Carp Creek

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (English) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

May 2010

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-71042-5
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-71042-5

ABSTRACT

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The short stories in this collection take place in the late 1980s to the early 2000s and are unified by the first person voice of the protagonist, Natalie, a girl growing up in rural southwestern Ontario. The stories deal principally with issues of gender, class, environment, and mortality. Death, a recurring theme, signals psychological and emotional malaise within Natalie's environment and the necessity for her to interrogate her mother's obsolete values about women's roles. Natalie's coming of age is shaped by her and other female characters' experiences of anxiety, shame, and isolation in the deaths of individuals, ideals, and relationships.

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Something That Is Dying

I never wanted to be where I was. It was spring and it was cold. The previous night's rain was dripping from the trees in the garden so that it sounded like it was still raining. The sky in the window was white. The wallpaper had red and yellow roses on it, and it was curling off in places. Where the wall met the ceiling, there were scraggly, rust-coloured streaks and tendrils, water stains. They looked like a doll's hair sticking out of a trunk. But if the ceiling were the lid of a trunk, then the trunk was upside down. Or we were upside down but just didn't know it. This made me very sad.

I was seven.

I sat on the hard chair. The old woman lay on the bed. We were alone. She was a friend of my grandmother's and I had forgotten her name. She looked like a sea treasure, dried and hard. If I watched her face, I could sometimes see her lips moving with her breath. I kept watching even though I hated to. It gave me a squirming feeling, like someone else's dirty fingernails scratching at my skin. It was her breaths and the bed sheets washed too many times and the glass of tepid water on the nightstand and the lace all over the house, like your skin without you.

The old woman owned the house. It was a three-storey on Riverside Drive, large but not large for Riverside Drive. The back of the house looked out over the grey Detroit River. Most of the second- and third-floor rooms had not been in use for years. The house had the air of once being very impressive, though everything was noticeably run down. The old woman's son from Stoney Point was going to fix the place up and sell it. My mother said, "They have a lot of work to do here," which made the work sound

impossible. She was cleaning. She had taken all the cans and jars out of the cupboards and set them on the counter. I thought they looked scared. They had probably been in the cupboards so long that they thought their contents would never be eaten.

We had left the house early that morning for the hour-long drive into Windsor. I had missed the Care Bears Countdown. Instead of watching the cartoon bears that produced rainbow slides and heart-shaped balloons from the emblems on their stomachs, I got to sit with an old woman who was dying. I knew my grandmother had asked my mother to sit with the old woman while she was at her doctor's appointment.

My grandmother was a person who gave instructions, and my mother was a person who divided those instructions and delegated them in a way that was almost always disagreeable to me. Often when we went to the grocery store, she would assign each of us a few items to pick up (I usually got the dairy section) and we were to meet at the cash register when we were done, but this never worked because someone always dallied or my mother thought of other things we needed, and the whole process ended up taking more time than normal shopping would have.

No one had asked my mother to clean the old woman's house. She said she was doing it because the old woman had no daughters. She washed and polished. She pulled the plastic covers off the sitting room furniture, vacuumed the stained and faded cushions, and replaced the plastic again. Sometimes she picked up a doily or lace runner to dust underneath it, and she held it away from her body like something filthy and stinking but put it back in its place all the same. She never mentioned the old woman's son in Stoney Point or what he might be doing that would prevent him from being with his dying mother. I accepted him, then, as one of those important people who only made

himself visible on very specific occasions, like the man with the gun who came to collect the money from the bank on certain days. Henry and I sometimes watched in the parking lot behind the bank as the man drove in and got out of his van with his gun in a holster. Seeing a gun was exciting only because it made you realize that you never really saw guns.

I was angry. Because my mother had decided to clean, my job was to sit with the old woman.

I sat on the hard chair. The woman's white hair wisped away from her head. There were tiny buttons fastening the collar of her nightgown. Oddly, there was a shoebox beside the nightstand full of old buttons. Some had bits of thread still attached, so presumably the buttons used to be attached to garments. It was like all the woman's clothes had died already.

The old woman swallowed, and her throat and temples moved down and back up. Then she went back to breathing.

My only relief was that I was not expected to talk to her. My mother had told me I didn't have to, because the old woman was too tired and sick to speak. I wondered if she had told them that, if she had said, "I am too tired to speak anymore," entering the non-speaking and final portion of her life and shutting the door on whatever her life had been before. It was hard to imagine this woman up and about. Doing the morning crossword puzzle. Having a shrimp cocktail. Talking with her friends on the phone in the afternoon.

My grandmother's friends were the type who played cards and wore fur coats. Fur coats could be worn in the city if you were that particular kind of person. They went with nice shoes and earrings. They were worn for getting in and out of the car, for going to

parties, for going to dinner. But in the country, fur coats could only be worn like a bad smell. People would look at you as at a shaggy animal they couldn't recognize. My friend Anita's mother had a fur coat that she had worn to a play in Detroit once. But my mother said Anita's father had only bought the coat for his wife because he had given lip at the border and they had both been strip-searched, so he had to make it up to her. That was in the eighties. The coat now hung in their hall closet. If men did something wrong, they bought you something you would never wear.

We did not live in the city. We lived in Wheatley, which was the same as the country because it was so small. The town was right on Lake Erie. Most of the people there were poor or a little less than comfortably off, except the people who owned the fisheries, who were rich. There were a couple campgrounds and a dock and an elementary school. There was also one coffee shop and one restaurant, places my father would go but my mother would not.

My mother always had to do things a certain way. She wouldn't drink coffee because she was worried about staining her teeth. But she would drink red wine that purpled her mouth. I thought she drank it because it was like medicine.

When I was older, I wouldn't trust women who didn't drink coffee. These women would take medicine to prevent sickness but never when they were sick. They covered their mouths when they smiled. They brought a hand to their chests to fiddle with a necklace they were not wearing. They were dainty and tragic in their suffering. When I was in university, I drank coffee from bowls.

As part of her mysterious ordering of the way things were, my mother expected different things from my brother and me. As I sat in the chair by the old woman's bed, I

could hear Henry walking back and forth in the room above and opening and closing closets. He was in the narrow room, on the third floor of the house, that was made entirely of mirrors. The mirrors opened into closets that held boxes of old clothes and fancy dishes. Henry was opening and closing the closet doors above. The grey sky and the tops of the flowerless magnolia trees were in the windows.

I know they were magnolia trees because there was a picture on the table in the hall of the old lady, when she was not so old, standing in front of the house with her husband and grown children, and behind them were the magnolia trees in bloom. In the picture she wore a large pair of sunglasses that covered most of her face. This made me think that when you were dying, your face was crossed out with a black magic marker on all of your pictures. I wouldn't have known then what they were called, magnolia trees. The ones in front of the house on Riverside Drive had probably been shocked by a frost one year, and they would never look beautiful again like they did in the picture. They might have still been alive. They might still be alive.

It was around that time that I had started to think about things dying. I noticed dead things everywhere. There were dead animals on the road called road kill. There were dead bugs in the ceiling lamp in my room. There were dead trees marked with an orange X in spray paint because they had to be cut down. There were dead people whose names were in the paper and dead people who were lying in graves under tombstones on Cemetery Road. There was a man on number 3 highway who had gone crazy and let all the pigs die on his pig farm. You could smell it for miles around. No one had really thought about it at first; sometimes there were just bad smells around the county. My dad

said, "These things happen," but we all knew how bad it was. It was wrong to let pigs die and rot.

It would be wrong to let the old woman die alone in her room. Someone had to be in this room with the old woman because she was dying. That someone was me. Henry got to play because he was a boy. I was so bored. I had brought a Barbie with me but I had left her in the kitchen in my backpack. She wore a tropical print bathing suit and carried a purse with a pineapple on it, and the purse could be opened up and contained lip gloss for me. I couldn't leave the chair to go get the Barbie in case the old woman died while I was gone. Besides, I didn't want Barbie to see me in the room with the old woman and all the lace; she would know I was not the stylish little girl whom Barbies were supposed to belong to. In the end, Barbie only made me feel guilty for not being more exciting for her.

The beaches that tropical Barbie came from had white sand and blue water. I only had grey sand and grey water. The Wheatley beach ran in a jagged strip along the base of a tree-topped cliff, which was gradually eroding. Each year the lake crept closer and closer to the cliff, scraping and exposing dry, tangled tree roots that looked like a dead woman's hair. Trees jutted from the edge of the cliff, close to falling, half their roots sticking out. Some trees had already fallen onto the beach. Their trunks had been polished white by the waves. The giant, smooth trees looked like elephant bones. The land swooped around into the curve of Point Pelee in the distance. When I went on a class trip there to see the monarch butterflies, my teacher had told us to stay away from the shore because there was an undertow that could pull you in and drown you. The monarch butterflies were in danger because the milkweed pods that they ate were disappearing.

I didn't understand how the Detroit River worked, how it was water but it was not the lake. The water roared.

A closet door slammed above.

The woman's head turned to the side and she looked at me. Her pink-grey eyes were on my face, giving me that feeling of dirty fingernails scratching me all over. I froze. I did not know what she wanted. I thought maybe I should call for my mother. I worried that it might be rude to call for her, that if I did, the old woman would know I didn't like sitting with her or my loud voice would upset her. But I wasn't allowed to leave the room to go get my mother either. The old woman was looking at me, and I knew that if I looked away, the lid of the trunk that was the ceiling would fall open and spill the awful, crawling truth of our upside-downness all over me like spiders.

I realized that the old woman was not looking at me. Her eyes were open. She was dead.

Mexie

I asked Marina what her new neighbours were like, and she shrugged and said, "They're just a bunch of Mexies." I had never heard anyone say that before, "Mexies," but I knew she meant that the new neighbours were foreign and dirty and beyond her consideration. Marina had braces on her teeth and her words came out thick and tough. I had always found her to be mean.

There were Mennonites who came to our town from Mexico, though they were from Russia or Germany before that. I heard kids at school call them Mexicans, which was confusing to me, because the Mennonites had white skin and light-coloured hair and spoke some form of German rather than Spanish. They were nothing like the Mexican field workers. My friend Anita had told me that the Mexicans didn't wash their hair.

My schoolmates' ideas about the Mennonites hadn't necessarily matched up with my own encounters with them. One was with a girl in the drugstore who had caught my eye in the way that shining, pretty girls did when I was little. She wore a deep pink dress with flowers that appeared when she turned one way and disappeared when she turned the other way. It was the pinkest dress I had ever seen. Another little girl came around the corner, wearing an identical dress, and stared at me with pale eyes. The two of them were like solemn clones, demanding nothing.

"What are you staring at?" my mother had hissed at me.

"Their dresses," I said.

"Don't be so silly."

This was my mother's stock admonition for any of my or my brother's behaviours too ludicrous or embarrassing for her to wish to dwell on any further. Like wearing rosaries as costume jewelry, twirling the beads in my fingers like a lady would her pearls. My mother let me know that these things were indecent but never explained why. She called it "wearing the curtains" when all the little girls in one family were dressed in the same material like that.

Mennonites went to our school. There were the few in traditional clothing, the newest to Canada, who played in their own groups at recess—the ones who were called Mexicans. Then there were others, second generation Canadians, who looked just like my friends, but went to a different church. The new family, the Klassens, didn't quite fit into either of these perceived groups. The children wore clothes like Henry and I would wear, but the mother wore plain dresses and a black kerchief that fell over the back of her head into a point. She looked thin and sweet and quiet, and I wondered if her big black shoes were too heavy for her. I wondered if her feet were pale and sweaty when she took them off. The father was large and mean-looking in black pants, work shirts, and suspenders. My dad told me that Mr. Klassen was a farmer and scientist.

It was difficult to tell what my mother thought of the Klassens. She didn't advertise them to Henry and me at dinner in the way she would have new neighbourhood kids she wanted us to befriend. The Klassens were mysterious to me, living in a white house bigger than ours on the edge of town, never giving themselves away with a forgotten parcel of groceries or a toy left in the yard. I longed after them in the way I did people I saw inside restaurants, seeing them framed in the window as I walked by on the street, thinking what interesting lives they must have.

We met them at a charity barbeque. It was put on at the provincial park by someone my dad worked with. It was strange to see my mother eating at a picnic table. She looked so alert, as if prepared to get up and move to a different seat at a moment's notice. She had never become friends with the people my dad worked with or their families.

My dad, talking with Mr. Klassen, introduced Henry and me to the two kids. The boy, Ben, asked Henry, "Why are you wearing a dress?"

Henry had been wearing the same t-shirt all summer. It was a men's size extra-large and it said Black Hole Sun on it, and there was a yellow sun with a black hole in the middle. Henry had gotten the shirt from our cousin Jordan and he wouldn't take it off. My mom hated the shirt and threatened to throw it away, but Henry gave her a look of such frantic hatred when she did that she put it in the laundry and hemmed it instead so that he wouldn't trip over it. I could tell she didn't want Henry to hate her. She didn't care if I hated her.

Henry told Ben, "It's a Black Hole Sun shirt" in a way that made it sound like Ben should know what that meant. Henry thought Black Hole Sun was the name of the band and not just the name of the song. He went around singing, "Black hole sun, won't you come" and "In my eyes, indisposed" because those were the only words of the song that he knew.

Henry and Ben were friends right away. Karin and I took a bit longer. Karin Klassen had long blonde hair down her back. If she had been nine like me and not ten, I

would have asked her if I could brush it. I wanted long hair. My mother made me keep mine above my shoulders. Though Karin's hair was impractical, I sensed her interests were serious rather than vain. I knew I would have to be careful not to reveal too much about myself right away in order to gain her trust.

Ben, seven years old like Henry, had blonde hair like his sister, sharp eyes, and freckles. He was quick-witted, handsome, and loved. Though we played together all the time, he ignored me in a determinedly careless manner. He seemed to pick up on my eagerness to please like an off scent on the wind. Fortunately, because Karin was my friend, I could spurn any of his behaviours alongside my brother's as childish and hopelessly male.

Despite Karin's austerity and her brother's inadvertent snobbishness towards me, they were good friends. Our sensibilities seemed to mesh. We preferred to play at the Klassens', where we had more freedom both inside and outside of the house. They owned farmland around that big white house—how much, I never knew—and the east edge of their property bordered on a marsh. My parents, who were more willing to provide rides, would drive Henry and me out there.

The Klassen house was clean and white and full of echoes. It smelled of wood and paint. Mrs. Klassen let us wander the rooms and slam doors and be noisy. She was usually in the kitchen. When she cooked, she cooked dozens of the same thing, poured stew into containers lined up on the wide kitchen table or rolled out dough there, made twelve of the same kind of pie to be stacked in the basement freezer.

The space meant to be the dining room was empty, save for a fancy wooden buffet against one wall. I investigated the contents of its drawers on my first visit. The top

drawer held fancy cutlery, clean, empty jam jars with blank labels, and fresh candles in rows. I pulled open the heavy bottom drawer, and it was filled entirely with packages of cigarettes neatly stacked. Mr. Klassen smoked. None of my other friends' fathers smoked. I ran my fingers over the smooth, cellophane-sleeved packages. I had never seen a drawer filled entirely with the same, identical thing. There was something shocking and luxurious about it. Whenever I was able, I would open the bottom drawer of the buffet just to see those cigarette packages stacked inside.

There was a grandfather clock in the Klassens' entranceway which I loved to smell. I loved to hold that clock like a dance partner and inhale its scent of wood and varnish. If Ben saw me doing this he would call me a queer. If I held on and waited, I could hear the minute hand click into place. The clock was new, but the thought of the hands moving in synchronicity with a hidden network of springs and wheels gave me the feeling of something older than us. Mrs. Klassen had a key that opened the clock's glass door, where the pendulum hung, and she could turn the chimes on or off. Sometimes we asked her to turn them on so that we could hear the long chime at noon.

Karin's room, where she and I sometimes sought refuge from the boys, was also quite empty, except for a single bed and a nightstand with a lamp on it. There was no bucket of naked Barbies in the closet, no stack of board games under the bed. The Klassen kids had some toys, but not the extensive collections of the children's rooms I had known. Henry sometimes tried to use his near-complete Star Wars Lego set against Ben when he felt threatened. As for me, I was jealous of the few things Karin had, like a digital watch with a baby blue strap her parents had given her for her birthday and a wide-brimmed straw hat that tied with a cord under her chin. The hat looked like

something that would come from my and Henry's costume trunk. I could never have pulled it off. It was another of those things my mother would call "silly," especially if worn in public. To Karin, it was practical. It kept the sun out of her eyes.

We loved the house, but we spent most of our time outside. The marsh nearby was part of a conservation area with proper boardwalks and trails, though we often entered by a muddier route direct from the Klassen property. Karin and Ben wore rubber boots into the marsh. Henry sometimes took his shoes off before going in and washed his feet and legs under the outdoor tap afterwards. I wore my school sneakers with the sparkly laces and got them filthy so that when I came home, my mother sighed and talked about keeping care of the things we had to save money. One day Henry cut his foot on a piece of glass and my mother broke down and bought us each a pair of rubber boots from Zellers.

The marsh water was full of things that slinked and plopped and never showed themselves. You could sometimes hear the sound bullfrogs made like strings breaking. We glimpsed muskrats, turtles, and baby milksnakes that streamed away like a handful of sand through your fingers. There were also the songbirds, which we would all increasingly take for granted. Birdwatchers came from all over to see the birds in our area. I didn't know which were more rare than others, but finding one in the marsh, its feathers brighter than everything around it, I was somehow reminded of something I had done wrong.

We discovered a drier, grassy area off the marsh, surrounded by trees, that we claimed as our hideaway. We brought lunches there, designated different corners of the enclosure as dining, meeting, and partying areas, and tried to decide on a president. Karin

was the natural choice, being the oldest. Ben and Henry fought over the office of vice-president and ended up sharing it. I was secretary. I carried a notepad and never wrote anything down.

Once we found a ripped up *Maxim* magazine and some beer bottles littering our spot. When I kicked one of the bottles, I could feel that there was something semi-solid inside, maybe dirt and grass mixed up with the damp, as well as dead bugs attracted to the sugar residues. The clumps inside of those bottles were the dirtiest kind of dirt. In the pages of the tattered magazine, there were pictures of some actress in a slip with her breasts hanging out. I remember one picture in particular, in which she bit her lip in an expression of wild uncertainty, one strap of her slip falling down over her arm. That loose strap was like a secret signal. Like a challenge

Ben came up with the idea that it would be funny to put pictures of the half-naked woman into neighbours' mailboxes. So he and Henry went down the road, waving the magazine at passing cars, stuffing pages into mailboxes and putting the little flags up. Ben even went down a couple driveways to tack the racy photos under the windshield wipers of cars. I was always surprised by Ben's audacity; I could see how strict his father was, that Ben would be punished for his pranks if they were found out. But he did these things anyway.

Sometimes when we went back to the house in the late afternoon, Mr. Klassen was home. He didn't speak to us. He didn't joke and tease like my father did when I had friends over. Mr. Klassen ate a snack of sandwiches at the table or sat on the couch and watched the TV in its large wooden cabinet. Sometimes he had out a translucent case with little sections holding samples of soil and different seeds, and he would be writing

things down, or making labels for the different plants. It was strangely intimate seeing him with his open case, like watching someone folding their underwear. Mr. Klassen nodded if we came into the room, sometimes smiling at us, sometimes not. If we had brought an insect or creature back from the marsh, he told us to let it go. That was all.

Inspired by *Maxim*, Henry began to speculate about the nature of Mr. and Mrs. Klassen's relationship, about what went on in their giant wooden bed, with its four posts like narrow men looking down, guarding. Henry didn't really understand sex, while I did more than I let on. There was a girl I sat with on the bus who made her My Little Ponies have sex all the time. To Henry, my friends' parents doing things in their bed was an unreal and fantastic joke. When I thought about the woman in the slip, about someone like Karin's and Ben's father looking at her and that falling strap and knowing what they meant, I was scared for Mrs. Klassen. I thought she would be like a delicate piece of soap in his hands, getting smaller and smaller.

