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The Byron Notebook and Other Stories

Emily Anglin

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing) at  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **The Byron Notebook and Other Stories**

Emily Anglin, M.A.

Concordia University, 2006

The eleven stories of “The Byron Notebook and Other Stories” are told from the perspective of distinct but similar young female narrators as they wander surreal realms. The stories are generated primarily by voice, as opposed to plot or character. The title story concerns the diminution of a narrator consumed by an imaginary love affair with Lord Byron. The subtitle, “A Private Argument,” refers to her struggle not with Byron, but with herself, as she negotiates the gap between interior and exterior reality. The narrators interpret the world from the remove of an almost isolated interiority, in a playful or sad exploration of imagination and subjectivity. The imaginative is often encountered in collage with the real.

Almost all the stories use first person perspective, a choice that is topical as well as formal. First person narration’s double potential both to reveal and to conceal information is exploited, in enactments of alienation and epistemological skepticism. These first person narrators share information about their lives with the reader, but this knowledge may not be reliable; they are structurally and emotionally separated from the other characters and from the reader at the same time that reader-narrator intimacy is courted. Related to this limitation of perspective, much of the narration grapples explicitly with what can be known, or, more precisely, what cannot be: in “Catherine Irwin-Gibson” and “The Move,” this epistemological concern borders on the genre of mystery. This concern relates to the way communication and love can be frustrated by language’s limitations, a theme running throughout the project.

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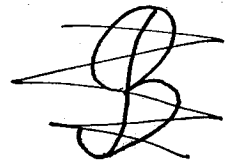
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Ruby St-James at  
256 Dowager Lane



The Byron Notebook:

A Private Argument

I have thought  
Too long and dandy till my brain became  
In its own eddy boiling, and overwrought,  
A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame...  
- Lord Byron



Lady Byron  
Lady Ruby Byron  
Ruby St-James Byron

January 1st

Lord Byron was born with a lame right foot. Although this has traditionally been imagined as a clubfoot, authorities now believe it was merely unusually small and withered. Despite his aristocratic title, Byron was raised by a single mother for whom money was perpetually scarce. Having little else in her life, she orbited the boy with persistence and reflected heat, as Mars does the sun. As a boy, Byron often had tantrums at church. He initially hated school, where he was beaten up and teased for his deformity, but eventually gained popularity for his wit and his protection of other lame boys. He later allowed the mists of time to cleanse and gild his schoolboy memories with the light of lost happiness, which he claimed never to have regained.

He fell in love at an early age. This adolescent infatuation haunted him throughout his life, reappearing in painful and mutated forms as he became a man.

As a young man, Byron ran up enormous bills at the upholsterer's, which he was very slow to pay back and reluctant to pay at all, preferring to spend the money on his Oriental adventures. His mother wrote him numerous letters while he was abroad pleading with him not to bankrupt and ruin the upholsterer and his family. His rooms



at Cambridge, and at his Newstead estate, were lavishly outfitted in the finest fabrics of yellow and scarlet, his favorite colors. When in Albania, he had an opulent suit of traditional Albanian dress made, complete with a turban. He often wore this outfit to sit for portraits. On grand occasions, he was known to sport an elaborate feathered hat.

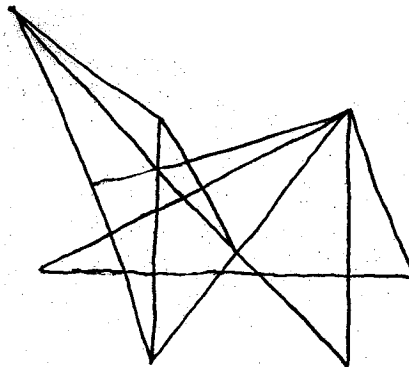
Byron enjoyed playing cricket, lying on tombstones, spending great sums of money, playing practical jokes, drinking out of a skull, traveling in his carriage, and eating bacon and eggs (although they did not agree with him).

He also wrote poetry.

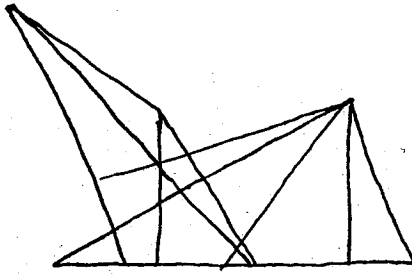
Happy New Year, Byron.

January 3<sup>rd</sup>

Here is a drawing of Byron:



Here is a drawing of the wintry abyss of angst:



Clearly, the two are uncannily similar. The only difference is that one wears long trousers to hide his lame foot, while the other wears nothing at all.

Both are stern, cloudy. Byron's gaze whispers a longing for love and adventure that calls me, unanswerably...

It's time to go to bed now.

January 4<sup>th</sup>

Byron lived in many different places. He lived in castles and mansions, houses and rooms. Among other countries, he lived in Scotland, England, Portugal, Turkey, Italy and Greece.

I live in one room. It has a mattress, a carpet, a window, a table, and a typewriter. I also have this journal, and a slender pair of scissors that I keep under my pillow. Sometimes, when I argue with Byron during the night, I slip out the scissors and modify the mattress, the pillow cover, the curtain, or my hair. I have had to do this many nights. I now sleep on an exposed spring that feels like a sharp, curly rib.

Although I regret the discomfort this habit has caused me, I feel that damage done to these objects is preferable at present to damage to any other objects or persons.

At different times in his life, Byron lived with his mother, with his lawyer, with his patron, with family friends, with the servant named Lucinda whom he impregnated, with a sixteen-year-old prostitute, with his wife, and by himself.

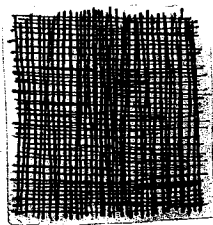
I live alone, in one room. I don't care to see anyone else at the moment. There is too much to consider.

Byron looks different in every portrait. I have never seen two that look exactly alike, although some agree more than others. Many agree on his chestnut curls, most on his moody and pensive brow, and all on his darksome, eternal eyes.

I find Byron's physical bearing, as well as his soul, powerful enough to drown out thoughts of other bodies and souls.

January 6<sup>th</sup>

Here is a drawing of a swatch of silk snipped by an unknown admirer from the delicate slipper Byron wore on his lame foot:



This drawing represents the swatch's actual size; however, its rusty coral hue is unrepresented, as is its faint, musty odor reminiscent of a depth, a life unknowable...

Note: While a pillow falling from a window is a satisfying sight, especially when it flops on the slushy street like a giant fish, a bare mattress makes a meager place to lay a head.

January 7<sup>th</sup>

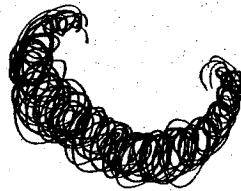
Once, aboard a Turkish ship, Byron was seen pacing the deck with a dagger in his hand, and was overheard to mutter, "I wonder how one feels after committing murder?" The crew was quick to retire, and so unfortunately failed to observe which robe he wore that day. Contemporary scholars are divided between his russet boating robe and his sapphire lounge jacket.

When Lady Caroline Lamb and Byron fell in love she was twenty-two and looked eighteen. When he broke her heart she was twenty-two and looked half-mad with grief as she was practically dragged from London to the country by her parents.

I am twenty-two.

January 9<sup>th</sup>

Here is a drawing of a lock of Lord Byron's hair:



The carpet is no longer in my way, as it now lies on the sidewalk in wrist-width strips.

It is interesting to consider possible causes of the acute melancholy that preyed on Byron throughout his life. Some say his deformity instilled in him a permanent sense of inferiority, some that his miscreant father's abandonment of the family unmoored him from security. I wonder about his obsession with death and his own mortality, and most of all about the series of violent, painful romantic attachments that shook and weakened his constitution like relentless bouts of a wasting disease.

January 11<sup>th</sup>

A strange dream last night. Was walking on a rocky beach with Byron. We stepped out on a large outcropping of wet stone, and he gazed into my pale eyes, filling them with the rich, bottomless brown of his own. "Although I

The boy looked at me in a way meant to seem casual, and glanced away, at some distant point on an abandoned factory. Rumple Felt Co. said the huge, faded letters across the faded yellow brick.

Wanna smoke a bowl? he asked, still gazing away.

No offense, I said. But aren't you kind of young?

How old are you? he asked, looking offended.

Nineteen, I said.

Five years. Big difference. Are you gonna stop me?

I guess I can't, really, I said, wondering if I should leave. Corruption of a minor did not seem the best direction my life could take at that point. But I didn't move.

What's your name, anyway? he asked, still on the offense, as though I had offered him a false one and he wanted the truth.

Donna, I said.

Is that like from that song, 'Oh, Donna' or whatever, by that old guy?

I guess, I said. I was used to the reference, though surprised to hear it from him.

My grandmas always listen to that shit.

You don't like it?

It's ok, I guess, he said. He opened his cigarette tin, and took out a little bag and a glass pipe. Man! he said. I need a bowl soooo bad.

I didn't say anything, but watched him as he stuffed the damp green buds into the pipe. The pipe was in the shape of a question mark, with the bowl where the dot would be. He sucked the flame of a lighter through the bowl and I could see smoke curl quickly through the clear glass into his mouth. Question answered, I guess, I thought to myself.

Hey, I said. It's Tuesday. Don't you go to school?

He looked at me, his lungs filled with smoke, his eyes watery and red. He held the pipe out to me, and I took it.

No, he said, closing his eyes. I got suspended. That stuff is good. Here. He handed me the lighter. The hot glass tasted burnt against my lips. I lit it and inhaled, exhaling quickly.

Why? I asked.

Why what?

Why did you get suspended?

Because the principal's an idiot. He said that since I've been with my grandmas I've been 'troubled' and that I 'need to think about why.'

What did you do?

I wrote on the board in art class that photography is for fucking idiots.

I laughed, noticing how relaxed I was, and how easily my laugh had come.

Why? I asked.

Because why the hell would you want to put up pictures that look exactly like all the boring shit we have to look at anyway? But whatever, I'm sick of school. What time is it?

Five.

Shit, why's it so late? I've gotta go. I've got stuff to do.

Like what? I asked. I didn't want him to go.

Like meet my grandmas at counseling is what.

Oh, okay, I said. See you later.

See ya, he said, and walked back down the tracks, jumping the slats two at a time.

Alone on the rock I wasn't sure what I would do with my evening.

I got the idea that I could flatten some coins on the track, like I used to when I was little, just as a kind of joke. I took out some nickels and pennies, and set them on the rail. I looked down the track. The sky at the horizon was pink and purple and a bit orange at the edge, and I thought again of the painting I had tried to do. It had been of a boy, of my brother when he was a kid, about three. I did it from an old picture. My brother was gone now, working in the city. One day, he always said, I could visit him. I would meet all his friends and we would go to art openings, and he said I wouldn't believe how beautiful the traffic lights looked in the fall, in the evening, with the leaves and rain falling past them at once. He wished he wasn't so busy, but soon there would be time for me to come.

I waited for a while for the train to come, but then I got bored and went home for dinner with my parents.

I saw the boy one day a few weeks later, again at the ice cream shop. He was wearing a pair of big black sunglasses, but his grandmas weren't there. I went up to his table.

Open, I said, sitting down beside him. He looked up, smiling, looking much younger for a minute.

Hey, he said. It's you. How do you know the game?

Don't worry, I said. What are you doing?



Nothing, he said. He looked at the empty table. I'm running away, but I don't know if I have enough money yet.

Where are you going?

He named the city where my brother had gone.

That's where my brother lives, I said. He says it's expensive.

It can't be that bad, he said. I've had a bank account since I was six, and I get money from my dad.

Why do you want to leave?

I don't know. Nothing to do here, I guess.

Neither of us said anything. I wondered if I should buy us some ice cream, but I didn't think I had enough money. The fan stirred the ferns in the late afternoon sun, and a fly buzzed at the window. I wasn't sure what else to say. I wasn't sure if I should address the idea of running away, or try to talk him out of it, being the older of the two. Should I somehow try to call his grandmas? I thought maybe I should touch his arm, squeeze the shoulder, feeling the shapes of bone and muscle under his clothes, anchoring us both down in that particular, meaningless moment.

