

# **I'll Take Care of You**

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## ABSTRACT

### **I'll Take Care of You**

David Barrick

*I'll Take Care of You* is a collection of stories set in (or near) Toronto and unified by the common theme of caretaking—the tentative/ambiguous attempts of friends, counsellors, siblings, and parents to understand and act upon what is best for those in their charge. Using a number of first person voices (and one third person voice), I explore the fine line between helping and hurting an individual, the flexible dichotomies of childhood/adulthood and childishness/maturity, and the nature of success and failure. The collection's themes are best represented in a trilogy of stories about the Gillis family siblings: Madison, a freewheeling songwriter who has alienated her parents through her single-minded pursuit of her musical vision; Jill, the scientific child prodigy who loves her older sister and longs to restore harmony to her family; and James, a meticulous jazz guitarist who is jealous of Madison's career, and eventually holds the power to facilitate or thwart his sister's desire to make peace with the family.

Stylistically, *I'll Take Care of You* is realist psychological fiction, influenced by Justin Cronin's *Mary and O'Neil*—a PEN/Hemingway Award-winning collection in the tradition of John Cheever and John Updike, but without the male-centric tone of those authors. Although it is not often explicitly evident, *I'll Take Care of You* was also influenced by the domestic sequences of *War and Peace*, in which Tolstoy juxtaposes scenes of pain and happiness without either emotional tenor dominating or negating the other.

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## Graffiti

Here in the bushes by the side door, the smell of spring flowers mixes with dumpster fumes from behind the gym. It's the kind of fruity stink Gordon would make jokes about if it floated into the lunchroom, but I don't laugh, I just think *tag you're it*. I got out of class early because I brought down the attendance sheet, so now I wait for him undercover. The recess bell rings and kids spill out the door, running past my hiding place, shouting and whipping things at each other. I watch them carefully, waiting for the flicker of Gordon's red sneakers or his Dallas Cowboys jacket or his dirty blonde hair, and all I'm thinking is *tag you're it got you tag you're it* until finally there he is, strolling out the door, and my timing is perfect—I burst from the bushes with my hand heading straight for his shoulder and I yell out “Tag, you're it!”

Gordon does this tricky sidestep, like the fullback we saw on TSN. I barely nick his arm, and he gives me a good smack from behind as my speed sends me into the bush on the other side of the door. As I struggle to my feet, he's just standing there picking at a scab on his elbow. “No—you're it.”

“C'mon, I grazed you. No touch-backs.”

“Who said that was a rule, Load?”

“No one has to say.”

Gordon yawns. “Whatever. So how long should I wait?”

“I don't know, ninety seconds?” We only sort of play tag—a stealthy stalker (him) and a lumbering oaf (me) punching, slapping, ambushing each other all over the schoolyard. Apparently it's good training. Gordon says the principal ordered new footballs for early June, and even though tag's a stupid game he says it will keep us

sharp. I don't really care. I'm in the sixth grade and I don't feel like running around anymore—he always gets me anyway.

“Oh man, what the hell's that reek?” says Gordon as the breeze picks up. “Smells like King Kong let one rip out here.”

“I don't think they changed the dumpster.”

“So they haven't changed you?” he says, grinning. He's told me that true red-blooded funnymen make jokes about everybody.

“Heh.”

“I'm kidding. Geez,” he says and cracks his knuckles just by flexing his fingers. “Will you lighten the hell up? You're such a mama's boy sometimes.” Gordon looks at the number forty-two stitched on my oversize t-shirt. “So are you ready for some serious action tomorrow?”

“Why?”

“TSN's doing season highlights and re-running the whole Superbowl—it's gonna be sweet. Be at my place, twelve sharp.”

“Uh ... sure.” I guess I can squeeze in some TSN at noon. That gives me an hour. My parents invited the Carters over for lunch at one tomorrow, and Mona might be coming too. She's been coming less and less often, but there's always the chance.

Gordon glances at his watch and suddenly slaps me across the bare arm, hard enough that a high-pitched *ping* rings through the air. “Ninety seconds—you're it,” he cackles, his legs launching him onto the soccer field, long hair whirling above his shoulders. I watch a patch of skin on my arm turn from white to mottled red. He always gets me.

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When we first met I was on my back in the gravel. This was eleven months ago and I was still in grade five, before they tore down the wooden jungle gym and rebuilt it with those stupid safe neon plastic tubes and rubber-coated monkey bars. The wildest part was the shaky bridge—linked up with fat metal chains, a huge space between every board. It squeaked and rattled as if only one bolt kept the whole thing from flying apart, and bunches of kids would grapple onto the railings, find a foothold, then rock the crap out of it, trying to fling each other off. Take a wrong step and *shk shk shk*, you were tangled up like a whale in a fishing net. I should know, it happened to me.

“His gut’s caught in the bridge!” yelled some girl, but I could barely hear her, my whole mind was focused on that one pinched fold of my stomach. I had missed a plank, and now I was jammed in one of the gaps. People kept shoving past, stepping on my fingers, never bothering to slow down, and then there was a boot on my butt, pushing, trying to pry me out, and I felt one last painful rip before I hurtled over the edge, plunging for hours, crashing into the ground like a giant brick tower. Just a roll and a little drop, really—Gordon told me that later—but when it’s happening to you, things feel a lot different than they might look.

Playground chatter spun around my head and I worried that Mona Carter might be staring at me and I think I asked someone to pass the chicken. Then a blurry figure stooped over my body and I heard the gravel grind beneath me as I lifted from the ground.

I woke up in the nurse’s office an hour later with no shirt, muddy footprints on my pants, and some big wads of gauze taped along my left side. A purple ring of bruised



skin spread from where the bandages stopped. I coughed and the nurse shuffled over on her rolling deskchair. “Gordon Jones carried you all the way up here,” she said, scowling, as if I should’ve done it myself. “He is a strong boy,” she added, glaring at my dimpled chest. “A very strong boy. You should be grateful, Christopher.”

Gordon was sitting where the nurse said he’d be—on the front steps under the flag pole, waiting for a ride from his older brother who never actually shows up. Gordon wore grey Levis, the knees torn out, and he was eating a tuna sandwich. I’d seen him in the cafeteria before, a sixth-grader with a sharp nose and a wide chin, his eyes icicle blue. He ran in the halls even when teachers were shouting him down, and he was always patting his own hair, curling it around his fingers. He said girls loved it, they all wanted to touch it since it looked like Kurt Cobain’s.

I thanked him and he said it was no problem since he already hated Jordon Duff, the kid who had heaved me into the gravel, and he planned on messing up Jordie’s face one day. Gordon never minded passing out little favours like that.

“But you’re one huge kid,” he added. There was a mix of fish and spearmint on his breath. “I mean, for a grade fiver, you’re really beefy. Helluva load. You could be an O-lineman.”

He asked me if I liked the NFL, and I said yes, too embarrassed to admit I preferred Astroboy cartoons.

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When I wake up Saturday morning, I’m surprised to find the red mark is still on my arm. It looks like a rash, or maybe that strawberry-coloured birthmark on the back of Terry Johnson’s neck—not the shape of a palm and fingers, more like a soft-cornered

rectangle. I put my hand over my eyes as the sun crawls up my bed sheets.

The hall already smells like Lysol and apple crumble and wine vinegar salad dressing. There's no mistaking it's a day for company. Dad's outside buzzing the hedges, the newspaper's still folded on the couch, and Mom's in the kitchen with her sleeves rolled up. She's got Tupperware bowls spread across the table like a drum kit—I slide into the last clear spot, pour a bowl of Lucky Charms, and tell her I'm going out at eleven-thirty.

“Oh?” she says, wiping her fingers on the corner of her apron. “Where?”

“Just around. Walking.”

“Why don't you invite Mona? Then you could both come back for lunch.”

Mona Carter is a grade older than me and at least four inches taller—tall like a basketball player, but she's in the school's gifted program for arts and wouldn't be caught dead in a numbered tank top. Her eyes are really dark, black-black, the iris and pupil blending into each other, and she keeps her maple-brown hair in place with these big Celtic hairpins made from pewter. When she comes to our family lunches, she sits on the rocking chair with her arms folded across her knees and reads spines on the bookshelf. Sometimes she works on cool sketches until her mom tells her to *put away that stinking Sharpie*. She doesn't say much—a 'hello' with a quick smile—but I like to think she's only quiet because of all the adults around.

“Well, Chris?”

“She's never home.” It's true, I rang her doorbell once.

“Really. Maybe you should look for her today,” Mom says, rubbing her forehead.

“See if you can find her.”

I'm not exactly sure what this means. I've heard snatches of Mom's phone conversations with Mrs. Carter, things like *she was an hour late for dinner again?* or *her hands were covered in ink?* or *why don't you stop buying her all those pens?* Maybe it's just a PTA worry, some pointless need to know what Mona does on her walks through the neighbourhoods with a sketchbook and permanent markers. Maybe that's why Mom's always saying I should hang around with her—buddies looking after buddies. Buddies keeping buddies out of trouble. But she's not a buddy. I can't just walk up to Mona and ask her to come over, even though she's been in my home a hundred times and our parents have been friends for three years. I'd like to, but I still haven't figured out how to talk to her yet. I mean, not how to talk to her *for real*—and there's a big difference.

A drop of milk falls from my spoon into a blue dish of walnuts. Mom is staring at me, waiting. "I'll try to meet her on my way back," I say.

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The sun is hanging behind the clouds, a dull glow, but still pretty hot. The closer I get to Gordon's place, the more my feet drag.

His house is about two miles away in a subdivision called Sunnydale. Nearby, the developers have mowed down a wide stretch of forest to make room for another bunch of new townhouses. They haven't actually done anything with the land yet, so on my way over to Gordon's, I get to see all kinds of weird junk that people have dropped in the mud. It sort of reminds me of the bargain section in Walmart. Today, there's a sliver of neon orange plastic, a rusty Matchbox car, and a few wax wrappers for WWF trading cards, along with the gross stuff I have to tiptoe around—mushes of cardboard, a soiled jockey, broken beer bottles.

I've gone about a quarter of the way in when a glob of clay sails past my head and smacks into a flat rock five feet away.

"Hey Load, stop looking for snacks—we're going in the back door this time," calls Gordon, wiping his hand on a patch of grass. He's standing at the edge of the lot in a white Cowboys jersey, number eight, and he nods towards a trail that branches into the forest.

It's cooler and dim in here, and he whistles to himself as we walk single file through patches of wet ferns. I think we're taking this secret route because we ran into five of his classmates two weeks ago. They sat drinking Gatorade on the steps of a townhouse and one yelled *why don't you play with someone your own age?* I thought they were talking to me, but then they began chanting *Gordo, Gordo, Gordo*, and one of them put his hand under his armpit and started florping along. *Go to hell*, Gordon bellowed back at them, and told me how he was planning to mess up all their faces one day.

We come out of the forest at the big brick wall that circles Sunnydale. "Have a look at this," says Gordon, pointing at the graffiti, and I don't know if he's bragging or disgusted. I've never seen so much before—it spreads out like a big dirty patchwork mural, hundreds of spray painted pictures. Some are really primitive and ugly, but some of them are complex and precise and shiny, almost like they're made of stained glass—3-D snakes and ladders, giant cartoon bubble letters, wild squiggly signatures that seem to cross themselves out. They remind me of this one drawing Mona did. It's been on display outside the art room for a few weeks, and I think it's a great picture—there's this black chunk of road ripping right up out of the ground, swooping towards the moon,

and the sky's filled with all these flashy green symbols that I can't exactly read. MC is penciled in the bottom corner in tiny silver letters.

"I said 'have a look' not 'memorize it,' stupid," says Gordon, opening his gate. "Hurry up."

Glancing back at the paintings, I suddenly feel bold and giddy and totally reckless. I follow him up the walkway, weaving through the broken lawn chairs and the line of Rubbermaid trash cans behind his house. I want to talk about Mona. "Hey Gordon?"

"What?"

"I've got a question."

"Sure," he says, letting out a belch. "Here's your answer—Troy Aikman threw a fourth quarter bomb, a goddam fifty-yarder for a touchdown, and I don't want to miss seeing that again. Let's go."

"It's not about that."

He snorts. "What else is there?"

"Well, do you know how to—talk to—y'know ... people?"

Gordon looks at me. I hear a sparrow whistle, and a truck dingles past somewhere out front. Probably one of those ones you think sells ice cream, but actually sharpens lawnmower blades. I'm sweating a lot, I can feel it in my armpits. Gordon scratches his head. "What the hell kinda question is that?"

I don't know what I expected. He watches me with his icy blue eyes, running his tongue over his front teeth, and I realize asking him was a big mistake, I'm crossing a line I don't want to cross and I wish he'd forget I asked, I'd even welcome a punch in the

arm right now if he'd just forget about it.

“Ohhhh, wait a second,” he suddenly says, winking and giving me an elbow in the ribs. “I get it, I get it, that’s slick. *People*. Right. C’mon, I’ll tell you a couple things.”

His parents aren’t home. His brother isn’t home. They’re never home. The big screen TV is blaring and I sit in the living room in an armchair, my clammy hands sticking to the leather. I watch Jim Kelly fumble the snap and crumple under a heap of defensive lineman. *Crunch. Uuragh. Crack*. It’s too loud and I can’t find the remote.

Gordon has it. He turns the volume down as he comes out of his bedroom and drops a thin book onto the couch beside me. It’s the school yearbook they printed in September, thirty photocopied pages and a laminated cover, bound together with a plastic coil spine. He turns to his class picture from last year.

“You gotta know what you want, Load, and you gotta know how to ask. That’s the main thing. You see her? Rebecca Nichol. She used to wear this really short skirt and green tights that rode up the back of her legs, and she’d come to school each morning without drying her hair from the shower. One day when we were in the coat closet, I took a—”

“Wait. Stop. You’re not—you don’t understand. I wanted to—”

“What?”

I sink deeper into the chair.

“Just tell me who you think is hot,” Gordon finally says, flipping the yearbook onto my lap. My finger hovers over the class pictures. There’s an inset photo of the art program students standing in front of the library display case. Mona’s laughing, hunching down so she’s about the same height as the other kids. It’s a bad photocopy but a nice

picture, even if all her features blend into the white of the page.

“Time’s up,” says Gordon, pushing my finger down so it lands right on Mona’s face. My stomach lurches and I taste acid at the back of my throat.

“Her? Carter?” he says. “Really?”

I don’t look over, but I can see him shrugging. “Sure, Load. Okay. Whatever turns your crank. Y’know, I see her around here sometimes, with her little pens and all that crap. Oh man, you’d be some pair. She’s a real sideshow number. Gotta be taller than a gorilla and probably hairier than one too. But I guess each dude to his own, right?”

Gordon snaps the book shut and tosses it into a pile of dirty laundry. “Relax, Load. I’m kidding.” He glances at me and pats the couch. “I said relax. C’mon, watch this punt return.”

I stand up and walk out of the living room into the kitchen.

“Get me a drink while you’re in there, willya?”

My hands rummage through the cupboards. *Get you a drink sure, absolutely I’ll get you a drink.* I find a package of cherry Kool-Aid, tear it open and pour it into a glass of lukewarm tapwater. I take a spoon from the drawer and stir in some pepper and Robin Hood flour, not knowing what else to stir in. I walk up behind the couch, where Gordon is now whistling along with an ad for European soccer in July, and I dump the mixture over his head.

He sputters and jumps from the couch, spraying pink water across the floor, and for a second he just stands there staring at me, his jaw drooping open like a puppet without a puppeteer. Then he rakes his fingers through his hair and they come back runny-red. “You—you shit! You stupid *shit!* You big fat stupid—”

I feel a smile coming on. I'm horrified, but I can't help smiling.

"Oh man," he says, shaking his head. "Oh man, now you're asking for it."