One day Karin brought rubber gloves and a garbage bag to our spot and cleaned up the beer bottle mess. She sat with her back against a tree trunk and read her book. Karin read for long, uninterrupted periods. I knew she was smart. She had read *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice* already. I had received special hardcover editions of both novels for my birthday but hadn't been able to get through either of them.

Karin was always introducing new possibilities to me. The idea of reading outside, so far away from one's house, was glamorous. I told my mom about Karin reading in our spot, in the vague way I sometimes tried to describe things to her that were

interesting to me, usually things I wanted to be. My mother said, "She shouldn't do that. You girls shouldn't be out there by yourselves," rejecting my fantasy. She would continue to deliver these unspecific warnings as I got older. I felt they had something to do with the beer bottles and the magazine and the unimaginable people those objects belonged to. Still, I resented my mother for her warnings, as if she had invented the danger for her own personal satisfaction, to make her world appear even more triumphant in its orderliness.

I didn't tell Karin what my mother had said about going to our spot alone. Mrs. Klassen didn't seem to mind that we went out wandering by ourselves, and we never told her exactly what we were doing, unless we were taking our bikes into town. It was a half-hour trip and one I would have been reluctant to take if it hadn't been for Karin's influence. She never questioned the amount of exertion it would take for her to achieve a certain goal; she just *did* it. She had her own personal errands in town, like buying school supplies or returning books to the library. These were things my mother usually did for me. Sometimes Karin and I stopped at my house during these trips into town, and my mother was always surprised to see us, looking out at the driveway as if she were expecting to see a chauffeur's car idling rather than our bikes there.

We always spoke more quietly when we were in my house. Our voices echoed more in Karin's house, so it would have made more sense for us to be quieter there, but somehow the compactness of my family's house in town caused us to lower our voices, as if the smaller-sized rooms would grasp our words more tightly and somehow use them against us. I showed Karin my musical instruments—my flute and my new, shining saxophone—and as I did so, I felt I was attaching a new, personal importance to them.

Items in my bedroom that I would have shown off to my other friends—like a new Barbie or one of those little girls' makeup sets of whose creams, no matter what colour they appeared in their palette, always came off as a transparent gloss on my finger—were things that I knew wouldn't interest Karin, so I treated them as filler, as background to my principal occupation of musician.

I practiced my music daily after breakfast because my mother told me I had to. Never before had I appropriated it as a defining characteristic of my identity. I would increasingly fall back on my music in order to legitimize my wavering in between school cliques and my lack of a classifiable personality, especially as I discovered that these instruments were things that most people didn't have, and that they were the most expensive things I owned.

One time when we were in town, stopping at Becker's for Popsicles, Karin and I ran into Marina and two of her girlfriends. These girls were a world apart. They were on a soccer team. They figure skated. They kept multiple flavours of Bonne Bell Lipsmackers in their pencil cases. They were allowed to watch *Beverly Hills, 90210*. They were the kind of girls I resented and deeply, deeply envied, though I knew I needed to hide this from Karin. Karin called Marina and her friends "Girly Girls." Karin was my friend and those girls would never be my friends, so I needed to hold onto Karin. I could never be a Girly Girl even if I tried. Marina regarded me in ungenerous appraisal.

"Hi Natalie," she said with a measured smile, merely glancing at Karin.

"Hi," I said. I noticed Marina was wearing the L.A. Gear shoes with lights in the heels. They lit up whenever she shifted on the spot.

"This is Tara and Bri." She introduced her friends, who were sucking on long blue Freezies and watching us, seeming to be waiting for a signal from Marina as to how they should proceed. I knew these girls' names from school. Either Marina thought I didn't know them, or she was supplying their names for a reason.

"This is Karin," I offered. It felt like the right thing to say. Marina didn't look at Karin this time, but kept her eyes fixed on mine in a way that told me she knew Karin's name as I did Tara's and Bri's. I thought that if I were allowed to watch *90210*, I would understand where this conversation was headed. My stomach sank.

Marina ripped off the top of her Freezie with her teeth and let it fall to the pavement. "My mom and her mom are in a fitness class together," she told her friends, and it was like an explanation. Marina and I had only talked when our mothers had been involved. Once she and her mother had come over for lunch. "Are you going to the skating carnival?" she asked me.

"*I* can't go," Bri complained. "I have to go to stupid Grosse Pointe with my parents." She rolled her eyes in apparent displeasure. I hoped I didn't look surprised; I loved going on road trips with my family. Marina looked at me and waited.

"I'm not sure if I'm going," I lied. I hadn't known there was a skating carnival in the summer.

"Well you should," Marina said. "It's going to be really fun. But I wouldn't bring Karin if I were you. I don't think Mexies really go to things like this." She swung her gaze over to Karin entreatingly, and I realized that this statement was what she had been working up to all along, and that it was my turn to say something mean or to defend my friend.

Karin didn't say anything, but stood there for a moment, then went to her bike where she had left it beside the tire pump. Without her, I was exposed. I thought my face might be turning red. I had failed the test.

"We have to go," I said.

Karin and I wheeled out of the gas station parking lot. I didn't look back at the girls. Their mean lips in shining Lipsmacker and their bright, crackling vocabularies left me feeling stung and raw.

I had failed Karin, but it was Henry who brought our friendship with the Klassens onto rocky ground. He and Ben were always competing, seeing who was the most successful at doing the stupidest thing, like hiding in the tall grass on the side of the road and throwing clods of dirt into the open windows of passing cars. They thought dog poop would make this stunt even better and followed the Coutos' dog around for an hour one morning, waiting for him to defecate onto a newspaper they held open behind him. He never did. The dog was an old and tired black lab who would sometimes roll over and allow his tummy to be scratched, gazing blankly upwards and perhaps trying to remember why he used to like this.

The dirt clod rarely made it into the vehicle. Henry had a bad arm. It was Ben whose dirt clod made it clear through the open passenger window of a passing Dodge. It must have startled the driver or disrupted his vision. The driver braked and the car squealed, wheeling its end around perpendicular with the road and hitting the dog on the shoulder. Karen and I were further down the road and we came running. I heard the

driver say, "Shit." He backed up the car and pulled it onto the side of the road. Then we could see the dog.

The dog tried to move a foreleg once, and then he lay still. He may have been breathing for a while, or the wind was rippling his fur, making it look like his side was rising and falling. There was fluid coming out of his mouth and pooling on the road, blood or something like it, and he seemed to eye it like something he had been saving. I was reminded of the old woman I had sat with and her dead open eyes. I couldn't believe that this trick was being played on me again.

I asked the dog, "Are you dead?" I thought that if I could know for sure one way or the other, the situation would be easier to get a handle on.

Henry threw up on the road. A string of vomit swung from his mouth and stuck to the front of the Black Hole Sun. Ben started running towards home.

Standing beside his car, the man grimaced and asked, "What the hell were you kids doing?" I could tell that the man felt awful. He thought this was his fault. "Whose dog is this?"

"The Coutos'," Karin said. She pointed to the Coutos' house. The man looked at it. He got back into his car and drove the short way down to the Coutos' and into their driveway. He got out again and rang the bell.

I felt sorry for the dog, though I hated his claws and his slack, black mouth. I always thought it would be easier to feel sorry for someone dead if they were pure and beautiful and loveable, not like the dirty, sad dog or the dry and wrinkled old woman. But it would never be like that.

We were staring at the dog. "He's dead," Karin said. We walked back to the Klassens'. I looked over my shoulder and saw the driver and the Couto lady standing on her porch, and they were looking at the dog. The woman raised a hand to her neck.

When we got to the house, Ben was kicking a soccer ball around the back, acting as if nothing had happened. We were waiting for the next step, which was to tell parents what had happened. We would be in more trouble if they didn't hear it from us first. Seeing our grave looks, Ben laughed.

"You guys are losers," he said, then, to Henry, "You're such a pussy."

"You killed it," Henry said.

Ben stopped kicking the ball.

"Shut up," he said.

"You killed that dog."

Ben looked at Henry. The expression on his face was one of cruel warning. It was the look of men who knew themselves, so certain of themselves that they could convince you that you were wrong even when you were right.

Ben told Henry, "It was all your idea. It's your fault."

Henry never held up well under pressure. He said to Ben, "What do you know? You're just a dumb Mexie."

Ben's angry expression suddenly cleared. His face was like a pale leaf, severe and perfect. Karin looked hardened and sure.

Henry's words had transformed us in the Klassens' eyes rather than the other way around. We had made a huge mistake.

We didn't tell anyone's parents about the dog. Henry and I were scared of what had happened. I think he still felt bad about the dog, too. A few nights after the incident, thinking we were bored, Dad offered to drive us out to the Klassens' after dinner.

We were both silent, then Henry said, "I'm not talking to Ben anymore."

"Why not?" my dad asked.

"Because he's a stupid Mexie."

My dad put down his fork, rose from the table, and grabbed Henry by the arm, lifting him off his chair, and I was reminded of koala bears pulling their young up onto their shoulder on a wildlife show I had seen on TV, the slow way they moved, until my dad threw Henry to the floor. He roughly yanked him by his collar of his Black Hole Sun t-shirt dress down the hall to his bedroom, threw him in, and slammed the door shut.

"And don't you dare come out of there until I say you can."

Dad came back to the table, sat down, and started eating again. I could hear Henry's quiet, cautious crying inside his room. I could imagine how scared and hurt he must be. Dad never yelled at us.

My mother looked genuinely shocked.

"Yes, it was fucking necessary," my dad said to her, like she had asked. "Or do you not care that your son sounds like a prick?"

I had never heard my dad say that word. He was angry at my mother. It was like the time when a girl's father at school had lost his grocery store in a fire and my mother said it was Lebanese lightning. Henry asked her what that meant, and she said it was

when they lit the place on fire to collect the insurance money. Then my dad had yelled at her and called her a spoiled bitch.

Later that night I heard my mother crying in their room, and his voice was low and comforting. I didn't know why he was giving in to her. I felt furiously, inexplicably angry with my mother.

The next morning, my mother made a casserole for Henry and I to take to the Klassens. She took us in the car instead of making us ride our bikes there. The glass dish covered with tin foil was warm in my hands. I gave it to Mrs. Klassen, explaining that my mother had made it. She said, "That's so sweet of her" and put the dish in the fridge, and I felt horrible. I imagined the Klassens spooning the food into their mouths, their faces turning sour at the taste of our guilt.

Carp Creek

Mid-June the creek swelled and stank and the man from the leisure park cut a channel into it with his bulldozer, opening the bank into Lake Erie. All the carp, rubbing up against the lakeshore after spawning, rushed into the creek's warm, murky water. Then when the creek bank closed up again on its own, the carp were trapped, crowded, fat and gulping with their ugly round mouths. Henry liked to poke at them with a long stick but not too hard. We had lived on the creek since Dad started working at the canning factory. My mother quit her job teaching kids at the library in town and started giving piano lessons in our front room. At first she was worried that Henry and I would fall into the creek and drown when she wasn't looking, but it wasn't that deep anyway, not until you got out to the middle, where the water was clearer and the wind gently pushed the ripples like a hand smoothing a bed sheet. A wide belt of reeds divided that deep centre of the creek from the shallower part where the carp got stuck. And now the seagulls leered and swooped low because if the carp didn't get out, they would die.

We didn't want to smell dead carp all summer. So Dad and Art from down the road, who also worked at the factory and ran a business fixing bicycles in his yard, had to rescue the carp, and Henry and I went along. We were taking the old blue pickup. Dad and Art filled the truck bed halfway full with water from the garden hose. The water slowly leaked out since the tailgate didn't close airtight. My mother watched at the window from inside the house with her cup of tea and a line on her forehead that for us had come to signal amusement or exasperation or weariness or a combination of these

things. Henry and I stood in the driveway in our rubber boots, Henry clutching the big net, double his height, that we would use to catch the fish.

Then Mr. Hillman drove up to drop off his daughter, Laura, for her piano lesson. He left his bronze Camaro running at the base of the driveway and the two of them got out. Mr. Hillman wore khakis and a pink polo shirt and grinned widely with his pink clean face. There was something about pastels on men that suggested affluence. Then there were his close-cut, silvery hair, his leather shoes, and the pristine and slightly babyish dresses that Laura wore to her lessons. Laura was eleven years old, a year older than me, and I regarded her with curiosity and a dull, incipient envy. I watched her stroll up the path to our door, clutching her music books, her gleaming brown hair and white patterned dress streaming behind her. My mother let her into the house. Mr. Hillman walked up the driveway smiling, his hands thrust in his pockets. He addressed Dad and Art, "So, going to rescue some fish, today, I hear," as if people had been talking about it, which I was sure they hadn't.

"Yeah, so those suckers in the creek don't all die on us," Dad replied. "What a smelly mess that would be."

"How many do you reckon there are?"

"Oh, maybe a hundred, hopefully not more."

The water was slowly trickling out of the truck bed, onto the driveway, and out to the road where the Camaro whirred and shone in the heat. The sun glinted off Mr. Hillman's silver watch. My dad never wore a watch.

"We better get moving before we lose all this water," Dad said. Art looked away and grimaced as he wound the garden hose around the plastic spool attached to the side of the garage.

"Alright, well let me know how it goes," Mr. Hillman said, grinning still, and he raised a hand in parting. I wondered whether, with his masculine elegance, Mr. Hillman and his interest in our expedition were sincere. As the Camaro pulled away I noticed my mother standing in the front room window again, this time with Laura, and the way they gazed down at us in feminine judgment made me think that maybe Dad and Art were doing something embarrassing or stupid. My mother and Laura looked delicate and authoritative there in the window, as if they were part of a display in a shop front. Finally they ceased to stare at us and went deeper into the room to sit at the piano, Laura perching on the piano bench with its leatherette seat and my mother on a straight-backed chair beside her. Soon major scales could be heard wefting through the soft June wind.

Dad, Art, Henry, and I squashed into the cab of the truck. Henry let the hoop of the fishing net hang out of the window. As we drove down Pier Road to the shallow end of the creek where the fish were stuck, I watched my knees swaying back and forth between Art's and Henry's, and I realized that Laura's legs, unlike mine, were smooth and golden and free of scabs.

Dad slowly backed the truck down the twenty-foot wide stretch of sand between the lakeshore and the edge of the creek. Some beachgoers stopped to stare at us. The carp flapped and gaped, tossing their large, greasy brown bodies. As soon as Dad brought the

truck to a stop, Henry flew out and began to prod at the carp with his net, gently and inexpertly maneuvering it through the writhing mass. The length of the pole was awkward for him and the net end tipped with the weight of the one fish he had caught. "Hold on, little man," Dad said. He gripped the pole and helped Henry to lift and tip the twisting fish into the truck bed. Art put on a pair of long, thick rubber gloves and began to pick up the fish in the creek one by one and toss them into the truck. Each carp shimmered and flexed in the air before landing in the bed with a heavy splash. I tried to capture one in a bucket but it was much too small to hold even one of the fish, which were longer than my arm, and I hated to see their staring eyes and strange, lipped mouths up close. They smelled horrible.

"Can people eat these?" Henry asked.

"If they want to," Dad replied.

"But should they?"

"No, probably not."

"Are they full of pollution?"

"Yes."

Dad had an uncanny way of affirming our most dreadful beliefs. As corrupt and polluted as the world might be, he would never lie to us about it. Henry, nine years old at this time, was full of specific and scientific questions.

This was an odd, in-between time for Henry and me. Only about a year and a half earlier he had been lining up his action figures and Happy Meal toys on the bathroom

counter to put on plays for me as I took my evening bath. I don't remember when I or my mother finally decided that this was no longer appropriate and I started locking the bathroom door. A number of years after our fishing trip he would adopt his pre-teen affectation and brooding, spending much of his time listening to music—Stone Temple Pilots, Pearl Jam, Nirvana—shut up in his room. He began to have opinions about things, about the right kinds of music and movies, on which he would occasionally lecture at the dinner table. Otherwise, he was quiet.

I would never be like that. I turned into an awkward teenager with quiet and controlled jealousies, though I was confused about how to present myself to the world. The tear-out posters of actresses and bands from teen magazines which I taped to my walls were symbolic of my ideas of young girls' interests rather than of any concrete facet of my personality. As part of my ongoing efforts to beautify my room, I bought a French duvet cover at an outlet store with a floral pattern that reminded me of some of Laura's old dresses. Then one day I spilled a Coke on it and had to flip it over to hide the stain.

Laura continued to come to the house for piano lessons into our mid-teens. Leggier and more mature, she wore polo shirts and tennis skirts in ice cream colours. Henry was particularly moody whenever she came over and would make repeated trips from his lair to the kitchen, past the front room, to get cans of pop during her lessons. I didn't interact with teen Laura very much but made mental notes about her fashion choices: the thick headbands, the golf socks with two slim bands of colour at the ankle. There was something so feminine about the way she fidgeted, her fingers toying with

hems and small trinkets my mother kept on top of the upright, her toes curling around the piano pedals like creeping vines.

My mother taught me piano too, but eventually she sent me to a flautist for lessons instead. I knew that my mother had never played the flute, and this made me happy.

Seeing that I wasn't having much luck with my bucket, Dad convinced Henry to let me try the net for a while. He supported the pole while I tested its weight and established a good grip, Henry coaching uselessly from the sidelines. Soon I developed a rhythm: scoop, lift, swing, and flip. With each *plop* into the truck bed the fish splashed the front of my t-shirt and shorts. The mud rose in swirls from the soft creek bottom under my rubber boots. My toes were sweaty inside them.

We caught a few dozen fish. We could never catch them all, but this would reduce the crowding. We drove down the beach to an area where there weren't any swimmers and transferred the fish from the truck to the lake. Smelt were draped in silver garlands along the shore. A heron gingerly stepped away from its feeding area, offended at the low hot rumbling of the pickup. The bewildered carp swam from Dad's and Art's open hands into the lake, heaving and gasping. I felt a bit sorry for them. The cooler lake water must have been a bit of a shock for them after the warm creek. Henry and I had kept a goldfish as a pet once, and the fish care book we borrowed from the library recommended leaving a fresh tank of water to stand for an hour and adjust to room temperature before putting the fish back inside, to ease its transition. Still, by the time the carp had adjusted to the

cool lake they would have forgotten the warm, crowded creek and how we had aided them altogether.

When we arrived back at the house I was surprised that Laura was no longer there and almost offended that she and her father had left without receiving a report of our completed mission. However, this all seemed to fit into my new dichotomous relationship with her. She wouldn't have been interested in a bunch of fish anyway. Banishing all thoughts of Laura's pristine world from my mind, I bounded into the kitchen in my dirty clothing. My mother was preparing dinner.

"Go change your clothes, please," she told Henry and me. "And leave the wet ones in the tub."

Henry rushed to his room, tearing off his soiled t-shirt and flinging it into the bathroom where it hit the edge of the tub and slithered onto the floor. He was anxious to stash the few items he had managed to collect from the beach as Dad hustled him back into the truck: a periwinkle shell smaller than my pinky fingernail, a rather unremarkable white rock that looked like the kind in the neighbours' rock garden, and a tiny, delicate bird skull. He kept his beach treasures in an old shortbread tin with a picture on the lid of a red-bearded man wearing a kilt. Inside the tin were rocks, fossils, waterglass, sand dollars from a trip to the east coast, and a few beer caps. It wasn't a bad collection. My mother was always encouraging us to collect things, or at least things that didn't cost a lot of money. Henry and I each had a series of souvenir pins from the trips we had taken.

Lupins for Prince Edward Island, a fleur-de-lys for Quebec, the Albertan coat of arms. I didn't know why my mother wanted us to want certain things.

