see her, but Cecelia noticed his eyes dart away from her into the dorm room.

“So, this is a dorm, huh? In all my years it’s hard to believe that I’ve never seen one.” He ventured into the room curious to check things out.

“It’s a bit like a jail, isn’t it,” he said as he ran his fingers over the cinderblock walls, and finally caught sight of Cassie on the other side of the room.

“Oh! There are two of you in this room?” His shock was surprising to Cecelia. Certainly the dorm-dwelling lifestyle was status quo for university students. It was becoming apparent that Charles hadn’t had the usual student experience.

“Forgive me for my rudeness! I didn’t mean to be intrusive. I’m Charles.” He extended his hand to Cassie, and she took it, looking just as perplexed as Cecelia at the strange character that had just entered their space. After making introductions, Charles turned his attention back to Cecelia, and his eyes traced her body from top to bottom and back again.

“Wow! Nice outfit. Vintage? You do have a quirky style! That’s what I like about you. An original writer and original dresser.”

Cecelia blushed pink at this statement and Charles took her by the hand, angling her back toward the door. He seemed anxious to get out of the environment.

“Nice to meet you Cassie,” he called as the two of them exited the room.

“Don’t wait up,” Cecelia giggled, copying a line that she had heard so many times in films.

Cecelia twisted her neck back just a bit to see Cassie’s reaction to this man, and saw that while the bewilderment remained on her face, she had raised both hands in the air to silently give Cecelia two thumbs up for approval.

Once outside, Cecelia, now familiar with the sprawling geography of the campus, naturally headed toward the transit station so the two of them could catch the subway downtown. But Charles pulled at her still clasped hand and redirected her toward another location with which she was not as familiar: the parking lot.

“Aren’t we taking the subway?” she asked, curious as to what he was up to.

“No. I have a car, silly.” He smiled at her and shook his head. She wasn’t sure why it was silly to think that they would be taking public transit. Most students took public transit, didn’t they? Cecelia was no longer sure where she was exactly. She was just as mystified by Charles’ life as he was of her dorm room.

When they approached his vehicle Cecelia thought perhaps that she was dreaming and reached with her freehand to pinch herself underneath the pocket of her fall jacket. The car that they were moving toward was a black BMW. Charles, being a gentleman, led her to the passenger side and opened the car door for her to enter. It was her first time in a luxury car and she was nagged by the sensation that she did not deserve it. The smell of leather and opulence filled her nostrils and sedated her. They took off with a force that Cecelia had never felt in a vehicle. It was as if they were bucking backwards before shooting forward. She smiled at Charles, but didn’t know whether to feel horrified or impressed.

When they arrived at the posh gallery on the east side of the city and walked through the crystal door onto the polished wooden floors, her heart was singing like a violin. The drive was lovely, cruising in luxury on the expressway with the city lights twinkling like jewels all around them. She gazed in awe at the room; the ceilings were vaulted and were so tall that they kissed the sky. The floors were caramel hardwood and were shined to the point that she could see the reflection of her shoes in them. The gallery was deliberately minimalistic, clean, rich. The people were mostly thin and dressed to the nines. They darted slowly around the room, as if engaged in the bizarrely refined mating rituals of birds of paradise, poking their svelte necks into a conversation here, coyly taking a sip of wine there, straightening their hair, smoothing their dresses and greeting each other like Europeans with kisses on both cheeks.

Cecelia looked down at her bargain duds and could tell that she was not wearing the right style of outfit for this function. The other women in the room were wearing cutting edge cocktail dresses, which fell above the knees. The colours were conservative: black, maroon, navy, and the styles were fairly similar with one or two original details to set them apart. She had the nagging feeling that when the two of them had entered the room, everyone had stolen a quick glance as if sensing there was an intruder in

their midst, but they hadn't missed a beat in their conversations.

Though she was paranoid of what they all might think of her, the people in the room were devoid of any sort of hindrance to their own egos. They had a glowing look about them as if they had been raised without ever having to want a thing, fed on healthy, organic food, choice meats--if they even ate meat--and fine beverages prepared by their beautiful health-conscious mothers or their servants in the annals of a five hundred-thousand dollar kitchen. They lacked preoccupations because, at least from a pauper's perspective, they had the answer to all of life's problems: money.

In processing her strange environs, Cecelia was reminded of a particular girl at her school that was excessively popular, though Cecelia could never understand why. The girl's name was Tiffany, but everyone called her Tiff and she was as big as a house. She was three times bigger than Cecelia at her fattest. And she wasn't even cute under all the weight, or intelligent, or particularly charming, but she was popular, nearly as popular as the head of the clique, Julia, who was thin and blonde and the object of all the boys' attentions. Cecelia was now able to comprehend that the reason for Tiffany's coolness was money, and she wondered how her life might have been different if her parent's had occupied a higher tax bracket.

"Cecelia," Charles interrupted her thoughts, "I would like you to meet Sharon and Michelle. I went to school with them. *Elementary* school!"

The twosome that Charles had named while Cecelia was daydreaming were now laughing at the elementary school comment, which Cecelia didn't think was all that funny. She wondered how one kept in touch with their elementary school friends, especially in a city as big as this. She had lost touch with all of hers.

"Meet Cecelia. She's a student in one of my tutorials."

"Cecelia. That's a nice name. You don't hear that one very often," sighed either Sharon or Michelle. Cecelia hadn't been clear who was who upon introduction and Charles acted as if it didn't matter. They both had chestnut coloured hair. One wore it short and one wore it long. Rectangular glasses too, one with black rims, and the other with silver wire. They were like two incarnations of

Velma from *Scooby-doo*.

“So, Cecelia. I hear you dabble in a bit of painting yourself,” said the other with a familiarity with which Cecelia was uncomfortable. Cecelia was surprised that Charles had had the time to speak with these strange women in the two days since they had properly met, and wondered why he had confided in them the details of her pastimes.

“Well, yes. I suppose you could say that,” she stumbled naively even though she was trying to sound as educated as possible. She was ashamed to be intimidated by these women, but she was. “But, if I’m an artist, I’m a starving artist.” She said this and giggled at her own joke like the simple fool she was, at least in the eyes of beloved Sharon and Michelle. In an instant, as if she’d heard Cecelia’s silly yet insulting thought, either Sharon or Michelle perked her head, knitted her brows and sunk her teeth deeper into Cecelia.

“A starving artist is right. I think it’s clear that you haven’t yet been paid,” said the young woman with a sneer, nodding her head toward Cecelia’s clothing. “I haven’t seen an outfit like that since the last time I volunteered at the church charity bazaar!”

At that comment, Cecelia turned her gaze slowly toward Charles for some sort of help, surprised that he hadn’t already offered it thus far in the conversation. He must have been able to telepathically interpret her dirty look because he slid his arm around her waist to comfort her.

“C’mon ladies. Don’t be so catty. I like Cecelia’s style. And Michelle, wasn’t it you who was telling me how chic vintage clothes are becoming?” The ladies looked at each other, flummoxed, as if wondering why Charles was sticking up for someone like Cecelia.

“Yes. Vintage *Pucci* and *Yves St. Laurent*. Not vintage *Sears* skirt suits. I am almost fairly certain that this outfit was purchased at a second hand store. Am I right? Smells to me like Sally Ann’s” Both Sharon and Michelle smiled at this comment after it was uttered.

“That’s nonsense. Cecelia might be a student, but she isn’t *that* poor.” Charles jumped in again to her defense. Little did he know that the outfit in question was, in fact, somebody else’s castoff. And, as either Sharon or Michelle had said, it actually was a *Sears* skirt suit purchased at the Salvation Army.

Cecelia's embarrassment had tipped past humiliation and into the red zone of mortification. This topped the offer of charity from her professor. She was a walking indigent, and now Charles was complicit in her lie. *And was she really lying?* She had no clue that the man on her arm was quite this rich before they had come out that evening. And she had no idea how poor she was until she had come to this city, this university and now, this art gallery, which was swarming with people who seemed to be able to tell instinctually that she was not like them.

"Come, let's look at some art, shall we?" Charles said directly to Cecelia, now completely denying any further banter with his old friends. As they turned to leave, Cecelia cringed as the two girls crumbled into fits of tight-lipped giggles and whispered words that were surely more condemning than what they had said to her face, if that was even possible.

"Are there going to be any more of your friends here this evening?" Cecelia asked, dreading the response.

"Well, I anticipate that we will at least catch a glimpse of Quentin, because he is exhibiting this evening. Oh, and my father is probably here someplace. This is his gallery." At this comment, Cecelia nearly choked on her saliva.

"This is your dad's gallery?"

"Yes. He owns about ten across the city. He used to work for Christie's but grew tired of life in London. Little known fact: I was actually born in London. My mother still lives there. I came to live with my father when I was five, when my mother remarried."

"Oh. How. Lovely," Cecelia responded, not sure how to react to such information. She was caught up wondering how in hell she had managed to attract this guy, who seemed to be one step away from being the pinnacle of affluence. She strained to block an image of bringing Charles into her parents' modest home. Envisioning his reaction was enough to make her ill. She thought of him running his fingers along their furniture as he had curiously run his fingers along her cinderblock dorm walls. She imagined the forced smile he might wear to disguise his shock and revolt. Finally, she imagined her parents, trying desperately to appeal to him with their small town anecdotes and peculiarities. It was this

thought that made her shudder.

Despite her uneasiness and her feeling that she was pretending to be something that clearly she was not, they made their way across the gleaming wood floors to the logical beginning of the exhibit, where the biography of each featured artist was superimposed upon the wall in refined black type. There were four in total: two Japanese, a Montrealais, and Charles' friend who was from Boston. *All men*. The theme of the show was an exposé of various expressions of the female form. Reading this, Cecelia was forced to choke back a yawn. She was hoping for something a little bit more visceral, perhaps a concept that hadn't already been done to death by the masters.

Cecelia and Charles sidestepped their way around the room, and she was glad to heed the implied need for silence. The first artist they viewed was a photographer who clearly had a lot of beautiful friends. He was in the business of taking close-up photographs of the female face. There were five large scale portraits of picture-perfect beauties running in a straight, neat line along the wall and as Cecelia analyzed the images, probably corrected in Photoshop, she wondered how anyone could actually be so flawlessly stunning. She supposed that the subjects were also rich like the people at the gallery. Her sinking feeling of defectiveness intensified and she felt like she was looking at images from a *Vogue* magazine instead of works of art.

The second grouping by the other Japanese artist showed an array of sickeningly cute manga-style women in the buff. The images were not crass, but rather tastefully portrayed with draped sheets painted over the women's unmentionables. The work was unconventional in that it was painted in oil and resembled a sort of modernized 16th century pastoral scene. The images showed more skill than the previous artist's but Cecelia could not get past the rendering of the cartoonish women with massive breasts and empty saucer eyes grazing like cattle in idealized country fields. She felt again that she was being advertised to instead of spoken to, and what was being marketed was the idea of unattainable beauty.