Okay, ready, he said. He sat with his chin in his hand.

What? I said, startled.

Guess.

Closed, I said.

He lifted his sunglasses and looked at me. His eyes were green and speckled with blue. I reached out and put my hand on his arm.

## The Move

The night I left Dorothy without saying goodbye and went to live at my new apartment, it was snowing hard. I carried one large suitcase that held the sum total of things I needed or wanted to keep. Recently I had lost yet another pair of mittens, and my fingers were frozen. On the step of the new place I fumbled with the lock, and when a cab honked behind me I dropped the big gold key; I couldn't see it anywhere in the slush.

I said to myself: I know intellectually that the object still exists, because things can't just be *gone*, for no reason. Sometimes it helps to think like a child.

I sat down on the step and began methodically searching every inch of ground with my eyes. I knew that Mr. Owen, the man I had sublet the apartment from, was *actually* gone, already on his way to Brazil.

Mr. Owen was polite, middle-aged. I had somehow pictured him more or less accurately before we even met, when he was just a name and phone number from an ad, then a voice: glasses, v-neck sweater, thinning hair, silk socks peeking over tie-up leather shoes. On the phone, I tried to chat, to ask friendly questions. He said he was a businessman. That's how he talked. Who uses the word "businessman," I thought, besides kids, or people with no money, like me? I'm a student, I said. Only I don't go to school anymore. I had graduated recently, and did not yet have a new personal title ready on my lips. One minute I was worrying about how this sounded, and the next we were making arrangements for me to move in.

He said he had to leave for Brazil immediately. Can you move in immediately? He used the word "immediately" a lot, instead of "really soon," and the word "arrangements" instead of "plans." Even on the phone, I started using formal words and

fewer contractions, even though it's always made me sad when I change the way I talk for someone else. But the sublet was perfect, and I wanted too much for Mr. Owen to like me, for everything to seem okay. Unbelievably, the place was only five hundred a month. I needed something cheap if I was to live alone. For a young woman of limited means like me, living with someone else is a lot more manageable. Financially, I mean. Not in other ways.

His voice was quiet, nearly a monotone. I noticed Dorothy's old phone had stopped crackling for once, as though it was trying to hear him better. Soon, I'd never hear that crackle again, or sit on Dorothy's bed, on or off the phone. After a pause Mr. Owen said, For a number of reasons, I don't mind if people think I am still in town. It will just be easier. Wait, I said, shouldn't I see the apartment first? View it, I mean? As though it were a strange request. Of course, he said. What are you doing now?

At the apartment, we leaned against things in his living room and talked. He crossed one leg over the other and I glimpsed a striped sock. My hat and scarf were still on, snow melting on my coat. The place was gorgeous, even nicer than I had hoped. I tried not to act like a kid as I looked around, to look at just some things, not everything.

Would you mind if I left my voice on the answering machine, just for a while? he asked. I'm expecting a few important calls in the near future. Yes, I said. I mean, no, I don't mind.

Also, he added casually, I'll leave the place fully furnished, if you like. Though of course if you prefer I can move some of my things out. To make room for yours.

I thought about the small dowry of rickety furniture I carried with me from place to place, and how it made an empty room look emptier, especially combined with another

person's things, which were always somehow more voluptuous and bright, more real-looking than mine. No, fully furnished will be fine, I said, and tried to soak up the cream-coloured armchairs in a glance, the loveseat, the bookcases. An odd but appealing print hung in the hall; was it Klee, or Miro? I didn't ask. I said I would move in immediately. Good, he said. I will be leaving tomorrow, then.

I noticed with more relief than worry at the time that he didn't seem to care why I wanted to move so badly. His own need seemed to drown out mine.

Two days later, I sat in the snow, on Mr. Owen's step, in front of Mr. Owen's apartment, despairing of finding the lost key that would make it my apartment, my step. Such a tiny machine, the lock-and-key, I thought, but what a total monopoly on personal progress. "Almost" and "wait" were words that came to mind frequently at that time.

I stood, eyes to the ground in defeat, and saw half of the key sticking out from under my boot. A smooth turn, a click, and I went from the cold and wind into the warmth of the hallway, and the vaguely sweet, soon-to-be familiar smell of my new home.

Alone in the apartment for the first time, I walked around intoxicated, dropping my bag to the floor somewhere behind me, free to stare and touch as much as I wanted, like a babysitter once the kids are asleep. The silence was thick, like the yellow lamplight that deepened the room's colours: mahogany tables, jewel-toned spines of novels in the cherry bookshelf. I paused at the books, head tilted to read the titles: *Daniel Deronda*, *Middlemarch*, *Silas Marner*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Wasteland*. Alphabetized. I wondered suspiciously if these books had ever been read. I thought of the bed-side table

in my last room, at the place I shared with Dorothy: the novels warped or stained, sometimes in two separate pieces, lying among teacups, toast crusts, splayed magazines, junkmail. How do people do it? I've never known. Dorothy was messy too. Once I even found a marble in her bed. It had been a cat's eye, with a blue swirl running through clear green, and a thin strand of yellow; a bit like her eyes, but without the black.

I should never touch Mr. Owen's books, I said to myself. Unless I'm extra, extra careful.

Very strange, sleeping in another person's bed, when they're gone. The feeling of their sheets on your legs. Inhabiting another person's perception is enough to keep you awake. What did Mr. Owen think of at night, lying here? I wondered, as I lay looking at the dark, foreign shapes around me that first night. There was a big square that I couldn't identify. I jumped up, and turned on the light. It was a big, scarred oak desk – I ran my hands over it, and on impulse, I tried the top drawer, but it wouldn't open. I opened a side drawer, and saw a stack of papers, covered with numbers and calculations, which I imagined was the language of Mr. Owen's business, and might as well have been a secret code for all it meant to me. Something came unstuck from the bottom of the pile and fluttered to the floor. It was a photograph, a young woman and a man in what I first thought was a jungle; their light, unprotective summer clothes and easy smiles were surreal against the towering, fleshy green plants that dwarfed them from all sides, the flowers like enormous foamy mouths. I saw the domed glass ceiling in an upper corner and realized they were in a greenhouse, and then saw that the young man was Mr. Owen. The woman had her arm on his shoulder, and they looked as though they had just stopped laughing. The photo reminded me of one Dorothy had kept on our fridge of her and her

Anthony: although they were in a living room in the picture, not a jungle or greenhouse, they contrasted equally with their environment: anything outside their animate, kinetic bond was dulled, almost ridiculous.

Back in bed, I couldn't sleep. "Business?" What is "business," exactly, what acts does the word cloak? The sheets were very soft cotton, and felt wonderful against my feet, despite my distracted state. I hoped Mr. Owen didn't sleep in his socks, for his sake. I felt sorry for him, but also a bit scared. Wasn't this whole thing weird? I tried to get some perspective, to figure out if the situation was at a reasonable level of oddness, or whether it surpassed "odd" into "off," or even "not right." Do businessmen often take off suddenly like thieves? It was almost light when I finally slept.

The next morning, I took in the mail, and drank a coffee perched on a stool in the kitchen, letting the morning light reassure me that everything was fine. Mr. Owen wasn't a crook! Crooks don't get mail from The United Way, or subscriptions to Time Magazine, like my dad. Besides, the mail proved that Owen was his real name. Crooks don't use their real names.

I skimmed through a flyer from a furniture store, looking at the pictures. I like that kind of thing: chairs, vases of flowers, lamps, arranged against white space, sometimes even pictured with couples or families using them. There was a brass desk lamp shaped like a stylized tulip that I thought Dorothy would love. I imagined her working late, in the warm, metallic light of the lamp, her hair the same color as the glow – tiny, invisible curls showing up, like writing in lemon juice. I wanted to imagine buying her the lamp for her birthday, to see her holding the wrapped box on her lap, and her smile. But I couldn't even think about it. I decided to take a bath.

Lying in the bathtub, I looked up at the skylight, and I concentrated. At first I thought: It's a window looking up onto a white ceiling. But then I saw that a blank white expanse isn't necessarily solid, but can be the white sky, with white snowflakes that you can't see in the air because they're white too. Some snowflakes had crystallized in small clumps on the windowpane itself, on its old, wavy glass and the painted wooden frame. The bathtub was white too, and the water had been so hot when I filled it, and was still very warm, and the contrast between lying in the warm water and looking up at the frozen glass and the white winter sky made me shiver, and feel alone, in the way that you hope won't end. It was all so simple. The only sound was the distant drip of the pipes. A winter afternoon was never so still.

All this detail could barely distract me. I missed Dorothy painfully, the sight of her skin that made me lean towards her, barely restraining myself from touching her, the sound of her voice. Maybe I could go back, I thought. What was I doing in this weird, empty new life without her?

The phone rang.

I lay and listened to the sharp noise bounce around the white silence, worried it might break or topple something, it sounded so foreign. I then recalled that a person is supposed to answer the phone when it rings – but that I hadn't even thought to get up and answer it. And not just because I was in the bath, but because it felt like someone else's phone, almost like I wasn't even supposed to be there. I pulled the plug and stood up.

I walked into the hall where the phone sat on a wicker telephone table. A neat white notepad sat beside it. "Code," it said, and at first I wondered if it was some kind of secret password, used in whatever "business" Mr. Owen was in – but then I realized it

was the code to pick up the phone messages. As I stood and stared, the phone rang again and I started. I put my hand out, then pulled it back. Then I grabbed the receiver. Hello?

Hello, Jane. This is Mr. Owen.

Oh, hi. Did you just call? I asked a bit too quickly.

No...

Oh.

It must have been someone else, he said. How are things at the apartment?

Fine, I said. Fine.

Good, I'm glad to hear that. I'm calling because I need you to do something for me. I need a number. I forgot to bring the piece of paper.

Okay, I said. Where is it?

Well, there's a desk in the bedroom. The top drawer will feel locked, but if you pull out the little drawer to the right of it, you will be able to open the top one. There should be a sheet of paper right on top, with the name Doctor Vargas written on it, and a number. Could you please go get that number and read it to me?

Sure, I said. Just a minute.

In the bedroom, I pulled out the small drawer, and then slid the large top drawer open. There was the page, with the name Dr. Vargas, and a long, strange-looking number with a lot of dashes. Both were written in neat, pained print. The page sat on top of a black box.

I went back to the phone, and told him the number.

Thanks, Jane, Mr. Owen said.

You're welcome, I said. So...



Jane, said Mr. Owen, if you're wondering why I left, I might as well tell you. I needed a change. My job at home was unsatisfactory to me, for a number of reasons. I moved here to pursue an interest. But it isn't important. It was just time for me to leave.

Okay, I said.

I've realized in middle-age that it's important to pursue important things to their end, or at least as close to their end as possible.

Oh, okay, I said.

I think we stop halfway, because we're scared of leaving the past, whether we like it or not, because the future is just barren white space.

Oh, I said. Okay. And what's important to you now?

Plants, he said. Tropical plants.

Oh, really? I asked, not sure whether it was a joke, if I was supposed to laugh, or whether this was a grave truth.

Well, he said. I feel quite strange having said that, and leaving on the subject, but I need to call my friend. Please make yourself at home, and enjoy the apartment.

Mr. Owen and I thanked each other and said goodbye.

Back in the bedroom, I pulled the black box out of the drawer, and lifted the lid. Inside was a stack of books: *Tropical Flowers. An Introduction to Plant Reproduction. Carnivorous Plantlife.* The books were old, flat, yellowed, like the nature books I read as a kid. At the bottom was a large book with a blank red cover. I opened it: under transparent paper were rows of dried, pressed flowers, each with a Latin name written beneath in shaky, deliberate script which sometimes lapsed into print. I closed the book, feeling both amused and confused. I could not know why we love what we do.

Back in the hall, I picked up the phone and entered the code. There was one message. I thought I knew who it was, and I was right.

