

Stacking Wood:  
collected stories

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**Abstract**

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*Stacking Wood* is a collection of short stories, some of which explore a woman's childhood relationship to her father, and some of which portray her romantic relationships as an adult. The stories highlight her struggles with the obsessive, tyrannical power and abuse that she experienced in her interactions with her father, in part as the consequence of the power imbalance that he experienced, as an immigrant and an eccentric. The woman's exploration of her love-hate relationship with her father, through reflections on the her past and present life, reveal him as integral to her sense of self, even as she struggles to deal with past injuries caused by him, and the deep sense of panic and paralysis created by his absence in her adult life. The stories complete one another, and in spite of their different points of view, by addressing common themes of power struggle, abuse, and trauma, in the service of an overarching exploration of paralysis versus agency.

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my father, who tried to teach us that fear and respect are one and the same, but instead taught us something else.

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## **Dead Weight**

When I found out that my father had choked to death on a chicken bone, I decided I needed a haircut. My long, wavy hair, parted straight in the middle like a '70s hippie, was long enough to get stuck in the zipper of my jacket, but had grown thin and scraggly and begun to feel like a dead weight that constantly caressed the sides of my face.

The phone felt heavy in my hand as I watched Sid fling himself down drowsily beside me in the hammock on the porch where we had recently arranged a large straw mat and were lounging, sipping whiskey. Leaves the various shades of fire whipped past our noses here and there in sudden bursts of ambition. It was early November and his thick mane of hair was still wet from our afternoon dip in the lake, which was as close as possible to the temperature of ice, I thought, without being ice. Aspiring ice. Almost ice.

It really was too cold to be hanging around outside, much less for bathing in the lake, but we would continue to do both until the water froze and put up its walls. The cold, along with smoke from the incense and the flicker of candles, created an atmosphere of the senses, shadowy and whole. The height of feeling that our frigid setup on the porch could summon within me was more than Sid would ever know. I was able to feel the calmest and the cleanest and the most alert when we fulfilled this late fall routine at his parents' cabin. This day, as he lay there wrapped in a wool blanket, sipping his drink and contemplating the nearest pine tree, the cold stung my exposed hand and made breathing more difficult. I clutched the phone and spoke with overwhelming effort to my mother.

“Chicken?”

“Baby, he even looked me in the eye before he hit the floor. For a second it was like, I mean, I saw what I once loved about the man shoot right out of his eyes at me as he fucking grabbed at his neck, and all I could do was stare. I was completely paralyzed, Isa. He took the table cloth down with him.”

When I hung up and turned to face Sid, he diverted his attention from the pine tree to a big bucket of rain water into which he plunged his big toe. He swirled it around, glancing carefully in my direction. I could hear his silence as it boomed all around us, bouncing off the trees, skidding on the lake, playing tag with the leaves, longingly stroking candlelit shadows.

My head itched and I raised my fingers to massage my scalp, my eyes stuck still to the bucket.

“He died?”

“Yes.”

I watched Sid consider this, his forehead scrunching up as he stroked his short, bristly beard. He was a big man, strong, sturdy. I liked that he was so much bigger than me. It made me feel at home. My father had had a beard all his life, and a long one, that concealed his neck, but I didn't like to think of that. Sid had only ever heard stories of the man, who had become a kind of villainous legend to him at that point. We'd been dating six years, living together for three, and I hadn't seen my dad in ten, since he'd taken off alone in his van, with that dove of peace painted on its side, a couple hundred dollars to his name, and the sole intention of “living someplace warmer.” That was before he came back to my mother, three months later, broke and suddenly sorry. But I'd already moved out by then, and I never really cared to see him after that. Anyway, he had also hit us

every now and then for doing stupid shit.

“I think I need a haircut,” I said, thumbing the ends now, seeing how broken they were. Unattractive. So when we went inside I draped a towel around my shoulders.

“I really don't know how to cut hair,” said Sid.

“Then do something drastic, and comfort me, or make love to me or something,” I snapped, immediately realizing how it would hurt him.

“Sorry. Can you just cut an inch off, babe? Don't worry about doing it perfectly straight or anything. I just need a bit of this weight lifted.”

But I could tell that the sting of my words was already in effect as I glanced over my shoulder at him: poised, scissors in hand, and just for a second I imagined he might kill me.

“Isa, I'm really, really sorry your sperm donor just died. But I'm really afraid I might fuck up your hair,” he managed, tossing the heavy metal scissors onto the table.

“Can you please not get mad at me? My dad just died. Can you give me a break, just this once?”

“How can you even call him dad?” he said. “Thank god the demon's finally croaked. Maybe now you can stop letting him rule your life.”

“You have no idea what you're talking about,” I said, my voice rising. I hated how Sid never took into account that life was complicated, that you didn't just fully hate someone because they had hurt you. Sid claimed to have had a perfect childhood: idyllic rural setting, mature parents, experienced in life, who saw art everywhere in the universe, no siblings but many friends. Sid had taught himself carpentry from the age of thirteen, never questioned whether he wanted to be anything else, and stuck with it. And now he



made more than enough money, loved his job, and was a stable adult but with art still running in his blood enough to make me want him. So why couldn't I also just look ahead with confidence and dream without despair? I wondered this, but what hurt me was that he wondered it more.

I wanted that trim so badly in that moment that I felt my ability to continue depended on it. My hair, like a dead weight, needed lifting. I could never wait when I needed lifting. So I pushed it.

“Please, Sid, please just clip a tiny bit off the bottom for me. Not much at all.”

“Fine. If you insist,” he said.

But quickly it seemed that he'd cut more than I'd asked, and if I hadn't known better, I'd have thought he kept cutting because he preferred me with short hair. He had mentioned this before—that time I cut it short was a huge turn-on.

“It's like having a new girlfriend,” he had said. After careful consideration, I'd accepted that as a compliment. His hands clutching my hips, pulling me down hard, there was no hair in my face that night, and none in his eyes as I leaned over him, and so much was revealed.

After a while I asked, “You're almost done, right?” And as I glanced at the floor my hair seemed all there.

“Yeah, but I keep trying to get it straight, and then one part just isn't,” he answered in the calm, subdued way of one who is focused.

“Okay,” I said, but it suddenly felt colder in the room. “Like I said, you don't need to worry about cutting it straight.”

Finally he held a mirror up. It was way too fucking short. “I'm just gonna go look

at it in the bathroom,” I said.

In the bathroom, I only glanced before starting to sob. It barely touched my shoulders—my least favourite length. I sank down on the floor and continued to sob, quietly. I thought about cutting it short, and shaving it all off, but even as I was in that moment, I knew that my chubby face needed framing to feel okay about being seen. I envisioned bobby pins and loose buns with strands of hair falling out, looking casual and hiding the effort it took. I summoned positive thoughts about Sid.

Sid and I met at a friend's wedding, but not just any wedding. It was the wedding of George and Zahra; her large, traditional Pakistani family meeting his pale, British-Canadian family on a blocked-off Toronto crescent. George made his entrance down a red carpet unfurled in the middle of the street, riding a large white horse, Pakistan-style, to impress his intentions on Zahra's parents, who were less than thrilled with the rebraiding of bloodlines with their imperial forefathers.

Seeing George in the saddle, I was taken aback. “Wow,” I laughed.

“I know, right?” That was Sid, also there alone. “Whatever the reasons, I'm always impressed when people aren't scared to be romantic,” he'd said.

“It's a fine balance,” I'd answered.

I had moved from Montreal to Vermont to live with Sid, and was teaching at the college. This meant that although I lived much closer to where I'd grown up, and where my father had died, in the Eastern Townships, I now had to cross a border to get there.

I slowly emerged from the bathroom to find Sid stooped over, sweeping my hair into a dustpan. “The funeral is tomorrow,” I said. “I'm gonna take the next two days off.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

I had wanted him to come, but something about the way he asked made me angrier, and the shakiness of death all around us made me brave.

The drive there was silent, and not long enough. The speakers in my ancient, mud-coloured Chevy had long ago lost their spirit. But the silence was of a new quality. It started with dread in the pit of my stomach and extended outwards in rays, to join the warm, comforting sun bursting through the window. The dread that rode with me that day, that rested thinly on my dashboard, staring dreamily out of the passenger side window, the dread that no longer wished to hurt me, was mere memory.

I thought about the day my parents tied the knot. I was already a year old, and though I can't claim to remember it, there is a photo, my favourite photo, of that day. They never had a wedding or anything—just got a little dolled up, my mom with her deep eye shadow and her shimmering bandana and high boots, a burgundy blouse, and my father with his black beret and blazer. They signed a few papers at the town hall, came home, sat on the couch, and got our neighbour to take a picture of the two of them together drinking red wine, arms linked, each from the other's glass, while my one-year old self sat idly by in a blue party dress at the edge of the cushion on my mother's side, giving them what I have always been proud to refer to as “a dirty look.” I must have been so wise, but then, of course, like all of us, I lost the wisdom I was born with.

I loved Sid, there was no doubt about it, but what could I do about it?

I remembered the orange cap story. At least that's what my brother and sister and I called it laughingly, as we rolled our eyes, looking back. My mother had taken us to visit her parents in Montreal. We were all glad to get to leave for the weekend and go to the big city. My father never came along on these trips to see my mother's family because

someone had to stay and take care of the dogs, and the cats. But really we all knew, especially him, that her parents just didn't want to have to stare at the dark, bearded, South American man their white Jewish daughter had married, after, of course, having a child out of wedlock. We spent a fine weekend bouncing balls in parks in the city and eating in kosher diners, only to return to my father, standing there waiting, with a carton of orange juice in his hand.

“Which one of you left the cap off the orange juice?” he asked. “Marsha, you teach these children to live wastefully, never caring if they are leaving the juice to rot or not! Now which one of you had your head so much in the clouds that you couldn't be bothered to put this away properly?” The next three days were a nightmare of screaming, crying and accusations, which eventually faded away into the walls and the ceilings of our creaky house.

The funeral took place in the old, abandoned barn on my parents' property. Behind it was the pond where I had trapped tadpoles in old yoghurt containers with holes poked in the top for air, and collected cattails for dandelion bouquets that I would later deposit on the table in the kitchen, in an old dirty jar. My parents had never used it in the conventional-barn sense, except when I was a baby and they still kept a few chickens and an old goat; for much longer it had been more of a storage space and a forbidden play space. For as long as I could remember, it had been filled up on both levels with casualties of my father's construction: massive wads of unpackaged insulation—pink and crystalline as cotton candy, long, heavy planks of wood, jars and buckets of rusty nails, cement blocks, uncared-for tools scattered about, a stray cat making a bed.

I carefully studied the new version of the old barn. It had been years. I did see my

mother here and there, but never at the original site, as I thought of it. The cleared-out room was thick with middle-aged men and I remembered many of their faces from my childhood. I had imagined what this scene might look like a thousand times. Some of them lurked uncomfortably in the sadder corners of the poorly lit area. Others wept unimpressively, gripping their girlfriends' arms. There was Donnie, the creepiest friend my father had ever had, still with his greasy strands of black hair and his jean jacket—he had helped pour the cement foundation for our house, I remembered, and my dad had always paid him in beer. There was Pete. One of my father's weightlifting buddies from back in the day—I had burned my hand on his motorcycle once. A couple of others had apparently already paid their dues and were on their way out, apparently anxious for a swig. I felt like a kind of phantom swimming through a series of tired dreams, each moment a little cloudier than the last. I thought of how hot Sid would look dressed like a biker. But most of the hotness came from the fact that he wasn't one.

In accordance with my father's known desires, there were no speakers, no religious figures present. There wasn't a coffin or anything like that either; a brass-looking urn rested undisturbed in its corner, my father's worn-out bandana with its colourful Indian print draped over it. This was him. I looked at it, and felt I had been irreversibly denied some kind of last tug on loose ends. The feeling quickly surrounded all of my thoughts.

I wore a black cardigan over a black T-shirt, tight blue jeans with a hole in each knee, steel-toed boots, no jewellery. My fresh haircut was mostly hidden with a frumpy woollen tuque—army green. One thing my father had never demanded was formality. I felt exhausted even though I had overslept and had two coffees. I imagined the bags

cradling my eyes would eventually cause the rest of my face to sag—eyes to cheeks, cheeks to chin. I ran my fingers over the curves of my face to feel how it was changing, and how it had changed.

