

Dead Brother's Club

By

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## ABSTRACT

### *Dead Brother's Club*

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*Dead Brother's Club* is a collection of eight short stories that look at the ways in which relationships are renegotiated after change, strain and loss. The stories portray characters with fluctuating degrees of self-awareness, forced to adapt to circumstances that have flung them from their comfort zones into the awkward, murky fissures the loss or change has opened up. "Gabor," "Dead Brother's Club" and "The Larper" are particularly concerned with connections between memory, commemoration and grief, while the work as a whole presents characters whose attempts at resolving their traumatic experiences are always inadequate or incomplete.

"Jane Pinches," "The Take Out," and "The Hemming" operate in a comic mode and rely on familiar character archetypes. They are alike in their stylization—dialogue-driven with limited expository intrusion—and in their use of hammy, absurd or tongue-in-cheek humour. While their action is often ridiculous, their emotional tenor is grounded in reality. In keeping with the other pieces in the project, what ultimately triumphs in these vignettes is the strength of the bonds between characters, which tether them to the world and cushion them from a larger alienation.

**DEDICATION**

For Dave

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dead Brother’s Club.....1  
Jane Pinches, Registered Massage Therapist .....13  
Ties That Bind.....21  
Gabor .....31  
The Take Out.....42  
The Larper .....49  
Sri Thakur .....64  
The Hemming .....78

## DEAD BROTHER'S CLUB

There are three of us in Dead Brothers Club. Candice, Pat and I meet every other Friday at the Allen Street Feed for therapy pints in the back corner booth with the pews for seats. Because it makes us feel bad to be so rote about an entire life when asked about our siblings—aneurism, car crash, overdose—Candice suggests that this week our homework should be to write a poem reframing their deaths. But it's not like we're poets. I studied kinesiology and intern at the Buffalo State physiotherapy clinic; Pat's in law school; Candice works in fine dining, as I did once, which is where we met and discovered our mutual bereavement, chatting between servings of duck confit and seafood risotto.

We've been meeting for almost six months now.

A poem? asks Pat with raised eyebrows.

Yeah, a poem, Candice says. Something to pry loose the staleness of telling about it. Of thinking about it, even. Write yours in statutes if you feel like it, Pat.  
Section one point five point three: Concerning brothers and bad decisions.

Pat takes a sip of cream ale—his third—then clears his throat: Subsection one point five point three point one. Whereas on November 4, 2011, the National Weather Service deemed the roads unsafe for driving, Charles Ocampo, twenty-one, rolled his Ford toward the Lord.

Beautiful, I say. Sublime.

Patrick Ocampo: Poet attorney, says Candice.

Thanks guys, he says, and we all clink glasses.

The hindquarter booths at the pub abut on one side against a russet brick wall lit by heirloom copper lanterns. Friday night is soul night. Candice and I sit across from Pat who, with closed eyes, sways to the fervor of Otis Redding, mouthing fa-fa-fa's. Speckled yellow tortilla crumbs and a few sad black olives lie jilted on the wicker platter atop the broad oak table.

Maybe I'll write a limerick, I say. Ben had a thing for the Irish.

There once was a man from Nantucket... says Pat.

Yes! Write a limerick! says Candice. As long as it's sincere, or the exercise is useless.

Can the irreverent be sincere? I ask.

I don't know, Candice says. But sometimes sincerity fails to be authentic, doesn't it? Or slips into melodrama.

True. Like how in twelfth grade I sincerely took up communism and started calling everyone comrade, Pat says. Another round?

Candice gives the thumbs up.

I'm in, I say, but last one. I'm off to the burbs early tomorrow. All out of clean panties.

Before Ben died, visits to my parents in Orchard Park—Buffalo's most verdant suburb—had been infrequent, dutiful nuisances. I'd make excuses for why it had been so long, like how expensive gas was or that Ronnie, my pet rat, was suffering from a particularly bad bout of separation anxiety: it was important I stick close to home. But give or take a few hangovers, since moving into a laundryless Allentown tenement five

months ago, I've been driving my soiled wardrobe every Saturday morning to the same brick and vinyl split-level I grew up in.

Pat slides a pitcher of beer onto the table. While I was waiting to order, he says, I wrote a poem: Underwear are ghosts. Socks disappear in darkness. Laundry never dies. Five, seven, five. Haiku!

Candice is deadpan. You're on a roll, she says.

But I'm under the spell of three pints of lager and the warm brass of Sam Cooke. Laundry never dies, I murmur and tiny bubbles of laughter break free. My heart's all mashed potatoes. How do I love thee, Candice and Pat? Joyfully, like a million lost socks rejoining their million lonely partners. I hallucinate the ghost of Ben's underwear drifting past the table. The coroner reported that he was wearing navy blue boxer briefs the night his heart stopped beating and fluid filled his lungs. Big beautiful pulmonary edema. God my brother was fun and Pat and Candice are fun and holy moses do I ever love them.

Now Candice chuckles, which builds to a cackle. Laundry never dies! she howls.

This is objectively unfunny, and yet when Pat doubles over and clutches his belly, pressing his palm into the brick wall for support, it's off—we erupt.

Tear-jerking, spleen-busting, self-annihilating whoops from us backbooth louts.

Searching through a beat up file folder in my parent's den—it's labeled *Tax Docs* but contains all the bureaucracy of Ben's death: his death certificate and life



insurance policy, account statements, the coroner's report—I'm relieved to have called it quits last night after three pints. I pull out the coroner's report because who knows, perhaps its swamps of medical jargon will inspire a limerick. It's been a while since I've looked at it.

Re: Benjamin Brazeau  
Date of Birth: 8 April 1983  
Death Pronounced: 15 May 2013  
Death Factor: Drug Toxicity (Acute)  
Manner of Death: Accident  
Status: Final

That's what it says: Accident. Status: Final. I'm not clear on which Status is being declared Final—the status of the investigation? the cause of death? Ben's life? Because the status of his life has been final for almost two years: over. The report confirms this in no uncertain terms. When I finally worked up the guts to read it, six months after he died, my heart plunged upwards and I ralphed. Sample text: postmortem hypostasis posterior and fixed; early putrefactive decomposition characterized by green discoloration of the anterior neck and upper chest; marbling of the face and extremities; bulla formation on the torso; bloating of the abdomen, etc. As if the blanched silt of his bones, encased in cherrywood on the curio shelf down the hall, wasn't proof enough of Ben's "status." But sometimes it wasn't, still isn't, tangible. In these moments I unlatch the clasp on the cherrywood box and run my index finger through his powdered skeleton.

Candice once told me she urinated in front of her brother's gravestone one summer night to feel that some part of her might touch him. I was shocked. I understood.

Mom, I call, sliding open the pocket door that separates the den from the living room, where my Mom is contorting her body into various yogic postures—a Saturday morning ritual. When I'm home, we're all together but usually in different rooms.

On the first page of the coroner's report, what does Status: Final mean?—Oh, sorry.

I've caught her in shavasana, eyes closed, supine on the thin blue mat. Despite upturned palms and turned out arches, her body looks stiff. A mesh of coarse black hair veils her shoulders. Slowly she rolls her head towards me, opens her eyes.

Means the case is closed, that the conclusions in the report are final.

And you agree with them, the conclusions?

Her ribcage expands with air; she halts her breath. I do, Maddie, she says, You already know that.

She exhales.

It's true that we've been over detail by gruesome detail together more than once. There is really only one I'm not at peace with: Manner of Death. That one festers like a rotting whale. Beached and heavy. It was a lot of drugs for an accident. Ben had been depressed.

My Mom peels her spine off the mat, shifting into lotus position, cross-legged, upright. Somewhere along the line I'm sure some instructor had her imagine an invisible cable stretched taut between the ceiling and the top of her head.

What made you pull out the report? she asks.

Dead Brothers Club.

Mom shudders palpably.

We met last night.

How's that going?

It's helpful, I say. Beats grief counseling.

So does meditation. If you'd like to join my group at any point, you let me know.

She's made this offer before and I know it helps her but I can't bring myself to go and just sit there among these new age yo-yos listening to Ohms and the ring of Tibetan bowls.

I shall.

Still up for a cup of tea and some puzzling before you head back this afternoon?

We had started a puzzle during last week's Saturday visit, but we only completed the perimeter. We used to jigsaw together on holidays, Mom, Dad, Ben and I, but this is the first puzzle we've touched in two years. A thousand bite-sized pieces which, when fit together, will feature a solitary kayaker navigating the ice floes of Prince William Sound, dwarfed by the looming Chugach Mountains.

Yes ma'am, Alaskan vistas await! I say, trying for playful but coming out phony. I'll join you in a bit; I'm going to try out some poems while my laundry is drying.

Alright, she says, and twists her body away from me, speaking to the wall: I just don't understand how poring over the coroner's report is helpful in any way. It's a medical document. It describes Ben's body, not Ben. Why can't you talk about the living version of your brother with your friends? He was more than his death, wasn't he?

She twists back to center.

I know that, Mom. That's exactly the point. We talk about the 'living version' of our siblings all the time—our memories and stuff. This week we're thinking about the death. The event of it. It doesn't feel like anything to say 'overdose' anymore, so we're putting it into poems.

I guess it just seems morbid to me. But a poem sounds good. I'm sorry for sounding judgmental.

As she rises, she lifts her arms above her head and reaches backwards. I worry her spine will snap. But no, she is more limber than she used to be. I look at her broad hips in black leggings and think how much we are alike—the shape of our bodies for one, but mostly our parallel neuroses, the way we are quick to judge ourselves for judging others.

These weekly visits home have become a nice ritual; the coffee's always on when I arrive. This morning, when I informed my Dad I now drank it black, he told me *atta girl* and put his hand on my shoulder, but so lightly that I could barely feel it. When I covered his hand with mine to give it a squeeze, his fingers felt so cold. He's less definite since Ben died, waifish almost. He used to seem so big. Finding Ben like that, blotchy, fully clothed on his bed in a stain of fluids—foam, blood, shit—shrank him. Ben's ankles were crossed and his left hand was resting on his chest. *In a natural position*, my Mom tells everyone. *He'd lain down expecting to get up again*. She was there too, helped break-in to Ben's apartment.

I wasn't informed until the next morning. At 8 a.m. my parents showed up at my door, and their faces, oh god, their faces. And their limbs. Standing there wilted like plucked clovers. *It's about Ben...*

Fun Ben.

Ronnie, my rat, bit the dust last month of natural causes. Status: Final. I found him in the oddest position: belly-up, midway down his rat slide with his front paws shooting straight up into the air like he was getting his picture taken on a rollercoaster.

My Mom peeks her head into the den to tell me the kettle's on.

I'll be out soon, I say.

She watches me idly tap my pen against the pages of my notebook.

Penny for your thoughts, she says.

Poetry's hard, I shrug.

Think with your heart, Maddie. Do you want me to bring you my *Collected Rumi*? Maybe it'll jog something.

Growing up, it was exclusively John Grisham and Tom Clancy novels on her bedside table. A world ago.

Thanks, but I'm trying for a limerick or two. You know how Ben fetishized Ireland.

Her perturbed expression tells me she thinks by 'fetishized' I mean something sexual, so I clarify: I mean how he loved all things Irish—green Guinness, watching Gaelic football. She nods as I imagine the pipe-smoking leprechaun tattooed onto the flesh of his calf pooling with blood after he died, but I keep this to myself.

A limerick. Hmph, she says, coming to stand beside the desk where I am sitting.

Tell me what you think so far:

Dear Benji your habits were racy  
Like something from Martin Scorsese  
Your opiate craze  
Sure numbered your days  
And now you are pushing up daisies.

I hear a deep inhalation and the atmosphere in the room shifts. I have offended my mother. I am insensitive, insolent, crude, bad-mannered.

That's supposed to be a joke, I take it?

Ben was such a clown, Mom. He didn't take anything seriously. He would prefer this to an elegy, don't you think? Anyway, that one was really just practice. I wrote a few others—Here.

I hand her my notebook and realize my misstep as she receives it. My mouth dries up.

