

Patati Patata and Other Stories

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2015

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

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Entitled: Patati Patata and Other Stories

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (English)

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Abstract

Patati Patata and Other Stories

By Yann Geoffroy

This collection of eight stories was written between 2012-2015. The stories explore general themes of identity, love, and anxiety in the face of these. The fictional characters in these stories are concerned with themselves mostly and not the state of the world, rather their place within the world. It can be said that the problems encountered in these stories are first world problems. This is why the characters are so self-absorbed. There is nothing more obvious and natural than first world self-absorption. Facebook is symbolic of first world self-absorption. Writings generally reflect the experiences and concerns of their authors. If not, they usually engage in Othering and are off-putting. Two of the eight stories are absurdist and expressions of the author's attempt to escape himself. These are the two stories that don't make any sense. The collection could very well be called "an exercise in solipsism."

The only values these stories may have are bits of humour and honesty. If these things are appealing to the reader, the reader should read these stories. The stories involve characters that are honest with themselves, or, if they are not, the author is honest with the reader about the characters. They might be fun ways to examine and connect to a community outside one's self and to look at how we deceive ourselves and present semblances to the world.

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Society of False Faces

I read in *Rabelais and His World* that clowns operate on the margins of society in between class boundaries and that all cultures have always held an ambiguous space for these tricksters. They represent the fulcrum upon which everything human can flip. You are a king but a clown treats you like a beggar. You are a saint but the clown fears you like Satan. You are happy but the clown comforts your broken heart.

Our apartment was a small self-contained world. Craig the silent king, Jamee the indolent queen prone to moments of oracular clairvoyance, and me, Barry, the court jester, trying to keep the house in order by constantly upsetting it. I had a thing for the queen, and the king, well, he had his responsibilities at the Liquid Smoke Factory. I aspired to be king by wanting the queen, but aspirations are dangerous for a clown.

“Go let Lawrence in and we can get this party started,” I said, snapping the biography of Rimbaud shut at the sound of the doorbell. Jamee looked at me with her blue eyes, the ochre light of August dusk through the skylight on her messy blond hair. It fluttered wonderfully as she shook her head no.

“My ankle hurts,” she said and then began massaging her ankle as if to illustrate the point. Her toenails painted a mermaid seafoam.

“Hey Lawrence,” I said. He walked in. I wondered if I looked different to him than I did the day before.

“Hey Bro,” he said. “Sorry for the delay, smashed the Camry, on bike now.” He was drenched in sweat.

“You smashed the Camry?”

“Streetcar making a right. Don’t worry, I’ll keep our tally going.” He took off his reflective vest. I’d traded him the Camry after I’d been laid off at the Tea Company.

Lawrence sat down on our cream pleather sofa under the tall tropical plant I was so proud of. He lit a cigarette. I lit a cigarette, so did Jamee, and a minute later, Craig came in and lit another.

“What’ll it be?” said Lawrence, leaning forward, the sound of his arms unsticking from the sofa.

“The usual,” I said, looking at Jamee. Lawrence marked it down in his ledger and handed me the pen to initialize. I cut lines for the four of us, chose a nostril and went first, handing the bill to Lawrence, who then handed it to Jamee, who then handed it to Craig. The feeling of the drug as it enters your bloodstream slowly just behind your face is the best part. It begins to dissipate as soon as you notice it, always receding just out of reach.

Lawrence’s pager vibrated and he left. Time disappeared. Jamee, Craig and I talked speedily, mostly about ourselves without listening to one another. I was excited about an open casting call scheduled that Saturday for the Blueman Group.

As the effects of the drug began to plateau, we shot ideas back and forth about a screenplay that incorporated characters from cheap product advertisements but couldn't decide who the intended audience would be.

"If it's children," I said, "the characters would be sincere but naive and able only to think in terms of the narrowly defined products they represent."

"Good point," said Jamee. "I feel like children are our best bet. "

"If it is an independently thinking critical audience the characters would be more self-aware, more satirical, and they would want more out of life than the narrow ideological associations of their products but would be forced to silence themselves in order to not anger the corporate gods.

"That's boring," said Jamee. "Too earnest."

"I agree," said Craig.

"Or it could be both, like the Simpsons, Craig, your favorite show, although you would never admit to having a favorite."

"Excuse me?" said Craig.

"Can I have a smoke, Craig?" He handed me one.

"Stop," said Jaimee. "There are too many characters now and the audience will not be able to keep track of them, nor make any sense of what they all mean as a group. What we need most is focus and intention."

She was standing, arms akimbo.

By this point Craig had gone to bed because he had to work in the morning. He was content at the Liquid Smoke factory, which made me jealous of him in other ways than the Jamee way. I had never been happy in any form of

employment and I don't think I ever will be. It's the exchange of time for money, and time made into a quantity like money, when really, time is quality, and we are outside time as much as we are inside time.

I had been laid off from the Tea Company. I was on my way to a trade show in Columbus, Ohio, and was refused entry into the United States by customs because I admitted that I had smoked a joint in the taxi on the way to the airport.

Now, two days before my big audition, my employment insurance had almost run out. I was convinced I was a very good clown however. An honest clown, honest about the fact that everything in society is a lie constructed to placate people into not thinking about death. I hadn't had any gigs yet (I refused to do birthday parties) and so things were getting a little desperate.

In the morning I lay in the darkness of my windowless room. Craig was at work. I imagined Jamee knocking softly on the door, slipping into bed with me, feeling my biceps and nibbling my ear.

I went into the sky-lit living room and sat down next to her, squinting and rubbing my temples. She was watching Dr. Oz, stuffing those envelopes with information brochures about a trade journal for electricians.

"We suck," said Jamee looking up. I looked at my scribbles from the night before on scattered pieces of paper on the floor. She put her feet on the coffee table and leaned back in a stretch.

"What are you going to do with yourself?" She asked.

"I have an audition tomorrow for the Blueman Group, remember?"

“I mean in general?”

“I guess that depends how tomorrow goes, you know?”

“That’s not much of a plan, Barry.”

“At this point I need to take things one step at a time. I made a big change in my life and I have to stick with it and give myself a decent chance of success.”

“Don’t you think what you are after is little unrealistic?”

“You’re stuffing envelopes. If this is realistic I don’t think I’m in.”

“Barry, you don’t get to dictate what reality is. At least Craig and I are working. Do you even think you are that funny?”

“It’s not about being funny Jamee, it’s much more than that. It’s about committing yourself to the moment, being open. It’s about occupying a place where one can laugh and cry at the same time. Being the eternal child that we all have inside of us; the *puer aeternus*.”

“Sure sure, your eternal child, I’ve heard it before. But he has to grow up sometime, Barry. And maybe that means he has to be funny. I’m not going to argue with you about whether the intention of your beloved Pochenko clown teacher is to be funny or not. I think public perception has made it pretty clear.”

“The clown’s mandate is to suspend all charade; to break through invisible barriers; to be completely vulnerable, not making animals out of balloons.”

“And to be funny. No one wants to be lectured about the truth by a painted, red-nosed fool. They want to point and laugh.”

“We fight like a married couple” I said, smiling hopefully. She stared.

“OK then, bozo,” she said. “Show me you're funny.”

I looked intently into her eyes. I tried to see into her soul and to let her see into mine. I knew I needed to act. I picked up an envelope, pulled out the brochure and began to read it as if it were a love letter, hoping the tension between content and tone would spark something I could build on.

I put my face up close to hers, almost touching noses. I opened another letter and this time read it in an Australian accent. I opened another and stuffed it into my mouth. I licked an envelope and stuck it to my face. Then another. I crouched like a bird and flapped my wings and danced around Jamee on the couch, chewing the paper. She didn't move but I noticed a smirk, which was quickly suppressed.

I flopped down beside her on the couch, my head pounding.

“Keep at it, bozo,” she said without looking at me. I took this as encouragement.

That night Craig, Jamee, and some other friends and I were up late partying in my apartment. We often kept the door open so we could get a view of the city if we also propped the fire escape door open.

At maybe three in the morning a young woman walked into our apartment and sat down on the chesterfield. She had with her an agenda, a big bag of weed, a roll of American cash, and a bottle of Wild Turkey.

“Are you guys partying?” She asked, and then slid over and sat on my friend Andrew's lap.

“Yes we are,” he said and put his arms around her waist and leaned his face against her back.

She was attractive and her voice had a childish quality.

"Do you want to see my art?" she asked suddenly.

“It’s late,” I said. “Maybe some other time.”

She got up and left the apartment, leaving the money and other things on the coffee table. After a few minutes I collected the stuff, took some weed for myself, and went to look for her. Andrew came with me. She had to have gone down the stairs at the end of the hall. We had descended the first half-flight when we saw her coming back up carrying a large canvas I assume she had painted. She had also taken her shirt off.

“You forgot your stuff,” I said, trying not to stare at her breasts.

“Look at my painting,” she said and held it up in front of her. It had a lot of purple in it, a moon, some cacti. The perspective was out of whack, and not by design.

“Yeah, cool, I like it.”

“Do you?” she asked. “Or are you just saying that?”

Suddenly her expression turned to horror. She dropped the painting revealing the thin leather belt she'd been holding and began to attack us. She was screaming wildly as she assailed us, her tits were bouncing and wiggling in a way that young men never imagine. The angular metal buckle struck me on the chin. She chased us back to the apartment, whipping the belt non-stop.

“Guys. Please let me in,” Her voice was suddenly calm and soft from the other side of the door. “I just want to party with you. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have hit you with the belt.”

“Go away,” I said. She kept pleading for a few minutes. We stopped answering. Eventually she went away.

I replayed the events from the night before as I rode the streetcar to the audition. Pigeons, overhead wires, Coffee Time, crooked houses. It was beautiful to me.

The auditions were held in the dance studios behind the Mirvish theatre.

I registered my name. There must have been two hundred young men sitting around. I judged them all negatively from a place of fear. Everyone looked nervous, pacing, drumming on their thighs, twitching. I had not eaten anything. I welcomed the pain in my head and face as a distraction from the nervous lump in my stomach.

Eventually I was brought into the adjacent studio. A man and two women were sitting at a plastic table.

“Welcome Barry, I’m Paul,” said the man. He had jet-black hair, blue eyes, and a long equine face. “This is Angela and Heather.” They nodded, staring. I realized I had never been to an audition. Paul asked me where I was from and what I did for a living.

“I’m a tea merchant,” I lied. This piqued his interest.

“Who is the most interesting person you’ve met as a tea merchant?”

I hesitated for a moment and then decided – not a lie but a stab in the dark – that the tea merchants that I had met in China were more interesting than the sales team in Etobecoke. Paul asked me to act like one of them, to speak to him in a made-up phonetic approximation of Mandarin. I did so. I realize he was looking for a way to destabilize me and to get me to tell them something in that moment without the use of language. I smoked a fake cigarette and made sounds. The three of them looked pleased at the weirdness of the situation.

"What's that, you have a shiatsu?" said Paul. Before I could answer, he said, "you are the shiatsu and you want this ball?" He held up an imaginary ball and moved it around. I followed it with my entire body. I dove under the table and ended up practically in his lap when he dropped the charade and laughed.

I backed away and the three of them huddled.

"Can you come back tomorrow?" said Angela.

"On Sunday?"

"On Sunday."

"What time?"

"Say ten o'clock."

"That's early for a Sunday."

She seemed a little taken aback, and then I realized I had just received my first call-back. "I'll be here."

I went home and slept until late in the evening. I felt jittery and knew that I wanted to call Lawrence. I knew it was a bad idea and hoped I could make it without. I opened *Rabelais and His World* at a random spot and started reading.

Grotesque Realism is how Bahktin characterized Rabelais' work. Celebration of the body's lower strata, the earth, fecundity, rejuvenation and death; images of pregnant old women, laughing at nothing but laughter itself.

The next morning I took the streetcar again. I tried not to think about the audition for fear of jinxing my chances. Some of the candidates from the day before were there but there were many less. Somehow, not being hung over made my situation seem much more precarious.

"What do you think they'll have us do today?" said one of the candidates.

"What is a Blue Man anyway?" I said.

"A strange, strange thing," said a slim young man with a large head. He wore sweatpants and an old t-shirt. I thought these were not good things to wear.

They brought us into the room in groups. The same casting people were there. Angela and Heather looked bored. Paul had the energy of a mongoose. He moved around the space this time and gave us instructions.

"We're going to play improvisation games," said Paul. "The first is called the 'blind guard and the thief'."

I was chosen as the thief. The man with the big head was blindfolded. He sat in a chair in the middle of the room.

"Begin," said Paul like a circus ringleader.

I crept toward the guard and a slight creak in the floor made him turn. I froze. I could feel the casting people watching me. The rules of the game made it so I could concentrate. I felt that this game lent itself well to Pochenko's philosophy. By playing by the rules and within their constraints, a universe of

possibility opened up. Freedom is in wearing the mask, like some resolving tension in a chord progression you realize that all people wear masks that constantly melt away revealing yet another.

Then they played a video, which showed the heads of three sitting dogs that were watching a ball being moved around off camera. They moved in unison and we were to attempt the same thing but as a basic mode of being in the character. Everything was to be done in unison and connection.

“That is what we want from you,” said Paul. “You are puppy dogs, child superheroes, you are totally devoted to one another. You have soft eyes and see the other Bluemen without looking directly at them.”

Part of the direction was confusing. Words tend to limit experience while they attempt to explain it. I was many people at once. The voices in my head were multiplying, fading away, then rising up again. Like when Jamee asked me to be funny, I was trying to be funny while thinking of how I could succeed at being funny. I was critic and creator.

At the end of the afternoon, Angela asked me to come back the next day. I assented immediately. Then I felt vulnerable, like I had something to lose. I wanted to go home, I wanted to find Jamee, and to forget this stupid life and gig that threatened to turn me into a miserable wreck. I longed to be like Craig, content with liquid smoke.

On the way home I stopped off at the Horseshoe tavern. The bartender (do they hire miserable fucks on purpose?) took his time serving me even though there were only a few drunks in the place. I ordered a beer and a whiskey.

“Hi handsome,” said a woman who had stumbled up to me. Her teeth were few and her skin was leathery from exposure. “What do you do?” She asked.

“Clown,” I said.

“You and me both,” she said. “You want to start a business?”

“What kind?”

“Mining, up north.”

“No thanks.”

“You dick.”

“OK,” I said.

I went home. Craig was asleep. Jamee was smoking on the roof. I went up to see her.

“How did it go today?” She asked. Her dress was moving in the evening’s stinking breeze, downtown Toronto glittered behind her. Fort York was a series of anthills under the massive structure of the QEW. The lake beyond was black and ominous.

“Good I think. They asked me back again tomorrow.”

“Hey wow, that’s amazing.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty excited.”

“Why do you sound so down then,” she asked, and it surprised me because I had not noticed how my voice came across.

“I am afraid of not getting the gig. Which means I am afraid of what I want. Which means anything I strive for will produce fear and anxiety.”

“Makes sense,” she said. “That’s why you shouldn’t try.”

I couldn't tell if she meant that. "Like Craig?" I asked.

"Like Craig," she said and laughed.

"Will you kiss me?" I asked.

"I will not."

"Why?"

We smoked in silence.