I changed my clothes and returned to the kitchen, where Dad and Art were loading up their plates. We were having pasta—a treat in the summer, since my mother did not like to cook inside and heat the house. She usually had Dad grill something outside instead. Henry flew back into the kitchen. "Go put a shirt on," my mother instructed him. She detested shirtlessness. She hated when Dad mowed the lawn without his shirt on for all the neighbours to see.

We ate on the patio furniture, watching the creek. My mother was nervous about us falling in when we were playing but she did love to watch the water. Patches of white cottonwood tufts floated on the surface like soap suds.

My mother poured water from a plastic pitcher into each of our glasses. "How was it?" she asked with a grim look.

"It was good," Henry said, his mouth full.

"I don't know what that man thinks he's doing," Dad said.

"Larry Couture owns that part of the beach, but he doesn't own the creek or the lake," Art agreed.

"He needs to leave the damned creek alone."

My mother gave Dad a look. She didn't like him to swear.

"How was the lesson?" He changed the subject.

"Fine." She shrugged, seeming to indicate that the question was irrelevant. "The Hillmans are sending their kids to U.M.E.I. this fall."

"They're not Mennonite."

"No."

"It's a good school."

"I think that's the point."

"I like our school better," Henry contributed. We went to the public school in town.

"Laura has a little brother, about your age," my mother said to Henry. "Maybe the two of you could hang sometime."

"Don't want to," Henry said.

Nevertheless, after dinner, as I read a library book in the hammock and Henry kicked a soccer ball around the backyard, he proposed that we go over to the Hillmans' to meet Laura's brother. "I don't really feel like it," I told him. I didn't want to think about Laura or her family. I was also more nervous about meeting new kids than I used to be.

"Come on," Henry persisted. "We could see their house up close. It's huge."

I finally marked my place in my book and agreed to go with Henry. We told my mother we were going for a bike ride. The Hillmans lived about fifteen minutes away in one of the town's newer subdivisions. My mother had once pointed it out to us when we drove by. Only the back of the house was visible from Concession 3, but I could see that it was enormous and surrounded by neat, miniature trees and shrubs. As Henry and I steered into the subdivision, I felt a foreboding sense of quiet. It might have been the unusual height of the houses and how they blocked out all sounds external to the neighbourhood. "This is the one," Henry said. We had arrived at the Hillmans' beige

brick house. There was a two-car garage and a basketball net in the driveway. "Should we ring the doorbell?"

"I don't think so," I said. I was feeling apprehensive and I sensed that Henry was as well. "They might not be at home," I added hopefully.

"We need a strategy," Henry decided.

We biked around the subdivision a couple times, stalling for time. I wished that Laura and her brother would come out into the front yard on their own and greet us or wave us over. That would have made things much easier.

"Let's go down the concession and see if they are in the backyard," Henry suggested. This seemed like an alright idea. We left the subdivision and pedaled down the back concession. A narrow field separated us from Laura's road. We could see that the Hillmans' kitchen light was on. A woman, probably Laura's mother, was moving around within. We saw a boy sitting on the deck.

Henry thought that it would be best for us to approach from the field. I imagined us arriving at the Hillmans' covered in mud, with straw in our hair. Still, this would be better than ringing the doorbell and having to inquire for Laura's brother directly, and I was too nervous to think of a better idea. We left our bikes hidden in the ditch and started across the field. The soil was soft and dry. The corn was just starting to come up and we carefully weaved around the new stalks. They looked soft and moist and I had a faint, absurd desire to reach down and touch one, to feel the firm, tender husks.

The sky was growing dark. We were silent. Henry walked with his head up, looking more optimistic now that we were on a definite path to our object. I knew how silly we must look, slowly tracking across the field like this, like we had been dropped in

the middle of the county and were lost. I suddenly felt tired. I was the older sister; I wasn't supposed to let my brother do stupid things like this. I was supposed to know how these types of courtships worked. We had cultivated friendships with kids from different neighbourhoods before. How did we use to meet other kids? I wasn't sure when things had become so complicated.

The smell of barbeque and cigar smoke wafted over the damp evening air. Low, murmuring voices became more distinct as the scene of a small party at Laura's neighbours' came into view. A group of men and women sat around a large glass-topped table holding wine glasses. Slender torches lit their faces. At Laura's, the young boy crouched over a handheld video game, his legs dangling over the side of the raised deck. Henry and I stood at the back edge of the Hillmans' lawn, hesitating.

"Okay," I cued Henry. It was time for him to walk up to Laura's brother and introduce himself. Henry was the outgoing one. And this boy was in his peer group. Part of me wanted to reach for my brother's hand, while another part of me was repelled by the idea. I couldn't remember when I had last held my mother's or father's hand, and I wasn't sure I had ever held Henry's.

"What's the matter? Are you chicken?"

One of the men at the party next door was heckling us. I could see his dark eyes shining in the torchlight. There was a low chuckle from some of the other men in the group. I felt a sickening jolt. When I was older and thinking about this night, I would realize that these men were probably drunk. Drunkenness was a fuzzy concept to me at this age, something that happened to sad men sitting in pubs in movies as a bartender offered pitying glances and wiped the counter.

Laura's brother looked up at us. We took this as an invitation to approach him.

"Hi," Henry said.

"Who are you?" the boy demanded.

"I'm Henry. This is my sister, Natalie."

The boy looked blankly at us.

"My mom is your sister's piano teacher," I supplied lamely.

"Oh."

"We're the same age, I think," Henry said.

"When's your birthday?" the boy challenged him.

"August."

"Mine's in April. So I'm older."

The boy looked smug. He wore a polo neck t-shirt and shorts. His feet were bare. I noticed that he had gleaming, cinnamon-hued hair like his sister's. Henry was silent for a moment, unsure how to proceed. The boy returned to his video game.

"We rescued a bunch of fish today," Henry reported. "Some guy let them get trapped in the creek." This news was preposterous enough to merit the boy's attention. He set his game down beside him on the deck.

"The man who owns the trailer park does that."

"But he shouldn't."

"Why not? He owns that part of the beach."

"But the fish would all die."

"What do you care about the stupid fish?"

My heart was pounding. I glanced alternately at the neighbours, whose attention seemed to have moved on from us now, and at the lit kitchen, from which Laura's mother had temporarily disappeared. I knew we shouldn't be here, that we were being ridiculed, that we should leave. Henry, however, thought he was coming into his stride.

"Did you know carp can get as big as me? Actually—bigger?"

"So?" the boy retorted.

"You can eat them if you want. But only idiots do that." Henry smirked.

I laughed. I laughed for Henry because I wanted to defend him and because I felt uncomfortable. It felt like when we went to Windsor to see the triathlon and a very overweight man, the last participant, came jogging limply up the spectator- and pennant-bordered lane in his ill-fitting jogging attire, visibly struggling to the finish line, and I was embarrassed for him. I looked up at Dad, not sure if I should clap for this man as I had for the other contestants, but Dad clapped and said, "He did it."

I suddenly felt a surge of affection and pride for my brother. Henry was brave. Henry was smart and inquisitive and interesting and this boy was being arrogant and superior. I could feel a heat rising in my chest: I was going to do something, to say something that would put this boy in his place and redeem my little brother.

I paused. A rectangular patch of grass had suddenly become lit near our feet. I looked up.

There, standing in the window, looking down at us, was Laura. A lamp had been turned on in her room. Inside I could see a white painted shelf holding some books and three dolls standing on their own. The combination of the backlighting in her room and the fading evening sky illuminated the crown of Laura's head and blurred her face,

making it difficult to detect her expression. Gauze curtains stirred on either side of her, and together with the lit halo of her hair, gave her an ethereal appearance. There was a sudden burst of laughter from next door at a joke or story one of the women had told. The voices made me feel sick inside. I thought how awkward and stupid I was, how sad I was for my little brother.

A second window on the upper level of the house was lit. Mrs. Hillman must have gone upstairs. I stood immobile in the light. Laura's brother leered at Henry derisively. His hair shone like polished wood.

"Let's go," I said to Henry, but looking at the boy. "I'd rather be anywhere else than around a bunch of rich people who can't do anything for themselves."

I wasn't sure what I meant by this, but somehow, the words satisfied me. The boy's face barely altered, though a look of startled recognition seemed to stir underneath it briefly, like something gliding past underwater. I turned and walked away, through the two squares of light on the grass, and Henry followed. We cut in between the houses to the front yard and ended up retracing our route along the road all the way back to where we had left our bikes. By the time we returned home it was close to nine and my mother was angry with us. We told her we'd been at our friends', the Pereiras'.

When I went walking by myself a few days later, I saw two children with fishing lines cast over the wooden bridge that crossed the creek. Their eyes squinted in the sun and their feet twisted lazily. The water was bright and calm, and when I leaned over the wooden rail I could see a fairly smooth but blinding reflection of myself. The carp

situation seemed to have turned out alright this year, though occasionally, near the shallower end of the creek, I glimpsed a splash and a brown fin.

If Mr. and Mrs. Hillman knew that we had spoken to their son that night, they never mentioned it to my parents. My mother would have asked us about it. Laura mustn't have said anything either. She arrived for her piano lesson next Wednesday at four as usual and disrupted my reading with her choppy Scarlatti sonatas. Henry never brought up the incident at the Hillmans', though I wondered if he thought about it later on whenever he watched glittering teenaged Laura slip out of her father's car in front of our house. Now that I think about it, I never actually saw him watching her from his bedroom window; I just assumed he did, because I did so myself. One golden leg would emerge from the car, then the other. And then Laura would be trotting up the front walk to our door, laden with schoolbags and sports equipment, a sheaf of sheet music tucked under her arm. I would hear my mother walk across the living room to admit her pupil. Then the doorbell would ring.

Accidents

When I was eleven there was a boy at school who died in a farming accident. Andrew Ward. He was in junior kindergarten. His brother, Alex Ward, was in my class. Alex smelled and he was always smiling at you like there was something gross on your face. You could tell him that he was the gross one, you could try to explain to him how gross he was, but he would never believe you. It was easy to hate someone like that.

I passed the Wards' house each day on the bus ride to school. The boys' mother used to wait outside with them until the bus picked them up, which most kids' parents didn't do. She would be wearing a sweatshirt over a long nightgown or a man's undershirt with pajama pants. There would be a third boy, a toddler, on her hip or playing underneath an overturned playpen in the yard, trapped under there so he wouldn't crawl away.

Where the Klassen house front was tidy and reserved, the Wards' was haphazard and effusive. There were stacks of lumber in the yard, old car body parts, a Fisher Price picnic table, a tether ball pole, laundry on a line. They had a painted stone goose ornament at the end of the lawn that they dressed up for the different seasons. The goose wore a Santa suit for Christmas, a bonnet for Easter, and a bikini in the summertime. The week that Andrew died, there was a black bow on its neck. The goose went naked for a long time after that.

The little boy had been crushed by a tractor. My dad knew his father, so we went to the funeral. Henry got to stay at home because he was nine. It was a big service at the United Church in Leamington on a muggy day in early September.

At the beginning of the service, we had to sing a song that went, *Jesus loves me, yes I know, for the Bible tells me so.* It sounded juvenile and placating, like a nursery rhyme. I thought of a children's show I had seen on TV years ago, where three people dressed in giant blackbird suits sang "Bye Bye Blackbird" and lay down side-by-side in a pie crust at the end of the song. It didn't make sense that they had been smiling and singing when they knew they were going to end up dead in a pie. I didn't know why we were pretending.

There was only one coffin bearer. The man, who was probably one of Alex's uncles, held the coffin like a breakfast tray by handles at either end. I didn't know it wasn't supposed to be like that. I didn't feel sad.

The family followed the coffin out of the church. First came the dark-haired mother in a muted, patterned dress that looked like one of her nightgowns. Beside her was her husband, who had white-blonde hair, as did the boy in the coffin and the two following behind.

Mr. and Mrs. Ward were like a duck and a cat who had had children that were all ducks. Within this arrangement, Mrs. Ward looked as if she had been singled out for some pathetic, solitary suffering. She would go to the grocery store with her brood of downy-haired boys and everyone would notice that they didn't look like hers.

Alex followed his mother, holding the hand of his toddler brother. He had a strange, smug, joking look on his face, like he was the only one who knew we had all been tricked into coming here for nothing. That Alex appeared to feel as little as me for the death of his brother made me feel that I must be as insensitive and revolting as he

was, a mutant without real emotions, and that there was definitely something wrong with me.

In the parking lot after the service, I saw my friend Anita with some other girls from school. Anita was a lot like me, quiet and somewhat insecure, but she made friends more easily. She wore her ponytail divided into sections with elastics so it looked like a string of link sausages. (My mother had let me know on more than one occasion that she thought this was stupid.) Anita carried her pencil case around like a clutch purse. It was covered in the collectable Spice Girls stickers that came with bubblegum.

The girls she was standing with were all Italian girls. Those girls had stacks of fancy names like the tiers of a cake. Instead of just "Danielle" or "Gabrielle" they would be "Daniella" or "Gabriella," and their surnames were even longer.

Anita saw me and didn't wave or acknowledge me in any way. I didn't know the other girls very well, and I rarely approached people unless they invited me into their circle. I thought Anita was embarrassed about me because I was gross like Alex Ward. I got into the car and I started crying, which I never did, and my parents thought I was upset about the funeral. They let me stay home from swimming practice later that day.

I hated swimming practice. I hated to be wet and cold. Our team was called the Vikings. We wore matching navy Speedo swimsuits. I had a circle sunburned on my lower back from where the hole was cut out of the racer back of my suit and I couldn't reach with the sunscreen. I never asked my mother to put the sunscreen on my back because I hated her to touch me.

Every day my mother drove Henry and me the twenty minutes to Tilbury for two hours of laps and relays and a brief game of British Bulldog at the end. I would wish for tornadoes so that I wouldn't have to go to swimming practice.

I didn't get along with the girls on the swim team. There were a number of reasons for this. The girls in my age group each wore a necklace with a heart-shaped pendant framing a picture of their favourite Backstreet Boy. I wasn't interested in the Backstreet Boys, didn't care much for their music, and was unable to pick one (the blonde one, the other light-haired one, the bad one) on which to build an intricate, personalized fantasy for myself. So a rumour had started that I was a lesbian. As we stood in line, each waiting her turn for her laps to be timed, the swim team girls stared me down. They swung their goggles by the straps so that the lenses clacked together, ran their thumbs under their bathing suit bottoms to ease the wet Lycra out of their butt cracks, and contemplated, I imagined, how it was possible for a girl not to like a Backstreet Boy.

That was one reason they didn't like me. Another reason was that one of the girls' mothers had taken me out with her and her kids for lunch and told all the other mothers that I had been rude and complained about the food being bad and didn't thank her for taking me out, none of which was true. I was still trying to figure all of this out the day of Andrew Ward's funeral.

The woman who had taken me out was Leeanne Girard. Her daughter was Hailey, one of the Backstreet Boy devotees. Hailey was fourteen and already wearing mascara that ran like black tears from her eyes when we were in the pool. She was the oldest of four children. Her six-year-old brother Michael was on the swim team in the junior

group, and her half-sister Jaime was in Henry's division. Her other half-sister was just a baby.

Leeanne always had the baby and a few bags full of toys and diapers and food with her at practice, which she spread out around herself on the bleachers from where the parents watched the swimmers. She was younger than most of the moms I knew, but not much younger. She had a long face, dark, thick hair, and small eyes. She wore jean shorts and tank tops and flip flops. My mother said Leeanne always looked like she was running out to buy milk.

I met her one afternoon while I was sitting on the bleachers, waiting for Henry to come out of the boys' changing room. My mother was talking to some of the other mothers of girls I wasn't friends with. Leeanne was packing up her diaper bags. She bent to reach for a teething toy on the ground and I glimpsed a tattoo on her lower back: a naked woman with a pointed devil's tail and spikes for nipples, a dollop of yellow hair curling around her body to cover her crotch.

Leeanne jostled the baby as she gathered her things. The baby wore a top and pants set trimmed in bows and had an orange-brown crust around its mouth. Leeanne noticed me looking at the baby and smiled, moving closer and asking it, "Is someone saying hello?"

She tipped the baby out from her hip for me to admire, like I was supposed to pick which part of it I liked best to complement. I never knew what to say to babies. When I tried to talk to them, my voice sounded like someone else's. That was another thing that made me like a monster.

"Isn't she lovely?" Leeanne remarked.

I didn't think so. I smiled in assent.

"I had to get my tubes untied."

"Oh," I responded. We had studied the female sexual anatomy in school. The overall shape of the illustrated cross-section was that of a vase with a flower falling out on either side. I imagined the fallopian tubes each tied in a knot and coming undone again as simply as thin rubber hoses.

"She looks like Keith," Leeanne said, meaning the baby. "When she's angry, she looks like a little pissed-off man. Keith never gets angry, though. He's so calm. He never gets worked up about anything, you know? He works for GM."

This sounded like an explanation.

"Keith's a great guy, not like Hailey's dad. He was a sandwich short of a picnic, that one. My mom used to say that, *sandwich short of a picnic.* No one says that anymore, but I do. But I mean, what the hell is wrong with someone that they think they can abandon all their responsibilities like that? How could you live with yourself? I really don't know. Your kids need to be fed, they need indoor and outdoor shoes for school, they need two kinds of pencil crayons. There's this list of stuff they need to have. Hailey was going through a bad time, she had broken her leg, and he just takes off. Some men are like children their whole lives. How do you get like that? It's because their mothers give them everything they want and fuck them up. Then whenever you do something they don't like, they call their mother and complain. So you get tired of your wife, do you just leave her and all your children? No, you do not."

Leeanne seemed exhausted by this argument with herself. She sighed and continued packing her diaper bags. I thought she had forgotten I was there, until she said,

"Would you hold this for a sec?" and gave me the teething toy she had picked up, which was shaped like a dolphin. It was wet and had dirt and grass stuck to it.

Leanne patted the outer pockets of her bags until she found her keys. She held them in her teeth by their leather keychain, took the teething toy back from me, and said, "Thankthss." She put the toy in the pocket where she had found the keys and took the keychain out of her mouth.

"You're friends with Hailey," Leeanne stated.

"Yeah," I said. I wasn't.

Leeanne stopped and tipped her head to one side, looking at me. "Natalie," she said, like she was tasting the word, like she was tasting something carefully that she had tasted many times before. "You don't look anything like your mother."

The bright afternoon, the smell of chlorine, and my damp, cold bathing suit clinging to my skin suddenly seemed part of a new, startling world of burden and possibility. It was as if she had given me an application to complete with an important section already filled out.

My awkwardness was like someone who stood at attention every time I entered a room. Someone who had always been there but had of late begun to make his presence known more and more often. Someone warning me from trying anything risky, reminding me, You can't be like them, don't forget who you are. Someone whom everyone but Leeanne could see.

Leeanne spoke to me over-familiarly and like I was an adult. This was confusing and alarming to me; I knew whatever I said back to her would have to be flawlessly mature. Whenever I said something to her, I was nervous as someone watching someone

else open a cheap gift they had given them, not knowing if they would recognize its cheapness and relieved when they quickly discarded it and moved onto something else. In the end, I never said much to Leeanne. That was probably what caused the problem.

We had swim meets some weekends, when we would have to get up at five or six in the morning and drive out to another team's pool to compete. Our coach wore a plastic hat with Viking horns. He led us in a series of cheers, and I joined in half-heartedly.

We each had to choose four out of five events in which to compete: freestyle, breaststroke, backstroke, butterfly, relay. I was average at all the strokes except backstroke. While I only placed in the top twenty in other categories, I usually placed in the top three in backstroke. In what was most swimmers' weakest area, I excelled. I was exceptional in the worst ways.