She reads the poems silently, leaning against the doorjamb. Amongst the crappy verses, this one:

The coroner said it was final  
'Your brother was not suicidal'  
But one caveat  
Was our little chat  
When you said you resented survival

My mother looks up and asks, What chat, Maddie? Her face is stone. Maddie, what chat?

I press my thumbs hard into the creases of my eyelids.

A chat we had a few weeks before he died. He was high, Mom, it was narcotic-fuelled drivel. He didn't mean what he was saying.

What was Benjamin saying?

He was being dramatic. You know how he got sometimes. He was feeling depressed, hopeless since Shelly moved on—but you knew that. Saying that he was tired of being Ben.

That nagging fester deep inside loosens and lodges itself in my throat. In this moment, I know it doesn't matter whether it was or wasn't an accident. In the end it's the same: Ben's not here.

My mom is looking crumpled despite her tree-like posture. I want to wrap her in my apology but as I stand to hug her, like an accordion puffing with air, she regains her former aspect. *Those left behind* implies that death goes ahead, doesn't it? Pat asked this at one of our first meetings. And I think of my mother sitting stock-still in lotus position, running, on the inside, towards Ben.

What kind of a name is that? Dead Brothers Club, she grumbles, but doesn't wait for a response. The kettle is screeching on the stovetop. She sets my notebook down beside the coroner's report and walks away.

I'm still paralyzed on the leather desk chair when she reappears in the doorway moments later and says: It's not your fault, Maddie. Ben needed help. He was a mess. We all knew.

Three days after Ben died, a few days before the funeral, my family was given the number of a guy whose special job it was to clean crime and trauma scenes. I met him at my brother's apartment, where my parents planned to join me later that afternoon to begin the daunting task of sorting and packing Ben's things. I can't recall the man's name but I remember fixating on his gloves, watching as they peeled the putrefied bedding from the mattress. I fought the impulse to tackle him (he was huge, I would have failed) and steal away with the shit-smelling sheets. It seemed berserk to me at the time that this last linkage to the physical person of Ben would be disposed as hazardous waste.

My parents and I made a pact that day, in the yeasty oregano stench of a Subway franchise on Elmwood. We were gutted from the cleaning. I picked apart a cheese bun and shared a box of chocolate milk with my Mom. My Dad ate a bag of Sun Chips.

We promised to never blame ourselves.

I walk into the kitchen carrying a cracked basket full of wadded clothing—the laundry that never dies. My Mom is holding a pen, she's been writing in her journal with the Paulo Coelho quote on the cover. The puzzle's been pushed aside, its rigid segments of sea scattered on a piece of cardboard. My Dad is here too, by the sink, quietly petting the dog. The three of us in a room.

How about this, she says when she sees me, and reads from her journal.

Benjamin you were a joker

Remember the time we played poker?



You hid all the queens  
Inside of your jeans  
And said you were going for broke.

I remember that day, with the queens in the jeans, I say. We were just kids.

And then I am crying and my Mom is crying.

The queens in the jeans, she echoes, and begins to laugh.

## JANE PINCHES, REGISTERED MASSAGE THERAPIST

The window proclaimed the clinic's name in colourful cursive: *You Knead Me! Massage Therapy*, and beneath it: *Jane Pinches, RMT. Walk-ins welcome!* Jane had done the sign herself, dipping a *Dollarama* paint brush into acrylic globs of royal blue and mint green squeezed from tubes onto a torn piece of cardboard. Irises, lilies and a lumpy purple butterfly bedecked the pane with perpetual spring. Ru, at first, had mistaken it for a daycare, but when she Googled *massage therapist near me*, the results pinned on the map revealed her error. *You Knead Me!* had no reviews.

After her first two visits, her sinuses cleared and her bloating relaxed. Now Ru was back for a third. She loitered in the entrance by the wicker basket that contained only two pairs of guest slippers. More couldn't fit; they were bulky plush animals with foot slots, shaped like horses and cats.

I gotta get off the phone, said Ru, I'm here.

She waved to Jane and mouthed *hi! sorry!* rolling her eyes a little to show that the person on the other end was long-winded. From behind the reception desk, Jane brushed the apology out of the air—*no, don't worry, take your time*, she said silently, enunciating each word as though her jaws were fused with taffy. A Band-Aid swaddled her middle finger.

Yeah, at the massage therapist's, she said, bending to unzip her boots with the phone clenched between her cheek and shoulder. I'll call you later.

The voice on the other end projected into the room:

That nutbar in Hochelaga you were telling me about?

Hot prickles flourished under her skin: This wasn't the first time her phone had gone rogue, switching into speakerphone mode at the bluntest nudge.

No, that was the peanut butter one, she blurted, and hung up.

Jane appeared in a turtleneck patterned with turtles wearing turtlenecks beneath a fuchsia cardigan, curly bob amok, to take Ru's coat. They were around the same age, approaching forty.

Just like in the movies! Jane said. Hanging up without saying goodbye, like, *Glad to hear your bunion's gone, click! Genoa and Hungarian are two types of salami, click!*

Each time Jane said *click* she used her thumb and pinky to demonstrate hanging-up. Ru overlaughed, burning. They were fumbling attempts to hang as a team her Gore-Tex shell on the freestanding rack. Every time it slipped off the wire they squatted in unison to lift it off the cracked marble tile, up and down, like partners in a Russian folk dance.

I forget who pointed that out, Oprah maybe? But it's true. Nobody on TV says bye before hanging up, and now that I've pointed it out, just watch. You'll notice.

Oprah?

It was her or Seinfeld.

The jacket finally stabilized on the hanger. There! said Ru. Now stay put.

Good dog, Jane said, patting the garment's sleeve affectionately.

It slunk to the ground as they made their way back to the studio.

The walls were a bright pistachio, hung with enlarged photos of tropical scenery—white sand beaches, palm trees, parrots—and posters illustrating the Human Meridians and Pressure Points, the Body's Digestive Pockets, and the Menstrual Chakras. An embroidered uterus stretched across a needlecraft hoop. In the corner, an oscillating fan swayed back and forth, clacking as it teetered on the uneven floor.

Don't mind the old drunk, said Jane.

Very rhythmic, said Ru.

Is the fragrance too much?

She assured her: Very refreshing.

On the window ledge, Satsuma oil burned in the porcelain castanets of an Andalusian dancer, beyond which stacks of vapour rose from the Molson factory across the river.

I'll let you change now, Jane said, heading for the door. But when she got there she halted and swiveled around, middle finger cocked.

Hot prickles again. *I can explain*, Ru was about to say, but Jane spoke:

In case you were worried about this—she pointed to the beige adhesive loosely wrapped around her digit—It's not in service today; but I can massage with the other four no problemo.

Geezus, she breathed out. What'd you do?

Nicked myself in the kitchen. Chopping cabbage—she mimed chopping. For sauerkraut.

Ru stared at the sepia water ring on a panel of dropped ceiling. She was naked under the polka dot sheet with an acupuncture needle stuck into the webbed crescent between her thumb and forefinger.

You're stiff as meringue, said Jane, pressing on a marble-sized nodule below Ru's clavicle.

Oof. I'm tender from racquetball.

Can you imagine I went more than thirty years believing it was called Rocket Ball?

Ru said she couldn't as Jane's fingertip, like a beak, pecked the nodule many times in quick succession until Ru felt something dislodge.

Rocket ball! Because the ball travels so fast. Ready for a release maneuver?

Ru nodded. It *is* the zippiest ball in sports.

Jane ran her fingers along the knotty ropes of tissue that connected the hip and pelvic bones. Farting during this manipulation is normal, she said. The goal, even.

I'm not feeling overly gassy but good to know.

The body has secret pockets of gas. Releasing them is good for digestion but unlike you most patients are squeamish about abdominal massage. Bend your right leg, please. She fit her palm over Ru's kneecap and tilted the leg inward while pressing her thumb into her pelvis, quickly but gently, as though popping a cell of bubble wrap. A toot evacuated.

You're very skilled at your work, said Ru.

Don't say that word!

Which word?

W\*\*k. It's a swear. I see it in my head as double-u asterisk asterisk kay. Bend your other leg, please.

Because you love your job so much that it doesn't feel like work?

Jane did the knee-tilt bubble-pop thing on the other side to the same effect.

It certainly *does* feel like w\*\*k! Helping my clients make peace with their bodies. Shame-vessels, I call them in my head, though I'm trying to come up with something more...Jane raised Ru's arm toward the ceiling in a floppy salute. Uplifting, she said.

Glory-vessels?

Jane narrowed her eyes, considering. An improvement, she said.

So *work* is a swear word because...?

Because it rolls off the tongue like a lashing, versus, for example, the f word, which feels good to say. The f word shouldn't be a swear word at all! Everybody likes to say fuck. Say it. Fuck.

Fuck, Ru mumbled.

No no. Fuck!

Fuck!

Good. Now turn onto your stomach and put your face in the face hole while I fix the CD.

The track was skipping where it usually skipped, looping the truncated blare of a foghorn. *Tides & Twists*, as the soundtrack was called, featured orchestral arrangements of Chubby Checker songs intermixed with lapping waves and seagull cries.

I want my clients to get the impression they're guests at a seaside resort, said Jane. She was chattier than usual, more fidgety. The kind where the house band plays by tiki light on a big garden patio every night. And people order calamari.

With her cheeks puckering in the hollow of the leather headrest, Ru said: I can see it. And the fan's wind is like an ocean breeze.

A breeze that whispers clickety-clack, said Jane, tableside again. Her palm was splayed over the back of Ru's head, fingers buried in hair. Let's finish with a maxillary expungement, she said. Open your eyes as wide as they'll go and fill your lungs for a count of three.

Here she lifted Ru's head by the hair so that her face hovered a millimeter or two above the donut-shaped headrest. Then she said, Exhale! and smooshed it back into the hole. Stick out your tongue. Say *hhhhhhkkkkggghhh!*

*Hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhkkkkgggh...cggh cggh...*

Drops of spittle landed on Jane's white Reeboks as the cellos on "Twist Again" diminuendoed to a close and the CD whirred to a stop. The room was suddenly quiet. Jane closed her eyes and brought her hands to hover in benediction over Ru's crown, beginning the mantra with which she closed every session:

*I release angry thoughts and feelings, I am gentle with myself and all beings, I am grateful for this sloppy but extraordinary sensorium through which I come to know the world and my own primordial dignity, & etc.*

Jane opened her eyes, paling to find the Band-Aid on her finger vanished.

Well that's a wrap!

When Ru was dressed she joined Jane in the reception area. I feel fantastic, she said, leaning against her desk. A little like jelly.

That's because I've preserved you, she quipped, but dispiritedly, without looking up. She was jotting something down with a pen like a torpedo, girthy with clickable multicolours, in the margin of *You Knead Me!*'s appointment book—a creased thing with curled up corners full of names and times scratched-out and rewritten. But despite the busy scrawl, it was easy to see that bookings were spare.

I'm ready to settle up if you are, said Ru.

Jane finished her "note," which was just the word *appointment* written over and over again, and looked up. Ru, she said. There's something I need to tell you.

Ru's heart was a hummingbird's. I know what it is. And I'm so sorry.

Jane's eyeballs surged out from their sockets. *You know?*

I know you heard earlier. What my friend said.

But you know? About the wart?

What wart?

Jane brandished her freshly bandaged finger. The one under here! There was never any cabbage. I don't even like sauerkraut.

Really? That's all? Who cares! I'd still see you if you had ten warts!

I know I'm a nutbar!

Me too! That's what I told my friend. We're the same.



While they ping ponged confessions, Jane processed Ru's credit card and filled out an insurance receipt. She made her fore and middle fingers do the can-can on the form before tearing it out of the book. I'll walk you to the door, she said.

They bent to collect Ru's coat from off the floor, each taking charge of an empty sleeve. A used bandage, still sealed into a loop and entwined with a few long hairs, fell to the mat before them.

Where did that come from? Ru asked.

Jane pointed to Ru's hair.

They stared at it for a moment.

Same time next week, said Ru.

## TIES THAT BIND

Joy Marion was concerned with going to hell. Tongues of flame, pulsating embers, prisoners charred and shrieking in manacles: images churning at any given time in the vat of her ten-year-old imagination. There were lighter ones too, of course. Peaceable animals. Landscapes drenched in summer weather. She was a normal Catholic girl.

