On the Cooking Stove and Other Stories

Alison Robins

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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

May 2015

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Alison Robins

Entitled: On the Cooking Stove and Other Stories

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (English)

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

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Chair
Stephanie Bolster

_____ Examiner
Judith Herz

_____ Examiner
Josip Novakovich

_____ Supervisor
Kate Sterns

Approved by _____
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

_____2015 _____
Dean of Faculty

ABSTRACT

On the Cooking Stove and Other Stories

Alison Robins

On the Cooking Stove is the literal English translation of the European, pre-Holocaust Yiddish folksong, *Oifen Pripitchik.* The lyrics tell of a rabbi teaching his students the Torah, hinting at the old Yiddish expression: "the history of the Jews is written in tears." These narratives explore the ways in which the past permeates the present. They are about the lingering effects of WWII on Jewish culture. Generations have been molded by this period of time, therefore so has the understanding of family, love and death. The narrator of these stories, Gabrielle, confronts a point in her life where moving forward seems impossible without taking a step back and considering how the past has come to inform the identity of her family members. She searches for ways to understand, repair, or figuratively resurrect parts of her loved ones that she sees as damaged. Some of these narratives experiment with magic realism. All of these narratives have the common theme of the difficulty of letting go.

Acknowledgements

With gratitude, I acknowledge the guidance of Kate Sterns in the completion of this thesis. Thank you for teaching me how to read like a writer, and use my words thoughtfully. Thank you also to Josip Novakovich for his encouragement. I would also like to thank Carousel Calvo for her critiques, patience, and friendship, and to Concordia University's English Department for its support. And finally, thank you to my family for reminding me that passions take precedence over careers.

For my Zaidie

Table of Contents

Cousin Judy and the Man on the Moon…….....1-10

On the Cooking Stove……. 11-22

We Don't Want to Talk About It……. 23-36

Digging for Grandfather……. 37-44

The Dinner Guest…… 45-53

The Checkerboard…..... 54-64

The Girl who Broke the Stars…….. 65-71

The Keeper of the Skins……. 72-80

Cousin Judy and the Man on the Moon

When, as a young girl, my mother read me *Goodnight Moon* at bedtime, I always wished that there had been a *Goodnight Gabrielle* at the end. I was very jealous of those inanimate objects—the red balloon and the chair, the clocks and the socks—that were all sent off to dream with a warm goodnight. There is even a page that says *Goodnight nobody*, and I always thought, well, I'm here, *let me in.*

I would stare at the flat items on the paper and wait for them to move:
dancing socks and moving hands on the ticking clock and the window opening up wide to swallow the balloon into the night. *Let me in,* I would whisper, but the page remained still. I read the story over and over with the hope that my turn would come, but they never brought me inside. It was always just, *Goodnight Moon*.

***

It was a dark night in late October when the air nipped at children's noses and the night sky was a cold, black sheet. Under the glow of a fat moon, I had received a phone call from my mother's cousin, Judy, who spoke with great urgency when she declared; *I need to read your tarot cards.* This is a curious coincidence, I thought. Cousin Judy was the second person that day who had felt a need to read my cards. The first was my boss, who for some time I had an inkling might be a witch. She had considerably long, thick hair for her older age, and she always got what she wanted from people after a certain squint of her right eye. She also told me that when she had come across her tarot cards while tidying her bedroom drawers, she had the vital sensation that she *must read mine immediately.* But I told her, let's not mix business with magic.

So, cousin Judy would come and read my cards instead. There must be something very wonderful in store for me, I decided, or else, this is my end.

Under the curse of a heavy moon, a witch, a psychic and those prophetic tarot cards, I concluded that the only explanation for this strange happenstance was that I was going to die, and it was sure to be something spectacular. As I lay in bed that night anticipating my meeting with cousin Judy the next day, I pondered on what the cards would say. I wondered, and my mind wandered, drifting in and out of a restless sleep, disturbed each time I caught sight of a shadow lurking at the threshold of my doorway. Part petrified and part exhilarated by the shadowy silhouette of the man I thought I saw passing by, I finally dozed off to the faint sound of falling snow. *Goodnight nobody.*

The next day, Judy arrived on my doorstep at half past six in the evening. She looked the same as she had the last time I'd seen her, many years ago at a family gathering when I was just a young girl with pigtails. Judy was hefty, with a round face and plump, rosy cheeks that resembled those of a child's. But at fifty-two years old, her hair was short and grey, and her curls, unfastened and raggedy, shot out of her head like sprouts. Her eyes were green and very clear and bright, faceted like a crystal. There was a gap between her two front teeth, and she smelled of thick olive oil and garlic. At the center of her stomach hung a large pendant with a blue stone set into silver, hanging from a thin chain around her neck.

"How are you, Gabby?" Judy asked in the entryway.

"I'm good. Thank you for coming over. How are you? How is your mother?" I replied, unsure of how to broach this peculiar encounter with a family member, who was more like a stranger, but who, apparently, had greater insight into my life than I did.

"She's good, thank you, Gabby. I live with her now, to help around the house."

“Can I offer you something to eat or drink? I have some chicken soup in the fridge from my grandmother, or I can make tea.”

I gestured for her to come in.

“No, thank you. I never eat or drink before a reading.”

“OK, as you wish,” I said, as I led her down the narrow hallway of my old apartment.

“You know, Gabby, your mother’s grandfather used to read tarot too, but through playing cards,” she said.

“I didn’t know that. My mother never mentioned tarot at all. It’s not something that we really—”

“Believe in?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“Unfortunately when Jack had a vision of his cousin John’s death in the playing cards he wasn’t sure he believed in it either. So he didn’t say anything.”

“And did he die? Jack’s cousin John?”

“Oh yes. He died in a terrible accident just as Jack had seen it. He told the family days later that he had a vision of the crash, and from then on tarot was banned from the family.”

“But you still do it?” I pointed out.

“Yes, well, it seems that’s just the way it has to be sometimes,” cousin Judy answered in an unenthusiastic whisper.

Once in the dining room she set up her cards quietly along the round table. I watched her, my leg bouncing up and down, hands fidgeting, waiting for the news. Cousin Judy took her time, then smiled, put her plump hand over my twitching fingers and explained that it was very rare to see death in the cards.

“I see omens around death. If I dream of someone in a certain way, I have to read their cards. And this is why I’m here,” she said. “I dreamt of you, Gabby.”

As she recounted her dream to me she used her hands expressively and her face grew distorted in fear of what she told.

“There was a brisk swirling of scabby grey creatures and spirits who were swallowing you whole. And from your feet grew roots that dug deep into the ground so you couldn’t move. I don’t know what it means, but it’s my duty to warn you, Gabby, that something difficult might be coming up soon. I don’t know what it is but I wanted to read your cards and see if I could help.”

There was an assuredness in the presence of cousin Judy that magic existed and that her claims were true.

The room was barely lit by a standing lamp, and from the corner of my eye I swear I saw again that slender silhouette of a man—who was not really there—lurking in the corridor. He came and departed as a shadow. The darkness caressed a string of cold air that snuck in through the cracks of the windowpane. Cousin Judy spread out the blue cards facing downward in front of me.

“Pick the first eight cards that you feel most drawn to,” she said.

And while this seemed to make no sense because I could not see what was on the cards, I did feel a certain pull this way and that. So I let my hand hover over them. Where I felt a curious warmth, I passed it to cousin Judy, who placed each card gently in a pattern. When they were all in place, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Brushing a loose curl away from her eye, she straightened her back and flipped the cards over one by one revealing a convolution of images and colours, faces and words.

I grasped the handles of my chair, watching her intently. *Say something,* I whispered. And she began.

"Gabby…"

I sat upright.