The third artist they viewed, the Montrealais, was into the whole woman. His oeuvre consisted of about twenty smaller pen and ink sketches of the many poses of one nude subject. In looking at the

pieces more circumspectly, Cecelia surmised that they weren't actually 'sketches,' but carefully calculated line drawings that were probably based on sketches— not actually done in the heat of the moment. They were too perfect. She resented this attempt at pulling the wool over the eyes of the audience. This was a false display of fake inspiration; the creation and sale of a so-called sketch that any genuine artist would use as only a reference for a greater work. To her dismay, she noticed that none of the other connoisseurs seemed to care, thinking that the works were somehow pushing the boundaries. She heard snippets from the crowd that had gathered around the work of this artist.

“So effortless.”

“Real skill.”

“Technically perfect.”

The crowd seemed much more concerned with the artist's ability to represent reality over his ability to offer up any original thought. She considered sharing this point of view with Charles, but when she moved her head to look at him she could see that he was just as bewitched by the images as the others in the crowd. His eyes were lost in a cloud of pensiveness and his hand was gently caressing his chin in contemplation. She wondered what on earth it could be that he was thinking about. These works disabled her thoughts.

They were nearing the final installment of vapid, unoriginal work: that of Charles' friend, Quentin, when Charles stopped short to beckon someone from the crowd. Cecelia wondered who it might be this time, and braced herself for a second round of discomfort and teeth clenching. She self-consciously sent a hand down to her skirt in order to straighten it, and sent another hand to her hair to smooth it out.

“It's my father,” Charles said, and Cecelia felt her face going ruby when she caught sight of the debonair man that had emerged from the throngs of art lovers, clad in an ink-black Banker's jacket with a red scarf tucked below the lapel. The man was tall and lean and chiseled and looked like he had been ripped out of a Fellini film. She hadn't been anticipating a parental meeting, and if she had known that it was to occur, she most likely would not have come on this outing. Cecelia, instantly shy, tried to avert

her eyes from those of the handsome stranger, but they were locked on.

“Who is this lovely lady, Charles? You dog! How long have you been here without introducing me?” The man extended his hand to Cecelia. “Forgive me for my son’s lack of manners. I am Charles Clarke, Senior. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Cecelia offered her hand in return and garbled some sort of an answer, which included the divulgence of her own name in return. She had already fallen for the charms of Charles Senior and was having a difficult time composing herself in his presence. She had wondered if her face had gone from scarlet to purple at this point. In her Sears outfit, she felt like the *Little Match Girl* standing beside these two men.

“I hope you are enjoying the show tonight. I curated it myself. I usually pay people to do that sort of thing, but I felt a natural gravity toward these works as I am so familiar with the subject matter.” At this the handsome man flashed them a sparkling smile that seemed to cloak a refined lechery. Cecelia nodded and gushed some other affirmative sentence, but was secretly thinking that there was no real finesse to hanging of the works that evening. She wondered if maybe Charles Senior should have left it to the professionals this time.

“Yes. I guess you could say that my father has a natural way with the ladies,” Charles Junior finally chimed in, jokingly punching his father in the shoulder.

At this point, Charles Senior took a quick second to appraise Cecelia as if trying to deduce exactly what it was that his son found attractive about her. Charles Junior didn’t seem to notice but rather looked honestly proud of having Cecelia on his arm. On their dream-like journey to the venue that evening, Charles had confessed that he had never encountered a girl like her before. He said there was something about her that set her apart from the other women he had seen at school. *An innocence. A naiveté.* She was too lost in the thrill of the ride to properly understand his meaning then, but now, surrounded by throngs of wealth, she knew. She was different because of her poverty. Charles Senior, probably coming to the same conclusion about Cecelia, put his hand gently on his son’s shoulder and looked regretfully at Cecelia.

“Darling. I hate to be a brute, but Charles and I have a family matter to discuss that I wouldn’t want to bore you with. Feel free to take advantage of the wet bar. I think they have some champagne that you would love. We’ll be just a moment.”

Cecelia felt that awful sinking sensation in her stomach, the kind one gets when she knows that she is to be the subject of a conversation that she has been excluded. But, with no other course of action available, she nodded her obedient head and slunk over to the bar area, deciding that she would savour the champagne. She was embarrassed to admit that she had never savoured such a thing before. The bartender poured the shimmering gold liquid and handed it to her with a white-gloved hand, and she accepted, feeling exceptionally parched. She had already chugged half the glass when the bartender asked what credit card she would be using to pay. She nearly spat. She assumed that this event was an open bar scenario.

“How much do I owe you?” she requested of the bartender after restraining her choking. He looked at her as if he’d never been asked that type of question before.

“Thirty-one,” he said without emotion. The champagne had begun to boil over in her belly and she felt like she might vomit on the black slate of the bar top. *Thirty-one dollars for a glass of soda wine!* She screamed to herself. She reached for her purse, but knew that she only had ten dollars in her wallet and not a credit card to her name. Not knowing what else to do, she looked earnestly at the young man behind the bar and told him she would be right back. *She would have to consult with her date.*

As she nervously approached the two men, rehearsing how to politely ask for money, she saw that they were huddled close together with Charles Senior leading the conversation. Neither of them noticed, as she grew nearer. She could pick up on dialogue.

“...I know Charles, and she’s not bad looking. Maybe a bit plump, but God knows we Clarkes appreciate that in a woman. The problem is that she’s not in our league, son. You can finish up here tonight, but I want you to drive her straight home. You can’t take a chance in having relations with a girl like that. If she were to become pregnant, we’d be on the hook for eighteen years at least. Just take her home and don’t call her again. We’ll find you someone more appropriate.”

She listened, and really she should have been more shocked by the exchange of words from father to son, but when she had been asked by Charles Senior to leave, she knew what their conversation would be about. It was obvious that she had no business being a part of this alternate universe, this world of pretty yet boring art and gorgeous yet insular people. She was poor. Her parents didn't live in refrigerator boxes, but they worked hard at menial jobs for their long lives to sustain a lower middle-class lifestyle. She could scavenge a vintage Pucci dress out of the racks of a Salvation Army and affect an appreciation for contrived artworks, but these people would never accept her.

She knew then that confronting the two men to inform them that she had no money to pay for the thirty-one dollar glass of champagne that she had just imbibed would really be the icing on the cake. She looked at the towering glass doors of the gallery, and back at the two Charleses and realized she had one thing to do: get the hell out of that place. Without another thought, she swung her body nimbly toward the exit and went in her second-hand outfit out the doors and into the night.

After taking the metro and two busses, she arrived back to the bleak comfort of her cinderblock dorm room, and was thankful that Cassie was not present. She was relieved at this bit of luck that had been afforded to her because she didn't have the strength to confide in her all that had transpired, and the deeper reasons behind the events of that evening. Though she was not overly surprised at how the night had ended, the sting of forever being unable to associate with a certain faction of people made her uneasy and depressed. The champagne she had tasted left her feeling compelled to drink, but she had only seven dollars remaining after her transit trip home, and that was only good for beer, which she hadn't developed a taste for yet. Instead, she set about removing her ridiculed outfit starting with her stockings, then the jacket and finally the wool skirt that before had looked stylish and cool, but now looked like an old woolen rag.

When undressed, she looked at her naked self in the dusty full size mirror that Carrie had tacked up on her side of the room. *You can't gage my tax bracket when I'm naked*, she thought with an ironic laugh. *Though you can gage my fat bracket. Ha.* She smiled at herself in the mirror, but the smile was demented. *She's a bit plump*, she remembered Charles' father saying, as if it wasn't enough to have a

distaste for her lack of money, he had to couple it with noticing her weight.

She pulled a flannel nightie over her head to conceal her nudity before Cassie returned, and sauntered over to her side of the room to the meager trove of art supplies underneath her desk. She rustled out the canvas that she had gotten in the discount bin and realized that it was there because the wooden stretchers in the back were slightly crooked. *Something you might only notice if it was hung on the wall beside other straight canvases*, Cecelia thought, *kinda like me*. She was hoping that it would pass for good enough and wouldn't invite another offer of charity from her teacher. She knew that it wasn't big enough, but couldn't have cared less. She now felt even more strongly that her teacher's demand for oversized canvas and expensive paints was a way of differentiating the rich from the poor. *The deserving from the undeserving*.

She looked at the blank canvas, letting the aching pain of her physical and financial deficit swell up inside of her till it reached her head and her fingers. She reached to her fishing kit of paints and grabbed black and midnight blue and red and white, spurting them out onto her makeshift Styrofoam meat tray palette. She took deep gouges into the blobs, which were so close on the palette that they had all begun to rub together, tainting the precious titanium white. She soon fell into a trance applying the paint to the canvas in bold, confident swoops and smears, and when Cassie came back into the room about thirty minutes later, Cecelia was so possessed that she hardly took notice.

"Cecelia? I didn't expect you back until tomorrow. What happened?"

Cecelia heard her voice but the rumblings didn't register as words. She was gone. She had slipped beneath consciousness into the brushstrokes of her painting. First black, then white. She felt no shame in using acrylics, though they were cheap. Not only were oils expensive, but they took forever to dry.

"I'm guessing it couldn't have gone very well if you won't even acknowledge me." Cassie shrugged. "Good luck with the painting. I'm hitting the sack. I have a test tomorrow. We'll talk then." Cassie turned off the overhead florescent light, and left Cecelia painting all alone in the dull glow of her bedside lamp.

She spent the rest of that night painting and the next, and the next and the next. Cassie had blessedly gone home for the weekend after her test, so Cecelia was gifted some blissful time alone. She allowed herself to get especially grimy now that she had no one to dress up for. She listened to her own depressing music, she drank her cheap bottles of Zinfandel, and lit one cigarette after the other, extinguishing them in overloaded jars and plates of discarded food. She only left the room when she got hungry and would have to trudge down to the campus mall for some slop. She wasn't particular about what she got. Anything to keep her awake enough to paint.

When her studio painting class rolled around again, she was ready and confident in her work. She knew it was successful after seeing Cassie's reaction to it when she had returned Sunday evening. The reaction of a non-artist was always the most honest, and therefore the most treasured.

"How was your weekend?" Cassie asked as she tried to find the most adequate space for her rolling suitcase. "I half expected you to be in here with your wrists sliced open, bleeding out on our precious rug floor. You didn't answer my phone calls!"

Cecelia wasn't able to apologize for her mood before Cassie caught sight of the painting.

"Oh my god! Did you do that? That looks better than what I thought you were capable of...sorry. Oh, I didn't mean that...it's just, oh never mind. Wow."

"It's okay Cassie. I'm glad you like it. I didn't think I could do anything like this either, but it is amazing what kind of a motivator pain is. I think that's why it's called *painting*." Cecelia smiled for the first time in days, even though she thought puns were the lowest form of humor. She felt better. She felt like she had exorcised the poverty monster, or at least pushed it deep back into the part of her belly from which it had emerged.

"That's pretty deep. It's disturbing, but I somehow can't stop staring at it. It really looks like you."

"I used your mirror. I hope you don't mind."

Cassie shook her head and continued boring her gaze into the painting.

Cecelia skipped the Art History tutorial as she would do for the remainder of the year to avoid Charles, and arrived early to painting class in order to hang her work before the class arrived for maximum shock value. When she had it mounted to her liking and was sure that it was straight enough considering its lack of structural integrity, she stepped back to admire it, proudly positioned on the pockmarked white wall.