A cold ripple runs through my body as Gordon walks towards me, clenching and unclenching his fists. I back down the hallway. I don't recognize this at all, this is nothing we've been through before—he's laughing in a low voice and he keeps touching his hair, wiping his hands on his pants, touching his hair, wiping them on his jersey. "Think this is funny? Think this is some joke?"

Gordon shoves me and I crash out the screen door onto the concrete patio, tearing the cuff of my jeans. He charges after me and I roll away, kicking him in the shin as he passes, but he ducks back around, catching me under the knees and scooping me up in his arms, his fingers digging into my thigh as he lifts me—I hit him twice in the ribs, which is useless from this angle, and he's holding on tight so I try to spit on him (most of it lands on my own shirt) and I start thrashing, rolling away from his chest, all my bulk working for me, and now he's straining, losing his grip, so he heaves me up as high as possible and dumps me into an empty trash can, the sides splitting open as my legs and stomach thump in.

Gordon is hunched over, panting. I'm crammed in the broken can, panting. Dick Enberg is hollering touchdown from inside. A bamboo wind chime clatters against its own parts. Gordon looks at his hands, then down at the pink mess on his jersey, then back to me. "What the hell, man?" he says. "I mean—what the hell?"

I try to haul myself free, rolling in slow semi-circles along the asphalt. A gasp of air whistles through my mouth. It's hard to talk when you're lodged in a garbage can.

"I wanted to watch some highlights," says Gordon. He peels off his wet jersey and



stands there in his undershirt. “Stuck alone in the house for the whole day, and I just wanted to watch some highlights. That’s it.”

“Sure,” I wheeze, pulling myself free.

“Geez, I was *kidding*—are you retarded or something?”

“I gotta go.”

Gordon raises his hands above his head. “What the *hell*, man?”

“I’m done with sports,” I say as I stand up. “I hate football. Hate it.”

He rubs the cloth between his fingers, examining the stains, and walks back to the screen door, running his hand through his strawberry-blonde hair. “Didn’t think you had that in you,” he mumbles, and this is something I don’t recognize either.

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It’s starting to spit, cold flecks of water hitting the asphalt and filling the air with the smell of wet dust. I stumble down the walkway, exhausted, my body feeling like a limp sack on legs. I pause at the gate, smoothing out my pants, brushing leafy bits from my shirt and hair until I think I look tidy enough for lunch. Then when I walk into the open, I see her and stop with a jolt. I almost turn on my heels and walk right back to Gordon’s house.

Mona is standing in front of the graffiti wall, shoulders curving over her sketchbook to protect the paper. She stares at a long elaborate tag, her right hand doing its own work on the page, and the Sharpie’s chemical smell mixes with the light mist in the air. “Hey Chris,” she says without looking over. Just *hey Chris*, really casual, and she only turns to face me when her hand finishes up.

“Hey,” I reply.

She caps the marker and threads it behind her ear, next to a yellow pencil that's been chewed brown at the end. "You skipping out on lunch too?"

I shrug and slip my hands into my jeans. I've forgotten about lunch. "What're you doing here?"

"Just some practice." Mona purses her lips. "Not that I actually tag on walls or anything, if that's what you're thinking. So don't go around saying—"

The sky rumbles and a few heavy drops spatter onto our faces. "Uh oh," she says, slipping her sketchbook under her argyle vest.

It's hard to keep up with her long strides. I promise my legs they'll never have to move again if they can just hold me steady for another minute. I order them not to start twitching or shaking, and miraculously they seem to listen. The sky gives a full out roar as we duck into a bus shelter, and then the rain starts coming down in sheets.

Mona crosses her legs and sighs, one of her unlaced Docs bobbing up and down outside the entrance. Water runs through the leather stitches. "I don't tag on walls," she says again. "But I like the designs. That wall's got some of the best throw-ups I've ever seen, beautiful stuff. Seriously, these guys are artists. I'm trying to work more of it into my drawings—I want to show people it's not just wrecking stuff, it doesn't have to be that." She examines the chipped burgundy polish on her thumbnail. "But it's not like you can talk about it to anyone. Try explaining it to your parents."

Mona reaches down to adjust her black and white striped stockings. She flicks a wet strand of hair from her eyes, resting her head against the glass wall, and all of a sudden I bust open. Words start pouring from my mouth. I say I don't really know anything about art, but I think her drawing is great and I see it in the hall when I walk to

the cafeteria and I think she's right, you can't judge anything from only one point of view, and to try to make my point I start going on about this documentary I saw about these weird flowers in Brazil that smell like meat so they can attract bugs to help pollination, but they're actually really pretty flowers and I think she should keep doing what she's doing since no one else in the art program does what she does, and I especially like how she uses pen and pencil crayon and marker all together—I don't know if there's a technical term for that, but maybe she could tell me.

Mona watches me when my flood of words finally stops. She's smiling kinda funny, nibbling on a bit of her hair and she pulls out her sketchbook, flipping to the first page and passing it to me. She says it's brand new stuff she's been working on, she hasn't shown it to anyone yet. This must just be a day for seeing things I haven't seen before.

## Scavenger Hunt

Waving off a few mosquitoes with her notebook, Elizabeth Campbell clattered down the mess hall steps and padded up the dirt path leading towards Pinecroft's study cabin. *Go see what you can learn out there, rookie*, Tom had told her after supper. *Then tomorrow you'll scout the north woods and try killing the nests—no budget for an exterminator this year*. He told her it was important to finish them off early in the month, since campers often used them as an excuse for idiocy—screaming *wasp* and hitting each other whenever there was a lull in the day's activity. *Five summers here and I've gotten used to all the smart alecks*, he had said. Elizabeth flapped the shoulder strap of her tank top against her neck and picked at the cuffs of her shorts, repeating a mantra under her breath: *just get the CV line and get out of here*.

Pinecroft's study cabin stood at the edge of the campgrounds, a converted cottage veiled with the branches of several large willow trees. It had little else besides lines of donated books and an old reel-to-reel film projector, but still, it was the only place where Elizabeth had felt comfortable during the first four days. She opened the pollen-speckled door and walked along the shelf of reference books, tapping her hand on the battered spines until finally pulling out *The Encyclopaedia of Insects and Invertebrates: Vol. 3*. She sat down at a table, flipped to the letter W, and glared at the photo of a magnified yellowjacket. It was flexing its abdomen, a single droplet of venom dangling from the stinger.

“What are you doing?”

Elizabeth glanced up. One of the seven-year old campers stood in the doorway, his wispy black hair falling across his forehead. He wore a Boston Bruins jersey that went

down to his knees, almost like a nightgown, and his ragged name tag was still stuck in the middle of the team crest: Brandon Bull. He shuffled forward, and Elizabeth slid her elbows over the wasp picture to hide it. “Nothing. I’m just ... trying to solve a problem.” She smiled, pulling at the blond tufts of her pixie cut. “Why don’t you go down to the fire pit, Brandon? Tom’s playing the ukulele and everyone’s singing along.”

“I don’t like singing along.”

“Okay, then why don’t you find something to read.”

“Because you’re reading my favourite book.”

Elizabeth stared at him blankly, flipped the cover up. “Really. The Encyclopaedia of Insects.”

“Pretty much.”

“Can’t you read volume two?”

“No. Three’s the best. It’s got everything except centipedes.” He sat down at the other end of the table and laid his head on the wood. “But I guess you can read it if you want.”

“Why, thank you,” murmured Elizabeth. She refocused on the page, skimming over the sections titled *lifespan* and *habitat*. There was a highlighted box along the left margin with tips about managing wasp colonies: bottleneck traps, insecticide, soap-based treatment. How to drown them and poison them and dry them up into little yellow husks. She read it twice, running her finger down the list and touching each bullet point, but couldn’t seem to retain anything.

Brandon coughed. “So how far have you gotten?”

“Not very. Do you mind? I’m trying to concentrate.”

“Did you read how some wasps have babies? Where they hunt down a spider and sting it to paralyze it, then plant eggs inside, then a month later the babies eat their way out of the spider while it’s still alive?”

Elizabeth clamped the book shut. “That is *sick*.”

“It’s not my fault they do it.”

“You know what? I think you’re my problem,” said Elizabeth. She took out a red pen and wrote his name in her notebook, underlining it twice. “You, and probably a couple other kids. How can we keep things calm here if you’re getting your laughs from scaring everyone with stories like that?”

“I don’t think it’s funny,” said Brandon, standing up. He kneaded his hands in the loose fabric of the jersey, twisting it above his knees as if he had to pee. “I’m scared too. They scare me.”

“So *why* do you keep reading about them?”

Brandon stopped fidgeting and looked at the cover of the encyclopaedia. “I just want to be ready for my hunt,” he said, then opened the door and ran outside.

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The next morning, Elizabeth could almost smell freshly ground coffee percolating in her apartment. She closed her eyes, walking across the cool tiles of her kitchen and filling a steel Thermos, putting on her grey dress and heels, slinging her purse over her shoulder. She took the subway downtown and clicked up Islington Collegiate’s granite steps, through the doors, and for the first time, into her own classroom—five rows of children in navy blue blazers, their hands folded neatly on their desks. She picked up a piece of chalk, and just as she drew her first line, she heard a knock at the door. Elizabeth

opened one eye. “Miss?” a voice whined. “Hello? Miss? It’s Jeremy. Derek dropped my comb down the outhouse since I wouldn’t let him use my toothbrush.”

Elizabeth threw off her sheets and slid from her bunk.

By eight-thirty, all fourteen campers had settled in the mess hall, snorting and snickering at each other through mouthfuls of Sugar Crisp. Elizabeth watched them from behind the louvered shutters in the kitchen, warming her fingers with a Superman tumbler of instant coffee. The back exit swung open and Tom walked up beside her, wearing a black and white striped Umbro shirt which, along with his bleached buzz cut, made him look like a wrestling coach. He was carrying an old box of cleats in one hand and dragging a nozzled spray tank with the other. “Found this by the dock and thought it might help,” he said, heaving it onto the stove top. “It’s for paint but what the hell.”

Elizabeth lifted the compressor handle, pumping it once. “I checked the shed for pesticides and we don’t have any. The books said a watered-down soap solution can kill wasps too, which is probably our only option.”

“Cool,” said Tom. He clicked his tongue and turned back to the exit. “Get on top of that after breakfast. I’ll go set up pylons for the afternoon soccer match.”

“Wait,” said Elizabeth, grabbing Tom’s sleeve. “I really don’t want to do this on my own.”

“C’mon, Liz. The nests will be small—it’s still July, there’s hardly any wasps until the start of August.” He pulled her fingers off his shirt one at a time, folding them into her palm. “Listen. I have to do the soccer game because I’m head counsellor. You have to do the nests because you’re my assistant and I want to write good things on your reference letter for Patty Lane. Simple stuff, right?”

Elizabeth leaned against the fridge. “Yes. Okay. But I’m going to be a teacher, Tom, and God knows some of these kids need a bit of structure. I brought along a few nature lessons that I’d like to try out.”

“Sure.” He smiled, rubbing his jaw. “Anyway, the nests are probably in the pines along the main trail. Just watch out for flooded spots, it gets pretty swampy after—”

A crash from the mess hall cut him off, followed by a chorus of screams and cheers and tinkling spoons. Elizabeth and Tom ran through the kitchen door, nearly slipping on a skid of milk and soggy cereal, and immediately saw everyone crowding around an overturned table, throwing dry Sugar Crisp onto a pileup of fighting boys. Tom pushed to the middle of the fray, ripping off kid after kid until finally reaching the bottom of the heap where Devon Caruthers was kneeling over Brandon Bull, both boys jabbing wildly at each other. Tom jerked Devon onto his feet. “What the hell’s going on, Dev?”

The boy swept his hair back and pointed at Brandon. “That moron was going to get the whole place filled up with wasps—he was picking at a hole in the screen and kept putting wet cereal there.”

A nervous mixture of laughs and whispers rippled through the mess hall. Brandon said nothing.

“Okay, everybody shut up,” hollered Tom. “Don’t make me get out the bullhorn. One more word about wasps and no one’s eating again this summer, understand? Lizzy’s taking care of the problem.” He slapped Brandon on the back. “Just earned yourself a three-day suspension, buddy. No campfire, no canoeing, no soccer.” He nodded at Elizabeth. “Looks like you got some company after all.”

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A breeze carried the sounds of the soccer game across the campground and up to the edge of the north woods. Deeper in the underbrush, it was hushed and humid and still. Elizabeth listened to the buzz of cicadas as she trudged along the trail, dragging the spray tank in a small wagon behind her. Filling the tank with soap solution had felt like building a homemade firecracker, but it had worked. For extra protection, Elizabeth had changed into jeans, a sleeved shirt, and heavy plaid garden gloves; still, she felt nervous every time she swept aside thickets of leaves to look for a nest. There had been nothing yet.

A few cracking branches and Brandon reappeared on the trail. In the woods his demeanour had changed, as if he were suddenly channelling energy from the wilderness. Kicking up dirt and pine cones, he ran past her with a shambling knock-kneed joy, and she hooked her finger under his collar, cutting him short. “Brandon, will you please settle down?”

Smiling, he drew the jersey up around his head and spoke through the loose cloth. “The forest is my home, you know. I live here.”

“You’re being punished,” said Elizabeth. “At least act like it.”

“I *am* acting like it—this is the only good part of camp, when I don’t have to play at anything. The forest’s my home, it’s way better than stupid soccer, especially when no one else is around.” Brandon’s brown eyes peeked out at her. “Plus, now I can hunt for all my secret stuff. That’s my master plan. Last year I hid some stuff in the forest for safekeeping, and now I need to find it. It might be hard since the forest changes, but I’ll just imagine I’m on a scavenger hunt.”

“How about a little less imagination and a little more focus? If you keep running

around like that, you'll get stung."

"No I won't," said Brandon, his face suddenly becoming solemn again. "I won't. Not here. The wasps aren't here."

"How do you know?"

"This is the wrong place. They're in another place up ahead—that's where I hid most of my stuff too, in one of the trees." Brandon tucked his arms into the body of his jersey, twisting back and forth so the sleeves flapped around his ribcage. "Help me get it—you can be my first mate. And I'll show you the wasps if you promise not to touch any, okay?"

Elizabeth let out a laugh, feeling an odd sense of relief. She tapped him on the chin. "Of course. Trust me, I won't get any closer than I have to."

To the left of the trail there was a bare patch in the bushes, which led onto a path of flattened grass. The farther they went the moister it got, sunlight dappling through the trees in kaleidoscope patterns. Brandon kept looking over his shoulder at Elizabeth, occasionally turning around completely and walking backwards, until she finally told him to stop goofing off and watch his feet. After about seven minutes there was the sound of rushing water, and they came out at a mucky clearing by the riverbank. A single yellowjacket skimmed past Elizabeth's face and she felt her shoulders clench, watching the insect land on a rotten stump at the edge of the clearing. Directly above the stump hung a nest, plastered against the thick branch of an old oak tree and glistening like a giant brown spit ball.

"That tree's where my stuff is," said Brandon. "In that squirrel hole. Just reach inside, there's a plastic bag with some army guys and photos."

Elizabeth wiped a line of sweat from her forehead, lifting the spray tank from the wagon. The hive's low drone mingled with the gurgles of the current. She tiptoed between puddles and furrows of mud, then jumped up onto the stump, putting her hand on the squirrel hole for support.

"It should be right there," said Brandon. "A plastic bag with photos."

She let go of the hole's edge, set the spray tank down between her shins, and pushed the nozzle into the colony entrance.

"What are you doing?" came Brandon's voice.