Dorothy's voice on the machine was intelligent and low, and warmed me as I listened, but she didn't know what I knew. She wanted me to come back. My note didn't explain anything, she said, she didn't understand why I had left, and felt hurt if I was mad and hadn't told her. I was like a sister to her, she said, and she just didn't understand what was going on. I thought you were my friend, she said. I sighed. I would have to call Dorothy in the morning and explain that I couldn't come back.

## Going Out

Mona I wanted to say that it was all because of *you* that I got fired from the restaurant this morning. It's easy to blame you for things because you're so wild. Even though you're older than most of us, maybe in your thirties, you act like a kid, or at least like you're drunk or crazy. You grew up in the neighbourhood, and you still live in the same worn-out 1970s apartment with your mom, and you're almost famous around here, even with me, and I only moved here last year when I left my parents' place to try to make it on my own. You're always wearing those tight black jeans, and you're pretty much a lesbian, though you never manage to have a real relationship with anyone, male or female. The truth is, I think people blame you unfairly most of the time, but this morning I blamed you too, at least at first.

I knew it all *had* to be about you last night at the bar, when I saw the cop car, then saw Tom the owner yelling, who told you not to come around again, just like you're never allowed in any bars in the neighborhood, except for Harry's, which wasn't even really a bar, but more like a place for people with problems to go, and which finally went out of business in June anyway. Sabrina told me too that Tom the owner was drunk before I even showed up, and he yelled at you, and threw your bike at you out on the sidewalk in front. As if that wasn't enough to warn me that there was going to be trouble.

And just yesterday morning you and your mom had come to the restaurant I'm fired from, just about the only place you were allowed to drink coffee at, except for the tables outside Double Donuts, which isn't saying much since even crazy *Jeremy's* allowed to sit there. And you were only allowed in the restaurant for the few days I worked there anyway, because I let you stay and didn't tell on you for being drunk or

weird. And *just yesterday* I let you and your mom sit there all morning, even though you only bought one coffee and one toast each, and asked for matches and ashtrays and extra butter and jam and all this when I was still getting trained and didn't want my boss to think I was friends with you or your mom, even though I'm not really, except for at the bar. And I don't know if I'd be able to be friends with your mom anyway, because first of all she's pretty old and second of all I think she has that problem where at times you don't talk except you sometimes yell. Even though she's pretty nice when she eventually says something kind of normal in a normal voice.

Then I thought maybe it's more Henry than anyone who got me fired. He made me go out to the bar when I didn't want to, not that I didn't want to, but he knows I can't say no when he wants me. He works nights at the airport, where he's something like a security man, and gets off at midnight; for him it's normal to go out that late. So to make a long story short, after only my fourth day at the restaurant we ended up staying out all night with you, you so drunk that I bet you don't even know it was Sabrina that got you cut up, which Sabrina's glad for, because everyone knows you go crazy if Sabrina gets upset, whether you're drunk or sober. More when you're drunk, but when you're sober too.

And Henry told me it would just be a few drinks, just us. And I thought he'd walk me home around midnight, and we'd lie together like last time, and I'd be ok in the morning. And he said you wouldn't even *try* to show up at the bar, because you're trying to be cool so you can get your ban lifted and hang out with us there again. Now I bet you'll be banned *forever*, and you'll have to stay home with your mom, and truth be told your friends won't even miss you, at least for the next few weekends.

But who knows anyway why you get banned for getting drunk or showing up drunk or just being weird, and sometimes flirting with straight girls, and looking weird, and sometimes throwing things, and only once in a while fighting, but only when other people get you going, and Tom the owner is allowed to throw things like your bike, right at you, and be drunk even when he's technically at his job?

Carol who trained me told me that it was bad to be hung-over at work on only the fifth day, or on any day, which I already knew, and she said the boss would know I was, but she gave me gum and said I'd just have to cross my fingers and told me I'd better wake up.

So I started trying to hum this song and not think about you or your weird mom, or Henry, and was balancing things okay, and trying to ignore Carol's glares, and not worry about the cook yelling at me if I messed up an order. But then who walks into the restaurant but *Jeremy*, and the song in my head stops, and I say in my head, Oh, God, please let him *not talk to me*. He grew up in the neighbourhood too, and I think he's about as old as you, though he looks even older. He says he has a rich Dad who sends him checks and pays his rent, so he doesn't have to work. I'm a modern day aristocrat, he said one time, but I didn't believe him because he lives in the same broken-down kind of place as you and your mom. He just walks around and bothers people on the street all the time, wanting to talk whether you have time or not, especially if you're a girl. And this morning at the restaurant, at the worst possible time, he walks right in, even though he's banned. He looks like the Cheshire cat with his grin, and he has that sunburn from riding around all day on that spindly seventies bike he has, like yours but even worse, with duct-tape all over it, which I can see out the window leaning against the restaurant, and he says

to me, Hey, girl, baby, beautiful, in that slow way of his. My mind, he says, it's blown, blasted, gone – what devil has allocated your lovely girlhood to this banal establishment? He talks in that way where he uses big words but still doesn't sound smart for some reason. And I say, Jeremy, I can't talk right now, *please*. I just started working here. And Carol comes by and glares, and Jeremy says to her, Hey, baby, smile, smile, and Carol says, Out, Jeremy! You know you're not allowed in here. Everyone knows Jeremy's name. But Jeremy just kind of ignores her, saying, Look, I have friends in high places now, and man, does it pay! He just pretends she's joking or something, and orders a coffee like I have no choice in the matter.

Mona I know you love Sabrina and that's part of the problem. And the worst thing is that she's with Jeremy, and it's sad to see it, since she's only twenty and still seems like a kid in a lot of ways, and Jeremy's thirty at least, and looks older from drinking all the time, and pretending he's doing all kinds of things like thinking or rejecting the system when really he's just been mad for a long time and tries to walk straight but can't. And he's been banned from all the bars too, since even before you got banned from anywhere, which means Sabrina has to hang out with him in the park drinking out of a big beer can in a plastic bag. And one time I saw him at the drugstore buying two big bottles of mouthwash and I didn't say anything, but he saw me looking and said, Darling, baby, I'm going to have the freshest breath in the city, and he laughed in a weird way, and I left feeling awful and I never said anything to Sabrina but I still feel weird about it.

Mona you're like me in a lot of ways, especially now that I don't have a job, except that I'm not banned from the bar yet, and probably won't be because Tom likes Henry, and sees me with him all the time. Henry isn't banned from anywhere, and neither

am I. But you and I aren't just like each other because we both don't have a job, but because we both feel love pretty strongly, at least more than a lot of people we know in the neighbourhood, like Tom the owner, for instance, who I think has a wife but maybe doesn't like her, so he stays at his bar drinking all the time, or Jeremy, who I think might be one of those people who doesn't really feel much anymore, for whatever reason, except for wanting to *get* things in various ways, like doing those pharmaceutical experiments for cash, or hiding things from Sabrina so that she somehow thinks he's a wise and okay guy. You've sometimes talked to me about Sabrina as though you want to get or have her too, but it seems more like you just want her to live in a way more suited to her nature, like maybe to your way of thinking she should be a queen or at least an owner of her own establishment, instead of just a barmaid waiting tables for Tom.

I talked to you once about Henry too, but you were so drunk I doubt you remember a thing. It was out on the bench by the bus stop that one night, before you were banned, but you had gotten kicked out of the bar in any case, and it was so close to last-call that I thought I'd leave with you, since Henry wasn't there because I think he had his ex's kids that weekend. He never talks to me about his ex or the kids, but I kind of know when to expect that he won't show up at the bar and why. You and I sat up on the back of the bench with our feet on the seat, and I told you that I was in love with Henry and asked you if you thought I should tell him. I felt free to talk to you about it, because I knew you wouldn't remember. I can't talk about it with other people, because I'm not exactly sure if his ex is fully his ex or not, and though people like you and Tom seem to kind of assume Henry and I are together, no one ever says it outright, least of all me, just in case. And you told me that at least I *half* had Henry, and I should try to be happy with that,

because half is more than nothing, and if I scared him off then I'd have nothing. That's what I already thought, but it was good to hear it from someone else, even though it also made me sad.

And I wish I would have thought about what you said more *last* night, because now I'm not sure what I have. I'm sure for one thing that I don't have a job, after the boss came into the restaurant this morning, with Carol glaring when I forgot things and Jeremy giving me his weird smile like we're buddies, and me still smelling like alcohol despite the gum. The boss sat at the back and smoked and watched me, and at the end of the morning rush I went up, and just stood there waiting to hear what he'd say. I'm sorry, he said. Too many mistakes. I know, I said, I'm sorry. I put my money belt behind the counter and left. I didn't even look at Jeremy when I went past the table where he was still pretending to drink out of his empty coffee cup, but I knew he would follow me, and as soon as I hit the sidewalk I broke into a run, thinking I could run away from the embarrassment of running away. When I'd run two blocks I had to stop to catch my breath, hung-over as I was, my legs shaky, and saw that Jeremy was on his bike, gaining on me fast, no doubt desperate as usual to "hang out" as he calls it, in that way of his where he uses tricks to try to get things. It was raining a bit, and I was starting to get wet. So when I noticed that I was near the subway entrance, I ducked into the station, through the turnstiles, down the stairs, and onto a train, the doors closing a quarter-second after I was in.

On the subway car I sat down and stared at an ad for cell phones, not wanting to think about you or Jeremy or Henry or the thought that no one but myself had cost me that job, and how I had gotten nothing for myself by not being happy with half. But the



phone in the ad made me think of Henry's phone, and how he always used to forget it at my apartment, leaving me with no way to reach him because he'd only given me his cell phone number, not his home number, and obviously I had his cell phone *with* me so I couldn't call him there, so I'd take it into the bar, and leave it with Sabrina if she was working, and just hope that he'd come by there and pick it up. I knew he wouldn't come to my place, because my buzzer was broken. And he didn't have my phone number.

When we'd meet up at the bar, we'd meet by guesses, mine mostly I think. I'd get a feeling around nine, and usually try to ignore it for an hour or two, then I might try to tell myself that I was just going out for cigarettes or for a walk, when meanwhile it was all too easy to find myself walking into Tom's, it being just across the street. So easy not to think about what I was doing as I scanned the row of stools for the shape of his back, him quietly drinking a beer. And so easy to see him for a second the way I had before I knew him, dignified and smart, partly because he doesn't say much and partly because he works hard all day. It felt so good to go straight to him and put my arm around his waist – in a way that didn't seem too obvious to anyone else. Having him around didn't mean there wouldn't be trouble, but he was never the trouble himself: he was like the eye of the storm. Maybe that's why ever since I've met him I feel like I'm in the middle of the storm looking out, and even though I'm not being blown around everything I can see is. Especially you Mona, you're always in trouble of some kind, and I think Henry worries about you and that's why he always stands up for you when Tom the owner gets mad. Maybe that's partly why I like him. But these days all I want is to be somewhere calm, like working at the restaurant, making okay tips and not getting in trouble, or sitting at the bar having one drink with Henry rather than seven with everyone, or most of all lying in

the dark with Henry, his arm around me from behind, and without him leaving afterwards, which he's done every time since the first.

At least I had him half Mona. Last night it was you and me, and Sabrina, all crazy on the sidewalk out front after Tom finally kicked us out, and even Jeremy showed up, but Henry was there too, so calm that you'd forget he was even there if you weren't me. And then *you* had to start baiting Jeremy, and acting like a knight in shining armour over Sabrina, like you two were going to joust for your lady, only on your lame bikes instead of horses. You started the act off as a joke but turned serious, and then Jeremy got mad, and Sabrina did, and she finally pushed you so that you fell down on the street and scraped your palms and shins really badly, and finally you rode away, your bike weaving all over the sidewalk. But then Henry was taking me by the arm and we were up at my place, just like every time, lying down, him turning off the light, but the difference was that this time I said, *Henry, I love you*, knowing the same second I said it that I shouldn't have. He lay there for a bit, and I couldn't see his face, and then eventually we kind of forgot about it, but later when he left he just *left*, not in a noticeably different way except that it felt to me like this time he was glad to be able to shut something solid between us. And I thought of work the next day, and what you had said about getting nothing by trying for more, and fell into an uncomfortable kind of sleep. And as you know now, since I'm sure you and your mom probably came by the restaurant for coffee, if you weren't too hung-over this morning, that I don't have a job anymore, and I'm telling you myself that I don't think I have the half of Henry that you warned me I might lose.