What she saw was a near perfect grey-toned rendering of a half-naked, half rag-wearing peasant version of herself. Her face was contorted into a look of angled wretchedness and her hand was outstretched into the foreground with complementary angular movement. She depicted herself essentially scrambling for a dime that had been dropped to her from a passerby whose expensive high-heeled shoes were the only concrete objects in the composition. She smiled at her creation, seeing conveyed in it the exact feeling she had had at the gallery, and to a lesser degree the feeling she had when her professor offered her money.

Eventually the other students straggled in with their own works, all massive canvasses that took the strength of three or four students to carry. *They really took the assignment literally*, she thought and snapped out of her reverie.

When the critique eventually was underway, the crowd seemed apprehensive about speaking, so her teacher jumped into the pool of silence, skipping immediately to Cecelia's work before the other twenty huge canvasses.

"I do enjoy this, I'll admit that, if enjoy is the right way of defining the way I feel. It is very fresh. I haven't seen anyone do anything quite like this before, at least in terms of style. The subject is ancient. Reminiscent of Siqueiros. But the *style*...Dare I say your style it is even more raw than Siqueiros." She let her questioning hand fall from her chin and drop, clenched to her hip. "I hate to be a stickler here, but I don't see exactly how the work represents the theme."

Cecelia took a moment to gather her composure before letting loose a little bit of herself. She'd been rehearsing the little speech with every stroke of the brush. The thing she would say to explain

herself. The explanation that would smooth over the fact that she was unable to use expensive materials. The speech that would somehow reconcile what was wrong with demanding that students use certain types of materials.

“My pain is large scale. My disappointment in life and in myself is large scale. My hatred, my agony, my failings, my inabilities, my inadequacies. They are all large scale. My bank account is not large scale.” Cecelia dropped her head, having to focus on the floor to prevent herself from crying.

Her fellow students seemed not to know what to say about this honest, if not somewhat torturous peak at Cecelia’s soul. She watched them as they absorbed her painting. Some were nodding as if they reluctantly understood, and the other more misanthropic students glared at her as if thinking, *you are not the first one to make this art, and you won’t be the last*. Seeing them now, all with their own private reactions to her outpouring of pain, made her feel less concerned about their opinions, though she had been secretly fantasizing about the reaction since she had slopped on her first stroke.

But here they were, generally apathetic. It was then, observing the observers of her own work that Cecelia came to a conclusion that changed her perception of things as they were. This change made her feel connected more than ever before, but it also gave her the uncomfortable feeling of floating in empty space. She wondered if the opinions of others really mattered. Their looks? Their bodies? Their stature?

They are all suckers, just like me, she thought. We are all moving around the same sucker-filled sea. We all have our pain. Our agonies. Some hate seeing the pain expressed through other people’s visions and some need the reminder that other people are suffering too; but, the most important thing is that no matter what our tax bracket or our fat bracket or any other bracket we occupy, none of us is free from suffering. Suffering is the bond that unites us the entire world over. Suffering is the great equalizer. That is, apart from death.

Cecelia looked at her fellow classmates and smiled, feeling for the first time that she belonged.

SANITY

That night her dreams were hot and vivid with flashing colours of white and green and pink. She dreamed of holding a bird in her hands, a bird with plumes of gold and glowing red eyes. She looked at the bird with compassion, wanting to nestle it straight through her flesh and against her heart, but it opened its beak and bit her on the plump part of her left hand. Sharp pain radiated up through her wrist and into her arm, this she could feel in her sleep. She looked again at the bird, surprised that it would have the nerve to bite her when all she wanted was to protect it; surprised that something so beautiful would defend itself in such a violent way. She shook the bird from her hands and it took flight, up, up, up into the atmosphere and settled on the edge of a school building. Her school. She knew that it would remain there, watching her as she entered and left the building, day after day. Sizing her up, waiting for a moment to strike.

At school that morning she had long since forgotten the dreams of the night before, as people tend to do, but the memory of something poignant occurring the night before was like an itch she couldn't scratch. She had read somewhere that a dream was lost the minute you made a physical movement like yawning or stretching or slamming the alarm, and it was well gone before breakfast. She was tired, however, and knew that because of her dream her rest had been restless. She sleepwalked through the first two periods--grade seven followed by grade nine--and after the lunch bell rang and the kids scampered out of the class without so much as adieu, she went about her usual routine of tidying up her classroom before heading to the cafeteria to buy her lunch.

Though she managed to dress impeccably each morning thanks to her keen eye for fashion, she hadn't been very organized since she'd left Patrick and her pseudo-marriage of six years. Since she had moved out on her own her mind had been scattered, like a mirror stuck full of post-it notes with to-do lists scrawled on them. Certain responsibilities like self-care had lost priority in this flutter of imaginary papers. She tried to stay on top of her teaching, but only managed to shower every second day, ate next to nothing, and had begun smoking again after quitting for five years at Patrick's behest. The most annoying responsibility that she never seemed to have the time nor the will to prepare was a lunch for the next day

of school. She was always settling for the crap in the cafeteria: poutine made with grease-soaked shoestrings and pale gravy; chicken burgers; brown-meat chicken sandwiches; pasta salads with Italian dressing. Often times, this tripe was the only sustenance she consumed in a day, and it showed. She'd shed a drastic amount of weight. *A sickly amount.*

She was about to empty the dustpan of pencil crayon shavings and make her way down the corridor to the caf, when her lunchtime imaginings were interrupted by a frantic knock on the door. Before she had the time to reach for the handle, the door swung open and there was Mylena, the eye-lined, black-nailed, Gothic pre-teen with straightened black hair and powder white skin. *Emo. She's not Goth, she's Emo.* The children never failed to correct Cecelia on this error. In her day, the ones that masqueraded around in black with their lips downturned were referred to as *Goths*, and you would never be so bold as to tease them. They weren't spoiled, snivelling whiners like the *Emos* she'd seen online and in music videos, they were terrifying Satanists who sucked the blood of chickens on the weekends instead of partying like the rest of the teenagers. She often marvelled over how little life had changed between the time she had gone to school and now, a gap of ten or so years. It was as if the last two or three decades had been put on repeat, but this "new" version was more diluted, soulless, weak.

When Mylena saw that her art teacher was frozen in thought with the dustpan hanging limply in her hands, she could no longer take Miss Murphy not noticing her.

"Miss, Miss, come quick, there's a bird on the ground outside and the boys are going to kick it!!" Her eyes were glossy between the rims of eyeliner, and Miss Murphy couldn't help but think that Goths in her day would never cry. Mylena kept on, "It flew into the window, Miss. It's going to die."

Cecelia emptied the dustpan, put it delicately back on the pole of the broom, and considered this rather odd claim. This event was strange. *How often did birds slam into windows? Once, twice in a lifetime?* Then why was it so naggingly familiar? And why was someone looking to *her* to solve this situation. Her mind darted to the reality of what the heck she was going to do with a bird if it turned out to be only half dead and in need of assisted convalescence. She had a quick image of herself feeding it with a tiny baby bottle. *Should I bring it inside? Leave it to die?* She quickly scanned the room for a possible

box to put it in and in doing this her mind skipped along to worrying about the administrative consequences of bringing a live, possibly diseased bird into the school.

“Miss! C’mon, what are you waiting for?” Mylena startled her out of her stupor, and she grabbed her blazer and bolted toward the scene of the unfolding crime, deciding that she should at least defend this poor, defenceless bird that was about to be kicked.

It was late November. The weather should have been blustery and sorrowful, but it was unusually warm, late summer warm, yet perverted because of the musky, wintery scent of wood fire on the air. She glanced upwards as she exited through the door leading into the courtyard, noticing that the clouds were at odds with the sky, folding themselves in neat layers of bluish backlit cotton with the sun nestled within like a warm living egg. She lowered her gaze and there, standing in a neat circle against the cloud-smearing backdrop were thirty or so oddball children all staring with wonder and disbelief at the most helpless little bird. She approached and saw that it was a brown, speckled starling. She wasn’t sure how she knew the kind, but supposed it had something to do with the many books she’d read in her young life.

The scene ripped at her heart, but not for the obvious reasons. She did not care so much about the bird, nor the pastoral scene of children so curiously circled around it. For some reason, she cared only about the fact that someone would want to hurt the tiny creature. She wondered the same thing that many people dealing with youths ask themselves. *Why are kids so cruel?* Not finding a satisfactory answer to this, she came off instantly cross, grumbling like a mother bear.

“If anyone kicks that bird I will make sure to have them suspended.” She wasn’t exactly certain that she had this authority, but it worked in scaring off a few of the rough children who had been quite clearly itching to maim or mangle the bird, instinctually programmed to prey upon the weak. The ne’er-do-wells gave her a few sneaky glares for ruining their sadistic fun, but shrugged their ill-wishing shoulders and bounded away to the cafeteria, on to the next unfolding scene. Relieved that the students hadn’t given her guff for her admonishment, she stepped into the circle of bodies.

“It hit the window and fell, Miss. It almost fell on Sandy!” Mylena repeated and Miss Murphy

glanced to her side at the sound of her voice, realizing that the student was still beside her. She looked around to find the girl, Sandy, who she had taught last year, but she was nowhere in sight.

“It’s a bad omen, a very bad omen to have a bird hit the window like that. Even worse if it’s dead.” Cecelia hadn’t meant to scare the students, but she was a little frightened herself, having been confronted by a similar scene once before. She remembered when she was seventeen and a raven had slammed into the east-facing window of her parents’ home. They rushed outside to see what had made such an awful racket and there it was, its neck bent at an extraordinary angle. Her mother reached to pick it up, but it was clearly dead: a black, lifeless smudge in the unforgiving white snow. They left it there, opting out of a burial because the ground was too cold to penetrate. Within twenty-four hours, they received news that Cecelia’s grandfather had died in a car accident.

The rest of the students watched as she moved in to pick up the starling as her mother had refused to do ten years before in their own backyard. She felt as if this was the only option with such a large, concerned audience. There was a collective taking of breath, and one concerned child warned her about touching the starling with her bare hands.

“H1N1, Miss! The bird flu.”

But she didn’t care about contracting some unlikely illness. She saw it as her duty now to release the bird into safety, if it was still alive. Its neck was blessedly not crooked, and its tiny black eyes looked into hers with a provisional life, and she was overcome with the strange feeling that it was about to bite her with its long, pointed beak. She shook, instantly terrified by this thought, but, the bird remained limp in her hand, innocuous.

She cradled it in her cupped hands for a few precious seconds so all of the children could see. As they beheld its tiny life, it propped itself up on one leg then the other, slowly, as if the children were giving it the power it needed to recuperate. It looked at its admirers, made a thankful peep and took flight. It swooped low around them, making a circle of thanks and took its leave, flying high above the school and disappearing into the confused sky. The students tilted their heads upward, amazed. Some waved, some just watched with smiles on their faces. They looked at Miss Murphy with pride and glee

and told her that she had saved the bird. She wanted to partake in their happiness, but she felt abandoned and alone.

For the rest of the school day the event recurred in her mind like a perverted advertisement for the church or a public service announcement for the preservation of the innocence of youth. The way it had unfolded was orchestrated near to perfection. After lunch, she told her group of grade eights about the amazing event with wide eyes and a look of bemusement, but the students returned her excitement with rolled eyes and yawns. She supposed that bird rescue did not figure very high on their list of interesting things.