Elizabeth squeezed the trigger and soap surged upward; the only sound from inside the hive was a quiet wheeze, the sputtering buzz of wet wings, and Elizabeth felt her heartbeat slow again, her muscles relax. Then she felt Brandon jumping up behind her, pounding on her back and pulling at her arm, trying to shake loose the nozzle. "Stop it, stop it!" he yelled, and Elizabeth's panic rose as she tried to pivot around, the spray tank twisting between her ankles and throwing her off balance. She bumped against Brandon, the two of them wobbling for a moment in unison, teetering, as if deciding whether to fall forward or backward, and as Brandon's small fingers dug into her ribs she suddenly felt her centre of gravity shift and she thought, infuriated and terrified, *oh God and now I'm going to crush him.*

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Elizabeth sat in the counsellor's quarters just outside the door of the medical station, her clothes smeared with mud. She scrolled through her cell phone menu, her thumb pausing above Patty Lane's contact info, the avatar of a calico kitten wearing a slate board hat. Elizabeth thought of their conversation two weeks earlier, Patty leaning

against Islington's award case and using her finger to stir a cup of coffee: *Oh, it's just a little job for you before the interview, Liz. You've done wonderful work in our student help centre, but this will push you over the top. I'd like to see how you manage a more rugged experience like this one. When you're a teacher your students won't always be angels, you know.*

The door creaked open and Tom walked out of the medical station. Elizabeth flipped her phone shut. "I left a voicemail message for the camp committee. I couldn't reach Brandon's father. I don't know if his father is reachable."

Tom shrugged. "No biggie."

"Well, it's supposed to be camp protocol. So is everything okay?"

"Yeah, don't worry about the wasps for now. It's going to rain all weekend."

"I meant with Brandon."

"Oh. Yeah—just a sprained arm and some bruises, nothing popped. But the little bastard still won't talk."

"Look, I'll try him if you want, but I can't take much more of this—five days gone and I'm already worn out. I'm having a really hard time understanding these kids."

Elizabeth ran her hands through her hair, pulling out clots of dirt. "If it's going to rain tomorrow, how about I try giving a lesson in the mess hall, and you watch Brandon."

"So now you're telling me what you're going to do." Tom cocked his head. "They like playing ball here, rookie. That's it."

"I'm *suggesting* what might be a practical alternative. Think about it."

Elizabeth brushed off her pants and stepped inside the medical station, which was lit by a candle in a plastic yogurt cup on top of the medicine cabinet. A shower curtain

divided the room in two, and the Bruins jersey hung over the rod like a filthy animal pelt. Elizabeth pulled back the curtain. The boy lay in the cot, his arm in a sling and his head tilted towards the window. When she sat beside him, he did not move. “So does it hurt?”

“No.” He kept watching clouds roll across the moon. “You lied to me.”

“I didn’t lie.”

“You lied. You promised you wouldn’t kill any of them.”

“I promised I wouldn’t *touch* any,” said Elizabeth, embarrassed by the semantics as soon as she heard herself. She leaned over the bed, trying to catch his eye.

“Brandon—what exactly did you think I was doing? Honestly, with all that equipment? And what did you think would happen when you jumped on me and started yelling in my ear? We got stung and muddy and bruised for nothing. They were just *wasps*.”

He pushed his face deeper into the pillow. “Everything is just what it is.”

“Okay. Tell that to Tom, he’s the one who calls the shots. But he’ll tell you we have to kill the nests to keep everyone from being scared.”

“Tom doesn’t know anything. Killing something won’t keep me from being scared. There’s always something else that’s scarier.” Brandon rolled over and looked at her. “They were dragons guarding the squirrel hole. They scared me but they were just doing their job—no other kids could touch my stuff.” He shuffled up in his sheets, putting a hand on Elizabeth’s arm. “I want to go back. We could go right now, sneak out real quick and grab my bag. You’ll be Legolas and I’ll be Gimli.”

“You aren’t going anywhere, it’s dark out and you’re suspended.”

“But I don’t have anything that’s fun here. No dinosaurs, no army guys, nothing. Just my B-shirt and now that’s wrecked.”

Elizabeth stood up. “Okay, I think it’s time for bed.”

“No, please, I have nightmares. I had one last night where I was alone in the forest, sitting on a branch, and then all these bears started searching for food—they were looking in the trees, eating all the honey and all the bees and the wasps too. Then when they ran out of that, they spotted me and stood on their back legs and started chasing me through the forest towards the lake, and every time they roared, one of my fingers fell off. They were faster than me, but they kept stopping to pick up my fingers, so they didn’t catch me until—”

“Enough, Brandon. Bears don’t even live in this part of Ontario—just stop reading books that upset you.”

He worked the sheets between his hands. “There’s a picture of my mom in the plastic bag too. I need it.”

“You should’ve thought of that a lot earlier.”

Brandon turned back to face the window. “I hate you. I hate this place and everything in it. I don’t even want to be here.”

Elizabeth stood up and blew out the candle. “Good night, Brandon.” She waited in the hall for a moment, listening for his voice, but only heard the sound of whirring crickets and spring peepers in the woods outside.

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A heavy rain began pounding Pinecroft midway through the night; by morning, the dawning horizon looked more like dusk. Elizabeth brushed her teeth and gathered her notes from the window ledge, watching rain shimmer across the slate roof of the mess hall. *Perfect weather for teaching about the water cycle.* As she left her room she

bumped into Tom, who was already carrying two plates of toast and cereal towards the medical station. “Got the sunnuvabitch covered,” he said.

As the campers finished breakfast, Elizabeth prepared a table on the other side of the mess hall, laying out a ream of computer paper, some safety scissors, four sets of stencils, and a basketful of broken crayons. The novelty of the setup held everyone’s attention at first: they worked feverishly when Elizabeth told them she would explain the whole secret if everyone traced out a sun, a river, and two clouds from the stencil patterns. They finished in fifteen minutes, and Elizabeth pulled out a poster-sized diagram of the water cycle, asking the campers to arrange their cut-outs as they appeared in the image.

“Oh. I get it now,” Jeremy sighed. “Is there a movie version?”

“No. Pay attention—the main point is that everything in a natural system is connected. It all starts with your sun, which heats up water and evaporates it from the river into the clouds. When your clouds get filled with water, and meet with a different air pressure system, then they’ll rain and fill up all the rivers again. Make sure to colour your clouds differently, to show which one is empty and which one is full.”

“My cloud is yellow. It’s filled with pee.”

“No, it’s more like a taxi cab—those are the wheels, right?”

“Or maybe it’s a big fat wasp,” said another kid.

A chorus of gasps rose through the mess hall. Elizabeth put two fingers in her mouth and whistled. “Quiet, quiet—let’s focus. Now can anyone tell me how pollution might affect this system?”

“Look,” yelled Devon. “It’s Tom, he’s come to save us from the water cycle!”

A gust of rain and wind blew open the door and Tom walked in. “Sure getting worse out there,” he said, shaking off his umbrella. He craned his neck to count the campers. “Hey. Where’s Brandon?”

Elizabeth put down her notes. “In the medical station? With you?”

“Nope. I had to go pull the canoes up on the dock, make certain they weren’t drifting off. I told him to come here.”

“You left him *alone*?”

“Hey, you shut up—he said he’d come right here.” Tom crossed his arms. “When I tell them to do something, they do it. Maybe he’s in the kitchen.”

Elizabeth began pacing up and down the hall. “Oh God—he could be anywhere now, he could be down by the lake, he could be in the forest, he could—wait—wait, okay.” She touched her forehead and pulled the door open. “I think I know where he might be. Stay here.”

Elizabeth skidded past the cabins, running past the soggy willow branches and the darkened windows of the study cabin, onto the main trail of the north woods. The rain needled through her clothes, slicking her shirt against her body. *He’s going to catch pneumonia*, she thought. *What’re we going to do with him—we’re going to have to send him to a doctor now.* “Brandon, enough hiding,” yelled Elizabeth. “This isn’t funny.” She turned down the side path, the flattened grass now floating in ankle deep water, and splashed through it until she finally reached the clearing. Her throat tightened when she saw the river. It had flooded over its banks and surged through the forest, leaving the old oak tree half-submerged, like the mast of a sunken ship.

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The first week of August in Toronto and leaves were already browning along the edges. They billowed behind the Venetian blinds of Islington Collegiate's main office, filtering yellow light across the desk and onto Elizabeth's lap. She wore a grey dress and mostly looked at her knees. On the other side of the desk, Patty Lane hummed to herself and perused Elizabeth's file. She shuffled up the pages and tapped them on the tabletop. "So you won't start the term with your own class. You want to stay in the student help centre."

Elizabeth nodded.

"That's okay. For now. You'll still receive your benefits and a raise. Welcome to Islington's full time staff, Liz." Patty pushed a flat rectangular gift box into Elizabeth's hands. "You'll need this for September."

Elizabeth said nothing.

Patty reached over and touched her arm. "Do you want to talk?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Liz," said Patty. "Things like this happen. They're rare, but they happen. Who could predict? Who could tell? Some of these kids are looking for something they haven't got, but you can't always give it to them. Remember that. The father's case is against the camp—no one is blaming you." She riffled through the file again. "It won't bother me if you say what's on your mind, Liz. Please. It might make you feel better."

Elizabeth stood up. "No. No thanks. I can't. But thanks."

She walked down the granite steps into the sunlight, the gift box tucked under her

arm, and weaved her way through the pedestrian traffic towards the subway station. A cool breeze lifted through her sleeves, raising goose bumps along her arms. She bit her tongue, hard enough to draw blood, but the sensations and images still revisited her. Of searching for a body at noon, just after the police had been called and some neighbouring farmers had come to watch the campers. The unbelievable prospect of even having to search for a body. Then walking along one side of the riverbank with Tom on the other, the two of them combing the river which had grown wide as a small lake, the sky above them light purple as they overstepped floating garbage and debris, hoping to hear a voice calling for help. And then finding it—finding him—between the forks of a fallen tree, quietly bobbing with the current, wearing a white shirt and neon orange gym shorts. Understanding that it wasn't a mistake, not a prank, not a heart-stopping close call. It was real.

Elizabeth bumped against the station's turnstile and clattered down the stairs onto the platform, settling on one of the silver benches. The train had been delayed by a track blockage and the crowds thickened, sweaty shoppers and noisy children pushing up beside her. Elizabeth set the gift box on her knees, pulling and picking at the bow until it came undone and drifted to the floor. She tilted the box. A leather-bound agenda slid into her hand, embossed with Islington's school crest and sleeved in a thin layer of bubble wrap. Elizabeth examined it, her grip tightening, popping several of the packing bubbles. She breathed out, rubbed her eyes, clenched it again.

“What's that?”

Elizabeth looked up and saw a girl in blue overalls standing in front of the bench, her knobby knees almost pressed against Elizabeth's. The girl glanced at the bubble wrap

curiously, then at the grown woman who was wiping her nose with the sleeve of her dress.

“That stuff looks fun,” said the girl.

Elizabeth pulled off the sheath of plastic, letting the book fall to her lap, and held it out to the girl. “Sure. It is,” she said, and tried to smile. “Here, why don’t you have it.”

## Fountain

~Madison Gillis: Spring 2005~

*Ba-tam. Ba-tam. Ba-tam.*

My pulse pounding in three places and a new guitar lick trickling somewhere way in the back of my head but I still can't fish it out. Shit. Everything slowly getting lighter behind my eyes and I can't open them even after six hours but at least other parts of me are starting to come back. Thighs and knee caps, shins and feet, wrists, then my throat, then my left hand which reaches up and finds the rest of my face. My nose too, and this place stinks like cedar shavings and gas and I think it's a garage. Slit my eyes open and there's a blanket covering me, pinning me down on a cot and I've just about soaked through the pillow. Oh my God. I swear never another drink but water.

The door creaks open and a fat middle-aged man comes in. He's got a tray with some white things, white crackers and Tylenol tablets and a white cup, and he sets the tray beside me, his hair pepper-grey and darting blue eyes behind wire frames. I think it's Mr. Lambert. Oh my God. It's Lambert. I was conked out and my Dad's best friend found me and he was probably wiping barf off my face with his own napkins and threw them in his own garbage can and he'll remember that every time he takes out the trash for the rest of his life. Please can I just die. Or him. Please, can one of us just die.

He passes me the water. "Sip it slow," he says and I do. Then he sits on a stool, pattering his fingers on his knees. "So Madison," he says. Pattering and pattering, silver buttons bouncing on his sleeve. "You've been asleep for eight hours now. I would've set you up in the house, but my wife said you were too ... sick." He works his fingertips in little circles against his forehead. "Before I call your Dad, mind telling me what you were

doing out so late in Taylor Park? On a weeknight?"

I fumble with the Tylenols, gulp three down. "What were *you* doing out so late?"

"Same as always—driving home after locking up the club. Nice try. Taylor Park's right in front of my house. Now tell me what you were doing."

"What do you think I was doing?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"Guess."

Lambert sighs. "Madison. If you want to make it in this business, you've got to go slower. I say that from experience. I've probably booked fifty musicians who've burnt out their first year in the circuit. Not a pretty sight." He takes off his glasses, polishes them on his housecoat. "Your Dad says you're laying down some tracks in the basement of Matt's Music. But let me tell you something—raw talent only takes you so far, and drinking vodka with local hotshots won't get you anywhere. You're seventeen. If you aren't careful, you can lose everything just like *that*—"

Clapping his hands *ba-tam*.

And oh my God. There it is. The guitar lick I've been trying to reel in for days, pure perfection, I can see it rolling out there on the waves, the whole red hot song on the horizon, at least twelve chords and way better than anything on my demo, the intro floating there like a fishing line and if Lambert would just shut up I could grab it and pull myself to the rest of the music, skim across the water and I've caught it between my fingers oh my God I got it—

"Shhhh—shut up—I need a guitar, quick—"

Lambert stares at me.

“You’ve got a guitar, don’t you?” I say heaving off the blanket. “You’re sort of a musician, right? You’ve got to have a guitar here, this is important—really important, I’m losing my song—”

“Sit *down!*” he barks, and another missile cuts off the top of my head *ba-TAM*. Oh my God. “I’m trying to help you Madison. I’m trying to make it easier for you when your Dad picks you up. Didn’t you hear anything I just said to you?”

“Yes, okay. Sorry. Really.” Jim’s got to have a guitar. I can borrow Jim’s guitar. If I’m still near Taylor Park, that means I’m only a couple blocks from his high school. Jim might lend it to me just for a second. “Um ... I think—I’m going to throw up again, where’s the bathroom?”

“Through here,” says Lambert, taking my elbow and guiding me around the clutter in his garage towards the door. We step outside and the sunlight’s just brutal. A punch straight to the face.

“Beauty of a day,” I say and squint.

“Yup,” murmurs Lambert, looking up at the sky. Then I bolt. Just start sprinting across his lawn and hurtling over plastic gnomes and garden chairs and running onto the sidewalk, skidding out and nearly scraping off my knee. I scramble up and dodge between parked cars on the street, bouncing off fenders, and I can hear fatso Lambert yelling behind me but I don’t even bother looking back. No way he can catch me, and I’ve still got the lick curled under my tongue. If I touch a guitar, I know the whole song’ll come out in a flood.

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A slight breeze and birds booming through the branches. I’d twist their beaks off

to shut them up if I could. But at least I made it. Made it to Jim's school. Resting behind the hedges by the music building until my skull puts itself back together. I think Jim's in the last practice room on the second floor. He's always there during his spare and lunch—spends the whole day running through scales. I swear that's all he does, it's like he's getting ready to play an all-scale concert. And to think I always used to beg him to jam with me. I crawl along the wall to get closer, then grab a rock, chuck it at the second floor window and it dings off the glass.

“Jim,” I croak. “Hey Jim-bo!”

The window slides up and my brother sticks his head out. His brown hair's parted all neat and tidy and he's wearing a flannel button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. As if he drove to school in a time machine from the 1950s. “Madison?” he says. “You look awful.”

“Yeah, I know. I'm hung over, what's your excuse?”

And he just shrugs. Jim never gets mad, he's like a robot. He's got exactly one-point-five expressions—the shrug, and the half-shrug. “Where were you last night, Madison?”

“Why the hell do you care?”

“I *don't* care,” says Jim. “But Mom said you were supposed to pick up Jill at seven and walk her to that magnet display at Archimedes Academy. Remember?” He leans out farther, brushing some dead leaves off the ledge that flutter down to my face. “Anyway, Jill was waiting at the bus stop for an hour.”

