

Everything's Just Wonderful

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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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

*Everything's Just Wonderful*

Miki Laval

My thesis is a collection of short stories that serves to highlight the psychological space revealed, altered, or bent in a moment of crisis. Influences include George Saunders, Etgar Keret, and Russell Banks and these authors' ability to present and reveal contemporary personality through voice. The narrators in the collection vary in age from early twenties to late middle age and often have a false sense of the certainty of things. Once psychological conflict is placed in their path their self-talk reveals multilayered and conflicting rationales employed during a crisis. At times, a comic protagonist has a less dramatic but more ironic/traumatic encounter that still manages to disturb and unsettle them. Shorter pieces in the collection look at the commodification of beauty, as well narration itself as a product or service.

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*To Lyne, Kirsten, and Danielle*

*Everything's Just Wonderful*  
By Miki Laval

To You Dear Reader.....	1
Bumpous.....	4
The Porn Star/Stamp Seller.....	7
On the Eve of Your Wedding.....	9
The Washroom.....	16
The C-Word.....	23
Escape From The Turnip Patch.....	31
The Good-bye Party Animal.....	42
Froggie.....	59
La Marchand de Venise.....	79
The Grieving Club.....	92

## **To You Dear Reader**

This story has been designed for your reading pleasure. After its completion, a panel of story commentators vigorously debated the pros and cons of each word before giving the ensemble a hearty thumbs up. You might be wondering, what are some of the features that appealed to this expert panel? Well, for starters, you can download this story on a PC, tablet, or a small pocket-sized mobile device. You won't need batteries. You won't burn any fossil fuels. None of the words in this story, at least the way they are strung together here, will insult your political beliefs or values. You won't need to drive to the mall to exchange a pile of words and sentences for something more functional or practical from the housewares department, will you? And even if this story ends up so-so, it still beats ripping through glittery paper and scotch tape to discover shoe laces, or a sweater, or a pair of socks. This story is an offering to you, dear reader, as if today were your birthday, or some other special day when you get presents. Sit back and relax, confident this story is THE BEST INTENTIONED STORY IN THE WORLD.

But wait, there's more. This post-modern meta goodie has been 100% redesigned and re-engineered to include state-of-the-art fiction technology. This story can convert readers into pure energy then beam them to any time or place in the world.

How about the African rainforest, trekking behind a safari guide as he hacks through the dense green foliage? Or perhaps a frolic in a 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian brothel?

Of course if sex, history, or geography is not your thing, your mortal frame can be blasted to the stars, to float through space. You can view strange cosmic wonders and out-of-the-ordinary alien landscapes.

But wait there's still more. Yes, more time, space, and reality pleasures.

Encounters with wild species in exotic locations can also be thrown in. For instance, in the Africa bit, six silverback gorillas can be included, as well as early dawn light, violent colors, and smells strong enough to singe the hair in your nostrils. Picture the silverbacks as they file by, munching on bamboo shoots. The younger ones tumble and wrestle. The baby suckles its mother. The last one stops and fixes his deep-set eyes on you.

How much would you value a clear insight the moment you and the silverback lock eyes? Imagine a flash of deep understanding as the gorilla takes a bite from his shoot, before his short legs dance, and he hops over the tree roots.

Now what would you say to that?

You'd say that's pretty great, right?

Okay, maybe you wouldn't. Maybe you're thinking, sure, leaps through time and space, throw in some gorillas, terrific, but it's a crappy metaphor and besides, there's a whiff of imperialism in the whole Africa/gorilla part. So let it be repeated, this story aims to please. Another fictional technique of this story is its ability to change on a whim, just like that, so... *poof*, no more silverbacks, and no more Africa. Besides, even as you're reading this story, this story is thinking about you reading this story, imagining your eyes skipping over the words, and fears you might sense it floundering at this point, trying too hard to entertain and impress, aiming to give you what you want too directly. You'd think after hundreds of years of literature a story could do a simple job like please the reader.

So this story will stop with the tricks and simply offer you: a pat on the back; a *Way to go, buddy*; a here's a bit of comfort for your day, and maybe even a sense you're less alone. Because though this story can't make you feel younger, or more alive, or clear

up your skin or your laundry stains; this story can offer some connection to you, dear reader, out there in the world, as you shoulder the ups and down of life, while still loving, and trusting, and dreaming, and believing, which is, come to think of it, pretty amazing and wonderful. And so, in conclusion, this story would like to salute you, dear reader, before simply and humbly coming to an end.

## Bumpous

In the operating room, a surgical team huddles above the nose, leaning in close to inspect the bulbous bump of cartilage and bone. One of them – the anesthesiologist, goes, “Alright, time to file her down.” “Shhh,” says the nurse, her head tilting towards the teenage girl, stretched out on the gurney, all knees, and elbows, and small round shoulders. The girl stares back, a backdrop of braids spayed across a surgical pillow. The anesthesiologist is lean, balding under his surgical cap. The scrub nurse is plump and pretty and pats the girl’s hand as if to say, “There, there, don’t worry, we’ll be watching out for you, no matter what.” The girl’s cells soak up the dose of Librium swimming through her blood stream.

In the waiting room, the mother sits on the edge of a blue chair. In the past, she has held the girl’s head between her two hands like a cabbage, or a cantaloupe, as if evaluating produce, and murmured, *So close, so close, almost pretty, but not quite.* Something’s a bit off. Something’s a bit too rugged. Why accept this? Are we not creatures who can shape our destinies? Of course we are. Besides, building self-esteem, and confidence, let’s be honest, it’s exhausting. How simple to fix - with a few taps, a surgical file, and some sutures – the outside. It’s so very hard to *be* good. But isn’t it marvelous that surgery can make you *look* good. Do not talk to the mother about superficial esthetics. Do not. She will say, “Producing beauty is our highest calling,” which is a tag line she picked up from a car commercial.

The girl thinks it’s cool to get a nose job, a *rhinoplasty*. It’s like being a fresh and sexy celebrity.

In the operating room, the surgeon looks to the nurse out of habit, not for guidance, then takes a step back to view the nose from a different angle. He sees nature's poor genetics in need of a grinding and reshaping.

A bank of grey machines tweet and bleep, and, as if answering their call, the surgeon steps forward. He has a theatrical side, rarely exploited in his profession, and so he begins as he begins each operation, by lifting his arms like a conductor before the first incision. The surgeon is speed, dexterity and confidence, and the girl, who is awake but sedated, closes her eyes, clamps them tight. When they open briefly she catches his fluid gestures and admires them. For a moment, his hands slow in motion, but this is the medication working on her brain. In reality the surgeon's steady pace impresses everyone in the room.

It seems as if coming from a distance, the grating sound, like a saw cutting into wood, and the girl feels a heavy pressure, as if her head is under water. She stares up at the overhead light to calm herself. Then she glances at each member of the surgical team who seem to inhale and exhale together, and this impression lasts longer than the girl would like. Finally, the time comes when the bump is removed, and the nasal passage is packed with gauze. Finished, the surgeon twirls himself around and asks, "Well, what do you think?" The surgical team breaks out in applause.

A resident sets the nasal split. The surgeon snaps off his plastic gloves, and tells a corny joke. The nurses chuckle. As the split sets on the girl's nose the chuckling continues. The bump is dumped in the surgical bin for disposal.

The team's satisfaction is palpable as the girl is wheeled towards recovery. This scene has been described accurately. All the details are true. Yet one thing is missing.

What happens after this bump is tossed into the garbage? What if rejected bits of bone and muscle could feel and reason? Would they chuckle at corny jokes once they have been purged? The bump would not. Instead, the bump would concentrate and summon up the letter **H**. As the orderly stripped and bagged the sheets, the letter **E** would follow. Minutes would tick down on the operating clock, leaving little time to conjure the letter **L**. And all the while the bump would lament its waning strength, aspire to a different end than being tossed in the garbage. Will someone use a flashlight to search through the waste for this small piece of flesh and cartilage? Will anyone imagine the bump whimpering, “How could you let me go?” while all the while fearing the searching hand seizing it between finger and thumb, and squeezing, squeezing, squeezing. Will anyone notice the letter **P** never comes?

## The Porn Star/Stamp Seller

There is a woman who looks like a porn star only she works at the post office. She comes to work each day dressed in tight blouses and skirts, perched on heels as skinny as curved spoons. The men step up to her counter in their shirtsleeves and cardigans, lean forward to breathe in the smell of her shampoo. They are so thankful mail delivery still exists. The porn star/stamp seller weighs their envelopes and asks if they'd like regular delivery or express. She places the head of the Queen of England in the upper right corner of an envelope. She flashes her red fingernails. Some men, so excited, hightail it over to the video store. (In the town there are weekly cultural screenings to discuss art movies like *The Magnificent Ambersons*.) Then the men disappear behind the velvet curtain, to slink out with a copy of *Testicles in The Park*, or *Chitty Chitty Gang Bang*. Others sit in their parked cars salivating until they are shaking with excitement. She's not a dream, or on the internet, or in a movie, or at the end of a phone line, or behind Plexiglas. She's flesh from real life. So real they almost can't believe it. So real they almost creep themselves out and feel guilty. But the men know how to be discrete. What helps is they're not obvious, or nasty, or angry, or violent.

Still, they blame her sexified lips, always plump and ready whenever she smiles. Of course she has great breasts. Round and full, each one huge and miraculous. The men long to lift up her arms and pull her sweater up over her head. They want to hold her breasts as if they are babies, cradling one then the other. With her breasts, and her lips, and her stamps, she's got such advantages.

The porn star/stamp seller does her job with determination and diligence.

But what happens at sundown? When the post office closes she walks home along the edge of the park, her blond hair extensions, and metallic hoop earring moving with the breeze. She slows down after passing the new townhouse development to toss envelope after envelope, in fact, a long series of envelopes, into the city garbage pail. She takes out a cigarette that she lights before sitting on a public bench. She smokes the cigarette until the last bit of ash falls off the end and hits the ground. Then with a finger rub, she wipes at her big made-up eyes, smearing her mascara, and cheapo blue eye shadow, until she looks bruised and startled.

## On the Eve of Your Wedding

“I will marry you in the morning,” you said, “even though we’re here in Florida, because Florida is not the problem. The problem is somewhere else completely.”

To get to the root of this dilemma let’s start with a certain vagueness that’s been plaguing you all your life. Let’s call it a fragile sense of self, or a kind of porous quality that leaves you open to influence. Let’s say due to this fragile and porous quality you’ve been waiting for something large and important to give you direction and meaning. Love. There’s no harm in admitting you’ve been waiting for love, and not a small love either, but the big one, the ideal sweep-me-off-my-feet and lose-my-bearings *amour fou*. In your mind, when love takes over, the odd mismatched directions in your life align. Your dim yearnings take shape and form. Everyday life has meaning and you get into a kind of flow, just heading to the groceries, or taking out the trash, as if a cool soundtrack is playing in the background. Suddenly, all the lyrics in all the love songs make sense. The sun and the moon, they mark the start and end of each day with quivering beauty. Birds soar. The wind sings. You get the picture. And then one day, my god, you fall in love with a woman who loves you back. It’s a miracle! What you want to do is get down on your knees and be thankful. What you want - out of respect for this love – is to stand up officially, and say Yes! Yes! You’ve dated others who were good enough – okay there were a few mind-bogglingly perplexing ones, but overall they were not the worst lot. But this one, this one here, is different. This woman is open to building a life together, and she also *gets* you. Which is soothing and kind of mesmerizing at the same time, isn’t it? So you will make public your promise and give your word before official representatives

of the community. That's essentially a wedding isn't it? A big-time promise before everyone.

Which is all fine and dandy, of course, except you'll need a venue, and caterers, and because there will be joy, (so much joy), you'll want to dance, so you'll need music, and invitations, an open bar--because who wants to be cheap at a time like this--and wedding gowns, and tuxes, and bridesmaid dresses, and wedding garlands, and favours, and place settings, and how about a wedding song? Some wedding wine? This giant snowball has been barreling down on you both, while morphing into stress dimensions unimaginable a few months before. And let's not forget how the slices of wedding cake almost killed you both by small degrees. It was the taste-testing at the caterers, wasn't it? There she was with her hand in mid-air, the spoon heading toward her open mouth. But when you locked eyes over the spoonful of cake, you did not see love, but instead the panic of a small animal caught in a trap. Then came the tears. Later, in the parking lot, after more tears, she confessed her fears. Your wedding was being snuffed out by the throngs of the bridal industry as it madly shoved you both up on one big tastefully designed Noah's ark, to avoid drowning in the dark lonely water with the singles. But what about you? Were you not feeling tortured, sick to your gut, and pretty much on the verge of bursting into tears yourself, at the sight, the *mere sight* of a stack of bridal magazines bristling with post-it-notes? When you think of her standing in the parking lot, you want to throw yourself between her and the bridal marketing imbeciles of the world. You want to say, my love, I will be by your side, and we will build our own ark, in our own way, one for all the unmatched misfits, and people on the fringes. Forget about luscious-caramel-

banana-pumpkin-harvest wedding cake. Let it never pass our lips again. You stood in the parking lot and said, "Let's skip the wedding cake," which was a good decision. Also skipping the big wedding was the right decision. When the words, "Let's elope," were first spoken, those words hung in the air, the wisest words spoken in the past eight months.

The problem was not in your speedy proposal. As the saying goes, *when you know, you know*. It's true, your friends were shocked. You proposed after only four months, after all. But then you explained your common small town upbringing, and how you remembered her in knee socks, running around. What they don't know, because you never told them, is how years later--and by then you'd forgotten she existed--you ran into her at a Christian Rock festival. You're one of those barely there Christian-lite Episcopalians. You celebrate Christmas and enjoy choir music. Religion has been a soothing backdrop to the few funerals you've attended. You don't think of yourself as a big believer, but you were at loose ends, and you knew a friend of a friend of a guy in one of the bands, and you're not the type to thumb your nose at a free camping week-end. In other words, you went for the hell of it. (No pun intended.) This is how you ended up in a parking lot overflowing with Rural Baptists, Born-Agains, Jews for Jesus, and other Church-of-God types listening to hour after hour of monster loud Jesus-loving rock. You were coming round the corner of the food tent when her voice hit you. When you turned towards the stage, there she was. Her own middle-aged brothers were stripped to the waist, banging away at their guitars, their heavy make-up running like black tears in the heat. She was wearing something white and cinched at the middle. A Viking helmet

sprouting paper maché horns was perched on her head. As a band they looked like mutant troubadours from a hell machine, which wasn't unusual, a lot of Christians were getting their freak on. But you remember feeling a pride you had no right to feel. You remember wanting to hold on to the moment. But already, reality, the blazing heat from the parking lot, a wafting miasma of fried processed meat mixed with campfire smoke, was pressing back. And her, you felt her slipping away. You stood amazed, watching her belt out a song about God and frustration, all the while ignoring the potential for heat stroke. And you thought...I'm going to forget this, I'm going to forget this exact feeling at this precise moment, which is unlike any other moment before. Only you didn't forget did you? Could this be the instant you fell in love with her? Or was it, at least, the very outer fringes of pre-love? Sure. Why not? Maybe yes. Does it matter? One thing is clear: if you'd have known then that one day this woman would come to love you eventually, the next five years would have gone by more peacefully. You'd have been more relaxed. You'd have been a better man. You would have been less disappointed when you met someone but didn't find love. You'd have been less angry. You often wish you could go back and spend some time with your younger self, and give you/him advice, although you know you/he would not have taken it. You share none of these thoughts with your friends, because, if you tell your friends you were both once *Christian*, they go weird on you, or they get all excited and start asking questions as if you secretly escaped from a medieval sect. No, the problem is not the quick proposal or engagement. The problem is somewhere else completely.

