Quotidian

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ABSTRACT

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This novel explores the experiences of a Canadian immigrant woman and her daughter as they attempt to understand each other and their respective identities. The novel addresses issues of language (translation, misunderstanding, acquisition), displacement, memory and trauma. In grappling with these four issues (among others) the novel reflects the fragmented and chaotic journeys of both women through a non-linear narrative that traverses time, space, and recollection.

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DEDICATION

To Peter and Kaliopi

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Prologue

Anya

Montreal

September 2002

Underneath the covers, sweating, and all I can think about is that mirror, that thin swath of mirror that lined the room. A panel, you could say, or a border. A dark yellow pattern fracturing the glass. This was done, I think, on purpose. Meant to be decorative, not functional.

I noticed the mirror before I noticed him. I noticed the way it reflected the room and the patrons, and myself. All of it, all of us mottled with yellow, faces distorted, heads enlarged. The mirror lined the room at a height where I could see my own face. Most people, they would only see their chests or, in some cases, their bellies. Me, I'm tall. Taller than average. I've read that the average woman is 5 feet, four inches and weighs 145 pounds.

He was sitting at a table. I recognized him because of his picture and because of the nervous way his hands wrapped around the cover of the book he was reading. I didn't know that he had nervous hands, didn't really know anything about him at all. They were almost vibrating, his hands. I could see this from a distance of five feet, before he looked up. When he did look up, his face pale except for the unhealthy flush of his cheeks, I wanted to leave. This was to be expected. But I didn't leave. I said hello, and we shook hands. Awkwardly. And then I sat and I realized that I was flushed as well. Not because I was nervous, but because I had walked to the cafe at a brisk pace. I was late, naturally.

Currently, it is 1:32 in the afternoon. Not much of a morning person, me. And it's

actually 1:12, now 1:13, because the clock is twenty minutes fast. On purpose.

I was there in that cafe because that is what normal people do. They date. Normal people meet strangers in cafes and have coffee and then go on other dates and eventually get married and have babies and live out their lives in pink suburbs and drive vans. The dating site I met this guy on, it didn't say the last bit. But that's what happens. I've seen it. I know people who have done just that.

We shook hands. I shouldn't have shaken his hand because he wanted to do the double kiss thing on the cheeks that always makes me rather nervous. Are you supposed to actually kiss the person? And if you're not, are you supposed to make a kissing sound? And if you're not supposed to do any of these things, what's the point in pretending to kiss someone, twice, anyway? So I grabbed for his hand while he leaned in and my arm brushed against his stomach which I definitely did not want to happen, at least not right away. You are not supposed to touch the person you are out on a date with unless you like that person, that's another thing I know. That other normal people know. And I didn't know if I liked this guy or not.

Jared, that's his name. Jared is about five foot ten and weighs no more than 145 pounds. Average on one account, not average on the other. Downright skinny, actually. Bird bones in his wrists that strained against his skin every time he moved his hands. When he flipped through the menu, for instance, when he brought his hand to his chin and scratched it absentmindedly, when he rubbed the inside of his ear with his index finger, those bones twisted and jerked against the bright blue veins in his wrist.

It is a goal of mine, one of many, to attempt normalcy. Normal comes naturally to many people, I've noticed, but not to me.

Pale light falls across my bed in dancing patterns: diamonds, stripes, and squares. The drapes on my window swing this way and that depending on the wind. Quite windy out, actually. My windows are open. They're always open at least a crack because of the smoking, my smoking. Most people don't smoke these days.

Underneath this duvet, I sweat, but not because of the temperature. Sometimes if I oversleep, my skin becomes uncomfortably clammy and wet. I am naked, too. It might be the alcohol I drank last night, the reason that I'm sweaty. My tongue is coated with the taste of stale beer and my stomach stirs with acid. Shots, besides the beer. Tequila. And jaggermeister, which I hate but which was free. And something else. Sambuca or ouzo. Something disgusting.

If I were to place my hands in front of my face, I am sure they would shake. Just like Jared's did.

Jared ordered a mocha that arrived topped with foam sprinkled with chocolate shavings. He dipped his spoon into the foam and wiped it clean with his lips. They shone with saliva and airy milk.

I watched his spoon quiver as it descended from his mouth and landed with a clatter on his saucer. Then he lifted his hands and wiped at the corners of his lips with the tip of his pinkie finger. Black spots the size of coffee grounds dotted his teeth. I looked away.

Only regular coffee for me. Two creams and one sugar, preferably brown. Refined sugar, I have learned, is unhealthy.

If I were to place my hands in the creases of my armpits right now, I would feel the gentle press of stubble against my skin. I did not shave my armpits yesterday, on

purpose. And if I were to then draw them out and hold them to my nose, I would smell a musky scent. Not the sharp, bacterial odour that wafts off the bodies of some women. No, my smell is a darker one.

The whiskers trembling above his upper lip glowed a reddish brown in the light. Such a random spattering of hair, so sparse, that I could have plucked them out with only a few vicious tugs. And then I began wondering if there was hair on my own upper lip, or if the single hair that grows on my chin had begun to sprout yet. You see, I have only one chin hair. It appears once a month (it must be hormonal) and then disappears after I pluck it and rinse the hair off my tweezers.

Halfway through my coffee I excused myself and went to the bathroom. Once inside, after I shut the door, I stretched my arms up above my head. Right in the middle of the two or so inches of midriff that showed, my belly button stared out at me. And right in the middle of my belly button, just as though it were floating, rested a pink piece of fluff. Why pink? I do not own any pink towels (they are all a dark blue) and I do not wear pink clothes. Perhaps this, too, would be a once a month occurrence.

Right now, a to do list is stuck to my fridge with a magnet. Included in the list are the following items:

laundry

grocery shopping

call mom

buy detergent (clothes and dish)

pay visa

check email

pay rent

shave underarms/legs

I write lists so that, when I wake up, I can walk to the kitchen not thinking and read the words and

then complete the tasks that the letters spell out. Sometimes this works. But right now I know, without lifting my head and peering into the corners of my apartment, that there is an empty bottle of wine and two empty, stained glasses sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed. Beyond that, a pile of open CD cases scattered next to my desk. On top of the desk, a stack of papers that, if I were to breathe on them, would send swirls of dust into the air and up my nostrils. And in the bathroom, a weeks worth of dirty underwear weaving its way around the base of the toilet. In the kitchen, egg yolk hardening on the surfaces of at least two plates, a tea pot with a mouldy tea bag inside, a sink full of glasses, food particles floating on the scummy water inside them, three empty frozen pizza boxes on the counter, and a dying plant next to the sink. I do not know where to begin. So instead of lifting off the covers and dressing and walking to the kitchen and reading my list, I rattle the pack of cigarettes that sits on my bedside table. Half a pack left. Both good and bad news. Good news because I don't have to leave the house for awhile, bad news because I might not leave the house for a very long time, not until the sun sets and the day is ending for most people. Most normal people. I light a cigarette and watch a wisp of smoke meander its way to the ceiling.

In the bathroom I dipped my finger into my belly button and fished out the lint and flicked it onto the fake marble floor. I inserted my finger again and dug deeper until it felt as though my finger would poke through the skin into my stomach. I shuddered and

brought my finger to my nose. A sweet smell, not clean, almost rotten. And I thought, this is what we are inside, beneath our pores, muscle, bones.

I looked at my face in the mirror then. A smudge of eyeliner below my right eye. I thought, if I fix this, he will notice and think I've done it for him. And if I don't? What will he think then? Perhaps he will think that I don't care, or that I don't look in mirrors or that I am the type of person who misses these important details of personal hygiene. I didn't know how I wanted the night to turn out yet, didn't know what kind of evening I had in mind. So I licked my fingertip, not the fingertip that had been inside my belly button, and I dragged it across the fragile skin underneath my eye. I wiped off half, maybe a little more than half, of the smudge. And I thought, there, now he won't know what to think.

Back in my seat I noticed that his glass was three quarters empty. When I brought my cup to my lips, I discovered it was tepid, and I gulped down a mouthful of the cooling liquid.

We'd been there awhile. We'd been talking, you see. About nothing that I can recall. Perhaps I mentioned that I was a student. Perhaps I told him about the neighbourhood where I lived. I don't know. I do remember some of the things that he told me. For instance, I know that Jared plans to one day go back to school and become a lawyer. I know that he has a degree already, in economics. I also know that he is not familiar with classical music and that he prefers cheese pizza to pepperoni pizza, neither of which I understand. I know he has a sister. Older, I think. And I'm sure that if I thought about it more, I would remember more of what I know about him.

My breath sounds a low wheeze. This pack that I have now must have been the

second of the night. I cough and a fleck of mucus flies through the air and sticks to my bed spread. It is a little ball of phlegm, the size of a single, cooked tapioca seed.

I smoked in the cafe. I didn't feel too bad because other people were smoking, too. I watched his expression as I pulled out the pack and then pulled out a cigarette and lit it. His expression didn't change. My on-line profile states that I am trying to quit. Which isn't entirely a lie because I would, one day, like to quit. But "trying to quit" sounds much better than "hopelessly addicted" or "pathetically weak-willed." Not that those are options anyway. No, the options are: non-smoker, socially, trying to quit, and regularly. They make no grammatical sense.

I asked him if he smoked and he said only when he was drunk. And then he said he was one of the only non-smokers he knew who didn't think smoking should be banned. I was surprised, a bit. At least, it shouldn't be banned in bars, he said. I told him I could put out the cigarette and he told me not to worry about it. His fingers were still trembling. He was holding his spoon between his fingers like a pen and I could clearly see it bob and weave about in the air.

I'm pretty sure he was the one who suggested going for a walk. We did walk, slowly, and as we walked my stomach became more and more hollow, the caffeine barrelling into my bloodstream so quickly that my own hands became jumpy, my heart booming. As we walked we entered the neighbourhood I live in. A strange thing happened then. All of the places that I know so well, the video store with its pitiful selection, the grocery store that smells of fermenting fruit, the drycleaners where I always mean to but never do take my soiled clothing, all of these places became new again. I watched myself walking and I watched Jared walking, too, his hands hovering beside his

belt, his shirt buttoned up too high, his pants awkwardly billowing at the thighs. My head was light and I smoked another cigarette to keep myself grounded, but it didn't work. I felt the same, worse even.

Now I am finished smoking my cigarette. The ashtray is on the floor underneath the bedside table. I always keep it there in case I reach for my alarm clock or a drink of water in the night and knock it over. Half a dozen cigarette butts. As I stub out the cigarette I notice clumps of ash strewn on the floor. I am not sure if they are from the cigarette I just smoked, if I missed the tray, or if they are from last night.

I am thirsty now. I can't find my water bottle, the one that I always keep by my bed. I wash it regularly. Fecal matter, I've been told, gathers in unwashed water bottles. I don't know how or why, but it is an unsavoury enough thought that I almost always remember to wash it out. I find it eventually, wrapped up in the sheets on the side of the bed I don't sleep on. I wonder sometimes if I will wear out the right side of the mattress. I only ever sleep on the right side of the mattress.

I suggested food, I remember that. And he said sure, that would be great. We were heading closer and closer to my apartment building, and we were about to pass the twenty-four hour Asian eatery. So we went in, even though it smells like unfresh fish and seaweed.

He got the three item dinner for $6.95. The place is overpriced, too. I should have told him not to. Sushi, I should have said, is the safer bet. Even though you only get two nigiri, half a large roll, and a little roll stuffed with cucumber and fake crab, and it costs $10.00. The large roll contains something crunchy, like corn flakes, in its center. But it is still better than the greasy beef and wilted vegetables you get in the buffet.

When he took his chopsticks out of their paper packaging and broke them apart, he rubbed them together, like he was sharpening knives. Hey, I told him, I do that, too. And he said that it was very important to remove the wood splinters in case they get lodged in your throat. And I knew exactly what he was talking about because I've always worried that I would swallow one, that a sliver would get stuck in my throat and that pus would balloon around it and infect me. When I took out my own chopsticks, I rubbed away the splinters more vigorously than usual.

I know that if I reach beneath the sheets and scratch at the small of my back, a film of crust will fill my fingernails. My fingernails will leave red trails against my skin. Not because they are long, but because their edges are torn. That is one habit I will not break. I have tried. I have even paid to have someone smooth away my own nails and apply acrylic ones. It didn't work. I bit into their toxic shells, I scraped at the white filling with my teeth until all that was left were the thin ridges of my own nails.

I know about the crust because I remember the moment when he turned me over onto my stomach. A sticky spray and a groan.

We finished eating and Jared walked me home. I asked him to come up. It was only ten, a time when coffee or tea or a snack is entirely possible. But he said no, he had to catch the metro, he had to work in the morning, even though the next day, today, is Sunday. He kissed me on each cheek. His lips were dry and cool against my flushing cheeks.

I went inside my apartment building and watched Jared turn the corner. Then I walked out of the building and down the street to the pub near my place. It was dark in there like it usually is. I remember the chill of the first beer as it touched my throat.

I don't remember his name, the guy I spent the night with. I don't remember him leaving, either, so the door to my apartment must be unlocked. I think I remember the heat of his hairy legs against my smooth skin, but I could be wrong. I do remember this, though. I remember that it surprised me, that warm splash across the small of my back. It surprised me because he was wearing a condom. I insist on that always, now.

2:13. Or, rather, 1:53.

But the mirror is what I remember the most about yesterday. Because, you see, we had a mirror like that in our first house. My mom and me. We lived there until I was two. Of course, I don't remember that mirror from when I was two. Who would? But my mom didn't sell that house until I was thirteen and I remember walking through it between tenants while she assessed the damage they caused. Unwashed drapes, broken lights, empty bottles. And once, cigarette burns in the carpet downstairs. That mirror took up an entire wall. It wasn't one whole piece of glass, though. It was a series of squares that repeated your image over and over again, a million faces, your own face, mottled with dirty yellow lines that looked like the deepest craters in the earth.

Calgary, 1980

Portrait #1

When the child was born, she slipped out from between her mother's splayed legs covered in a fresh cream. Beneath the cream, a fine down of black fur lay hidden, but the nurses would only see it once they washed off the mucous. What they did see, even beneath the thick off-white layer, was a mole the size of a pencil eraser clinging to the left edge of the child's top lip.

"Oh my," one nurse exclaimed, not only because of the perfectly circular black birth mark that marred the newborn's face, but because this child was born to a very beautiful woman. Even now, in spite of the woman's sweating brow and pinched eyes, in spite of her spread-eagled position and her recent screaming in a foreign tongue, the fine curves of the woman's mouth, the hollow of her cheeks, the gentle slope of her nose, could not escape anyone who looked at her. When her eyes opened, waiting impatiently to see her child, they revealed a deep chocolate, not milky or mousy or dull, but flashing.

The nurses contemplated the woman's face and her petite figure (still petite in spite of the child's weight – 8 pounds three ounces) and they were secretly pleased to discover the thin black threads that wove their way around the child's limbs and back and even around the small pouch of her stomach as they rinsed her under a warm stream of water. As they wrapped the child in a pink blanket, their eyes lingered on that black dot next to her mouth.

They handed the child to her exhausted mother. The woman was happy with the weight of her infant, with the wisps of black hair that crowned her small skull. She

unwrapped the child from her pink blanket and turned the small body over using her right arm, the left one secured awkwardly in a sling. She counted ten fingers and ten toes. She ran her fingers over the soft, black down covering her daughter's body.

"My little monkey," she laughed. And when she saw the nurses' expressions, "it is normal. It will fall off."

She knew the hair would fall out because she herself had been born covered in a fine fur at her birth. Her mother had told her this, had laughed; it was a characteristic of the family.

But then she turned her gaze to the child's face. To her eyes, the irises pointing inwards as if the child was staring at the tip of her thick, snub nose. The woman was not alarmed at the child's gaze. She was alarmed by their colour. A light blue, sky blue, almost pale.

"The eyes?" she asked no one in particular.

"Most babies are born with blue eyes," one of the nurses explained.

"Oh," she said, but she felt, almost knew, that these eyes would not turn a deep chocolate brown.

Then her gaze fell on her daughter's lips, on their cupid's arrow, on their rose shading. On the black mole clinging to their perfect shape.

"And this?" she asked, pointing at the mole, "this will change too?"

"No," the same nurse answered. "That won't change."

All the black hair on the little girl's body fell out after the third day. All except for the hair on her head which remained thick and luscious and shiny. But the mole did not disappear on its own, just as the nurse had said. It continued to cling and, in the woman's

eyes, grow.

It was only after the woman spoke with Dr. Weinberg for more than an hour that a surgery was scheduled. On the 8th day of the child's life, her black mole disappeared under the sharp edge of a scalpel. The only evidence that it ever existed is a small, pin prick scar and a photograph of the child swaddled in a pink blanket, her eyes gazing at the tip of her nose, a perfectly round, black birth mark clinging to her lip.

Soula

1949, Greece

Smoke whispers from the chimneys, delicate tendrils curling into the morning sky. I watch the village from a distance, a blanket around my shoulders. My mother stands beside me, her fingers smoothing my hair, pressing into the bones at the back of my neck.

The men said that we can't move during the day, that we should sleep and stay hidden.

One man stayed back with us, a man with a thick black moustache like my father's. He says little, smokes tobacco and stays awake while we sleep. He carries a gun on a strap, one hand grasping it even when he eats and smokes.

I imagine my grandmother waiting for me at the chicken coop. She will wonder where I am, why I'm not there to help her pick eggs and carry them home for her. I can feel the warm, white globes beneath my fingertips, the yolk sloshing inside the shell. Don't drop them, my grandmother always says, don't drop them because they are so precious.

It is important that we do not talk. We are not allowed a fire because it would draw attention, although when the sun rises it will be too hot for one, anyway.

We will move at night, the man told us. They have a cart and a horse, they will take us away and we will be safe. My sister cried when the man with the black moustache like my father's told us this. My mother shushed her, drew her into her chest and rubbed her back. Later, when my sister was asleep, my mother told me I was very brave, that I

was a very good girl.

Watching the smoke curl from chimneys, imagining my grandmother alone with the coop full of chickens, I also want to cry. But I blink very quickly, and I suck my stomach in and clench my fists, and my eyes don't spill a drop.

The sun sets and the man with the moustache tells us to gather our belongings, the bags with clothes and food we took when they first came.

You will leave soon, the man says. They won't be long. They'll take you to the border and you'll be safe then.

We wait for the other men while the village twinkles quietly in the dusk. The moon rises, a brilliant sliver next to shining stars.

Can we go and say goodbye to Yayaka?

No, Soula, we can't, my mother says. We can't go back. It's too dangerous to go back. There are people looking for us, bad people.

Stupid, my sister mutters, a blanket still wrapped around her shoulders even though the earth radiates heat, the air wet and hot in our lungs and mouths.

Maybe I can go back, tell her why I wasn't at the chicken coop this morning.

No Soula, my mother takes me by the shoulders. Soula, we can never go back. She will understand.

My mother's hands grip my shoulders tightly, her fingers digging into the soft dimples of my upper arms.

She softens her grip and says, your grandmother will understand.

The men arrive. They speak in hushed tones and all I can hear are the words

"partisans," "monarchists," and "bastards." Then they shuffle us between them and tell us to walk quickly, not to speak.

Two hours later and I am further away from my home than I have been my entire life. The trees seem larger, the smell of sheep manure more potent than in our village.

The cart waits, attached to two mules.

You will lie down underneath the straw, one of the men tells us. Don't speak, don't move. Everything will be fine.

Mama, where is he?

Who?

Papa. I thought he would be here.

No, choristimou, no. Your father is away, he is far away, fighting. He is fighting the partisans. He is fine, he has sent these men to look after us. Be brave, Soula, my little gypsy.

We lie down, our lumpy bags underneath our heads. They tuck the straw in around us, spread so much on top that I can no longer see the moon or the stars.

The straw heats from our breath and our bodies, so hot that I sweat like I am sitting in the sun without shade or a hat. The cart rocks back and forth, bucks at every stone, every rut in the dirt road.

When the cart stops, it is morning. The three of us get out, clutch our bags by our sides.

A new man with a fair beard and large hands leads us to a small house. We eat bread and butter, use the outhouse and splash cold water on our faces.

Now, you come with me, the new man says. He gestures to my mother and I step

forward.

No, little girl, you stay.

He takes my mother by the hand. She twists away, crouches beside my sister and me.

Be good, be brave. I will see you soon.

A wet kiss on the cheek and a quick squeeze, and she is gone, a different cart rattling on the dirt road.

My sister sleeps with her mouth open, her earthy breath blowing on my cheek. She snores, a choking snore that snorts from the back of her throat. I lie down next to her with my head on my arm, and I watch her sleep. Her eyelids flicker. And sometimes they lift slightly, if her head slants backwards, and I can see her eyes rolling from side to side, back and forth. When she wakes, I expect her to be crazy. Like a rabid dog. But she's just my sister, who sleeps with her mouth open and pinches me whenever she feels like it.

When the train stops in the morning, my sister wakes. Chunks of sleep show at the sides of her eyes. My eyes, they haven't closed all night. They're red, itchy. The skin around them is dark and puffy and feels tight to the touch.

My sister looks at me looking at her. She reaches her hand to my elbow, but I'm too fast. Her fingers twist the thin material of my blouse, pull at it.

Ha! I say, but she's already getting up.

Where are you going? But I know she's going to use the bathroom.

I wait in the sleeping compartment. Four other people still sleep. The air swims around us, dank and dark. If I get up and leave and come back, I'll be disgusted at the fact

that I slept in here at all. I guess I didn't sleep, though.

When my sister comes back, she wrinkles her nose.

What a smell, and she waves her hand in front of her face.

My sister grabs her bag and shoves my bag towards me. I get up and follow her to the corridor.

The train starts again and I ask her where we just left.

She shrugs her shoulders, slinks against the window because people walk through the corridor on their way to their seats. I do the same.

I watch the whirring streets and trees, then the whirring fields, right in front of my eyes. Moving so fast I can't catch my breath. I ask my sister to open the window for me. She rolls her eyes but she opens it anyway. I press my face into the air, and I really can't breathe, can't catch my breath because there is just too much air rushing towards me. I close my eyes and I feel the train beneath me, rolling and shaking and shifting from side to side.

My sister has turned away from the window. She stares at the dirt on her shoes, kicks at the cigarette butts that litter the floor.

I turn back to the window, stand there as the fields rush by. The train slows and then starts again, slows and starts, pulls me backwards and forwards and makes my legs tingle. But I stand at the window long after my sister goes back inside to sleep.

Anya

Montreal, 2003

A flash of silver. It darts across the sleeve of a purple blouse, wiggles its way into a buttonhole and is gone.

I stand in front of my open closet door. I shudder.

I'm putting away laundry. It's something I try to do at least once a week. It saves me from digging through a hamper full of fresh smelling and quickly wrinkling shirts, bras, and jeans to find something suitable to wear to work. It saves me from tripping over a growing pile of soiled and sweaty garments on my floor.

It's been two weeks now, the length of time since Jared left on business. I received the phone call, did a load and decided it was time to organize. That's when I saw it: the silverfish.

The silverfish only lives, I'm sure of it, in my closet, amongst my things. Jared's closet, his dresser, his clothes, are immune. I have no hard proof of this fact, but I'd be willing to bet on it.

The clothes that actually hang in my closet are not part of a regular rotation. Maybe I wear that purple blouse once a month. Or, more likely, once every two. I examine these neglected articles, particularly those in close hanging proximity to the purple blouse. This sweater, a turtleneck, itchy pink angora. I find an old crust of a skeleton embedded in the airy fibres of the armpit. Another carcass entwined into the darted material around the chest.