I was thinking all this over on the subway, after my great escape from Jeremy, and I guess I fell asleep, because next thing I knew I woke up and saw that everyone who

was left on the train was leaving, so I jumped up, still dazed from sleep, and got off too. Sleep had blurred the bad things that had happened a bit, and I felt pretty good wandering along the platform, at the end of the line, especially because there were these big round windows like aquariums that looked outside rather than into nothing like you usually get in the subway. The sun was shining through raindrops on the windows, and there were branches of bright yellow leaves sticking to the glass, and the whole combination of sun and water was somehow incredibly refreshing, like I'd been dying of thirst and hadn't realized it till I was saved. I felt like I could walk around there for a long time, slowly, almost like it was a museum or an actual aquarium, so I started looking at things like they were put there on purpose for me to see. One sign said that this station was the shallowest in the whole system, which explained the windows and light. I looked at the sign that showed the map of the subway system, and I saw that I was at the very top of the whole thing, at the northern-most tip of the green line. As I stood there, the map of the subway, with its bright green and yellow and orange lines against the black background, began to look like a system of roots running through the ground. Somehow this thought made me feel happy, and something about the change in weather and in how I felt made me feel like I had woken up in another world. I felt like I was on the brink of something, and even the top end of the green line, where I was, looked on the map like a green shoot that was just about to burst out aboveground. I'd never really felt happy in that exact way before, and I wondered if I'd like to have someone there with me, and of course I imagined Henry there beside me first, his arm around me, but I didn't want that, because then all that was around me would probably fade and I'd just see him, and start worrying about what he thought and whether I'd lose him or not. I went through a bunch of people

in my head, picturing them beside me, but none of them seemed right. The only idea that went with how I felt was the one that hit me when I was looking down the tunnel, at the shaft of sun lightening the grimy tracks, and I laughed when I imagined hearing your bell Mona, and seeing your bike come weaving down between the tracks, you laughing too, drunk and crazy as usual, but straightening out when you came into the sun, looking straight ahead, drinking in the strange sight of the underground springtime.

“To drop my detestable tropes & figures you know I have always thought you the cleverest most agreeable, absurd, amiable, perplexing, dangerous, fascinating little being that lives now or ought to have lived 2000 years ago.”

Lord Byron, to Lady Caroline Lamb, April, 1812

“...[N]o—it must be broken off at once, & all I have left is to take some step which will make her hate me effectually, for she must be in extremes.”

Lord Byron, about Lady Caroline Lamb, To Lady Melbourne, September 1812

If Lady Caroline Lamb Were Alive Today:

Things She Would Not Know

Why there is a Portuguese drink with a name that translates to “Death while Dreaming,” and no equivalent drink in English.

Where exactly email spam comes from, and why the entities that send it have such unusual names. Whether anyone is fooled by names like “Ulysses A. Dexter” or “Mamie Bean,” and opens emails from them hoping they are from someone they have forgotten, maybe an old school friend, or a lost lover.

When she will accept the mortality of those she loves. Whether she will ever ride a horse in this lifetime, or why the idea of horseback riding seems funny now and unnatural, and seemed so majestic when she was a child. How different things would be if she hadn’t left the city. Whether she will look back and wish she had spent more time with certain people.

Whether she should sit down and really think about Baudrillard’s ideas or not. Why she can’t remember to take out the recycling on Tuesday nights. Why, though she knows that even a three-minute walk around the block cheers her up, she still hangs around inside and wonders why she feels listless. Why she can’t make time in the day to write the letters that she realizes she should write in the middle of the night – or if not

letters, at least emails – or whether, if she tried, she could say what she needs to in written words.

Whether, as Nietzsche said of young men, a young man can know if he is suited to finding out about the Greeks and Romans or not. How to spell Nietzsche's name without double-checking, and whether other people need to double-check or not.

Whether she'll ever see him again. If things might have been different if she hadn't had to leave the city. If they might have watched together as the seasons moved the pieces of the neighbourhood around like a happy game of solitaire, and whether this would have built permanent intimacy between them. If she would have eventually stopped finding it hard to keep a conversation going when he was in certain moods. Whether or not he still has the third-story room with the floor filled up by the big bed, where she lay almost hallucinating from the heat of a mid-August city night, listening to the drunk cries out in the streets, wondering if he was okay on the couch, and wishing either he or she would just disappear. How it's possible to feel love and hate at the same time. Whether that day when they walked together he said all he wanted to, or if she did, and why they were silent at the Portuguese restaurant, stirring their drinks under strings of colored lights. Whether or not she should email him and ask. Whether or not she will. Whether technology brings people together or keeps them apart.

What exactly happened between them, and why she is alone now.

Whether, when she feels cold sometimes, it means anything other than that she is cold. Whether email is ultimately a good thing or not. If it will dramatically change the way history is written, or how past lives are understood. Whether or not she wants the emailed words of her former lovers kept in virtual folders named after them, which will

probably be forgotten and lost when she's finally convinced to switch to a different email provider, or will be printed out and then eventually lost in some drawer or bag like the last time she got a new email address. Why we switch email addresses, and why some people seem to want others to switch to different email providers, as though it matters. Why she makes lists of things she really needs to remember to do and then doesn't look at the lists. Why she's made the choices she's made, and whether it matters if she wishes she could change some of them. Which choices she'd change. Why we stop being in love with someone only when we fall in love with someone new. Why we don't really stop being in love with the first person, but it's just different when there's someone else to think about. Why we think about those we are in love with more than those we just love. Whether love can be communicated electronically, and if so, if it is better stated frankly, or conveyed through some kind of joke or compliment or thoughtful anecdote. Whether it's best to try to fill up all of our time or leave it empty.

Why she doesn't get more irritated when the computer underlines her mistakes, especially when they aren't even mistakes, it's just that the computer can't understand what she wants to say or how she wants to say it. How italics sometimes communicate feeling so well. Why tone is so important, and body language, and even touching another person sometimes, and hearing that person's voice, and using the expressive functions unique to human beings. Whether she will kiss someone again. Whether the winter will be very cold again this year, and she'll stay inside a lot. Whether or not there will be time to say all the things she needs to say to certain people. How conscious her use is of different forms of forgetting – sleep, drink, blind love. And whether this forgetting is balanced by wanting at other times so badly not to forget.

Sent

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: hey!  
date: 12-10-04

Hey Charlie,

Just a quick line to say "hey," but I guess I already said that in the subject line. Oh, well, you can't have too much of a good thing, so "hey!" Ha ha. No, but seriously, just wanted to see what's up and to say hope you're doing great. It's been 12 days since "the big decision" and I've never felt better, honestly.

Also wanted to mention that I'm really glad we decided to take some time apart this fall. I want to thank you for that. I really think I need some "me" time. And maybe it will be nice to see other people, too, who knows ;).

Anyway, good luck with your work. I know you'll get published in no time. The play is genius. I'm not just saying that.

Okay, bye,

Love,

Lo

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: hey again  
date: 12-10-04

Hey Again,

Sorry to bug you. Just wanted to add a quick p.s.



I don't really want to see other people *per se*. You know, if it would make "us" less likely. Let me know what you think, if you're comfortable with that.

Cheers,

Lois

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: wow!  
date: 15-10-04

Hey Chuck,

Hey, long time no talk, honey. How's it going? Life's such a whirlwind for me now I thought I'd just take a breather to say hi.

Everything is just so exciting now for some reason. All these opportunities keep jumping up in front of me. I feel like my mind is on fire sometimes, really. I just can't believe they want to publish me. Me! When I always thought you'd be the literary star of the two.

Just kidding! I know *The Night is All Mine* will be huge.

Thanks for helping me see the fantastic side of freedom.

Love and peace to you,

Lois

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: ?  
date: 16-10-04

Hi There!

Just writing to see if everything's cool. Haven't heard from you in a while. No problem!

Just let me know you're doin' good.

Cheers, Lo

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: oops!  
date: 16-10-04

Just a quick note to say of course I remember you said we wouldn't be in touch till you found a publisher, because until then you need to focus on your work. Oops! That's cool actually because I could use some time off in a serious way ☺.

See ya,

L.

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: thinkin' of you  
date: 17-10-04

To My Sweet Chas,

It's such a rainy day today and I thought I'd just lie in bed and listen. Everything outside my little room is so meaningless. Especially without you. I hope that's okay for me to say. But the rain was dripping and I thought about how we would lie in bed and read poetry. And I want you to know that you're the poem written indelibly across my heart. What I'm trying to say is that I'm yours forever, if you want me. I know that *All Mine* is your priority right now. But think about it.

All My Eternal Love,

Your Little Lowly

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: mix-up  
date: 18-10-04

Hey Man,

Wow, am I embarrassed. I was trying to write a fictional email conversation based on this idea I had for a story, and was actually experimenting with typing it out in my account, and accidentally pressed "send." That's the 411 on that last email. Please just delete it. I guess "send" comes like second nature now to our generation. Just like rats after pellets, eh? LOL.

Lo

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: (none)  
date: 21-10-04

Charles,

I think it is only fair to explain my recent silence. I have decided that it is best at the present time for me to discontinue correspondence with you. I trust you will understand that this is a decision I need to make for personal reasons. It is only fair for me to put "me" first sometimes.

Best Regards,

L. M.

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: Is it sold?  
date: 25-10-04

Hi Charlie,

I was just curious to see if you've sold *The Night is All Mine*, or sent it out anywhere interesting. If there's any news, I'd love to hear. Feel free to call me about it. I feel like that play is part mine, in a way, because I helped it grow. So I think it's fair for me to ask how it's going. As a friend.

Your friend,

Lois

P.S. I've been meaning to tell you. In Act II, when Helen smashes the mirror to represent her addictive past, you may want to think about your characterization of women a bit more. Sorry I didn't mention it before!

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: a few words  
date: 26-10-04

Dear Charlie,

I will be frank with you. I sense that you don't wish to correspond, and I have failed to respect that. I realize I have been unreasonable in that regard, and that my emails may have caused you some worry or distraction in the last little while, if they have seemed inconsistent, or if you have sensed any tension at all in their tone. The fact is that I have been experiencing something that I was reluctant to share, because I didn't want to upset you. I'm sorry to say that I have been in a relationship with someone else for the last few weeks. Melanie is a really super person. She may not have the literary intelligence you have, but she knows how to share.

I thought you should know. I hope you are all right hearing this news.

Warmly,

Lois

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: quick note  
date: 27-10-04

Hi Charlie,

As I said, Melanie's great, but I wanted to mention that it's still casual between us, so if you could please let me know if there's a chance for you and me, that would help me avoid playing unfairly with another's heart. If you could get back to me on this at your earliest convenience, that would be great.

Thanks,

Lo

to: charlespick@umail.com  
from: loismurray@umail.com  
subject: the truth  
date: 28-10-04

Charles,

My love for you demands honesty from me. No, there is no Melanie. She never existed. Only the stress of modern life can account for such an absurd lie. I know you well enough to know that you'll understand what I mean by this stress – no, agony. I don't mean it lightly. Just as *The Night is All Mine* illuminates so heartbreakingly the raw alienation of living in this technomaniac, postmodern world, so does my heart burst open under the strain of longing for an impossible past. A past for us. A past with you.

Call me some time. My cell is usually on. Or feel free to email, if it feels more "real."

Love, Lois

## Ola, Basil and Ellie

Princess Ola isn't really a Princess, but that's what Basil named her. He made her a crown out of tin-foil, and she would wear it around their place, sweeping or singing, or stretching, balanced on the tips of her long white feet. Basil would watch her from the orange armchair, from behind a book. And I would watch them, from the corner of their apartment, where I worked on a crossword, or a story, sketching their faces in the margins.