"Do you want to call Lawrence, then?" I asked. I poked at the small scab that had formed where that woman's belt buckle had struck me. It felt like part of a mask. At least that I could understand. At least I could pin myself to that.

"Probably not tonight," said Jamee watching me.

Patati Patata

Julia's phone lit up. *Taking lunch request.* A steady succession of people were pouring into the SAAQ office. They would fill the chairs and then the security guard would begin to turn them away in the afternoon.

She looked up from her counter and saw Michel across the L-shaped office. Why did he insist on communicating with her in English, anyway? And constantly. He didn't have to slick his hair back like a hipster and wear vintage leather boots in this office, either. A lot of trying. It was a little misconceived. If that is even a word. My boyfriend is misconceived. Ha.

Today would be mind-crushing if she kept looking at the time on her computer screen. A woman wearing a black hijab approached her, Julia, Clerk three.

"Bonjour," she said in her polite detached tone.

"Bonjour Madame," said the woman in classy North African French. *"La photo, s'il vous plait, pour mon permis."* She's beautiful like royalty, thought Julia. Delicate bridge of nose, slender arms. Beneath her coat, Julia could see that her body was stunning. Wearing a gold ring on her left hand. Her husband was probably an engineer in Morocco but works as a cab driver in Montreal. Poor thing. Michel would never propose to her unless she asked him to first. But, she had to admit, that's because she

might not say yes unless she told him she would before hand, and even then.

“*Oui madame, donnez-moi.*” Julia took her papers and checked that all was in order. Twenty-six and married. Living in Point Saint Charles. “*Présentez-vous la bas.*” Julia pointed to a line up at the other end of the office. Michel was working the camera, somehow a coveted task.

She texted Michel: “*Je veux un couscous ou du Bang mi.*” Winky face. A minute later Michel shook his head, embarrassed. Julia rolled her eyes.

The digital number on the LED screen changed, accompanied by a piercing *ding*-ing sound that broke through the muzak. Nile watched a black man in a cheap-looking coat make his way to clerk three. She was the prettiest of the clerks. He’d ranked them. The man looked as if he had just arrived in Montreal. It’s the snakeskin dress shoes, embroidered jeans, he thought, or that he has no tuque. Classic immigrant error. Protect the head my friend. So simple, and cheap.

Nile spied from behind a magazine. The coke drip made his throat bitter. A little early but hey, the wife’s away. The clerk was a young woman of medium height with straight shoulder-length, chestnut hair. Her bangs cut straight across her forehead parallel to the thick frames of her

glasses. Her lipstick complemented her burgundy blouse. Slightly overweight, just a little, but her breasts were ample and he imagined kneading them. Dark eyebrows and olive skin are attractive even though the light covers everything in plastic.

It would be a terrible place to spend an entire day, he thought, and flipped a page, wondering what he would do with the rest of his afternoon before the hockey game that night. After an hour of jaw-grinding and cheek-biting, the LED flipped to 806, Clerk three. Lucky, thought Nile, as he walked toward her and handed her his ticket.

“Allo, comment puis-je vous aidez?” said Julia.

“Bonjour, je veux vendra mon voitu a l’insurance?” His mangled French.

“Selling the car to claim the insurance.”

“Yeah, I don’t really know what that means but that’s what they said.”

What’s complicated about that, thought Julia. Are men all a little incapable? I wish I was a lesbian. But I’m not. Hello bright-eyed sorta tense guy – tragically Anglo. You’re an exile in your own city. Pity.

Nile handed her a wad of folded papers. He noticed that the skin around her small mouth was blotchy under the makeup. Seeing this imperfection gave him confidence. He read her nametag.

“Julia, I’m doing a survey, what’s the best and worst of your job?”

She raised an eyebrow and smiled. What's this? "That's easy. The best part is the power."

"The power?"

"That I can take my time and make everyone wait as long as I like."

"You try to make it as Kafkaesque as you can? Noted." He leaned in and put his elbows on the counter with his hands clasped. "Kind of cruel, though."

"Exactly."

"And the worst?"

"Also the power. Such a burden. I feel like the Grand Inquisitor."

She glanced at his hands. Not calloused so he's not blue collar, but also not office soft; nicotine stain on thumb and forefinger of right hand; dark hair on back of palms which could mean a hairy back, which is kind of hot; clean trimmed fingernails with fraying cuticles. Not a chewer *per se*, but perhaps anxious.

"You like Kafka?" said Nile ignoring the previous comment.

"Like,' is a strong term. I'm familiar. But who cares when I can check Facebook all day."

"I kind of like your glasses."

"How so?"

"That New York nerd look. The square structure superimposed on your round face shows how humanity is squeezed into administrative structures."

“Round? Sure, I guess. Address and telephone number the same?”

This is your home number?”

“Cell.”

“Work?”

“Cell.”

She saw Michel across the room, adjusting the Moroccan woman’s head position. He’s probably not supposed to touch her.

“I know this is *fromage*,” said Nile, “but what time do you get out of this place? Or do you ever get out of this place? Maybe they just plug you in and recharge you.”

“I guarantee that to the extent of my knowledge, I am fully organic. How do I know that you are indeed a creepy human being?”

“Ever met a robot named Nile Cardinelli?”

“I suppose not. And what do you do, Nile Cardinelli, besides try to pick up ladies who are paid to talk to you?”

Nile straightened up and smiled broadly with a cocked head, hoping his dimples would work their magic. “Have coffee with me after work, Clerk three, and I’ll tell you all about my interesting life.”

“Ha,” she heard herself exclaim. “That’s rich.” The way he was looking at her felt good. She finished the transaction on the computer. “There you are, Monsieur Cardinelli, you’re all sorted. Just send this to your insurance company and they’ll send you a cheque for the value of the car.”

“Did you just say I’m all sordid?” He kept his eyes on the papers she’d handed him as he said it.

Julia counted money from the till below the counter, biting a smile. “And this is a refund for your provincial registration for the remainder of the year.”

“With this unexpected windfall I can take you to dinner too.”

“You want to have a \$137 dinner? What a baller. Here’s your receipt.” She slid a piece of paper over the counter.

“OK Clerk three, thank you very much. Enjoy your afternoon and well, if you change your mind, you have my cell number.”

Julia ate all of the chicken *Banh Mi* sandwich Michel had bought her for lunch. Michel ate with her and talked about a graphic novel he wanted to read. Nile, she thought as she checked her Cleopatra haircut in her photo app., an Egyptian river I am Queen of. *So, where should we meet?* she texted after Michel left the lunch room.

St-Laurent metro? Nile texted back immediately.

He spent the next four hours creeping on girls on the Main. He had never walked so much. No car, forced to walk. At least I can see ladies more closely, he thought, as he trailed a slim young woman wearing tights and a pencil skirt into a super market. The hood of his parka was up.

Julia and Nile planned to meet at four thirty that afternoon at the St-Laurent metro station.

Nile arrived first and waited behind the *Bixie* stand so he could watch her from a distance. Four-thirty came and went and Nile felt his control giving way to self-doubt. He checked his phone.

The outside sky was grey and low as if it were pressing down on the city and its ant-like inhabitants. She scanned the gravel lot. A mural on a large brick wall at the South end depicted three frames. One of them caught her eye. That's Montreal, she thought shivering from her cooling perspiration, colourful fish in a bowl, hoping the water won't freeze.

Nile observed her observing the mural. He hadn't noticed it. He began to walk toward her in a wide arc. When she spotted him he waved.

"Pretty, right?"

"What?"

"The mural. It's just got such great colours."

She glanced at it again. Not really. "I guess."

"You're a little late," he said.

"Sorry about that."

"So, what do you want to do?"

She looked at him. This was your idea big-shot. "I could eat."

"Let's walk up St-Laurent and see what we see."

As they walked, Julia's heels clicked on the sidewalk and sounded to him like the ticking of a clock in a world where time passed twice as

quickly. His own muted steps were fewer and farther between. Nile liked Julia's business look. Her hair was now up in an elastic. He was pleased with himself and he felt like a truant.

They stopped to look in the display window of a thrift store.

"Have you ever been in here?" asked Nile. "They have this pool the size of a room and it's full of used clothing. You climb in and search for things. Isn't that—"

"What do you mean?"

"An empty pool as big as a room with clothing piled three meters high. You take your shoes off and climb in to look for stuff."

"And get bedbugs."

He'd never thought of that. He'd never been into the store either. "I guess it is kind of unhygienic."

They crossed rue Sherbrooke at the top of the hill. "Do you want to get a burger or something?" he asked.

"I'm a vegetarian."

"A veggie—"

"But I eat chicken and fish."

"That's cute," said Nile.

Vague annoyance passed over her face. "Seriously guy."

"It's not vegetarian, right?"

"I'm not cute either. Forget it."

"How about *Patati Patata*? They have a tilapia burger."

“Sounds good.”

They continued walking.

“So which part of town do you live in?” said Nile.

She tamped down her annoyance, blew out a breath. “Montreal East, near the Jacques Cartier Bridge. It’s funny how you can live in a city and always end up treading the same paths through the same neighbourhoods.”

Michel owned the condo. It was clean and pleasant, with a closed bedroom and office, and two balconies. They had new appliances, a front-loading washing machine and Apple TV. They were very comfortable. Now she was thinking about him. He’s so safe. He thinks I’m Christmas shopping.

“Which parts of the city do you never see?” she asked.

“I try to see them all, spread the love.”

They covered the busy part of St-Laurent in silence, each a little distracted about being spotted. Errant snowflakes fell and rose in the slushy rush hour.

Inside *Patati Patata* they took two spots at a counter facing the boulevard.

Nile tried to order a tilapia burger for her and a cheeseburger for himself but the punk cooks with flesh tunnels in their ears pretended not to understand.

“Un cheese et un burger au poisson,” said Julia. *“On partagera une frites.”*

The window was frost-covered around the edges allowing only a porthole view on the street. They flipped through the *Do’s and Don’t’s* section of a *Vice* Magazine while they waited. Nile tried to think of something to talk about.

When the food was ready Nile took the tray from the cook with one hand.

“Merci.”

“Oué.”

“Junk food,” he said, touching her shoulder before putting the tray down in front of her. “It makes you feel comfortable, eh?”

“Comfort food *is* junk food in my mind.”

“It’s not *that* unhealthy but it’s just that it’s a step away from our model selves.”

These were Amanda’s words, Nile admitted to himself, and she never ate junk food.

Julia was silent.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

She dipped a French fry in mayonnaise before answering. “This small restaurant, especially with its frosted windows, makes me feel like there is no outside world. Winter does this. You bundle and bundle and wrap yourself out of the world.”

“Totally. Imagine this was our world? These twelve people.” He scratched the frost with the fingernail of his index finger. “Want something to drink?”

“I could see myself sharing a coke with you,” she said with a smile. “And a world with these twelve people.”

“Perfect. I’ll grab it.”

She checked him out now with his back turned to her. He kept his hat on inside just like everyone else who didn’t want to grow up. Except Michel, who kept his on to give the appearance that he didn’t want to grow up. There’s a difference. Michel’s is a curated look. The hat is ‘interesting,’ the haircut is high and narrow, stylish, she supposed, but cautious. *His* hat perched carelessly on the top of his head looks cute. Disheveled is more interesting.

She took a bite of her tilapia burger and watched Nile. His short black beard, prominent jaw and protruding Adam’s apple. His low hairline and deep-set eyes as he came back toward her and sat down. His right thigh and arm touched her left thigh and arm. She did not pull away and he did not press into her. They stared through the frost-bound window, swaying imperceptibly on a calm gelid sea. But Nile was impatient for it to pick up. “So, what next?”

“You were supposed to tell me what you do.” She suspected he did nothing.

“This and that.”

“What happened to your car?”

“A bus ran into it.”

“Oh no.”

“They pull out into traffic without looking. That’s what happened. He side-swiped me.”

“They have the right of way.”

“I know but I was already almost through the intersection. It’s this *Libre Négo* – They’re frustrated about their pensions and all that.” He shifted forward. “City workers are a public threat. The other day I saw a bus hit a construction sign that flew onto the sidewalk and landed next to a baby carriage.”

“What about you?” she said, bored by his rant. “Are *you* a public threat?”

“I’m threatening in other ways.” He leaned against her.

“You’re in the wrong though, you know that, right?” she said leaning back.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s bullshit. There are these set scenarios that put one party at fault automatically.”

“There are reasons for that, honey.” She took a sip from her straw.

“So you crashed your car and you do this and that.”

“To be honest, the car was kind of necessary for this and that and so I can’t do this and that anymore.”

“Right.” She took a bite of her tilapia burger.

“You smell good, you know that?”

“I do? All I can smell in here is grease.”

“You do. It’s White Musk?”

“It is,” she said. “But I guess I don’t notice anymore. I’ve been wearing White Musk for twelve years. Is that weird?”

“No, I like it.”

Must be married, she thought. He has the confidence of someone who has someone at home. “Are you married?”

“Guilty,” he said with a sheepish smile. “She’s out of town.”

“What’s her name?”

“Amanda,” he said lowering his voice. “How about you? Are *you* married?”

“I am not but I live with someone.”

“Same thing.”

“Almost.”

“Isn’t it though?”

“I mean it’s not quite the same. Eyes of the Lord, ceremony and all that. Tell me about your wedding.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Oh, come on. We’re adults.” She touched the back of his hand lightly and let her finger run from the middle knuckle toward the wrist.

Their wedding had been like a dream for Nile. A dream in the sense that he felt he was not quite control of what was going on. “It was

moderately expensive, paid for mostly by our parents. Lots of family. Catholic ceremony, heavy on the liturgy, thanks to my mother, Carmelina. Too much food, speeches, dancing. Everyone got wasted. Big tent – Mo-West.”

“Sounds nice.”

“I guess.”

He could not remember their vows. He remembered Amanda had had more friends to invite than he did. Wasn't the man supposed to have more friends? A big group of guys who tease each other but are bound by a dude code? That could be so completely wrong. It *was* wrong and there were photos to prove it. There he was, a little boy groom in a black suit, beside a bride whose look was complete serenity. How had he scored her? More importantly, how had he kept her, and was he losing her?

“What about you? Are you going to get married?”

“Would it change anything?”

“About this? No!”

“I mean in general.”

“At first it does but then things sort of go back to the way they always were.”

They turned away from each other and stared at the frosted window.

A homeless man stopped his shopping cart full of belongings and put his face and hands against the window. He pounded not so hard that he would break it, Julia thought, but hard enough to get noticed.

“It’s funny how many street people know the limits of their desperation. Or what they can show of their desperation, even though they may be mentally ill.”

His face was almost black with grime and his beard was stained yellow around the mouth. He had hollow cheeks as if his teeth had disintegrated or fallen out. His eyes were intensely blue, with red around the edges of the irises. He wore a scraggly parka and an aviator hat.

“Reminds me of Munch’s *Scream*,” said Nile. “Looks just like it.” But he knew how close he was to the other side of the glass. “No, it’s the Macaulay Culkin *Home Alone* face.”

“You’re heartless. This isn’t an aquarium.”

“Ah come on, what can we do for this guy?”

“Everyone needs love and deserves it. I could give my body to a man like that.”

“Really?”

“Is that sordid?” She winked. “But there is something erotic in it.”

“I think it’s very magnanimous of you.”

“If only that were it.”