"…something will cause you to put yourself in a very dangerous situation. You could lose everything," she said, as the white flush of the moon behind her lit up the tips of her hair. She flipped over more cards, took a moment to study them, then placed her elbows on the table, fingers entwined.

"Gabby, there is something very dark about a sadness that you carry, and you may not be entirely aware that this sadness even exists. You need to be sure that when you begin to feel it, and this will happen soon, that you deal with it properly. You have to be very careful, Gabby," she said.

"Be careful of what?" I asked.

"I'm not entirely sure." She nodded. "This card here," she pointed to a card with beautiful symbols and colors, "this is the Harmony card. But strangely, it falls in the conflict section on my board. I've never seen that before."

"Well, what does it mean?" I asked.

"It means that you don't think you deserve happiness."

"But why?"

"Well, from my dream I would say that the roots growing out of your feet were an attachment to a past life. Sometimes people are born with a sadness or regret from lifetimes ago that was so strong that it spills over. It's like a curse in a way. A past you never dealt with it, a deep pain. You will have to deal with it now, unless you find a way to end it."

"How do I end it?" I asked.

"Well, the dream was a warning that if you take the sadness on as your own then you will suffer the same fate as your past you. You must be very suspicious of anything that might make you feel better no matter how alluring it seems. Pain must be felt, not patched up with an easy fix. This is no normal grief – a past anguish that surfaces can be very painful. So just remember that the sadness is not yours. Let me know when you begin to feel unwell."

With those words, cousin Judy stood up. I thanked her for coming and walked her out, wishing her a safe ride home on the icy roads, with the promise to be in touch if I needed her.

I pondered her warning in the weeks to come as the winter air became more unbearable and my sleeps became less peaceful. The heavy footsteps of the Shadow Man outside my bedroom door grew louder as he paced back and fourth, whispering my name. The moon waxed and waned, and the snow covered the remaining flowers and leaves. As the city had come to a wintry hush, something began to stir inside me that felt as defeated as the grass beneath the snow. Conquered, like tree branches by icicles.

And then it fell upon me all at once: a sadness so deep it took the breath right out of me. It was heavy, like sandbags that pressed on my eyelids, and it sunk me down to a low where I could barely speak. Everyday it hurt a little more. Reality began to slip away like stardust and after two months there was nothing left of me.

So one night I asked the Shadow Man when he walked by my bedroom door: *Do you have something that will help me*? *Yes I do. Tell me when you want more.* The Shadow Man handed me a glass bottle filled with liquid, and a little box that held a little pill.

So I drank the liquid and swallowed the pill. And just like that I was swept up, listless, in a gust of icy wind, unraveled like a spool of thread and spread out thin. Carried to the sky, I rose

higher and higher until everything beneath me became nothing more than a speck. From the apple of my eyes, the earth disappeared way below me. I was free.

Goodnight world.

Soaring high through the sky, I passed the red balloon, the house, the mouse, the brush, the kittens and mittens, the chairs and bears, and the Shadow Man who lived on the moon. They all passed me by but did not try to bring me back down from the cold night sky.

Goodnight, Gabrielle, they all said.

I was finally there. They had let me in.

For months, I visited the man on the moon, and when I left he said, *Come back soon*. Whenever the darkness fell and I didn't feel well, I would ask the Shadow Man for *more.* He was always there when I wanted to fly, to lift me up to my home in the sky.

I lived there for days on end, soaring with the stars and laughing with my new friends. But in the final hours of one starry night, before the darkness broke to light, and the stars still shimmered, and the moon still shone, and everything that hurt was entirely gone, I passed the cow jumping over the moon who was holding the red balloon. I stared for too long at this magical site until I began to come down. My foot, for a moment, touched the ground. I felt the world beneath me and something felt safe.

Home.

With this touch my eyes grew wide at the thought of cousin Judy's golden insight. "*The sadness is not your own. Call me when you begin to feel unwell."* The words echoed in my chest, and I thought that she might know what's best, so I called her from that glittering space between the earth and the sky, I shouted her name, *Cousin Judy,* and waited for a reply, and then just like

that she was standing in my doorway, fifty-two, plump cheeks, sprouted hair, bright green, shining eyes.

***

"Hello, Gabby. How do you feel?" she asked quietly.

"I don't," I replied.

We walked in silence down the narrow corridor of my apartment, past my bedroom door where the Shadow Man waited patiently for me to come back for more. In the dimly lit dining room, cousin Judy adjusted herself to the chair, then pulled the cards out from her purse. She spread them downwards on the table in the shape of a crescent moon, as my eyes wandered from the cards to the sky that beckoned me from outside.

"OK, Gabby, you remember how this works? This time I am going to read your past life, but you have to listen to me: your sadness is real now. You took it as your own and you tried to patch it up. I see what you've done. If you continue it will swallow you whole. And that curse will carry on forever. Do you understand?" she asked.

I bobbed my head and the lingering stardust of my high in the sky trailed behind me. I picked my eight cards with slow hands. Cousin Judy set them up in the same arrangement and then flipped over the first card.

"You were once a man," she said. "You were not a bad man, but you always wanted more than what you had. More, more, more," cousin Judy explained as she turned over more cards. "One day a man came into your town and offered you everything that you wanted, but at a price. He offered you gold and treasure and the perfect life, though you had to give up your family in return. He promised you they would be safe, and excited by his offer you accepted wealth in their place. With riches and gems you thought your life would be complete, but after

some time it all felt obsolete: you wanted your family back…" Judy turned over the remaining cards.

"…so you found the man who had given you all that you asked for and you begged him to return your old life. You pleaded with him and promised to give back all of your riches. You said, *I will give you whatever you want at the drop of a hat,* but he replied, *sometimes there is no turning back.* So you sat in your palace with your robes and crowns and for months, watched the moon over the water as it rose and fell. And after some time, you died alone and your family lived happily without you in their home," Judy said as she read the last card.

"How did I die?" I asked.

"You drank yourself to death," she said.

The moon's tide began to swim through me again, the remnants of last night's journey to the sky and I felt scared of my love for it.

"What do I do?" I asked.

"You have to talk to him. You have to let him know that you don't want his sadness anymore," she said. "But you have to do your part too."

"How do I talk to him?"

"You can write to him in a letter or a story. Yes, why don't you write this story? Write it all down. From beginning to end."

"And what is my part that I have to do?" I asked.

"Realize that at some point you are in too deep. If you don't face the sadness the curse will remain, and in your next life you will have to suffer again."

I walked cousin Judy to the door, thanked her and wished her a safe ride home on the icy roads. Alone, on the ground, with nobody around, I thought of the sky, the man on the moon, the

rocking chair and the red balloon, and I wondered if they missed me at all, and if I could stay with them a little while longer, or if I should not go at all. I crawled into my bed, thoughts buzzing around my head, craving to fly, but not wanting to die. So I took out a paper and pen, then wrote the story of our sadness until I reached the end. And from my window I saw the Shadow Man sitting on the moon, he was calling my name and I wanted to say, *I am coming back soon*, but instead I closed the curtains and whispered *Goodnight. Goodnight moon.*

On the Cooking Stove

There is so much lonliness in that gold.
The moon of every night is not the moon
That the first Adam saw.
The centuries
Of Human wakefulness have left it brimming
With ancient tears. Look at it. It is your mirror.

Jorge Luis Borges

From a row of crowded walkups on Clark Street near the Main, my grandmother learned the art of Jewish cure cooking from her Polish immigrant mother, Bubby Gertie. Using recipe books splattered with brisket sauce, they cooked chicken soup to the tune of her mother's Yiddish folk song, "*Oifen Pripetshik*," or *"*On the Cooking Stove.*"* The sequence of houses on the block shared the scent of *lokshen kugel* and freshly baked *challah* bread. My grandmother's home was no bigger than a walk-in closet, but the street was a string of open doors and kitchen windows. My grandmother played the piano for anyone who came to visit on the weekend and the sound would carry through open porch doors onto the street where children played hopscotch and made up games with chalk, told stories of other worlds of bigger homes and dreams.