Joy and her brother Léo, a brand new teenager, came home from school and stood in the kitchen contemplating snacks. The pantry, their oyster. Stacked cylinders of tuna, cut green beans, instant ramen, “real fruit” jellies shaped like sports equipment, cookies and crackers in boxes with their flaps up, all options.

You didn’t get detention? Joy asked.

At Special Assembly today he had blurted something obscene about genitals during the chorus of *He Towers Over Me With Love*.

I charmed my way out of it, he boasted.

You shouldn’t have said that though. It was bad.

Léo rolled his eyes and whisked a packet of fruit nubs from the box, knocking it over in the process. Whatever, he said, heading for the door.

Joy stood the box upright. For herself she chose a handful of Triscuits, which she stuffed into the kangaroo pouch of her windbreaker and nibbled on the way to Courtney’s.

When she got there, she found Courtney perched on the stoop before an impressive array of felt pens. Courtney was tall with acorn-brown hair that fell to her shoulders in a hurry—the antithesis of Joy’s, which expanded outward like a sheep’s around her heart-shaped face. From Courtney’s small earlobes dangled big silver hoops, a style of earring that Joy was not allowed to wear. In any case she complied willingly, fearing tragic snags and gore.

Looking up from her leather-bound sketchbook, Courtney said, That was funny what your brother said today. He’s gutsy.

He kind of ruined the song, Joy grumbled, settling onto the step. And yet, recalling how the other kids had laughed and afterwards doted on him in the halls, she gave an inward curtsy: My brother, ladies and gentlemen.

Check it out, said Courtney, passing her the book. Do you like them?

Are they superheroes? Like, from a foreign country?

They’re Hindu gods. From India. That blue one with her tongue sticking out is Kali. She cuts off the heads of men and strings them around her neck like a necklace.

That’s disgusting! said Joy. Just looking at the image felt wrong.

Calm down, she’s not real.

Why does she cut their heads off?

Probably because all men are pigs or something, how should I know?

Her pulse relaxed when she flipped to the sketch of a jewel-studded elephant reposing in a crown of petals. This one’s my favourite, she said.

That’s Ganesha. We’re going to his temple next month, when we go to India.

It was hard for Joy to keep up. The farthest from home she'd ever been was three hours by car, to Kingston, for her brother's soccer tournament. They'd got to stay in a hotel with a waterslide.

Will you have to make a sacrifice, like with blood and all that? At the temple?

Don't you know anything? she scowled. Nobody does that anymore. She stole back her sketchbook and suggested that they do something different: makeovers.

I liked your drawings, Joy faltered, as Courtney went inside.

She came back out clutching a quilted pouch imprinted with peace signs. My mom bought this new kind of lipstick, she said. I could try it on you.

Are you allowed to use it?

I asked and it's fine. Sit closer.

Your mom's not even home.

We have an agreement and it's none of your business.

She pulled a small bottle of viscous liquid from the bag, a hot glossy pink. It's called Ru Paul, she said. Like the drag queen.

Joy sort of knew about drag queens, and had the feeling they were illegal. But she wasn't about to ask. It looks like nail polish, she said, trying to glimpse the label as Courtney closed her palm around the tiny glass jar, making it disappear.

Hold still, she said, clamping Joy's chin in a death grip. Don't you trust me?

It smells like chemicals, Joy lisped.

The wand swooped in, dripping with magenta, brushing top and bottom lips.

Then burning. Tightness.

Joy leapt up, hurtling through the screen door towards the bathroom, where she locked herself in, struggling to contain the closed-throat feeling that always turned into tears.

Courtney was knocking.

Joy? Let me in. It was only a joke.

Sobs jostled the close-up reflection of her lips in the mirror as she examined the crude strokes of Ru Paul. Why had she let her do it? She took a bar of soap to her mouth and rubbed, but the colour wouldn't budge. She scraped frantically with her fingernails wondering when her lips would fall off. Above the toilet a framed photograph of a grinning man in a burgundy robe—the Dalai Lama—mocked her stupidity.

I have Cutex and cotton balls. Open up!

Reluctantly, she rotated the gold dial on the knob.

Finally, Courtney huffed, leading Joy by the shoulder to the toilet bowl. Sit on the lid, she said.

Don't touch me, she growled, shaking her off.

Courtney handed over the acetone-soaked wad. Fine. You do it, she said.

She seared the varnish from her lips thinking, Never again will I trust her.

I'm going home, she announced. It's almost supper.

Joy made it past the entrance crammed with every make and model of Birkenstock, to the end of the driveway where the Westfalia was parked, before Courtney caught up to her.

I'm sorry, she said. Will you forgive me?

Joy dug her sneaker-toe into tar that filled a crack. Maybe, she said. I'll have to think about it.

She walked home, stinging.

Which did she want? To yank the hoops from Courtney's ears and watch them bleed?—a thought so violent she feared for her soul? Or to forget the whole thing, turn the other cheek? Perhaps if she left a little bouquet of buttercups on Courtney's stoop to smooth things over? Nothing was resolved when Joy turned onto her street to find Maisie Vikanza barreling toward her from ten feet away.

Scott Baird peed inside your brother's ball cap! she erupted. Scott and his friend pulled up in a car that had *two* mufflers. Two! And they got out and Scott said, *Nice hat, retard* to your brother. Scott's friend was even bigger than Scott and he took Léo's hat and threw it on our lawn upside-down. And then Scott peed in it! In front of everybody!

Joy ran toward the small crowd of neighbourhood kids that had gathered on the Vikanza's lawn, expecting to find Léo center stage, bragging about the wisecracks he had made to put Scott and his friend—despotic eighteen year-olds with a flare for drag-racing—in their place.

She found him off to the side plucking blades of grass into a pile. A few of the younger kids hovered about him silently; the others formed a ring around his soggy hat.

Is it true about Scott?

His voice was barely audible. My hat's wrecked, he said.

Mom and Dad just got you that hat. If you tell they might be mad. Or Scott and his friend might beat you up. Are you going to tell?

Imagining the fallout, her throat closed up again.

I don't know, Joy. Leave me alone, he said, ripping a patch of grass up by the roots.

The kids on the block were heading home now, and they stared as they went.

Joy hissed: You have to get up now. It's almost supper.

He walked a few paces ahead of her, muttering: That sunuvabitch.

She let his language slide, kicked him a stone. He caught the rebound off the curb and passed it back.

Courtney put nail polish on my lips today after school, she told him, punting the rock so hard it lodged in the sewer grate at the end of their driveway.

He drew a deep breath and asked if she was okay, then he said: Forget her. You're better than her.

The endorsement shone in her chest like a silver coin.

I hate Scott Baird more than anyone in the world, she said. If I had my way, I would chop off his head. And wear it as a hat.

Léo's eyes stayed downcast, but she glimpsed a smile.

Spaghetti would be ready in five. Joy arranged cups and cutlery on spongy floral place mats, Léo laid plates. Empty jars of Ragù sauce accumulated on the

counter next to the fridge, an old clunker that displayed with round black magnets the kids' most recent school portraits and the poem "Footprints" on a bookmark.

Their dad doled out clumps of noodles and started eating. Grace was skipped, as usual.

How was Courtney's today? asked Mrs. Marion.

Fine.

Were Mr. and Mrs. Cole home?

Nope.

Joy's hand played mama bird, lowering noodles one at a time into her gaped jaws to prevent any sauce from making contact with her lips—the tomato acid burned. Across the table, Leo strung noodles over each fork tine and watched them slither back to his plate.

Their parents exchanged looks.

Okay. What's going on? asked Mr. Marion, setting down his fork.

We ate too many snacks after school, said Joy, so we're not hungry.

Joy ate a whole box of crackers, Léo said, grinning.

Léo had ten Cheese Strings.

We don't have Cheese Strings, their mom said.

Under the table, Léo kicked his sister and shot her a *nice going* look. I got in trouble at assembly today, he said. That's all.

He yelled "ball sacks" during hymn and was sent to Father Lunny's office.

Ball sacks? said his dad. Classy. What did Father Lunny have to say?

That heaven was for the meek or something. And to watch my tongue.



And did you apologize?

I promised to repent as soon as possible.

Joy suppressed a scoff.

Come on mom, Léo said, noticing her crossed arms and hard gaze. Forgive and forget, right?

Two decades' worth of thin yellow spines aligned on the bookcase shelves. Joy selected an issue featuring India's Lagoons, and read it on the den floor after dinner. The pictures telescoped her into a narrow channel of the Ganges overhung with gargantuan tropical blossoms and melons she learned were called jackfruit. The longer she stared, the more the bulbous fruit blurred into blisters and the more the blood-red blooms resembled lips. Blisters and lips and lips and blisters—the page swam with them. She zoomed out from the grotesque canvas when Léo came in.

You know where Scott and Courtney can go? he asked.

To Siberia? she said. Wasn't that where no one wanted to go?

To H-E-L-L, said her brother. Know how we could get back at Scott?

Pee in *his* hat? she suggested.

No dum-dum. We could sabotage his car. I found an easy way to do it on the internet.

"We" could sabotage his car?

Well are you in?

How could she say no? They barely hung out anymore.

OK, she said, but is the thing we're going to do a sin?

Get a grip, Joy. This isn't about that.

It wasn't about that. So she imagined Courtney floating down an Indian canal in some primitive catamaran as the plants along the bank shot forth barbed tendrils that cut and stung as they enveloped her entire family in ropy webbing.

I'm in, she said. Can we stop at Courtney's on the way back?

The Bairds' lived two blocks west, in the house with the turret and the triple car garage. On their way over, Joy and her brother passed Maisie Vikanza doodling flowers on the sidewalk with fat peach chalk. Your hat's still here! she called, and was ignored.

What do we do if anyone's around? asked Joy.

Circle the block until the coast is clear, he said. Zero witnesses.

But they hadn't anticipated arriving to find Scott's red Camaro missing from the driveway. Léo lost all the zip in his pace when he saw, stopping short.

Oh, said Joy, sinking too. What were you going to do, anyway?

He took a twist-tied baggie of granulated sugar from his coat pocket. Dump this into his gas tank, he said. It ruins the engine.

Well should we hide in the bushes? Until he comes home?

Who knows when that'll be, he moped.

Maybe it's in the garage and we could break in?

He stared at her, his faint smile and the tilt of his eyebrows asking, Who *are* you?

Let's just go to Courtney's, she said quickly.

Vamoose, he said, drop-kicking the sugar satchel down the street.

The Cole's Westfalia, parmesan cheese with tangerine accents, blocked the line of sight to the door and windows of their brick bungalow.

Keep watch, she said, creeping around the side of the camper, where she took from her pocket Midnight Glam, a bottle of metallic blue nail polish. On the van's side panel she painted a pair of lips the size of a baby's fist, with a caption above that read:  
ASK COURTNEY ABOUT ME.

Léo approved, lowering his hand for Joy to slap before they scrambled.

I guess I shouldn't expect any postcards from India, said Joy. Does this make me a bad person?

No, he said. What do you think?

I don't know, she said. But I feel happy.

## GABOR

My brother can imagine things into being. Even as a child he had this ability, which garnered praise from the adults I loved. I remember sitting around the dining table pitting cherries for pies and sour soup; I was eight, Gabor, six. I worked dutifully while he arranged the cast-aside stems into an intricate pattern not unlike the brocade scroll of our *anya's* hand-stitched cottons.

Quit fiddling, I said to him.

My *anya* frowned. Be kind to your brother, Magda, she said, then glanced at his mosaic. Such magnificence! she cried. By the way she took and gently joggled his forearm with her ruby-stained hand, blackened in the wrinkles with dried juice, you could tell that she meant it. Explain me your art, she asked in the awkward English (it was her third language) that I mocked and cherished.

I'm casting a spell on the ponies, my brother said.

You're crazy! I cried, and threw a cherry at his head, which our mother and *anya* ignored, and which Gabor calmly picked up from where it landed at the foot of the Victrola. He returned the cherry to the big ceramic bowl before resuming his tinkering. His even temper infuriated me.