The problem is not the gradual process of revealing a more earnest and vulnerable self. You began on safe ground, naturally, with a few stories from your childhood. To start with the Broccoli Wars, for example, a family story firmly installed as an adorable yarn, was a good way to begin opening up. Your own mother has even told the story to past girlfriends whenever she wanted you to hurry up and get serious. At the time you were eight and broccoli disgusted you. (It doesn't anymore.) You were also inflamed with a passionate sense of injustice. Why did your parents insist you eat broccoli? Why broccoli? Why not spinach? You had no problem with spinach. Or with carrots. Or peas. Why? Why? Why? What a futile life they forced on you! You clamored for your rights in several protest letters. Your parents were "burning" your feelings. (You confused the word "burning" with "hurting".) Your parents were pushing you towards a hunger strike! You were going to run away in the middle of the night while they were sleeping! You knew this story would charm her, as it has charmed every woman you have dated, or had sex with. In fact, she was so charmed, you were disappointed. Yes, of course, you had sex afterwards, but as you lay in bed spooning her, you craved *more* acceptance from her. So you spoke of your miserable adolescence when your parents communicated only through their divorce lawyers. You spoke while tracing a large invisible loop on her arm with your forefinger. You told her you must have been angry, although you only remember feeling numb, until one day, while playing at a friend's house, you found yourself strangling a kitten. You don't remember why. The kitten wasn't annoying. (That would not have been a reason to strangle it.) Of course you dropped the kitten straight away. You were shocked and couldn't believe what you'd almost done. You told her that you'd never told this story before, because you felt it revealed a horrible violent potential. After

all, don't all psychopaths begin with animals? But also, when you think back to the moment itself, to you, with your hands around the kitten's little neck, to the weight of its little body, free-hanging, its spine arching back and forth, its paws peddling in the air, you feel your anger all over again and then you feel shame. To tell this story means revealing the whole vicious circle of anger, shame, and self-loathing you frequently get caught up in. Her reaction was crucial, you said. Which is why, when she spoke, her voice, though soft, had the potential to wound deeply. And what did she say? She made a joke, that's what. She said something, like, cats know people's secret feelings, but don't care. Then she left the bed and went straight to the bathroom. You could hear the sounds: an anal spluttering, a sigh, the toilet roll trundling before the flush. You live in a semi-loft-like space, and the bathroom walls stop two feet short of the ceiling. You open the faucets whenever you go to the toilet to let the water cover any noise of the main activity, but she doesn't. Once back, she tossed you a t-shirt, while she slipped into her jeans, clipped her bra on backwards to hook the clamps. Then she got down on her knees to crawl around for a misplaced sock, while asking your help to find it. Life was continuing on. You scanned her face, her body movements, the tone of her voice for judgment, but couldn't find any. What a relief.

Of course, children can be brutal and cruel. You know it. Maybe one day you'll have kids, maybe not. But none of this, not the wedding stress, or the speedy elopement, or the state of Florida, or the motel room, with its twin bed, outdoor pool, and nearby outlet shopping is the problem. None of this is makes you uncertain. It's just this one particular moment, an instant, really, that left the briefest impression. As you lie in your motel bed

in Florida, you close your eyes, and see her back in your semi-open loft on her hands and knees. And then you hear her squeal with enthusiasm, like an adolescent, like a young girl, no, like a child handed a lost toy, when you find her balled up sock. She was not judging you at all. Your assumption that she might have been was wrong all along. In fact, you've been obsessed with the wrong preoccupations. Perhaps this idea that she *gets* you is *all wrong also*. What if, in fact, her *getting you*, is linked to an overall attitude that comes bundled up with certain habits, such as her constantly singing along to an imaginary song in her head, as well as her inability to pay bills on time, and her love of spaghetti for breakfast, and pancakes for dinner? And what if these habits and personality traits together do not add up to a magical and somewhat precious sensibility, but in fact a kind of cluelessness? Could this mean she is, on some level, incapable of deeply understanding you? Because you now know this, is there not an irreparable divide, a gulf between the two of you? Are you not in fact more alone than you have ever been, and therefore on the verge of complete despair? As the traffic sweeps by, these tiny monstrous thoughts push your mind into the cognitive danger zone. And the first light is showing through the blinds. This is the problem.

## The Washroom

Things are getting fucking crazy inside my head and these jolts of adrenaline keep shooting through me. There's no two ways about it, this is bad, really bad. I duck out of the hospital corridor, into a washroom, lock the door behind me, and splash cold water on my face. In the mirror, my face looks haggard, like I've aged ten years in one swoop, which for some reason frightens and fascinates me at the same time. For a moment my face distracts me from the reality on the other side of the door that I don't want to deal with. I suck in several deep breaths to slow my racing heart, but it doesn't help, so I just give in. I let my knees buckle, let myself sink to the floor. And then I crawl, on my hands and knees to the corner, like some drooling baby, some preexisting version of myself, to sit with my back against the wall. This washroom is my refuge, my cubbyhole. The room is getting shakier and narrower. Soon it will crumble and I'll have to come out.

There's a knock – three short raps on the door. A moment passes. The door handle jiggles back and forth, then another three knocks. Whoever it is they're persistent.

“It's occupied,” I snap.

I hear footsteps leave and imagine a pair of sensible shoes sounding along the floor: a pair of white trainers, the kind nurses wear. I exhale a long sigh and my anxiety dips, opening up space for some hard thinking. I was planning to go to the police all along. I was. What I need is a straight story and a good shot of courage. She was drunk after all. And there are no witnesses. And I can tell a good story from beginning to end. I can do that. I can answer all the police questions. Open up your notebook, Officer. I will tell you everything, exactly how it happened.

Her description? She was tall and thin, with a tattoo I couldn't read on the back of her neck in thin script. And she was drunk.

"You have to leave," she said. "If you don't leave, I'll tell him you hit my kid."

"He'd never believe you," I said.

"Oh, he will. Blood is thicker than water. A father will do anything to protect his child."

And then she fell, Officer.

I close my eyes and in my mind I see her falling slowly, sliding down, drunkenly flailing, towards the floor.

No. As a story this will never do.

The lighting is terrible and my reflection stares back, my bone structure skeletal. I look hollowed out, lacking flesh, as if I've been chiseled out by insomnia and a diet based on coffee and cigarettes. I place both hands on the edges of the cool surface of the sink. The moist air feels heavy with the acrid tint of concentrated soap. The smell of hospitals: rubbing alcohol, and chrysanthemums. There's no other smell like it. Even in the washroom, hospitals stink.

She was tall and thin and had a tattoo I couldn't read on the back of her neck in thin script. She was drunk and coked-up.

"You have to leave him," she said. "If you don't, I'll tell him you hit his kid."

"What kind of lowlife mother uses her kid as bait?"

She shouted then. Her words flew out across the park. Wind tossed them up above our heads and they loomed over us like giant birds.

And then she fell. I close my eyes and see her falling slowly, sliding down, drunkenly flailing at the air.

Only we weren't in a park.

We were in her kitchen.

And when she shouted, her words banged off the walls, off the appliances, off the fixtures. They hung above our heads, like giant birds trapped in the closed space, their wings flapping against the ceiling.

She took a drunken stagger towards me. Her look said she was on top of the situation.

“He'll never believe you.”

It was such a simple blow.

And then she was actually and heavily bleeding. I rushed her to the sink and I splashed cold water on the gash. I pressed a wad of paper towels to her forehead. She laughed then, and said, “You've really done it, this time.”

And then she fell slowly, drunkenly, flailing at the air.

And when I saw her lying there, with her eyes open, her face almost smiling, I felt, well, let out of prison. She was always calling, always in trouble. She was jealous and possessive of his time. The words, *his wife died suddenly*, shot through my head. I don't remember picking up the bottle because it was like someone else did.

*His wife died suddenly.* I loved the sound of the words and felt serene when I left.

That night I couldn't sleep. I got up and went down to the kitchen and shook the bottle of Advil. There were four left, four cool blue capsules. I downed them all with water from the sink. Back in bed, at last I fell into a half sleep when thoughts meld with dreams.

There I was as a kid. There was my sister, my dad, my mother. We were all at the oak dining table. From somewhere I heard the drone of a non-existent TV. My mother was eating strange food in small economical bites. My dad was wolfing down larger chunks on his plate with his fork. The pieces scrambled around on invisible legs and made slobbering noises. My sister sat before a large mound of peas, crushing them with the heel of her fork, making a paste the same colour as green Playdoh, oozing up between the prongs of her fork.

“God you're gross,” Dream Me said.

Dream Mother glared at me. “It's a sin to take the Lord's name in vain.”

“Oh please.” My Dream Sister rolled her eyes back until they were white.

“Everything's about *God* now.” A silence lasted maybe two seconds, but in dreamland it was long enough for a black hole to open up underneath us and swallow us whole.

Only my mother was left, floating alone in a bland space.

“You poor thing.” She was shrinking, her voice and face left saying, “Only through God's grace will you find salvation.” She took me in with one long look. “None of us can know peace until we accept that.”

I saw my mother's face shaking as if she were about to break out laughing, but instead tears – terrible, salty tears ran down her face. And then she was going, going, gone.

Swallowing hard, I take a deep breath and for a few minutes, still on my knees I press my hot face against the cool washroom sink. It feels like my heart is pounding in my head, like my heart is where my brain should be. And then it hits me. Was it always in me, something nasty swimming through my veins waiting for the right conditions? When I slipped out from between my mother's legs, was there something malignant in me already, or did it enter my bloodstream, invade my tissues later?

The police called him first thing in the morning. He talked rapidly into his cell, then snapped it shut. He was all action, gathering up his bag, his son's shoes, calling his son, bundling us into the car.

"We've got to get to the hospital," he kept repeating. I followed him three paces behind as he kept repeating, "we've got to get to the hospital."

He slipped behind the driver's seat, looking straight ahead. No. He hoisted his son in the back seat. No. He opened the back door first, slipped his son into his car seat then hoisted himself into the front. I climbed in beside him and buckled my seat belt. I can't remember what I said. I said something, but my words had no weight, so I said them again.

"Of course," he replied.

And then he turned the key and the engine switched over. He slipped into reverse and backed the car towards the road that curved towards the quay in one direction, and up over the hills towards the hospital in the other. On both sides ran a row of trees. The sun shone heavy on the leaves. Overhead a pair of kites loomed heavy. Again I thought of great birds. A man and woman were walking, but stopped as the car backed out onto the road. Under their arms they carried yoga mats and gym bags. The woman held a small girl by the hand, dressed in black shorts and a white t-shirt. The car pulled out as the little girl reached down to pick up a stone, then tossed it overhand. It hit the back bumper with a clink.

I cry for about five minutes, then unbolt the washroom door, ready, sort of. Immediately a woman enters and glares at me. She goes straight to one of the cubicles and I hear pee against porcelain. After the flush, she stands alongside me, as we both wash our hands. Once she leaves I practice the words again.

Officer, she was drunk when she stumbled and fell. But when I left her she looked fine to me. She just needed to sleep it off.

As I head out to the waiting area I hear voices, trolleys, footsteps, the banging of doors. The hospital building's old and shabby, with harsh track lighting and worn surfaces. The walls, pale yellow, need a coat of paint. They look as if a thousand car crashes, heart attacks, knife wounds, and battle bruises have left their mark on the place. I sit down, a bit shaky, on the chair next to him, hoping he won't notice my blurry eyes. His son is in his arms, head on his chest, mouth half open in sleep. I smile at the son and ask, "Any news?"

His shoulders tense forward, and is it my imagination, or does he flinch when I touch him?

“What? No,” he says. “The doctors aren’t sure yet.”

## The C Word

My life is awesome! Even the other night was awesome and it was a Tuesday night, and on top it I had a cold! My amazing friend Jen, who's crazy about cinema, suggested a movie, and later meeting her friend a documentary filmmaker! Of *course* I want to meet a documentary filmmaker after I've just seen a movie! You can't have too much cinema in one evening, even if you *are* run down with a cold! Plus, who wants to go straight home to their roommate who spends all her nights crying since she broke up with her boyfriend? Why not, I thought! Ten o'clock's not so late! Let's digest and process the film as we walk to the bar, then down a drink or two!

The first bar was so noisy! All the hot looking people were speaking through cool body language code because the music was too loud!

But the world is amazing because something better is always around the corner! Like, the next bar we went to was better than the first! Let me tell you, even though there was a huge TV with the sports channel on, and neither of us watches sports unless it's the Olympics, and even then it *has* to be swimming or hockey, the bar was not so bad! It *was* noisy, but better than the first bar across the street! Still we *knew* we could do better! One can always do better. Like my dad says, "You can do better." Like my boss says, "Not bad, but push it further." Like my roommate says, "I know there's someone better out there for me." Better, better, better. So we crossed the street again, and what did we find? A *better* place, even though it was almost empty! It was perfect! Then the worst thing happened – Jen's phone died! It was a catastrophe!

Now we have to find a payphone because I don't have a cell! I'm anti-technology and anti-neo-liberal, but still, my friend needed to call her friend to tell her where to meet

us! Imagine the catastrophe if one friend can't reach another. And a pay phone is practically an extinct technology! Will future people remember the sound of phones ringing on street corners, since phone booths will be extinct by then? Do you know how many blocks you have to walk to find a working payphone? Tons! Tons and tons of endless city blocks! But this is how awesome my life is – because there was a payphone! Right! On! The! Corner! And the next awesome moment was amazing! Picture Jen talking on the payphone, “Hey, how’s it going blah, blah, blah--” Then picture Jen seeing her friend, the documentary filmmaker, walking down the street talking back to Jen, on her cell phone! Welcome to the 21st century folks! Jen and her friend threw themselves at each other as if they arrived from opposite sides of the globe! Her friend shook my hand, and then introduced us to her friend Yosip, and we all headed to the bar together!

Can you believe I ended up sitting next to Yosip, who was also deaf in one ear?! And he teaches linguistics! It was not the easiest conversation at all! But I asked him about his research even though I had a cold, and I had pages to submit to my editor where I work at the PR company! I’m not knocking my job, because it’s awesome! Yes, writing copy for a shoe company sometimes makes me feel small and frustrated, but these feelings come with a rich full awesome life and a wide berth of emotions! And it’s so awesome that I don’t have to worry about money, that I can pay the bills! So I was nice! I smiled a lot and asked him questions, and answered his questions! And because life has taught me the importance of connecting and communicating better with people, when Yosip mentioned he’s from Israel, I saw a way to improve our conversation and said, “That’s amazing!” because it was! And you know what’s even more amazing – one of my favorite writers is Israeli!”

“Who,” he asks.

“Etgar Keret!” I say.

“He was my student,” he says.

That can’t be right, I thought! “Seriously? Etgar Keret was your student?”

“Yes. And the recurring character in his stories, Yuri? I know Yuri.”

“Oh! My! God!”

“To be honest, I was never a fan of Etgar’s.”

Oh my god, this Yosip person was so fascinating! What are the chances of meeting a linguistic professor who *knows* Etgar Keret? He possibly even *has* Etgar’s phone number or his email address! Maybe he and Etgar have long lengthy Skype discussion about the state of Israel, and knock Mitt Romney and Benjamin Netanyahu!

“I never really understood his writing.”

“Well he’s no Dostoyevsky!”

“Dostoyevsky? I’m not so old I need Dostoyevsky. But I’m a fan now because Etgar has matured. I saw this at a writer’s talk, when Etgar interviewed an American writer. What was his name – maybe you know him?”

“George Saunders?” I whispered.

“No.” Yosip pushed his glasses up his nose. “Gary Shteyngart. Have you heard of him?”

“Oh! My! God! Absolutely!” Jesus Christ, I thought! The universe continues to be awesome! Here I was talking to someone, who knew someone, who had published books, even if he didn’t know him, but taught him! Which is not so bad come to think of it! Maybe he helped foster Etgar’s talent! Maybe some secret knowledge was hidden in

this short, half deaf linguistics professor! Maybe I could get a small kernel of it! If the universe throws an opportunity right in front of you, right before your eyes, you should seize the opportunity! Or you might as well say to the universe, “Universe I do not want to succeed!”

“Etgar is very funny.”

“Yes! He’s funny!

“And so is Gary Shteyngart.”

“They must have been hilarious! I can see them onstage sitting in their chairs, wearing their shirts and glasses!”

“Yeah, sure. Like I said, Etgar is funny. Really, very funny, but you know humor is mostly ego, and Etgar put his ego aside and left all the space to Shteyngart. At that moment, I became a fan.”

“I can see it! Two brilliant writers swapping anecdotes about life and the human condition!

“Of course, before he became famous Etgar was kind of lame.”

“Lame?”

“Yeah, he’s a little guy, kind of hunched over. He always seemed – what’s the word? No, lame. Lame is really the best word.”

“I think he’s got balls!”

“You want to know a story about Etgar?”

“Do I? Yes! Please!”

