

Elsewhere and Other Stories

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Abstract

Elsewhere and Other Stories
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Elsewhere and Other Stories is a collection of short fiction that explores notions of selfhood as they relate to space and place. Within these stories, characters struggle internally with alienation, aimlessness, and self-doubt, but it is through interactions with the external (or natural) world that they are able to contemplate the elusive – and sometimes detrimental – aspects of their identities. Whether it be from inside a house to the backyard, or from Kingston to Banff National Park, what enables each character's quiet self-discovery is the movement from one place to another; in a sense, each character must be uprooted in order to grasp an interior sense of belonging. As the stories are predominantly set outdoors, they often depict encounters between protagonists and the wilderness in ways that reflect how fleeting moments can have the most richly complicated effects on the individual's perception of the world. Bears, crows, trees, mountains—these representatives of the foreign and unfamiliar are what lead the characters of the *Elsewhere and Other Stories* to a better understanding of home, direction, and selfhood.

Dedication

To Aisy,
for keeping me sane (but not *too* sane).

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Crows

Lanna pressed the largest button on the remote and watched the light fade out of the television. The cartoon she'd been watching was replaced with a dark reflection of herself, slight and poised for flight, and she paused for a moment before leaving, caught up in this sudden shrunken image of herself. She raised her eyebrows and watched them curve above the frames of her glasses, tiny muted rainbows peeking out over the lenses. She bobbed her head to the left, and her chin-length hair – nearly black on the screen – swished out in a flurry before settling again in its natural place, in a bend below her ears.

If Cam were home, she'd ask him to go with her for a walk, but he'd been out all afternoon. Out with his friends. Sometimes she wished he didn't have any friends just so that he'd stay home more often, play games with her like he used to. She'll go to the park alone, she decided: Cam might even be there, and she could stick with him 'til dark.

Night was coming too early for a day in the middle of August. She'd have to leave soon if she was going to make it to the park before dusk, and sooner still if she were to have a crack at evading her mother. Dad was too busy in the yard to think twice about spurning her walk, but Mom would cross her arms and give her that look that tells her everything she needs to know.

It's getting dark, Lanna. You should have gone sooner.

Lanna waved goodbye to her image in the television.

"See you later then," she said.

From the door she heard the mower hack to life. Lanna swooped into her runners, jamming a finger into the left to pull her heel past the folded fabric of the beaten shoe. The red sun gave off a misleading notion of warmth, but with the door open she could

already sense a sharpening in the air, autumn on the breeze; this was reason enough for an extra layer of clothing. She reached for her bunnyhug before stepping out into the yard.

Dad's vigorous maintenance of the yard has kicked up a golden haze under the cloud-addled sky. Lanna inhaled this air, dusty and sweet. One day this would become a scent which – at the right time of day in the right kind of light – might send her reeling into the sentiment of the lost days of childhood, of summer curiosity, of her father. For now, though, she simply exhaled and stepped onto the lawn. Dad rounded the corner of the yard, halting at the pavement when he sees Lanna walking towards him.

"I'm going to the park," she shouted over the noise.

Cocking his head to one side, her Dad cut the mower's engine. "Sorry," he said, "your old man's going deaf."

"I said can I go to the park?"

Her father dragged the back of his hand across his forehead, pulling with it a long day's line of sweat. He turned his face up to the sky. Lanna could almost see his mind working, his eyes making a slow arc from one cloud to the next before settling back on the eleven year-old before him. "Tell you what," he said. "Be back here before dark and you'll spare your mother's wrath." He reached for the ripcord and paused, turning back to Lanna one last time. "Have you seen your brother, by any chance?"

Lanna shook her head. "He's gone. He might be at the park though."

"Do me a favour and bring him home if you see him."

Lanna patted him on the forearm. “Thanks Dad,” she said. As she turned toward the street the mower flared again, and she smiled at the thought of her dad toiling away at the planted grass.

In the time it took for Lanna to walk from her house to the end of the block, the sky has sunk at least a shade darker, like the deep end of the pool. She picked up her pace at the corner, almost sprinting the next two blocks before slowing for breath in the narrow path at the threshold of the park. Another twenty feet and the pavement would end where the grass began. She walked these last few steps with the tips of her fingers trailing lightly on the fence to her right, thumping rapidly along the spaces between the boards.

This was Lanna’s favourite place in the neighbourhood. A hollow metal stump at the entrance named the park Paper Birch, for the trees she thinks, planted in clusters around the edge of the sprawling urban green. She tried counting them once but found herself distracted by the trees themselves, white bark peeled around the bases in wisps, thin enough to tear in strips but deceptively resolute. Dad told her once that bark like this was the best for starting fire, but she found it also made nice little scrolls, perfect for writing messages and leaving them for the squirrels.

There was barely enough light left for her to see from one end of the park to the other, almost a full kilometre away. She could make out figures way down there, though, gathered amongst the trees like football players in a huddle. There were five, and almost certainly all boys. For Lanna there was no hesitation, striding so quickly she was almost hopping in their direction.

Halfway across the open stretch of the park, Lanna recognized the shortest of the figures, his backwards-turned Jays' cap a giveaway from anywhere. The excitement of actually finding her brother rose up through her lungs in a shout.

"Hey!" she called, running towards him.

All five heads turned at once, first towards Lanna and then into panicked glances from one another. Each of the boys flicked something tiny to the ground.

"Hey?" she called again, this time with concern. Cam and his friends set out running too, away from Lanna and towards the closest entrance at the opposite end of the park. By the time she reached the spot where they had stood, all five have disappeared.

Cigarette butts were strewn throughout the grass, some of them looking old and shrivelled from weeks of weather gone by. While she propped herself against the tree to catch her breath, she saw that three still glowed and she stomped them out in frustration.

"Not. Fair."

Though it was a surprise that Cam was smoking, what really bothered her was the fact that she had been left out. Left out of everything. She stomped again on the last butt, and again and again, her breath rising in a sob from chest.

"Stupid," she said, stomping a final time. Her voice echoed back to her from the opposite end of the park.

From somewhere above her came a rustle in the tree. She looked up in search of the source and found that the tree has sprouted large dark fruit. Lanna couldn't remember having seen fruit in the park before, especially fruit of this size. Almost like pineapples, but black, more slender. Her eyes adjusted in twilight as she counted the shapes. One on the lowest branch, two just above it, one just above them, and two more across. She

heard the sound again, followed by a squawk from the branch lowest to the ground, and then a flap from higher up. One of the fruits raised its head out from under a wing, and Lanna finally understood what she was seeing: branches home to roosting crows.

She peered up into the tree, suddenly aware of how quiet the park felt around her. Crows were always around the neighbourhood, juking from yard to yard, hopping along the curbside and cawing garishly from the rooftops and hedgerows. She had only known them as a nuisance, but now, at the foot of the tree, there was something serene about them. The way they kept together, perched quietly as shadows. Lanna felt her frustration wane as her heartbeat settled into a gentler rhythm.

As she looked from crow to crow, she realized the closest had been watching her intently. She could make out the glint of an eye from its side-turned head, fixed upon her face. It tilted its head just the slightest and Lanna did the same.

“Hello,” she whispered, raising her finger-tips up to the tree.

The crow fluttered its wings, followed quickly by another. All at once they seemed to stir: eyes flashing, tail feathers twitching, wings tensed for flight. Lanna held her breath. The entire flock would shoot out from the branches at any moment, she thought, into the sky and away from her, fleeing the park like her brother and his friends did before. Then she would be alone again, just her and the trees and the quickly approaching night.

After a minute or so, Lanna slowly exhaled, letting her hand fall back to her side. The crows seemed to relax, and even the one that was closest, with its eye so keen on her face, ruffled its feathers and rested its beak on its chest. She looked up at the crows until her eyes strained in the fading light, and when she knew it was past her time to stay, she

dug around in her pockets, looking for something to leave for the crows. All she found were a nickel and a dime, but they were better than nothing. She placed the coins on one of the roots sticking out from the ground, then peered up into the tree one last time.

“These are for you,” she said. She waved to the crows, turned for the other end of the park, and – feeling no haste at all – headed for home.

When Lanna stepped from the grass to the pavement, the nearest streetlamp lit up as if it had been waiting for her. Further down the block a handful of other lamps lit up, all towards the corner of the block where she’d turn for her own house. She imagined her mother was back from work, standing in the kitchen where the window faces west, watching the ruby waves fade in the sky and running her hand through her hair, sighing deeply, wondering where her children were. Wondering where *she* was.

Lanna strode more urgently. Maybe she could blame her brother, say that she tried to follow him because Dad said so, and she got lost and had to retrace her steps. She wouldn’t sell him out for smoking because she could hold that over his head, and maybe then he’d think twice about running the opposite direction.

As she rounded the corner of the block, a flicker in the distance caught her eye: the silent pulse of red and blue light. People were gathered at the intersection nearest her street, and beyond them a police car. There was always an allure to those lights because they could mean so many different things, a thief, a fire, a car accident. The closer she came, the more she was convinced it was indeed a car accident, but this led her thoughts back to Cam, and how fast he could run, and where he could’ve gone after they’d left the park. Fear flashed through her mind and she tried to push it away, but her pace

quickened nonetheless. Cam was headed in the opposite direction, wasn't he? Wasn't he?

She knew there had been a wreck, but there were too many people for her to get a good view. She weaved in and out of whispering onlookers. Some faces looked grave, some amused, and others merely curious. Lanna couldn't tell yet which category she would fall into. Out of the murmur came a voice she knew, and she turned to find her father just a few feet away in conversation with a neighbour. She slipped beside him and tugged lightly at his coat.

"What happened?"

He turned to her, unsurprised by her sudden appearance. "I heard it all from the yard and wandered over," he said. "What a mess."

A couple with a dog who'd been standing ahead of them decided they'd seen enough and continued down the sidewalk. Lanna finally got a good look at the accident, agreeing with her father about the mess. Across the street, an SUV had slammed into the back of a utility trailer, propelling it onto someone's front lawn and demolishing most of the fence around it. Debris was everywhere: glass glinting on the pavement, trailer parts decorating the walkway like lawn ornaments, plastic shrapnel strewn about the entire street. What she was seeing could have been a scene from an action movie, or at least the aftermath of one, since the bad guys seemed to have been taken away. Lanna wished she could've seen it happen.

A man was dazedly speaking to a couple of police officers, nodding once and gesturing with a head nod toward the wreckage to his left. A second man, bound to a stretcher, was being wheeled towards the open doors of an ambulance. Lanna expected

him to give the small crowd a thumbs-up like the injured hockey player she'd seen on television a weekend ago. But then the doors closed and the ambulance departed.

"No one else was hurt?" she asked.

"I don't think so."

Lanna look to the wreckage and back to her father. "Do you think he was drunk?"

"Maybe," he said, scratching the stubble on his cheek thoughtfully. "Or just stupid." He shook his head, then looked at her more severely. "This is a bad corner, Lanna – you know that right? Every year something like this happens. It's only a matter of time before—"

"I don't usually walk this way."

"Good girl," he told her.

When the police had what they needed from the dazed-looking man, he ebbed his way through the mess in the yard and sat on the front steps of the house. Lanna's excitement waned when she realized this must be his home and his yard and his mess. A tow-truck had hooked to what was left of the SUV and was hauling it from the lawn. She watched the man as he watched it roll away, his shoulders slumped inward, his face devoid of expression. He looked up from the tow truck and towards something above the police car, where streetlamp on the corner must have been struck in the accident, and bent low over the street. As Lanna followed the course of his stare, she found the lamp flickering chaotically.

The man stood again and walked along the remains of his fence. In this early twilight, Lanna thought he could have been sleepwalking.

“Alanna—don’t stare.”

Lanna flinched, dropping her gaze to her feet. Her dad had a way of making the simplest words bite without ever raising his voice. Despite the reprimand, she felt the need to justify herself, saying, “I don’t really think he cares right now.”

“Doesn’t matter, it’s not polite.”

“But we don’t even know him.”

Her dad bent low and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, drawing her into a private huddle. “You’re right, we don’t, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t act as if we do. We’re part of this neighbourhood, okay? And so is he, and right now the least we can do is respect his privacy.”

“Shouldn’t we leave him alone then?”

With a glance at the people surrounding them, her dad sighed. “I think you’re right. Give me one sec,” he said, then turned to speak to the man beside him.

Lanna looked around at the crowd too, then back toward the man, and felt a stab of guilt. “Sorry,” she whispered. There had been something satisfying about watching him in the midst of this disaster, but in the end he was just like everyone else around here. Even herself. Lanna turned away, letting her gaze pan over the street.

Something shone on the pavement just a few feet away. It looked like a feather, narrow black and bright. The crows were everywhere, weren’t they? So of course they’d be here, too, and for a moment all Lanna could think was that they’d left her this feather for the coins they’d left her.

Her father nudged her with an elbow. “Time to go, hon.”

Lanna didn't want to go. She tried to stall, but her dad had started off towards their street. She took a step and paused, watching her father's receding shoulders: how long before he looked back? She quickly spun, dashed a few steps and snatched the feather from the ground. The moment she held it between her fingers, she knew it wasn't a feather after all—it was too hard, too cold, too sharp. Not a feather at all, but glass. She slid it carefully into her bunnyhug as she caught up to her father, cradling it gingerly the rest of the way home.

When her dad went inside the house, Lanna snuck into the backyard. There was a spot near the back fence where she could hide out of sight from the window, so she crept from shadow to shadow, peeking up at the window to make sure no one happened to be looking for her. Once in the clear, she sat cross-legged, inhaled eagerly, and withdrew the feather-shaped glass from her pocket.

At first Lanna wasn't sure what she was seeing. There was barely enough light left for her to make out the muddled image, but it somehow seemed familiar. As she tilted the glass up towards her face, she realized it was part of her own reflection, one eye and one nostril and just the corner of her mouth. In her hands was a piece of the side mirror of the SUV, cleanly broken except for a crack, thin and faint, along the bottom edge. Along the top, though, was upside-down translucent lettering. She rotated the mirror to make out the message printed along the edge: OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER, it read. She mouthed the words silently to herself.

Lanna placed the mirror in the grass and saw the light go out of it, the reflection now of just the sky. As she leaned over it, she found herself thinking of Cam and where

he was and what he might say about all this, and that was somehow enough, knowing that he *would* say something. But she wouldn't give him the chance because the mirror was a relic of her walk to the park, of her night alone, of her curiosity. It reminded her of the crows, too, and whenever she looked into it she would think of the park and that tree and those branches filled with crows.