“What does that mean?”

You, she thought. You’re uglier in some ways than the homeless man so I’ll give my body to you.

She pressed her thigh into his and then pulled it back and squeezed her knees together. Nile noticed but didn’t push his luck.

He watched her long lashes sweep the air in front of her eyes as she took bites of burger and ate French fries dipped in ketchup. He watched her chew and dab the napkin to the side of her small mouth, careful not to smudge her burgundy lipstick.

Nile finished his burger first.

“You ate that quickly,” she said wishing he would relax and take his time. There is no rush. If only he knew I’ve already made up my mind.

“I skipped lunch.” He put some French fries on his empty plate.

“Listen, you should come to my apartment. We could smoke a joint.”

“Ah ha! I knew you were a drug dealer.”

“Everyone in this city smokes pot. Anyway, it was just to see what you are into. I’m grasping at straws here,” he said. “What about tea, we could have tea?”

“Just relax. What are *you* into?”

His palms began to dampen. He scratched his head through his hat.

“Everything.”

“Sure, I’ll do tea. Where are you parked?”

Nile paid and they walked toward his apartment, which was nearby. The falling darkness gave him confidence.

The click of Julia’s heels echoed in the stairway. The second floor apartment had an angle to the floor that made it so when anything spilled it formed a rivulet that headed for the kitchen. The ceilings were high, the windowsills had layers of cracked paint on them, and this time of year, late

November, before anyone wanted to turn up the heat, humidity collected on the windows and crystallized, creating patterns of refracted light on the white walls from the streetlamp outside.

Julia handed him her grey wool coat and he hung it on the radiator. She kept her scarf on. Nile dropped his parka on the kitchen table. He wondered what she thought of his place but he had already asked her what she was thinking once. He went into the kitchen nook and plugged in the kettle. Julia sat down on the chesterfield with her hands under her thighs.

“Earl Grey or chamomile?”

She looked around the living room. There was a photograph on the wall of Nile and a woman: Blond hair, healthy skin, beautiful, late thirties? This is his wife, thought Julia. She is hot! I am betraying my gender, or some sort of solidarity that should exist between women. I feel worse about hurting this unknown person than about hurting Michel.

“Music?”

“*Oui.*”

He dropped the needle on Iggy Pop’s greatest hits.

“*Trainspotting* right?” He had planned this.

“Bingo.”

“Do you have cable?”

“No,” said Nile from the kitchen. “Why, do you want to watch TV?”

He opened the fridge and saw withered vegetables and left-over take out.

He found the milk and poured it into a little cup. He put two Earl Grey teabags in the pot and poured the nearly-boiling water over it.

He came into the living room with a tray and put it on the coffee table.

“What do you do at night?”

“Read mostly.” Actually, he was always delivering at night.

“Who does the cooking?”

“We both do.”

“Who does the cleaning?”

“What’s with the survey?”

He poured the weak tea into two mismatching teacups, holding the lid of the teapot in place with one finger. He handed one to her and gestured for her to put in her own milk and sugar.

Julia poured milk from the creamer into the tea – a white cloud mushroomed into the copper liquid. He watched her scoop a teaspoon of brown sugar. She touched the bottom of the spoon against the meniscus of the liquid. Her hand was steady. It pushed gently on the surface, until the cohesion of the liquid gave and flooded the golden pile.

They were touching sides again. Leaning into each other. Delicate clinks sounded as she stirred.

After she had put the spoon down on the tray, she turned to him and took a tentative sip.

“Hot,” she winced and put the teacup back on the table.

Nile took his turn. He poured milk and added sugar as carefully as her. But he felt self-conscious, as if he were only copying her movements. His hand was shaking.

They waited a few moments and looked at each other as the music played. Then they took up their cups again in unison, and blew softly over the surface of the liquid. Steam rose, partially masking each from the other in the cold of the apartment – a seductive veil that swayed – they watched it disappear against the high white walls that had long diagonal cracks in the paint from the slowly shifting grounds on which the building sat.

Julia put her cup down. We've dallied enough, she thought. She removed her scarf and bent toward him.

Nile put his right hand on her shoulder then gently moved his hand to the nape of her neck with his fingers weaving into her tied up hair. Their breath became the meter of the moment. They leaned close and kissed.

“Not here,” said Julia. “It’s cold.”

He stood and took her hand. The floorboards on the threshold of the bedroom creaked under their feet and Nile remembered how this often woke Amanda when he came home late. He pushed the thought out of his head. He could control what went on in his head. At least that.

The bedroom was darker than the rest of the apartment because it was tucked into a corner of the building with only a little window on the unlit back alley.

They embraced near the bed and began to undress.

Julia shimmied out of her cardigan, blouse, skirt, and tights. Nile stepped out of his pants and pulled his sweater and t-shirt over his head. He put one arm around her lower back and pulled the duvet aside with the other. Julia scooted into the double bed. Nile slipped in after her. The bed was cold and they shivered into each other. Icy fingers against warmer skin.

They kissed again and eased themselves back into the moment.

Julia noticed the time on the clock radio. Michel would be wondering where she was. He always stayed at work until five-thirty or six and her shift finished at four. Two hours later, she thought as Nile lowered the cups of her bra, I'm in a stranger's bed. I would never do this in my apartment.

His stubble stung her skin. She felt a pleasurable ache as her nipples stiffened one at a time in his wet mouth. She closed her eyes.

She shivered and thought, wow he's really good at this. There is no awkwardness like there is with Michel even now, after years.

The record in the living room ended.

The sensations and the somber light made a puddle of time.

Now his hands stroked her thighs. He kissed her navel. There, she thought, the descent of man.

She closed her legs as his head went lower. "I haven't shaved."

His index fingers were hooked on the sides of her underwear.

"I haven't shaved, is that gross?"

Nile felt a measure of empowerment.

“I really don’t care about that,” he said and began to kiss her again.

Her belly was just a little soft. He looked up from the darkness beneath the covers and could see the silhouette of her breasts and her chin beyond.

Her hands went over his ears. She looked at him in the eyes. “I wasn’t expecting this to happen,” she said, hating herself for this self-consciousness. He pulled down slowly with his fingers and then she felt his tongue. A wave came over her and she opened to him as her underwear slid past her knees and she pulled her left foot clear. She squeezed her breasts and the previous thought dissolved with a moan. Now she was warm.

OK, thought Nile. This is happening. He was compelled by instinct. He was like a burrowing animal, desperate to go forward. At the back of his mind was a comparison. Amanda never had any pubic hair, which undermined her entire mode of life as a yoga instructor. Did it justify what he was doing?

Julia came surprisingly quickly in five convulsive fits. It was almost painful. She whimpered and bucked and Nile clung to her pleasure, her thighs squeezing his head.

This is not the way it happens with Amanda, he thought, as he was being gripped by Julia. This is violent and unexpected. I am so in my head.

When her orgasm subsided he brought his face up to her face and pushed into her quickly.

“Don’t come in me,” she said.

He felt her gaze. Strangers.

The thought flashed into his mind immediately. This is a stranger you are fucking.

They kissed but he kept opening his eyes. His vision had adjusted to the dark and details seemed to materialize as his awareness overtook him. Her orb-like brown eyes open as well. Her thick eyebrows were clipped and rigid. He could see the pores on her skin that were caked with makeup. Her waxy lipstick a film on his lips. A mask, he thought.

They had told each other almost nothing. Mostly they’d resisted answering each other’s questions.

He looked away and saw the glowing red numbers of the digital clock. He remembered waiting, the numbered ticket, the click of her heels on the sidewalk, his smashed car. He felt small, distracted and worthless, and he was beginning to lose his erection. He felt numb and his mind emptied. He put his head down into her neck and the smell of White Musk was alien to him. A tidal wave of thoughts, the ones he’d tried to push away, came rushing into his mind.

He had to think of an excuse. Every man has had this happen, he knew. “Is everything OK?” she asked. No! for Christ’s sake. Not OK! He wanted to scream. All for this? Risked everything to stumble before the finish line. “I have to take a leak, I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s OK,” said Julia. “Go, go.”

He practically ran to the bathroom. He did not have to pee at all. He stared at himself in the mirror. He was reminded of the homeless man. His heart was beating quickly and his breath felt short. His damn hands were shaking. He gripped the sides of the stupid sink. He remembered Julia's steady hands holding the teacup. He saw his wife's shampoo and conditioner on the edge of the bathtub behind him, her artisanal soap, her small blue glass bottle of witch hazel on the sink, her home toothbrush with soft bristles curling out. She brushed her teeth in small delicate circles. Her things calmed him. He bared his teeth and touched his fingernail to the bone.

This life belongs to her. I am no one.

He ran cold water, flushed the toilet and exited the bathroom before he was ready to leave. This seemed to be how he did everything. This impatience was the reason why he'd crashed his car.

The overhead light was on in the bedroom and to his surprise, Julia was out of bed and dressing.

"Oh," he asked.

"I should really get going." Her voice was lower than Amanda's, a distant challenge. Bored with him.

He often watched Amanda dress in the morning. They never used the overhead light. Julia did it differently. She'd touched him differently. "Why don't you hang out a bit. Are you hungry? I could make us some

food or something, we could watch a movie.” The truth was he wanted her to leave as much as she probably did.

“Really, it’s kind of getting late, you know? I have a spin class.”

“Of course.”

She took a hair elastic from the bedside table and tied her hair up.

“Is that yours?” said Nile.

She laughed.

A golden butterfly with intricate pattern hung from a slim chain around the bedpost. The butterfly Amanda never took anywhere. Julia followed his eyes to it. She took the butterfly in her fingers and examined it.

“Nice.”

“Take it.”

“No,” she laughed and let the butterfly fall from her hand. She stroked his cheek gently. His insecurity was ugly. It was cruel and twisted to want to fuck the ugliness in a man. But there was some satisfaction in it as well.

He followed her to the door. She put on her coat. They shook hands automatically and gave each other a kiss on each cheek.

“I wish I could give you a ride. I really miss that car.”

“Ha. I don’t mind walking for a while. See ya?”

“Yeah, for sure,” said Nile.

He closed the door behind her.

Nile switched on the lamp over the dining table, fished his phone out of his coat pocket and reread their texts. He should delete them. Needy cryptic texts from his customers had begun to amass in his inbox. *You around? You working? How long for Mile End.* Something would have to be done.

He noticed the two cups of tea at the edge of the coffee table. One with a faint streak of red on the rim. The still opaque liquid reflecting the diagonal cracks in the walls. She was no longer a stranger. He had failed but not completely.

Nile touched his lips to the red streak on the cup of cold tea. It was still thrilling, he thought. Falling is still thrilling.

Shrimp of Labrador

Nineteen young sailors between the ages of seven and seventeen gathered on the ice, approximately sixty miles off the coast of Labrador. The ship was off in the distance behind them. The light was strange; it seemed electric but nobody thought about it. The crowd had gathered on the bleachers to watch.

Brustles was bigger than the rest and a year older. He was the *de facto* leader even though he wasn't the fastest, strongest or brightest. But *de facto* leader he was, at least while Captain was away. He was unpredictable and mean. Willy knew to avoid him if he could, especially when the Captain was away.

"Let's get going," he said and the others shuffled on their skates. It sounded like many dental assistants scraping plaque. There was a hushed whisper from the crowd as the young sailors began to circle the hole in the ice. A tube and a rope ran from the hole to the ship looming in the distance with light gleaming off its hull – an Albatross and other seabirds overhead. The sailors moved as if they made up the cells of a jellyfish, and it looked like it could be fun to be part of the pageant. But things were very serious.

Willy was small but somehow the strongest. He had wiry limbs and

a measure of poise as if his core were a wound spring. He was timid unlike Brustles. He was not sure about the execution of the plan.

Bubbles rose to the surface of the water. The little sailors slowed and shuffled around the hole to get a look down into the dark. The rope, air pipe, and water were still. Captain was down there. Captain was always somewhere dangerous, and the thought of losing him made all of them nervous because only the Captain told what to do and when to do it. Who could take the place of Captain? Brustles couldn't, thought Willy, but increasingly as though he would try.

Suddenly Brustles pushed Evan into the water. Splash. The crowd gasped. Evan was gone. His skates and sweater had pulled him down. Brustles bristled and shrugged. They stopped skating. He stood facing them and said, "Better him than any of you!"

A terror lump formed in Willy's gut. He lunged at Brustles who stopped with one straight arm.

Just then the albatross swooped overhead. Brustles ducked and swatted the air. Breaking character was not advised, but he composed himself, challenged them to confront him for his lapse. This confidence made him the favorite.

The bird was so big, Willy thought despairing. It could carry one or all of them away. He wished Evan had been carried away on the bird and not pushed through the ice. He'll come up, thought Willy. He has to.

He kept an eye on Brustles, as they all did. The brute. Willy knew he mustn't break character more than he and Brustles had. The moment had passed. The show must go on.

The ship's low foghorn sounded. Guitar music came on the PA system. The opening guitar riff to Van Halen's *Hot for Teacher* played in a loop over a dance beat. The sailors knew what they had to do. They began to skate again the way it had been rehearsed. A figure eight to signify infinity, with one of the O's centered on the black hole in the ice and the other centered on the Captain's ratty, high-backed chair. They went as fast as they could in a group, the music urging them to speed up.

Someone with a loudspeaker called out from the crowd: "You call this doing justice to the symbol of infinity?" The crowd jeered and roared. The music stopped and the sailors bumped into each other and tumbled all over the ice. The crowd laughed a hearty, natural laugh. Willy was beginning to worry about the Captain. The ship must not stay stuck in the ice, now Evan was gone, and Brustles was exerting more and more power. Maybe the Captain would bring Evan back.

Suddenly the Captain's head popped out of the water. He had on his million-dollar diving mask, studded with precious gems. The crowd started chanting and the sailors cheered but Willy was dismayed. The Captain did not have Evan under his arm. Instead, he held out a large *Pinctada maxima* and smashed it on the ice with one motion. Everyone went silent. Still bobbing in the water, he smushed his fingers through the bits of slick

oyster flesh. He pinched something with his thumb and forefinger. Captain put his hand in the water and cleaned the object. The crowd inhaled with anticipation. He held up his hand and a pearl glinted in the light. The crowd cheered, as did the little sailors. Holding the pearl higher, the Captain, thankful for his luck, beamed.

Everyone cheered except for Willy because Evan was his brother and he was gone. But he remembered they worshipped infinity, and according to this principle, Evan had to return.

He wasn't sure what a brother was. They all led the same life on the boat. They all slept in the same bunks. They all woke up at the same hour and ate the same food. In fact, there was no way for Willy to be sure Evan was his older brother except from the genealogy chart hanging in the mess room next to the tenets for the pageant. It had always been like this, but he remembered Evan the longest. He knew they looked more similar than the others, even though they all wore the same blue outfit sweater and pants. Willy felt alone, surrounded by the cheering crowd and sailors.

Back on the boat that evening during food, Willy went up to the chart and gazed at it. He wasn't hungry. There was his name, written in fountain pen on the chart. A thin line connected his name with Evan's at ninety degrees. Above their names was written the title, Sailors. No other lines were connected to Willy's name. The boxes above his were blacked out. Willy turned and looked out the open porthole at the silent crowd on the stands as night fell. He could barely make them out in the darkness but

they seemed riveted to him alone. He heard one of them cough and another one of them sob. People in the back rows were whispering. He returned to the table with his ration of shrimp and macaroni.