My mother was nowhere to be found. My sister lived the furthest away, and would by no means make it. She had moved to Japan two years earlier and could still be said to have the most hatred in her for our father in particular, and the family in general, and by extension, North America the continent.

I missed Sid a little. I wouldn't have minded linking my hand through his thick, warm forearm as I stood there alone, taking it all in. By now he'd be starting on dinner, and I was thankful that he was not the kind of man who'd be waiting for the moment I walked in to find a dumb thing to yell about. If it hurt him that I'd left him behind, we would talk about it, and that was all. How could I hold it against him that he wasn't more fucked up, that he knew what I needed but not what I wanted, that he believed in romance and doing the right thing, that he couldn't cut hair to save his life?

A tiny, deluded part of me honestly believed that I could go mostly unrecognized by my father's friends, that I could just pace in the field for a while, sit on the old well with my journal, wait for mom to show up, and then go have tea somewhere. After all, it had been ten years since I had spoken to the man. His friends represented a whole other lifetime for me. But I guess not everyone believes in past lives.

"Isa!" It was old Frank Young, with the tattoos all up his arms. He wore a leather hat and had obviously lost all his hair.

"Hi! Wow, long time no see! How the hell are you?" I could feel a fake, frosty smile form and congeal to my lips.

“I'm alright, I'm alright. But this came as a real shock, Isa, a real bloody shock. When I found, well...it's been a long, long time since your father and I spoke, my dear. Too long. He was a good man. I wish I'd found it in me to settle our differences somehow. But he was a tough one, wasn't he?” Frank's hearty chuckle turned quickly to a hoarse cough.

“Yeah, he was.” I hadn't heard about Frank and my old man's beef, and was curious. I wanted to say how I didn't feel sad so much as cheated.

Old Frank kept trying. “So, you holding up alright?”

I had never liked him.

“Yeah, I'm fine.” Old Frank was looking me up and down, apparently more observant than he'd ever been.

“What was your beef with my old man?” I asked, in part to distract him from studying me.

Bingo. Took him by surprise, just as he was gonna say something about my hair.

“Oh, well, now's hardly the time, my dear. Water under the bridge now, ain't it?”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” I said, suddenly feeling bold in my skin. Something about being back at the original site, something about that ashes to ashes phrase cycling around in my head, and something about the fresh country air. “But, you know, I hadn't spoken to him in years either, Frank. I'd be really curious to know what it was between you and him. I wouldn't mind understanding why someone other than me and my family would be pissed with him.”

Frank looked at me then, up and down, judging my heft, it seemed, judging my guts.

“Darlin', he was a hurt man. You probably know that much. The last time I saw your old man he invited me over for coffee. We always used to sit there for hours, over many coffees—I'm sure you remember that even from when you were a kid. And then we'd get to discussing the Bible, which your father had studied the hell out of. He knew every word of that damned book.” With this he commenced chuckling, and this in turn, became a sort of snorting laugh. In spite of myself, I couldn't help but smile with recognition.

“Yeah, he always made it his business to know everything about the things he thought were total garbage,” I said.

“Yup. Well, we got to arguing about the good book, as we usually did. Your father knew I was Christian, he always did, and I knew he was who he was, but we enjoyed discussing and arguing about the finer details of the Bible. It was just a way to pass the time, is all. Your dad would usually win on a technicality, but I always felt that I was changing the way he thought about life a little bit anyway.” Old Frank stretched his arms taught behind his head, belly protruding, and took a seat on a nearby tractor tire, cleaned off and set on its side for the occasion.

I studied Old Frank. Why exactly I cared what vapid reasoning had gone on between my father and him I couldn't say. But I knew one thing for sure in that moment, in that barn, at that funeral. I did. I kicked at a small hole in the thin floor, accidentally enlarging it with my foot.

“And?” I could not conceal my impatience with the man. I remembered how he was back then, a good fifty pounds heavier, heaving his thick, crooked body up our long winding driveway because he never wanted to drive up it, especially in the winter. I



always thought he was a wimp for that, and so did my father. I always thought he was gross and probably had molested someone. I steered clear of him.

“Well, it was the day my sister Ginny passed away. Not sure if you remember. Fell down the stairs with her husband just watching, helpless to stop it.”

I did. Everyone knew she hadn't fallen. Even Frank knew.

“Well, I came over to talk to your dad, figured he was one of the best people to talk to then. He had a way of calming me down some. He had a way of putting things, your father. But I guess he and your mom had a fight the night before, and your mom was in the kitchen, slamming cupboard doors and your father just ignored it, started rolling himself a cigarette. Then he said to me, At least she's at peace now, Frank.”

We looked at each other, Frank and I, straight in the eye, and a massive smile started creeping up on me from behind my ears. My father saying that was funny. My mother slamming shit around while he said it was funny. Old Frank was making me laugh.

And then Frank let out a little chuckle too. Which turned into a wheezing, whistling cough, which continued into a loud cackle. He wiped his eyes, and slapped his knee hard for support.

“Your mother, when he said that, turned to us, and said, How do you know she's at peace? Well, I knew then, looking at your mom, that all was not right. I knew already that they weren't exactly good together, your mom and dad, but at that moment, I was pretty raw what with Ginny and all, and I couldn't turn a blind eye to it anymore. She was limping, your mom.”

“Yeah.”

“So.”

“My father, he liked to say he believed in peace.”

“We all wish we were true believers, dear.”

I decided to take a hike to the urn to pay my respects. I sauntered up to the spot, and two large men in leather chaps and greasy caps moved out of the way for me. Then one of them came back with “Are you his daughter?”

I stood there and stared at my father, what he'd been reduced to. I thought about whether or not he was watching me.

I thought about his family, how none of them had made the journey to this Canadian funeral in a barn. I thought it was sad they weren't there.

I slid my tuque off, down my face, to my chest, and kept it there. I said a little prayer.

My hand flew to my head, and it felt good, that dead weight being gone. Maybe I looked like shit, but if I'm gonna be honest with myself, it felt better. My hair would grow back.

## Dust

“You think you got it bad? You think you work harder than most people?”

He tells us that when he was growing up, in his country, an only son, he worked whatever job he could when he was just eight to support his family. And that his father was a drunk and used to tie him to a tree and beat him. And how he never had any shoes, and that he played soccer barefoot until his feet bled.

We're at the table and I'm trying hard to swallow a mouthful of slimy chicken, the only food that makes me gag. He makes it two or three times a week because he wants me to understand that somewhere children starve. He killed the rooster himself this time, the tough old bird that used to chase me out of the barn and scold me. I had nightmares about its sharp beak stabbing me in the eye.

The curry stains his white beard yellow in little tufts at the corners of his lips and his hands stain the pages of the Bible on the table in greasy thumb-shapes. I watch as he folds a corner down. He blames all the stains on cigarettes and adds more yellow powder to the pot. I agree with my father that other children starve. But I secretly wonder if other children vomit in their plates, is it still a waste to throw it away? I did that once, but nobody could tell the difference, so they made me eat it.

It wouldn't be so bad, the chicken, but the smell of it swims throughout the house like it's lost and searching, and always, the yellow stains, creeping from every crack: on the table, all ground into the knots in the wood, in puddles on the place mats, and in my father's beard the crusty strands cling. On good days, it stains Grey-dog's lips, it gets between the pages of the Sears catalogue on our table that everyone touches but no one

ever opens. It blots those pink and mint cardiganed blondies into blotchy canaries with faces of meat. At best I make it to the toilet with an entire fistful, and if it doesn't flush I don't have to be scared because neither my mother nor my father seems to tell the difference anyhow.

Everyone's done but me, and he is saying something about how we are always trying to get out of stacking wood by escaping to the mall with our mother.

She is in the bathroom pretending not to hear.

But he knows she can, and he tells me: You're just like her.

He doesn't mean the good things that he reminded her of that afternoon when he kissed her and we all turned away.

Just like your mother, always trying to escape, he says. I can smell his yellow mouth and I say nothing.

My sister and brother are always finished before I am and I don't know how they do it. I'm almost 14 and the oldest, and it should be easier for me because I've been at it longer. Cora's plate isn't empty; she's left the glazier bits behind. But it's enough to pass, enough for a ticket back to her room, and her dolls. I hear her slam her door. Leo's plate is clean and I can see him from the window. He's outside drawing faces in the dirt, plucking dandelions for the eyes. A grimy black bird lands to peck at them as though they were stale bread. He shoos it away. It lands a few feet away and looks up to catch me staring.

My father patiently rolls a cigarette. My mother's doing the dishes and she coughs and sighs so I can hear her, so that I know if it were up to her I could eat something else or not eat at all. My father stands, stretches and lets Grey-dog outside.

“You have an hour, Chayla,” he says, and stares.

I stare back and see that one of his eyes is black and floats high above his face like it's searching for something that's not in the room. The lashes are long and grey, covered in dust. He blinks fast and the dust flits towards my open look. I can't stop the tears from streaming down to wet my nose. I have to blink even though I don't want to lose that hovering eye. When I open my eyes again and look through the water at his gliding gaze the lashes are as black as the eye itself and both parts shine wild in the dim kitchen. But as he's turning away, I notice that all that dust is back again, right where it started. He goes without saying a word. I've mentioned his eye to Cora but either she doesn't see what I mean or else she'd rather not. Either way, I don't blame her.

My mother does the dishes with her back turned so all I can see is her silky shirt draping lovely beneath her pale speckled neck. I blow a little of the air and dust around us to tickle her, to get her attention. I aim right and she sneezes and shakes, breaking a plate in half against the side of the sink. When she turns around I see she's cut herself and is clutching her finger tight in her nice blue skirt. I notice the color it makes there where she holds it close between her thighs: it's beautiful and purple like a bruise. My mother never could stand dust. But no matter how she cleans, there's always more.

She doesn't know it was me—she looks at me like we're both hurt. I look away, into my plate and do my best to make it vanish.

I carve out a bite. I scrape at each piece till the greenish jelly-like fat is all off. I round up the bits I've cleaned—they're the only ones I try to eat. The rest is filled with even more green slime, binding meat to red-grey bone. Every time I try to eat that kind my whole body slackens as the fork touches my tongue. It's a synchronized outward

motion of all parts of me at once: the center of my stomach jerks forward, stepping up to bat. It feels just like that, like I'm pushing something large and hard straight out. It shoots up fast and sharp through my ribcage, tears circles through my chest and spirals up to hug the inside of my throat. It feels like I'm strangling some jagged bone, or else the bone is strangling me from inside. Then it exits through my mouth—stale chicken air—but it feels like a live, squawking bird tearing its way out. Sometimes I try and time it so my father sees me when this happens.

The first bite goes down slowly and suspiciously. The next one won't, so I have some water. Suddenly, my mother's standing over me, still holding her finger, and she sighs, deep frustration. I don't have to look to know she's shaking her head.

She picks up my plate, letting her bloody knuckle breathe and asks, “Can you eat half if I get rid of the rest?”

I glance at the door to be sure we're alone. My stomach sways and I almost grab the plate back. Her uncut hand quickly swipes most of the mess into a big green bag that sags from her bloody one, and she shoots it under the sink. When she puts it back in front of me I see she's left all the worst pieces.

My mother leaves the room and I look around. I wish there was a clock in the stupid kitchen. I begin to feel afraid and I wonder if I should I let Grey-dog in—he's scratching on the door, jumping up to stare through the window, from me to my chicken, from my chicken to me.

My father comes back, puffing a pipe. He pulls up a chair and sits down beside me. He has never done this. His chair is the one at the head of the table. It's the only one with arms and when he yells he seizes them till his dark knuckles look pale. But this time

he's sitting beside me in a normal chair, leaning forward on one elbow with his head turned, just looking at me real close, like I've never seen him do. Puff, puff goes the pipe. I've whittled a decent morsel, not a bad size either, and it's on my fork all ready but I can't quite bite it because of the way he's just sitting there. Puff, puff goes the pipe and then he puts it down and steals the fork, just grabs it fast out of my hand. He's looking at the piece I made and making a shape with his mouth I've never seen, and he goes to shoving it down my throat, fork and all.