Lanna was lost in the mirror when the back door swung open. She hadn't realized how long she'd been waiting for the stars to appear, and the sudden bang of the door hitting the side of the house almost made her drop it.

"Lanna? You out here?"

Lanna turned the mirror so she was facing herself again. It was dark now, but she thought she could see something there: the distant shape of a pair of eyes, maybe, or a cheek or a nose. But there was something there, that was for sure.

Lanna stowed the mirror in her bunnyhug and stood. "I'm coming," she said.

Empties

Cam felt a heavy pat on his shoulder. This time it was Nathan, another face he hadn't seen since high school. The surplus of gut under Nathan's shirt showed the weight he'd gained in the past few years, a common sight amongst the house's partygoers. Seemed to be the rule of bumping into school-day familiars: they either got fat or got into shape. Nathan stared at him, frowning. "I heard about your Dad," he said, shaking his head in a slow crescent arc. "I'm sorry man. Really sorry."

"Me too," said Cam.

"We're all sorry to hear," said Nathan. "Everyone's sorry."

Unsure what else to say, Cam downed his beer and glanced around the room. Six people jammed in the couch, two in the chair. People sitting on the floor, people standing, people in laps, people dancing in the corner. The music thumping up from the basement gave the house its own pulse. Cam had come here expecting something quiet, walking the six blocks from the offsale with a case of beer in the backpack he'd dug out of his old closet. He'd just wanted to get out for a bit, get away from the house he'd grown up in. What he got instead were the same six blocks he'd grown up on with the same backpack he wore for all those years, same street signs, same pavement. A house full of Nathans.

The hallway to the kitchen cleared a little. Cam dropped his empty on the coffee table and took his chance to vacate, nodding a little at no one in particular on his way out. It seemed like every face in the hallway looked at him with some kind of pity, even the ones he didn't know.

Cam stepped into the kitchen, where seven or eight people were apparently gathered for a drinking game. A shirtless guy stood up from his chair at the table, slapping down a card. The others fell quiet but the music kept thumping. Cam watched shirtless guy's eyes shift from one end of the table to the other before resting on a girl who was sitting on the oven. He opened his mouth as if to sing but ripped a burp instead. The room collapsed into laughter, the girl applauding from the oven.

Cam pulled his bag off the cupboard and made for the Pilsner he'd tucked away in the back of the fridge. Of the three that remained, he slid two into the bag and cracked open the last for the walk home.

He felt tug at his sleeve. Cam glanced over his shoulder, expecting another sympathetic frown. Instead he found a scowl. It was the girl from the oven, arm crossed, elbows in hands.

"Those are mine," she said over the music.

"What?"

"The Pil." She reached forward and gently tapped the bottle in his hand. "Mine."

Cam stared at the bottle, then at the girl. "Uh. I'm pretty sure I brought these." He continued to watch her, but neither her posture nor expression had budged. "I guess if you want them, go ahead." As Cam bent to unzip his bag, the girl burst out laughing.

"Christ Cam, I'm pulling your leg."

Cam stood straight, confused. "Do I know you?"

"Well I would hope so," she said.

"I don't think I know you."

Now she frowned, glancing down at his bag. "You're not leaving, are you?"

“Yeah, I think so. How do I know you?”

“I’m heading out for a smoke,” she said. “Keep me company?”

Cam didn’t want to be here, but the thought of going to his parent’s house – to his Mom’s house – chewed at his insides. He shrugged to say *Why not?* and followed her, zipping his bag along the way. Shirtless guy stood up again, eyes shifting between Cam and oven girl. As she pulled open the door, she did a little curtsy and swung an arm in the direction of the back yard.

“After you,” she said. Shirtless guy whistled at them as they left, followed by a chorus of laughter.

The patio light came on as they stepped outside, beckoning the mosquitoes and moths to gather around it in a frenzy. Oven girl walked straight off the pavement and onto the grass, spinning a bit at the fringe of light and sitting on the lawn. Cam liked this idea, and there was enough beer in his blood to try it himself, but when he spun his bottle foamed, and he fell gracelessly to his ass. The lawn was damp when he planted his hand behind him, a sensation of childhood he hadn’t thought of in years: running through the sprinklers with his sister and cousins, that sweet smell of dew-dropped foliage in the early morning sun. Cam took a heavy breath and held it, feeling so much older than he did a month ago.

Oven girl was leaning back on both hands with her legs stretched out before her. She nodded slightly, the hair around her shoulders flashing golden in the light. “So why’re you home?” she asked.

The air spilled out of Cam’s lungs. “Oh you know,” he said, staring into the mouth of his bottle. “Time for a visit.”

“The family?”

“Yeah.”

“Mmm,” she said. “And how’s your sister?”

“She’s alright.” He took a drink and noticed she didn’t have one, then held out the bottle.

She peered at the label before cautiously tasting it. “Cold at least,” she said. She took a longer sip before handing it back. “What was her name again?”

“And what was your name again?” he asked in return.

At this she tossed back her head and laughed in a hurt sort of way. “Oh man oh man.” She kept her face turned up like that for a bit, walleyed in the sharp light. “You really don’t remember me.” Cam started to apologize but she cut him short. “Don’t worry about it,” she said, nudging his shoulder with an elbow. “You’ve been gone.”

“Apparently I’m a bigger asshole than I thought.”

“We both know that’s not the case.”

“Still,” he said.

The music from the house shifted into something slower, more melodic. Cam smoothed the peeling label of his bottle and took a long pensive swig, aware he was being watched intently. Just another face he’d probably never see again. He didn’t really care who she was, but the faint guilt he was feeling annoyed him, and that, in turn, made him feel more guilt.

“What kind of face is that?” she said suddenly. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“That I’ve had too much to drink,” he said, trying on a smile.

“But really.”

“I don’t know,” Cam said. It wouldn’t really make a difference what he said because he didn’t know her, even if she knew him. And if she did know him and he didn’t know her, who cares, he thought. “It’s weird being home,” he said finally, “and everyone here. I don’t even know them anymore. Does that mean I’ve been gone too long?” He took another long pull on the bottle, then held it up to the patio light. Empty. Oven girl peered at him, head tilted quizzically: *elaborate*, her eyes told him. Cam held up his empty instead, blowing into the bottle neck so that a low hoot gushed out. She held out a hand, and it took a moment for Cam to realize she wanted the bottle. He handed it over.

“I was gone too,” she said, conjuring a pack of du Maurier. In one quick gesture a smoke and a light appeared between two fingers. Her face shone when she sparked the light and inhaled. “But I ended up back here like you.” She tapped the ash into the empty and offered her smoke up to him.

“You shouldn’t smoke,” he said, reaching into his bag for another Pil.

“And when did you quit?” she asked slyly.

Cam raised his eyebrows, surprised but not surprised—she knew him, after all. “It’s bad for you,” he said simply.

“Says the guy with another beer in his hand,” she said and dragged again, grinning from behind the burning cherry.

Cam tried to give her a mean look, but then a bang came from the house and the music cut out. They both looked toward the silence. A new sound was revealed just beneath the distant mumbled voices from inside. A low drone. He leaned back, closing his eyes to listen more closely. The glow shifted over his eyelids and he found himself

shrouded in the scent of vanilla. Oven girl was leaning close to him, enough to feel her hair brush his cheek.

Cam opened his eyes. She hung over him like a lover, chin dipped low, playful eyes. Her lips shone with gloss, and for a moment he could imagine himself kissing them: the tiny flick of her tongue, the taste of cigarettes and beer. Then she leaned back and brought the smoke to her lips.

“What’re you doing?” he asked.

She cocked an eyebrow, smiled. “What does it look like I’m doing? I’m killing myself slowly.”

Cam waited for more, but she fell quiet. He turned to look at the house, strangely haunted without the beating music. Not much different from his own house. The music had died there too. His gaze drifted up above the door, he finally realized the source of the drone he’d heard earlier: the flies and mosquitoes and whatever else that was drawn to light. A buzz to break the silence. Who would’ve thought the sound of bugs could be such a comfort? Cam cracked the bottle in his hand and drank, then turned to the girl beside him. He thought about all the things he could say right then: “I’m here for a funeral,” and “My Dad’s fucking gone, how about yours?” and “I find you very attractive but I’m drunk and that might have something to do with it.” The things he could say that wouldn’t matter because he didn’t know her anyway.

Instead he asked, “Why did you go?”

“Hmm?”

“You said you were gone. Why did you go?”

“School,” she said, tapping more ash into the bottle.

“You quit?”

“I finished. Thinking about going back, to be honest—‘Go hone those skills,’ my dad is always saying.”

Cam nodded, feeling wobbly. “And another thing,” he said, squinting. “Could you please please *please* tell me your name?”

Oven girl laughed. “But where’s the fun in that?”

The house thumped back to life, followed by a cacophonous cheer. “Tchh,” he said, and she laughed again, more gently this time. Affectionately. Cam watched her finish the smoke and tuck the filter into the empty. Watched her lean back and peer up at the sky. It was clear enough to see the moon, and if he weren’t so drunk, probably a smattering of stars. He set his Pil down and ripped up a handful of grass, letting the blades fall from his hand in clusters.

Oven girl pulled out the smokes once more, flipping the top of the pack and rattling what was left inside. “One for now, one for later,” she said. “It’s my lucky day.” She lit up, eyeing Cam almost defiantly, then took a breath and let it go, the smoke rising up between them until it disappeared into the night. Leaning towards him ever so slightly. Smiling at him with that smile again. Cam slipped his hand around her torso and drew her in, his kiss arriving askew of her lips. She recoiled with a gasp.

Cam rolled to his side, his mouth ajar. “Shit,” was all he could think of to say. “Pretty much sums it up, doesn’t it?” she said, rising to her feet. She looked different from down here, he thought, more angular, more spiky. She said she knew him, and maybe there was someone way back there in his memory, the good days, the playing in sprinkler days, kids running up and down the blocks with whatever festivities

they dreamed up before they could grow up. Mom getting mad because they invited everyone in and the house was a mess, but Dad—he was having fun, pointing at these neighbourhood faces, calling them made-up names like Brickerbrack and Pallywal and Spikeyhead.

“I know this is a bad time,” Cam told her, “but you’re starting to look familiar.”

Oven girl still held the smouldering butt, which she lifted it to her lips while she gripped her elbow and contemplated him. That was all Cam could see from his place on the lawn, a bright red spot and her silhouette against the patio light.

“I almost remember,” Cam said. “Didn’t he call you Spikeyhead?”

She started laughing at that, bending at the knee and holding her stomach, and Cam listened to her and laughed too, the real kind of laughing, something he hadn’t done in a—

“Someone’s had a tad too much to drink,” oven girl said abruptly. Her voice was gentle but almost sad-sounding, and since Cam couldn’t see her face very well, he imagined it concerned, maybe biting her lip a little, brows pulled together in concern. She dipped and deposited what was left of her cigarette in the same empty bottle as before. “I think it’s time you headed on home.”

“Hey, hold on,” said Cam, moving to his knees, “I’m trying to figure you out!”

But she had turned to toward the house, was walking toward it, away from him. Through the door and gone. Cam stayed that way a while, knees planted with his bag beside him, staring at the house she had disappeared into. The yard went dark after a while because nothing had moved under the sensor in so long, and something like a moth fluttered past his head.

Cam reached for his beer and found that it had been knocked over. He picked it up and swished around what hadn't spilled out before bringing it to his mouth.

There was a bottle left in his bag and six blocks for it to keep his company. The air was warm with summer, but there was a breeze now in the dark – or had been all along and he hadn't noticed – and he shut his eyes and thought about nothing in particular. He would be wanted there in the morning, back in his own bed, but the grass was kind of like a bed, too, and it would be so easy to just sleep out here. The stars were up there somewhere, and the moon, and it was nice to just be outside. Maybe it would rain just a little, and maybe she would come back to check on him and they would both just sleep out here in the dark. The music would stop and there would be quiet for a while, just their breathing and steady hum of the bugs, and wouldn't that be beautiful? Something else to dream of on the way home.

Coyotes

When we heard the pump start going in the tent, I unzipped the flap and Jeff's waiting there with this queen sized air mattress, saying *Hey there's a nice empty spot up for grabs.* He found a way to sneak it in when no one was looking, and right in the entrance so that you've gotta stop and marvel at the ingenuity of bringing an inflatable bed and shoving it in the middle of a six-sleeper. All five of us would fit comfortably without it, but he's the expert, right, so no one can really call him on it because Jeff knows how to camp and we don't. Then he just knelt there with that nervous little smile, saying *Better call shotgun!* No one does, though, because Jeff snores.

I'd already decided by then to fall asleep thinking about the ways I could sabotage that mattress with the Swiss Army knife I borrowed from my brother: poke it with the scissors or poke it with the short knife or poke it with the slightly longer knife. There's even a pointy one that looks like it's meant for deflating things, that's the one I would use tonight if I were in a more saboteurial mood.

Someone coughs. I roll from my right side to my left side because there's not enough space to lay on my back. Then the honk and squeak of Jeff rolling over on his mattress, just to remind us of what we're all missing out on.

"You dick," I say in the smallest voice possible. Fernie giggles beside me.

Jeff rolls again. "What?" he says.

Fernie from beside me: "Molly was just talking in her sleep."

"That must be annoying," says Jeff. "Maybe you should just come up here with me? Loads of space."

Fernie says nothing.

I want to feel bad for Jeff because I think he's just lonely. Bad luck with dating, etc. But it's not like the rest of us have had luck, aside from John and April, both of whom are adorably snuggled up beside Jeff's stupid mattress at the opposite side of the tent. The saddest thing is that I probably *would* hop on his mattress if his snoring wasn't orchestral. I shared a futon with him last summer when we crashed at his friend's place in Saskatoon, and the only sleep I caught was in those few minutes where he might or might not have stopped breathing.

I know a while has gone by, but it's hard to tell how long in a tent after dark. A cricket chirrups, then stops. Fernie is deep breathing and probably asleep. Every breeze rattles the trees and bushes, and the silence that follows is inherently ominous. Then a sound whirrs up from the valley, a faint *woooo-yyyip wooo-yyyip yip-yip-yip*. When no one says anything, I try to ignore it by focusing on the rhythm of Fernie's respiration. But then the sound grows louder, the *yip-yips* layered like an echo.

"Does anybody hear that?" I whisper. I know Jeff is awake because he isn't snoring yet. I wait, and when he doesn't say anything I say, "Jeff?"