Later that evening she found herself to be overwhelmingly perplexed. During her drive home from work, she had remembered the dream from the night before, finally grasping it back from the edge of her consciousness, and the odd feeling of familiarity she'd had all day was confirmed. Upon rediscovering the lost reverie, she nearly veered off the highway and into the river that ran beside. Now, as she attempted to soothe herself with a glass of wine, the images of the two birds she had held in the past twenty hours, once in dream and once in reality, juxtaposed in her mind, and one picture was not settling well upon the other. Her brain and stomach were both in the blender. She wished that she had someone to confide in about this occurrence.

The odds of having a precognition of such a rare event were so slim that they probably ranked lower than the chances of being struck by lightning. She tried desperately to logistify. *Was it a spiritual message?* She had neglected her Catholic faith for so long that she found it hard to believe that some implausible saviour had returned to offer her solace, especially in dream form. And wasn't the dove the ornithological symbol of Christ? Another option was that it was possible that she was a psychic. She'd been into astrology, and had a brief stint as a Wiccan when she was a teen. She could even sometimes guess what the next song on the radio was going to be, but she could not accurately describe herself as being in touch with her supernatural side. She hadn't been able to foresee the implosion that was her past relationship.

She wondered to herself why she never had precognitive dreams when she was with Patrick. She

guessed that it was because when they were living together, she had typically spent her free time taking care of him. On weekdays, she would come home from school and prepare supper, tidy the apartment, do the laundry. She had been a very efficient young housewife as far as she was concerned, having modelled everything from the behaviour of her mother who also worked full time and took care of the family home. In a relationship, Cecelia had no time to be prone to flights of fancy. She had time only for work and domesticity. Now, these long hours in solace were opening her up to things she had left for dead.

During those six years with Patrick, she had also neglected her art and her writing, but this did not bother her so much because the need to create was offset by the fact that someone needed her. This human need had priority over her selfish desires for expression, but was inevitably what had sabotaged them, she thought now in hindsight. She was brimming with self-dissatisfaction over so many factors: her body, her weight, her place in the world, and she was unable to vent these frustrations through her art, so she vented them by being absolutely insolent with Patrick. When the grumpiness was first manifest, he was quick to console, but as the years passed, her mood was more off than it was on, and he could no longer handle the browbeating. She had become similar to those who had picked on her in school. She had become what she had always feared: the unconscionable bully. Patrick had said he was sorry, but she would have to move out and *work on herself*.

Is that what she was doing?

She moved from the tiny kitchen in her bachelorette apartment and toward her small office-cum-studio trying not to sink too deeply into the melancholy of her current situation, nor the fact that she was slowly losing grasp of reality, whatever reality might be. She sat down on the grimy carpet, feeling the need to be close to the floor, and grabbed one of the canvases on which she had already painted a background. Once comfortable with the canvas on her lap, she got to painting two cupped open hands with the pinkish-white Caucasian flesh colour she's picked up on sale at the paint supply store. When the hands were finished and dried, she set about painting a brown starling, which she referenced on the computer for a realistic effect. The bird's neck was twisted away from its body and its beak was open and tearing a chunk of meat out of the palm of the left hand. When all that had dried, she painted a thin

rivulet of blood that descended from the bitten hand.

Whether she had gone nuts or not, she was now at least able to create. And she found the more she painted, the more profoundly she was able to move away from herself and her stresses. She had never been so artfully prolific in her life. She looked around her run-down little office and admired her own works: canvas after canvas of paintings, bizarre paintings, paintings that told of monumental pain. Her eyes moved from the works of art to the digital clock at the corner of the computer screen and saw that it was after midnight. She tipped the most recent painting against the wall, stepped back to admire it, cocked her head into a look of appreciation, and crossed the hall to her bedroom and her single bed.

The next morning she woke late, having slept through ten minutes of her alarm, which she now realized was too dreamy a melody to do the job of waking her from her ever-deepening slumbers. Each morning she had to summon up a reason to wake, and in most cases the reason she found was that she had to be there for her students. She couldn't leave them alone with some know-nothing supply teacher. She was grasping at straws. She rose, snapped on her bra and pulled one of her vintage dresses over her head and yanked on some navy blue tights to match. She quickly brushed her teeth and drew the hairbrush through her frizzy bird's nest. Two minutes later she was bounding down the steps of her apartment and out the door to her car. As she descended, she tried to remember the contents of the stirring dreams that she might have had last night, but came up with nothing.

She sped to school, being deliberately reckless in doing twenty over the speed limit and taking hard curves, all the while smoking her cigarettes and flicking them out the crack in the window onto the highway below. She didn't care so much about her well-being. Every morning, she had the faintest intimation whispering to her that if she were to die in some fiery car crash that she would not be missed much. The biggest inconvenience was that they'd have to find yet another replacement teacher to take over her Art classes, but in these days of surplus teachers, that wouldn't be too difficult. Also, if she were to die, she would no longer be able to ruin the lives of others like Patrick because of a deep-seated anger that bubbled up from her own festering insecurities. If she were to die, she'd be a martyr of sorts and she would no longer do a mediocre job of teaching the children that had been put into her charge.

She wasn't always mediocre, but because she couldn't gather the strength to reinvent the wheel when she had been called at the last minute to cover yet another pregnant woman, this year her pedagogy was rote. She'd taught the grades before, and was going through the motions now, consulting the big, unchanging binder full of art plans gathered from teacher's college and other assignments she'd used in her time as a teacher, like all of the teachers she had despised when she was a student. Teachers who failed to recognize that students changed from annum to annum, and generation to generation, and that it was necessary to make accommodations and modifications that would entertain the new batches. She was ashamed of herself for giving up so early. She was hoping it was only a phase.

Despite her inner-wishes for death, or at least some sort of end, she pulled into the parking lot safe and sound, rolling her second-hand Corolla into its regular spot by the side door. She walked towards the school, a hulking modern building recently erected with beige and peach stone, and on the interior, shiny floors and pristine lockers that hadn't yet been defaced or decorated by graffiti. She had managed to beat the busloads of students and many of the teachers. But although the lot was mostly empty, she did have a surreal feeling that something or someone was watching her. She looked to the eaves of the building to see if it was her pet starling, but the eaves were bare but for the half cylindrical forms of a few wayward balls that had been kicked up there by accident and had not been retrieved. This feeling of being watched was new to her and she wondered if it was the onset of paranoid schizophrenia.

Before making it to her classroom, she stopped at the teacher's window of the cafeteria so that she could order the first of the many coffees that she would be drinking that day. She made small talk with the man behind the window. He was overweight, newly divorced and had a strange sense of humor, but she got along with him fairly well. *I'm never insecure with the hard labourers of the world*, she thought. She felt as if she was more befitting of their league because of her own humble beginnings. It was her colleagues and administrators with whom she was never quite comfortable. She wasn't sure how transparent she should be with them, or whom she could trust. They were such a gossipy lot, and always looking to betray the weakest link.

She had just settled herself into her desk chair and was about to check her email when there was a

knock on the door with a similar weight and rhythm as the knock that had come the day before regarding the fallen bird. She sauntered over to the door, hoping that whoever was on the other side was not going to keep her for too long. The precious minutes she had before period one were her favourite of the day because she was able to put her head on straight and build her stamina to confront whatever the students had in store.

When she opened the door, she was struck with the feeling of *deja vu*. There was Mylena, with the same timid look of concern that she had worn the day before, the only thing about her that had changed was her outfit. She had gone for green and black striped stockings, a black novelty crinoline and a green vest over a black scoop neck. She had a comically sized bow in her head and on it were printed tiny green skulls. Miss Murphy wondered where her student was able to procure these clothes, and what parent in their right mind would shell out the cash for them.

“Mylena! What on earth are you doing at school so early? Is everything alright?”

“Actually. Not really. Miss, you know yesterday, when I came to you about the bird?”

“Yes. How could I forget? It was a strange event.”

“Well, those boys who were going to kick it, they’ve been really mean to us lately. Like really mean.” Mylena’s eyes dropped to the ground, and it looked for a moment as if she might break down into sobs, but she caught herself.

“Who are *us*?” Miss Murphy asked.

Mylena creaked the door open to reveal a modest rag-tag entourage behind her. She recognized most of them from having taught them in previous years. There was Markus, the boy who had a penchant for the theatre and was always singing Broadway show tunes as he walked the halls. There was Gordon, the big kid with the crazy Afro. Sandy was a girl who was incredibly small for her age, seemed unkempt and never said much. And finally Jill, Mylena’s dearest friend who had a loud way of expressing herself, but was not quite Emo. Today she wore a feather boa with plaid leggings and a dress printed with a clear image of a blue sky with white clouds floating across it.

“Oh, yes. I know you guys! What are you doing hiding in the hall like that? Come in, come in.”

She waved them into her classroom, scooping the air. “Tell me about the incidents and I will report them to the principal.”

The students entered the class with mild apprehension and watched as Miss Murphy fumbled around in the filing cabinet that she kept beside her desk. What the students likely didn't know was that she was looking for a tailor-made form that she was obligated to fill out and submit to the administrators should there be any instance of bullying reported to her, which seemed to be the case now.

The province had recently implemented the Anti-Bullying Bill, and the school board had been hasty in disseminating the required procedures to the teachers. Miss Murphy's one hundred colleagues and herself had gathered two weeks prior for an all-day professional development lecture, which had begun with a breakfast in the cafeteria. The food was sugar-laden and the coffee plentiful, and the teachers were left to their own devices, meant to mingle with one another as the principals looked on to see that they were all functioning as a team. Situations like this made Cecelia nervous, and she attempted to attach herself to some of the kinder looking teachers. Though she had been covering contracts at the school for three years, she had failed to make any friendships. She tried this clique and that, but was mostly ignored. In one scenario she had even been brave enough to speak, but her attempt at an anecdote was met with looks of disgust and derision. It wasn't long before she had migrated toward the wall where she sipped at her coffee and tried to look happy to be alone.

When the breakfast was over, they were shuffled like a herd of scholarly cattle into the library where apple shaped papers with mortarboard-wearing worms with the teachers' names written across them were stuck to the tables. Cecelia was silently thankful for this preordained seating assignment. It meant that she wouldn't have to sidle up to a group with the vain hope of absorption. She searched around for her name and found it: Mrs. Murphy. She supposed that she had no business thinking that anyone had taken the time to care whether or not she was married, and she was saddened at the thought that this recent breakup with Patrick most likely had ensured that she would not be married for a while. She shook her head at the paper as if trying to erase the name with her neck movement, and swiftly swept the paper off the desk and into her bag.

When the others had sat themselves with their coffees and teas and bits of uneaten breakfast foods placed before them as a sort of wall, she realized the schematics of the seating. Each table was meant to contain one teacher from every department at the school. On the left side of the table there was herself, from the Arts department; an older, cranky faced woman from the Humanities; an offbeat, strange-tie wearing bearded man from the Social Sciences and a snotty looking girl who was miraculously younger than Cecelia and permanently employed, from the French department. French was the only thing teachers were hired for permanently.