We all come out of the warm mud and we all go back to it. The ice is a wall that you stand on. And the hole is a wishing well where the Captain goes and comes. And there is another wall between the adults and the sailors, an invisible wall that is thicker than the ice. Captain had explained this many times during stories. Willy thought about this as he poked around in his shrimp and made them move in a sea of macaroni.

The next day they were back at it. Still no Evan. They had their skates on and they were lined up in front of the Captain in his chair. He looked each one of them in the eyes. The light was the same. Willy felt listless.

“Yesterday was a good day,” the Captain announced and the crowd cheered behind him. One of them sounded an air horn. “We have a pearl now, and one of you will get to offer it to Coal Nancy.” Everyone looked at Brustles and he beamed, because he’d got rid of his only competition. He elbowed the sailor next to him.

The Captain’s mustache was falling out in places and he covered his mouth when he smiled. The crowd was a little more restless than the day before. They were eager to get on with it, now that the pearl had been found.

“Now that we’ve got the pearl,” continued Captain, “we need you to be in ship shape.” He scanned them evenly so as not to alienate anyone.

“We all know what that means, don’t we?” The sailors nodded. More and more it seemed to Willy that they were just going through motions.

“Willy!” said the captain. “What does it mean that we have a pearl?”

Willy’s thoughts were jumbled. The other sailors created space around him as if he had the pox. “Willy,” repeated the Captain. “What does it mean that we have the pearl?”

“It means, Captain, that we are ready for spiritual, for honest, um, to stimulate our—”

“Willy!” said the Captain. The crowd jeered. Someone set off a cherry bomb and Brustles fell down in a fright. The Captain looked over his shoulder at the motley crew on the bleachers. He turned and motioned for silence. “I know, I know,” he said. “This sailor has lost his way. Skate!” A remix of Journey’s *Don’t Stop Believing* came on the PA system and they skated infinity around the Captain’s chair and the hole in the ice. The music faded and the day went dark, leaving a spotlight on the Captain and sailors. They returned to their positions in front of the Captain.

“Willy!” They all parted for Willy, who had regained his wits and remembered what the pearl meant.

“We can give it to Coal Nancy,” said Willy, “as a gift for her forthcoming warmth.” The crowd went wild. “The pearl,” he continued gaining momentum, “means we are pure and charitable and honest, and

that we can advance from the ice and move out to the sea and enjoy the coming warmth from Coal Nancy.” The crowd cheered louder and someone set off another cherry bomb. Someone else lit a Roman candle and aimed it at them. Little coloured fireballs flew out of the dark and into their ranks. They skated in a melee of smoke and sound. The Captain looked proud. The crowd sustained a roar. Many of them were dancing.

When the music stopped everyone felt calm and beautiful. They stood with dignity, just as they had practiced. For a moment Willy momentarily forgot his woes and felt like part of the pageant. It would be smooth sailing from here.

“Are there any among you who feel that we don’t deserve to move off of the ice and into the future?” The Captain put his hands to his ears and swept them theatrically at the crowd. The crowd yelled, “No!” The Captain shouted, “I can’t hear you!” He leaped onto his chair in a crouch. “Is there anyone among you who feels that we don’t deserve to move off the ice and into the future?”

“NO!” yelled the crowd. Silence followed, and then a single voice said, “Yes.”

The sailors looked truly bewildered, not because this had been practiced but because this had not been practiced.

The Captain stood up straight and dropped his shoulders. “Excuse me?” he said.

The single voice repeated, “Yes?”

“Yes what?” said the Captain.

“Yes, there is someone among you who doesn’t deserve to move out of the ice and into the future.”

The Captain laughed nervously and walked toward the crowd.

“Are you kidding me?” he said. “You’re really doing this right now?”

A woman stood up. Her hair was tangled and she had a lazy eye. The crowd made sounds like, “here we go.” The sailors stood frozen on their blades, not daring to move.

“We’ve been over this,” said the Captain. “You know how it works. We have the pearl. We have it all worked out. Once we present it to Coal Nancy we can get the hell out of here. We’re so close and I’ve got a sun chair with my name on it down South. Who do you think you are? What’s wrong with your eye?”

“One of them is missing.”

“One of what?” The Captain had never seen this crowd so close. They were a haggard bunch – dirty, unshaven, looking a little stir-crazy from months of pageantry, but he still thought they were a good crowd, all things considered. They cheered when they were supposed to. They didn’t make too much of a racket when things were serious. They really did seem to have a vested interest in what was going on down on the ice. That was exactly what he was going to put in his Captain’s log.

“What’s your name, miss?”

"I'm Carol."

"Welcome Carol."

"One of the sailors is missing. I saw him yesterday."

"Tell me, who's missing?" The Captain turned and did a quick count. Damned if she wasn't right.

"Didn't anyone else see that one was missing?" Everyone in the crowd pretended not to hear him. They all looked up at the picture perfect sky with sun and clouds and sea birds.

Willy watched the Captain talk to the woman in the crowd. He knew it was about Evan. Evan was gone. Brustles was responsible for pushing him into the cold water and he had never come up. They had a pearl and so the boat would be leaving soon. He looked at Brustles with tempered hatred. He wanted to stay behind and wait for Evan.

Where was Coal Nancy? Had she seen Brustles push Evan into the black water? Could she not make things better?

He looked at the crowd scratching and milling.

The Captain and the woman walked toward them. Willy felt as though this was a decisive moment. He looked at the crowd and then at the boat. He could see something glinting from the upper deck. It repeated itself like a signal. Willy squinted and tried to convince himself that it was some sign as to what to do next.

The albatross flew over their heads and Brustles dropped to the ice. Willy saw him drop and then he dropped too. The other boys shuffled away from them.

“It was the one who’s scared of birds,” said Carol looking up at the Captain, with one eye on the sky.

“It looks like both of them are scared of birds.”

“Yesterday only one of them was scared of birds. I think it was the big one, but I can’t be sure. He dropped to the ice right after pushing one sailor into the hole in the center of infinity.” She pointed.

“Hmm,” said the Captain. “Like I said, it looks like they’re both scared of birds. You know what the book says. If one of them does something out of the ordinary, we skin ’em. If two do something out of the ordinary, we leave ’em behind. Any more and it’s a sailor mutiny. A mutiny is very, very bad and that’s why we can’t skimp on the first two tiers of punishment. Would anyone like to comment on what we have here?”

Silence.

Everything was packed up – the crowd, the sailors, the bleachers. They boarded the ship. They presented the pearl to Coal Nancy on a purple cushion. She was reading under big sunglasses. She accepted the pearl by extending her empty wine glass and the Captain dropped it in. She was not even paying attention. He was not pleased, but the show must go on.

A few hours later smoke billowed out of the stacks and the ship slowly began crushing its way through the ice. Willy and Brustles stood side by side on the ice, shivering in their skates. An albatross flew over and Brustles ducked.

“Here we are,” said Willy. “Back to the mud.”

Brustles, who had gotten to his feet sniveling, suddenly snickered and said, “No mud here, fish bait.”

Willy felt more sorry for Brustles than he did for himself. Finality crossed his mind and there was something liberating in it. The pageantry was over.

“You’re right, Brustles,” he said. “No mud here.”

He remembered Evan’s name and the thin black line that connected it to his own. He looked into the black hole with calm wonder. Evan will return. It's impossible that he won't.

The day was long and hollow, so he decided to keep warm by skating the pattern of infinity.

Eventually, the light faded on Willy and Brustles, and a thin layer of ice began to form over the wishing well.

Saint Frig

“The squirrels are comin’! The squirrels are comin’! Don’t shoot ‘til you see the whites of their eyes. But wait, their eyes is all black and they’re comin’, scurryin’ quickly. Look, they’re swarmin’ now. I can’t. I can’t hold. I’m gonna start shootin’ I swear to it. I don’t have enough ammo to kill them all. They’re gonna eat us alive, from the feet up. Oh it’s gonna hurt so bad, so much pain is comin’ our way.”

Grandpa stopped rocking and slammed his stick on the ground. The squirrels had seen it all before and forgotten. They continued to approach Grandpa’s cucumber and fake cheese sandwich that sat on a plate on a stool in front of his chair.

The grandchildren hollered at him.

“Grandpa, them squirrels is gonna eat yer cucumber sannich! Look out grandpa." Dale threw an acorn at the squirrel but missed and hit Grandpa in the shin.

“Oh, they got me!” Grandpa screamed. "They bit my leg clean off. The eatin’s gonna start now and oh the mountain of pain I’m gonna feel. Their mouths is so small and their little buckteeth is so sharp. Oh it’s gonna take days and if the agony don’t kill, or if they get tired of eating me from the feet up or if they fill up their little sinner bellies then it’ll be the rabies that finally finishes me off. Oh, I’m gonna get the lock jaw and the anger is gonna seethe and blow in me. I can feel it happening already. Oh

the rage, I just wanna bite somethin' meaty. I don't want no cucumber sannich no more, I want a granchillen! I'm gonna eat me a chillen."

Grandpa hit his gnarled stick on the porch again. The squirrels bolted and the children screamed and ran off in a million directions laughing. They threw their hands in the air, and fell all over the lawn like tumbling gnomes. Grandpa grinned to himself and felt total joy and all at once was ready to die and adored life. He looked up at the sky and saw the blue beyond the low white cumulonimbus and knew space went for always.

The kids were hiding somewhere on the edges of the lawn. The yard, deserted, scared him. The squirrels only wanted one thing and he wouldn't give it to them. They'd found their way into the roof and made nests. He'd repaired the roof many times. He'd been to the doctor so many times it was just boring. Boring. Same questions. No answers.

What, something new hurt? Some achy pain throbbin' somewheres in his creaky architecture? He did know it was coming. Yeah, it was coming, like those squirrels. They were rallying. One day he wouldn't be able to thump his cane on the porch. One day he wouldn't be able to suck the air into his lungs or move by hisself.

His eyes got hot and shook. He smiled a mercy smile. He wasn't even hungry and the sandwich sat there, hardening in the breeze. But he wouldn't let them have it. He would protect that sandwich with all the vinegar that was left him. He looked at his hands. Fat, wrinkled chicken's

feet or something. He'd gutted a lot of chickens at the slaughter house before getting the river boat casino job. So many they couldn't be counted. Death seemed everywhere. In the bushes. In the eyes of the squirrels. In the sun that sat on a fixture in the sky as he spun out his memories.

"Frig," he said. He felt a presence near him then. He was too tired now to be startled. He tried to lift his stick but fell asleep instead.

When he awoke the first thing he felt was a breeze cooling beads of sweat on his wispy forehead. The sun was lower in the sky. The plate with the sandwich was gone. He felt hungry and he hit his stick on the porch. He noticed the kids playing on the edge of the maple trees where the swing was.

Donny and Fabian

My brother Fabian comes over every Sunday to play Chinese checkers and knock back a few beers. We talk about our week, or rather, Fabian talks about his week and I mostly listen. I win most of the games. The more you're talking about yourself, the less you're head's in the game. This might have been Fabian's problem.

Fabian was sitting across the coffee table from me in my big leather chair. That chair is a beast of comfort and you can't do better than sink into its soft cracked leather while you sink your soul into a good book. Fabian wasn't so relaxed as you might think for a Sunday, though, in a nice chair, playing a board game with his brother. He was losing as usual, but that wasn't the reason for his agitation. For the past half hour, Fabian had been recounting a dinner date he'd had with his girlfriend, Daisy. I was used to his monologues. It had always been like this with us. He was older and more experienced, so, naturally, he had more to justify his holding the floor. I can't say I minded. I focused on the game, which had a soothing effect on me.

"So at this point, Don," said Fabian, shaking his head with a look of astonishment, "the damn waiter comes back to our table and begins to describe dessert as if it were a sex move. He's been a little too familiar with us all night, you know? And all over Daisy. We were full but she wanted something sweet." Fabian rolled his eyes. "You have the

Marjolaine,’ says the waiter, ‘which is a layer cake composed mainly of butter cream. Chocolate butter cream, coffee butter cream, vanilla butter cream, and hazelnut butter cream,’” said Fabian as he leaned in. “Daisy was like enthralled with him. What other kind of cream, I wanted to say.”

“You should have, Fabian,” I said. “This guy sounds like a real piece of work.”

“Yeah, he was,” my brother answered. “I can’t stand these waiters, hipster waiters, that prance around as if they own the damn restaurant when they’re working for us, you know? I mean he was serving us so he should’ve known his place is all I can say. Didn’t he care what kind of tip he’d get?”

Fabian played a lackluster move. I sipped my beer.

“I hope you didn’t give him any tip, Fabian,” I said with a laugh. I countered his with a killer move at that point, from one end of the board to the other.

Fabian was looking at his phone again. He’d been texting a lot that afternoon. It was annoying but only because I didn’t really get that many texts. He could interrupt himself but I couldn’t. Brothers.

“Here’s the thing, little brother,” said Fabian standing up and moving his hands in circles. “You can’t not tip a waiter. They get all holier-than-now and actually say something like, ‘our work is gratuity-based, sir?’ Oh really? Then I guess you should have thought about that when you were hitting on my girlfriend, buddy.”

Fabian's leg had knocked the coffee table during this last part of the story and some of the marbles came out of their grooves on the board. I always knew exactly where every piece went, though.

Fabian's pants were all bunched up and his dress shirt hung loose and wrinkled making him look like a bag of laundry as he stood in front of me. The thin silver-rimmed glasses he always wore were slightly foggy. We have dark hair, Fabian and I. We keep it short and gelled.

Sometimes I wish Fabian paid a little more attention to our games. I mean, I enjoy winning but I prefer some competition. There's more of a payoff when you eek out a win.

Fabian was still standing but he was staring at his phone again. I watched him for a few moments before he looked down at me.

"What," he said.

"Sounds like a real prick, Fabian," I said staring straight at him.

"What else was there on the dessert menu anyway? It sounds pretty good." I laughed, a little embarrassed for asking but it just slipped out. I was getting hungry.

Fabian smoothed his pants and sat back down. He placed his phone on the arm of the chair but kept his hand on it. I was sitting in my less comfortable chair across a low glass coffee table. The chair was upholstered with orange fuzzy fabric.

"Yeah, so this hipster waiter," said Fabian but his phone lit up. He stopped, looked at it for a moment, and then continued in a completely

new direction. “You know, all this mumbo jumbo about us pharmaceutical reps working for the dark side. I just don’t buy it. I mean everybody needs meds. In three years this country will have more seniors than minors. All I’m saying is that we’re part of an important industry and this waiter couldn’t give a damn, you know? They’re going to need us.”

I nodded. He was right, they will need us. At this point Fabian played a terrible move on the board. It was ok, he was working some things out, and that was the real reason we got together anyway.

“Don’t tell me if you were laying in bed,” Fabian continued, “cancer eating away at your bones and you wanted to make it to your daughter’s wedding months away, you wouldn’t think twice about begging for the right meds. Or if you couldn’t get it up, you’d come to us for Viagra. Viagra is no different than any other drug. It serves a purpose, does no harm, and Pfizer happens to own the patent and make a decent profit from it so we can develop newer, more effective drugs.” Fabian took off his glasses and cleaned them with his shirttail. “There’s nothing wrong with that. That’s business, that’s what makes our country so great.”