The weekend after I met Leeanne, there was a swim meet in Ridgetown. It was almost the end of the summer and I was tiring of competition days. Swimmers spent the greater part of their day waiting around for their next event. Our team had a designated area where we spread out our towels and coolers. I sat in the shade and read.

I had started reading biographies of famous composers. I was reading about Mozart, how he had toured Europe as a child, how the people around him were falling over themselves to support his talent. I wanted to be a huge and important problem like that, rather than a small and inconvenient one.

The other girls lounged around during the breaks, dozing on their towels with their embroidered *Vikings* jackets over their heads to block out the sun. These girls were

slow and lazy, complaining about having to get up so early and eating all the candy our coach had brought for us. But in the water the same girls came brilliantly to life, swift and athletic.

Hailey Girard was one of the strongest swimmers on our team. She was muscular, tanned, and busty. There was some of Leeanne's feminine chaos about her, but Hailey's imperfections only made her more impressive to me: her eyes bleeding black and glitter, her chipped toenail polish, the slightly red and irritated-looking area of her bikini line. I didn't even shave my legs yet.

I was reading my Mozart book from the library as Hailey and the other girls lounged on their towels. My mother was at the sidelines, watching Henry swim his frantic, sloppy butterfly. Leeanne came over to me with the baby, spread out a towel, and sat down. She asked me what I was reading.

I was embarrassed. It looked like one of the moms was sitting with me because I was alone and she felt sorry for me. In truth, I wanted to be left alone to read.

"A book about Mozart," I replied.

Leeanne looked mystified and nodded in feigned comprehension. She laid the baby on her outstretched legs and held the heels of its feet underneath each of her breasts, buoying them up. She allowed the baby to kick at her chest. She smiled and made faces of adoring disbelief at the baby, who looked truly in love with her. I felt uncomfortable.

Leeanne had been seeking me out to talk to all week. I preferred to remain inconspicuous, and Leeane's vitality and disarray constantly invited attention. Her body and her love for the baby were loud and shameless. She was always pulling her tank top down to hide her tattoo or pulling it up to cover her cleavage, tying her hair up in an

elastic and pulling it out again, taking ten things out of her diaper bag that she didn't need and putting them away again later. She told me all about how she had met Keith, how Hailey had had her wisdom teeth out, how Michael had been put on A.D.D. medication. She told me about using a new self-tanner and getting a rash on her legs that lasted for two months.

"Keith said to me," Leeanne went on, "he said, 'Everything that you put on your body is absorbed into your body.' You put lotion on your face, that's in your body. You spill motor oil on your hands, that's in too. This self-tanner with all the chemicals and dyes got into my body. And my body didn't like it. We pollute our bodies."

"I don't use self-tanner," I contributed.

"Half of these things we do, we do them for men. And it's not good for us. Are you dating boys? Are you old enough for that yet? Well, it doesn't matter. Are you interested in boys?"

"No," I answered honestly. "I'm not."

I wanted to be invisible to boys. Sometimes a boy on the swim team named Patrick, who was very friendly to everyone, tried to talk to me or ask me about my times. I hated when he talked to me. He was sixteen and he had to wear two Speedos.

Leeanne was opening a jar of baby food.

"Why are you reading about Mozart?" she asked suddenly. Leeanne did that sometimes: she jumped back to a topic or something you had said earlier that you thought she had disregarded.

"I play music," I confessed.

"Like that classical stuff?"

"Yeah."

"You're a musician," Leeanne declared. She was staring determinedly past the tip of the baby spoon she was pointing at me. "You're going to be a professional musician. I can see it. You're focused. I knew there was something about you. I knew you were going to be a star."

She had the strange authority of someone who sounded like they knew me. That was the way people tried to own you.

I was flattered by Leeanne's groundless praise, but I didn't want to tell her about my instruments or my training. She might take it and give it back to me as something I couldn't recognize, like a piece of bread she had chewed up to feed the baby.

My event was announced over the loudspeaker: backstroke, girls aged eleven and twelve. I reluctantly set down my book, which I had kept page-marked with my thumb the whole time Leeanne was talking to me.

Leeanne licked a smear of pureed squash off her wrist and grinned. "Knock 'em dead," she told me.

I didn't get nervous for races. Being in the pool was peaceful. With my ears underwater, the shouts and cheers of the spectators sounded far away. Reaching back and pulling the water under me, watching the sky brushed with thin cloud and the strings of pennants snapping in the wind over the lanes, knowing my competitors were nothing like me and that if they beat me it wouldn't matter, I felt in control. It was a good way to be alone.

I won the race. Later that afternoon, I accepted my first place medal in backstroke. I heard a cluster of Backstreet Girls discussing my win.

"*She* got first place?"

"That was lucky. Her times usually suck."

One girl offered dismissively, "Lesbians are great at backstroke."

I zipped my medal into the pocket of my *Vikings* jacket, which I wadded up and stuffed in my backpack. I packed quickly, wanting to get out of the pool area, away from the other girls, and to my mother's car as quickly as possible. But Leeanne was thrilled about my medal, even more than she was about Hailey's gold in butterfly and silver in freestyle and relay. She trotted up to me, pressed my arm and gushed, "Congratulations Natalie! Oh, that is so fantastic. You have to come celebrate with us. You should come over!"

By this time, my mother had noticed the special attention Leeanne was giving me. She seemed confused rather than suspicious about it. I understood that my mother was never jealous of my friendships, only resentful of what she perceived to be my poor taste. However, my situation had little to do with taste. Leeanne had selected me.

"Hailey would like to have Natalie over for a sleepover," Leeanne told my mother. Hailey looked mildly stunned at hearing this information, but didn't say anything. "It's fine with me, and I'll just bring her to practice tomorrow and you can take her home then."

My mother was affronted, not, I thought, by the invitation, but by the embarrassment of being seen exchanging dialogue with Leeanne in the first place.

Leeanne hadn't asked me if I wanted to sleep over, and I felt uneasy at the idea of spending a prolonged amount of time with her, being toted along with her like the baby, like an accessory.

"I really can't," I told her. "I have to practice my music every day."

My mother suggested mildly, "You can make up the missed practice time tomorrow night."

I was shocked. My mother was allowing me to go. She was sending me off. I knew she didn't like Leeanne. I had the sickening, dismayed notion that my mother was challenging me. She wanted me to find out how much I really liked the companion I had (she thought) chosen for myself. She was watching me, waiting for my answer. Leeanne spoke up for me.

"Perfect! I'm so glad. Nat's going to have so much fun."

I was a *Nat* now.

We headed to the parking lot—me, Leeanne and the baby, Hailey, Michael, and Jaime—to Leeanne's boxy, wood-paneled van. Leeanne told me to sit in the front.

I was unsure if I should do as she said. Taking the front seat, where Hailey would sit if I were not there, would be a breach of the social order. Hailey, being a Backstreet Girl and wearer of bras and mascara, was my superior. However, I didn't have to argue with her. Hailey climbed into the very back of the vehicle with Jaime, indifferent to her mother's whims, possessing the level-headedness of someone who is around unstable people and situations all the time.

I buckled myself into the passenger seat. Michael and the baby in its car seat each occupied a captain chair in the centre of the vehicle.

Leeanne turned on the ignition and waited as a group of wet-haired little girls laden with towels and backpacks trailed their mother in front of the van.

Leeanne shook her head. "What is she thinking? You can't leave wet bathing suits on little girls. It's not healthy. You need to let your bum breathe."

She pulled out of the parking space and onto the road.

Jaime asked if we could stop at McDonald's for McFlurries.

"I don't know where the next McDonald's is, sweetie," Leeanne called back to her daughter. "But god, I could really go for a Big Mac. I'm lucky, I never put on weight. I can eat all the junk I want. Hailey can't. She's a quarter Native. Her dad. There's a McDonald's in Chatham. We'll stop there. You know, I keep saying I'm going to take the kids to the Wheels Inn in Chatham. They have a big pool with all these waterslides. You would love that."

Before long we were approaching Chatham, the upward-twisting rope from the smokestack of the ethanol plant visible in the distance. Michael was squirting a juice box at Jaime in the back seat, and she protested, pleading with Leeanne to make him stop.

"Mike, you better smarten up or you can forget about that McFlurry," Leeanne warned him. She said to me, "I don't want him to be like that, pestering his sister. That's disrespect. I know one thing, and it's that boys need to learn their lessons early on if there's to be any hope for them."

Jaime continued to wail as Michael squirted her. Leeanne said, "That's it. No McFlurry for you."

Michael started screaming and crying. He pitched his juice box at the dashboard. The baby woke and began to whimper. Hailey appeared listless, gazing out the window and sucking on her Backstreet Boys pendant—she had chosen Nick, the blonde one—the

cord of the necklace cutting into either side of her chin and giving it the appearance of being hinged onto her face.

"You're crying doesn't work with me, mister," Leeanne said.

We turned into the McDonald's. Leeanne spoke into the drive-through intercom and Michael howled all the louder. Leeanne turned in her seat and started smacking him in the leg. I could see she wanted to hurt him but was not succeeding.

She turned back and adjusted her sunglasses. She asked me, completely calm, "Do you want a McFlurry?"

I did, but I said no because I didn't want to upset Michael any further.

Leeanne ordered McFlurries for Hailey and Jaime and a Big Mac and a strawberry sundae for herself. She gave me little spoonfuls of the sundae to feed to the baby. Once when I reached back with the spoon, Michael kicked my arm.

Leeanne's home was half of a duplex in a new development in Tilbury. The brick houses were symmetrical and bland with a garage and driveway on either side. There was a small, barren garden with a wooden sign stuck in it that said "Bless This Garden."

I helped unload the car. Jaime and Michael disappeared into the house. Leeanne passed the baby to Hailey and asked her to change its diaper.

A man in jeans and a sleeveless undershirt stood up when Leeanne and I entered the kitchen, kissed her and cupped a handful of her ass in her jean shorts. With her arms around his neck, Leeanne said to him, "Keith, this is Natalie. She's going to be a musician."

Keith regarded me with curiosity or perturbation. I often felt that men looked at me like that as I got older, always wondering why I was so strange and why I was there. Keith was one of the nicer ones. "Take whatever you want out of the fridge," he said.

Leeanne was hanging off his neck. A German shepherd came into the kitchen and nosed at her thigh. Leeanne gazed at Keith with a drugged, doting look.

Looking at him, she said, "I'll take you out to the fridge, Natalie."

Leeanne disengaged herself from Keith's embrace and led me out to the garage. She opened an old latch-sealed refrigerator, and there were rows of beer and cans of pop lined up and boxes of popsicles in the freezer compartment.

"We have to lock the garage now," Leeane told me. "Once we were gone to Detroit shopping and when we came back all the meat was stolen out of the freezer. They took Keith's electric drill, too. Locking the garage. That's something you never think about until someone takes off with a hundred dollars worth of steak."

I took an Orange Crush and Leeanne took a beer.

We settled down in front of the TV. Jaime joined us, and later, Keith.

"The baby asleep?" Leeanne asked him.

"Mmm-hmm," he said. He put his arm around her and pulled her towards him.

I liked that he didn't say much, but I didn't like that he was touching her and that I was here, intruding.

Around nine-thirty, Leeanne told Jaime she had to go to bed, and to tell her brother the same. I was unsure what to do, being alone in the room with Leeanne and Keith. I remained and watched the movie with them for half an hour. Then I got up to find Hailey.

"Are you going to bed, Nat?" Leeanne asked me.

"Yeah."

She smiled serenely. "Okay. Goodnight. Ask Hailey for pajamas."

I went to Hailey's room. She was sitting at a small desk with an open math textbook. She was doing her homework. I was surprised to find her at this mundane task. I thought mature, popular girls like her would have more glamorous occupations in the evenings.

There were the predictable boy band posters on her walls and a peg board where she had tacked up her many swimming medals. Clothes littered the floor. There was a lamp on the nightstand with a revolving cylinder inside that set the shapes of striding horses—blue, green and yellow—moving round the walls.

"Do you want to go to sleep?" Hailey asked. "I'm going to bed soon."

She was straightforward and not unkind. I was grateful for her.

Hailey took a rolled-up t-shirt from a drawer and gave it to me. I changed in the bathroom. I didn't have a toothbrush and decided I would have to go without brushing my teeth for that night.

I returned to Hailey's room and she was removing a giant stuffed alligator and a kangaroo from her bed and turning down the sheets. Instead of pajamas, she wore gym shorts and a tank top that made her breasts look huge. I stood uncertainly in the Guns and Roses t-shirt she had given me to wear to bed. I thought uneasily that it might belong to Keith.

Hailey switched the lights off and the coloured horses moved peacefully around the walls.

"You want the lamp off?" Hailey offered. I told her no, but she turned it off anyway. We got into the bed.

I was in a bed in the dark with a girl I hardly knew. She took up so much space in the small bed. She had a distinctive smell. She was heavy and feminine and strange.

A few times during the night I heard the dog come in and its heavy breathing, and it stopped by my side of the bed and sniffed around. I tensed and waited. Then I held out my hand for it to lick.

I lay awake for three hours before I fell asleep.

Before delivering me to my mother at the pool the next day, Leeanne invited me on a second outing to take place the weekend following. She was taking the kids to Colasanti Gardens for the baby's first birthday. I accepted. I had never refused an invitation. It never occurred to me to do so.

My mother didn't ask me about being at Leeanne's. I felt she was punishing me, letting me think about what I did. I was tired after not having slept well and didn't feel like talking.

When we arrived home after swim team practice, I took a nap. Then I practiced my instruments for four hours.

I had taken up the violin recently. It was different from my other instruments, which were wind instruments. The violin needed convincing. It was something sad and beautiful. Violins were very expensive, but I asked for one and my parents bought one for me, even though my birthday was still three months away. It made me feel powerful, that

I could so easily command such a precious object into my possession. I was discovering that I was talented. My parents never discussed it. They may have been trying to hide from me the fact that I was gifted, but my mother now drove me into Windsor twice a week to take music lessons with a better teacher. Music was becoming something even better to hide in, a vocation.

I practiced in my room with the door shut and the window open, butterfly hairclips fastening my music to the stand so that the sheets wouldn't blow away. I had trouble focusing as I practiced. New people who came into my life and altered the way I thought about myself where like insects getting caught in my hair, distracting me from my course.

I thought about Leeanne telling Keith I was a musician, and how the word had seemed to signify so little to him. I thought this had something to do with the kind of person he was. Leeanne could have told him I was a plant or a garden hose and he would have reacted in the same way.

I didn't know any men who were interested in music like I was. My dad didn't know much about music, though he seemed to respect it. My mother played and taught music, but I didn't want to be like her, and I refused to believe that she loved music as much as I did. She couldn't. She wasn't as miserable as I was. I wouldn't let her be.

I had started to keep a mental list of things to say to Leeanne if I had the chance. She wasn't interested in what anyone besides herself had to say, but I wanted to be kept in her good graces. Everything on my list related to topics that Leeanne was interested in,

including health problems, surgeries, retail scams, my destiny to become a famous musician, and the despicableness of men.

When she came to pick me up in the van on the way to Colasanti Gardens, I was prepared to discuss Princess Diana's recent death, the suspiciousness of the driver, the liability of the boyfriend. If not for the boyfriend, Princess Diana wouldn't have died.

I thought Leeanne would be interested in the accident. But she seemed harried during our visit to Colasanti's, less energetic than usual, worried about the kids running off and about picking out her hanging plants. She and Keith had had an argument.

I walked with the kids through the greenhouses and barns. There were horses, rabbits, exotic birds, reptile cases. You could buy pellets out of a gumball machine to feed the goats. I was too old for this.

We toured a small shop that sold keychains, mugs, and stuffed toys. Hailey bought a small cactus in a clay pot. I thought she would keep it on her desk in her bedroom. I felt a surge of affection for her then. She probably had to go on stupid outings like this with Leeanne and the kids all the time. I suddenly wanted to talk to her, maybe even to try to get to know her and be her friend, but thought better of it. It would probably be easiest for both of us if I left her alone.

Laden with hanging plants and bags of gifts for the baby, Leeanne met us at the eating area. We had French fries and doughnuts and sugary orange drink. Michael coloured in a booklet with broken crayons.

Leeanne took a single birthday candle out of her purse, inserted it into a doughnut on a paper plate, and lit it with a Bic lighter. She set the plate in front of the baby. She

made us sing Happy Birthday. Then she coached the baby in blowing out the candles until Michael extinguished them with a spray of saliva.

"Michael, don't be an idiot," Leeanne said.

She began to mash up some of the doughnut in milk to give to the baby. I noticed that her skin was duller than usual; she hadn't put on any makeup that morning. Her lips looked dry.

"How's your food, Nat?" she inquired.

I told her the food was great. I was thinking about Hailey's cactus. I thought I might buy a little plant of my own before we left. My mother kept some plants on the windowsill in the kitchen but I had never had one in my room. The idea was novel. Ideas I took from other girls were usually ones pertaining to dressing, trends that I sported guiltily and could never truly make my own. A plant, though, could really be mine. Such a small and simple thing.

Jaime asked Leeanne if she could go back to the shop to buy a keychain she wanted.

"Hailey, take your sister," Leeanne ordered.

Hailey picked at a doughnut and looked at her mother darkly, which was unusual for her.

"I can do it," I offered.

Leeanne shot me a dangerous look.

"She said she would do it," Hailey said, exasperated.

"You do what you're told," Leeanne returned.

"I don't mind, really," I said.

"It's not your problem," Leeanne shot at me.

Hailey appeared surprised that her mother had yelled at me, but was dispassionate. We could never be friends. She stood up, scraping her chair loudly, and walked away with Jaime.

Leeanne dipped a napkin in her water glass and wiped the baby's face roughly. She didn't speak to me for the rest of the afternoon. She was aggressively silent in the van on the way home, dropping me at the end of my driveway instead of pulling in.

"Bye," I said. "Thank you."

Leeanne stared straight ahead. The kids were tired and paid me no attention. They were all through with me.

When I went to swimming practice the next day, everyone was oddly rude to me. I was being shunned. The Backstreet Boys group was more exclusive than usual, energized by a new hatred. Girls clung to hate like it was a messy treat they were devouring and happily smearing on their faces. Leeanne had been spreading gossip about me, telling the other mothers, and I suspected, some of the girls, that I had behaved rudely during lunch at Colasanti's, and other things that I wasn't entirely sure of.

Hailey was markedly cold. I couldn't tell if she was hostile and spreading rumours like her mother or just pouting. I sensed that she and the other girls were talking about me when I walked into the changing room after practice. One of the girls burst into purposefully indiscreet, spluttering laughter.

I tried to imagine what Leeanne was saying to make everyone hate me so much. What accusations or untruths could ignite enough scorn to cast me as a worse misfit than I already was? How had she done it? Had she pulled each of them aside, saying, "You're not going to believe this," or, "Let me tell you about this girl Natalie?"

Leeanne's adoption of me likely had something to do with Hailey's dad and her wanting to hurt Hailey. But I took things personally. I was humiliated. I had trouble striking Leeanne off of my list, out of my mindspace. I couldn't do it to her as easily as she had to me. I knew that if I had spoken up, if I had questioned Leeanne's forwardness in the beginning, this might not have happened.

I couldn't wait for the season to be over. There were only a few practices left before school started.

While my dad took Henry to swimming practice after Andrew Ward's funeral, I stayed home with my mother and watched Princess Diana's funeral on TV. The TV station did a retrospective, showing clips from her wedding and from her aid trips to Africa. I saw her wedding dress with its long train like an enormous pile of laundry she was dragging down the aisle of St. Paul's Cathedral.

My mother sat on the couch with me and said, "She was so young. It's such a shame."