“Eat,” he says.

It's surprise that makes me choke and then gurgle like a baby bird. A baby bird, I imagine. We must look real funny, my father and I: my hands in the air reaching for nothing at all, his eyes hovering black and full of dust, trying to aim that bite right.

Just when I really start to heave, my mother comes with a basket of socks and drops it loud in the middle of the floor and screams, “Stop!”

My father says “fuck” and drops what he's doing like a hot metal skewer full of slime. The socks are spattered yellow, I see, and will have to be washed again.

As my mother and father start to fight, Grey-dog suddenly knocks down the door, jumps on the table, and scarfs down the chicken; we are all powerless to stop it. I had no idea he could be so strong and I am proud of him. But I have to try and protect him for the next little while, because he has broken all the rules. My father gives up, which he never does. I can hear my mother winning all the way from my room, even with a blanket on my head.

When my mother notices a mess she gets to scrubbing it on all fours. She can't stand stains, for one thing, and before bed that night she throws her nice blue skirt into a

pot of red dye when the blood won't come off. She scrapes the yellow crust from the knots in the table with a butter knife until the varnish cracks and streaks of white wood grin through. And she can't deal with dust. That night she sneezes so much that even he can't sleep and he finally moves to another room. My mother stops sneezing and my father snores up a dust storm in the book room, alone.

The next morning is Saturday and she goes for a long run in the hot sun and he lies on the living room floor in shorts. None of us are used to seeing so much of him, not even in summer. Cora and Leo both cast glances my way but I don't look back because I know he's going to see. He's decided to show off his carefree side.

“Beautiful day for stacking some wood,” he says.

“You mean watch while you do it?” says Leo.

His hands go up to block the playful cuff that my father aims at the back of his neck and he laughs so hard at his own joke that his face turns red and shiny. Cora just groans and searches me. I know because I feel her do it, she's looking for a sign of resistance. She rolls her eyes in her dark tired way when she sees I'm not about to say anything. She's been in her room since her chicken ticket the night before and has only just emerged. Her hair is matted in a thick brown clump off to the side of her face, which is red with pillow creases. She's mismatched her sweat suit, a purple top with elastic olive pants. Toothpaste from the night before has crusted her front in a neat dry stream from her chest to her belly. She's rolling those red-rimmed eyes at me to see what I'll say to this stacking of wood business.

My mother comes back sweaty in track shorts and a sports bra and my father pulls her to the floor beside him, both of them flailing. She shrieks at the force of it as he jabs



his wood-dense fingers into her ribs. He's playing around and doesn't notice what his hands are made of. She's laughing hysterically and begging him to stop and he won't until she's down, her back to him, and playing, playing dead right alongside. My sister and brother shoot me looks, I can see them from both sides.

“You know, your mother and I toiled day and night on this land long before you were born,” my father begins.

He draws my mother close as she slowly lets him. I think I catch her rolling her eyes so high and then low down that she even beats Cora, so low down that they might just plop right into her smile like peas into a pod.

“Look,” says my father.

He holds out his hand above my mother's face for all to see. It's huge and brown and the knuckles jut out all gnarled and stiff with earth-coloured blisters hiding yellow underneath. His thumbnail is dark and this means it's dead though I'm not sure how. None of us say anything, but Leo laughs. Then he holds up my mother's hand. It's red and rough from dishwater and from ignoring her cuts but her head is clear from a more or less dust-free sleep and she pulls the hand away but she doesn't feel like ruining it, his mood, so she scratches her red hand like it was just itchy and leans her body against his, arching her back along his big stomach. His dark thick arms circle her pale waist with room to spare. They're like a black and white Saturn tilted on its side. His hands are open wide across her skin and it looks like if he moved them there would be some kind of muddy underprint stretched straight along her ribs, a stark black bird, its feathers all spread out. A sudden draft from outside and my mother's allergic again, her body racked against his. Cora's already left the room and is slamming her door. My mother sighs.

Leo suddenly points at the thin light lines snaking from my father's armpit and asks what they are. He knows they're stretch marks from weight-lifting—he's already heard the story. He's stalling, that's all he's doing. He knows he can play and he's stalling. Innocent Leo. Baby brother.

“This?” says my father, leaning his head on his chest to point as though no one had ever asked him before. “These are scars,” he says.

“From what?” encourages Leo.

“When I was a boy, I was walking home from a friend's house after dark. But to get there I had to walk for about ten minutes on a path that went through the fiercest part of the jungle.”

He clears his throat. “Most people that had to travel through did it in the daytime, because you really had to be on guard.”

I hate when my father says “on guard.” His voice gets deeper when he says it and it always sounds like one word: ongarrd!

“I was attacked by a tiger,” he continues. “I didn't even see him coming. I didn't have time to think, but luckily I knew my wrestling moves.” He winks at my brother as if they share some wrestling secret, father and son. “These are the scars,” he says again and motions to the stretch marks. “That's why you should learn how to wrestle.” He laughs and coughs, reaching up to cuff the back of my brother's head again.

My mother smiles and I hate it.

“Did you kill it?” Leo asks, but my father just smiles. Everyone is smiling.

I swallow hard, imagining I was the tiger. A real one.

We're a half hour into the stacking of wood and Cora hasn't even bothered to

change her crusty shirt. Leo's walking way too slowly from the pile to the shed where we're stocking it all, making all of us a little edgy. My mother is in town buying things we need like tomato soup and shampoo. My father's leaning on the shed, sipping juice, watching. He tells Leo to stop working like a girl. I stop what I'm doing and think about lunging at my father log-first. But instead I watch as his eyes roll back, their glint shot to black again. He holds out his mug for me to take.

“What,” I say.

“Get me some more juice.”

“There's none left.”

“Yes there is.”

I turn to go check even though I know we're out because I finished the juice earlier, but that hard hand of his dries to cement on my shoulder, holding me in place.

“What?” I ask, gulping wet air that stings on the way down. I feel like scratching at his eyes until I can see them. They've sunk deep into his skull, and all I can see of them are the dark damp centers all wet and throbbing. My chest is humming a rapid tune and my attention wanders—Leo's standing by, his face all flushed and his eyes huge.

Whenever he gets this look his eyelashes seem abnormally long. He gets the exact same look when we swim in the lake and he comes up really fast from ducking his head into the freezing water, his eyes so wide it's funny and drip, drip, dripping with the jolt of cold air.

“Say yes,” says my father.

“Yes,” I say.

I'm thinking how it feels as though cement from his hand has filled me up through

a hole in my shoulder.

“Say: Yes, daddy!” He bellows the daddy part and the leaves on the trees get excited.

“Yes, dad.”

“I beg your pardon?” he says. “Do you have cotton balls wedged into your ears?”

Ha. Cotton balls, I think. Like when you open a bottle of aspirin, and you have to get rid of that soft white fluff before getting to the pills. But I read the side effects once and don't think I'll be fishing for that cotton ball any time soon, unless I'm really in pain.

Cora drops her log and hunches against the shed. Leo drops his too and stands all wide—at ease, like it's not fair damnit, and like he's gonna do something about this silly ol' matter we have going on here.

“This instant!” he hollers, and Grey-dog sprints from his nook by the oak like a bad dream is chasing him all the way to the road.

“Yes daddy!” I summon it. I know then that I must have powers.

My teeth are working so hard there's a pasty froth at the corners of my mouth—I can taste it, sticky white like flour and water. A cold grit installs circles in my temples, they whirl and whirl and pound at the back of my neck, begging to be let in. On my way to the kitchen I drop the mug and the handle breaks off. I cut my thumb on its sharp white smirk but it doesn't hurt. I'm about to open the door to the house when I trip. I've stepped on something. I'm not sure what it is at first, but it scares me anyway. It's hard and soft, and something inside of it moves under my shoe; I can feel it roll under the sole of my foot.

I look down and see that it's black, and wet: a tattered old dusty bird thought the

window was still sky.

I thought it was dead and I stared but when I moved my foot off it it flew away—which scared me more than when it had been dead just a second before.

My mother comes home later than she said she would. We are, all of us, off to our own business by then. Leo's scratching faces in the driveway and coloring them in with Grey-dog's shit. He uses rocks for the eyes. Cora's up a tree, pretending she's a bird that would rather just sit still than fly or do anything. My father is cooking. I'm reading on the balcony when I hear my mother enter.

“I'm sorry supper's not ready yet, I've been a busy little slave for you all day.” He says it fast, before she's in the door. I can hear him.

She doesn't know until then how we've ruined his happy mood. She stops dead with the groceries swaying.

“Go find yourself another slave to please you,” he says.

She doesn't say anything and then she does.

“Yeah?” she drops the bags; I can hear the cans of tomato soup as they bash and roll. “Why don't you go and find yourself a job and stop making up stories?” She lowers her voice then, but I can still hear. “The children can hear every word you're saying.”

“Who do you think is going to hire me?” He stresses the “who” like he's asking for a miracle, like he's asking God. He means: I have dark skin and a long beard and why should I cut it and people are afraid of me, people fear the great and powerful unknown. “Who in the hell,” he repeats, banking on the “who” again. “Who do you imagine in that tiny skull of yours, woman, is going to cook the meals and gather wood while you're out doing God-knows-what all fucking day?”

I don't usually notice my father's accent but when he gets really angry and starts saying "fuck" or "fucking" a lot, I do. It comes out more like faacking and you can tell then all he wants is a fight. All he wants, a faacking fight.

"While I'm doing God-knows-what," says my mother. "God-knows-what," she says again and I don't hear the rest of it because she's drifting off, she's losing her thought, she sounds like she's thinking real hard.

My father is chopping carrots. He stops, flings the knife into the sink, one of those very heavy ones, and breaks something. We never seem to have enough dishes. We're always out of something— plates, or mugs—and my mother has to go all the way to town, and waste a perfectly good Saturday away from home to buy more.

They continue to yell downstairs where we can still hear them. After a while my mother climbs the stairs and when we look at her she mouths the words "it's okay." She tells us that we can eat sandwiches, there are cold cuts in the fridge, she just bought them, and there's cheese too if we want, and she goes back down. Later, watching sitcoms, we don't hear them anymore. I wonder if the laugh track is just distracting me from hearing.

Before bed I'm brushing my teeth in the bathroom, which is right above my father's room, the study, recently transformed into a separate bedroom because of my mother's dust allergy. But she is visiting—I can hear her making sounds. I imagine her mouth taking shapes I've never thought of, I can see her legs wrapped all around. I know what it looks like, like Saturn with too small a hoop. I brush faster and hum loudly. The next night it's the same and so I convince Cora that it's fun to brush our teeth together. When she catches on and tries to escape, I block the door, cackling. But then I feel bad and let her push past me. I think that maybe I'm supposed to protect her.

One night they're loud again, and the sounds are swimming through the house with that same old chicken smell, so none of us can sleep. Lou gets up. I wouldn't normally describe him as fearless—he's usually pretty scared, actually. But he is half-asleep, only one foot in the waking world, and he marches downstairs in his pyjamas, not even slowing down to stop the creaking. He walks straight in. I am reading on the sofa, and am shocked as I watch him march past. I follow him on tip-toe to the top of the stairs and watch him go down. I can hear it all from there because he's not all there and when he doesn't care he can yell.

“What's that sound?” he demands to know, and suddenly my pale, naked mother gets to choking really hard on account of all the dust—she'd forgotten, she hadn't noticed in all the excitement.

She throws on a robe, leaves my father frozen there, and puts Lou back to bed. But then he comes and tells Cora and me what he did. We're impressed but we don't say so. We just laugh like hell and he knows we love it. We stay up late, the three of us, playing Go Fish on Cora's bed until we're too tired to hold our cards.

The next morning my mother opens all the windows and beats pillows hard against the side of the balcony. “Your father doesn't know how to build a house,” she says when she sees me going for the cereal. She can't live this way, this house is a goddamn haven for dust, there are too many tiny cracks in the floor and in the walls where dust collects.

“After you eat, do me a favour, will you Chayla, and clean your room,” she calls as I head for the sofa with my bowl.

“Yes,” I say.