Oh shit. Poor Jill. I am such an idiot. “God, I'm sorry.”

“Tell her that yourself if you actually mean it. Dad too. He's really blown up over

this.” Jim folds his arms along the window frame, rests his chin in the crook of his elbow. “Aren’t you supposed to be prepping your application for York? Or working a shift at Matt’s? It’s past noon. Don’t you ever do anything anymore?”

“Jim, you know what I’ve been doing.” Or *trying* to do. “Look, I need your help. I’ve got a brand new song and I have to work it out real quick—can I come up there for a second?”

“Do you have any smokes on you?”

“Nothing on me but clothes.”

“Oh,” he says, scratching his shoulder. He glances back into the room, like he heard something, then taps his chin with his palm. “Well ... I don’t think so. Nope. Why don’t you go to Matt’s if you need a guitar so badly?”

“That’s all the way across town—c’mon, I’ll sneak you a pack later—Jim this is getting urgent—”

“No, Madison. I don’t want to be late for class.” He almost smiles and I can tell he’s enjoying this. “Besides, I think you should spend some time on your chops instead of running off another pile of mediocre songs.”

“I think you should spend some time on shutting the fuck up.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” he says, dropping the window closed.

“What does that even mean, you ass?”

I grab another rock and chuck it, chinking it off the window frame. Idiot wishes he did something besides play at Lambert’s jazz club, all they ever ask him to do is comping and bass lines in the house band, never any of his own songs. I root through the hedges, digging into the dirt with my fingernails until I find a bigger rock, sort of chipped



and chiselled along the edge. “Come on Jim, don’t be a prick,” I yell, launching it. And this one goes straight through the glass. Oh shit.

I glance down the sidewalk to see if anyone saw, then back at the window. Jim’s standing there again, poking at the jagged hole until a glass tooth comes loose and falls into the bushes. His mouth slung open and his eyebrows raised up, the closest to shock I’ve ever seen on his face. A new expression. Oh my God, I actually gave Jim a brand new expression. “Happy birthday, Jimmy James!” I yell at him and wave. And before he can fire back an insult I’m gone, running along the fence by the football field and through the staff parking lot onto the other side of the school.

I’m fine until I come out on Exeter Street, then nausea decks me again. Pow. Right to the gut. I drop on the boulevard and try to hold it back but can’t help heaving against a tree. Oh my God. I am so thirsty and hot and barely clinging onto my riff. I lie down in the grass, close my eyes. Listen to the stream of passing cars. And how to keep the song from floating back into the deep end. I’ve never had perfect pitch but I try humming the lick out loud, tasting the first seven notes, rolling them around in my mouth to get the flavour. Focus on the intervals till they match the throb of my temples, timed up with each *ba-tam*. Maybe this is what it feels like to meditate.

“Hey Russki! You okay?”

Who’s calling me Russki again. I shuffle up on my elbows and someone’s pulling over in a big orange car, wheeling right onto the curb and I can see my reflection in the hubcap. The driver bangs her hand on the outside of her door, as if she’s at a zoo and the tiger’s not paying attention to her. “Hey! Hey Russki, funny seeing you here—you still recovering from our little soiree with Jared Tobias?”

“Oh. It’s you,” I say, clambering up against the side of her car. “Call me Russki one more goddam time and see what happens.” It’s that stupid girl, what’s-her-name, the one who always hangs around Matt’s talking about the local producers and tastemakers she knows. The one who said Jared Tobias was a perfect match for me. “Why the hell did you guys just leave me out there last night?”

“Sorry,” she says, all serious now, “everyone else was leaving and Jared Tobias said when the bottles dry up it’s ‘all for none and none for all.’ He said that’s the rule.”

“And did that ass say anything else about my songs?”

“I can’t remember.”

Whatever. I don’t even care anymore. I rest my head against the car roof. It’s cool. Cool and refreshing metal on my cheek and it makes my head feel better. I put my arms around it. Like hugging an iceberg. Just drifting out there. And I can watch the slow bobbing of my guitar lick, watch all the little beads of it floating neatly on top of the blue water. Life is so beautiful. Then what’s-her-name’s shaking my elbow. “Hey, wake up.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Madison?” She sounds nervous and pushes something made of pebbly plastic against my hand. A Thermos. “Drink some water, you look like you’re going to keel over.”

“Okay,” I say taking it and unscrewing it and letting the water stream over my tongue. So good. Wipe my lips on my arm. Then I squint and pull open her back door. “I really need a guitar. Will you drive me to Matt’s?”

“But—”

“Look, if you don’t, I’ll puke on your seats right now.”

She says I have to hold a grocery bag under my chin the whole way, but at least she shuts up and I can think. The car purrs against my aching legs and I sit thinking about those first seven notes. What do they sound like. How do they fit together. What do they lead to. It makes me a little sad and I don't know why. I'm trying not to feel depressed, but sometimes that's hard. I sip and sip until the water's gone, then let my bruised-up head drift down to the damp seat cushions.

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*After ten. The air smells like earthworms and rubbing alcohol. I step onto Taylor Park's soggy baseball diamond and all I can see is the glowing dots of cigarettes at home plate. Then someone flicks a lighter and I see six people there, sitting cross-legged on a bench with bottles and Dixie cups scattered around their feet. The guy in the middle sits higher up on a Gatorade bucket, wearing five gaudy rings and a gold chain and leaning back against the batting cage. His beard is shaved in spiral patterns, and he keeps touching his mouth. He looks like Fred Penner on crack.*

*"So there she is," he calls.*

*"Yeah. Hi Madison," says what's-her-name. "Meet the one and only Jared."*

*"Call me Jared Tobias," says the bearded guy, kissing two fingers and pointing them at the other people on the bench. "And that's my crew. So you got something for me to hear?"*

*"Yes," I say.*

*"Then let's get down to biz." He pulls out an old Discman, flips it open, holds it up in front of me. I take the demo CD-R from my pocket, and reaching forward my hand starts getting quivery. Shaking like hell. Stupid, I know. I've listened to these three songs*

*a million times, spent hours on each one, but I still don't know if I'm happy with them or if they're any good. It's hard to tell, they're different every time I press replay—first they sound beautiful, then they sound like garbage. She loves me, she loves me not. The muse is such a bitch.*

*“Just put it in,” Jared says and I do. Then he grabs a skinny bottle of vodka, fills two Dixie cups and passes me one. “Take it. Juice up while I listen, Russki. It's the rule.”*

*“Why?”*

*“That's just his rule, Russki,” says one of the girls, and the whole crew hoots like gorillas. “That's just the way Jay Tee rolls.”*

*I tip back the cup and the stuff lights up my throat, smooth as spring water. Jared takes a swig from the bottle and puts on a pair of headphones. I sit there and watch him, sipping at my cup, biting my nails, sipping at my cup. I can't stand this. And his crew keeps blabbing at each other like nothing's happening, like this is just a happy little picnic. After four minutes, Jared hits pause and scratches his face.*

*“Well? So?”*

*He examines the green-gemmed ring on his left hand. “Did you use pop filters on your microphone?”*

*“No, I've got no budget, I'm recording on junk equipment—but the song—what do you think of the actual song?”*

*“Well,” he says. “It's clear you're a guitar player. You got hands. You got a voice. Each note's well-played.” He takes the bottle of vodka and tops up my cup. “But there's no hook. Or too many hooks. Let me ask you this: when you think you have a perfect song, how do you know which part to take out?”*

*“Why would I take out anything?”*

*He taps his mouth a few times, then shakes his head, pressing the headphones against his ears again. “Think about what you just said to me, Russki. Think about it.”*

*Jared Tobias listens to the other two songs straight through. I sit there sipping and biting, sipping and biting until I can’t feel my fingers. It’s painful watching him. He doesn’t react to anything. Except for my sister, I’ve never seen anyone stay so completely still when listening to music. Finally he presses stop, stretches his arms and yawns. He looks down at the ruby ring on his right hand, plays with the stone. Spins the ring around his finger a couple times.*

*“Holy shit you ass, just say something about my songs—stop screwing around and say something, for godssake, please just tell me if you think I’m onto something. Please.”*

*Jared sniffs the air, clucks his tongue. “Overall, it’s post-rock jazz. Fusion-y. Some 60s Miles Davis filtered through Lou Reed and maybe Weather Report. A real mix.” He opens the Discman, pops the CD out with both thumbs. It hits the ground and wobbles along the baseline, finally flopping over into a puddle. “But what does it all add up to? Doesn’t tell me a story. Tries doing too much of everything—too many dynamics, too many rhythm changes, too many notes—which is all to say, Russki, that this shit just doesn’t work. None of it. Sorry.”*

*Oh my God. He’s just like my Dad.*

*“I never asked you to love it,” I say, my voice wavering on luh-uh-ve, and I could just about curl up and die because of that. “I don’t need a pat on the head, Jacobias, so go to hell,” and I grab one of the bottles and tilt it back, swigging until my eyes start*

*watering and it feels like there's a little man running laps inside my mind. Huh. And why are my hands so sweaty when the stuff's in my stomach. The bottle slips between my fingers and suddenly I can't breathe and a hot fist's pushing up out my throat again and again and it tastes like sour potato salad and then it's dry like I'm doing aerobics—Hrk and Hrk and Hrk until nothing's left, I'm gut-empty hearing voices whip around me somewhere—*

*—turn her—turn her on her side—*

*—Jared—*

*—hurry up—this stinks—*

*—honesty. Yup. That's all I ever gave anyone.*

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When I wake up something's dripping on my face. So sick of damp drippy things. I'm propped against a dumpster in the alley behind Matt's Music and what's-her-name must have just dumped me out here and drove off. Ditched me again. At least she got the address right. I push back against some dirty packing crates and creak up to my feet. Oh my God. Feels like my headache drained down into my legs and now they're just two long strips of gristle. I am so done with this day.

I pull Matt's back door open, wincing and hobbling through the storage room towards the yellow lights of the main floor. And finally that beautiful scent of new instruments, I can smell factory varnish and fresh wood, just ten more steps and there'll be a hundred guitars to choose from, an SG or a Les Paul or a Telecaster or even a Flying V. Doesn't matter. Anything will do.

I hurry out of the dark into the showroom's lights and slam straight into

somebody, bouncing off his chest and back against a rack of cymbals. My Dad. My Dad's standing there with his thumbs jammed in the belt loops of his jeans, his broad-brim cowboy hat tipped down over his red face. He looks totally exhausted and pissed off. I scramble to the left but he steps in front of me, blocking the path to the walls of guitars. "Not a chance," he says with that semisweet voice he uses when he's pissed, but knows other people might hear him. Jerks his thumb towards the front door. "Car. Now."

"Wait," I say, hobbling back behind the stomp box display. "All I need's five minutes. That's it. Five minutes with a guitar, please—"

"Car. Now."

"No—let me—hey Matt, where the hell are you?" I yell, and he's not at the repair desk or the acoustic room and my legs are throbbing worse than before and how can I get out of this. "Matt?"

Dad pushes up his hat and sighs and I can see the gap on the left side of his mouth where he lost another tooth last summer. Never bothered getting that fixed. "Forget it," he says. "Me and Matt already talked. You're out of a job. Blacklisted. This is the last time you'll ever set foot in here."

I've got nothing. No reaction. I just wilt. I am so done with reactions.

The air out front smells like leather and smoke. It smells like Dad. He's moving all my stuff from the space in the basement, a couple crappy guitars and an old hard drive, boxes of papers and notes. I sit leaning beside the car with my wrists balanced on my knees staring at the junk he's brought up so far. And who knows where my lick went. Lost my grip and it went spinning off somewhere into the clouds. I look at my beat-up

acoustic and feel sick. I don't even want to touch it. Pointless. Six more months. Six more months and I'm free. That's all I can think. Six months to eighteen.

"Psst. Madison."

I turn my head to the left but no one's there, just an empty parking lot. Then I glance up and see my little sister peering down through the passenger window. "Jill?"

"Where were you last night?" she says, opening the car door and swinging her legs out. She's wearing her favourite white button-up dress, the one that looks like a lab coat. Oh my God. Like I needed to feel any worse.

"Sorry. Really sorry about the science thing," I murmur. "I'll make it up to you."

"Are you coming home for dinner tonight?"

I sink my head between my knees. "Mm."

"You look sick." Jill says. "You should take a break. I think you've been doing too much work."

"Too much?" I wipe my mouth and laugh. "Too much? Doesn't seem like that to me, seems like I've just been ramming my head into a brick wall all day long and doing jack, but I guess that's what you've got to do when you're trying to be a pro, you just ram your head into walls all day long until you snuff yourself out." I look at the guitar again and my throat feels thick. "I always wanted my music to sound like Niagara Falls, but everyone else wants me to turn it into a fucking park fountain."

Jill frowns. Now I'm going to get the swearing speech. She smooths out the front of her dress and looks over at the trees across the road. "You know, Niagara Falls sounds funny—my class took a field trip there last year. It's really loud up close, but when you're far away walking through the city, it just sounds like this soft hum. Really pretty."



She points over at my guitar. “So what does waterfall music sound like?”

I stare at her, my nerdy little sister who doesn't know one thing about music, and I think my head's going to explode from pure fucking bliss. I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her against my shoulder, pressing until she starts to squirm and I probably smell awful so I let her go and give her a big kiss right on the forehead instead. “You're an angel, Jill—fell straight from the skies,” I say and grab the guitar, tweaking the tuning keys. “I'll give you all the waterfall music you want.” And who cares if it works or doesn't work—I just pluck two harmonics, *ting-tong*, latch onto the closest note, and let whatever's coming carry me where it has to go.

## Maple Keys

~Jill Gillis: Fall 2007~

James left with Mom and Dad fifteen minutes ago for his first solo show ever at Mr. Lambert's club. He's been practicing all week, the same ten songs over and over at full volume, which is why I'm behind on my homework. I can't concentrate when there's any music, even if my project's simple. But now I've finally got the house to myself, and I'm laying out my leaf samples from largest to smallest on the kitchen table. I love organizing things—chemical tables and math equations, but most of all, nature catalogues like this one. I have to mount twelve leaf specimens in my environmental log book and write what makes them different from each other. My oaks are especially great, with symmetrical vein patterns and tear-free epidermises, and my maples are pretty good too, but I just picked them up on my way home today, and they're an inch too big for the pages.

I hold one up to the kitchen light, trying to think if maybe there's a tiny-leafed Japanese maple somewhere on our block, when I hear three heavy thumps at the side door, as if someone's pounding our corn cob wreath against the wood. I wait. Three more thumps. Finally a muffled voice whispers *Ollie ollie oxen free*, and I run down and snap the deadbolt open.

"Hi Jilleroo," says Madison, flicking a corn husk off her shoulder. "Nice doorbell. Got a minute?"

I just stand there watching her. My sister hasn't come by our house for almost four months and she looks so different. Her cheeks are brighter and her hair's pinned back in braids, dark purple, way nicer than that weird aqua-coloured haircut she used to

have, and even her clothes look fancier than usual—shin-high boots and a plaid skirt and black fingerless gloves that go halfway up her wrist. It's like she's dressed to give a speech at a banquet. And she just can't stop smiling. That's the biggest change.

Madison puts both hands on my head, rubbing my hair and tangling it up. "I've got such a freaking surprise for you. What're you doing right now?"

I twirl the stem between my fingers. "Working on a leaf catalogue."

"Well ... yeah, I can see that," she says, leading me over to the shoe rack and sitting me down. She takes the leaf and sticks it in my hair. "But guess where I'm taking you?"

"The Banting Centre?"