Jeff sighs. "That's just coyotes," he whispers back.

I sit straight up in my sleeping bag. "What do you mean coyotes?"

"I mean that's the sound coyotes make."

"But aren't coyotes, like, dogs or something?"

"Pretty much," says Jeff.

"Then why the hell do they sound like that?"

Jeff chuckles a little. "Molly, how have you never heard a coyote before?"

His sass is embarrassing so I hide behind Fernie. It's not my fault I don't have coyotes hanging out in my back yard like some people apparently do. Squirrels and blue jays, sure, but I'm more likely to eat them than they are to eat me. My Uncle told me once about a mange coyote on his property that lost all its hair and had to be shot to keep his kids and the chickens safe, but he lives on a farm, so that coyote makes sense.

After a minute I ask: "How many do you think there are?"

"In Saskatchewan?"

"I mean these ones."

I hear Jeff scratch his stubbly cheek. "I don't know, a few by the sounds of it."

"But what's a few?"

Jeff squirms and his mattress squeals. "Are you scared or something?"

"No."

"Well if you are... I mean, there's lots of room up here on the mattress."

"Jeff, godDAMMit."

Jeff exhales and I realize he's been holding his breath. He squirms a bit more, feet swishing under his sleeping bag. "Coyotes are harmless," he finally says in a muffle. He's already turned his back to me.

"Harmless," I repeat. Then, "Harmless?"

They're like foxes but bigger, this is a fact I'm moderately certain of. They eat small things like mice and whatever. And even if they're mange, then what? A bunch of bald Border Collies aren't much to be afraid of.

Jeff starts to snore. Loud enough, at first, to drown out the coyotes. I realize, though, that in the pause at the bottom of every breath I can still hear them, louder and louder and louder.

“Jeff?” I whisper. He snores in response.

Waooo-wooooooooyip!

I start to imagine them roving between the trees. They smell our site and the food we left out like idiots. There aren’t bears down here but the assholes at the park entrance should’ve told us about the coyotes. Ten of them, twenty of them, noses to the dirt. Yipping and howling all the way to our flimsy little tent. Some of them are huge, man-eaters, bigger than wolves, foaming from the mouth all over our chairs and the picnic blanket and the cooler, killing the near-empty beers we left by the fire, drunk now with hunger *and* alcohol, drunk with rage too because they’ve seen the way we treat this place, pissing in the trees and leaving trash all over and basically being just all around shits.

Then the leader hushes them: Behold the human steaks, neatly packed in nylon wrapping! They fall into formation, staggered rows of three or four on all sides of the tent. A sneak attack. The wind drops dead, the crickets scatter. Quiet now. Coyotes a tip-toeing oh-so-quietly, ready to make their move.

Just outside the door.

Suddenly Jeff’s air mattress becomes a viable option. Just shimmy over Fernie and Peter and into the protective range of Jeff’s sonorous growls. Step on people’s feet, who cares? We can all die together.

I slide to the foot of the tent and – disoriented by the dark – reach to touch the wall before I climb over my friends. And here, instead of nylon, my fingers discover a

backpack. *My* backpack, with all of my essentials, toothbrush, compact mirror, nail clippers, spiced rum—but inside, the most essential thing of all: red, cold, potentially dangerous.

I hug my brother's Swiss Army knife and listen. The swish of trees in the wind, the trill of crickets, and the pervasive snores of Jeff. Everyone's nestled in and I'm here at the door with a weapon in my hand. I should just make my way back to my pillow, but looking at them all sleeping there, defenseless, I feel almost responsible. If the coyotes are still out there, and I'm the only one awake—if I'm the only one awake, I should probably check, at the very least. Since I'm up here anyway.

My mom always says *Hope for the best but imagine the worst*, so that's what I do: I imagine a pair of yellow eyes in the dark, and every time they blink they disappear, and every time they reappear they're closer. I unfold the longest blade and reach for the zipper, and my heart's going wacky in my chest when I zip the door open and lean forward to look outside.

"What are you doing?" Jeff says from behind me, and I almost jump out of my skin.

"Jesus, Jeff, nothing, I'm going to the bathroom," I tell him. I'm annoyed enough that for a second I'm not afraid to look outside, so that's what I do. First there's nothing but darkness, but then my eyes adjust and I can make out some trees and the picnic table and a chair. And then I can see pretty much everything. The knife is still in my hand when I stand to leave, and that's when I decide it was meant for the mattress all along.

Cousins

The German Shepherd watched a wasp idle through the dandelions. She strained against the leash, choking several times before lunging ahead, her front paws hovering just above the ground. It took Kellan's whole weight to hold back the big dog.

"Manny!" he yelped, gripping the tether with both hands and pulling. "Hold your damn horses!" He dug in his heels and watched Harris step out of the shed with a long plastic case in his hands. "What is that?"

Harris patted the case. "We're gonna have some fun," he said.

Uncle Ted had gone into the city, trusting the boys keep out of trouble with the promise of bringing them back some pop to drink with supper. Kellan knew that Uncle Ted and Aunt Penny thought he was a good kid, and it was true: Kellan had manners, made the grade in school, did as he was generally told to do. Giving Harris free reign, was like giving a raccoon wings: the mess would not be contained in the cupboards.

Maybe his aunt and uncle thought Kellan would balance out the shit-disturbing tendencies of his own boy, assuming that, having been granted the responsibility of watching his younger cousin, Harris would step up and prove he was deserving of other responsibilities.

Harris was usually good for keeping Kellan safe, but that was different from keeping out of trouble. But what could he say to Uncle Ted when Uncle Ted already knew?

They walked along the old grain road, high-stepping the grass that had grown through the ruts in the years since Uncle Ted gave up on harvest. Manny tugged on

ahead, choking in bursts at the end of the short blue tether. It seemed weird to have a farm dog on a leash, but Harris had insisted, reminding Kellan that Kellan lived in the city and his brain therefore thought like a city brain. “You just don’t get how it is out here,” he’d said.

A single cloud floated into view as the road curved along a berm. Kellan watched it hang up ahead like a parade balloon, realizing for the first time how empty the sky was that day: just a solitary cloud and the white harsh sun right above them. With his attention diverted from the road, though, he didn’t see the gopher hole directly ahead, and when his toe caught the lip of it, he spilled forward, dropping the leash and allowing the Shepherd to spring off down the road.

“Dammit Kellan, she’s gonna be running around with that leash on all day now.”

Kellan brushed grass and gravel from his knees. He looked at Harris and Harris whacked him in the shoulder. The thought crossed his mind to whack Harris back, but when he balled a fist it looked small and pathetic. “It’s not like the leash was my idea,” was all he could think of to say.

Harris shook his head, rapping his knuckles across the case in two knocks. “She’s leashed so she don’t get shot.”

Kellan stared at the case, frowning.

Harris’s eyes seemed to glisten with pleasure. “Don’t worry,” he said, “it’s just the .22.”

“You’ve got bullets?”

Harris reached into his pocket and flicked something small towards Kellan, who somehow managed to catch it in the blinding afternoon light. He opened his hands to

find a tiny golden shell. Kellan turned his palm and felt it roll from side to side, flashing bright under the sun. It was warm from Harris's pocket, and surprisingly light. Hard to believe that this was all it took.

The sound of Harris's departing footsteps drew Kellan's attention back to the road, so he slid the bullet into a pocket and followed.

The boys walked most of the way in silence. It was a rare windless day, the only sound of the grass made by the swish of their feet. The road curved around the gravel pit and into the trees beyond it, leading to the plateau at the crest of the valley. Having overheard his uncle and dad converse in the past, Kellan knew Uncle Ted liked to shoot at there because the rounds couldn't hit anything but dirt. Couldn't hit Manny either, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Where are we going?" asked Kellan. It had been a while since he'd been this deep into his aunt and uncle's property, and everything back here looked more unfamiliar with every few steps.

"I got a spot," said Harris. "You remember the badger den?"

Another thing Kellan had heard mentioned by Dad and Uncle Ted. "I thought we're not supposed to go back there."

"You heard what Dad said. 'Keep outta the dump, boys, and I'll bring you some pop.' Didn't say nothing about the den."

Kellan thought this over. "You ever see them?"

"See who?"

"The badgers."

"One time," said Harris. He stopped and pulled a wood tick from his sock.

“You weren’t scared?” asked Kellan. He watched as his cousin pinched the tick between his fingers, scrunching his whole chubby face in concentration. A glaze of sweat shone on his upper lip and across his forehead. Kellan leaned forward, wiping his own face into the bottom of his shirt and finding only small dots of sweat in the fabric.

Harris let off the pressure and peered between his fingers, where the tick continued to struggle. “Why’d I be scared of a badger?” he said, flicking the bug into the grass. He grinned at Kellan. “I got a gun and they don’t.”

Kellan didn’t respond. He didn’t care for the idea of running into the badgers, but admitting that to Harris would just give him more ammunition to tease with. He also didn’t care for how the day felt hotter and hotter, the sun relentless up above. And mostly he didn’t care for the gun.

It was a comfort seeing the treeline up ahead. Kellan quickened his pace to keep up with Harris, with what little moisture on his brow made cool by a sudden wayward breeze. Maybe Manny was over there, just inside the grove—tail wagging and tongue lolled, waiting for the boys to join her in the shade. And the leash: there was no way he’d be dropping it now that he knew what Harris was up to.

When they made into the trees, though, Kellan realized it was the other direction he wished he’d been walking, back towards the house, towards the basement and the tv and the air conditioning. Uncle Ted would bring them pop and they could play card games and watch movies until his mom came tomorrow to take him back to the city. “Manny?” he called into the trees, and his voice echoed back from the hollow of the valley.

“Don’t worry about her,” said Harris. He propped the case against a tree, crouching low to search for something in the hedge.

Kellan saw a post sticking out from the bush right before them and pointed. “What’s that?”

Harris followed with his eyes, still taking him an extra few seconds to spot the post. He reached forward, pulling out a wooden sign with a target stapled to the top. There were only a few holes punched through the rings, all on left, and none near the centre. “I knew it was in there,” he said.

“I swear with your eyes,” Kellan said, and a laugh snuck out of him. “It would’ve taken you all day to find it.”

Harris turned his squint to Kellan, holding the sign over his shoulder like a baseball bat. His cheeks were sprouting a flush. “You can go ahead and shut your mouth if you know what’s good for you.”

For some reason, seeing his older cousin’s embarrassment made Kellan embarrassed, too. The only other times he’d seen Harris look this flustered were when Uncle Ted or Aunt Penny were giving him shit. “I was only kidding,” he said. “Sorry.”

Harris frowned and said nothing.

Somewhere in the distance, Manny started barking. It was faint, but both boys looked towards the sound coming from down within the winding valley. The way sound carried through there, she could be just about anywhere on the farmland.

“I wonder where she’s at,” said Kellan.

Harris shrugged. “We’ll go find her later.”

The badger den looked abandoned. The last time he had been here, Kellan's dad had pointed out the feathers and bones scattered around the massive hole: sure signs that its inhabitants were alive and dangerous. But that had been years ago, when he had been small enough to sit safely atop his dad's shoulders. Prairie grasses had since grown tall over the den, with a thick cluster sprouting out of the badger hole itself. None of it looked trampled. This was a relief to Kellan, though the overhead canopy was proving to be less of a shelter from the brutal sun that he'd hoped.

Harris was explaining the gun. He spoke like he was afraid to be overheard, though they were out in the middle of nowhere. Kellan watched his cousin's hand move from the bolt to the sight, tracing something along the way about which Kellan was only vaguely aware of. Manny continued to bark in the distance, hurried, shrill, and rhythmic, and it drew Kellan's attention away from their place in the trees.

“I don’t think she’s in the valley anymore.”

“But she’s still a ways off,” said Harris, “so I think we’re good.” He leaned the .22 against a tree and walked the target up to the den, shoving the post down through the softer soil on top. Next he knelt beside the entrance, turning to Kellan with a smirk before sticking his face in the hole and hollering.

“Hey, badgers!”

“I don’t think anyone’s home,” said Kellan.

Harris looked back, still grinning. “Yeah, you’re probably right. But you know what that means?”

Kellan shook his head.

“Something meaner must’ve scared them off.”

“Maybe it was us,” said Kellan, but Harris ignored him.

The lone bulbous cloud rolled over the sun, granting the boys a sudden reprise from the heat. Harris knocked the dirt from his hands and walked back to the tree, then turned and stood as if admiring of the target. After nearly a minute, he picked up the gun and tucked the butt into his shoulder, pressing a single round into the chamber and drawing the bolt with alarming speed.

“Alright,” he said, “alright.” He glanced at Kellan without turning his head then looked back toward the den. “So the trick is this: you gotta breathe in deep and then squeeze the trigger at the bottom of your breath when you let it back out. Just like this.”

Harris’s chest swelled. Kellan waited for the bang of the gun but Harris continued to hold that breath, looking more and more like he would burst at any moment. In that drawn out pause it occurred to Kellan that he couldn’t hear Manny, despite the trees having fallen silent without the wind. Kellan looked from Harris to the gun, then to the target and towards the last place he had heard Manny barking, and finally back at his cousin.

“Harri—”

The rifle cracked and the dirt two feet to the left of the target leapt simultaneously.

Harris popped the empty shell, reached into his pocket and drew another round. “Like shooting fish,” he said, loading the gun and firing again without the prior hesitation. He repeated this three more times, and though Kellan couldn’t be sure, the target appeared to have remained unscathed. It had happened so quickly that the gunfire had barely an effect on Kellan, though strangely he had felt a growing distress at the

thought of his cousin missing another shot. It was after the fifth – which Kellan could definitively say had hit a tree to their right – that it began to dawn on him: Harris had no clue where his shots were landing.

The cloud overhead had shifted, giving way to another grim wave of sun. The birds who'd been silent since Kellan and Harris had entered the trees began to sing, and a breeze had kicked up enough to flick the leaves into whispers all around them. Just like that, the grove had swelled into life.

Harris turned to Kellan, .22 held like a baton. "Your turn."

The thought of touching the gun made Kellan wince. Accepting Harris's offer was a simple gesture which carried too many possible outcomes, and though many of them were awful, he couldn't shake the worst of all: what if he was a better shot than Harris?

Kellan looked up and nodded to the rifle. "But I'd rather see you shoot, Harris."

Suspicion flitted across Harris' face, and then it was gone. "Huh," he said. "You know, you're right. You gotta watch someone do it a bunch before you try it for yourself. I like that."