I grab a garbage bag. In goes the blouse, the sweater. I inspect other items. A loose fitting pair of jeans, a corduroy skirt. No evidence of insects, alive or dead, but I toss

them in anyway.

When the closet is empty, I peer inside. A film of dust and dirt layers the floor. I think I see delicate tracks left by the silverfish, but I could be wrong. More importantly, I don't see the silverfish themselves. It must be the light. I switch it off and the closet darkens. I shut the door.

I decide on a shower. I would have taken one anyway, but now I feel like I really need one, like the mites are crawling through the fine white hairs on my arms.

I was born on a Monday in July at the tail end of my city's annual orgy. The final firework of the Calgary Stampede exploded the night before I made my entrance and the entire city moaned, in the throes of a deep hangover. The cows and the horses were shipped out of town, probably on their way to the slaughterhouse. Carnies began dismantling their perilous rides and scamming games, off to cheat and disappoint the citizens of another Canadian city. Bar staff breathed for the first time in ten days, counting their tips into the thousands. Tourists left town, too, carrying away their new cowboy hats, cowboy boots (barely scuffed, for shame), and cheap western wear bandanas.

Everyone was leaving town when I entered it, at 8 AM. Screaming, as is to be expected, and kicking.

"You were a kicker. Kicking kicking like you wouldn't believe," according to my mother's best friend.

I arrived right on time, on the exact day the doctor said I would arrive. It was a miracle, my mother's always told me. A miracle not so much because of my punctuality.

It was a miracle that I arrived at all.

The bleeding started at 6 months. My mother broke an arm and sprained a knee. The doctors gave me a twenty-five per cent chance.

"They said, Soula, you've got to realize that you might lose this baby. You've got to prepare yourself. I said, you prepare. This baby is coming out in three months. Right on time."

And, of course, my mother was right.

She said she prayed. Her best friend prayed. My grandmother and her village prayed. Every Calgarian of Czech descent prayed. Some Greeks, too. They prayed day and night for three months straight.

"You do not understand the power of a mother's prayer. Of a grandmother's prayer. Mothers and grandmothers have a special connection with God. We are in good with him. We are."

What did you ask when you prayed?

"I told to God, I said, you make this baby come out and she will do special things. She will be very special and she will do many things to make you proud."

Yes, my mother knew my gender ahead of time, and not because any nurse told her during any test.

"Always I knew you were a girl. I asked God before. I could tell. The way you slept in my stomach, a boy wouldn't sleep like that. The way your foot felt when you kicked. No boy foot could get in between my ribs like that and split me."

Yes, I kicked my mother so hard during the pregnancy that I split the flesh between two of her ribs. This happened before the fall, the bleeding, and the praying.

"So much pain. So much pain and I took no pill. No injection. They said, you must take an injection, something. But I said no. I did not want my baby girl coming out all drugged up, all funny in the head. I would not do a caesarean even though my arm was broken, even though my leg was all bandaged up. They could not put my arm in a cast because of my growing belly. But still I took no pills."

She rubs her arm from time to time, unconsciously, looking at me. God forbid I knock it or hit it or bump it.

"That is the arm you broke."

She spent three months in bed. Mirka, her best friend, cooked and cleaned, emptied bed pans, emptied buckets of my mother's vomit (morning sickness round the clock for nine months).

"Thinking about a cow, I would throw up."

Mirka's daughter, Milla, five at the time, kept my mother company during the days. She and her mother slept on a blow up mattress in my mother's bedroom for three months, Mirka's ears perked for the slightest cough or call. They are good friends.

"There is no sister or brother for you because you finished me. I could not take another one like that."

The water starts running cold. I'm not even standing in the shower. I'm sitting, curled up so that my arms wrap around my knees. I haven't even washed my hair or shaved or anything.

It's the water that gets my attention. I stand up slowly and I twist the hot water tap all the way to the left. The temperature is cool now and I bathe quickly, my already

puckering skin raising goose bumps.

By the time I shut off the water and wrap myself in a towel, my teeth are chattering.

I was sleeping when the phone rang. My mother called at 4pm, my time. If it were a Thursday, I'd have been at work. But as it is Wednesday, I was at home. It's nice that everyone else's hump day is my mid-week vacation. But it's unfortunate that today, while the city's professionals ended their days, while they were battling traffic, inhaling each other's fumes on the metro, thinking about dinner, dreading seeing their husbands and wives, I hadn't even cracked an eyelid. My alarm clock had been set. It even went off at 10 am. But after three hours of nine minute sleep intervals (punctuated by the shrill scream of the damned clock), I gave up and shut the thing off. From one to four pm, I slid in and out of dreams (one featured a giraffe eating a turnip, another was about my best friend in grade two). After each dream, I would wake slightly, sense the sunlight waning from behind my closed eyelids, and suppress the rising waves of panic-induced nausea by burying myself ever deeper into my nest of pillows (five), blankets (two), and duvet (one).

The phone rang. I ignored it. Ten minutes later, it rang again. Once again, I ignored it. After the fifth call I picked it up, upsetting a full ashtray and knocking over a glass of water. My bare foot slid through the black sludge as I breathed a croaky "hello" into the receiver. I knew whose voice awaited me, I knew the mood it would be in.

"What is this? You don't pick up phones?"

"I was out. Sorry. Just got back in."

"Hmmm. This is important. Listen to me."

"Yeah?"

"It is your grandmother. She is sick. A stroke, she had. A bad one. She can't move the left side, nothing, not even to blink. She is in the hospital. I am going to her."

"Oh my god."

"Don't say those things. Why do you have to say those things? What does God have to do with it?"

"Sorry."

"Now listen, I do not have a number you can call, but I will call again. You answer next time. I have to go now. I leave on the plane in three hours."

"Wait, Mom, say hello, or, er, something to her. Say I love you. From me."

"Yes, okay. Goodbye."

That was it.

So, my mother flies back tonight. The first trip home in over ten years. To say goodbye to a woman she hasn't spoken to in almost thirty.

It's 9 o'clock and five hours since the phone call.

My mother is up there somewhere. She should be crossing the Atlantic by now, I think. Or she could be zooming across Greenland.

I imagine her in her aisle seat: Soula sitting and eating salted nuts and drinking tomato juice (no ice). She alternately sleeps lightly, one of her ears resting on the blow up shoulder encasement she brings with her on extended trips, chats with her neighbour and listens to classical music using her airline issue headphones.

But of course there is a chance that my mother is not engaging in any of these activities. There is a chance that she has imbibed a gin and tonic instead of her usual tomato juice (no ice). There is a chance that she has not said a word to her neighbour. There is a chance that she is listening to the rock and roll station on her headphones. There is a chance that she cannot sleep, that she took sleeping pills, that she forgot her travel companion blow up head rest. I'm not sure. She's never traveled under these particular conditions before, going to see a mother who is dying. I can't say either way.

But here's what I do know about my mother. For certain. This is her fact sheet, and I write it down. I don't know why I'm writing it down, or even thinking about it, or why I'm so rattled at this moment. Writing down the words, though, seems to help.

Name: Soula Kirkoudis

Birth date: February 27, 1945

Birth place: small, unpronounceable village, Northern Greece

Important Dates and Events:

1949

- end of the Greek civil war; Monarchists beat communists
- the Kirkoudis family is forced to leave Greece because of Mr. Kirkoudis' communist sympathies
- Soula is separated from her parents; journeys with sister to Czechoslovakia

1949-1953

- Soula spends a good chunk of her childhood living in various state orphanages around Czechoslovakia

1953

- Stalin dies. Soula, along with other Czechoslovakian school children, mourn him
- the Red Cross reunites Mr. and Mrs. Kirkoudis, who have been living in Bulgaria, with their children in Czechoslovakia

1953-1968

- Soula grows up: teenager, young woman. That's all I know.

1968

- Prague Spring
- Soula leaves Czechoslovakia and goes to Germany
- Soula leaves Germany for Canada

1969

- Soula's father dies in Czechoslovakia
- Soula stops speaking to her mother

1969-1980

- Soula becomes a hairdresser; opens her own salon

1976

- Greece grants exiled communist patriots amnesty and Soula's mother returns to Greece; my mother's sister remains in Czechoslovakia

1980

- Soula has a daughter (me)

That's her life. The thirty-five year parcel of time she spent on this earth without me. All I really know about my mother is what came after me, and even that, well. I'm pretty fuzzy on a lot of that, too.

One detail I'm not fuzzy on, though, is the one that has shaped my life up to this point. She said I was to be special. That was her deal with God: if I were born, I'd be special.

I have to say that few are suited to miracle births and the details that surround them. It is a difficult negotiation. You laugh it off. I laugh it off. But then there are moments when I think, What? You made a deal with who? You told him what? Are you crazy?

She surely bartered with God in a moment of desperation and fear. Lying on her back those three long months, her aching arm rising ever higher as her belly grew, her useless leg itching (one of Milla's jobs, I've been told, was to scratch my mother's encased calf with a thin wooden spoon), her engorged stomach quietly emptying its contents into a Tupperware container, she must have had a lot of time to weigh out the terms of her proposition. I am thankful she did not commit me to God's service as a nun (they don't do that where she comes from). All she said was "special." I would be special and I would do special things and I would make God proud. At least it could have been worse.

She said special but she didn't quite mean it. Talented, gifted, rare; these would have been more appropriate. She was on the lookout for signs of my talents, gifts, and rarity from the beginning. Picture after picture of my infancy features my chubby body positioned on my mother's lap, my cherubic appendages cradled by my mother's good arm, the other one flashing white in its new cast. My mother smiled at the camera but her eyes stayed on me. There is a stiffness in each pose, like my mother is waiting with bated

breath for the moment when it happens, when my specialness shows itself. She is so intent on not missing it that in one picture the knuckles of my mother's good hand are white, her fingers grasping my fat baby foot. My eyes are wide in that one. The next photo is one of me crying, my mother shrugging sheepishly at Mirka through the lens. She didn't mean to.

"You didn't talk early, you didn't use the toilet early, you didn't walk early. For a long time I worried. Maybe I make a mistake with God. Maybe something was wrong. The only good thing you did was sleep too much."

And no wonder. Being prodded and grasped and carried and stared at by a tense woman waiting for a sign. It must have been exhausting. No wonder I slept all the time.

The sign didn't come for six years. Not for a lack of trying on my mother's part. By the age of five I had tried ballet, skating, art classes, karate, and kindermusic. I started kindergarten at the age of four but didn't really grasp the alphabet until the following year. I could count to twenty by age five, but so could most of my class. I lacked the coordination for ballet, I wobbled on my skates, my finger paintings didn't impress, and I was too shy to shout in my karate classes. Kindermusic, however, was a different story. My mother wanted to put me in real lessons right away, at the age of three and three quarters, but five teachers in a row told her I was simply too young. My hands were too small, my attention span was too short, and my inability to grasp musical nomenclature would only frustrate me.

Don't ruin it for her, they said.

"When is it a good time to start?"

Seven, they said.

So my mother enrolled me when I was five the spring before grade one.

"You weren't so good at the start. But we kept at it."

We certainly did. Two half hour lessons a week, one hour of practice a day broken up into three twenty minute sessions.

"We must to do it like that. You couldn't do longer. So twenty minutes in the morning when you wake up, twenty minutes after school, twenty minutes before bed. Not too bad."

And I improved. I learned my notes, I mastered timing, I excelled at differentiating between pianissimo and fortissimo. I practiced scales and listened to my teacher's instructions so intently that I never developed any bad habits of form, no bent pinkie fingers, no raised wrists.

But my talent was not a naturally prodigious one. I was no Mozart. I would not be appearing on any breakfast shows or late night shows or on any TV shows at all.

And then, one day, it changed.

It was Matthew, the tone deaf mongrel whose lesson happened to be before mine, that did it. Matthew had been working on a grade one study by Czerny for months. Week after week I would hear his left hand sloppily falling behind his right, his insincere melody as melodious as rifle shots, and, in the last line of music, he never, ever failed to depress the B flat, which was not part of the key signature, not an accidental note, and most definitely not the correct note.

One week in March I had had enough.

"It's not B flat!" I yelled across the room.

My mother, who had been reading an article in Reader's Digest, pinched my bicep.

"But Mom, it's the wrong note. He plays the wrong note every time." I glared across the room at Matthew and said, "You play the wrong note every time. You keep on playing B flat. It's supposed to be B. B *natural*."

My mother's fingernails began to dig their way into a second layer of skin but my piano teacher's voice stopped her.

"Matthew, we're going to end the lesson a little early today. Why don't you pack up your music and wait for your Dad."

Matthew did just that, relief flooding his narrow face. His books packed, his filth-stained Stampeders jacket on ("you see that coat? It's filthy. Do you see me sending you out in a coat like that?), he stared at me while backing out of the room, his sticky fingers (I knew they were sticky. I played on the piano right after he did) rubbed at the wet that constantly oozed from his nose. Little did I know that that would be the last face, the last image I gazed upon before my life changed forever.

"We are so sorry, Mrs. Turner, so sorry for the interruption. Please tell Matthew's father sorry. No, Anya, you will tell Matthew and his father sorry. So sorry Mrs. Turner."

"No, Soula, it's okay." Mrs. Turner looked at me strangely then.

"Anya, how did you know it was a B flat?"

"I could hear it."

"But how did you know it was *that* note?"

"I could hear it."

At this point I started getting annoyed. I said I could hear it. Couldn't she?

Couldn't Matthew?

Mrs. Turner played a note on the piano.

"What's that?"

"Middle C."

"This one?"

"F sharp."

"This one?"

"B flat." Of course it was B flat!

Mrs. Turner turned to my mother. She said, "Mrs. Kirkoudis, your daughter has perfect pitch. This is very rare. This is very special."

Notice that Mrs. Turner did not say that I was very special. Neither did she say that perfect pitch guarantees prolific musical ability or a successful musical career. After all, piano tuners have perfect pitch, and they never appear on TV, they never win awards, they never get record deals.

This fact did not matter to my mother. I barely touched the piano that lesson, my mother asked so many questions there wasn't much time left for my scales or my minuet.

"So, what does this mean exactly? What is happening to my Anya?"

"Well, Soula, Anya has a special ability. When she hears a note, she knows exactly what it is. Many musicians can train their ears, but perfect pitch isn't something you can learn. You are born with it."

"Hmmm. This is good?"

"Yes, it will help Anya with her playing. She will have an easy time doing well on ear tests."

"Famous?"

"Sorry?"

"Will this make her famous, this being able to hear special things?"

"Um, not necessarily. She still needs to work hard and practice. And, really, perfect pitch doesn't guarantee musical ability."

"Hmmm."

My mother's eyes were glazed, her cheeks glowed read, a sheen of perspiration coated her upper lip.

She drove erratically on the way home, speeding between red lights, slamming the brakes, accelerating so quickly that she almost hit the cars in front of us.

"Mom, slow down."

"Anoushka, don't worry. Your mother is a good driver," she said, almost side swiping a minivan.

When we arrived home, we went directly to the piano. She dug through the piano bench and found my first Leila Fletcher book.

"Okay, I am going to play a note and you will tell me what it is."

"Why do you have that book out?"

"Because how else will I know if you're right or not? I will look at the little keyboard here," she pointed to the black and white illustration of the keyboard, neatly printed As, Bs, Cs, and the rest adorning their appropriate note. "Then I will press on a note, and then you will tell me which one. Now turn around."

"Okay."

She played middle C.

"Middle C."

"No, it's not. I play again."

"It's middle C."

"No, you make mistake. It is not middle C. It is B."

I turned around to face her.

"No, Mom, this is B," I played a B. "*This* is middle C."

"Hmmm, that's not what it says in the book."

"You're not reading it right, Mom."

"Fine," she handed me my book. "Now you know more than your mother. That's fine. But you don't know so much as you think. You heard Mrs. Turner. You must practice. You must practice every day. More than before. This is special, a special gift. You must use it so God knows he didn't make mistake."

In spite of my protests (I had just had a lesson!), I practiced. I practiced two hours that night, and the next, and the next after that. Two hours every weekday, three on Saturdays and Sundays. When I turned ten, it was three hours a day across the board.

I did well. No, better than well. I was a machine, winning competitions, wowing adjudicators, intimidating everyone. My fellow competitors, their parents and teachers, winced when they saw me walking into the competition room. They had no chance of winning top prize. No chance at all.

An hour has passed and I think it's time to open up the closet door.

In that hour, I blow-dried my hair, did my make-up, got dressed. I'm going out. It's normal for me to go out on a Wednesday. It's part of the routine.

I approach the door, twist the handle with my right hand while simultaneously switching on the closet light with my left.

Almost imperceptible, I think. But unmistakeable. Another darting, flashing strip of sliver. Gone now, behind the baseboards. They're in there, sure enough, twisting and breeding and breathing my air.

I go to the kitchen and grab a bottle of bleach. As I walk back to the bedroom, I untwist the cap. Then I pour the contents, half a bottle, onto the floor. I douse the baseboards, fill every crack. I don't care about the hardwood varnish or the potentially deadly, toxic fumes. I've got to do something about the silverfish, after all.

And it feels satisfying, like I've done something with my day.

Never mind the list of chores magnetted to my fridge.

Never mind the:

1. dishes
2. Musical theory
3. Abdominal exercises.
4. Laundry.
5. Piano.
6. Going to work.

All these items need to get done. Some more than others. My dishes, for instance, are piling up. An odour of garlic and fermenting citrus fruits wafts from the kitchen. It hits me every time I enter the apartment, every time I pass by the kitchen on the way to

the bathroom. Every time I breathe too deeply while watching TV. The remaining unwashed laundry, while not offensive to my sense of smell, is strewn across both the bedroom and bathroom floors, making basic navigation of these rooms rather difficult. Musical theory? Piano? Well. It's an old list. Very old. So old that I made it when I was still enrolled in school.

The night air is sharp against my face. No wind, just a slap of cold. The air chills my lungs so I light a cigarette. I unglove my left in order to grasp it, and soon the tips of my fingers go numb, start to burn.

It feels good. It feels like I'm awake for the first time all day. I don't even think about lists or silverfish or the bag of clothes and crusts.

For a few slippery blocks, I think of nothing. I would be content to keep it that way, but I can feel nagging thoughts pressing at the periphery of my mind. Thoughts I don't understand, that I don't welcome. Thoughts about my grandmother, how she's paralyzed, dying, about how my mother is on her way to see her die. Thoughts about how I know absolutely nothing about the circumstances of my grandmother's birth. I do not even know the exact location. I imagine she was born in a house, a bastion of women surrounding her, boiling water, praying, casting out the evil eye. It was in Turkey. What is now Turkey. At the time of my grandmother's birth, the area was still called Greece.

I do not know if the pregnancy was difficult. I do not know if she was born in a bed, on a table, on the ground. I do not know whether there were complications, if a doctor was called (would there have been one?), if the midwife cast spells over my great-grandmother's belly, if they knew she would be a girl, if there was lamentation about the

fact that she lacked a penis.

"They told me she is waiting to die, but first to see me. She cannot die before I arrive." That's another thing my mother told me when we talked on the phone.

My grandmother's sister told her that. There are others waiting for my mother, too. Prematurely aged faces belonging to slack bodies with unshaven underarms. Village life does this to women. At least the women I've seen, anyway.

I think about my grandmother for another block. Then I see the bar. I take a moment, clear my head, chuck the cigarette into crusted snow on the sidewalk. And I open the door and my body steams and I forget the cold and my grandmother and I head to a seat at the bar.

Calgary, 1980

Portrait #2

The child grows. Slowly, her spine uncurls itself from the foetal position. Slowly, her torso lengthens, her limbs stretch, her fingers reach. Slowly, her neck strengthens. Slowly, the dimpled knees thin, the stomach pouch hollows, the poofed cheeks deflate.

Soula watches. First, with fascination. Then, with concern. Finally, with horror.

"It is as though I don't feed her. It is as though she doesn't eat. People will think that I am starving the girl."

Where are the chubby thighs, the rounded belly, the apple cheeks? What happened to the stubby fingers, the soft elbows, the mass of soft flesh that Soula had expected, that she had so wanted?

More important, more perplexing, is the hair. Not the soft, black body fur that entwined the infant's body at birth, that had fallen out rapidly and properly. No, where is the thick mop of black curls on the child's head? Where are the ebony tendrils? Why have they been replaced with straight locks, a golden fringe?

The hair started turning on the second week. It seemed to lighten by the day, then by the hour, then by the second. The coarse curls unwound themselves into a mass of soft, velvet blonde.

The eyes, too. They did not change their colour. They remain a light blue, not even close to the warm chocolate brown she had dreamed of.

Suddenly Soula suspects the nurses.

"This is not my child," she thinks, but tells no one, not the doctor, not Mirka. She

does not even speak the words out loud to herself.

But Soula knows that the child is, in fact, hers. The evidence was there from the beginning. The mole (beauty mark), the black fur, the dark head of hair. The child was hers. But as the little infant body lengthens, as the skin and hair lighten, as the entire body grows a layer of cruel and taut muscle, the child is revealing another part of herself, another set of imprints, another profile.

She had gotten rid of him. She had washed her body, her sheets, the floors of her apartment. She had sprayed down every surface with bleach and toxins and chemicals. But of course the little mound of her belly contained half of what was his, of him. Or, she had at least supervised as Mirka did this for her. She had believed she was safe, that they both were. She had thought she had eviscerated all that remained. Every pubic hair, every piece of clothing, every errant whiff of his cologne. She had been wrong.

"Anya, my little Anoushka. What is happening to you?"

And the child looks up at the mother with wide, worried, blue eyes.

She has no words to answer.

Soula

Calgary, 1968

I sip scotch. I purse my lips, set the glass down. The scotch burns my throat, burns the lining of my stomach.

Raise the glass to my lips and sniff, swirl the brown until it almost leaps out of the glass. I set the glass down and lift a cigarette out of the ashtray. Half-smoked. I am trying to cut down by smoking cigarettes in halves.

One light in the room. A side table with a shadeless lamp. A brown blanket on the bed. I exhale gray into dim light, watch the smoke drift into stale air, up to the leaky ceiling.

I take another sip of scotch.

I swallow, decide I am bored with drinking scotch. Decide I shouldn't pick this moment to cut down on smoking. I extinguish the butt of the cigarette, lift another one out of the pack, set it between my lips, light it.

And I cough. Because it's winter and because the heat in my room is oppressive. Oppressive to the point where I am forced to wear a slip and shoes. I wear shoes only because the floorboards splinter and the light is too dim for me to pick slivers out of the bottom of my feet without breaking the thin slices of wood in half.

I drink the scotch because it was a present. Not so much a present. Actually, it was left behind. I drink the scotch because I have nothing else to drink.

I remember the shoes. I remember the shoes and their soft chocolate leather. Their tan suede, their smooth black stitches. Strong stitches, binding leather to heel. The boots,

the pumps, the flats. My calves in the shoes, tight with a shadow of muscle.

I miss the shoes.

I sip more scotch, make a face, shiver as I swallow, close to gagging. But I have nothing else to drink.

The milk freezes overnight. I place the milk bottle on the window ledge, outside. I take it in in the morning, set in on my bedside table. Most days, I forget about the milk. And it's okay if I leave the window open. It's cool enough in the room if I do that. But if I don't, the milk sours. I return in the afternoon or in the late evening and my room smells like baby puke. Sour sweet, chunky.