“I was walking down the street with my best friend, who, by the way, is a horrible person. I’ve known him since he was ten, so I can say he’s horrible. Anyway, we’re

walking down the street and we bump into Etgar, who at the time was writing for a comedy show, something like Saturday Night Live. This was fifteen years ago, and Etgar, wasn't famous yet, and you know, he really wanted to be recognized and appreciated. So I introduced my friend, and my friend says, 'Oh, you're Etgar. Tell me why your show isn't funny.' You see, I told you my friend was horrible. And he insists 'Tell me why your show's not funny. Please explain this to me. And Etgar says to my friend, 'Because you're out of touch.' And then my friend says, 'But it's not just me. My wife doesn't think the show's funny.' And Etgar says, 'So your wife's out of touch.' And then my friend says, 'But my son doesn't think the show is funny.'"

"What does Etgar say?"

"He says he has to pee and he leaves."

"Oh my god! That sounds straight from an Etgar Keret story!"

"No. Not as good."

"I read online the other day that Etgar Keret represented the new Israel!"

"Sorry. I wish."

"Sorry?"

"The new Israel is racist, dominated by religion, like the whole Middle East, even if Islam stated it."

Oh no! I turned the conversation political! And not any political situation, but the Middle East War, which, come on, you might as well discuss genocide or murder, because everyone's against the idea, but no one knows how to stop it! But life can still be awesome in this kind of awkward social situation! Use deflection to change the subject!

Do not confuse this with ignoring the situation! Serious problems need serious consideration! But a bar is not the place for this! So I asked Jen where she got her boots!

Only, get this, Yosip *would not* stop talking about Israel.

“I’m not saying Islam started it,” he said. “I’m not saying Islam didn’t,” he said. “I’m just saying, *if* Islam was first with the religious fanaticism, *maybe* Israel responded with its own fanatics.”

“Jen, those boots are awesome! Where’d you find them?!”

“Ten buck last week at Value Village! A real bargain!

“What’s this Value Village?” Yosip asked.

“Oh my God, how long have you been here?!”

“Eleven years.”

“But it’s like you’ve just arrived!”

“I’m not an integrationist. When people talk to me I say, where I come from we shoot one another. And here I am talking Israeli politics with you.”

Then he was talking, talking, talking about how he never goes out, how his wife moved here but made no friends, and went back to Israel with his daughter! There was so much talking! I’d already filled my ears listening about his research! I had a cold! I wanted to go home!

“This is the first time in, well, a very long time I’ve been out. I feel young again,” he said something like that!

Thank god I remembered we were with a group of people! I tapped Jen on the knee and pointed to him, only, for a second drew a blank instead of his name!

“Yosip,” he offered.

“Guess what, Jen! This guy taught Etgar Keret!”

Jen would know this is amazing because she’s seen all Etgar Keret’s films on YouTube.

“I’ve seen all his film on YouTube!” she said.

“I don’t watch films so much.”

“You don’t like cinema?”

“I don’t look to cinema for artistic stimulation. Books, yes. But not cinema.”

“You don’t like cinema?” Jen’s voice went up almost a full octave! Jen lives for cinema! She’s seen every Bergman film seven times, can quote whole passages, and describe how the lighting represents the struggle between good and evil! Jen sees flashes of God in Bergman, which is so amazing because I find his films slow! Right then, she starts talking about Bergman and how he transcends the human experience!

And do you know what Yosip said? “There is this one Bergman line, I can never forget. It’s horrible really, but this line has always stuck in my mind. It’s from *Scenes from a Wedding*.”

“You mean, from a *marriage*,” Jen corrected! Because guess what, he had the title wrong!

“Yes. *Scenes from a Marriage* and the line is horrible really, the line is, ‘I hate that you control me by opening and closing your cunt.’ It’s horrible really. And to bring it up right now . . . I don’t know why . . . it’s not appropriate to the context.”

After we’d left, I thought of a comeback, like, “I didn’t know it could open and close!” Ha, ha, ha! Jen wasn’t sure if the line *was even in the movie!* Of all people, you’d

think a linguistics professor would know the power of one single word! But this is why life can be so amazing! You can be home with a cold, going half mad from solitude, and right when you think maybe, just maybe, things aren't working out the way you were perfectly sure that they would, and maybe you've made some massively bad life decisions, the phone rings, and out you go, and you end up getting a life lesson on how clued out some people can be!

## **Escape from the Turnip Patch**

The evening is caught between day and night, still bright, yet the moon's out, and the city pigeons are floating the way they do, circling a patch of sky for an errant French fry; and the scorching heat wave has cooled, and the traffic has thinned, and there's a silly love song stuck in your head; and all of it gives you a bounce, as you breeze through the front door, practically singing, only to find him at the kitchen table crying, and whimpering, and heaving, oh Christ. Your brain needs a second to brace for the catastrophe.

When he says his mother is dead, you pause, then rush forward and throw your arms around him and say, "What? When?" into the side of his neck.

When he pulls back to look at you, the despair on his face makes your heart contract. He shakes his head and falls into your arms sobbing, sobbing. Death is stupid when it comes suddenly. Stay quiet for several minutes. Then ask if he is okay, and realize what a dumb question. Of course he's not okay.

This is not the time to break up with him.

You comfort him. You listen to the sad details. You can imagine how the scene played out. A pair of emergency paramedics probably trudged along, hauling gurney and heart monitor, across a band of city grass. One would have pushed open the double glass doors of the apartment building, and waited in the lobby near the elevators, while the other one hunted down the superintendent. All three would have rode up to the second floor, never thinking to break into a sweat and rush the flight of stairs. Instead they rose slowly up the elevator shaft listening to the jangling keys on the super's key ring. When the door was finally unlocked, there would have been no dramatic sound effects, music

tracks, or tight close-ups like in the movies. His mother's blouse was not ripped open, popping button into the air. No paramedic called out "Clear!" to press EKG paddles to her chest. It's horrible how real death is so much flatter than on T.V. Let him rage against building custodians and ambulance drivers, even though you suspect, no, you know, it would have made no difference. But don't bring this up because the truth would be tactless, even tacky.

Get two beers out of the fridge. Notice he's already had three. Order take-out pizza dripping with cheese grease. Run to the corner store and buy more beer. Listen. Listen. Listen. Ask yourself, "Why did she have to die *now*, why?" Take the thought straight back. Let him cry and drink too much. Consider how grief has made him look small.

Say, "Michael, we should go to bed."

When he answers, "I . . . you." When he adds, "Love . . . love . . . you." His words drawl and stumble. Reach out and hold his hand, then plunk him on the edge of the mattress, blasted, smelling of beer.

Let him fall back in a booze sleep. Yank off his pants, his shirt, his socks. Notice his feet, pale and thin, look like they never see daylight. Think of his shoes: U-boats docked side-by-side near the front door and imagine from inside their hulls they are sending out sonar pings that reverberate around the room, sensing objects, verifying everything is static and in place. Everything *is* static and in place. Feel useless, like a third shoe, as you slip between the sheets. Brush his hair off his forehead and whisper, "I you too, Michael. I you, too."

Feel horrible for lying, but tell yourself pain can make a person sentimental, or devoted, or stir up emotions close to love. Feel subdued. Soften. Notice his eyes, wet, reflect light in the dark as he takes your hand, and draws you to him. Press your knees to the back of his knees, and flatten your breasts against his back. Hook a finger to his thumb linking you together before you slip off into separate dreams. Begin to breathe deeply, as his groggy grunts blend with the sounds of the city: a bus shuddering and exhaling as it pulls from the curb, a lone car harping its horn, and other noisy details from the last city players rolling home in the night.

Stare up and away at the cracked ceiling and wonder if you ever *really* loved him.

Not *if* you loved him, but if you *really, really* loved him. Because what hits you is that you aren't less lonely in this relationship, only less afraid. Or maybe you're afraid because you're only seventeen to his twenty-four, just a kid really, trying to live like an adult, with a job, an apartment, a man. Bravado can only take you so far. Inexperience eventually kicks in. So either your load must shrink, or you must grow up. So this is it. This is grow-up time. Wonder if he wants to call his wife. Then be angry with his mother for dying the way she did. There should be rules at the end, don't you think? No matter who the person is, when they go, it should be with caring and dignity, and no matter what they've done, their goodness should rise to the surface, and the crappy mess they've made should sink to the bottom like rocks in the sea. It would be easier for who's left behind.

Lie awake in the hot night struggling with the question – should I have done things differently? Sense yourself closed in by the walls, flattened by the ceiling. Drift off to sleep hearing cars go by, and music somewhere that skips a track, then a line, then breaks down. Slip into a slow sleep, as the second hand ticks backwards from four, to three, to two, to one. As time gives up the clock, the hours, weeks, months are knocked out of sync. The leaves on the tree retreat into buds. The grass goes underground to become seeds. Streams flow backwards. Time turns back and points its arrow towards the past. Is it dark or light coming on?

You wake up to a city white with the snow of December.

You work at a café that serves homemade bread sandwiches and latte-like-art foamed toppings on the coffee. The manager's name is Michael. He has blond hair, perfect broad shoulders, and wears slacks instead of skinny hipster jeans. He listens to your opinions, and laughs when you say funny-awful things about veggie-pate and pesto. Most days, there is a continual fluttering in your stomach as you wind your way through your customers while welding steaming cups and big heavy plates. After your shift ends, he takes you to dark bars, and there is joking, and too many gin and tonics. One time, you go to a hotel and on the back of the bathroom door the sign reads:

*We reserve the right to eject without notice any objectionable person. Do not throw waste material of any kind in the toilet bowl. Thank you. The Management. Call Again.*

*P.S. We consider our guests the finest people in the world.*

There are no little soap bars, or shampoo bottles, but instead the smell of hard detergent on the sheets. This is where people go when one lives with her parents, and the other his wife. His divorce is groaning through the system. You take off your clothes. Carefully you lie on the bed, naked. He is flushed and serious and for a moment the way he gazes at you seems almost sad. For a moment, you wonder if you're objectionable, but there is his voice, his arms, and then hello, hello, new woman you. Outside the snow falls in soft fat flakes. The world is decked out in lights and bows with Santa on street corners and your first sex is forever linked to Christmas. Soon, whenever you gaze at his face, you want nothing but him. When he suggests living together, you leave home with your hopes pointed forward. You pitch yourself as an explorer off to discover strange territory that holds a secret, unknown to you. You have no expectations for this secret, no practical use for it, only the hope it opens up something wide within you.

You live in a world of two.

You have some mutual friends, but not many. You, like an adolescent, clamor about how your parents are evil overlords or like the plague. You call your mother a witch, your father a vampire. It doesn't matter, he says, you and he will be all the family you need, though he'd still like to you to meet his mother.

When you do, you are polite to her, even though she takes you aback.

"You're a pretty girl," she says. Smile an awkward goofy smile that you're sure is not pretty. Reach into your bag and hand over the bottle.

“That’s for you, Mom,” he says. “You like red, right?”

“Oh yes,” she coos as if he’s done something amazing.

He takes the bottle, pausing for her kiss as he swaggers towards the kitchen. Over the sound of cupboards opening and closing, he calls out: “Hey, no sense opening this bottle when you’ve got scotch, right?”

“No point drinking it alone,” she says. Her voice has a smoker’s rasp, yet sounds flat and medicated.

He should have prepared you. On every surface, piles of dust, coins, old earplugs, and crumpled junk food bags mix helter-skelter with tossed clothes and dirty dishes, all of it sprawling and chaotic. An interior panic says, bolt, run, turn on your heel and make a get-a-way. But instead you smile and stare her straight in the eye, and try not to feel the place shrinking inward like a dried pumpkin. You keep your smile fixed when you repeat, “It’s so nice to finally meet you,” as you sit on the edge of the brown upholstered settee.

Drink too much. Feel the boozy warm fuzziness that softens and muffles the rough edges. Giggle when you look at Michael because you remember his orgasm face. Feel euphoric. Free. Confident. Bouncy. Nauseous. Run to the bathroom to throw up. Wobble back to the conversation that sounds confused as you sink back into the sofa. Unscrew the bottle and fill your glass with *glug, glug*, sounds that spill over. When you laugh, hear your voice stagey and dramatic with big round *ha ha has*. His mother laughs, but doesn’t look up. She is slumped, and more slumped with each minute until she is a curved mound in a chair. When you leave she is passed out.

Some people have a gift for that – passing out whenever.

“We’re going now, Mom,” Michael says. She is still as a statue now with quick little snorts escaping her mouth. “You’ve had enough excitement for one day.” There is a long tired silence.

It’s odd the things some people think are exciting.

On the other side of the window the sun falls in a smoggy sunset.

Winter drags. You begin to feel confused, cranky and drained. A record snowfall slows the city to a slug’s pace. Plows grind away at the streets as you hop over snow banks. Work at the café is quiet and the few costumers arrive with their faces flushed, stomping their feet, shaking the snow off their hats and shoulders. You flirt shamelessly with a musician who drinks four lattes with cinnamon. You say yes when he invites you for a drink. You lie. You call home to Michael, your rheumy store manager sick in bed with the flu. You blame the storm, the traffic, the subway and make a joke about the boss who stayed open in this weather. You say you’re spending the night at a girlfriend’s.

One month later, draw the musician’s penis on a napkin. When your girlfriend says you’re gross, near-sighted, or easily satisfied, laugh and say, “Yes, you’re right.”

Spring is mild and always slightly grey. You get waitlisted for university.

Summer. You ruminate. Life with your parents still trails behind you, like some pop song, blaring, then waning, then gone, leaving only a tinny note, plaintive and weary.

But what's there anyway? A father: moved out. And a mother: not sad, not exactly, tight instead, closed against the world. Her face no longer smiles when her mouth does.

Decide you feel indifferent towards both of them.

Cold people shouldn't have kids – in particular charming cold people able to make people laugh. It's like being teased by candy only to be locked out of the store. How often have you stood with your face pressed up against the glass waving, waving, trying to get one or the other's attention, only to have them turn and look past you, over your head, then back to something more urgent? Your mother says your father is busy. Your father says your mother is stressed. These are excuses to cover their own disappointment. Besides what do stressed/busy people do? The men woo wives then leave them. They go on to marry groomed Estee Lauder women, who cavort around stainless steel kitchens in front of the glistening knife rack. The women date younger and younger men. Swear a private oath never to become either of them.

Consider breaking up with Michael. Reconsider when you find out you're pregnant. Change your mind again.

“Don't feel bad,” your girlfriend says. Most of her energy is concentrated on pushing open the basement window of the club. “I've had three abortions already. I guess the next one I'll keep.”

Look for some sign of irony.

“Hmmm,” you say. Your fake ID has been spotted and so you are shimmying through the cramped space after her.

Leap from the window ledge as a sexy spy in a sexy spy movie, and when your skinny heels hit the floor, feel the impact in your knees. Say, “gross” in your best adolescent mumble when one foot lands in a puddle with soggy cigarette butts. Hear the muffled dance beat change tempo through the wall.

“By the way, I’m not his number one fan, but I think you should tell him.”

Shrug. Yeah. Well. But. Sometimes it’s hard to say, I don’t want your baby. Don’t say that out loud, instead, scrape your sole against a dry patch of floor. Don’t admit what’s harder to say is, I don’t know if it is your baby. Lift your foot as if you’ve stepped in dog crap, and wipe your shoe with a paper towel from the dispenser.

“Do you ever think about being a mother?” you ask.

“No,” she says quickly. Then, “I don’t know. I mean, it’ll happen eventually. But right now I can’t get worried about all that.”

Toss the paper towel on the pile overflowing the bin.

The door opens. A guy in a tuque floats in on his own wind. For a second, sound blares and music fills the washroom. The door swings shut.

“Hey nice jacket,” he says. “Do you drive a motorcycle?”

Roll your eyes back in your head, and make a *tsk* sound, “It’s vintage.”

Notice how his skinny jeans are too shabby, as well as his Converse.

“Okay,” he says with a shy nod. Then he takes his cowboy stance before the urinal. You hear the metallic unzipping, notice his shoulders curved over his chest, his hips tucked in. You and your girlfriend stare straight at his back pockets. There is an uncomfortable silence, the distinct sound of no one peeing. The two of you giggle.

Tell her how the nurses left you half doped on your gurney to go make goggle eyes at some newborn. Imitate with your hands their cooing and gooeying words floating around the dream baby, fat as birthday balloons, and you popping them with a sewing needle. Leave out the part where you clenched yourself against crying. Because you did not cry. You did not cry. You did not.

“Some nurses are real bitches.”

“I think they get insensitive being around death so much.”

“Hey guy, we’re going now,” you call over your shoulder.

And then, as she pushes against the door, your friend half yells over the sound, “You don’t want to tell him, sure. Just don’t give me this independent shit.”