Later she takes Cora and Leo to the dentist. I get to stay home and scour the property with my father, collecting up all the rotting planks of wood with rusty nails in them, yanking out the nails, and burning the wood in a great big mountain in our yard. A burning, towering mountain of crap that we never used but that someone always thought we would use somehow, until now. I hate collecting the useless pieces and using up my energy to drag them from one place to the next. The fire at the end is the only part I like.

We won't burn it till the night, though, because my father likes to scare Leo and Cora with his campfire tales about demons made of wood that live in the trees around our house. He tries and fails to scare me too. He tells me I'm too old to have fun.

In the very first hour I step on a nail sticking out from one of those nasty planks and it goes straight through my foot.

“You really didn't want to work, did you?” he says it like a joke.

I catch his eye as it starts to change.

He doesn't think I need a shot because the nail wasn't rusty. I think I do because a nail went through my foot. We sit on the balcony and he tells me a story to make it seem better than it is until my mother gets home with the car.

He's given me ice in a bag and I'm trying not to move my foot off it, so I don't feel like talking. I'm thinking of how none of my friends from school ever come to visit because we live too far. It's at the end of the universe full of nasty planks and rusty nails and crusty curry and Grey-dog's shit piles, and dust all over the place.

He says: “You think you got it bad?”

I groan and roll over onto my side, letting the melted ice lose contact as I try to cover my ears. I think of the rabbit cotton-tails in those little bottles of aspirin.



My father ignores me, but I think I hear him smile. “I never had shoes when I was young. I used to run around playing soccer barefoot. Then, one day, I was ten years old—a man from the neighbouring village came to visit, and when he noticed that my feet were all cut up, he said he was going to buy me shoes and bring them the next day. I got so excited,” he says and pauses to look at me.

I had turned my head but now look away.

“Sure enough,” he continues, “he came back the very next day with a brand new pair of soccer shoes, and he hands them to me, just like that.”

I want to ask how the man knew what size to get, but my foot is throbbing too hard for me to talk.

“I thank him, and my father thanks him, and they have a drink and I go off to play in the field. It was my first pair of shoes. When the man left my father called me over and told me that he knew of a family in the next village whose son could use the shoes more than I could and that I should do the right thing and give them up.” He stops here again, but not to look at me.

My foot is on fire and I imagine it is a plank of wood with a long rusty nail sticking out of it, high on top of a burning pile of crap that will never be used again.

“So I did,” he says. “With my father, you did what he asked or it was your ass on the line.”

He stops and I peer up at him. He's looking past me, through the leaves, to the road, and further still. I think that maybe he's fascinated by something he sees, a fox. But then I see it too. I have to look back at his eyes to see exactly where they are pointing before I can find it, all shabby in the dirt and the brush, across the road and a little ways

into the trees. But when I'm onto his gaze, I can finally see the thing he's been talking to, the same thing he talks to whenever he remembers and forgets at the same time, and I have seen it before.

It's that wet old dusty bird. Hard and soft both at once.

Now that I know where it rests, I promise myself I'll follow that bird. I'll hop on my bike and stop whenever it does and watch it do its tricks until I learn to do them too. If it takes me any place I can't follow, I'll just wait and watch from the road. I never want to lose track of where it goes.

When I catch its eye it flies away, but my father keeps on looking.

### Reappearing

The woman, like Kashi, was on the train in India. From the upper berth where she had been keeping out of sight for almost two days, Kashi observed the young woman now with wide eyes, and froze at the sight of blood coming from her head. A man gripped her unusual hairdo tight to her scalp with his fist, so tight his knuckles were screaming white. He was yanking this way and that, quietly but firmly saying things into her ear that any Bengali or Hindi speaker must have been able to understand. Everyone in the car but Kashi, the quiet imposter. The pair had gotten on at the previous stop, and the man had pulled her onto the train that way too, hand to head. Now the poor woman was in a kneeling position on the floor in front of him, eyes streaming while he held fast. People fidgeted, watched, pretended not to fidget and watch.

The two women were about the same age, not much older than twenty, but Kashi noted the other woman was a little taller, a little darker, and quite a bit thinner than herself; her hair was chopped to mid-ear, and was mussed up on her head in an irregular way for most Indian women. She was dressed differently, too—no plain or elegant sari, but instead a cotton dress, some striped or flowered print—it fell just below her knees and puffed up in an unattractive ruffle at her shoulders. But Kashi, the young Canadian, with a picture given to her the year before of her Indian great-grandparents, which was sitting at home on her desk, could not very well dwell on the woman's strange fashion for long. Because even though she was by nature an observer, a writer, and most of all, for the purposes of this trip, a researcher of her absent father's family history, the woman before her was crying, and screaming, and grabbing at things to prevent herself from falling

over, and this was a more urgent fact, a more present reality than any she had encountered since her arrival in the country a week earlier. This was saying a lot, because her very first interaction upon landing in Mumbai had been with an armless child who asked her for a stick of her gum. Kashi was forced to move her attention away from the woman's unconventional dress and note instead that she was in trouble.

Kashi the foreigner had been keeping a low profile from her perch on the upper berth since the day before. She'd been going it alone in India for several days, having gone a separate way from Jordan and Rose, a couple she had traveled with from Canada, with the plan that she would meet up with them again further down the line, in Rishikesh, where she was now headed. She had wanted to go it alone for a while, do the kind of observing that she could not do with co-voyagers that drew too much attention to themselves. Her desire to be alone had been fuelled by an ongoing argument with her friends about whether her Indian appearance made her lucky or unlucky. Rishikesh was considered a holy place; it was where the Himalayan mountains met the Ganges head on, and people from all over the world were known to flock there, to the ashrams, with their meditative intentions and their camera bags, and their illnesses, looking for respite. Kashi, who lacked the geographical details necessary for accurate family research, and whose main plan had been to look for her father in people's faces, people's actions, had failed to research places themselves much at all in advance of her trip, and had never even heard of the place until she had arrived in India, but it seemed like the perfect place to arrive go it alone in, even if the aloneness was short-lived.

The woman on the train was screaming now, and Kashi, dressed like an urban Mumbai Indian woman in her jeans and t-shirt, pretended to sleep in a fetal position on

the top berth, not knowing what she could do, and intermittently closed her eyes. People fidgeted and watched. From her perch, she made eye contact with the woman for a second without anyone else noticing. The woman's eyes asked for nothing—Kashi noticed this. She also noticed that the man looked like he was the girl's father (she was, after all, a girl), in a green sweater and baggy brown pants, grey tugging at the ends of his moustache.

She thought of her own father, in some muddled way the reason she was there, after all. He had been an immigrant to Canada from Suriname, a former Dutch colony in South America where most of the inhabitants hailed from India and Africa. He had never, himself, been to India. But she had wanted to be the one to go a step further back in exploring the family trajectory. She had done a little of this kind of research before coming. The Indians had been taken on ships to this new land of promise; many had been promised better chances of wealth; many were women running from the consequences of illegitimate pregnancy; these people were being recruited to take over much of the work of the African slaves who were gradually being freed. The histories caught her imagination, as she imagined herself on those ships, where so many people never made it off alive, due to illness or lack of proper food. Her father had told her that her great-great-grandfather had made a last second decision to jump aboard one of those ships. Her father, who didn't tell her stories anymore.

The day before, Kashi had not yet attained invisibility. She hadn't yet realized that desire, and had been sitting on a lower berth, reading. No one occupied the seat beside her, a rare and noticeable circumstance she only fully understood afterwards, as everyone else seemed to be traveling with their families or else they were men on their own. About

six in the evening a middle-aged man had claimed the vacant spot and was eyeing her curiously, something she had learned to observe without employing her usual, preferred tactic of looking at things directly. He was priming himself to say something. She could feel it—it lasted for a good twenty minutes. But just as she thought that maybe he was going to let it go, his hand gripped her thigh and she was forced to turn rapidly to face him for the first time. He was almost handsome, but his smile thwarted that. He wore loose green pants and a tattered blue t-shirt. He had a beard and she could not tell how old he was.

“No,” said Kashi, firmly pushing his hand away. This was clear, she thought, and I am surrounded by people who will hear this.

“Where is your father? Your brother?” he asked her, still smiling. “Why are you alone?”

“I’m actually here looking for him,” she wanted to say, but did not. “You see, he went missing many years ago and I have a feeling I might find him here.” Missing, well, that was a loose term. She was sure he was somewhere.

“I am meeting friends,” she said instead, annoyed. “I’m from Canada.”

“You? Canada?” he laughed, grabbing her leg again, trying to separate it from her other one, without any reservation in spite of the people all around. It was getting dark.

“Stop!” she pushed him off again. As though on cue at that point, like a hero in a Bollywood movie, a large, muscular man sitting in front of them turned around, and spoke to him harshly in Hindi. They had a back and forth, and the offending man abruptly left his seat. Meanwhile, the muscle man had taken his place beside her, and although somewhat relieved to have seen the first man go, she braced herself for a new set of

antics.

“You're lucky I'm here,” he said, extending his hand. “Raj. Police.”

She shook his hand, knowing that he probably could not imagine that his being a police officer did not comfort her.

“It's very unsafe for a young woman to travel alone in India,” he said. “I will sit with you and keep watch.”

Much to her relief, Raj did not try anything, nor did he try and engage her in conversation after she could no longer keep her eyes open. Nobody tried to get near her after that, and she was thankful. The following morning when Raj got off the train, wishing her well and bidding her be careful and trust no one, she retreated to the world of the upper berth, vowing not to move from that spot unless she was about to piss her pants. Kashi had a large backpack with her also, which she did not want to leave unguarded. She slept on, and around the backpack, and pretended she was a tired, quiet, perhaps ill Indian woman whose family was sitting just below her. She tried to convince herself of this, and almost believed it at times. If nobody asked her anything, she would not need to speak, or be noticed for who she really was.

But now the man went further and, still gripping the woman's oily hair, bashed her face into the front of the bench he was sitting on, right between his legs. She came away with blood dripping from her nose, and continued crying as before. He complemented this action by hitting the side of her head twice with his fist. Kashi jumped involuntarily, her body shooting forward, almost sending her falling, defencelessly from her high bed. She began to think that perhaps what was happening to her personally was that she was about to witness a murder, a public murder. She tried and failed to imagine the same

scene unfolding with blonde Rose sitting nearby in her tank top, absorbed in her Harry Potter paperback, children crawling on her knees, asking for money and candy, or a lock of her strange yellow hair. All the while she frantically pondered, the man was saying quick, fierce things to the now bloody young woman before an old man sitting across from him discreetly gestured to him to lean forward. He did so, his fist still gripping a handful of her hair, her legs splayed into the aisle, and the old man said something very quietly, almost a whisper, into his ear, as the slightly younger man still held the young woman's head up as though the rest of her body did not exist. He slowly nodded at whatever his elder had said, and loosened his grip on the woman, gradually letting go altogether. She hoisted herself up and sat beside him wiping at her face with a cloth from a bag on the seat and swallowing hard. He did not glance at her or speak to her at all after that, and the train rolled on. She continued to cry quietly, and Kashi felt that she alone saw this, as a quick glance around the car revealed endless averted gazes. She wondered where the pair was going and where the woman was being taken.

Only then did Kashi imagine successfully intervening in the violent scene as it had unfolded, only then did she picture herself dropping a book on the man's head or screaming "Stop!" in accordance with some idea of what she had always thought to be right: If someone is in pain or in need, help them. Simple. Had she learned this in Canada? Or from her father, who had taught her to respect all walks of life, and yet who, himself, mistook fear for respect, causing him to enter into a fantasy world where no one dared follow? Her fantasy could only have ended with hundreds of people staring at her, scolding her, yelling, asking questions she could not answer or understand, she told herself. They would certainly speak English too, but this did not comfort her. "Sorry,"



she'd have to say, “my Punjabi grandfather was conned onto a Dutch ship bound for South America a couple of generations ago, so I'm new to this place, and I don't speak—” She lay on her berth and swallowed hard and could not look at the woman anymore without feeling she was drawing attention to herself. She was a day away from her destination. She wondered if the man was, in fact, the woman's father.