On the right side of the table were the alpha folk: two young, cute, but already betrothed men, clearly buddies, from the Maths and Sciences; a fit, attractive but suspiciously brazen looking blonde teacher from the Physical Education department, and a rugged, but standoffish teacher from the Design and Technology department who specialized in shop. Cecelia hadn't seen him at staff events very often and she supposed that he was often exempted because of his tenure and age, and the fact that Design and Technology teachers were very difficult to get a hold of, especially those with teaching degrees. Those from the Maths and Sciences departments were quick to start poking fun at the others in a jovial manner, attempting to lighten the mood at the stuffy table. The senior Science teacher focussed his attention on her almost immediately as if picking up on the stench of fear. She hated to be singled out, and wished she could have just melted in with the table.

"You new to Xavier, sweetie? I've never seen you around these parts."

She smirked and wondered how appropriate it was for this man to be assigning her a chauvinistic term of endearment in front of her colleagues. She didn't feel much like playing along. In fact, she was mildly sickened by this condescending bit of attention.

"I've actually been here for three years, off and on, but thanks for not noticing." Her sarcasm was a shock not only herself but to a few of the others on her side of the table. The French teacher even uttered a snort of approval, which led Cecelia to believe that perhaps she wasn't as bad as she seemed. Her tormentor was also taken aback, switching immediately into defensive mode.

"Well, you've got to admit, it is a rather large staff. And the departments don't do a very good

job of mingling.”

Cecelia nodded, already bored with these obvious observations, convinced that this guy was only talking to her because she was skinny these days, and maybe even mildly attractive. He wouldn't have spoken to her otherwise.

Luckily enough for her, the seminar had begun, and the crowd was called to attention by the administrators who were introducing various members of the so-called “Bill-14 squad,” a group of four peri-menopausal women sent to them by the school board. After the formalities, and a sappy, contrived speech about the detriments of bullying on a child's psyche, the groups launched into a progression of four team-building activities including paper bridge building, trust falling, the egg drop, and even some role-playing. *The types of games that had been boring staff members for the past twenty or so years,* Cecelia thought. After a couple of them were completed, she noted that the activities accomplished little more than promoting a neanderthalic competition between the alpha members of each group, and further subjugated those, like herself, who were more arts minded. She wished that the left-brained individuals could for once be subjected to some creative activities where there was no competition, and no pressure to succeed. She pictured the lot of them painting watercolours to some soothing music, perhaps Chopin, and decided this would be a far more effective anti-bullying activity.

When the games had miraculously come to an end, Cecelia realized that she had hardly uttered two words to her teammates, and she had begun to lose track of why they had even been playing the games to begin with. She skipped the provided lunch in the cafeteria, and spent the free hour mid-day alone in her art room. When she returned to the library she found that the afternoon, in a fashion much worse than the a.m., consisted of a general, browbeating lecture that was clearly meant to frighten the teachers. They were each presented with a photocopy of the anti-bullying bill and, as a staff, they pored over each word and for each section and subsection the ladies from the board had a few cautionary tales to match. By the end of the day the teachers were positively horrified. The gist of the cautionary tales was that if any teacher failed to report an instance of bullying, the teacher herself would be held accountable. If a child were to injure herself or take her own life, the accountability might result in the

end of that teacher's career, and the possibility of being sued by the parents involved without any support of the school board.

She left that day with a deeply uneasy feeling and wondered why teachers should be held solely accountable for the actions of their students. What people failed to understand was that in an average school day, a person might, in the hallways, oversee, pass by, witness or break up many types of bullying. There was always some kid calling another kid a fag, a loser, a pussy and when questioned, the victim will invariably say, "It's okay Miss, we're friends."

How much of bullying is the improper use of language? In other cases, there might be a child drifting around on his own with no discernible friends: a situation of exclusion bullying. The problem being that the teachers had no way of knowing who has done the excluding and why. Were teachers to dictate who was to be friends with whom? The classroom was one thing. It was easier to have control in a room that you were paid to patrol, but the minute your back was turned to the board, what was stopping the kids from sending a text or passing a note with something insulting in it? Could these actions lead to dismissal?

And what of the parents? Was the modern trend of parenting to have a couple of children and take no responsibility for them once they are dispelled from the womb? She had seen many parents in her short stint as a teacher that definitely should have been a bit more regimented with birth control. Parent teacher interviews spoke volumes. There were mothers and fathers, sometimes separately, sometimes together, who would come in with their children and berate them in front of their teachers for poor marks or behaviour. There were parents who came without the children and confided in Cecelia that so and so was a loser anyway, and probably wouldn't amount to much, or that the older sibling was the shining star in the family. And then, the highest percentage, were the parent who just didn't come. Parents who had the time but didn't care. Or parents who would have loved to, but had to work sixteen hours at two jobs in order to make ends meet. What were their children doing with these heaps of free, unobserved time? What were they getting up to?

Cecelia regained herself, being reawakened from her memory by the pressing issue at hand: the

students standing before her with their own separate stories and issues. She realized how dreamy she had been of late. She was finding it more and more difficult to focus on the reality of her situation. She was a teacher in a school full of people in constant need. She looked to the students standing in front of her, wishing for some clue as to how to help them to come from their pleading eyes, but she was fixated on the mandated importance of recording their complaints and reporting them so she wouldn't lose her job. She looked to her hands and saw that she had located the form from the professional development day.

“So, you'll just have to tell me the names of those who have been picking on you, and I will record them here. The principal will call you to the office shortly. Probably even today. And then you can explain yourselves and your situations to him.” Cecelia hoped that this was going to provide the succor they needed.

“Actually Miss, that's not really what we had in mind,” Mylena was quick to retort, and Cecelia's hopes fell. “If we tell you who the kids are and something happens to them, then you can be sure that something more will happen to us, too. And you are going to need a bigger piece of paper to record the names of the people who pick on us.” Mylena stared skeptically at the form.

“Not what you had in mind? Mylena, you must understand, there is new protocol when it comes to bullying. The government insists on this.” Cecelia was worried that his refusal might cost her her job, but Mylena, seemingly uncaring, screwed up her face and let loose.

“Do you think that the *government* knows what we go through, Miss? They don't. And no offense, Miss, but you don't really know what we go through either. If you did, you'd know that no piece of paper is going to help us out.”

At this comment something unlatched in the stomach of Cecelia Murphy, something that she had been repressing for much of her young adult life. One memory, then a flood of them poured out into her guts and fizzled up to her brain. She had an image of being a lonely fat kid taking her lunch in solitude outside of the school building or in the library during the winter in order to avoid the people who were constantly harassing her. Another image replaced that one, and she saw herself rushing through high school corridors with her head down to avoid as best she could any judgment or insult from her fellow

students, mainly the gaggle of girls who always had some contrite comment. Her mouth twisted upon itself to hold tight the rush of emotion that accompanied the final image that came to her of Miss Esperanza in all her glory, the last day that she'd seen her in the art room. The only teacher who saw her as she was, the teacher that had inspired Cecelia to become Miss Murphy: Art Teacher.

She *did* understand what her students were going through, perhaps more than they did, and for the first time that year she felt as if she had a purpose, a reason to be solicited for assistance. She realized she could take the pain and discomfort that had backlogged in her brain and translate it into help for others in need. She wasn't just a useless teacher who couldn't make friends, she was a person that the weak, different and physically abused students could approach and feel safe talking to. She gave up the bureaucratic angle; throwing the form back into the file she had wrestled it from.

“What did you have in mind, then?”

“We were hoping that you might be able to let us come here at lunch instead to work on art. It's one thing we all have in common. If we are here, then the bullies can't bother us.”

Cecelia pondered this statement briefly and wondered how it might impact her career. She could protect these kids, and certainly being able to devise a group in a space that would remove them from the dangerous wasteland that was the relatively unobserved hallway was better than filling out a form that would cause these students more abuse.

“Well, I guess art is the best way of alleviating sadness, problems and stress.” Cecelia said placidly, directly quoting her favourite teacher. She smiled a toothy genuine smile; perhaps for the first time that school year.

“Well, when can we start, Miss Murphy?” Mylena prodded, more hopeful than ever.

“How's today at lunch?” She smiled again and so did the little group, with their spirits noticeably lifted, they high fived each other, having won their little battle, and paraded out the door, confident.

For the next four months, the students, led by herself, convened in her room every lunch break for the Art Club, which she had unceremoniously dubbed the group. In the first of their meetings, Cecelia dispersed white slips of printer paper and the few students went about making posters to hang throughout

the school. Those that were not vandalized and defaced proved to be somewhat successful and the population of the group grew steadily over a week, and plateaued at around thirty members. The students were mostly juniors in grade seven and eight and early seniors from grade nine who had not yet become comfortable in their own skins or developed coping mechanisms to handle the tough environment that was entirely different from their coddled and comfortable elementary schools.

Cecelia had noticed her own mood improving over the course of the four months. In the evenings, she now took the time to make herself a decent meal, so that the students wouldn't tease her about the cafeteria food that she was always buying. In the mornings, she had an easier time awakening because she knew she could not miss Art Club. The students would give her hell if she were to be absent. When she painted in the evenings, she noticed too that her artistic subjects had become less graven and desperate. She had begun working on landscapes with colours of rich purple and reds and blues; the colours that she would overlook as being too cheery for her personal palette. Once the students goaded her into bringing one of the landscapes into class, and she could because the subject matter was not too disturbing for the perspectives of youth. When she presented the work to the students, they gathered around it and cooed and chirped at her accomplishment. They told her that she should be a famous artist, and for a moment she was inclined to believe them

“What did you do for lunch before Art Club, Miss Murphy?” one of them had asked her early on.

“To be honest, I sat in here all alone eating bad food, thinking my own thoughts, checking my emails, you know.” She felt somewhat uncomfortable being peppered with this line of questioning, but also felt compelled to tell this child the truth. Some of the other students looked up from their respective artworks, and the questioning continued.

“Why didn't you go to the teacher's lounge with everyone else?” asked the student, clearly confused. “You'd rather be here with us?”

“Well. I don't know. I guess I just liked to decompress at lunch, and I don't really make friends very well.” The truth was that many of the people working at her school were backstabbing gossips that would feast upon a psychologically weak person like herself, who clearly didn't fit into the upper middle-

class, happily married suburban norm.

“Ha! Like us! You’re a misfit. Sorry Miss, I hope that didn’t offend you. I just learned that word, and I wanted to use it.”

Cecelia nodded her head with a slight grin on her face. She *was* a misfit like these kids, and always had been. She looked out at the weirdly beautiful group, some madly drawing in their sketchbooks, others making abstracts with bright tissue and glue on paper, some others finishing the projects that she had assigned them in her classes. They were an odd bunch, no doubt. They had irregular haircuts, strange clothes, and even a few unconventional faces. Their body types were diverse. They were skinny and fat, and short, and gangly, and stocky. They stood out from the lot of their peers, the muscular boys who seemed as if they had been training for the Olympics for most of their lives, and lithe pretty girls who mocked them for being suspiciously irregular, for enjoying the Arts, for wearing glasses, basically for any reason why they were imperfect in their view.