Then she is gone, swallowed up by the music, the throbbing strobes over the musky crowd heat. You dive in after her, into the sound coming at you from all sides. You dance. You make robot hands near your face and pogo jump up and down like a maniac until you are covered in a fine layer of sweat. You feel determined, fierce, like an anarchist. Some guy buys you three vodka cranberries and you give him your number.

Decide to break up with Michael.

Trip home from the club, saluting taxi cabs, refusing rides. Feel disdainful of straight lines, and straight lives of direction and stiff spines, and feel light as a honey bee in the night, and notice how the moon has cooled off the city heat, and how it hangs bright like a translucent onion, and the way the city pigeons float in circles hoping for an errant French fry, and how a tune stuck in your head gives a bounce to your knees, and

has you practically singing as you breeze through the front door, only to find him at the kitchen table crying, and whimpering, and heaving, oh Christ. Your brain needs a second to brace for the catastrophe.

When he says his mother is dead, hesitate, then go “What? When?”

Stay quiet for several minutes until the despair on his face makes your heart contract. Then ask if he is okay, and realize what a dumb question. Of course he’s not okay.

This is not the time to break up with him.

## The Good-Bye Party Animal

Endings should come with a bang, don't you think? A boom. Some emotional fireworks makes for a proper send off. That's what I'm thinking as I cut through the woods, pass the creek, and round the bend to Alex's house. Already the day is swimming in heat and mosquitoes, but I'm feeling upbeat because I slept off the morning to clear my brain and reload for today, the final round of partying. All week long I've been *the guy*, throwing back drinks with old gym teachers, cousins I haven't hung out with since grade school. Even Russell who works over at Blockbuster downed multiple shots of tequila with me.

"You're alright. You don't talk much but you're alright. And you'll be okay, I know it." Then Russell tapped himself over his heart before upending his empty shot glass on the counter.

Bye Bye. So Long. Cheers and Sayonara. The words clatter around inside my head. Not that I'm scared or down about leaving, because I'm not. It's just I need to go out on a high note. I feel that I have to. So there's a nervy buzz in me as I wave to Jay and Harris up on the porch, sitting and swilling beer, their version of chilling hard like always. I see Harris with his chair tilted back, feet resting on the railing. I hear a squawk and look up to see this bird, making slow loops in the air. It's only for a second, but the image triggers a tight feeling in my gut that reminds me of the last days of summer as a kid. Then Alex pushes through the screen door, and a rush of voices and music from inside trail after him, the base beats matching the thump of his steps as he makes his way over to the cooler.

“About time you showed,” Alex says. “Hey everybody, Mr. War Hero has arrived.”

Funny guy. Alex knows I’m not regular army yet. After three months of basic we both know I’ve got the skills to drop him right there on the spot, if I want to. It’s just that I don’t.

Instead, I say, “Don’t make me feel special or anything.”

Alex stands there looking straight at me, until he says, “Oh shit. Get a beer already.”

He and I get locked into these competitive guy-guy moments that have been playing themselves out since grade school. He’s still got the cast from when he broke his ankle jumping off the library roof, which beat my jump off the tool shed. That leap was pure Alex. He stared down three stories of space between him and the ground and just went for it. As soon as the plaster was set, he even made me write *Alex is the winner* in magic marker and sign my name and date. Alex would never let a few broken bones get in the way of him beating me ever since I landed in this town fourteen years ago. That’s when my mom bought our small house during an economic downturn after the divorce. A word here about where I live: Ibsen, population 7,400. A country town with a regular rolling population: urbanites in need of a rustic escape to recharge their urban souls; trust fund types progressing through a private and expensive university. Those of us who are fixed in place do things like sell handmade porcelain and stripped down wicker furniture, shovel entranceways, and fix plumbing.

“Come on,” Alex says. He passes me one of the two beers he’s holding, and I take it with a smirk. “You know we’re proud of you.” He scans my face looking for a reaction. I hold my beer up and we bang our two cans together.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“You’re welcome, Son. Want me to punch you so hard your nose breaks?” Alex and I burst out laughing, and he chugs his beer, then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

Between Alex, Jay, Harris and me, we have the following father issues: a workaholic, a debtor, a quitter, and a drinker. But I’m the one with the fuzzy memories who kept thinking for years mine would show up magically and save me. From what I don’t know exactly. I think I need to be saved from myself. The truth is underneath my I-don’t-give-a-shit mask of mockery is a layer of panic. For a while after I joined the military, I felt calm, even if it was due to some vague macho asshole ideas. Then I found out I’d be spending my time assigned to a desk job without ever seeing any active combat, and the jumpy and mad-at-the-world feeling came back. To cheer myself up, I spent an entire week downloading war movies online, watching how guys get it in battle and die. At least none of my arms and legs are going to be flying up to heaven on little cherub wings. At least my mom won’t ever get a visit from a class A sergeant and a chaplain. I don’t mean to sound like a bumper sticker, but I made a decision: whenever the empty space opens in my head and starts filling itself with bad thoughts about being broke and living in my mom’s basement, I tell myself *when life gives you lemons you just got to make lemon aid*, and this week-end we toss in the gin or vodka. So my plan is to

keep the positive energy flowing, stay in overdrive, drown any grey thoughts with music, booze, and hopefully, maybe even some fucking.

And then, wouldn't you know it, as if my mind has become the master conjurer of my world, Maya steps out onto the porch looking gorgeous. Maya's basically my dream girl realized: hair straight and shiny as a doll's, legs long and tanned. She'd look like a million bucks in a red bikini running along the beach in slow motion. Jesus, she is so beautiful a pain burrows through my chest and bites a hole in my heart. So you know what I do? I stride across the space between the two of us and plant a kiss full on her mouth to see what happens. And you know what she does? She kisses me right back. And I can only describe her kiss with the word "abandon." Because she grabs my butt with both hands, and pushes me hard against her, grinding her hips against my hips, because she wants it so badly, her tongue going half way down inside of me and licking the top of my heart, until a bell goes off at the base of my spine.

Okay, not exactly.

Okay, not at all.

I down the rest of my beer and walk the length of the porch to the far end where the cooler is, grab another, and walk back casual like. Meanwhile Alex, Harris, and Jay have formed a tight pack around Maya, which puts me off to one side. I am dressed in an old pair of jeans, a t-shirt and flip-flops. The nose ring and the earring are gone, and with my newly shaved head I probably look like a guy fresh out of prison adjusting to his civilian clothes.

Harris is going on about Ryan Gosling. Maya is saying the camera should only ever film his abs, period. She flexes an ankle and I see the fine layer of dirt on the bottom of her foot.

“That’s pretty snap,” Harris says.

“Well, his last film was trying too hard to be *rad*.”

“Who says ‘rad’ anymore?”

Maya lifts an eyebrow like Harris has said the stupidest thing in the world. “The kind of people who made that movie.”

At this point I want to fling myself on the floor and commence doing push-ups to prove I could kick the shit out of Ryan Gosling. But I do not.

The debate switches to how college types use words like “problematic” and “agency” whenever they talk. I am only half listening because Alex is looking at Maya, ogling her with the concentration of a fox eyeballing a roast turkey on a platter.

This seriously unnerves me.

Maya and I spent a night together before basic and though the sex had been flat and automatic, afterwards she was sweet. She said there was something good in each person, and you could see it from the outside even if it was the simple way they smiled or touched their hair. My bedroom is next to the laundry room, and maybe that’s why the air became warm and exotic, as soon as she’d said everyone was basically good, and I felt teleported to a different country. I even took her hand and kissed it. But it was only a one-nighter thing, and to be honest I’m not even sure I *like* Maya that much, because I *want* her so badly I can’t tell for sure. But I know when she stepped out onto the porch something inside me cleaved, and all the hair on my body stood at attention. I am glad

she is here. I am glad she is standing near me in her cutoffs, and plaid green bathing suit top. With the chipped blue polish on her toenails, her perfect little feet kill me.

A ping from a bouncing beer cap sounds off one of floorboards.

“Well, aren’t you pretty,” Maya says.

A fluff of a cat has appeared out of nowhere, and sits on the railing batting beer caps like a bored marksman at a circus fair. I think I’ll go over and pick him up, offer him to Maya. But Alex gets there first, and grins as Maya takes the cat from him, breaking the invisible cord charged with electric particles between her and me.

“Say hello to Mr. McNuggets,” Alex says as he sinks his fingers into the animal’s neck fur. “Where have you been all day gorgeous, huh, where?”

Maya dangles McNuggets by his armpits then she cradles him like a baby while stroking his belly. “Oh my god this cat is so beautiful.” McNuggets wraps his front paws around her arm as his back legs peddle for something more to push against.

I get nervous and say something like, “I don’t understand cats.”

Alex gives me this weird look then starts into a speech about how he’s different than most guys. He’s not a dog person, you see, but a cat person.

“Cats represent pure chaos,” he says. “Whereas a dog, a dog does what you tell it to do. Kind of like a soldier in the army. Oh, sorry man,” he adds as he turns to me, “I didn’t mean anything personal by that.” Then Alex stares straight at me with a wide smile, a Cheshire cat smile, a smile that will still be hanging in the air after he’s left the porch and gone off to live the rest of his life someplace else.

I down the rest of my beer in one swill. “I’m heading inside the house,” I say. And the truth is I don’t even mean to act mad, but the door slams behind me as if I am.

Bodies are sprawled on the couch and floor as if the place is made of pillows and hammocks, instead of regular furniture like couches and chairs. In the middle of the room, two girls are locked in a dance, both of them wearing t-shirts so tight they stick to them like static cling. They're doing the imitation stripper dance thing, stroking each other and stuff, trying to get the guys around them worked up, but it doesn't affect me because my one visit to the strip club got me totally disillusioned. I'd gone with some guys from the base expecting this den of iniquity writhing with sex-crazed men, and a harem of huge-breasted women, and maybe swathes of red velvet. I figured the place would be classy, until the watered down gin and tonics, plus the way my shoes stuck to the floor made me realize the place wasn't classy after all. But what really got me was the way the strippers came out one after another and basically did the same routine: bouncing and jiggling and twirling hair, bending over and spreading butt cheeks. It made me feel like a dumb penis robot. Push a button and presto! Regular guy turns nymphomaniac.

In Alex's living room there's an old 70s TV console he installed with a mini fridge. On its corner is a saucer piled with crushed cigarette butts because the college kids think it's retro badass to smoke when they get wasted at parties. One slow-burning cigarette nudges this urge in me to burn something. I don't know why. Maybe it's the gangly guy wearing sunglasses inside. Guys like that, I can't even look at them because I just want to punch them.

Jay dances over to me, making karate chop air moves, half pissed and says, "Happy going away party, you asshole," then kisses me on the ear, which makes a loud smack. But the truth is it doesn't seem like a party for someone who's going away. It

doesn't seem different from any other party, and this makes me jumpy and restless again. I push Jay towards one of the armchairs, and he slumps into it, laughing, draping his leg over the armrest. I feel a desperate thirst for alcohol.

"I need a beer," I say pointing towards the kitchen, because by this time the mini-fridge is empty. "You want anything? My throat's about to close up."

"Naw, man." He takes a swallow from the bottle of J&B he's holding. "I'm good."

I don't know the girl with the low-slung jeans and pierced navel. I don't know the guys she's deep in conversation with, but they both seem distant as if I'm watching them from one end of a long tunnel. The effort they have put into their clothes and hair embarrasses me. Then it registers fully – a flash of loneliness and despair that shocks me in its intensity. And there's more. Some part of me hates this town and can't wait to leave because this place reminds me of myself and how I must be seen by the rest of the world: as someone who couldn't, who didn't, who messed up and went nowhere.

Jesus. I twist the cap off my beer and swallow half in a hard gulp. It's the stress of saying good-bye over and over. I've heard of people staging huge fights when it comes time to leave to avoid the sadness of departure.

I slalom around the people in the hallway, making my way to a vacant spot on the couch.

"You okay?" Jay asks as I slump down beside him. "You look a little freaked."

"You don't have a cigarette do you?"

"Yeah, in my coat pocket in the bedroom."

“Here,” Harris says as he holds out a pack. I go to take one, only how long has Harris been sitting across from me? I’m so drunk I’m unsure. The words KEEP CALM & KILL ZOMBIES are spelled out across the t-shirt of the guy who’s maybe Harris, maybe not. He looks at me kind of sad as he lights my cigarette. From across the room, I hear Alex holler that the place already stinks like an ashtray so if we’re going to smoke, do it outside.

“Just stay clear of the woods. There’ve been bear sightings. We don’t want anything happening to our hero two weeks before he’s shipped off.” Alex puts an extra stress on both syllables: here-O.

I try to get Maya’s attention only she won’t look at me. Then Alex kisses her, and it happens so quickly, and when they break off, he looks at her with a sincerity I find crippling. I feel a mingling of sadness and anger, and a *what the fuck?* as he whispers something in her ear and then slides a hand up her rib cage, and stops while his thumb slowly grazes back and forth across her breast. Then I am conscious that I have been watching them too closely.

Alex notices and mouths the words, “Looking at something?” and I hear them underneath the music’s rumble.

“Yeah well –”

Before I can say something like, “have a nice make-out session, enjoy the STDs,” Harris wraps an arm around me and tells me I’m really drunk and I say, “No kidding.”

“Hey, watch out for the bear.” I think that’s what Alex’s voice says. But the words trail off while Harris drags me outside for some air.

I am getting meaner and drunker.

All I want to do is talk about Maya and Alex and how they obviously both have issues, which makes them perfect for each other, and I wish them all the best. Besides, I'm going to be off serving God, corps, and country, which is a hell of a lot more than Alex will ever do. As for his crack about the bear-

“What the fuck does that mean? Is Alex pissed at me or something?” I ask Harris.

Harris shrugs, takes a swallow from Jay's bottle of J&B. “He's a moron.”

“Do you know what Alex would do if he came across a bear? The one thing a person should never do. He'd run. He'd be so scared he'd shit bricks running for his life with his pants around his ankles.” The idea of Alex butt-naked, with his ankles bound, shuffling a manic two step makes me giggle and I loosen my grip on Harris's t-shirt. I am so drunk I'm not sure I'm talking out loud. Then Harris tells me that I am.

“You never run from a bear like a scared chicken between your legs,” I say.

Harris agrees with me.

And I agree with Harris.

Harris punches me in the shoulder and says, “Who's the guy, huh?” and for a moment on the back terrace, the guy, that's me. Pretty soon we're cackling uncontrollably and giving each other low punches and high punches, blocks, and ducking until we're falling down on the back porch like we're stoned or retarded, although we're neither. When we run out of steam, we sit there bristling with our toughness, me personally resenting everyone in the world who has failed to recognize our stellar bad-ass qualities. Then I am pissed and sad, because I feel the empty space again, only now it's grown larger.

All week-end long I've been telling my army stories. There's the crowd control drills: half of us, dressed in 58 lbs. of riot padding, who stood there and took it while the other half spat and swung 2x4s while yelling *Kill the faggot!! Kill the faggot!! Blood makes the grass grow green!* There's the times I got smoked by my drill sergeant, the day they gassed us in a dingy barracks in the woods.

But I've skipped over the boring chapters. Being a soldier means being a corporal entity, being a body and not much more, one that stands around for hours, for days. You stand in line for chow. You stand to give blood, to get x-rays. You stand with the platoon under the noon sun, until sweat runs into your eyes that you can't wipe away because discipline is part of the grand military tradition. I've lost whole days and weeks standing until I'm about to go mental, until my feet hurt so badly they're numb. Then there's the slow moving bureaucracy, the endless rules and procedures. No one's asked me why I signed up, but my reasons are like most guys: no more options at home, and a need for a ticket to someplace else.

Harris swings his legs to hang off the end of the back porch and leans forward to stare out at the edge of the woods, trying hard to concentrate.

"There look," he sort of whispers. I follow his line of vision and see the trees rustle and damn if I don't catch a flash of something brushing past a tangle of branches. I almost laugh at the ideal timing, as if I have stirred up the woods by talking about bears. As if the trees are testing me, taunting me, the edges of the branches lift and fall just like in the movies to prepare the audience for something ominous. The moment is almost too

perfect and I wonder if anything else is going to happen and of course, it does: a flock of birds lift from the trees in whirling squadrons.

In the moment I hear the house full of people and someone's cell ringing when there's a pause in the music.

"What if it's not a bear? What if it's a *lion*?" In his normal voice, Harris would have sounded childish, like a kid scared, but thrilled to be scared at the same time. Instead, his voice growls and snaps as if pulling against a chain. I flash him a shit-eating grin, "Well, I'll tell you what," I say. "I know exactly what to do."