"Oh my God, Jill, *no*. No nature, no science. Not today." Madison crouches in front of me and her eyes are so bright blue they're almost hard to look at. "You, Doctor Jillian, now have a weekend job as honorary roadie at my band's very first album launch at The Phoenix! You're gonna have all-access super VIP treatment and you'll get tons of crazy swag and you'll stay in a hotel and eat so much junk food we'll need a bulldozer to push you back here—"

She keeps talking and I watch the way that her nose crinkles and she rolls her hands in the air as she describes all the fun we're going to have and little green dots start flickering on the wall behind her. I take off my glasses and rest my head against the banister.

"Jill—hey," says Madison, tapping my face. "What, are you having a stroke or something? Chill out, I already told Dad about it."

"Really? You were talking with him?"

“Sure.” She reaches back for my sneakers, slips them halfway onto my feet.

“Phoned him up this afternoon. Now let’s go.”

“But he didn’t mention anything about this before he left tonight.”

She takes my jacket off the coat rack and drapes it over my shoulders. “Of course he didn’t—this was supposed to be a *surprise*. An early birthday present. I’ve been planning it for ages.” She stands up and points at me. “Look, you’re already dressed. Are you coming?”

I scratch my forehead.

“Geez Jill, the gig’s like thirty minutes from here, probably less, and I’ll have you back by Sunday afternoon. Maybe I’ll even stick around for dinner.”

“Do you promise?”

“Sure.”

“Well ... okay then,” I say, stomping my heels the rest of the way in.

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We drive downtown in Madison’s long white van which smells like a wet ashtray, and my seat’s pulled up so far my knees almost touch the dashboard. The back is filled with black music crates and microphone stands, cables jammed into every open space, but I don’t mind. It feels like we’re on a cargo plane and Madison’s the pilot, the dashboard lighting up her face a funny green as we speed along the skyway towards the CN tower. I keep sneaking glances at her. She looks so pretty with her braids, and she’s driving a lot better than she used to, almost as smooth as Mom, switching lanes and talking without even thinking about it.

“Between recording sessions we’ve been doing real tours,” she says, passing me a

bag of Twizzlers. “A different city for each day. It’s incredible. I mean, obviously the vans get trashy after a while, but there’s nothing better than playing in front of people who want to see you. If you stand up there once, you never want to sit down again, you just want to play and play. It’s like falling in love every single night.” She looks over and grins. “You’ll understand tomorrow.”

I pull out another licorice whip and twist it around my fingers. “You know James is playing this weekend too.”

“Yeah,” she says. “Jimster always plays Lambert’s open mike on Fridays.”

“But tonight it’s solo.”

“Well, good for him,” she says.

A few minutes later we turn off Dundas and Madison cranks down her window. “Jill, check it out—there it is,” she says, slowing the van and pointing. “Our weekend playground.”

Up ahead there’s a yellow brick theatre with giant red letters that spell out The Phoenix. The marquee has little lights that zip around the edges, and on both sides it says *Razorback: Live Release Sat / doors @ 9pm*. Underneath there’s an old fashioned ticket booth and a double-door entrance, with a group of five people wearing mismatched dress clothes and standing around smoking. The girls have nose piercings, and one of the guys is about the size of a silverback gorilla with tattoos all down his arm. Madison leans out, throwing the Twizzler bag at them. “Hey guys,” she yells. “Lounge in ten.”

We drive down the next alleyway and park between two hotels. I follow Madison up one of the cast iron fire escapes, her boots clacking on the metal grates, and we come out in a dining room that has marble floors and brass chandeliers hanging from the

ceiling. There's also a pond made from granite, giant gold-mottled fish cruising through the reeds at the bottom. I trace my fingers along the water as we walk. "Wow. Look at those koi," I whisper. "Look how big they are!"

"Yeah, this place is class—you should see our room," she says, steering me towards the lobby and the elevators. "There's a chair that can give you massages. Ever heard of anything like that?"

"No," I say, hitting the elevator's up button. "Let's try."

Madison keeps walking deeper into the lobby. "Later. Band meeting first. C'mon, the lounge is pretty wicked."

I cross my arms. "Well ... I think I'd rather go upstairs."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Are you scared of my band?" Madison looks like she's trying not to smile, and I feel my face going red. "Jill, there's nothing to be nervous about. Trust me, 99.9% of people in music are a-holes—but I work with the other 0.1%. These guys are total kittens—you'll love them. C'mon, I'll buy you some fries and a Coke. It'll be fun."

"It'll be fun upstairs too."

Madison shakes her head. "God. Ten years old and she still doesn't know how to have a good time. Must be that regressive gene from Dad kicking in."

"Recessive. And he was cool enough to let me come here, wasn't he?"

"Okay. Right," she sighs. "Whatever you want to do. That's the only rule—no freaking rules for you this weekend." She pulls a plastic card out of her boot, slipping it behind my ear. "Here's the key, we're in room 2204. Go put on a movie, I'll be up in like

twenty minutes.”

The elevator smells like lemon-tinged roses, moving completely silently while the floors tick off, almost as if it’s not moving at all. I look at my watch. It’s past ten which means James is done his show, and he’s probably at home with Mom and Dad, and they’re probably making popcorn and watching TV. I feel dizzy. I wish I’d stayed with Madison.

At the twenty-second floor the elevator slides open and I hear a loud voice. Outside, there’s a man wearing a broad brimmed hat and a housecoat, yelling into his phone about a missing caviar tray. He turns around and looks right at me but before he can open his mouth again, I sprint down the hall and fumble with the card at 2204 and unlock the door as quickly as I can, shoving it closed and leaning against it. I listen for his footsteps but they don’t come. There’s nothing but the sound of my breath and the blue light of the TV. It’s already on, flickering like a ghost in an aquarium. I tap the switch beside the bed and two incandescent lamps come on, lighting up the heaps of clothing and CDs, the huge messes of cables, and the three guitar cases propped against the wall. It looks as if Madison just grabbed all the junk from her old room and dropped it in here. That makes me feel a little better, but I don’t want to watch a movie. I just want to lie down. I want to call home. I wish I’d brought my leaf catalogue. I’m going to fail, there’s going to be a big red F written beside my name in Miss Schooner’s grade book and they’re not going to let me submit a display to the senior science fair. I tug back the bed sheets and curl up, where it smells like lemon-tinged roses too.

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Someone shakes my shoulder but I don’t want to wake up. I pull the covers tighter

over my head, but a finger pokes my stomach twice. “Jill?” I open my eyes and see Madison standing in front of the bed smoking, her braids loose and dangling down to frame her face. She’s still wearing the same clothes from yesterday, but it’s morning now and I can see right across the Toronto skyline behind her. She flicks the cigarette into the garbage can and crouches next to me. “You okay?”

“Yes.”

“You were mumbling in your sleep.”

“I was?”

“Yeah, it kind of freaked me out. The same as when you had the chicken pox and you would sleep-talk all night long.” She watches me, her arms crossed along the edge of the bed, then peels off one of her gloves and touches her bare palm to my forehead.

“You’re not getting that again are you?”

“No. I can’t.” I giggle and flip her hand over, pressing it against my face. “Use the *back* to check for fever.”

“Whatever you say, Doc—as long as you’re good to go.” She stands up, dabbing her neck with her glove, then passes me a Styrofoam plate of cold pancakes covered in Nutella. “It’s eleven, you better eat something and wash up—we’ll be late for sound check.”

“Right. Um ... just so you know, I should spend some time on my homework today.”

Madison’s shoulders slump. “Oh my God, Jill. You’re kidding.”

“Well, it’s due Monday and I need new maples leaves. My teacher doesn’t accept late journals. Plus I don’t want to be worrying about all that tomorrow night while we’re



eating dinner.” I look at Madison, not quite in the eyes. “It’s important.”

She tugs her hair under her chin like a bonnet strap. “Fine. I think there’s a park somewhere around here. Now can we get moving? The band’s waiting.”

I drag my heels on the way to The Phoenix, but the wind is fresh and chilly and it clears up my head. When we get to the doors, no one else is around. There are two big stacks of cardboard boxes behind the ticket booth, and Madison grabs the top one, punching a hole in the packing tape with a guitar pick. “Oh sweet, Jill, check it,” she says, pulling out a t-shirt like a giant black Kleenex and draping it over my shoulder. “These are the new goods—gotta get you decked out before they set up the merch table.” Madison rips into another box and I unfold the shirt. It lists fifteen different dates and cities across the back, some of them all the way in Alberta, and the front says *Razorback* with a black and white picture of a donkey pushing a covered wagon up a hill with its head. It looks like a photo from a silent Western movie, dumb and funny, but it doesn’t make me feel like laughing.

“That’s the album cover too,” says Madison, passing me a CD in plastic wrap.

“Are these the songs you recorded at Matt’s?”

“No,” she says, slipping a baseball cap onto my head and dropping a key chain into my pocket. “I used a few of those demos as guide tracks when Toby and I started recording, but I scrapped that garbage after the band came together. Once you’ve got real chemistry with other players, you start hearing things you never heard before. Being in a band’s the greatest thing ever. C’mon, I’ll show you.”

In the lobby, we push through a set of doors light as balsa wood and walk onto a red-carpeted aisle. The building is nothing like Mr. Lambert’s club—it’s a real theatre,

with hundreds of padded fold-up seats and a balcony level. The far end is a giant wooden shell, arching over the stage, which has rows of speakers and guitars. I can see someone sitting at the drums, probably the huge guy with the tattoos, twisting knobs and occasionally tapping parts of his kit, and I can hear the hissing of a violin. A hushed voice says *again, check, check, one two* from the overhead speakers. It sounds eerie and solemn. Madison puts her finger to her lips, the first time she's ever done that to me, and we walk slowly down the left aisle. I hold onto her hand and watch her eyes moving from the floor to the ceiling to her band, like she's never seen any of it before.

It takes us ten minutes to reach the stage, where one of the girls from last night is tuning a cello. She's wearing a willowy crêpe dress, and notices us without looking up. "Hi Madison," she says. "Good timing—Max already balanced the Rhodes and the bass, but he and Jason had to go to Belle Air since we blew another tube in the Leslie cabinet. Oh, and we still haven't heard from the photographer. Guy's gone AWOL."

"Don't worry about it," Madison says, and tries to tug me out in front of her. "Justine—this is my sister, Jill. Jill, this is Justine. And that's Clara and Toby."

Clara points at me with her bow. "Hey, sister Jill."

"We've heard all about you," says Toby, playing a tinkling rhythm on his cymbal. He doesn't seem so big when he's sitting down, and his voice is high and crisp-sounding, sort of like Winnie the Pooh's. "Everything's tweaked and ready to go. How about a jam?"

Everyone's looking at me. I don't know why they're looking at me. Madison looks at me too and she's smiling. "Sorry Doc," she says and shrugs, walking over to her guitar rack. "As soon as you step on this stage, you're part of the band."

My heart skips. I back up into a microphone stand, shaking my head. I want to hide behind Madison, but she's the one rooting around the speakers trying to find me an instrument. "Glockenspiel, accordion, marimba? What do you want to play? We've got everything. You have to pick one."

"No. You said no rules."

"I forgot about this rule—it's the one rule. How about bass?" says Madison, dragging a huge syrup-coloured guitar beside me and setting it upright in a stand. It's taller than I am, the four tuning keys as big as silver dollars. She plugs a cable into it and the overhead speakers crackle. "Jason won't care if we mess with his rig. Jill, you lay down the groove."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know how."

"Sure you do. C'mon. Music's just math—right, Toby? All patterns and numbers—your specialty, Jill."

"I guess." I glance at the bass. "I can't even lift that."

"You don't have to. All you have to do is plunk the open E." She reaches around my shoulder and rolls her thumb over the biggest string. A fat *baoh* sound comes rumbling from overhead. "Try it." I brush the string with my fingers, and the same sound comes again, but softer. "Good, keep it going. That's it Jill, nice and easy. Cool. One, and two, and three." She mouths the numbers at me as she walks backwards to centre stage, grabbing a red guitar and slinging it over her head. I keep brushing the string, and on the other side of the stage, I hear the cello lilting back and forth, filling the space between

notes. The violin starts chipping out short melodies that run up or down, depending on which way the cello is going, while Madison plays arpeggios for harmony. And somehow it makes sense to me. I can hear everything, how it fits, the way that Toby holds it together by playing clicky rhythms on the rim of his drum, snipping his foot to make two cymbals open and close. It reminds me of insects in the tall grass at our cottage on the lake.

Madison keeps mouthing the numbers as she sways, her braids bouncing in time with Justine's ponytail. Then she closes her eyes and turns to face Clara, sweeping her right hand across the strings and suddenly pulling the music in a totally new direction. My hand messes up, but everyone else keeps following her. It's like watching a flock of birds turning in mid-flight—they know exactly what to do and when. They're musicians. And I feel silly sitting here pretending I am too. I fumble with the E string, trying to squeeze back in somewhere, but I can't find the seam. I don't know if there is one. Suddenly it seems so stupid that I'm here instead of Daddy or James.

I stop playing and slip off the stage, pushing out through the closest exit at the foot of the stage. It leads onto a fenced-off concrete patio outside. The only thing here is a beaten-up bench on a narrow strip of sod. It stinks, and I bet this is where all the actors and musicians come to smoke during their breaks. I shiver and sit down, staring at the frost-skinned puddle between my feet.

The door rattles open and Madison steps outside, her face glowing with sweat. "Hey, why'd you go? Your solo was coming up."

I press my foot into the centre of the puddle, watching the ice dissolve around my shoe. "So this is the closest I'll get to a park."

“Oh. Okay, I see. We’re taking care of some business now,” she says, straddling the bench beside me. She points at the sod. “You could use some of that grass for your project.”

“No. Everything has to be deciduous. They have to be from actual trees.”

“We’ll bend the rules,” she says, leaning down and yanking out a big clump.

“No, I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Madison shreds some of the grass, ripping it up into little bits and sprinkling it on my lap. “You know, your teacher probably won’t even care.”

I slap at the grass. I slap at it and slap at it until I’ve got every last blade off my clothes. “Well, *I’ll* care,” I say and stand up, touching the edge of the table for balance. “Doesn’t it matter that I’ll care? That’s important too, isn’t it? Can’t I care about something too? Am I allowed?”

“Holy ... take it easy Jill. Be cool.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you weren’t so cool. Everything doesn’t have to be cool all the time. It could be normal. We could just play a board game, or work on a puzzle, or go for a walk in the forest.”

The door rattles open behind us and Clara rushes onto the patio, a camera dangling from her fist. “Madison, get inside quick—someone from CTV is waiting in the lobby, and he needs our new contact info. It might be for the morning show. Here kid,” she says, slinging the camera around my neck. “You’ll be our photographer today, we need shots for the website.”

Madison says something to Clara, but I can’t hear it. They’re talking but they sound very far away, like they’re underwater, and I step forward holding up the camera.

Madison's head bobs in the viewfinder, lining up with Clara's as green spots flicker across their faces. I twist the lens to clear the image, wiping the spots right off the lens but then Madison starts disappearing too and the patio concrete suddenly rushes up towards my face and fills the viewfinder.