He loaded the rifle again, aimed, and missed.

When Harris's pocket was empty of rounds, the boys went to inspect the target. Kellan had lost count of the shots, but of at least twenty only two had hit the mark. One was only a few centimeters from the edge, just below a trio of holes Harris had previously put in the target. The other, though, was nearly a bull's eye. Kellan could tell

by the look on his cousin's face that Harris was disappointed in himself, maybe once again embarrassed for his younger cousin baring witness to his failure.

"Pretty off today, eh Kellan."

Kellan pointed at the centre of the target. "But this one was a beauty." He turned to Harris and grinned. "You clearly got the talent."

Harris squinted at Kellan and said nothing. He put the .22 back in its case, propped it up over his shoulder like before, and turned to walk back the way they'd come.

Kellan stood where he was at first, enjoying another fleeting veil of shade. Relief had swept over him the moment Harris had clasped the gun case, and now, watching his cousin's slow march out of the grove, all he could think about was Uncle Ted and Aunt Penny's air conditioned basement.

Harris stopped just past the gravel pit with his chin cocked to one side. To Kellan, he looked like a bird of prey listening for a mouse or a gopher, something hidden out of view, and in that moment Kellan briefly understood what Harris had meant when he'd chastised Kellan about being from the city. His older cousin's skin was darker from the sun, and there was a thick line of dirt under his nails. He knew his way around, knew how to *find* his way around. Harris seemed to belong out here as much as anything else.

"You hear that?"

Kellan cocked his head and listened too. The newly spirited breeze made the grass and shrubbery sway, and at first all he could hear was just that: a sound almost like rainfall or waves crashing on a beach, the entire field inspired to dance. He closed his eyes and listened harder, finding something just beneath the wind after all.

“That’s not Manny, is it?”

“I think so,” said Harris.

“Where’s it coming from?”

“Behind the barn, I think,” he said. He scratched his chin. “I wonder if she’s gotten into the dump again.” The whining trailed off, and just as the wind abruptly quit, a sharp cry rose up in the air. Kellan looked to Harris, whose face for the first time showed genuine concern. “We should go check it out.”

“We’re not supposed to go back there.”

“What if she’s hurt, Kellan?” He looked toward the barn, a lofty silhouette beyond the house up the road.

“But your dad –”

Another cry was carried to them on the wind.

“We gotta go,” said Harris. He took a breath, turned from Kellan and set out running.

After the briefest hesitation, Kellan decided his cousin was right. He was supposed to hold Manny, and if she was hurt it was his fault more than anyone’s.

It didn’t take much to catch up to Harris, and the two of them sprinted relentlessly to the barn. Manny whined again, the sound reeling out from the hills. Kellan wondered if she was somehow trapped down in the dump. The spot Uncle Ted chose for the pit was deep enough to accommodate whatever old upholstery, rotten wood, and shoddy farm equipment he deemed expendable, and it was easy to imagine Manny sliding down into the bottom, beat up and heaped beneath some rusty barbed-wire fence posts or a pile of old tire rims.

The yard stretching past the barn had grown thick with tussock, which covered the stretch of land leading into a cluster of aspen at the base of the dump. On the far side of the pit, the shells of long-dead vehicles were parked along its steepest edge, and it was there – huddled behind the wheel of an old Chevy – that Kellan spotted Manny. Her ears were laid back, teeth barred and wild eyed, and her left hind leg hung limp beside her. Thought it was hard to tell from here, she appeared to be coated in a dark mat of blood from her flank to her ribs. Kellan could even make out the short blue leash, trailing from her collar into the shadow of the pickup like a power cord to a block heater.

“Here girl!” Kellan called out to her.

Harris was pointing further down the ridge. A large dark shape appeared between two beat up cars and sniffed the air, looking in the direction of the boys. “Holy shit,” he whispered to Kellan. “Is that a goddamn bear?”

Kellan watched it drop its nose to the earth, head swaying from side to side. It reached forward with a wide paw and clawed at something. Nothing about its appearance made sense here, on a farm in the middle of nowhere. As Kellan glanced sideways at his cousin, all he could think to say was, “What the hell’s it doing?”

“Ho-ly shit, a bear,” said Harris.

Though he’d never seen a bear before, Kellan could tell something was wrong with this one: whatever strange circumstances had brought it here had brought it in bad condition. The bear’s fur was patchy and oddly pale, as if scorched from the sun. Its longue lolled from the side of its mouth, a stream of saliva dripping down to the dirt. A crust had formed around its eyes that reminded Kellan of a kid he’d seen at school with a terrible infection, and one of its ears was chewed up and healing. Strangest of all were

the quick grunts coming from its gullet, pig-like except that they were wheezy, strained.

It looked too skinny to be a bear, but it was still more than twice the size of Manny, whom it seemed to be following. Kellan found himself on the fringe of panic.

“We need to do something!” he shrieked.

The bear dropped back down on all fours and rounded the back side of the car. Manny backed herself as close to the wheel as possible, growling now with obvious fear. Kellan picked up a rock and flung it as hard as he could, but it flopped in the dirt just a few feet up the opposite side of the pit. When he reached down for another he was joined by Harris.

Kellan threw another rock and yelled this time as loud as he could. The bear rounded on the spot and stood, freezing Kellan with his arm cocked back to throw. A thought stumbled through his head – *run! run! run!* – and he almost acted upon it, but then the bear’s focus shifted back to Manny. Kellan let the stone fly, and when he rounded on his cousin, he was surprised to find him with the rifle in his hands. Harris looked pale where he stood, but even paler when he reached into his pocket.

“We used them all,” he said weakly.

Kellan realized his heart was beating harder than it had ever beat in his life, and he felt dizzy and electric all at once. He looked from Manny to the bear to his cousin to the gun, and finally remembered the way the bullet flashed in the sun as it rolled in his hand before he put it in his pocket. He reached down into his shorts praying that it was still there.

“You’ve got one,” he said, and held it out to his cousin.

A bullet this small against a bear would feel like a bee sting, but maybe that was enough to scare it off. Kellan held it out and Harris took it, loading the gun while the bear lumbered up to the front of the old Chevy.

Harris closed one eye, breathed in a breath as deep as the pit itself, aimed the gun, and missed.

The driver's side window shattered, raining glass upon the bear. It lurched backward clumsily, shaking its head violently before whipping around and bolting from the pit. Kellan watched it go, loping awkwardly, glass shining in the patchy fur around its flank. Before it was out of sight, it slowed to a trot, and then a teetering walk.

When he finally looked at Harris, Kellan found him exactly as he stood before—gun raised, finger poised, eye aimed down the barrel at where the bear was only moments ago. Sweat poured from his temples, and it glinted on his skin the way the glass had in the bear's fur.

“Harris.”

Harris flinched, then lowered the rifle. “It’s gone,” he said matter-of-factly.

“You can put the gun away now.”

“I know.”

They found the bullet later that day, after they’d taken Manny up to the house, after they’d recounted the story several times to Uncle Ted and Aunt Penny. It was Uncle Ted who walked with a rifle in his hands as they approached the pit on return, but he didn’t need to use it: the bear was long gone. Despite the fact that they’d put themselves in danger for a dog, Uncle Ted seemed to reserve any disciplinary action for

later; there was just too much excitement for the boys, because they'd saved the Shephard with a single shot, the only shot, the last shot, and they'd taken on a bear and the bear had been vanquished.

Uncle Ted peered in through the door frame where the driver's side window used to be, nodding to himself before taking the boys to the other side of the Chevy. The passenger door shuddered when he wrenched it open, and he showed the boys where the bullet had embedded just above the handle, using his thumbnail to dig it out of the interior panel.

"Now you better keep this," he said, dropping the squashed grey slug into Harris' open hand. "A piece of luck if I ever saw one."

Later that night, after Uncle Ted and Aunt Penny went to bed, Harris showed Kellan the bullet. It was smooth on one side and chipped on the other, somehow feeling heavier than Kellan had remembered it from earlier that day.

"Can you imagine if I missed?" Harris said.

Kellan looked at his older cousin and laughed. "But you did miss, and it was the best shot I've ever seen."

They talked a bit more about the bear before Harris dozed off, snoring up into the darkness while Kellan lay awake in his sleeping bag. For a while it was pride for his cousin that worked its way across his mind, a feeling that he had done something good, done the right thing. But it was Kellan who'd carried the bullet, making him responsible too. He remembered the way Harris stood, silhouetted like a stone in the sky, and wondered if he could be capable of taking that shot. Just before he slipped into sleep, an image slipped into his mind: Kellan alone at the pit, no Harris, no Manny, just Kellan and

the bear, and as the bear moved towards him he looked down the barrel and the barrel went on forever and he could see all the way.

Kellan rolled onto his back and listened to Harris snore, each breath deep enough to be the pause before another pull of the trigger.

Elsewhere

When Amelia left Kingston in May, it was with the hope she'd see the coast within a year. Her parents had disputed the idea, and convincing them to let their only child set off alone became a struggle she almost lost. While it had been her mom who'd asked if they had influenced this decision, Amelia knew it was her dad that felt responsible. His accident was what brought them to Kingston, after all, and his imprisonment that, even if only for a couple years, left Amelia and her mom trapped in a neighbourhood full of families just like them. The loved ones of inmates. Everyone here avoided making eye contact, and it rubbed off on her, amplified her humiliation. It wasn't long after the move before the whispers began at school – always loud enough for her to hear – about the new girl's dad and how he was a drunk and that he might've run someone over with his car. The gossip itself wasn't much of a surprise, but hearing such accurate details of her dad's accident traded by her classmates was crippling. And these stories about her family followed her around, defining her as the daughter of criminal.

She spent those years wanting so badly to fade into the background, but it never happened. Even if people weren't talking about her or looking at her funny, she felt like they were. So while her dad was in prison, Amelia endured her own confinement. And why wouldn't she want to get out?

She didn't blame her dad or his sentence. She didn't blame anything, really, aside from Kingston itself. *I just really want to travel*, she insisted to them, *is that so bad?*

After almost a month of arguing, Amelia resorted to a lie: she told them she would travel with her older cousin, Spencer, a veteran of the road, and he could navigate

better than anyone she knew. Her parents finally caved, despite their lingering apprehension. She had to phone, of course, but that was an easy condition for her to manage. The harder part would be collaborating with Spencer, who would have to play his part in this story while she was away. He was on board, though, promising to hold up his end of things for as long as she needed. Along with the tidbits she'd been able to drag out of Spencer about his own travel experience, she had all the essentials for a solo trek across Canada: a small chunk of savings, a fifteen litre hiking pack, a pocket knife, a tiny can of mace, and a good pair of boots. Her nine-month travel plan meant she'd have almost two months per province, so she didn't see how there could be hitch in her plans to stand on the shore of the Pacific before bells rang in the New Year.

She left on a Sunday morning. Her parents waited at the door while she sorted her pack, watching carefully as if to record one last image of Amelia before she was gone. She expected a last-ditch attempt of discouragement, but they surprised her instead with long, silent hugs. As she pulled away from her dad, she saw that his eyes were glassy. Maybe it was his guilt that led to them giving in to her request, or maybe he was just sad to see her leave; either way, the sight made her own cheeks burn. Hastily tying her boots, she blinked away her own tears, shouldered her pack, and departed after brief goodbyes.

After treading Division up to the 401, Amelia checked her phone to find that only an hour had gone by. She sipped from her water bottle and watched the traffic rip along the highway in a steady stream, wondering whether or not to hitch. There was a ten dollar hostel in Roblin, but a car would get her there by noon, and she didn't want to just sit around until tomorrow morning. Better to keep moving. She would walk, he decided,

because she had to get used to carrying around the extra weight, and she could save her thumb for when she really needed it.

Amelia crossed over to the other side of the 401 and headed northwest, relishing in what turned out to be a sunny morning. Her feet were cramped in her boots at first, but with every step along the roadside, she came to understand that this was how she needed to leave in order to feel free of Kingston, by way of her own effort. She walked for half the day before it occurred to her to look back towards home, and by then it was already out of sight.

June had already rolled over to July by the time she passed through Sudbury. Amelia had shared a meal with an aging glam rock guitarist, played poker with a group of high school teachers, and spent a night dancing with a Daniel Radcliffe look-alike. She'd spent almost a week in the guest room of a coyote farm outside of Balaclava, and received two free lessons from a jujitsu black-belt in Rolphton. Walking became her primary mode of travel between towns, and the two times she did hitchhike ended up being the most boring of all the days since she'd left. There was just something more substantial about carrying herself from one point to another, a sense of progress. When she stopped at the end of a day, whether at a hostel or one of Spencer's couchsurf hookups, the throb in her soles and the itch between her shoulders from having lugged a pack so many hours made these distances real.

Ontario proved to be much larger than she would have ever imagined, but she found her stride and made it to Sault Ste. Marie in a rush. Cresting Lake Superior, though, took the better part of a month. The weather was unpredictable along the shore,

and she ended up storm-stayed at a hotel in Terrace Bay for several nights before marching into the hottest stretch of days she could remember. Exhaustion led her to rest and drink more often, and by the middle of August she was hitching for the luxury of sitting in air conditioning.

Amelia picked up a bit of the character of every place she passed through, but somehow, being caught up in the novelty of these road experiences, she hadn't thought about how strange the world could be when she really paid attention to it. The people she met were unexpectedly her favourite part of all. The Cree man who was unicycling across the country. The woman writing a memoir about her grandmother's immigration to the Northwest Territories from Ireland. The kid who'd built his own robot and became a YouTube personality. Maybe she'd become so used to hearing gossip that she'd never understood the difference – the *pleasure* – of a story, and now that she was stumbling across them wherever she went, it was easy to settle into the role of listener. She had become privy to other people's lives instead of the other way around, and there was never a pressure for her to return the favour by sharing her own. The more people she met along the way, the more she came to realize that this anonymity was what she'd always so desperately wanted.

It wasn't until she'd crossed into Manitoba that Amelia actually paused to think about her journey. She'd been in the constant process of leaving since walking out of Kingston, and while this was liberating at first, the initial momentum she'd felt was giving way to a sense of evasion. The only question on her mind in May had been about where she was going, but now she was thinking more and more about what she was leaving behind. This was a wayward lifestyle, and the longer she spent immersed in it,

the less she was convinced of what she wanted from it. She'd thought of travel as being distance, and that was what she believed she wanted, but travel also meant time, and time was different when you were always on the move. Somehow she'd made it to the end of September without realizing that the days were becoming shorter, that the leaves were losing their green. Her parents, when she called, had become increasingly restless.