Magda, can't you see the stars and the hay bales? my mother asked.

It was only a dumb pattern of stems.

In the middle of the night I heard Gabor crying, something he almost never did even though he was just six. I had given myself an ulcer from all the cherries I had wolfed, and laid in bed, rocking from side to side, long after the lights went out.

Magda? he whimpered, from his cot across the room.

I asked him what was the matter.

Our tree. We took all of its cherries.

So? That's what they're for. There's still some on the high branches for the birds. (He was crazy about birds).

But now the tree's lonely, he said.

I went over and petted his curly head. But we get to eat pie, I said. Now no more giving drinks to the mice.

It was a Hungarian expression that Gabor often used with me. It meant stop crying.

When the bus dropped me off after school the next day, Gabor was there, looking like he had to pee or something. He led me around back, to where the cherry tree stood in the meadow that connected to 300 acres of pasture, corn and potato crops.

Look! he beamed. The cherries came back!

All around the tree's base and to its lowest branches he had taped hundreds of jaggedy red circles. When he showed me the blisters on his fingers from all the cutting, I felt queasy.

It was only a coincidence, but at the end of that summer, the tree bloomed again and a second crop of cherries appeared, too runty for pie.

Our parents and our mother's mother—our *anya*—fled Hungary for Austria and then Canada during the Uprising, landing in Renfrew County in 1956 with nothing but

a trunk of handicrafts. I've always been wary of Catholics, where if you're a woman you're either a saint or a prostitute, but they can't be all bad because a group of them got together and raised money so that my parents could secure some land. The farmhouse they built, our childhood home, is where Gabor lives today. He moved back five years ago after his wife Mary died from a bullet to the head. A kid who shouldn't have been hunting.

The order of passing in our family goes like this: Mary, our father, our *anya*. Missing them has tired me; it's as though there are little weights attached to my eyelashes, and bigger ones strung from each rib. Three deaths in five years, *anya's* just last fall. Gabor's become even more reclusive—always tinkering.

For seventeen years I've tended bar at the Wilno Tavern off Highway 60, *the church of latter-day hippies*, as my mother calls it, and I guess that makes me one. I was there before everything white became yellow: the lace window valances, the Canada flag nailed to the wood paneling, the checked cloth napkins. Under the row of wooden ovals onto which are mounted taxidermied pike and pickerel, there's a dartboard whose cork is splitting. Once, Mary dragged Gabor out for a game of 501 and a round of whiskey and shit hit the fan. My brother rubs some people the wrong way by virtue of being awkward—I always tell him to blink more when he's talking to people, for one. Well this kid I had never served before was there, he had a lot of stickers on his truck, and Gabor must have rubbed him the wrong way because one minute Mary was whooping over a bullseye, and the next, Gabor had a dart in his cheek. No one knew exactly how it started, but the kid had yanked the dart from the board and stuck it in my brother's face. The whole bar helped kick him out, and then

Gabor sat for a while unspeaking, holding Mary's hand, dabbing his bloody cheek. The wound left a crescent moon scar.

Two months ago, Tully Scott came in for a Carlsberg.

I dropped in on Gabi this morning, she yelled—her hearing was going. He said he'd watch Shaika and Aiko while I'm down visiting Noah in Santa Fe. Three weeks I'll be gone!

Tully's 70, zippy as a pickle, with stately jowls and a sea salt bob that sticks out in sparse tufts from under her trucker hat. She's been living on the farm next to ours since Mum and Dad got off the boat.

Those brutes sure love your brother, she continued, referring to her hulking Akitas. You should have seen their tails go when I mentioned his name.

I said, If Gabor had a tail, I bet it would wag for them, too.

They'll be bunking with him up at the farmhouse, said Tully. Gabor said it was no problem, on account of what happened at Bev Nowak's.

I told her I had heard.

Fritz Mayr, sipping his 4 o'clock Coors at the far end of the bar, said, Everyone this side of Killaloe has heard. Not the first time wolves have poached a herd of cattle.

Fritz was a regular. On the wall, there was a photo from twenty years ago of him in a loose necktie clamping a daisy between his teeth. He wore rings now, and had a paunch. Tully and I ignored him.

The dogs will be good company for him, I said.

Probably the only ones who can stand his company are dogs, said Fritz.

Watch your tongue, barked Tully.

No offence, Magda, but he gets weirder by the hour.

None taken, I said. As someone with a strong work ethic who minds his own business, I could see why Gabor wouldn't appeal to you.

Ha ha, he said.

She wasn't joking, said Tully.

All I was saying, Fritz said, is that between you and your brother, you got all the graces.

Tully drained her bottle. You couldn't curry her favour back in 1985 and you sure as eggs can't now, she shouted.

I was overdue for a visit. Shaika and Aiko tore around the side of the house to greet my car as it pulled up Gabor's laneway. He trailed behind them in rubber boots, carrying a hunk of branch, smiling.

Look at those floopsy tongues! he said, patting their bulbous heads while their tails, as thick as biceps, wagged half-moons into the gravel like windshield wipers. He catapulted the stick across the field and sent the dogs flying, then we hugged. He invited me in for a tea.

The house was a minefield of books, and smelled like bacon. I put the kettle on the stove and Gabor went straight away to the double pedestal oak table, hunkered down, and began fiddling with a watch. Miniature screws, cogs, tools, metal thingamajigs, diagrams and sketches were scattered on the table around his breakfast plate, which was bare aside from a sheen of grease and a few beads of maple syrup.



Is that Mary's old Movado? I asked.

He nodded, picking up a loupe.

She had such bony wrists, I said.

They were five inches around.

The dogs were whining at the door and I let them in. They barreled through the hallway and tackled my brother in his chair, nearly knocking him to the ground. He pet them back to calmness.

Usually when I visited, I milled about the farmhouse, flipping over books that hung from armrests to see which arcane subjects he was into now, or rummaging through our *anya's* record collection in the Victrola cabinet that was full of Hungarian peasant music and Glen Campbell. Gabor would keep working and ignore me—we were comfortable like that. Maybe it was the little grin he wore while the dogs sat at his feet, drooling sticky pools onto the linoleum, but he seemed more sociable on this particular visit.

I've been missing them more than usual, I said. You too?

I wasn't prepared for his *No*, which felt like getting punched. I knew better than to ask.

He turned a dial inside the watch face with a little key, and went on: I've put them in things. So no, I don't miss them.

You've put them in things, I echoed. What do you mean?

I know where to find their shapes.

In a conversation with my brother, you had to work. I asked, Like how you used *anya's* rocking chair to trim the gable above Mum's in-law suite? He had whittled and

aligned the spindles to follow the curvature of our grandmother's spine. I found it morbid, and avoided looking up at the structure that was attached to the back of my own home.

Like that, he said, and started messing around with the dogs, tracing circles in the air around their snouts. Eventually he got up and placed the skillet of congealed grease on the floor for them.

Tully would skin you alive if she saw that.

I hadn't expected to see him again so soon after our visit. At 6 a.m. two mornings afterward he was on my stoop, shaking, in the same canvas pants and barn coat he had on the day before, except now they were rich with dirt just like his fingernails. I recognized the bushy tails that dangled from his belt loop and braced myself in the doorjamb.

I made him wash his hands. We sat at my kitchen table in the pearl light of daybreak, and he asked for a cigarette. It took him a full cup of coffee before he was ready to speak.

I had a premonition, he said. Feathers were flying. I dreamed the wolves got into Tully's hens. So I loaded the truck, this was yesterday, with electrical wire and went to put a fence up. When I got home, Aiko was in the driveway, raving, turning round and round in circles. I whistled. Gabor drew a deep breath, and then a few more. No Shaika, he said.

Aiko had led him across the pasture to the edge of the woods, where he saw something scarlet in the grass. A chewed foreleg—a deer or a calf's. Then, fifty feet

beyond it, the writhing form that was Shaika. The dog convulsed and gurgled and had foam on her lips, but no visible wounds. Gabor thought she was having a seizure. He ran with Shaika in his arms to the truck and placed her on the passenger seat. Driving to the vet's, he kept telling her, *hang on, hang on*, as he watched her body contract into a hard crescent, gurgle, contract again. They were near the clinic when he realized about the foreleg. If he turned back now, Shaika would probably die; if he didn't, Aiko certainly would. He braked and reversed. By the time he'd found Aiko, it was too late.

When he finished his story, he closed his eyes. His shaking had been replaced by a water-like stillness. We listened to a second pot of coffee percolate from start to finish.

I asked about the tails.

He'd cut them with a machete before burying the dogs in Tully's plot.

Down at the Tavern, people were talking. Erna Kowalski had seen Gabor at the Ultramar with the tails hanging from his belt. She pried and I told her my brother had avant-garde taste in accessories. I heard whispers of *witch doctor* and *necrophile*, and there was even a theory going around that he was the Wilno Window Sniper—a serial killer who had shot three people in their homes through closed windows. I called the assholes out. I didn't understand my brother, but he was none of those things.

Last week, I saw Tully for the first time since the incident.

On the house, I said, sliding her a Carlsberg and giving her hand a little squeeze. She squeezed back twice.

The bitter part of me wanted to report Bev Nowak to the SPCA, she confessed, for planting that poisoned meat. But Bev showed up at my door, hunched in half with remorse, eyes like tomatoes, and what could I do but just hug her like the dickens?

Tully's heart could pull an oxcart full of iron up a hill.

I seen Gabor this morning, said Vernie Horvath, a regular who was having his band saw repaired by my brother. He musta had about a dozen glass carboys lined up by the window in his workshop, each one filled with some kind of jelly and with a bulrush or some plant sticking out the top. He turned to Tully—You might want to block your ears for this part.

I'm deaf, she said.

Well he was wrapping them dogs' tails in stinging nettles. With his bare hands!

I looked at Tully for a flinch or some sign of heartache. She noticed and said, Those tails aren't much good to my dogs six feet under, Magda.

I told them about the time when, as kids, Gabor and I found ourselves in a patch of stinging nettles, and only I emerged blistered and itching. I wanted to deflect questions about what he was up to. Another one of his projects, I assumed, like how after Mary died, he built a pond overnight. One day he was renting a backhoe, and the next he was transplanting bulrushes, yarrow and canary grass that took root and flourished overnight as if enchanted.

Fritz Mayr groaned that he should've gotten a permit.

The stone path leading to my mother's in-law entrance is thick with pansies and dandelions that she won't let me pull. We had citrus tea and rétes together this morning, a month since the incident.

She swirled her tea incessantly—her worry always made itself frenetic. Tully says your brother is building something near the pond that looks like a wooden torpedo, she said. I called him to ask what. He sounded like he had a fever, and told me just: *An experiment*. Nice explanation for your mother!

Typical, I said.

We stared into our porcelain.

I'll check in on him after my shift. I looked at my watch and groaned. I should get going, I said, threading my stack of bangles back onto my wrist.

My mother got up slowly—her bones were creaky now—and kissed the top of my head. You're such different birds, you and your brother, she said. For example, you don't like to work.

I work!

You drink ale.

It's part of the job!

Like a horse with monkey's ears.

It's been seventeen years of this exchange.

It was sundown when I got to the farmhouse. It's not like the dogs had been there long, but I missed their greeting as I stepped out of the car. Missing compounds

missing. The drone of crickets that usually sounded from the field beside the driveway had vanished with the change of seasons, and the wind chimes in the trellis were tangled and didn't sound. The quiet followed me up the steps of the back entrance. Gabor? I called, but he wasn't inside.

I walked toward the A-frame timber barn painted jade, noticing for the first time that a series of hexagrams had been carved into a few of the panels. I passed the gnarled cherry tree (Gabor picked its fruit now) and traveled along the gully that separates the pasture from the forest area, on the other side of which is Tully's land, and came to the pond beside which stood the wooden torpedo Tully had described. From up close it was more like a wizard's dwelling: a stout pagoda with three tiered roofs painted all over with strange symbols. Gabor was sitting in an Adirondack chair overlooking the pond. Mary's wristwatch was on his lap.

I put my hand on his shoulder.

Aren't they extraordinary? he asked, without shifting his gaze.