I had met Ola first, in a poetry course -- the Romantics. We would walk together in the park, sit for hours under a tree. Basil would join us and we would read Coleridge, pretending our cigarettes were opium. They would rarely hold hands, but seemed very much in love. At first I couldn't tell who I was in love with -- was it Ola, with her head thrown back in laughter, or with her abstracted gaze? Or Basil, and the way he looked at me? "Ellie!" he might say, after I had said something ridiculous. "You're great. Ola, she makes things different, doesn't she?" "Yes," Ola would say, looking at me as though for the first time. "It's true."

That summer, we were best friends. Almost nightly I would balance my gin-and-tonics on the threadbare arm of their big green couch, late into the night, the balcony door propped open for the breeze. We would dig dollars in change out from under cushions to go buy ice. Music, voices, and papers would stir calmly through the rooms, glasses clinking and cracking, until one or both of them would walk me home through the quiet streets, our laughter swooping among the towering maples. We were writers, or wanted to be. We were all around twenty-three, and we couldn't imagine how young we were, or how things might ever change.

Sometimes Basil would walk me home alone, when Ola was tired or too drunk. One night she went to bed early. It had been an especially hot day, and the night air outside cooled my face like a hand checking for a fever. Basil wore a green cotton shirt that stuck to his back with sweat. He had a quiet voice, but clear.

“Look at those birches,” he said. “Three of them. One for each of us. Their papers are peeling off. Can I say that?”

“Yes, you can. Why wouldn’t you say it?” I asked.

“Thanks,” he said. “I don’t know.”

“Bas,” I said, my voice outside of me. “I love you. Do you know that?”

“Of course,” he said, turning to me, half-smiling but serious. We walked in silence for a few seconds.

“Me too,” he said.

I felt my place in space move, without me moving myself, as though an iceberg that I had been standing on had suddenly broken loose.

“But Ola,” I said. “I love her as well.”

“I love her too.”

“Then what should I do?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Try to think of something, and I will, too. But I don’t know if there’s anything to be done.”

In the lane behind my building, we kissed under the streetlight, our fingers tentative on each others’ waists. I loved him with all my imagination.

But things went on as usual. The three of us were at work on a collaborative project, which grew vaguer and more complicated as our ideas multiplied. We talked

But things went on as usual. The three of us were at work on a collaborative project, which grew vaguer and more complicated as our ideas multiplied. We talked about it endlessly, discussing writerly constraints, or writers we admired, or how we would divide the project, getting less and less writing done as drinks took the place of pencils in our hands. Little did they suspect the other project I was being forced to plan, nor did they conceive of the challenge before me. The capture of a fictional character is far less difficult than the theft of a man. I could feel that I was crossing the line of the law. I imagined myself going into a costume shop, renting a Zoro mask and cape under an assumed name, never to return the outfit or to pay. I imagined the “Z” I would slash through the air. I imagined it blowing hot against my face and eyes, as though made of fire, making them water behind my mask. I would feel zero at the bone as I fled into the night behind the wheel of a borrowed ’82 Subaru, Basil beside me. Would he fiddle with the radio? Would we talk? I would handle everything.

“Ellie,” Ola said one evening when the two of us were sitting on the screened-in porch. The night had come on quickly, and when I lifted my eyes from the page I discovered that I had been reading in near-darkness. Ola’s skin was shiny with sweat, and a tendril of blond hair stuck to her temple in a wet curl. I wanted to tell her how beautiful and strange she looked, her face floating in the dark, but I was scared to. She gazed at me thoughtfully and lit a candle beside her with a match.

“Hi, Ola,” I said.

“Hi,” she said. “What are you reading?” I panicked for a minute, forgetting the title, like a kid caught daydreaming in class.

“I’m not really reading,” I said. “It’s too hot.”



She suggested a game of Scrabble. She made “leaf.” I made “cold.” She made “sugar.” I made “iota.” I ended up with all vowels, and stopped trying. She made “yellows” and got fifty extra points. She hugged me. I stared at the words on the board and tried to fit them into a story, about a woman flying off through the leaves into the cold, yellow space around the moon.

As the days passed, I thought about Basil so much that I could hardly even see him anymore. I practically lived with them, but felt separate. I drew a lot, and whiled away the long evenings lost in my guilty thoughts, an unread magazine or a blank page on my lap.

It could only be a kidnapping, I mused desperately. I wanted to rent a car, but had no credit card. I thought again of a friend’s offer to lend me his battered Subaru, if I ever wanted to visit an Aunt of mine who lived in the country. That would be fine. Then there was the issue of where we would go, once Basil was stolen. Maybe my story about the country was better than just a story, I finally thought: the country, it sounded like a big place. We would make it up from there.

The dark highway, white lines flashing ahead, under and behind us, like riding a code. Mist over a field of bowed wheat, the occasional house or bridge in the dark. And then nothing for miles, until a broken grey shack up on the right. We would pull over, the car tilting dangerously at the edge of the ditch, and we would walk towards it, blue stars crackling above, the smell of bog, our shoes and socks soaked heavy, then abandoned. Barefoot at the doorless wooden house, on an old rusty cot we would lay down our coats and disintegrate on top of them into the grey and blue shadows, never to be heard from again except by each other.

I heard the skipping of a record, and looked up at Ola, her hair hanging over one cheek as she bent over the player. Her crown had fallen off, and lay on the ground near her feet. Basil was asleep in his orange chair, and the candle beside me had melted into a puddle, a sputtering flame in a shallow pool of hot liquid. I returned to the page, to see what silly things I had written and drawn.

I sketched in a few crinkles of Ola's tin-foil crown. I looked from my page to her bright face, mouth open, as she quietly tried to fake her way along with the Spanish of a song she had put on. It was late, but the breeze was still warm, and it stirred the hem of her dress on its way through the room. She looked up, suddenly self-conscious, as though she had forgotten anyone else was there, and smiled when she saw that it was just me.

## Flight of Days and Horses

Early one December morning I took my team of white horses out to run in the snowy fields behind my estate. I let them go, not being in a particular hurry and knowing that they had been kept in for too long; I was glad to watch them jump and gallop as they set out in the direction of the frozen river and disappeared behind a hill. I raised my wrist to check my watch, but discovered that I had accidentally put on the watch with no hands again. I stood and waited for what felt like quite a long time, peering into the grey sky and pondering the seasons, and soon became absolutely content with existing in the world like a distant figure in a painting; thus, I don't know for exactly how long I stood, but scuffed up quite a bit of snow with my boot and watched many black birds fly by.

Eventually I saw them come thundering back over the hill, looking as mad as a bunch of thieves. When they came to me they snorted and tossed their white manes in the wind. They were altered. One of them had fishes in its hair; one had its tail tied up in red ribbons; one had lipstick on its neck; they all trailed shreds of silver chains from their ankles that dangled behind them as light on the snow crust as a child's paper chains. One of them who approached me for a rub with a particular brown-fever in its eyes had a leather collar around its neck with a scroll tucked inside it. I pulled out the scroll, unfurled it in the increasingly bitter wind, and I read:

*To Whom it May Concern,*

*I write to you to tell you that I have taken your horses without your permission and have run them around the world over near and distant lands for this past year. I would like to confess to you my crime, and to offer you some recompense by telling you the story of our travels, what things we saw, what ways we went.*

*When I saw your horses I couldn't help but be reminded of the sea, and I wanted to take them away with me forever and watch them dip their tiny ankles in the surf as I contemplated the tides. I wanted to take them to Macy's Department Store and watch them overturn racks of leather skirts and shelves of peanut brittle. I wanted to take them to the saloons of the ultimate edges to drink with me beneath the eye of high noon. You see, though you might think me regrettably earnest, I have been wanting to rise into the world in all its glory like a pack of released doves. When I saw your horses, I knew they would set me free.*

*First we galloped into the Haunted Regions of New Jersey, and ate bagels with criminals by day and bagged groceries at the All-Night Fruit Supermarket by night. We then trampled west and ate at family-style restaurants with State Troopers on the outskirts of Indiana. My horses were given oats in Ohio, grass in Kansas, and water and air in Colorado. We ate biscuits and gravy in Oakley, Missouri, a town with one bar and one dog, run by one man named Mittens. We spent our nights at drag races and our days at county fairs. I got a job as a desk clerk dressed as Annie Oakley at the Annie Oakley Motel, and the horses gave rides in the parking lot.*

*When the Oakley townsfolk got tired of our Ontario accents and ran us out of town at the wrong end of their bb guns we headed back east. We entered the Big Apple at dawn, and got a single room in the drunk tank to rest our heads. There, we met a tap-dancing showboy named Jose who let us in on some ultimate questions he had discovered teaching a film course on Bergman at a city college. When we left the tank, we went to a small grocery store and the horses ate onions out of bins. We went to Grand Central Station, and it was as big as the sea inside. I didn't know that there would be a bar there,*

*but there was, so I sat on the balcony and contemplated the tides as I drank my twelve-dollar-martini. The large gold clock in the middle of the floor reminded me somehow of my grandfather. The huge crystal chandelier reminded me not so much of my grandmother as it reminded me of her rhinestone necklaces that my grandfather saved in a sock after she died. I watched the horses gallop around and around the room until they were a white blur of foam.*

*When we stumbled outside, we almost tripped over an old man with a toothpick and dress pants who gave us a small tract called "Musings of a Sentimental Invalid." I spent a few days reading it, back in the tank. It can be summed up by its thesis, which is that life is like a fortune cookie you've saved for years, which when finally opened turns out to be empty – although if you try a bite of the broken cookie itself, it's not actually too bad. Ha, ha! I said. I decided to leave then, and go out and fall in love.*

*I fell in love within seven days with seven maids from seven lands. Each time I fell in love I tied one of your horses outside the maid's window. Eventually, I had only one horse left, and I remembered as it whinnied with loneliness that they were not actually my horses to give away, but yours, dear soul. And so I collected them back up and am returning them to you now with the same symbolism as a bunch of white roses. With a card attached. I don't know you, and you don't know me, but I know your horses, as do you, and these horses know us, and this is a kind of sacrament, my good brother, a sacrament of equestrian communion.*

Well, I thought, rolling the unusual letter back up, isn't that something. I was glad the horses had had a good run; I had kept them in far too long. I called to them, and they followed me back up to the house. They stumbled exhausted into the stable, where falling

sound asleep in the golden hay was the work of an instant for them. I watched them sleep for a minute, with a smile, and turned to go inside.

When I entered the front hallway, I checked the grandfather clock for the time, but discovered that the servants had put up the three dimensional cardboard cutout of a grandfather clock again for their amusement. Ha, ha! I went to the kitchen, hugged my cook George as tightly as I could, and asked him to bring me a bowl of tiramisu and a glass of brandy. Of course, of course, Sir, he said, delighted by my appetite. Of course. I went and sat before a lit candle at the dining room table, contemplating the extraordinary beauty of the raspberry-coloured tablecloth against the dark mahogany of the wood, until George came in with my bowl and cup. George, I said. George, where are we? He laughed, muttered something about daftness, and went to join the other servants in the ballroom, where they were just kicking off their revels. I sat over my drink for hours that night, wondering why each day can't end with tiramisu, with the servants' singing and saxophones echoing from the hills.

## Natural Blond

Hitchcock Girl began the 21<sup>st</sup> century by moving to a new city, into a small apartment with a bed right under the window so that she could hear the rain. This room opened into a small kitchen where tomatoes ripened on a table. Her place was sparsely furnished; the only excess were the phones that hung on the wall in each room.

Hitchcock Girl sat on her blue and white bedspread. She wore only a firm black bra and slip, and as she ran her hand through her short blonde hair, the hairs on her arm stood up. She had already read the paper. She was waiting for a call from Emil, who she had met earlier that week while job-hunting. She had met him by accident.