Amelia drifted into Winnipeg late in October. Tired and sore from a long day of walking, she wandered over to an old brick hotel off the highway, ready to spend almost anything for a hot shower and a bed. Despite the discouraging "fuck you" graffiti beside the door, she surrendered to her desperation and entered to book a room. Quaint, but as it turned out, clean, and convenient. The desk clerk, a tall blocky man with a moustache, made a point of mentioning the Red River, as if its being so close to the hotel was her reason for staying there. "It starts in the States," he told her, "and winds up in Hudson Bay, if you can believe it."

Amelia peered out the window, and there it was in plain view. Narrow and murky. She couldn't tell if there was a reddish tinge to the water, but it was a cloudy day, and the sun brought the colour out in everything, it seemed. "Pretty," she said.

"Not when it floods," said the clerk.

After paying, Amelia took the elevator to her room. She shed almost everything she was wearing at the door and flopped down on the bed, stretching out her limbs as far as they would go. A constant ache had developed in her lower back, but here, splayed out over the covers, she felt momentarily relieved. The bed was surprisingly comfortable, but surprisingly expensive. She was almost broke, and running out of options. While the walking had probably saved her a pretty penny on travel, the extra

time it had taken meant spending more nights at motels in towns where she hadn't been able to crash somewhere for free. On top of this, she knew that money just had a way of being spent. She could probably afford another month on the road, but that wouldn't take into account the cost of the winter wear she'd need to keep herself from freezing solid at the roadside.

Amelia sat on the edge of the bed, debating whether or not to call home. Her parents would almost certainly talk her in to turning around, not just because they didn't like the idea of her being alone out here, but because *they* didn't like to be alone. And maybe that was justified. She could remember sitting across from her dad on the day after school let out for the summer, the guard by the door, the other families sitting at tables just like them, and her dad saying, "*The hardest thing in the world is being away from you*" before slumping into his chair. They'd all had a miserable time back then, but how could her parents have known how hard it was for her? All that time her dad had wanted out, she had, too.

Beside her on the bed, her phone vibrated in two short thrums.

Amelia checked the screen and found a text from Spencer, miraculously timed. Seeing his name on her phone brought an immediate smile to her face, but the moment soon became bittersweet. Spencer had spent more of his time helping her prepare than she could have ever asked for, and more importantly, he was the only person wholeheartedly supporting her journey. She thought he knew how she felt about their little closed-in town – water on one side, limestone on the other – and she was convinced that's why he left as often as he did. He'd opened a door for her, given her a path to follow, but now she'd have to admit defeat.

How's the journey, he asked. Where the hell are ya?

She relayed to him the sad conclusion that she'd come to, and conceded that, as he'd told her multiple times, you just wouldn't want to do Canada in a year.

So what now?

Home, she said.

Her phone thrummed again, this time a phone call. Amelia felt it vibrate in her hands a couple more times before answering, watching her cousin's illuminated name flicker warmly across the top of the screen.

“Hey, Spence”

“Alright, so. Just listen for a sec, ‘kay? Listen, I’ve been there, too. I remember the second year I went out, the year I really just took off on my own, I had my own money dilemma in Banff. Blew too much of it on beer and expensive ski equipment. But I got so lucky. This guy I met at the lodge, he worked in Banff and said he could hook me up with a job if I really wanted it. And I did want it, I wanted it badly. Remember that? When I was working in Banff?”

“A bit,” said Amelia. “I was like, what, ten? It felt like you were gone for forever.”

“It was a year.”

“No freakin’ way.”

“Well, not quite,” he continued, “but close enough. I spent my time making trips to and from the village, making money, making friends. Turned out I was a brutal skier, but I did get some good hiking in. It kept me sane, in a weird way.” He paused, and in the brief silence Amelia pondered just how much of her determination was fuelled by

Spencer's stories. They'd grown close since he'd moved back to Ontario a couple years ago, and part of that closeness was built on this dynamic: he liked talk, and she liked to listen. It was one thing to want to leave, but having these impressions gave her destinations that weren't just *away*, but *free*. Every one of his stories reinforced the notion that she had to get out of Kingston, but they also showed her the way out. "The people, the smell of the air, the gorgeous fucking mountains—it kept me sane."

"Who needs the mountains when you've got the Red River is right outside your door," she joked.

"Just wait," Spencer said, "just wait. But anyway, this guy, he's still in Banff."

As Spencer went on, Amelia began to see where he was going with this story. He wasn't just relating his experience to her, he was opening another door. But by the time he told her that the friend who'd hooked him up with the job was still living in Banff, she was ready to offer her skepticism.

"How do you know he'll have a job for me? And where would I stay? And is he... is he a creeper? I've feel like I've been lucky enough not to encounter many so far, but still."

"I have to admit, he's a different duck," Spencer said with a chuckle. "But once you get past his quirks, he's a good guy. And I'll bet you a year of my life that he'll have a spare bed for you."

"Spare bed in a spare room, you mean."

"Absolutely."

"What did you say his name was?"

"Josh," he said.

Amelia mulled this over. It would be a huge leap of faith, but after traversing halfway across a continent, she should be more accustomed to these strange little twists in the road. And her parents couldn't really say no if she was already there and nestled in for the winter.

"Josh," she said. "Okay. And what makes this duck so different?"

"He's just—" Spencer slowed, choosing his words carefully. "Josh believes in some strange things. Harmless things, but, I dunno... strange. Get him telling stories and you'll know what I mean."

"That shouldn't be a problem," said Amelia.

The prairies blurred by in the morning haze, and as Amelia watched the white line wind along the pavement her eyes strained and her thoughts dimmed into nothing. She dozed her way through Saskatchewan with her face smushed against the window of the Greyhound, like she used to on road trips with her family as a kid.

Amelia's first glimpse of Alberta was a giant inflatable beer can at the roadside, and behind it nothing but field. According to her phone's GPS, the bus was just past the border: more than half way to Banff already. As the Trans-Can took her through Medicine Hat, Brooks, and a town along the banks of a swollen river, she watched the landscape gradually morph from lumpy flatlands to craggy hillsides and treescapes. It was around the time Calgary appeared on the horizon that she realized she was seeing something else there too, beyond the buildings, a grey bluff against the blue sky that could almost be mistaken for clouds.

She had never seen mountains before, and she would never see them this way again, she realized – from the window of a bus in the fading daylight, silhouetted dark against the golden sky to the west – for the rest of her life. Just like the towns and roads and scenery and people, everything she'd seen since May: a first time for something is a last time, too.

Amelia was one of two people to step off the bus when they pulled up to the station. She had promised a call home upon arriving in Banff, but as she paced back and forth between the empty parking lot and Railway Ave, her phone dropped reception entirely. Perhaps more distressing than this was the fact that Spencer's friend was nowhere in sight. The sun was no longer visible beyond the building (let alone the mountains), but strangely enough, the sky appeared almost white despite the looming darkness. Amelia glanced back towards the now-vacant bus and saw there was a payphone at the terminal, so she checked her backpack for change and made her way over. The phone purred in her ear after dialling her parents. She closed her eyes and took a breath, feeling the cool mountain air light up her lungs.

“Hello?.. Hello?”

“Mom? Hi, sorry – just sort of gathering myself.” Amelia looked up again at blank white sky, this time following the black outline of the mountain from one end of the horizon to the other. Looking up this way, she could see her breath swirl out above and disappear. “We’re in Banff.”

“I didn’t recognize the number,” said her Mom. “Where is your phone? Or Spencer’s?”

“I—my battery’s dead. And his too,” she added with a weak laugh. “Just a weird coincidence. We’ll charge them as soon as we get to Spencer’s buddy’s place. Mom, it’s beautiful here. I can barely see anything but it’s just... wow.” The streetlamps around the perimeter of the station had come on, spouting light in cones around the lot. The mountains looked darker than ever.

“Well tell him hi and... hold on.” She heard muffled voices from the other end of the phone, her mom talking to someone in the background. “Your dad says hi. He wants to know when you think you’ll be home.”

“Tell him hi, too” said Amelia, smiling. For as long as she could remember, he dad had never liked talking over the phone. “I’m not entirely sure yet. Spencer has this friend here who we’re going meet up with. He’ll give us the lowdown of the place and whatnot. He’s actually supposed to be giving me a lift here, like any minute now.”

“Oh? You know, me and your—”

Something behind Amelia clumped on the pavement, snapping her attention away from whatever her mom was about to say. All the little hairs on her arms and neck bristled up. She didn’t want to turn but turned anyway, holding the phone firmly with both hands now, her breath caught up in her chest like she’d been waiting all her life to breathe for the first time.

Illuminated under the streetlamps, a bull elk stood in profile. He was massive under a flourishing winter coat of dull earthy tones, and beneath him, an even larger bloom of shadow like an oil spill under an old truck. One leg was crooked at the knee, and his nose pointed high as if breathing in the alpine air like Amelia had only minutes before. He was missing one of his antlers but somehow the one that remained reached all

the way back across his entire frame. If the rocks and dirt and trees suddenly came to life in an animal form, Amelia thought this is what it would be.

The elk dropped its head with a snort and trotted off into the darkness down the road.

“Hello? Amelia?”

“Sorry, what did you just say? I just saw an elk,” she added breathlessly, expecting a surprised remark in return.

“I said that Dad says you better keep safe.”

Amelia considered repeating herself, but instead she said, “I never realized how big they are.”

“Well take pictures,” said her mom. “Can you put Spencer on? I just wanted to ask him a few things.”

A pair of headlights turned onto the street leading up to the station. Amelia watched them slow before turning into the parking lot. “Looks like our ride is here,” said Amelia. “Uh, yeah, Spencer’s over there talking to him. Yeah, sorry, I think we gotta roll.”

“Alright then. Listen to your Dad, okay? And call us soon.”

“Yeah. I will, Mom.”

“And come home.”

“Love you guys. And tell Dad he raised a tough one and that she’s got shit under control.”

“Oh I’m sure he’ll like that,” said her mom.

Before either of them could speak again the time ran out on Amelia's call. She listened to the operator, and then, after glancing towards the approaching vehicle, placed the receiver back into its cradle. "Shit," she whispered. "I'm... sorry."

As the lights closed in, a turquoise Ford Ranger materialized behind them. Amelia picked up her pack and watched the Ranger slow, pulling up beside her in a screechy flourish. The passenger-side window rolled down and the driver leaned over from his seat, revealing a round, stubbly face. Amelia bent towards the window and gave an awkward wave. The man returned the wave but continued to smile without saying anything.

The question of whether or not this was the guy she was waiting for crept into the forefront of Amelia's thoughts. "Hey, there..." she began cautiously, "you don't happen to be...?"

"Josh," he said. "And you don't happen to be..."

"Amelia," she said, dipping her shoulders in obvious relief.

"Nice to meet you, pilgrim," he said with a nod. "Toss your bag in the back and let's get the flock out of here."

Amelia heaved her pack into the box of the truck and hopped in beside Josh. The moment she clicked home her seatbelt, a heavy wave of tired rolled over her: maybe, after all these months of being on her way, Amelia finally felt as if she had arrived somewhere. With a quick glance around the tiny cab, she decided the truck, despite being cluttered with various cd cases, books, and dash deco, was the cleanest she'd been on since she left Kingston. This, for whatever reason, felt comfortable.

"So you've come a long way, hey?"

“Hmm?”

“From Kingston, right? That’s quite the ways.”

“Yeah,” said Amelia, “I guess it is.” Josh seemed to be waiting for her to elaborate, but all the energy she’d been coasting on had evaporated since she’d cozied in. “I’m really sorry, I just—” she yawned for effect “—am really tired.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, they seemed to manifest in heavier eyelids and sluggish thinking. She reclined the seat a few notches and tilted her head toward the window.

“Ah-right, of course,” said Josh. “We can trade stories later. Like in the morning, for instance... Do you like coffee?”

“Coffee is the constant in my life.”

“Right on, pilgrim.”

They drove in silence for a bit, and Amelia felt herself dozing off. She opened her eyes just in time to see a horse-drawn carriage clop by, aglow beneath the streetlamps. A rosy-cheeked couple sat all-smiles on the bench in the back, the man with an arm around the woman’s shoulders, and in between her fingers a lit cigarette. They vanished as quickly as they had appeared, leaving the Ranger dark once the carriage had passed. Amelia found herself face to face with a ghostly reflection of herself: her usually brown hair muted, her eyes vacant, her cheeks pulled tight. She was so much thinner than she’d realized, having eaten more opportunistically since she began worrying about money. This must be how Josh was seeing her too, a dimmed version of her usual self.

A question seeped into her fading consciousness. Amelia glimpsed sideways at Josh, who appeared to be lip-synching to a country song. “Hey,” she whispered. “Why d’you call me that? Pilgrim.”

Without taking his eyes off the road, Josh turned his head toward her. “Because you’re on a pilgrimage,” he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“But—but I’m not looking for anything.”

Josh chuckled softly. “You don’t even see it on yourself, Amelia, but you’ve got the look. You’ve got the look of a pilgrim.”

His voice, Amelia thought, was like rain on a windshield. Thick, melodic, gentle.

“You wear your shoes like they’re a part of you. You wear your pack like it’s got your life in it. You look at the mountains and you look at the roads and you even look at me as if you’re searching. So you must be.”

She listened now in the dark, and she realized that yes, her eyes were closed, and his voice was distant, and the rumble of the engine and the tires on the pavement, all of it falling away in the dark.

The sound of a truck door closing. The sound of hers opening.

Hey, we’re here.

The sidewalk and the house. The steps. The stairs into the basement.

This is your room.

The bed, the bed, the bed. The coolest, softest pillow.

Let me know if you need anything.

The lights going out.

Goodnight.

She dreamt about highway: the salty taste of mountain air, her feet wrapped in clouds, the white strip of paint winding on and on and on.

Amelia woke with the sun across her eyelids. Though waking up in strange beds had become the norm over the past few months, she sat up with a gasp. It took several moments of glancing around the room – her bag on the flood, an old reddish dresser, a football flag hung up over the window as a curtain – before her heart slowed and the haze around her memory of arriving in Banff dissolved.

Josh.