The bulrushes?

Look at them fight over the stick! he chuckled.

He's off the deep end and I can't catch my breath. Who fight over?

*Look, Magda.*

And so I did. On the edge of the embankment, in a swishing stand of reeds, Shaiko and Aiko's tails had been, astoundingly, grafted. The sedges had been pruned to resemble their forms and when the wind rippled the stems, the dogs rollicked and rolled, ecstatic with life.

Thank you, I said. We stayed like that, looking, until the moon was high.

## THE TAKE OUT

The refrigerator door was a jumble of photographs, newspaper clippings and stickers with energetic slogans like *Be the Change You Want to See!* and *May the Forest Be With You!* and *Kiss Your Farmer!* A mangy fern in a white plastic basket sat atop the appliance.

Fran stared into the void. *Hellooo in there*, she called to the soy sauce, miso paste, Veganaise, half jar of chutney and other bottles of condiment lining the refrigerator walls.

Nothing.

She cupped her hand behind her ear and leaned in closer—Still no answer.

Sedgie said: God I'm hungr—

*Shhhhhh*, said Fran, now stooped and taking the pulse of a bundle of rapini whose leaves wilted over the lip of the crisper drawer. *I'm talking to the vegetables.*

OK, but you're wasting energy.

They're unresponsive. We've been neglectful!

In cable knit polyester and stretch pants, Fran, 24, shut the fridge door and joined Sedgie at the kitchen table where she sipped herbal tea from a mug with a cat photo on it—someone else's cat: the mug was thrifted. Sedgie was a decade Fran's senior and she wore, exclusively, black fabrics that were ripped at minimum along one edge. The two had met three years ago, dumpster diving produce from a Sobeys.

It's okay, said Sedgie, we'll use them up as soup stock.

We're not bad people?

Not a chance. Do we shop at Wal-Mart? Drive cars? Flush on yellow, even?

If it's pee, let it be.

Exactly. We just didn't get around to the vegetables. This week's been nuts.

It was the fourth night in a row Sedgie had come home late from Eco Space, where she co-chaired the board and oversaw three taskforces: Clean Your Climate, Forget Sprawl! and Animal Benefits. The latter was embroiled in an on-going debate over the purchase of worm composts. Its members were divided: Did keeping worms in plastic bins constitute captivity?

Still no consensus, she said, sighing like a horse through vibrating lips.

I wouldn't like to live in a plastic house if I were a worm, just saying.

Sedgie flashed her palm at Fran. I'm done talking about it for the day.

Wait, did you just *silence* me?

The loose fibers that bordered the Mayan tapestry strewn over the table made good fidget fodder. Sedgie twisted a thread around her index, snapped it off. Sorry, she said. I'm getting hangry—it's after 9 and there's nothing to eat.

You're forgiven...But your privilege is showing.

Fair enough. The rice and beans in dry storage *aren't* nothing.

Every grain has a tiny soul!

Well if we make beans we won't be eating until after ten.

We could pick up fresh veggies on Parc....

...But only Sternborg's would be open.

And we obviously can't go there...

Their sourcing practices are horrendous!



Did you hear that they import Belizean puppies with their papayas to breed for dog fighting?

So awful.

The refrigerator broadcast its hunger with an empty buzz while Fran munched her fingernails and Sedgie sucked her tea to the dregs. When their eyes met, Sedgie spoke first:

Just this once?

Is there any other option?

Sedgie reached for her flip phone.

Order me the usual, said Fran.

With mittened hands they unlocked their bikes from the wrought iron porch spindles where the potted ivy climbed—it was a cold November, they kept forgetting to move their plants indoors. Sedgie's messenger bag was crammed with a few weeks' worth of reusable takeout containers from Café Wavelength—where their order of coconut dhal, tempeh Caesar salad and almond mango lassis awaited pick-up—that you could return for a discount.

The empty bike lane was flanked curbside by a slope of leaves compacted by a month of wind and rain.

Thank Gaia all the fake cyclists are off the road now, said Fran.

Tell me about it, said Sedgie. They were stopped at a red light next to a McDonald's; deep-fried air surged up their nostrils.

I know it's bad and all, but sometimes that smell makes me yearn for childhood.  
Don't you ever just crave those french fries?

Never, said Sedgie. Her gaze was fixed on a group of friends leaving the restaurant, laughing, chatting, with an armload of trademarked paper bags and fountain drinks.

Hey, aren't they from the Animal Benefits committee?!

How can they eat there in good conscience?

Quit staring!

Truly baffling.

Are you jealous because we weren't invited to their party last weekend?

Why would I want to go to a Wes Anderson theme party?

To have fun?

Oh please. She looked up at the light. Is this the longest red ever, or what?

It was 9:30 when they stepped into the Café which was dimly lit and filled with the notes of a saxophone, a flute and an upright bass.

Your order went out for delivery ten minutes ago, said the boy behind the counter.

In a car? asked Fran.

Unfortunately, yes.

But we ordered pick-up, said Sedgie, unzipping her bag and brandishing the empty containers. We always order pick-up!

I'll refund those for you, he said. The driver should be back soon. In the meantime—he gestured toward the parted velvet curtains, too long and piling on the floor, that framed the provisional stage—Enjoy the impromptu jazz! Sit down! Relax!

They waited in coats and hats, slouched on the bench across from the counter.

We're being punished, said Fran, by the spirit of the dead rapini.

Saxophone blasts punctuated the slam poem of a young woman who had just joined the ensemble.

Those guys on stage are the only ones doing the punishing.

Please respect the artists, the boy said from behind the register.

Oh it's okay, she's a slam poet, too, said Fran, turning to Sedgie and whispering: I've got your back.

Everything will be cold, said Sedgie. Except the lassis. They'll be warm.

*I'm warm.*

I know, it's a freaking furnace in here.

Feel free to hang your coats on the hooks, said the boy.

How is he hearing everything we say? Fran whispered.

The flute trilled on a high-pitched note for a full minute. Sedgie rubbed her temples. It's ten o'clock, she said. Ten o'-fucking-clock.

The boy leaned over the counter: Can I offer you some water?

In unison the women flashed him their bottles.

Listen to my stomach, said Fran. It's groaning like a walrus.

You might be interested in this weekend's Body Acoustics workshop, said the boy.

Well the last one was useless, said Sedgie.

She's kidding, we completely enjoyed it.

We listened to our cells multiply for three hours, Fran.

Different strokes, said the boy.

Fran asked: Any word on our food?

Shouldn't be long, our driver's probably just lost again. Larold has no sense of direction!

Everybody clapped when a French horn player took the stage and began to blow a series of rapid toots; Sedgie got up and left, beelined it across the street to the Couche Tard while Fran, in a stupor, watched from the café window. A few minutes later Sedgie emerged with a bag that swelled in the middle like a jolly belly. Fran met her outside.

Here, said Sedgie, thrusting a Snickers bar into her mitt.

Caramel and peanuts covered in chocolate!

Shush up and eat, said Sedgie, shoving Twix rods one after the other down her gullet before pulling from the stash a bag of Doritos.

Hand over the Cool Ranch, said Fran.

I got you Sweet Chili Heat.

*The Cool Ranch. Pronto.*

She surrendered the bag and opened a box of Glosette raisins, which they shared, followed by a lemon Twinkie and sleeve of Corn Nuts. By 10:45 the bag was full of empty packaging; Sedgie scrunched it into a ball and chucked it into the public

trash can as the boy from Café Wavelength poked his head out the door, scanning the length of sidewalk.

There you are! he said. Great news: Larold's back!

He extended an arm from which the bagged food dangled. Better late than never, eh?

In the nook by the door, Sedgie sloughed the plastic bag from the paper bags which it contained and passed it back to the boy. Extra waste, she said.

So valid. But are you sure? Our reusable lids are notorious leakers.

Sedgie, remember last time when—

I'm sure, said Sedgie.

When she's sure, she's sure, said Fran, and they walked toward their bikes hand in mittened hand.

## THE LARPER

Kerf Schultz knew he dressed badly. Over forty and still with all his hair, he focused the bulk of his vanity above the neck and sent the rest of fashion to hell. Thick cotton crewnecks and variations on the cargo short (the cargo pant, for example) filled his dresser drawers. On top of his mainstays, he put on a knee-length ivory tunic imprinted with an Iron Cross—a hand-me-down from Stavros, one of the original *Guerriers de la Montagne* and Kerf's closest friend. *Surcoat, Kerf. Not tunic. Knights wear surcoats*, Stavros had corrected with feigned gravitas.

There were hours to kill before larping. He sat on the floor of his couchless Montreal living room and flipped between news and the History Channel before rising to spread half an avocado onto a piece of rye bread and remembering to mist the hibiscus. Standing at the window he cracked all of his knuckles, pulling each finger from its socket until the *pop* happened, saving the thumbs for last. No one around to drive bonkers anymore.

Cynthia had taken off with the couch three months ago, abducting it with the help of who the hell knows while Kerf was at work. Her new cross-fit friends maybe, lifting on the count of three with perfect form so no backaches. In a way, he was thankful that the old couch with its drooping core was gone. Let *her* be reminded of all the hours they had spent sardined in its orange plush.

These days Kerf sat on the floor among the hair, crumbs and nail clippings accumulating in the grooves of the coiling multicoloured rug—his new favourite spot.

He sat there cross-legged at midnight, eating Cheerios and watching *Monty Python*; sat there sloshing coffee, reading *Smithsonian* on Saturday mornings; sat there staring at the dark paisley wallpaper until its spiraled teardrop forms became colliding embryos—kaboom! There went her childbearing years.

Sat there picking his nose.

Kerf probably wouldn't have left the house at all on weekends if not for Stavros, who for years had beseeched him to join the unending pursuit of glory on the Live Action Role Play battlefield. Something about the acronym had given him pause.

LARP.

It sounded like thudding fat—*larp larp*, or the bark of a special needs seal, although just thinking that he felt on edge, bracing for a word from the high horse. You're passive aggressive, Cynthia told him; she didn't get that when he said he couldn't care less that someone at work had come on to her, he really didn't care—he wasn't pushing her buttons on purpose. Anyway, didn't all couples push buttons? *You have no buttons, Kerf.*

Stavros was over the moons of Jupiter when Kerf had finally said yes, a month after Cynthia's departure.

You'll play a cleric to start, he said. I have the vestments. A knight's surcoat beneath a monk's robe.

Can I still fight? Or do I only heal?

Primarily heal. But you will need to fight defensively, as others will want to destroy you.

During his first larp campaign, he'd come across a fallen lord with his neck bent groundward in supplication, awaiting salvation.

Is this what I do? Kerf asked, placing his hand on the damp head of this total stranger.

The revived lord got up, genuflected, and said, Thank you my good fellow.

Once when he had revived an orchid, Cynthia exclaimed: Kerfield, you have superpowers! and he had ballooned with pride and floated away for a moment. She was the only one who called him Kerfield. Because it sounded sophisticated, he assumed. But maybe he only reminded her of Garfield—the cat, not the president. His full name was four letters long.

Stavros and Kerf worked together at the Anjou Public Library where they made a point of checking in before weekends. In the 500 section, the Sciences, Stavros had taken a book from the trolley and read the title to Kerf: *Modern Perspectives on Gas Mechanics*. Scientists pin down society's shifting position on public flatulence.

Right next to *A History of Noble Gases*, Kerf rebutted. Something about the Tudors breaking wind?

Wit had never been Kerf's forte, but Stavros laughed his baritone, too-loud-for-a-library laugh.

Find yourself another chesterfield, Kerf?



You know, I rather enjoy not having one, he said, running his fingers along the spines of the books on the shelves. I'm more active around the house that way.

Stavros dipped an eyebrow. You lie like the rug you loaf upon, he said. Will you be joining the fray again this Sunday?

Despite my middling flair for drama, yes.

Who else was going to crisscross the field to heal the grievous wounds of knights and archers, assassins and fighter-thieves, bards and berserkers, so that they might again contribute to the ongoing defense of the Teutonic Order?

Excellent, said Stavros. Aileen will be there too. He lowered his voice—She likes to bring a smidge of wacky grass with her and espy from the sidelines.

