

Sit Down, Stand Up

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complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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## ABSTRACT

### Sit Down, Stand Up

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*Sit Down, Stand Up* is the story of Jamie Milan, a creatively and financially frustrated young man who has moved from Vancouver to Montreal to pursue a romantic relationship with folksinger Amy Webb and, he hopes, a career in stand up comedy. The novella begins with the abrupt end of his relationship and details his attempts to win Amy back. The action takes place in several bars and performance venues around the city, as well as the soap factory where Jamie works for low wages and interacts with a group of immigrant co-workers. It explores Jamie's attempts to develop a more mature attitude towards women, and people in general, and to overcome his insecurities and find a creative voice. It is also a novella about failures of communication, and about the occasional successes that occur despite the many barriers that exist between the characters.

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## Chapter One

I stepped off the northbound train at Beaubien metro station, set my small suitcase on the platform, and stretched. It was six in the morning on a Monday in June. A lone passenger mounted the car I had just exited. He turned and looked back at me as though he'd rather eat his grandmother than be up at this hour. I nodded to confirm that we were both thinking the same thing. The doors of the train chimed loudly as they slid closed. The train roared down the tunnel in a rush of wind, leaving me alone on the platform. I stretched again, my t-shirt riding up on my gut, and let out a loud yawn that echoed like a shout off the tiled walls. My throat was sore and phlegmy. I hawked and spat onto the tracks before bending to check the safety pin securing my suitcase's broken zipper. I extended the handle and wheeled the suitcase over to the stairs, dragged it up the short flight of steps and onto the escalator, and closed my eyes for a moment as I ascended towards a very bad day.

I had taken the overnight bus from Toronto on my way home from visiting my family in Hamilton because it was cheap and I needed to be back in time for work. I had barely slept, but I had to be at my job by eight, which only left me about an hour to get home and crawl into bed with Amy for a quick cuddle before biking down to Verdun. I could already feel her warm body cradled in my arms, my face buried in her long blonde hair.

My feet hit the top of the escalator. I tripped and fell on my hands and knees. My suitcase popped open, spilling dirty laundry on the station floor. I swore loudly

and stood up, rubbing my sore knees. A middle-aged man in a blue STM jacket and pants stood staring at me.

“*Ça va?*” he asked.

“*Oui, pardon, merci,*” I answered, using three of the dozen or so French words I’d mastered in my six months here.

“*Attention à l’escalator, anh?*”

“*Oui, merci, pardon,*” I replied, switching the order to display my range.

“Are you correct?” he asked.

“Yes, fine, let me just...” I said, stuffing my clothes back into my suitcase. The head of the safety pin had bent. It snapped when I tried to bend it back. “*Merçi, pardon.*”

“*De rien,*” he said, shrugging as he stepped onto the descending escalator.

I watched the back of his head sink from sight. *Fuck, fuck, fuck,* I thought. *I’m such an asshole.* I picked up my suitcase, held it closed against my thigh and exited the station, squinting at the daylight. I was surprised by how many cars were already out on the road. We only lived about five minutes away, so I walked the distance in a limping two-step, keeping my mind focused on my destination.

I arrived at our apartment, a three-and-a-half, third floor walkup with steep stairs. As I climbed, I thought about Amy curled up under our sheets. I didn’t want her to wake until I’d slid into bed next to her. As quietly as possible, I opened the door to the dark, silent hallway. All of her shoes were missing from the rack and I wondered if she might have done some sort of cull over the weekend: Amy could be impulsive that way. I smiled and shook my head, sliding off my sneakers and closing

the door behind me. I set my suitcase down in the entryway and let it flop open. My dirty clothes spilled onto the floor. I stepped over them and walked down the hall towards our bedroom, opening the door with a big smile on my face.

The room was unexpectedly bright. All of the curtains were open. The bed was empty and made. *That's weird*, I thought, *why would Amy be up and out of the house so early?* Amy's dresser, which she had painted blue with green vines and white flowers, was gone from its place to the right of the door. The closet door was open, and the closet was half empty. Then I saw a white envelope laid out on the pillow. I walked over and picked it up. My name was scrawled across it in Amy's baroque calligraphy: cobwebs in between letters and teardrops dripping off the tips of the *J* and the *m* and the *e*, and a heart for a dot above the *i*. Amy's style was always elaborate, but the amount of time that had gone into these five letters betrayed a seriousness that could only be bad news. I tore open the envelope.

*Dear Jamie,*

*This letter may come as a shock, but it won't be news to you to say that we've been in trouble for some time. I don't know if it's because Montreal has turned out such a disappointment for you, or because I have, or because your life simply isn't going where you want it to go, but I can't be with you anymore. I've never been good at explaining the reasons for things. But I've met someone else, someone who loves me as I am. I hope you understand: I still love you. But I can't be with someone who doesn't love himself, and I don't think you do. I hope one day you will learn to. Perhaps some day, we will be friends, but until then, know that I tried. I'm so sorry, and I hope that you find happiness one of these days.*



*With Love,*

*Amy*

I let out a gasp of laughter like a sob and sat down on the bed. I reread the letter, then set it down beside me on the bed. I stood up, shaking my head, then stepped forward and punched the wall three times where the dresser had been.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

I was dizzy and had to remind myself to keep breathing. My knuckles throbbed. Maybe I'd broken my hand. *I should ice this.* Picking up the letter, I left the bedroom, shuffling down the hall towards the kitchen. Passing through our windowless living room, I flicked on the light to find another empty space where our couch had been. I laughed again, my breath catching in my throat. Amy had packed up her guitars and her keyboard, which normally cluttered up the corner. I nodded as though it all made sense. In the kitchen, I set the letter down on the old wooden table and looked around. The cupboard doors stood open, revealing mostly bare shelves with a single set of dishware. It was arranged in a little stack: a set of cutlery standing in a glass standing in a mug in a bowl on a dinner plate. I shook my head and opened the fridge. Inside, amongst a handful of condiments, there stood four cans from a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon, undoubtedly left behind by the asshole she'd left me for. I imagined him mincing around my house in four hundred dollar shoes, the cuffs of his tight jeans rolled up, his head half-shaved and stretchers in his ears, touching my things, judging my book collection. ("Oh *Dickens*. How *literary*.") I took one of the beers from the fridge and threw it across the room. It thudded against the wall, exploding on the floor with a fizzing bang. I let the beer spray the

walls and pool on the linoleum floor. I took a second one from the fridge and held it against my knuckles, sitting down at the table in a chair with a broken slat in the back and wobbly legs. The clock on the stove read 6:40. Twenty minutes until I had to leave for work. Was I actually going to work? I needed the money. I took the can off my knuckles. They were red and hurt like a bastard, but they didn't look swollen. My first fight since the seventh grade was against a wall. And I had lost. Fuck it, I thought, opening the beer. It was the first time I had ever started a day off with a drink, and it smelled like bad body odour. I drank it anyway, crinkling my nose at its cheap, skunky flavour. A sparrow landed on the power lines outside my window and I flipped it the bird. It chirped back at me and flew off into the summer sky.

About a year before, I'd been working in the student union building of the University of British Columbia at a pizza shop called Slice U. I had just finished my English degree, and was working through the summer while I tried to figure out what to do next. Slice U was staffed by students and managed by recent graduates, and we spent the majority of the time blasting abrasive music and goofing off. There were usually a few employees hanging out back, eating pizza, and occasionally sneaking off to smoke joints by the dumpsters before cleaning up at the end of the day. The campus was on a peninsula jutting out into the Pacific Ocean, on the far end of English Bay in Vancouver, rimmed with rainforest and a nudist beach that ran along the bottom of the cliffs. On sunny days, the crew working the early shift would head down there when we got off in the afternoons. Most of us stayed dressed, but I

especially avoided nudity. I suffer from spiderbody syndrome: my arms and legs are as skinny as an arachnid's, but my gut bulges roundly at my middle.

I met Amy on one of those afternoons down at the beach. She had come cross-country from Montreal on a road trip with her boyfriend, who was friends with a Québécois exchange student I worked with at the shop. It was one of those perfect days of which Vancouver sees about ten a year: a warm sun in a cloudless sky, heating the air to a gentle twenty-five degrees. The beach was packed, with a drum jam in the centre, and all of the usual vendors wandered about selling empanadas ("Empanadas, chicken, veggie, or bee-eef!") and weed cookies ("Happy home-baked goodies. Make you smile!"), the flaccid penises of the men dangling like raw breakfast sausages beneath their fanny packs full of tourist cash, the sun-baked breasts of the women hanging like deflated balloons. Amy and Claude had just arrived in Vancouver that afternoon, and had come down to check out Wreck Beach at Marc's suggestion. They showed up walking far apart in the sand. Amy wore a halter top with a red sarong wrapped several times around the length of her body, her small breasts standing out like baby birds beneath the fabric. She carried her shoes in her hands and dug her bare toes into the beach. She pulled her sandy blonde hair out of a ponytail as she came up, and it fell in waves over her bare shoulders. There was a splash of caramel freckles across her face and down her chest. She noticed me looking at her and gave me a closed lipped smile before looking away. Then Claude stepped in front of her to hug Marc. He was wearing white canvas shoes with no socks, a claw-like toenail protruding from a ragged hole in the toe of his left shoe, cut-off jean shorts, a green souvenir t-shirt from some

Quebec provincial park, and a mass of curly brown hair pulled back into a puffball by a light blue headband. He introduced Amy to my coworker Marc, and Marc introduced them in turn to the group. Marc and Claude then fell into conversation, leaving Amy alone.

She hadn't said a word up to this point. Instead, she stared angrily at Claude, who had turned his back on her. She put a hand on his shoulder to get his attention, which he brushed off with a sneer, laughing at something Marc was saying. I shook my head at him. Amy was looking at her feet in the sand, so I introduced myself and invited her to sit down.

"Marc told me you just arrived from Montreal," I said. "How long have you been driving?"

"Fourteen days. We stopped a few times along the way. I've never seen much of Canada outside of Quebec and the East Coast. BC is amazing."

"I don't know, mountains are pretty boring," I said, rolling my eyes, "Like, oh, look at me, I'm so high. I'm so much higher than the rest of Canada. It's kind of like the people here." I waved my hand at my friends lighting up another joint.

"Pfft," she said, rolling her eyes, shaking her head, and grinning. "Are you from here?"

"Not originally, but I've been here for a while. I came out here from Ontario for school. You? Are you from Montreal?"

"I live there, but I grew up in New Brunswick."

"Neat. Where?"

"Lower Sackville." She stuck out the tip of her tongue.

“Not even Sackville proper huh?”

She laughed again. “Not even.”

I later found out that they had fought all the way across the country. Amy broke up with Claude within a week, and he drove back to Montreal on his own. She decided to find a sublet and stayed until the end of August. She was a folksinger, and played a few open mic nights around town. I had a crush on her immediately, but I really fell in love when I heard her sing, though I couldn't bring myself to speak up until nearly the end of the summer. We spent nearly every minute of her last week in town together and continued to exchange letters throughout the fall. I packed up my life in Vancouver and moved to Montreal over the holidays, and we found an apartment together.

I finished the beer in one grimacing chug. Then I tried calling Amy's phone. It went straight to voicemail, and I hung up. It was now 6:55. If I wasn't going in to work, it was time to call and tell my boss I'd gotten stuck in Toronto. I debated a moment, and thought about having another beer, but realized that getting drunk on a Monday morning and missing out on a day's pay wasn't going to improve anything, so I got up and went into the bathroom, where I stripped naked and climbed into the shower. I finally started crying when the warm water hit my face.

The truth was, I knew why she was leaving me. It had been a miserable six months since I arrived in Montreal. After four years on the West Coast, I had a hard time adjusting to the bitter cold. It was also more difficult to find work here than I had realized. With virtually no French, I couldn't even land a job in a kitchen.

Through a Craigslist posting, I had finally been hired at a soap factory just north of Verdun, with an Anglophone boss and an immigrant staff. The pay was miserable, and the long hours and long commute left me little time or energy to do much outside of work. I had moved out here planning to get involved in the comedy scene. As a student, I'd neglected my studies in favour of smoking pot and bingeing on comedy recordings. I had memorized bits by George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Bill Hicks, and Louis C.K. the way some of my peers in English classes memorized poetry. I had talked up plans to start doing stand-up all fall but had no clue how to start once I arrived in Montreal. Amy encouraged me in the beginning, but grew quieter and quieter on the subject as I got more defensive about it. It wasn't long before I was coming home angry and depressed, mocking her for the earnestness of her songs. She was right to leave me, but without her, I had virtually nothing here. The only real friend I had made outside our relationship was an amateur comic named Karen O'Sullivan, whom I'd met through a musician friend of Amy's. She was loud and raunchy, but we got along well. I figured it might be weird to drop all of this on her, but she was the only person I could talk to. It was too early to call her, so I sent her a text message when I got out of the shower.

*Hope this doesn't wake you up. Amy dumped me ☹️ I'm a fucking wreck. You gotta help me out with this one. I'll call you later today. I need a plan!*

It was now 7:15, and I was in danger of being late. I got dressed, brushed my teeth, and jogged down the stairs. I unlocked my bike and pedaled off, tired and sore and sad.

## Chapter Two

I skirted along the eastern edge of the Plateau, through the dampness of Park Lafontaine. The park was populated by sleeping drunks and young moms in Lulu Lemon suits jogging behind strollers tricked out like baby SUVs with oversized tires and shock systems. I had earbuds in, listening to Bill Hicks spit vitriolic routines on anti-smoking campaigns, the stupidity of patriotism, and the hypocrisy of Republican Christian fundamentalists. I wasn't laughing much, but his anger affirmed mine, and I ground my teeth and curled my lips in a mean snarl. A man in spandex ran out onto the bike path in front of me, where I nearly hit him. Ringing my bell, I passed him on the left. He had a blinking wireless earpiece clipped to the side of his head. He was yelling breathlessly into it, and I dismissed him in Hicks fashion: "Enjoy your *lifestyle* you multitasking yuppie prick."

I burned through town, fantasizing about all the things I would do to Amy's new boyfriend once I figured out who he was. Buy him a subscription to *Barely Legal* magazine? Shit in a DVD case and leave it on his doorstep? Karen would likely have a few suggestions to add.

I arrived at work just in time, sweaty and winded. Clean Spirit Cosmetics was one of several businesses that shared an old subdivided brick factory building just south of the Lachine Canal in Verdun. Scott, the manufacturing manager, was standing at the main entrance when I arrived, smoking a cigarette as though he were trying to pinch meaning and purpose from the butt. He squinted to keep trails of

smoke out of his eyes. He was in his late thirties, with thinning blonde hair and fair, patchy stubble. He had a slight stutter and a habit of keeping one hand on a wall at all times. As a boss, he could be indecisive and cagey, but I liked him just fine as a guy. He raised a hand to greet me as I locked up my bicycle.

“Hey Juh-Jamie. Guh-Good weekend?”

“Yeah, I went home to Hamilton for my dad’s sixtieth birthday. You?”

“Guh-good thanks.” He took a long drag from his cigarette. “Didn’t get up to muh-much.” He dropped his butt into the grey metal box nailed to the side of the building. “Anyway.”

He nodded towards the blue steel door. I followed him through it, down a series of wide cement hallways cluttered with pallets and marked with yellow tape. The bottoms of the walls were lined with a rubberized baseboard protector, and there were crumbling holes in the drywall from shoddy pallet jack steering. The factory was the local franchise of a larger company. I’d never seen the owners, who worked out of offices in Toronto, and owned a number of businesses there.

I nodded at Narinder and Gurjeet as I came into the staff room, where they were drinking tea at the kitchen table. Aside from Scott and myself, there was only one other man, a Nepalese immigrant named Kavin, working in the factory, and six women, all of whom came from other countries. As the compounder, I made two dollars more than the production assistants, who made minimum wage. Four of the women were Punjabi Sikhs who all attended the same temple. The other two women were Vietnamese and Chinese. Narinder gave me a polite smile and tilted her head slightly. Gurjeet, who spoke less English than the rest of the crew, (and no



French) called out “Anh! Jamie,” in a sharp tone that I’d learned to recognize as friendly.

“*Kidah?*” I said (or hoped I said). This meant something like, “How are you?” It was the greeting they had taught me, along with a few other Punjabi phrases I’d asked to learn, which had gone a long way towards endearing me to them.

“*Meraa haal theek hai,*” Gurjeet answered, as she always did, and laughed. This meant something along the lines of “Fine, thanks.” “Very good!” She said, followed by something else to Narinder, who laughed back.

“*Nahee! Nahee!*” (“No! No!”) she said, and smacked Gurjeet on her meaty bicep. Gurjeet winked at me and I shrugged and headed into the men’s change room.

Kavin was seated shirtless on the bench, tying up his steel-toed work boots, which factory regulations required. I enjoyed walking around in mine. Their heft made me feel manly and authoritative, rather than just skinny-fat Jamie, a middle class white Anglo Canadian from the suburbs.