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*Everyone was in a different room. James was eating in front of the television, Mom was in the kitchen putting on coffee, Daddy was sitting at the dinner table finishing his spaghetti really slowly. It was as if each bite had a message and he was saying something by eating slowly. I sat across from him and watched, coiling noodles around my fork. Madison was in her room and not coming out and I was almost done, so I went down the hall to get her. I knocked on her door, and said come for dessert, and she said no.*

*Well, I'm not going back to the table unless you come too, I said.*

*You have to go sit down, Jill. Go sit down, be a good girl. It's different for you.*

*I said no, it's not, it's exactly the same.*

*Wrong, they want you to sit there. Not me.*

*They only want you to be more careful. You have to eat, Madison.*

*I've got my own food in here. I will not sit down across the table from Dad until he comes here, gives back my tapes, and apologizes.*

*Well, you can't make him do anything. You can only make yourself do something.*

*Shit Jill, whose side are you on?*

*Nobody's, no one's, I said, and instantly wished that instead I had said, everybody's, everyone's.*

*Better get going, Jill. You probably have homework or whatever so you better get back and finish eating. There's nothing you can do. I'm putting on my headphones, goodnight.*

*Wait, I said. Wait.*

*Goodnight, Jill.*

*Wait a minute.*

*Go. You're going to bomb your homework.*

*No I won't, I've never failed anything before, I said. Wait.*

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Miss Schooner calls me up front to her desk and asks me why I didn't hand anything in. She sits there with her arms folded on her ledger, her glasses settled on the tip of her nose like an old lady's, even though she's just over thirty. *Where's your project, Jillian?* she says. I take a breath, and say *I had family issues*. She looks confused, or maybe she just doesn't believe me. *I had family issues*, I say again, tapping the back of my left hand against my right palm, as if that makes everything clear. Her face doesn't change. *Well, your parents haven't breathed a word about this to me. What do you mean?*

I wake up lying in a bed with gauze around my head, and there's a beeping sound coming from above me. I faintly remember another trip in the van, and some people in scrubs rolling up my sleeves and taking my temperature. I tilt my chin to the left and Madison is sitting in a plastic chair beside me. She's wearing her old jean jacket now, and she keeps raising her fingers to her lips then pulling them away, as if she's smoking a cigarette. But she's only got a cell phone. No one else is in the room.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” says Madison, her face completely drained of colour. “You fell down and hit your head. It was exhaustion or dehydration or something like that. They’re doing tests and wanted to know if we’ve got a history of anything in our family—it probably isn’t serious, but they don’t know for sure. I mean, anything could set someone off like that, and it’s probably nothing—that’s what they said, anyway. You can ask the nurse.”

“Okay.” I nod my head and feel strangely calm. “So will the concert still be tonight?”

“Yeah,” she says miserably. “Yeah, it’s going to be tonight. Oh my God, what a disaster.” Madison ploughs her hands through her hair. She pauses, staring at her phone then back at me. “You probably think I never even called Dad yesterday. Don’t you? But I did, pretty much. It’s true. Just some miscommunication or whatever the hell you want to call it. God. I should be used to this—everything always turns into such a big deal, such a crisis.” She waves her hand at the clock. “Never mind. I called them again and they’re coming for you now. I guess you’ll get that family reunion you wanted.”

We sit silently for another minute, Madison wringing her phone while smoking her invisible cigarette. I cough, and she reaches over to straighten my pillow. “Listen. I might not be seeing you for a while. I’m just saying that so you know. And I was thinking about it, that maybe I should—well, they kicked me out of here during the blood tests, so I was walking around outside for a bit, and I found some of these for your thing,” she says, digging into her jacket pocket. “Look, whirlybirds.”

She shakes them out onto the counter beside my bed. There are five of them. Green and brown, very dry, the membranes a little torn but still in decent condition. They



could probably still fly. “They’re called samaras,” I say, and I don’t know why I had to clarify that, or why my voice is so tiny. “Maple keys. Technically, they aren’t classified as leaves, they’re seeds.”

“Oh,” says Madison, settling her hands on her legs. The expression on her face makes me want to cry. “But they kind of look like leaves. Don’t you think?”

“I guess they do,” I say. I sweep them onto a tissue and lay them on my lap. “It’s true. I’ll see if I can fit them in.”

## **The Noon Slot**

*~James Gillis: Summer 2010~*

I came to St. John's expecting a summer-long residency at a small jazz club called the Blue Train. Three nights a week, sixty dollars a set, plus one dollar from every cover charge—and the managers wanted me to play originals too, not just standards. Pretty good gig for the East Coast. But my second-floor flat on Scots Avenue—that was not so good. I got there after dark on June fifteenth, and even then I could see how badly the old house slouched, its balcony sagging to the left, half the shingles blown off the roof and sprayed across the sidewalk. The place was probably one loose board away from being bulldozed. There was only one tidy thing about it: a note taped to the front door, sealed in a crisp yellow envelope. I clasped it between my teeth and hauled my luggage up the rickety stairs, flicking on the lights in the closest bedroom. I slit the note open with my key. It was from the Blue Train management. They had decided to shift me to cover-free lunchtime entertainment. The noon slot.

Story of my life. I ripped up the note and threw it out the window, dropping onto my bed and closing my eyes. I was on the verge of drifting off when I heard the door bell ring. I rolled off the mattress and walked downstairs, a mixture of grit and stale crumbs crackling under my feet. The bell rang six more times in a quick staccato burst.

“What?” I said as I jerked open the door. Then I forgot all about the note and the flat.

“Hey there Jim-bo,” said Madison. She stood with her sandaled left foot perched on her right knee, one of her elbows propped against her guitar case for balance, the porch lamp casting an orange glimmer along her arm and up the shoulder of her plain

white t-shirt. In the lighting, her eyes were navy, the colour of sea water at night, and she had dyed her hair a crimson that was close to natural.

“How did you find me?”

Madison laughed. “Oh, you know, word of mouth, all that. Nice place you’ve got here.” She looked up the stairs to the glow coming from my open door. “Who’s paying for it?”

“Mom and Dad.”

“Then it’s only fair I stay too, right?”

I leaned against the doorpost. “Ha ha.”

“C’mon, you’ve got plenty of space, don’t you?”

“Well ... I guess.”

“Perfect, thanks Jim.” She brushed past me, clanking her luggage up the stairs.

I stepped outside and smoked a cigarette on the stoop. Hard to think of what to think. I wanted to have a snappy comeback ready just in case she got too obnoxious, but the only thing coming to mind was this photo of our family from about eight years ago, when I was eleven and she was thirteen and Jill was just three. I was standing between Mom and Dad, shallow-chested and awkward, while the two sisters stood out front: Jill, shy and turning sideways into Madison, just one eye on the camera; Madison, smiling but pale-faced, her arm around Jill’s shoulder and her head tilted back, the brim of her baseball cap low over her brow as if she were trying to pick a fight with the cameraman.

*You talking to me?*

It had been nearly three years since any of us had seen Madison, and life had been so calm back home that I’d almost forgotten about her. Of course, I could never really

forget, but sometimes you pack people away in the back of your mind for a while. I stood up and butted out my smoke on the side of the house, trying to think of a good first question.

Madison had already settled herself in the other bedroom down the hall. She sat on the mattress with her legs stretched out, sandals flopping at the tips of her toes. “It smells like puke in here,” she said. “Not that I’m complaining or anything. How’ve you been, Jim?”

“So how did you find me?”

“You always have to *know*, don’t you.” She threw one of her rolled-up socks and it bounced off my shoulder. “I ran into Lambert at the Toronto Jazz Fest and he told me you had a residency here for the summer.”

“Yeah, it starts two days from now. I just got demoted to lunch duties.”

“Really ...? Oh my God,” said Madison. “Well—that sucks. Sucksville. But—hey, look, here’s something to cheer you up—” She hooked her foot around the strap of her bag and slid it over, then started to rock up and down on the bed springs. “I brought movies with Bruce Willis and explosions. You have a DVD player?”

“I don’t even have a telephone.”

“So no player, huh?”

“No.”

“Too bad. You mind if I keep my sandals on? This floor’s disgusting.”

“Why the hell are you here?”

She stopped moving and the creak of the springs fell away. I thought she would glare at me with that *you’re too stupid to live* expression, but instead she just picked at

her finger calluses. Her eyeliner made the rest of her face seem faint. “Well, I could leave.”

I suddenly felt tired, the whole train trip catching up with me. “Look. It’s just—you come out of nowhere, and—sorry, it’s just weird.”

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She disappeared for most of the next day. When I woke up I thought I might’ve dreamt the whole thing, but then I found her Dukes of Hazzard tank top slung over the bathroom door knob. Inside, my duffel bag was open; one of my towels had been used, twisted up in a wet knot and dropped beside the toilet. I snapped it over the shower rod, then turned on the bathtub taps to rinse a few red hairs down the drain.

Before going to the Blue Train, I decided I would tune up and run through a couple songs. Habit. No matter how well I know a song, I still need a lot of practice to feel ready. I cracked open my guitar case and sat on the kitchenette counter, running through my licks again and again. Deeper and deeper. I’ve always loved the way it feels to work a song into my fingers, memorizing all the chords and melodies. When I was a teenager, my Dad told me this was the key to jazz: if you had every scale in your head, if you learned them really deeply and carefully, you’d be able to pull them out whenever you want. Even the wildest, most mind-bending bop solo is based on patterns—it all stems from the foundation of daily practice. Of course Madison thought too much theory was a waste of time. She said drills kicked the stuffing out of music, and you could learn a lot more from messing around with the guitar. That’s why Dad didn’t let her play his 1969 Jag or his Grestch White Falcon—whenever she messed around, Madison always found some way to dent the wood or chip the chrome hardware or break a string.

My watch beeped and I glanced down. Eleven o'clock. My fingers were running on their own, independent of my mind—the sign of a good practice. I laid my Takamine in its case and looked for my keys.

The Blue Train stood between a community theatre and a bakery on Newcove Avenue, tucked twenty feet back from the sidewalk. A grey awning rippled over the patio, and the windows were tinted brown, with a thin gold band etched along the edges of the glass. The front entrance was still locked, so I slipped in the back way, ducking behind a line of aluminium vats to avoid the chef, then pushed through the double-hinged doors into the club. It was a nice venue, probably seated close to seventy, and there was a scented candle on each table for atmosphere.

“Buddy—hey, hey—where are you strolling off to?” I turned around and saw a man sitting at the bar wearing a fringed suede vest over his dress shirt. His hair was pulled back in a ponytail and a set of square-framed glasses sat at the end of his nose. His name tag read *Mike*.

“I got your note yesterday.”

“Oh,” he said, patting my back. “You must be James then. Welcome. Checking out the stage for tomorrow’s show?”

“Why did you take me off nights?”

“Scheduling problems,” he said. “The note pretty much summed it up. Anyway, you’ll be a killer act to jump-start our day.”

“Don’t pad it.”

“We’re still paying you the same flat fee.”

“But there’s no cover charge during the day. And no exposure.”

“Welcome to St. John’s,” chuckled Mike. “But seriously, lunch crowds can be better than you might think—”

“That still won’t cut it.”

Mike smiled and played with one of the tassels on his vest. “Your demo was good, no doubt, but nights just aren’t going to work this time. Deal with it. If you want a stable job, give Wal-Mart a call.” He fanned through a stack of pages, pulling out a contract and some carbon paper. “Now let’s have your autograph on the dotted line.”

I walked along the coast until my shirt was damp with mist. At three-thirty, I found a family diner and drank two bad cups of coffee, watching teenagers grind their skateboards across curbs and staircases outside. I didn’t feel angry anymore, just hungry. I bought some takeout fish & chips in a newspaper cone and gorged until I had a grease headache, feeding the extra fries to seagulls along Scots Ave. At seven I was standing on my balcony again with all the windows open, trying to flush the stale air out of the flat. I leaned on the railing and ashes drifted from the tip of my cigarette into the empty garden beside the stoop.

“Hey.”

I jumped and the butt slipped from my fingers, tumbling end over end to join the ashes below. Madison stood behind me, clutching a blue plastic bag, glancing tentatively around the room. Her hair was tied back with a plaid bandana and I could see her light brown roots pulled taut at the top of her forehead.

“Uh—hey. How did you get in?”

“Through the back door.”

“There’s a back door?”

“I guess. Or window. Anyway, I bought this at a thrift store,” she said, shaking the contents of the bag onto my bed. It was one of those race-to-the-finish-and-win board games with knobby plastic tokens, a rubber band holding the box together. The theme was marooned sailors trying to escape a desert island. “You know, since there’s no DVD player. I think we used to have this one when we were kids.”

I stared at Madison and she rolled her eyes. “Oh, *come on*. Don’t be so uptight, Jim.” She pointed at the back of the box. “Ages 4 and over. We’re old enough.”

I laughed, surprising myself. “Okay.”

There was no real furniture in the flat, just a few foldout chairs, a coat rack, and a stack of old bricks beside the coil heaters. Madison didn’t want to play standing up at the kitchenette counter, so she pushed two chairs together to make a table. I closed the windows on the balcony and then heard the dice clatter. “Three. Here’s your big chance, Jimmy-boy.”

I sat down across from her and rolled.

“Whaddya know. Snake eyes,” she said, scooping the dice back up.

We played three rounds in half an hour, only talking with the game’s language. *Move back four spaces. Your turn. Roll again. No doubloon for you. Shark attack.* It was pretty easy to get into. I won twice. As she set up the fourth round, I asked, “So how long will you be on the coast?”

She rubbed her arms. “Um ... a while. I guess we’ll see.”

“Why aren’t you with your entourage? What happened to the tour bus and all that?”

“I have a couple smelly vans, not a bus,” she said, shuffling the game deck.



“Besides, I’m not touring right now. We’ve been on break since we opened for Arcade Fire—everyone’s working on side projects while I write material for the third record. Just taking it easy.”

I looked at the board. Madison could come off as really hot stuff, the way she dropped her credentials around. It was almost tempting to remind her that her band plays third-rate fusion jazz and she doesn’t really know how to sing and her whole career is pretty much a lucky side-effect of doing things to tick people off.

“So. Do you still live with them?”

I glanced up. “Who?”

“The family.”

“Sometimes,” I said. “I’ve got a room downtown now. But Mom and Dad moved from Mississauga and bought a bigger place in Rosedale. I sleep there on weekends.”

“Mm.” Madison set her elbows on the table. “How’s Jill?”

“Oh. She’s—all right,” I said cautiously. “Yeah, she’s—fine. Skipped ahead to grade eleven at the Academy last year. Quite the little prodigy.”

“Has she picked up an instrument yet?”

“No.”

“Figures,” laughed Madison. “Who else turns down the radio because Stevie Wonder’s drowning out the birds? What a weird kid.” She jostled a die in her palm. “But that was okay. Don’t you think? The way she lights up, you have to go along with it. Or I wish I’d gone along with it more often. When I brought her to my launch, she only got excited about some dumb fish. She wasn’t into our rigs. I put a vintage Stingray right in front of her, right in her hands, and she still didn’t—”

“Yeah, anyway, Jill’s on a soccer team now,” I said. “She’s good enough that the coaches put her on the first line. Last spring they beat every team and finished at the top of their division.”

“Really? Wow.” Madison threaded her fingers together and sighed. “You know, I think we can agree on Jill. Don’t you, Jim? If nothing else, I think all of us can agree on Jill being pretty special.” She spun the die on one corner and it whirred across the board. “Does she ask about me?”

“I can’t really remember ... remember a specific *time*, I mean. But—” I clamped my hand on the die. “No, she doesn’t. I’m going to bed.”

“It’s only eight.”

“I need to rest. I’ve got a lot of empty tables to play to tomorrow.”

“No,” said Madison. “You’ll be great.”

“Doesn’t matter how you play if your billing’s junk. You know that, so stop trying to make me feel better.”

“Stay up five more minutes and talk. Please?”

She had a knack for making me hesitate, but I kept walking to my room.

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I had a poor sleep, bogged down in the semi-conscious dreams that usually only come with a fever. In the worst of them, there was a new Wes Montgomery song I had to learn, but every time I reached for my guitar, my hands would slip right through the wood. I grabbed at the headstock, the machine heads, the strings, the sound hole, trying to touch that one magic spot that would make the instrument real. This went on for hours. Madison sat on a Marshall stack watching me, her heels bouncing against the speaker

grills, and she kept saying *C'mon Jim, why don't you just pick another song.*

When I finally woke up it was ten thirty and a deep fog was blowing in from the coast. I could feel a headache coming on, the kind that goes with a quick change in air pressure. The flat was rank-smelling, a whiff of skunk and sulphur as I walked towards the bathroom in my boxers. Madison's door was closed and she didn't answer when I knocked. I got dressed and left ten minutes later.

"You're early," said Mike. He was trimming the candle wicks and wiping down the tables. "It's only quarter past eleven."

I shrugged and slipped into a booth beside the stage. "This morning's a write-off. I always get edgy before playing."