I go inside and grab the gun off the gun rack, hanging over the washer and dryer. It's a Christmas gift Alex received from his dad with two barrels and a silver-inlaid trigger guard with his initials engraved. It's true. I'm sloshed. But just for a moment imagine you are me. And you are sloshed. But you're good with a gun. And you were good before the three weeks spent shooting at green plastic silhouettes. And there is something in the woods, lurking a few feet from a house full of people. What would you do? You would do exactly the same as me.

Something's in the woods. Get the gun.

I do it.

I aim straight, hold my breath, and squeeze the trigger gently. Bam. A branch drops from a tree shedding leaves as it falls to the ground. I jump off the porch, skirt to the edge of the woods, and raise the rifle. A ping fires off of a red sign reading NO TRESSPASSING, but I don't give up. Harris flashes with his hands, telling me to slow down, but I pay no attention. I am off, into the woods, firing away, the pops sounding like

firecrackers on a national holiday. Only when the last bullet leaves the chamber do I feel the recoil against my shoulder, and see the drop. Only then does it occur to me.

I stand around for a few seconds, staring down at the ground, feeling like shit.

Harris shows up, panting, eyes goggling, his mouth hanging open.

“That,” he says between breaths, “is Alex’s cat.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” is all I can answer.

I look away, up between the branches at the sun whitewashing out a patch of blue sky, then back at the cat, with its wide frightened eyes, and the raw bloody hole, and the clump of wet fur in his belly.

For a moment I am fourteen and I can smell the scent of kerosene. Alex and I are in front of a wire pen, watching a thirty-pound rooster scratch and peck at the ground. All summer long this poultry monster has terrorized the neighborhood by raiding garbage cans, chasing kids, and threatening small dogs. Alex has decided his days are over.

He douses the rooster in gasoline. At first, the bird looks amused, ruffling its feathers as if it has just stepped out of a bath and it’s time to dry off. Alex repeatedly clicks his lighter on...and off...on...and off, and the rooster combs out his feathers, fluffs his feathers, combs his feathers again, understanding nothing of what’s going on because you can’t torture a creature with no imagination. At this point I’m thinking this is one of Alex’s games, one of his dares. He’s waiting for me to stop him, and then he’ll secretly be glad that he didn’t have to back down on his own.

“C’mon, Alex,” I say, “let’s get out of here,” and I grab his arm, but he yanks it away.

And then the rooster is in flames.

Squealing, it ricochets off the wire pen, until the door swings open. The ball of fire heads straight in my direction. I can feel the flash of heat on my skin, can taste the burning soot in the back of my throat. Alex catches it with a roundhouse kick and in the next second he is kicking and stomping the shit out of a cloud of flames, dust, and flying feathers.

Six years later, I am standing over Alex’s dying cat, with its face mocking me with a vague smile. I reach forward to examine the bullet hole and touch the drops of blood near its leg. I lift the cat up, and see it dying in its eyes, and the corners of its mouth go limp, and its body droops. Already a fly skims by its hind legs. When we were kids, Alex was the genius inventor. He had us shoot at each other from opposite ends of the fields with bird guns. He told us he knew how each one of us was going to end our days, and that we’d see a sign in the sky before our last moment.

“Go inside,” I say to Harris. And I tell him what to bring me back from the kitchen.

It’s easy to relieve Mr. McNuggets of his pelt: first, off with his head and hind legs, then the front feet, the tail. I separate the skin from the flesh with my buck knife, then peel the rest down off his body like a sock. I work with fairly good speed, though I

am messier than usual. There is more blood because I haven't had time to hang McNuggets and let him drain.

But here's the thing I notice: McNuggets looks like any slab of meat. Maybe once you strip away our outer pelts we're all just chicken, beef, or pork chops, to eat or be eaten. I read somewhere that any food you digest can be good for you as long as you enjoy it. Thanks to the power of the human mind, the food you consume can be either a holy act of communion, or a crappy piece of baloney. I cut down the length of McNuggets' underside from one end to the breastbone. With my fingers I scoop out the last entrails, and then chop him up in pieces at the loin, the shoulder, and the back.

I tell Harris to fire up the BBQ while I go inside to wash the meat off in the sink.

At first the water is stained a deep orange red. But it all rinses away, the blood on my palms, the blood caught in my fingernails. I watch the circles swirl down the drain until the blood thins out completely. I am left with clean hands and cubes of white meat. The alcohol fog in my head lifts somewhat.

"You making us something to eat?" The girl with the pierced belly is leaning against the kitchen counter.

"Just a snack really. It's moose meat."

Her eyes widen. "Oh wow. I've never had moose meat. What's it taste like?"

"It's not as exotic as you'd think." She looks disappointed, so I reassure her. "I'm sure you'd like it, though."

"Awesome. Say, what's that on your shirt?" She points to the red that forms a pattern sprinkled across my belly. "It looks like you're an ax murderer or something."

"Really?" I look at her and smile. "Take it then."

And then I pull off my t-shirt and hand it over to her, and she slips it over her own shirt laughing.

“I love it. Thanks,” she says, because she’s the kind of girl that finds it natural for people to just give her things.

It doesn’t take long for me to become the heroic moose meat provider of the party. People are saying things like, “Moose meat! Best party ever!” And it *is* the best party. I feel a shared bond between everyone. I appreciate the quick way they stab at the cubes of meat with the toothpicks I’ve put in a bowl. I see Maya pack two pieces in her mouth before passing the platter to Alex. He looks it over, like he’s going to decide against it.

I think of the old dead cat joke, the one where this guy’s dog comes home with his neighbor’s cat, dead and filthy, and because the guy can’t bring himself to tell his neighbor what happened, he cleans the cat up before placing it on his neighbor’s doorstep the next day. He takes the cat into the bathroom and washes off the blood and dirt. He brushes and blow-dries the fur. He replaces the cat’s collar. Since it is late at night, he creeps into his neighbor’s yard and lays the cat on the mat in front of the back door.

Alex picks up the cube with his forefinger and thumb and I stare at it going into his mouth. I watch him chase it with a swill of beer.

In the joke, the next day the neighbor has a nervous look about him. Finally, he confides to the guy with the dog how he’d buried his dead cat in the yard, but found her lying on the mat in the morning.

“This doesn’t taste like moose meat,” Alex says.

At this moment I have the strangest feeling. It's as if I can see every event in my life as a long series, one after the other, linked together forming a whole. If I look back I can see things from the beginning, like a flash of me as a kid running after my dad up the small incline of a hill. Then in an instant I am back in the present, but if I turn my thoughts I can see what is going to happen next. It's like this perfect harmonious pattern that's alive, a living entity which exists on its own, in its own superior way, connecting us, giving us purpose, yet at the same time holding us back and trapped. It's not like I know exactly what is going to happen next, because it's more of a feeling than a detailed photograph. But I can guess.

## Froggie

You need to know three things when I'm babysitting: no going on about your awesome action figures, or whatever; no getting up in the middle of the night for a glass of juice or water; and no leaving your room unless there's some disaster like a flood, or an earthquake. These are my sacred rules of babysitting and if you break them you will find yourself locked in your room, peeing in a salad bowl next time I'm over.

Like always, I'm using scare tactics with the new kid to keep him in line. I've babysat eight year olds who think they're a better person than you just because they have nice stuff. This one has designer kiddie sheets with printed baseball players matching the pillows up against the headboard. The double closet doors are covered in decals, so he's a collector. Which would also explain the row of pop bottles filled with sand on the window ledge, each one from some great vacation his parents took him on, I guess. He's small for his age, and is kind of intense looking, but quiet. When he asks me to tell him a story I say, okay, but don't expect me to "make something up" as if I'm some sort of entertainment machine for eight bucks an hour. I'll tell you something that really happened.

I ask if he wants to know who killed Froggie and his eyes practically bulge out of his head.

Froggie's the girl from my class who turned up murdered a month ago. She used to be nobody, just a kid who tried too hard to fit in, with the pleading look that said, I will accept any humiliation to be your friend. Honest to god, the girl had no more pride than a bowl of peas. Then she went and got murdered and the news spread like some superstar

virus. First, she was on the Amber alert, and then all over the TV and internet. And here she's gone and risen from the dead when she should have stayed put in her grave.

"She's a ghost now?" the kid asks, unsure.

"Oh yeah. And I'll tell you who killed her if you promise to go to sleep straight after." I say it completely smooth and the kid looks so impressed he practically stops breathing.

The tragedy known as Froggie does not start with her sad perm and clothes, but with the general beaten down look she wore on her face: like she'd been kept locked up in a broom closet all day. Who knows? She was white as a bone, and looked like she could break easily, snapped in two just like that. Probably by the time she got to St. Anne's Academy somebody had broken her already, though nobody acted like they cared. I, personally, had no warm spot for her because her desperation showed at recess. She'd chase us and grab us and plant these frantic kisses on our lips, and we'd be yelping, and hollering, and running away. She seemed to get a real kick out of it, the whole catch and release kissing, but it was perverse, and it dug her deeper into the weirdo pit. If you ask me, that girl would have kissed anyone.

Also, she told the worst lies. She'd met the Pope. Stephen Hawking almost ran her over in his wheel chair. Who says such things?

Kristen and Mallory called her names like SLUT WHO IS UGLIER THAN MICHAEL JACKSON, but just to have some laughs. I didn't want anything to do with her, but life kept plotting against me.

Like this one time, I was sitting at my desk, in class, busy updating my notebook, the one with my scores. I have a score sheet with my rules on one side, and a column for each day. If I get more than two answers wrong when called on, I start deducting points from a perfect ten. I usually fill it out when I get home, but if I'm too tired, or lack focus, I fill it out the next day in class. So, there I was, with my notebook, perfectly happy when the teacher picked me to go fetch Froggie who was sitting outside on the school steps. I went because I had no choice. And I called out, "Hey Froggie."

Of course, she didn't answer. She just sat there in her zone of solitude while the leaves blew through the courtyard. There was no grass or flowers, only the trees planted by the city, and the whole area seemed so empty with her sitting there with her head in her hands. So I pitched a pebble, not hitting her, just so it would land close enough to get her attention.

"Who throws stones at people?" she asked.

"You're supposed to be in class," I said.

"I don't like school, that's all."

"Why not? Without school you'll end up a loser." Then I added, "like everyone says." Which I instantly regretted because I was being honest, but it sounded wrong said out loud.

The rules, the unofficial ones for making life and school suck less, should be written down. It's got nothing to do with saying the same smart-ass comments as everybody else, or wearing the right clothes, or liking the same bands as some anonymous cool-deciding machine. It's about finding your group, your gang. Kirsten,

Mallory and Stephanie organize the car wash fundraiser, all the theme dances, and Earth Appreciation Day, and what they say goes. And because they're my friends, they're my group. Last year I got lumped in with the Kids Who Read And Write, which was a loser group, I can tell you. Froggie's problem was that she was in the Nobody Group, which isn't a group, really, just a bunch of lone satellites orbiting around the school without protection. You can't make it that way. Which is why I've worked hard to be friends with Kirsten and those girls. I did things the way they said, and sometimes we do good things for each other, and sometimes we don't, but the main thing is, don't trust anybody outside your group, or you'll end up like Froggie - so far out on her own nobody even remembered her real name until it showed up in the police report.

I let my advice sink in for a bit, then I lean forward for emphasis, "If it was anybody's fault I'd say it was her mother's." I say it with a serious tone and the kid looks stunned, like someone just took his picture with flash bulb.

Her mother spent days in her room with a blanket draped over the window. No one ever saw her, ever, which was a not a big deal, until one day Froggie showed up with a split lip, and told us her mother had slapped her for no reason. Froggie said she didn't cry, even when her lip started bleeding. She said she spilled no tears. I figured when she first went missing she'd taken off to escape a life of purgatory.

"I thought she was murdered," the kid asks.

"Yeah." I shrug. "But you don't want me skipping the good parts to get to the end do you?"

It's quiet and through the window, we hear the older kids playing. He's turned on his side. There's a poster hanging on the wall over his bed, with the word DINOSAURS topping a collection of prehistoric creatures. Some charge to the right. Others howl to the left. They look disorganized and really angry that evolution wiped them off the planet. I don't know why I think that or even care. I stare out the window, past the line of pop bottles, past the treetops and what's left of the sun. The water in the pool ripples in the breeze.

After class that day, I waited for Froggie and tried talking to her, but she looked at me like she barely recognized me. Who knows what was buzzing in her head? And I missed my bus, and had to walk home, which took me an extra hour. So that was the end of my kindness mission.

Which, fine. Besides, to avoid her, we stopped hanging out in the yard during break, although she still found us in the alley near the fast food parking lot. There was Danielle, and Erica, and of course Steph, Mallory, and Kirsten. Froggie came bursting around the corner actually happy to have found us until Steph said, all slow and dramatic:

“Froggie, you've got a tummy going. Are you pregnant?”

“No,” she said slowly.

“Then you're fat,” Steph said, shaking her head.

I swear Froggie's aura shrunk. Then Kirsten rolled her eyes and made a face, “She's just pretending for attention, and to get out of gym class.”

I stared at Kirsten then looked away. For a second I wanted to be out of it - the alley, the parking lot, the gang of girls, the school, all of it. But I was stuck. Tomorrow I'd wake up in my same bed and see the same girls at school the next day. There was nowhere to go. The whole thing seems like a long time ago, but it wasn't.

I'll tell you something lots of people don't know. She'd been to three different schools in one year, lived in a foster home, and had run away three times. Because my parents considered Froggie one of the *unfortunate*, they were on their own kindness mission when they invited her into our home. But you have no idea how depressing the less fortunate can be. There's no nice way to say this, but the needy can suck all the air from the room, like a starving person sucks the marrow from a chicken bone. The whole time she was around I tried to exist in a parallel world. I'd sit in the living room watching TV while she sat in the kitchen waiting for her mom to come pick her up. Thank god this only happened once in a while, before Froggie vanished, though you can bet having her in my house meant I got handed some hostile attitude from Kirsten, Mallory, and Steph. Of course, later, after the police, and the morgue, and the funeral, and the reporters, they were all, "Froggie was the sweetest girl, and poor thing we will always remember her."

Can you believe the turnaround? They'd always said she was a freak.

I tell you, some people are the worst even when they're your best friends.

How is it that some people can be annoying, say hurtful and dumb things, and because they're your friends, you take it, but if you don't like a person, just the way she chews her food drives you crazy? Dinnertime's no big deal, right? My mom obsesses that

I eat since my puking phase, but with Froggie we could have had lettuce for dinner and it would have been excruciating. You could see her pink tongue rolling around inside her mouth with all her chewed up food. It was disgusting. But I guess some people can't change the way they chew because it's a deeply ingrained physical tic, like stammering or something.

The worst was having to sit there wearing what Kirsten calls a "mask of sociability" until Froggie'd finished eating. Eventually I'd get to leave to go watch TV while pretending to exist on a completely different planet. Of course, the whole time I'd be sitting on the couch I could feel Froggie's eyes boring through the walls into the back of my head, but I'd pretend she wasn't an actual person, just some tragic character from a lame sitcom. My dad was always nagging me about hanging out with her.

"Why are you here and she's there?" he'd ask. "You two girls must have lots you could do together." Then he'd smile as if Froggie and me should have a tea party, or something, while we talked about rainbows and flying kittens.

But it was always the same with her.

One time I found her sitting in the kitchen, at the table, all alone.

"Are you done eating?" I asked. A stupid question but I didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah, I'm done."

This might sound harsh, but she seemed so sad and lonely with her gloomy eyes. And she just sat there, staring at me, waiting for me to ask her another question. So I

asked her, “What?” like you do when someone wants you to ask what’s wrong, but you don’t really want to know the answer.

Then she started in with this crazy story about an abominable snowman, I don’t know, something about a snow castle and snowman juice. She’d made the whole thing up to scare my sister Mara. And she’d done a pretty good job, but there was no way I was falling for this lame story. I think Froggie was younger than her real age, stunted emotionally in some way, because what kind of twelve year old talks about abominable snowmen? So when she started again I just zoned out halfway through until she said, “It’s not my fault you know,” because people who say it’s not my fault are always guilty of something.

Just the way she was sitting in the chair, stiff, and all alone, I had to leave the room, I did. She was sitting on this hard unpadded chair. You think of a kitchen as a place that should be warm and cheerful. A kitchen’s the heart of the house, right? It’s all about warmth and food, right? Why did she have to come and clutter up my life? Why should she steal my time and suck my thoughts? Why sit at the bare table, with her dishes stacked in the dishwasher, like some orphan all alone and helpless?