Kavin had burn tissue that looked like melted wax all over his upper torso and neck. I couldn’t work up the courage to ask him about it. He was around my age, and worked at the factory part-time under the conditions of his wife’s student visa. He had the short, compact build of a Sherpa, and his arm strength far outstripped mine, so he often helped me haul in large loads of raw materials and empty the mixing vessel when we were in a hurry. He was more than capable of doing my job, but his part-time status prevented him from taking it on. We often worked silently, though he was the one person in the factory I was most likely to unburden myself to if the boredom became unbearable. Kavin seemed to have little need to express

himself in this way; as a result, he knew a lot more about me than I knew about him. He had lived a few years in India on his way from Nepal to Canada, so he knew enough Punjabi to speak with the Sikh women. They all treated him with respect, though they teased him in much the same way they teased me.

We nodded at each other as he headed out to the production floor. I changed into my uniform: black cargo pants, a green t-shirt, and a black apron with the company logo printed on the chest. I stashed my belongings in my locker and went back to the kitchen to gulp down as much coffee as I could in the three minutes left before I had to be on the floor. The stuff was thin, bitter, and acidic, but on this morning in particular, I needed it badly. I tossed the dregs into the sink, rinsed out my mug, and walked through the hanging plastic strip curtain and into the production area.

My station consisted of a steel table with a digital butcher's scale, a floor scale on the ground for heavy loads, a steam-heated and propeller-driven melting vessel with a metered water hose attached, and two gas burners with an industrial emulsifier for small batches. There were also pallets of raw materials arranged in a row: the soap noodles, needles, and flakes that formed the base for our "handmade" soap—these were manufactured by a chemical company in Toronto. The fragrances, flowers, colours, glitters, and sundries were organized on shelves against the far wall away from the stoves.

On the other side of the room, the women wheeled the pouring racks out of the cooling room to start unmoulding, weighing, and packing the finished soap from

Friday's batches. Kavin hauled in a fresh pallet of soap noodles from the receiving area before going to join the ladies and their Punjabi talk radio in the packing area.

Scott had left a print-out of the day's production schedule and a stack of formulas on my mixing table. I looked through these to plan my batches as I pulled on a pair of latex gloves and wiped out the mixing vessel with isopropanol, coughing on a lungful of fumes. I'd been inhaling this stuff for months, and I wondered about the hazards of breathing it. We had dust masks, but these didn't block the fumes. In fact, they seemed to trap and intensify them.

I turned on the heater and opened the valves of the steam pipes on the mixer and started filling it with water from the hose. I plugged my iPod into the dock at my station and dialed up Led Zeppelin's *Physical Graffiti*. Later, I might flip on the CBC or put on some stand up, but in the morning I needed music that would get me moving. I breathed a sigh at being alone with the hiss of the mixing vessel, Robert Plant's orgasmic squeals, and Jimmy Page's hard riffing. If there was one thing I liked about the job, it was the intense amount of mental space it left me. I'm a natural daydreamer (Amy called it my "astral traveling") and often used the time at work to think over problems or work on jokes. My formula sheets usually had notes scrawled across them by the end of the day, and I'd have to spend a few minutes copying them into my notebook, trying to remember how *Super Prison Rape: super prison for rapists. Punishment fits the crime. Child rapists. Extra shower time was supposed to make someone laugh.*

On that day though, I was more preoccupied with what to do about Amy. She was a folksinger, but aside from performing, she made money as a freelance graphic

designer. (She had studied at NSCAD before moving to Montreal.) Her real career was her music, although she struggled to find a way to fit into the scene in Montreal, which was either French or dominated by indie hipsters who were more interested in laptops and looping pedals than the sixties-style folk ballads Amy wrote. She got gigs around town, but they never paid more than 40 or 50 bucks a show. She sent her demos to record labels that ignored her, and people talked through the sets she played at small venues in Mile End and the Plateau.

All this made her very sensitive about her work, and yet I couldn't help cracking jokes about her bad luck. It was hard to come home from eight hours at the factory, plus travel time, making less than 100 bucks a day, and take her as seriously as she took herself.

I felt like my problems with Amy had more to do with my working circumstances than a fundamental incompatibility. Lenny Bruce once said that, "I am influenced by every second of my waking hour," and that's how Amy lived, and how I wanted to live, but I found myself burdened by my job, and unable to find inspiration outside of it. What contribution was I making to the world by grinding out luxury soaps for ignorant people with too much money? Surely I had more to offer. And yet I was too scared to try anything else. I was a coward, while Amy poured her beating heart into what she did and received nothing more than a shrug from audiences. How could I come home from this job and be the kind of guy she wanted?

That was the question I needed to answer as I stood watching water pour into the vessel. The water meter beeped and shut off the flow. I lowered the

mounted propeller to start the water stirring. On the mixing table, I measured out powdered colours on a micro scale for dilution in water. The fine dust of the colours got on and into everything no matter how carefully you handled them, and I'd be blowing out rainbow snot like a Care Bear with a coke problem by the end of the day. When the water reached temperature, I pulled a stepladder over to the mixer and slung the first bag of soap noodles over my shoulders like a body, carrying it up the steps and balancing it on the edge before slitting its throat and emptying it into the mixer. I had to be careful to keep my balance while handling the bags. I wasn't really strong enough for the job, and had almost tumbled into the hot vessel with its merciless metal propeller on several occasions. We should have had some sort of guard, but then, there were a number of things about the factory that I suspected weren't up to code. There'd been an inspector through at some point who'd made a lot of notes, but hadn't come back. I wondered if he'd been paid off in the Montreal style, a brown envelope and a handshake. I dumped in the last bag of noodles and rapped my knuckles on the vessel, which made a dull ring.

There were a few practical problems I needed to work out. For one thing, I had to find Amy. The direct route would never work; it wouldn't be as simple as calling her until she agreed to see me. For all her sensitivity, Amy could be as stubborn as gum on a running shoe. I needed to be strategic. I also needed to find out something about this guy she'd left me for. I had always prided myself on not being possessive; now I wished I had paid more attention. I didn't know who she'd been spending time with, only that she'd been out a lot.

I tested the viscosity of the base in the vessel with a paddle and decided it was ready to be transferred to barrels for cooling and mixing with fragrance and colour. I cut the motor on the propeller and waved Kavin over to help me pour it.

“We’re starting with a hundred kilos of Vitality,” I told him. He helped me lift and secure the propeller and rolled over a barrel. “Hey, if you were trying to find a girl in town whose number you lost, what would you do?”

He gave me a look that suggested I’d just asked him if it was a good idea to drink my own pee. “I guess call her friend?”

I nodded.

With a slight smile, he returned to the packing team on the far side of the room. I thought about whom I could call as I paddled the base in the barrel and checked the temperature. It had to be someone who knew her well enough to know where she’d gone, but not close enough that her sense of loyalty would win out over her sympathy for me. I thought of her friend Rosie.

The base was still too hot for the next phase, so I went outside to the picnic bench at the side of the building for my break, and, scrolling through the contact list in my phone, found Rosie’s number. She had played bass for Amy up until this past winter. They hung out often when I first arrived, and I had met up with her on my own a couple of times in the early days. Since then, they had fallen out because Amy refused to play with Rosie’s boyfriend, a drummer who wasn’t up to Amy’s standards. I pressed call, and she picked up after the third ring.

“Hello?” She sounded like she’d just woken up.

“Hi Rosie? This is Jamie Milan, Amy’s boyfriend. Sorry, did I wake you up?”

“Yeah, that’s okay though. How are you?”

“Mmm...not bad. I have kind of a funny question for you.”

She coughed. “What’s up?”

“Have you talked to Amy lately?”

“Not much really. Why?”

“We had kind of a fight, and she took off.”

“Oh, I see.” There was a pause. “You know we’re not on the best terms, right?”

“Yeah, I know. So I take it you haven’t seen her. Do you know who she’s been hanging around with? She’s been out a lot the last few weeks, and she’s kind of disappeared. Well, not disappeared, she left a note. But I don’t know where she’s gone.” I was afraid of sounding stalkerish, so I said, “and she accidentally took my laptop charger.” Then I winced. Then I made it worse. “I’m not about to do anything nuts or anything.”

Rosie was silent and I pictured her gesturing to someone in the room to call the police or trace the call, like in a movie. (It didn’t matter that this didn’t make sense.) Finally, she sighed.

“I can’t tell you where she’s gone, partly because I think I shouldn’t, and partly because I don’t know for sure. But did you ever meet my friend Francis? Or did Amy ever mention him?”

The name was vaguely familiar; I remembered her saying something about playing music with him at some point. “I recognize the name, but I don’t think I’ve met him.”

“Well, they’ve been hanging out.”

Amy hadn’t mentioned this, but the more I bounced the name around in my head, the more familiar it seemed. “I see.”

“Yeah, so there’s that. Actually, I think he has a show tonight, and I think Amy’s opening for him.”

Shit. A lump rose in my throat at the thought of her singing with this douchebag. “I see. Where’s the show?”

“Give me a sec, I’ll check online.” I heard the insectile click of a laptop keyboard. “OK, it’s at Le Petit Prince on Mont Royal at 8. He performs under the name Francis la Fleuriste. I think Amy’s playing keyboards for him.”

*Francis la Fleuriste?* I punched the steel door next to me, then sucked air as my sore knuckles reminded me I’d already punched above my weight this morning.

“Hey, what was that? Everything ok?”

“Yeah, fine. Sorry, someone was just taking out the garbage, and the lid on the bin is really loud. Plus, I just killed a guy.”

She gave a nervous laugh. “Alright. Look, I should probably go.”

“You think you’ll be there tonight?”

“Probably not. I’m still pissed with her about Matt, and to be honest, this thing with you isn’t helping. Call again if you need anything, OK? I’m still her friend, but don’t let her fuck with you.”

“Thanks Rosie. I should get back to work.”

“And no crazy shit. It wouldn’t be worth it.”



“I promise. But if you hear something on the news about a naked guy wandering up St. Laurent later tonight, that’ll probably be me.”

She laughed. “Alright funny guy. Talk to you soon.”

I hung up the phone and leaned against the picnic bench set up at the side of the factory. It was warm out, but the sky was cluttered with lumpy dark clouds. In the distance, cars and transport trucks hummed along the overpasses towering above the canal. I noticed that I had received a text from Karen while I was on the phone.

*Duuude. That sux. Want to meet me at Mercado after work? Around six. Let me know. And don't kill yourself before then. I want to watch. ;) K*

I wrote back: *Sounds good. See you then.* Then I slipped my phone into my pocket and headed back into the factory.

## Chapter Three

Karen was seated at a plastic table on the back patio of El Mercado Común when I arrived, a half-empty pint glass of cider bubbling in front of her. She was smoking an extra slim cigarette and playing with her smartphone. She had just gotten off her day job as an editor for a DVD subtitling company, and was still dressed for the office in a filmy peach blouse, her black hair tied back. She had the phone down in her lap, and was smiling at whatever was on the screen.

“See something down there you like?” I asked as I approached the table and set down the pint I’d bought at the bar inside.

She answered without looking up, “Better than anything I’d find between your legs I imagine.” Her voice was deep and smoky.

“So you’re switching teams now?”

She finished typing and looked up. Her large, dark eyes were rimmed with black eyeliner. “Better no dick than a short one,” she said with a shrug.

I made a wounded face and looked down at my crotch.

“Don’t worry, it’ll grow one day,” she said, and laughed. “Here, give me a hug.”

I leaned over and put my arms around her shoulders, trying not to press my chest too firmly into her breasts.

“So, what the fuck’s going on with you? You got dumped? Give me the dirt.” She gestured towards a chair, and I sat down.

“I got home from Hamilton at six o’clock this morning. Amy was gone, along with her stuff, and I found this note.” I was carrying it in my backpack and pulled it out to show her. She flipped it over and read a few lines.

“Shut the fuck up!” She looked up at me and laughed, “this is too good.” She quoted from the letter, ‘But I’ve met someone else, someone who loves me as I am.’ What a drama queen!”

“Seriously though, do you think you could help me here?” I was starting to wonder if I’d made a mistake.

Karen passed the letter to me and leaned back. “Well, I’m not exactly Dan Savage. It’s been almost a year since Shawn and I broke up, and that was a huge mess, as you know.” She took a drink of her cider. “But I’m guessing you don’t have anyone else to ask.”

I shrugged and nodded.

“I’ll do my best. Before we get into it though, I want to ask you a question. What is it you like so much about Amy?”

I paused to take a drink of my pint. I set the glass back down, arranging it evenly in the centre of the coaster. “It’s pretty hard to say concretely. I guess it’s just that I feel so anxious all the time, and when I met Amy, she made me feel relaxed and liberated and cool for once. I feel like I have to know somebody for six months before I can begin to say even one honest thing about myself. With her, I felt like I could open up right away. Also, I love the way she chases after exactly what she wants. If she wants to write a song about something, she just sits down and does it. She doesn’t waste time on bullshit the way I do.”

Karen lit another cigarette. "So basically, you love her because you want to be like her."

"Not exactly. I think I love her because I admire her." I held out my hand, two fingers open to request a drag from Karen's cigarette. She passed it to me.

"That sounds like bullshit to me. But I guess it doesn't really matter what your reasons are if you're feeling stubborn. The truth is, Jamie, I don't really know her all that well. I've only met her what, three times? So why don't you tell me what you think will win her back, and I'll try to help you get there."

The cigarette burned my throat, and I coughed out a thick cloud of dirty smoke before passing it back. I took a swig of beer before I answered. "I was thinking about this all day at work. The problem is basically that I think she finds me too much of a bummer."

"Jamie, you are a fucking bummer. That's why I like you."

"Hm, thanks. But I need to convince her that I can be something else. I really think it's just this job that makes everything so bleak."

"So you're going to quit your job to win her back?"

"Well, no. Not yet anyway. I wouldn't be able to pay rent, and my name is on the lease. My plan is to prove I can actually get up there and perform. I figure I get some jokes together, rehearse an act, invite her out without telling her I'm going up, and trick her into seeing my set."

Karen stayed silent while I finished my pint. I had to consciously stop my legs from twitching under the table.

"So...what do you think?"

She pointed at my glass. "You want another one of those?"

"Um. Sure. What about my plan?"

"I need one too."

She got up and walked into the bar. I looked around to check if anyone had been listening to our conversation, but the crowd around us was mostly French. It was a warm evening, and everybody looked happy and comfortable. Maybe it was a stupid idea after all. Maybe I should just let it go. I picked up a used metro ticket that was sitting on the table and organized stray ashes into little piles.

Karen came back with two fresh drinks and sat down at the table.

"Jamie, you'll have to forgive me if I've asked you this before, but you've never actually performed, right?"

"No. But I know stand-up. I can do most of Carlin's *Class Clown* from memory. And I've got books of jokes at home. I think. I've just never tried them out on stage."

She gave me a sour look. "Nice that you've written some jokes, but performing is a whole other thing. I've been doing it for two years now, and I'm still a total wreck the whole day before a performance. Even just five minutes at an open mic makes me want to hang myself. I threw up before every single show for my entire first year. You think Amy's going to get wet watching you vomit on your shoes?"

"Well, no."

"That's one thing. And then you know what happens when you actually get up there? On a bad night, I straight up *hallucinate*. Like time and space get all warped and bendy, five minutes feels like five fucking hours, the audience feels like

they're ten miles away, and then they're towering over you. It's a religious fucking experience Jamie! Every second you feel like your soul is being judged." She lit up another cigarette. "You'll be all by yourself in front of a silent fucking room trying to make people laugh, and if you don't, they will hate you, and you will feel their hate, and you will want to kill yourself. Straight up man."

She sat back and smoked, shaking her head at me.

"Assuming you've got good material, and like, we can talk about that later, that's a whole other issue, just getting over the fear is 90% of the battle. Do you know how much harder this will be for you if you've got the added pressure of trying to win back your girlfriend? So no, Jamie, this is not a good plan. Not at all."

We were both quiet. The patio was getting busier, as more *cinq à sept* drinkers filtered in. I stared at the table, feeling like a scolded child.

"Sorry, that was too much," she conceded.

"No, I probably needed to hear it."

A busser came by the table and added the empty glasses from our first round to a teetering stack of others he was cradling in his right arm. I forced a smile at him.

"I'll help you with it anyway, but as your friend, I have to be honest.

Relationships are hard work, blah blah blah. But if you're really busting your balls, have you ever thought maybe it's not worth it? Amy's awesome, and I understand why you like her, she's a total babe and everything, and I get the hot singer thing. And I like her, at least from the times we've hung out, though I don't really know her. But this thing's been kinda shitty since you got here, hasn't it? You guys have had

trouble as long as I've known you. So if you can work this out, awesome, I'm ready to help. But you better make sure you know what you're doing."