I go to the bathroom and I pour the milk into the toilet. I go to the corner store, open late, and I buy more milk. I don't even drink milk.

I stop buying milk.

My cat sniffs the glass of scotch. She curls her kitten teeth around the clear lip and gnaws.

Poussinka, I warn. She darts her pink tongue between whiskers and fur. She leaps onto my belly and paws at my sweater, catches the wool between razor claws. I swat at the pink pads of her paws and she nips my finger in her mouth.

She jumps on the windowsill, runs her claws through the screen. I pull her off. The landlady told me no pets.

No pets and no smoking. But I blow smoke through the thin wire and I wash the floor with bleach and soak my blankets in the sink. No carpet, so I don't worry about that.

I ash my cigarette into a clean tin can, a tuna can Kisa and I shared for dinner. I rinsed it but the room still smells of fish. Fish and smoke and cat. And, as I bring the clear glass to my lips, scotch.

I hang my stockings on the bare curtain rod over the window. My stockings will freeze solid if I don't finish the cigarette and close the window soon. I will go to bed and sleep and wait for Kisa's pink paws to tread against the back of my neck and wake me in the morning.

But while the cigarette burns between my fingers and the window remains open, I think of cigarette smoke drifting up from real glass ashtrays, through windows that let in warm, wet air. And other cats, feral, screaming, mating in the alley outside the windows and the hot, sticky air that clings to skin and cotton nightgowns. I could not lie about in a wool sweater in these rooms. I could not tolerate the soft pads of a cat on my stomach.

And smoke through the windows. Not cigarette smoke. The smoke of chimneys and burning garbage, early morning smoke from fires stoked by grandmothers.

And the sun rising, heating the horizon, heating the air that drifts through windows, hazy with fire. Chickens clucking, the rooster's call booming in my ear.

Pull eggs from underneath warm straw. Wet oozes off the eggshells, wet from the chickens and their effort. I hold the eggs with the tips of my fingers, avoid the moisture, the goo. These eggs come from somewhere inside the chickens. My mother makes me eat the eggs, my teeth slimy with yolk, my throat tight against the slippery yellow.

I cough. The skin on my throat itches from my cat, from her soft, gray fur and wet, pink nose. I rake my fingernails over the itch. I know I am making it worse. I push her warm body to the side and sip my scotch. It's the last of the bottle. The last few sips

that burn my throat and stomach. I will miss it, this scotch. I will not buy another bottle. Too warm, too startlingly strong to be truly enjoyed.

My cigarette burns at the filter. I ash it and close the window, draw Kisa to my pillow, turn off the light.

Anya

Montreal, 2003

Most of my life has been measured out by the tick tick of a wind up metronome. Years, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds; these were secondary. I ignored calendars; time passed in beats per minute.

(Time was measured out in scales: minor, major, chromatic; first practiced slowly, then repeated more quickly, then at full tempo. Practice sessions progressed not by a clock's traveling hands, but by the growing numbness in my right shoulder blade, by the fatiguing of my slight but very strong wrists and forearms, by the cramping of my fingers which, to this day, always win mercy fights and thumb wars.)

Days became a succession of one hour block practices, weeks were noted only by recurring Monday and Thursday night lessons, months were evaluated by the outcome of the prior Sunday's afternoon recital. Years began and ended during the March festival season. The only exams that meant anything occurred twice yearly in the summer and winter. Special outings translated into 4 hands, 2 piano rehearsals. Holidays meant a revised practice schedule, and summers ended with nary a freckle on my arms.

Now I count dial tones. Time is measured out by the cursor flashing blue against the black of my computer screen. Days have become shifts, weeks are a total number of hours clocked, and a month equals a pay cheque.

Someone picks up.

"Hello, this is Cheryl Lynch calling from Alliance, a national public opinion research firm. We are calling today to ask a few questions. Please be assured we are not

selling anything today. We are simply interested in your opinion. May I please speak to the head of the household aged 18 or older?"

Normally, I don't get this far.

"He's not in."

"Is there anyone else in the household aged 18 or older with whom I may speak?"

"Fuck off."

I make a check mark in my notebook under "foul language," and click a button that tells the computer to dial another randomly generated phone number.

While the computer dials, I count the number of times the cursor flashes. When a phone on the other end picks up, I record that number in my notebook under the heading, "cursor flashes." That's what I do here. Well, rather, I am paid to give surveys to unsuspecting citizens, mostly American, and interrupt their dinners, arguments, love making, moments of personal tragedy, and the other mundane activities that make up their lives. The other part of my job, the part I don't get paid for, is data gathering. Some of my colleagues read crime novels, some file their nails, and some, the ambitious ones, study between calls. I, on the other hand, have managed to compile seven notebooks full of statistics.

I didn't record anything at first. No, when I began, I spent my time staring at the clock perched above the supervisors' enclave. I brought in magazines, only to be rudely interrupted by the tired voices of my unsuspecting interviewees on the opposite end of the line. I tried crosswords, Sudoku puzzles, comic books, romance novels, and once, in a moment of weakness, I attempted to teach myself how to knit. But each time the line picked up, I was interrupted. I grew resentful. I grew hateful. I considered quitting.

And then one day, about a month in, I wondered exactly how many different salutations I was greeted with. How many "hellos?" How many, "yeahs"? How many eerie, breathy silences? And more than that, how many people simply hung up on me before I could even finish my introduction?

How many telephone calls even ended up being answered?

In the following three months of my employment, this is what I discovered (per 5 hour shift):

Average number of calls made: 291

Average number of fax numbers called: 33

Average number of businesses called: 24

Average number of human pick ups: 233

Average number of hang ups: 140

Average number of surveys started: 30

Average number of surveys completed: 10

After my initial data gathering, I branched out. At one point I tallied the number of children answering the phone (45), the number of housekeepers/maids who answered (37), the number of men who answered (117), the number of Southern United States accents I encountered (94), the number of people who didn't speak English (20), and the number of people over the age of 65 who said they were simply too old to answer any questions (5).

I am currently recording the number of times people swear at me and the number of times they disparage my character and/or intelligence. If they do both, I make a check mark under both headings and simply place a star next to those particular check marks.

To make my life a little more interesting, I have also been keeping track of the number of men who pick up and sound fuckable. And, because I am dealing with very specific demographics at this time, to keep myself busy I have been recording the number of times the blue cursor flashes on my computer screen while the computer dials.

I cannot tabulate any conclusive data for at least another two weeks.

"Hello?" 5 flashes.

"Good evening. This is Ira Livenwerther and I'm calling on behalf of" - click.

I double click and a message appears on my screen:

There are no more available numbers, it tells me.

I sigh.

As I walk to my supervisor's desk, I look around at the various people who surround me for thirty plus hours each week. Here is Hugo, the fire eater, who follows me on my cigarette breaks and smells vaguely of sour sweat and lighter fluid.

There's Luke, a.k.a. Ginger, as he instructs his friends to call him, who claims to have owned his own lucrative import/export business but gave it all up to live, as he says, more simply. We go for beers on occasion, me and Ginger.

Then there's Genvieve, the math major who views me as the only other person she can relate to because I once revealed to her that I am also in university. She has deemed me worthy of her insights on immigration (unnecessary and bad for the economy) and anal sex (uninhibiting and inherently feminist).

"Susan, the numbers are out."

"Oh, okay. I'll get on it."

Susan eyes me with annoyance. She's been flirting with the French team's

manager, Stephan, for weeks now, hoping that he might overlook her acne scars and flat ass and possibly fuck her.

I smile at Stephan, take in his tight white jeans and imitation Gucci t-shirt.

He smiles back, a dead, gray tooth peeking out from between chapped lips and I think, "not in your lifetime, asshole."

I head back to my cubicle and when I see that the new numbers still aren't up, I change my status screen from *TRAINING* to *UNPAID BREAK*. The national public research and opinion firm I work for requires me to publicly announce all of my non-call time activities to my supervisors and fellow employees lest I sneakily waste any of their valuable time and money following my own agenda.

Hugo sees that I am going on break so he also changes his status to *UNPAID BREAK* and follows me to the elevators.

"Hey Anya, or should I say, Trixie?"

For months now, Hugo has been trying to convince me to get out of the survey racket and try my hand at stripping. He has even picked out a stage name.

"Nope, still Anya."

We ride the elevator in silence. I look straight ahead while Hugo the fire eater glances sideways at me. He ignores my unwashed hair, my faded jeans with the torn hems, my grey zip up hoody, and directs his attention towards my breasts instead.

Once we are outside, Hugo asks me for a lighter. He never has a lighter on him, ever.

"Seriously, Trixie would be a good name. Seriously, do you have any idea how much money you could make?"

"Hugo, seriously. What do you want to be? My pimp? Fuck off."

Hugo hunches his shoulders and sucks back on his cigarette. He flicks it away after only a few drags.

"I'm just sayin," he walks back into the building.

We smokers have been relegated to the side of the building. The only attractions on this side street happen to be a rarely frequented depanneur and a Caribbean restaurant whose half-burnt out sign flashes the letters *CU Y* over and over again. The snow starts again, the second storm of the day. Fat waterlogged flakes fall and quickly obscure the tips of my boots, blur the restaurant's sign to an indecipherable smear.

Today is a Thursday. People tend to be nicer on Thursdays. It's the anticipation. Tomorrow is Friday. The weekend. Anything could happen. But then Friday arrives and they all realize that they haven't managed to secure any truly fun and exciting plans. There's an edge to people's voices on Fridays. A panic as they face the fact that Saturday will be occupied by little Jane's volleyball tournament and Sunday means a family dinner with the folks. Young people, twenty-somethings, are slightly better. At least they can look forward to getting pissed with friends. And surprisingly, if they're already drunk, they're less belligerent than they are talkative. I haven't come to these conclusions from studying my statistical notebooks. No, it's just something that I've noticed.

I don't normally react anymore to the rude ones. Before it used to shatter me, even "we're not interested" or "I don't care" or "stop goddamned calling me." I've been told that I possess poor boundaries, boundaries so ephemeral they don't exist beyond my skin. But I am aware of others' boundaries, and calling a family, an unwitting family in the

middle of dinner, is an invasion, a trespass. Learning that someone's father can't come to the phone because he needs time to recover from drinking, or that a man in Kentucky makes $600 in a year, or that a woman has just suffered a stroke and just doesn't have the strength to speak, well, these types of things left my mouth twitching and my eyes wet and I'd have to escape to the bathroom and take deep breaths and grip the bathroom counter until someone came in the bathroom or it had been so long that I was likely to be fired.

And then one day it stopped. All of a sudden, like a wire between my brain and my mouth got disconnected. It was at the start of an interview with a reluctant woman whose son had got her on the phone. I asked her the first question, "Do you intend to spend more, less, or the same amount on the Holidays this year as you did last year?" And she said, "I already finished my shopping." And so I said, "well, having finished, could you tell me if you spent more, less, or the same amount on the Holidays this year as you did last year?" And she said, "I don't know." She had raised her voice. And when I asked if she could estimate, she said, "I don't even know why I'm doing this survey. I don't even want to be doing this survey," and that's the point when I stopped caring. I hung up on her. I didn't ask, like we're supposed to, if there was a better time to call back. I didn't probe, I didn't clarify, I didn't give a flying fuck. That's what it takes. Contempt. You can get through the day if you have enough of it.

I'm mostly immune now. To the fuck yous and take me off your lists and stop interrupting family quality times.

"What are you up to tonight?" Ginger wants to know as we hand back our "post-

Christmas spending" survey sheets at the supervisor's desk. Our team has gotten enough information from enough people and the survey is officially over. It's now time to start the "Sunday Activities" survey. It means a new set of questions, a new entry in my notebook.

"Oh, nothing much."

"Want to go for a beer?"

"Can't tonight. I need to do some laundry. Get to bed early. I've got a lot of studying to do tomorrow morning."

"Ah, I see. You academic types."

"Yeah, well, have a good time."

We go back to our stations.

I don't know why I lie to Ginger. He probably wouldn't care if I said I had plans. But then he would ask for details later on, and I would have to make something up, invent another story and it would be too exhausting. There are too many stories to keep straight as it is.

The survey is entitled "Sunday Activities," but it should really be called "Sunday Activities/newspaper reading habits/pet needs." The questions run half a page long, and even I don't understand what they're asking by the time I'm finished asking them.

"Last Sunday, while reading the Sunday newspaper, did you and/or any of your family members come across one or more of the following advertisements:

1. Fluffy Princess pet grooming products and Cat Fancier subscriptions.
2. Squawking Parakeet Bird Feeder and Bird Houses Animal Shelter Program.

3. Papa John's Pizza Promo: three pepperoni pizzas for the price of two, plus a 2 litre bottle of Pepsi.
4. Science Centre Little Scientists' Weekend Social Programs.
5. Green Thumb's Garden Centres Perennial Bulbs.

If you and/or any of your family members did come across one or more of these advertisements, did you clip one or more of these advertisements with the intention of purchasing products from these stores?"

I have not completed one successful survey. None of the participants really understand what I'm asking, but even if they do, they give up when I ask them the next question.

"The Sunday before last, while reading the Sunday newspaper, did you and/or any of your family members come across one or more of the following advertisements..."

And then I have to repeat all of the advertisements again, because if I don't and one of my supervisors is listening in on my call, the survey will not count. So far, every single person who is actually willing to do a survey has hung up on me.

The computer dials a number. A man picks up. Seven cursor flashes.

"Hello?"

"Hello, this is Meredith Smith calling from Alliance, a national public opinion research firm. We are calling today to ask a few questions. Please be assured we are not selling anything today. We are simply interested in your opinion. May I please speak to the head of the household aged 18 or older?"

"What? What are you selling?"

"Actually sir, we are not selling anything. We are simply conducting a survey and

are interested in your opinions."

"What is this survey about? What are the questions?"

"Well, sir, I can't give you any of the questions before we begin the survey, but, like I said, the survey is concerned with your average Sunday activities. It is also interested in your newspaper reading habits and there are some questions about pets, as well."

"Why the hell do you want to know about what I do on a Sunday?"

"Well, sir, as I said, I am calling from a public opinion research firm. Your opinions are very valuable to us-"

"What a joke! Listen lady, why don't you go back to school?"

I yell, "I am in fucking school, you fucking asshole," into the phone before I even know what I'm doing.

I'm shaking and my coworkers are looking at me. The dial tone is buzzing into my head through my damp headset. I'm out of breaks for this shift but I take off the headset and I get up from my computer without leaving an explanatory message on the screen. I run down the stairs and I'm outside in the cold air lighting a cigarette.

I realize two things. First, buddy had already hung up and my words would never register with him. And second, I'm not actually in school. Not a lot of people know this. Not my supervisors, who interpret my disdain for them as elitist snobbery. Not my friends back home, who always ask about my performances. Not my mother. Not my mother who is funding this little project of mine, who sends me a $1500 living allowance every month. Not my mother who thinks that I am advancing my craft and making connections and creating a name for myself in a big city across the country.

There's a lot I could have told that guy. I could have told that guy details about his voice, about his pitch (sharp) and tempo (even) and even the key in which he spoke (A major), but I didn't. I could have told him that I had effectively mastered most of Mozart's sonatas by the age of 13, that most people on this planet would never do that, even the musically inclined, but I didn't. I could have even told him that he was a dick for making assumptions about hardworking (relatively speaking) strangers who were just trying to make a buck, but I didn't. Instead, I told him a fact about myself that was true 15 months ago. I had been in school. But now, not so much. "Lady, why don't you go back to school?" Why had he chosen those words? Why not, "get a real job?"

I flick away my half-smoked cigarette and take a deep breath and go back inside. My hair drips melting snow and my hands are wet. I continue taking deep breaths as I ride the elevator, walk back into the call centre, and to my station.

Back at my computer, everything seems normal. Hugo closes his eyes between calls. Ginger does a crossword puzzle. Susan flirts with Stephan. Like my outburst never happened. I relax a little.

Outside, the storm swirls more violently. Inside, the light is unnaturally bright. It hurts my eyes.

I dial a number.

"Hello?'

"Oh, um, hello. This is Anya Kirkoudis calling from – er, sorry. Wrong number."

I hang up.

It doesn't happen very often that I forget and use my real name. In fact, it's never happened before. The reason I did, I think, is because of the counting. I forgot to count

the number of times the cursor flashed. It threw me off.

I'm not sure what to do. Do I simply ignore it? Do I enter it and write, "missed"? Do I have to scrap almost three weeks worth of information? Do I start over again?

Unaccounted for time levels is up

The message is for me. I'm sure of it. It must be for me. Although I have never before wasted time at work, never before sat so long in between calls.

How much time has passed?

"Anya, you okay?" Ginger looks concerned.

"Hmmm? Yeah, fine. I'm fine."

I click the button and the computer dials again.

Fax number, five rings...Business number, seven rings...Voicemail, eight rings...

"Hello?"

"Hello, this is Anya Kir-"

Fuck.

Three rings. But does it count if I screw up, hang up?

The cursor keeps flashing. It won't stop. The little square of dark blue against the black screen.

I am dialling again. I didn't mean to dial yet. I needed a moment.

"Hello?"

Click.

I didn't count.

Please see your shift supervisor in room 5F.

The message appears as I dial another number. I abort the call before anyone can

answer.

Blood begins to rush. My cheeks flush. I can feel the pulse of blood, boom, boom, boom, a perfect beat to match the flashing cursor. The flashing blue against black.

She is waiting for me to die. She is waiting for me to die. She is waiting to die. She is to die.

But then the beat increases, baboombaboombaboom and

I am watching Anya. Outside, watching, seeing and not hearing the muttered words, Anya hunched over, hugging her stomach, red in the face, watching the cursor-

"Anya!"

Ginger's hand is on my shoulder, shaking me.

"Anya, what's wrong?"

Back inside.

"Anya, you okay?"

Ginger is crouching beside me, his freckled face inches from my own.

"Yeah, yeah, just not feeling very well."

There is a presence at my left elbow, a tap on the shoulder that Ginger is not squeezing.

"Ms. Kirkoudis? Can you please come with me?"

My heart is still pounding, my breath still escaping in rapid wheezes. But I get up and I follow this short woman through the maze of telephones and black screens and staring faces.

Room 5F. She opens the door and I walk in behind her. She sits behind the desk and I stand in front of her.

"It's Anya, right?"

"Yeah, it's Anya."

It's a new supervisor, one I haven't seen before.

"How long have you been with us, Anya?"

Good question. I pause, count, pause again.

"18 months, Anya, you've been with us for 18 months."

"18 months," I say, nodding.

"And in these 18 months, Anya, in this year and a half, you have been told, I imagine, it has come up, I imagine, that using foul language when speaking with a interviewee is against Alliance's policies? That it is, in fact, completely unacceptable?"

"What?"

"Because, Ms. Kirkoudis, we received a complaint very recently, in fact, within the past hour, that you swore at a potential survey participant. And, because here at Alliance we take such accusations very seriously, we reviewed your recent telephone recordings and we found that you did, in fact, swear at this participant."

I stare at this woman. I don't know what her name is. She doesn't even have a nametag.

"And because we take these matters so seriously, because you represent Alliance as a company, we have decided to take remedial action"...

I stop listening. I think about my Alliance t-shirt. About my excellent performance reviews. I look at her more closely. Charlene, I think this woman's name must be Charlene. Charlene and her smudge of red lipstick at the corner of her working mouth. Charlene isn't that much older than me. Charlene might even be my age.

"...a suspension pending performance review-"

"Charlene? That's it, right?"

The woman stops talking.

"Why don't you just tell me? Admit it. Just tell me your name is Charlene."

I don't know why I'm asking this woman why her name is Charlene. She is silent.

I open the door to room 5F, slam it behind me. My heart is beating again, but this time it's different. As I grab my purse, stuff my winter coat into the crook of my elbow, grip my notebook in my hand, I feel different. Excited.

"I'm out of here, Ginger. I'll give you a call in a few days."

I stomp away to Susan's desk before he can respond.

"My grandmother died today."

"Anya?"

"My grandmother died today. I quit."

The air is thick, snowflakes sticking to my face and coat, melting immediately, the effect the same as rain.

Since my last cigarette, the sidewalk has disappeared. In its place is a carpet of dripping snow, puddles forming in other people's footprints. My own feet sink to the concrete and I can feel the wet seep in, past the leather of my winter boots, past my thick black stocks, into my already puckering skin.

I had wanted to walk, to get some air, but in this weather it would take me an hour. And with wet feet? That's how people get pneumonia.

It is ironic that the call centre is located steps from the university that I have failed

out of. Or, that I simply stopped attending. Both share the same metro stop and sometimes I see people from Music History 331, or performance theory 336, or some other class that I attended a handful of times before I walked away without looking back.

When I see them, I avert my eyes. I walk to the other end of the platform, I study my nails, I turn around and walk back up out of the metro.

I doubt they remember me. I doubt they care. I doubt that I did anything particularly memorable to have even been noticed. But seeing them makes my stomach ferment. It is not the same as looking at the pile of unopened counterpoint textbooks on the corner of my desk at home, or even remembering that hundreds of pages of sheet music are hidden away in my filing cabinet. These sights I have gotten used to. These books and sheets of paper cause no more panic than the sight of my soup ladle or deodorant stick. They have blended into the everyday detritus, they are simply part of the landscape now.

Tonight there is no one I recognize on the metro platform, nor at the bus stop, nor when I walk from my stop to my apartment. I am abandoned to my thoughts and to the increasing numbness of my toes.

When I arrive home, I focus on the task at hand. I neatly put aside the visions of ivy-coloured buildings and the decades old Steinways confined within them.

The transformation takes a good hour.

A quick shower, a quick once over with the razor, a quick blow-dry. My hair straightener or curling iron, depending on the levels of humidity and/or precipitation, make-up, dangling earrings, tight jeans or a skirt (tonight, jeans), a lacy bra, and I'm good

to go.

My rouged face does not resemble the one I wore to work. Gone is the puffy skin, the pale complexion, the stern expression. I have no idea how Hugo the fire eater, a man who has only seen me while at work, could even conceive of me as a stripper.

Now I look like I'm ready to have a good time. Now I look like I'm looking to have a good time.

This ritual transformation is repeated three or four times a week. Not normally on a Thursday. But this Thursday is, I think, out of the ordinary.

I never go to the same place twice in a week. If I've gone through a couple regulars, I stop going to that place altogether. If the bartender or waitress gives me a knowing look, a slight sneer, I cross that place out of my rotation for at least three months. If I go to a bar with *him*, with Jared, I definitely don't go there on my own. Still, it is risky.

All this for a lay.

Tonight's bar is a local one, a few blocks from my apartment. I have chosen it for its proximity; there is, after all, a good foot and a half of snow on the ground. *Chez Justine* is a bit of a dive, what with its low hanging lights, faux stained glass windows, and dingy upholstery. It's even carpeted, the threadbare rug scarred with cigarette burns and stained with tar and chewing gum and filth.

I realize my chances aren't great tonight, but I slide into a seat at the bar anyway and order a double vodka soda. At the very least, I will not leave the place sober. Tomorrow, I'm not going into work.

Why don't you go back to school?

I shake my head to clear it, sip the drink as delicately as I can, but if anyone were looking, they would see a third of the fluid disappear up through the straw.

My mother had called. She hadn't left a message, but caller display showed a long, unrecognizable number.