So I headed back to the living room, and my mom asked if Froggie was done eating and I said “yes” and when she asked what she was doing, I said, “nothing” because she was doing nothing.

Then my sister, Mara, goes, “Maybe she’s waiting for her dad to come get her,” which made no sense because her dad had skipped out.

I'm twelve and Mara's seven, so the difference between us is like the difference between an astrophysicist and a monkey. I've made her eat spoons of salt before, or kept a hair clip on her nose until she cried. This one time, I told her there was poison in her orange juice, and she ran straight for the bathroom to stick her finger down her throat. All that came up was a string of yellow bile, though, because Mara knows nothing about puking.

Before I could get Mara with anything this time, my mom rubbed her eyes with her fingertips, then looked hard at me, as if I were thinking about shooting up a bus load of babies with heroin, or I don't know what. Her look said, "don't start." She didn't even have to open her mouth.

"I'll go speak to her," my dad said. And off he goes to the kitchen. When he gets back, he says he's going to drive Froggie home, because he'd talked to her mother on the phone.

"Why can't her own mother come pick her up?" my mom asked.

But my dad's convinced it won't take long, so then the talk was all about why be quick when her own mother should come pick her up? And yes, it'll only take twenty minutes, tops, if I take the highway; and you're forgetting about the congestion, the congestion on the roads; and no I could take the tunnel; and, well, let her own mother sit in bumper to bumper traffic; and it's kind of fantastic how they kept repeating the same lines back and forth until my mom's saying, only *we* don't work things out, do we? You do. And then it's, you're underestimating, and why do we have to debate everything. I thought I was going to die, I did. I thought I'd roll myself up in a ball, and die right there

in the middle of our living room floor and they'd still be at it. All I could think of to say was, "Oh my god, I want out of here already."

"Me, too. I want to go," Mara said, totally misunderstanding.

"For Christ's sake," my dad moaned. "What's the worst that can happen if I drive her home?"

"A massive car accident and your head gets severed off." I got everyone's attention when I said that.

"Are you happy now?" This was my mom to my dad before she turned specifically to me. "Please explain why you're so morbid." Then added, "This is a serious question." She wasn't really interested in me answering though, she just does that often – tells me she's serious, or not kidding, in case I think she's joking, I guess, when really, how could you?

My dad just laughed. "I'm getting the car keys."

Eventually we all piled into the car, my dad wearing his house slippers even though he was driving. Us kids were packed in the back, me sitting next to Froggie. My mom turned on the radio, and when this long guitar solo came waling through the speakers, my dad snapped the radio off.

"What?" Mara asked.

"I said the snowman's not scary." This was Froggie speaking.

"Oh," Mara paused for a moment, confused.

"He's actually really nice." Froggie shuffled in her seat. "Want to meet him?"

“Sure,” Mara answered.

“Froggie,” I said in a way that meant: *I’m sorry you’re so delusional. Now please shut up.* “Mara’s actually scared of snowmen.”

“Am not.”

Through the car windows I could see the houses with the porch lights on, but the streets were mostly dark, with spots of creepy brightness under the stoplights. Then I did this thing I do when I’m sick of dealing with people. I squeeze myself shut. And I can do it even towards one specific person. Even though I felt Froggie’s body sitting next to me, I could stop up my ears like stone, leaving no room for her words.

“Well,” my dad said, “there’s nothing to be afraid of. You just have to stop kissing the girls at school.” When I opened my eyes he was looking silently at the road ahead, like it was no big deal he knew this.

Of course Mara had to ask. “What girls? Kissing what girls?”

And Froggie said, “He isn’t gone. He hears everything I say, every single word.”

And then Mara, who’s so full of questions you’d think she never learned anything in seven years, asked, “Can you see him?”

“No. He’s invisible. But when he shows up for real again I won’t even be surprised.”

“If you behave yourself and study hard, you’ll be okay.” These were my dad’s standard words of wisdom for every stupid and uncertain situation. Besides,” he added, “it’s all right now.”

“I’d walk down this street by myself. I’d walk down that street by myself, and that one, and that one.” Mara was pointing in all directions like some nutso policeman directing traffic in a wild land of lawless freeways.

What sticks in my mind, though, is not how the car seemed to be this mini unit propelled by outside forces down the street, or how the window felt against my face, or how my knees were squeezed by my dad’s car seat. I think of my sister, and how easy it is to make her believe anything, to scare her so hard she’s practically shaking.

“Cool,” the kid says. He looks excited and I can see a half smile on his face.

“What’s so cool?”

“Abominable snowman. But were there any zombies?” he asks, not missing a beat.

I don’t say anything but try to picture a mob of the undead, hungry for human flesh and brains stumbling after us.

“No. No zombies. Everyone knows once they show up it’s the end of the world as we know it.”

The kid nods his head like he understands me perfectly.

I wish my parents’ kindness mission had stopped with the after-school visits. Instead, Froggie ended up sleeping over. I can still see her standing in the doorway between the dining room and the living room, holding her sleeping bag to her chest, trying to look bored as hell, so I tried to look bored, too. Only when she opened her knapsack she had this pair of pajamas just like mine, which completely floored me. I tried

to shake the thought out of my head, of Froggie having even one tiny particle of anything similar to me, of being linked to her in any way, of me ending up ostracized, and of how that lonely feeling of no one being on your side is the worst feeling in the world. Navigating the social order when you're twelve is like dancing blindfolded through a minefield.

I fell asleep that night feeling sorry for myself. I woke up later when I heard the neighbour's dog barking. When I went over to the window I saw it pulling against its chain, eyes bulging, panting, barking. On top of that Froggie was singing. She lay in a pool of light actually singing. Only come to think of it, it wasn't the moon, but an electric street lamp, and her body in the sleeping bag was covered in electrical light from outside. I waited for her to stop once I got back to bed, and when she didn't, I hissed, "Go back to sleep." Then the light went on in my parents' room and I heard footsteps. The hall light came on. More footsteps. Froggie stopped singing and the footsteps hesitated. There was a pause, and the footsteps turned around and went back to bed. Froggie started singing again, but it was softer this time, as if she was singing to herself. But I could see her eyes. Even though the hall light was out, I could still see them.

I hoped she would get sick and die, which was horrible of me, I know, but I was going insane with her non-stop presence. Then, for some reason her mother put a stop to the sleepovers.

"Are you sure? She can stay with us for a day or two if you like," I heard my dad say that into the phone. When my mom got up to leave the room, my dad took a few steps

in her direction, but there wasn't enough reach to the phone cord. I think that was the night we ordered BBQ chicken. I know that was the one time Froggie came straight to my room after dinner. She didn't even knock on the door first, just went straight to talking about the snowman.

"How do you know he's back," I asked, "when you can't even see him?"

"I can feel it," Froggie said. "He's back and just waiting."

"How come you know?" Mara said. "Are you scared?"

"I don't know." Froggie thought about it for a minute and then said, "No, I'm not scared. I'm not anything."

Mara paused then asked, "How can you not be anything?"

Froggie looked at us. "Remember when I slept over? Ask your mom if I can sleep over tonight? I don't need my sleeping bag."

I didn't know what to say, or how to deal with this, but her voice sounded shaky, so I went to ask my mom, and Mara came with me.

"Her mother already decided," she said. "Besides, why do we have to do something about this?" My mom asked my dad. "Why can't the police do something?"

"What can we do?" my dad answered.

"With all the taxes and tuition fees we pay, we have to look after a child that should be under the care of child services? Listen to me." My mom's voice was getting that high-pitched edge to it, kind of pleading, but also angry, and she was standing in the middle of the kitchen, with her hands on her hips. My dad didn't answer. He just rubbed the side of his face with his hand, stalling for time, hoping the conversation would turn

around to his way of thinking, but it wasn't working. We were told to go back to our room, back to Froggie.

“Dad said you and your mom have to lock your door and windows, and sleep with the phone by the bed, and you'll be alright.”

“Alright from what?” Mara asked.

Nobody answered. The three of us just sat on my bed in our different states of understanding. There wasn't a sound coming from the kitchen and it was easy to imagine my parents facing off in silence. They could disagree using only their eyes and body language by now. Then I realized my dad was standing in the doorway.

“Hey, someone call a staff meeting and I wasn't invited?”

“No,” I said, groaning inside.

My dad looked closer at me. “Have you lost weight?”

“No.”

“You look pale.”

“Yeah, it's all the drugs I'm taking.”

“Terrific,” my dad said. Maybe it was the lighting or the mood, but he looked old, and, for the first time, fragile, and I thought one day he will be old, and that made me feel scared.

“Wait here while I get the car out of the garage, and pull it round to drive your friend home.”

Mara and me, we turned and looked at Froggie sitting on the edge of the bed. Froggie looked back at the two of us. “It was fun when I slept over, wasn't it?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “Fun.”

Mara nodded her head. "I had fun."

"You were asleep the whole time," I said.

"Maybe we could hang out in the woods behind the back yard. Maybe that'd be fun?"

"Yeah. My mom would really love that idea."

"I don't know." Mara shrugged. "She's always saying go play outside while it's still light out." Then she added, "I'm not scared to go."

"Yes, you are," I said.

We crossed the back lawn. The sky overhead had these wispy clouds. When we walked through the back gate, I saw a collection of cigarette butts on the ground. I stepped past the gate thinking this was the first time I'd seen them, and that no one in my family smoked since my dad quit two years ago. The idea of anyone standing and smoking, staring straight at the back of our house sent a wave of creepiness through me. I listened for a footstep, a whisper, or some shadowy figure lurking behind a rock.

"I bet if someone were to jump out from behind that tree, you'd be so scared you'd start screaming," I said to Mara.

"Would not."

We walked down the path worn slick by joggers and dog walkers. We crossed the small creek, with its boulders and overhanging trees, stepping over mossy stones and fallen branches. Froggie talked non-stop, trying to keep us with her through her chatter.

“Would you, would you, would you rather find true love or never be loved back? Find a cure for a cancer or AIDS? Forget yourself or everyone else? Be blind or deaf?”

“Touch,” I said just to stop her. “I don’t want to be blind or deaf.”

“But if you couldn’t feel anything, you couldn’t feel your own body, and how would you know you even had one?”

“That sounds bad,” Mara said.

“So come on – blind or deaf?”

“I try not to think about things like that,” I said.

“What about you?” Froggie asked my sister.

We stopped and turned towards Mara who, as usual, was several paces behind, because she’d stopped to look at a cool leaf, or a nice twig. Now she was fiddling with the zipper head on her jacket. She wiped her mouth and mumbled something that sounded like, “I want to go.”

“Where?” I asked, unsure.

“I don’t know. Just home.”

Froggie went silent. She looked down at the ground.

“Are you okay?” I asked, because she had this hunched over look.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Of course you are.” I tried to sound convincing like I meant it, which was when I realized that I didn’t, and this wasn’t some kind of defense mechanism. The biggest part of me, inside, honestly, didn’t care. I was just following this whole situation like some bad movie, wondering how it was going to end.

We followed Froggie up the slope – me two, three steps behind her, while Mara trailed both of us. Froggie stopped at this spot near a fallen tree with red ants crawling over the bark devouring every crevice. The sun was setting fast and the colors were dying, moving from mauve, to orange-red, to cold grey.

“I want to go back,” Mara said.

“It’s getting dark,” I added.

“We don’t have to.” Froggie sat down on the log even though there were bugs in every crevice.

“I want to go,” Mara said. “I’m going to tell.”

Then Froggie brought her knees up to her chest, wrapped her arms around her shins and started crying.

“Great. Now you’ve done it, Mara.”

“Quiet,” my sister gasped. And we all stopped and listened, our eyes turned towards the path lined with tufts of yellow grass. “Somebody’s coming.”

Froggie was on the log, hugging her knees. Tears were running down her face, hanging from her chin before falling off.

“Who is it?” Mara asked.

“I don’t know.” I stepped onto the path and looked back in the direction we’d just come from. Because of the light I squinted and in the almost dark I was startled. “We have to go now. My dad’s coming.”

“I’m going to say you made me come,” Mara said.

Froggie wiped her eyes but there were still traces from the tears. “Didn’t we have fun the other night?”

“I didn’t have fun.” Mara crossed her arms in front of her belly and looked at us.

That was the last time Froggie stayed over. She was at school for a week or so and then, just when I was managing to put up with her, she went and disappeared. There was a lot of fuss for a while, and the news was nothing but vicious stories of snatched kids. Headlines screamed “ABDUCTION” and the whole world got caught up in a kidnapping panic over an unknowable shadowy presence, until her body was found in a hangar in the east end of the city, which was a real blow for everyone. I heard her mom fainted when she identified the body at the morgue. At the funeral, there wasn’t a dry eye in the place. At least that’s what Steph. said, but I wouldn’t know, because my mom didn’t want to talk about Froggie, or go to the funeral, so we didn’t. Some people said her ghost showed up at school after hours, running through the classrooms in muddy clothes, and scuffed shoes, and that she practically gave the janitor a heart attack. I guess when facts get too unbearable people start inventing, though that means she was unstoppable because she survived death in her own way.

Oh, and they took my dad in for questioning, which was no big deal because the police hounded *everyone*. He just wanted be kind, but for some people that means you’re a child molester, so they hope for your crucifixion. There were a couple of stones thrown through our windows, slashed tires. People called and whispered the word, *monster*. Sometimes people are so happy tragedy hasn’t happened to them they turn ugly. Maybe they think being cruel will somehow protect them.

I keep this picture of Froggie from the yearbook, in my notebook. She’s standing in a field, wearing a red sweatshirt, holding a soccer ball and smiling. She looks so

normal. Who knew Froggie played soccer? And what am I supposed to do with this kind of information? In the picture, she looks like an actual person, like she and I might have had more in common than school, a few sleepovers, and a dumb pair of monkey print pajamas.

“But who killed her?” The kid’s sitting straight up in his bed, his big eyes fixed on me, full of expectation.

“Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you ... I did.” He doesn’t look shocked or anything, instead there’s this satisfied look on his face.

“I know you’re kidding.”

“Okay,” I say. “Who did it then?”

“A monster. One who eats little boys and girls.”

I look at him sitting there with all this space in his head for belief in a world that is safe and kind, where bad guys get caught, and good people get rewarded, and what I really want to do is crush that space. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, maybe it has something to do with Froggie, but not really, or maybe it has something to do with my parents and friends, but not that. I just know there are cruel people out there, and that good things end, and that the real monsters are the ones who look just like everyone else, and you think are totally harmless.

## **La Marchand de Venice**

Age is not something Max likes to think about. She turns forty-five this year, but thanks to a scrupulous skincare regime since her early twenties, involving facials and copious amounts of sun block, she's able to push the thought back where it succumbs under the weight of more crushing problems. Max is back at university finishing a master's degree in creative writing. In theory she is fulfilling a lifelong dream, to write a book, to be a writer. Some dream, she thinks as she trundles down the grubby sidewalk, half hidden under February's wet and grey snow. It's an early Wednesday morning, not nine o'clock yet. Max has an appointment at the bank, because she's broke.

Because Max is lousy with financial planning, she's run through her money, and with one semester left there's not enough in her account for the next mortgage payment. Two years ago, with a settlement from a messy divorce, she bought an apartment in a neighborhood of wrought-iron staircases, imported cars, and second-hand bicycles. Today her visa is maxed out. Her financial status is low. If the bank doesn't extend her credit, she can't pay next month's mortgage. Then there's the property taxes, the insurance, the phone, the heating. Max is on the verge of panic.

At the corner of Berri Avenue, she passes the park, and the paved square in front of the metro station. The bank's annoying bright green sign hangs from the second storey, in between two enormous silver Christmas wreaths. Aren't decorations supposed to come down before January sixth to avoid bad luck? Maybe the banking world doesn't believe

in superstitions. In half an hour Max is due to meet Mme. Séguin in one of the offices. She feels she's going to need a rabbit's foot, or a lucky break, or some magical combination of good forces on her side. Max passes the independent record store as she heads south, and crosses the light at the Korean-owned *depanneur*. Windows plastered in neon signs call out, *BIERE FROIDE*, and *GUICHET EXPRESS*. Chugging a beer would calm her nerves, though she's not seriously considering it, first thing in the morning. Although would you smell of booze if you brushed your teeth straight after? It's not like smoking, right? The odor can't get on your clothes, can it?