Since moving to the city, she had circled job ads each morning and left the building no later than nine, a leather folder tucked under her arm. This morning routine also somehow included the plucking, washing, combing, blow-drying, pinning, ironing, buttoning, and dyeing that ensured the perfection of each sidewalk debut. She would click down the street in her beige pumps, onto the bus with a nod, to be carried off to whatever studio or office expected her. Job-hunting left her weary: the young men with thick glasses and patchy facial hair; middle-aged men looking up from solitaire and email to consider the way her skirt looked on her hips; cigarettes smoking in the ashtrays of tired-looking women who would ask, have you always used a persona? and leave her bewildered. She knew well the five-minute sighs from across one desk or another about competitiveness, and all the attractive girls looking for the same jobs, all the doors politely shut.

One afternoon after a few long bus rides Hitchcock Girl felt especially tired, and decided she would stop for lunch at a snack bar with an old ginger-ale sign above its door. Potted plants hung from the ceiling above a row of red vinyl stools at a counter. Hitchcock Girl sat at the back and ate tomato soup and chicken salad, and was watched through a haze of cigarette smoke by a man at the counter. When she pushed her dishes away and began a cup of coffee, he approached.

Hi, he said. Can I say how much I love your look? It's truly, truly vintage. Beyond vintage. You've really got it down. She considered him. He was tall, thin, in dark colours, glasses, a bit of growth on the pale skin of his cheeks. Thank you, she said. I hope you don't think this is weird, he went on. But have you ever done any acting?

Yes, in fact, said Hitchcock Girl with a faint smile. Won't you sit down?

The man sat down and lit a cigarette. I've been looking for someone, if you know what I mean. He exhaled smoke. I mean, I make films. I guess I need to say that. I'm interested in personalities.

I see, said Hitchcock Girl, though she didn't.

No, he said. No, I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound like that. It's so difficult now, to explain yourself. To talk at all. They say postmodernism is dead, but all there is to do is stand around at its funeral trying to think of something to say. I can hardly open my mouth. I'm trying to break out of all this anxiety, to just do my art. Do you know what I mean? He stubbed out his cigarette, and tossed an empty pack on the table.

Hitchcock Girl nodded. She didn't know what he meant, but she hadn't worked since Alfred stopped calling.



I came over because I saw you and thought you looked like you were *doing* something. Like the way you dress. The way you sit and move. Even your hands are different. And your hair – it's *perfect*. It's rare to see anyone brave enough to really *do* something these days.

Thank you, said Hitchcock Girl. Would you like a cigarette? She pulled out a silver case, and he took one. She took one between her fingers and waited. After a minute, he grabbed his lighter and stretched a hand across the table to light hers. Two of her fingers touched his wrist. She had not worked in a long time, but she hadn't forgotten how things were done.

Out in the street about a half hour later, Emil said he would call her. When the bus came and she boarded, he watched how the doors folded her inside, and how for a minute as the bus moved forward and she walked to the back she stayed in the same spot in space.

That had been Tuesday and it was Wednesday evening now, as she sat in her underwear on her bed, watching the streetlight glaze the window. She felt that there was something she needed to do, but couldn't think of what, and was rooted where she sat, a vague, gentle amusement drifting in her head like cream in coffee before it's stirred. As she sat, she absentmindedly reached under her slip and began to roll her pantyhose down her thighs.

When the phone rang through the dim apartment, her body shook slightly and straightened, her eyes skittering through the shadows. She rose and shuffled to the kitchen, pantyhose around her knees. She could have answered in her room, but it would

have been too soon; she waited a ring and a half and plucked the phone off the wall.

Hello? Her greeting was poised.

Hello, yes ma'am, good evening. This is Elroy from Bishop's Real Estate here in the city. I'm calling to inquire if you and the man of the house might be interested in selling your property any time in the near future?

I'm afraid I rent my apartment.

Oh, well. Thank you, dear. Good night.

Hitchcock Girl replaced the phone with one hand while reaching down with the other to finish peeling off her pantyhose. She went back to her room and sat back down on the edge of the bed. If she stayed perfectly still, she could feel the gentle vibrations of the wall clock under the mattress, where she put it at night so the ticking wouldn't keep her awake. She wondered what she should do. She stayed as still as she could and felt the beats beneath her, but no matter how she strained she couldn't hear even a muffled tick. It had just started to get dark and she hadn't turned the lights on yet. She stared at a dim corner of the floor and reached one hand up underneath her slip, pushing aside fabric, and let her fingers rest. She watched the slightly dusty floorboards in the corner and magnified the dirt between the slats. A tiny green shoot appeared in this dirt and uncurled. It was now almost dark in her room, but she could see the tiny speck flicker like a flame, bright at first, growing rich and dark as it rose and clung to the wall and spread out veiny leaves as thick as leather that climbed, turned the corner to the ceiling, one tendril curling delicately around the cold lightbulb.

When the phone rang again, she rose and went to the kitchen. It was Emil. He wanted to know if she could meet him in the subway at two that night if it wasn't too late

or too short-notice. By the way, he said, the film I'm doing is called "My Life Had Stood."

Through some connection, Emil had special permission to film in the subway system after the subway stopped running at night. He explained to Hitchcock Girl that he wanted visual emptiness, but still wanted the sounds of the rumbling trains and footsteps in the background, so he was going to record the soundtrack during the day. So she would have no spoken lines with her lips actually moving, but she would record a monologue that would weave in and out of the background noise of the subway, as the camera followed her from behind through the deserted station.

But for now she would simply walk, and occasionally look over her shoulder to gaze down the tunnel. She accepted this professionally, and walk she did, listening to the echo of her clicking heels bounce off the tiles. He wanted her just as she had appeared to him the first day at the snack bar, with her tailored fall coat, brown patent leather handbag, her perfect hair swept up above one temple to reveal the pale skin of her scalp.

You're wonderful, he said again and again. She turned over her shoulder to look down the tunnel, and it was reflected in her eyes, running deep into the dark of her pupils. One furrow of her brow suggested without revealing what lay at the tunnel's end. Her lips opened just barely. And her hair was perfect.

After several nights of being filmed by Emil in the middle of the night, Hitchcock Girl began to feel a kind of sympathy for the woman she was playing, as little as she knew what to make of this woman's life or however it may have stood. All she knew about this woman was that she was waiting and watching for something. Hitchcock Girl

was also waiting; professionally, but with growing concern, she waited for Emil to mention recording the monologue again. She sometimes wondered if he had even written it yet. She had never asked to read it, but as his roll of film grew thicker, she sensed that he hoped she would continue not to ask.

Emil and Hitchcock Girl began to have a late dinner together before their nightly descent underground, at a small dark Italian restaurant across from the station. Hitchcock Girl liked these dinners more than she liked the filming itself; the way the candles glowed, each table floating in the dark like a private island. She liked sitting across from him, punctuating his thoughts on art with nods, without really listening. She learned to synchronize her inner dialogue with his talk in a delicate and intuitive way, so that she could smile at her own private jokes at the right places in his stories, so that it looked like she was laughing at his.

She thought a lot about Alfred, and what had happened between them on the set of their last film together. But even more, she thought of the happy times: of Cary, Jimmy, the kind make-up and hair people; the smell of orchids and the fainter smell of cologne that lingered in her dressing room. Emil would eat and talk, and pour them more wine; she would show appreciation and thoughtfulness. As they sat, the feeling that had been nagging her – that there was *something she needed to do* – would diffuse above their table like smoke.

One evening as they sat finishing their dinner with cups of coffee, Emil told Hitchcock Girl that he was very happy with the way "My Life Had Stood" was turning out, and that the film would be pretty much a wrap after that night of work.

I just want to thank you, he said. For everything. He reached his hand across to hers and squeezed her fingers. His blue eyes met hers from behind the glint on his glasses. I don't know what this film would be without you. If it would be at all. I can't believe it's just about done, when such a short time ago I thought I would never write another word.

Hitchcock Girl's fingers slid from under his to her cup. She lifted it to her lips, and pressed it there.

What? Emil said. What's wrong? He folded his hands on the table and leaned in towards her. She felt his warm breath in her nostrils as she breathed in deeply. The smell of orchids, of cologne, the sound of tinkling champagne glasses mingling with stars' graceful laughter evaporated from her mind, and she was filled again with that nameless imperative. The need to do the thing she was so good at. What was it?

I thought I told you about the writing. I told you. Just the other night. You were listening, right? I told you.

I'm not sure what you mean, said Hitchcock Girl.

The monologue. I recorded it already. I told you. I got an old friend to do it. Remember? You know I really wanted your voice but this friend of mine hasn't worked in a long time and she needed a job. She's worked for me before, even when I couldn't pay her. I had to help her out.

Oh, said Hitchcock Girl.

But you're my star, he said with a warm chuckle. A pause hung between them. Listen, I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you.

Yes, said Hitchcock Girl. It's all right. She wasn't angry; she was distracted. She was about to understand something. Can you excuse me for a minute?

Emil watched Hitchcock Girl glide past bus boys and waiters and couples eating spaghetti and disappear into the bathroom at the back. She locked the door. The bathroom was a small, dim, red room. Burning on a shelf was a clear candle with leaves and spices suspended in it. The flame released a sweet, musky smell that reminded Hitchcock Girl of her trip to Malaysia with Alfred one summer, where it was so hot that her white linen blouse would be transparent with sweat each day by noon, where she would lie in her dark hotel room until dinnertime wrapped in a wet towel. She sat on the toilet seat, her head down and eyes closed, and unzipped the top of her dress. She heard the rushing sound of water, the echo of dripping below her. She looked across the concrete floor and saw a drain. She went slowly down on her knees and listened; the sound of the sea churned in her ear. She pulled the grate up, and lay on the floor with her head beside the hole; the rushing sound grew louder. A warm breeze ruffled through her hair. She put her fingers on the damp edge of the drain, pulled, and felt it widen until it was big enough for her to swing her legs around and down into it. She sat with her legs hanging down, as she had on a window ledge for one of Alfred's films. She closed her eyes and jumped.

Hitchcock Girl's heels made a sharp clack as they hit the tiles. She opened her eyes, and saw that she was in the subway station, that she was gazing down the length of an empty tunnel.

A hand rested on her shoulder, and she spun around on the axis of a single heel. Emil stood behind her, camera tucked under his arm, a smile on his lips. He held out her raincoat to her. Ready? he asked.

Yes, said Hitchcock Girl. I'm ready to film. She looked at his face, his smile, his camera, and cared for him. She knew what she was good at, and nothing else mattered to her.

Great! Remember, this is the last night, and then we can both take it easy. I think these late nights have more than earned us a break.

I'm ready, she said, and smiled, tying the belt of her raincoat tight around her waist.

Emil put the camera to his eye. Okay, this is the final moment. Tonight, I want you to start from far away, and walk towards me. It will be the first time we've seen you from the front. Remember, in this part of the film, the monologue is reaching a climax. The energy of the words has risen to a pitch, like a fever, like delirium; we don't know what's real and what isn't; this is what the words convey. But at the same time, what we will get visually is you walking towards us very slowly, very calmly, with only a bit of a smile on your face. That strange smile of yours. The one I knew I wanted the first time I saw you. And that will be the end. Okay?

Hitchcock Girl smiled, and walked down to the end of the station. Emil began to record and she walked towards him in even paces, hands still at her sides. She

remembered. She remembered why Alfred had loved her, and why, and realized what she needed to do. A smile appeared on her face, transforming it, as though she had just broken through a sheet of gauze that had subtly obscured her.

Perfect! called Emil. His voice echoed off the tiles, below the steady tap of her heels. Okay, okay, he said, trying to contain himself for the final moment. Okay.

Hitchcock Girl stopped a foot from the camera. She stopped smiling. Emil stopped laughing and talking. What? he said. What's wrong? But he kept filming, as though terrified of losing her slightest expression. As he watched her through the eye of the camera, in black and white, Hitchcock Girl's face crumpled, her eyes widened and filled with the essence of some unseen horror. She raised her hands to the sides of her head, and clutched clumps of her hair, and released a scream so piercing and terrible that it burst through the station like light and heat, sending Emil reeling backwards. Hitchcock Girl composed herself. She smiled. My scream, she thought to herself as she offered Emil her hand. My scream is perfect.