After the funeral coverage was over, I went with my mother into town to pick up a few groceries. She bought a cassette tape of Elton John singing "Candle in the Wind" and "The Way you Look Tonight," and we went to the Dairy Freez for milkshakes. We

rarely did things together just the two of us. Usually when my mother took Henry and me for ice cream, she wouldn't have any herself or would just get a scoop of frozen yogurt in a bowl. But today she had a milkshake with me, even though they only came in one extra-large size, and didn't nag me about my chewed cuticles, because a beautiful Princess had died.

We were having our milkshakes in the car.

"Do you like swim team?" my mother asked me.

I was surprised at the question. I thought it was obvious how much I hated swim team and that my mother just hadn't cared. I told her I didn't like swim team.

She said, "I want you to complete your lifesaving training. But you don't have to go on the team next summer if you don't want to."

It occurred to me that my mother may have seen how uncomfortable I was around the other girls at the pool and felt uncomfortable about it herself. Perhaps my being a misfit on the swim team signified a failure for her. In me she saw a part of herself she didn't like, and so she had punished me and sent me away with Leeanne. Today she had tried to take me back. It was a special day, with Andrew Ward's and Princess Diana's funerals.

The milkshake sat uncomfortably in my stomach. I wished I hadn't drunk the whole thing. I wanted to be home, in my room, alone and away from my mother.

Still Breathing

Becky had horrible asthma. There was a twisted, knotted navel in her neck from a grown-over stoma. She had had a tracheotomy a few years back. The wound contracted when she inhaled and bloomed when she exhaled, like a shy anemone flexing with the waves. It was hard not to stare at it.

It looked like there had once been a jewel embedded in her neck like a superhero would have, a jewel that had given her the power to turn things to ice with her breath. But the jewel had been wrenched out, leaving Becky a pitiable mortal with a cosmetic pouch full of drugs and inhalers. Her pill bottles rattled as she walked.

Her breathing was heavy and rhythmic, making her sound perpetually aroused. It wasn't hard to believe she had been shut inside a flashing ambulance and had a hole cut into her windpipe. What I couldn't believe was how someone who had come so close to death could be so unglamorous. Becky was slightly overweight and wore plain, oversized clothes. She liked burning candles, making ugly earrings out of beads and silver wire, and reading romance novels. She watched too much TV and stirred too much margarine into the Kraft Dinner.

She was fascinating to me in her dullness. I was watching her breathe and make jewelry. Her materials were spread out on the kitchen table and the radio was turned on to the Windsor-Detroit alternative rock station. She was breathing in half-time to Hole. There was the slow suck of the inhale, then the moist rattle of the exhale. She was oblivious to my watching her, hunched in concentration, hot-gluing over a *Maclean's* I had cut up for a school project on Kosovo. With needle-nosed pliers and surprising

dexterity, she bent wire into shapes astounding to look at but hideous to wear. The beads she used were individually pretty but ludicrous and tacky when hooked onto her ears.

Becky lived down the road and watched us when our parents went out, which wasn't very often. I was nearly thirteen but my mother didn't like my brother and me alone in the house at night. She told me what to do if Becky's asthma took a turn for the worse.

"Just call 911 and the ambulance will come get her. Call her mom, too. The number's on the fridge."

My mother didn't seem worried about this possible emergency. She didn't like Becky. She found her laboured breathing obnoxious, her lethargy vitriolic. My mother disliked anyone who had a disability, seeming to think they should have thought about it ahead of time before they got one. Weaknesses were embarrassing for everyone and should be avoided. But Becky was our babysitter.

Henry loved the idea of Becky breathing out of a tube in her neck, a chubby slug kept alive by machines. He mocked her for it. He tried to poke her stoma. He wanted to see if it would catch his finger when she inhaled, like a mouth. Becky would repeatedly swat his hand away and reprimand him. She tried to be stern with us but was distracted and lazy.

I was mean to her too. I practiced my saxophone and called out to the living room where she was watching TV, "You could never play this, could you Becky? You would die in like two seconds."

I wasn't trying to be cruel. I thought I was being observant, noting the tasks I took for granted that required a considerable amount of breath and would be nearly impossible

for Becky to accomplish. I thought the motions of the everyday must each appear more precious to her, that her boring personality was one she chose for herself, a monotonous exterior belying the bustling, elaborate workings of her mind underneath.

She was bright in some ways. She understood how things were put together. She fixed our vacuum cleaner. She took apart the casing with screws, disassembled the parts inside, removed the hair and fibres wound around the cylinder, and put everything back together. She hung an antique barometer that had been lying against the wall in the living room for a week, waiting for someone to mount it. I let her fix my flute when one of the screws became loose.

I wouldn't let most people touch my instruments. Becky appeared clumsy, but her hands were precise.

There were trade-offs in life. You couldn't be good at everything. If you were exceptionally good at one thing, you were bound to be awful at another thing of greater or equal value.

My mother said of one of her piano pupils, a forty-year-old, unmarried biology professor at the University of Windsor, "That's what she gets for being so smart."

I was talented at playing music but untalented at making people like me. Becky was good at making and fixing things but had an ugly dent in her neck and no personality to speak of.

Watching Becky make jewelry was how I learned about good songs. Her taste was poor in every area except music. The music that played on the radio as she made jewelry was the only kind of music I cared to listen to aside from my classical albums. The song playing at the moment was a Hole song that went,

I'm Miss World

somebody kill me

kill me pills

no one cares, my friends.

The song was perfect for Becky because she was the only person I knew who deserved to feel as tragic as its singer sounded. Courtney Love sounded like she was half-asleep when she sang the verses. She sounded like she could barely stand up anymore.

I went to my room and attempted the song's melody on my violin.

"You're so gay," Henry told me.

I knew I was weird. But Becky was weird in a weirder way.

She was unafraid to rearrange things in our home at her convenience. She would arrive with a large bag full of her possessions, as if prepared for a lengthy visit that would be difficult to endure. She removed my mother's tablecloth and faux fruit centerpiece from the kitchen table to make room for her craft area. There was her ritual of taking a mirrored tray from the bathroom (on which my mother displayed her perfume bottles and jars of face cream), setting it on the coffee table in the living room, placing her candles on it, and lighting them. No real work could begin until the candles were lit. There were different candles that smelled strongly of trees and a cat candle with a long cat neck. When she blew out the candles, she poured out the wax with a swirl of her wrist to leave the outer shell intact.

Sometimes Becky put things back they way she had found them, and sometimes she did not.

She was usually absorbed in a smutty book or a show. We had recently signed up for a free satellite TV trial. My dad watched the sports channels. My mother said the extra channels were unnecessary and we didn't need them, but she watched movies and the lifestyle channels. Becky watched reruns of eighties sitcoms. She didn't like us to sit and watch with her. "You have—homework," she said, gulping for breath. That was how she talked. "I don't—know anything about—geography."

We didn't like to watch TV with her either. Her loud breathing with distracting.

If we were lucky, my parents left us money to order from Lucky Wok, as they had tonight. My mother said Becky didn't clean up well enough after she cooked, anyway, so we would all be better off.

I made myself scarce when the delivery man came to the door. I didn't want him to think I was related to Becky or anything. She paid for the food and called Henry and me for dinner.

She read as we ate. Watching Becky eat was distressing. She chewed with her mouth open in order to get enough air. She sounded like she was being strangled. She passed chicken balls dipped in blood red sauce to her mouth with one hand and held her romance novel open with the other hand. On the cover of the book was a woman falling limply out of a man's arms like a sack of flour.

While Becky was focusing on reading and eating, it was an opportune time for Henry to try to poke her stoma wound. The struggle ended with Henry getting smacked and a mess of spilled Chinese food and jewelry beads.

I would never have tried to touch her wound like Henry did. I would hate to feel the rough scar tissue, the suck of breath underneath like water through a pipe. I wondered if Becky ever touched the spot to feel the puckered skin, if she hated it, if it made her feel ashamed. It would be a constant reminder, telling you that you that you were just barely still here.

I felt embarrassed for myself and for other women, like Becky.

The flaws of the women around me were as infuriating to me as blemishes on my own body. Whenever I observed Becky's stoma wound pulsing, glimpsed a faded, dirty bra strap slipping out from underneath a woman's sleeve in the check-out line at Zellers, or saw my mother throwing a pinkish, tissue-wrapped wad into the bathroom wastebasket, I felt a flash of panic. I wanted these imperfections hidden, as if they had the potential to reveal something shameful about myself. I wanted control. I wanted all women to be discreet and clean, so that I would not be noticed, found out, dismissed, and humiliated.

Even the library fountain embarrassed me. There was a fountain in front of the Leamington public library with statues of naked women bathing. The women had blank open eyes. In winter they were wrapped up in black canvas like bodies about to be tossed out to sea. But now it was summer and the women were bare in their stony nakedness, languishing on the fountain edge as if it were perfectly natural to hang around naked. Once Anita's brother and his friends put laundry detergent in the fountain and it bubbled for days.

I knew everyone made fun of the statues, and it made me feel guilty, like I was somehow culpable for their nakedness—their breasts, the gentle bloat of their stomachs, the self-conscious, docile tilt of their heads. The soap bubbles made it look like they were sweating froth. Like horses would.

I could never get away from women and their offensive productions.

It was a warm June day. My mother was about to tweeze her eyebrows. She was walking around the kitchen with a warm cloth over her forehead to open up her pores. She couldn't simply sit in her bedroom and relax while this occurred; she had to be doing at least three things at once. She was holding the cloth to her face with one hand and wiping out the cutlery drawer with the other as she cradled the cordless phone between her ear and her shoulder, speaking to her sister.

I was sitting on our patio, eating the leftover Chinese food I had heated up for my late breakfast and listening to Grieg on my Discman. The creek was bright and calm. I was wearing headphones, but I could still hear all the clattering inside the kitchen.

All these composers whose music I listened to were men. If they were jerks or assholes, I didn't care. They didn't steam their faces and pluck their eyebrows. They didn't make so much *noise*. They were dead, and therefore irreproachable.

I went walking down the road. I came to Becky's house.

Becky and her mother were sitting on the stoop. They looked like they were deciding whether to go somewhere or not. The mother was smoking. She was an older and more vivid version of Becky. Her silhouette was larger and cushier, but she wore

more neatly fitting clothes and some makeup. Her eyes were brighter and she had an overall appearance of being more alert and permanent than her daughter. She dragged on her cigarette. She angled her lips to blow the smoke away from Becky. She looked like she was trying to blow an insect off her face.

Becky looked weak and faded, like a garment washed too many times. I wondered if they had been on their way to the car and she had gotten too tired and had needed a rest.

There was one of those wooden cut-outs of a man and woman bent over and the man's hand on the woman's bottom in their yard.

Becky's mother muttered something to her, probably something about me.

"Hi there," she called out.

I stopped and took off my headphones.

"Hi," I returned.

"Well aren't you cute," Becky's mother remarked, smirking sourly, as if to say she knew how ugly her daughter was sitting beside her and just about anything would be better, including me.

She added, "I just made carrot muffins, do want one?"

My mother always told us not to accept food from people we didn't know well. School bake sales were off-limits. We were to consider licked fingers and spoons, uncovered sneezes, cats walking on the counter. Or in Becky's case, spray of cigarette ash and mucous.

"Uh, no, thank you," I said.

I hesitated, then put my headphones back on and continued down the road.

As I walked, I felt a mysterious tension slowly leaving my body, like water dripping from a cloth. I often felt anxious when talking to people I didn't know very well, and to people I did know well, for that matter. I didn't notice the exact moment during an encounter when this tension arrived and took hold of me, squeezing me so that few words, and fewer words of real value, could make their way out of my mouth. But with Becky and her mother, I realized, there had been an added layer to this tension, an extra rigidity. It was as if I were subconsciously worried I might contract some of Becky's malaise—her phlegminess and her utter uncoolness—just from being close to her. As the tension drained from my body, I felt oddly thankful. I thought, at least I could breathe. At least I wasn't fat. At least I wasn't a teenager with a big hole in my neck. When I was a full teenager, I wouldn't be so pathetic, and I could at least be thankful for that.

Still, I was a bit shocked that Becky's mother smoked cigarettes despite her daughter's extreme asthma. There was something sly and uncouth about her, dragging on her cigarette and smirking as her daughter panted helplessly beside her. Perhaps I couldn't stand to be around Becky because she was unloved.

My mom called up Becky to watch us that Friday night. She and my dad were going to a blues show in Windsor. Becky arrived with her tote full of candles and craft activities, as usual. Within minutes, the house stank of pine and hot glue.

I had my counterpoint workbook open on the kitchen table as I watched her. To my surprise, she took an interest in me.

"Would you like me—to make you—some earrings?" she managed.

"Sure," I said. I wouldn't be caught dead wearing anything she made, but it was pathetic she had no friends to give her jewelry to, so I thought it would be kind to say yes.

"Your ears—are pierced—right?"

I fingered my lobes. "Yeah, they are."

I had had my ears pierced when I was five or six. It had felt like a hard pinch, not as painful as I had expected. I rarely wore earrings and was concerned that my holes might have closed up.

Becky began to fiddle with some silver wire. She produced two tiny, matching eighth notes. They were not something I would have picked out for myself in a store, but they were much more tasteful than the earrings she usually made.

Becky cleaned the ear hooks with some rubbing alcohol. She presented the little music note earrings to me. It was very sweet. I felt honoured, uncomfortable, like I might cry, and like I needed to spit.

"Thanks," I said to Becky.

"No problem—Natalie," she said.

I went to my room to finish my homework and stayed in there for the rest of the night. I didn't want to be around Becky. I was almost trembling with the nauseating intimacy of her gift and the fear that I might have to accept any more of her pitiful generosity. It felt like she had stuck something in my heart that didn't belong there, like a penny she should have thrown into a fountain.

I turned off the lights, crawled into bed, and tried not to think about Becky. This was difficult. Because her breathing was so loud, I could always tell where Becky was in

the house. She had already checked that Henry's lights were out, but I could hear her coming back down the hall, breathing heavily. She should have realized that trying to sneak around was useless. She sounded like a creature sneaking up on you in a horror movie.

A light went on. The hallway was faintly lit. She was in my parents' room.

I got up. I moved quietly to the edge of the doorframe. I looked into the room.

Becky was bent over my mother's dresser. She was pulling things out of one of the drawers: lingerie. Lingerie I didn't know my mother owned, underneath the stacks of plain white panties, that she probably didn't wear very often. The items were lacey and stiff, like things vomited in private, dried and kept. Becky was fumbling through the drawer, taking things out, laying them on top of the dresser and inspecting them.

I backed down the hall into my room.

I felt sickened by what I had seen. Why was Becky going through my mother's underwear?

The incident confirmed to me that Becky was a complete weirdo, even more bizarre than I had thought she was, and that I should never accept any type of kindness from her again.

But I also felt threatened in a way that had nothing to do with Becky. The lingerie was a sign that my parents did not hate each other. That my father did not hate my mother.

I had always thought of their outings, on nights when Becky watched us, as mandatory ones, parent-teacher meetings or dinner invitations politely accepted, rather than romantic excursions. It had never occurred to me that my parents wanted to spend

any time together alone. However, their outings had been more and more frequent as of late. It was as if they had suddenly become more interested in one another or were trying to recover something.

I had gotten used to my parents not getting along and to seeing the ways in which they were different, and I found a certain comfort in this. My father got angry at my mother for being snobbish, and she was critical about certain things he did. All of this had something to do with the way she was brought up. Recently, she had yelled at my dad because he had taken Henry camping and Henry got ticks. The fight ended in him leaving and slamming the front door and her dropping a plate and crying.

I was beginning to understand why I didn't like the piano. My mother was always at home, ushering students in and out of the living room like a gracious matron. When she was with a student, she spoke more evenly and softly. She wore skirts. It was a role she played with energy and one that we, her real family, didn't deserve. Sometimes, for a treat, my mother would play a song for a student. She was pleased if they asked. She had never fallen out of practice. If she had trained as rigorously as I trained, she might have been a performer. She was prideful, and I knew this bothered my dad.

She was critical of him, but I knew she wanted his attention. I saw how she sometimes flirted with him, asking him to buy her something that she didn't really need. He sometimes cooperated with her fantasies and flirted back, even if he wasn't going to buy her the bracelet or the scarf she had asked for, but he was often repelled by her acting. I felt good when he rejected her, when he shook off her silly embraces. Then I knew that my mother's feminine advances were stupid and useless.

If my dad didn't like her, I felt better. I felt saved.

The next morning, I felt a bit better, because my parents had a disagreement about buying our family plot in the cemetery. It was my mother's idea. She had put it on her Mastercard. The cemetery man had given her a map of the cemetery with our spots marked with X's. She showed it to us.

My father was gingerly kneading his forehead with his fingers, as if feeling for imperfections on the surface of his skull. "I can't believe this," he said.

"It's a good deal," my mother responded mildly. She was flipping through the Pennysaver. "Six spots. It's a nice cemetery. People want places in this cemetery. It's going to get full."

"Who are the extra two spots for?" I asked her.

"In case we get fat," Henry said.

I thought sullenly of Becky and her chubby thighs.

"And you're certain we're all going to be dying here?" my dad demanded.

My mother looked up at him and stared.

"I'm not living here forever," Henry snorted.

I hadn't thought about where I would live and die. I had always had a trapped feeling like I wasn't really living yet, though there had never seemed to be an option of leaving.

"That Becky is getting wax on the carpets," my mother commented. She had turned back to her flyer.

"Why can't we just stay home on our own?" Henry asked.

"Because your sister would be too busy playing her instruments to notice if you left the house or hurt yourself or lit something on fire."

She didn't say it like it was a bad thing. Playing music was my job, the only thing it was really okay with her for me to do.

"I hate Becky," I said. No one looked at me or said anything.

That afternoon, I decided to take my bike out to Cemetery Road to see our family plot. It was quiet on this road and I pedaled slowly. The air was cool along the wooded border of the provincial park. I could see bright studs of marsh marigolds inside the woods on the dark ground.

I read the gravestones. Some people had been buried here a hundred years ago. Others had been buried very recently. I had brought the map, and I located our family plot. It was a small area—smaller than I had expected—near the southwest corner of the cemetery. I sat down on the grass of our plot. I was not afraid to be there in the cemetery, not like in an empty room where I felt like someone could be hiding behind a piece of furniture and jump out at me at any moment. It felt like I was the only person who could come here.

I saw a Junebug on one of the headstones. Junebugs came out around this time, shortly before the school year ended. There tended to be more of them in Leamington than in Wheatley, covering houses and shop windows. June bugs were dirty. If they got on your clothes, they left a mark.

The June bug swayed in the breeze, but its sticky body was stuck to the headstone. Each of its wings was the shape of half a heart. Junebugs only lived for a day.

I picked up the Junebug by its wings and set it on the grass. I got up, and I stepped on it. It made a light *pop*.

When I returned home, I went into the bathroom, locked the door, and tried on the earrings Becky had made for me. They slipped in fairly easily; my holes hadn't closed up yet. The music notes appeared tiny enough in the mirror. Even cute. I had my hair pulled back and the notes flashed when I turned my head.

I took out my hair elastic and brushed some of my hair over my shoulder. The earrings looked even more understated this way. Just a hint of silver. I thought I could actually get away with wearing them in public. Girls my age wore enormous earrings, hoops or dangly shoulder dusters that looked more appropriate for dances at the arena than for school. I had always found that adding jewelry or makeup to my outfit made it look like I thought I was prettier than I actually was, that people would look at me and scoff, Who is she kidding?

Old ladies sometimes told me I was pretty. My mom had told me I was pretty once—or rather, she had told Henry I was pretty when he called me an ugly freak. "Your sister is pretty." She said it to him in the same way she would say, "Don't be an idiot."

Becky, I was sure, was not pretty. Becky was ugly. A lost cause.

I could have startled her the night before, threatened to tell my parents that she had been going through my mother's things, bargained with her. What she had done was too strange to be forgivable. I later attributed the incident to a gawky curiosity about sex.