She had chased the few things she liked about her father all over the globe, literally mimicking the routes that his family bloodlines had travelled, either by force or voluntarily, first to the Netherlands—the source of colonial power—then to Suriname, in South America, where he had grown up, and now to India, the original home. She thought about how bad her relationship with her father was, how as a child she had wished him dead, how he had always compared his own controlling, tyrannical behaviour, the guilt trips, the mind games, to his own father's more palpable, visible abuses, in an effort to make his own behaviour seem valid. Yet she was here to feel closer to him. She wanted to blend in here, to the brownness, to her ideas of herself as the daughter of a man she would never really know.

Kashi kept staring at the woman on the train in India from the corner of her eye, and the more she looked at her, the more she felt that she herself did not exist. The woman hadn't once acknowledged her, or even looked in her direction, except for that one moment in the middle if it. Without her, Kashi felt she might simply disappear. It had been two days, with very little food besides the granola bars stowed away in the side of her backpack, minimal bathroom trips, very few changes of position. It wasn't just that she didn't want to have to explain herself in an interaction, it was also that she didn't want anyone to notice that that she was alone. They were on the same train, headed in the same

direction, Kashi and the Indian woman, from opposite ends of the world, and Kashi couldn't help but think of how their brains and hearts might look different, or similar. Is one of our hearts stronger? she wondered. Do we have different ideas of pain? Do our ideas cause us pain? There is nothing we could ever really say to each other, she thought, and eventually fell asleep, completely exhausted from trying to look like she was sleeping.

She woke up with a start, and could not say how long it had been, though it was quiet and dark in the car. She couldn't move her body. Her head half covered by the blanket, eyes half open, Kashi tried to move, to sit up, to push the blanket down, to fully open her eyes, but she couldn't budge—it was like there was a wall stopping her mind from being loud enough for her body to hear, assuming the two can be separated. She struggled for several minutes, her mind slowly rising to panic in spite of her snoozing limbs. It felt like if she did not struggle as hard as she could against the heavy, invisible cover, she ran the risk of never moving again, of sinking back into the bed so far that she would either become paralyzed, die, or simply vanish. After about five minutes, by sheer mental force, she snapped herself out of it, her body jerking forward, her mind propelling it fast into a half-sitting position. She wanted nothing more than more sleep, but was afraid that whatever it was that was sucking her into that elevated bed in the corner of the train wouldn't simply quit.

Her father had once said that her particular “sleep problems” sounded like the beginning stages of an out-of-body experience, which he had had, and which he said she should just let happen.

“Don't be a coward,” he had said, but she had never been able to “just let it

happen.”

She looked around for the woman, but could not see her anywhere. Her seat was empty, but the man she was with was still there. Kashi couldn't tell if he was awake or asleep; he sat upright, eyes closed, calm. The old man remained still in his seat, head bobbing to and fro across his chest.

There was no denying the fact that going to the bathroom was at this point a necessity, and she decided it would be wise to go while eyes slept. Slowly Kashi crept, rung by rung down to the train floor; her feet hadn't stood for a day, and they tingled as she went. It seemed the entire car was asleep. Her socked feet padded their way nimbly to the nearby toilet she had grown accustomed to relying on, but a quick tug on the door handle revealed resistance. Looking down, she realized that a little boy was curled up, asleep, right in front of the door. She did not know where the next bathroom was, but was sure it was far, and was sure she would wake someone on her unfamiliar quest for it. She asked herself what any normal, respectable Indian would do, and proceeded to nudge the boy gently with her foot, once, twice, three times, in his little ribs, but to her dismay he didn't stir, just sighed and kept dreaming. At this point she really had to go, and was beginning to become alarmed. What if she really woke him and he woke his parents, assuming he had parents, and someone asked her a question, and—well, she had really become attached to being invisible. It was a first-time experience for her, and the maintenance of her invisibility seemed a delicate affair.

“Where did you adopt your beautiful little ones?” the obnoxious woman in line at the bank had asked her white, Canadian mother. She had been one of many with the same

question. “Oh, they're mine actually,” my mother would say when this happened. “My husband is Indian.” Indian had always just been the easiest, most accessible description the family could find, in spite of its inaccurate, oversimplified implications. “Oh! I'm sorry,” the woman had laughed. It had been a small town, a white town, and questions about difference were generally treated with more respect than difference itself.

Unlike the smooth, sterile, enclosed spaces that were the trains she knew in Canada, India had introduced her to a new kind of train: no wifi, no automatic doors, and wide open spaces at the end of most cars instead of closed doors; any child or traveling vagabond or dreaming woman could easily grip a side rail and simply hang out, into the wind, or cautiously dip her head into the fast-rushing air. Kashi reasoned that she could squat, and feasibly hang out backwards, while peeing onto the ground below. Observing the risks, this way and that, she wondered again in spite of her urgent need to pee where the woman had gone. Breathing deeply, she decided not to waste another moment out in the open as she was, and she stepped over the sleeping boy to the wide, breezy open doorway at his back, adjacent to the bathroom itself. Although it was not in her nature to take physical risks like this one, she felt she had no better option, and told herself repeatedly to stop being afraid, shut up and just do what she had to. Just let it happen, she told herself. Aside from the sleeping boy at her feet, there was no one in her immediate vicinity. She wished again that he would roll away for a minute, caught in some dream. Sighing, she pulled down her pants in one deft motion, and then gripped the door's side rails with both hands while dipping her ass to meet the wind. She started to go, but it was splashing up onto the floor of the train. She kept going, and tried to lean out further, into the warm night, thinking how frozen her ass would be if she was in Canada doing

something like this. She worried that the wind or a railroad sign might send her hurtling, but she held on tight as she'd ever held onto anything, and just pissed, squinting into the darkness as she went, as they all moved in the cover of night, to make sure no one was watching. She saw legs and arms draped, she heard rasping and snoring. Finally, she pulled up her pants and stood, steadying herself. As she was carefully manoeuvring back to her berth, there stood the woman, right in front of her. Her bruised face had simply materialized out of the darkness, directly in front of Kashi's. Kashi felt that the woman was looking right through her; she advanced even closer. But then Kashi blinked, and the woman was gone.

Back in her bed, young Kashi sat upright against the wall and tried to do something like meditate herself into nothingness, or sleep. She did not understand where the woman had come from in the darkness or where she had gone, and was made uneasy thinking about it. Slowly she drifted off.

When she woke up, it was happening again, that frozen feeling. She could not move her body, and tried in vain to snap out of it for ten seconds or more before total exhaustion took over, and it overpowered even fear. It was too much effort to fight. Remembering her father's advice, she reasoned to herself, if whatever is pulling me is stronger than me, then maybe I should just let it have me. Finally she let go, and felt a painless snapping sensation at the back of her neck. The next second she was floating and saw nothing but white. And then suddenly she was back on the top berth, sitting up, looking around. It seemed to have taken a few seconds. She felt more rested than she had in a long time, but realized with a start just how hungry she was, and that she needed the bathroom again. Her legs ached and she unselfconsciously flung them over the side of her

berth, wiggling her toes. It was light outside, and there was a scene developing below.

The woman's seat was still empty and the man she had been traveling with took no note.

He appeared to be travelling alone.

Carefully, Kashi descended, rung by rung.

### Whatever Comes After

I hear people below. Their scurrying awakes in me a frantic urge to turn around and run away from the entire scene and further still, until this pitiful, prolonged daze is mere memory. The thud and clank of baby carriages and big grey trolleys carrying unwanted plates of falafel and dry french fries rises up to meet my attentive ears. Emerging from the very centre of it all is the shimmering nucleus of the Eaton Centre itself—a horrendous, giant, rotating Christmas tree. It is plastic and so are the battery-activated clowns and elves that hang by their necks from its faux pine boughs. I am standing on the third story platform a shout away from the Café Depot to my left. My legs shake. The food court recedes and swells, farther and then nearer, beneath my swaying loafers. The only thing separating me from the pink spattered tiles of various restaurants is this waist-height cage of a balcony. I lean my entire body against it.

Letting my head fall below my shoulders, I grip the painted metal bars tightly, allowing my neck muscles to relax, and my jaw to unclench. It all blurs together, the noise and the sight, but the noise comes through in waves of acuity unknown to my eyes. My throat is dry, so I swallow; it sounds like wiping my eardrums with an old sponge.

I close my eyes. I do not need to remember these things, these words, the frolicking of sound. Silence too, may act as a canopy for living. But I stand tall, surrounded on all sides by a modern order of bustling rats all vying for more to look at, touch, or fuck with. A baby giggles. A mother yells. I am positive that I alone can hear the harsh smack of a parent's hand slapping a child's face.

It was not supposed to be this simple. I am feeling dizzy and my temples throb,

shooting a dull pain through my head, which feels thicker and less recognizable by the second. Minutes have all but dissolved.

“Mocha glacé!” I hear from behind me. The clicking of heels and then a tired voice, “Crème fouettée?” I am distracted.

I woke up on Evelyn's pull-out couch this morning. She has no curtains and the sun gets in your eyes early, shining light on her dusty books and her dark apartment. Today the sun found me dirty and scarred, shedding light on old acne and stringy hair. I could feel how I must've looked as soon as I opened my eyes. She was already up, in her grey bathrobe, and I could hear the coffee percolating, dripping slow and steady, as the sun invaded her living room.

I care about Evelyn. She shivers so easily; she's always cold, and that ripped bathrobe only enhances her timidity. I sleep on Evelyn's tweed pull-out couch more than I do in my own bed. She's such a nice woman. Lately, if I don't sleep at Evelyn's then I don't sleep at all. Sometimes I roam the streets, hopping from one 24-hour café to the next, just so I can sit and stare in relative peace. I only go back to my one-room apartment on occasion, to shower, change my clothes, or to take a shit; things I don't like doing elsewhere. Being alone there has become suffocating. I usually keep it dark because I don't see a point in paying for electricity. Often I swear I can hear rustling noises coming from the corners of the room, from the spaces where the walls and the ceiling meet to form angles. Sometimes I hear voices in the shrouded sounds, but I don't listen to what they say. The loud, incessant hum of the refrigerator I bought for twenty five dollars at the Salvation Army drowns out any real possibility of ever confirming that the whispery hush coming from those dusty corners actually exists. That said, I am not



one to turn my lights on or unplug my refrigerator and find out.

After the divorce last August, Karen got custody of our two children, Lesley and Marion. They are seven and eight. I was forbidden to see them and I guess that makes perfect sense in this society we've built; that a father should not be allowed to see his own children. I lost my job at the furniture outlet in the same week. My friends disappeared quickly. But I'm not stupid. I know the reasons. I know what kind of a person I am. I could blame it on someone else if I really wanted to. But instead I crave a release, an ending to the self I have inhabited up until now. I would like to see if I can be of use playing a different role, the one that comes after this one: a role that redeems. There are enough people like me already.

Behind me two security guards run by. I can hear their clanking keys and their headset radios whirring by, leaving the clientele seated at the Café Depot tables in a frenzy of inquisitive voices and craned necks. I am not fazed. I see this all the time. They're out to nab some fourteen-year old black kid who slipped a watch or a hat into his over-sized pocket. They'll grab him, rough him up a bit, and then throw in a call to his parents. Ever since the day I moved into my hole on Greene Street, ever since they took my kids away, I have visited this place. There are so many different noises here but combined they become muddled and droning and end up sounding a lot like the rustling entity that has made its stale home in my rank apartment. But the difference is, there are people here, people I will never speak to or even care to meet. I am free to sit, and to hear. It is here that I come to seek shelter from my blackened home.

Evelyn is a very kind woman. She works at the Dollar Store one mall over. I came to know her face because I would buy the occasional pack of gum there every now and

then, and if I was short she would let it slide and not tell anyone. She wears thick, coke-bottle glasses, and a headband with pink and yellow flowers on it in her bleached blonde hair. I waited for her one day while she closed the store, watching her pale, washed-out figure restock the shelves from the other side of the glass; Christmas ornaments, hair elastics, boxes of crackers, and Evelyn on her knees in her dirty white sneakers. At first she was taken aback by me, but as soon as she realized that I was not out to sleep with her, we became friends. We talk sometimes, and sometimes we just sit. She thinks she understands my condition and thinks she can help me and that is exactly why I found her. She feeds me coffee and eggs.