## Catherine Irwin-Gibson

I carried my list of phone numbers in my purse for over a year before I noticed *Catherine Irwin-Gibson's* name. Granted, it wasn't hard to miss, considering the list was written on a small page softened by a history of folds, in writing of almost record-breaking minuteness. There was no real reason to look the at top of the list anyway, since it listed only those people I had met in my first few months in the city. These people had quickly fallen into two categories. Those in the first group became my intimates, whose life-stories and numbers were ingrained in my memory. Those in the second category remained mere acquaintances, who faded from my consciousness almost altogether except for the occasional "hi" in a hall or on a bus, and who I would never think to call. Unless, hypothetically, there was some kind of strange emergency.

The faded names in this latter group were like ideas jotted on little slips, hopelessly lost in the infinitude of lists, novels, articles, forms, letters, bills – the papers that bury kitchen tables, desks, nightstands, and, finally, us – and I think of them with vague regret. But at least I do this much, at least I feel something. And at least their names recall faces familiar, if mysterious. I could not say the same for the name of *Catherine Irwin-Gibson*.

I moved here two years ago, when I accepted a standing offer of a job from an Uncle who worked at the University library. The anonymity both of the job, an evening shelving position, and of the city, with its many streets and languages, appealed to me. Hoping somehow to find self-forgetfulness in this anonymity, I saw the move as an antidote to a heartbreak that I had tried to leave back home. Ralph and I had shared true love, but I tried not to think about it much, and still don't.

The books at the University library were very dusty, and a whole lifetime of attention to them wouldn't be a waste. The students worked so late, bent over their books, burrowed into themselves like owls, and I came almost to love them without the exchange of more than a few words. Soon some of them became friends; one in particular, a guy named Rodrigo, an attentive listener and a loud laughter, became a coffee-break confidant. He invited me to his place for a get-together, where I met more people over olives and pita-bread, cigarettes and wine. A co-worker, Denise, and I also became close, and I grew to know her boyfriend and friends first through her late-night stories, then in person, then as my own friends. I was shocked, as Rodrigo or Denise let me in on the latest developments in these lives over drinks, at how quickly the concern or surprise I expressed became sincere.

I would usually go out with friends I finished work at the library, at eleven – my first few months in the city felt like a too-bright movie: speedy midnight cab-rides, snowflakes swirling against traffic lights, girls filling bright kitchens at parties. I was always laughing and for some reason a bit scared.

One evening at this time I was out at a reading, or performance, or something in between, the kind of thing that goes over well in pretty insular communities, when a guy named Oscar who I recognized from the library started talking to me. We became friends. We went to the botanical gardens; we walked downtown among the ladies in suits; we had dinner with my Uncle and his girlfriend; we gradually fell into what was kind of like love, but without a lot of pain. He called me Helly instead of Helen and I didn't even

mind. We moved in together towards the end of the year, mostly to facilitate the sheer amount of time we spent together. I was still in love with Ralph, and fantasized about reuniting with him some day. But Oscar and I ate good meals together, read a lot, and were fairly happy, especially on winter mornings with our arms around each other, when it seemed to matter less that we were practically strangers.

After Oscar and I had lived together for about five months, I started to feel lonely. Most of my friends were in school, settled into relationships and routines, and I didn't see them much. Oscar and I both worked, and our schedules were such that sometimes we would hardly see each other for a few days running. One morning, sitting at the kitchen table, trying to interest myself in either the story I was trying to write or the Chopin record I had put on, I became aware of an intense loneliness. I felt like I hadn't talked to anyone in weeks, or even months. I yearned to call someone, and meet them, and talk to them the way you can when you feel you've known and loved a person a long time, whether you have or not. Like a craving for a drink, or food, it was higher on the chart of needs than a mere feeling.

I found my purse after the usual search, and pulled out my phone list. I ran my eyes over the numbers of my most familiar friends, friends I could call any time. I realized that for one reason or another, at that moment, I couldn't really call any of them.

I went to the very top. Ralph, it said on the first line, beside his out-dated home number. Ralph, it said on the second line, beside his parents' number. Ralph, it said on the third line, with his new number, which I had never called, except once when I was drunk and Oscar was sleeping. (I had hung up when he answered, and he probably knew it was me.) Below that came my Uncle's number at home and at his girlfriend's; Rodrigo,

Denise; Becky, Marissa, Tony, Bob... friends I had met through my two main friends, or through their friends, most of whom had never become close to me, even if they had seemed to briefly. Then, about twelve or so numbers down, was her name: *Catherine Irwin-Gibson*.

Who on earth is *Catherine Irwin-Gibson*? I thought. The name didn't ring the faintest bell. I considered the names below hers, and remembered a party I had gone to the previous fall, when I still didn't really know anyone. The party had been in a yellow apartment with a rug patterned like a Scrabble board. The people I had arrived with got drunk and went somewhere else without telling me, as though things were different between us depending on how inhibited they were. Which was okay with me. I don't mind being at parties alone: standing by the sink, having internal dialogues, admiring people's charms, as long as I have some kind of cover, like seeming-enthralment by a nearby conversation, or the fridge magnets; drinking rye on ice, like I had that night, in the hopes of opening up, and then becoming very open. A tall woman in glasses had talked to me, I recalled. She was a little older than most of the people there, and I think she said she did something, like pottery or jewelry-making, which I suddenly felt I wanted to know a lot about, and even to see with my own eyes. She was easy to talk to, and I think she asked for my phone number. I'm not sure whether she thought it was a romantic thing, or whether I did. Was that *Catherine Irwin-Gibson*? No, I remembered, that woman had been Polish; she mentioned growing up on a farm outside of Warsaw, its resident rooster and unusually large barn cats. Her name had been Agnes.

I continued to skim through my memory. *Catherine Irwin-Gibson*: the name had such authority, each syllable-pair ending with almost the same sound, "in, in, in," as

though for emphasis. And the formal specificity of the double last name! A hint that it was not to be forgotten. So how had I forgotten her?

I recalled a girl I had met at one of Rodrigo's dinners; I remembered her name as Caroline, but I could easily have been mistaken. She had been involved with one of Rodrigo's friends, and when they stopped seeing each other she had disappeared from the group, her name no longer even mentioned. I had talked with her about the volunteer work she did at a soup kitchen, her political views. I had liked her. That woman, who might have become a friend, must have been *Catherine Irwin-Gibson*.

Later that day, I met Rodrigo for coffee. I had talked him into it, and I could tell he was under a lot of pressure. He was writing a thesis on the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, and practically smelled like the heather that he said infused the novels' landscapes. He explained the romantic subplot of the book he was rereading for the third time, and I enjoyed his hand gestures as well as the free story. Wow, I said, when he had finished. So complicated. That puts things into perspective for me. I know, he said. These novels make your own life seem smaller, or at least further away.

By the way, I asked, after a pause. Have you heard what *Catherine Irwin-Gibson's* up to these days? Is she still in the city?

Who? Rodrigo asked.

*Catherine Irwin-Gibson*, I said. That girl Armand was seeing for a while. I think she was kind of an activist. Short brown hair.

Oh, you mean Caroline. She moved back home. I heard she had a bit of a breakdown, actually. Armand still feels guilty, but he needs to understand it's not his fault.

Her name was Caroline? I asked.

That's right, he said.

Then who's *Catherine Irwin-Gibson*? I thought you would know her.

No, I've never heard the name, Rodrigo said. Who is she?

I don't know, I said. She's on my phone list and I can't remember who she is.

Maybe you made her up, he said with a smile.

Why would I do that?

Well, he said, you do act pretty weird sometimes, Helen, let's face it.

He meant it as nothing more than an affectionate joke, but the whole conversation put me on edge. On the way home on the bus, I found myself wondering if the other passengers thought I was crazy. I was conscious of how rumpled my coat was. I tried to sit up straight, and studied the ads for cellular phones.

That evening, Oscar and I made dinner together. I noticed his hair was getting long. He was in a good mood and sang as he heated oil in a pan. We hugged in the middle of the kitchen floor. I love you, Helly, he said. I love you too, Ralph, I said. Oscar looked at me expressionlessly.

Oh my God, I said. *Oscar*, I mean. Oscar, I'm so sorry.

Really, it's okay, he said, getting hold of himself like a fumbled glass just before it falls. He smiled and held me by the shoulders.

I've done that before, he said, turning back to the onions on the counter. It just happens. A name's a name. Let's just forget about it.

Later, after Oscar was sleeping, I stood at the payphone at the corner. I unfolded my little list of contacts and dialed the number beside the name *Catherine Irwin-Gibson*. It rang four times, and I was just starting to panic at the prospect of maybe leaving a message, unprepared, when she answered. Her voice was slightly hoarse. Had I woken her up?

Hello? she repeated.

Hi, Catherine? I said, not sure what tone to take.

Yes, she said. Who is this?

Um, well, I work at the library...

What?

It's Helen...you met me last fall?

There was a silence, a long one, and I wondered if eventually one of us would just hang up.

Helen, she said finally. How are you?

She sounded as if she knew me, though her tone was cool.

Fine, I said. Not bad. How are you?

Not bad, she said. Is everything okay?

Yes, I said. Everything's fine. Why?

Well, why call? I mean, why now?

I paused, trying to decide what to do, whether to tell her frankly that I couldn't understand or answer her question. But I had called late, maybe woken her up. How could I tell her that I didn't know who she was? I didn't want to confuse or upset her; and

I was worried now that maybe I already had upset her in some way I couldn't remember, in the past. I didn't know what to say.

Well, I said, I was just wondering if you wanted to meet.

Now? I noticed how tired her voice sounded.

Well, I mean, maybe not. It's okay, actually....

No. She said it with surprising finality. I think it would be a good idea. Are you ready now?

At her suggestion, we agreed to meet at a nearby bar in twenty minutes.

I couldn't recall having seen her before in my life, but there was only one woman in the bar, so I sat down across from her at her table. She had straight blond hair that rested on her shoulders, and looked a lot less tired than she had sounded. Her eyes were bright and green. She was very pretty, though not in the way I would have imagined. But I was happy to look at her, and maybe gazed into her eyes a little too intently, as though I might find reflected in them the scene of our first acquaintance. I asked how she was, to create a kind of refrain with our phone conversation. She said she was great, and lit a cigarette. Her voice sounded different, still hoarse, but more animated. She asked me how I was doing, and if I was having a good night. Yes, I said. I am.

Erica! A man's voice came from very close behind me.

The blond girl's eyes sparkled in the direction of the voice, and she tilted her head coyly. Jim! She said. Beautiful Jim!

Jim leaned down and kissed her. Who's your friend? He asked, turning to look at me, losing his balance a little.



I'm Helen, I said, offering my hand. I didn't know what else to do.

How do you gals know each other? Jim asked, pulling up a chair beside the girl, smiling, and looking at me closely.

We were just starting to make friends, said the girl, giving Jim the coy look again.

I'm sorry, I said. I thought you were a friend of mine. I was supposed to meet her here.

And you don't know what she looks like? The girl laughed.

Wait, let me guess, said Jim. This is some kind of sexy Internet thing.

They laughed together, and I stood up.

No, not really, I said, collecting my coat. Well, sorry about this. I hope you have a good night.

But the night's just starting! Have a drink with us and we can all see what your friend looks like.

Well, I said. Really, I don't think I can. I don't think she's coming. Bye.

I turned and walked out of the bar without looking back, so quickly that I almost ran into a girl just outside the door. She wore a black coat, and looked very serious. She had short, wavy dark-blond hair and brown eyes. Her face awoke a vague recognition.

Hi, Helen, she said. Of course it had to be her. Hi, Catherine, I said.

She looked at me for a minute, and then hugged me. My arms relaxed on her, and I watched snowflakes land on her shoulders. When we pulled away, I asked her if we could go to the bar upstairs instead of the one I had just left. Upstairs, we sat in a booth and ordered bottles of beer. She folded her hands on the table and looked at me.

So...are you doing a bit better these days? She asked.

I'm doing fine, I think, I said. I'm still at the library. I'm living with Oscar.

Not Ralph? she asked, an eyebrow lifted.