As I think about my mother hovering over her own mother's deathbed, a man sits down two chairs away from me at the bar. He doesn't glance at me, so I take the opportunity to look him over. Late twenties, probably 28. Not a big guy, not on steroids (a benefit), not scrawny or even skinny. Brown hair, green eyes. He is picking away at the Heineken label when he finally looks over. I smile, he smiles. He shifts his body so that his chest faces me. I turn my shoulders ever so slightly in his direction. When he opens his mouth and speaks, I can't understand a word he says. He sees my puzzled expression and asks,

"English?"

"Yeah, sorry," I shrug and continue my smile.

"I said, it is not so good you are seul. Seul. Alone?"

"Oh, no, I'm just having a nightcap," and I bring the straw to my mouth and suck at the ice cubes in my glass.

"Another?"

I hesitate, look him over like I'm assessing whether or not he is a psychotic, and, after a few drawn out moments, I smile and say "sure."

"Une autre pour la mademoiselle," he tells the bartender.

Turns out my new friend's name is Philippe. Philippe is a student. He studies

geography at one of the French universities in town, and is celebrating acing his midterms.

"Not so cool?"

"No, well done."

"You in school?"

A tricky question.

"Yeah, McGill."

"Ah, I see. What are you studying?"

"Law."

Law is safe. No one expects you to discuss civil vs. criminal law or demonstrate the writing of a brief. Plus, it makes you seem smart, like you're not one to be taken advantage of. And it might also occur to them that you have easy access to lawyers in case they are thinking about anything not above board.

With music, who knows? Three hours later when you're good and tanked and very likely half-naked, the guy might pull out a guitar or a saxophone or even a mouth organ and expect you to work your magic.

"Do you have tests?"

"You mean right now? Just in the middle. I needed a break. Too much time in the library and I start going nuts."

"Nuts?"

"Crazy – um," I circle my index finger around my ear and he smiles, laughs.

"Me, too. Fou!"

By my fourth drink I begin to sway slightly on my stool. The key is not to get too

drunk. I want to remember the details. Was I on top? Was he? Was he a good kisser? Did I come? But then we have one more, and then another after that.

My friend Philippe and I slip and slide all the way to my front door. It is almost 2 in the morning and we are both drunk. We stumble inside and before I can get out of my boots, Philippe is pressing me up against the closed door. His icy hands fumble up my shirt. I gasp, he takes this as encouragement. I shrink away.

"Wait, wait, let me get out of my boots. I'll get us some beers, too." I unzip the boots, head to the kitchen for a couple Buds.

Philippe grows impatient. He walks to the kitchen, picks me up and throws me over his shoulder, the beers in my hand. I squeal as he navigates the littered living room, locates the bedroom, throws me on the unmade covers.

I will remember that part. The lifting, the carrying. The rest will be a blur of beer and hands and flesh and fluid.

I wake with a start. A man is in my bed. The damp, hot skin of his arm is sticking to my belly. I peel the limb off me, a sucking sound as the flesh separates.

I squint my way through the living room. The light inside the bathroom is bright, but I keep my eyes wide open, stare into the red orbs of my eyes. I feel almost sick but not, because I'm still drunk. I sway, remember the beer I drank while Philippe dozed on his back.

It started with the whispering. Almost intangible. Like maggots churning, rats masticating, tendons twisting. Until you get the whiff, hear the crunch, feel the pop. Sibilant Ss slipping through, jaws working, tongues licking lips. Whisper whisper

whisper until all you can hear are the voices, not only when you pause, but every time your fingers touch the keys. It is a battle between you and the music and the whisperers and their shivering, lisping syllables.

I was sixteen the first time it happened. At a recital on a Sunday afternoon, waiting back stage (so formal for such a small gathering), fingers warming inside mittens, stomach fluttering, ears attuned to the performer before me messing up, once, twice, a third time. A smattering of applause and the MC announcing my name. I stepped on stage, sat at the grand, settled into the bench. I positioned my hands and before I could start, I heard them. Two women in the third row (I didn't look up, I couldn't, but I knew) softly ushering words into each other's ears. Not softly enough. I waited for them to stop. They didn't. I waited to begin. I forgot how to begin. I stared at the mess of black and white (usually so organized, so sensical) spread out before me and I couldn't begin. I couldn't remember. I looked at the audience and I muttered, "I just need my music." But when I rose and left the stage they applauded quietly (to hide their own embarrassment for me, at me) and I realized as I retreated that I couldn't very well return. The MC regarded me oddly and then I was backstage gathering up my music, my mittens, and then I was in the lobby and then outside in the cool March air of a sunny Sunday afternoon. I waited for a long time, until everyone in the audience had spilled outside except for my mother and my teacher. I waited behind a post, hiding, hidden, until my mother came outside calling my name. There was a look of fear on her face, like something had broken, and mingled with the fear was a slow rage, and my teacher called me a coward. She said, "Anya, you are a coward. A coward." I believed her. I couldn't say, it was the whisperers. She said I would perform the piece the next month, along with

another one I had been working on, even though performing two pieces wasn't allowed. So the next month, four Sundays later, I returned and so did the whisperers. But this time I didn't forget the music. I played, my fingers danced across the keys. But something had broken, I had broken. My legs shook, my hands shook, my body shook through both pieces, but I played them and I finished them and I didn't mess up. But the pleasure was gone.

I'm sure there were many whisperers before that Sunday in March. I just noticed them for the first time that day. Perhaps it was the way they whispered, or what they whispered. They didn't like me, those two women. Their own daughters performed that day, before me, missing trills, pounding dully, ignoring rubatos, forgetting crescendos.

And of course I might have imagined their whispering, imagined it all, but in the end it doesn't matter because something snapped. Every performance after that I waited for the whispering and whether or not it came, I shook. My hands, legs, arms, fingers, feet. I wonder how I did it, performing all those twisting pieces for small audiences, large audiences, examiners, adjudicators while my body vibrated and my heart stopped, suspended until the applause finished and I could vomit in the bathroom.

And now, standing in this bathroom, naked, my eyes red and watering, that's how I feel again. For different reasons this time, but I bend over the open toilet bowl and there is the familiar surge and splash and my stomach is emptied of its brown poison. I wipe my mouth and go back to bed.

Calgary, 1985

Portrait #3

The blonde child sits in her mother's shoe closet and cries. She brings thin-heeled brown suede boots to her nose and breathes in the smell. She fondles the soft green leather of her mother's favourite pair of pumps. Her own shoes always smell of feet, sweat and bacteria and general nastiness. Her mother's shoes, however, are new and fresh, like she has never worn them. The child knows her mother wears the shoes, has seen her spend ten hour days balancing on precarious heels.

The child rocks back and forth, the pump's pointy toe jabbing her ribs, the slight stabs echoing her own rhythmic sobs.

And then the closet door opens and her mother is looming over her, a pained expression on her face. The child stops rocking. She stifles a hiccup and breathes through her saliva.

"What on earth are you doing? I've called you for ten minutes."

"I thought you went away."

The mother says nothing and grabs the green pump out of her child's hands.

"Don't do that again," and she smoothes the sweaty finger prints off the leather with her palm. "Don't ever do that again."

The child feels very small, like she could shut her eyes and disappear. She feels ridiculous, because here is her mother, in front of her in the flesh, her ample breasts pressed together in a tight halter top. She is very much alive, her chest straining the horizontal blue and purple stripes.

Her mother wears the shirt in the garden and her back is baked black, the skin pigment so dark she could be of a different race. That is where she was before she found her daughter rifling through her shoes.

"Come and set the table."

The child shuffles out of the closet, crawling past her mother's firm legs that are criss-crossed with blue and purple veins, much like her top. The child notices her mother's heels, rough and cracked like dried plaster.

The mother squats down in the closet and straightens all the shoes, notices that her daughter pulled the paper stuffing out of her brown boots.

"Anya, what are you trying to do, ruin my boots? Do you know how much they cost?"

"No," the child says.

"We don't have enough money to buy new boots."

"Okay."

"Just don't do that again."

Soula

Calgary, 1969

At night, before he left, I would wait. I would wait with the cat purring on my throat, my body naked under covers, shivering, but not with cold.

I would wait with a full bottle of scotch beside the bed. A full pack of cigarettes. I sucked mints to stem stale breath. My teeth felt fuzzy in a fresh mouth of blue.

And then the cat would lift herself off my neck, stop her purring. She would jump into the corner of the room and scratch holes in her litter box. And the room would smell and I would have to slip the window open with a naked arm, goose bumps and raised hair.

If he came at all, he would come in at that moment. He would enter as my cat licked her anus and my arm reached for the window. He would come in and turn on the light and laugh. I would pour scotch and light two cigarettes and give him one.

In the morning, the room would freeze and I would find my face buried in the fuzz of his armpit, my breasts mashed against his rough arms. My mouth would taste like ten dozen stale cigarettes and my teeth would still be fuzzy.

The trains I have taken. Trains from Thessaloniki to Bulgaria, to Czechoslovakia. Trains with flea-ridden pallets and piercing whistles. Trains without water, with toilets backed up, my bladder pinched, my body bending from the waist, rocking back and forth to hold in the liquid.

The train from Brno to Nuremberg. A train with hard, wooden seats. I placed a

sweater on the seat, crossed my legs and looked out the window. I smoked cigarette after cigarette, squeezing my lips and blowing smoke through my nostrils.

Germany and its trees, houses with slanted roofs, glimpses of red geraniums on the windowsills.

Here, there are no trains.

When I wake, my stockings are frozen. I pry apart the thin material and it tears, a gentle rip in the knee, in the thigh. They are my last pair.

I walk to work, walk in a gray wool skirt, my bare legs numb to the fibres, their itch. My toes mashed into the stitching of my black, suede boots. The heel is pointed, the soles smooth. I slide across hard-packed snow, my feet catching all the ripples and dips of the ice. I take mini-steps, my thighs burning with the effort of such contained strides.

The house is warm. Always warm even though the fireplace never crackles when I am there. Twice already I have scooped powdered ash into a bag, wiped the blackened brick with a damp cloth, so I know they must use it.

This woman, Mrs. Hill, supplies clean cloths and lemony detergent. I change into old clothes, walk across smooth strips of wood with bare feet. She smiles at me, this Mrs. Hill, asks me to clean the bird's cage, tells me it's okay if the little blue bird flies through the house, it is too cold to open the windows anyway. She flaps her fingers while looking at the bird. Little Benjamin, she calls him. She lifts the latch on the cage door and he sits on his stoop, stares at me and cocks his head.

What a delicious snack for Kisa, a juicy bird with soft, sky-blue feathers and an orange beak. I smile to myself as I sweep the kitchen floor. The bird settles itself on a kitchen chair and chirps.

Mrs. Hill motions to the door. She wears a thick, black coat.

Visiting a friend, she says. She holds a tin in her hands, perhaps cookies or cupcakes or other sweet, sweet pastries that make my stomach ache. She says I can have a sandwich, there is meat in the fridge, bread in the breadbox.

Thank you, and I smile.

I walk home with an envelope in my right pocket. My name is written on it in shaky handwriting. *Soula*. Mrs. Hill has my name from the work agency, my last name, but perhaps it is too long to write out. Not short like Hill, although I do not know Mrs. Hill's first name.

My fingers grip the envelope tight, my toes sharp against the thin leather of the boots. Trolleys, how I miss street trolleys. Their eagerness to pick you up, their chiming bells, the grooves in the street that they follow.

My thighs swish against each other. The friction keeps them warm, although perhaps they are so numb I can't feel them. Perhaps I don't know how much they will thaw later, tingle.

My left hand grips a little bundle of paper. A bit of roast beef, some wedges of fat I sliced off the meat that went into my sandwich. A half-teaspoon of butter. All rolled together and bleeding grease through the paper.

I stand in front of my apartment building. A squatting, square box, boring and brown. My window faces the alley. It faces the tall, mirrored buildings and the tower I thought was a factory's chimney. It faces broad windows that look into other people's apartments, their houseplants and bookshelves.

I unlock the door and walk in, observe that the bathroom is unoccupied.

I unroll the paper and place the moist food in Kisa's dish. She licks it, licks my hand, and then she chews her food slowly.

I take a bundle of bottles, underwear, and pyjamas to the bathroom. I lock the door behind me and kneel on the streaked tile. I run the hot water and pop the plug in, pour vinegar and soap into the stream of water and watch the bubbles breed.

An inch of water, its steam sour and pungent, and I plunge a hand into the brew, a scrub brush clenched between my fingers. My skin emerges pink, spotted with bubbles. It cools as I scrub the walls of the bathtub, the puckered grooves where the porcelain has been worn away by ripples of skin and water and soap, the delicate gray film coating the stone, almost imperceptible.

I scrub until the muscles in my palm ache, until the water turns tepid. Then I drain the tub, splash water with my hands until the water drains clear, no bubbles popping as they swirl down hot pipes.

I plug the tub again. I sit down and wait for the steam to drip off my nose. I wait for my thighs to burn, for my feet to redden.

I push in the faucet with my toes, the water almost rippling over the porcelain onto the floor. I stay very still, feel sweat run down my scalp, stick to the roots of my hair.

When the water has cooled and my skin wrinkled, I drain the tub and wrap myself in a towel.

I walk to the room in slippers, not trusting the corridor's brown carpet.

Kisa sits on my bed, a hand rubbing the crease between her neck and chin. The

hand doesn't pause when I enter, just keeps rubbing and rubbing, twirling its fingers through the soft fur.

Anya

Montreal, 2003

I wake to find a strange man staring at me.

"You snore, you know."

"I know."

My eyelids are sticky with sleep and I dig at the corners with my pinkie finger. I roll over to my right side and check the clock. It's flashing 12:00.

"Do you know what time it is?" I ask the strange man.

"Nope."

His name. I can't remember his name.

I get out of bed and shuffle to the computer. 11:47.

"Listen, I gotta get going," I say. My mouth is dry and my tongue is thick with last night's booze.

Standing makes my head spin, so I sit back down on the bed.

"Do you want the breakfast? We could get some?"

"No, I don't have time for breakfast. I have to get going. I have to go to work."

"I thought you said you quit your work."

I stand back up. I don't remember saying anything about work, but I don't say this. Instead, I dig into my laundry hamper and pull out a pair of shorts and a grey t-shirt, pull them on. I am thirsty.

"Well," I say, "I've got stuff to do."

I start ripping off a pillow case, throw it to the ground.

"You really need to get going."

"Well, you said that your boyfriend wouldn't be back until the night."

My hands lose their grip on the second pillow case. Surely I had not mentioned Jared.

"You said it was your anniversaire."

This strange man is starting to bother me now. His naked, lolling body is coming between me and the sheets that I need to wash.

"Listen, you gotta go."

He makes no move, doesn't even twitch a muscle. I grip the duvet and pull it off his body. He didn't expect that. He grasps at it too late, his naked body in full view. His shaved chest, broad shoulders, limp penis, all in view. He has a tattoo of a bird on his arm. I don't remember it from the night before.

"Tabernac, what are you doing?"

"Get out. I said you gotta go."

The man reaches his arm to the ground, fumbles around on the floor for his clothes which are crumpled up by the foot of the bed next to the empty beer bottles.

For a moment I am the only one wearing anything and I feel in control. Nauseated, slightly moist, very tired, but in control. He dresses and then he turns to me.

"I'm sorry about your grandmother."

He walks out of the room, pauses to put on his shoes, and then leaves the apartment. He doesn't even slam the door behind him.

I sit down on the floor and bring the duvet up around my shoulders. Panic swirls my stomach. My heart rattles my chest, I can only almost feel the blood in my veins

getting hotter.

I wonder, what other secret stories have I told? How much else have I simply handed out?

I stay on the floor for a while until I calm myself. Then I get up, finish stripping the bed.

In the kitchen, I find Philippe's number written on the back of my visa statement. He tacked the statement onto the fridge door with a cat-shaped magnet. He must have done it last night.

514-730-4954. Philippe. Call me.

I take the visa statement down, tear it into tiny strips and throw them into the kitchen garbage can which is overflowing with eggshells and moulding coffee grounds.

I search for evidence of him, of sex, and find two condom wrappers beneath the bed. I check the bathroom garbage for the actual condoms and find none. I suppose he flushed them down the toilet.

My stomach is raw and my head is aching. I pour a glass of water and chug it. It doesn't help but I know that hydration is important. Today is, after all, an important day.

I will wash the sheets. I will sweep the floor, do the dishes, empty the ashtrays, spray French perfume through rooms, scrub the bathtub, organize the piles of clean and dirty clothes on my bedroom floor. I do this every time Jared comes home.

But first I will call work and tell them – and then I remember. I don't have to call in. I have quit. They are not expecting me. The excuse I had, the excuse about my grandmother having a stroke and being in the hospital, is worthless.

I fill another glass with water and drink greedily, drops of water escaping my

mouth and dripping from my chin to my chest.

I set the alarm clock for 2 pm and crawl back into my sheetless bed.

The winter sun is pale. It barely pierces my curtains, leaves my bedroom in thin shadows. Before I fall asleep, my body already curled in around the pillow Philippe used to rest his head, I realize I was right. The most memorable portion of the night had been the way he picked me up off my feet, the way he swung me onto his shoulders and the way he threw me down onto the bed. After that the motions bleed into one another, a collage of flailing hands and darting tongues.

I can't remember anything else.

I open my silverfish closet for an inspection. I'm not sure if the varnish is really damaged, but there's a dried white froth across the wood.

The bed is made, the dishes done, the garbages emptied. I have placed the newly washed ashtrays underneath the kitchen sink. I have removed Jared's slippers and shoes from the hall closet and arranged them in a neat line on the shoe rack. The apartment smells of lysol and perfume, but the scent of stale smoke still lingers beneath it.

The only problem is the closet and the bag of clothes stuffed under my unused desk.

No evidence of the silverfish. No tracks through the foam, no carcasses, no crusts. I can't bring myself to hang anything in there, though. So I place the plastic bag full of scaly clothes in the closet and I close the door.

I have another list of tasks to complete before Jared's return from work, from his selling or inspecting or whatever it is that he does. I wrap myself up in scarves and

sweaters, stuff a shopping list into my coat pocket, set off down the slippery sidewalks. An air of dread settles on me. Dread at the thought of Jared's reappearance? Or perhaps it is just that I have never gotten used to the permanent presence of a man in my house.

My birth might as well have been a virgin one. Well, at least you could say that I thought of it that way. For the first twelve years of my life, or so.

It didn't occur to me for a very long time that my mother had not simply conjured me out of thin air. That her desire for my existence wasn't enough to make me suddenly (and, as I've been told, painfully) appear. The fall, the bleeding, the doctors, the prayer, the promise to god, all this was just a messy business that couldn't be avoided. Extraneous details. At the heart of the event was my mother. She alone.

They started appearing, however. At friends' houses they would show up for dinner, receive larger portions than the rest of us, consume their food quickly, and then retreat to their dens or the basement to watch TV in private. They were the large, lumbering figures that we tiptoed around. My friends' mothers would silence us with the words, "your father's trying to sleep." I never quite understood the gravity of this phrase, but I would mimic the solemn terror exuded by my friends and shut the hell up.

Fathers. To me, a nuisance. A wonder. A curiosity. Most of all, a mystery. Where did these men go off to in the morning? And more importantly, why were they allowed to return at night? They weren't all bad, of course. In fact, none of them were particularly bad at all. Mr. Wallace, for instance, gave me candy each time I came around for a Saturday afternoon play date (the play dates were scheduled between practice sessions and therefore never lasted longer than three hours). Mr. Schoenberg told mediocre knock-

knock jokes at dinnertime. While the jokes were lame, his spirit was in the correct place, and I appreciated that.

Other men, I could figure out. For instance, my grade three teacher, Mr. Lukasic, made sense. His job was to impart knowledge and babysit. Mrs. Owen's husband, too. Mrs. Owen was my piano teacher from the ages of nine through twelve. Mr. Owen (I presume that was his name) had a few jobs. The most important of these was to avoid contact with Mrs. Owen's students and to bring her a cup of tea at the start of each one hour lesson. He was obliging and I think he would have even been friendly if not for the palpable fear he had of his wife.

While I wasn't at a complete loss about the possible roles men had in relation to my life and the lives of others, it wasn't until the age of twelve that the equation began to make sense. Grade 6 sex-ed with Mrs. Nolan. Mrs. Nolan was a large woman who spoke to us about vaginas, penises, birthing canals, and ejaculations. While she spoke to us of these phenomena, my classmates squirmed and wondered: did she have such things? Could such appendages be found underneath her brown skirts and between her stout and thickly stockinged legs?

While my classmates speculated away their lunch hours, I experienced epiphanies. According to the data, according to what I was being told by the *authorities*, these lumbering men who appeared, disappeared, revolved around the peripheries of my friends' lives, had an actual involvement, a vital one, in the creation of my friends' very being. That's why my friends' mothers tolerated these men taking up so much space, that's why they fed them, that's why they cleaned up after them. That's why these men had the right to a perfectly quiet house and a single malt scotch at the end of the day.

In the face of such evidence, I revised my theories regarding my origin. It was very possible, even probable, that my mother had not acted alone, that some greater biological machinations had been at work.

I began searching the house for evidence. Perhaps one of these hairy individuals inhabited my own home and I had simply missed it. Perhaps he appeared as I left for school and disappeared as my bus rumbled down the road when I returned home again. I searched for the paraphernalia I had seen at my friends' houses: large lace up running shoes smelling of sour sweat and foot fungus; silver handled razors with coarse black hairs twisted between the blades; golf clubs; Men's Health magazines; beer.

I found nothing. Instead, I got in trouble for rifling through closets and creating general disorder.

But one day, I did find something. My mother's *Hairdressing Handbook*, a textbook she had used in beauty school. The book contained diagrams detailing the correct construction of pin curls, the proper proportions of chemicals used in permanents, and instructions on how to be aesthetically pleasing to the client (*Bathe! No Gum Smacking! Clean Clothes! A Happy Disposition and Cheerful Smile!).*

I had pored over the well-worn pages many times before, studying the musculature of the human scalp, imitating massage techniques (indicated by curving arrows) on the bald head of one of my childhood dolls, and imagining myself holding both a comb and a pair of scissors in one hand, just as my mother did in her salon.

And then, one day, I saw it. One word scrawled next to my mother's first name in what could only be her own, much younger, handwriting.

Kurkova

Soula Kurkova

Something in my twelve year old head clicked. I made the connection.

I had always known about my mother's marriage. Of course, I don't remember hearing the story. Just like I don't remember the first time my mother told me about the orphanage. Just like I don't remember hearing about my mother's arrival in Calgary. But I know these stories nonetheless.

"It was October. In Prague, it was beautiful. Here, there was snow. Fields. I saw from the aeroplane and I thought, my god, they bring me here to work in the fields, picking potatoes. Because that's what we do in the orphanage. My hands cold all the time, cracking and bleeding. I cried for two weeks. If I had money, I would go home."

These stories, the ones about her coming and going and what happened in between, these I knew. I still do. But the story about the marriage was different. That story was always whispered between my mother and Mirka, elusive clues about a man and my mother and a marriage. The details were fuzzy, but still, I knew.

And anyway, I couldn't see my mother with a man. I couldn't see her connected to any other human being. Well, besides me, anyway.

It didn't take much to put two and two together. My mother, a man named Kurkova, and Mrs. Nolan's information was enough. I hid the book in my sock drawer.

She found it within three days. Maybe she was simply putting away socks. Or maybe she just sensed its absence. Who knows?

"You taking my things? Little shit, stealing from me."

I didn't get any dinner that night, didn't get tucked in.

She took the book back and I never saw it again. And still I wonder if I hadn't known before, if I hadn't asked my mother about my father. Surely, these questions would have come up. But I can't remember.