“You know,” continued Fabian, repositioning himself in my chair, “our industry gave malaria meds to five thousand African children last year. Do they thank us for it? You don’t have a stupid waiter come up and say, ‘hey thanks for saving all those African children last year.’ No, he only looks at you as some money-grubber. I can’t stand these guys.”

“He actually had a mustache, Don,” said Fabian. “A mustache! All waxed up and perfect. I mean come on. We pay for his mustache wax and this is the thanks we get. Am I right?”

“Yeah Fabian, you are.”

“Really though, is it me or am I right?” Fabian shook his head.

I felt like I had to add something more so I said, “why do waiters all of a sudden have to look like they just came out of the nineteen twenties?”

“Food service industry,” said Fabian, handling his phone. “So fake.”

“It’s all show you know,” I said, picking up where he’d left off.

“They want to make a buck as badly as anybody else. That waiter was just acting that way to get a rise out of you. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“God forbid you wanna make a buck,” said Fabian. “Daisy though. She was giggling and slumping her shoulders. It was insulting.”

“Was she really?” I said. “That is not cool, Fabian.”

“You know, Don,” mused Fabian after a moment, “it’s a strange thing but it kind of made me want her more.” He crunched up his nose and his eyes brightened.

“It’s a little perverse thing in people,” I suggested leaning in. “It’s like you want what you can’t have or at least what might slip through your fingers. But you have her, Fabian, you do,” I assured him before adding, “I understand the feeling though, just the thought of it is kind of strange. Beer?”

Fabian looked at his half-empty beer and nodded.

My fridge was clean and organized, I thought as I looked into the bright whiteness; ready for a woman's inspection, someday, any day. I pulled two bottles from the cardboard beer case.

I was fated to win our game of Chinese checkers. I felt like even if I tried to lose I'd win. I decided to take steps to make sure I'd win. That's just the way I am. Once I get an idea in my head, it stays there. I played my move.

I walked back into the living room and popped the beers open with my bottle-opener. *Pfizer* is written on it in white cursive letters and for some reason I really like that name on that particular kitchen utensil. *Pfizer*. An *f* sound tightened by a *p* sound means business. A punch in the face. Just like the sound of a bottle cap coming off a cold beer. My brother and I work for Pfizer but all I'm saying is I wouldn't want to work for anyone else. They're good. And I like the idea of Viagra. It's my kind of product. Men should be proud. Old men shouldn't have to lose their dignity. They deserve a little help what with all the prostate removals. We are doing good work, I think.

Fabian was looking at the game board and didn't say thanks for the beer I handed him. The beer I always bought. He began again without looking up.

"Sometimes I'm not sure, Don. I mean, there's no question, I'm the best she can do. But is she the best I can do?"

“I don’t know, Fabian, maybe. But I gotta admit, Daisy’s pretty great.” I was bothered by this question.

I wasn’t positive he could do better, though. I mean let’s not kid ourselves, we’re not male models.

Fabian’s a pretty good catch, after all is said and done. I mean he’s good at what he does. He’ll probably go places. We’d helped each other and we’ll continue to help each other. That’s what brothers do.

“‘Back off bro,’ is what I wanted to say,” Fabian said, bringing our attention back to the subject at hand. “But that would have been inappropriate. Sometimes you just want to jump up and stab a fork in someone’s neck. Am I right?”

Fabian knocked the table with his fist and the marbles came out of their spots again.

“Yeah!” I said.

“I guess we need to protect our own, Fabian,” I continued automatically. “We really do, and I believe that.”

“This Don Juan or whatever continues to verbally hump Daisy.” Fabian shifted in the chair and sat forward a little before proceeding with his parodic impression. “‘You have the *Religieuse*,’” Fabian’s voice rose and fell like a rollercoaster, “‘which he describes as some puff pastry thing. *Oo la la*, buddy. You should ‘a heard the guy. Daisy is just eating it up too. She was wiggling like a puppy and the waiter looked like he was going to scoop her up in his arms.

“Too much,” I said. “The place sounds really good, though. All this talk of dessert is making my mouth water.” I looked at my phone. Checked my e-mail, nothing but junk and something from the office.

“Well obviously it *was* good but that’s beside the point,” Fabian said. “By now I had decided not to tip him. Well, at least tip him way less than fifteen percent, that’s for sure.”

“Right. Someone once told me you can’t not tip a waiter, eh?” Fabian didn’t respond to that little homage. I guess he was too distraught.

“He wasn’t done either, Don. At this point, probably picking up on Daisy’s body language, he sits down in the chair next to me, diagonally across from her. I had to put my leg up on the bench next to Daisy just to put some kind of barrier between them. What, were they going to jump each other? I mean, where’s the respect, right?”

“This is crazy, Fabian. You put your leg up on the bench?” I imagined my poor brother in the middle of this restaurant.

“Christ, I had to do something to keep them from basically doing it,” said Fabian.

“You don’t think they would have—”

“Don’t be stupid. It’s a metaphor.”

“Hell, sorry Fabian, I don’t know.” I wasn’t paying attention. I was getting hungry, as I’ve already mentioned. “You said it.”

“Don’t be stupid Don. It’s a metaphor, you know?”

“Ok, ok. I’m sorry. Go on. What happened?”

"So did you have dessert?"

"Yeah, Daisy orders the clementine thing, probably feeling like a pig because of the meal we'd just had."

"That's what I thought she'd pick."

"Right? Get this, after the dessert arrives the waiter saunters over with a bottle of dessert wine. He says it's on the house. He pours not one, not two, but three glasses and sits back down with us. The clementine is sitting on the table and Daisy is poking around in it.

"The waiter is all jovial, my foot is back up on the bench and then Daisy, you're gonna love this, pushes my foot off!"

"Ooh, this sounds bad, Fabian," I winced, "what was wrong with her anyway?"

"I don't know, we were a bit drunk at this point. The waiter's all twisting his mustache and asking us what we do and where we're from as if we're tourists or something. I was set on leaving this guy like maybe a five percent tip."

"I hope you did, Fabian, I hope you did."

"We'll get to that," said Fabian. "Daisy's all chatty and telling him she works in finance and used to be a waitress blah, blah, blah... What am I, chopped liver?"

"Hell no, Fabian, you're the god damned marketer with the highest number of completed surveys in the province, two years running."

“Right?” Fabian said, touching his hair lightly. “The waiter, probably out of sympathy, asks me what I do. I tell him and his eyes glaze over.”

“I can’t believe this story Fabian. I mean at first I thought maybe you were overreacting but this is just too much. Now I want to go to that restaurant just to give this guy a hard time and not tip him. Or like maybe I could pretend to find a hair in my food or something and cause a stir, I don’t know. I can’t stand to hear how this guy was trying to humiliate you.”

Fabian actually played a move while I spoke. My next move was already chosen – the best of four moves – but something made me wait. I was beginning to feel sorry for Fabian. Things just weren’t going his way. I decided in that moment I would try to lose the game.

“We think alike Don,” said Fabian. “I was doing just as you say, thinking of a way to mess with this guy. Anyway he got up from our table to do one thing or another. Hit on someone else’s girlfriend probably. I took the opportunity to say something to Daisy. I said, ‘sorbet, eh? Who are you trying to impress anyway, that waiter?’”

“You actually said that?” This was unexpected. Even I, who’s only ever had one long-term girlfriend, would have thought twice about that one. He was like a rat in a cage and he got desperate. He’d been backed into a corner and he lashed out, simple as that.

I played a very bad move that actually opened up a huge amount of possibilities for Fabian. I couldn't help it. I guess I'm a softy. And all that stuff about me winning, well, let's just say family comes first.

"Yeah, that's what I said. And then, of course, Daisy got her feathers all in a ruffle. She was all 'what the hell is that supposed to mean? I can't believe you said that. Is that what you think of me?' She was shaking her head and getting all red in the face. Maybe I went too far but I had to say something Don. She drove me to it. I couldn't just sit back and let her act however she wanted."

Fabian was very distressed. He got up and walked around my living room with his phone in his hand. He waved his arms and threw them up in the air.

"Relax Fabian, it's alright," I said. "It's not that bad."

I stood in front him with my hands on my hips. It made me uncomfortable to see him like this.

Suddenly he stopped moving and dropped his hands.

"You can't let people walk all over you. That's what you do and look where it's gotten you. That's what you did with Ella and look what happened. She broke your heart, brother, and you let her do it."

He was only two years older than me but he acted so high and mighty. I had followed him blindly all this time. Even going into university I followed him choosing the same major in medico marketing.

The games meant nothing. So what if I won all the time? It had nothing to do with real life but then, in that moment I was realizing that perhaps it did. Fabian was so caught up in his himself. It was always about him, about how others did things to him and how they made him feel. I always kept my opinions to myself. I always played the game and he always just laid things out on the table to dissect and analyze. It was exhausting. I knew how Daisy must have felt. He couldn't be bothered or was unable to take pleasure in Daisy's enthusiasm for what sounded like a great restaurant and a suave waiter. Sure, he might have been presumptuous, from the way Fabian described the situation, but so what? What did Fabian have to worry about? Jealousy is a perverse thing. It's indulgent in all the wrong ways and for all the wrong reasons. It feeds on insecurity and really has nothing to do with the other person except that it objectifies them.

Don said I shouldn't let people walk all over me but that is exactly what he was doing. He made himself so low that people couldn't do anything *but* walk all over him. He had become a scoundrel in front of me while recounting this story. Much the same as how he must have seemed to Daisy. I could imagine her realizing who my brother really was. I could see her anger at being deceived. I could see her sadness at having misjudged him. His duplicity was well concealed but he had dropped his guard.

I went and sat down in the leather chair. I pushed the game away and stared at the window. Fabian came over and sat in front of me with a pleading look on his face.

“Don,” he said, touching my arm gently.

Cupid, please hear my cry! is what I wanted to yell to the entire world. I’d seen her many times before in the practice rooms of the university. She was blond, with a small curvy body. Her laugh rippled through me like an electric current and she laughed easily and often. Somehow she was the type for me, if such a thing is possible, if there is such a thing as a type. But perhaps, as I look back, there is no such thing as a type.

She wore a blue summer dress with little daisies all over it so that her movements ruffled the flowers that patterned her body. I was mesmerized; I was hooked; I was an addict; I followed blindly, saw nothing except what I wanted; was drawn along as if a puppeteer controlled my every move, a master of my thoughts. My entire being was manipulated and imbued with another as if I were attached to little wooden dowels and thin strings with which she, unknowingly I thought initially, dragged me through hell.

There’s something about your first love. You feel like, for the first time, you have the right to want it, to make it happen. Before then you’ve

felt like an imposter in a strange land. Attraction entices you but you don't have a way of dealing with it or understanding it. The feeling changes, somehow, along the way, and it germinates. The eyes give away so much. All a man needs is that flash of recognition, curiosity, and even mischief. Hers were sharp, barbed hooks and they embedded themselves in me and drew me along like a dumb fish on a line. I regressed and progressed at the same time. All other troubles fell away and there was freedom.

The door to the practice room slammed and seconds later the mellifluous sound of major scales played on a piano by two hands in unison could be heard. I continued along the fluorescent-lit hallway and listened to the magic made by her hands while my eyes wallowed in the yellow shadow-less everywhere of the light. It had a strange effect in me; as if this heaven could exist within narrow walls, this hallway inside a big structure that repeated itself like a honeycomb. It was impersonal but the sound she generated seemed only for me. Like her laugh, I wanted it all to myself and I would defend that secret right with everything I had. I was bathed in an ocean of harmony. But then the ominous sound of minor scales came brooding out of the room and left me irresolute. I walked out onto campus.

Fabian and I had met up in a bar we both liked. It was a basement place and this was back when smoking was still legal. Accordingly, it billowed out blue smoke and the hazy interior smelled overwhelmingly of tobacco but somehow the smells of sweat and beer could be distinguished.

It was a Thursday night and the place was packed. I had gotten there early and ordered a pitcher of draught at the bar. It had taken a while; I had smoked a cigarette and gotten drinks spilled on me while bodies pushed up against me.

Fabian had been doing an internship in Toronto; something I was planning on doing in two years. Medico-marketing programs required an internship with a company in the field. Fabian had gotten his with his first choice, Pfizer. He was brave for moving there. I thought that since he had done it, I could do it. While I was only concerned with meeting his benchmarks, Fabian had an entire world of possibilities before him. This seemed daunting to me. I wondered how he could know what to dedicate his life to. I would later realize that trail blazing probably seemed more daunting to me than it could to Fabian. Fabian had always been first. First child, first into elementary school, high school, first to leave home and live alone.

I found a table in the middle of the melee. I was sitting facing the door, waiting for Fabian, watching everyone move in the music. I knew some of the people and I had said hi but it was as if I wasn't part of it anymore. Since I had been seeing Ella I was serious, had focused more on school and on trying to learn how to cook her dinner. It was a challenge I had given myself because it suited my needs. I wanted to be able to make her happy without having to spend money I didn't have. I wanted to be a creator and not just a consumer. I suppose also, in all honesty, I wanted to

have her to myself. I would rather have dinner in one of our two apartments where I would be the only person for her. We could put on the music we both liked and dance in the kitchen, Ella and I, to Ella and Louis.

Fabian walked down the stairs and into the bar. He was tall and dressed in a slim casual charcoal suit. I was proud. I noticed girls look at him. I wanted them to. The attention he drew I could credit to myself somehow. Fabian and I were connected in that way. My experience was so closely-knit with his it felt as if I could transfer it onto myself. I felt we were a team and brothers make the most indestructible teams.

I stood and we hugged. Two men hugging in the middle of a college bar, people bumped and drinks spilled, a girl I knew hugged us and closed her eyes and then a drunk guy joined the hug. We separated and laughed at the spontaneity we thought could only exist in Montreal.

“Don, my man,” said Fabian, leaving a hand on my shoulder and squeezing it.

“Hey Fabian, welcome back man. Beer?”

“Do you have to ask?”

I poured him a mug and we clinked the glasses like pirates. We sipped and sat back down to take in the zoo around us. The music was loud Led Zeppelin.

“How was your trip, Fabian?” I said leaning in and putting my elbows on the wet, sticky table.

“Ah, you know, the train, always slow, always stuck sitting beside somebody you don’t want to talk to. What’s going on? How’s school?”

“Fine, been working hard and not going out too much. Hanging a lot with Ella.” I sipped my beer again and lit a cigarette. Fabian and I liked to smoke together when we drank. He took one from my packet and allowed me to light it with the plastic lighter.

“Good stuff Don,” he said looking around. “When I think about it, the undergrad is probably the hardest part of your career.”

“Is it part of my career?” I said. “Are you saying your internship a piece of cake?”

“It’s not so much a piece of cake but definitely as easy as pie.” He winked.

He had always been like that, deflecting things that were at all serious or that smacked of real life.

“Yeah, I guess taking five classes and trying to have a life at the same time is pretty difficult. It’s easy to get by but takes so much effort to do well, you know?”

“I know, Don,” said Fabian taking a long draw on his cigarette. He blew the smoke up in a billowing cloud toward the low ceiling. I tapped mine in the ashtray. I felt the burning in my lungs stimulating me. I drank more beer.