Her brother, Moshe, sang in his baritone voice to her piano tunes, belting *"*Dona, Dona" and "Tumbalalaika," his post-pubescent voice strong and unwavering, like the family cantor at the synagogue they walked to on the holy Sabbath day. Her high school was on St. Urbain, and the green space bordering Park Avenue and Mount Royal was her playground for yo-yo competitions and weekend bike rides for twenty-five cents. In the summertime, neighbours shared a house in the Laurentians to escape the heat of the city. They learned about farm life: milking cows and strawberry picking to make pies for dessert, then it was back to the ghetto and

houses that had seemed to swell in the pulse of the heat. More children were born, and then came more trash on the sidewalk, more planters on the steps, skip ropes and piles of old newspapers that grew on top of the stacks that dissolved into the asphalt with the rain. There was never time to clear those stairs because there were always more children born: the ultimate mitzvah. But, there was never more money. The hand-me-downs passed from door to door, along with the milkman, the scent of cooking dill, and the man who sharpened knives.

With the start of the war, Moshe, along with some of the other boys on the block, enlisted in the army and the streets sobered. Porch doors closed to mask the tears behind them. Many of our relatives died in the Holocaust, caught living deep in the forest as Partisans, slaughtered inside the forts they made from the trees that sheltered them, shot in the depths of their dugouts. My great-grandparents arranged passage for remaining family members to emigrate to Montreal, to refill the empty streets.

Nearly 70 years later, my grandmother still lives in the crowded crawlspace of her head where the war never ended and the streets are haunted by the intolerable hours of waiting, only to learn that nothing would return to the way it was. Now, her apartment in downtown Montreal is decorated proudly with paintings by important Canadian artists: John Little, Suzor Coté, Philip Surrey; prestigious renditions of street scenes from the past. Museums call her to borrow artwork for their exhibitions, and now, with all the veneers of comfort, my grandmother continues to make batches of chicken soup, which she calls Jewish Penicillin. We eat it to cure our colds, stubbed toes and broken hearts.

***

I held onto a warm container of that chicken soup in the back seat of the car during the three-hour drive to New Hampshire with my mother and grandmother. The movement of carrots

and parsnip floating free in a broth of boiled chicken burnt my thighs. My grandmother hadn't been invited—it was a getaway weekend for my mother and me to relax—but when she heard of our plans she'd called and asked if she could "grab a ride with us." I'd wanted to ask, "Where exactly are we dropping you off?" but when we grudgingly suggested that she join us, she'd responded, "If you insist." One hour into the drive, my mother continued to sing the wrong lyrics to every song on the radio, what my grandmother referred to as "terrible noise".

As the sting of burning soup subsided, my grandmother had turned around for our weekly session of Jewish guilt.

"Gabby, when do you plan on giving me great-grandchildren?"

"First I need a man, Grandma. But no time for that now."

"I can find you one. Ida and Shelley have grandsons that are accountants. That's a good job, Gabby. You should meet them. I can call right now." She opened her flip phone.

"No. I'm focusing on my career right now, Grandma, remember?"

"And how will you make a living being a journalist?"

"I will figure it out. As I've told you before."

I stared back and tried to picture her as a little girl with blonde ringlets holding on to a red balloon, innocent and loveable, floating soundlessly out the car window to be swallowed by the blue sky where I could no longer hear her, and might even miss her. Instead she stared, her brow creased with disapproval. She lacked no presence in opinion and I wanted to throw her out of said window. I saw my mother wink at me from the rear view mirror. She was almost too short to see over the steering wheel and when she smiled the tops of her teeth near her gums were the color of an over-boiled egg yolk. Pieces of flattened hair stuck to the side of her face

and my belly flopped at the thought that she used up all her love on me over the years, and forgot to take care of herself.

When we arrived at the hotel the sky was grey and I had already eaten seven party sandwiches that my grandmother had brought from Snowden Deli. She asked me not to finish them all so that we could *save money on snacks when we get there*. This is why she brought the chicken soup. Mostly I was insulted by her insinuation that I could eat 40 sandwiches in a sitting. However, destroying self-esteem at a young age through a perpetual discourse on food is a Jewish right of passage.

There were only three cars in the lot. My mother gathered a bulge of garbage from the cup holders. I saw my grandmother snag a piece of hair off her head and use it to floss her teeth, squeaking air in and out of the spaces.

"Mom you left your apple core on the front seat again," I said.

"Thanks, honey," she responded with a true aloofness to my irritation as my memory marinated in the unbearable loudness of her chewing. She always knew exactly how to eat her fruit in a way that made me momentarily hate her—she smacked her lips and swished the juices around in her mouth, she had no self-awareness but it was in such an innocent way; she was the only woman I knew who didn't look at her reflection when she passed by a store window. She just went where she was going, she just chewed the way she chewed. And when I saw her from behind with her short brown bob, she still looked like a little girl, and I had no right to hate that little girl for eating her apple however she pleased.

My grandmother used the car window to fix the dry pile of blonde poof that floated on top of her head, and watched from a distance as my mother and I unloaded the trunk.

“My sisters and I once went to a spa in St. Sauveur. It was very nice. Breakfast was included with our stay and all the rooms had balconies so we could see the view of the mountains and the lake,” she told us using her sharp voice as we all walked towards the elevator.

“That’s nice, Mom. Our room here has a balcony too. You’ll love it,” my mother said, and my grandmother nodded in satisfaction.

We walked into the garage elevator as I pushed the trolley of our luggage slowly, so as not to spill the reverenced soup. Inside, the shiny walls were made of imitation oak and the mirror was covered in flyers. It smelled of stale cigarette smoke and cheap air freshener. I looked closer at the mirror to fix my hair but was distracted by thick streaks of Windex and chewing gum stuck to the wall. On the ground there was a scrunched up coupon for ten percent off one arm of an arm wax. I recoiled and pushed the tips of my nails into the palm of my hand and squeezed, the destructive forces of evil at work via anxious fingertips. I had to send out my resume and work on an article and try to make something of myself at every moment. I didn’t have time for this spa, and it was clear that not many others cared for it. When the elevator doors opened, the lobby was empty.

“I guess they don’t have good advertising,” my grandmother quibbled.

“Oh, Mom, it’s just not a busy time of year. That’s why we got such a good deal,” my mother responded, maintaining an air of excitement.

I pushed the trolley, eyeing her as she approached the reception desk. Her baggy jeans and crooked shirt matched the crooked foldout tables that held soggy welcome danishes. The walls were beige, the carpet was beige. The open dining room was a vacant space of beige, stools with cracked cushions lining an empty bar.

"Welcome to Lincoln Hotel and Spa. How can I help you?" asked the lady with the non-discreet mullet and one dark chin hair. Why didn't she just pluck it? I thought with hatred.

"Hi there! We are checking in, my name is Joanne Miller." My mother spoke, peering over the counter looking to point at her name, then realizing it was not a dinner reservation, she looked back at us with a wide, toothy smile. Memories rippled through the tides beneath me, the absent mindedness of my mother, the time she didn't understand why she couldn't get out of the car only to realize her seatbelt was still on. Her mind was always somewhere else; I am sure it was on my happiness. Everything else was peripheral. I felt the dirt and oil from the car ride sink deeper into my pores.

"Can I take your bags, ladies?" asked a short, red-suited man with a toothpick hanging from his lip. He grabbed the trolley and led us to another elevator. My mother followed him eagerly, exhibiting no hesitation towards the overt strangeness that inhabited this space; something lopsided and off-centered, as in a horror film that irks rather than horrifies. But my keen mother looked back and signalled for us to follow, shirt tightening over the bulge of her lower stomach, the strap of her messenger bag outlining her heavy breasts. She stomped along, her glasses too big for her face sitting in a film of grease at the tip of her nose. The skin above her jaw line was beginning to hang like pockets filled with sand.