He'd driven her home and walked her to the (basement?) room, hauling her bag over his shoulder like a lumberjack. Babbling to her about something all along the way. Amelia had been past tuned-out at that point, and felt the tiniest pang of guilt that she hadn't been more alert last night. It wasn't fair to assume that a stranger would pose some threat to her – an exhausted, solitary young woman – but it was stupid on her part to let her guard down so fast, even if he was a good friend of someone she trusted.

The walls were decorated with twenty or so photographs, all different sizes. Most of them appeared to be local landscapes, but there were a few with people, and one of grizzly bear with its nose to the ground. Her eyes came to rest on a frame on the bedside table. Newlyweds with their foreheads pressed together, rendered in black and white. She thought of the mantle back home: pictures of her grandparents in the 50's, softly shadowed faces, eyes a-glimmer with love. It hadn't even been five minutes since she'd awakened and she was misty-eyed with nostalgia.

After dressing, she cracked open the door and peeked into the hallway. It was the basement after all. The sounds of bustle and footsteps wafted down the stairs to her, so Amelia took a nervous breath and headed up.

Josh was neck-deep in the fridge. The kitchen itself was rich with the smell of coffee, and Amelia took a moment to inhale a bit of her new habitat. The fridge door swung closed and Josh turned with cream in one hand and milk in the other.

“G’mornin!” he said, placing the cartons on the meager baby-blue kitchen table below the window. “Not allergic to peanuts, are you?”

Amelia shook her head.

“Perfect. And the good stuff is inbound, as promised.” When he pointed an elbow towards a coffee maker on the counter, his sleeve rode up enough to reveal a baseball-shaped tattoo of some animal on the back of his arm. This, Amelia realized, was the first clear look she had of Josh. He was stout, but athletic: the build of the kind of person whose exercise was more natural than barbells and treadmills. When he stood straight, he was about as tall as the fridge, but Amelia saw eye to eye with him—eyes, she noted, that were a similar earthy shade to her own. They could have been siblings, though he was probably almost a decade her senior.

Amelia took a seat at the table and stretched. “Sorry if I was, ahh, rude or anything last night. I can’t remember the last time I’ve been hit so hard by the zees.” He paused midway through peanut buttering his toast and raised an eyebrow. “Sleep I mean. What were we even talking about on the way over last night?”

“Well let’s see,” said Josh, sliding two plates of toast onto the table. “You introduced yourself. Then I introduced myself. Then I talked about Banff for a bit. And *then* you started snoring.”

“Oh god.”

Josh smiled with a mouth full of toast. After he'd swallowed, he opened his mouth to speak but halted, cocking an ear towards the window. "You hear that?"

Amelia listened and heard nothing but birds squawking. "Umm—" "Whiskey Jacks," he said. "They're clever, you know? But sneaky clever. I saw this guy one time hold out a handful of peanuts, cause they'll land right on your wrist and eat them, but while one Jack was having lunch another was stealing the guy's wallet."

Amelia turned suspiciously to the window. "We're talking birds here, right?"

Josh got up to pour coffee. "Just don't trust 'em, hey? And the ravens too, they'll take your glasses, your watch, your phone. These sneaky little arseholes are all related."

While Josh was at the counter, Amelia munched her own toast and took in the kitchen as she had the spare room. The abundance of colourful fridge magnets. The sasquatch calendar on the far wall. Everything looked new or at least in good condition except for the ugly chair Josh had been sitting in, an antique with wicker backing and a cheap metal frame. He returned with two cups of coffee, and when he sat, the chair creaked treacherously.

"Is that thing even safe?"

Josh spooned sugar into his coffee and wiggled his ass. "This chair is my favourite. Which is nothing against your chair. That one's good, too." He took his first sip, rolling his eyes upward as if it were the best coffee he'd ever tasted. "You know, Spence asked me the same thing. Try it?"

Amelia drank from her coffee. "It's perfect," she said.

"I meant the chair."

“Oh... not right now.” Amelia imagined him asking Spencer if he wanted to try his chair and burst into giggles. “I mean, how do you know this chair isn’t my favourite chair?”

Josh smiled, his eyes lit up in the sunlight coming in through the window. “Spence told me to look out for you,” he said. “You should convince that bugger to come back this way one of these days.

“I know he wants to. He talks about Banff all the time.”

“What kinda stuff has he said about me?”

The words “different duck” popped into Amelia’s head, but she pushed them aside. “He said you’re a good guy, and that you’re full of stories.”

“Spence, now that’s a good guy.” Josh lifted his mug and pensively inhaled the steam rising from his coffee. “You know I never really asked you yet—we should probably get to know each other, don’tcha think? So tell me, what’s *your* story Amelia?”

“Me?” said Amelia with a laugh. “I don’t think I really have a story.”

“Oh come on,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “Tell me anything.”

Amelia stared into her coffee and a vaguely darkened version of herself reflected back.

“Well—well I guess my story would be that I wanted to travel before I went back to school. Go back to school I mean, Queens like everyone else I know. And since I’ve been to the east coast I decided to come west. And now I’m here.”

Josh sat watching her as if the story was yet to begin.

“And that’s my story.”

“Hm,” said Josh.

“How about you?”

With his nose in his mug, Josh peered at Amelia over the lip and raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t know anything about you, aside from what Spencer told me,” Amelia said, then hesitated, thinking back to her phone call a couple days ago. “Which is pretty much nothing, come to think of it. Tell me something.”

“Ask me a question.”

“Well for starters, where you from? Spencer made it sound like you were from elsewhere.”

“Where else,” Josh said quietly to himself. “I’m actually from a little gem not unlike your own hometown.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call Kingston a gem...”

“Hey now,” Josh said playfully, “Kingston is most certainly a gem. If you look at a gem in the wrong light, all you’ll see is a dull piece of stone. When it comes to places, you just gotta find the right light.”

Amelia tried to imagine the pleasant parts of Kingston – the limestone, the lakeshore, the ancient brick buildings – but these were replaced by thoughts of the littered yards in the student ghetto, the beggars downtown, the front doors of the Collins Bay Institution. She shrugged. “What’s the name of your gem, then?”

“You passed through it on your way here,” he said. “Regina.”

“I hate to break it to you, but I slept through Saskatchewan.”

Josh sighed. “You’re not the first, nor will you be the last.”

“But that’s all the more reason you should tell me about it.”

Josh pulled out his phone and checked the time. “It’ll have to be the abridged version for now. I’ve gotta rip over to Johnston’s Canyon, and you might want to drop by your current and future place of work.”

“Might not be a bad idea,” said Amelia. “What’s at Johnston’s Canyon?”

“This guy I know, his name is Greg, he’s got a project on the go, and… did I mention I, ah, like to take a photographs?”

“No? For some reason I thought you worked at a ski resort or something.”

“That I do, but I’ve picked up a hobby or two along the way. And I mean, being here it’s hard not to want to stand still for a minute and focus all your attention on something you might never see again. The landscapes. I’m fascinated by them.”

Amelia thought of the way he’d looked out the window at the birds, and even the way he’d looked at her when he first pulled up. “Landscapes,” she said. “I’d love to see some of them, if you ever feel like it.”

“Absolutely.”

“But for now I’ll settle for Regina.”

“Because we’re needed elsewhere,” said Josh, nodding. “First, the preface: there’s only really one thing I’ve never liked about Regina, and that’s that it’s called Regina. I mean the name isn’t that bad, but I’ve just heard too many jokes making puns out of it that I’d rather just avoid. Even frickin’ Madonna of all people, I shit you not. It’s my hometown, and I’m, you know, protective of it. So instead of Regina, I’d rather call it The Queen City.”

“Isn’t that what they call Toronto?”

“No, that’s just Queen City. Regina is *The Queen City*. The ‘The’ is key. I’m not sure if you know this, but Regina is to Queen as Rex is to King. Which is to say it’s Latin. So of all the nicknames my hometown has acquired, I prefer ‘The Queen City’ because it’s just so damn literal. It’s in the middle of the Canadian bread basket. You could think it as either the small town of cities or the big city of towns; either way, it ain’t very big. Everybody doesn’t quite know everybody, but everybody definitely knows someone that you know. Most people think our greatest commodity is wheat, but they’re wrong: it’s space. All the space you could ever want and then some. From the edge of town you can look out in any direction and see nothing but sky, roads, fields, sunshine, darkness. And I guess seagulls. Lots of seagulls. Why a sea bird would choose the furthest place from the sea to make its home, I have no idea.”

As he talked, Amelia watched how his face changed: his brows became more animated, his mouth moved rapidly, and his eyes cast off into the distance like he was looking for another bird, only this one part of some other world that only he could access. The whimsy that had been trickling beneath the surface of everything he’d said was now bursting outward.

“And what makes The Queen City such a gem?”

“It’s like I said before, you know? I could tell you about why it’s a gem, but it wouldn’t mean anything unless you saw it for yourself. And not just see it, actually—no. You just have to pay a little attention.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Amelia told him. “Sorry I missed it.”

“Lucky for you, there’s always the way back.”

The Ranger bumped the curb as it pulled up to the pub. “Whoa there, cowboy,” Amelia blurted. “Where’d you learn to drive, the prairies?” They both chuckled while Josh put the truck into park. An old brick building – McMillan’s, said the sign in front – stood squat against the peaky cordilleran backdrop. “You used to work here?”

“For a couple years, yeah. Decent place. Great location.”

“Still repping, eh?”

“Until the day I die,” said Josh. “Dave knows you’re coming, just ask for him. I might not be back ‘til after supper, so—” he fumbled with the keys dangling from the ignition til he severed the one he wanted—“here’s the house key. I don’t know if you want to walk around town or cab back up there or...?”

“A day like this,” said Amelia as she slid out the door, “I most definitely will walk.”

Once inside the bar, Amelia walked toward the bar, where a stout woman not much older than herself was absent-mindedly wiping the counter. Her eyes followed something in the window, and Amelia glanced back. Unsurprisingly, it was Josh: he had pulled an awkward u-turn and was currently backed up on the curb.

“Something I can get you?”

Amelia turned back to the bar, where the woman now leaned on her elbows. “Yeah, actually, is Dave around?”

“Ah, you’re the new girl.”

“I intend to be, anyway.”

“Dave’ll be back in a bit. Had to grab a few things,” she said. Her eyes flicked to the window and back. “You know that guy?”

“Just met him, actually. He used to work here I think?”

“A while back, yeah,” she said, scrunching her whole face. “I’ve seen him in town but never made his acquaintance... what’s he, ah, like?”

“Seems like a good guy. And my cousin thinks the world of him.”

“Ah,” she said.

Amelia stood where she was, and when the woman said nothing, she slid up on one of the bar stools. Whatever song had been playing over the pub speakers ended, and the ensuing silence made her anxious. The pub, which had enough tables to seat at least 50 people, had only one patron, and he had the look of a regular old-timer, but grungy rather than distinguished or mysterious. There was a faint odor, too—not the yeasty musk of pubs she’d entered in Manitoba, but a sourness that reminded her of a hockey arena washroom. And the way the woman behind the bar looked at her, eyes pulled tight with suspicion, darty, severe: Amelia couldn’t help read her tone as hostile.

As if hearing Amelia’s thought, the woman cleared her throat. “I’m Jess, by the way.”

“Amelia,” said Amelia, offering a hand. As they shook, Jess peered again to the window, where Josh had finally pulled away. “Is there” — Amelia hesitated, thinking of how foggy her memory was of the night before — “anything I should know about him?”

“I’ve just heard that he’s an odd dude,” said Jess. “Talks to himself. Tells all kinds of weird stories. To be honest, he just seems too happy, you know? Who’s that happy?”

Amelia laughed, feeling an unexpected tenderness swell within her. For a moment, she’d expected a tale or two of Josh’s creepiness, but this somehow fit so much

better. “I honestly don’t think I’ve met a more jovial person. But how can you not like him for it?”

A tall man with a thick red beard walked in through a saloon door behind the bar. He surveyed the tables around the room before settling his gaze on Amelia and nodding absently. Amelia raised her hand in a hello and he nodded, then exited back through the door.

“Was that?”

“Not Dave,” Jess told her. She put down the glass she’d been wiping and shuffled sideways. “Hey, Pauly?”

The man’s head appeared above the doors. “Yello?”

“How’s it lookin’ back there?” she asked, her tone shifting to a sweeter pitch than with Amelia.

“Need some coasters,” he said. “Hand-soap, pepper. How do we go through so much pepper?”

Jess shrugged. “D’you happen to know when Dave’ll be back? She’s hoping to talk to him,” she added, tilting her head at Amelia.

“Oh he’s gone, said he won’t be in again ‘til next week.” The beard and head vanished again to somewhere in the back.

Jess turned as if to say something to Amelia, but two young men approached the bar and she immediately diverted her attention to them. Amelia watched them talk: the way Jess smiled and tucked her thick black hair behind her ear, the way the men giggled abashedly and peered up at the chalk board behind the bar to search for their beer of choice, the way Jess – fully engaged in her role as server – chose to forget that Amelia

was still sitting there. Maybe she was only doing her job, but the way she'd turned without a word or gesture left Amelia feeling estranged.

She thought about waiting for Jess's attention again so that she could ask more about Dave and if there was anything she should do if she wanted to work here, but the problem was that she *didn't* want to work here at all.

She slid off the stool and made for the exit. As she pulled open the door, she waited for Jess to call out a "hey" or a "sorry," but there was only the sound of mumbling voices and footsteps dragging across the wooden floor. Amelia stepped outside and left McMillan's behind.

At some point since Josh left it had begun to snow. Amelia held out her hand and let the flakes fall on her skin, each melting instantaneously. It was time to consider her options: call a cab, head back to Josh's, reassess the situation. Call Mom? Call Spencer?

She glanced up the street, where she could make out the peak of one of the hotels on the main drag, and beyond it the hazy shape of a mountain shrouded in a flurry. Yes, she would head back to Josh's, but she would take her time getting there.

Walking along Muskrat Street, Amelia found herself amused by the animal names displayed on every street sign. She hooked a left on Moose street and headed toward Banff Avenue, where she knew she'd find the shops and restaurants essential to any resort town. She'd been so caught up in the scenic view from the bus last night that she hadn't paid any attention to the town itself, and there was something exciting about the prospect of exploring Banff now that she'd shed the occupational obligation that had brought her here in the first place. Even if she was left with no other option but to return

home, she wasn't going anywhere until tomorrow, and that gave her time to meander through this place like she had all the others on her trip out west.