But unlike me, Evelyn is not afraid to be alone anymore. And so I must let her.

I breathe deeply. My eyes are still closed and my hands grip the metal rail tighter. I exhale, and the mall spins around me. It has gotten to my head, all of this. I have had too much coffee, I tell myself. Christmas is a bad time, I tell myself.

The last time I saw Lesley and Marion I was staring at their backs, their matching Captain Planet t-shirts, as Karen ushered them sombrely down the courthouse steps. The last time I visited my apartment the rustling sounded just like that: small sandaled feet dragging over countless steps of stone, each one wider than the last. It was too much; I slammed my door on the way out.

I want to cry. But it's been too long. My face hurts from the thought of it. I open my eyes and stare down again, into the distended mass of bodies. A pregnant woman in a long blue dress carries a tray of food while the man beside her carries her jacket. I remember Karen's belly and how we would touch it, how I'd put my ears close to it.

I will never forgive myself. My eyes close of their own accord and I break into a

sweat. My head is swallowed up by a hot, searing pain.

*Marion's legs are splayed across the bed. She has a piano lesson at 5:30 and she's wearing her red dress. I lightly close the door.*

*"Marion, honey, how was school? You and I don't get to talk much anymore, sweetie. Tell me how your day was. Daddy's had a rough afternoon." I put my folder down on the desk.*

*"Why was it rough?" She bares a smile with two missing teeth.*

*"Too much paperwork, and not enough time to have fun," I say, sitting down on the bed beside her. I stroke her hair, her light brown curls. She has hair just like her mother's.*

*"I've missed you, sweetheart. Grownups don't get to have any fun. You should stay a little girl for as long as you can." My hand reaches down to pet her long, slender leg. "You're so pretty, Marion."*

*Her eyes get wide; she knows what comes next. "But daddy, you never see Lesley either!" Her legs tighten as my hand gently works its way up to caress her tanned, mosquito-bitten thigh.*

*"Daddy—" She's scared, but I reassure her.*

*"Sweetheart, you know you'll always be my baby. You know I'll always love you best. But don't go and tell Lesley that." I chuckle. "He wouldn't understand. He might get jealous, and then we wouldn't get to spend time together, just me and you, sweetheart." I am flushed. My fingers find their way into my five-year-old's underwear. Karen is at work. Lesley's in the park.*

Water will not help. Sleep will not come. I crave a prison more tangible one than

this one, this waist-high cage of a balcony, this all-consuming non-sound. I stand straight, wondering for the first time if anybody is watching me. My palms are wet; they slide along the metal rail. But their grip only tightens.

Evelyn's ex-husband used to beat her until she bled. She tells me these things over toast and jam and sugar cubes melting into her coffee. But I've never seen her cry, not once. She might be timid, but she is strong. I have told Evelyn everything. I have told her about Karen and how we stayed up that night screaming at one another and shattering glasses in the kitchen. I told her about losing custody and losing my job. I have told her the entire sad story of my life, but I have omitted myself, the cause of it all. Every single time I enter that woman's house, I neglect to tell her why people have shunned me.

“I'm sorry, Evelyn.”

In my mind, I mouth these words over and over again.

*Karen marches into the living room with purpose. She is holding Marion's hand and carrying her Barbie lunchbox. When she sees me she steers Marion upstairs, whispering something in her ear. Marion has been crying. In that precise moment—the moment right before Karen's eyes grow large with intent, before she lunges at me, before she says the things that she says—it is that precise moment that I believe my heart breaks. I hear it as it breaks. I remember the sound clearer than anything I've ever heard before. In the framework of my life, it is a recurring sound. But much like the hum of my refrigerator, Karen's screaming interrupts—the moment does not last long enough for me to verify the rustling, the gradual but steady breakdown of my heart and mind.*

I stare at my watch and the numbers blur. But I hear its ticking louder than all other noises combined. I remember that it is Wednesday, and Evelyn works on

Wednesday evenings. I think about easing my grip on the rail and letting my hands fall. I think about taking a nice, deep breath and walking away, toward the staircase that leads downstairs to the Dollar Store. I think about buying a pack of gum. My face contorts and I let it happen. It does not matter any more if people see me for what I am.

One of the security guards that ran by just two minutes ago walks back; I know because I can hear his keys again. I turn my head for the first time in what feels like years, though it has only been a few minutes. He is holding a little girl's hand. She is sobbing but she pauses just long enough for our eyes to meet. I do not keep my head turned to acknowledge the young security guard. Instead, I find my whole self tilting forward, my stomach hinged to the rail.

The fact of the matter is, I still can't think of Marion's skinny little legs without getting hard. This is the thought that sends me soaring—through the air, over the food court, past the pregnant women and the dirty old men alike, in circles around the Christmas tree, and into whatever comes after.

## The Break-Up

I stood frozen on the grassy shoulder.

“Just cross!” yelled Dan from across the four-lane highway. Semis rattled by at a rate fit to slaughter any living thing.

Careless pick-ups, hatchbacks, minivans, and even a few convertibles followed suit, not giving a shit about anything other than getting to point B as quickly as their drivers could manage them. A few of these drivers noticed me with amused looks.

“I can’t!” I screamed back at him. I had been standing there for the better part of twenty minutes in the glaring August heat.

We had been hitchhiking across Canada eastward from BC to Quebec for three days and were making good time. We had made it as far as Winnipeg, never had to wait much at all, sometimes even got overnight rides with truckers or in the mobile homes of really old couples who had learned how to travel together long ago, learned how to stay together, and keep moving.

We had been on the road for two months, having first hitched west from where we lived in Montreal, all the way to Salt Spring Island, BC. Dan's parents lived there on a quaint little farm, where they sold organic produce to the community of artists, sculptors and carpenters that lived in the vicinity, making a small yet reliable income. From there we'd toured the other Gulf Islands, visited some friends, then to Alberta for our more journalistic, central quest: to visit the tar sands and some of the Native communities dying of cancer downstream on the Athabasca, and write about it in a way that people not dying in this way would be upset by, riding the ever-waning wave of Dan's carpentry

money, and my small accrual of funds doing freelance editing work, all the way. Friends had jokingly called us a “power couple.” We were a young, freelance journalist-activist pair that could get by with little and sleep in ditches and clean up real nice when we went to artistic or political events in the city.

We had met three years earlier at a comedy festival. Dan was a friend of a friend, and had gotten a free pass to all the shows he wanted because he had designed a logo for the first-time festival: a remarkably fat, strikingly beautiful woman, laughing very hard, clutching her rippling stomach. I had thought he was boring when I first met him, but was sold when I saw how he laughed with his entire body, uninhibited, head dancing, not seeming to care what people thought. It was fucking refreshing, and I had to laugh just looking at him, quite frankly. Even more refreshing was the fact that he had never once asked me what I was laughing at, and had not even one time assumed that I was laughing at him. Men do that, in my experience, and it annoys the hell out of me, because I laugh at everything, usually, because it's damn funny, all of it, and when, on a date, a guy has asked me what's so funny, it has invariably ended quickly. I liked my men secure in themselves, and capable of seeing the absurdity of life on demand. I'm not saying it's reasonable, but that's how I was, and how I still am, today.

But standing paralyzed on the side of the road, unable to accept death should it be in the cards, I truly hated Dan, and nothing about the situation was funny. I had lost my sense of humour several thousand kilometres back. Who could say where? Everything about his body language from where I was standing, terrified, said, “Hurry the fuck up, wimp. PS: I love you.”

My left leg and lower back were killing me. The doctor had said sciatica, just like

my mom always had. Dragging a heavy, ill-fastened backpack around while wearing flimsy flip-flops seemed to seal the deal.

Dan had crossed like a flash. His sixty-pound pack seemed not to slow him at all. If it hadn't been for my thirty-pound pack, I might have had the confidence to tackle that whirring asphalt myself, maybe fifteen minutes earlier.

Now, he sat in the dirt, propped up by his pack, waiting, attempting to appear patient, and failing miserably. I knew he was thirsty, and we'd run out of water back in Alberta that morning. We never seemed to take care to carry enough water. One bottle between the two of us, with faith that we'd reach another gas station soon, faucets flowing with the warm, chlorinated fluid we'd been swilling thus far. The rare restaurant with cold pitchers of the stuff was always a treat. This had led to the unpleasant rationing of something I apparently needed, if I was going to make it across. "Why don't you get a water bottle too?" I had asked, maybe twice.

"It's just more weight," he'd responded. "Besides, what's the big deal if we just keep refilling yours?"

"Can you fix my pack?" I'd say. And sometimes he'd readjust it for me, but it was never right; the hot fraying thread of tension from my back to my calf always got worse no matter how he adjusted the straps or how much I stretched.

"You can do it!" he yelled. But I could barely lift my pack. I stood there, openly suffering.

I hoisted my bag onto my shoulders for the third time, and tried to breathe. I had been in a state of panic since Dan had successfully crossed without me, or maybe since I'd spotted the place we had to cross, the place we'd had no choice but to traverse if we



were going to sleep that night. I was probably more angry than panicked, to be fair. I was angry at Dan for his efficient journey across, and I got angrier as I thought of the efficient way that he accomplished everything. I steadied myself for the sprint that would land us both on the other side, where we would collect ourselves, descend the steep embankment, and continue eastward, avoiding the road that entered Winnipeg altogether. Just as I was about to take the plunge, a semi hurtled past, pigs squealing from their metal air-holes. Missing my brief window, I roared, loud and full, not holding back: “Fuckkkkk!”

Across the way, Dan's head had fallen onto his pack, eyes closed.

I wanted to sit down in the dirt, too, on my side of things, without even bothering to cross. Nope, sorry Dan, not gonna happen. We're at an impasse, and I say you come back over to my side and walk back over to that motel we just passed. And then I'm gonna shower, no matter how gross the bath is, and we'll drink tap water, and you'll make me come so I can live to laugh another day. And in the morning we'll even eat food before leaving, and I won't eat as fast as you, even though you think we should get going before the sun gets too high in the sky.

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I thought of when we biked together in the city. He always sped ahead, no helmet, through red lights, zigging in between lanes. Horns would honk and people would shoot him looks. I would linger blocks behind. I have never had much respect for traffic rules but I don't trust others to follow them either. Catching up to him, I'd say “What's the point of going so fast? You just lose those few seconds by waiting for me.” He'd just look at me and shrug, with that look. Once he said to me, “You might live longer, but I'll have more

fun.” It was joke that I never found funny, thinking of it on and off as I did for the next week or so. I thought of the way our loyal golden retriever used to heel my mother on her morning jogs, and I tried to devise a smart return for him, something about unfair expectations, or treating me like a pet, but it never panned out in my mind.

Once, heading up St. Laurent, full of its bars and restaurants, on a Friday night, I'd been in the lead, and Dan had gotten stuck a couple streets behind, in a rare twist of events. I was, after all, just as fast as him if not faster. I stopped and waited, relishing the moment of breath. Turning back, I watched a woman in an SUV cut him off. He spat on her windshield before reclaiming his place in front of her, narrowly avoiding her bumper smacking his tailbone. Dan was rude on the road, but he wasn't usually a spitter. It was the SUV that put him over the edge this time, I knew. “How?” he would ask. “How, at this point in history, can anybody justify a car like that making sense? How?” In what became an absurd chase, the woman pursued a furiously bicycling Dan up the street, and she, wheels screeching, with her window rolled down, screeching even louder.

“You piece of shit!” And she was crying.

Customers and workers came outside and clustered on the sidewalk to behold the spectacle. There was something of a horse race and something of a soap opera about it. I had stopped and was frozen still, eyes fixed on Dan's maniacal grin, his tensely knotted brows, the way his face was contorting with the acute awareness afforded him by the rush of adrenaline, as he passed me by, literally racing the SUV woman up the street. Other cars had pulled to the side in an effort to avoid the two swerving contestants. Then I could barely see him anymore.