I waited to hear sounds from behind the doors as we walked down the hallway to our room. The red-suited man handed us our room keys with dirty hands. "Thank-you- good-sir," my mother sang, and passed him a five-dollar bill at which point my grandmother's eyes widened.

Inside the room was a table balanced by folded paper under two legs, chairs with cushions that did not match each other, a toaster, and a plastic refrigerator that buzzed loudly. A standing lamp in the living room, a television, a still-full garbage can, and a balcony that looked

onto New Hampshire's finest freeway. Within seconds, my mother had picked up the guidebook from the low wooden table in the living room, ready to plan.

"Um, where are the beds, Mom?" I asked.

"Oh, this is great! Murphy beds. We can pull them out of the wall and then close them up during the day so we have plenty of room if we want to play Scrabble in the living room."

"The bed comes out of the wall?" I asked.

"Yes, dear," said my grandmother. These were very common when I was growing up. Our houses were very small and narrow and we were four children for two bedrooms, so many of the houses came with Murphy beds, or bunk beds. You know, we just did what we had to do."

My grandmother spoke of her crowded and impoverished childhood with pride, as if we didn't deserve big rooms, or that we were taking them for granted.

My mother removed the cushions from the living room couches and as she pulled down the bed another roll in her stomach appeared from underneath her t-shirt. She helped my grandmother do the same to her bed, purse still outlining the bloat of her body, the flappy skin estranged from her bones under her arms. I watched, and felt my throat closing. When had she stopped caring? I wondered.

"Thank you, Joanne," my grandmother declared, lifting the blanket on the bed, testing the fluff of the pillows. "Wait. I think this is a pubic hair." She pushed the pilling fleece cover onto the floor with her foot. My mother took charge.

"Ok, don't worry. Gabby, call the front desk and ask them for…"

"Another blanket with pubic hair? I'm sure that's all they got, Grandma."

"Just call them," my grandmother spat back.

So I did, with pleasure, because what else did the chin hair and mullet have to do this afternoon? My mother walked to the center of the room and stood still with her hands held out mid-air, not releasing a breath. This was her thinking position. The moment of silent pondering before the revealing of a big plan that would cover all bases and ensure everyone's happiness. My grandmother put the soup in the fridge.

"OK. It's 4:00 now. I say we relax a bit, then shower up, maybe open a bottle of wine and get ready for dinner in the dining room. Who brought makeup? Then we can watch a movie later and look at the spa menu for tomorrow. Sound good?" my mother asked.

"Well, I made soup if anybody wants. And I brought some *mandel* bread that your aunt Irene made special. Don't let it go to waste, not everyone has the good fortune of having this much food," my grandmother said.

"I'm going to do work until dinner," I replied.

"What do you mean work?" my grandmother asked, laying out her shoes by the door, her luggage sprawled out on the bed.

"I have to finish my resume and some writing; I have deadlines."

"I thought you were here to relax? This is a vacation," she replied.

"This is my job, Grandma. With the money from my job I pay my rent, because no one else pays my rent. So, I'm going to do my work now. Is that OK with you?"
My grandmother took a step back.

"No no, don't worry, Mom. Gab is just a bit stressed. We're going to get her a nice massage and pedicure tomorrow to relax," my mother sang, using her hands to imitate the motions of a massage.

"Mom *what* are you talking about?" My throat contracted. "You know we can't afford

that, so why are you pretending? You asked to borrow money this morning! You told me at home that we'd just hang by the pool unless Grandma offered. Where are you coming up with these funds for pampering? Why can't you both just be honest and say that this spa is fucking creepy and none of us except for Grandma has the money to do anything and she won't spend a penny. Leave me do my work so I can support myself, unless one of you wants to do that for me!"

They both fell silent. "No, I didn't think so."

My mother stared at me, shocked and embarrassed. I heard a knock on the door.

"Did someone order another blanket?"

"Yes, we ordered a clean blanket without pubic hairs," I said.

"Gabby!" my mother yelled.

"Listen, you people charge $35.00 for a polish change—you can give us blankets that aren't hairy." I scanned the fleece. There was no hair, only lingering bits of dead skin flakes caught in between the pill and coarseness.

"It's fine, thank you," I closed the door roughly and threw the blanket on my grandmother's bed. I stared at our luggage: open cosmetic bags with tubes of concealer, my grandmother's brown lipstick and night cream, crumpled panties, bottles of thyroid pills, Wellbutrin, acid reflux medication, a scrabble board and books. I imagined the mess of my mother's room as a teenager: her love letters and scribbled song lyrics, band t-shirts and packs of cigarettes now packed away in a memory box at the back of her closet. My grandmother's room, where she and her sisters had played Chinese checkers to the sounds of the street below them. Now, our shared room was overheating with estrogen and the fervor of the three of us. My mother looked defeated. My mother, who had planned this getaway for me. My mother, who had

stayed up all night browsing the web to find the most convenient and affordable spot to do this. My mother, who needed to borrow money so her cheque wouldn't bounce. My mother, whose financial issues I had just exposed. Her shoulders shrank, and the swelling of her stomach grew larger when she sat down on the couch, purse still on, one hand gripping tightly to the New Hampshire city guide.

"I'm sorry," she said. I felt like I'd just kicked the little girl for enjoying her apple.

***

I heard the balcony door slide open behind me.

"Gabrielle, are you hungry?" my grandmother asked.

"No," I said.

"I have chicken soup," she tried again.

"No, thank you."

"But you have to eat, *maideleh,* even if you are upset." I licked the tears that stuck to the side of my mouth and stared onto the freeway, waiting for something to crash and overwhelm the lack of beauty of this town. My grandmother began to cry behind me, a sound I had never heard before. When my grandfather passed, we stayed with her for the seven days of sitting shiva, during which she resolved to only cry in the shower where the water would cloak the sound of her tears. When she came out her eyes were red, her nose stuffed and red around the nostrils, but we had missed the storm. She is the widowed matriarch of the thirteen of us: who, when told *I love you,* responds with *thank you.* It was the quiet collectivity of that generation to never show weakness again, so emotions were gifted sparingly. *We should all suffer a bit,* was her mentality. Only when lost in one of the paintings on her wall did she ever lapse into a moment of pure sentiment. At my grandfather's shiva she had stared at the charcoal shadows and urgent lines of

Betty Goodwin's *Without Cease, the Earth Faintly Trembles* and with defeated breath, said, "That piece looks so different now."

***

"Let me pay your rent." She spoke as a procession of cars zipped by. I turned to my grandmother, her shoulders hunched like my mother's, who through the window I noticed sitting at the edge of the bed clinging to the guidebook, staring at the wall in front of her.

"Grandma, thank you but I don't want your help."

"I know you don't. But your mother can't help you, and that's all she wants to do. I'm doing this for her too. Let her see you happy, for me," she begged. "She's my daughter," she whispered.

The sky began to look decidedly off-kilter as the warmth of the afternoon left us abruptly.

"Tell your mother your rent is paid. And her rent is paid too until your father figures out his work. I would sell everything I own, all my paintings, to help my family!" Her voice was sharp. "Do you know how much you mean to me?"

I didn't, because she had never told us before. She fought off sentimentality as if it were a curse. I'd never even heard her tell my grandfather that she loved him, although she'd fed him and ironed his shirts and nursed him with rigor until he died. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, a play my grandmother had taken me to often as a young girl, Tevye asks Golde: *Do you love me*? To which Golde responds:

> *For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes*
> *Cooked your meals, cleaned your house*
> *Given you children, milked the cow*
> *After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now.*

A softness came over my grandmother, her curtness diffused into the warmth of the sleepy sun, and she expressed—in her way—love. With it came a release of guilt and a sense that it was OK for her to help her family now despite not being able to have saved them years ago. Her voice was pained as she held me and sobbed. Maybe that is why my grandmother never ate her own soup. She didn't believe she had the right to be cured.