I was not ready for what was coming that night. As we talked and drank the subject slowly turned to Ella. I didn’t like to talk about her

because I didn't know where I stood. There was always a distance in her eyes. She was from Toronto and she could escape me by going home. I was never invited and I knew why. She was part of another social world. There was something cosmopolitan about her, something big city, which intimidated me. When we had met she had just come out of a long relationship, or more specifically, was coming out of one. One of those high school relationships that are doomed but that inevitably stays with you for life. My relationship with Ella would be mine.

“You know Don, about Ella.”

My stomach dropped and I quickly asked, “What?”

“I was out at a bar last Thursday with Amanda. I spotted Ella and I pointed her out and told Amanda that she was your girlfriend. Anyway, strange coincidence, but Amanda knew her. They have mutual friends.”

I knew where it was going.

“Amanda said that Ella has a boyfriend in Toronto that she had just met the week before. Some guy in a band.”

It might have been easier to live with that kind of betrayal if it had been safely confined within me. But now my brother was in on it. The exposure was unbearable. I felt as though after my stomach dropped. I lit a cigarette.

“I know Fabian. She told me about him. They broke up when she moved here for university but it's complicated.”

“Sounds pretty simple to me bro. Dump that fucking bitch.” He leaned back in his chair with a severe look.

It infuriated me. I couldn't believe he could be so cold toward her. It was a natural reaction in me but then again it was probably a natural reaction for my brother to see nothing but the hurt it caused me. He was always such a loyal person. The way Fabian saw it, our family was the best and the most important compared to any other. In a way I agreed.

I was left with a mixture of anger and gratitude. When he returned to Toronto I thought of him and what he had told me. He was right. I should have left Ella but I didn't. I confronted her with the information that I knew was true. She wouldn't give me anything. She wouldn't deny it or make any effort to win me over. Somehow she became the victim in that situation and I found myself making excuses for her in order to live with it. A year later she would move back to Toronto and there was clearly no point in me following her.

When Fabian brought it up that Sunday in my apartment in defense of his actions, I hated him for it. I hated him because it was true. I hated him because he was walking all over me and had done so for our entire lives. But hate is not a thing that should exist between brothers and the sharp

edge of hate turned to the mild identification of sympathy. He sat before me looking imploringly for my support.

“Fabian,” I said. “You’ve gone off. You can’t go through life insisting on everything going the way you want. I think you should leave.” I felt I needed to think. Solitude sometimes made me uneasy but Fabian’s presence seemed worse.

“What about the game, bro? I might have a chance this time.”

I picked the lid up and placed it over the game board. “Forget the game, Fabian. You need to leave, you need to talk to Daisy.”

“Daisy and I are done, Donny. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you all afternoon. You’re kicking me out too? This is the end of our Sundays, then? Just when your brother needs you, you turn your back on him?”

I stood up, grabbed Fabian's coat and walked to the door. He followed me dragging his feet and shaking his head. I opened the door onto the bright day and the light striking my eyes made me dizzy. The beer and the hunger and the void I felt where my ideal had been kept for so long weakened me. I felt intense sympathy for my brother but the anger I still had for Ella, for myself, and for him seemed to derail my thoughts.

“I don’t know, Fabian, I’m sorry.”

I leaned in the doorframe and watched my brother walk down the street, getting smaller in the distance. I felt confused but then I realized that I had broken the pattern. It would be hard for Fabian to take me for

granted from then on. He had always had faith in my going along with everything he did.

I watched the many Sunday walkers in the street. My neighbour's boys were playing on the sidewalk. The older one was leading the younger from tree to tree, spying on some imagined enemy.

Queen E.

I don't really believe that I am insignificant. I am just unacknowledged. Perhaps my parents had something to do with it. They passed this neurosis along with the name and the house. They were the most supportive parents. Always telling me I was worthwhile, that I had depth. "Special," I heard them declare on more than one occasion. Why not? If you believe your children to be special then you might have an opportunity to take credit for it. Alas, I don't have any children. It is a vain endeavour. How selfish to make another needy human being in the likeness of yourself. It is arrogance incarnate. I hope that I never stoop to such levels of vanity and close-mindedness.

I have never had a job because I have never wanted one.

I sit in the hotel lobby. I am aware of being noticed or unnoticed. The ones who notice me make me angry. Why? I stare at them defiantly. Am I not allowed to exist? Am I not allowed to walk into this particular hotel in the center of this city and drop a suitcase? I have money. It is as good as anybody else's. They will take it smiling, all the while thinking they have gotten something from me and that they are being magnanimous, doing me a favor by taking my money and not letting me in on the secret, the joke; that I do not belong. It makes me sick. If there was a fire and they needed saving I should walk right past out into the street,

out of the heat and let them burn and suffocate in the inferno. Those who don't notice me can burn too. They are too self-involved. *Oh I have such and such an important opinion on the situation in Iran, no the situation of Western decline. There are no jobs. Cancer is mowing us down. The Chinese have no notion of human rights.* Well, I say, what about it? What will you do about it? You can't even notice me walk into a room, how should you expect to change the human rights situation in China. It is ego stroking and it makes me sick.

I go into the hotel restaurant and order a fish supper. I ask the waiter if it is fresh or frozen. He looks at me with the false superiority waiters sometimes get. *Yes, I am serving you but I have the answers.* There is no way of trusting a waiter, that is for sure. They will tell you anything you want to hear and that is why I never leave a gratuity.

I have always liked spending a few hours a day in a hotel bar. Places like these allow me to relax. I can be a traveler too, un-local. I'll sit and be noticed or not. I'll eat some bar snacks. I'll peruse a newspaper.

It is not my fault that I have never had a job. I have been cursed, like I said, by my parents. They left me with a sum of money before they moved to Turks and Caicos. Not enough money that I would be noticed but enough money to keep me idle. Oh how I wish I could be a poor soul who is given no choice but to work in some god-awful place. A factory or a bus terminal. A kitchen. Washing dishes. Yes, that would be the most

beautiful place to suffer. Drenched, standing in a pool of other people's filth and food.

I frequent the Queen Elizabeth lobby bar. I drink amber beer and Jameson. Not together. One on ice and one in a pint glass. The dark plush cavern set inside the gaudy lobby of the old building on Dorchester. But it is not Dorchester anymore. It is René Lévesque now. And it is not The Queen Elizabeth anymore but the Le Reine Elizabeth. English is a composite, malleable language. It is detached and ironic compared to the passionate earnestness of French. It's all the same to me.

Rose only knew about ten songs. I noticed because I went every Friday to be anonymous and to hear her. She always played the same songs in the same order. In my ear I could hear the next song beginning as the last song ended. That is the kind of automatic reaction that aggravates me because it is as if I have been deprived of free will. But I was compelled to listen to her anyway.

Rose is a small woman. A button nose. Fair hair. Brown eyes. Everything that together might create the quality of mousiness. She has not a slender frame nor busty voluptuousness. Just a little mouse playing the same songs day after day. At first I didn't notice. A collection of old standards. Every Friday it went the same way and so on, until two weeks ago she changed the set. She must have learned a new one. Instead of *Autumn Leaves* after *Crazy*, she went into *Mac the Knife*, bouncing fifths with the left hand. I nearly spit out my mouthful of peanuts. At first I was

offended. I considered leaving and trudging up the hill to Grandmamma's apartment in that castle of a building. And then at the thought of those mocking gargoyles looking down on me as I pant up the steep incline to Doctor Penfield, I was disgusted with myself.

Rose. She was playing away, meekly. She ventured a little solo. A few notes with a minor ring. Very weak. I laughed out loud and then saw the looks I got.

Was I surprised when Rose sat beside me at the bar? Yes. Was I annoyed that this little creature chose to torment me with her happy innocence? I endured. I always play the gentlemen because that is how I was brought up. I was brought up by my Grandmamma. Well, no. I was sent to live with her in the city when it was time to go to college, leaving my parents in the hermitage of the countryside on the lake by the mountain. So quiet. So green. So empty. Give me city lights. Give me hotel lobbies. Connect me to the world. It is turning at a great speed. Information is blasting through every source and avenue. I can't imagine living in the middle of nowhere.

Rose asked me if I liked her music. I laughed again with a snort.

"It is not your music," I said. "You don't even change the set list. Until tonight that is."

"I make it my own in a way. But you are right." And after a pause, "I played a solo."

Really? I thought. She wants to have this conversation?

“Listen miss,” I said, “you're fingers are too short to solo. They will stumble over themselves if you try anything dexterous. You might consider learning some new songs. Perhaps a little U2. Ever heard of Diana Krall? Gershwin is getting a little old, don't you think? You should curate your set instead of trying to impress us with underwhelming solos.”

She laughed and I noticed her hair was cut straight in a line below her jaw and it was not unattractive. Her hair was healthy. This meant a lot to me, but she had a double chin. I knew there would be something. I am a sucker for a sleek chin. Is that too much to ask?

“They might not like it if I change the set too much. They were pretty clear about the vibe they want in here. But thank you for the advice.”

“And you are OK with that? As an artist? You will let them dictate what you choose to play? Don't you think that is a little pathetic?”

"Are you alright?"

To this day I do not know what she meant by that.

I sat in silence and listened as Rose chatted with the bartender. Eventually Rose played another set. I left halfway through, disgusted with the entire situation, myself included. And besides, I had spent all the money I had for that day.

That evening when I arrived home at my Grandmamma's apartment, dinner was in the oven. It was a salmon filet with mixed wild rice. A tomato and Bononcini salad sat on the counter. A garnish of basil was

wilting like an autumn leaf. It was not what I had in mind after a few pints and a whiskey. The old maid, Suzette, always managed to come up with something that seemed like it was out of a food marketing magazine. Perhaps that's why Grandmamma kept her on despite her attitude. I found it uninspired.

I sat down to eat at the kitchen table. I could hear Grandmamma in the parlor watching television. Her many bracelets jingled as she ashed her cigarette.

The apartment is very similar to the bar at Le Reine Elizabeth except for the artwork. Both have plush leather furniture and dark oiled wood trim. But at the Queen E the walls are decorated with landscapes and pastoral scenes: Open horse carriages or snowy sleds; canoes in rapids. Here on the eighth floor of the Senate we have the Haitian art collection. Skinny underdressed black people on angular beaches and amongst slum housing. There is a lot more smiling in the Haitian ones and I attribute that to the lack of snow and ice. It's not as if they live in the lap of luxury.

Oh how I hate the winter in Montreal. It gets me so down and lasts so long. How I wish I could live in a hut on a beach somewhere and smile everyday.

I could not unconcentrate on Grandmamma's voice so I took my dinner into the parlour and sat beside her even though the smoke was sickening. The salmon was overdone and I've already mentioned the basil.

“Well, well. Little mister beer belly is back from his adventures. Where were you, guy? Let me guess. The bar at Queen E, hmm?”

“No Grandmamma, I was at the library doing a translation.”

“Is that why your eyes look screwy and you’re sweating?”

“No, that is because we live on top of a giant hill.”

“It's not a giant hill. Ever been to San Francisco?”

“No.”

“There’s giant hills.”

“Well it’s big enough, Grandmamma. If you ever left this flat you’d see what I mean.”

“I been all over the world, sonny. Just look at these paintings. Don’t you forget it. These paintings pay for your life. Why do you speak like an aristocrat anyway? You read too much. Your grandfather never went to school and he made a mint. They made him an honorary member of the Beaver Club and he spoke like a sailor.

I ate my wild rice with disgust. I know she wants me to get a job.

We sat and watched as the TV flickered. Every time a commercial came on Grandmamma spoke to it angrily and changed the channel. She keeps the remote on the left armrest with the ashtray.

History: The Desert Fox. “He was no Nazi!” exclaimed Grandmamma.

“What was he then?”

“He was a great soldier. Hitler made him eat a cyanide pill in return for trying to kill him. Your grandfather respected him because he was a great tactician.”

“Hmm.”

“Translate that!” She lit a slim cigarette with a shaky hand and poured some more dry sack into the little gold trimmed glass she uses.

“I’m going to bed Grandmamma.”

“Pussy.” She was drunk so I forgave her. I leaned in to kiss her cool soft forehead.

A week went by. I played chess at my club three nights. Took my fencing lesson. Spent a good deal of time in the library. Caught up on sleep and watched television with Grandmamma.

I take pride in the way I speak. My mother taught me to speak the part you'd like to play.

January trudged along at a slow pace. Suzette kept the piano polished but no one played it.

Friday was a good day because I went to the library and checked my interlibrary loans. I pride myself on getting the most remote books I can from the system of interlibrary loans. Why not use the system to the max? From the *Université de Québec à Montréal*, I borrowed a history of the War of 1812, as it played out in the Eastern Townships. After a quick read

I was not surprised to learn that the biggest challenge for most of the soldiers and their Indian allies and enemies was food. Nothing to eat. Fiddleheads, wild garlic, wild mushrooms and fish: Sure, they abound but it takes knowledge to find them. It also takes time and patience – something terrified soldiers on the move had not.

After reading all day I went to the Queen E. bar for a beverage.

There she was. Rose. Her little body sat at the big piano. My ears perked up when she started to play *Where the Streets Have No Name*.

Then I couldn't believe it when she went straight into *Tiny Dancer*.

I looked around at the patrons. No-one seemed to notice these new numbers except the bar manager. He went over to her after a few more new songs. She looked up at him with a sheepish smile. I could tell he was not pleased with her new choices. She resumed her playing and fell back into the old set.

"I tried," she said to me, sitting at the bar after her set. "He said that if people want something risqué, they can go to the W."

"And you've given up?" I was dismayed for all the workers of the world, who muffled their independence for money.

"I don't really care what I play," she said. "I put those songs in for you."

"Why would you do a thing like that?" I said, surprised to hear this.

"You're the only person who pays attention to my music in here."

"I'm sorry for that, I'm sure." I pulled out my bills, and counted out the amount, *sans* gratuity, and slipped them into the leather booklet in front of me that held the *addition*.

"You're funny," she said and touched my chest with a short finger.

"Ha!" I exclaimed, feeling strange about the touch she had bestowed upon my lapel.

"My Grandmamma," I explained, "is not well. She is on top of the hill in the Senate, on the eighth floor. I must get to her at this pint – I mean point – in the evening."

"What's your name?"

I was already on my way. My feet had taken action despite the indecisiveness of my mind. I had a twenty crumpled in my hand, absorbing the sweat therein. I walked toward the lobby and dropped the money into the hat on the piano stool without stopping or turning. But then I noticed a scribbled paper on the music stand. I did not look back, why would I? The mouse coming after me? Thank you for the tip. I did not tip her for a thank you. I do not know why I tipped her. I did it. That is that.

I went into the night of Friday. I headed West on Dorchester.

When I arrived at the apartment, Grandmamma was asleep in her chair. I turned off the television and the deafening silence made her start. She did not wake. I brought my dinner, – hardened filet mignon in a god-awful Porto sauce with turnips in vinegar on the side – into the parlor and

watched her. She had seen things I would never see. I remembered the paper I'd taken from Rose and took it out of the pocket of my corduroy trousers.