I screamed for him to stop as the people around slowly returned to their pitchers

of beer and sangria, shaking their heads and snorting with laughter. “Dan!” I screamed it so loud, my throat hurt. I stood on the sidewalk with my bike. I imagined stamping my foot down on the pigeon busily pecking fries at my feet until I could hear its bones crunch. When I finally managed to transport myself from that spot a good twenty seconds later, I walked up the street to find that the woman had parked in the middle of the street and leapt out of her vehicle, leaving the door wide open, and traffic unable to pass on either side. She had apparently had the wherewithal to realize that pursuing Dan was more expedient on foot, and the unhappy woman was actually running for him, fists swinging for whatever she could hit. But he quickly escaped, unscathed, as is his way, leaving her howling, melting down in front of oh-so-many people, in front of me. Our eyes met for half a second between her arms pointing and flailing and her head falling into the crook of her arms, as she leaned, steadying herself, sobbing, on the hood of her big shiny car.

Dan knew when I was pissed, but often didn't know to what extent because I didn't want to give him any justification for offering solutions to my agitation—something he loved to do. The only rage I ever expressed was the sort aimed at systems of power larger than both of us, violators of justice that left our personal contests, our rigged elections, in the dust.

Oil, and the way it made people behave was worth our anger. Lisa, the Cree elder we had stayed with in Fort McMurray, Alberta, had seen to it that neither one of us would ever forget it. She and her husband, Harold, don't have enough food to live anymore because the trap lines they set are of no use when the animals are as poisoned as the people. And the fish. When Dan wasn't around asking pointed questions about the

companies, and getting me to hold the camera straight, and teaching me what types of questions would be appropriate to jump in with, she opened up in a woman way, folding towels, stirring the stew, telling me the kinds of berries they used to have: raspberries, high bush cranberries, Saskatoon berries. She listed them off in circles, repeating the names, once, twice, three times, drawing attention to the abundance that she had no pictures to prove. She paused after each name, breaking in remembrance to taste each one. Very slowly, I imagined I tasted them too. Later I wrote an article where all details about the megaproject revolved around the presence and absence of berries. Dan had smiled at my phrase “when berries tickled the land,” wondering if such a thing were even possible.

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My pack fixed securely on my shoulders, I took a deep breath, steadying myself again to cross the highway. On the other side, he had pulled out a book, *Essence*, about an oil pipeline vandal-vigilante.

I tried to imagine his reaction if he looked up to find I had vanished.

Suddenly, there were fewer cars, my ten-second window appeared to have doubled—so I did it. I rushed across that hard, tar surface with all of the intent I could muster to focus on my destination straight ahead. Dan flipped a page to finish the paragraph before raising his head to deliver a congratulatory smile. I knew he meant well. I knew he loved me.

Wordless, we began to walk. I didn't even get why we had had to cross the road to begin with. But Dan had argued for making it as far as Kenora that night, where he had a friend who could put us up for free. So there we were, on the outskirts of Winnipeg,

making the most of the remaining two hours of daylight to get three hours further down the road.

Once we had walked a ways and stationed ourselves in a good spot—one with a wide shoulder for pulling over, and decent visibility—we dropped our packs, huddling them together to make our baggage appear less than it was, and I took my routine position, several feet in front of him, leading the thumb display with my female allure of non-threat. Also, Dan had suggested that due to the heightened intuition that I clearly possessed thanks to my being a woman, (and in part because of the greater risk I was taking), I had the decisive say about whether or not we would accept the ride or not. This meant that in spite of my being slower with my pack on, I was the one who ran ahead when a car stopped, was the first to say hi, and thank you, and look the driver in the eyes, assessing the situation. I had only ever refused a ride twice. Sometimes the eyes are just a little too bloodshot, the glint a little off-kilter, the smell of the vehicle a little too mysterious, and you tell him, the driver, that you're gonna wait for someone who's going a little further, so you can make the most of the remaining daylight.

I had to pee and the thought of getting a ride while having to pee scared me so I let my thumb drop and, without informing Dan, just walked into the bushes beside the shoulder and pulled down my pants.

“I have to pee!” I yelled in explanation from where I squatted.

As I was pulling my pants up, I noticed a blackberry bush right in front of me. I was starving and hoped they were the good-tasting kind. I carefully chose a few of the juiciest looking ones and plopped them into my mouth, tasting them one at a time. But some weren't yet ripe enough to be anything but sour, and a couple of others were sweet

but with a strange chemical aftertaste ruining it for me. Lisa had said that berries were medicine, that they were really good for almost any physical ailment, but that once they tasted like they'd been “infiltrated,” —that was the word she used—then you could just forget it, because all of their good properties had been cancelled out. Lisa talked the same way about the tar sands operation: their lands had been “infiltrated,” their water, their air. Those doing the infiltrating were also stealing information on their traditional medicines, she said.

“Don’t know how they’re gonna copy our secrets once they kill everything around here, though,” she said.

It was sad because I knew if the berries had been good they would have made me feel much better. I probably wouldn't have even felt hungry again till the morning. I dropped the fistful of berries I had picked for Dan and rushed back up to the road.

Manitoba rides were a tough sell. Many drivers gestured apologetically, incomprehensibly. The traffic progressed uninterrupted, like families out shopping on a Saturday quickly pass the homeless while whispering “sorry” under their breath. “Friendly Manitoba my ass,” I muttered for the fifth time at a passing license plate and another good-natured gesturer close to two hours later, the light dying a slow death all around us.

“Dan, we need to just stop.”

“We've still got a bit of light.”

“I can't stand any more.” I stretched to reach my toes, certain that I was doing all the wrong stretches to deal with my particular tensions. I winced as a sharp pain shot up the whole left side of my body, causing me to visualize what damage and swelling was

occurring in places I couldn't see, making me question my priorities in life.

Ten more minutes passed and the light really had gone. Mosquitoes, shielded by the darkness, feasted on our ankles.

“Dan, can we just set up the fucking tent? We've agreed it's not good to get a ride when we're in a bad space. Also, there's a great tent spot right over there where I peed. There's even a blackberry bush.”

He looked at me. “Wouldn't you rather sleep on a couch tonight and eat something more than berries?”

“There's a good, flat spot of soft grass over there,” I responded. I ran down to the blackberry bush again and picked a single, plump berry, and then returned and handed it to Dan. “Tell me, does this taste okay to you?”

“Yeah, tastes fine to me,” he said, gulping it down.

“Really?” I wasn't sure if he was telling the truth.

He looked at me. “Alright, let's camp,” and just as he was saying it, a car pulled over, a good fifty-foot jaunt ahead of us.

“Holy shit.” My stomach swerved. I hated getting into strange cars when it was dark. Half-limping, I ran on up ahead, as was our custom. Two teenage boys had already opened their trunk for our bags. I leaned down to say “Hi, where you heading?” through the passenger side window and the acne-faced driver with a Slurpy in his lap simply shot back, “Get on in!”

“Where you heading?” I repeated, determined, as usual, to get an answer first. Dan, behind me, had already thrown his bag in the open trunk. He grabbed mine off my back, and threw it in after his, which was not our custom. I shot him a look. The car

smelled of beer, and I couldn't seem to get a direct line on eye contact. Cigarette butts lined the dashboard like dead fish hug a shoreline.

“That way, 'bout twenty minutes,” said the boy in the passenger seat, pointing ahead. “You want a ride, or not?” His knees jerked up and down nervously as he spoke. “Actually,” I said, “we're gonna wait it out for someone going a little further. We've got a lot of distance to cover tomorrow. Thanks anyway.”

“Suit yourselves,” said the driver, and before I could turn around to nudge Dan, who was out of earshot, to grab our backpacks, the car screeched away, trunk still open wide, our bags, our wallets, our tent, and all of our possessions within them still inside. I could hear both boys hooting and laughing as they made the next sharp turn, freshly painted yellow lines guiding their bald tires as they disappeared into silence.

I turned slowly, to look at him. He was standing at ease, his head in his hands. He stroked his hair back with both hands, jumping into the air, punching an imaginary foe. “Fuckkkkk!”

“Dan.”

“What?”

I walked down to the flat spot by the berries and lay down. I let the mosquitoes have at me. I pretended they were tickling me. I let my body's pain slowly conform to the soft grass, which also tickled. It felt ok, to let go like that. And then I started laughing.

“What are you laughing at?” he said.



## S

Sheila sat in her car, hands gripping the wheel so tightly that her knuckles had grown pale with the effort. She wasn't going anywhere. Just frozen—stiff in a still, parked car. The leaves shook in the trees overhead, the trees that surrounded the circular dirt lot in a half moon. The dirt lot that was her front yard.

Nobody was home, but he would be back soon, any minute. She let her grip loosen to smack down on the horn as hard as she could, creating a loud, blaring whine, so alarming that birds shot from their trees in a panic. Staring straight ahead, past the woodshed, past the children's bicycles, past the trees, she saw a way out. She would end it all very quickly without wasting any more time. She started the car, swung around quickly, backing up close as she could without hitting the barn, and swerved down the long driveway, veering right at the last second to continue onto the road.

When she got to Pierre's it was almost dark. In the fifteen minutes it had taken to drive there, the sun had sunk considerably in the dark, veiled sky. She parked the car on the uphill slant in front of his door and pulled the parking break.

Pierre was usually home by eight from his day of working hard in the shop. He worked five minutes from where he lived, just down the highway at a local garage where young men daily got their hands dirty to keep the community rolling free. Sheila had sometimes fantasized about getting a job there herself, but the fantasy always ended with Pierre propping her up on some filthy hood, legs spread wide, his hands greasy as the car—touching her, fixing her.

The light was on and Pierre was home. She knocked twice, gently, so she wasn't

sure he'd heard at first. He was probably in the kitchen with the tap on, clanking cutlery, rapidly tearing vegetables apart with some dull knife to cook up a stew with any one of a dozen hunks of frozen game he had hunted himself. Deer, bear, moose. Moose was her favourite.

She had tasted it first the night Spencer had accused her of cheating. He'd found some old photo of a boyfriend in one of her drawers. She had covered it with other papers, tax receipts and doctors' slips, but Spencer was unobservant until he felt like noticing something. She had kept the photo because she liked its composition. She didn't know much about what made a good photo but she understood that the dark man with tousled black hair, a bright smile, a sky even brighter overhead, and blue, with the leaves of trees blurred behind him, was a captivating image.

Sure, she had loved the man in the photo once, and he had loved her back, but sometimes love moves on, and then you meet somebody else one day, someone you love a little thinly, maybe, in comparison, but who is clear, and committed. Spencer wanted her to be committed too, so she had torn that photo right in half to prove to him that she was. But he never fully believed her when she was passionate about something. Right from the start his clear blue eyes had levelled with her. She had caught a glimpse of what it was like to have someone want you without a single doubt in their mind. It had felt to her like muscles relaxing after years of flexing.

Pierre had fixed their cars since her kids were babies. He had lived where he did longer than the garage had existed, had grown up where he was, inheriting the small wooden house from his grandparents who had raised him. Yes, he had made Sheila some delicious moose stew the night Spencer punched a hole in the wall above their bed, just

barely missing her head. She hadn't known him that well, then. He was the man who had fixed her bent-in fender after her run-in with a deer one night, leaving her stunned and it limping back into the darkness to suffer a slow death or heal slowly and painfully. Sheila still wondered which, sometimes. He was the one she called when her car broke down one night in a snowstorm about thirty minutes down the road on her way back from Cowansville. He was the one she called when she needed to jump into her car and escape because something inevitably always went wrong with her car when she needed to escape.

He seemed to be the one she ended up needing when bad things happened. So it hadn't been that much of a stretch when she fled from her house in a bloody mess, jumped in her car, and ended up at Pierre's. Speeding down the highway, his dirt driveway reaching out like a friendly omen on a seemingly endless stretch of deadly asphalt, had somehow managed to slow her down, foot on brake, and make that left turn. When he put the bowl in front of her, the tears began to come. She'd revealed more than she intended to in that sitting and when she'd stopped talking he had brushed her chin with his hand, seemingly afraid to touch her longer, she thought then.

She sat across from him now, eyes dry and burning, heart hot and rushing.

"I am leaving him," she said.

Pierre inhaled deeply, and said nothing. He loved her.

"But he's not going to let me," she continued. "He'll do anything, you know that."

Pierre knew that this was true. He had had the misfortune of working with Spence for a few months once. The man had a certain dull, burning chaos in his eyes. Not someone you wanted to piss off, ever. Not someone whose limitations you could ever

predict, or prefer one over the other, for that matter.