He grinned, then came back with a shot glass and clamped it down in front of me. "Take a little edge off, if you want. Just make sure you stay upright."

I stared at the amber liquid, rolled it around the lip of the glass. I don't like drinking. I just sniffed it and began to drift a little, the smell making my eyes water. Same eye-watering smell on Madison's breath when she just turned eighteen and I helped her move out. She had a pile of demos and turned eighteen and was getting a lot of tech hours at a studio owned by a drummer named Toby. She never applied for York's engineering program, the one Dad had graduated from. She always said she missed the deadline. In mid-October, she came home and rang the doorbell. Her hair was shaved on the sides but still long on top, and it matched the blue of her jeans and nail polish. Dad invited her in for dinner, but she wouldn't go past the second step. She said one of Universal's sub-labels had offered her a two-album deal, so she wouldn't be around much anymore. My parents talked in hushed voices about *that kind of life*. Road life. Dad told me

technical production was safer, you should be an artist on the side, and then talked about the strengths of York's program. She sent tickets in the mail sometimes, but we never used them. We decided going to her shows would be implicit approval of her choice. Best to let the dates slide by quietly. But I saw her in Toronto sometimes. She came twice to the club where I played bass for John Lambert's blues band. I saw her in the crowd, hanging around back with a beer in her hand, eyes closed and head swaying, always leaving halfway through the last song.

“James, buddy—hey—” Someone was shaking my shoulder. I lifted my head. The shot was gone and Mike was pointing at his watch. “It's almost twelve. We better get ready.”

There were only eight people in the club, which made the candles seem idiotic. Everyone sat at the back tables, probably afraid I'd try to talk to them if they sat any closer. I stood on the stage with my arms crossed over my guitar, rolling on the balls of my feet while Mike finished patching me in. He tapped the microphone. “Welcome to The Blue Train, y'all. James here is going to make your lunch a little tastier. Give him a hand.”

There was a spatter of clapping. I checked my intonation, closed my eyes, and let my fingers lead me through my first arrangement, a long medley—Ellington and Brubeck interpolated with a couple of my own pieces. Pure release from the past few days. I leaned against the speakers on stage left and listened, my brain unpacking itself, the melodies flowing from my hands, fingers moving without a tremor or mistake—if I opened my eyes it would be like sitting on my own shoulder, watching someone else play the guitar. But with my eyes closed, it just felt like breathing. When it feels that way, I'm

happy with my playing. That's all I want. I don't need a huge crowd that's ramped up and totally into everything I do. But when I let the last chord of Blue Rondo a la Turk ring out, I heard a surge of applause. A lot more than I expected from eight people.

"Thanks," I said, and started into a sleek 6/8 progression, one of my favourite originals. I had planned to save it for later, but I wanted to coast on the audience's energy. People were actually clapping along, and I heard a few cheers as I modulated into the bridge. I looked under the stage lights and thought I was seeing triple or more: there were nearly forty people inside the club, a large pocket of them gathered at the side, standing in a semicircle. I squinted to see what was going on and nearly stopped mid-song. Madison.

Sitting by one of the house speakers, three candles at her feet, playing a twelve-string. She was unplugged and I couldn't hear her over my monitor—I just saw her fingers speeding up and down the neck, rolling and stopping, silently moving from mode to mode in time with my own movements. I resolved the progression on the wrong chord to throw her off, then jumped from the stage and pushed my way into the crowd.

"Hey there Jim-bo," she called. "I asked anyone I could find to come and see you play. And they did! Look at all of em."

I reached over someone's shoulder and snatched at her guitar.

"Hey, take it easy Jim, I'm just strumming along. I told them I'd play too. Can you believe people actually knew who I was?"

"Why the hell did you tell them you'd play?"

"Well sorry, I didn't think it'd be such a problem."

"You have two albums in a fucking store. They can go and buy those if they want

to hear you. This is my job, understand? If you weren't—"

"Half-price beers at half past!" yelled Mike, walking through the crowd. He laid a hand on my shoulder. "Hey, this jam thing's a good idea—you two sound great. Why'd you stop?"

"He's just taking a breather," said Madison. "And I'm leaving."

"Well, if you have to," Mike said, moving towards the kitchen. "But I'll see you tonight, Madison. Remember, doors at eight-thirty."

I felt my mouth drying up.

"James," she said.

"How could you do this to me ...?"

"It isn't—when I asked for your address he offered me a gig, but I—"

"With every other fucking opportunity in the world—" I dropped my guitar and pushed forward, reaching for her hair, trying to grab a big red hank of it, but she ducked back under someone's arm and when I shoved into the crowd again everyone started yelling and some fat guys started pushing me back, shouting at me and bumping me into tables until I was pressed against the exit and falling into the alley beside the recycling bins. The door clicked shut. I stood, rubbed my hair. There was no door handle. I pounded once. Waited for half a minute, thought about going in the back way. Then I turned and started walking along the sidewalks or roads or whatever it was out there. Just walking through the fog which had moved into the city, filling spaces between buildings.

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Three years ago we had come home after my very first solo show and all the lights were off. Jill's backpack was propped against the fridge, there were leaves

scattered over the kitchen table, and the landing was covered in mud. Dad called her name. No reply. We checked Jill's room, checked the backyard, called her friends, the tutorial service, the school, and finally the police.

At dinner time the next day, while we were gathered around the phone waiting for any kind of update from the police, Madison called. She said that Jill was in the hospital. Jill had fallen and hit her head at Razorback's album launch, oh and by the way, did Dad get the voicemail about all that on Friday?

Jill seemed calm when we arrived at the hospital. She was sitting on the edge of the bed with a notepad in her hand and asked if her tutor had called. Her clothes smelled like cigarettes and grape soda. Madison was out in the corridor, trying to explain the phone situation, telling Dad that she had left two messages for him, but she hadn't known it was his old cell phone, the one he left in the studio for professional calls during weekends. Three nurses held Dad back, asking him to stop yelling. In a violent whisper, he told Madison this was *it* for her, last straw, the final lie, just wait for the police and the restraining order and all the rest. Then Jill broke down. She ran into the hall crying and clutched his shirt, saying that it was her fault, it was her own idea, the whole thing. Her nose was running and she kept saying *sorry* over and over, until Mom came up behind her and hugged her, stroking her hair, saying everything was fine, the incident would end here, no one in the family would ever bring it up again.

And I watched.

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It was coming on dusk, the mugginess of the day fading into a moist chill, pigeons settling along the window ledges. I sat on the balcony with my legs threaded through the

rails and examined the back of my left hand, wind riffling through the fine blond hairs. A scar curved from the first knuckle onto my palm. There was also a kink in the little finger, where I had broken it during a baseball game when I was twelve. Both my hands were well-worn, like tradesman's hands. I placed them palm to palm, noticed that my right index finger was slightly longer than the left. It struck me as odd that I had never seen that before.

At eight-thirty I heard the drapes rustle behind me. Madison sat down on the balcony, slipping her legs between the metal bars. "Listen James. I never told Mike I was your sister, and he never said I was replacing you—and then when *you* said you'd been cut from nights, I thought we could—"

"Forget it. I don't want to hear any more." I picked at the peeling paint on the railing. "Doesn't matter. No one'll care in a couple months anyway."

"Sure they will."

"Oh, like who? You? Well thanks so much for your concern, but that's not going to change your long shitty track record. I don't recall you ever listening to my demos or trying to get me a good billing—"

"Stop," said Madison. "*You* never wanted to play with *me*. I just wanted to make music. You were always the purist."

We sat in silence for a moment. A car whirred by and the street lamps began to flicker on. I slipped a cigarette from my shirt pocket and lit it. The tip flared orange in the dark. "Smoke?"

She shook her head. "No. I quit last year. Started thinking of it as long-term suicide. Scared myself into stopping."



“That’s original.”

“No, it’s not,” said Madison, “and it’s not funny. Look, I don’t care about playing your slot—we could’ve tried double-heading this, that might’ve worked, but whatever. That’s not why I came. I wanted to see if ... ” She raised her hands to her head, then let them fall back into her lap. “I’m tired. You can hold up for a long time out there, but it wears you down. You think you’ll just make your music and be totally free, but it never works out that way. You’re tied to a whole bunch of people, which feels good sometimes I guess, sort of like family—you take care of them, they take care of you, and we all pat each other on the back. But then you get time off and everyone disappears. You’re sitting in a motel room for days, weeks on your own, doing nothing. Nothing normal—no one to talk to, no one to take to the movies, no one to play games with or even just act silly.”

“Stop, then.”

Madison stared at me.

“Just stop,” I said. “You proved your point.”

She shook her head. “It’s never been about that. There’s nothing else I love doing this much.”

“You could think about—”

“James. I won’t stop.”

“Then I don’t know what it is you want.”

Madison pulled her knees under her chin. “I just want to find a way back in with you guys. Maybe it would make everything else easier.”

“Apologize.” I rolled the cigarette between my thumb and index finger, took three quick drags, feeling a kind of giddiness rise in my chest. “I’m serious, apologize to them.

That's all you can do, so do it. Go tell them you're sorry for everything—for the gear you ruined, the nights you didn't come home, for skipping York, for that mess with Jill. Say you were wrong. They're not so bad. They'll forgive you. But don't phone them—that's no good, you've got to tell them in person, walk up to them and look them in the eyes. That's how you do it right. Hell, do it tomorrow, take my return ticket to Toronto. They lent me enough cash to buy another one if I need it.”

Madison tilted her head back, her eyes catching a glimmer of light from the street lamps. “They were always right behind you.” She stood up and walked back inside, pausing at the balcony entrance. Her fingers settled on the wood, and the glow from inside fell along her profile. “We'll talk more tomorrow, okay Jim?”

“Okay.”

When I woke up the next day, her room was empty, the sheets tucked into the edges of the bed, the lump of her clothes swept up from the bathroom floor. I looked at myself in the mirror above the toilet and felt nauseous. At twenty to eleven I went downstairs for a smoke and spotted a new note taped to the door. It was from Mike, letting me know my guitar was still at the Blue Train, and asking if maybe we could work out a new deal for nights. I flipped the page over, searching for more writing, a phone number, another note. Nothing. I sat down on the concrete stoop and lit the last cigarette in my pack, crumpling the foil liner and tossing it into the empty garden beside me.

## Exfoliation

(April 2011.)

I haven't replaced any of the wine when Andy comes back from his out-of-province weekend, one day early. He's got a terrible haircut—messy, but with the sharp angles of a production-line job. He doesn't look fashionable, he is not heralding the glorious second coming of tie-dye jeans and open neck ruffle shirts, as he told me he would. He looks a little like a hobo dressed as Jim Morrison for Halloween—dazed and squinting, the crevice of his mouth splitting his overgrown beard—and he smells like socks that've been sitting under a wet towel for two weeks. As he opens the fridge, gripping the broken door handle and groping for the tall emerald bottles that aren't there, he asks me where the tire tracks on the front lawn came from. Four muddy scars cutting through the grass—he spotted them as he pulled into the driveway. I almost tell him, but stop. Andy's been moody for months now and even though we've had arguments before, telling him what happened will just make things worse. So I'll try to be pleasant and redirect him instead, since he's easily distracted. Maggie stands behind me, giggling into the long pleats of my skirt, chewing on a blue hangnail of a thread. He hasn't noticed her yet.

“So what happened out there,” he mumbles again, hands clinking through the condiment jars. “You're supposed to report all property damage to me, Betty.”

“How did the convention go?”

Andy pauses for a moment, brain switching gears. “How does it look like it went,” he says, tugging at his hair as if trying to pull off a wig. Then he bends over and

starts moving through the lower cupboards, pushing aside bleach bottles, fistfuls of plastic bags, dish detergent. The shiny black seat of his pants strains, and Maggie leans forward, cocking her ear as if waiting for the sudden shriek of fabric. “Every goddam stylist in Montreal was booked solid, so I cut it myself. Convention was crash and burn after that. Who wants to buy designs from a guy when his hair looks like a dead beaver?”

This is another one of his career experiments: Andy, the clothing designer. He’s constantly trying to jettison himself into a more fantastic way of life, fuelled by some freshly discovered trace of a childhood interest—although his excitement has been waning since January. This hangs pretty heavily on my conscience. About a month before the New Year’s party, he had let me in on his latest inspiration: *I was thinking about those crazy rock stars on the back of my dad’s old LPs—Daltry and Plant, all those guys with the curly gold manes and tan leather vests, tight pants with yellow stripes down the legs and all that. Man, you can’t find clothes like that anywhere anymore. But I got a plan—did you know I was gonna be a fashion designer once? I did all these sketches when I was twelve, and now I’m thinking, if I dust them off and get with the right people, man, it’ll be a cinch. Because they don’t make this stuff anymore, sure as hell can’t find it at The Gap, and with some word of mouth...* He went on like that for weeks. I’m the last tenant left in his two-floor apartment, and I have to share the kitchen and the big living room across from his office, so I’ve listened to a lot of his ramblings. Andy’s hard to disengage.

“Better luck next time,” I finally say. “Right?”

He’s found an empty under the newspapers in the recycling bin, and he tips the bottle back until he catches a drop, then lets it fall into the sink. “Wine,” he says, turning

to search the pantry behind me. He spots Maggie and frowns. “What’s she doing here?”

“Waiting for her mom to pick her up,” I say. Maggie seems fascinated by the circles of sweat growing under Andy’s arms, the silky crimson turning maroon. She reaches for one of the tortoiseshell buttons on his vest, and he backs against the sink.

“This one of your little clients?”

“No.” I dig a fingernail into my palm, trying to control my temper. “She’s my niece and she was just visiting me.”

“I said no kids in here. You want her up in your room, fine, whatever, but you should know by now, I’ve said it like a million times—*no* kids.”

“Wait outside, sweetie,” I say to Maggie, taking her by the shoulders and shuffling her into the foyer. The door closes behind her, and I turn back to Andy. “She’ll be gone by seven so get a grip, okay?”

“Yup, when I’ve had a drink.”

I point to the pantry. “There’s lots of bottled water.”

“I need wine. I need a glass or two. I need *wine*,” he says, as if water is a luxury and only a necessity can satisfy him now. “Where is it?”

“I’ll replace it tomorrow—”

“I had three unopened bottles in here. Three bottles, on my side of the fridge. Are you telling me you drank all that by yourself in two days?”

“No.”

“Then where is it?”

No option but honesty now. “Some of my coworkers came by this afternoon collecting for our silent auction, and I forgot I’d promised them a donation. The wine was

the only worthwhile thing I could scrounge up. Sorry.” I pause, and I can’t help myself from adding that final brutal nugget of truth. It just pops out. “And John Hart backed his truck onto the lawn.”

“Hart,” mutters Andy. “Hart, special education.” He fiddles with his shirt cuff, popping off two buttons. “I guess wrecking my grass is Hart’s idea of another joke, right?”

“No. It was just an accident. He couldn’t see out the back windshield.”

“I said I never wanted him around here again. None of them,” Andy says, rubbing his beard, pulling out one long brown hair at a time. “No more parties, no morons from special education, no one touching my wine, no kids—there are rules y’know, and just cause you’ve lived here nearly two years doesn’t mean you own the place.”

“Okay, I get it,” I mutter, and chew on my tongue to keep from saying any more. I fish a bottle from the case in the pantry and twist the cap off. “Here, why don’t you just have some water and relax?”

He pushes my hand back and the bottle spills over my shirt. “Listen to me, I’ll say it real clear—I make the rules here, okay? This is where I make the rules, and I can kick you out if you break them. I can. I can kick you right on out, Betty.” It’s not the wet shirt but his last repetition, that obnoxious little *right on out*, which finally sets me off.

“Oh will you grow the hell up?” I yell, throwing the water bottle into his chest. “Kick me out if you want, I don’t care, I only have a month left on the lease anyway and it’s about time I got a change of scenery. I’m getting pretty sick of seeing you strut all your acid-trip carnie costumes through the living room.”