Over the months she had become better acquainted with the ones who originally approached her to found the group, as well as some of the others. Within the first week, Mylena had confided in her that her parents were going through a nasty divorce and she was the pawn in their elaborate adult games. Her father had abducted her one evening after school, taking her out to some fancy restaurant where she was able to order only desserts, and then the two went shopping for new Emo clothes and shoes. Mylena hadn’t exactly said that she was abducted, but Cecelia deduced this certainty from the fact that Mylena’s mother was apparently frantic and had even called the police.

Jill, Mylena’s ‘bestie,’ didn’t seem to have any tragic tale to tell, other than the regular bullying she got for the clothes she wore, and for her love of the fine arts. She said that she never really knew what to talk about with the other kids. She didn’t know about sports, and when she started mentioning Baroque composers or great books that she’d read, their eyes would roll up into their heads and they would call her either a nerd or a loser. In spite of catching guff for her adult tastes, she was a strong girl and a true rock for Mylena.

Gordon was a refugee from Haiti. During one session of the Art Club, he had started talking

about his old way of life before the earthquake. He talked about the colours and the colourful people indigenous to his country, and said that even though they didn't have a lot of money, they always managed to have fun playing soccer or dominoes and somehow always had enough coins to buy a bottle of Coke. He hated the cold winter in Canada, but was thankful that his foster parents had adopted him because if he had have remained, his life would be spent begging for money in the streets. Both of George's parents had died in the earthquake.

Sandy was a more difficult case to crack. She never missed Art Club, and preferred to sit in the back of the room, as isolated from the others as possible. Cecelia thought that this was because she preferred being alone, which was not peculiar for artist types regardless of age; but after a discreet complaint from one of the other students, Cecelia realized that Sandy might have wanted to distance herself because of her personal hygiene. At the end of one of the lunch hours, a boy who had been sitting near Sandy had approached Cecelia and told her that Sandy smelled like she hadn't taken a bath in a month. The following day, Cecelia pulled Sandy outside of the room to ask her if everything was all right, and she smelled the scent for herself. It was almost like the whiffs she had caught off of homeless people that lived in the subway stations in the city. She tried not to appear disgusted even though she was struggling to keep from gagging.

"Is everything going okay at home, Sandy? Can I help with anything?" Sandy looked at her with horror glistening in her eyes, and began vehemently shaking her head.

"No. Everything is fine, its just that my Mom is...not well." Cecelia returned this contradictory statement with a look of such concern that it almost brought the tears out in her eyes.

"Alright. But I'm worried about you. Will you talk to Miss Stacey today? She's a friendly lady, and I hear she has candy in her room." She was delicately referring Sandy to the school psychologist. She knew that whomever was at home was not providing the basics to this poor child.

"Okay, Miss. If you think I should," said Sandy in deference.

"I think you should," said Cecelia trying to stop the tears welling up in her eyes. She was wondering if 'not well' meant a mental issue or a physical issue.

Later on in her career, and even in spite of how difficult that year was for Cecelia in her personal realm, she would look back at the time she spent commandeering the Art Club at Xavier as the happiest time of her life. In the four and a half months that they were able to spend lunches together, the students and she had undertaken murals, set design, poster creation and were even responsible for implementing a public art gallery in one of the defunct classrooms. In four and half months she was able to share in the stories of so many bright, beautiful and exceptionally different students who made her realize that she was a valued member of the school community, contrary to the opinions of much of the staff. She saw the art room as a sacred space that existed for those who needed it, whenever they needed it. She saw the art room as a community that helped her overcome her own psychological and emotional downfall. But all that was to change quite suddenly.

On the last Tuesday of February, her profound experience would come to a rather abrupt end. It was the end of the day and she was stacking dried watercolour paintings and preparing them to take home for assessment when she heard her name called over the P.A. system.

“Mrs. Murphy, please report to the office at your earliest convenience.” Her heart sang at the news. She had never been called to the office before, and she naively assumed that the principal was summoning her to give her some kind of praise for the exceptional extra-curricular work that she had been up to lately. She even let herself imagine that she was being paged because the principal had lined up another contract for her to begin next year, and she would not have to spend the upcoming summer waiting for a call that may never come. She dropped what she was doing, and went immediately to the place that she’d been called.

When she walked in, the all-knowing secretaries motioned her to enter the principal’s office. Cecelia saw that he was not alone, but accompanied by a woman who was sitting across from his desk. Cecelia was terribly shy in that moment, and afraid that she was interrupting, but proceeded anyhow at the urging of the ladies behind the phones. When the principal caught sight of her he called her in and flashed a smile that she read as being somewhat forced. A feeling rose up in her gut and she knew that

the impromptu meeting was called not to praise her but rather, probably, to break some sort of bad news.

She took her seat beside the other waiting lady and felt her eyes move up and down her body, analyzing her head to toe. The woman spoke.

“So you’re Mrs. Murphy,” the lay said, and Cecelia cringed at this improper address and the snarky manner in which it had been delivered.

“It’s actually Miss Murphy...not married.” But the lady proceeded as if she had not heard this, or at least didn’t care.

“I’m Mrs. McMahon, the teacher you’ve been replacing. Pleased to meet you.” The imposter pushed a pudgy hand in her direction and Cecelia looked at it a moment, dumbfounded as to why she was being introduced to this woman, especially now. Her contract had been for the full year. She was sure of it.

She finally did extend her own hand to meet that of the lady, and while hand shaking she had a chance to analyze her more closely. She looked as if she were in her mid-forties even though she was probably in her late thirties. Her mousy brown hair hadn’t been cut ages and a two inch line of black and grey speckled roots was more than apparent at her scalp. Her clothes were ill-fitting and hardly matched: a mauve wool turtleneck sweater, and beige corduroy pants. She didn’t have a necklace, a bracelet, or even a watch to add any other visual interest, and her face was not nearly pretty enough to capture attention on its own. The first thing that struck Cecelia was that the woman was completely devoid of art or creativity. She looked to be no more exciting than a stale suburban mother. Cecelia diverted her attention to the principal for some sort of additional information that would make this meeting less awkward.

“Now that you two have taken care of the pleasantries, I believe it is time for me to explain. Mrs. McMahon is returning from her maternity leave a few months early, so we will need to vacate your spot and cancel the contract.”

Cecelia took a moment to process this matter-of-fact bit of information that had just shattered her insides, and stopped her mind from thinking. She stumbled over her words.

“Wha? When is this...uh...change happening, exactly?” In her stupor she looked like the poster girl for incompetence. She wanted to scream that this whole situation was terribly unfair, but she kept visualizing her contract, the same type of contract that she had been given every year she’d covered for someone at Xavier, the contract that read that her post was intact until the end of the year, unless, for some reason, the permanent teacher should return early from her leave. She’d never seen a permanent teacher return early.

“Well instead of you returning from the March break, Mrs. McMahon will be resuming her post.”

Mrs. McMahon chimed in with a phony sort of solace. “I’m sorry dear, but I just found out that I am pregnant again, and I have to accrue enough working days before I take my Mat leave again.”

Cecelia’s belly was consuming itself by this point. She wondered why her life had to be destroyed because someone else’s lack of birth control. *Who gets pregnant during a maternity leave?* she wondered. *Whose body is even able to handle that?* The office, the world and she were spinning at different rates, and she felt as if she might wretch in the silver mesh garbage can that the principal kept by the side of his desk. Her cheeks were flaming, and she must have looked as if her head was about to spontaneously combust.

When she came back to her senses, she realized Mrs. McMahon had left the room, and she was sitting alone with the principal, who clearly seemed to pity her.

“Mrs. McMahon will be in next Monday to shadow you and get back into the swing of things. I know this is difficult, Miss Murphy, but I have no say when a permanent teacher wishes to return to their post. I might have another opportunity for you at Xavier at the beginning of April, so please don’t lose hope yet.” Cecelia felt marooned on her island of inability. She wanted to speak up and defend herself and her position and the phenomenal work she had been doing, but she was scared into silence by the fact that her outspoken opinion might cost her this future position. She was well aware of her place as a contractual teacher, hoping some day for tenure.

The suggestion of a future position was enough to propel Cecelia out of the room without falling down, but she was still both infuriated and deeply saddened by the events. She drifted back to her

classroom, slumped into her desk chair—*correction: Mrs. McMahon's desk chair*--and unleashed her tears in deluge of saltwater. Once she was drained enough to begin packing up to leave for the evening, she lifted her head and saw that she had wept onto one of the student's watercolours, and all of the beautiful, soft images had run into each other to combine an unappealing brown mess. She felt impotent and useless.

The following Monday, as promised, Mrs. McMahon showed up during Cecelia's sacred before school time. She had some sickeningly fragrant herbal tea in a mug that said 'World's Best Teacher,' and reading this obviously false claim was almost enough to make Cecelia break down in tears. She refused to let this aging teacher see that she was so deeply affected by this harsh early upheaval, and she smiled her sweetest smile and spoke to break the silence.

"We should have a full day today. Five classes. Four before lunch and one after. Some days you'll have a sixth class: grade seven art."

"Oh, for today, I think I'm only going to make it to lunch, dear," with this statement she patted her belly, which to Cecelia looked only pudgy and not pregnant. "Doctor tells me I've got to take it easy. I'm a bit old for childbearing and the last pregnancy I had a lot of bleeding so I have to avoid straining myself and any additional stressors."

Cecelia wondered again why this woman was coming back to usurp her position when she was so clearly fragile. *Did she think that teaching six individual classes with six needed preps was going to be stress-free?* The students, especially those who had their own individual dramas, needed a teacher who cared, not one who was just punching the clock and racking up hours for another leave. Cecelia doubted that this woman would even take the time to learn all of the 280 names she would need to know. Most likely she would call them all *dear* and *sweetie*, similarly to how she referred to Cecelia, whose name she'd probably also forgotten.

The morning continued, and the woman sat in the corner taking notes, or was she doing a crossword, Cecelia honestly couldn't tell. In the Art History lecture during the grade nine class, she had the nerve to contest Cecelia in the middle of speaking about Van Gogh's life as a painter and his troubled

relationships with those around him.

“Wasn’t his brother’s name Teddy, dear? I don’t think it was Theo,” the new teacher squawked rudely. Cecelia had heard of pregnant brain, a condition that made those carrying babies rather dim, but for some reason, that didn’t seem to be the culprit.

“It is Theo. I studied Van Gogh rigorously in Art school.”

“I don’t know, dear. We’ll have to double check later.”

Cecelia did not take well to being undermined in front of her class by someone who clearly didn’t know the first thing about her favourite artist. A pit opened up in her belly and sucked her breakfast down into it, leaving only a hole of nausea.

The students were now suspect of the older lady in the corner, and she could see them cocking their eyebrows at one another, and even caught a duo passing a note which was probably looking for some clarification as to who the invader was, but Cecelia couldn’t bring herself to make introductions, to announce she was soon to be gone. Cecelia bet that they thought it was someone sent to assess her abilities as a teacher, because they seemed to be on their best behaviour, hoping she would not get reprimanded because of them. She admired this solidarity in these students who were typically rowdy and prone to chatter, and this made her even sorer about leaving them.

They made it to lunch with only a couple more direct contraventions. The one that had made her the most upset was during the colour theory tutorial that she had been giving the grade eights. She was explaining to them how to go about mixing brown with all three of the primary colours when the teacher piped in.