I would accept her offer to help because when someone loves you that much, you have to let them, but for the life of me I will never be able to wash my eyes of my mother's curved back and dropped head, her hands on the guidebook, knowing that the help could not come from her. God knows, she loved me so hard, it took the wind right out of her.

We Don't Want to Talk About It

Being
Is dying
By loving.
To live in the world as it is
& save yr soul too
is a lot to do

Tom Clark

The rain never came as the TV weatherman had predicted the night before, when my mother, grandmother and I had all gone to bed, our backs turned to one another to avoid conversation. In the morning I had gone, unnecessarily, at 9 a.m. to lay claim to a chair by the pool, before my mother was out of the washroom, where she had brought her coffee and would remain for 30 or so minutes, preparing herself for the day. Growing up, I would climb up onto her high bed and stare at the white bathroom door, amused by the sounds that fluttered out from behind it. Her singing voice and the sound of the blow-dryer's plastic casing hitting the counter. The click of makeup palettes and lipstick cases snapping shut. I imagined a beauty team climbing out from underneath the sink to make her beautiful while she used a hairbrush as a microphone.

My grandmother wasn't in the room and that didn't surprise me. She had become a very early riser ever since my grandfather passed. Something about waking up before the sun made her feel like she had beat time, and that he might be waiting there in that undefined space. Her bed was made with the white top sheet folded over the fleece blanket, as if to tell the cleaning service (not that there was one) that she could do it better. Her pillows were fluffed. Her nightgown was placed in a neat square at the edge of her bed. I knew that she had eaten because the scent of peeled banana lingered, and there was a white bowl drying on the top rung of the

dishwasher, a hint for my mother and me to eat in the room and not spend money on breakfast in the dining room downstairs.

I heard my mother take a sip of coffee from behind the door, so I quickly slipped into a bathing suit, jean shorts and t-shirt, threw my notebook into a beach bag and left, easing the hotel room door shut. My flip-flops smacked like fly swatters as I ran down the corridor and the noise of my getaway made me very aware of what I was doing.

By the pool, the sky was studded with clouds. I looked around at the gloom of my surroundings in the grey light: the edge of the pool's chipping paint, the sparse and sporadic layout of decrepit pool chairs, the arrangement of decaying plants and flowers, and no people. When the clouds parted I lay back so that my skin stuck like putty to the alternating teal and white plastic rungs of the chair, until I gagged at the thought of who else's oily skin had made its mark there.

I had forgotten to bring a towel; or rather, I had thought that they might offer towels at the pool. However, it appeared as though no one worked at that spa except for the red-suited men who congregated in the lobby like rogue sheep blocking a road. I watched a few of them lurking at the window, waiting to see my grandmother push them out of her way, or my mother ask them to move, politely, so that she could pass. Neither came, so I left the events of the previous night to float off in a bubble. And then there it was again.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
we lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
loved and were loved, and now we lie
in Flanders fields.

I had memorized that poem for English class by pacing back and forth on the taupe carpets in the basement of my childhood. I dragged my feet to its rhythm, making marks in the

carpet until the whole basement floor was a sea of elongated footprints. I forced my parents to listen to me practice for two weeks. My mother clapped each time I finished. I remember this because of the way she hit her hands together—as a child would, palms open wide—proud of her daughter's capabilities. But once in front of the classroom, without the carpet to guide my beat, I lost my words and failed the assignment. As punishment for my failure, my mind developed sensors that detected relaxation. Instead of an alarm, that poem cropped up, repeating, repeating, repeating, until the relaxation had fled the scene.

My mother had comforted me in my grade school defeat with a beautiful notebook, inscribing *Write your own words* on the first page of the thick, eggshell-coloured paper, followed by two lines of a Lawrence Raab poem, which had taught me that the magic of writing lay in the fact that absolutely anything is possible.

let's take those trees that died last winter

and bring them back to life

The sunlight was interrupted by some clouds, so I climbed out of my thoughts and sat up to try my hand at writing. But it wasn't a shadow, it was my mother.

"Oh, hi Mom," I said quietly, and lowered my stare to take in the chipping paint of her toenails, the color of a flamingo. Attached to her left sandal—cracked brown leather that looked like a dry tree trunk—was a trail of toilet paper. The sight of my mother from the vantage of that pool chair had the effect of a tsunami on me.

Anger: Why the hell don't you put some effort into yourself, you look awful.

Pity: You've used up all your love on me; it's not your fault.

Resentment: You were better before. Why did you have me?

Guilt: I'm sorry for judging you.

The unruly combination of love and hate sat like oil and water in my body, the water boiling, the oil prepared to catch fire. I imagined my combustion, and then my black ashes falling in slow motion into a neat pile on the ground. I pined for a time when I didn't know about the person that my mother had been before she had me; the kind of woman who would never leave the house with toilet paper on her shoe. It was difficult to conceive that I once grew inside of her, that we were once attached. I then moved up from the very first row of the movie theatre to the very back, where the pixels fell into place and everything became clear. That clarity was the loss of innocence.

I can't pinpoint exactly when it happened. Beginnings are always less defined than endings, but there was a day in kindergarten that stands out. I had given my teacher a drawing I made during our free time: a crooked rainbow, some clouds, a sun in the corner. She seemed shocked by the beauty of it, told me I had talent, and that she would keep it forever in a safe place. But at the end of the day when I gathered my snow boots and lunch box, I passed by and saw my drawing in the garbage. At one point I would have processed the picture in the garbage as *picture* and *garbage*, but understanding what it was doing in there is what changed me. Truth and appearance. Toilet paper on my mother's shoe was no longer *paper* on *shoe.* Those objects paired together took on a new meaning.

The search for incongruity became a common thread in my life. People who laugh when they cry, for example—two conflicting simultaneous acts. A flower budding in snow—a paradox. A sad smile—an oxymoron.

My mother—then and now.

She referred to her life before my brothers and me as "back *then,"* and when she spoke about it, she became it. *My Xanadu*, she had said once, which meant nothing to me as a child.

When she told me about New York, I only knew it was something wonderful because when she said it, she lit up like a neon store sign. The hot shot job at the publishing house, her walk up apartment in the West Village: seven steps to the door. A spider plant in the window. A visiting cat from the neighbour, extra blankets in the winter because the heating was shoddy. Her hangout, a French restaurant in Soho, *Raoul's* and its back terrace covered with strands of glowing light bulbs in tin cans, the interior darkness broken by the orange light of cigarettes, strangers becoming friends, and the tarot card reader who sat upstairs by the bathrooms. My mother paid $5.00 almost three times a week to hear the lady dressed in gypsy clothes repeat the same message (her only message, because usually people only visited her once to experience the kitsch of the place) – "*tonight is the night you will fall in love."* She spoon-fed my superstitious young mother hope.

Beautiful and optimistic beneath the tall buildings. *I could have stayed there forever*, she once said to me with a faraway gaze before she put me to bed. *Instead I have you, and I am so thankful for that*. She kissed my head as she tucked me in, then shut the door and disappeared into the hallway. *Short days ago she lived.* I wanted to resurrect her with the trees that died last winter.

***

"Hi Gab," my mother responded.

"How are you?" I asked, then, "you have something stuck to your sandal, Mom."

"Oh, well, that's embarrassing." She removed the piece of toilet paper then scrunched it up and held it in her fist. "I'm good," she continued. "Just cleaned up a bit in the room and had a coffee. Do you know where Grandma is?"

"She was gone before I woke up," I said.