Banff Avenue was like nothing she'd seen before: to her left, a small turquoise river leading into an steep escarpment, cliff sides in the distance, birds of all kinds perched in the trees and on the bank, and crystalline sun hanging high above it all; ahead to the right, parallel rows of lodge-style buildings as far as the eye can see, all under a faint layer of snow, all bustling with people drifting in and out and up and down. It was like she'd woken up that morning in a snow-globe. Every aspect in the center of Banff seemed to work towards a singularity – a Banff-ness, carefully constructed out of novelty – that was almost overwhelming. She decided to walk left first and circle back to the main drag later.

A sign at the head of a footpath told her the river's name was Bow. Even from up close it appeared pristine, though the shade of the water wasn't nearly as dark, and the shallowest spots along the edge were murky with sediment. She knelt beside a plume of sagging reeds and dipped her hand in, recoiling at the shock of cold. It was strange how frigid the water could be without showing any signs of ice—was it because of how fast it was moving? Or was all glacial runoff this cold? Maybe she could ask Josh later.

"Excuse me," said a voice just behind her. Four elderly people stood on the path, and a much younger man had joined her at the river with a small silver camera in his hands. "I was wondering if you could take a picture."

"Of course!"

The man handed her his camera, and Amelia swapped positions with the people on the path. As she held the camera up and clicked the focus button, she thought of what

Josh might be seeing though his own lens at the moment and felt the trickle of self-consciousness. If he were here now, would they see the same thing once the screen found its focus? The digital screen wavered until the image was clear: two couples, she decided, and the young man possibly the son or grandson of the pair to the left, each of whom had an arm behind his back. Not unlike her grad picture from last spring, her mom's arm around her waist, her dad's pulling her in tight so that her shoulder nestled into his armpit. Together.

She found herself searching the young man's face, his eyes, his mouth. "Cheese, guys!" she called, and when they smiled and laughed, she did too.

The first shop Amelia stepped into was crammed with knick-knacks and souvenirs. It seemed like everything – the key chains, pens, shirts, wallets – had "Banff" etched into it, or the image of a bear, or an inuksuk. She passed a bin of pocket knives, and there at the top of the pile was her dad's name, K-E-I-T-H carved out in bold black letters. The moment she saw it, she fully intended to bring it home for him, but seeing the price tag made her want to drop it and run. Spencer once told her that everything in Alberta was cheaper, but everything she looked at would cost her at least a couple of meals. The time for getting gifts for her parents was probably long gone. Amelia had time to kill, though, and the shops further up the avenue might have something she could afford. She did a quick lap around the shelves at the back and headed out into the crowded street.

The prices, she realized, were always the same. It turned out this snow globe world came at a premium. She picked up and put down souvenirs with increasing haste, and this in turn came to reflect how she treated the actual shops on Banff Avenue.

The names of every one of the shops were Banff-inspired, shamelessly playing up local motifs to draw in the gift-seekers and enchanted sightseers. Mountain Legends, The Sleeping Buffalo, Duck Duck Moose. Maybe each of these names suggested its own unique allure, but in truth the shops were nearly identical: picturesque storefronts, maple syrup candies, lumberjack toques, and moose-crossing hoodies. After Pine House Gifts, Amelia was annoyed with herself for having fallen for the allure of yet another novelty clone. She saw others on the sidewalks, though, families and couples, all who'd been in and out of the same shops and somehow marched on the next with the same wide-eyed enthusiasm she had probably worn on her own face when she first stepped foot on Banff Ave. Maybe this was a thing that people genuinely enjoyed, and Amelia was the one who was strange for not buying in to the enterprise of tourism.

Still, she was disappointed. Banff was turning out to be like the biggest present under the Christmas tree, but it's only the most exciting until you open it up and realize it was mostly packing peanuts. And when she looked to the north, she saw that there was a whole lot of present left to open—she'd only walked a couple blocks.

Amelia sat on one of the crop of benches outside the shop. It was early afternoon and she didn't feel like making her way back to the house just yet. There were bars and pubs spattered all along the avenue, and a nice hot meal would be nice right now. A savoury burger and fries, gravy, ketchup, mustard, and an Irish coffee to warm up her bones.

A man and woman, each with traces of white in their hair, approached from the direction Amelia had come. They stopped just out of earshot, but Amelia watched them speak: the man checking his watch, the woman gesturing urgently up the street; the man patting his bulging gut, and the woman finally turning to enter Pine House Gifts. Once she was gone, the man plopped down on the adjacent bench and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He glanced briefly at Amelia and offered a distracted smile while he searched for something in his pockets. A lighter. He lit a smoke and inhaled ecstatically, closing his eyes and holding the fumes in his lungs until a stream of smoke poured out through his nostrils and floated into the air as a single delicate bloom. His shifty grey eyes flicked open, and he glanced again from the lit butt in his hand to Amelia.

“You want one or what?” he asked.

Realizing she’d been more or less staring at him for the past couple minutes, Amelia felt her cheeks burn as she shook her head embarrassedly. “No no no, sorry, I have a bad habit of people watching.”

“It’s alright, I get it all the time,” he said. He set the pack beside him on the bench before gesturing with the lit cigarette towards his pudgy chin. “It’s the looks, I can’t help it.”

Amelia chuckled. The man smiled distractedly again before gazing off into the distance.

For the first time that day, Amelia felt a chill shoot through her. A wind kicked up. She was about to rise from the bench when the hard beat of wings throbbed from behind her. Up in a bleak looking tree. Since the branches had lost most of their leaves, it wasn’t hard for her to spot the large black shape perched amongst the higher branches.

Amelia had never seen a raven before. She'd known on some level that they were like crows, but hadn't realized how large they were. Or at least this one. The only reason she was so sure this was a raven was from the plaques and photos she'd seen come across in several of the shops, the bird often portrayed in flight or perched in profile as this one was now. What she'd heard must have been the bird landing in the tree, but now it was disconcertingly silent—its talons steadfast around the branch, its beak aimed toward the street.

To Amelia's surprise, the raven suddenly hopped from the branch and parachuted its way onto the backrest of the same bench upon which the smoking man was sitting. It stood still at first, head tilted to one side almost quizzically. The man, still lost in a trance, hadn't noticed the raven appear beside him, and didn't so much as blink when the bird hopped further down onto the metal seat of the bench.

Amelia wanted to get the man's attention without startling the bird, so she shot him a sharp "psssst." While the man didn't flinch, the raven turned a single eye on her before stepping sideways on the bench.

The man took another drag of his cigarette and coughed into his hefty fist.

The raven sidestepped again, now in arm's reach of the man. It cocked its head to one side, eyeing the man for a moment before honing in on something beside him. Amelia first thought it was looking at the man's bulbous belly, but then the bird sidestepped again and she could see exactly what had caught its attention.

"Excuse me, but—" she began, and the man finally broke out of his daze. Amelia pointed at the raven, and the man – eyebrows bunched in confusion – lifted his arm and looked at his coat. "No, your smokes."

“You do want one, eh?” the man said. He turned just in time to see the raven snatch the little cardboard pack and hop up onto the backrest again. “Hey, yah!” he barked, and swatted aimlessly at the bird.

Amelia stood, not quite sure what she was intending to do. The raven, however, tensed when she took a step forward, and shot up from the bench. It crested the rooftop of Pine House Gifts with a few rapid wing beats and out of sight.

“Sonovabitch!” the man barked in the direction the raven had fled, then more quietly after facing Amelia, “Sonovabitch.” He raised what was left of the cigarette he’d already lit to his lips and sucked.

“I feel like that was my fault,” Amelia said slowly. “But I have to admit, I just wanted to see what he was up to.”

“Chain smoking, apparently,” said the man. He dropped the smouldering butt into one of the cigarette receptacles at the far end of the bench and stood. “The worst thing is that my wife ain’t gonna believe a sonovabitch bird stole my smokes. Probably deserves them more than me, anyway.”

Amelia watched the man dust off his coat and waddle into the store. She looked up toward the rooftops, almost expecting to hear the mocking caws of the raven in the distance. Instead she heard just the growl and squeal of traffic on Banff Ave.

Having totally forgotten about eating, Amelia continued up the street, peeking up along the skyline as she went. Not looking at the mountains anymore, but for the dark flash of feathers and talons.

The wind seemed to die off as the sun made its arc across the sky. The snow, though, was steady as ever: slow, deliberate, soundless. Everything, including the pedestrians, was coated in a dry glimmering layer. The crunch beneath Amelia's steps grew crisper throughout the afternoon, and she couldn't help think of how different even this was from home, where the sound of boots on snow was clammy, muted. Her dad used to tell her stories about the winter weeks he'd spent in Edmonton for a wedding way back when, about the dry air and the flat terrain and the bad drivers. He always said it wasn't as cold as people made it out, that the air coming off Lake Ontario was just as frigid as anywhere in Canada. Amelia, though, began to think otherwise. It was only November and couldn't be lower than minus 10, but her cheeks felt seared, her lips dry, her eyes and nose running steady.

It was almost 4:30 when she realized she'd missed a text from Josh. *It's gonna be a late night*, it read. *Help yourself to anything in the fridge, including beer etc. Catch ya later.* The sun had crept up to the peaks, and it probably wouldn't be a good idea to get lost out here in the dark. She was hungry, too, she remembered—she hadn't eaten anything since toast that morning. The notion of kicking back on Josh's couch with a full plate of spaghetti and catching up on some tv was enticing at first, but on her way up the roads – Hawk Avenue, this time, and then Jay Street – Amelia realized what had been nagging at her since she first stepped into McMillan's. It had been growing steadily throughout the day despite the wonderful feel of it all, the air on her cheeks and sharp crunch of the dry snow beneath her feet and the birds that seemed to have stuck around well past their window of departure south. She had begun to feel lonely.

Sitting in bed with her knees pulled up to her chin, Amelia dialled Spencer. She didn't really expect him to answer – it would be around supper time back home and he was probably busy – so it caught her off guard when his voice broke through on the first ring, sounding very drunk and jolly. He rambled for a bit about drinking too much at his friend's birthday before hinting to Amelia that his lifestyle was becoming exhausting. She couldn't think of ever having heard her cousin sound concerned before, but before she could say something, he asked, "So what's up with you?"

"Me?"

"I do believe you dialled me, unless my booze-addled brain is deceiving me."

"Yeah," said Amelia. She began to trace circles with her finger on her knee-caps, clockwise then counter then clockwise again. "I'm not entirely sure why, to be honest. Just feeling antsy for some reason."

"About what? Everything alright?"

"It's amazing here," she said softly, now tracing peaks and valleys. "I hadn't even taken ten steps from the bus and an elk crossed my path. Huge. I was on the phone with my Mom and it was the strangest feeling, because on one side of me there's the world right there, the mountains, the air, and out of it this elk just standing there like it was waiting for something. And on the other side mom's voice floating over from a million miles away."

"You miss home?"

"Well that's the other thing—I didn't think much about home til I got here. And now, yeah, I wonder if I'm missing it. Or maybe it's mom and dad, the way they worry about me. Or the weather, even—did that ever happen to you?"

“Did what ever happen?”

“Missing home.”

Spencer was silent from the other end. Since she’d never seen his place in Gatineau, Amelia pictured him stretched out on his parents’ couch in Kingston with his feet kicked up on the armrest, a bottle of beer nestled between his legs, free hand tracing the outline of his goatee. The look on his face when he was deep in thought was always *worried*, eyes squinting, cheeks puffed up full with air. Did he even have a goatee now? She realized she couldn’t remember the last time she’d actually seen Spencer in person.

“Well, honestly,” he said slowly, “no. Not really, no.”

“No as in never? You never even missed Uncle Jim and Aunt Carrie?”

“I was never really a fan of K-town, hey? Queens and all that bullshit. And I was so determined to get the hell out of there, *anywhere*, and my parents being so against it only made me more determined. So I got the hell out. Hitched out with a guy I worked with for a bit, and I couldn’t even tell you what he’s doing these days. But anyway, they just sort of got used to it, and we ended up with an understanding I guess.”

“I didn’t realize—I mean I always thought you....” Thinking back to the narratives that floated around in the family when she was a kid, Amelia had always thought of her cousin as an explorer. He was mysterious, exciting, courageous. She had grown up wanting those things because of him. “But you ran away?”

“I guess you could call it that,” Spencer said with a chuckle. “I mean it wasn’t ugly or anything, but they were pissed for a bit. When we finally talked it out, they realized I wasn’t happy. But that was ages ago. I talk to my parents on the phone a couple times a week, and it’s kinda weird because I actually think I’m closer with them

now than ever. So no, I don't miss them, or Kingston. I need the distance. It's like, ah, breathing room." As if for effect, he exhaled into the receiver.

These words stung Amelia at first, not because she'd never been told this side of Spencer's story before, but because she realized she'd never asked. She had modelled this whole endeavor after an image of her cousin that she'd essentially made up. But this guilt was quickly replaced with bubbly amusement: she was stuck in Banff of all places, freeloading off a guy she'd met yesterday, broke, tired, lonesome, and without a plan of any kind for the future.

"Oh my god," she said quietly, then burst out laughing. "Spencer, you shit!"

"Huh?"

"I have no idea what I'm doing!"

Spencer said nothing, probably confused as Amelia's laughter flared up again. She kicked her feet out and pressed her phone to her chest, cackling wildly. As the convulsion tapered off, she lifted the phone to her mouth and breathed in deeply as Spencer had. "Breathing room," she said, "Breathing room. Oh man... I just realized I am a complete lunatic."

This time the silence on the other end was so prolonged that Amelia began to wonder if her cousin was still there. Finally, he said "I feel like I should be saying sorry, but I can't quite figure out for..."

"You can apologize to my parents if they ever find out we freakin' lied to them. But me? I'm just glad I'm not the only one."

Spencer chuckled softly. "Amelia, I'm starting to believe I'm too inebriated for this conversation."

“I can let you go,” she said. “Just tell me one more thing, ‘kay? What would you say if I told you I wanted to open a coyote farm?”

“A coyote what?”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. Have a good night, Spence.”

With a mixture of gratification and disquiet, Amelia tapped “end” on her phone. Spencer always had a way of mending her mood, but that didn’t change the fact that her condition hadn’t changed during the conversation. In a sense, she was in a familiar position, here in this bed: tonight she would fall asleep here, and tomorrow she could very well fall asleep somewhere else. But this threshold was different from all the ones before. There had always been momentum. There had been uncertainty, too, but now what she felt was more like doubt. Home had been easy to leave because it would continue to be there, right where she left it. The one and the same. Only that couldn’t be true, could it? Because she wouldn’t be the same.