“Surely, that is not possible. How are you going to get brown like that? What I advise the students is to just use a pre-made brown.”

Cecelia bit her tongue, and commenced to make the loveliest brown colour as she had always done in these lectures before. When she had it produced, the students applauded her, all clearly banding together against the stranger in their classroom. Mrs. McMahan looked miffed, but said nothing.

At lunch, Mrs. McMahan began gathering up her notes and rinsed out her mug in one of the

classroom sinks. “I guess that was a good morning, dear, but you and I really have two different styles of teaching.”

“That’s to be expected, I guess. We went to teacher’s college decades apart.” After her day, Cecelia felt entitled to this job, and continued to pack up the projector pretending not to realize how cruel the comment had been.

“And that PowerPoint business. I surely won’t be using any of that. And projecting the Internet onto the board? Preposterous. I’m a chalkboard type of gal. Good old-fashioned coloured chalk in the art room. I have some posters kicking around, too.”

Cecelia rolled her eyes to herself, and had begun to dread the rest of the year for her poor still-unsuspecting students. They were so young that they had never been without technology. Their parents’ cell phones were placed in their hands at a young age and had spring-boarded them into the realms of the Internet, laptops, iPads, PowerPoints and social media. It was futile to try to appeal to them without these perks. It was useless to stand still in the current of innovation that was flowing quickly around them all.

By the time she could think of some retort to the luddite standing before her, the Art Club students had begun trickling in with their lunches in hand, laughing and carrying on with the many friends that they had met because of the club. In response to their output of spirit, Mrs. McMahon recoiled and stepped away from them as if they were infectious disease carriers.

“And what is the meaning of this? It is lunch, isn’t it?”

“This is the Art Club I hold every day at lunch. It’s where students come to relax and escape some of the stresses that unstructured time holds. They have made a great deal of friends here, and for many of them, their marks and attitudes have improved.” Cecelia realized she was boasting, but was so proud of the gang that she could not help herself.

“Well, you can be sure *I* won’t be doing anything like this. Lunch is your own time sweetheart. You shouldn’t be spending it with students. It’s unnatural.”

Cecelia decided with this comment that she now actually hated this woman. She wondered how anyone, especially a mother and a so-called teacher, could be so hateful toward youth. *And what was she*

implying about how it was unnatural for her to spend her lunch in an art club with the students?

“Well, thank you for coming today. I hope you have a successful end of the year.” That was all she could think of to say. Mrs. McMahon left the room, and left Cecelia determined to treasure the final five days that remained with her class and club.

“Who was that woman, Miss?” one of her students asked.

“Well. I guess I will tell you all now. That will be your new art teacher. My contract is over and she is returning.”

Terror struck the eyes of all before her and a wave of nos and buts shivered through the room. She explained further that it would kill her to leave them, but she had no choice in the matter. They would just have to be understanding of the situation. The students collectively bore a look of rejection even though she would have given her kidney not to abandon them.

The following day, the dismal news had travelled to all of her classes. Throughout the morning her usually energetic, cheerful students entered the room as if they were a members of a funeral procession. She was greeted with dirges.

“Aw Miss, why? You’re the best teacher we’ve ever had!”

“You’re abandoning us to that woman! Miss, she didn’t even know anything about art.”

“How could they do this? I’m telling my parents. They’ll call the principal.”

She made short work of their complaints, explaining that she was just as upset as they were, if not more, and that alerting their parents would be of no use. It was all clear and legal. The regular teacher would be reassuming her place, and the best they could do was to enjoy their remaining week together before the March Break. She promised that she would come visit, and that she may even be back in the building. With the prospect of another contract hanging over her head, she made sure to repeat herself to her students ensuring that they wouldn’t cause a controversy.

“I bet she won’t even do the Art Club. She looks like the kind of teacher that eats in the teachers’ lounge,” said one of the forlorn students at lunch, and the rest of the club looked at her for some explanation.

“Well. I guess you’ll have to wait and see,” Cecelia said, not wanting to rob the students of every bit of their hope.

“We’ll have to go back out in the hallway. I bet the kids have been saving up their insults.”

Of all the students who were devastated by the news, it seemed to have hit poor Sandy the hardest. At the end of Art Club, she lingered behind after the rest of the group had slunk out of the room. Cecelia did her best to smile at Sandy, but Sandy just stared at her with her wide timid eyes, eyes that looked like they had grown well accustomed to disappointment.

“Did you call about my mother?”

Cecelia was a bit stunned by this question, as it didn’t relate to the current personal drama that she was experiencing.

“No. Why do you ask?” Cecelia asked, even though she was sure that the psychologist must have contacted home after the discussion Cecelia had urged them to have, the contents of which were not disclosed to Cecelia.

“I guess it was the psychologist you sent me to. Anyway, I’m to go live with my Aunt today. She’s picking me up after school. People came and looked at my house, and said my Mom needs time to get better.” Sandy looked so hideously terrified and lost.

“I am sorry to hear that, Sandy. Do you like your Aunt?”

“Yeah. But she’s not my Mom. With you and my Mom gone, I don’t know what I am going to do.” Sandy looked desperately close to tears, but in the same light not close at all. She seemed battered but rigid, like the bird that Cecelia had rescued months before. Like the bird, it looked as if Sandy had flown into a wall, but had the temerity to keep on flying, because as a bird, that was the only thing left to do.

Cecelia looked long at the sad wisp of a child before her and gathered her words carefully. Just then she remembered the leather bound sketchbook that she had recently bought herself as a treat before she had realized that her career was coming to an end. She told Sandy to hold on a moment and retrieved it from her computer bag that she kept hidden in the cupboard below her desk.

“I have just the thing,” Cecelia said once she had retrieved it, and revealed the beautiful black book to Sandy. Her eyes widened for a split second but narrowed again as if this was a trick. Cecelia continued, “If there is a point where you feel like you just don’t know what you are going to do, draw in this book. I promise you, it will make you feel better. And when I come back to visit, you can show me what you have done. And if there is no Art Club, go to the library or go outside, and find a quiet place, and draw in this book. You will be safe. It worked for me.”

“Worked for you? What do you mean? There’s no way that you were a loser like me.”

“Sandy, you are not a loser, and neither was I. We are just different, that’s all, and other kids don’t like different. They like same. But you know what different kids have that same kids don’t? They have talent. Maybe not talent in sports or making friends, but talent for seeing the world in a new, exciting way, and best of all, talent to feel! We can really feel, Sandy. That’s why we hurt so much.”

Sandy’s eyes had grown wide again, and she knew now that this wasn’t some trick. She nodded her head and clutched the sketchbook to her chest. She might have wanted to say a lot more, but she could only squeak out, “Thanks, Miss,” before she hurried on her way out the door and to her next class. Cecelia wanted a minute to consider the gravity of what she had just told the child, but her own next class was coming in, and she had to proceed with the lesson.

On the last day of her teaching at Xavier High School, amid the parties, and the tears of her students, and the general malaise of it all, she was called back to the principal’s office. When she heard her name being paged, at lunch, she was elated, thinking that he would have news of the next position that he had mentioned to her in their former meeting.

She left the Art Club in the charge of the teacher next door, who had popped her head into the class for one of the free cupcakes that had been baked by the parents of one of the more wealthy students in the class. Cecelia rushed off toward the office with great excitement. Once there she was ushered in, and she took her familiar seat across the desk from the principal. She noticed that he had a long paper in his hand, and she wondered if it was a new contract to be signed.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Murphy,” he set off in a tone that did not hold much promise, and she was

instantly frightened to correct him again on the marital status gaffe. Instead she nodded her head and smiled wanly, waiting to hear the news.

“Do you know what I hold here in my hand?” he asked, with eyebrows narrowing ever closer together.

“No,” she answered curtly.

“What I have here is a petition signed by two hundred odd students, demanding that I do not remove you from your position here.”

Cecelia was instantly confused, having no idea that her students had gotten up to something so conniving, but smiled in spite of herself, feeling rather flattered at their genuine care and concern.

“I assume by your smile, that you were a party to this petition, as if you really thought that it would do some good for you, to put your students up to this.” The principal’s tone was deepening, and Cecelia turned defensive, resenting having been accused of such a thing.

“I can assure you that I had no idea that they would ever dream of doing such a thing, and I smiled only because, in the moment, I was flattered.”

“Ah, then I suppose you did not urge these students’ parents to telephone me. I have had at least ten messages from members of this community, all breathing fire down my neck. Did it not occur to you perhaps *not* to tell your students of your leaving? To have some discretion?”

“You mean, just leave and never come back? No. That thought never occurred to me. I believe in being honest with my students, because I respect them.” Cecelia was shocked that she was again sitting in this office with all hell breaking loose. How could she be blamed for the actions of her students? How could she be expected not to tell her daily companions that she would no longer be teaching them?

“You should have thought about your professional responsibilities over your personal feelings, Mrs. Murphy. You have undermined me as your principal, and I feel as if I have lost the respect of the students and the community over what you have done. I retract my previous offer of further employment. Your time here at Xavier has come to an end. That will be all.”

Cecelia, upon replaying this horrific admonishment later on, only recalled the deathly feeling of

being shot in the stomach. The principal's words were bullets that had torn her to shreds. She couldn't remember anything beyond his final pronouncement. She couldn't remember how she had managed to make it out of the office without collapsing into a state beyond tears. She couldn't even remember the afternoon spent with what must have been a false smile, engaging in the festivities that the students had arranged in each of the classes for her parting. She couldn't remember what she had said to them all at the end of her time with them.

She did however remember the feeling she had as she was leaving the building for the final time with her box of cards and small presents from her students in her hands. She recalled the feeling of being watched by something perched high on the roof of the school building, or perhaps hovering undetectable in the air above her. She had the extra-sensory feeling that if she remained for a moment longer in the presence of the building, she might be attacked.

AFTERWORD

In writing this collection of short stories, I intended the main character, Cecelia Murphy, to be a composite: a blend of personal insights, media reports and shared stories with colleagues. Cecelia is not me, nor does this thesis reflect my family or early environs. In fact, the reason that I decided to write a social fiction was so that I could contextualise my personal experiences as a student and teacher, alongside stories circulating in society, through my main character. Cecelia began as a kernel of an idea that grew into her own personage with traits and stories that belong solely to her. In writing this collection I was committed to crafting a character that was not an insular “woe is me” victim who is repeatedly exposed to similar situations of bullying. I wanted instead to show an evolving character that encounters and occupies various positions in the figurative circle of bullying as she moves through various trials in her life.

Chapter 1, “Spirit,” is the representation of bullying committed because of differing religious views. I wanted to show and tell how, in some cases, prejudice and hatred are instilled within children at a young age, trickling down from family members who have had a lifetime to develop certain steadfast opinions on unfamiliar belief systems. Though individuals are born as blank slates, families--whether cognizant of it or not--begin “scribbling” upon their offspring at a young age. Prejudice is adopted mainly because they naïvely trust their predecessors to be correct in their judgements, and because they have not yet developed their own systems of morality and ethics to differentiate between opinions that are ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ The child essentially starts out disadvantaged in the game of life, having to uphold the ideas of his or her antecedents.