"I hope she knows where to find us." She sat down on the chair next to me, crossed her legs and opened her book.

I held my breath and waited for her to bring up last night. A lady bug landed on my folded knee. A bird let out one clean chirp. Leaves being swallowed by the pool gutter, the sound of a comic strip caricature gulping.

Say something. Anything.

She turned the page of her book but I knew she wasn't really reading by the length at which she held the book from her. She couldn't see that far without her glasses. Her book was a prop in her game of evasion. My family members were black belts in the sweep-under-the-rug-and-let-it burn-inside-you tactic.

"What are you reading, Mom?" I asked.

She fidgeted and flipped the book around.

"It's called *The History of Love*."

"How is it?"

"Um, good question. I wasn't really processing the words."

"Oh, really."

"Ya. I guess I'll get to it now. I hear it's a great read." She planted her nose in the book.

***

I was around eight years old when I first noticed this tendency of her mind to wander. The kitchen was dotted with crumbs and stained tea towels that she tidied up before my father came home. Transparent peelings of onion and garlic stuck to the bottom of my bare feet as I walked along the cold tile. She was stirring the contents of the pot on the stove in perfect circles, her wooden spoon hitting the metal on the *two* beat in the *one, two* tempo of a metronome. She

was in a trance, staring beyond the cerulean blue backsplash ahead of her. When the steam grew heavier and the bubbles had started to boil, I called out, "*Mommy,*" and she crawled out of some memory, looking at me blankly as if for a moment she had forgotten who I was, then forced a smile. I wish I had asked her then what she was thinking, but it's too late for that. I imagine it was the intersecting lines of a specific skyline.

Instead, I have you.

***

A sudden clunk and then a scratching noise on the pavement. An old man was wheeling in a large blue cart and my grandmother bopped in behind him. He was at least 65, I gathered, by the way his skin hung and the way he walked, with a certain caution, and yet also a boyishness to him: a strut. Pock marks under a layer of scruff, baggy cargo shorts and a worn in t-shirt with the graphic of a beer can that read *Pabst*. He shimmied to the corner by the fence and pulled out a matte silver stereo from behind the cumbersome contraption. He pressed play and as the music started he jigged his hips to the burst of Elvis' voice.

Well, since my baby left me,
I found a new place to dwell.
It's down at the end of lonely street
at Heartbreak Hotel.

The music rode past us on a breeze. The ripples on the water looked like shattered pieces of light under a twirling disco ball. The arrival of this man, the sun, Elvis and my approaching grandmother made the space feel more real, as an empty room only becomes a "party" once the guests arrive. My grandmother winced as the man pumped his arms backwards to release a pelvic thrust. She continued towards me and my mother, a hazy figure in the bright wash of the sun. Once at the edge of our chairs she paused and stood over us. I held my breath again, waiting

for her relaxed facial muscles to spasm.

Say something. Anything.

But she just smiled. If we had a family crest, *We don't want to talk about it* would be etched on our coat of arms.

***

I first learned of my family's tendency toward denial when my grandfather's oncologist asked that each grandchild take a turn "saying our goodbyes." I did what I thought was the right thing to do. I sat by his bed on a fold-out plastic chair. I commented on the nice breeze that came in through the window, and how nice the sun in the room was. Then I held his hand in mine and told him that I loved him, and would miss him very much. He let go of my hand and responded by showing me the strength of his breath in the spirometer.

"See?" he whispered, as if it was a sure sign of recovery when the little red ball the size of a ping-pong mounted halfway in the plastic tube. My grandmother interjected with, "no, no dear, he'll be home soon," and then shoved me out of the room. *We don't want to talk about it*. He died that night, and I had to force myself to believe that when my grandmother had said he would be *home* soon, she had a different idea of what that word meant. But for three months after he passed, she kept a shirt, sweater, pants and shoes in his cupboard *in case he needed them,* she repeated often.

***

My grandmother was hovering.

"Good morning girls," she sang from above us. "I just checked the weather for the day with the front desk and it should be very nice out. I also looked at the breakfast menu but it was a little bit pricy so I went back to the room and ate while you both slept. I had some yoghurt and

fruit and then went back to the front desk to ask them if there is any interesting Jewish history in this town. They didn't seem to know, so maybe you can look on your computer, Gabby, and we can see if there is something important to visit while we are here. It's important to know." Her methodical run-through of the morning came out in staccato bursts; her S's lingered like a whistle.

"Sure, Grandma. I'll check when I go up later." I sat up straight to face her, still waiting for her to say something about last night. I was more anxious than before we had arrived, not knowing if she would go through with her offer. A sort of financial purgatory. I wanted to sit down and work out the details, the pay back plan, say thank you.

"Joanne, Gabby, you need to eat," she enunciated the last three words slowly.

"I just had my coffee, Mom. I'll eat something soon," my mother said.

"Gabby? I'll warm up some knishes I brought," she offered.

"No thanks, Grandma. I'm not hungry yet."

"Well you need to nourish yourself if you're going to sit in this sun. You shouldn't be in this heat on an empty stomach. Can you believe this weather? That weatherman should be fired," she spat her words, as if he had personally offended her.

"Why don't you come sit down, Grandma?" I patted the chair next to me.

"There are no towels. Where are the towels?"

"I think we were supposed to bring them from our room, but we didn't know," I said.

"They want us to use our *bath* towels as *pool* towels? Well that's absurd."

With that, she headed towards the man now setting up what appeared to be a sort of bar area from the blue cart. My mother looked at me and we both shared a brief half-smile then

watched her approach him, as it was sure to be entertaining.

"Excuse me. Where are the towels for the pool chairs?"

"Morning, ma'am. How do you do this fine day?"

"Fine. I'm fine. Would you lower that noise?"

"That's no noise, ma'am, that's Elvis." He turned down the volume slightly. "Now what can I do for you?"

"From whom can I request towels for our pool chairs, please."

"You can just ask the pool boy, ma'am."

"And where *is* the poolboy?"

"You're lookin' at him, ma'am."

"You're the pool boy? Oldest pool boy I've ever seen. Anyway," she stuck her hand out and flicked her wrist downward to hang like a dead chicken turned upside down, "the towels please."

"FYI ma'am, I'm the resident disc jockey, pool cleaner, bartender and whatever else you'd like me to be. With respect." He handed my grandmother three towels with the grin of a boy about to throw pop rockets near the feet of unsuspecting girls. She turned around. He turned up the music.

"If you don't ask, you don't get." She tossed my mother and me each an ochre orange towel that felt like and looked like sandpaper.

"Thank you," we blurted in tandem, then adjusted our seats to face the sun.
My grandmother pulled out a box of antibacterial towelettes to wipe down her chair handles, then gestured the package toward my mother and me. We shook our heads, so she kicked off her sandals, then sat down with a grunt.

Because we couldn't complain about the good weather, or that we had finally got our towels, no one spoke at all. I stared discreetly through my sunglasses at my mother reading. Her nose nearly touched the pages so I knew she was processing the words. I examined her. Pixels condensed. She was small and hunched over with two rolls protruding from her stomach like scoops of ice cream. Stringy hair stuck to her face. She had seemed much taller back *then*. Taller in Hawaii, where her hair was thick, held back on one side by a fuchsia hibiscus flower. Gleaming under the fiery young sun, shiny and caramelized on all sides like a pig on a spit. She was smiling at my father, who had snapped the picture: a simple man with whom she shared a safe, colloquial kind of love. *Then.* Before the tectonic shift. The destructive tsunami of a different kind of love that one can neither choose, control, redeem or return from. The love of a mother for her child.

You're a one-way ticket, she used to say.

***

The man with the blue cart was still dancing as he poured bags of ice into a large grey bucket then added a carton of lemonade, bottles of water, a few cans of soda and an array of beer bottles. He took out a metal cash register and cranked open up a wide umbrella, speckled with holes, to protect the drinks from the direct sunlight. He was tall and had little balls where his biceps used to be.