Aileen and Stavros had met at pub trivia as grad students. Stavros was the MC; Aileen's table always came in first.

She likes to watch you in action?

Certainly, he said, then added, but I think it's like I feel about her oil paintings.

Kerf wondered if he should have gone with Cynthia to that community cocktail reception for the foundation about children's welfare she supported.

Kerf brushed the crumbs of breakfast and lunch from his tunic. He stuffed his larping gear—a pair of black gauntlets and a latex mace with long, soft spikes—into Cynthia's abandoned backpack with the ink stain on it that still looked wet. Years ago her rollerball pen had exploded after an evening French class. *Voulez-vous danser*

*avec moi?* he'd ask, every time she came back from her course. Eye rolls. Outside it was July and the cyclists flowed. It was nothing personal but he imagined swatting them off their steeds as they approached, leaving a trail of spandex-clad bodies on the way to the metro he used to call *their stop*.

Combat practice had already begun on the grassy strip along the Rivière des Prairies when Kerf of Trier, Cleric, looking gently pregnant in his tunic, arrived at Île-de-la-Visitation park—the best larping spot in the city. On the premises were an 18<sup>th</sup> century mill, dam, church, and the rubble of a cider-pressing house. Magic users in beaded arabesque cloaks gesticulated their spells as shielded warriors deflected blows from oversized foam swords. Aileen lazed on a lawn chair in sunglasses.

Greetings, brother! Stavros said, stepping off to the sidelines with his battlestaff. Robin is to early as owl is to...?

Late. I know, said Kerf, putting on his gauntlets. Terrible analogy, by the way.

Thank you. There aren't enough healers out there today, so tarry not. The campaign needs you.

With a bow, Stavros, black magic mage, turned and fled, his long ponytail dropping down his back in a thick line. At almost six feet six inches tall and slim as a spear, he fit the role well. Kerf threw the empty backpack ink-side-down onto the dusty perimeter and jogged toward a wounded faerie.

Earlier that spring, Cynthia had suggested that Kerf needed a so-called outlet. They sat on the front porch where Cynthia sipped her over-steeped Red Rose on the wicker loveseat, next to Kerf, who had his arm around her.

Outlet for what? he asked, imagining an electrical portal.

You know what I mean.

It was a conversation they'd had before, Kerf's emotional spectrum being the length of a flea. You're too... level, she said. In twelve years, I've never seen you get really mad about anything. Does nothing bother you, because you don't care? Or, I don't get it.

He pulled his arm out from around her shoulder. She was working herself up.

When they cut your vacation days at work, weren't you angry? Because you said, Oh well. Or when some asshole broke into your car and stole your laptop? Or when your mother called me, your *wife*, quote, more barren than Mars?

Mars is not technically barren.

Cynthia scowled.

My mom knows we've never been sure about kids—that was more a jab at my life choices.

You should have defended me, Kerf!

That happened five years ago, he said. But you're probably right.

His wife's clenched forehead softened as she began to cry. Milky orange drops spilled from her mug, which hung from two fingertips. Cynthia had long blond hair that

she scrunched into curls with Alberto styling gel after showering, making it look wet all the time, weighing down her ruddy, heart-shaped face. Kerf adored her.

He had leaned against the porch rails, paralyzed by his wife's sobbing. Sometimes when he tried to reach out with a hug, she cooled and stiffened. So he stayed put in the space between empathy and resentment, reminded of the dog his family had rescued when he was boy. It had bitten him without drawing blood, and then cowered in a corner with its tail between its legs. Kerf wanted to go to it, to comfort it, but he was afraid to get too close to the thing that had just bitten him. Eventually they put the dog down.

Cynthia stopped crying and looked up, eyebrows pressed in a tight V. You keep it all inside, she seethed. You're all gummed up.

Well would you prefer me to be *angrier*? I don't have much control over—

Oh but you do, Kerfield, she interrupted. Not over circumstances, no, but in everything else, yes you do. She walked past him into the house.

That's not my name, he said, after she closed the door.

Kerf's first attempt at an outlet was therapy. Jungian psychotherapy.

I'm not against it, he told Stavros, from whom he'd been given the business card of Dr. Elaine Hylman, the partner of a larping friend. The card showed a labyrinth inside a brain.

Dr. Hylman's suite was how Kerf had imagined it. A brown, brass-studded leather sofa was sandwiched between two mahogany end tables topped with Kleenex boxes. Also: Persian rugs, a sepia toned desktop globe, and in the corner, a droopy spathiphyllum. But an odd choice, to hang *The Scream* on the wall opposite the couch.

The doctor had a tiny face of tiny features and a blue complexion. Her pashmina scarf was wrapped around her neck about a thousand times and her hair, a tangle of livewires, was banana-clipped to the top of her head. She wanted to know why Kerf had come.

My wife, Cynthia, thinks I keep it all inside.

And do you?

No. Yes. Maybe. I don't know.

She cocked her head to the side and frowned.

Well, would it be so bad if I did?

Repression and denial are valid coping mechanisms, to a point.

He eyed the red sky of *The Scream*. I'm not in denial of anything, he said. I just don't think I have *surplus* emotions, like some people.

And what does having 'surplus emotions' look like?

Crying and all that. Losing my temper.

What about feelings in the opposite direction? Extreme joy, or the satisfaction of having fought for something and won, for example.

I have a stable personality, he shrugged.

Do you fear that experiencing strong emotion will destabilize you in some way?

I don't think emotions are what give a person substance, is all.

What does give a person substance for you?

Kerf scratched his curls.

I'd like to propose a visualization, said Dr. Hylman, with the intention of quickly exposing your conscious self to your shadow self. It can be jarring. Do you consent?

Be my Virgil, he said.

She gave him a dry look and the world's puniest sigh. I want you to close your eyes, she said, and imagine a slumbering wolf cub curled up at the base of your abdomen. Now imagine your wife, she's in there too.

In my stomach?

At its foothills. Now Cynthia begins prodding your sweet sleeping wolf with the snapped-off end of a stick. You see its peaceful little face begin to twitch awake, Kerf. And now the stick is prodding relentlessly, gashing even. The soft fluffy wolf fur is sopping up geysers of fresh blood.

Kerf shifted on the couch to accommodate his sudden nausea.

Your wolf is awake, and it's enraged by its unjust entrapment, furious at being prodded. Howl for your wolf friend, Kerf! Howl for its pain!

Out loud?!

Yes, Kerf, now!

What else could he do? He thrust his Adam's apple forward, tilted his chin to the heavens and...

... groaned. A whimper, really.

He opened his eyes to find Dr. Hylman's closed.

Had he failed therapy?

He began to weep.

She wasn't my style, he told Stavros when he had inquired as to whether he'd be going back.

When Kerf larked, his usually rounded shoulders straightened, his memory sharpened, his senses heightened. The flamboyant corals and cinnamons of the peonies along the footpath blazed in his peripheral vision. The hot earthworm and algae smell of the river filled his nostrils. A Viking with a pre-teen moustache was coming at him with a spongy axe.

With this blow, I avenge my queen, said Kerf, whacking his enemy's hand. The Viking sportingly put the damaged appendage behind his back. Then Kerf was accosted by a stonemason who drove a dagger into his foot, and he doubled over in mock pain. He could have recited a healing canticle to revive himself but he welcomed the break. The sweat rings under his arms were growing.

By the river, a Brittany Spaniel who looked like Poochie Shultz chased waves. They used to dress their spaniel in festive sweaters every December for their holiday photo card. *Merry Christmas from Ma, Pa and Poochie Schultz!* His fake wound smarted.

Cynthia had whitened when he came in from his post-dinner walk, with the leash but no dog.

Cynthia...I took him up the mountain. He chased a squirrel—something fast—into the bush.

Cynthia brushed past him, grabbing her coat and keys from the hook. Get in the car, she said.

I looked for him for almost an hour, said Kerf.

They had spent the night driving around Mont Royal in the Camry, through the cemetery up to Beaver Lake, around and around, until their hope ran dry and they turned back for home. In the morning Cynthia made posters.

The loss was something that hung about the house, stinking.

The strength of Odin won't save you from the coming raid!

It was Stavros. The Viking had struck him down.

*Nosce te ipsum*, recited Kerf, and was off to the rescue, cheering on, as he jogged, an elfin archer whose foam dart had pierced the ribcage of an enemy sorcerer.



*You're too... level.*

Dull, she'd meant.

He sliced the air with his mace.

Everything had seemed normal on the night before she left. The wine flowed freely as they competed to settle Catan with Stavros and Aileen in their West Island bungalow. Stavros had just shared the news that on most summer days he larked naked under his full-length tabard.

Stavros! You don't, said Aileen.

I do.

Creep country, Kerf muttered.

Boff! It's hotter than a flaming arrow out there. Do you want me to drop dead of sunstroke?

Aileen grinned and shook her head.

The dining table was strewn with the honeycombed board, wine glasses, chip bowls.

Fanning her cards seductively, Aileen proposed that Stavros give her two bricks for one ore.

Fat chance! You're one settlement away from victory, he said, swiping her hand away, chuckling. She grabbed his hand and bit it.

Cynthia poured herself more wine. I need wheat, she said. Stavros, I know you have wheat.

I have wheat, said Kerf. I'll trade you.

She ignored him. Stavros, you scoundrel, I know you've got a mitful.

I have wheat, Kerf chimed. I'll give you two for whatever you're getting rid of. He winked at her. She flicked him the card, spilling her glass of burgundy in the process. Oh, fuck, she said. Fuck.

We have hardwood, Stavros reassured her. Not a big deal!

Kerf grabbed a rag to soak up the liquid and Cynthia excused herself for the washroom. When she came back, her eyes and cheeks were bloodshot.

Aileen won the game.

The next morning, Kerf had awoken to find Cynthia filling a pink suitcase.

What are you doing? he asked, but from the cement that filled his lungs, he already knew: it was a scene from a movie everyone had seen.

I hoped not to wake you, she said, stuffing socks into the mesh compartment of the luggage. I'm staying with my mom. Indefinitely.

He sat up in bed, suddenly ashamed of his belly and his sad fleshy pectorals. Like the movies, there was no discussing, no negotiating. The cement flowed in all directions, filling the smallest cracks in his ribcage, his throat, his hands and feet.

Cynthia, his voice broke. You love me.

The sound of her suitcase zipping shut was razor sharp. The instant she left, the room smelled different: Old Spice instead of Alberto. Kerf was wretched with mucous.

Early on in their relationship, they had flown to Strasbourg to eat warm pretzels and lounge in beer gardens. Yeast Week, they dubbed their holiday, and had stayed in a Gothic hotel overlooking the Rhine. In bed that first morning, their bodies smushed together like slices of bread, he sang her Aaron Neville: *I don't know much...but I know I love youuu...That may beeee, all I neeed, to know*. He booped her nose with his. Cynth, he said, You're all I'll ever need to be happy.

That's a nice sentiment, she said, adding, That's *all* you'll ever need?

He had been eager to confirm his surplus emotion. That's all, he said.

Stavros rose from whence he had been smote. Kerf of Trier, he declared, thou hast remedied my mortal wound. I vow to work the blackest spells of torment against our mutual assailant.

The fiend who crossed us shall wish he had never been born.

They sashayed toward the Viking, slowly—the game was winding down, the air was sweltering. Kerf said, Remember, how I told you about our trip to Strasbourg? How I sang to her, and she asked *That's all you'll ever need?*

I do, brother.

I misinterpreted, Kerf said. It was a criticism, not a question.

There was no time to confer. An army of balding, ironclad orcs carrying barrow-blades, rams, pikes and crossbows was advancing from the wing.

*Eeeeeelalalalalalalalalalalala!* cried Kerf as he rushed the combatants head on.

Kerf of Trier, you're mad! Stavros called, watching his friend barrel ahead.

Kerf waved his flabby weapon at his enemies' greaves, pivoting to and fro, floundering in self-defense as the vulture orcs swarmed and he was surrounded. Their pimple-faced leader seized his shoulder, bringing his foam bludgeon to bear on Kerf's thigh. Something in him loosened. He dropped to his knee, thrust his mace toward the heavens, and howled.