Concentrate, Max tells herself. Despite an entire adult life in French, numbers still take extra mental effort. That's why Laurent is coming to the bank meeting, even though Max is bilingual.

She clumps her way down the bricked blocks. The house fronts each have the same shaped square windows, fronted by slightly different-coloured bricks. She reaches in her pocket for her key chain. It doesn't feel right to use her key when Elise and Laurent are home, but she knows the bell doesn't work. Elise gave her a copy during a stretch of terrible insomnia, after Max's divorce, when falling asleep in a house full of people helped. In the last year, she's used it once or twice, but today, either by design or accident, the door is unlocked, and slightly ajar. Max pushes though.

"*C'est moi*. Your door's half open." Max kicks off her boots one heel at a time, and makes small thuds up the stairs. The renovated duplex has the kitchen and living room on the second floor, leaving Laurent's office and the bedrooms on the first. The dog whimpers when he sees Max, and does a happy-step-dance.

Behind him, Max sees Elise who seems to be taking the couch apart, pulling off cushions and pillows, tossing them onto the rug.

*“Mais, il est où?”* She’s lost something again, thinks Max. Elise is constantly misplacing keys, jackets, her glasses. Scattered and distracted temperaments are two of the few personality traits they have in common.

*“Elise, je sais pas moi,”* Laurent says. From the other side of the kitchen island, he digs out a small metal spoon in a wicker drawer. “Aha!” He’s found a couple of sugar packs left by a batch of friends who stayed at their place last month.

Elise looks from the couch, towards the kitchen area. “I saw the cheque yesterday and it was right there.” She stops in front of the large window to stare straight at the kitchen island with her hands on her hips. Briefly, she is silhouetted against the bleached sky, still, only for instant, and in that moment Max feels a surge of self-pity. Elise has enough money to go on vacation whenever she wants. She has a cottage, and a house, and a good-natured cleaning lady who scrubs the place with environmentally safe products.

“I just lost a thousand dollars,” she says to Max though Max didn’t ask.

“One thousand dollars.” Max tries not to calculate. She gives Elise a kiss on each cheek. She’s just showered and smells like peppered honey.

“It’s the rent from my apartment.” Right, Max had forgotten about the apartment.

*“Mais tu n’a rien perdu.* You probably deposited the cheque already.” Laurent pours a stream of black coffee into a thick cup with no handle. *“Je bois de café, Max. T’en veut?”*

“No. Thanks. I’m cranked up enough as it is.”

*“Ta dormi?”*

“Yeah. Non.”

*“Mais Max. Tu sais ça va bien aller.”*

“Yeah. Sure. Can we practice what I’m going to say again?”

If the bank says, *Excuse me, but we don’t lend money to people without jobs*, she can always sell her apartment, but the thought scares her. The messy divorce had come roaring into Max’s life after she embarked on a demented affair with a friend of a friend in Paris. At first, her husband had been open-minded. Then he told her he was leaving. His sudden shift had stunned Max. She’d taken his lead in the loose definition of marriage and monogamy, and had accepted his two – or was it three – casual affairs in the eleven years they were married. More shocking was how unmoored she felt without his definition of how things should be. She floundered. She knew she needed the illusion her feet were on solid ground, and so she bought an apartment, thinking, at least now, no matters what happens, I have a home. Then she went back to university.

“I was thinking I’d tell the bank last year I was looking after a sick friend, because I got behind on some of my visa payments and maybe it’s affected my credit.”

*“Mais, t’a pas besoin de raconter ta vie à la bank. It’s your bank not your doctor.”*

“I know, but I might have really let things slip.”

*“Quoi? Why lie about a sick friend?”* Elise is beside Laurent, behind the kitchen island. She takes a sip of Laurent’s coffee, grimaces, “Ugh. *Ta mis du sucre.*” One night when Max slept over she had peeked in on the two of them sleeping. Under the pile of

comforters and blankets, Elise was splayed on her back, her head turned towards Laurent. He was curled up against her, an arm and leg draped over her body. They were both breathing deeply, effortlessly sleeping. The room had a warm, human smell.

“I already extended my mortgage to go back to university.”

Someone has left a small jar of baby pickles on the kitchen island and it looks out of place in the morning. The thought of pickles makes Max’s stomach lurch.

Laurent takes his cup back from Elise. “You know you can have your own coffee, right.”

“Laurent, I’m late. And when did you start using sugar? It’s so bad for you. *C’est pas de sucre blanc, j’espère.*”

Laurent, lifts up one of the packets, reads, “Organic cane sugar. One hundred percent natural.”

Elise looks at Laurent, sighs, “It’s still sugar.” Then she turns to Max. “How about a herbal tea before the bank. It’s cleansing.”

“*Attends.* I want to hear what Max is going to tell them.”

Isn’t there a double meaning to the word *crisis*, or *loss* in Chinese? The positive twist, the flip side of catastrophe can be opportunity. That’s what people say, right? That’s why Max had decided on self-invention. Two years ago, she dug in, and took a deep breath, and leapt off the cliff of the known world. Newly divorced, she quit her job writing copy for an advertising company, and leapt into the bliss of a dream, one where “I could have been” would morph into “I am” and where all her previous limitations would fade into insignificance. The plan was to emerge from the mess of her failed marriage

utterly transformed into a dazzling version of her former self, as a writer – da dum! And everyone would be so impressed.

“I’ll say I had a creative…”

“A redirection, say something about inspiration being unpredictable.”

Elise tucks her black shirt into her black pants. “*Chérie*,” she says and for a second Max thinks she’s speaking to her, “I don’t think ‘unpredictable’ is the word you use with a bank.” Elise loves black more than anyone Max knows. She dresses head to toe in black and could have been wearing the same clothes every day for years. She teaches graphic design at the university and has such passion for her students Max envies them.

“Okay. Re-orientation.”

“*Oui c’est mieux.*”

“Is your mortgage fixed or variable?”

Max looks at Laurent with a blank expression. “I’m not sure.”

“Okay, we’ll find out. Maybe we can get your monthly payments down.”

To Max it seems the other students in the writing program are all writing furiously away with bravado, aiming to be included on some list like 20 under 40, or 5 under 35, or 30 under 30. Most of them don’t go much for her stories, a collection of fairy-tale like worlds filled with ghoulish creatures. Deep down, Max believes her stories are nothing to be proud of either. She wanted to be a writer, yes, but she’d wanted to be a painter once, too, and before that, a sculptor. The problem is she has no idea of the necessary hard work

involved in learning a craft, the years of training one has to put in. She believes she has talent, yes, but she's spent her entire adult life flirting from one discipline to the next. Eventually she'd landed an advertising job, really the correct level for her talents, but she'd chucked that aside in the spirit of renewal, based largely on the fact that she had entertained her friends with anecdotal stories for years.

Too bad nobody at the university is entertained by Max's writing. It's true, the other students are much younger than Max, but she envies them, grudgingly based on the assumption they had all been all raised by parents, who, in Max's opinion, indulged and coddled their children. A few of them write boozy stories about a drunken life none of them are living because they are far too well behaved. Max always assumed her massively dysfunctional childhood gave her some sort of artistic credibility, but here she is surrounded by kids bred to pick at metaphor, diction, syntax, point of view, and to deconstruct (god, what a horrible word) a text (what another horrible word) until all the breath in a story expires. Her vision of herself shrivels up a little bit each day. Writing feels as complicated and impossible as performing open-heart surgery under water with chopsticks. Max has the impression she is fading before everyone's eyes, as if she is slowly turning invisible. She lies awake at night staring at the ceiling – the cracks will have to be plastered over soon. Some nights it feels as if a fist is pounding away in her chest for no reason. Has she started getting panic attacks? Or, Christ, has she hit menopause?

Three blocks away a siren whines and moans in the distance, heading towards a catastrophe. Max and Laurent stand on the corner, Laurent wearing a micro-fibre black jacket that zips into a tube at the neck. He rubs the side of his face with one hand.

“That didn’t take long.” Laurent is stout with thick features that gather towards the middle of his face. He has a flat nose with huge nostrils and his barrel chest gives him the physique of an old time boxer. His hair is silver and tucked under a ribbed tuque. An entire lifetime ago they dated once, briefly. Back then, he’d looked older than Max, kind of sophisticated, really.

“It’s not surprising. You have no job, so she has to think about it. When did she say she’d call?”

“This afternoon or tomorrow.”

“It’ll be fine. You’ll see. You own an apartment.”

“Yeah. What’s more debt, right?”

“Oh, Max,” Laurent says.

“It’s just with the unemployment rates I’ll never get a good paying job.”

Laurent sighs, “Forward thinking, Max. Don’t look back and keep on moving. Call us and let us know what happens.”

Max walks the two blocks back to her place, calculating. The tax return can pay the house insurance. If she cashes in her life insurance policy, she can pay the property taxes. The heat is only one month behind, as is the phone bill. After thirty days they send a warning, so there’s fifteen more days before they move her file to collections. She pays a bill a month, rotating from one company to the next, trying to stay a step ahead of the harassing phone calls. In Max’s bag is a file, with her tax returns, and bill receipts. In the

end she was able to rattle off the numbers surprisingly easy. Not all the numbers of course. Maybe because it's RRSP season and Mme. Séguin was rushed and over loaded so she didn't ask about the visa payment. The truth is, Max could make ends meet if she hadn't raked up so much debt on her credit card. It's the monthly payments that are killing her. Still, it didn't go so badly, considering. Max tries not to get her hopes up, but for some reason she's got a good feeling.

For the rest of the afternoon, she plans to avoid thinking about money. She will leave the subject in a brief balloon of fragile confidence. However, her calm deflates and shrinks into a sense of disaster when Mme. Séguin calls and asks to meet Max again in person. Unable to reach Laurent on his cell, Max plods back to the bank, down streets spurning with traffic. Why she didn't she insist to be told the verdict over the phone? Why didn't she stand up for herself more often? No wonder life feels like a series of catastrophes. At this rate she will never learn and life will never get better. Her mood gets blacker with each step. Perhaps she should just accept the world is against her.

The meeting lasts twenty minutes. Max takes another two minutes at the bank machine to withdraw forty dollars. A total of twenty-two minutes later, Max stands on the same street corner where she had stood with Laurent four hours earlier.

Now the sky has the exact pale grey brightness as earlier in the day. All week long, a wet snow has been falling, and the quality of light has been identical, as if the clock has given up, thrown in the towel, and decided there will be only two times worth noting: morning and night. In between will stretch one long band of sameness.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Max thinks as she plays the conversation over in her mind. She feels the old craving for a cigarette even though she quit five years ago.

Mme. Séguin had greeted Max with a warm handshake before Max sat down in one of the two available chairs. At first, when she’d been approved for the loan, relief had made Max lightheaded and she’d asked Mme. Séguin to repeat her words in case she’d heard incorrectly.

Mme. Séguin had laughed, “*Si tu savait a quelle point je me suis battue pour toi.*” If only Max knew the lengths to which she had gone to convince her boss Max was worth investing in. Max was about to find out, though.

Mme. Séguin had done an online search and scrolled through Max’s Facebook page. She was pretty sure no compromising pictures were floating around on the web because Max had always been camera shy. Still, there were some vague and blurry nights remembered only in sketchy outlines. Then there were the dumb cat videos passed back and forth between herself and her friend Joanna, a joke they called the Kitten Wars of 2013. A challenge had been launched to see who could bombard the other with the most inane cat content. Max had declared herself the winner with a photo of three scowling orange tabbies sitting in empty containers of Japanese Cup-a-Soup. The Kitten Wars had ended a month ago, long enough in internet time to be washed away without an obvious trace. But what if Mme. Séguin’s online search had landed on a cat with its head stuck through the hole of a pizza slice?

Max adjusted her position in the bank chair, felt the top of the bank desk, in the bank office, in front of the bank advisor.

“Oh,” Max said, without trying to sound surprised. She was going to say something next, but the thought had exited her mind.

Mme. Séguin smiled at Max, her expression friendly, encouraging. Then she leaned forward and in a breathy and excited voice told Max she knew she was a serious writer. Wasn't she writing a book on Italy? Wasn't the title *la Marchand de Venice*, she asked in French.

Max scanned her brain. Perhaps a piece she'd written for a travel blog still came up under her name?

Mme. Séguin explained she'd never read much before her twenties – she hated school and reading as a kid – until a friend had loaned her a book about a ruinous love affair in Tuscany, and she'd been so moved, now she always had a book going, two so far this year, she said. Max didn't recognize the French titles Mme. Séguin rattled off. She didn't have time to translate them in her head anyway, because already Mme. Seguin was describing how this book set off her deep admiration for everything Italian. Her voice went warm and syrupy as she described the vacation of a lifetime taken after her divorce ten years ago. Mme. Séguin described the blisters of paint on the side of a gondola in Venice, the pungent smell of coffee and cheese in Florence, the taste of well-seasoned pasta in Rome. To this day, she said, each morning she wakes up and thinks of Italy.

It took Max a few stunned micro-seconds to make a connection in her brain to this non-existent book, *la Marchand de Venice*, and to Italy, a country Max had only visited once while backpacking through Europe in her twenties. Then it hit her. There was a Shakespeare group at university with a website of reviews of the plays and the modern film adaptations. Max had posted a piece when they asked, although it hadn't been *The*

*Merchant of Venice*. However, both the play and film had been heavily critiqued and commented on the site. It seemed incredible, ludicrous really, but the only explanation was a confusion of hyperlinks, and a mix-up between French and English to explain how on earth Mme. Séguin had come to confuse Max with a play written over four hundred years ago, and even more absurdly to associate her with the greatest writer in the English language.

“*Oui Italie*,” Max said. “*C’est tellement . . . romantique*.” It had lasted how long – a blink? A flash? Long enough for a door to open in on a room overflowing with the warm glowing light of recognition and praise. It wasn’t the real Max who had been invited inside, but a fantasy Max, one Mme. Seguin had constructed in her mind from bits and pieces online. Max felt the warm light hover in front of her like a mirage. It had less substance than her own reflection off a blank computer screen, but before a swarm of critical thoughts could blot out the hallucination, Max put on a reflective expression and began speaking of Italy as a great source of inspiration. All those museums, all those El Grecos and da Vincis, and the narrow winding roads, wine with every meal, sitting for hours in a café and watching the people go by from a sidewalk café. The best food. Best architecture. Plus the people, so beautiful. Max checked herself from going further.

Mme. Séguin’s round face and eyes hovered above her tidy desk. She looked scrupulously honest. Even her teeth looked straight and polished. Max noticed a large gold brooch clipped to her flower patterned dress.

“*J’admire ce que vous faites*.” Then Mme. Séguin switched to English. “I would like to read your book if –” then she paused, “when” she corrected, “you’re published.”

“Absolutely,” Max said. The two of them should go out for a coffee when a first draft was done, in a few months, to celebrate.

“*Sur une terrasse,*” Mme. Seguin added.

“Yes, on a terrace,” Max said. Once the gloom of February and March had finally been slogged off like a layer of wet slush, she thought, though she didn’t say so. Already Max was beginning to feel tired, so tired, and she couldn’t wait to be out of Mme. Séguin’s office, to be alone. There were papers to sign and Max signed them. After Mme. Séguin stood up and held out her hand. Max couldn’t meet Mme. Séguin’s eyes, and so she focused on her left shoulder, and the brooch clipped to the red and orange flower patterned dress.

Max’s apartment is on the first floor, which means it’s only illuminated on the brightest summer afternoons. For a second, she stands in the doorway letting her eyes adjust to the light as the shadows turn into familiar shapes. She doesn’t take off her boots, or her coat, or her scarf, or her hat. Instead, she walks over to couch and sits down. She sits in her winter coat, on her red couch, in her dimly lit apartment, as the grey brown slush from her boots drips and stains the floor.

“Shit, shit, shit,” she thinks. And then very slowly, Max leans back, her spine curving into a C form, as something crawls up out of her guts, her lungs. Max isn’t sure if she’s about to start laughing, or crying, but she’s afraid of the throaty, muffled sound caught in her throat.