“Pierre, do you think you could get me a gun?”

Her request made sense to him, but he was someone who thought before speaking, especially before responding. He had learned early in life that not doing so often brought with it circumstances more dire than one usually thought possible.

“Just in case,” she added hesitantly, after a few moments. “I need to be ready, just in case. I’m going to end this, Pierre, but I need to be ready for him. He’ll notice that I’m gone before I’ve even left. You know that. And the girls—”

“I can come with you,” he said, knowing that it made sense, and that she would never allow it.

“I want you to be there.” She looked up, locking eyes with the man in his dark blue coveralls, unbuttoned to his waist, revealing an equally stained, tight-fitting undershirt, once white. She looked at his worn work boots, the laces frayed at their ends, the state her nerves had now permanently claimed as their own. She saw his beautiful chapped hands, large, and rough as sandpaper in places, veins emphasized by a life of manual work, the lines on his hands darkened with engine oil. She saw a man she had slowly come to love and her instinct told her she wanted to protect him.

“I need to do this alone,” she said, and this scared both of them.

“I have one you can have,” he said, after a while.

She stood up to put her cup in the sink and he pulled her toward him, hand anchoring hip. He pulled her even closer, both of them half avoiding with their eyes. They kissed, for a long time.

She left that night with the same pistol Pierre had wielded at the age of thirteen,

while crippling his father, who happened to be storming at him for the very last time. It was the same pistol that his father had held against his mother's temple more than once—after a few too many drinks—before that day when he lost all the feeling in his legs. It was shiny and black, and Pierre had not used it since. He had kept it clean, fully loaded, and tucked away, like a cold, ancient tool not to be handled unless necessary. She placed it in her glove compartment now and headed back to her house, travelling under the speed limit for the first time in her life. It was very late, she thought.

Hands gripping the wheel, she thought of her wedding day. People talk all the time about rainy weather being a bad omen for marriage. Hers had been beautiful—a hot, sunny, May day, not a cloud in the blue sky. But the funny, nagging reality was that she had been hoping for a rainy day. She had convinced herself that it would be a thing of solemnity—of vows being spoken with the type of sincerity that a nice sunny day would never have accentuated. And that afterwards, they would run through the rain, she and Spence, defying omens, looking straight in the face of fate, and ignoring its stare, while kissing, drenched, and surrendering to something greater than themselves. But what she had gone out of her way not to mention to others, was that sunny days, commonplace as they might be, made her very, very anxious. Sure, she could keep it to herself. She could relax into them after a while, generally speaking, and even come to enjoy them. Her body did, after all, respond to sun much in the same way that it responded to Spence. But at the core of both experiences for her was a dull sort of terror. No, perhaps terror was too strong a word, but whatever it was, it was sick, sick in an exciting way, and easy to control and to hide.

On sunny days as a young girl she had rarely been allowed to play. This was part

of it, she knew. Summer break made up the bulk of her father's continually seized opportunity to teach his children the value of a day's work. But he had never known how to stop what he was doing, look around, and reassess a situation. Instead, he would spiral ahead, through those people and things he felt he cared for, like a big, fat screw.

She had said “I do.” She had planned to, in advance, of course. She had gone through with ceremony, in spite of the hot sun that shone on the people and events around her in such a way that none of their flaws had a chance in hell of remaining concealed. She had succeeded that day in concealing her own flaws, with her smile that waved like a flag at the throngs of people who gave little thought to sunny days. She had managed to disguise her grinding stomach, her shallow breath, the pit of terror—there was that word again—at her centre, coolly dismissing it all as doubt, the kind that every woman experiences on her wedding day. Not the kind that tears your stomach open from inside, clawing through vital organs as if they were minor obstacles, ignoring survival as if it were an abstract concept, not the kind that you can understand or explain.

And when she and Spence had climbed into that dark car with the words “Just Married” outlined in marigolds all along the back, the sun had already set for the day, her breathing had evened out, allowing her to forget her anxiety about sunshine, turning instead to champagne and sex down in Florida, where Spence's mother had set them up in a fancy hotel.

As she neared her own driveway again, Sheila's vision had begun to blur in a contracting sort of way, and she could barely see the road for seconds at a time. This didn't worry her as it might have—she knew its curves and felt its width, and the thought of pulling off to the side seemed deeply sinister. She became aware, at about the same

moment, that what she had been doing all that time was tracing her path. In her head that is, envisioning and re-envisioning the unlit stretch of twists and turns between Pierre's driveway and the dirt road leading to her own. She saw it snaking again and over again, the road she was on, playing on an endless loop in her mind. The shape of it, the double "S" quality, her car, stopping the flow like a cork, a third of the way through the second S. She saw herself, then, in such clear detail, that her senses were overloaded with information: a woman in her prime, beautiful, in a way. Gripping the wheel, but remaining in the same place. Moving, but always blocking her own path. A woman with a gun, in a car. A woman in a car with a gun in it. The simplicity of it expanded and contracted like a pupil at the centre of her forehead, pulsing at a rate equivalent to panic.

She thought of her two daughters, of how they were her only reason for retracing this same old road now. She slowly shifted back into drive, expecting that she would know when and how to switch gears again automatically when the time was right, that her body, her skin and blood and bones would remember just how to act and just what to avoid, would remember their history and take steps to improve things for their next of kin.

It was ten when she pulled in, and she saw that all the lights were off. Spence's pick-up was parked in its usual spot, on the steepest incline before their house. Usually he left the lights on if she wasn't home yet, was up, pacing and drinking and getting worried.

The very first time he lost it, they had not yet been married. Sheila did not like to admit this fact to herself, but she knew it to be true. They'd been together less than a year and had been living together for only three weeks, in the same house they now inhabited. Sheila had not been working at the school long at that point either. The house, their life

together, and her new job had all seemed to signify to her forward motion and general progress. She felt, at the time, that she was becoming an adult more with each breath. Spencer was a spooning lover exhaling into the back of her neck, his arms tightly fastened around her waist, making air dance lightly at the base of her thoughts. He had liked to wake her in the morning by softly tracing her face: from forehead, over tip of nose, down to lips, where his finger would rest, feeling her breath on his skin until she awoke a moment later to the surprise of his attention. She was a heavy sleeper and he liked to test her.

She'd come home from work an hour later than usual, to find Spencer home before her, a rare occurrence. That was when he had worked at the garage with Pierre, who had hired him because he knew cars, yes, but mainly to help the new couple out. That was before Spence had lost his temper, and ultimately lost the job, a few months later.

"Where have you been?" he had asked, without looking her in the eye. He was crouched behind his pick-up, shirtless, tanned and sexy, tinkering with something.

"I had to stay at work a bit later for a planning meeting."

"Why didn't you call?"

"Sorry, I thought I had mentioned it this morning, but maybe you weren't entirely awake yet. Sorry, hon. I'll be clearer next time."

"*Sorry, hon. I'll be clearer next time.* Really, Sheila? Really? What was I supposed to think? Well, my girl's an hour late, I guess I'll just wait a little longer before calling the cops."

"Spence, you could have called the school if you were that worried."



“I should not have to call the school, Sheila.” He stood up quickly, kicking the toolbox aside, scattering silver.

“Okay, I’m sorry. Next time I’ll be sure you know where I am.”

He flung the wrench that was in his hand, hitting her square in the knee and catching her by total surprise.

“Jesus Christ, Spence!” She clutched her knee, nearly falling over as the pain began.

He walked over to her then, as she leaned forward, heaving, and pushed her chest lightly with his fingers, just enough to send her falling, sprawled out in their driveway, on her back, in shock.

“Spence, stop.”

He had leaned over her then, and she could remember it as clear as yesterday, even now, with the weight of a gun in her lap, and the headlights off. He had crouched down and hovered inches from her face. “Babe, I’m sorry,” he had said, gently tickling her neck with his fingers. “I just lost it there for a second. You had me worried sick.”

“Okay,” she had said, as his hand slid slowly up her bare thigh, tossing her skirt aside. Their dog, Henry, began barking at this point, suddenly noticing that something was awry. The tips of his fingers still grazing Sheila’s neck, Spence used his other hand to pick up the wrench again and fling it at Henry, keeping him at bay, narrowly missing his head. Henry sprinted behind the barn, whimpering. Sheila’s throat was very dry, and she began to cry. Her stomach twisted.

“Hey. You know I love you, sugar. Shh. I’m sorry.” He stretched her underwear to one side and slid a finger inside her. “Sheila.” He went down, then, all the way, boots

digging backwards in the dirt, jeans filthy, bare chest and beating heart to the ground. He buried his face in her then, as she cried. As she cried, he licked her, sucked her, kissed her, massaged her, until she came right there in the driveway, in front of their home, in a mess of tears and dirt. Just as she came, he carelessly placed his hand on the injured knee, causing her to scream out, complicating the sounds she made.

Sheila got out of the car, gun in hand. She walked up the steps to their front door. The girls would sometimes still be up this late. Dark and silent. She froze. He had known. He had known, and he had taken them. He had done the thing he knew she would not heal from. She had to steady herself against a wave of nausea. She half expected him to jump out of the shadows and surprise her. She entered the house and glanced all around before switching the light on. Nothing. No one. Just toys on the floor, the TV on mute, an infomercial about knives, or wedding rings, or both. Down the hall to the girls' bedroom. Just before she reached the door, she realized she still had the gun in hand, no longer cold, now slipping with sweat. She tucked it in her back pocket, immediately feeling its weight. Her arm was sore from holding it for only a few seconds. Adrenaline, she thought, quietly pushing the door open, exhaling, adrenaline, adrenaline. They were there, fast asleep, and she didn't understand how it could be.

They were breathing there, in their separate beds, stuffed animals on the edge of each for the usual nightly protection from bad spirits, as Gwen called them. Anna still just called them "the bad," in spite of her older sister's best efforts to teach her the proper terminology. She closed the door softly, both relieved and confused. Swiftly onward, to her and Spence's room, spotting an empty kitchen on the way, pushing open the bathroom door to find nothing, no one. Once in their room, she found the bed made, just as she had

left it that morning, no ashtray or scotch glass left by a venting Spence—both but small traces of what she and her body had expected to find. He was still out somewhere, at a bar, maybe. But that's not his style, she thought, before the first thought had yet subsided, and then, even faster: but his truck is here.

No longer as frightened as before, emboldened by the so-far unexpected, and the gun in her pocket, she did another once-over of the entire place, gave her sleeping daughters pecks on the cheeks, and went back outside. The moon was almost full, and lit up the yard without any help needed from the dim porch light. She headed for the truck, opened the dented door; it caught, and she pulled it open hard. The usual. Nothing. Signs of disorder: cigarette butts under the pedals, empty liquor bottles, water bottles, a few of them, with piss inside, she was sure, but had never checked. Spence's piss was a colour similar to whiskey, at times. The truck smelled of take-out—ketchup, maybe, or melted cheese left in the sun too long. The Styrofoam containers were all behind the seats, tossed out of the way so they couldn't be seen, but still living, breathing, wafting always.

“Where the fuck.” She said it out loud, to validate, verify, officially make sure that she was actually present in this alternate world, one where Spence did not exist, where only evidence of him lived on.

There Sheila stood, in the middle of her dark yard, her children asleep in their beds, her husband's usual dwellings mysteriously, unsettlingly empty, dim, and quiet. To the side of the truck, parked at an angle she had not initially seen, was his dirt bike. Her approaching hand could feel the heat was still there.

“Spence!” her cry rang out, unmistakably frightened below the moonlit sky, stars shining down in silence, their bright bodies bearing solemn witness to her fear.

“Spencer!” Sheila marched behind the house, searching frantically, as for a lost child, a game of hide and seek gone one step too far.

“Spence!” She screamed it this time, suddenly aware as her voice rang back that she would wake the girls, but she was already calling him again. Beyond her fiercest reasoning and into the territory of her fiercest desire, she watched herself from afar. She sat on the steps and wailed his name, crying into her hands. “Spencer.” “Spence,” she said it softly now, a quickly fading chant. She sat on his bike and waited, for what she didn't know. She saw it snaking again and over again, the road she was on, playing on an endless loop in her mind.