I didn't want to answer right away. "Are we having another round here?"

"I could. Or not. Or we could go somewhere else. It's still early. I have to work tomorrow, so I can't get too sloppy, but I imagine you're the same. I don't know.

What do you think?"

"Well, maybe I shouldn't even bring this up, but Amy has a show tonight."

Karen's eyebrows shot up. "Oh yeah? Near here?"

"Not far."

She nodded. "Where's she staying anyway?"

"Actually, she didn't tell me...but I think it's with the new guy."

"Ouch dude! I'm afraid you might be fucked. Was she cheating on you?"

"I don't think so, but honestly, who knows?" A lump rose in my throat like a ball of wax and I started tearing up.

"Eh, eh, oh. What the fuck is that? Put a plug in it there weepy. I'm not spending yet another Monday night watching a man cry. You have to at least buy me dinner first."

"Sorry. I can't help it."

"Man, we need to get you a hand job or something."

I dabbed my eyes with the sleeve of my t-shirt.

"Sorry, I should probably be a little more sensitive. Look, if we're going out from here, I need to drop my laptop and stuff at home and get changed. Why don't you come over for a drink? I've got scotch left over from my birthday. I'll make us

some food, and we can figure out what to do next. OK? Just don't cry anymore. At least not in the middle of the bar. Come on." She raised her glass to toast me, and we downed the ends of our drinks.

I walked my bike alongside Karen clicking up St. Laurent. She was taller than me in her heels, and her elevated posture emphasized her figure. Men craned their heads to catch a view of her as they drove past. One guy leaned out his window and said something to her in French. She responded by raising her middle finger without turning her head.

"What was that?"

"What do you think it was? Never mind. Learn some French already."

Her apartment was on Clark, just below St. Viateur, about a five-minute walk north of the bar. She unlocked the outside door and went upstairs while I locked my bike to a parking sign. I followed her up the stairs and found her seated at the kitchen table rubbing her stocking feet. The main part of her apartment was an open linoleum-floored kitchen bordered by a strip of hardwood, which served as a sort of living room with a long antique sofa and a couple of bookshelves. Her collection of funny hats and wigs was piled on top of the bookshelf, crowned by a giant black afro and a fringed sombrero. Her book collection was broken up by framed photos of her drinking margaritas in a bikini on a beach somewhere with a bunch of girlfriends, as well as some older shots of her traveling in Europe and Asia. She was a couple of years older than me and had studied musical theatre, taking odd jobs on cruise ships and in Asian night clubs before moving back to Montreal to try stand-up. She wasn't



yet thirty, but she complained that she was already getting too old for acting. I'd met her shortly after arriving. I wasn't really sure why she was interested in me, but I was flattered and chose not to question it.

I kicked off my sneakers and sat down on a black leather loveseat. Karen went over to the fridge and spent a few seconds digging around inside. She looked up over the top of the door.

"I've got a frozen spinach pizza we can toss in the oven, and some arugula and cherry tomatoes for a salad. Sound good?"

I nodded.

"You chill, I'll pour drinks. You want rocks?"

I nodded again.

"You mind talking?"

"Oh sorry, I was spacing out. Yes please. You want me to do anything?"

She cracked two cubes out of the tray from the freezer, clinked them into two short tumblers, and poured us two substantial drinks. She flicked on the oven and brought me my whiskey.

"Here's to love darling," she said, dragging out the "I." I groaned and we clicked glasses. She walked back over to the kitchen and ripped the plastic wrap off the pizza and slid it into the oven.

"Actually, if you don't mind putting together the salad while I get changed, that would be great. Can you wash the arugula though? I don't trust the 'triple washed' shit they write on there. 'Triple washed' in what, that it doesn't wilt? Formaldehyde?"

She plugged her phone into a small docking station and put on a Nina Simone album. I got up from the couch as she went off into the bedroom and closed the door. I washed the greens and sliced the tomatoes, nodding my head to the soulful reggae thump of the music as Simone sang a lament for Baltimore. I tossed the salad in the bowl with a bottled dressing. I jumped when the smoke alarm starting beeping.

“Sorry sorry sorry. Fucking thing.” Karen came running out of the bedroom brandishing a magazine and waving it madly at the device on the ceiling. “It’s like a goddamned air-raid siren.” She had changed into a thin, long-sleeved v-neck shirt and a tight pair of dark jeans.

“Can you check the pizza?” she asked as she went into the bathroom.

It looked done, so I pulled it out and slid it onto a cutting board on the counter. Karen came out again in a cloud of perfume and set plates out.

“How’s your drink?” She nodded at my empty glass and leaned forward to fill it before I could respond. “Where’s the show?”

I filled her in on the details.

“She’s opening for him, or she’s playing with him?”

“Both I think. Cheers.” We clicked glasses again and drank, then bit into the pizza. The booze had made me ravenous and I smeared shredded spinach around the sides of my mouth as I ate.

“Jesus you’re eating like you just got off a boat from Africa. You been on a hunger strike?”

“Sorry. Too many drinks too early.”

“So what are you going to say to her?”

“When?”

“Duh. Tonight at the gig?”

I looked at her blankly. Somehow, this had not occurred to me as a situation I would realistically need to deal with.

“We’re going to rehearse it then.” She finished eating and wiped her fingers on a towel. “I’ll be Amy.” She took a deep breath, then tossed her hair over her shoulders like an actress in a shampoo commercial. She mimed an air-keyboard and sang a falsetto “La la la...oh my gosh Jamie! I’m so surprised to see you here.” She batted her eyelashes.

I tried to get into character, which is a weird thing to do when the character is you. I cleared my throat and spoke in a deeper voice than natural for some reason. “Hi Amy. I got your note.”

“I got your note?” Karen asked in her regular tone. “Try again. Hi Jamie, I’m so surprised to see you here,” she said, again in falsetto.

“Hi Amy. I know I’m probably not supposed to be here, but I had to see you.”

“Not bad. A little teenage rom-com.” She poured me some more whiskey. “I’m enjoying this. It’s like I’m back in school. Let’s keep going. What do you say next?” She switched to her Amy voice again. “Why did you need to see me?”

“I think you should come back to me.”

“Why?”

“I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you. I know I’ve behaved badly these past few months, but that’s not the guy I am. I’m still that guy you met in Vancouver.

Give me some more time, I'll show you. I came here to do comedy, and I'm going to do it. Once you've seen me perform...oh no, wait. I was going to trick her into coming, wasn't I? I can't do this. It's too embarrassing." I rubbed my face with both hands.

Karen laughed. "Yeah. For both of us."

"Oh fuck off."

"C'mon, that was super cute. But yeah, you totally can't show up tonight and be that cheesy and desperate. Can't you just play it cool?"

"No. Plus, I think I'm drunk. Karen, what the fuck am I going to do?"

"Fuck, I don't know. Eat your salad. I'm going to think. And here, have some water. Fucking lightweight."

She poured me a pint glass of water, which I chugged.

"Hm, actually, I have an idea," she said, and disappeared into the bedroom behind me. I belched.

"Nasty!" she called out from the other room.

"Sorry!"

There was a loud rustling sound on the other side of the room, and I started turning around to look.

"Wait a sec! Don't spoil it." She took a few heavy steps across the floor and jumped in front of me wearing a big pink tutu and the afro wig. "Ta da!"

I forced a laugh. "Afro ballerina?"

"No, you idiot. Costumes!"

I pulled back and gave her a cocked eyebrow.

“Look, if you show up at the gig as yourself, you’ll have to talk to her. Otherwise, you’ll just be cowering like a creep in the back, looking even more impotent than you already do. If we go in costumes, we can check out the scene, stick to the dark corners, and she’ll never know you were there.”

“No fucking way. That’s retarded.”

“Oh shut up and have another drink. It’ll be way more fun this way. You know you’re fucked no matter how you do it anyway, right?”

I gulped as she splashed more scotch into my glass.

Half an hour later, the room looked like we’d raided a circus trailer. There were feather boas, leopard print scarves, coloured velour hats, oversized sunglasses, buckled shoes, canes and walking sticks, plastic handcuffs, toy guns, pixie, afro, and long-haired wigs, glitter-encrusted wands, long-tailed tuxedo jackets, checkered sport coats, sequined short-shorts, and mountains of silks and tulle. As Karen had been running around pulling these things out of closets and boxes under beds and couches and from the pile on her bookshelves, I couldn’t resist asking, “Jesus Karen, why do you have so much of this shit?”

“A girl never knows when she might need a disguise. Here, try these.” She handed me a pair of white corduroy bellbottoms.

She was now in the bathroom, making some adjustments to her outfit. I walked towards the full-length mirror she had hung on the wall next to her front door. I had on a brown newsie cap over a black pageboy wig and a pair of oversized rainbow-lensed John Lennon glasses with circular frames. I was dressed in a blue

velour shirt open at the collar, with the tight white bell bottoms Karen had given me earlier, secured with a wide brown belt affixed with a large buckle decorated with horses. We hadn't found shoes for me yet, as Karen's feet were a couple of sizes smaller than mine. Everything else fit surprisingly well, though the pants were a bit tight in the crotch and saggy in the seat. "There's no fucking way!" I shouted.

She came twirling out of the bathroom. "Nonsense darling. We'll stay in the corner. She'll see us, but she'll never guess it's us, right? I mean, look at you. Has she ever seen you looking so goddamned ridiculous? Hiding in plain sight darling."

"No, but this is too much. And I'm too drunk."

"No worries there. You look hilarious, and the booze'll make it easier to play your part. Anyway, how do I look? No comment? I took your breath away?"

She twirled again, ending in a curtsy. She had put on a long, silky black wig that fell halfway down her back, and a lacy, black, long-sleeved dress that ended in a flourish at her thighs. It was cut low, and I had to consciously stop myself from staring at the valley between her breasts. She had on a pair of towering platform boots, eyelash extensions, and had painted spiderwebs in the corners of her eyes. She had on white face powder and black lipstick. She held the curtsy too long and stumbled over onto the sofa. "Shit. Tomorrow's going to suck."

"This is ridiculous. We look like fucking cartoon characters. Let's just get this shit off and stay in. I want to sober up and go home."

She got up from the couch and planted a finger on my chest. "No way buddy. We've already gone too far. Once I'm dressed, I'm dressed." She took her finger away and softened her tone. "Besides, you want to prove you've got balls? Grow some. Just

don't talk to her directly and she'll never suspect it's you. Loosen up and have fun for once Jamie. We both know you're fucked here anyway, right? Might as well ride it out."

I turned and looked at myself in the mirror again. I felt foolish and sad.

"Fine. Let's just fucking do this."

Le Petit Prince was only a fifteen-minute walk from Karen's, but she insisted we take a cab.

"I'm not walking there in goth heels, and don't you think she'd recognize your bike if you park it out front?"

The cabbie glanced at us in the rearview as we tumbled in. Karen gave the driver the address in French, and we pulled away. I was getting drunker by the minute. I rolled down my window and leaned my head against the frame. The night air felt like cool hand stroking my face. The driver took a right off St. Laurent, then doubled back down a dark, industrial-looking street I'd never seen before. The quick turns made me nauseous.

"Holy shit, this guy really knows where he's goin'," I slurred. "Look at all these things!" I waved my hand vaguely at the tall buildings blurring by. "They have lights on in some of the windows." I belched, and pizza, whiskey, and stomach acid bubbled up and burned my throat. I leaned over and whispered, "I think I'm going to throw up."

"That's nice Jamie, just keep that mouth pointed out the window then."

"*Qu'est-ce que il à dit?*" The driver asked.

*“Rien de tout monsieur. Tout est correct,”* Karen answered.

“You’re really good at French,” I said.

“Yeah, thanks.” She gently shoved me back across the seat, and I laid my head down on the edge of the window again and closed my eyes. I saw Amy in our living room. She opened her mouth to sing and a deafening roar rushed out. I heard Karen saying, *“Bonsoir, merci,”* and felt her reaching across me and opening the door. I rolled against the back of the seat and out of the cab, stumbling in circles on the sidewalk before regaining my balance and standing upright. Karen had me by the shoulders.

“Steady there cowboy. Can’t take you anywhere, can we?”

I was looking down at my blue velour clad belly, which rose like the hump of a whale. I grabbed it with both hands. “Karen, I’m fat.”

“Oh for *fuck’s sake*. Just lean against that wall, I’m going to get you some water.” She ran to a *depanneur* across the street. An older couple passed me as I slumped against the building like a winded runner, breathing heavily and trying to keep my dinner down. I waved at them as they passed.

*“Bonsoir!”* I tried feebly, rolling the “r” like I was speaking Russian. *“Excuse moi!”*

Karen returned with a bottle of water. “Drink this, and try to practise not talking to anyone.”

“I need to pee.”

“Well, use the alley for chrissakes. Do I have to hold it for you too?”



“Right. I’m going to *do* this.” I stumbled around the corner and up the block, turning into the first dark alley I could find. There were piles of sawdust on the ground; I wasn’t sure why. I stepped over two little rivers of other men’s urine. I pulled out my penis and rolled it between my fingers. It felt numb and foreign, like a gummy worm. When the pee came, the numbness melted away and the sensation was so intense it was almost sexual. Tears came to my eyes, and I started moaning. I closed my eyes and swayed loosely back and forth. I could hear footsteps behind me, but I couldn’t stop the stream. I looked down and saw a little yellow river running towards my feet.

*“Chalice! C’est tellement dégueulasse.”*

“I’m sorry! *Desolé!*” I shouted. The women passed by and hurried on, and I turned just in time to see two perfect bums in short, tight skirts turn the corner.

“I am disgusting,” I said aloud. I tucked my penis back in and zipped up. I didn’t appear to have splashed any urine on the cuffs of my bellbottoms. Karen stuck her head around the corner and called out.

“Hey, everything all right back here?”

I gave her a thumbs-up and walked to where she stood with her weight balanced on one hip at the end of the alley. I felt a little more clear-headed now that I’d pissed and had some water. “What time is it?” I asked.

Karen checked her phone. “Just after ten.”

“Shit, they’ve probably already started.”

“Believe me, that’s a good thing.” We walked back to Mont Royal and started up the block towards the venue. “Now remember the plan. Keep those sunglasses

and the wig on, and stay in the back. We're only here to look, not to get involved. If we need a closer look at something, I'll go up and check it out. If I get recognized, no big deal. But she can't see you. If anyone tries to talk to you, pretend you're too focused on the music, or that you can't hear. Play dumb."

I gave her a thumbs-up and we started walking in the direction of the bar. The bars and restaurants along the street had opened their terraces, and we weaved unsteadily through the heavy traffic of well-dressed people filling the sidewalks. We passed a karaoke bar where someone was belting out "Walking in Memphis," and I couldn't help singing along under my breath. "Walking in Memphis. Walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale..."

"Jesus Christ. Shut the fuck up, will you?"

"Sorry."

Le Petit Prince had a raised wooden terrace set up on the sidewalk, which was packed with drinkers. Amy's voice came drifting out of the open windows of the bar. She was playing guitar and singing one of her covers, Joni Mitchell's "Carey." Her voice was a jeweled dagger in my chest. She was mid-chorus, and I accidentally started singing along. "Oh you're a mean old daddy, but I like you..."

Karen turned and gave me a popped eye look that suggested I might get a pointy-toed boot in the nuts, so I turned my eyes back to my feet and shut my mouth. I looked up in time to recognize the two girls from the alley, smoking in front of the bar. As I passed them, I tried to duck, but one of them noticed me and said, "*Degueulasse*," again and spat on the ground.

Karen paused before the door. "What was that about?"

“Nothing, never mind.”

“OK, whatever. Ready?”

I shrugged. “No.”

“Let’s go.”

The room was dark and smelled of perfume and beer. Amy was performing under a bright spotlight on a short stage in a corner at the front of the room. She was only a few feet away, so I kept my face turned to the wall. A woman seated at a table near the door held up five fingers. We handed her two five-dollar bills and she pressed a star-shaped rubber stamp onto our wrists. It seemed odd that she took so little notice of our costumes, until I turned and looked around the room. Francis’s fans were dressed in clothes almost as ludicrous as ours. There was a woman in a red velvet petticoat with a frilled shirt and fishnet stockings seated at the table closest to us. Next to her was a girl in a peasant dress with a stuffed bird nesting in her hair. I felt like I’d stepped into a casting call for *Moulin Rouge*. Karen was already weaving her way through tables and I exchanged smiles with these girls as though we were wearing nothing more remarkable than jeans and t-shirts.

Karen had found us an empty table in the back and was waving me over. I avoided looking over at Amy, half-expecting her to be rubbing noses with Francis when I turned around. She finished the song she was playing, and I used the applause break to stumble quickly to the back. Karen was ordering drinks from a waitress when I arrived.

She leaned in and whispered, “I ordered you a beer. Hope you can handle it.”