## SRI THAKUR

By all accounts Aunt Momo was a solid person. She had led a wild youth, never tethered to one place for long, until she settled in Montreal with an anthropologist named Kirk who left her eight years afterward for one of his study subjects on Baffin Island. She found men in general to be regressive and, with no misgivings, stopped dating around her 45<sup>th</sup> birthday and took up the more rewarding task of fostering dogs from the local shelter. Most recently, she had taken in a German Shepherd named Kitty Cat with a goiter on his belly who passed away just before Gina, her sister's 23-year-old daughter, arrived from Alexandria last summer. This was the plan: While Momo's sister was in Japan, Gina, a grungy loner with stringy tresses that fell in her eyes, could stay for free at her aunt's Côte-des-Neiges flat while she worked at Cinéma de l'Art and saved tuition for film school. Momo was glad to have her.

No matter who she's up against, said Gina, Meryl Streep always wears it best, right?

She sat on the sofa reading *Us Weekly*, drinking wine with her sasquatch feet parked on the coffee table. The trait ran in the family: whopping feet, and bones that filled up limbs. The only good thing Kirk had left Momo was the idea that in certain cultures, big feet on women signified a powerful connection to the earth. Meaning she and her niece were practically goddesses.

Always, said Momo, setting down a bowl of Orville Redenbacher next to the stack of beat-up tabloid mags. She and Gina were going to watch *Rosemary's Baby*.

I met a real character today, said Gina.

What kind of a character? Momo asked, pouring a little brandy into her copper mug before plunging into the sofa.

This Anglo lady in a sari. She stopped me in the middle of the road and said, *Your aura is radiating*. Like, out of nowhere!

What colour did she say it was? laughed Momo.

She was actually really interesting.

Momo paused mid-sip. She asked her niece if she believed in auras.

Maybe? she considered. I don't think people are walking around with purple sunbeams coming off of them or anything. But you can kind of tell a person's energy before meeting them. Don't you think? She pulled a crocheted blanket over jeans that had the knees blown out of them.

If only, said Momo. I could have saved myself a lot of time.

How would you describe Neil Peart's aura, if you had to?

Momo exaggerated a wistful expression, resting her chin on the backs of her knuckles like a ham. The one that got away, she sighed. He and Momo had dated in the early 70s.

Obvious dodged bullet, said Gina. Imagine having to look at Geddy Lee's soul patch all of the time?

Your generation has no appreciation for Rush.

They cheers'd to their respective truths and then Gina leaned over and pulled a flyer from her jeans' pocket, passing it to her aunt.

Momo's mouth was full of popcorn. Creepy, she sputtered. The flyer showed a bald man with droopy eyelids and a pasty face, robed and meditating. Across the top

was written *Sri Thakur's Way of Peace*, below which were printed in Papyrus typeface the details for a meeting.

You find *him* creepy but you're good with Roman Polanski?

She had a point. It's just that with his eyeballs rolled into his head like that, said Momo, I'm one hundred percent sure this man is communicating with Satan.

I think he's in a trance, Gina shrugged.

Momo knew trances. She'd been to Goa. This didn't look like the fun kind. Did the woman in the sari give this to you? she asked.

Gina nodded. She invited me to a workshop about transcendental meditation.

Are you interested in that?

David Lynch meditates, she said. It's not like it's hocus pocus—I think I'm going to go.

Sure. Why not? said Momo, refilling her mug. It's important to try new things when you're young. She took a few gulps. As the deep plum warmth of the brandy slinked through her bloodstream, her whole body heavied and her shoulders slackened—had she really been that tense? Gina clicked play.

Momo rode the escalator into the dingy, dated interior of Cinéma de l'Art, where movies always cost a toonie. The entire place smelled of stale fabric; movie posters hung behind fiberglass frames on chipped beige walls: *Dead Man Walking*, *Exotica*, *Kids*, *The Usual Suspects*; the once red carpet had been beaten thin and hardened by the hundreds of thousands of steps taken upon it. A fiercely miming woman draped in

gold and turquoise stood in front of the ticket booth/concession counter gabbing away while Gina stocked the display with Junior Mints. She wore her coarse silver hair in a fat braid attached at the end with a scrunchie. Momo would rescue her niece—from her time at a B.C. pot dispensary in the 80s, she knew what it was to be held captive by talky eccentrics dying to share their views on separatism, the ozone layer, how actually Fidel Castro assassinated JFK.

Aunt Momo! This is Devashanti, from meditation class.

Oh! Of course. I've heard about you, said Momo offering her hand, scanning Devanshanti's face for a resting place because her eyes were not options. One of her mossy green balls was fixed outward, the other skittered minutely in every direction in a waking replica of REM.

I don't think I've heard of you. You're Gina's aunt? said Devashanti, receiving Momo's hand in both of hers. The woman's palms were like the soft bottoms of paws. Momo could just crush them.

Yes, she lives with me—Her Aunt Maureen? Devashanti looked like she was trying to decipher a difficult language, so clearly no bells were ringing. Momo freed her hand, saying, Anyway, not even my shrink calls me Maureen.

She got a chuckle from Gina.

We were discussing Guru Sri Thakur, said Devashanti. Did you know he helped Richard Gere win an Oscar?

Momo cleared her throat. I didn't because I don't know who that is, she said.

The man from the flyer, Gina reminded her.



Ah yes, Lucifer's serf, she thought, but aloud she asked, Is he an acting coach or something?

Devashanti's lip curled, Momo was sure—she looked to see if Gina had noticed but she was fiddling with the butter pump.

He's an *everything* coach, she said grandiosely, sweeping out her arm like Ginger Rogers. It seemed Devashanti had also taken lessons. He's even worked with Susan Sarandon, she continued. Here—I have evidence. She fished in her bag and pulled out two grainy Polaroids, handing one to Momo, one to Gina. The celebrities were shown at some kind of peace march, standing with prayer hands before the wan yogi around whom a crowd had assembled—probably because of the actors.

That's pretty cool, said Gina, passing back the pictures.

Momo asked Devashanti, Did Sri Thakur live here?

Gina answered: New York. But he's from Bangladesh. Aunt Momo, you should come with me next time if you're curious. Devashanti leads the class.

Well from the three or four times you've been—

—I've been five times.

Five? Really? OK, from the five times you've been, I've heard only good things. Let's say I'll strongly consider it.

No meat for a minimum of three hours before class, though, Devashanti instructed.

It sounded like a threat. What was it to her if she and Gina liked a little moo in their stew?

It affects the energy of the room, said Gina.

*Perfect Light Café* is up the road from where class is held if you're stuck for options. Gina knows it.

They serve pay-what-you-can vegetarian meals, she said.

Though most pay the suggested price, added Devashanti.

Momo stood there unblinking. There's an idea, she said.

Devashanti announced that she had to run and told Momo to enjoy *Clockers*.

Just remember that time is an illusion, she laughed, before leaning over the counter to take Gina's cheeks in her palms. My Gina, she sighed. A true seeker if ever there was one. Momo felt dirty.

See? Such a character, said Gina, leaning against the counter with her hands in the pockets of her plaid coat.

I found her a little pushy to be honest.

She turned her back to Momo and started wiping down the soda taps. She's a bit intense I guess. But go, Momo. You're missing the previews.

She had never called her just Momo before.

Before Gina moved in there was Kitty Cat, and before Kitty Cat, Charmaine, a gimp Weimaraner. Before Charmaine there was the French Poodle Tinkerbelle, so named because of her plentiful and iridescent dandruff. Well before Tink, there was Kirk. Everything after Kirk had been worthwhile, though it had been difficult for Momo to shake feeling like the unwanted last bite of a sandwich. Brandy helped to wash that feeling down. Movies, too. Slowly she came to feel like something nutritious again, not that the dogs cared about that—they'd eat anything, and just wanted love.

Then Gina had chosen her, asking to move to wild aunt Momo's flat when her mom took a job in Japan. They had always been close: On weekends when Gina was a girl Momo would drive to Alexandria to give her sister, who was raising her alone, a needed break. She'd go off to wherever and leave Momo and Gina to loop paper chains at the kitchen table, or rank jujube colours and potato chips by flavor, or when Gina was a teen, to flip through issues of *People* and *Saturday Night* judging celebrities' outfits. Through it all there were movie nights, and eventually Gina's decision to apply to film school. At age twenty she told Momo, *You helped me find my calling.*

Gina prepared a pot of lentil mush, to which Momo added a mountain of salt, before Momo's first workshop. She was going to give meditating a whirl: If Gina found it helpful—*It declogs my brain*, she'd said—maybe there was something to it. And it probably wasn't a bad idea to eat less meat; in fact, her former self had completely given it up for a while. It had been a trendy thing to do, but on top of that, Momo remembered believing that her choice was the only ethical option. Over time something shifted, and the smell of A & W won out.

Their walk there was quiet.

I'm grounding myself, Gina told Momo. You can use the grass, or a flower stalk, or your own heartbeat. Anything that's *there*, you know?

Not much grass to boot, said Momo, looking at the brown blooms that stretched across the surface of the Lachine Canal. She didn't know why she felt nervous; her jaw kept clenching.

A poster of Sri Thakur's bust adrift in a wispy blue sky was taped to the door of the renovated sixplex where the meeting was held. An arrow had been Sharpied onto it, directing participants to the room at the end of the corridor.

It smelled like church inside. Gina, about as grounded as a honeybee, buzzed off as soon as she was through the door to greet a girl she apparently knew, leaving Momo adrift by the door like a yacht in an empty marina. Party time!

Maureen! said Devashanti, eye askitter. I'm delighted you made it.

Curiosity killed the cat, she replied, which made no sense, and had the special effect of shooin Devashanti away. Momo stared at the floor, hoping to find a map to a more comfortable environment.

She found a seat where she could keep an eye on Gina, next to a teenager with a ponytail and a pencil moustache sitting stock-still with his eyes closed and his hands piled into the crotch-hammock of his bloomers. There were about eight other people scattered in the two rows of plastic chairs that faced the altar—just a big folding table with a cloth over top. When Devashanti moved to the front of the room and struck a small gong with a felted mallet, Gina gave a tata-for-now squeeze to her new friend's hand and sat next to Momo.

Who's ready for pure joy? Devashanti whispered when the gong's echoes petered out.

Sinister.

The candles on the altar flickered alongside several dozen volumes of Sri Thakur's writing and a hand-crafted dove sheathed in real white feathers, missing its left bead-eye.

Devashanti started *ohming* and everyone joined in, humming the sacred syllable in syncopated loops. Eventually Momo stopped comparing the sound they produced to the drone of a vacuum, coming to enjoy the feel of her vibrating lungs. It actually sounded nice, that particular harmony, pulsating in waves that washed over the room until everyone, including Momo, was the sound.

For about three minutes. At which point Momo got bored and opened her eyes. She peered over at Gina: barring her tie-dye tee-shirt, she looked like something out of a biblical tableau, rapturous, with cheeks like pink embers and her chin toward the sky. It felt wrong, peering at her. Devashanti opened her eyes at least a minute after everyone else, then, after breathing out a lengthy sigh, said, Who needs drugs when there's *that*? The room giggled. Not so sure, thought Momo, remembering how the walls of the Grand Palace had melted and given way to a pool of spangling emeralds that time she dropped LSD in Bangkok.

Gina leaned over and said into her ear, Pretty dope, eh?

Other exercises followed. For example, they chanted *Peace is the presence of love* fifteen times, allotting seven syllables to the word *love*. They visualized themselves as feathers that had broken free from their birds. Momo tried to "get out of her head" (although she was explicitly told *not* to do that) the whole time. And the last exercise made that all but impossible. Devashanti brought out a framed portrait of Sri

Thakur—only the whites of his eyes showed— and put it on a plinth. Would she ask them to stare at the yogi’s anemic countenance?

She would.

Sri Thakur is a teacher of the path of the heart, said Devashanti. Beware the false teachers who try to dissuade you from this path. They think they know what’s best for you, but they don’t see the fire that burns in your heart.

Had Devashanti’s eyeball flashed at her on purpose, or was she paranoid?