"Girls, the bartender or whatever he is has some drinks. I want you to hydrate. I would like to buy you each a bottle of water. OK?" She would buy us water, although not without telling us how much it cost. My mother and I nodded in agreement, so my grandmother pushed down on the chair to lift herself out of it, and walked across the pastel grey pavement with her purse, towards the man with the drink cart.

“Excuse me. I would like two water bottles and three cups please,” she said to the man.

“Well, hello again pretty lady. Twice in ten minutes, one might call that flirting,” he winked at her.

“Sir, if I was flirting you would know. And if I was flirting with you, then someone ought to lock me up,” she said and he laughed.

“OK. Two water bottles and three cups coming right up. And lucky for you, first customer of the day gets a free beer.”

“I don’t drink beer. Thank you.” She took a step back from him.

“Then a shot of vodka, that’ll do it.”

“Sir, I don’t know what you take me for, but your suggestions are frankly offensive.”

“Oh c’mon now, I was just pulling your leg,” he laughed.

“Pull your own leg. Now give me that water, please.”

“Coming up, ma’am.” He dug his large hands into the bucket of ice, pulled out two bottles wet with condensation, then handed her three glasses. “I didn’t mean any harm, ma’am, and don’t take offense to this, but you should lighten up a bit. A little bit of humour never killed anyone,” he said.

She squinted back at him in disbelief.

“I won’t even dignify that with a response,” she said and walked away.

He was only a decade or so younger than my grandmother but they seemed generations apart. He clung to youth, she slouched towards the other end of the spectrum.

“Joanne, I called your sister. I invited her to come join us with Rachel,” my grandmother said.

“What?” my mother sat upright in her chair.

"They live around the corner, it would be a shame to miss the opportunity to be with two of my granddaughters and two of my daughters at the same time. You know we're lucky to have such a big family. You wouldn't deprive me of this visit, would you?"

"They live in Rhode Island, Mom, not around the corner. And I wanted Gabby to relax here. She's been working four jobs all summer. This trip was for her to unwind before school starts again."

"I'm fine, Mom," I said.

"It just would have been nice if you'd asked us," my mother continued.

"OK. Next time I'll ask. I'm sure Gabrielle won't mind a visit from her cousin."

She looked to me for confirmation.

"Sure. It will be fun," I said.

My grandmother lay back in her chair and closed her eyes. My mother looked back at me and I shrugged my shoulders as if to say *what can you do?* We laughed silently, breaking the ice with the pick of my grandmother's well-preserved talent of manipulation. The day was young and everything was less disastrous than I had anticipated. But there was one more thought on which I hadn't finished musing: the mystery of the list my mother had left out on her counter before we left. It read:

Milk
Caraway Rye
Steve's dry cleaning
Fix it
Lavender for Gabby's pillows
Orange Pekoe Tea

Fix it, she wrote. As in a verb. As in taking action. The kitchen sink? The pull in her sweater? The clogged drain? Her *life?*

I thought of the fierce way in which my mother had taken charge of helping my grandmother get rid of my grandfather's belongings after months of, *in case he needs them* had expired. She had *fixed* things then, solid and confident, no toilet paper attached to her shoe. It had helped me to envision her in *Xanadu*: lively, determined, bold. A complete woman with all her tectonic parts. She'd taken the rest of my grandfather's clothes out of his closet and packed them in two grocery bags. She escorted my grandmother to the car (where I sat silently in the back, in awe of the speed at which she drove down to Salvation army). "Those are not him, Mom, those are *things*" and she helped her empty his clothes from the plastic bags into a plastic bin the color of a melted raincloud, for strangers to pick at. It was cruel but it was love. I liked to watch it, it had given me hope that she would apply the same energetic charge to herself and *fix* things. Of course we never spoke of that day again; we don't even look at rainclouds.

Maybe she was just very good at the art of letting go. Maybe she didn't mind the tectonic shift. The one way ticket. Maybe things just end, and maybe that's OK.

Digging for Grandfather

The way he put up with her, only they could understand. She was a tyrant of a wife: *Irwin I need you to do this*, *Irwin take out the garbage*, *Irwin, you're ridiculous*, *Irwin, I found the Fudgee-Os you hid in the bottom drawer. What are you trying to do, kill yourself*? I never understood that love could work that way until I understood that the type of love my grandparents shared was different. Not only for them, but for that whole generation of kin who, likewise, had been witnesses to a state of the world in ruin.

As much as I have grown tired of reading my grandmother's daily e-mails reminding me of what happened, I understand that the war and its repercussions shaped the character of a people, and that history is inextricable. After the pain came a form of reimbursement from the universe, for with survival after trauma comes the rare capability of earnest appreciation. In the case of my grandparents, the recompense for a life of turmoil was the sensational feeling of absolute, and unconditional, love.

They never really felt like grandparents to me, more like extended parents. When I close my eyes I can see each detail of their home in the Town of Mount Royal. The geraniums lining the front walkway that my grandfather had planted. The mosaic vase with peacock feathers at the front entrance. The copper bowl of hazelnuts and its embossed silver nutcracker in the upstairs den. The fireplace and its iron tools. The artwork I was not allowed to touch. My grandfather's study where he kept fall leaves from our trips to Vermont pressed between book pages. My mother's old childhood room where I stayed when I slept over: orange from the 70's with a cream quilt blanket and a decorative copper floor bowl filled with comics and old magazines. The terracotta tiled kitchen. Woven baskets on top of the shelving against the blue walls. A window to the grand backyard. My grandfather's gardening tools. A lilac tree.

My grandparents had sold this house to move downtown when I was 14-years-old and it hit me very hard. In fact, when my parents sold our actual childhood house, where I'd grown up from 4 to 24, I was unaffected. I had already gone through the trauma.

What I learnt was that wherever we lived, my grandfather was endowed with the unique skill of making each of his seven grandchildren feel like they were his favourite. Despite his arbitrary nickname for me, *Mackenzie* (he had one for each of us) and his other, not so arbitrary nickname for me, *P.I.T.A (pain in the ass),* we shared a special connection. He would stand behind me and cup my face, my *punem,* in his large hands and with a rough pinch of my cheeks introduce me to friends, or colleagues in his business of the fur trade: "You know it's her fault I'm a grandfather."

I realized later on that he shared that same sort of special relationship with his first-born child, my mother, who he introduced as "the girl who had made him a father." The way he looked at my mother, Joanne, who he nicknamed *Joni,* was the same way my mother looked at me. I recognize what real love looks like because of what it did to his eyes.

Irrespective of my watching my mother or—more accurately—judging her ruthlessly on that spa vacation last summer, furious that she had grown out of who I thought she should have been, I often think of a moment I overheard between my mother and Zaidie during his last few weeks of life:

"You know you're my favourite," he had said to her.

And my mother had nodded, because she knew that too. It was the way she had cared for him in his final days, as if somehow she had known him, not only as her father, but as a man, as a human being, as afraid. She was brave enough to understand that, until he was gone, it was not about her losing her father, but instead about her father losing his life. He needed to grieve

before she did. And she was strong for him.

It was not only formidable, but of a variety of love that I take to be immortal. Those full and honest words that he said to her, *my favourite,* made me reconsider that she might in fact be exactly who she was meant to be. By learning about him, I began to understand her, and so I planned to dig deep down to the roots that supported my family tree.

***

In a row of crowded walk-ups off the Main, at 141 Villeneuve, had lived my grandfather, one of two sons and a daughter—my grandfather, Irwin Miller, his brother Morris and sister, Louise—belonging to Gertrude and Jack, immigrants from Poland after the war. I didn't know much of him then, but there must have been something about that man that brought over 700 people to his funeral, filling the seats, any standing space and even the hallway. Or why one of his business acquaintances in China had named their Asian son Irwin. Or why, when people hear that he was my grandfather, they feel the need to grab my hand and hold on to it. There must be a reason, and I intended to find out what it was.