Her writing was small and underdeveloped. *Tiny Dancer* was written at the top of the page. She hadn't so much dotted her *i* but placed a little juvenile circle above it. She wrote in block letters. The melody was written out on the staff below. I'd taken oboe for a few years before switching into translation and so my sight reading was not nonexistent.

The filet was not breaking down despite my vigorous and persistent mastication so I took Grandmamma's gold-rimmed glass of Sherry and washed down the wasted bovine's loin. I put the plate on the ottoman between my feet. There stood the piano in the soft glow of a stained glass lampshade.

Just to see if the little creature hadn't carelessly written it wrong, I sat at the piano. I shook my head at her notation. Scribbled in haste no doubt. I played the first rising double peak of melody. Oh, how I do not like Elton John and do not understand why he should have been knighted. He is only half of a song writer.

The Medievalist

I was at the University late and that is when I saw that Cathy had given birth to an older gentleman in a matador's outfit. His posture made him look distinguished and important – like someone who knew exactly what was what, although he was quite small. I walked by the rotunda, not wanting to stare. Cathy was asleep on a bed next to the old fellow's cot, her left breast out of her robe, hanging a little to the side, looking as exhausted as her wispy-haired brow. I was there for a meeting with the Medievalist. After a late class in the yellow-lit old Mathematics department, I had made the trek to the round stacked ergonomic slabs that made up the floors of what would normally have been called the Humanities Department, but now, since consolidation, was referred to simply as The Department – to see if I could come up with equations that would represent the number and pedigree of religious allusions in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. I had noticed that mathematics was being used more and more often as proof for literary theory.

The Department always made me uncomfortable because of its focus on 'interpretation,' obscure theory, and morbid history. The abstraction of numbers and concrete relationships comforted me and provided a sense of harmony. in the Department I felt like a cosmonaut with a rip in his space suit, a little claustrophobic and untethered.

I had known Cathy from an undergraduate professional writing class. She was my tutorial leader and she put together such a perfect game of literary Jeopardy that I fell immediately and hopelessly in love with her. Needless to say I was dismayed when she returned from the Western beaches two summers later with a beach ball for a belly.

Her ex-boyfriend, she'd said over coffee, a campfire on the beach, Jack Johnson's acoustic guitar playing. I wouldn't hold it against her.

There I was, exiting the elevator, one penny loafer in front of the other, my downturned faced reflected in the waxed tiles. To my left the parturient scene – faculty and adjuncts, staff and eager masters students, standing around the pride and joy of the department. The first birth in the university, and in the Department. Quite *à propos*. There were champagne crackers, triangles of mild brie, and litre bottles of high altitude Australian red on a foldable table. The old bullfighter, new to this world, in his embroidered satin, leaned on the edge of his cot, asking this and that without listening for the answers, his thick glasses magnifying his large open-minded eyes. He is very tanned, I thought, for a newborn.

I stopped by the one window that looked out over the city of Montreal in the direction of the river. Snow swirled in three dimensional eddies, like my emotions, hurtling acrobats, endlessly routine-ing in the atmosphere. Perhaps not only were the flakes my emotions, but each flake was a person in the endless march of generations; that the sky was like an eternal library, a catalogue of the countless lives and feelings of self-

importance that have teemed on earth for millennia. I remember thinking: Do lesser beings feel self-important? Does an aphid think it deserves its share of this or that? I would put my money on yes.

The Medievalist sat at his desk and typed on an ergonomic keyboard. The most advanced keyboard – I had asked the secretary, and she had willingly informed me with arched eyebrows – in the entire Department. He never uses a pen, she said, and mostly uses voice-activated software. He looked up and stood with the deliberate movements of an accomplished actor. He was tall and his torso almost a perfect rectangle. He rounded the desk to shake my hand. The tapered jeans were just right, tucked but not tucked into tan leather boots with wide soles and blue laces. His shirt, no doubt purchased in New York city during a conference, was white and bore little red trapezoids that reminded me of digitally-rendered flowers.

Geoffrey Chaucer, the wine merchant's son, he said, pouring me a glass of *Bin 54* – remains an enigma. The wine was the same brand as the one I'd observed at the rotunda party, the stealthy rogue, but one does not become a foremost scholar of medieval literature in the year 2015 without cunning etc.

I took the drink. He continued.

Geoffrey Chaucer fought in the Hundred Years War and was taken prisoner by the French at Rheims. He was well-treated and released on ransom, said the Medievalist. I argue that this added to his anger toward

the French – a grievance he may have already harbored because his father's wine business was suffering due to the difficulty of shipping English-owned Bordeaux wines to other kingdoms and duchies in the continental East: Wallachia and the greater Rumanian and Hungarian empires.

The Medievalist sat down again and stared. I was intrigued. I could tell that he was an experienced and confident speaker. Silence was his friend more than it was mine.

I showed him the rough graphs I had sketched, thinking these would be easier to understand for a humanist than their equation counterparts – the graph a rendering of data; the equation an abstraction of data; the graph an image of reality; the equation an image of unreality or predictability.

He seemed to understand right away, bouncing the index finger of his left hand on my work.

There is, he began again, a curious link between the Wife of Bath's character and Heloise's responses to Abelard. You probably know the story of Abelard, the religious monk and temporary head of the Notre-Dame Cathedral School in twelfth-century Paris, and Heloise, his pupil. Their love affair is evidenced in a series of letters. Abelard's subsequent castration at the hands of her uncle and guardian. The letters were probably written by French church authorities as a behavioural guide to women of the cloth.

He took off his glasses, leaned back and smiled. I did not know the story but I was not surprised that this would be the subject matter of a project in the Department.

Hmm, I said, and took a pensive sip of my *Bin 54*.

Anyhow, Chaucer's character, Alysoun, a loose and financially independent woman, appears in dialectical opposition to Heloise, by using the same religious and patristic allusions. Some say he had created a proto-feminist text. But we know that Chaucer was accused of rape and so might not be a proto-feminist after all – except possibly out of guilt – but a staunch nationalist, using the Wife's prologue as a satirical attack on the French dialectical religious scholarly tradition.

Chaucer would have had access to the letters of Heloise and Abelard, and in light of the biographical details I have told you about, my thesis is that he created an anti-French text, that can be linked to the forces of economic trade.

I sat listening and realized none of this had anything to do with the work I had put in during the previous Saturday, which I had initially thought interesting. It had more to do with shoring up a thesis with empirical analysis. Apparently this would appease the critics when the book, which had already been secured funding, would hit the shelves.

I learned this bit about the funding as I was returning to the elevators. I stopped to have another drink in the rotunda and see if I could catch a moment with the new mother, the woman that made mathematics

beautiful yet irrelevant for me. She was the pride and joy of the department. Not the dried raisin of a newborn who was asleep at her breast. I could not get near her. I ran into an old friend, Julian Castiglione, an expert on Heidegger who had been subsumed by the Department after the closing of Philosophy. We'd found common ground in Bergson, a philosopher who appreciated and made use of mathematics. I joined him lurking on the outer ring of faculty celebration. Here we were again, finding ourselves in the overlapping region of a Sven diagram, so to speak.

He filled me in on the Medievalist's book idea.

The Medievalist is ruthless, he said. He'll do anything to get a book on the shelf, even if the methodology is nonsensical. He's found a way to apply mathematics to any thesis he deems marketable, which appeases the Bill O'Reilly's of the world. Why do you think he asks a different mathematician for every publication? Basically, he reduces all human phenomena to quantitative economic arguments, and this makes sense to everyone in a world – he swept over his head as I'd seen him do often – that is only partially revealed but fully distorted and obscured in that partiality, to all those who seek to find meaning in the instance of consciousness between life and death. I understood and I didn't understand, but was happy to be invited to the Humanities department and to be involved in such a promising book proposal. I exited into the wintry evening, and thought about Catherine the gender theorist, wondering how her work was developing. I was warmed by the thought that she could not

be quantified or explained. In the elevator, I remembered Abelard, the emasculated monk, and Chaucer, the prisoner poet, and wondered how they might have felt about their worlds, enmeshed in institutions and work of great importance.

Stockholm Syndrome

I am making copies at a shop in old town, Vilnius. It is a big job, or, I am not very organized. I have piles of papers strewn about the entire service counter. I am trying to communicate with the young Lithuanian woman who works here, but things are getting left out. I want seventeen copies of "Bobcat," a story about a woman and her husband who host a dinner party. At the end of the dinner comes a knock on the door. You know this is trouble and the rest of the story comes snapping back like the crack of a whip. You say to yourself, I saw this coming! There were clues! How could I have been so swept up? This is what I'm talking about here. I should have learned my lesson.

I am a teaching assistant in a writing workshop in Vilnius. The other workshopers have Ph.D.'s and MFA's in creative writing; one guy is even a creative writing professor in Kalamazoo. They've mostly all written novels, published collections of short stories, personal essays, etc.

My background is in restaurants. My parents had owned a high end sushi place in Montreal. That was before my brother and I turned things a little sour two summers ago. But that is water under the bridge. I'd decided to go back to school and do things properly. I have always been a writer, but felt I needed the security and structure of a university program.

I'm thinking this all the while stapling, sorting paper, speaking to the beautiful young Lithuanian woman with thick black eyebrows. Every

Lithuanian woman I have seen in Vilnius is stunning, and I am from Montreal where it is known the women are hott with two t's. In the restaurant scene, we are used to the beauty of affluence, but here it seems unforced.

As a Canadian ex-restaurateur I am acutely aware of loud Americans. Along with their gregariousness, usually comes money. I don't notice him at first but an American man has come in with a younger, Lithuanian man. The American, Sean is his name initially, has a big belly and is balding, has a dark complexion – I will find out later he is of East Indian descent, a Christianized Muslim – a pockmarked face and looks to be in his fifties. His sidekick, Edgar, who is a tender-looking zitty blond, maybe in his late twenties, sports wire-rimmed glasses, and an affable smile. There is something predatory about them. They look bored and hyper aware of their surroundings.

“Hey there,” Sean says to me. “What are you up to here?”

“Copying,” I say cheerily.

“Are you a writer?”

“Yes.” I wonder why he would guess this. Do I look like a writer?

Any student could be making copies.

“What do you write?”

This is a question that I hate because it is the one question I can't answer without sounding like I'm full of it. I have written a screenplay, but what is a screenplay without the film to bring it to life? I haven't been

published. I haven't been paid. Is it enough to talk about what you write? I think it has something to do with asking questions and resisting assumptions about the world. This is why I am intrigued by this man and his partner, however, perhaps it is due to the fact that I am bored and don't really feel like sitting through a writing workshop that seems to deteriorate into gossiping about famous writers most days.

“I wrote a screenplay but now I'm focused on fiction.”

My instinct tells me that when someone is overly friendly with you for no apparent reason, it is because they want something from you. I know because I have experience with shady people. Two summers ago, my brother Marley and I tried to shop my screenplay to a couple from L.A., Mani and Magda. Mani said he was a software entrepreneur and Magda was a descendent of the Shaw in luxurious exile. They ended up taking us for all we were worth. My father and uncle basically disowned us. They made us feel like we had something to offer besides our money. Money makes money feel at ease.

But the writer in me is curious today. This is a mini mystery I want to solve. With only a few acquaintances here in Vilnius, I feel like I want to meet people. I have one week left of my two week stay. Time seems to be flying by and I want interesting stories to tell and to write about.

Sean asks me if I've ever done any ghostwriting and I think of my Parisian cousin who suggested it to me when he found out I was studying literature. He had called it *le nègre*, which is what they call ghostwriting in

Paris! Let us remember that in Gaulish France the Franks had full freedom to say and do and this is the root of the word 'frankness.'

I say, "no I haven't."

"I like to call it co-authorship," says Sean.

I say, "no I haven't." I have been here an hour already, why not waste more time speaking to this guy even though he annoys me? I need material. Besides, the teacher already thinks I'm an adorable failure. My family might agree minus the adorable part.

"Do you want to write a book with me?" says Sean.

"Will you pay me?"

His eyes sparkle and he laughs, raising both eyebrows, as if he respects the question.

"What's it about?" I say. "What do you guys do here in Vilnius?"

"Market research," says Sean, which is about as vague as associating animal shapes with clouds. I ask him to elaborate but he tells me that we should meet the next day for lunch and he'll tell me all about the idea. He suggests Cathedral plaza at noon.

I go back to class. The teacher smirks at me as if to say, you silly little boy, how charming that you are so late.

"I was being solicited to co-author a book, for money!" I whisper into the curly black hair on the side of her head. She laughs and says it is good that it is for money.

I concentrate on the writing exercise about conflict.

The next day I walk to the Cathedral Plaza to meet Sean and Edgar.

Vilnius is humid. I am always sweating or cooling from sweating. The plaza is a large trapezoid of uneven slate tiles with two old oak trees and wicker tables set up in the center under the ubiquitous umbrellas of the city. It rains nearly every day and everyone smokes, always under umbrellas and awnings. Across the street the cathedral is under the shadow of the old castle perched on top of a steep grassy hill. The crows of Vilnius stand up there in the wind. I climbed it with a pretty Lithuanian girl who burns the hair that gets stuck in her comb in the park for good luck. We watched those crows. They are very large and have a grey swath of small downy feathers around their necks that makes them look like pagan chieftains wearing fur-lined cloaks.

A massive white stucco cathedral stands across from the square. It was rebuilt after the Soviets destroyed it. There are statues of saints and patrons inset in its outer walls. The dome is glittering copper. In the middle of the plaza that extends along one side of the cathedral there is a statue of King Gediminas. He is on foot, leading his horse by the reins, sword drawn, leaning forward at a powerful angle. It exudes noble history but in fact there is nothing noble about the recent history of Lithuania. Occupied under Stalin, liberated by Nazis, several hundred thousand dead Jews and Poles buried in mass graves in the hills surrounding the city.

Sean is on the phone. We sit on wicker chairs. Edgar smiles yesterday's smile and asks how I am. I tell him I feel sick today – something to do with cheap liverwurst and instant coffee for breakfast. He makes a horrific expression. I guess this is a big deal? He is sorry because he is Lithuanian and he feels responsible for my eating cheap liverwurst? His affect makes no sense until I realize that his concern for my mild nausea is a way to avoid talking about why we are here without Sean mediating the discussion.

Sean finishes the phone call and tells me it was a publisher in London. I think to myself, this is it! My life may be taking a turn. Screw literary fiction, I'm going to be a James Clavell of sorts. I'll make more money and be more famous than I ever would writing 'literature' because most of the world can't handle literary fiction. It cuts too deep. It leaves the reader with more questions than answers.

Sean asks if I am hungry.

I say I'm not feeling well but then feel like this will sort of truncate the interaction, and it does have that effect. Like how can we move forward and have a light, get-to-know-each-other business lunch if I don't even feel well?

I observed many business dinners in my father's restaurant. The pageant of the business lunch disintegrates if you don't eat or drink. If you've nothing to fall back on, nothing to say to the people at the table and you can't put a fork of food into your mouth to fill the silence with action,

you open yourself to awkward moments and awkward moments are only good to watch, not to be part of.

Marley and I knew this and that is why we lavished expensive sushi and wine on Mani and Magda. We wanted them to feel like we were in control, that they could trust their money with our idea. That summer, while my father and uncle were sailing in the Dodecanese Islands off the coast of Turkey, trying to decide what to do with our now worthless real estate in Florida, Marley and I were left in charge of the restaurant. We added to the family's financial crisis by emptying the wine cellar, as well as lending two never-to-be-seen-again Riopelles from the dining room to this couple we were vetting.