I thanked her and took a seat. I turned to face the stage. I almost didn't recognize Amy at first: it seemed as if the costumes were spreading like a disease. She had her hair up. (She normally wore it down when she performed, the motion of tossing it over her bare shoulders like a blanket of silk between songs being almost a part of her performance.) Tonight, she had it pulled back and pinned with a fascinator made of black netting and purple ribbons. She wore thick pink eyeshadow and bright red lipstick, and had a fake beauty mark painted on her cheek with a sprinkling of glitter across the bridge of her nose. Her long dress was slit high along one leg, revealing a smooth stretch of thigh. It felt like I hadn't seen her in months, rather than just a few days. I started feeling sick again. There was something deeply unsettling about seeing her so changed so quickly, but she was also intensely beautiful. I felt like crying even as I was filled with desire.

The generous applause subsided, and it occurred to me that I'd never seen her receive such an enthusiastic response.

"Thank you, thank you very much," Amy cooed into the mic, "*Merçi, merçi beaucoup.*" Her French was round and smooth, with a gently rolled "r" and a "ç" as soft as a feather. Something turned over in my stomach.

"This will be my last song, and then Francis will be coming up." The mention of his name drew some further applause and a couple of wolf whistles, and my hand tightened into a fist under the table.

"This last one is another of mine, it's called 'Softly in the Morning.' *Merçi.*" She began the simple fingerpicking pattern that ran through the song. This was one she'd written when I'd first moved to Montreal.

“When you get up and go, and leave me so softly in the morning,” she sang in a whispered falsetto over major chords, “and I roll myself over a blanket of snow.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I was thankful for the sunglasses. I must have had a pained look on my face, because Karen reached under the table and gently rubbed my knee. I gave her an unenthusiastic thumbs-up. The waitress returned with two bottles of Boreale, and I waved Karen’s wallet away and paid for the round. I took a long drink, hoping to break the waves of emotion rising up my chest. I couldn’t look up at Amy’s face, so I stared at the table while she sang, struggling as the pressure built up behind my eyes.

Karen leaned over and whispered, “You look like a kid whose puppy just died. Maybe this was a bad idea after all. We can just slip out the back now if you want.”

I waved her off. As I listened to Amy sing about me, I thought about how excited we’d both been when I first arrived here. I had left all of my furniture in Vancouver. I shipped a few boxes of books to her old address ahead of time and flew home with only a couple of big suitcases carrying all of my clothes. My mother had been so excited to see me step off the plane, finally coming back East after so many years, but I could barely remember that Christmas aside from my long phone conversations with Amy. On Amy’s recommendation, I took the train from Toronto on New Year’s Day. Amy met me at the Gare Centrale wearing a sky blue peacoat. I felt like a character in a novel, letting my suitcases tip over onto the ground and burying my hands into her soft blonde hair and kissing her in a way that would

embarrass me now. Everything about her glowed; she looked like a doll in her thick winter clothes.

Amy sang, "And then you're gone, so softly in the morning, and I rise," and played the final chord. The audience clapped loudly and several audience members hollered things in French.

"Aw, thank you so much, you're very sweet. *Merçi, merçi. Francis est la prochaine. Merçi.*" She smiled widely and curtsied before hopping off stage with her guitar. People started getting out of their chairs and moving around, calling out to each other and ordering drinks from the two servers moving around the bar. I couldn't see Amy anymore, and was thankful for it.

I turned to Karen, "Well, I don't think I've ever been so goddamned miserable in my entire life. This is just shit." I drank my beer in one chug and called the server over to order two shots of whiskey and two more beers. Karen shook her head at me. "Don't worry," I said, "I've got this one." My buzz was picking up again, and I was slurring. "I half-ass everything. We're going whole-ass tonight."

At the front of the room, Amy reappeared and started rearranging the stage, packing up her guitar and setting up her keyboard off to the side. She motioned to someone waiting off stage, and Francis stepped into the light. He had a long handlebar moustache, waxed and curled up into an elaborate spiral at either end. He wore a striped shirt with a flower in the breast pocket and suspenders holding up baggy tweed trousers. His hair was oiled and combed back, with a slight curl to the tips. I leaned over to Karen and pointed. "Speaking of going whole-ass, check it out. He looks like a clown."

“That’s our guy, hey? Nice suspenders.” She seemed half-serious.

Francis was setting up several instruments: a silver trumpet, a banjo, and a ukulele. The server arrived with our drinks and I paid her.

“We’re not actually doing these shots, are we?” she asked.

“Fuck yes!” We raised our shots and clicked glasses. The whiskey went down like water. Karen’s phone started buzzing on the table, and she picked it up and started texting. The stage was set for the main show, and Amy and Francis had disappeared. I scanned the room, angrily swilling beer. They were standing together near the door. Francis was facing Amy with one arm around her waist and two fingers of the other hand under her chin. He was a few inches taller than her, and she looked up into his face, her eyes glistening. He leaned in and kissed her, open mouthed. I stood up from my chair. With a note of alarm in her voice, Karen asked what I was doing. I didn’t answer her. Rage and hurt and whiskey flooded my brain all at once, making the room pulse with each throb of blood through my temples. “Asshole!” I said under my breath, but loudly enough that several people at nearby tables turned to look. I balled my fists and started making my way across the room, slapping chairs and tables out of the way. Francis looked up from his kiss with puzzlement written across his brow.

“*You*,” I said, and pointed my finger at him. He put a palm on his chest, in a gesture that clearly said “*Moi?*” Amy looked over as well. I couldn’t tell if she recognized me.

Suddenly there was a hand on my shoulder, and Karen spun me around to face her. “Leave. Now.”

I shook my head and she slapped me. She put a hand on my chest and started pushing me backwards towards the door. I stumbled to keep my footing, and the backwards motion nauseated me. I threw up in my mouth and clapped a hand over it to stop it from spilling out. The entire bar stared at me as I made a run for the door. Francis jumped aside, flattening Amy against the wall with his free arm. I still had the sunglasses on, but Amy seemed to see right into them as I ran past with Karen pushing me from behind.

“Jamie?” I heard her ask softly. Then I burst out into the night air and vomited an acidic, chunky mush of pizza and beer into the gutter. The two girls from the alley were still outside smoking.

“*Degueullasse!*” They yelled behind me as Karen and I ran off into the night. Amy didn’t follow.



## Chapter Four

I stood in the kitchen at work the next morning trying to swallow a pair of aspirins with a mouthful of hot coffee when Kavin came in from the production floor.

“Re-melts,” he said. He was standing with his weight balanced on one hip and his arms crossed, tapping his thick bicep with rough, short fingers. I stared at the scarred muscles on his neck. I wanted to touch them. I rubbed my eyes.

“Shit. Which ones? Why?”

“Green Clean. Blue Hawaii. Blue number 5 wasn’t mixed right.” He wiggled his fingers. “They have the specks.”

This was a problem that came up when the powdered colours hadn’t been properly blended. A re-melt wasn’t a total disaster, but we’d lose about half a day’s production, and the end product always looked a little rougher than a fresh batch. Scott wouldn’t be angry, but it would make him edgy. I asked Kavin if Scott had seen them yet.

“No. You want to see? I stopped them packing it.”

“Yeah, I’ll be right there.”

Kavin nodded and left. I splashed water on my face at the sink and dried it with cottony blue paper towels from a big roll on the counter. My head was still throbbing, but I wasn’t as hung over as I might have expected. Karen had sent me home in a taxi, and I’d continued throwing up when I’d gotten there. Once I’d stopped vomiting, I had the presence of mind to guzzle a pint of water and take a

multivitamin before bed. I couldn't remember any of my dreams, but I'd woken up alone, my legs kicking with spasms of anxiety, ticking off the events of the previous day on a tally of regrets. I sighed and headed into the production room to examine my failures in greater detail.

Scott was already standing over the pouring racks examining my soaps. I walked up next to him and picked up one of the small gift-size pieces. It was peppered with dark specks all over. Nothing was technically wrong with it as soap, but to a customer it would look diseased.

"Hi Scott. What do you think?" I asked.

"Nuh-not a total disaster. But duh-definitely need to re-melt these. If you re-melt at 80 and emulsify the shuh-shit out of the batch, they'll still look spotty, but we'll be able to ship them. We can save them. But try to be more careful today." He turned to look at me. "You OK?"

I nodded and sighed and closed my eyes a moment. My head was spinning. I could smell whiskey steaming from my pores. "Yeah, sorry Scott. I'm fine. I'll fix these."

"Alright, I've got to go catch a call from Toronto. Get Kevin to help you with the second stick blender if you need him."

Kevin helped me pop the soaps out of their moulds, and we loaded them into a pair of pots and set them on the gas burners. Narinder's team was happily packing on the other side of the room. Despite the fouled batch, I'd been productive on Monday, and bigger batches made it easier for them to hit their production bonuses. They organized the packing tables with military discipline. Two of the women were

popping soaps from their molds and building a mountain of blocks separated by waxed paper. Another woman was prefilling shipping labels on rolls with manufacture dates, and the other two were stacking up towers of boxes with pre-cut bubble wrap and wax paper liners. Narinder was directing the operation, wielding a large-button calculator like a field commander and calculating exact numbers of boxes to fold and labels to fill. She turned and waved to me with a stern look and an authoritative furrow of the brow that implied the stress of command. I saluted her; she rolled her eyes and turned back to her team. The pots filled, Kavin handed me the long-nozzle BBQ lighter and went to join the packing team. I opened the gas valve on the first burner full blast and clicked the lighter on above it. It jumped to life with a whump. I turned it down low, and then repeated the process on the second burner. The soap had to be re-melted slowly to avoid burning it, so I left these and went to the mixing tables to have a look at the schedule for the new day. With nothing ahead of me but work for the rest of the day, my thoughts returned to Amy and the night before.

I hadn't received any sort of communication from her, but I couldn't imagine she hadn't known it was me. I had tried to call her and apologize on the cab ride home, but Karen had taken my phone away and wouldn't give it back until I promised on our friendship that I wouldn't call Amy again until the next morning at least. Even after she'd dropped me off, I'd stuck to my promise, partly because it was a good idea, and partly because I felt superstitious about it. I couldn't lose Karen on top of everything else.

I carefully remixed the blue number five from the day before, allowing it to sit and soak up the water a few minutes before blending. The mixing vessel filled with water and started heating. I counted out bags of noodles and needles, measuring out sodium stearate and propylene glycol for Bananarama, then blended the sickly sweet fragrance with crocin, a bright yellow gardenia extract that smelled like bandages. My head was still throbbing in spite of the aspirin swimming around in my bloodstream. I over poured the crocin by about a tenth of the amount, tried to soak up some of it with paper towels before it mixed with the fragrance, and then decided to leave it. It wouldn't ruin the soap, or even alter the colour dramatically, even if it ultimately left a yellow film on people's tubs. I hoped it wouldn't be noticed, but then, did I really care right now? I wondered how much lack of attention to detail cost me on a regular basis. Amy had been hanging out with Francis le-Fucking-Flourish Fournier for a month before I'd noticed. I wondered again if she'd been sleeping with both of us at the same time, and kicked the garbage can as I threw out the stained paper towels.

"Anh! Jamie!"

I jumped and turned to find Gurjeet standing with her hands on her hips.

"Come!" she said, and waved her hand towards the break room. The rest of the ladies had already left the floor.

"Thanks," I shook my head, "too busy." I gestured at all the production equipment whirring, humming, and burning around me.

She shook her head back at me and tut-tutted. "Too serious!" she wagged a finger and laughed, then turned and walked away. I sat down on a blue metal drum

of fragrance and hung my aching head, running my hands through my hair. There was still more than six hours left in the day.

Tuesday night was five-dollar night at the Comedy Spot downtown, so I decided to go after work, partly to distract myself, partly hoping to find some inspiration for my own set, in case I actually went ahead with it. I had texted Karen to ask if she wanted to join, but she hadn't replied. Even though I didn't really feel like going out, I couldn't sit in my apartment alone all night after a harsh day at work. I locked my bicycle up at the racks under the Concordia University Library building and walked over to Crescent Street, the entertainment block where the club was located. The terraces on the strip were already filling up with the boorish business district drinkers and out-of-towners that made me avoid this part of town under most circumstances. The Comedy Spot was a red brick building designed to look like an old pub. I entered and passed through the main bar into the show room upstairs at the back. The show had already started, and the balding, overweight, wild-haired and wild-eyed host of the evening was bellowing through his opening routine in a raspy voice that implied lifetimes of drinking in clubs and yelling like a drill sergeant into microphones.

"Young girls though, I tell ya. Young girls. You know they're just looking for Daddy, you know it's trouble, but what the fuck are you going to do? You are *genetically* programmed to *need* to fuck them. You don't have a choice, you're just following orders. No, I swear, it's in the Bible. The Bible says 'Be fruitful and multiply...the number of 19-year-old girls you can bang in your lifetime.' Those are

God's orders. He's like a porn director up there, directing an all-day every-day orgy scene. Ron Jeremy on a cloud with a fucking brandy snifter. Same moustache, but with a big white beard."

The audience's reaction got louder as the bit went on, some people yelling amused disgust, others laughing and clapping and howling like wolves. I wasn't easily shocked, but it seemed gratuitous to me and not particularly clever. I paid the doorman anyway and took a seat in the back, in the darkest corner. There was a low-rise stage at the front of the room, backed by an exposed brick wall displaying a red and blue neon sign of the club's logo and framed by black velvet curtains. The bar at the back was made of dark wood with a wide brass rail running along the bottom and stained glass panels hanging overhead. The waitress was a curvy, dark-skinned Persian woman. I'd seen her perform here and liked her act, which was about the difficulty of growing up as a second-generation immigrant in Montreal. Her hair was long and black and kinky, and her fingers were overpopulated with gold rings. She came over to my table and quietly took my order, a pint of *rousse*.

"Anyway, what the fuck am I saying? That is nasty. Nasty! Are you guys ready to hear the first comic of the night?"

The audience cheered.

"Ah, c'mon, this isn't a *Canadiens* game. Cheer like you expect to see a good show! Are you ready to bring on the first comic?"

The audience cheered louder; two guys in baseball caps booed. The host shot at them with a pair of finger guns and announced the name of the comic who was

stepping onstage and taking over the microphone. He was middle-aged and handsome, and after greeting the audience, launched into a bit about his wife.

“So my wife says to me, ‘When you gonna clean out the garage?’ That’s right, I’m a typical guy, this is a typical marriage, and I’ve got all sorts of shit in my garage. So I say, “Yeah, I’ll clean out the garage as soon as you clean out the shit between your ears so I’ve got some place to put my stuff!”

There were a couple of quiet chuckles throughout the room, but otherwise, the joke fell flat. He tried to stay in the bit, gesturing with an open hand towards the two ball-capped guys sitting in the front row as if to say ‘ta-da’. One of them leaned over, saying something quietly to his friend, but neither responded to the joke.

“Ah c’mon, at least boo me. You booed the *Canadiens*, and I don’t think I’m sucking that bad.”

The jocks booed.

“Alright, that’s better. At least that shows you’re listening. But don’t worry folks, because I am going to win you over. I will win you in these next five minutes.”

These nights were always hit or miss, and judging from the way this one had started, it seemed it would be the latter: the jokes were unfunny and out of touch, and it was apparent that I wasn’t the only one who thought so. There were lots of smart, funny, talented people in Montreal, but there were just as many who were so bad it hurt to watch them. Even the bad stuff could be fun though: it always reminded me just how good the good ones were.

Tuning out the comic on stage, I dug into my bag for a notebook. I had just had an idea for a joke about middle-aged men. “It’s a cruel irony,” I wrote, “that

every single young man is destined to become the one thing that not one of them wants to be.” Not funny, I thought, but maybe there was a seed of something I could use later.

The comic finished his set, and I looked up as the host got back on stage. He announced the comic’s name again to scattered applause. “Alright guys, you’re not going to believe this, but you know what we’ve got in the audience tonight? Huh? ‘What is it?’ you say? Is it Ben Affleck with his hand up a stripper’s skirt? Michael Jackson’s corpse shot full of cocaine and brought back from the dead?” He grabbed his crotch and thrust, singing a falsetto note. “No, even worse! We’ve got a joke thief! I swear to you. Turn up the lights in the back.”

Oh shit, I thought, and scrambled to stuff my notebook back in my bag as the lights came on in my row.

“Yeah, there he is, right there. That runty guy in the back row with the skinny arms.” He raised the mike stand like a bazooka and shot it at me. “Boom! Yeah, he’s got a notebook, and he just pulled it out and started writing stuff down halfway through the set, like all secret-like under the table.” I sunk my head into my shoulders like a turtle, cheeks burning with embarrassment. He made a ratty face and hunched his shoulders, mock writing into a mimed notebook. I shook my head.

“Oh yeah? What are you doing back there then?”

I said the first thing I could think of, “I’m a journalist.”

“You’re a what?”

“A journalist!” I shouted.