## The Grieving Club

I grew up not knowing my dad. Instead of a father I had a collection of photos in a leather-bound photo album, which sat in a bright yellow and red *Vitamix* sample case once filled with nutritional supplements. The case was tossed in a spare room that was more a dumpster for whole sections of my mother's life, dropped and forgotten like lost buttons. An exercise bicycle stood next to cardboard boxes filled with bird watching binoculars and tap dance shoes. A row of party gowns hung in clear plastic dry-cleaning bags. I was a bit afraid of those dresses. They had wide twirly skirts, with swishy hemlines, and intricate beading, and because of the plastic bags they gave off an electrical charge whenever I touched them. They hung, a few of them with stiff molded bodices, across from another stack of boxes filled with hats, purses, and shoes my mother no longer wore, or even acknowledged. I don't know why she slipped my dad's photo album in the bright yellow and red *Vitamix* case, but she did. On days alone in the house, bored, I'd head into the closet, and part the row of dresses like an electromagnetic curtain. Loose strands of my hair clung to the plastic dry cleaning bags. I'd drag the case out by its blue handle into the hallway, and plunk myself down for a few hours.

The pictures start with my dad as a baby. Then he's an adolescent. Then a young man. Often, there is a large family gathered on the steps of stone houses with Corinthian columns, and ornate porticos. The girls and boys stand in straight lines with glossy hair and neat bangs. My grandmother's foreign and illegible romantic ink script fills the pages between the photos. I can't read the dates. There are almost no pictures taken inside. The house looks dark and empty through the widows.

One loose picture of my parents has slipped between the pages. The background shows a party, or a dance, and in the foreground my mother stands behind my father. She looks like she's stepped off the dance floor in one of those swirly dresses. She looks in love. The two of them are almost unrecognizably young and happy. It's an anomaly, of course. It's a moment that doesn't fit with the photos in the album or the life that happened later. The picture is the only memory I have of them happy together, only it's not a memory, but a snap shot.

She left him when I was three. He visited on and off until I was about five. I don't remember exactly when my dad stopped coming by. I guess he kind of faded out of the picture.

He found me again, or I should say I found him. But before I get to the father and daughter reunion part I need to warm up. I need to take few steps backwards so I can gather momentum. I have to go back to the yellow-red case, with its blue plastic handle and flip open lid.

Inside, glued to the pages of the photo album, must be a hundred or more photos. By now each one should be stored in my memory. Instead, it's as if they exist only when I pull out the *Vitamix* case, and then, like magic, they transport me to a different place, a different time, an alternative reality, one that I can enter and leave at any moment, like a dream you start and stop at will. Only in this dream, my father is the hero who will grow up to conquer all life's obstacles and live happily ever after. He is not the man my mother called weak and lazy, but instead, strong and handsome. Even as a baby.

In one photo he is standing bare chested, arms crossed. Maybe he is ten or eleven. Pasted opposite his picture is a drawing of a muscle man, in the same pose, with bulging biceps and a handle bar mustache. Obviously a joke is being made. But I have no idea whose joke, or who took the picture.

My father was born into an old Eastern European family, one with titles. True or false? My mother was born in Burma, and biked through Ireland and Sweden selling Bibles. Believable or not? When I was a kid my dad had me followed by private detectives. Yes or no? I'm calling this fiction so no one can tell the lies from what truly happened.

He went on hunting trips and hung rabbit carcasses on my swing set to drain the blood. He weeded the front lawn by bending over, pulling out each weed by hand, one at a time. I didn't miss growing up without him, or I convinced myself that I didn't. But when he died, I had no idea how to grieve him. How do you mourn a father you can barely remember? Instead of grief, a miserable low-grade sadness chipped away at me each day. I'd begun to imagine I smelled sad.

So I started coming to the Grieving Club.

The grief instructor wears her hair in a tight ponytail, and, along with her glasses, this makes her look like a librarian, or at least bookish.

“Think of the person you adore, who is no longer here,” the grief instructor says. “Your father, your husband, your wife or child, a person who was in your life, who you loved with all your heart, and who is no longer with you.”

The grief instructor makes her progress around the room, heels tapping on the tiled floor. I forget her long oval face, and how she seems too tall when she stands up, and try to concentrate on her words. She is just a voice now, and the sound of heels. Click, click, click. The radiator gives off heat and the room feels more crowded than it is.

“Bring that person into your mind...see the tilt of their head, hear their laugh, remember their way of walking. Let the memories come one after another and string themselves together.”

As a group we sit in a circle on chairs we unfolded from a stack against the wall. We are a hasty bunch who look thrown together. We have large unblinking eyes, closed now, and in the middle of winter we are so pale the small veins show beneath our skin. In the room, the radiator spurts. The radiator goes on spurting in small sprays, and I think, by the time the next drop hits the floor, this time, I will be changed. I will be able to cry tears and feel pain. When I open one eye, I see L, small and skeletal, who should be with her son. Across from her is S, large and crumpled. J has an elegant hook nose. These are my peers.

“Gradually, bit by bit, the thread of grief transmutes and becomes a thread of treasured memories.” The grief instructor is on the other side of the room.

“These are the gifts of life you shared.” Now her voice is near my ear.

I hear someone cough, but no, they’re crying.

When we open our eyes, the dead are buried. Under the ceiling of florescent tube lights, each object in the room becomes clear. A line of coats. A stack of basketballs. A coffee urn next to Styrofoam cups and napkins. And me here again, just another imperfect day.

I imagine the grief instructor believes what she says – a small amount of grief is easy to talk about, but often hides a greater one underneath. So we are supposed to talk, to share. But at first, we were not a chatty group, really. We were a bit slow. Even organizing our chairs – who should sit where – was difficult to sort out. We sat around slack-shouldered and blank, and didn't say much. It's not easy. The kind of stories that follow people into high school basements aren't easy. Small boys clutch toy trucks while being wheeled into surgery. Catheter tubes burst. Old bodies break down and smell of decay and dampness like rotting vegetables. But then the confessions begin and each time they come with regrets, and when they do, I pay close attention to the details. I hear how the voice drops, then shakes. I see how the eyebrows tighten. I am teaching myself the gestures of pain, and grief, and I pick each one up like a flower. Only who will I give my sad flowers to?

“All right everyone it's time to choose a partner for the hug,” the grief instructor says and we all rise and scrape our chairs back. As always I head to F.

“Come here, you,” he says and his arms open wide.

F is a sweaty guy with pockmarked skin and a soft and sorry voice. Each week he wraps me tightly, and for a moment, I feel trapped. Six months ago his wife ground up

pills into a milkshake, and now he spends his evenings alone, surrounded by her clothes, pressing his nose against the fabric, trying to smell her fading scent. You'd think if I was going to cry, this is when I'd do it, when each week he hugs me, and I think of him, and his whole life reduced to sniffing a load of blouses and skirts.

Talking in a group of three is P (boyfriend: car accident) to S (wife: heart attack). S presses the coffee pot handle and a stream of cheap quality dark coffee pours into a Styrofoam cup which is held out to M (son: leukemia). Her face is swollen from crying. M confessed today her son had been a bully. Before his blood cells began storm trooping his bone marrow, before the chemo, the vomiting, and the headscarves, he'd picked on the other kids, got into fights, called them names. Once he was sent home for three days after he'd forced another boy to the ground and shoved a stick in his mouth. P pulls a Kleenex from his pocket, and M looks from the coffee cup to the ball of Kleenex, for a second puzzled, before the words burst out. "What if my son had grown up to be an asshole. I've thought that."

S puts an arm around her, and makes soothing cooing sounds, and says that God only takes little angels, which I'm sure is a line from a movie.

"The schools don't know how to deal with regular playground stuff," P says, his voice full of forgiveness.

I want to add something about the Kubler Ross stages of grieving, but I can only remember denial and anger. "I think it's wonderful you're able to express your feelings," I say.

"Yes, you're being real," P says.

“And authentic,” echoes S.

Yet I haven't been honest with any of them. I'm not yet ready to tell the group that I feel like a fake really, an imposter, because I haven't lost a loved one, not really, only a man who was caught shoplifting, a man who sold insurance, then kept the money for himself. A few sketchy details and memories do not add up to a father. They barely add up to a man. They total up to a blip on the radar screen of my life. And I imagined it would always be that way. Then after a series of mother-daughter phone calls involving hysterical yelling and one of us slamming the receiver down, I began to Google search my father's name obsessively. I stayed in most evenings to do so.

Some kind of addiction had taken over me, the kind where you type a name into a search engine and the scrawl through billions of web pages, come up empty, and start all over again. But vicious cycles generate energy and somehow I couldn't stop, so I clicked on peoplesearch.com and sent them my father's name, date of birth, along with one hundred dollars through PayPal, and waited.

There are days everyone remembers. Where you were when the Berlin wall came down. What you were doing when the planes hit the towers. I remember nothing about that day except the email on my computer screen.

“We regret to inform you that your father passed on a month ago, and the death certificate is attached to this email. If you would like the long form certificate for an additional twenty-five dollars, please fill out the attached request form.”

I pushed my chair back from my desk and stood up in the middle of the room. Death announcement by email. I sat down again, and ran my cursor over the words, “passed on.” Sounds like “passed by”, as if my father had sailed off on a boat tipping his hat. Yet he’d *died* in the palliative care unit of a hospital. Instead of Google searching his name non-stop, I could have reached him by car in under two hours. But I had no idea he’d been dying. Why was I cheated? Why sense a connection only to have that connection severed?

I wander over to the corkboard chock-full of flyers. The usual paper leaflets form a collage of fitness, wholeness, vegetarianism, and cooking seminars. I don’t need my dog walked, or to learn Spanish, or to volunteer for the next school fundraiser, so I head down the hallway towards the vending machine for chocolate bars and chewing gums. Halfway down, I spot K, sitting on a bench, holding a black teddy bar in her lap. She is hunched forward a bit, but doesn’t look sad, more like she’s waiting.

“What’s his name?” I ask, pointing at the bear.

K looks at me and says, “Ian.”

“Ian?” I sound surprised the way you do when someone calls a dog, *Richard* or *Steven*. “Sorry. That probably sounded cold.” I take a seat on the bench beside her.

“No, it’s okay. We were supposed to bring a memento or a souvenir, right? But I got no sleep last night with the damn thing in my room. It was in the closet and I kept hearing scratching sounds. Finally I shut it in the bathroom with the fan switched on so I’d be sure not to hear anything. Pretty crazy.”

“I guess Ian reminds you of your dad.”

K closes her eyes. “No. I wasn’t scared when my dad died.”

“I can’t wrap my head around that.”

“I knew I had to be there. I guess that helped.”

This makes my brain ache and my heart feel like it’s going to stop. Only I know K’s story. I know K never left home until after her father died, and she never married, and she never started her own family. When she first told the group, I figured her father was selfish and his wife wasn’t enough for him. I picture K in the hospital room, with her dad in a coma and the machines humming and blinking, the red lines, the blue beeps, the plastic tubes, and the nurse in front of a beige curtain. There are gift shop balloons, and saline bags, and K sitting on a plastic chair whispering in her father’s ear. Her step-mother has said the last words a wife says to a husband. Her brother will pass on the one-on-one last good-bye. Then will come the shutting down, when the nurse switches off one machine, then another, and I guess if you believe in God you say prayers and think of heaven. After a few minutes the electric blue lines and beeps will fall flat and silent.

“Can I ask,” I say carefully, “what you said to him?”

“Yes,” she says quickly. Then she sighs and her shoulder slump. “I don’t remember all of it actually. I guess I basically said thank you.”

K holds Ian up like you do a baby you’re about to bounce on your knee. “I know what you think. But my dad was a complicated man, and I loved him.”

For a moment, red rushes into K’s eyes and they are as shiny as glass. I think of the yellow and red *Vitamix* case sitting in my car. The clasp is broken and the lid has trouble closing and because I’d had to park several blocks from the school and a light rain was falling, I couldn’t decide whether to risk getting the album wet or not. I couldn’t

make a decision. Then I'd seen a man stop at the street corner with his daughter and just the way he was holding her hand, the way the two were connected by some unbreakable bond, had suddenly made the case seem heavy, too heavy to haul for a five-minute walk.

I look at K dismayed, confused. What flashes through my mind is the following: *having* a father means *being* a daughter, being the one woman in his life who can always look up to him. His mother might be disappointed in him. His wife might fall out of love with him. But only a daughter can see a father as larger than he is really, and send that picture of size and strength back to him. K was thanking her dad for feeling necessary, needed. I feel a lump in my throat.

"I get it. I do."

I look at Ian staring straight ahead, sightless.

"Maybe Ian freaks you out because your dad died so quickly and you didn't have time to process."

"You're probably right. I think he goes back in the box for a while."

K glances at her watch. "You know it's time for us to head back in."

The grief instructor makes a gesture for us to sit down, and nods at me when I take my place on the one vacant school chair.

"Who'd like to go now?" she asks as she casts her eyes around the circle. I cross and uncross my arms. Everyone is seated in the same places as before the break. When all eyes fix on me, the inside of my throat feels dry and scratchy. That's when I realize not talking has not been doing me any good. It's been a year since my father died, and all this time I've been waiting for some sort of apology, because he was taken away

from me twice. I've been waiting for death to apologize, I guess, which is not going to happen, because death is not going to change its mind, or act sorry. Only humans have regrets. Abstract concepts like death, or fate, or supreme beings called God do not. As for this club – I've been sucking up everyone's grief and distress, trying to put my own free floating and vague pain into some kind of form. But I've been piggybacking on others, borrowing from their lives instead of owning up to and admitting my own.

So I tell the group.

I tell them how my mother bitched about my father constantly, and how on my twenty-third birthday I asked her to say one nice thing about him, just one, and how she looked at me and said, "No sorry, it's a shame really, but I can't," and how I went behind her back and took the photo album in the yellow-red *Vitamix* case to an old Polish translator to decipher my grandmother's writing, and how, without my consent, the old Polish translator contacted my father, and how the idea of meeting my father was at first scary, but then exciting because he was a stranger, but how ultimately he was disappointing, because he gave me advice, like don't have sex until you're married.

I tell them how, by the time I left I him in the restaurant, I had planned to never see him again, and I didn't. It wasn't until four years later and after I'd gone six months without speaking to my mother, that I asked myself – what if her version of their marriage and our life before he left wasn't the whole truth? What if she had made it impossible to see him through my own eyes? And what if my father wasn't the loser she'd always described.

"Do you have any memories of your dad?" the grief instructor asks. "Any of your own, not your mother's?"

A truck roars by.

The grief instructor once said that memories were like songs, that each one had its own rhythm and pace. So I concentrate and try to go deep inside to see the notes, the music the past may have left inside me, but it's so silent, and all I hear is the present: the creaks in the room, the groan of a heating system, the rain streaming down the windows. From the past there is only silence, or at least nothing like music, nothing like a song, maybe only a few notes, in an empty space, knocking against each other.

Then what I remember is not like music at all, but a color, orange.

There is a sheet of orange construction paper, and an old margarine tub filled with crayons. Next to my left hand is a cereal bowl, half filled with milk and floating Cheerios. I am giving a serious try at drawing the number eight. With my crayon in hand, I go up left, and across, down right to close the loop, but the tricky part is inverting the loop for the bottom circle. I can't get it. And I can't do one fluid movement without stopping. Instead I always wobble when it comes to the bottom, and end up with a lumpy squiggle. I open and close my fingers on the crayon, and there is the smell of wax on my hands that will stay until I wash them later. My dad reaches across the paper.

"Maybe I can help a little," he says. He wraps my hand with his, and together we press the crayon to the paper, and go the other way. Only we don't wait. We keep going. We make a circle and then climb all the way over it, and underneath it, and around again.

"Terrific," he says.

Another one, and we climb all the way again, making an infinite loop, hand in hand, and I could spend the rest of my life pressing a dark blue crayon onto an orange sheet of paper.

“You’ve got it. Don’t stop. You do it.”

When I pause, the high school basement feels still. I look around the circle of faces and for a moment the world feels reliable and stable.

When I sent peopleserach.com one hundred dollars, I knew three sure things about my father: his name, his date of birth, and his last known city of residence. During the two weeks it took for them to find him, I thought of a father-daughter relationship, but mostly I had a specific-yet-vague yearning inside. I wanted to feel seen by his eyes. I wanted to feel recognized, I guess. And then I wanted to be able to look him back and say good-bye. Maybe I needed a proper ending, and my timing was lousy because I missed it by one month.

So.

There will be no condolence cards or phone calls. I do not get to lie in bed for a week and cry while people bring over casseroles to pop in the freezer. I don’t get a funeral, or a memento like a teddy bear. Instead, I get a hand-to-hand loop de loop in orange crayon until eternity, and a pile of photos yellowing and bending with time, packed into a box, like a jack in the box, in circus yellow-red-blue colours, that pops up no matter how hard you press the lid down; it pops up, pops up and it will not stay down.