Let us now concentrate on the image of our supremely loving guru.

Gina focused. Momo closed her eyes, building in her mind the perfect burger, and then feeding it again and again to successive dogs at the shelter. Then class was over.

Devashanti stopped Gina on her way out to tell her how proud she was of the spiritual progress she was clearly making. *Great job being brainwashed!* more like.

I can see you are beginning to distinguish between true and false consciousness, she told her, using her hands to gesticulate a flower opening on *true* and closing on *false*.

I wonder if that means different things to different people, Momo put forth. Like if there might be some grey area in there.

There’s no grey area, Devashanti snapped. One’s heart knows that oneness is the nature of reality. Only your mind wants to argue.

That’s what minds do, said Momo.

Devashanti raised her index finger as if to make a great declaration: No truth can be found in a busy mind, she said.

I'm sure Einstein's mind was very busy, for one.

Clear, not busy. *Clear.*

See? You're arguing.

On the walk home, Gina said, I literally feel like champagne. Full of tiny bubbles that won't stop rising and they connect me to everything. She hesitated before asking, What did you think, Aunt Momo?

Seems a little culty, she said, and immediately regretted it.

Gina scoffed and asked when she had become so closed-minded. They didn't speak the rest of the way home.

They'd always been so easy around each other; now strain hung between them like heavy drapes. Momo's strategy for maintaining normalcy was to avoid discussing her niece's spiritual habits, which seemed to suit Gina fine.

One evening, while Momo was setting up the TV trays— they were going to watch *Braveheart*—Momo asked, Did I ever tell you how Neil Peart's orgasm is exactly the same as his sneeze?

Gina looked up from the book she was reading called *Conscious Satisfaction*. Momo, she said, You should try to live more in the moment. There was pity in her tone, a saccharine compassion.

Thanks for the hot tip, Gina. But the last time I checked, to be present in the moment, you don't have to erase your past. She could feel her chest constrict around her heart.

I wasn't suggesting as much, Gina said, and went back to reading.

Momo served pork chops with a side of frozen peas and little cubed carrots and switched on the Mel Gibson. About half-way through the movie she got up to grab the Brandy, and remarked that she missed having a dog around.

I love animals, too! cried Gina, with all of her old zip.

Momo lifted her copper mug, Here, here! she bellowed, clinking her vessel against Gina's mug of tea—she had given up alcohol.

What was the name of that sweet Weimaraner again?

Charmaine, Momo smiled. Maybe I should foster again.

You should, said Gina, and Momo felt things were looking up.

I'm glad you brought up animals Aunt Momo, because I've been thinking a lot...She started toying with her cold pork chop, completely intact, floating in a pool of oil on her plate.

They were dry. Don't sweat it.

...I've been thinking that I'm done with meat for good.

It was funny, how fast things could go from up to down inside a person. And why that was the thing that set her off. God knows what I'll feed you now, said Momo, abruptly leaving the room.

Gina called after her, Didn't you used to be a vegetarian?



She came back with an armload of books by Sri Thakur and starting throwing them down, one by one, onto the coffee table. Everything rattled. How many of these things has Devashanti lent you?

These *things*? Momo, stop it!

She threw the last book down. What would your mother think of this?

You're just jealous! Because I've found something I really believe in, and you can't even say the word *spiritual*. Spiritual people are *regular* people, Momo. Devashanti is a retired legal aid!

Do you think David Lynch has a guru?

I don't know! Do you need to drink all that Cognac?

Never mind me, I know what I am. Devashanti's the muddled one.

What's up with her lunatic eyes?

You're such a bigot! What, do you think all people with divergent pupils are freaks?

Momo felt so small she was about to disappear.

Gina started picking up the books. She carried them to her bedroom and locked herself in.

In the morning, Momo woke up to a clean kitchen and a Post-it note stuck to the top of the round table that they never ate on.

*Please don't call Japan. It's not a cult. Be back later.*

She walked down to the shelter wondering, what was she missing and how she came to be missing it and what Devashanti didn't see in her. She would pick out a dog and be its world.

## THE HEMMING

You worry too much, said Alvin Hucks, sipping his coffee from a mug he had scooped from Mel's diner a decade before. He leaned against the floor-to-ceiling shelving that contained in its compartments swaths of denim and cotton, scraps of leather, industrial-sized spools of thread, spare parts, shears, measuring supplies and various boxes of needles, pins, buttons, grommets, snaps and zippers.

I'm just saying, said Josiah—balding, heavy-set—anything can happen so it's best to be prepared.

Sure, Josi, sure. But the likelihood of anyone breaking into the shop while you're in it is pretty low. Mile End isn't the dicey neighbourhood we used to know. Anyway that bottle of Mace won't do you much good if buddy's got a weapon.

Josiah, since boyhood, had been unable to apply even a finger of force against another human being—not in grade school when a crew of younger bullies stole a hat right off his head, nor when they were inebriated as teens and Alvin pushed him up against the jukebox at Mel's forcing him to concede that Debbie Harry would win hands down in a fight against Stevie Nicks, nor any other time in his 46 years. In the face of physical aggression, he went slack as a noodle floundering in broth.

Josiah placed the can in the drawer of his sewing table and lowered the presser foot to the linen sleeve of a cream sport coat. Can you believe it? The client wants the arms taken in—that's how the kids wear their clothes these days, everything tapered so you can't bend at the knees and elbows, they call it *skinny style*.

You don't say, said Al, who had nowhere better to be.

The door swung open, Josiah looked up and smiled his customary Picasso greeting: on the right side of his face, his mouth stretched in a friendly arc toward his crow's feet, while on the left, his mouth, cheek and eye muscles contracted in a squinch. Morning! he called, slowly rising to greet the short, sprightly young man with the face of an altar boy. What can I do for you?

My friends have been so impressed by your handiwork—you're Josiah I assume?—that I thought to myself, *Leif, it's high time you got those sweet jeans hemmed.*

Leif removed the pants from his knapsack. Aren't they a beautiful wash?

Very fine denim, said Alvin from the back.

I picked them up two years ago in Tucson and have been meaning to get them hemmed ever since. They still have the price tags on, see?! He waggled the dangling tags.

Let's get you into the fitting room, said Josiah.

When he was inside, Al said: Nice kid.

Josiah squatted to take the measurements of the first leg, deftly pinning the pant cuff to mid-ankle length. Moving on to the second, he dropped the tape and gasped.

It's been years since I've seen this condition! He waved Al over. Come have a look.

What condition? I have a condition?!

Well I'll be..., said Al.

Now don't be alarmed, Josiah informed him, but your left leg is longer than your right one.

Leif frowned. Then why don't I limp?

Well technically your legs are the same length, but your outer left ankle is a sixteenth of an inch lower than your right.

Leif swooned. You're saying I have mismatched ankles?

Yes, you've got mismatched ankles! I'll have to hem each leg accordingly: They'll be different lengths.

Won't that look odd?

There's no other way.

Al said: Josiah's been at it twenty years. He would know.

Well then sir, you have all my confidence!

Back at the counter, Josiah took down Leif's information and told him to come back the day after next.

Teetering toward the exit he said: You can be sure I will, and paused in the doorjamb. I feel a little unsteady after the mismatch reveal. I'm just finding my sea legs—or should I say, ankles! Goodbye!

Delightful kid, said Al, as Leif stepped into the path of an oncoming cube van whose sides were painted with oranges and a flourish of text that read *Taste the Sunshine*.

The section of Saint Urbain Street in front of the Shoppe was cordoned off for the remainder of the work day; Josiah flipped the window sign to closed. At some point after the ambulance took the body away, Josiah gave an officer from the Sûreté du Québec a statement—the young man had been distracted by his ankles and had stepped in front of a truck—and that was that. But Josiah felt agitated, he wrung his knuckles, there was one question he couldn't get off his mind:

What do I do with the pants, Al?

Al sat on the window ledge with his back to the street.

What do you mean, 'what do I do with the pants'? You gonna hem a dead guy's pants?

I don't like to leave a job unfinished.

Next thing you're going tell me you're hosting a dinner party for Michael Jackson's ghost. Put the pants in the pile of other unclaimed junk back there; donate 'em for crying out loud.

You saw how much he liked that denim, Al.

It was a nice wash.

Shouldn't he get to wear them after all this time? Two years he waited. He brought them back from Tucson. They ought to be the last pair of pants he wears.

His funeral jeans?

His funeral jeans.

Josi, Alvin whispered. Psssst, Josiah.

The tailor was asleep at his machine, disheveled in a crinkled button-up with hair like a thinning mop-top wig pulled from the bottom of a tickle trunk, limp and parted haphazardly. It had been two days since the accident.

Alvin put his coffee on the sewing table and placed a work-worn hand on his friend's shoulder.

Springing to life like a crazed jack-in-the-box, Josiah raised the can of Mace (which in sleep he had been clutching beneath the table) to the intruder's face and discharged a stream of fiery aerosol.

Gaaaaah! screamed Al, cupping his eyes.

It's you! cried Josiah.

Alvin crisscrossed the room like a decapitated guineafowl, capsizing the coffee, knocking trousers off racks and spools off spindles. Josiah removed a carton of highly curdled milk from the backroom fridge and seized Al by the elbows.

Hold still, he said, pouring the chunky liquid over his head. Now blink it out, blink it out, pal.

A customer walked in and then out again.

The milk helped the burning subside. Josiah picked up the mug from the floor—there was still an inch of coffee at the bottom—and handed it to Al, who sat wiping rancid dairy from his face and neck with a damp towel.

I've been on edge, Al.

You don't say.

I haven't slept much. He nodded toward Leif's jeans, hemmed and enclosed in a thin transparent bag, hanging on the pick-up rack. I've been trying to contact his family but no luck, he said. He'll be buried in ill-fitting pants.

Wouldn't be the first, said Al, taking from his pocket a rectangular newspaper clipping. Here, he's in today's obituaries.

Josiah studied the newsprint: Leif Leifsson had been a 27 year-old musician of Icelandic descent born and raised on the island of Montreal. He said: Did you know K.D. Lang was of Icelandic heritage?

No kidding?

Shocking, isn't it?

You can say that twice. He took a sip of coffee. Listen Josi, the funeral details are listed in the write-up: it's this Saturday. I'll go with you and you can get those pants back to Leif.

I'd like that, he nodded. They certainly can't stay here.

They arrived at the funeral home before the service, lingering at the entrance of the visitation room where guests had lined up to offer their condolences to the immediate family members. Josiah was surprised that the parents of the deceased were each at least six feet tall—he would have given Leif no more than 5'5", max.

It's funny how genes work, said Al.

Josiah pointed to the casket. I'm going to leave the trousers by the altar up there. Do you think it's rude not to offer my sympathies?

If the line-up were shorter, I'd say yes.



We'd be waiting all afternoon!

Al stayed in the foyer while Josiah proceeded to the casket, open and hemmed in on both sides by cascading blooms and foliage, carrying with him the brown paper bag on which was written in elegant cursive "Leif's Jeans." He looked at the lifeless boy, admiring his slim-fitting plaid shirt and bolo tie, yet perturbed by the ratio of ankle-to-pant on the left leg. Very gently Josiah tugged at the hem, hoping to bring it down one sixteenth of an inch.

What are you doing? asked a woman with eyes that looked gnawed by mosquitos. It was Leif's mother; she had left the receiving line.

Josiah flashed his Picasso smile. I'm sorry for your loss, he said, I was your son's tailor, I wanted to return his jeans—he was very fond of the wash.

I hadn't realized Leif was close with his tailor.

I barely knew him.

Leif's father, large and aggravated, appeared and asked: What were you doing to my son's leg?

Adjusting the hem of his pant leg. Leif had mismatched ankles.

When the towering man clamped his hands into fists and stepped closer to Josiah, the tailor's spine turned to jelly and the room began to spin. But they were fists of grief, not anger. The man bent over and lifted up his pant legs.

It's genetic. He gets it from me, he said, and broke into sobs on Josiah's shoulder.

Come and see me at the shop, said Josiah, patting his back. I'll fix you up.

Out in the corridor Al asked Josiah: Do you feel better now?

Much, he said.