"I guess I am hungry, after all," I say. I anticipate that we'll have some zeppelins or kibetas, pickled herring or chicken Kiev; borscht or goulash; sausage or braised pork shank in onion broth; beet salad or dumplings with cream. Anything to make my experience authentic.

"Let's have Chinese, again," says Sean to Edgar.

We begin to walk up the street and Sean proceeds to direct and hold traffic using wide swings of his umbrella for women whom he addresses as honey and darling.

We enter the Chinese restaurant and a thought crosses my mind. I remember that all the restaurants I have been to in Old Town Vilnius have three or four floors of subterranean grottos, which have a musty smell and palpable humidity that scream, dungeon! It is always in retrospect that you

know you should have trusted your gut feeling.

We take a table by the entrance and I relax. I take out my notebook because of a preconceived idea of what a ghostwriter, reporter, fact-based chronicler should do and Sean stops me.

“Keep that notebook closed or I'll make you eat it,” he says.

Edgar grins nervously. Sean quickly flashes a smile that seems intended to defuse the threat.

“We need to trust each other,” he says. “We need to get to know each other. What better way to get to know each other than lunch and friendly conversation?”

I think, yes, he could be right. I don't really need to take notes yet. I close my notebook.

I'd learned a lot about business etiquette from my father. We prided ourselves on importing tuna directly from Japan for the restaurant. It's not that there isn't good tuna in Canada, there is, but the ones sold at the auctions in Tokyo are the biggest and best, and the public perception we gained from flying in the tuna was important.

When visiting our Japanese supplier, step one was to have a huge dinner and get wasted; then to go sing karaoke in private rooms and chain smoke. The next day, hung-over, sheepishly crawling out of bed next to a prostitute, eating ramen, meeting the merchants early in the morning in the hotel lobby, there is an understanding.

“So,” I venture. “Why are we here?”

“Barry,” says Sean, “I thought you would never ask.” I don't smile.
“Do you know who Marc Rich is?”

“No,” I say thinking by now that Sean might be thinking I am not the guy for the job. I'd better just be myself, I think, and not pretend to be John LeCarré.

“He was a fugitive of the USA who lived in Switzerland and made money on the commodities market, selling oil to enemies of America.”

“Ok,” I say.

The waitress comes by and Sean touches her waist as he orders two plates of ginger beef for us, and one cashew chicken for Edgar.

“Do you want a beer?” asks Sean. I say, “yes,” eagerly. “Yes I do.”

“We only have wheat beer,” says the waitress. I dislike wheat beer but I say yes, a wheat beer sounds nice.

Sean continues. “You are talking to a fugitive of the United States of America.” I cock my head to the side, not having seen this coming. “But I am the first fugitive of the United States of America to be granted political asylum by the EU in Lithuania.”

Just then three Russian-looking dudes walk in – mullets, tight t-shirts over beastly arms and chests, cheesy sneakers, track pants. I look around. Are people leaving? Is this a racket? This is not uncommon in Vilnius. My family is quite wealthy but what they would dish out for my safety is debatable. The city is full of Russians. They are easy to spot because they wear a lot of white, have bad haircuts, lift weights, and have

terrible style in general. Of course I have been conditioned by Hollywood to think they are all gangsters with a capacity for extreme violence.

“Barry,” says Sean, “this is Edgar.”

“I know.”

“He is my partner, my friend, my support.”

Edgar beams. Sean seems to be his *raison d'être*.

“I love this man but I don't have lust for this man.”

This is a strange comment.

It dawns on me that they are not very well dressed. Sean looks like he has been wearing the same blazer for a while without a trip to the cleaner. He has no tie; his shirt is white but wrinkled. Edgar is wearing a regular suit; no tie either.

The beers arrive.

“So what did you do?” I ask. The three of us clink pints.

“I am accused of electoral funding fraud,” he says. “I was Commissioner of Human Rights in a municipality of Florida. I was running for executive sheriff and the incumbent had his Federal Agent friend fabricate allegations and proof that I took five thousand dollars from a donor in cash, broke it up, gave it to my friends to donate back to me in smaller portions.”

“What is the proof?” I ask. “They can't have a warrant out for your arrest if there is no credible proof, can they? And if the proof were

discredited, why would you have fled? Wouldn't that make you appear to be guilty?"

"Why," says Sean, "would I take five thousand dollars when I spent thirty grand of my own money on my campaign already?"

I don't see how that is an answer to my question. I want to be on his side at this point because I've wasted so much time. He shows me an official-looking brass badge that says 'Commissioner of Human Rights.' I turn it in my hand and look at the back.

"Don't bother, it's real," says Sean nudging Edgar as if my skepticism amuses him. I am being played. I just can't figure out why.

"Danhji Shankdhur Shiraz," I say reading the name on the badge, "I thought you said your name was Sean. And how did you get out of the United States? And what kind of book do you want to write? Like a revenge kind of thing? You want to expose the people who you feel have done you an injustice?" Then, turning to Edgar. "What do you do? How do you make money?"

Edgar shrugs and looks at Sean.

I am on a roll. So much bullshit is swirling around me. And all the while Sean is staring at me like a prizefighter; like he is so focused and impassioned with all this; like he is willing me to believe his story.

"Tell me about yourself," I say. Again that satisfied look as if he respects the question. It now seems manipulative.

"I was born in India, a Muslim. I came to America when I was eight

and was raised in a Catholic environment. I studied law at D.C. University.”

“Are you married?” I ask. “Do you have kids?”

“Yes, two kids and an ex-wife. She lives in Alabama.”

The hesitation in his voices sounds like I've struck a nerve.

Our food arrives. Shank, which is what he wants me to call him now because his electoral slogan was: *Vote for Shank, Money in the bank*, goes on about how there is so much sauce on Chinese food that you can't tell if you are eating dog or cat and that you probably are eating both, and that, by the way, they eat dog here in Lithuania too. He has the least amount of beer left, then me, then Edgar. Why have we come here to eat dog? He is unstable at best. One of those manic talkers, changing subjects often, making sweeping generalizations, flirting inappropriately, slightly aggressive tendencies, explosions of emotion, and contradiction, for example, insulting Chinese cooking but returning to the same restaurant every day to eat the same food. He is impossible to pin down so I focus on Edgar.

“Where do you work, Edgar?” I ask.

“What do you mean?” he says.

“Isn't the meaning obvious? How do you make money?”

Edgar looks at Shank and then back.

“We do consulting.”

“Do you work for a firm?” I ask.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“What do you mean?”

“You are a lawyer and lawyers, especially young ones, work in firms, no?”

“Well,” he says, “I didn’t like it so now I, we, work for ourselves.”

“Doing what?” I ask, gaining momentum. “You consult on what? Commodities? What exactly do you guys do for money?” I feel like this is a fair question.

“We help with international contracts,” says Shank. “We consult with telecommunication firms, cell phones and stuff like this.”

“Ahh,” I say. I fish around in my food and find a short dark hair. It is either eyelash, pubic, or head. I pull it out with my fingers and my lunch mates don’t notice. Fortified by the fact that you can’t know, and indeed do not want to know what goes on in kitchens of all grades and by extension, what unwanted byproducts of being a live human being that sweats, flakes, drips, spits, sheds, shits, and scratches, might happen to sojourn into your food, I continue to eat. In fact, the wheat beer and heightened sense of intrigue are making me hungry. Then I think, they have poisoned my food and I will be asleep soon and then I will wake up strapped to a table or with my kidneys removed somewhere three stories below the street. I push the thought away.

We have reached, as I was explaining earlier, the point in the business lunch where everyone eats a little and there is silence. In the silence, everyone ponders their game plan, turns over what has been said up until then, and makes adjustments. In this way it is not awkward that everyone is in their figurative corner getting ready for the next round.

Shank comments on how great the umbrella holder is. It is basically a windowsill at the level of our eyes with holes drilled into it that you can hook an umbrella handle through. “Yes,” I agree, “it is convenient, especially since here in Lithuania, which apparently means 'rain,' it rains every day.”

Our friendly lunch is coming up cold.

“Why me?” I ask.

“I don't know, Barry,” says Shank after a moment. “I guess you seem like a good guy and I thought it fortuitous that we met in the copy shop when we did.”

This is shallow businessman mysticism – one where he tries to invoke spiritual meaning, fate, and divine maneuverings into his desire to make money or acquire something and quench an insatiable thirst for power.

I continue to eat and find another hair in my food. This time it is long, leaving no doubt which part of the cook's body it is from, and I pull at it until it is clear of the plate. Dangling at its end, like a piece of bait, is a nice little chunk of saucy beef. We all stop eating and stare at it. It sways

like a pendulum between us. Like the dynamics at this table, back and forth, like my opinion of this exiled shyster.

I say that it is Ok because I am not hungry anymore; I'll just push the plate aside. But Shank is not having it. He calls the waitress over. He touches her shoulder not for the first time. She is visibly embarrassed about the situation. Do I want something else? No. All four of them urge me to order something else. A few minutes later the fried rice shows up.

“Shank,” I say, “thanks but I need some information. I have no notes. I don't really understand the legal situation you're in. Can I get in trouble for talking to you?”

He looks at Edgar. “Should we send him the letter?” he asks. It sounds rehearsed.

Edgar nods and smiles. I fear Edgar is as uninteresting as a paper clip and perhaps as twisted. That is why he has latched on or been taken for a ride by this gregarious American.

Shank loses his composure at this point. He gets really intense and starts pointing his fingers at me, evoking extremely passionate ideological opinions as to what it means to be an American, what America is to him, the oaths he has taken, the flag his honour is wrapped up in, the flag *they* have trodden on, and how he vows to get revenge on them and that I will see etc. etc.

At this point I've had enough – enough food, enough wheat beer, enough vehement patriotism, enough stories and details that I can't keep

straight.

We get the bill. They assure me they will send me the ‘letter.’ We step out onto the street and part ways. I go to a café and Google Danhji Shankdhur Shiraz, finding nothing. I try various spellings and combinations and there are no hits, which is even more suspicious.

That night over drinks, the expat Russian professor, head of the program, tells me that Shank is the type of person to stay away from.

“Vilnius,” he says, “is a city not unlike Moscow, London, Paris, New York of course, and to some extent even Montreal. You will find people who have fantastic stories.”

“Sure,” I say, “but I really want to know what is up with this guy.”

The professor says, “it doesn’t matter. What matters is that you don’t want to get involved with an enemy of the state of Florida. Especially Florida,” he adds. “As a Canadian, to become *persona non grata* in the USA is not what you want to do.”

This is an important detail for me since my family owns so much real estate in Tallahassee. We were not able to sell any of it after the Great Recession and it pulls like a dead weight on my family's finances.

The next day I get an e-mail with documents attached from Sean’s G-mail account. The documents seem dubious. The name is different. The details add up but continue to be vague. They don’t give me a better picture of who this man is. The website he has hyperlinked are all one-

paggers with no links themselves, and thumbnail photos of people with whom they supposedly work.

I picture Edgar and Shank, working away in a flat, trying to put this stuff together the night before. Scammers. I just can't figure out for what purpose. It gnaws at me. I discuss it with people in the writing program.

"Some people," says a young academic, "do things for reasons that only make sense to them, and that you can never understand, and that you don't need to understand."

"Sure, but some people do things for sinister reasons and it is important to figure out what they are about in order to protect yourself."

"Or, just stay away from them."

The next day I e-mail Shank and tell him his story is very interesting and I'd like to help out but I still need more information. I say that I need him to tell me more about his childhood; his rise to politics; his political asylum within Lithuania; his market research clients.

Within an hour he writes back saying that he is willing to provide all the details I need however he would like me to tell him a little about myself first. He insists that he did all the talking the day before and really just wanted to know what kind of writer I am. What kind of family I am from. What are my interests, what kind of books I like. He asks me to send him the screenplay I wrote. I think this is fair and so I answer the questions and attach the file. This is my mistake. I am fooling us both at this point.

That evening I am reading in the apartment I'd rented. It is near Vilnius city hall by the river. This part of town is always deserted in the evening. My building is a massive Soviet-era apartment block with strange metal sculptures occupying the mid level façade. They look like giant cosmonauts tangled up in barbed wire constellations drifting though space. The concrete staircase up to the fifth floor is very dark. The doors to the flats are seven feet tall and five feet wide. I am sitting on the red divan, reading a submission for the workshop when I hear a knock on the door. I have a bad feeling. I don't move and I hold my breath.

During that week I had not seen another person in the stairs, which continue up four floors above mine. There is never a sound either. And when I smoke on the balcony there is never anyone else on the other balconies. After six o'clock, the street is deserted. So why a knock? Who could it be?

I open the door and see that it is a bike courier with an envelope for me. Within I find the 'open letter' to the public Shank had mentioned. He has attached a note that informs me that he has read my screenplay and is impressed. The reason he did not e-mail me is that the information contained within is sensitive and cannot be trusted on the web because not all the pieces are yet in play for their coordinated vindictive assault. It is decently written. It exposes those who had done him wrong. I should google the people named in the letter but I don't. Instead I go to a party at the Writer's Federation building.

The party goes late and everyone is very drunk from bottles of vodka that are passed around in the courtyard of the Writer's Federation building. Inside the building there are two dark rooms and in one of them a D.J. is setup. I am talking to a young woman with black hair. She is beautiful and slim and we share cigarettes and pass the bottle of vodka between each other. She says she is a writer of poetry and lives in another part of town, across the river. We enter the area where people are dancing and I notice that the crowd does not look like writers to me. They look Russian to be honest. They have the muscles and the haircuts I mentioned earlier. They are not really dancing either but sort of lurking.

"Let's get some MDMA," the girl says.

"OK," I agree immediately. "Do you know how to?"

She motions to a group of men standing against one of the walls. She goes up to them and I follow. They say they need my passport in order to determine if I am a cop or not. She tells me this is normal and I give it to her to give to them. The man who takes my passport hands the girl some pills. Her and I go outside and climb the latter to the roof to watch the city and swallow the pills and wash them down with vodka. I watch her climb the latter in her tight jeans and I am right below her. We sit close together on the roof that overlooks the main street of Old Town Vilnius. We take the pills and wash them down with vodka.

My memory here begins to become cloudy. I remember kissing her on the roof, standing and stumbling around on the low angled tin. I

remember her teeth clinking against mine and feeling her hipbones protrude as we embrace. I remember climbing back down the latter and entering the Writer's Federation. I remember my friends leaving and me wanting to stay behind with her.

"My passport," I remember saying. "We need to get my passport."

Dad, please understand I am only seeking experience. I have grown up working in your restaurant and only learned to navigate that world. I am hoping to forge my own path now. In a way, things have been too easy for me. I am curious about the world, the world beyond business, although I know about the all-encompassing importance of money. I have learned that lesson all too well, again. I need you to help me. I have been robbed: My passport, my wallet, and my cell phone have all disappeared along with my memory of the night at the Writer's Federation. You are right to think I am irresponsible. And maybe I don't deserve your help right now. But I am asking for it.

I have written this for you, as a chronicle of my naivety and honest openness to the world. I hope you can sympathize with some of my decisions. I have explained more than I had to.