“Pfft, right. You’re doing some kind of investigative report? ‘Undercover at the Comedy Spot.’ Get the real dirt. We go undercover to expose the comedy industry. Bullshit! *Who do you work for?*” He delivered this last line like the hero in a political thriller.

The entire audience had turned and was staring at me. I was sweating hard. I tried to think of a local arts paper I could name, but I was so nervous I just stuttered a few nonsense syllables.

“Yeah sure buddy. Well my shit is patented. Patented! These are one-of-a-kind jokes you’re hearing up here tonight. One-of-a-kind, patented, copywrite-ed material, am I right?”

The audience cheered and turned back to the front.

“Alright, turn those lights off. Let’s get on with the show, joke thief or no. Our next comic...”

I didn’t hear the name of the next guy because my ears were buzzing with humiliation. I slipped out the back door of the show room and down the stairs. I could only hope that no one had committed my face to memory. I rode home imagining fifty different ways I should have responded, humiliating the repulsive ogre over and over again in my mind. By the time I got home and crawled into bed though, my anger had been replaced with shame, and I lay in the dark and thought about all the ways I’d like to tear my own head off.

There were more problems at Clean Spirits the following morning. I had forgotten to add the propylene glycol that acted as a humectant for Scrubs, one of

the soaps we'd produced on Tuesday afternoon. Now that the batch had cooled and hardened, it was impossible to re-melt and add the missing chemical, and we were going to scrap 200 kilos of product. Scott came onto the floor and asked me to come to his office when the morning batches were mixed. The ladies in the packing area watched the exchange, stealing glances at me and speaking amongst themselves after Scott had gone. I smiled at them and shrugged, but they shook their heads impatiently. They knew that the loss of production meant they would spend the afternoon cleaning instead of packing and wouldn't make their production bonuses for the day. The bonuses weren't even substantial, eight to sixteen dollars on a good day, but the mood in the factory bottomed out when the ladies knew we couldn't hit them. The targets written in colourful chalk on the blackboard in the production room seemed like taunts when things weren't going smoothly.

I went to see Scott before my first break. His office occupied a small windowless room on the other side of the kitchen. The door was open and Scott was seated at his desk, entering totals from a logbook into his computer. He waved me in without looking away from the monitor, and I took a seat in front of him. There was a flipchart on an easel next to the desk, scribbled over with columns of figures. The round meeting table was cluttered with printed emails, formulas, and sheets of production figures. Finally, Scott looked up.

"Huh-hi Jamie. Thanks for coming in."

"Hi Scott. I'm sorry about the batch. I don't know how I forgot. It's been a bad week."

“Listen, it’s not a huh-huge puh-problem, but I do have to report the wastage in the system, since our buyer will need to replace the Essential Mixture. I thought you should know how much the EM for Scrubs is though. Have I explained this to you before?”

I shook my head.

“It’s one-eighty a kilo. And Scrubs is...” he consulted a formula on his computer, “one-point-four percent EM,” he tapped at one of the large button calculators we used in production and spoke with his head down, “so that’s just over fuh-fuh-five hundred dollars in wasted EM alone, not to mention the other materials, lost sales, and labour cost. So I’m not trying to be thuh-threatening, but I do have to report the wastage, and you can’t let this happen again.” He looked up from the desk.

I felt genuinely sorry and sheepishly told him so, hoping it sounded sincere.

“Well, it’ll be alright. I’m going to catch some shuh-shit from Toronto, but not too much. If it happens again, it’s a bigger puh-puh-problem. I know you were tired Monday, but you looked pretty rough yesterday, so...”

“I am sorry,” I said. He waited for more, so I sighed and gave it to him, “I broke up with my girlfriend on the weekend.”

He nodded as if he understood.

“So I’ve been distracted, but I’ll get it together, I promise. I’m pretty embarrassed.”

“Alright.” He nodded, looking satisfied that he’d done his duty. He dug through the papers on his desk until he could find a wastage report form. “Fill this

out and try to be more careful. Might as well let the staff take the soap home if they want it, though it'll shrink on them pretty fast."

I took the form and apologized again, then went into the kitchen to take my break. Gurjeet said something sharp in Punjabi to me with a stern look. Narinder slapped her on the shoulder. But she wagged a finger at me, also looking cross.

"Guys, I'm sorry!" I said.

"Very bad boy. Very bad boy," Gurjeet said, then laughed and winked at me. I gave them an exaggerated shrug, grabbed my sandwich from the fridge, and headed out into the sunshine.

The women finished packing just after lunch and cleaned up all afternoon, leaving a little before their time with a half-hearted wave. Gurjeet shouted to me across the floor, "Bye Jamie! Be good boy," and made a "tut-tut" sound, then left on a laugh. Narinder fixed me with a stern look. She had been hard on me my first few months here because, I guessed, she was sore that they'd hired me instead of training her on compounding. But she'd become kinder over the months. She was the natural leader of the packing crew, partly because she had the best English, but also because she wasn't afraid to stand up to Scott and me. She had come to Canada on an arranged marriage, but had separated from her husband and was raising her children in a separate house, which I gathered was unconventional for a Sikh woman. Even though they were separated, divorce wasn't an option. Her husband occasionally came to pick up or drop off their two children. They had frightening arguments in the parking lot where her husband shouted, and Narinder would come

back in, flushed and red-eyed, too angry to speak. She had been a math teacher in India, she told me, but here she wasn't qualified and could only work menial jobs like the one in this factory. On more than one occasion, she'd said to me, "I don't care about myself. I am here for my children. It doesn't matter what happens to me." I was impressed by the selflessness of her feelings as a parent, though it must have put a lot of pressure on her children. Her husband ran a pizza shop somewhere in the city, and was an alcoholic, or so Kavin had hinted to me, and I had the sense he was abusive. I wondered if Narinder had smelled alcohol on me the day before. I held her eye and nodded solemnly to tell her that I'd received her message clearly. She nodded and left for the day.

I had made a third vat of base and stayed late with Kavin to catch up with the schedule. We were standing in the cooling room paddling steaming barrels of hot liquid soap, trying to get them down to pouring temperature as quickly as we could. The only sounds were the humming of the refrigeration fans and the sluicing of soap. I was stirring Citrus Mistress, floating in a nauseating miasma of orange essence and patchouli, while Kavin nodded against clouds of lavender oil steaming from a barrel of Dreamweaver. I felt guilty about keeping him late, though I knew he was glad for the overtime. The silence felt awkward, and I started a conversation, even though I knew he probably would have preferred that I hadn't.

"So I don't think you've told me what your wife is studying here," I said, leaning on my paddle in a self-consciously workman-chummy posture.

"Like for accountant?" he said.

"And she's at LaSalle?"

“Yes. And she works Tim Hortons.”

I didn't know how to interpret this addition. I wasn't sure if he'd meant to imply that he'd rather I shut my mouth, or if he was simply supplying information. He didn't look up from his barrel of soap.

I heard the sticky sound of the vinyl curtain strips parting behind me and turned to see Scott entering the room.

“How's it cuh-coming, guys?”

Kavin answered first. “Like, still too hot. It's take long time to cool.”

Scott retrieved the digital thermometer from the shelf and sunk the metal tip into my barrel. He was an experienced compounder himself, and had been chosen from the Toronto staff to start the Montreal operation. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the formulas.

“Ruh-right. Still fifteen degrees over. That's going to be an hour at least.” He twisted his lips and sucked air through the side of his mouth. “OK, gather all of the white buckets we have, wipe them out with I.P.A., and line them up in here. If we spread the batch out, the whole thing will cuh-cool faster.” He clapped his hands and left the cooling room.

I was fascinated to see him so animated. Kavin and I gathered up ten 20-litre buckets that were stacked on the racks in the washing area. Two of the ladies had spent the afternoon scrubbing tenacious residues off their surfaces. (Soap equipment tended to yield endless quantities of foam, and washing the dishes here could be a Sisyphean chore.) We wiped them dry, sterilized them, and lined them up along the floor. Scott came back dressed in an employee uniform he had stashed in

his office. He looked adolescent in the shapeless outfit, and I felt a tingling surge of love at the gesture of his coming into production. He seemed pleased with the opportunity to step out of the office, though I also knew that he was helping us because he would be stuck here as long as we were. He was the only one with keys and the code for the alarm.

“We’re going to have to keep stirring the buckets as much as we can so that we don’t lose too much product on the sides, and so that it’s not too chunky when we pour. We’ll also need to pour quickly once we start. You guys ruh-ruh-ready?”

Kavin and I nodded, and the three of us set about separating the soap into smaller quantities. We worked in silence, goosebumps standing out on our arms under the cold breath of the fans. We each pulled up an overturned milk crate and sat to stir our buckets while we waited for them to cool. If we poured too early, the soap could separate and produce layered blocks, or might crack while it cooled. Either way, it would be unsellable if we couldn’t keep it consistent.

The room went silent again while we stirred. I looked up several times and made eye contact with Scott, who looked away. It was useful to have a chore to attend to, even if it was a mindless one. I coughed quietly and apologized. Kavin looked up quickly and I dropped one of my paddles into the bucket and had to dig it out, peeling off my soap coated latex glove and rolling on a new one. Kavin started whistling a tune. He had remarkable control over his tone, the notes wavering and bending to his will. I had never stopped and listened closely, and was shocked at how skillful he was. I saw Scott staring as well, but Kavin seemed oblivious to the way we looked at him, his pursed lips working their way through the tune, and

neither of us interrupted. We alternated between glancing at each other and staring at Kavin. When he stopped a minute later, we both applauded spontaneously. He looked up as if unaware he'd even been making any sound.

“Kavin man, that was incredible. What was it?” I asked. “I didn’t even know you were a musician.”

“Like a Nepal song. Very popular. I am playing instruments in Nepal, but I don’t have here.”

“Were you a professional?” Scott asked.

“No, like my father is musician. Not professional though.”

“But you performed?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Sometimes. Soap gets thick I think.”

Scott checked the temperature in his bucket. “Five more minutes maybe.”

Silence fell over us again. Again, Kavin broke it, this time with a question.

“You are musician?”

Scott shook his head.

I said, “My girlfriend.” Fuck. “Ex-girlfriend.” Nobody said anything, and I cleared my throat and turned my attention towards the soap in my buckets. It finally came time to pour, which we did quickly and efficiently, using plastic pitchers to scoop the soap from our buckets and pour it into the plastic moulds laid out on the racks. We left the dishes for the morning and double-checked that all the machinery had been switched off before killing the lights and heading to the change rooms. Kavin changed quickly and left, while I lagged wearily behind. Scott was waiting for me out in the kitchen when I was done.



“Everything shut down in there?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. The alarm system beeped while he entered the code behind me.

I headed down the hallway and out into the dull warmth of the late afternoon.

## Chapter Five

I sat at my kitchen table on Friday evening eating frozen pizza for the second time that week. I still hadn't heard from Amy. The days at work had been dreary, but at least they had kept me occupied. Now the weekend yawned like an abyss ahead of me. I flipped through the pages of an arts paper called the *Montreal Main*, trying to find something to do. The Jazz Festival was on at the moment, but the ticketed concerts were too expensive, and the free ones at Place Des Arts were likely to be tacky and overcrowded. The Just For Laughs Festival in July was only a couple of weeks away, and I had passes that included tickets for Jim Berman, one of the headlining acts. Amy and I had planned to see this together. I'd already bought her a ticket, and it hadn't been especially cheap. I needed to unload it, so I called Karen.

"Jamie! What's good?"

I told her about the tickets.

"Guess you're screwed if I don't come then."

"A little," I admitted, "I'm broke right now."

"Well...I already bought a pass for the festival, but I chose a different headliner, so I don't have tickets for Berman. I wouldn't mind seeing him though. I saw him a couple of years ago, and it was super funny. I have news for you too though."

I waited.

"Fine, don't ask me, I'm telling you anyway. So they have this 'Duel of the Laughing Mic' competition at the Comedy Spot on Monday. You don't have plans on

Monday night I imagine? I'll assume no, because you're a loser. Actually, only a loser makes plans on Monday night, so maybe you do, but you're going to change them because..."

I waited again. "Because?"

"Because I sent in an audition tape, and I'm in!"

"Oh hey, that's awesome!"

"Yeah, and the winner gets to do a set at the Comedy Spot's showcase during JFL. It's an audience participation voting thing, so you have to be there."

"Well, as long as I clearly have no choice, I guess the answer is yes."

"Damn right it's yes, bitch! Holy shit I'm nervous though. I got the call last night. Fucking panic attacks all day. Anyway. What are you doing tonight?"

"Well." I couldn't think of anything to say. I really had no plan, not even for the next few hours. "Staring out the window and weeping?"

"Sounds awesome. I've got a date. This hot dude who works in the offices in the building where I work. I see him on the elevator all the time, and I ran into him at lunch yesterday. Maybe put an end to this dry spell. It's been fucking Saharan around here lately. Arid. Topsoil blowing away. Depression-era dustbowl between my legs. Sorry, that's nasty. You think it's good though?"

I laughed, a little bit forced. "Uh, yeah, that's pretty funny."

"Yeah, well, fuck you anyway. I gotta go. Try not to drown in those tears of yours."

I decided I needed to go out, even if it was by myself, so I went to a new Woody Allen movie at the old Forum building. I sat in the darkness and watched

Allen's selfish, neurotic characters battle to satisfy their desires, which were eventually resolved too easily. Even Allen had given in to the temptation of happy endings in his old age. (Perhaps a taste for these was a side effect of marrying your adopted Asian stepdaughter.)

Afterwards, I wandered down Ste. Catherine past strip clubs and late night shoppers and teenagers in packs. Montreal was an entirely different city in the summer. People thronged the streets like newly hatched amphibians in the warming air. They were having an aggressively good time. I forced myself to try and smile, to at least look and behave like a human being, but was met with waves of indifference. I resigned myself to invisibility. On one corner, an old man playing wooden spoons to a recording of jaunty Québécois folk tunes. He was virtually always on this corner. I stopped to give him some change, listening to his off-kilter tapping. I could never get over how bad he was at playing the spoons, despite it being his full-time profession. I instantly regretted my self-indulgent selflessness, and turned to look back at him a few paces down the sidewalk. He winked at me and nodded without breaking his unsteady rhythm.

I reached the end of the shopping district and came up on Place des Arts, which was crowded to the point of anxiety, so I decided to backtrack to Bishop street to get a drink at McEwan's, a basement bar with a vaguely Irish feel. Aside from the Guinness on tap, though, nothing in the bar was specifically Irish. The front terrace was overcast with a haze of cigarette smoke pierced by lightning bolts of shrill laughter. I had to contort my body to get past the smokers who occupied the space around the door so naturally they seemed like part of the architecture. Inside,

the bar was swollen with drinkers like an overripe pimple, oily and dirty and ready to pop. It was a warm night, and the bar had only a narrow row of windows at the front. If there was air-conditioning on, I couldn't feel it. Most people were in shorts or skirts and t-shirts or tank-tops. I was regretting my skinny jeans. My balls felt like a pair of spoiled oysters pinched between my legs, oiled and grotesquely alive with their own agency. (I had a memory of showing Amy how they still moved around on their own when you sit still, like they're breathing.) I turned my gaze away from my pants and made my way to the bar to order a pint and a shot of Jameson. A band was setting up on the short stage. Feedback squealed from one of the microphones and everybody flinched and covered their ears. I paid, drank my whiskey in one caustic gulp, and headed out back towards the rear terrace with my pint.

There were no seats, so I leaned up against the wooden fence that sealed the terrace off from the dirty alley, trying to look nonchalant, drinking my pint quickly and staring at the sky, almost wishing I smoked. No one else was alone at the bar. I pulled out the paperback copy of *Lucky Jim* stashed in my bag. It was obviously a loser maneuver to pull out a book at a public bar on a Friday night, but it felt better than sitting and staring at women I wouldn't talk to and friends I didn't have. It was a pose (a secret part of me thought someone might find it romantic and mistake me for a writer), but it was better than standing there trying to look deep. I could obsessively check my phone as if I was waiting for someone, read until the end of my beer, then get up and leave as though my plans had changed. On the cover of my copy, a yellowing Penguin edition from the seventies, Jim stood in front of a lectern under bold blue lettering spelling out KINGSLEY AMIS. The title of the novel was

splashed beside him in a heavy red cursive typeface, like someone had written it in the gaudy lipstick of Margaret, one of the characters. Jim looked drunk, one gesticulating hand upturned and raised in the air, with his glasses crooked on his face, his collar undone and his tie hanging loose and twisted to the side, a large page of his lecture notes caught mid-air, fluttering to the ground like a ragged leaf. He had a black eye and tousled hair. His lips pouted like a fish. His legs were skewed so that the left looked shorter than the right, and the right looked oddly dislocated from its hip socket. I already knew the improbable ending of the book (he avoids the neurotic Margaret you expect him to end up with and loses his job, but lands the beauty), but the book was a nice fantasy for those of us lacking in both the natural grace of the beautiful and the arrogant aloofness of the pretentious, though I wondered how much of it was unfiltered optimism on Kingsley's part. I took a big gulp of beer and flipped open the book to the hangover scene. I was chuckling to myself, feeling buzzed and suddenly happy as Jim woke up in bed with an agonizingly detailed headache, only to discover that he'd let a cigarette burn through his boss's luxurious bedclothes and scar his rug and furniture. It was, perhaps, the greatest hangover in all of literature. A server came around and offered to retrieve another drink for me. I smiled at her and ordered one. I was halfway through the second pint, feeling like things were actually going quite well considering, when I heard my name.