The Chinese guy is still selling the shitty street noodles on the corner of Pine two hours after I first saw him. He was staring out the window when I walked by on my way to the SAQ. He's still staring out at the street. Maybe he's staring at the people walking down the street or at the Portuguese restaurant across the street, I don't know. Maybe he's just staring at his own reflection in the window.

I didn't bother to roll up the hems of jeans so they're dragging through the muck and snow and by the time I get home they'll be crusted up with salt and gunk. I won't bother to wash them. Tomorrow I'll wear them again but I'll roll them up so nobody will be able to tell.

I could take the bus home. I've completed my shopping, picked up everything I needed to, so my hands are full and my boots are leaking. But I'm trudging up this hill instead of taking the bus because I have more time to notice people like the Chinese guy. I wonder if he eats the street noodles he fries up and I also wonder what they taste like sober. They taste bad enough when you're drunk. I can't imagine them sliding down my throat without the sour taste of too many beers, shots, filling my mouth. Greasy worms, the taste of burnt oil and chilli sauce. He must carry their odour home, through his front door, into his living room, kitchen, bedroom. Even after bathing his hands are pockmarked with the errant splashings of grease. Does the smell on his clothes make his wife gag? Does it comfort her? Is she indifferent? Does the Chinese guy even have a

wife? Would she do his laundry?

These thoughts distract me from the brown muck spraying from underneath tires, from underneath my own feet as I steadily slip home.

They distract me from the bottle of red weighing down my purse. The strap cuts into my shoulder, the left one, and causes my neck to ache just slightly. I could ask for a massage when I get home, but I won't.

When I arrive he will embrace me, kiss me, hold me, and I will stand as fluidly as possible, willing away my stiffness. I will unfurl myself from his arms and present him with the bottle of red. "Look, a koala," I will say, pointing at the cartoonish image gracing the label. I will smile. The wine isn't from the Dep, it's SAQ quality. But still I picked a bottle showcasing an animal. Monkeys, roosters, kangaroos, lizards. I have drunk all their cheap wines, sickly sweet or sour, all lacking important winely qualities.

I am showing him I realize the importance of the occasion. See? An SAQ wine. See? I stopped especially. See?

But we'll toss the paper bag imprinted with the SAQ label into the recycling bin and we'll drink the wine and then we'll throw the bottle into the recycling bin, too. He won't remember the SAQ bag in the morning when my snoring wakes him and he feels hung over (I won't be hung over. It takes much more than half a bottle of wine). My flowers will sit on the kitchen counter, blooming for at least a week. By the time he goes away again, they will wilt and die and I won't throw them out until the day before he comes home again.

Not that we celebrate with wine and flowers every time he comes home. Just birthdays, anniversaries. Just those. Today is an anniversary. Actually, it was yesterday.

One and a half years. We couldn't celebrate yesterday, though, because he wasn't home. He was somewhere in Ontario. Next week will be New York. The week after, I don't know, but he will be gone again, selling or doing whatever it is that he does while on the road.

One and a half years neatly punctuated by a total of six wine and flower nights. A spattering of chocolates, a few movies, some Indian food, the purchase of a pink vibrator, a pair of high heels and stockings.

My pace slows as I take out a cigarette, light it, walk on. There was a time when I couldn't walk and smoke at the same time. Smoking and walking requires coordination. Sliding the cigarette back in between your lips, inhaling while your body bobs up and down, directing the cherry away from the flyaway ends of your hair. Nothing worse than the smell of burnt hair.

Dinner will be take out. Indian? Probably. He can decide. Just not street noodles. He would never eat street noodles. The Chinese guy will be selling those slimy worms until after the bars close, until the last of the drunk undergrads stumble into their cabs, until the streets are empty and he is sure no more Styrofoam containers can be sold.

One more block. I chuck the smoke into a shining puddle and reach into my purse for gum. He doesn't approve of the habit.

The lights are on. He is at the door of the apartment I so meticulously cleaned and organized just a few hours ago. I can see the bouquet in his hands, and then they are around me and his warm, milk breath is on my cheek, in my ear. I pull away and show him the bottle of red in my purse, say, "Look, it's a koala," but the bottle is still encased in its brown SAQ bag.

I always sleep on the same side of the bed. It's the side of the bed furthest away from the wall. I can't sleep next to the wall. It makes me feel claustrophobic. Plus, if I sleep next to the wall, my arm invariably goes numb. I have no idea why.

Jared doesn't snore. He should snore because of his sinuses. They're always plugged up, always full of mucous. His voice is almost whiny because of it, because of his stuffed nose. He breathes through his open mouth and his breath comes out in even popping noises through his chapped lips.

He's a deep sleeper. Thank god for that.

Jared and I didn't finish the bottle of wine. There's still a good glass left in there. I pour the wine into a water tumbler and head outside for a cigarette.

Tonight is the first real snowstorm in the city. It is my first real snowstorm. Sure, it has snowed before. It has been snowing straight for the past week. But this is the first real blizzard. The kind that this place is known for. The stuff of legend. Whipping winds, freezing rain, black ice, these I've seen. But since I arrived home with my SAQ wine a few hours ago, the snow has managed to engulf cars, cover porches, erase sidewalks. It's not cold, not warm. Crisp. The red wine steams a little, and each time I bring the cup to my lips, the liquid is a little cooler.

I slide my slippered feet through the new snow until I stand at the edge of the sidewalk. The bottoms of pyjama pants are already wet. I will have to change them before I go back to bed.

The snow is a clean, pure blanket hiding dog shit, plastic bags, the warning labels off packs of cigarettes. In the spring, layers of refuse, layers of animal waste, remnants of

drunken nights, all of it compacted tightly under feet and car tires, will melt a pool in the dips of sidewalks, clog sewers, muck newly purchased mary janes.

But now the city is clean and silent, the only sound I hear is my own breathing trapped between my scarved mouth and hooded ears.

The wine is cold now and it leaves a metal taste in my mouth. There is only a gulp left, and I shoot it out of the glass, spraying purple across the white sidewalk. The liquid warms the snow slightly, then freezes. A purple pattern crusting the nuzzled snowflakes.

A few years ago, I finally asked. It was a peaceful moment between my mother and me, a rare one, where my mother was drinking coffee and I was doing the crossword. A Sunday morning. We had made breakfast together. I washed the dishes, she dried. She didn't criticize my washing technique. The day was going well.

It came to me then, engrossed in all those clues ("Struck by cupid's dart?"), in all those words. I remembered. I hadn't thought of it in years, but all of a sudden the name flashed in my head:

Kurkova

"Kurkova. Was that his name, then? Kurkova?"

"Hmmm?"

"The man you were married to."

She stiffened, her face hardened, but all she said was, "not the 'ova.' The ova is only for the women."

She didn't say his name, didn't utter the two syllables, *Kurkov*.

All those years I had obsessed over a name that, in the end, had only ever

belonged to my mother.

Soula

Calgary, 1969

My mother, before the train from Brno to Nuremberg, would bring boys home to meet me. They would sit at the kitchen table with a cool glass of water, waiting. I would slide into the apartment silently, cast an eye towards the kitchen, and silently slide out.

The boys were Greek. Dark hair on their heads, dark hair curling out of their shirt collars. We belonged to the same Greek enclave in our new Czech home. But their Czech was slippery in their mouths, uncomfortable, even though we had all learned the language at the same time, when we were children and terrified.

I would leave the apartment and walk to the river. I would walk along the river to a café, a random café, and have a small cup of coffee or a beer. I would sit and wait. One, two, three hours would pass. Then I would return home.

The kitchen, empty. An abandoned glass of water, drained of its contents. My mother standing with a cooking spoon in her fist, her lips tight, the muscles of her jaw working, working under soft fat.

I would say nothing. I would nod to her and go to the living room and open a book. I would walk to the window and watch the street fade into night. I would wait. And then, as always, as though she timed it, her lips would part and the words would begin.

Ungrateful, she would say. Unnatural. Who doesn't want a good, Greek husband. A man to provide and to have babies with. A man to one day return home with.

My father would emerge from the bedroom with a small smile on his lips. Not this one, Eleni, another one. Soula will find someone when the time is right.

And now I wonder if the time is ever right, if one of those Greek men would be different, and if so, if it would matter.

I ask him to turn around. He flicks his head towards the wall. His eyes can still glimpse me if they slide to the right. I pull on underwear and a pair of pants, a sweater, brown with a small hole in the armpit.

It's okay now, and he turns his head towards me.

Your hair is wet.

Just took a bath. What did you think?

His hand twirls through Kisa's fur, little bits of hair flying onto the blanket on my bed.

She's shedding, I say.

I bought scotch.

A bottle sits on the bedside table.

I don't drink the stuff.

At least have a cigarette.

Cutting down.

And he says nothing. I examine his lips in the thin, afternoon light that streams through the window. Whiskers, pale and rough, line his mouth and chin. He did not have them before.

Your cat, she's bigger.

She's grown.

And your English, how is it.

All right.

Working?

Cleaning for a few women.

And what else?

I start the hair program soon.

Good, good.

He walks to the bottle of scotch and twists it open, pulls a cigarette from the pack in his front pocket and lights it. He pulls another one out and offers the lit one to me. I take it and suck. My head becomes lighter, the room dancing so that I have to sit down. I stroke Kisa and pull her onto my lap, but she jumps off, her claws biting into my knees as she leaps.

Kisa, I say, my breath short.

Why that name?

Why not?

Well, it's not Greek.

I run my fingers through my hair

You haven't asked anything about me.

I blow smoke in response. Then I stand and open the window.

It's cold.

It's a non-smoking building.

I am working now. I work in a restaurant, in the kitchen. We get a portion of the tips.

Good. I'm glad.

Have a drink. Please.

And I accept the glass that he extends to me, swigging back the scotch as fast as I can so that I don't feel the burn.

In the morning, I am back in bed. I lie on my side, away from him. When he wakes I close my eyes. He stands and stretches, moves away from the window when he realizes the blinds aren't drawn. He walks to the bed and looks at me, bends down and brushes my cheek with dry lips.

He dresses, pats Kisa, slips on his shoes, ties the laces.

Malak.

I didn't know you were awake.

Malak, at the restaurant, do they need help?

I don't know, I can ask.

I can't clean if I go to hair-dressing program. They won't let me clean at night.

I'll see, maybe in the kitchen.

Don't forget.

All right, all right. I'll ask.

Thank you.

He pauses at the door, then opens it and walks through, shuts it softly behind him.

I lie in bed a long time, until the sun sits high in the sky and my side of the building is covered in shadow. I will walk to the houses tomorrow, explain that I have a new job, that I was sick and couldn't come.

Today, though, is mine. I take the dictionary and set it on my lap. I pull a cigarette

from the pack on the table, open the bottle of scotch, and sip.

I wake up in the middle of the night. Malak, this man sleeping next to me, snores softly, his mouth open. I get out of bed and wrap myself in a blanket, switch on the light. Too bright. I switch it off, grab a book, open the door to the hallway, push Kisa back with my foot, and walk to the bathroom.

Sitting on the toilet with the book open in my lap, I form silent words with my tongue. I mouth silent sounds.

The book is a dictionary, an English-Czech dictionary that my English teacher gave me the second week of class. This will help, she said, her red hair always in her eyes. I would watch her during class, watch the way her bangs floated in between her eyelashes, wonder if it bothered her.

Zelenina. Vegetable. I separate the syllables in my head, mouth them. Ve ge ta ble. I combine them in my mouth. Vegetable. Vegetable. And then my throat vibrates and I push sound out of my mouth.

The toilet seat sticks to my skin as I shift my weight. I cross and uncross my legs, my feet growing numb.

We stand in front of the judge. The sign on his desk reads, Justice of the Peace. I do not understand these words, will have to remember to look them up in my dictionary.

The man says my name.

Soula Kirkoudis, he says. But he doesn't quite say my name. Soul Kerkouds. I flinch at the flat Rs choking his tongue.

He asks if I will marry Malak.

I say yes.

You need to say I do.

Oh, I do.

The ring is silver, a thin band that glints dull in the sunlight. Malak has promised me a new band as soon as he is promoted to assistant cook at the restaurant.

We leave with Mirka and her boyfriend, Allan, a Canadian, our witnesses.

The thin afternoon light chills me, even though it is late April and the trees push green buds into afternoons just like these.

So. Should we eat? I ask.

Yes, we need to celebrate. This is a time of celebration.

Mirka looks at me hopefully, her mouth a wide smile. She takes a cigarette out of her purse and hands one to me as well.

We go to the restaurant where Malak works, the restaurant he said I could work at, too, a long time ago. I found my own café, though, where I slice potatoes and prepare garlic bread.

The restaurant is almost empty, two men sitting in a corner booth by the bathrooms. We take the booth by the kitchen. Malak orders wine.

We order a pizza, ham and cheese and tomatoes. The crust is slightly soggy, the tomatoes raw, although Malak says that's the way they are supposed to be.

Our third bottle of wine arrives and I start laughing. Nothing in particular is funny. Just the booth and its sad vinyl tablecloth, red and blue checkers. My ring reflecting the candle. My skirt itching my waist.

Mirka joins in, laughs so hard that she yells, I need to pee, and runs to the bathroom. I run after her, collapse against the bathroom wall, yellow tiles and gray grout. She pees and flushes, leaves the stall with a red face.

Do you need to pee, she asks?

No.

The laughter aches my stomach, tires my shoulders. Suddenly, I am drained, exhausted, and we go back to the table, our glasses of wine confiscated by Allan and Malak. No amount of begging or bartering will get them back.

In the bedroom, I take off my clothes. I lay my new skirt on the chair, place my stockings on top of it. I sit on the bed.

Malak comes out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. He lets the towel drop to the floor and slides underneath the covers, turns his back to me.

I slide in next to him, rest my hand on his shoulder, feel the slender sprouts of hair on his skin.

Malak, Malak, I whisper. We're married.

I can hear his eyelids blink in the silence.

He turns over, a whirlwind of blankets.

You embarrassed me, is all he says. He turns over again.

What do you mean?

What do you mean, what do I mean? Your laughing. You and that Mirka. In front of that man. Like a couple of...

Alan? He doesn't care.

No, of course he doesn't care. It's just that we all seem so…

What?

Nothing.

He sighs and burrows deeper into the covers, his breath long and nasal, almost snoring.

I slip out of bed, slip on my housecoat, pick up Malak's towel from the floor.

Downstairs, I open my Czech-English dictionary, search for the words, "justice" and "peace." *Smirci soudce*. Two words that make sense, that I understand.

Anya

Montreal, 2003

"Anya, your mother called while you were in the shower. I didn't get to the phone in time, and then I didn't want to pick up in the middle of the message."

"That's fine."

My hair drips down my the back of my Alliance t-shirt. I bought the shirt with my Alliance dollars. The idea is that if you complete the greatest number of surveys in a shift, you win a "dollar." Your name flashes at the bottom of the screen during the entire shift, advertising your skill, your superiority over your fellow colleagues. For two Alliance dollars, you get a pen. For ten, a mug cozy. For twenty, the crème de la crème: a t-shirt. I shouldn't be wearing it, shouldn't even acknowledge that I used to work there, but the worn-out cotton and the hole in the armpit comfort me.

"Aren't you going to listen to the message?"

"What? Oh, yeah."

My mother's voice crackles over the answering machine speakers.

"Anya, it is me. I'm still in Oristeatha. Everything's the same. I calling you tomorrow."

Jared stands behind me, nudges his chin into my shoulder. I shrug him away.

"What's up with your mom?" he asks. "She sounds upset."

It is Saturday morning and Jared is still home. It is 10 in the morning and I am awake. Amazing. Coffee has been brewed, breakfast has been prepared and consumed. The dishes have been washed. I've even taken a shower.

Small miracles.

"She's in Greece."

"At this time of year?"

"Yeah."

"How come? Doesn't she normally go in the summer."

"Because my grandmother had a stroke. She's in the hospital. She's dying."

"Oh my god. Anya," he turns me around and engulfs me in a hug. We stand like that for a few moments. I can feel his heart beating through the layers of skin and cotton that separate us. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"Jared, are you crying?"

The back of my neck is wet from his watering eyes. I don't answer his question, can't tell him that the idea of him fawning over me, treating me like something delicate and about to break leaves me cold.

"No, no," he clears his throat. "It just must be so hard for you, all alone here, dealing with this. You should have called me. I would have come home."

I imagine that. A few extra days, say three, of Jared pottering about, making lunch, drinking tea, sweeping the kitchen floor, offering me kleenex, bringing home flowers, teddy bears.

"Jesus, she's not dead yet."

His arms drop and it's right there: horror.

Rein it in, Anya. Rein it in.

"I just, it's hard. I haven't seen her in so long. It's hard to know what to feel."

A softening around the eyes.

"It must be so hard," and another hug.

He used to ask me to play. After work, in the mornings, after sex, while he made dinner. He used to ask me to play all the time.

It wasn't until after we moved in together that he even realized the electronic upright with touch sensitive keys was anything more than a piece of furniture, a large box covered by a dark blue sarong and piles of books. It was only when the special movers picked it up and dropped it off that he clued in.

"Anya, play something," he would say, over and over again. It is probably the only thing we have ever fought about. That and the CDs. "Top twenty favourite Mozart piano pieces," or some other sort of rubbish. Not Mozart. The pianists, the production quality, the liner notes.

"Listen to them, Anya, maybe they'll inspire you," he would say, over and over again until one day I told him that I had acute tendinitis in my wrists and that I couldn't play and that his constant hassling was lowering my self-esteem.

It did the trick. He stopped.

Now the piano sits silent in the corner again, covered in the blue sarong and piles of books and, presently, a dozen roses in my cheap IKEA vase. The day old petals are already beginning to wilt, will probably die altogether by Monday, a result of the stale, staining water that I will neglect to change.

He had placed the flowers there last night as I was opening up the wine, and when I walked into the living room carrying two oversized wine glasses, I froze.

"Anything wrong honeybun?"

"No."

"You don't like the colour?" An edge cooled his words.

"No. I like them. More than that. It's just that they're so beautiful."

He took a glass from my hand and pulled me into him. A drop escaped my glass, splashed the hardwood, but he didn't notice.

Was it possible that he had forgotten that the looming blue in the corner was not just an awkward box? That I had screamed at him once before when he placed a glass of water on its surface? That he bothered me for months to play the damn thing? No?

"I ordered Indian. Saag paneer and butter chicken."

He took my glass from me and set it down on the coffee table, took me in his arms again and danced me around the room to the uneven beat in his head.

He led but I did my best to steer him away from the blue box in the corner, just in case. Even though I had cursed it a thousand times, had contemplated selling it, taking an axe to it. But I couldn't. What if my mother came to town? What would she say?

The vase weighed down the room and I glanced at it frequently as I chewed my dry naan bread. "Where'd you order from again?"

"Bombay Palace. Just down the street."

Yes, Bombay Palace. We had decided never to order from again after the last time. After the night I was convinced I was having a heart attack. It turned out only to be heartburn, but still.

"You sure do like those flowers."

"Hmmm?"

"The flowers. You keep looking at them."

"They're just so beautiful."

After he leaves tonight, I will still be dancing around them, avoiding the stench of their rotting water, waiting for the scum to emulsify on the glass, for the water to evaporate completely.

I normally don't smoke when he's around. I hate the disapproving glances, the scented candles that he burns down to the wick to camouflage my smell. I don't even smoke in the house when he's around. He once said that he didn't mind smokers, that he understood them, but now I think that was a lie, a way for him to communicate that he was laid back when really that isn't the case at all.

Today I don't care. I have an excuse. I bring out the ashtray and I sit on the couch and I smoke one cigarette after another.

Jared hovers, brings me tea, lights his candles, but he doesn't say a word. I don't either. I watch Saturday afternoon TV movies instead. A film about a dead bride and her lookalike and the man who becomes obsessed with her. In the end, it turns out that the dead bride is the lookalike's twin. The man and the doppelganger find the bride's murderer and trick him into giving himself up. It is, I think, a Canadian film.

He wants me to talk about it. He has asked, "how do you feel? Are you ok? What are you thinking?" But I silence him with one word answers. "Ok. Fine. Alright." I will not fight about this.

Jared is leaving again tonight. Normally he leaves on Sunday evenings, but tonight he is flying out on the red-eye.

I watch him pack his carry-on suitcase from the couch. It's 9 o'clock, but he is

leaving soon anyhow, because of the snow, he says. Because it's an international flight to New York. He can't risk a delay, he has important business to prepare.

"I understand," I say. As he packs, I plan. What I will wear, where I will go, what I might do when the taxi comes and takes him away.

"I love you," he bends down and kisses me quickly on the lips.

"Me too," and then he is out the door.

I watch the taxi's lights fade as it drives away into the snow, and then I get up and begin.

Soula

Prague, 1968

Arms hang out the train car windows, dangling hands with cigarettes attached to fingers. Cigarette butts litter the platform, the tracks underneath. Some of the butts float in pools of rainwater, the concrete still damp from last night's shower.

I stand facing the train, my fingers clenching the handle of my suitcase, my toes pinched together to keep me upright.

A hand on my shoulder, a ticket pushed into my palm. My father looks at the train, glances at his wristwatch.

A few more minutes, he says. It will go smoothly.

I unwrap a package of cigarettes, a new pack for the trip, and offer one to my father. He doesn't smoke. In fact, I've never seen him with a cigarette, but he takes the cigarette and places it between his lips and lights it with my matches. I light one as well.

You shouldn't smoke. Stains your teeth.

I exhale a stream of gray and look at his face. Fine red lines frame the browns of his eyes. His forehead crinkles, smooth waves of skin on his temple.

We stand side by side, the suitcase on the ground between us. We both blow smoke out the sides of our mouths. The whistle blows and he takes my hand. His sausage fingers squeeze mine until I can feel the outline of each scab pressing into my own smooth palm.

We throw our cigarettes onto the ground, turn and look at each other. He squeezes my hand, brings his mouth to my ear and whispers.

On the train, I speak only Greek. No papers, I say. And I am honest. They are gone, burned, and I can give any name I want.

Soula Kirkoudis, I tell them. On vacation for two weeks. The men in uniform eye my bag, my skirt and jacket and high heels.

Fine, I say, and the train starts. My hands shake in my lap. I lift them and light a cigarette, set my elbow on the windowsill so I can steady my fingers.

The bag I packed is old and black, something my father found in the back of the closet or elsewhere, something that wouldn't be missed.

I clutch the bag with the hand that doesn't hold the cigarette.

When the train passes into Germany, I show my visitor's visa. I speak a few words in German, the only ones I know, and the rest in Greek. A blonde woman comes and sits beside me, the train car filling up, and is asleep before the train shudders and starts, its whistle still echoing in the station.

Every station we pull away from, I think I see my father, standing in his long wool coat and gray cap. Waiting.

My father whispers in my ear.

Soula, I will not tell your mother.

He kisses me on the cheek and pushes me forward ever so slightly.

I will write, I say, I promise.

Anya

Montreal, 2003

My mother calls in the morning. Jared is gone and I am alone in an almost clean apartment that will soon dirty itself with my footprints and ashes and cigarette butts, dirty dishes, stained sheets, the detritus of the everyday.

"Your grandma is not doing so good right now."

My mother's voice has never been soft. There is always something hard: barbed wire, broken glass, something pricking. It is almost deep, as well. Not masculine. Just unyielding.

When she calls, her voice sounds thick and muffled, like she is shielding her mouth with her hand, like she is pained. But then she says, "this is no excuse to not to do work. You must practice. Do not forget why you are here."