Do you know Ralph?

No, but you mentioned him.

When? I asked.

That night, she said. Don't you remember? She smiled. Well, if you don't remember me, do you at least remember the cat?

I just looked at her.

You found that cat under the truck on the way home, she said. Poor dirty white thing with oil all down its back. You tried to get it away from the street and it scratched your arm.

We both looked at my arm.

On our way home?

To my place, she said. My, you really don't remember anything, do you? I don't even think you remember where we met.

No, I said. I think I do now. That little place, downtown, with all those pictures on the wall, the dark one.

I did remember. I had ended up there one night a bit before closing time, when my party had dwindled to one – just me, that is. I remembered seeing her sitting at the bar, asking if I could sit with her. The library job had come up, and I had talked to her for probably too long about the brilliance of various books, authors and songs I couldn't quite recall the names of, and then other things, which now floated in a kind of dark, oily

liquid in some impenetrable mental furrow. That was all until the grey wake-up in my bed the next day: the thankfulness and surprise that I had made it home.

Do you remember what you told me that night? She asked.

I'm sorry..., I said.

Well...you told me something pretty unusual.

What?

She gazed at me intently, as though trying to figure something out. Well, she said, you said you loved me. You said that you felt we had known each other for years. You mentioned love at first sight, but then said you felt like you loved me from before the first sight. You eventually asked me if we could live together and...oh, all kinds of things. You were really drunk, and I told you so, but you insisted that you meant it, that it wasn't because you were drunk, but that being drunk made you able to speak honestly about how you felt. You asked if you could come to my place, and I wasn't sure what to do, but I didn't want you to go home. And besides, I liked you. I know it might be pathetic, but I liked the things you said to me, and I kind of wanted them to be true. Either way, you were in no condition to go home alone. So, we walked towards my place; you held my hand, and kept stopping to hug me.

But then we saw that cat, and as soon as you got scratched, you seemed to change. You seemed to get sad, and all of a sudden said you had to go home, that you needed to go home right away to see Ralph. I was still asking if you were okay, and who Ralph was, when you hailed a cab and we got in. When we arrived at your little place, I was confused. You lived alone. I had expected Ralph to be there. I asked who Ralph was, and

you laughed and said, "you are." It was a bit scary, to tell you the truth. I couldn't tell if you were laughing. Then you kissed me. You said you'd always loved me.

I pretty much lost you then; you lay down and fell asleep. I had to leave in the morning, but I'd given you my number, and to be honest, I thought you'd at least call. You hurt me, Helen, drunk or not. In any case, I just hope you don't do that kind of thing all the time.

No, I said. I'm so sorry. There wasn't that much else I could say. Thanks for letting me know. I didn't remember any of that...it's like I was a different person.

Oh, she said.

Not that it's an excuse, and not that I wouldn't have liked you anyway. I mean, I do like you, you seem very nice. Meeting me like this, and not hating me...that is, if you don't.

Of course I don't hate you, she said. But I think you need to work a few things out.

I know, I said. I'm trying.

But I wasn't really trying, I knew it even as I said it. I was floundering, passing through different identities and people, submerging myself unanchored in different ideas of love. I wanted to disappear completely, looking soberly at *Catherine Irwin-Gibson's* sober face, asking her with my eyes what I should do next but without the nerve to ask her for anything in words.

### The Mysteries of Jupiter

What is it about the subway, about going underground, that both scares and attracts the twenty-five year-old soul? Some days I walk, even in the cold or rain, when I'm in certain susceptible moods. No matter how I focus on the tiles, or on reading the paper over someone's shoulder, it's hard not to imagine the chasms filling with water, to see Charon's boat coming down the dark tunnel. Or at least to imagine that the people one sees underground appear by design, orbiting like the bodies in a model solar system, casting fates and predictions in their synchrony.

Overall, the underground world is a potentially stunting distraction for the impressionable mind. But as an experience, it's cheaper than a membership at the Planetarium, and much more surprising, so I loyally buy my monthly pass. I never regret the cost, though it sometimes means striking a food group or two from my diet: what I lose nutritionally I gain in experience that can only be called cosmic.

Yesterday, for instance, I met a man in the subway system who claimed to be Lord Byron. I should mention that I was skeptical – his nose wasn't quite right. First of all, it appeared to be made of papier-mâché and affixed with some kind of putty. I decided I wouldn't challenge him, but if he brought it up I would ask if the nose was for sale. If so, I would offer him a generous price, within reason; although it was clearly a facsimile it was a very good one, and I fancied it would make a fine addition to my collection of Byronia.

He never did bring up his nose, or the white powder that paled his face to an aristocratic translucence, or his curly dark wig, but nonetheless, this subterranean Byron and I talked all morning.

I got on the subway at nine, on my way to a Planetarium show called "The Mysteries of Jupiter," but it was a frigid, steely day above ground and I easily forgot my plan. I first encountered this Byron as I stood waiting, just as my train rushed into the station, when a voice behind me whispered: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd."

Pound, I thought, Pound, at nine in the morning. I will pretend not to get the reference. I will not complete the image, I refuse. I turned around, and saw the nose first, then the fetching dark eyes glittering with humour, or perhaps lunacy, took in the white powdered face. "Petals on a wet, black bough," I said, with a slight stutter at the word "black." We boarded the train and sat side by side.

"I am Lord Byron," he said.

"Hello," I said.

"I will show you some photographs, if you'd like." He produced from the pocket of his black velvet pants two crumpled bits of paper that looked like they might be receipts. He handed me one. "This one is of Lady Caroline Lamb and I entwined in a naked embrace in her parlour, just before her father walked in and demanded I leave the property and all of their lives."

I looked at the receipt. "Mavis's Theatrical Supplies," it said. "Nose putty, \$3.99. Face powder, \$4.49."

"This is a photograph of us dancing," he said, handing me the second receipt. "It was taken several minutes before the other one. The causal relationship between dancing and physical passion is nicely illustrated by these two snapshots, I think."

This receipt was from the Planetarium. "One adult," it said. "\$10.00. Explore the mysteries of Jupiter."

“Oh, do you go to the Planetarium?” I asked.

“Ah,” he said, smiling. “I see you have been following me. I thought it was the other way around. Symmetry may be grafted onto life through art, but the illusion is almost impenetrable, don’t you think? For example, I’m sure that you too have a photograph in your pocket that you’d like to show me.”

“Ummm....” I said, feeling in my pocket.

“Come, now,” Byron said.

I pulled out a card that my grandfather had sent me that Christmas. It was a 1960’s Easter card with pastel, semi-psychedelic flowers on it that he must have found in some drawer. Inside, in his slanted, spidery handwriting, he had written two lines:

Winter falls in the snowlands.

Always on the phone – we have so much to say.

It wasn’t signed. Since I had first read those words they had been expanding inside me like an underwater explosion. I paused for a moment, trying to decide whether or not I wanted to show them to another person, and then passed the card to Byron, who sat beside me adjusting his nose and humming slightly. He read the card, and was silent.

“Is this for sale?” he finally asked.

“Of course it isn’t for sale,” I said, trying to be indignant but not quite able to be sincerely so. “Of course not.”

“Very well,” he said.

The train slowed to a stop, and he got up. I hesitated for a second and then dashed out the door behind him. He crossed the station and stood at the opposite platform, staring at the tiles. I stared at him for a moment, and then stared at the tiles too.

Unmarked orange coins, I thought. A half-hearted metaphor. A middle-aged couple clutching grocery bags walked past us. Through the plastic I could see packages of pasta, an umbrella, a box of Kleenex, and other signs of a shared life. The man held a cell phone to his ear, and the woman gazed past us. I followed her gaze and saw a group of Catholic school girls in knee socks and unusually short skirts, their thin thighs identical in beige nylons.

“Urban alienation does nothing for me,” Byron said suddenly.

“The experience?” I asked. “Or the topic of conversation?”

“What makes you think I was going to bring it up?” he asked with a half-smile.

“Nothing, except that you just did, and I wasn’t expecting it.”

“You weren’t expecting it?” he said. “Is that to say it’s not on your mind?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t know.”

“It’s difficult,” he said. “I know. Twenty-five is such a strange age. You see Death wherever you go, though you’re in your prime. You smell blood when you bring in the mail, and see wolf-rings around each of your far-flung experimental souls.”

“Wolf-rings?” I asked.

“Rings of wolves,” he said.

“Experimental souls?”

“Exactly!”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Are you sure that isn’t more you than me? I mostly just go to the Planetarium.”

“Ah, the mysteries of Jupiter....” he mused.



“Do you mean the mysteries themselves, or the show ‘The Mysteries of Jupiter?’”

I asked.

“The mysteries themselves,” he said.

“What are they?” I asked.

“They’re really too mysterious to name,” he said. “At least here in the station.”

Our conversation was snuffed out by the warm, compressed breeze of the arriving train. We boarded, and I saw that it was filled with twenty-five year-olds staring at their reflections in the windows, in lieu of scenery.

“‘And all I loved, I loved alone,’” Byron said.

“Poe,” I said, before I could command myself not to. I was getting a bit tired.

Why must I participate in such references? I thought. It always wrecks my mood.

“Bless you,” he said.

“There were a few minutes of silence, and I listened to the twenty-five year-olds cough and reconsidered asking him if the nose was for sale, now that he had asked to buy the words of my ninety-five year-old grandfather. And not only did I still want to own the nose, but I had begun to be very curious about what was underneath it.

“Are you a Romantic?” I asked. “I mean Romantic, not just romantic? Are you really a poet?”

“Yes, I do seem to be. But appearances underground are often deceptive. I may not even be real. I may be a symptom of your twenty-five year-old subjectivity.”

“I should have gone to ‘The Mysteries of Jupiter,’” I said.

“In that case, here, have this—” he said, and for a minute I thought he might reach for the papier-mâché nose. Instead, he reached into his pocket and brought out the Planetarium receipt.

“Isn’t this a photograph of you and Lady Caroline Lamb dancing? Taken just before your naked embrace, and her father’s entrance and request that you leave his property and all of their lives?”

“No,” he said. “It’s a ticket to ‘The Mysteries of Jupiter’ at the Planetarium. I was going to go, but decided I wanted them to stay mysteries. So here, have this, as a token of my regret.”

“Regret about what?”

“That I have detained you so brazenly from the business of your afternoon, madam,” he replied, with a slight bow of his head. The upper corner of the nose came dangerously detached. He closed his eyes.

“Byron?” I asked. He didn’t respond.

“Byron?” I asked again. “It’s okay, please don’t worry! And thanks for the ticket. I actually don’t need to be anywhere. I was only going to the Planetarium to distract myself anyway. Please believe me.”

Byron’s head sank lower, and I leaned down to check his face, in case he was sick. I saw that he was smiling, not ironically, or with humour as before, but sadly. The nose dangled by a fragile bit of putty. I gently took it in my hand, and pulled it away from the powdered face. Underneath was nothing – except a pink nose, of bone and cartilage and blood and skin.

“Can I have this?” I asked him, in a whisper.

“My dear,” he said. “Consider it yours.”

When our train stopped at the next station, I waited a minute to see if he would get off. I sensed from the formality of his last words and his still-bowed head that we were meant to part here. I patted him awkwardly on the shoulder and debarked, joining my heavy-footed peers in their trudge up towards light.

When I arrived, the Planetarium was filled with children: children waiting restlessly in line, children curving their bodies into the shapes of letters, children standing on the plush seats, calling out words, or hanging upside-down, staring at the cosmos. I sat at the back, feeling somewhat nefarious in my dark raincoat and nervous eyebrows, clutching Byron’s nose until it was soft with sweat. The lights went down, and a voice spoke from somewhere above and behind me.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls! Welcome...to the Mysteries of Jupiter!”

The children screamed as the lights went out, and oohed as planets flamed into view on high. We were floating in space, upside-down, and I found myself saying the names of moons as they blazed one by one into being, along with the kids; words I didn’t know I knew, like “Io.” “We have so much to say,” I thought, and leaned my head far back so that I couldn’t see the room, only the sky.