His only comeback is a stutter. A catch in the throat. I grab my jacket and purse

and walk into the hall, feeling liberated and immature and guilty. What I was actually getting sick of was the months of his moodiness and the constant feeling that I had been responsible for making him unhappy. I push open the door. Maggie is not in the foyer but outside playing, and seeing her makes me feel better. She runs through puddles in her rainboots, the triangular flaps of her oversize windbreaker catching the breeze, making her look like a rag of cloth flying up and down the sidewalks.

(September 2011.)

I can't seem to hold back my insults. They spill out of me like an excess build-up of bodily toxins. I've been working to cut down on them for a long time—for all of my thirty-one years—but suppressing the urge to shoot off a zinger is still hard. It can feel pretty awful, like swallowing a stick of dynamite that quietly blows up somewhere deep inside of you. My sister Laura said it's the same thing as stifling a sneeze, and that one day my eyes will pop out or I'll have a brain aneurysm. *Let it out*, she says. But I can't exactly sit in the administration office of the Northridge Boys and Girls Club, sniping down people who just want to pick up a tax receipt or register their kids for summer camp weekends.

“Delivery for you, Betts,” says Willy Newbanks, walking in and dropping three fat manila envelopes onto my desk. “Straight from the boardroom.”

“What is it?”

“More of the same,” he says. “They want the Annual Report packages ready nice and early this year. See you tomorrow.”

“Great.” I dig my pen into a registration form, feel another muffled bomb go off. I'd like to put my paperwork through the shredder and skip around the building, throwing

white ribbons into the air, shouting *hooray, look everyone, it's snowing inside!* I see more tax reports here than boys and girls, although three weeks ago a blond kid shuffled into my office and asked for directions to the August hot dog cook-off. She must have been pretty lost. There's a labyrinth of brick walls separating my office from the atrium and the halls that lead to the swimming pools, the gymnasiums, the craft rooms. All the interesting places. I've been waiting a long time for a more stimulating position to open up here, but when it finally does, they'll probably tell me I have to go back to school for another degree.

I start unpacking the envelopes, grateful that at least this'll be my last job of the day. Best of all, when four-thirty comes, I'll be meeting Maggie at her school. Maggie defuses me. She lightens my mood. She also improves my behaviour: when we're out together, I know I won't pick a fight with the usher at the Cineplex or skewer the teenage clerk in the food court. If she hears me raising my voice, she'll give me this look that makes me feel like I'm a brat who skipped out on first grade manners class. Maggie doesn't care about the give and take of offender and offended—she'd much rather play with her zipper and race me to the pay phone across the aisle.

That's how she helps me. I try to help Maggie by getting her to talk. She has trouble with words and her teachers think she's probably dyslexic—so I ask her to read simple signs and billboards aloud as we walk around. Laura loves me for this, because she works most nights and doesn't have time to go through packs of flashcards with her daughter. Maggie loves it because she thinks it's just a game.

I glance up at the clock and lick my thumb, flicking through the documents as fast as I can. No problem. It's only three now, I've done more work in less time before.



As the minute hand hits quarter past four, a man walks into my office. I look up from my filing cabinet and I stare at him. It's Andy, although part of my brain won't quite accept that it's him. He's wearing a flannel shirt tucked into a pair of jeans so blue that I mistake them for dress pants, and his silver belt buckle is centred at the waist. His beard is smaller. He hasn't shaved it off, but trimmed it down very close to the skin. Apart from one bald patch and a few longer tufts sticking up like crab grass, he looks tidy, almost professional. He's holding three Ontario Hydro documents, flapping them against his thigh.

"Andy?"

"Hey Betty."

"What're you doing here?"

"I dunno, making a donation," he says, slipping a quarter into the clear plastic coin box on my desk and taking a candy. He sounds raspy, like he's been talking for too long and he might lose his voice soon. "Got another building four blocks from here—I was checking the meters, so I thought I'd drop in and say hi. Don't get the chance too often." He rolls his documents into a tight cylinder and unwraps the candy. "Yup, so here we are. Just two ol' chatting pals again."

I absorb his new image slowly, superimposing it over my old impressions of him. I've only seen Andy once or twice since I moved out. The first time was in late July, back when his beard was wild and he still wore strange combinations of leather and spandex. Hurrying to make an appointment, I had walked right into him on a street corner and his sunglasses flew off, skittering over the curb into the gutter. He apologized as he picked them up. I told him it was my fault, I should've been watching where I was going, but

Andy said *no, no*, and mumbled something about *a bad weekend, wine, lawn, you know, sorry*. I thought for a second, then told him not to worry, that was old news. I gave his shoulder a pat. This seemed to put us back on good terms, but not to where we had been before the New Year's party way back in January.

“So what's new?” I finally say. “Been to any more conventions?”

“Nope.” Andy pushes the candy from his left cheek to the right. “No point anymore. I went into Goodwill a couple months ago and they already had racks full of my favourite stuff. Didn't seem so urgent after that. Besides, you have to be a fast-talking dirtbag to get attention from anyone in that industry.”

“Oh. So what's next?”

“Don't know. Find a second job, work at Price Chopper or something. The housing market's pretty dead right now, and I don't have the cash to fix up my places. Got all kinds of drainage problems, and some of the wiring's shot. But what can you do.” He lets go of the papers and they rattle out on his lap. “You still work in the same department here, right?”

“Yes,” I say, surprised by the question. Andy's never asked me anything serious about my job. “The paperwork's godawful, but hopefully I'll get out of here soon. I want to start working one-on-one with kids full-time, maybe as a counsellor. I'd be a lot happier doing that.”

“Really?” He sounds more surprised than I was. “Interesting. Huh. Interesting. Kids really get me down sometimes.”

“I guess they must,” I say, and glance over his shoulder at the clock. Four twenty-seven.

“Yeah. So how’s your new place been?”

“Great—perfect, in fact. Except for a little leak under the kitchen sink.” I slide my filing cabinet shut with a satisfying bang. “Anyway, it was good talking to you, Andy, but I’ll see you later, okay? I’ve gotta go pick up Maggie from school.”

“Really?” He takes a second candy from the box, leaving another quarter. “Can I come?”

“Why?”

“Got some free time,” he says with a shrug. “I’m sure your cousin wouldn’t mind.”

“Niece. And I thought kids get you down.”

“I said sometimes.”

Mountcrest Elementary is about three blocks away from the Boys and Girls Club. Although it’s technically a downtown school, there’s a multi-purpose sports park on one side and a new group of townhouses on the other, so it feels more residential than urban. We take the back route, walking along a leaf-covered bike path to the Language Development Centre, a building shaped like a stout silo. Maggie spends forty-five minutes here each day after regular classes. Andy follows me through the side door, pausing to wipe his feet on the concrete stairs. Inside, the walls are packed with gold-starred quizzes and alphabet charts and the occasional door-length poster of Sidney Crosby or Batman pointing a finger, saying that Cool Kids Read. I crack open the door of room 124. It’s mostly empty now, chairs tucked in, peanut butter jars filled up with rulers and pencils, and all the books have been filed back into the long line of multicoloured spines that weaves along the window ledge. After students finish their exercises, Mrs.

Higgins lets them work on art; Maggie sits at a large round table with short brick-shaped legs, and she is dipping a brush into a palette of chalky tempera tablets. Her auburn hair is tied behind her head in a ponytail and the sleeves of her shirt are rolled up to the elbow. Andy crosses the room and sits in the rocking chair, staring at Maggie as if she is another species. He watches the loose motion of her wrist as she brushes more paint onto the page, and he tilts his head, listening to the small hum rising in her throat.

“Hi Maggie,” I say, kneeling down across from her. “Where’s Mrs. Higgins?”

“Out.”

“And what are you working on?”

Maggie puts her brush in the water can and holds up the painting. There is a cloud of green foliage sweeping across two jagged brown tree trunks, which are planted in a red swath of dirt. A bright yellow circle fills the top left corner, and traces of red taint all the other colours.

“Can you tell me?”

“Colouring.”

“What type of colouring?”

“A painting.”

“A painting of what?”

“Plants in the forest.”

“Good work, Maggie. We’ll bring it home for your mom. Now go wash your hands.”

She nods and runs out the door, her footsteps echoing in the hall. Andy walks over to the table and drops into Maggie’s seat, his knees rising up almost to his shoulders.

He examines the painting, gingerly touching the dry portions with his fingers. “Amazing. Look at that,” he whispers, holding it by the edges. “What a piece of crap. It’s beautiful. Beautiful crap.”

“I—what?” The tone of awe in his voice throws me off. “She’s only five, Andy.”

“I know. That’s exactly it,” he says. “That’s why it’s great, it doesn’t *feel* like a piece of crap—because she’s five. That’s where the magic is. Oh man, she better enjoy this. Some day she’ll just throw it out. Unless her mom saves it, but that doesn’t count.”

“She isn’t thinking about that, she’s just having fun with paint.”

“Yeah, you’re right. And she might get better.” Andy cocks his head, looking at the page from a different angle. “Or maybe not. Some things you can’t ever get any better at. You just have to let em go, let em fly up, up, and away.” He rubs his mouth with his sleeve. “Anyway, I said it’s crap but yeah, it’s okay,” he says, tipping it on its corner in a diamond shape, and he stares at it with a baffled expression that makes me feel like I owe him something.

(January 2011.)

Andy spun and stutter-stepped through crowds of my coworkers in the living room. His building had never been so full before, he’d never had a real party there, and he was loving it. He told me he enjoyed all the obstacles, the pockets of chatting people who gave the halls a weird new shape. He wore a black shirt with a tuxedo printed on the front and he stood behind a foldout card table serving drinks in disposable plastic cups. “I’m Andrew, host of this fine establishment,” he would say before he served anyone. “Would you like some Chardonnay? Sherry for you? A sip of Port, my good man? Schnapps and Vodka for the Missus?” He poured from the same cheap bottle each time,

but seemed to enjoy the way fancy words tumbled from his mouth. When he ran out of new words, he cycled through the old ones again with a bad French accent. The guests mumbled polite thanks.

I sat in the easy-chair at the very back of the living room. My fingernails dug into the left arm, leaving a set of half-moon scars on the vinyl. “Maybe I should have a hair net for my face,” I heard Andy say from somewhere in the centre of the room. Two months earlier, at a staff meeting, I had offered to hold the annual employee New Year’s party at my apartment; then I had asked Andy to help serve refreshments. Now I was seriously regretting the whole thing. I wove through the crowd and pulled on Andy’s sleeve. “Will you tone it the hell down?”

“I’ll try,” he said, snapping open a napkin. “But I’m flying high tonight.”

I slumped back into the chair. Mr. Flanagan, our division president, watched as Andy tried to toss a stack of plastic cups over his shoulder into his other hand.

“Whoopsie,” Andy said as they scattered across the floor.

“The man certainly thinks he’s something else,” said Mr. Flanagan, picking up the box which held the Employee Achievement plaques. He cleared his throat, but before he could speak, Andy held up a bottle and banged it with a butter knife.

“Attention! Attention everyone, I wanna make a toast—to the people drinking my booze. A toast! I hope you’re all having just as much fun as me.” A few glasses plinked and clinked along the walls. Andy stepped into the middle of the living room, swirling the wine in his cup. “As you know, my name is Andrew and I’m the host of this fine establishment. But it’d be nice for me to get to know a few of you a little better.” He strolled among the guests, looking at each of them as if he were playing a new version of

Duck Duck Goose, and finally tapped Ben Walker on the shoulder. “What’s your name, sir, and what do you do?”

“Ben. Janitor.”

“A noble job, thanks for coming. And ... you, ma’am?”

“Peggy Wilson.” She spoke into her drink. “I’m the Summer Travel Coordinator.”

“Putting the beach in beachball volleyball, eh? Excellent. And ... you, sir?”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Mr. Flanagan. “I’d like to start—”

“One moment, friend, I’ll get to you in a flash. And you sir?”

“John Hart,” said the next guest, sitting at a coffee table and looking very bored. “I’m in special education.”

“Special education, eh? And what exactly is that?”

John sighed. “Programs for slow learners.”

“Hey, maybe you need some special education, Andy,” I called out, a kind of disembodied voice from behind the crowd. “We’ve got discount openings for assholes like you—why not sign up when you learn how to spell your name?”

There was silence. Then John Hart laughed. A sputtering guffaw. He just couldn’t hold it in. He started laughing, turning red in the face, pounding his hand on the coffee table, and the laughter spread quickly through the room, catching from corner to corner. It grew until it had nothing to do with my joke anymore, people were just laughing for the simple relief of it. Andy chuckled a little too. Sure, he was in on the joke, he could be a good sport. Then he tried to quiet the crowd again, banging on the wine bottle and frowning and calling out, “Attention everyone!” He turned to the still-hysterical John

Hart and shouted something, but the laughter washed over his voice. Andy stood by the drinks table, flushed and frustrated now that everyone else seemed to be hosting him.

(October 2011.)

The trees outside my kitchen window are the colour of candy corn. Maggie is in the living room, her hand tracing out wobbly letters, making small words in an activity book. I'm wearing a white floral dress despite the Labour Day rule, and I keep the thermostat at twenty-four so I don't have to put on anything heavy or itchy. I know that's irresponsible, but heating is included in the rent and I'm not ready for fall yet. This is the only way I can fight it.

Andy says he usually deals with the cold by wearing about five sweaters. He must be wearing them today since he looks extra bulky, like the Michelin Man with a tool belt slung across his hips. I invited Andy over to my apartment to check the leak under my sink, to get his professional advice. I tell him that the superintendent isn't a crank about repairs, but he's really slow. Andy nods, feeling the pipe for weaknesses, and patches it up with some duct tape, saying it will hold until I get a replacement. Then he starts wandering around the living room, looking at my tweed furniture and my framed family photos. No matter what he says, I've decided to stay calm. But Andy just sits down on the couch across from Maggie and pats one of the walls. He says he prefers when they're painted deep colours, but he really likes this bright white too. If you stare at something red for a minute and then look back at the wall, you'll see a massive green spot. The eye doctor taught him that trick a few years ago.

I take out a bottle of beer for him, a cooler for myself, and we sit at the kitchen table. Andy tells me that he's been working at Cooper's barber shop two days a week. It



may be temporary or permanent, depending on how the housing situation goes. He now thinks designers and stylists are lame, and he tells me how much he likes the clippers and the white aprons and the Barbicide for the combs. “When I was ten, it reminded me of blue Koolaid.”

“Me too,” I say.

Andy asks me if I think he’ll make it as a barber. I say yes, and I mean it, since it’s a reasonable goal, and as far as I know, Cooper’s clients only ask for buzz cuts anyway.

“You know what Coop told me? Hair is one of the body’s many exfoliations.” Andy speaks slowly, like he’s narrating a documentary. “It’s all dead on top, but you have to be careful since it’s always still growing underneath the scalp.” Then he laughs. “Yeah, but hell, I like seeing Coop mow off those big wads of hair. When I sweep them up, it’s like pushing fur rugs across the floor.”

We sit silently for a moment. A sudden windy gust throws a flurry of red and yellow leaves against the window pane, and we watch them funnel up between my building and the house next door. The heat vents start churning again. I hear Maggie shuffle down the hall towards the bathroom.

About three times Andy says he has to leave, but he doesn’t stand up. He picks at the label on his bottle and we talk about the transit system for a while, then about how the garbage strike is less noticeable in the cold weather. It’s even harder to disengage someone when he’s in your own kitchen, but I feel no need to. I just want to sit there. Sort of like when you’re in bed, wrapped up in the covers, and perfectly content to stay still. A drop of sweat falls from Andy’s forehead, and he starts struggling out of his top

sweater. I tell him he can turn down the thermostat if he wants to, but Andy says he usually doesn't do that around now. He never bothers to hit the thermostat or open the window or switch on the ceiling fan—when it starts getting too hot, he just takes off another sweater.