I do not know if she means here, in Montreal or here, living, in general. But her voices changes when she says it, and the iciness is back.

I make a pot of coffee. I grind the beans. I pour the water. I curse as the water sloshes against the sides of the measuring cup and hits the floor. I don't wipe it up. I will forget about it and when it is not quite dry, I will walk through it and leave black smudges, almost footprints, across the kitchen floor. I wear my shoes inside.

Soon, I will have to leave the apartment and trudge through the streets to the bus stop, then to the metro, then to the building where I no longer work. It will be an effort to open the heavy doors and press the elevator button and punch in the employee code that gains me entry into Alliance's call centre.

I have to go and pick up my last cheque. I have to sign some papers, to make my unemployment official.

The wide sidewalk has been reduced to a gutter of compacted snow, a five-inch wide catwalk with three feet of ice on either side. My pace is slow as I place one foot in front of the other, trying to balance, to not topple over.

I should be taking the bus. The temperature is dropping as the weak sun dips closer and closer to the horizon. I can feel the cold through the layers of wool and down and cotton that are supposed to protect me from the elements. I can feel it on my face, the way my skin tightens, almost itches, the way my lips chap. The ice hardens a little bit more and my heels crunch into the crystals. I am the only one navigating the sidewalk.

It takes me twenty minutes to escape the confines of well-worn sidewalk paths. I'm shuffling across an ice plain, a tundra illuminated by the lights of downtown. The field slopes downhill and I tense my thighs and calves against the impending pull of gravity. In summer, this hill is the property of beach volleyball enthusiasts, their taut brown bodies spiking and diving and bumping and high-fiving. Now their sandpits are covered in a frosty white and just thinking about those half-naked bodies makes me shiver. The arches of my feet are aching from the effort of my short, mincing steps, so I stop and light a cigarette. The pause slows my blood. I feel it first in my feet. The warmth of my toes, my soles, has melted the snow seeping through the cracks and holes in my boots. Now it starts to freeze again. A hot pain creeps in, radiates from my nail beds to my ankles. My fingers, their tips bare and grasping the cigarette's filter, they turn hot, too. Their skin is grey against the dull brown filter and I am amazed they can even hold onto

the cigarette, they look dead already.

I shift my weight from left to right, inhale smoke. My heel slips from underneath me. I feel weightless and then I fall perfectly, cartoonishly, onto my back.

I lie there, hold my breath, and I think, this is how it happens. A stumble. A broken bone. In the morning they will find me like this, limbs spread away from my body, as though I had decided to make a snow angel and then, simply, stopped. I've read that some victims of hypothermia strip off all their clothing as the body provides one last surge of blood to the skin, producing so much heat that the victim thinks she is on fire. Perhaps that will be me, shedding my layers while hallucinating that I am ablaze.

But there is no shooting pain, no broken bones, nothing sprained. I don't even feel my feet anymore. I don't have to stay like this. I can get up. I can continue my awkward shuffle step all the way to the city centre, to the temporary warmth of Alliance's headquarters.

Ice is a private terror. On its slick surface, I am always waiting to fall, always waiting to hear the crunch of fracturing bones. It's always been a fear, even when I was young. Skating lessons at the age of five. Me standing in the middle of the Braeside community centre's indoor hockey rink. Me pushing off with my left foot, my body trembling, my belly clenched. Me wobbling on my right leg, unable to lift it off the ice, to get a proper stride. Me concentrating fully on reaching the safety of the sideboards, the sloping path that leads up and out and into the change rooms. Far away from the slick, unforgiving surface of the rink. I even wore a helmet. I didn't care that I was the only one.

The cigarette survived the tumble. It's not even wet.

My feet pulse now, fight their numbing. The pain is back. If it weren't for my feet,

I wouldn't even feel cold. If it weren't for the boots and their holes...it's the boots. The bloody boots. Or else I wouldn't think of it.

It was the boots that saved the girl in the story my mother used to tell. The story about a girl who received a letter and was told to go to a particular place at a particular time. She was Jewish, I'm pretty sure, and it was World War II.

In the story, it was mid summer and she dressed herself in summer clothes, in summer shoes. But before she left the house with the little suitcase that they undoubtedly took away from her, her father told her to wear her winter boots. Maybe they argued about it. She must have at least asked why and I have no idea what kind of answer he gave her. In the story, the father and daughter never saw each other again.

The thing is that that girl and the other girls who had also received letters were made to walk. Thousands of kilometres. A death march. They were made to walk straight through the winter. And, because of her boots, she was one of only a handful of girls who survived. The other girls must have worn flimsy sandals, impractical heels, maybe even cloth flats. But she wore her winter boots and she survived.

The snow starts. Flakes fall and I can't feel them touch my skin.

I wonder about her coat. Did her father insist on a coat as well? Or were they given scraps of cloth at some point? Are boots more important than a coat?

I want another cigarette, something to keep me occupied while the snow falls and the afternoon light wanes and my body shivers. I dig my bare hands into my pockets, can't find the pack. I raise my head and look around me, locate my bag a few feet away. I reach for it, spread my fingers and stretch. I raise myself on an elbow, slide my torso to the right, and, there.

Swish swish swish

A sound so soft it is almost silent.

Swish swish

And then breathing, the solid deep breaths of exercise.

"You okay down there?"

The skier looms over me suddenly. Her face is close enough that I discern flushed cheeks and a bubble of snot at her nostril.

"Oh, yeah. Ha ha. Just fell."

"You'd better get up, it's too cold to be sitting in the snow."

"Right, it is chilly."

"Here."

I take her gloved hand and she pulls me up, painfully.

"Ow."

"You should get home now. Drink something hot. And here I thought I was the only loonytoon out tonight. Ha!"

"Yeah, ha."

Swish swish

"You take care!" she calls behind her.

"Hey, thanks."

Swish swish

A flashing light on the answering machine. I check the call display. A long distance number. Greece, I can tell, from the zeroes.

My mother rarely leaves messages. She simply calls and calls until I pick up.

I ignore it. I linger in the shower, my toes and thighs and fingers on fire from the warm water. They thaw and the blood pours back in.

We went back once to my grandmother's village. I was ten. We traveled from Thessaloniki by train (I fell out of the bunk, was too scared to wake up my mother. I was lulled to sleep by the rocking back and forth of the car).We didn't stay with my grandmother, though. We stayed with my mother's aunt, my Great Aunt Toula. Great Aunt Toula had a lazy eye and spat on me, slightly, about every three minutes.

"What is she doing?" I finally asked my mother, wiping my cheek after Great Aunt Toula had left the room.

"It's a superstition. To keep away the evil eye."

The only evil eye that Great Aunt Toula had to worry about, in my opinion, was her own. But I never had a chance to tell her that, on account of her not speaking English. Of my not speaking Greek.

"Everyone asks me, why doesn't Anya speak Greek? Why doesn't Anya speak Greek? So I tell them, because she refused to learn when she was a baby. That's what I say. You were so stubborn."

Great Aunt Toula lived in a fun house of slanting floors, marching ants, and gaping holes. As the water was heated by electricity, and the plumbing was either very old or very shoddy, I managed to lightly electrocute myself every time I bathed.

"Just don't hold the water handles too long. Be quick, quick," was my mother's advice.

I visited my grandmother once. Great Aunt Toula took me. She chattered away in Greek while I grasped my mother's camcorder, her strict instructions running through my mind.

"Hug her. Say, *sa ga po, Yaya*. Then press play on the recorder so she can see you play."

My grandmother wore black, her stockings thick and woollen in spite of the sticky July heat. Her large body engulfed me in a hug and my face lost itself in her breasts. I breathed in the scent of onions and moth balls. Her bare arms were cool against my own.

"Sa ga po, Yaya," I said, and she laughed and repeated my words back to me, my name replacing hers. She started to cry then, wiped at her face with the back of a pudgy hand, and hugged me once more.

She looked at me, held me at arm's length, and, through much gesturing, pronounced me too thin.

We began our lunch of fasouladia, salad, and bread. My grandma and her sister drank tea but I was given my own bottle of Fanta, something my mother never let me drank ("It's a bad habit, drinking sugar drinks. Full of sugar. You know what sugar does? Makes you fat.").

We ate lunch in a room that served as my grandma's dining room, bedroom, and TV room. She had a bedroom, I could see into it when we arrived, but I could tell that she slept in the smallish daybed tucked into the corner of the room. At the side of the bed, on a table, lay a black hard-cover book and a crochet hook.

My grandmother and Great Aunt Toula didn't talk much during the meal. Instead, my grandmother stared at me so intently that her spoon occasionally missed her mouth.

Her sister had to inform her that a dollop of sauce was smeared on her chin.

After lunch we watched a soap opera on her TV. The picture was grainy, and I wondered how my grandmother could even make out the Greek words that appeared on the bottom of the screen. The actors all wore out of date clothes, huge hairstyles, blue eye shadow. I wondered if my grandmother knew she was watching a program that was obviously a decade old.

I was uncomfortable. I wanted to get a good look at this woman who was my mother's mother. The idea of my mother ever being young, well, it was ridiculous. I wanted to stare at my grandmother, but how could I when she spent most of the time staring at me? From what I did see, though, I couldn't detect my mother in this stranger. I couldn't see her in my grandmother's wrinkled face, in the squinty eyes, in the plump elbows, small feet, delicate hands. Hands so unlike my mother's, so unlike my own. It was while looking at my grandmother's hands that I remembered my mother's instructions.

I took the camcorder, which I had placed on the little table holding my grandmother's books and crochet things, and turned it on.

"Yaya," I said, and gestured at the camcorder. The soap opera had ended, the credits streaking across the screen.

I pressed play and placed the video camera in my grandma's hands. Sound leaked weakly from the machine, an assortment of coughs and shuffling papers. The picture showed me sitting at a black grand in one of the recital halls of Mount Royal College. I watched my grandmother watching me on the little screen. Once I began, the notes crashed loudly, the machine's speakers straining to distil the notes. I played Chopin, a

nocturne. I remember that I played it well.

But my grandmother did not react the way I thought she would. She did not cry, did not applaud, did not even look that pleased. Instead, the corners of her mouth hardened, and her considerable jowls trembled. My miniature figure finished the nocturne, the audience applauded, I bowed, left the stage. My grandmother handed back the camcorder.

Great Aunt Toula smiled and spoke some encouraging sounding words. She had already seen the performance. My grandmother only nodded, then she left the room. Great Aunt Toula came and sat next to me and her slight body barely filled the gaping dent left by my grandmother's girth. She cupped my chin with her hand, muttered more encouraging sounding words, and spit softly into my face.

My grandmother returned with a plastic bag and handed it to me. I did not feel like she wanted me to open it there, to peruse the items. I gave a shaky *efharisto*, one of the only Greek words I knew, or know now.

The visit was over. My grandmother hugged me, cried and wiped her cheeks like before, her hands delicate in spite of their pudginess. Something had changed, though. I walked back to my Great Aunt Toula's house holding the camcorder away from my body by its strap. It dangled and hit the edges of my tanned calves, just like my mother had told me never to hold it, in case it broke.

My mother declared most of the contents of the plastic bag to be mine. A gold chain wrapped in tissue and tape, a white lace doily pressed between two pieces of cardboard, and a small figurine of a blue bird protected by what appeared to be an entire

roll of toilet paper.

The watch, she said, was hers.

"It was his," she said.

"Whose?"

"My father's."

She had mentioned him before, talked about his love of all things sweet, reminisced about his opulent Sunday breakfasts. But even though I had seen his picture, the one where he is dressed in his uniform, it was not until I saw the watch that I realized he had actually existed.

Again, I felt awkward. My mother tearing up over a dead man's watch when her own mother was only a ten minute walk away.

"I don't think grandma liked my playing," I said.

"She wouldn't."

We didn't stay much longer, maybe a few days before heading back on the train (I got the bottom bunk, this time.)

Great Aunt Toula continued spitting and I tried to avoid both her spittle and her lazy eye. My mother avoided her mother, and I only saw my grandmother one more time, when we waited for the bus that would take us to Oristeatha and on to Thessaloniki.

I saw my grandmother before my mother did. Her gait was more of a waddle than a walk, but she did not look foolish. Formidable, yes she looked formidable.

They did not speak. My grandmother hugged me once more, but did not cry. The bus came, the driver loaded our luggage into the appropriate compartment, and we were gone. I have not seen my grandmother since.

That was our last real vacation. The two weeks away from my piano were too much.

"Your fingers are lazy. I can hear it."

To make up for the lost time, my daily practice was increased to three hours.

I emerge from the shower wet and red, my finger tips puckered, water logged, but no longer grey.

I blow-dry my hair, line my eyes with kohl, dust my cheeks with bronzer. For clothes I select a tight black sweater and skinny jeans that I can tuck into my boots. I am all set to leave, with keys in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

If I don't check, it will ruin my night. If I don't check, I will back within the hour.

"Anoushka, it is Mommy. She's gone, peaceful now. I am sorry."

I listen again, and then a third time. Then I erase it. Walk out the door.

Soula

Czechoslovakia, 1960

When my father arrives with it, it is not in a box, it is not wrapped up. There is no bow. Just a curved and hollowed belly of wood, a straight handle notched with nylon strings.

"For you. Happy birthday." He places the guitar in my hands and looks at me.

"Papa, it's wonderful." My smile is wide, too wide maybe.

I cradle the guitar in arms. It smells of pine.

"The other way," he says.

"Oh, of course." I switch the neck from my right hand to my left.

"Just like that."

I strum the strings.

"It needs to be tuned, of course."

If it weren't for my father's expression, the look of awkward expectation on his face, I would cry.

It is cheap, the best he could afford. I hold it awkwardly like a colicky baby. It is not what I wanted, and he knows it.

"Kiss your father," my mother says. She is standing inside the kitchen door, partially hidden.

I stand and set the guitar on my chair. I kiss my father on the cheek, hug him.

"I will put it there," I say, pointing to the corner of the living room, "until the lessons."

My father looks down. No lessons. He couldn't afford the lessons.

Later, after I have helped my mother wash the soiled dishes from my birthday dinner, I go to the bathroom.

"A piano," I had breathed once, many birthdays ago, when my father told me to make a wish. He said I should keep wishes a secret because otherwise they might not come true. That's how wishes worked.

I sit on the edge of the bath tub and think about their slick black skin and slender legs and how I will never sit in front of one, hands poised above the keys. So the wish wouldn't come true anyway.

One cry, I decide. This is it. And never another word about it.

I never do learn to play that guitar.

Anya

Montreal, 2003

There was one attempt at dating. I was eight. The man seemed nice. He brought a box of Turkish delight for me and flowers, pink carnations, for my mother. He had a thick beard spotted with grey patches and he smelled of cologne. Before she left me with Mirka, my mother hugged me too tightly and told me she wouldn't be long. She gave me a wet kiss on my lips.

Two hours and thirty-seven minutes. My digital clock blinked away the seconds as I pressed my face up against the cool of my window. Mirka thought I was in bed. I had announced at 6:30 that I wasn't feeling well. She helped me dress into my blue felt nightgown and then wrapped me tightly in my blankets.

"Don't worry, she won't be out long," she told me. Then she went into the kitchen and, as I discovered the next morning, ate a third of the box of Turkish delight. I had eaten only one piece for dessert, in spite of my love of everything sweet. Dinner didn't go down very well, even though it was schnitzel and I love schnitzel. My stomach churned and I felt hot as I untucked myself from my bed to keep vigil.

They returned at 8:39pm. The man walked my mother to the door and they hugged. When my mother entered the house, I gave myself three minutes before running into the hallway. I ran at my mother who was still wearing her jacket and attached myself to her waist, squeezing to make sure she was real.

"Anoushka? It's okay, it's okay. I'm here."

She smelled of cigarette smoke, clorettes and the night air. Her wool coat was

scratchy against my face, but I didn't care.

After she tucked me into bed again, I couldn't sleep. I listened at my door and heard sniffles.

"He was nice, Mirka. But, you know."

"You didn't even see the movie!"

"I couldn't...I couldn't stay away."

"I was looking after her. It's not like she was alone. It's not like I don't know how to take care of her."

"It's not that Maroushka. I just can't bear it."

And I felt pleased. My mother loved me so much she couldn't stand to leave me with anyone. She couldn't stand to be away from me. She loved me that much.

Now I don't understand it, how my mother has been alone for twenty-three years. No contact, no love, no rough stubble against her cheek. No fucking. For Christ sake. No fucking at all.

The man who sits across the table from me is named Mark. I know I won't remember his name (just like with the others) but I will retain some odd detail. I always recall at least one detail. A kiss, a position, something. Once, even a spurt of semen across my back. There are always surprises.

These men enter my apartment, leave their shoes at the front door. They drink water from my kitchen sink and they use my bathroom. Sometimes they leave the toilet seat up. They never say a word if they notice a men's stick of deodorant or a blazer or a pair of size eleven running shoes. They never comment on the overflowing wastebaskets

or the unmade bed or the filthy floors. They never ask me to play the piano. They don't know me. We are strangers.

These strangers hover at the edges of my thoughts during the day. They invade my head while I shower, while I sleep. And before, up until a few days ago, they lingered in the background while I interviewed other strangers on the phone, asking about their eating habits, their laundry soap preferences. In this way, I am never alone.

Three days after the date and Jared emailed.

I pictured a frozen pond, twinkling Christmas lights (white), twirling couples. I pictured myself wearing fuzzy red ear muffs, no, a pink woollen hat. Matching mittens. I was smiling, holding his hand. We were one of the twirling couples. There was a fire in the middle of the rink and we glided to it and warmed our hands. My cheeks were rosy, the tip of my nose pink and almost numb. He leaned in for a kiss and our lips met.

Then the reverie ended.

There would have been no gliding, no kissing, definitely no twirling. Instead, I would have pushed myself with my left leg, wobbled on my right. Pushed, wobbled, pushed, wobbled. There would have been no smiling. Just a furrowed brow and clenched teeth. I would not have held Jared's hand, I would have hung off him for dear life. My nose would have dripped, my lungs would have rasped, my feet would have frozen.

In his email, Jared had not suggested skating. Indeed, it was too early in the year for frozen ponds and hot chocolate. But Jared struck me as the type to organize active dates. Bowling, picnics in the park, hikes up the mountain. If we went to a bar it would be to throw darts or play pool, not just to get drunk. Thoughtful, inexpensive, intimate.

I shuddered at the thought.

All he wrote was that he had a good time, that he thought we clicked, that he would like to see me again, maybe Tuesday.

I couldn't fault him. Not for suggesting another date. Not for his dry kisses on both my cheeks. Not for his chocolate spotted teeth. I couldn't fault him for walking me home and leaving me on the foot of the stairs. For being what one could call a gentleman.

And because I couldn't fault him, I emailed him back.

We went on the kind of dates that I imagined. We went hiking once. We rented bikes and toured the Old Port. We took the train to Quebec City and stayed in a bed and breakfast.

I was good. I played my part. And eventually, we moved in together. We celebrated with a bottle of champagne and take-out sushi which we ate while perched on unpacked boxes of books.

But then he went away. Every week he wanders, working hard at a job I don't know much about. Saving for law school.

It was in the in between times that I started thinking about that guy. About the sex and the condom that he took off and that spray that became a crust while I slept. I started sleeping on the couch.

I became bored. And then I found myself at a bar and the bed was filled again and that was that.

The snow has stopped. It is 3 am and Mark and I walk the four treacherous blocks to my apartment. As we walk, I run my mittened hand over the fresh layer of snow that

covers each car along the street. Thin strips of metal shining against white.

Soula

Calgary, 1969

Dear papa,

Canada is everything I could hope for. The people are quite friendly. I have a job and will soon get a better one at a restaurant. I will start hairdressing school soon.

I hope mama is doing better now. You didn't say much in your last letter about her, but I can tell that she is upset. Tell her I love her. Say hello to everyone.

Love,

Soula

PS I am including some money.

My father never ate the oranges.

I think about this while walking through the produce section of the grocery store. Rows and rows of glistening green, yellow, red. The sprinklers leave moist pearls on the smooth skin. I can take as many as I want, as many as I can afford. I can take bags full of red peppers and onions and zucchini, leave them in my fridge until they liquefy.

I walk by the oranges. I stop and pick one up, feel the weight of juice and skin in my palm. The pores are smooth, the peel like cellulite. I place two in my basket, the wire handle digging into my palm.

At home, I peel the orange. Kisa sniffs the skin, wrinkles her pink nose. I push a slice into my mouth, the juice spurting down my chin.

We ate oranges once a year at Christmas. My mother would wait in line for hours,

her nose red, her nostrils leaking clear fluid when she came home. She would set two oranges on the kitchen table, our family's allotment, and they would wait for us until after dinner.

When the dishes were washed and dried, we set two plates out. My sister and I peeled the oranges, handed morsels to our mother. We chewed slowly, the dry pulp moist in our mouths. We licked the stickiness off our fingers, sucking our indexes and thumbs long after the sweetness had disappeared.

We offered the oranges to our father. But he always shook his head. He said he didn't like the way the skin stuck in his teeth. He said they bothered his stomach. We believed him, pushed the offered orange into our own mouths a little too readily.

This orange, I'm sure, is sweeter than any Czech fruit I have eaten. But somehow it sits heavily in my stomach. When I am finished, I wash my hands in the bathroom. I cannot bear to lick the dry, sticky juice from my hands.

When I return, Kisa bats a bit of peel around the floor. I throw away the rest of the peel, but months later, I will find this segment of peel in the corner, dried and curled.

The phone doesn't ring often. Sometimes Mirka will call on the weekend, ask me over for coffee. Sometimes the restaurant calls Malak to pick up an extra shift. Sometimes it doesn't ring for days.

I pick up the phone, a static film blurring the line.

Soula? Soula?

The line is full of static.

Soula, Soulinka?

Mama?

Neh, choristimou.

My mother does not own a telephone.

Soula, ach-and then she sobs, wet bubbles over the phone lines.

And when she can't speak, my sister. My sister with her calm voice, prickling me with cold consonants, Greek and Czech and gibberish.

I drop the phone.

When Malak comes home, he finds me on the kitchen floor.

Soula, what the hell is going on?

My tongue is limp. I part my lips but cannot make a sound.

Malak holds me, his arms awkward around my shaking shoulders.

Shhh, he says, shhh. It will be okay. Prestavka, Soula. Stop, stop.

But I cannot stop. I cannot catch my breath, cannot keep the bile from rising.

Hours pass and I stop shaking. I pick myself up from the kitchen floor where he left me and I stand and reach for my cigarettes, a stillness spreading inside.

I pick up Kisa, the unlit cigarette dangling from my fingers, and I squeeze her.

Kisa, Kisa, he is gone. My father's gone. He has left me.

I bury my face into her warm fur, wet from my dripping eyes and nose.

He is gone, I say, and all I want are my father's thick fingers pressing into my shoulder, his soft odour of soap to wash over me and send me to sleep.

Anya

Montreal, 2003

I have been waiting for this moment for over a year and a half.

The moment that he opens the door to the apartment and he walks inside a day early. The moment when he stumbles over a pair of size elevens that don't belong to him.

I have been waiting for the moment his confusion changes to comprehension, the moment he understands what is going on. The moment he marches through the apartment, his shoes spreading black salted water across the hardwood floor.

I have been waiting for the moment he hears the muffled sound of fucking, the moment he opens the bedroom door, the moment his eyes adjust to the light and he sees a sweaty stranger thrusting himself deeply into me.