“Jamie?”

I felt a mixture of panic and excitement. In spite of myself, I sighed loudly before I looked up.

“Amy. Wow.” She wore an A-line dress, her hair pulled back in a braid, her lips shining moistly with gloss. Her hands lay flat on her thighs, perhaps bracing for my reaction, though I couldn’t tell if that was perhaps my projection, or what it said about me if it was. For six months I’d gone to sleep with my face buried in her hair, which always smelled slightly of sweat and patchouli. Now she stood nervously in front of me like a stranger.

“I saw you come through the bar,” she said.

I’d been thinking about this moment all week, but had expected some sort of warning. Now, I felt as though my heart was being drawn and quartered. I couldn’t bring myself to speak an actual sentence.

“Listen, I’m sorry. I can leave you alone if you want. I’m here with friends, so I can’t stay out here long.”

I made an odd huffing sound and looked down at my hands in my lap. I knit my fingers and nodded my head as though there were words passing between us.

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” she said. “If you don’t want to talk, I’ll go.”

“Please sit,” I finally managed. There was an empty stool across from me. The server brought my second beer and I handed her the money and dropped a tip on her tray. Amy declined to order one. The server left, and we sat in silence, avoiding each other’s eyes. I traced a wavy line in the condensation running around my glass, torn between telling her off and begging her back. When I finally spoke, I was alarmed at how bitter I sounded.

“I mean, you’re sorry. OK. Thank you. I’m glad you’re sorry. But what the fuck for exactly? For leaving me with an apartment I can’t afford? For dumping me for a

French clown? For leaving me a fucking note as a goodbye after nearly a year? For breaking my fucking heart? So, OK, you're sorry. Well I'm glad you're fucking sorry."

Her eyes teared up, and I regretted what I had said.

"Sorry," I said, hating the shrillness of my tone. "Fuck." I took a breath and tried to calm down. "Can we just sit for a minute?"

She raised her hands in surrender and laid them flat on the table, palms down. A deep line creased the centre of her forehead, as though she was concentrating. I felt dangerously tender towards her, pictured myself taking her in my arms, wiping the distress from her brow, and holding her head to my chest as she sighed. I struggled to shut out those thoughts.

"Jamie?" she interrupted. I looked up and saw tears running down her cheeks. A trap door opened in my chest. I felt stoned, and the streetlights, which had come on since sunset, took on a chemical brilliance. My eyes filled with tears to match hers. I reached across the table and took one of her hands in mine.

"I know I owe you better than what I did," she said, choking on her words, "but I don't think I can sit here like this. You make things impossible for me, you never tell me how you feel, and I'm not good at guessing. I don't know what to make of you. I never know what you're thinking. You seem angry all of the time, and you never tell me why, so it always feels like I'm the reason."

I shook my head.

She held my gaze and I fell silent. We both wept. I couldn't think of anything to say, and finally, she spoke again.



“Anyway, maybe that’s all wrong, but it’s too soon. I need more time before I can see you. Can we meet in a few days or something? I wasn’t prepared to talk to you tonight, and I don’t think I’m making any sense. I shouldn’t have come out here.”

“You’re right,” I said. Nodding and letting go of her hand, I reached up to wipe the tears from my eyes, ashamed to be weeping in a bar on a Friday night. I took a few deep, sighing breaths to clear my head. Then I caught sight of *Lucky Jim*, and of Jim standing behind the lectern, and had an idea. “Look, it’s Friday night, and I’m tired from a hard week. Maybe it is too much for us to have a real talk on the first meeting.”

She nodded.

“So here’s an idea. You remember my friend Karen? The comedian? With the black hair?”

“Of course.”

“She’s got this big show coming up Monday, and she asked if you would come.” My fingers were twitching madly under the table as I lied. “So what if we, just as a way to diffuse things, met up on Monday for the show? We can both take the weekend to calm down a little, and then there’ll be less pressure, and we can laugh together a little, to get comfortable again. I know it’s soon, but I really want to be friends.” I was beating out a military tattoo on my legs. “And I feel like if we leave it too long, it’ll hurt our chances of that being possible.”

“I don’t know. I think that’s probably a bad idea.”

“I promise you I’ll be good.” I held up my right hand.

She grimaced and shook her head.

“OK, how about this. Don’t decide now. I’ll text you the details tomorrow, and you can decide on Monday if maybe you want to come. Karen really likes you, and it would mean a lot to her if you came. And to me. I think it’s important for us.”

Her face fell, and I realized my misstep.

“I mean for us as friends. Don’t answer now though. Just think about it, OK?”

She held my gaze for a few seconds before answering.

“Alright, I’ll think about it.”

“Good. I’ll text you on Sunday.”

She nodded. “I should get going. My friends and I are heading to a party.”

I winced, probably visibly.

“I’d say it was good to see you, but this is hard. This is hard for me too, I hope you know that.”

“Of course,” I said softly.

“If I don’t come on Monday, I promise we’ll meet up soon when we’re more ready to talk. OK?”

I nodded.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight Amy.”

She turned to leave, then stopped halfway to the door. She turned around where she stood. “By the way though, that was you in that costume on Monday night, wasn’t it?”

I shook my head and tried to look confused. “Monday?”

She nodded, clearly not believing me, and headed for the door.

## Chapter Six

On Saturday morning, I hauled a box of old journals out of my closet, stacked them up on the kitchen table, and sat down with a fresh notebook open in front of me. I had funny observations and sketches for joke ideas scattered throughout these books, and my plan was to go through them and see if I could assemble a set of jokes from my notes, which seemed easier than trying to invent a whole set from nothing. I looked for the oldest book first, which had a scuffed up fake black alligator skin cover that was peeling away in pieces. It had been a gift from my uncle when I was sixteen, a follow-up to a conversation we'd had that year at Christmas at his house. My uncle had shown me the letters he'd written home to my grandparents while he was travelling in Europe for a year in the seventies, these odd folding paper cards that formed their own envelopes. He'd encouraged me to start keeping a journal, and told me that he'd had ambitions to become a writer when he was younger, but had given up. My own journaling had been periodic over the years, but after seven years of writing, I had built up a reasonable stack. My books were full of embarrassing, self-deprecating, self-centered rants and poems about how the world didn't understand me. Many of these entries were directly addressed to an imagined reader. There were pages that began "If you're reading this, you should know that I am aware of how stupid this all is." I flipped further, past pages of heavily rhymed teen poetry that sounded vaguely like rock song lyrics. It was embarrassing to be responsible for something so puerile, but it also had its charm. I wondered if a stand-up had ever used their teen journals as an act. There was the old Andy

Kaufmann bit where he read *The Great Gatsby* from cover to cover as an act, but then there was real cleverness to that. (Or was there? I could never decide.) But did I want to be the Teen Poetry comic? Was that even clever?

There was nothing in the first couple of journals resembling a joke. Finally, in a book I'd filled in when I was nineteen, I found the following scrawled in the margin:

*A gay erection is a rainboner.*

Stupid, yes. But I couldn't help chuckling at it. Against my better judgment, I wrote it down in the new book under the heading "Joke Ideas." More attempts at humour appeared later, though they were almost universally unsalvageable. Finally, a couple of books further on, I found:

*I think me and the people who make fruit-on-the-bottom yogurt disagree about what fruit is.*

Thinking back, I realized that this dated from my Mitch Hedberg obsession and was my attempt to imitate his rhythm and his type of thinking. In the right voice, perhaps it could be funny?

Towards the end of the pile, I found a notebook from the summer before, with some longer, more digressive bits written out in full. These were more clearly influenced by Louis C.K., to whom I had been listening obsessively while I was working at the pizza place. I found one bit that I could distinctly remember writing down while uncomfortably stoned one night:

*Smoking Pot*

*Any pot smokers out there? A few? OK, no one cares. I really don't care if you smoke pot actually. No one cares. But anyway, I'm actually thinking of quitting. Here's why: I was doing the math on it the other day, stoned of course, because when else do you think of stupid stuff like this, and I was going "OK, so it's been twelve years, like say twice a week on average, times 52 weeks a year, times 12 years, that's like 1248 times. 1248 times! 1248 times I'd been high on fucking pot. And it made me a little sad because I thought about how the experience had degraded so much over the years. Like in the beginning, I remember learning so much about myself, and other people, and the world, and how connected things are and stuff...and it's awesome, right? First few times you get stoned? It's so overwhelming. I remember my very first time, I'm like fourteen, and I'm in my buddy's basement with a bunch of guys, and we've finally managed to buy some pot that's not like oregano or whatever, and we've made a gravity bong, you know those things where you cut the bottom off a two litre pop bottle and there's this complicated process where you stick it in a jug of water, and use the suction from lifting the bottle up to suck the smoke down into it? And it's totally unnecessary, and you end up looking like you're blowing the thing cause you're bobbing your head up and down trying to squeeze every last microgram of THC out of the thing cause you're fourteen and you're super poor? Anyway, if you know, you know, and if you don't, fuck you, cause I'm sure the whole bit is already lost on you. So, I'm in my friend's basement, and we're all blowing this pop bottle contraption and we go out for a walk afterwards, and I'm so high it feels like my arms are popping out of their sockets every time my heart beats.*

*But I can still remember how vivid everything was. You know, we're eating candy and it tastes like pure energy, and I can see all my friends' auras and I'm hearing these weird sounds when our energy fields overlap, and I feel this deep powerful empathy with everyone and everything around me, and I'm like "I'm going to die one day, but that's OK." Then I smoked pot 1247 more times, and by the end of it, my average stoner insight is like, "You know what really goes together? Steak and pasta. Huge fucking plates of steak and pasta greased up with butter and cheese and salt. Yeah, that tastes awesome." Which is why I'm basically thinking of quitting pot. Well, that and the crippling paranoia that comes along with realizing my adult life is turning out to be a depressing pile of shit.*

Was this funny? It seemed more reasonably so, though it also made me realize how bummed out I'd been until I met Amy. I wondered if I could make a rambling bit gel alongside a bunch of one-liners, or if the story would just seem long and pointless. The punchline didn't exactly grab you by the balls, and the audience might not even get it. More importantly, how would I make it all into an act? I didn't just need jokes, I needed a persona. Lenny Bruce had done his jazzy riffing sick comic thing. Carlin and Pryor had done voices and talked about counter-culture. Steve Martin and Robert Klein had been the wild and crazy song-and-dance men. Steven Wright was the deadpan from another planet. Mitch Hedberg had been the cool, clever stoner. Louis C.K. was the frustrated everyman railing against the idiocy of modern life. What was my angle going to be? I didn't want my comedy to be just about me, I wanted to say something with it. I flipped the notebook to a new page and started

writing out a joke about moving and material possessions and waste. The punchline (insofar as there was one) involved me suggesting that perhaps we could weave our garbage together into giant quilts for the homeless to huddle under. I wrote in the margin that I would mime pulling this garbage blanket over my head and settling in under it. It seemed workable as a joke, I could picture an audience that would laugh at it, but then I imagined myself up there, trying to work through the bit. I stood up and acted it out in my living room, but I realized it ran over a minute and had maybe one or two laughs in it at best, and probably not even that. The audience in my head sat silent with their arms crossed. A few people booed, and eventually the crowd started heckling me and throwing bottles as my confidence died. The punchline turned into me shielding my face. If the crowd in my head was this hard on it, I couldn't imagine taking this thing public. It just wasn't funny. I drew a big X through the bit in my notebook. I remembered the "Super Prison Rape" joke from my notebook last week and got that out to try and work it into something, but ran into similar problems. It seemed both preachy and pointlessly offensive at the same time, and I knew I really didn't have the swagger to get up in front of an audience and start making rape jokes about pedophiles. I scratched another big X through the page and decided to take a break. Nearly ten years' worth of notebooks and only a couple of jokes were passable.

In any case, it was already late afternoon, and I wasn't going to get any more writing done. I was tired of eating poorly, and the Jean Talon Market was still open, so I decided I would walk up there and buy some vegetables. There would be just enough time to shop before everything started closing up. I snapped my notebook

shut. It hadn't been a terribly productive day, but I did feel better somehow for having tried. Nobody would likely ever hear these jokes, but I felt that tiny bit less like a fraud.

On Sunday, I shaped what I had into a script, trying to add a few jokes about how tough it is to move to Montreal. I practiced reading the script aloud, timing myself so that it ran 5 minutes as a set. I recorded it onto my laptop, then took a break to do laundry, since I was back at work the next morning. I packed my clothes into my broken suitcase and wheeled it to the *Buanderie* down the block. I sat and read *Lucky Jim* while I waited for my clothes to dry. I had forgotten that Jim gives up on himself three quarters of the way through the book and settles for Margaret, the girl he doesn't want. This part gets even worse when Christine (the beauty) confirms for him that she could never have been anything other than a fantasy object for him, even if she had momentarily forgotten that herself. It depressed me terribly. As I was folding my clothes on the table, the laundry attendant came over and started messing with them, saying something incomprehensible. Her voice sounded like a parody of working class Quebec French, like someone with a stuffed-up nose trying to talk through a duck call. I shrugged and asked if she could speak English. She swallowed hard and said something I didn't understand. I shook my head and she cursed me. I left not knowing what I'd done, went home, and listened to my recording. My quaking voice sounded young, arrogant, naïve, and small. There was no way anyone would laugh at that. All this time I'd put off trying and I couldn't hack it anyway when I finally did. *Goddammit!* I drank four beers while finishing the



book, pretty certain by the end that when things suddenly did turn out for Jim, it was all a bit of a crock. I went to bed at midnight, half drunk, and woke up sweaty and grinding my teeth at four A.M. There were two cats fighting loudly outside. I opened my window and hissed at them and lay back down, but my body was rigid with energy, and I didn't fall asleep again until seven, just minutes before my alarm spanked me into an underslept Monday morning. I sighed and went to work.

At the factory, all I wanted was to lie down on a pallet of soap noodles and sleep. It took all of my strength to keep myself focused, which was important, considering how poorly I'd performed the week before. I came home from work and listened to the recording on my laptop again. It sounded slightly better than before, but it still sounded like a fifth grade student rehearsing a speech he'd written for a contest. My imagined audience transformed into a classroom of ten-year-old kids flicking erasers at me, which I suppose was better than throwing bottles. Still, I decided to write out the act, just in case. I sketched out the jokes by name on cue cards that I cut into quarters, small enough to be subtly palmed. I shuffled through the cards. Then I threw them into the garbage. What a stupid fucking idea. I made a salad, congratulating myself on the bold life changes I was making. I ate half of it, then threw out the rest and warmed up a pizza pop and drank a beer. I went to the bathroom and threw up, then dug the cards back out of the garbage and put them in my pocket. I was definitely bailing out on my plan, but at least the shame would be confined to myself, since I'd shared my plan with no one.

I received a text message from Karen on my phone.

*Holy shit. Trying not to pee myself. I'll be down at McEwan's if you want to have a drink. You better be coming. C U soon.*

I called Amy. This time, she picked up.

"Hey."

"Amy, hey. So, I'm getting ready to head down to Karen's thing." Since I wasn't going through with it, it didn't matter so much what she decided to do, but I realized with an odd twist in my gut that I didn't actually want her to come down. "Are you thinking about joining me after all? There's no pressure. I understand if you want to bail."

"No, I think I'll come." She sounded disconcertingly chipper. "I'd like to see Karen do her thing. I know it might be a bit awkward though. It's OK if you want to take it back. The other night was...hard."

Trying to sound enthusiastic, I overcompensated in my response, my voice cracking like an adolescent's. "Yeah, no, totally. Come, come. I'm heading down now to meet Karen for a drink at McEwan's. Do you want to come join us down there?"

"What time is it now?"

"Six-thirty. Show's at eight-thirty, so it'll be a quick one." *Please don't come.*

"Yeah, sure, why not? It'd be nice to see Karen again before the show. So you'll be down there at, like, seven?"

"Yup." *Shit.*

"OK, great. See you there."