Later that year, my parents came home and found Becky watching porn on the satellite. My mother terminated our free trial the next morning. Becky never came back. She died from an asthma attack when she was eighteen. She may have never had sex.

Boys and Ghosts

The greenhouses glowed like little chapels and lit the night sky burnt brown. I could not see the stars. There was a dusty rotting smell from the smashed tomatoes on the highway.

We were walking down the highway from Kelly's house.

My arms and legs were cold. My hair was cold and smooth on my shoulders, and I could smell how burnt it was. Kelly had ironed it for me on the bed. First she tried getting me to bend over the ironing board, but that was awkward and hurt my neck, so she had me lie down on her parents' bed and she ironed my hair out in a fan around my head. It was a hard bed.

The tomatoes were flat gleaming blisters on the pavement. They had tumbled from tractor wagons on the way to the canning factories. Whenever a car drove by in the dark and the headlights shone on us, I could see the crushed tomatoes spotting the road, their undignified oozings of pulp and seeds, and the broken wings of hair lit up around my face. My hair was the colour of taffy in the light. Sometimes the cars honked at us. That meant we looked slutty enough. Kelly's wooden wedge heels were going *clok clok clok* on the road.

Jaclyn and I were walking behind Kelly and Anita and the stripes of Anita's miniskirt didn't match up at the vertical seam in the back. This irritated me. I was wearing a dress that barely covered my ass. We always dressed up when we left the house at night, even though we never went anywhere interesting. There was nowhere interesting to go. But we had to look good in case we ran into boys.

We were sixteen.

Jaclyn had had the same boyfriend for two years. She was one of the few girls I knew who could have a boyfriend and not talk about him very often, which meant that she was self-assured. I felt threatened by her. Kelly was a girl who pretended she had done more things with more boys than she really had. Anita had never done anything with boys but wanted to.

I felt uncomfortable around boys. I didn't want to be around them. But I was in a rush to *do* something with them, to be *done* by them. I felt I had something to prove, that once I had had sex, then I could relax and not worry about it anymore. I had no desire to be in a relationship—not the brief, decorative kind of relationship that many girls had once or twice a year, flaunting their boyfriend like a new haircut, nor the understated, enduring kind of relationship that Jaclyn had. I craved men's approval, but at the same time, I really couldn't bear it. I hated to be looked at. I wanted to be alone.

We were in search of boys, but this outing was officially for snacks. The grocery store was at the edge of town. A group of field workers milled in front of the A & P in the left-over heat of evening: Mexicans and Jamaicans holding plastic grocery bags, chewing wooden toothpicks, and ogling groups of teenaged girls on their late-night trips for ice cream, like us.

A shuttle bus took the workers to and from the grocery store on Friday nights. Some rode their bicycles.

We filed past the staring men, past the hanging plants and paper cones of flowers for sale and through the sliding doors. Kelly's wedge heels clacked loudly through produce. It was past nine and most of the aisles were empty, the deli counter closed. A

Jamaican man lingering in the freezer section whispered to us, "Are you cold?" His voice sounded far away but insistent. We giggled nervously and skittered away, clutching our cold arms.

We bought ice cream and three bags of chips. Original, barbeque, sour cream and onion. We exited the store.

I watched a man tying a plastic bag onto the handlebar of his bicycle.

Some boys we recognized from school were getting out of a truck in the parking lot. They all had the same shaggy hair style that let you know they thought about their hair a lot.

"It's Will. Come on," Kelly said.

We went up to the truck.

Kelly crossed her arms, intentionally or unintentionally pushing her breasts together, a plastic bag hanging from each of her elbows. She wore a pink tank top with a skull on it, and coming out of the skull's mouth was a tongue or a snake or a ribbon or something else.

To the boy who had gotten out of the driver's side seat, she said, "What's going on."

I tucked that perfectly opaque line of greeting into a pocket of my mind for later use.

"We're going to Isaac's," Will said.

I didn't know who that was.

Kelly and Will talked quietly together. Jaclyn said something to one of the other boys which I didn't hear, and the boys and Jaclyn and Anita all laughed. I had already

fallen behind in the conversation. I was never listening properly. This tended to happen whenever my friends and I encountered another group. I felt marginal.

Finally Kelly said to Will, "You know Jaclyn and Anita, right? And this is Natalie."

Will nodded charily.

He didn't know me. I was the girl with all the instrument cases on the bus whom people never really knew. I played flute in band class. The material was pretty simple. I was first flute and I got all the solos, so I sat on the end of the row with Anita on my left. Condensation would build up inside of her flute and run out the end and onto my knee.

The one boy that I had made out with was from the band. He played the trumpet and often had a red half-moon over his top lip. He had tasted like metal.

A head suddenly appeared over the side of the truck bed. It was a boy I sometimes saw at school, Sean. He had been lying down in the back of the truck. He looked at us, and seeming to have discovered nothing remarkable, lay back down and disappeared.

Will invited us to go out to Texas Side Road with them later that week.

We walked back to Kelly's. Few cars were on the highway now. The humidity had not let up. The sky, with its chemical browns and pinks, appeared stained with the heat of daytime. There were fewer tomatoes to avoid on the way home; only empty tomato wagons traveled in this direction, back to the farms.

We ate the junk we had bought and made vodka-orange drinks with grenadine. Kelly put grenadine in everything. The red syrup stretched to the bottom of my glass, slow and unreal, like menstrual blood.

Kelly's brother gave Anita and me a ride home around one.

Anita had done the Miss Tomato pageant this year. She had to have three dresses: one for the opening, one for the talent section, and one for the awards and closing. Her first dress was a backless halter, so she had to wear one of those stick-on bras from the pharmacy.

She did a gymnastics routine for her talent. She flipped and tumbled and twirled a streamer. She was very good. I had forgotten that Anita was good at anything, that she had these abilities. I preferred my friends to be ordinary and talentless so that I could be sure I was superior to them.

Nicola Cervino won the pageant. Her dad's winery was sponsoring it. She had played the piano for her talent, a rendition of "Colours of the Wind" from *Pocahontas*, and I knew that she sucked. I was indignant. Nicola was not a real musician like I was. But I would never have gone into a pageant.

Anita was devastated. She had worked so hard on her routine. She had spent two months' pay on her pageant dresses. She worked at a dollar store with a Sears catalogue service.

I ripped off her stick-on bra for her and she cried. Kelly, Jaclyn and I tried to comfort her.

"She only won because her dad is rich," Jaclyn insisted.

"She's a shit musician," I said. "She's not even a musician, what am I saying. She's not even that pretty."

"They should have pageants for guys," Kelly suggested.

Anita nodded appreciatively, sniffling.

"No one wants men to parade up and down a stage," Jaclyn said.

"No," Kelly agreed. "But they should."

Kelly's house was the only place where we could usually drink. At my house, there was only my dad's beer in the fridge, and my mom would be furious if we drank it. Anita's parents didn't keep alcohol in the house, and Jaclyn's parents were Catholic.

Kelly often borrowed a set of special shot glasses from her brother. When you filled them up, images of naked women appeared in the bottom. I felt sad for those shimmering, wanton prisoners. It was as if they had been hypnotized into their underwater life, thinking they were happy, thinking that everything was wonderful and never knowing what they were missing. Once I downed my shot, the woman disappeared.

Kelly wanted a set of shot glasses with naked men on the bottom, but she couldn't find them in the store where her brother had gotten his set. Still, she was pretty sure they existed.

This is what we did on most weekends: sit at Kelly's, talking about the things we never did, eating junk and drinking. Sometimes Kelly made something nice, like quiche, and we ate that and drank.

Occasionally we were invited to a party, which was always a bonfire in a field.

We weren't cool. We didn't have cars or cell phones. I had a purple Raleigh bike called *The Tarantula* and an old Motorola beeper my dad had won in a raffle at work. Sometimes my mom beeped me when I was late coming home, but I never called her back, so it was pointless carrying it around.

I didn't mind riding a bike. Sometimes I rode my bike all the way to Kelly's, which took almost an hour. I kept a pair of spandex biking shorts in my purse in case I was wearing a dress or skirt. It was fun to cycle over tomatoes and hear the gentle *squelch* they made. Sometimes I played a game, thinking I had to swerve each time a tomato appeared ahead. Like a signal of respect. The pavement would gather under my front tire. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Then a dark glistening—a tomato!—and I would steer around it. The little squashed mound would gleam up at me in gratitude.

The highway was too dark at night for me to cycle back from Kelly's, so I usually slept over or had my dad come get me.

We used to attend the occasional concert at Cobo in Detroit, but it took longer to cross the border now. 9/11 had happened a year ago. I was in school at the time, and the principal came on the P.A. system to tell us what had happened. Then my Polish math teacher started telling us about what it was like in Poland during the war. Not really understanding, I had only felt afraid when I went home and saw the news coverage on TV, with videos of the planes hitting the buildings.

I had heard that the radio stations weren't allowed to play "It's Raining Men" anymore, because it might remind people of the people jumping out of the World Trade Centre buildings, but if I heard the song again, I must not have noticed.

Being invited to go to Texas Side Road was more exciting than anything that usually happened to us. Texas Side Road, near Amherstburg, was supposed to be haunted. Some people said there was a headless woman walking around, looking for her

head. Some people said it was a man. Kelly said she was pretty sure it was a woman because the man would probably think his head was still attached. There was also a story about a family called the Morencies living on Texas Road having trouble with ghosts back in the thirties. Their house eventually burned down.

There were no actual records of accidents on the road, but the lore persisted. Kids went to the area all the time and got stoned and wandered around, looking to get scared. Anita was scared of ghosts. I was scared about being stuck in a vehicle for an hour with a bunch of guys I had nothing to say to. The trip seemed like a good opportunity, though. I could say and feel like I had done something.

Jaclyn decided not to come and stayed at home with her boyfriend. Anita, Kelly and I piled into Will's mom's van late Thursday evening.

I sat in the back of the van, next to Sean. He smelled like Burger King. He had dark, lustreless eyes, like a rabbit's. He grinned dryly at me, but with affability.

"Do you smoke, Natalie?" he asked me.

He knew my name.

"No," I replied, "I need to keep all my air."

What I meant was that I played wind instruments and needed to keep my lungs free of tar, but Sean seemed to accept my response at face value. He lit a joint, dragged on it, and passed it to me.

"Just this one time," he said.

"Once can't hurt," I agreed.

I liked smoking the joint. I liked having something in my hand, something to do besides watching everyone.

I began to notice the crumbs and grit in the creases of the seats. There were fast food wrappers littering the floor. The van was dirty. The pot made me more paranoid about the dirt. I was clenching my thighs together and holding my arms tight to my sides. I was strangely afraid to relax my limbs and allow them to come into contact with more dirt.

Sean passed the joint to Patrick and to Anita, who refused it. I knew Anita was afraid pot would make her see ghosts.

I felt anxious and giddy. Sean looked at me and grinned.

"You look like you're getting a shot at the doctor's," he said.

"I do?"

I laughed without meaning to. That was a funny thing for him to say. It sounded sweet and childish. For I moment, I considered that maybe I was too harsh on men.

"It's the dirt," I told Sean. "Ew."

"You need to relax," he said.

He rubbed my shoulder in circles. I could feel my whole body wanting to move in circles, like one of those clown punching bags with a sandbag in the bottom. I clutched my purse in my lap and rooted myself to the seat. My body hurt from tensing my muscles.

I noticed how uncomfortable Anita looked sitting next to Patrick.

"Are we pairing off?" I asked stupidly.

"I think your friend likes Will," Sean offered.

I knew Kelly liked Will. I saw how every moment or so she reached over to him as if to brush something out of his hair. It was generous of Sean to pretend that my comment was not awkward.

We arrived at Texas Road. Will pulled over by the cemetery. I was happy to get out of the van, away from the dirt.

It was dark, though the sky glowed that chemical pink and brown in the distance. Will produced a case of beer and passed the cans around. He and Kelly linked arms and stumbled off. I heard her scream, once, pretending to be scared. Anita went off with Patrick.

We ran around in the dark and drank.

Sean walked with me among the tombstones. I thought of men in top hats strolling with women in heeled boots down garden paths. I hated strolling. I felt silly.

"How did you know my name?" I asked him.

"I don't know. School. I've seen you carrying your suitcase around."

"My suitcase? You mean my saxophone?"

I panicked. Did people think I carried a *suitcase* around school?

"So where is this ghost supposed to be?" Sean wondered aloud. I wished I was as natural a conversationalist as he.

"I don't know. Probably not here."

I had heard that ghosts didn't hang out in graveyards. Sean and I went back up to the road and began to walk down it. He grabbed my hand and we walked like that. Then he pitched his already empty beer can into the grass, stood before me in the road, and took my waist.

When I was closer to him, he smelled better. There was a clean scent of soap or shampoo underneath the stink of smoke. The Burger King smell must have been from the van. I thought briefly that the clean scent on Sean might belong to some drug I didn't know about—something medicinal, a solution you rubbed on your cheeks or earlobes and imbibed through your skin all day.

Sean gripped my waist and looked at me. I held my right shoulder with my left hand and my beer with my right hand. I was grateful again to have something to hold.

Sean kissed me. He was slow, practiced. He was better than trumpet guy.

He let go out of my waist. He produced another joint and began to smoke it. He wandered off into the dark.

Was that it?

I wondered if he was trying to be dramatic or mysterious.

I walked by myself and sipped my beer. I looked around for a woman with no head. I thought I saw something once, but it was only Anita, her pale face an orb in the dark. Half an hour or so must have passed before I returned to the van, where Will, Kelly, Patrick, and Anita were waiting.

Will regarded me skeptically.

"Any ghosts?" he inquired.

I was sure he found something about me reprehensible.

"No," I said.

"Where's Sean?" Patrick asked.

Will turned on the headlights of the van and honked the horn.

Sean came prancing out from the tombstones, holding my purse. He was wearing my spandex biking shorts over his jeans.

"Those are going to get stretched out," Anita said sententiously.

She was the only sober one, so she ended up driving the van back to Leamington.

I spent the next morning practicing my violin. I was confused, disappointed, and vaguely thrilled about what had happened the night before. Sean and I had kissed. I wasn't sure what was supposed to happen next. Were we going to date now? How would I talk to him again?

I was able to practice my instruments more often during the summer months. I didn't have a summer job and my parents didn't seem to care that I didn't, though Henry was working full time at Heinz for his second summer in a row. If I wasn't in school, I was still busy with my music. If Henry wasn't in school, he was lazy. Laziness was one thing that my parents could agree on. It was disgusting and dangerous.

Henry was in his quiet years now. The only thing we ever did together anymore was walk to Captain's Corner, a store that sold ice cream and firewood. Henry would tell the young cashier that he had seen a man steal a chocolate bar on his way out so that she would go after the ostensible man and *he* could steal something. I would buy a scoop of Moosetracks in a bowl.

Henry wasn't interested in my life. I didn't think he was terribly perceptive or wondered about what I was doing at any time. I don't know what he thought when Sean

called and asked for me. I was sure he wouldn't tell our parents that a boy had called for me. He wouldn't care enough to.

Sean had asked Will to ask Kelly for my number. He asked me if I wanted to come over that night. It sounded casual, like a guy asking another guy to come over. Guys were supposed to show up and take girls places, not ask them over.

"Sure," I accepted.

"What was that noise I heard?" Sean asked.

"What noise."

"When your brother picked up the phone, I could hear something."

"I don't know," I said.

"There was something."

"It was my violin."

Sean paused. "Okay, then. See you later."

I rode my bike to Sean's house after dinner. He lived on Mersea Road 24. It was a one-storey house with lots of windchimes and junk hanging off of it. It looked like a crashed spaceship that someone had turned into their home. I stood my bike against the house near the side door, and a dog with speckled fur lying on the ground looked up at me confusedly like I had turned on a bright light that was hurting his eyes.

I knocked on the frame of the screen door and Sean opened it. He was wearing the same thing he had been wearing the night we went to Texas Side Road. I went inside the

house. I didn't remove my shoes. His parents were home—I could hear a TV on in the living room—but we walked past and went down into the basement.

There was a washing machine and dryer, an ironing board, a computer desk, a couch, stacks of boxes, and lots of hunting stuff. There was a deer's head mounted on the wall. The floor was cement.

We sat down on the couch and started making out. Then we got high.

I told my parents I was going to Anita's when I went to Sean's. I always went straight into the shower when I got home so I could wash the smell of pot off of me. I went over to Sean's two more nights that week. Then, on the fourth night, we were making out on the couch and he put his hand up my skirt and yanked down my underwear.

The first thing I thought was that the easiest thing would be to give him a blow job. But the thought of it grossed me out. And this thing, what I wanted to get over with, was something I needed to have done *to* me, so there could be no question about it—I could know it had been done. So we had sex on the plaid couch underneath the deer head. The couch smelled and felt nubbly and scratchy underneath me. It was painful.

The deer head was staring at me, its eyes shining and asking, "Why do I look like I'm alive? I hate to pretend that I'm alive. I'm dead. Let me be dead."

I thought, What am I doing wrong right now? Is sex wrong? Is killing animals wrong? Is having sex in front of dead animals wrong?

Then I thought, I need to get out of here. I should be practicing my flute right now.

I pushed Sean away from me. I got up and put on my clothes. He watched me. I smiled. He smiled back, and I felt relieved and disgusted. He thought I was being the mysterious one this time. I went up the stairs and slipped out the door.

I got on my bicycle and rode home. It hurt. I tried to pedal standing up, which made my progress slower and was still painful. There weren't many cars on the road. The air was still and humid. My ironed hair frizzed around my face. There was only the rhythmic *chink* of the bicycle chain. Some tomatoes had tumbled over the yellow line and onto my side of the road. I could have played the tomato game, but I wasn't in the mood.

I arrived home. I heated up some leftover casserole my mother had made and brought it to my desk in my bedroom. I started writing a list.

Saturday

6 am	*flute*
10	*snack*
10:10	*violin*
12:30 pm	*lunch*
1	*saxophone*
3	*snack*
3:10	*flute*
4:30	*homework*

6:30 *dinner*

7 *flute/violin*

9 *bed*

I sat and ate and looked at my list. Then I realized I would have to go to bed soon if I wanted to get up at six to start my new weekend schedule. I went to bed.

Sean called my house the next day, but I told Henry to tell him I wasn't home. He called again the next day. Then he showed up at my house. We had sex awkwardly and hurriedly, standing up behind my bedroom door. Sean threw the condom into the waste basket beside my desk. After he left, I picked it out with a Kleenex and rode my bike to the gas station to throw it out in the garbage can there. I knew my mom would find it if it was in the house.

I worried that my parents might have figured out what had happened. But they didn't. Once I was sure they hadn't noticed anything, I was calm. Twice meant that I had really gotten it over with. In a way, I felt like none of it had ever happened. The encounters were each quick, bright and insignificant as an earring dropped down a drain. When Sean continued to call me, I was surprised to find that I seemed to have entered into some kind of contract with him. I started going to Anita's at night, cutting my practice schedule a bit short, so I would not be at home if Sean came looking for me.

By now, my mother had noticed that Sean was calling the house a lot. I knew he was a slob and not the kind of boy she would approve of, even if she ever believed a boy

would like me, but she asked me if I liked Sean and if I thought we were going to go on a date. That was the first time I felt sad. I was angry at her for being so stupid and not knowing.

A group of us met at Kelly's one night: me, Kelly, Anita, Jaclyn and her boyfriend, Will, Sean, and Patrick.

Kelly, Anita and I were making drinks in the kitchen, and Kelly said, "So how is he?"

"Who?" I feinted. "What? Sean?"

I never said anything I meant.

"Will told me you guys slept together," Kelly persisted. "How is he?"

Anita looked shocked. I hadn't told her.