Jared's email arrived as I slouched over my harmony text book. Italian and German chords. That's what we were looking at in Harmony 331.

The problem was that I had already studied them for the RCM Grade 5 harmony exam. I knew what those chords looked like, I knew exactly what they sounded like. I knew how to play them. I knew harmony.

I had done it all before: the practicing, the studying, the memorizing random facts about Schubert and Tchaikovsky and Hildegard von Bingen. I had performed, I had won competitions, I had wowed. I had even faced down the worst case scenario: forgetting the notes, leaving the stage. Vomiting, trembling. Not sleeping for days before a performance, returning to the piano at all hours of the night just to prove to myself that I

knew how to play. Being chained to a baby grand for the greater part of my waking existence.

I had done it. I knew it. And yet, there I was. In a strange apartment, in a strange city. I was doing it all over again. A continuation. A goddamned coda.

I set the book aside and waited.

I walked away from the book and waited. I sat on the couch and waited.

Silence. Nobody there. No one saying a word.

I went to the piano. I switched it off. I shut the cover.

I don't remember the last thing I played. Mozart? Haydn? Rachmaninoff? No idea. It was probably a scale. F sharp major? B flat minor? Chromatic, both hands? I can't say.

But I do remember hotmail's "ding ding" notifying me of a new message. I sat at the computer and opened hotmail and I read Jared's message.

I wrote a draft in response, saved it. Sent it off two days later. Applied at Alliance. Piled my books on a corner of my desk.

I waited. And still, no one said a word.

This is the moment. Of course, I heard the front door open. Of course, I heard the stumble. I heard the cadence of his step on the hardwood, the quickening click click of his shoes.

Light streams in from the living room, illuminating the room, casting the stranger's face into dark shadows. He stops mid thrust and turns his head.

"What the fuck-"

Jared is beside him, pushing him off me. The stranger's penis slips out with a plop.

He is naked beside the bed, covering his dying erection with his hands, dodging Jared's punches by jumping from side to side.

"Dude, dude, I didn't know."

I think Jared realizes that that's the truth because he stops attacking the guy and says, "get out."

The stranger is already in his pants, is already throwing his sweater over his head.

I shudder at the idea of the scratchy wool against his sweating skin.

He is struggling with his boots. He is out the door.

It is just Jared and me, now.

I am still on the bed, sitting up instead of laying down, but I haven't bothered to wrap myself in the sheets or to throw on any clothes. I never imagined that I would.

"You fucking whore."

I wait. I am expecting a slap. I imagined a slap. A throttling of some sort. I expected him to punch me in the face. A black eye.

He says, "I came back early because of your grandmother. I didn't want you to be alone."

A twist. That, I hadn't been expecting.

"You shouldn't have bothered. She's already dead."

Soula

Calgary, 1969

Mr. Kretzinger says I am a natural. He says he could tell from the moment I held the scissors and the comb in the same hand, easy extensions of my fingers.

The odour of bleach cuts into my nostrils. The combination of chemicals that produces bright red, creamy blonde, chestnut brown, these all sink into my lungs, stick to their fibres and render me breathless.

The sharp snip of hair, the finality of silver blades swishing, strands falling on the floor, makes up for the late night coughing fits.

I used to cut my father's hair, would shape the thick curls tickling the tops of his ears. I used to trim his beard, my fingers passing over the blunt stubs of his moustache.

Mr. Kretzinger gives me the station closest to the door. I watch passersby with their thick, pale faces, their balding heads and tightly curled tendrils. He watches me as I layer white paper over pink curlers, twirl the curlers through pieces of hair, set them tight to the skull, my customers pursing their mouths for an instant, then relaxing their lips.

The girl next to me, she doesn't hold the scissors and the comb in the same hand. She prepared a permanent solution too strong, too much of this chemical, not enough of that. Her customer's hair came out with the curlers, sticky sprouts left on a red scalp. The woman, a sluggish woman with a hooked nose, hyperventilated. Mr. Kretzinger took her into his office and gave her a paper bag and a full refund. She hasn't been back since, not that there would be much hair to style anyway. That is the risk, I suppose, of trusting students with your head.

This girl, Mirka, and I are friends. We do not talk about hairdressing. She is Slovak and we talk about home, about the people and the men, the food. I cook for her, Greek paidakia when I can afford the lamb, and she bakes for me. Cream puffs and cakes, sweet dumplings with cherry compote on the side. We sit late into the night on the weekend, talking, our mouths comfortable.

I approach Malak from behind, a pair of scissors in my hands. Wisps at the back of his neck graze his collar. I hold the blades in my fingers, grasp a tendril and, before he can whip his neck around, I slice it.

Ha, I say. Now it's uneven. I'll have to cut it all.

Malak doesn't turn. He hunches his shoulders and then slams his fist on the table, knocking over a hot cup of chai. The chai spreads translucent over the kitchen table, seeping into my theory papers, into my Czech-English dictionary.

I grab the papers and the book off the table, take them to the sink.

The door slams, his coat and shoes missing. Kisa cowers behind the stove. I go to her, pick her up, croon, Poussinka, Poussinka, I'm sorry.

He returns at night. I am at the kitchen table, long wiped dry, my damp Czech-English dictionary open, my pen hovering over my theory notes.

He drapes his chest over my back, his hands spread on the table. Scotch floats on his breath, the sour, deep scent of alcohol emanating from his skin. He grabs my hair and pulls it back.

Look, he says, look. He has shaved his head. His skull is smooth, the bones at the

back of his head tapering into the muscles of his neck. His face is severe without the warm fringe of brown, just as I thought it would be.

He lifts a hand off the table, places it on my neck. He brings his face to mine, his blue eyes dazzling, his mouth on mine, his tongue pushing my shut lips open.

I think about shoes. I think about smooth, chocolate suede underneath my fingertips. I think about deep black kitten heels, a small silver buckle at the side. I think about sandals, open-toed platform sandals in red leather. I have never owned a pair of red shoes.

The delicate pinch of toes as I walk down the sidewalk, the matte black leather straining against the tops of my feet. In the mirror, I admire my Achilles tendons, their sinewy stretch above the low heels, pointed. I lift my heels, watch the calves flex, relax, flex, relax. Such slender calves underneath the gray wool skirt, the way they taper into angular ankles.

I want a new pair of shoes. In all the months I have been here, I have not bought a new pair of shoes. Frivolous, I have always thought, but now I want new leather to stretch itself against my feet, to bleed my heels and scrape gashes in my ankles.

I take a bite. He jerks his hand off my throat, stumbling back. He almost trips.

Shoes, I think, I will buy a new pair of shoes.

He cradles his arm, the arm that held my neck, that squeezed slightly too hard. He turns, his heavy feet plodding up the stairs, into the bedroom.

Tomorrow, even though it is summer, I will wear a turtleneck. Small, red beads will graze my neck for weeks where his fingers grasped.

I am left alone at the kitchen table, the pen in my hand, half-moons from my

fingernails patterned in my palms. I rub the pen against my theory papers, a smear of black, a small spit of red.

Shoes, I think. Shoes.

I wanted sausage. Thick salami spiced with peppercorns. Warm bread, slices the width of a table.

We ate too much soup. Soup for breakfast. Soup for dinner. Soup that was broth with a few pebbles of floating rice.

My hipbones pierced the black wool of my favourite skirt. My cheeks sucked into the hollow of my jaw. Nothing for my father to pinch, if he had been there. Choristimou, he would say, his fingers flexing, pinch, pinch.

I went to work, always wanted to leave the refugee camp and occupy myself. I picked potatoes for a week, my hands bleeding, cracked, tingling with cold. I wiped tables, swept floors.

But there was only soup. Soup so thin it ran like weak water.

Anya

Montreal, 2003

"You're pretty sick, you know that?"

"I've considered the possibility before."

Still, no slap or punch or even very harsh words. What is wrong with this man?

We haven't moved from our places. He is still standing by the bed and I am still sitting on it.

"Go back to where you were. I'll be gone by the time you come back."

"That's all you have to say to me?"

"What else is there to say?"

I survey the items that I need to pack. I have a hard time focusing on the task. I think, instead, about my grandmother. About why she and my mother haven't spoken in so long. I've tried asking her in round about ways. I've tried asking her directly. But her response is always the same.

"Bitter. She is bitter. She blames me."

For what, she's never said. But I do know that my mother sends my spitting Great Aunt Toula money every month. That some of that money went to my grandmother, that some of that money bought her a fridge and windows and doors. Perhaps my grandmother wasn't so proud. Perhaps she counted it as just payment.

I kept the boxes from the time we moved in together. I had ripped off the packing

tape, folded them neatly, stacked them one on top of the other and tucked them into the back of the hallway closet.

I retape these boxes now, relabel them with permanent marker: books, kitchen, miscellaneous. I work quickly and quietly in the living room. The packing tape sticks to my hands, sticks to the floor, sticks to itself so that I can't separate the sides. Jared is in the bedroom, the door open. He sits on the bed in semi-darkness. Sometimes, I hear him sniffle.

I will forget something, I'm sure of it. An elastic band. An errant tampon. A pack of pink bubblegum. The ashtrays. I will most likely forget the ashtrays. But I won't do it on purpose. I will leave no trace of myself on purpose.

The only problem is the piano. I considered selling it. I considered giving it away. I considered transporting it to Ginger's apartment. But I can't. It's not mine to sell or give away, and Ginger's apartment will barely be able to house me and my boxes for a few days, let alone a piano.

So I have called a moving company. I have given them the address (useless, really, as it is only a P.O. box and rural route number) and emailed them detailed directions.

"Turn off highway 22x going west. Drive for ten kilometres. Turn right at the third turn-off. Drive 3.5 kilometres. Turn left..."

They take it away tomorrow. I have already rolled it into the centre of the room. I have swept behind it, giant bunnies of tobacco-scented dust.

I place the last of my unopened theory books in a box labelled "Books" and then proceed to the kitchen. I open the cupboard, wrap half a dozen chipped dollar store plates

in newspaper, place them in the box. Next, the cups, plastic water glasses, tupperware bowls. I can't remember which utensils are mine, but I can't bring myself to ask Jared who bought the spatula with the slightly melted tip.

When I finish filling the miscellaneous box with sheet music, bill stubs, scraps of paper and old birthday cards, it is 7 in the morning.

In the bedroom, Jared is asleep on the bed. The duvet is still where it fell on the floor, and I take it and cover Jared's body with it.

I start packing my clothes in the dim light, rolling them tightly before placing them in my suitcases just like when I pack for a trip. When I finish, I roll the suitcase into the living room. I go back to the bedroom and haul out the garbage bag full of clothing and silverfish crusts. I haven't decided what to do with it, if I should take it with me or leave it out on the sidewalk.

I sit among my boxes and light a cigarette and I write Jared a note.

Dear Jared,

I am very sorry about all of this.

I'll be back at 7tonight to meet the piano movers, just so you know.

I wish you well.

Love,

Anya

I read the note over while tapping my cigarette against the ashtray. I consider ripping it up, on account of the "love." But I don't. Instead, I add a P.S.

P.S. You might want to check the bedroom closet for silverfish...sorry about that.

I lift the garbage bag of clothes and take my phone with me, call a taxi van, and

set the bag down on the sidewalk. Today is garbage day.

Soula

Calgary, 1969

My fingers shake. I am cutting a bob, my favourite style with its diagonal precision and tapered ends. But this morning I shake. Perhaps too much coffee, I say to myself, perhaps one too many cigarettes. Perhaps I stayed awake too long on the sofa, Kisa purring on my chest, her drool pooling on my t-shirt.

My turtleneck itches. Even with the door open, the breeze lapping at my bare legs, I sweat underneath the wool. My lip is slick with perspiration, and I turn my back from the mirror every so often to rub it dry with the sleeve of my sweater.

Soula, you want to go for lunch?

It is Mirka, a stiff smile spread over her cupid's lips.

I nod. When I am finished, I say.

I finish the cut a little too quickly. I could have used the razor at the back of the neck, worked over a layer or two, measured the ends against each other.

The customer, Sarah, lives nearby. She talks about her children, her cat named Merrybell, her husband who likes to bar-b-q. I say I have a cat. When she leaves, she gives me fifty cents and I thank her.

It was the morning they found out I was Greek. Being Greek, I couldn't stay. There was no refugee status for Greeks in Germany. I had eaten my bowl of thin soup and volunteered to pick potatoes. Someone must have seen the letter I was writing, spindly Greek letters littering the page.

But I'm Czech, I told the uniformed guard. You have to let me stay.

He barked at me, German words I couldn't comprehend.

I went out onto the street with my small suitcase. I walked to the train station and sat down on a bench in the middle of the ticket area, watched travelers lugging suitcases from platform to platform, people lined up at the ticket counter, grasping small slips of paper that granted them passage to Berlin, to Rome, to Paris. My pockets were empty, no bills or coins to be found, nothing to buy my passage anywhere.

I sat on the bench and craved sausage. Salami and feta and olives. Lamb, roasted on a spit, with a tomato salad doused in olive oil on the side.

My stomach gurgled, the soup licking the walls of my intestines.

I took out a cigarette and imagined the tobacco fumes were the aromas of baking bread and roasting lamb.

A policeman circled the ticket area, strutting with his hands on his hips. The bulk of his arms flexed each time he smoothed his brown hair or scratched his nose. I watched him from the bench, losing sight each time he passed behind.

When I lost sight of him, I looked at the café on the other side of the room. A few chairs and tables, a high counter where travelers sipped coffee or beer. I squinted and saw sandwiches inside the glass case, fruit. On the counter, a bulky silver pot of soup or stew. My mouth watered, my lips wetting my cigarette, my tongue itchy.

Young lady, a voice said. Young lady, you have been sitting here for a very long time.

The policeman sat beside me on the bench, his German cool and crisp, slicing the stale, smoky air around my face.

I shrugged, smiled.

Do you speak German? he asked, a small spray of spit landing on my cheek. I wiped it away before he noticed.

A little, I said.

Who are you waiting for?

No one.

What are you doing here?

I came from...I came from the work camp.

Where is your country?

Czechoslovakia.

You do not look Czech.

No, and again I shrug.

I offered him a cigarette. He pointed to his uniform and shook his head.

Perhaps when I am finished, we can have a bite to eat?

And in spite of myself, I nodded, smiled, flicked ash onto the floor.

I watched him walk the periphery of the ticket room for two more hours, avoiding his eyes by studying my fingernails, the burning end of the cigarette, the floor. And when he came over at the end of his shift, when he came and sat, my eyes passed over my feet, my crossed ankles.

My shoes, I said.

What about your shoes?

My shoes. I left them.

I stood up. He followed, grabbed my suitcase and carried it the distance to the

lagger.

I had a dream, I say.

Mirka and I sip coffee on our lunch break. Her face droops, the skin around her eyes puffy.

Oh, yeah?

It was in English.

I hear that happens. She pauses and takes a sip.

Alan moved out, she says.

Oh my god.

I take her hand and squeeze it.

Are you okay?

Not really.

Mirka's lips pout and quiver, a trickling of tears pooling on her lips. She licks them with a darting tongue.

Don't cry, Mirka, everything will work out.

I take her in my arms and hold her, hand her a handkerchief when she pulls away.

When our lunch break is over, and we are back inside the hair school, she stands beside me cutting hair. She works the scissors over the head, hair scattering across the floor. Her face is blank, her eyes dull.

The bastard, I mutter, the hum of the blow dryer muting my voice.

At home, before sleep, I will myself not to dream. I try to erase my mind, to empty it of thought. But all I can imagine is Alan sitting across from me at Malak's

restaurant, sipping his glass of wine and passing a hand over his pale blonde hair.

When I wake the next morning, I have dreamt another English dream.

I lie in bed next to Malak, Kisa purring on my pillow. My father never let us speak Czech at home. Only Greek, he would say, only Greek so that you remember where you came from.

Now when I think of the village, it is hazy and small, a smattering of houses obscured in smoke.

The policeman pressed a hand against the guard's chest, shook his head with a stern expression.

Let her through, he said.

I ran to the room where I slept, looked beneath the cot. I reached a hand out, stretched my fingers into the dark corners. I felt nothing.

They're gone, I said. They're gone.

I looked around the empty room, scanned the beds for my bag, searched beneath the other cots.

The policeman stood at the door.

Someone took them, I said.

He turned to the guard, spoke harsh words too quickly for me to understand.

The guard shrugged, said he didn't know about any shoes.

And when we walked out of the lagger, the policeman still carrying my suitcase, my hands empty, I started to cry.

No, don't cry, the policeman said. Maybe you can come back tomorrow and they

will be there.

It was so stupid of me to forget them. So stupid.

He took my arm with his free hand and led me to the café outside the lagger.

Don't worry, we will get you something to eat. You will feel better soon.

You have never asked me about before.

My fingers knead Malak's chest, pinch the slender hairs between fingertips, pull gently.

Ow, he says, his face a frown.

You've never asked.

What about? He sighs, his exhalation a blend of after-dinner coffee and meat sauce.

You've never asked about me. Before.

What are you talking about? We both came here in '68.

Before that.

You were in Greece. You left because your father, God only knows why, was a communist. What do you want?

But you've never asked what it was like to leave.

Listen, I'm tired, I've been at work all day. Do we have to talk about this?

No, no we don't.

I get up and go downstairs, sit at the table and flip through my theory papers.

"Exfoliate." I flip through the dictionary, jot down, *odlupovat*.

"Epidermis." I flip again, Epidemic. Epiglottis. Epicure. No epidermis. What is an

epidermis?

I peer at the diagram, the paper faded in the dim light. Layers of wavy lines, black pinpricks. I have no idea what it is.

What does epidermis mean?

I grab the phone, am about to call Mirka when I realize it is late and she is probably asleep.

Kisa slinks around the table leg, around my calf, nuzzling me with her wet, pink nose.

Do you know what an epidermis is, Kisa?

Panic boils in the pit of my stomach. An exam tomorrow and I don't understand this word. What on earth is an epidermis?

I walk back upstairs, shake Malak until his eyes open.

What is an epidermis?

How the hell am I supposed to know?

The policeman buys me a plateful of sausage and sauerkraut, a cup of coffee with cream and sugar. My stomach gurgles when I am finished. It churns, the chewed food sloshing against my intestines.

My dear girl, he says. I think you are in trouble. I think you need help.

I'm fine.

No, you're not.

He takes my hand and cups it in his palm.

You need a job.

My stomach tightens and I feel as though I might gag.

I have a friend. He owns a restaurant. They always need help.

And my stomach relaxes, the food flowing through my abdomen, absorbing into my blood.

I will take you there when you are finished your coffee.

And this man, this German policeman with blonde hair and tight biceps, I never see him again.

Calgary, 1986

Portrait #4

It is a Sunday morning tradition. Each Sunday, Soula sleeps in. She rests her tense muscles, shoulder knots, cramped feet, and aching elbows for a few extra hours.

Each Sunday morning, it is Anya's job to wake her.

Anya herself cannot sleep in. Her body starts at seven without fail. She cannot help it. It is as though a little engine starts up, as though someone turns a crank. Anya wakes and fists the sleep from her eyes. She silently unwraps herself from her night-time cocoon of blankets, sheets, and teddy bears. She shuffles out of the room, careful not to squeak the already partially ajar door as she does so.

She treads the carpet softly until she reaches the kitchen. There she pours herself a glass of tap water, using her own special plastic purple water cup. She drinks quickly and she can feel the cold water as it sloshes down her oesophagus, as it hits her empty stomach.

Empty plastic purple water cup safely set on the counter, she begins what feels like her weekly pilgrimage, or inspection.

First she sits in the middle of the family room, folding her skinny legs into each other. She watches the light turn the walls shades of yellow, tries to keep track of the moving shadows. At intervals, she presses her nose deep into the two-inch long carpet threads, and breathes. She inhales dust and something else, something that smells like dry, crunchy beetles. It doesn't smell or taste like dirt, but sometimes Anya wonders why her mother bothers to vacuum three, four times a week. She has sneaked a sniff of carpet even after a fresh vacuum, but still it smelled the same.

Anya doesn't know why, but she knows she shouldn't let her mother see her with her nose pressed deeply into the carpet fibres. It's an odd thing to do, somehow. Anya knows it's odd just like she knows the way she avoids stepping on cracks is odd, or the way the number seven makes her think of Satan is odd. She doesn't share these things with anyone.

After an hour of sitting and staring and sniffing, she walks to the piano and traces her fingers over the cool keys. She is amazed that they don't make a sound, that she can sometimes make the keys play songs (little songs as her mother calls them) and sometimes they remain silent.

Then it's time for her favourite room. The living room. The living room is a museum full of expensive and valuable artefacts she is not allowed to touch. When her mother is awake, Anya is not allowed to be in the living room, she is not allowed to touch anything.

But now she does handle the artefacts. She opens the mahogany cabinet and runs her fingers (barely touching) over the Czech crystal vases, over the lace doilies (made by her aunt in Greece) they sit on, over the fragile looking tea cups and saucers, over the porcelain doll that she doesn't understand (why make a doll entirely out of porcelain? Why would anyone just want to look at a doll?). Then, in the final half hour before she wakes her mother, she examines the photographs. She doesn't touch them (fingerprints show up so easily against clear glass). She just looks at them. At the black and white image of a young version of her grandmother standing stiffly in front of a white wall. At a bearded man she's been told is her grandfather. The man is wearing a boxish hat and uniform and is holding a rifle.

Her favourite photographs are of her mother, though. Her mother as a little girl in the orphanage, photographed with her class. Her mother with her father, standing at some sort of station. Her mother in a factory, young, maybe 17. And her favourite photograph, another black and white one, of her mother when she first came to Canada.

Anya's mother wears a fur-collared jacket in the photograph, her hair is in a bouffant, and she smiles, coyly and with closed lips, at the camera. Her black eyebrows look velvet, almost wet. She is dark and striking and beautiful. Anya can't imagine anything more beautiful than this photograph. It is this last image that she lingers on, the last image she sees before she goes and wakes her mother each Sunday.

Her mother sleeps on her back, her face calm. Her room is warm.

"Mommy," Anya whispers, waits.

"Mommy," she whispers again, jostles her shoulder lightly.

Still nothing.

"Mommy! Mommy, it's time to wake up now!" Anya jostles her again.

Somehow, she knows to check for breath. She leans in close to listen for breathing, but she senses nothing. When she wraps her arms around her mother's chest, she feels no heart beat. Her mother feels cold.

Anya sobs while clutching her mother. Her face is wet and her own breathing ragged. Her mother still has not moved.

And then, miraculously, her mother opens her eyes and smiles and Anya can feel the arms she thought lifeless hug her.

"What's the matter? Why are you crying? Mommy was asleep, that's all." Soula sits up and rocks her daughter and then whispers into her ear, "I wouldn't leave you."

Soula

Calgary, 1980

He always comes back. After a few weeks, after a few months. I am at home, cooking, and the door unlocks and he is standing there. As though he has only gone out for a carton of milk, a pack of cigarettes.

Or I come home after a long day at the salon spent snipping split ends, listening to my clients' complaints about their children and their jobs and their husbands. I come home and I know immediately. I don't have to see his shoes or smell his cigarette smoke or hear the television droning loudly in the background. I know before his cologne wafts towards me, before I find his crumbs on the floor or his beer in the fridge. The air chills, water tastes of metal. My skin begins to itch.

Soula, is that you?

Who else would it be?

Yes, I call.

He is smoking. It turns my stomach. I'm not sure what he is using to ash in, but I know it isn't an ashtray. I threw those away months ago.