"Cool." I hung up and punched wildly at the air. I opened another beer and went to get changed into a button-down shirt. My stomach was bloated and I

belched horribly, searing my throat with stomach-mulched greenery and vinaigrette. I buttoned my shirt and went to brush my teeth, checking for sneaky bits in my teeth. By the time I left the bathroom, there was already a dark patch of sweat spreading across my back faster than the growth of the Pacific garbage sink. *Fucking fuck.* I peeled the shirt off. The surfactants in my deodorant were foaming with the dampness of my pits. I swapped my t-shirt for a clean one and tied the collared shirt like a preppy sweater around my shoulders. I'd look stupid on the way downtown, but at least I'd arrive decently aired and reasonably dry. I checked myself in the mirror. My eyes were a little bloodshot, but there was nothing to be done. If I didn't leave now, I wouldn't have a minute to see Karen before Amy got there, and I was going to need her help to get through this. I ran down the stairs and unlocked my bike. There was a tightness in the front pocket of my jeans as I swung my leg over the frame, and I realized that I still had the cue cards stuffed in there. I thought about running back up to throw them into the apartment, but scratched that idea. *Go, man, just go.*

I arrived at McEwan's out of breath and queasy, and locked my bike to a parking post out front. I found Karen inside at the bar, sitting in front of a pint of cider.

"Holy shit, I'm so nervous," she said, her hands shaking as she brought the pint glass to her mouth. It made a sickening muted click as it hit one of her large front teeth. "Ow, goddammit. Did I chip a fucking tooth?" She turned to me and bared her gums like a wolf. "Did I chip a fucking tooth? Jesus."

“No,” I said. “Amy’s coming.”

“What? What the fuck Jamie? Are you...wait, did you guys work it out?”

“No, no, hardly. I just needed an excuse to get her to spend time with me. So I told her that you really wanted her to show up.”

“What the fuck? This is supposed to be my fucking thing. This isn’t about your stupid little...well, whatever. Sorry, I didn’t mean that. Actually, whatever, OK. Amy’s coming. One more set of applause for me. I don’t give a shit. I’m losing my mind here. I smell like a fucking horse.”

“You look good actually.” And she did. Her hair was down and coiled into dark curls. It looked like she’d had it cut, though that might have been a result of the way she wore it. Her cheeks were either flushed or she was wearing blush. She was wearing tight, dark jeans and a Western shirt with snap buttons. She was showing less cleavage than usual, but the outfit framed her body well. Her eyes were glittering with intensity. She looked ready to take down a bull. The bartender came over, and I ordered a double whiskey.

“So, are you ready?” I asked, after taking a big gulp of liquor.

“I think so. No. I don’t know. I’m just going to do my normal five, with one new bit buried in the middle. I don’t know who’s going to be there though. JFL is next weekend. There could be industry people here early. Certainly lots of the local guys’ll be out. If I totally bomb, I’m going to fucking kill myself.”

I wanted to say that I felt the same way about Amy coming down but realized it would sound shitty to compare us, so I said, “No, you’re going to be great,” and

took another big mouthful, holding it in my mouth a moment before swallowing.  
Karen was nursing her pint.

Then, just as I took a big swallow to finish my glass, Amy walked in. She was dressed in a more muted style than usual, in jeans and a thin black hoodie, her hair hanging like a curtain down to her shoulders. I was disappointed to see her so plainly dressed, though her sweatshirt still clung to her small breasts and slim stomach in a way that made me feel slightly ill. I got off my stool, and she gave me a friendly smile, so I moved in for a hug. I could feel her angling her familiar body slightly away from mine. She pulled back and raised a hand to Karen.

“Hell-o,” they sang in unison, their voices pitched.

“Tonight’s the big one I hear,” Amy said.

“Yeah, I’ve been watching *Eight Mile* and *Rocky* in tandem all weekend.” I laughed as Karen mimed a few feinting jabs. Amy just smiled, and I wondered if she fully understood the reference.

“Anyone need a drink?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Amy said. “Is that cider?”

Karen nodded.

“I’ll have one of those thanks.”

I gestured towards Karen’s glass, which was nearly empty, as the barman came over. She held up an open palm. “I’m going to wait until after I go up. I don’t even know yet when I’m on.”

I ordered Amy's cider and another double whiskey for myself. Karen shot me a look, but said nothing. I held out a twenty when the barman came back with the drinks, but Amy cut in front of me with a ten and said to him, "For the cider."

"I'll get this one," I offered, my feelings hurt.

She smiled and shook her head, but kept her eyes off of mine. "You can get me one later maybe."

I wanted to argue, but decided not to. I paid for my drink and held up my glass to propose a toast. "To Karen, may she emerge victorious!"

"Hear hear," Amy said.

"Thanks guys," Karen said, finishing her drink. "Can you excuse me?" She hopped off her stool and headed for the bathroom.

I turned to Amy, who faced forward on her bar stool. The whiskey spread through my body like fresh sap, and I looked into the smooth, sculpted folds of her ear. I snickered as I realized how resolutely she was keeping her gaze on the bar in front of her, and that I was, once again, staring at her like she was cut from marble. She had just a tiny fraction of an eye on me. I blurted out a question before I could censor it. "Amy, do I creep you out?"

"Come on Jamie, stop it." She laughed nervously. "This is just a bit weird." She turned towards me and gently patted my knee. "I'd like us to be friends."

"I wouldn't," I said, then clapped a hand over my mouth. "I didn't mean that."

"No, that's OK," she said, turning back away from me. "I understand."

“No, I really didn’t mean that. That was shitty.” The music was loud, and her back was towards me, so I had to raise my voice. “I just...miss you so much.” I felt embarrassed to be speaking this way in public again.

She shrugged and I got angry. “Alright, fine. You know what? Fuck you. A little bit. Well, no, I don’t mean that. But you act like you’re the one being fucked over, and it’s selfish.” She shrugged again. “No, fuck you a lot then. I came here, all this way, for you, and now I have nothing.” I thought she shrugged again, and I was a moment away from storming out of the bar, when I realized her shoulders were shaking. I couldn’t hear her over the music in the bar, with her back to me, but she was hunched over, sobbing. I was overcome with grief. I had failed yet again to understand even the most basic things about her. She turned to me with tears cutting crooked rivers down her cheeks, her eyes red and swollen.

“I’m so sorry,” she spat out. I felt like I’d been hit in the chest with a cinder block, and soon I was weeping as well, tears splashing onto my jeans. I wiped my eyes with my free hand, and we held each other’s gaze.

“I’m sorry too,” I said. Amy just nodded. Karen came back from the bathroom and took a look at us sitting there. She shook her head and grabbed her purse from the hook mounted under the bar. She slung it over her shoulder and held up two middle fingers. “You know what?” she said, “Fuck the both of you,” and stormed out of the bar.

I hopped off my stool and chased after her. To my surprise, Amy followed. It was nearly time for the gig, and the Comedy Spot was close by. We chased Karen around the corner to Crescent, where she bounded up the stairs to the club. Amy

and I arrived in front of the building before we'd had a chance to collect ourselves.

"Wait a sec." I turned to Amy. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were burning.

"I feel like an asshole," I said.

"Me too."

"I still need to go in there though."

Amy nodded. I wasn't sure if that meant she was coming with me. I wiped the tears from my face, rubbing it with both hands.

"Shall we then?" she said.

I was surprised, and wondered if perhaps I'd misunderstood (yet again) what had just happened between us in the bar. Following Amy up the stairs, I leaned ahead and held the door open for her. We passed through the inner bar and cued up in the short line leading up the stairs to the performance room. The doors had just opened, and the small crowd was filing in one at a time, exchanging five dollars for the imprint of a smiley face rubber stamp on their wrists. The house lights were dim. I scanned the room for Karen and found her at the back, standing in profile to me, in a small circle of comics, some of whom I recognized. I nodded at her, hoping she might invite Amy and I over and introduce us, but she turned away from us. Amy had already started to make her way towards a table off to the side of the room, along one of the vinyl padded benches that lined the walls. As I was maneuvering myself through the tables, the wild-haired host who'd humiliated me the last time I'd been here was coming the opposite way, and I stepped aside to make room for him, keeping my face slightly averted, hoping he wouldn't recognize me. My body was clenched tight as a fist. He gave me a funny look of half-recognition but seemed



to decide that he couldn't place me, grunting as he went past. Then I moved up the room and slid into the seat next to Amy. There was a big JFL banner strung up across the brick wall at the back of the stage, and the room was humming with anticipation.

"This is pretty exciting, isn't it?" Amy said, leaning over and half-whispering in my ear. Most of the upset from a few minutes before had left her face, and her eyes glittered. I felt a bittersweet taste of the thrill I felt sometimes when she was around.

"Yeah, really," I said, and gave her a big smile. "I wonder if Karen's got a chance at this thing. An JFL show would be like, a big deal." I noticed that the quartered cue cards were making an awkward lump in my right pocket, and I moved to cover it up with my hand. The waitress showed up to take our drink order. We both ordered a beer, then, feeling inspired, I turned to Amy.

"Let's do shots!"

She winced. "Hm, I don't know about that actually."

"It'll help get us ready to laugh when Karen's on stage."

The waitress stood impatiently tapping on her serving tray.

Finally, Amy blushed and shrugged, which I took as an assent.

"Two shots of whiskey please."

"Any kind in particular?" the waitress asked sarcastically.

"Jameson if you've got it. Thanks."

"I don't know if I really want to drink that much tonight, Jamie."

"We'll just do one round to warm ourselves up for the show."

She didn't answer, and an uncomfortable silence fell while I tried to think of a way to change the subject from alcohol. "So are you...um, how's your music?" It came out with all the awkwardness of a first date.

"It's good thanks. I'm starting to think it's time for another record actually. I've been writing a lot lately."

"Sad songs?" I blurted out, intending it as a joke. She coughed a little, making the moment even more awkward than it already was.

"Some of them. A friend is going to help me with the recording. My friend's got access to a proper studio."

I shut up in a hurry when I realized that she was using an ambiguous noun to avoid naming Francis. The waitress came back with the drinks, and Amy let me pay for both rounds. I raised my shot glass to her with a big grin on my face. "To laughter and love."

"Cheers," she said quietly, and we clicked glasses. I tossed back my shot. Amy took a sip of hers and set the rest of it back down on the table. Before I had a chance to acknowledge this, the house lights went down and the theme music from *Rocky* came on over the soundsystem. I nudged Amy with my elbow to remind her of Karen's earlier joke. The spotlights flicked on at the front of the stage to reveal the wild-haired host faking a slow-motion run up to the stage. The audience started applauding him and he took the stage with his arms raised like a champion, revealing the already-gathering wet spots under his arms. I recognized a fellow sufferer of chronic sweats. My back was already perspiring against the vinyl of the benches, so I leaned forward to pull my shirt away from it.

“Welcome ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Duel of the Laughing Mic,” he said. The audience applauded, and he launched into a routine about the upcoming festival and the misery of his life preparing for it. I was only half-listening, scanning the room looking for Karen, keeping an eye on Amy, who was laughing quietly but politely at the host’s jokes. She took a second small sip of her whiskey, setting the shot back down half full. The host launched into an explanation of the rules for the event.

“OK, so for the Duel of the Laughing Mic, we’ve selected fifteen local up and coming comics, and we’re giving each of them a chance to show us five minutes of their best stuff. At the end, our judges will select their three favourite comics from the night, and they’ll each get one additional minute. Then, of the three finalists, you, the audience, will choose our champion by the volume of your applause, which will be measured by our official Duel of the Laughing Mic laugh-o-meter.” He stepped away from the microphone and demonstrated how his arms would form a pair of needle-gauges in the air. “Are you ready for our first comic?” The audience cheered. “OK, hailing originally from Ottawa, but making his home in the Mile End as the official first hipster of Montreal comedy, please welcome Ryan Buxton!”

A comic I recognized as one of Karen’s friends took the stage. He was sharply dressed in a fitted blazer and jeans with the cuffs rolled up, his pomaded hair slicked back with a careful fade. I’d met him once in the past, but he’d had little time to speak to me. I noticed Amy fidgeting beside me, which drew my attention away from the bit he was launching into, complaining about Mile End hipsters, while simultaneously mocking himself for being one so obviously. Amy’s hand was resting

on her thigh, her pinky finger spread out from the others, only inches away from the hand I had resting on my own leg. I wondered if she might be inching her way over to brush against my hand. I checked to see where her eyes were focused, but they were fixed on the comic onstage. I inched my fingers over like a spider, not wanting to make any sudden movement to draw her attention. She was laughing gently at a joke that had most of the room going, and she glanced over quickly to see why I wasn't laughing as well. She caught me with a guilty look on my face and gave me a distrustful glance. I picked up my beer and smiled at her as if that's what I'd been reaching for, then conspicuously turned my attention back to the comic on stage while taking a long drink. He finished his set to solid applause, and I set down my beer to join in. Then I looked to the back of the room and saw Karen glaring at me. I shrugged at her and she shook her head. I took another long drink from my pint. While the second comic was being introduced and taking the stage, Amy excused herself and got up to go to the bathroom. When she was out the door, Karen moved across the room and slid into Amy's empty seat.

"Hey, how's it going?" she whispered.

"Good. I'm sorry about earlier. I shouldn't have brought Amy along tonight."

"Whatever," she said. "I have bigger things to worry about. I'm up against some funny guys tonight. There's only one other girl on the bill, though, and she sucks. I've seen her before, and I can totally kick her ass. I think I have at least a chance to make it into the finals." She took a look at Amy's half-empty shot. "You trying to get her drunk? It's not going to happen that way."

I looked towards the door and saw Amy coming back in from the washroom. “Shh, no,” I said. “She’s coming back.” She was waiting at the back, and when the comic finished, everyone sprang into action. Karen got back out of her seat, but awkwardly ran into Amy on her way back to the table, and into the server who was trying to make her way up the aisle. Karen pulled Amy into the back of the room to let the server pass. I could see the two women speaking closely, presumably apologizing to each other as well. I downed the rest of my pint and waved the server over to order another. Not only had Amy not finished her shot, she hadn’t even touched her pint. I was feeling pretty buzzed already. It seemed like a bad idea to let things get so out of balance, but I found I couldn’t help myself. I was too nervous. I wanted to crawl under the table, but I kept drinking instead. The other female comic that Karen had mentioned was now taking the stage. She was blonde and had sandy freckles, not unlike Amy’s, and she addressed the audience in a droll, but high-pitched voice that implied a mockery of girlishness. “Hi!”

Amy made her way back to her seat and gave me a smile as she sat down. To my relief, she finished her shot, and, coughing a little, took a sip of her beer.

“Must be getting warm,” I said, not quite sure why I would say something so dumb.

Amy looked confused as well. “Me, or the beer?”

“Um, you? The sweater?” I realized I was inviting her to take her clothes off, which was not what I meant.

“Kind of I guess,” she said, and unzipped the hoodie. She was wearing a tank-top underneath, and I could see the slight rise of her breasts just under the neckline.

I felt like a pervert, ogling my own ex-girlfriend. If she noticed, she had enough grace not to point it out for me. "Cheers," she said, looking conciliatory and a little guilty, and held up her glass.

"Cheers," I said, and took another drink.

I jumped and nearly spit my beer when a woman's voice asked over the microphone, "Hey, Mr. Fucking Chatty Pants on the side there, would you mind shutting the fuck up? Thank you." She was looking right at me. "Guys these days, think it's all about them. You know? Anyway..."

I listened through the rest of her set, laughing demonstratively at her jokes to beg forgiveness for talking through her set. She curtsied and exited to fair applause, and the host got back on stage.

"Alright," he said into the mic, "so I hate to take us off on a detour, but Mr. Chatty Pants as Christina called him, I saw this guy coming in, and I couldn't place him at first, but I think I recognize him now." He pointed a big meaty finger right at me. "You're the joke thief from Tuesday, aren't you?" I shook my head and tried to look as if I didn't understand his accusation. "Yeah, you are, I recognize you. Man, you're just the worst, aren't you? For those of you who weren't here, I caught this same fucking guy here on Tuesday, hiding in the back with a little notebook, fucking stealing people's jokes. Diddling them into his little book like a rat collecting shit for his nest. Don't fucking shake your head, buddy, I know that was you. I recognize your ratty little face. You come into comedy clubs, and you steal people's jokes, and you talk through their sets? You know how hard it is to get up here? I bet you think you're some kinda comic yourself, don't you? Well, come on, then, I'm inviting you.

We've got room for one more in the set tonight I think. Get up here and try your stuff man. Come on people, cheer him on. Let's see how funny Mr. Chatty Pants fucking Joke Thief can be."

I glanced over at Amy, who wore an expression of petrified shock. I looked to the back of the room for Karen, desperately hoping she might intercede on my behalf, but I found her glaring at me. I felt nauseous and faint, and I got up and started running towards the back of the room.

"OK," I heard behind me. "So he's a coward too. Well, good fucking riddance."