I said, "Oh, he's. . . you know."

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say. Maybe brag about how great he was or complain about what a pig he was. I knew it would all sound like a lie anyway. Kelly put her arm around me as if she were proud and fond of me. Her body was soft and warm. I never hugged or touched anyone. Anita looked hurt, angry, and scared all at once.

We drank and listened to the boys' music in Kelly's parents' living room. My too-sweet and viscous drink was making me feel sick. The grenadine lolled around in the bottom of the glass. Sean was sitting next to me. He grabbed my hand and pulled me to Kelly's parents' bedroom. He was saying, "Come on," and holding my fingers.

I wasn't having sex on that flat hard bed. It was like a big altar.

"I'm not sleeping with you anymore," I told Sean.

He gave me a confused look. Then he laughed.

"Why not?" he said. "It's too late. You already did."

He thought I was trying to undo what I had done. I wasn't. I said to him, "I'm not doing it anymore."

"Natalie, come on."

"No."

Sean tugged at my fingers, my t-shirt, the belt loops on my jean skirt, looking for the right catch that would make my whole body collapse miraculously onto the bed. I wanted to get rid of him. The whole thing was so fake and embarrassing.

"Fuck off," I said.

Sean stopped. He let my bra strap that he had been fingering snap back to my skin. He struck me in the chest with the back of his fist, like you would a vending machine that wasn't spitting out the chocolate bar you wanted. It was simple, ridiculous, desperate, loathing. I stood on the spot, not knowing what to say.

I walked out of the bedroom. I stopped ironing my hair. I was done with boys for now.

Once we went to the beach for a family picnic, and he dangled a dead crab in front of my face. It was the fact that he was trying to make me cry, not the sight of the stringy, desiccated crab, that caused me to burst into tears. When I did, Edward seemed pleasantly surprised. I did not consider whether this meant that he disliked me or not, which is strange for me, because even at six, I was fanatically concerned with what people thought about me. I can still picture the crab pinched between his thumb and index finger, its greyish colour, the claws dangling tenuously from the body, and behind it, his face tipped to the side.

I never developed a normal relationship with him. He had always been one of the older cousins, not quite an adult or having any authority over me but someone vastly intimidating in his alien sophistication. Even now that I was a teenager, my awe hadn't quite dissipated, instead hardening into a glassy, permanent veneer around him. Edward had taught English overseas and studied literature at Cambridge. He was now working for a company that sold environmental solutions. I didn't know what that meant. I pictured recycled-cardboard boxes, neatly tied with string, in smooth procession down a conveyor belt. And there would be slim women in pale skirt suits moving silently around Edward, ferrying coffees and documents. *Sshh. He's thinking.*

There was the crab. Then the photo. I was a bit older here, maybe eight, with a giant, floppy bow in my hair like a napkin. Handsome, sixteen-year-old Edward stood beside me in an olive green shirt and corduroy pants, smiling peacefully. He never showed his teeth when he smiled. My grandmother had bought tickets for all the

grandchildren to see The Music Man at the Fox. Being Edward, he must have been too polite to act embarrassed about being on a childish outing with his younger cousins.

And finally, there was Storytime. When I was ten Edward gave me a figurine of a girl reading a book, or at least, my aunt picked it out and he gifted it to me by proxy in the family Christmas gift exchange. He had chosen my name from the hat. On the bottom of the figurine, in tiny lettering, was the name Storytime, an intricate symbol, and a serial number. A false token of sentiment. I kept the figurine on my shelf with my school trophies, though I resented pretty, delicate things that I had to dust on Saturday mornings when my mother made me help clean the house.

Edward and I had spent little time together. He had been away quite often, but even while in the same house at some family function we barely spoke. When my mother asked if I wanted to spend the day at Edward's while she shopped in the city with my aunt, I said no, and she acted like I was being rude. She didn't understand that my cousin and I had barely exchanged a word in years. My mother was oblivious to my awkwardness. She thought I was content. Or focused.

I had transferred to an arts high school in London for my senior year. The school was two hours from our house, and my parents had decided that it would be better if I moved somewhere closer rather than commute each day.

My parents were separated now. My friends' parents who had gotten separated or divorced had done so years ago, when their children were still in elementary school. Since I was older I should not be upset by the divorce. It had been a long time coming. I should be reasonable and compassionate. But I was angry that it had taken so long and

angry that I was anything like my mother, whose fault it all was. Most of all, I was angry that maybe my dad thought I was like her.

My parents actually felt guilty. They offered Henry and me presents, the use of the car, and dinners out. Accepting these gifts was like taking jewelry off a corpse. They were things I wanted but not within the circumstances. I wanted to be angry and righteous with wanting them, but not to have them.

I felt like I was being shipped away. My parents had figured out how much I drank and agreed it would be good for me to have a change and enter the arts school. They had found a place for me in a lady's basement—and I did think of her as a "lady," as a woman with an indiscreet, festering femininity, unused and putrefying. Julia was in her mid-fifties, a nurse, and had some extra space. I had free reign over the basement, which had a bedroom, a tiny living room area, and a kitchenette. Julia didn't mind when I practiced my instruments for hours on end. She only came down when she needed to do laundry. Sometimes, on nights when I didn't have orchestra practice, she invited me to dinner upstairs. She prepared a couple of large meals during the week and packaged up the leftovers for her work lunches. She always set the table nicely when we ate together, with dessert forks and candles, and I thought it was what she would do if she were making dinner for a man.

That I felt sorry for her felt wrong to me. I knew I shouldn't think of Julia condescendingly just because she was single and, before me, lived alone.

I too was a loner of sorts, not knowing anyone in the area or having any close friends at my new school. I had no one to buy alcohol for me. I worried that Julia's solitariness would somehow contaminate me, that I smelled like her house, like the cross-

stitched potpourri sachets she kept in her drawers. I could never fully accept her friendship, because I was embarrassed for us. I went home on weekends.

It was one weekend in the spring that my aunt accompanied my mother to the bus station to pick me up. I had grown used to bus stations, though they made me feel lonely. I bought trashy magazines and crossword books and Reese's peanut butter cups to cheer myself up. I sat in a plastic chair and watched the road through the window, eating my chocolate, though it was only ten in the morning. When I saw my mother's car pull in, I didn't get up immediately. I had been dreading this day more than an exam. Eventually I collected my things and went outside. The air was cool and wet. It had rained the night before. I loaded my backpack and saxophone case into the trunk and got into the car. My mother and aunt were cheerful.

"How's school?" my aunt inquired.

"Great," I replied. "Really good."

"We thought we could drop you off with your cousin to visit, and then you two could meet us later for dinner," said my mother.

I hadn't seen Edward's new house yet, or his new girlfriend. I had heard that she worked in human resources. They lived just outside of the city, in one of the developments that had gone up when I was younger. Theirs was one of the smaller houses in the subdivision, but I knew it still must have been expensive. I wondered if they would get married and have kids soon. It seemed like the type of neighbourhood for that kind of thing. There was a park down the road.

We pulled into the driveway, where Edward's shiny, black KIA dripped rain droplets. My mother and aunt trotted up to the door—my mother was wearing high heels, which she only did when she was going to shop in higher end stores or to a party, now without my dad—and I took my time getting my things out of the trunk. I thought maybe I could get some homework done while I was here. I wasn't sure what else I could do to pass the day, or if Edward would be making any efforts to entertain me. The front door of the house opened and my mother and aunt went inside, where Edward gave his mother a one-armed hug. My mother called my name.

I clumsily toted my heavy backpack and saxophone case up the front walk and into the house. With my cumbersome accoutrements, I literally appeared a burden. I knew Edward didn't want me here.

"Oh . . . here," he said, taking my saxophone case from me and setting it further down the hall, looking at it warily as he did so. This was either because he was afraid all my luggage meant that my stay would be longer than he expected, or because my saxophone case simply disgusted him. I loved my saxophone but I hated carrying it around. I had bought it second hand. The case was tacky, brown faux alligator and emitted a foul, musty odour.

"Where's Vanessa?" my aunt asked.

"In the bathroom," Edward said, sounding slightly aggravated and toeing my saxophone case flush with the baseboards. He took my backpack from me, with my flute case sticking out of it, and set it on top of the saxophone. I took him in quickly, his sweater with the collared shirt underneath, a bit formal for weekends, but worn with a

pair of jeans. He looked the same as he had when I had seem him at Easter two years ago, though slightly heavier, and his hair a bit longer.

My aunt, as if suddenly noticing the profusion of musical instruments around us, exclaimed, "Natalie, you should play something for us!" My attempt at a polite, noncommittal smile must have resulted in a look of panic, because she added, "Oh, well, you'll have time for that later. I'm sure Edward would love to hear it."

I was sure he wouldn't.

After giving Edward directions to the restaurant where we were all to meet that evening, my mother and aunt left. I stood in the hall next to my ridiculous pyramid of belongings, abandoned, and I wincingly realized I must have looked like a dog dropped off to be babysat, waiting by the door in faith that doing so would make my owner return more swiftly.

Edward was looking somewhere past my foot and running a hand through his hair. "Um, hold on, I just have to make a call," he said, and disappeared into the living room. His behaviour seemed rude to me; it wasn't polite to leave a visitor, even one who was technically a family member, in the foyer without welcoming her in. Still, I was sure that all of this was my fault, that it was I who was making everything awkward. It was a given that Edward never did anything wrong. My aunt hadn't appeared to notice his tone of suppressed irritation with her, and neither she nor my mother had caught on to how displeased he was with the situation.

I swayed in the hall for another moment, then went into the kitchen. A young woman, whom I assumed was Vanessa, was standing at the counter with a towel around her shoulders, smearing jam onto bread. Her head was wet and flat. She looked like she

had just surfaced from underwater. Mingling with the scent of toast in the kitchen was the chemical stench of dye: she was colouring her hair. It struck me as odd. I had always thought of Edward's girlfriends as being naturally beautiful. He had brought a few of them to holiday dinners over the years, girls who sat sweetly and rigidly at table and never served themselves an exorbitant helping of mashed potatoes (I always overshot). They wore earrings. They were charming, modest, and unoffensive. Just the sort of girls I knew I wouldn't get along with right away, because I could never feel comfortable around anyone so amenable and pretty.

Vanessa was different from the others. She had large eyes, almost so large as to be buggish. Like a hollow doll being gripped around the waist, with all the air squeezed into her head. Stunned and made to be pretty. She was small. And her nails looked chewed. When she saw me standing there, she gave me a faint smile and put the jam in the fridge. She seemed vaguely bothered, but not in a haughty way. I wondered if she was annoyed that I was there, but I didn't feel the need to make conversation that I usually felt when I was around someone new.

"Fresh bread," she said, and it sounded like an offer. She spun the bread bag shut and tossed it back onto the counter. She walked past me, giving me a quick and insincere smile, which I returned. She went upstairs with her plate of toast. I noticed that her jogging pants were ripped at the bottom where she tread on them with her heels, and I felt that I liked her.

I took a piece of bread out of the bag and ate it plain. It was the fresh bakery kind that I had rarely tasted since I stopped living at home. The kitchen window looked out onto the backyard, where there was a deck and a small shed. A plastic flat of little plants

sat on the deck, waiting to be planted in the bare garden. A cylindrical bird feeder hung from a tree branch. I couldn't picture Edward filling a bird feeder. Vanessa must have put it up.

I heard the TV on in the living room. Edward had finished with his phone call, if he had made one at all. Even being in the next room, I could hear him sigh before he said, "You can come hang out in here, if you want."

The living room furniture was a mixture of new and old pieces, some that I recognized from my aunt's large house in Windsor. There was an endless, incestuous cycle of decorating, redecorating, and furniture exchanging within my extended family, so that everyone's house bore a piece of each of the other's. Edward and Vanessa's living room, adjoining a dining room, seemed the fresh progeny of the family homes. It was tastefully and trendily decorated overall. A laptop, probably Edward's, slept on the dining room table (newly varnished and formerly my aunt's sewing and project surface) next to a vase filled with flowering branches. I recognized one of the side tables from my grandmother's old bedroom set, and uncannily, a picture frame that used to be in our den. My mother's wall display of my brother's and my school photos had evolved over the years, various outdated or unflattering shots being replaced by newer and more attractive ones, and the overall number of photos gradually diminishing. I wondered if the transplanted frame had once contained a photograph of me. It now showcased a picture from one of Edward's graduation celebrations.

I sat down next to my cousin on the couch, which was crowded by a legion of decorative pillows and didn't allow me to conserve as much space between us as would have been most comfortable. I made to put my feet up on the coffee table next to his but

thought better of it, not wanting to appear over-familiar or oblivious to the undesirability of our being thrown together. I hated that I thought about things like that. There was a look of waiting about the room, the pillows, branch arrangement, and raspberry curtains all representative of Vanessa's absence, as if we were staying in her house while she was away on vacation. The way empty houses held their breath. I was oddly thankful for Vanessa's absence; I sensed that she didn't want to participate in our show of a casual visitation. Maybe it was her wise aloofness that I liked about her. Edward flicked through the TV stations, both of us pretending to be interested in the Saturday morning talk shows. His displeasure was palpable.

"Here, you pick something," he finally said, tossing me the remote. I held it in my hand. This was too much pressure for me.

"Do you have any movies or anything?" I asked.

"Yeah, of course," Edward said, sounding somewhat relieved. He got up and opened the lower drawer of the TV cabinet, where there was a series of videos and DVDs. "Is *The Sting* okay?" He was unwrapping a DVD case from its plastic. "Vanessa got it for me for my birthday."

"Sure." I hated that movie, but this would be better than aimless channel surfing. I thought I remembered Edward's birthday being in November. Maybe he hadn't liked Vanessa's gift, or just hadn't had time to watch the movie.

Edward put the disc into the player. "So you go to an arts school now."

"Yeah. I like it."

"What will you take in university?"

"Music." I thought this would have been obvious. But at least we were speaking now.

"I haven't seen you in a long time," Edward remarked. It was the only thing he had said that wasn't filler. It felt intimate, but appropriate. He had probably forgotten that I had been at Easter a couple years ago. He probably didn't remember each of our encounters as vividly and devastatingly as I did, or that he had given me a figurine once. He did things like that for his mother all the time. He always did what she asked him to, because he was good.

"Do you drink coffee? I could make some." Edward was about to get up. He was in a better mood now.

"No," I replied. I hadn't started drinking coffee yet.

Edward settled back into the couch. We sat there. There was the sound of a faucet running upstairs. Vanessa must have been washing the dye out of her hair. I watched the screen without paying attention to what was going on.

Edward unzipped his fly. I knew he was doing it—I saw him—but in my mind, he couldn't be doing it, because it was absurd. The morning was so quiet. Even with what happened next, I didn't react, because it didn't seem real to me. He took my hand in his own—his skin was soft, and I had a ridiculous thought that he might be the type of man who kept a tube of handcream in his nightstand—and closed it over the bulge of his crotch. I shrieked and flew off the couch, almost giggling, like I had been pinched in a game. I ran to the front door, snatching a pile of literature from the hall table—I liked to have something to read when I felt awkward—and went out to sit on one of the wicker porch chairs.

My heart was pounding. I felt humiliated that I had screamed like that. I should have sworn at him. I should have asked him what he thought he was doing. I should have done *something*.

The chair was cold and bits of wicker escaping from it poked into my thighs and back. A neighbour across the road, an older man in a baseball cap watering a driveway border of chrysanthemums, gave me a long, friendly look. He almost looked concerned. But he couldn't have known. I leafed through the Canadian Tire flyer in my lap. I had also picked up a university alumni news magazine with a picture of someone who had made some scientific discovery on the front. It wasn't quite warm enough for me to be out without a jacket, but I couldn't go back inside now. In a delayed, revolting synchronizing of memory, I realized the porch chairs had been my aunt's.

The feeling of his hand on mine had been worse than anything. I knew that on some level I had liked the feeling of his skin, as if it were someone else's, as if we were just accidentally brushing hands. I was averse to intimacy in general. After Sean, I had dated a self-conscious boy who made me use my hand even when I told him I didn't mind going down on him. In his mind, a concession in the hierarchy of favours, but worse for me because I might see his face that way. We had broken up when I left for my new school.

I couldn't help thinking of Edward dangling the dead crab in front of me years ago and his expression of pleased discovery when I started crying, his complete indifference to my feelings. This indifference was somehow worse than outright cruelty. In neither that incident nor today's had he been trying to hurt me personally. I was just there. Today would just be another of my run-ins with my cousin to be replayed and

agonized over in my mind for years to come. Like the crab incident, when I couldn't have explained to my mother how Edward had made me upset, it would be difficult to describe to anyone. The kind of story that would lose its significance in its retelling.

I sat on the porch for what must have been a couple of hours. When I was too hungry and cold to stay out there any longer, I reentered the house quietly. I passed by the living room and saw that it was empty and the TV had been turned off. I thought Edward might have been upstairs. I went into the kitchen and Vanessa was sitting at the table, cutting pictures out of home magazines and pasting them into a notebook. It was something I would have done with fashion magazines when I was younger. Vanessa looked up at me, said, "Hey," and returned to her cutting and pasting.

I made a sandwich with the good bread and sat down beside her. After living with my mother and Julia, it was odd to sit with a woman at a kitchen table and not have a placemat underneath my plate. Vanessa didn't care.

I felt nervous and guilty. I forced myself to eat so she wouldn't notice anything was wrong.

"Are you making decorating plans?" I asked.

"Sort of," she said. "I collect ideas. I've lived in seven different places over the past ten years of my life. I decorate each differently from the last. I never want a new house to look like one of my old ones."

"So it's like starting over every time?"

"No. . ." Vanessa laid down her scissors for a moment and looked hard at her work. "No. Something else. I don't know."

"The living room looks nice," I supplied.

"It's okay."

There were the sounds of me chewing and the scissors snipping. I hoped she couldn't tell something was wrong.

"You play a lot of instruments," Vanessa commented.

I was startled. "Yeah."

"You love music."

"My parents put me in lessons when I was little," I said. "They made me practice for an hour every day."

Vanessa put down her glue stick. For the first time, she looked me full in the face, and seemed to be reading what was written there. She stared at me. I really couldn't decide if she was pretty or not. Finally her attention went back to her notebook, as if she were satisfied or had decided that what she had seen didn't concern her. This was somehow disappointing to me. Her attitude suggested that she wasn't there to approve or disapprove of me, and I always wanted people to approve of me.

When I was finished my sandwich, I put my plate in the sink and took some homework out of my bag. Vanessa and I sat and worked until around five, when Edward came downstairs and into the kitchen. Neither of us looked up from our work, but for different reasons. Edward had put on aftershave. I could smell it. It smelled sweet and wonderful. "I guess we better go," he said, and I knew he was talking to me. It was time to meet our mothers for dinner soon. "You coming, Vanessa?"

"I don't know, does your mother want me there?" she responded shortly.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Stay here if you want."

I let him carry my things out to the car. He didn't speak to me. I wanted to tell him that he was the idiot, not me, that Vanessa was too good for him, and that he was a fake and didn't deserve everyone's attention, but I didn't say anything because I was afraid. It was too quiet in the car. Once we were out on the road, I turned on the radio, which was something I would typically have asked permission to do in someone else's car.

It took us half an hour to get downtown. Edward took us along the Detroit River, past the casino. We drove through the entertainment district, which I rarely did. I had never had much reason for going downtown. Girls from my old school had taken fake IDs out to the clubs, but my friends hadn't done things like that, and I would never have been able to find a fake ID anyway. There were flashing, glittering signs made up of thousands of little bulbs. Cheetah's and the Million Dollar Saloon. Girls Girls Girls. Dollar sign Dollar sign Dollar sign. I had only a superficial, cartoonish idea of what girls in strip clubs looked like. A shower of coins falling from their smiles. I thought of Natalie Wood in a satin gown, clutching a fur stole to herself like a boat accident victim would a tarp.