I haven't seen him in six months. Almost six months to the day.

The groceries I bought won't be enough for the both of us.

I put away the milk, the chicken breasts, the carrots, celery, and the spinach. I cannot stand the sight of red meat. Not the smell, not the running blood. Dr. Weinberg has ordered me to eat spinach on a daily basis. He says that I'm at risk for anaemia. The dyes, the permanent solutions, even the shampoos and conditioners are too much. I hired

another girl, a Canadian, to help out at the salon. I spend most of the day in the office. Mirka slips in to chat between hair cuts (she refuses to do permanents), and the regulars check in on me, too. They bring little gifts, flowers, candy, toys.

I knew he would be back. He always comes back.

The last time he was here, we had a fight. It was over money. It's always over money. He says he has jobs, that they take him all over the country, that he works hard, makes good cash, that he can't afford to stay in one place when there is so much money to be made all over the country. But when I ask him about the money, when I ask him to show it to me, that's when the fights begin.

Money, money, money, that's all you are after, woman. That's all you women are ever after.

Who pays the bills here? Who bought this house?

It always ends like that.

But I am right. While he gallivants god knows where, driving his trucks, making his deliveries, I stay here and work. All day, every day, always at the salon.

It is April, but in this country, April doesn't mean spring. Spring and fall don't exist here. They are only a time of snow and sleet and sometimes sunshine.

So today, April 16th, it snows. Fat snowflakes that darken the sky during the day, illuminate it at night. They muffle footsteps and car motors. They stick to you, to your skin and hair and eyelashes, melt instantly. I am drenched.

I stand at the kitchen window. The two plastic bags rest on the countertop, next to the sink. My hands grasp its metal edge. They are wet from the snow.

I could handle the waiting at first, mostly because he was never gone for very

long. The waiting was exciting at first. Expectation like electricity buzzing around me. Kisa feeling it, meowing whenever I moved from room to room. She would follow me, sucked into my force field, the ticking, ticking of the clock on the wall that I would unconsciously stare at for minutes – five, ten, fifteen – at a time.

It happened slowly. A month would go by and I'd stop looking forward to his return. I became accustomed to my routine, to the hours spent at work, to the solitary dinners eaten while standing at the kitchen counter. His visits became interruptions, anomalies.

And then one day two years ago, almost to the day of our tenth anniversary, while he was back for one of his visits, he left the front door open. Passed out in the middle of the day, drunk off rum and cokes. I walked in after work, found him asleep on his back, a half dozen pop cans on the floor next to the couch, and Kisa gone.

I closed the shop the next day, cancelled permanents and cuts and colours, and gave my girls a full day's pay to help me in my search.

It was February and a Chinook had rolled in, warm winds melting a month's worth of snow and ice, tricking trees out of their winter slumber, coaxing green buds out of their winter dead branches. But the Chinook wouldn't last forever, I knew, and soon the Rockies would send snow and sleet and icy wind to shock the trees back into their sleep, cover the streets in slush, and freeze the softly thawing soil.

I searched into the night, plastering photos of Kisa onto street lamps and mail boxes. I spoke to almost every neighbour within a three block radius.

The next day I searched again, taking breaks to come home and rest and while I wept Mirka ran the shop and Malak packed his suitcase.

She will come back, he said and kissed my wet cheek and then left again.

As the snow returned and the posters disintegrated, my sadness turned into a deep chill. It surrounded me, replaced what had once been electric anticipation with complete dread.

I have grown accustomed to his absence. I have grown comfortably accustomed to the absence of men.

I keep Kisa's things in a lidded box next to my bed. Sometimes I look inside, examine her pulverized toy mouse, her fur-filled brush, the collar that I had bought and foolishly never placed around her neck.

I called the SPCA for six months until the volunteer receptionists came to expect my calls, always at the same time: Monday, 4 pm. They knew me by name.

She has never returned and I think about her in the freezing slush of that February, alone and lost and scared. She has never returned, but Malak always does, leaving behind an errant sock, a full ashtray, and other mementos that remind me he has come and gone and will return again.

He walks in. For another beer, most likely. Beer is the only thing he brings with him. That and his laundry and his dirty shoes.

I do not turn to face him. You can't tell so much from behind. I've studied my back in the mirror. The waist still tapers in at the hips, my hips don't seem wider, my ass hasn't gotten fat.

I wonder what he thinks I do in the intervening spaces. If he thinks there is someone else who visits me, who stays once he has gone. If he thought that, he would be wrong. It would be easy enough to find someone. Maybe one of the men who come to the

salon when they do not need a hair cut. Or the ones who smile at me in the grocery store. But I know they too would disappoint.

He comes up behind me and I feel the pressure of his hard, pale biceps as they wrap around my collar bone. He squeezes slightly and it is almost hard to breathe. He nudges his face into the side of my neck. How has he not noticed?

And then he looks down. Or he senses the girth of my growing belly, senses the baby inside.

What have you done?

Like I acted alone that night six months ago.

My mother used to bring home Greek boys for me to date, to marry. I have wondered from time to time if she hadn't been right. She used to say, marry someone like your father.

He twirls me around and takes me in: the bump, the breasts, the blue veins on my chest. The veins appeared three months ago.

What have you done?

I doubt he remembers it. The way he turned onto his side, the way he shifted his weight.

Whose is it?

Yours.

Liar.

The problem is that I haven't been able to find anyone like my father. I do not think such a man exists, and I would tell Malak this now, except he drags me towards the door by my arm, says, You and your bastard can go to hell.

The snow melting against my breast bone, against my hair and face. The push. Or is it a slip? I don't know, but I am flying, soaring, before the ground reaches me, pulls me in. A crunch. I cannot breathe.

I feel a wetness that is not the melting snow, a seeping from between my thighs. The bright red wakes me, I enter my prone body. I move my hands to my groin, and one of them, of course will not budge, but is heavy at my side and twisted in ways it should not be.

I wake to bright light, to a gentle hum, to voices speaking softly nearby.

I feel no pain. I look at my arm and it is ensconced in white cloth, propped up in a sling, oddly weightless.

Soula, Soula, oh thank god!

Mirka sees my darting eyes and comes to my side.

Doctor, she's awake!

Mirka sobs and Dr. Weinberg enters the room.

Your arm will take time to heal. We can't put it in a cast because of your condition, he nods at my belly. But it will heal.

And? The baby?

We haven't been able to stop the bleeding.

He doesn't look at me when he says this.

It will stop.

Soula, my dear, it is...there is a chance it might not.

How big, this chance?

There is a fifty per cent chance. But we are doing everything we can.

I can't feel the girl, I know it is a girl, kicking.

The bleeding, I tell him, it will stop.

It is almost silent in the hospital room. My roommate, Evelyn, snores softly. Gallstones.

I cannot sleep. The drugs are starting to wear off and the arm throbs, on fire, from my fingertips to the base of my neck. The pain is sharp, and then it dulls, but always the arm throbs.

The doctor said that the leg isn't broken. Just a bad sprain at the knee. They have wrapped it up, tight.

I use my good arm to massage the skin of my belly. I can still feel her, there is still a warmth inside, a small tickle.

I talk to her, to this little girl I wasn't even sure I wanted until very recently. I tell her, just stay inside until it's safe to come out.

And then I promise her, we will never talk about that man.

He hasn't come and I know he won't. I saw him for the last time when the ambulance arrived. His eyes were wide, worried, as the paramedics wrapped me up and spoke soothing words. When they got me into the ambulance, he told them he would follow in his car.

I think I feel a shift, a spark inside, but it could be the pain.

You'll be a very good little girl, I say. I just know it.

The pain surges stronger, hurts the back of my eyes. I cannot tell its source

anymore.

I feel the need to sleep, cannot. I press the button that calls the nurse, wait for her to come bring me something to soothe me into sleep.

Anya

Montreal, 2003

We burrow through these tunnels, hundreds of feet beneath the city. Hot and damp and humid. Some passengers remove their coats, unloop their scarves, stuff their mittens into bags. They wipe at the sweat on their upper lips with the backs of their hands.

I don't even unzip my coat. A drop of sweat tickles its way down my spine, rests at the small of my back until the fabric of my jeans soaks it up.

The metro shudders, slowing too quickly. People lurch about, tighten their grasp on the metal handles.

I never use the handles. I stand with my legs planted widely, root myself to the spot, sway with the stopping and starting of the cars.

There is one other passenger wearing a jacket zipped up to his chin. A beading of sweat, little pustules, dots his forehead. I imagine there must be sweat hiding among the hairs in his beard, clinging to the follicles. Underneath his jacket, two perfect circles of darkened, damp cloth at his armpits, a series of stains marking his back.

He turns then, shifts his body to face the opening metro doors. That's when I see the words: *A Manner of Dying.* They're embossed on the back of his bomber jacket in thick gold thread.

A Manner of Dying.

The doors slide apart and he walks onto the platform. I follow.

Before I saw the man, this stranger in a varsity jacket with an ambiguous message emblazoned across his back, I had been thinking about the call centre.

I finally went and signed the papers that officially terminated my employment there. I finally picked up my last cheque.

I was waiting in line to speak to the administrator, Josee, and right there, taped to the wall, was an article on telemarketing. It was about a new no call list. Whoever had posted it, a supervisor no doubt, had scrawled the words, "Remember: We don't sell stuff so the liste doesn't applie!!!" Beside the body of the article was a box with the heading, "Your top ten ways of beating telemarketers."

I didn't need to read the list. I knew what it would contain: hang up, walk away, give the phone to a talkative child, pretend not to speak the language, swear and then hang up, say that you're a burglar and the homeowner is away. And, indeed, the list contained all of these. But then I read item number seven, and my breath caught.

"I either say there's been a death in the family or that my terminally ill child just returned from the hospital. That always gets a guilt-filled apology and they don't bother me again."

I didn't get to the other three items on the list. I reread response number seven, my heart quickening, my stomach jumping a little each time my eyes passed over the phrase, "terminally ill child."

It was my turn to speak to Josee and I told her I needed my last cheque and to sign some paperwork. She stared at my face for a moment, and then asked me my name.

"Kirkoudis. K-I-R-K-O-"

"Oh, right," she said.

While she searched through a filing cabinet, I read over item number seven again.

"...terminally ill child..."

I didn't need a list of effective or popular or insulting responses. I had heard them all before and then written them down and calculated their frequency.

But I had only heard the terminally ill child response once.

I made the call six months in. I began my spiel like I always did. I don't remember what name I used. Susan Smith. Maybe Veronica Hector. Who knows. I never did keep track of my pseudonyms. I told him I was calling from Alliance, that I wasn't selling anything, that I was interested in his opinions.

The man interrupted me before I could ask if the head of the household, aged 18 or older, was available.

His voice was hushed. Not a whisper, just low.

"I'm very sorry, but I just brought home my terminally ill child from the hospital. We're all in bed at the moment, just trying to get some sleep."

"Oh my god," I said, my throat clenching, "Oh my god, I'm so so sorry." I waited on the line for him to hang up before I disconnected the call.

It shook me. I took a break, splashed cold water on my face in the bathroom, went for a cigarette. And still, I couldn't get the image of the man out of my head. Of the three of them. The dying boy, his eyes closed, his breath shallow and his skin pale and clammy, resting in the middle of the bed between his parents. The boy's mother facing her son, her own eyes closed, almost asleep, grasping her child's hand in her own, her fingers gently gripping his thin wrist to ensure his weak heart still beat.

And then the father himself, eyes open in spite of his exhaustion.

And then the phone rings. The wife opens her eyes as the little boy coughs and the man reaches for the telephone. Maybe he expects the hospital with test results. Maybe he

hopes for good news. Or maybe he's expecting his mother to call, or his sister, or his wife's brother, or someone, anyone, besides me.

"Good afternoon, this is Sheila Armitage calling from Alliance..."

And he didn't yell at me, didn't hang up. He just calmly explained his situation.

I felt guilty, of course. But I also felt grateful.

And then, this morning, when I read the words, "just say that you've brought home a terminally ill child from the hospital...", the scene changed. The man was no longer laying on his side in a dimly lit bedroom next to his dying child and quietly distraught wife. The man was instead leaning against his kitchen counter, a beer in hand, a group of friends surrounding him. When he heard my voice, he motioned to his buzzed buddies to be silent, and then he lowered his own voice and furrowed his brow and told me about his dying child and then he hung up and started laughing and his friends joined in, and they finished their drinks and forgot about the phone call and went out to a bar.

This scene played out in my head as Josee set forms in front of me, starring the lines I needed to sign to terminate my employment. She gave me my cheque and I walked through Alliance's doors for the last time.

"A Manner of Dying" strides up the escalator. He has broken away from the throng of commuters and a line of trudging bodies separates us. By the time I reach street level, he is almost at the door. I push my way forwards, elbow a teenage girl in her school uniform, and sprint towards him.

Frigid ice against my face, a sharp intake of air. I think I feel the insides of my lungs freeze a little. I shove my gloveless hands deep inside my coat and shuffle forward

furiously. The man is crossing the street and as I reach the curb, the yellow light changes to red.

I pause, giddy, waiting as the cars accelerate, a parade of snow and mud splattered bodies exhaling gray breath into the dark afternoon air. What am I doing, exactly? Why am I chasing this man?

A break in traffic and I run into the middle of the intersection, pause as a car coming from the opposite direction nearly hits me, and slip slide after the man.

The problem is that "A Manner of Dying" is surefooted and fast. I keep my eyes focused on the ground, scanning for patches of black ice, for puddles.

The trek is not entirely useless. Even though I got off a metro stop too early, I am heading in the right direction. I am simply detouring down poorly ploughed and dimly lit side streets in doing so.

I can no longer read the words on the back of the man's jacket. They are just a smear of colour bobbing up and down in the distance. He turns again and by the time I reach the corner, I see him unlocking a door, his body and his jacket and the words disappearing inside.

The piano is wrapped in blankets. A ramp reaches from the moving truck to the sidewalk. I can see the problem from half a block away: a valley of compacted snow, rock hard and riddled with gravel blocking off the walkway between the sidewalk and the apartment.

One of the movers leans against a shovel while the other one smokes a cigarette. Jared is nowhere to be seen.

"This your piano?" the one smoking wants to know.

"Yes."

"You're late."

"I'm sorry-"

"You know, you're not the only person in this town who wants a piano moved."

I eye the man leaning against the shovel, then look through my bag for my gloves. They're almost useless, a child's sized pair made of stretchy black cotton from the dollar store.

"Here," I say, gesturing to the shovel. The man lifts his eyebrows, and then shifts his weight and gives it to me. He shrugs his shoulders and the other one flicks away his cigarette.

I strike the snow on an upswing and the wooden handle shudders in my hands. I repeat the swing three times and then I pause to survey my work. A few chips of snow along the top, that's it.

"You should have cleaned this up before we came." It's the smoker, and he lights another cigarette.

"Couldn't you guys just come back in a bit?" My voice is punctuated by the ping and scrape of metal hitting gravel and ice.

"I mean, you must have other stops to make, right?" I pause and tilt my head and smile at them. I wait.

Montreal, 2003

Portrait #5

Soula's feet swish back and forth across the cold concrete floors of the international arrivals terminal. Doors open for her, magically, and she shuffles ahead of other weary travellers. She wants to go home. She has had enough of airports, of lines, of waiting. Yes, she has had enough waiting. Waiting seven days and seven nights in the hospital in Oristeatha. The garish fluorescents flickering over her mother's half-frozen face. The sickly sweet stench of quickly dying flesh. The staring. The waiting. The not saying a word.

And she did not say one word. She had not since her mother called her that day in 1969. Not since her mother accused her of killing her father.

"It was your leaving that did it. Now he will be buried in a foreign country. Now he will never come home again."

It was true. Her mother left Czechoslovakia seven years later. Left her husband's bones behind. Left Soula's father's bones behind.

And the waiting at the cemetery. The wailing and the moaning and finally, finally, the lowering of the casket. The last squeak of the ropes, the last flower thrown into the open grave, the last thud of dirt. And it was over.

She pulls her luggage behind her, follows the taxi sign until she exits the terminal. The damp begins to seep into her bones the moment she steps outside. She thinks of the humidity as a virus, penetrating skin and flesh and blood and settling into the marrow, chilling you from the inside out.

A uniformed man points her in the direction of a cab and the driver takes her luggage and swings it into the trunk of his car. She is not sure if the cab driver understands English so she hands him the address on a piece of notebook paper and nods when he mutters a few words.

The damp clings to her even inside the cab. Its presence feels malicious and she presses a hand to her chest, coughs slightly, the air she breathes thick with it.

Calgary's air is dry. In the summer it presses its hot breath against your skin like a whisper, teasing the hairs on your arm. In winter, it shivers you, roughens your elbows and knees, splotches your cheeks and tightens your skin, but it doesn't get inside. It skirts the peripheries of your body but is kept at bay by sweater sets and down-filled jackets, air conditioners and fans.

Here, the air is heavy with wet. It is an effort for her to breathe.

The cab speeds along the highway, swerves in front of other cars. Soula would think that the driver was changing lanes, except there don't appear to be any. Cars coalesce in lines that at once disperse and then form again – a well choreographed group dance that is both random and apparently rule-bound – there are no collisions, against Soula's expectations, at any point during the car ride.

Soon they are off the highway. The stop-start of urban driving feels uneasy, so Soula stares out the window and watches as stately single family homes turn into row housing. It is gentrified, her daughter's neighbourhood, but it feels like poverty to Soula. The curving, rickety, snow-covered staircases leading into labyrinths, people living on top of each other, so close they can hear each other's phones ringing, smell each other's stinky cooking, listen to each other's inane conversations. They breathe each other's air,

Soula thinks, shivers. She longs for the open space that is now her home, the dry-aired, clean, almost flat order that she adopted as her own years ago.

This city is messy and dirty and it reminds her of the chaos she has just left. The hospital with its constant buzzing, the harsh lights, the frantic nurses – like any hospital. But in Oristeatha, in that town like in the whole of northern Greece, for Soula there is a tinge of misery, everything coloured in drab, everything just a little bit off, soured.

It is early evening but the sun has set, the streets are dark, building numbers almost indecipherable. The cab driver consults the piece of notebook paper. He slows, shakes his head, stops at the next corner.

"There, across the street."

Soula pays the man, tips him just under ten percent, and waits for him to fetch her luggage. He drives off just as she realizes she has left her daughter's address in the cab. She does not know exactly where her daughter lives. She stands, at a loss.

The city is muffled by snow, but Soula can make out a rhythmic chiselling. It echoes between the buildings. A moving van blocks her view of the opposite side of the street and she recalls the young man on the phone who gave her the address. She remembers the sound of his voice: dull, almost choked. Anya's roommate, probably, although she had never mentioned one. Soula doesn't imagine he would fill another role. He had asked her when she would be arriving, and when she said 6:30, he said that would be fine. Anya would be at the house. At the time, Soula hadn't thought anything of the phone call. It was a long distance call, the line was crackling, and she was exhausted. She had wanted to explain why she was coming, that she needed to see her daughter, that she couldn't wait for a semester to end or for the summer to begin. Something in the man's

voice stopped her from doing so, and now, standing on the street with her luggage soaking up the salted snow, she wonders.

The moving van drives off. Soula sees her then, her Anya with a shovel in hand. Anya chipping away at a snow bank.

Soula draws in a breath. The sight of her daughter always shocks her – Anya's long, thin limbs, the torso that never ends, her sheer height. As though she had been stretched on a rack. Even in this light, and in spite of her puffy jacket, it is obvious that her daughter is long and lean. So different from her own short, curvy body.

And even though she cannot see her daughter's face, even though Anya has her back turned, Soula sees it in full: the blue eyes, the fair skin, the small cupid mouth. So little of it hers. She remembers suddenly the clinging, perfectly black, perfectly round mole that had attached itself to her infant daughter's face in the womb. How she had it removed, how she watched the little scar it left fade away until it became only a pin prick, invisible.

She does not understand what her daughter is doing, or why, or why she has just shouted. But she watches her daughter's lithe body strain with effort, watches her back arch and round with each thrusting movement, transfixed. She watches her daughter's long blonde hair, thick and slightly wavy, shimmer across her back.

Soula realizes then that her daughter is not wearing a hat, that she has ripped it from her head, placed it in her bag. Soula once again feels the damp, watery air settling heavily into her lungs, and she thinks about how much body heat evaporates from an uncovered head. Anya has never liked wearing hats. When she was a child, she would complain that they itched her.

Soula walks, tentatively shuffling her low-heeled shoes across the snow. They have no grips, and Soula is terrified of falling. She holds her breath until she and her luggage cross the street and make their way to where her daughter works.

Anya

Montreal, 2003

The men tell me they will be back in one hour, that if I haven't cleared a path for the piano by then, they can't help me. They get into their van and my face is filled with exhaust fumes and then they are gone.

The shovel hits the ice in a perfect beat. Dirty ice sprays into the air. The skin on my palms chafes. It burns and I imagine it reddening, stretching, bubbling over clear fluid.

A manner of dying, I think. One syllable for each strike. *A Man – ner of dy – ing.* Like a waltz or a polka, ¾ time, but slower because I don't have the strength to pick up the pace. A tableau of dancers moving very slowly, their dance robotic and interrupted, jerky.

An hour will not be enough time.

Jared has not emerged from the apartment. I imagine him listening to my rhythmic shovelling, trying to block it out by scraping the couch across the living room floor, by placing a table in the empty space where my piano used to sit. Maybe in a masochistic move he is listening to one of the piano CDs he bought me, that I left behind. Or maybe he is washing the ashtray that I forgot, that I knew I would forget. The plastic bag full of my clothes is gone, and I wonder if the garbage men have taken it away or if he brought it back inside. I wonder if he is going through it right now.

A man-ner of dy-ing

My hands ache. They reverberate after each strike. Underneath my clothes, my skin sweats. Beads fall from the base of my neck to the band of my underwear. By now, a

salty trail staining my back.

A large chunk of ice the size of my fist goes flying.

"Yes!" I shout, pump my fist in victory. The ice begins to fracture, the delicate spray turning into a blizzard of dirty, crusted snow.

And the waltz picks up, the dancers' movements flowing now, natural.

A manner of dying and I think about the first snow storm of the year, how paramedics are on alert, how ERs must prepare. I imagine all those elderly, out of shape shovellers dropping all at once, a hundred 911 calls dialled at the same moment, a hundred ambulances dispatched.

My head grows hot, my scalp itches. I rip off my hat, scratch my forehead. My damp hair cools quickly.

"This is how pneumonia happens." I think.

"You should wear your hat."

I hear the voice, but it exists, I am sure, only in my head.

"Here, put it on."

An outreached hand offering my hat.

Her face is tired, the corners of her mouth weary and downturned. The skin at her eyes seems papery, delicate. She is standing in front of me, tired, and handing me my hat.

"What is that doing here?" she asks, nodding to the piano.

"I'm sending it to you."

"Oh," she says. "Here, put it on," and then she pulls the hat over my head.

"Do you remember when you were six and you went outside to play and you

came back in the house without anything barely on? You took off your mittens and your hat and your scarf and even your coat. You said you were hot and then you were sick."

"No," I say, but I do vaguely remember. The hat was itching and the mittens got in the way and the scarf was strangling. I must have been feverish.

"I was so angry but, more, I was worried. You got pneumonia."

"I got pneumonia," I say, nod, though I can't quite remember that part.

I cannot take her inside and she does not ask. I start my shovelling again, and while I work, we both wait for the moving truck to return.