Amelia rolled to her side, then her stomach. She flipped her pillow and kneaded it with her fists. Tomorrow she would call home.

With her eyes closed, Amelia’s thoughts returned to the night she arrived. The elk in the parking lot. Alone. She knew it was too easy to muse it into meaning something that it was not, so instead she imagined herself turning from the payphone, walking to where it stood, following its tracks. She treaded across the pavement, into the trees, over the hills. A higher elevation.

And the elk—she found it in a meadow. Eating, moving, sleeping. She would sleep too, eventually. Nothing simpler than this.

Amelia woke earlier than she'd intended, feeling the kind of nervous spasms in her midsection she was used to getting before exams. Somewhere along the course of her dreams, she had fallen into a labyrinth of highway, turning corner after corner and always ending up on the same empty stretch of road. Finally she gave up, sitting cross-legged on the center line with her hands clenched in her lap while everything around her was enveloped in what appeared to be a thin grey fog. But it wasn't fog at all, and she wasn't alone on the road. Behind her sat the man who'd been robbed by the raven, and in each of his hands were thickly rolled cigarettes. The smoke was soon too thick to see him, then too thick to see the road, then too thick to even see her hands when she held them up before her. Everything after that was smoke and nothing else.

Now she sat up in bed, crossed her legs, and rubbed her temples.

With the curtains pulled shut, the room was nearly as dark as the middle of the night, but the digital alarm clock on her bedside table assured her that it was 6:19. For a moment she considered lying back down and trying for more sleep, but her stomach squinched again and she knew it was a fruitless endeavour. She made her way upstairs, checking (and seeing) that Josh's bedroom door was closed. She saw that his boots were in the foyer, and as if this wasn't enough, she glanced out the front window, too, where Josh's Ranger was parked in the narrow driveway. Amelia must have been out cold when he got home.

Time to make coffee. It would be a nice gesture to have it made before Josh was up, and giving herself a task of any kind would pull her mind away from last night's dreams. She flipped open two cupboards before she found the one with filters and a tin of fine ground Tim's. She rinsed the pot, threw out yesterday's grounds, placed a new

filter, measured out the spoonfuls. Hit the button marked brew. Glanced down the hallway at Josh's bedroom door. Set two mugs on the counter, then two spoons. Paced into the living room, paced back. The rich smell of her measly endeavour had begun to fill the kitchen.

If the microwave clock was correct, it was now 6:28. She could feign cleaning dishes and knock a couple pans together – an old trick of her mom's to get people out of bed – but considering how late he probably got home, it would be a dick move to wake him up earlier than he wanted. She could sit instead, and watch the coffee drip into the pot one bead at a time.

Amelia sank into the chair she'd sat in the morning before and looked wishfully at the empty spot across from her. Josh's wicker chair. She hadn't sat in it when he'd offered because it seemed like a strange thing to be asked by someone she barely knew. It was strange that, after all the things she'd experienced since leaving home, this question was what had jarred her out of complacency. Now though, alone in a tiny kitchen with nothing to keep her company but a sasquatch calendar to keep her company—

“Why the hell not?” she said to herself.

The chair sagged slightly when she settled herself into it. It was springy, and almost rocked back and forth if she shifted her weight in any direction. She could lean back and the chair leaned with her, no resistance. It creaked incessantly, and it was maybe a bit taller than she'd usually expect a kitchen chair to be.

Yes, the wicker chair was comfortable, but it was pretty much just a chair.

Amelia crossed her arms and breathed in the intensifying aromas. The pot looked like it was close to where she'd filled the water, and every twenty seconds or so another bead plunged in. She closed her eyes and listened to them drip like a leaky faucet into a sink full of water, each followed by slow moving silence.

"Told ya."

Amelia sat forward with a jolt. Across from her, Josh sat dishevelled but smiling. A steaming mug sat before him, and next to it a camera.

"Was I just asleep?" she asked, rubbing the sides of her face. "I swear I just closed my eyes."

"I've dozed in that exact position I don't know how many times. It's that chair, I'm telling ya. I'm never getting rid of it."

"Do you want to trade?"

"Of course not," he said, then sipped his coffee, then raised it in a salute. "I like to share my things, Amelia. Especially my coffee."

Amelia rubbed her eyes with the pads of her fingers, then glanced around at the microwave clock. She'd only been out for ten or so minutes, but she felt like she'd just come out of hibernation. "Speaking of coffee," she said, then went to the counter for a mug.

"How'd the interview go?"

"That," she said, stirring in a sugar and some cream. She brought the mug to her mouth and held it there, letting the vapour spread warmth across her eyelids. It really was quiet in the kitchen, and after letting her gaze slip towards the window she realized there were no birds outside this morning. "I wouldn't really say it went at all."

“Uh oh,” Josh whispered.

Amelia returned to the chair. “As soon as you drove away I had this feeling, or more like a certainty, that I wasn’t going to work in that place.”

Josh nodded. “That’s alright. Places around town are hiring all the time, especially now with the slopes getting ready.”

“I’m thinking it might be time to go home,” said Amelia. Her eyes met Josh’s for a moment, and where she’d expected to find disappointment there was only concern. Still, she couldn’t hold his gaze, and turned to stare blankly out the window. She sat that way for a bit, sipping her coffee silently.

Two short clicks sounded from the across the table. Amelia pulled her eyes away from the window to find a lens pointed at her.

“Hey!” she said.

Josh lowered the camera. “Couldn’t help myself.”

Though mildly annoyed, Amelia felt a budding curiosity as she watched a look of satisfaction emerge on Josh’s face as he peered into the screen. “You’ve got to show it to me now,” she said.

Josh pressed a button on the camera and set it on the table. “Maybe later,” he teased.

“Oh come on, you said you’d show me your photos.”

“I sorta have already. Did you happen to take a look around your bedroom?”

Amelia thought of the framed trees and mountains, the bear, the goats. “Those are yours?”

“The ones on the walls, yeah. I mean I’ve got more but those are some of my best.”

A smile crept up on Amelia face. “No kidding,” she said. “I honestly sat there for a while looking at them, and it never even occurred to me—but didn’t you say you only photograph landscapes?”

“Well sort of. I don’t necessarily photograph *only* landscapes, but I guess you could say that I look for landscapes in everything.”

Amelia eyed up the camera. “If that’s the case,” she said, and then, making as if she were picking up her coffee, she reached across the table for the camera. Josh’s reflexes were quick, though, and he nimbly snatched the camera and held it over his shoulder. “I want to see it.”

“Not yet,” he said.

“But I want to know what you saw.”

Josh narrowed his eyes. “You’re positive you’re leaving?”

“I’m... still figuring that out. I should probably look into buses.”

Josh leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table with the camera held out before him. “Tell you what,” he said. “Book your bus for tomorrow and I’ll show you the photo. It’s not like it’s costing you to stay, and there probably won’t be any buses going out of here til tonight anyway.”

“What am I going to do though? Sit around and twiddle my thumbs?”

“I was thinking you could come out to Johnston’s with me for the day, maybe hike around for a bit. Got the idea yesterday, actually. And now, if you’re gonna roll out so soon? You came all the way out here and I wouldn’t dare let you leave without at

least getting a taste of what it's like out *there*.” Josh waved a hand toward the window.

“You’re barely in the Rockies yet, Amelia.”

Amelia sat back in her chair and sighed. Another detour. Yet she hadn’t really ever been in a hurry, had she? And she did want to see more, had wanted to ever since the elk in the parking lot. She could figure out the rest tonight. “Alright,” she said. “Deal.” Her stomach made a hungry burble, which was welcome after the nervous ripples she’d woken up to. “But first I’d like some toast, please and thank you.”

The drive felt longer than Amelia had expected, especially after Josh pulled off the highway and onto a downward winding road. She found it stressful at first—the mountains were so different from the interior, larger, ancient, imposing. Each loomed in the distance, never seeming to get any closer despite how fast Josh pushed the Ranger onward. The sky was so much smaller between the white caps and tufts of cloud. At one point they stopped for a herd of goats crossing the road, from steep ditch on one side and into the woods on the other. Where it appeared there was no way forward, the goats simply climbed upward. Seeing this mobility eased her claustrophobia.

Josh spent most of the trip telling Amelia the tale of how he’d ended up in Banff. He’d left Regina for a job in Calgary, and that led to dating a woman who taught him how to ski. A couple of years on, he got on at a lodge as part of the park maintenance, and he was able to buy the tiny house from a co-worker who’d decided to move. That had been almost four years ago.

“And you’re here to stay?” Amelia asked.

“I’ll probably stay ‘til I have a reason not to.”

“But do you ever think about going home? I thought it was a gem?”

“The Queen City most certainly *is* a gem.” The truck slowed, and as they rounded a lofty curve, Amelia could see vehicles parked along the side of the road up ahead. “This is a gem, too,” Josh continued. “I’m lucky because home isn’t even a day away. I could leave in the morning and be at my dad’s in time for lunch. And my brother lives in Calgary, comes up here at least once a month.”

As she watched him speak, Amelia realized she’d found herself yet another storyteller. But unlike the others she’d encountered the past few months, something about Josh compelled her to give something back in return. No more thank you, goodbyes.

“I don’t have any siblings,” she said. “My dad, he—” she paused, working out the best way to articulate what she had resolved to say. “He ended up in prison when I was a kid. And I think by the time he was out, my parents were too concerned with other things to have more kids. Concerned with catching up, I guess.”

“Are you close with him?”

She had prepped herself to go into the details, the DUI, the shitty apartment her mom got stuck with, how kids at school found out—but this question caught Amelia off guard. “Yeah, actually,” she said. She hadn’t ever thought of her relationship with her dad in those terms, and surprised herself by how quickly she found the answer. “I mean, it wasn’t ideal obviously, but yeah, we visited him quite a bit. My mom says he’s quieter than he used to be, but in a weird way I like that about him. He never has to say much.”

“My grandma was always like that,” Josh said as they approached the stationary vehicles. “She could say more with a look than I could in a week.”

Ahead to the right was a nearly empty gravel parking lot. A carved wooden grizzly stood guard at the entrance, where an old gas station had been converted into an info booth. The pumps were still there, looking too weathered to be in use. These drew her attention so soon after pulling in that it took a moment for the surrounding mountains and pine and snow to really sink in.

Josh pulled up to what looked like a convenience store and put the Ranger into park. “You should see this in the summer,” he said, turning to Amelia with a grin. “Hundreds of people by the hour. It’s better once the snow flies. Feels quieter, for some reason.”

“I guess that makes it easier,” Amelia said, still thinking about Josh’s proximity to home.

“You bet,” Josh replied. He reached behind his seat and pulled out his camera case, pulled the strap around his neck. “We picked a good day.”

From the Ranger, they followed a broad path that led them up past the store. Amelia could hear the boom of rushing water as they reached the trailhead. The path narrowed ahead of them, where a smattering of footprints led away along a ridge and into the thick stony forest. While Josh pulled out his camera, Amelia took a few steps off the path and gripped a narrow tree, peering over a sharp bank and into the canyon.

Glacial runoff, Josh had said on the way over. The bluest blue and whitest white all at once. A gentle rush of air drifted past her, cool and ceaseless. She breathed it in with a long slow breath, and as Josh appeared beside her, she turned to him and said, “Thank you.”

Josh looked past her, up towards the sky. “I remember the first time I walked up here just like you did,” he said. “I was with my brother and he ran into the store, so I came up here and wow. It was summer, and the sun was burning hot, and I Just stood here, taking it all in. I asked myself, ‘Where else could you rather be, right this second?’ That might have been the moment I decided to buy a camera.”

They spent the half hour hiking along the canyon in silence. It was strange at first without the steady current of Josh’s voice, but Amelia understood. The sound of the water receded to the background, and its constant presence – while impossible to ignore – made her keen to listen harder. Nothing else moved aside from them, no birds, no squirrels, not even the trees, and yet there was always a feeling that something was nearby. It was like the canyon had held its breath, and now they would, too.

The dirt path led to a long stretch of planks, which brought their course directly over the water. Ice had formed over the rock face from the mist that clung to the air in this part of the canyon, and Amelia reached over the rail and ran her fingers over it as she walked. A few paces ahead, Josh marched forward as he’d probably done countless times. The planks dipped low to the water and back up high, low, high, low, until the stone levelled off and gradually became earth and trees again.

Josh stopped suddenly as they entered a clearing, and Amelia walked right into him. “Sorry,” she blurted, but Josh appeared too focused to be bothered. He knelt on the path and gestured with his hand for Amelia to join him. She knelt too, feeling the snow beneath her knee melt through her jeans.

“You wanted to see what I saw this morning?” Josh asked, and when Amelia nodded he turned toward the trees to their left.

Twenty or so yards away, a raven perched on a fallen log. The dusting of yesterday's snow hadn't quite covered the ground here, but the trees and branches held a thin layer of whiteness that seemed to outline the bird much more starkly than the one she'd seen yesterday. It sat so silent and so still that it could have been a statue, left by some ancient people years and years ago.

"Here," Josh said. Amelia glanced and realized that he had been looking at something much closer, a tree at the side of the path right beside them. "When I found this yesterday I stared at it for I don't know how long. Birch bark. And then this morning, the way you were sitting reminded me of this tree."

Amelia let her fingers trace the details of Josh's tree, the marks made from rutting elk, a mysterious little knot sticking out at eye level, velvety bark, sunbursts of lichen. This tree was defined: she could stop here now in five, even ten years, and remember this tree, its posture, its brightness.

A burst of clicks from Josh's camera. Out of her periphery, Amelia could tell his sights were set to where she had been looking in the first place.

"There was a raven," he said. "Did you see that?"

"I must have missed it," she said, gazing out into the forest beyond the leaning birch. Out there where the trees appeared more closely layered, almost intertwined—those trees were anonymous, and she would never know them the way she knew this tree. Even if she walked out there now, where the ground was untouched, they would change into something other than what she saw from here. "I saw one yesterday though, it stole a pack of smokes from some tourist."

“I told ya, they’re clever. And look,” he said, holding out his camera for Amelia, “just a blur in these ones. Damn.” He stood, still flicking back and forth between images, then powered down the camera and cradled it at his side.

Amelia remained on her knee for a moment. She looked into the woods, wondering what her parents would think of it—what they would say when she brought them here sometime in the future. Then Josh offered a hand and she took it, rising to her feet.

He nudged her with an elbow. “Glad you stayed?”
“Yeah,” she said. “Glad for a lot of things.”