We parked and walked the rest of the way to the restaurant. There was a small patio area out front made up with tablecloths, but it was unoccupied. It was too cold to eat outside. The restaurant had a glass front and we could see that our mothers were not inside. Edward and I stood there on the sidewalk. "They were supposed to be here," he said, sounding harassed again, likely angered that he would have to sit at a table with me

alone until they arrived, and I felt a rage begin to mount inside of me at how rude and immature he could be. Then I saw my mother and aunt.

They were waving at us from across the street. My mother untied a colourful scarf from her neck, which she hadn't been wearing that morning, and waved it in the wind. I thought, That's what a woman who is alone looks like.

I knew my mother would be excited to show me everything she had bought. She and my aunt were laughing.

I arrived back in London late Sunday night, and Julia asked me if I wanted to have some dessert with her. The candlesticks were on the table, and I realized guiltily that she had thought I would have been back on time for dinner. When she opened the fridge to take out the parfaits, I could see the stacks of Tupperware holding the leftovers from the large meal she had prepared. It was embarrassing for both of us that she had been disappointed, I thought, and neither of us mentioned it.

"How was your weekend?" she asked me.

"It was strange," I answered honestly. Julia waited for me to continue with a patience I thought of as the special attentiveness of the lonely, though I was beginning to see how unselfish and giving she was, how she must be a good nurse. "My cousin has this girlfriend," I told her. "She's this down-to-earth, normal, flawed person. But my cousin is so perfect. On the outside, I mean. And they don't seem to really like each other."

"They don't love each other?"

"I—I'm not sure," I said, and knew I had been avoiding saying the word "love," because I hated the sound of it, especially coming from myself or Julia.

Julia was silent for another moment, and when I didn't speak, she ventured, "Sometimes we see people for what they are supposed to be rather than for who they are. Why do you say your cousin is perfect?"

"He's not. He's just one of those people." I could never have said something like this to my mother. She would have told me I was being judgmental. Julia, on the other hand, seemed to understand what I meant, or at least, what those words meant to me. I added, "He's not very kind to her."

Julia shrugged, took up her spoon, and dug into her parfait. "He doesn't have to be," she said. It was the first time she had sounded bitter.

When I went home the next weekend I took Storytime off the shelf, brought her into the garage, untied the garbage bag in the bin, and dropped her in. She fell heavily onto the discarded packaging and food scraps inside. Her porcelain skin and dress glowed luminously among the rotted, stinking mess. I felt sorry for her, if that was possible. I had always found it hard to throw away old things.

That evening, my mother, being finely attuned to any changes in our house's décor not administered by herself, noticed that my treasure was gone. She asked me, "Where's that figurine that used to be on your shelf?"

"I knocked it off," I told her. "Broke it."

"Who gave that to you?"

I thought she would have remembered. "I don't know," I said. "I forget."

My mother wiped the empty spot on my shelf with her hand and examined her fingers for dust. She sighed and said, "You shouldn't be so careless." As she left my room, she pulled the door shut behind her, like she used to do when I was little after we said goodnight.

After I finished my senior year at the arts high school, I went to McGill University, in Montreal, to do my Bachelor's in music. Anita and Kelly went to the University of Windsor, and Jaclyn to the University of Guelph. Anita called me from time to time, but I was growing apart from her and from everyone.

I lived in a second-floor apartment in St-Henri with a Master's student named Leon, who was an acquaintance of Kelly's, and his girlfriend, Shannon. Living with a couple wasn't as horrible as I thought it would be. Their bed was on the same wall as my room, and their nighttime movements, the brushings of limbs against plaster, sounded like harmless rodents in the walls.

Leon was fairly nice. He was gaunt and hairy and had a beard. He shared a newspaper with me in the mornings. He read the entire newspaper, and this made me want to do the same. Leon was studying philosophy. He was a person I thought might really be smart enough to become a professor one day. He often didn't dress until evening; all his classes were at night.

Shannon was stranger than Leon. She was blonde and tall and pretty and I think that was why Leon was interested in her. She always acted like she was stoned. Sometimes, she was. She wore a strange, pink dress everywhere, like a child in her favourite dress-up costume. She was in Fine Arts. She had postcards of Waterhouse and Munsch paintings taped over her tiny desk. Her favourite paintings were all of miserable, sexually frustrated women: the Lady of Shalott, Mariana, the Madonna. I found it strange

that Shannon liked these women so much because I didn't think she was as complicated as they were or shared any of their problems.

Shannon was always cutting up fabrics. She took samples. She cut a bit of fabric off a couch someone had disposed of on the sidewalk and from clothes in shops. These swatches were never amalgamated into a final project.

She bought and ate a lot of mangoes and carved them in a manner she called "hedgehog style." Placing a mango in front of me at breakfast, she would say, "There's your hedgehog," and look at it proudly like it was something she had given birth to. I tried to look happy with what she made me, but I soon realized that Shannon was satisfied with what she had accomplished regardless of my reaction. I could be completely indifferent and she wouldn't notice.

I liked breakfast with Leon and Shannon because I felt like I wasn't alone but didn't have to talk to anyone.

An older woman lived downstairs. I often saw her watching me from her window when I left to go to class. Her pale face in the glass was startling. One day in October, I came across her and another woman talking in the hallway. I said hello, and the woman stared at me and said to her friend, "There are so many new people here." From then on, I disliked her.

We were good, quiet tenants, but the woman didn't seem to like us. Shannon's outfits must have confounded her. I also assumed the woman made judgments about me and the men I brought home. She would have seen them either coming in with me or

leaving the building. I slept with a few men I met at lectures or concerts, then avoided them. I was always surprised when I got off so easy, when they didn't call me or bother me afterwards. These guys were nothing like Sean. This was nothing like high school.

Shannon was enthusiastic about my one night stands and asked me questions about them. She wanted to know what the guys' names were, what they looked like, and what they studied or did for a living. She seemed impressed that one guy was a jazz drummer, and another, an architecture student, though these recommendations hadn't played a role in my decision-making. I only realized how much older than me the architecture student must have been when Shannon mentioned she had heard that architecture Ph.D. programs were really difficult.

"Architecture is a very soulful occupation," she informed me.

"Sounds kind of practical," I said.

"We are totally affected by the spaces we live and work in. Architects think about that."

"What if he's designing business towers or condos or something?"

"I doubt it," Shannon disagreed. "Was he generous in bed?"

I considered. "Yeah."

He had been practical.

"What made you notice him?"

I told her honestly, "He was good-looking. He was alone. He didn't look like he was having the greatest time. I thought he might want to talk."

"So you just connected with him, like that?"

"We were both bored."

"What if he designed concert halls? You should have asked him. That would have been so perfect. You would have been a perfect match, like, freakishly so. I wish I had seen what he looked like," she added.

I could tell Shannon thought I was different from her, but I wasn't really sure how she saw me. She didn't seem smart or alert enough to be truly judgmental. She might have been amazed that I was proactive in seeking out these men and seen me as being outgoing and ambitious rather than lonely and insecure. She struck me as someone who let men come to her. She was moony and erratic, but she was attractive and people noticed her. I knew Leon had wanted her.

It was Shannon's idea for us to go to a concert together. I usually went to concerts alone. She had taken some pills and was dancing and running her hands up and down my sides. I laughed because I was ticklish and because it was strange and wonderful to have someone so pretty paying attention to me in this way, even if she was my roommate and a pothead.

She held my hand as we walked home and asked if I wanted to sleep with her and Leon. She and I got into bed with Leon, who had been reading, and we both kissed him. Leon put his arms around each of us and smiled at me and I felt very happy. I wasn't sure if when Shannon had asked me to sleep with them she had meant just "sleep" or actually have sex with them. I thought for a moment that they might be waiting for me to animate them, that I was the main event. We didn't have sex. Once the two of them fell asleep, I went to my own bed. That was the loneliest I felt since moving to Montreal.

Shannon must have still been thinking about that night we danced and I slept in bed with her and Leon, because she decided it would be fun to trick the lady downstairs into thinking she and I were lesbians. We walked out of the house one afternoon, arm in arm, and sure enough the lady was watching from her window. Shannon kissed me and grabbed my butt for full effect. When I came home from class the next day, the woman was glaring at me from her window, the telephone up to her ear. I ran upstairs. I couldn't wait to tell Shannon that the woman was calling all her friends to tell them about the lesbians in her building.

The next week, we hung a gay pride flag in our window.

We made a point of making a show every time we left the house. The woman was always lifting up the edge of the curtain and shooting us vicious looks. Soon the French landlord called us and said the woman downstairs had been complaining about our lewd behaviour. We explained the whole thing, saying that it was just a joke, and the landlord laughed and admitted that the woman was a pain.

Shortly after the landlord's call, though, Shannon got tired of the joke. I was disappointed. Those few weeks after the concert had been the closest I had ever felt to her. It was fun to laugh and complain about the old woman together. It was nice to have Shannon's arm around me as we walked to the bus stop. It was nice to walk to the bus stop with someone. Because we didn't have to orchestrate our departures so carefully anymore, ensuring that we would be leaving when the woman would be in her front room and not in the kitchen cooking or getting her groceries, I usually went out on my own now. I felt silly for having wanted to be close friends with someone I had thought was stupid, with someone I didn't even like.

Things went back to normal, though the woman downstairs continued to spy. I could detect a flutter of the curtain out of the corner of my eye as I unlocked the door to the building in the evening, carrying a brown-bagged bottle of wine in one hand and my flute case in the other, like a purse. The drinking age was eighteen in Quebec. For the first time, I could buy liquor for myself. I could drink and sleep with strangers whenever I wanted, and nothing ever happened.

I didn't have any friends. I didn't spend much time with the other music students outside of class, where they had group dinner outings and themed parties. Instead, I started getting coffee with a Russian girl named Anna I had met in French conversation class. She was twenty-three and married with a baby. She had long, dry, blonde hair and bony hips in low-slung jeans with a rhinestone belt. Aside from having a very straight and prominent nose and looking a bit brittle overall, she was very feminine. Physically, she was like a tissue paper version of Shannon.

Each of the students in the French class had to write and present a story. Anna told a story about how she had met her husband in Germany. She had arrived at a hostel alone and he had offered to carry her suitcase up the stairs for her. The story was sweet and I tried to imagine how a man would look at Anna and think she was special and want to do something nice for her.

Anna and I spoke in English though we were meant to speak in French. She spoke seriously and with an accent. She asked me, "Where are you from?"

"Wheatley," I said.

"Where's that?"

"In Ontario. Near Windsor."

"Is that near Detroit?"

"Cross a dirty river and you're there."

Anna neither laughed nor balked at my cynicism. She just accepted it. That was why I thought we would get along.

I met Anna's husband when he came to meet her after our class. He was an economics professor, blonde and tall like her, and I thought he was probably too good-looking for her with her long nose and tacky clothing. Anna introduced us. I said I wanted to see their baby, which wasn't really true, because I didn't like babies. But I was curious to see what the blonde child looked like. Anna told me, "Next time we will go for coffee and I will bring my baby."

We had coffee downtown for the first time in November, towards the end of my first semester. Anna's husband dropped off the baby and went to give his afternoon lecture. The baby was ugly. She looked about two years old. She had baby acne, a scattering of delicate pustules climbing up her cheeks. She looked like an unhealthy potato.

Anna bought coffee and a muffin for herself and milk for the baby. I bought an extra-large coffee. I could never get enough coffee. I even loved the stink it left on my clothes. Coffee made me think about my mother, because she refused to drink it. If someone even mentioned coffee she would wince. The thought of its effects on teeth disgusted her. Whenever my mother called me on the phone and asked me what I was doing, I would tell her I was studying and drinking coffee, and I could sense her cringing

on the other end of the line. Coffee drinking was probably the worst thing she could imagine me getting up to in Montreal.

I liked the idea of sitting at the table in the café and having a stack of books in my bag and a paper to write and a late afternoon class to go to. Sitting in a café like this was what I had thought my university life would be like. On the other hand, Anna wasn't the sort of friend I had imagined for myself. She was straightforward and abrupt.

"Do you have anyone?" she asked me. "A boyfriend?"

"No."

Her face didn't change. She swung her long hair over her shoulder. "Do you like your classes?"

"They're okay. I'm writing a paper about Glenn Gould right now. Music is my life. What about you, do you like Montreal?"

"It's fine. There is lots to do. I take Katarina to a playgroup and swimming class. I took her to a show for children about a caterpillar."

"Does your husband go with you?"

"To the caterpillar, yes. To the other things, no. He's very busy."

Anna was a bit like in me in that she spent her days alone.

One day, I asked Anna to come to my apartment. After having coffee at our usual spot, we walked down Atwater, under the dark overpass, to Saint-Jacques, Anna pushing the baby in its stroller. We stopped at the gas station and Anna bought a lottery ticket. We

waited as the clerk processed it. An electronic glissando spouted from the machine. The prize was five dollars.

Anna said to the baby, "Your mother has won."

We walked through a small park near my apartment. There was a fountain in the park, the bottom pale green, cracked and dirty. Leaves, bright red or mauve or yellow-brown, floated on the water like flat jewels. On the fountain were strange black faces. I thought of the fountain with naked women at the Leamington public library which I had always hated.

Anna carried the baby and I carried the stroller up to the second floor apartment. Leon and Shannon were dressing to go out. I introduced Anna to them. Leon shook Anna's hand. Shannon smiled and tugged on the baby's jumper.

Shannon put on a puffy down jacket over her dress. She was still wearing her sleeveless, meagre pink dress as the weather became colder, adding sweaters and bulky legwarmers to stay warm. She slipped a pair of pinking shears into her purse. She and Leon left. The baby looked forlornly at the closed door.

Anna said of Shannon, "That girl is a space cadet. Her brain is not all there."

I was glad she had noticed. I told her about Shannon's fabric clipping habit and warned her to watch her things. Shannon had clipped some of the lining out of my fall coat.

"Why do you live with them?" Anna demanded. "How can you live with a couple?"

"Leon and I have a mutual friend."

"You should move out. Find roommates. Girls. Or live by yourself."

"Leon and Shannon are okay to live with. They're nice. They're happy people."

"Happy people? Do you really think there is such a thing?"

Despite their poverty, I saw Leon and Shannon as being happy. This was because I felt excluded.

"Yes," I said to Anna, "I think there are happy people. I think some people wake up, make breakfast, go to the gym, meet a friend for lunch, go to a class or to work, and come home to their boyfriend or girlfriend. And they have a nice day."

"There's happy people and then there's crazy people," Anna said.

I don't know if she meant that I was crazy.

I invited Anna to my spring concert at the university. It was still snowing in March. The Queen Victoria statue in front of the music building was covered in a mound of snow. Her crowned head and the tip of her sceptre poked out the top.

Anna sat with her husband and the baby in the audience; she had brought both of them. I felt embarrassed. It was like they were my family. I had had no one else to invite. I had wanted Anna to be there but had thought her husband would be too busy or not interested to come. The other performers received their loud and chatty friends after the performance, and Anna and her husband came up to me. He complimented me on my playing. Anna thanked me for inviting them but said nothing about the music. She was not easily impressed, and I liked that about her.

Anna had suggested going out for coffee after the concert, but the baby was fussing so the three of them went home. I walked home by myself in the dark, which took about an hour.

I had stopped bringing home new guys by this time, but I occasionally saw the jazz drummer, Tim. I went to see him play at a bar one night, and sometimes we met for coffee and talked about music. I was trying out a new personality with Tim, that of an enthusiastic, absorbed musician. This personality was partly true and partly false. I did spend most of my time practicing my instruments, but I knew this wasn't the reason for my lack of a social life. For the amount of time I spent practicing and studying, my grades weren't as strong as they should have been.

Tim made a lot of money playing at restaurants, bars, and parties. He hadn't been to university or college. He was twenty-five, dark-haired, and only a bit taller than I. He wore jeans or black pants and a black shirt every day. He had an understated confidence. He was capable. I was surprised to learn that he was from Owen Sound, Ontario, because it seemed as if he had lived in a city all his life.

Whenever I said something negative, Tim looked like he wanted to laugh—not in a mean way, but in a fond way.

I continued going to his gigs and he introduced me to some of his friends. In April, he came home with me again. We started dating.

I went home for a few weeks in the summer. I had given my notice to the landlord, Leon, and Shannon. Tim and I had agreed that I was going to move in with him when I came back.

Henry picked me up at the train station.

My mother came into the front room to greet me like a guest. I felt like I was one of her piano students coming for her lesson. She crossed her arms and said, "You look different."

She sounded suspicious. I thought she was looking for the effects of the coffee, or of Tim. People were supposed to look healthier when they were in love. I wasn't in love. I had only made a decision.

"I gained five pounds," I offered, though I never weighed myself.

I brought my suitcase into my old room, which was bare without my things. There were a couple of storage boxes containing old, mismatched dishes stacked under my desk.

It was strange to think of Henry and my mother in the house by themselves. I hadn't lived at home for very long after the divorce—I had been in London for school—so I still wasn't used to my dad not being there.

I went to visit my dad at his new place in Windsor every couple of days. We would go out for dinner or eat at his place, but I always drove back at night. I never thought of our old house as my mother's place; it was just our house.

Anita was home for the summer and working at the dollar store again. She called me, and I felt embarrassed that I hadn't made more of an effort to keep in touch during the year.

She and I drove out to Cedar Springs one day to buy strawberries. We had to pull over to the side of the road. There were police cars, a transport truck carrying an enormous cylinder of gleaming steel, taller and wider than a two-story house. Next came a blade the size of small aircraft, like a harsh petal fallen from the sky. Windmills were being erected all along the highway. There was some contention about the possibility of the windmills disrupting birds' migratory patterns. But once the windmills were up, they were beautiful.

It felt unfair that everything was so different. But I didn't want to live in this place again.

I moved in with Tim. He had a mid-sized apartment with a second bedroom that he used as a music studio. There was a drum kit, a piano, and sound equipment. I started giving music lessons to little kids in that room. I printed posters and hung them up at daycares and schools. I advertised in newspapers and online.

I found that there was more of a demand for piano lessons than violin or flute lessons. My mother offered to send me some of her old piano books to teach with. I told her that no one used those anymore, though I wasn't sure.

With a couple of Tim's contacts and a cellist from the McGill program, I formed a string quartet that played at weddings. I was making money. School was becoming less of a priority. I wasn't sure if I would finish the year.

The feelings of loneliness and exclusion I had had while living with Leon and Shannon went away, but I think it was because of the money rather than Tim. I cared

about Tim, but our relationship and living arrangement felt very temporary, like we were simply surviving together for the time being. We cooked, we slept, and we went out and made money.

I still spent time with Anna. I brought her to one of Tim's bigger gigs downtown, where she looked out of place. I helped set up sound equipment and sat with her during the show.

"You made the right decision," she told me.

Anna was someone who could look out of place but not uncomfortable. She sat beside me like a pale bird in the dark.

On a cold night in late October, Tim and I were cooking in the kitchen. The stereo in the music room was playing loud, slow blues. I was washing vegetables in the sink. Above the sink was a small window which we didn't have a curtain for, and the night outside was black. I felt at once happy and unsure.

Tim opened the fridge and took out three peppers in a cellophane sleeve. The peppers were red, yellow, and green. He took the stickers off the peppers and stuck them onto the blacksplash, which was something weird that we did.

I washed the peppers and he chopped them. I thought about how once, a long time before I moved away, I saw my mother cut open a red bell pepper and there was a black insect inside, crushed and alive, and it was going to die. The pepper was so red and glowing that it looked like it was alive, but it was dead, because it was no longer part of a

pepper plant. But the insect, even though it looked dead, was still alive. My mother washed the insect down the drain.

But all of that was somewhere you could never go back to. It wasn't going to be there anymore.

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