By the end of this chapter, even in spite of the lack of available outlets for her pain and aggression in the school environment, Cecelia has undergone an emotional change that has strengthened her self-conception. She has faced her fears, stood up to her bullies, and has been able to express the trauma that she has felt through artistic reflection. When she is recognized as having not one, but two talents, in singing and the arts, she is elated, and better able to cope with the troubles she has endured throughout the plot. When she is fed some positivity by a classmate who formerly teased her, her other

issues with bullies in all aspects of her life seem to melt away, and she can, for the moment, feel comfortable in her own skin.

In “Size” I demonstrate some of the more commonplace examples of bullying based on physical appearance and how the effects can harm the victim on many levels apart from the physical. In the previous chapter, Cecelia might have proven to herself, her family and the church community that she was capable of greatness, but the original adversaries remain a problem: her classmates, who are preoccupied with outward appearance. Even though she is changing settings from the elementary milieu to the larger high school environment, she is preceded by her reputation as being the “fat girl.” Though she tries, she cannot escape the words that others use to berate her which echo in her head, and serve to muddle her senses.

Because of the depressive state that she has fallen into, and because she has been pushed to the brink where she no longer wants to live, she is forced to either end everything or to come up with a solution that will allow her to get past this difficult mental and emotional time. One might argue that she chooses life because there is one motivating factor to staying alive: the art class and the newfound relationship with her teacher Miss Esperanza. Cecelia could easily confide in this positive mentor, but because she puts the teacher on a pedestal, she chooses rather to admire her and wants to impress her. She desires to exhibit her talents for the teacher, to attract attention to something other than the physical, her natural talents, and in the same light, she wants to be like the teacher, thin and beautiful and artistic and seemingly trouble-free. In seeing Miss Espe, she realizes she does have some control over her appearance and sets about starving herself, which is an unhealthy option, but seemingly the only one available to a flailing Cecelia.

In writing an unexpected ending for the character of Miss Esperanza, I draw attention to the fact that while teachers can appear to be so flawless and put together, they might be victims of their own personal problems. It was important for me to show the strength that Miss Esperanza exercised in setting aside the troubles of her private life to be a positive role model for the students in her class. I wanted also to foreshadow the struggle that Cecelia would eventually experience in trying to balance the private and

the professional in her own teaching career.

In “Sex,” I wanted to shed light on the seedy underside of being a teenager with regard to drug use, first sexual acts, and the peer pressure and bullying that accompanies such ‘immoral behaviours.’ Cecelia’s childhood and young adult experiences have come together to form a young woman who is unsure of her newfound sexuality. Because she was widely viewed by her peers and herself as being undesirable at the age when she should have been gradually experimenting with the opposite sex, by the time she enters the teenaged sexual scene, she is unaware of the potential of her actions. Her risk-taking leads her into behaviours with which she is uncomfortable. As she feigns interest while she ‘makes out’ with nameless boys, we sense that she is doing what she is expected to do, and not what she wants. All the while, she is cognizant of the possible damages to her reputation that might occur should she go too far. In illustrating these opposing viewpoints that the character has on the discovery of her own sexuality, I explore the ‘Catch 22’ that is inherent in being a teenager concerned about measuring up to societal norms and at the same time preoccupied with going beyond societal norms. This is in effect, another form of bullying.

Teenaged sexual discovery is happening more and more frequently in the public eye today. What was once an activity relegated to a safe, private space has now become the subject of *YouTube* videos, *Facebook* statuses, *Snapchats* and *Tweets*. Although Internet and computer technology was not as widespread in the corresponding timeline of this story, I nevertheless illustrate a situation of an extremely private incident being unleashed upon the student population of Cecelia’s high school. It was important for me to show the juxtaposition between the sexually educated and the sexually naive, the sexually private and the sexually public and the negative consequence of such pairings.

Because being a teenager is marked by rebellion, Cecelia is depicted as being a character that rebels against many imposing facets of her life. She lies to her parents, she engages in light drug use, drinking, and of course, the act of vandalism in the graffiti that she inscribes upon the wall in the lot below the infamous apartment. She even finds ways to rebel against the art assignment she must do in school. She wants to use images of things better left unseen, but wonders about how the teacher will

interpret her work. That is why it is important to her to get these underlying feelings of disgust out of her system through the act of spray painting them on the wall. The unconventional, grungy tools and method is more complementary to the feelings of disgust she cannot reconcile in herself, and thus this criminal act seems like a more appropriate outlet. She wants to use art as a way of exorcising herself of the demon she has battled outside of school, and the project given inside of school does not seem like an adequate vent.

The message of “Savings” is that Cecelia is able to control various aspects of her physical appearance and personality in order to decrease the instances of bullying, but there are fundamental behaviours that set the bullied apart that can recur despite a change of location and characters. The idea of how rich or poor Cecelia was never crossed her mind until she was immersed into a wider mosaic of people at university. She notices how their appearances tell of their wealth, and she wonders how students are able to afford haircuts and cars, when she can barely scrape together enough money to be able to afford art supplies. This feeling of alienation from her peers is exacerbated when her favourite professor, the one teacher she has made a connection with at the school asks her if she needs financial assistance. This questioning illustrates a sort of unintentional classist-based bullying that is present in many institutes of higher learning. While the teacher believes she is being helpful in offering Cecelia assistance, Cecelia feels belittled, betrayed and more like a ‘charity case’ than a student. This humiliation brings out previously unexamined emotions in Cecelia and leaves her feeling angry and uncomfortable.

Even though Charles does not bully her outright, she still feels the sting of a rejection based on qualities that are beyond her control, like a passive form of bullying through social exclusion. Driven by her pain and the anger that is bubbling away inside her, Cecelia resorts to what she has been trained to do: create art. She takes her most depraved feeling of inadequacy, converts it into a visual image, and spend days painting it to perfection on a canvas that is neither large nor new. When she exhibits it to the class, she succeeds in shocking the group, and in attracting the attention of her professor. Unfortunately, even though the image is well-rendered and original on the largest canvas that she can afford, the teacher finds fault with it being too small, and thus not in line with the parameters of the presentation. This is a poignant moment in Cecelia's quest for self-discovery. She realizes one of the hardest lessons in life:

sometimes your best is not good enough.

“Sanity” demonstrates how a culmination of all of the years of bullying, low self-esteem and self-destruction manifest in a mild, but emerging mental disorder. Cecelia is unable to function in a relationship; she has lost her drive to plan and execute lessons to the best of her abilities; and she is rendered socially useless with her own peer group, suspecting them of ridiculing her and acting defensively before giving them a chance. The effects of bullying are long term, and Cecelia is still suffering. Throughout the course of her life, Cecelia has been a victim, a bystander and at times, a bully herself.

It seems like the only group that Cecelia feels comfortable with are her own students. She is at first hesitant to allow them into her safe space of isolation during her lunch hour time, but once they have persuaded her, she feels slowly healed by their presence. What is not explicitly mentioned is that she is profoundly lonely, and the nurturing, non-judgemental space of the art room has provided her with the company she needs to overcome these deeply depressive emotions. When she realizes that she is to be replaced by the permanent teacher of the position she is temporarily occupying, she immediately breaks it her students because she respects them, and does not want to harbour a lie between herself and them, a rupture she still feels in her memory of Miss Espe. She has an unspoken allegiance to the children, rather than to the administration and the profession as a whole because the students are the only ones who support her in her time of need. She helped them and they helped her, attending to the reciprocal dimensions of teacher-student relationships.

These stories, and to a greater degree, the social fiction these stories combine to create, ends with the disturbing image that Cecelia is being watched by a bird that is poised to attack. This feeling is perpetual for Cecelia. It is impossible for her to feel safe, as she is always haunted by the anxious thought that someone is going to prey upon her. She drifts from space to space in her life, but her places of refuge are few and far between. She knows not where her next place of solace will be, but until then she is always on edge, waiting, untrusting, and defensive of everyone and everything she encounters. She is the sum of all actions of bullying against her, and the arts, for her, are the only outlet that has kept her from

giving up.

As artists, teachers and researchers, we may say that the only way knowledge can be gained is through the inherently patriarchal idea of building blocks, from one historical foundation to the next in a steady ascension rising from one mutually recognized foundational point, but I prefer to define knowledge as an ephemeral wisp of light that can be pulled from many different sources. My intention in the writing of this thesis is to offer up my personal knowledge and observations of social systems within teacher culture, informed by colleagues as well as the media, as a story that can offer insight and potentially change to teachers, student-teachers and students alike. By adopting a rhizomatic understanding of bullying (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) I enter a hotbed of non-hierarchical experience which bridges the ever narrowing gap between subjective and objective interpretations, understandings and indeed experiences in relation to bullying. This post-structural perspective may provide a lens unto the stories we are, and serve as an entry point for others to take up the reigns of arts-based research and push forward into the innovative spaces of the twenty-first century, thereby shedding the tight-fitting qualitative armours of our predecessors, and opening up a dialogue surrounding the importance of unconventional perspectives possible through social fiction.

In her most recent article, Patricia Leavy (2012) touts the ability of fiction to be able to enlighten human consciousness, promote understanding, and above all, teach empathy (p. 252). This connection between the literary and the empathic is also recognised by Coplan (2004) who cites studies suggesting that creative works of fiction are better able to engage the psychological processes that result in the feeling of empathy as opposed to mere sympathy or “emotional contagion,” which is the mimicking of the emotions of others (p. 144). Leavy (2012) rejects the opinions of those who do not subscribe to the idea that fiction research is a means of activating empathy; she prefers to side with educators Barone and Eisner (2004) and Cole and Knowles (2007), who have been fostering this method and others for more than two decades. Leavy (2012) explains her process and eventual decision to write her own work of fiction which will, in her case, expose the additional knowledge that she has gained in her study of female body image and project it toward the masses in an attempt to foster empathy (p. 256). My research design

in this thesis is based upon this approach, and I strive to demonstrate the potential of social fiction as a method and methodology in this examination of bullying, rather than taking a more traditional approach.

These fictionalized stories of oppression at the hands of bullies in all aspects of life are one of millions, if not billions of stories that go unheard. The difference between myself and those countless others is that I am in a place and time where I am able to use what I have learned from my difficulties to promote change within the educational system, and hopefully within the heads and hearts of those who are obligated to spend years of their lives as students and teachers within those sometimes limiting walls. While the format of social fiction that I am using is less common than other more rigid forms of quantitative and even qualitative research, I believe that it is better able to get at the heart of the issue.

I am contributing to the field of art education by showing and telling of the overwhelming need for love, acceptance and liberation in the confining structures of the school system, the academic institution, and the community at large. I believe that the solution to oppression, to bullying, to violence, to hatred and to aggression, lies somewhere in the community that forms in the art classroom and that the need for these alternate spaces as harmonious systems is crucial to the justification of the visual arts in education. Through the in-depth exploration of this space through creative writing, and all that is connected to it, I will re-invigorate and redeem both a school subject that is too often dismissed as being redundant, and often the first to be chopped with governmental budget cuts, and represent a difficult and emotionally charged issue that has become a chronic and unrelenting issue in society today, bullying. In the course of writing this thesis, I feel that I have breathed my own troubled voice into the arts to show how they are foundational to the promotion of empathy, and essential to the salvation of many students and teachers alike.

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