I burst out the door and into the stairwell, and made for the bathroom. I went to the sink and splashed water on my face. I bent down and put my mouth under the tap, taking a long drink. *What an asshole!* I thought, though I knew that I'd behaved badly. Still though, it seemed entirely unnecessary to call me out so aggressively. It wasn't as though I'd been heckling. I did feel like a coward though. It was the same with every other bully I'd ever met. At the first sign of conflict, I'd run away and tried to take the moral high ground. Maybe Amy would come out to look for me. Drying my face, I decided to get a drink from the bar downstairs. I exited the bathroom and half-stumbled down the steps. I'd gone from tipsy to loser drunk, it seemed, in just a few minutes. *Fuck it*, I thought. I looked like more of a coward in front of Amy than ever, and I'd probably just ruined my only real friendship. There were a couple of people in the bar downstairs. The doorman was flirting with the female bartender behind the broad wooden bar, and they both turned to look at me as I came down the stairs. I tried to look as sober as I sat down. The bartender came over.

“You OK?” she asked.

“Fine thanks. It’s just a bit hot up there, you know? Can I get a double Jameson on the rocks please?”

She looked at me skeptically for a moment, and then glanced over at the doorman, but he was preoccupied with something on his phone, so she rolled her eyes at both of us and went to pour my drink. I paid her and sat on my stool feeling like I’d finally bottomed out. I was insincere, cowardly, selfish, and possibly on the road to alcoholism. I wasn’t going to fix any of this tonight, however, so I kept drinking. Amy still hadn’t come through the bar, but I wondered if she hadn’t slipped out in embarrassment while I’d been in the bathroom. I also wondered if Karen had gone on yet. I rubbed my sweaty palms on the thighs of my jeans, and my hand brushed the cue cards again. I shoved my hand awkwardly into my pocket and pulled them out. The dampness of my perspiring thighs had blurred the ink. I rubbed my eyes and slapped my face to straighten out my head a little bit, and the bartender and doorman, who’d gone back to flirting, glanced over at me warily. I smiled and gave them a thumbs-up, which earned me another eye roll from the bartender. While I finished my whiskey, I flipped through the cards, rehearsing the jokes in my head. They were odd, but maybe some of them would be funny if I delivered them well. As I got to the end, my phone started vibrating in my pocket. I pulled it out and read the text message that had come in from Amy.

*Are u coming back? I’m still here. Karen hasn’t gone yet.*

Amy had stayed. I felt inspired. The doorman looked half ready to jump me as I slid off my stool and turned to stumble drunkenly up the stairs. I flung open the



door to a wave of applause, which confused me for a moment. My eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room, and I saw a comic wave at the crowd and dismount from the low stage. I walked towards the front, raising a hand at Amy as I went past her. She was wearing a concerned expression. I stepped into the glow of the stage lighting, and the host shook his head in an exaggerated expression of surprise.

“Holy shit folks, he’s back!” He pulled at the loose tufts of hair floating like a weedy ostrich tail above his head.

I held out my hand, arching my eyebrow in an attempt to look determined.

“What, you want the mic? Are you fucking serious? Folks, what do we think? Are we going to let him see what it’s like?”

There was scattered applause, and the host said, “Alright, you asked for it. This outta be good.” He handed me the microphone.

I climbed unsteadily up on stage and turned to face the room. The lights were hot and blinding, and I could only make out the faces in the very front. I put up a hand to shield my eyes and could just barely see Amy off to the side. Karen was near the back, doubled over, leaning against the bar. I thought she might be throwing up.

“Hello?” I asked the room, disturbed at how badly my words were slurring over the P.A.

“Hi!” someone shouted from the back. Someone else booed. I thought I might throw up, and leaned against the mic stand for support. I felt my pocket and realized I’d left the cue cards sitting on the bar out front.

“Uh-oh. I left my jokes at the bar,” I accidentally slurred into the microphone. To my surprise, this got a few laughs. I realized it sounded like a joke. I grinned a big

grin. This was starting to go well, I thought. I decided to press on. "So you know yogurt? That's not fruit on the bottom. It's just some sugary shit." The room was so quiet you could hear the bartender scooping ice into a plastic cup in the back and the microphone humming on the sound system. I tried my next joke. "So we have any pot smokers in here?" I asked. This got one or two little yelps, and someone in the front shouted, "Smoke weed!"

"Yeah, buddy, smoke weed!," I said, "Yeah, but no one cares. I used to smoke lots of weed too, and I saw like, auras and stuff. But now I just get stoned and eat steaks. Like, what's that?" I mumbled, "Shit, wait a sec." The suffocating silence was cut by a number of people who were getting up from their chairs and moving around the room. I could feel myself losing whatever attention they'd been paying me. "Wait," I said, lifting a line I'd heard bombing comics use before. "You just wait. I'm going to win you over by the end, I swear." The room was falling apart. It felt like I'd been up there for hours, and I was sweating profusely. I absentmindedly stuck a hand up the back of my shirt and dipped my fingers into the Yangtze of sweat running down my spine. I brought my fingers back in front of my face. They were dripping with watery perspiration. "Yuck," I said into the mic, slapping a hand over my mouth again. Someone far in the back of the room was howling with laughter. I shielded my eyes and realized it was Karen.

"Woo-hoo," she cheered me on. "Go Jamie!"

I raised a fist in mock-triumph, and the host was suddenly beside me, taking the mic from my hand and pushing me gently off stage.

“Well folks, we’ve either just seen the brilliant debut of the next Andy Kaufmann, or that was the number one, absolute worst comedy performance I’ve ever seen. Ever. Give him a hand folks! What balls!” The audience applauded this remark generously. “Holy shit that guy was sweaty.”

I looked first for Amy, but she had vacated her seat. I looked up in time to see the door swinging closed behind her. Karen stood at the back with a huge grin on her face, shaking her head at me in disbelief. I held up my hands as if to say, “what can I say?”

She turned from me when the host announced, “Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome our second *comedienne* of the evening, Ms. Karen O’Sullivan.” Without glancing back, she started towards the front of the room. I paused for a moment by the door to watch Karen take the stage.

“Thank you ladies and gentlemen, and thank you to my impromptu opening act for whatever that was...Ya, go get’er champ, I’ll see you later,” she said, and launched into her first joke. Karen would be all right, I told myself, and headed out the door after Amy. The doorman looked as though he’d been waiting for me. I came down the stairs, still unsteady on my feet. He made a slight move towards me, and I faked like a football player and fell into a table.

“Out,” he told me, and I saluted him before following his command. I found Amy standing on the sidewalk out in front of the club.

“So,” I said, “what did you think?”

She gave a short laugh, though not of amusement. “I don’t know what to say. That was awful. What were you thinking? Jamie, you’re fucking hammered.”

“That’s true,” I said. “So you’re not impressed?” I hardly expected her to be, but I’d been holding onto a shred of hope.

She shook her head.

I nodded. “Karen thought it was funny.”

“Yeah, I saw that. Well, good for her. I’m embarrassed. For me, and for you. I don’t get it, but whatever, you know. It’s not my problem any more.” She looked furious, and was tapping a foot impatiently. I was surprised and hurt by how angry she was, and I suddenly felt incredibly tired and hungry. I sat down on the curb while she stood over me with her arms crossed. Before I could stop myself, I was crying again. I sobbed loudly, not even embarrassed any more. Amy finally knelt down next to me. After a while, she put a hand on my knee.

“Jamie, I’m sorry,” she said.

My tears stopped as suddenly as they had started, and I caught my breath and sighed, deeply. Amy was rubbing my knee. I looked up into her face. The lines creasing her brow had softened from anger into concern.

“That’s it though, isn’t it? You’re sorry, but it doesn’t change anything, does it?” I said.

She looked at the ground and shook her head.

“OK then.” I stood up. She stood up with me, holding onto my elbow as if I might collapse. “I’m sorry too.” I held out my arms for her, and she fell into them. She felt small and frail and made me feel strong for a moment.

“I do love you,” she said into my chest.

“I know,” I said. She loved me this way, but not in the way that counted. “I love you too.” I felt relieved and sad at the same time.

She pulled away from me. “I’m going to go, OK? I don’t think I can take any more tonight.”

“OK,” I said. She hugged me one more time, quickly, then turned and walked away up the sidewalk without looking back. I sat down on the steps again and thought briefly about going back into the club. I couldn’t face that crowd again though, and I’d have to get around the doorman somehow. Karen would be finished by now anyway, and it’s not like she really needed me for anything anyway. My stomach grumbled loudly, and I stood up and tottered off in search of something greasy to replace the dinner I’d lost at the start of the night.

## Chapter Seven

I awoke on Tuesday late for work at Clean Spirits for, as it turned out, the last time. I pedaled hard once more down to Verdun. The fresh summer air was restorative for my hung-over brain, which throbbed lightly like the subwoofer of a party heard through the wall. The canal was still and quiet. The skies were grey, but the air was warm. It would be a while before I set foot in another comedy club, and maybe it was time for a break from drinking. Or, at least, I wanted to think that. Then I remembered that JFL was starting on the weekend, and Karen and I were going to the Berman show. I smacked my forehead like a stooge when I realized that I hadn't even called to find out how the contest from the night before had turned out. I was already fifteen minutes late when I arrived at work and locked up my bike, but I decided to call her anyway. With everything that had happened in the past week, I could barely muster half a care about work, or at least about showing up on time. I'd find some kind of excuse.

Karen answered the phone half-shouting amidst a chatter of voices and mechanical sounds, clearly on the bus to work.

"Jamie, hey, so you didn't kill yourself after all?"

"Almost," I said, "but not quite. I hope you're not disappointed. I feel badly about taking off. And about getting up on stage. Karen, I'm so embarrassed."

She laughed. "Well, I should probably be mad, but you were hilarious. I can't stop laughing about it. And it totally killed whatever nerves I had about my own set. That was absolutely the biggest fail I've ever seen. You bombed like, I don't even

know what. Just like, the whole time, I'm thinking, 'sit the fuck down dude!'" She laughed until she was out of breath.

"OK, yeah, I got it. I feel like shit this morning."

"I bet! You were wasted. But enough about you...aren't you even going to ask me how I did after you left?"

"Yeah, sorry. That's why I'm calling. How did it go in the end?"

"I fucking won! Woo-hoo! I've got a fifteen-minute opening spot at the Thursday evening showcase next week. Can you believe it?"

"Karen, that's amazing."

"I know. Look, I hate to cut it short, but I'm off at the next stop. Call me tonight?"

"Yeah, OK, I will. Talk to you later." The noise on her end abruptly stopped. A spot at JFL, if she pulled it off, could be a major step for her. I tried to search myself for even a hint of jealousy, and found that I didn't feel any at all. There was an odd part of me that was glad I had gone up the night before. It had been horrible, and even with proper preparation and a sober state of mind, the idea of going up in front of an even bigger audience sounded like my version of hell. I felt panicked even considering it. I still loved comedy, and I still didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, but I felt pretty sure that wasn't it. I could get better at it, conceivably, but I would never be good, and knowing that made the prospect of going up again even more harrowing than before.

I had to set these thoughts aside, however, because I was now nearly half an hour late. I was hoping I might slip in unnoticed by Scott, who often locked himself

in his office most of the morning. The hallway seemed eerily quiet as I came into the factory. I could hear the distant sound of a forklift at work in one of the other production spaces in the building, but I didn't hear the Punjabi talk radio I would have normally expected by this hour. I came in through the kitchen and decided to poke my head into the production room before heading in to get changed. I popped my head through the vinyl strip curtain and saw the entire staff grouped around Scott, who was holding some sort of impromptu production meeting. An acrid smell of burnt metal stung my nose over the heavy perfumes of the factory, and I noticed the industrial floor fan humming quietly on low next to the melting vat, even though the room was fairly cool.

"Those of you who won't be cuh-coming in," Scott was saying, "if you have vacation days saved up, you can use those and still get paid for the week. But otherwise, you'll have to go without pay until next week." He turned at the sound of the vinyl curtain strips slapping together.

"Oh. Huh-hi Jamie."

"Hi Scott. Sorry I'm late. What's going on?"

"Um, you buh-better wait for me in the kitchen."

I nodded. It didn't look good, and that burnt smell was not encouraging. I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table, but abandoned it when Scott came through a minute later and waved me into his office. He offered me a chair in front of his desk. He didn't seem angry, but he was unsettlingly serious. He folded his hands on his desk and sat stiffly upright like a high-school vice principal about to discipline a delinquent kid.



“So we’ve had an accident.”

I nodded. “OK.”

“It’s fuh-fairly serious.”

“I see. Anybody hurt?”

He shook his head and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. I could already sense what was coming.

“Remember when you left last night? You were the last one off the production floor, and I asked if yuh-you’d shut everything down. Like usual.”

I nodded, and replaying the scene in my mind, I saw myself emptying the last batch and leaving in a hurry to get out to Karen’s show. “It’s the mixing vessel, isn’t it? I left it on.”

Scott nodded. “The safety shut-off didn’t come on for suh-some reason, and the heater burnt itself out. It’s totally wrecked I think, and we’re lucky there wasn’t a fuh-fire. I’ve got somebody coming out from the service centre that sells the units in Toronto, so we’ll be shuh-shut down at least a few days, and we might have to replace the whole unit, which will shut us down for at least a week, maybe luh-longer. I’m going to get Kavin to compound on the stoves, as much as he can, and bring in probably just Narinder to pack what he makes. The rest will be shipped from Toronto, and everyone else will have to stay home until we’re up and ruh-running again. The safety fail wasn’t your fault, but Juh-Jamie, I still have to let you go.”

I nodded. I felt close to tears. I didn’t know what I was going to do. My distress must have shown on my face, because Scott quickly added, “I can give you a

week's pay for severance. It's not personal, but that's too many mistakes. You're costing the company too much money, and Toronto wouldn't let me keep you now even if I tried."

Failing at comedy was bad enough, but I couldn't even hack it in a basic factory job. I felt bad for the other employees as well. Some of them were supporting families on ten dollars an hour, and a week's lost pay meant a lot to them. I sighed loudly. My head still hurt. I was getting tired of feeling so strung out all the time.

"OK?" Scott asked. He looked wary of what I might do next, and stood up with me defensively when I stood up.

"OK," I said.

He offered me a hand to shake. "I don't mean to push you out the door, but it would be better if you left today."

"Yeah," I said. "Well, thanks for the job. I'm sorry I let you down."

"Factory work isn't for everyone. You're a nice guy. I'm sure you'll do better suh-somewhere else."

I shrugged, not feeling sure about much of anything. "Anyway," was all I could think to say. I shook his hand and left the office. I stopped in at the production floor to say goodbye, but most of the staff had left. Only Narinder and Kavin remained.

I went to Narinder first. She nodded at me with a neutral expression. Her long black hair had strands throughout that were dyed with red henna to cover the grey. The whole bundle was drawn back into a thick braid that trailed down her back.

“So,” she said.

“So, I’m going.”

She nodded as if she already knew. She’d seen people fired before.

“Sorry I’m such a pain,” I said.

She stopped what she was doing and looked me in the eye. Then she shrugged and said, “You’re a nice boy. Be good. Say *sat sri akal*.”

“*Sat sri akal*,” I said, as best I could.

“That’s goodbye,” she said, and smiled.

I went to Kavin. He was preparing to start a pair of small batches on the floor burners.

“I’m going,” I said.

He waved at me with a look of what I took to be indifference. Then he surprised me by asking, “How is your girlfriend?”

I told him it was over.

“Maybe next one, you should marry,” he said, and then laughed. I wasn’t sure how to take it, but he appeared to mean it well. We shook hands, and I left the production floor. In the locker room, I weighed my boots in my hands, wondering if I’d actually have any use for them again. I removed the lock from my locker and took out a bandana I’d left in there. I headed back down the hall I’d entered by, swinging my boots by the laces. When I shoved open the door and stepped outside, a warm summer sun had burned off the grey clouds, and the day had turned beautiful. I let the sun fall on my face a moment and emptied my mind, though my worries began to catch up with me quickly. Maybe I could get E.I. and sign up for French classes

with the government. Make myself more employable. Or, maybe I could break my lease and move to Toronto, where it would probably be easier to find work. In any case, I would need to call up my parents and ask to borrow money, which was embarrassing at my age. At the very worst, I could move back in with them in Hamilton for a little while. The thought depressed me, but as a worst case scenario, it really wasn't that bad. I made a show of complaining about the middle class world I came from, but it had its advantages as well, ones that I took very much for granted. I promised myself I'd stop doing that, but I also knew that promise wouldn't last. It made me feel boastful and spoiled to think that way, but it would've been dishonest to deny it. I certainly wasn't going to miss dragging myself down to a factory every morning, as I had these past six months. And no matter what came next, I had a book in my bag, and it was a beautiful day for sitting and reading by the canal. I unlocked my bike and tied my boots awkwardly over the handlebars, kicked off and made my way slowly down the path with a smile on my face, trying to stop the boots from knocking my bike off balance. It was not a clever arrangement. There was a patch of grass near the Atwater market I had in mind, and for today at least, there was nowhere I'd rather be.