I couldn't ask my grandmother because she doesn't like to talk about these things, so I asked Judy, my tarot card reader who was also my grandfather's favourite niece, because—of course—years ago she had made him an uncle.

Judy came over one afternoon in April when the wind had lost its bite and the snow had finally surrendered to the grass. Her sprouted hair was greyer and her face rounder and plumper than I remembered. I asked her if she had any stories about my grandfather's life she wouldn't mind passing on. She laughed and then answered me with a nonchalant sigh.

"I just saw him actually. At Uncle Saul's funeral."

Judy went on to clarify (if we can call it that) that he had showed up at Uncle Saul's

funeral to help him cross over.

She described him physically in a way I had only known from pictures: young, healthy, with a full head of brown side swept hair, wearing his brown leather jacket. He had come to help Saul because Saul had refused to leave the mortal world without settling his gambling debts. He couldn't fathom letting his wife, Irene go through the terrible pain of mourning him, *without* him. It was difficult for Saul to grasp the sense in leaving the person you love when they need you most. My grandfather had tried to convince him that that's just how it works, in fact he said, "That's the way the cookie crumbles, old boy," but Saul wouldn't budge. Finally, someone shared a humorous anecdote in their eulogy, and Irene broke out in laughter. When Saul saw that she could still laugh like that, he agreed to cross over.

When Judy had finished telling this story, she pulled out a bright purple velvet bag from her purse and removed a Ziploc filled with pistachio nuts still in their shell. Her stout fingers grabbed one and she cracked it open with her teeth, then left the cracked shells on the table. She gestured the bag towards me but it was Friday and Shabbat dinner at my grandmother's promised much food and little excuse to not eat. The purple bag on the table looked like a man's prayer bag used in temple to hold his *tallit*. It appeared to be filled, the soft fabric puffed up from the inside. I moved my gaze from the bag back to Judy.

"Who else could see my Zaidie at the funeral?" I asked her.

"Just me, I think," Judy replied. "He said, *Hi doll*, when he saw me. Just like he used to," she said.

Did I believe her? Part of me did, because she seemed to believe it herself. She told stories of magic with the same intonation that one might use to talk about the weather.

"I didn't go to that funeral because I had an exam. Or, not even an exam. I just had to

study for one. I can't believe he was there and I missed him." I felt my throat clench.

"Well really, you can talk to him anytime you want," she said.

"Can he see me now? I don't really understand how this works. Do I have to invite him or something?"

"He heard us talking about him so naturally, he showed up," she said, and I fell silent. "Is there something specific that you wanted to ask him?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact there is something that's been bothering me. So what do I do? I just start talking?" I asked Judy and she nodded. I proceeded to look up at the ceiling because if he was anywhere in the room it must have been above us.

"Hi, Zaidie," I said. "I don't know if you can hear me, but I want to tell you that I'm not at peace with the way we said goodbye to each other. I know that you were angry at how early your time came, so I've been worried that you haven't been able to move on, or be happy, wherever you are. I just want to know, I guess, despite being deceased, are you OK?"

I felt the top of my throat throb and my jaw clench as I resisted the tears that fought to surface. When I turned to look at Judy her eyes were already closed. She took a deep breath in through her nose and placed her hand on the velvet bag next to her. For five minutes she rubbed the fabric with her fingertips. She breathed steadily, in and out, while her eyes moved around under her flickering lids. I waited impatiently.

The tick of the clock was unbearable to my ears. The undercurrent of buzzing electricity tapped at my bones. Through the window I saw a pigeon perched on the twisted wire connecting telephone poles, watching me. Perhaps it was judging the bizarre daytime séance occurring in my apartment, or perhaps it was my grandfather resurrected as a bird. Judy opened her eyes slowly.

"OK, Gabby. I don't know if you know this about your grandfather, but he only went to

school up until grade 8. He had to drop out and start working to help support his family. That wasn't unheard of back then. Life was hard. He worked a few jobs, one of which was for some cousins of ours at *National Furs,* where he started off marking and counting fur pelts in the cold vault. He was a hard worker and eventually made his way up to President, where he did very well for himself. But he was always ashamed at not having had a formal education. This is all to say that you're not wrong. He *was* angry to leave the world at only 73, because he wasn't done learning. But what he wants me to tell you is that he's learning everything he's ever wanted to know where he is now. He says if he has a question about art he can ask Picasso. And, there's no time limit." Judy reached for another pistachio.

Picasso, I thought. I didn't know he liked Picasso. My grandparents had a beautiful collection of Canadian art; street scenes of the Jewish ghetto where they grew up, and the snowy rooftops of Montreal's downtown Fur District where my grandfather spent his days. I imagined that there were volumes I didn't know.

"So, why do you think my grandmother is so scared about her money? She has more than enough. Last year when we were in New Hampshire, she told me she would help me pay rent while I'm in school so I can focus on my work. But then she never brought it up again. I know she can afford it, but she lives like she's impoverished."

"You have to understand," said Judy "Your grandparents had nothing growing up. Your grandmother's parents even refused to let her marry your Zaidie because he had nothing to give her. Of course, she got her way in the end," Judy chuckled. "Your Zaidie did everything in his power to make sure that his children and grandchildren wouldn't have to live the way he did, and now that he's gone, all that your grandmother has left of him is what he left her. It's not about wealth. She's protecting what he worked so hard for. When the funds are gone, to her, so is he,

and then she's back at square one." Judy searched my face for understanding. She picked up another pistachio and sucked the salt off the shell, air squeaking between the gap in her front teeth.

"What else don't I know about him?" I asked.

"There's probably a lot more than you think," she said. "He had a very interesting family history. For instance, did you know that his first language was French?" she asked.

"Come again?" I said. Judy laughed.

"Not only was his first language French, but on his first date with your grandmother he was so self-conscious about his English that he barely spoke. Never mind that he had terrible acne and was poor, he was the only Jew in the area with a Francophone accent," she laughed again.

My phone vibrated loudly on the wood table.

"It's my grandma," I said.

Judy gestured her hand toward the phone for me to pick it up.

Hi grandma … I'm good thanks, you? … Early? How early? ... Sure, but I'm actually with cousin Judy ... Yes, your niece ... No, we were not having a family reunion without you, it's just the two of us …Because I invited her … OK. I will …Wait, Grandma, was Zaidie a Francophone? … Why is that a ridiculous question? … Fine, explain later … See you at 4:30.

"My grandma wants to know if you'd like to join us for Shabbat dinner? But we would have to go early to bring her a few groceries that she's missing," I said to Judy.

"How nice. I would love to join you. Your grandmother will have plenty to share on this topic," Judy said. "Shall we grab the bus and continue this conversation later?" she suggested.

I agreed. Judy zipped up her purple velvet bag and scooped the pistachio shells off the

ledge of the table into her cupped palm. I changed into my Friday evening attire: no rips, no skin showing, no fly away hairs, no blemish uncovered – no ammo for grandma.

We headed out to fetch my grandmother's groceries and help her prepare the dining room table for Sabbath. The dynamic between my verbose, self-proclaimed psychic cousin and my cerebral, shut-off grandmother was sure to make for a memorable evening.

As we boarded the 24 bus to head eastward down Sherbrooke street, I wondered if Judy planned to tell my grandmother about having seen her dead husband at our uncle's funeral. I also wondered if my grandmother had been de-clawed that week.

The Dinner Guest

I did not know how to reach him, how to catch up with him...
The land of tears is so mysterious.
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince

Judy and I arrived at my grandmother's building with five minutes to spare. The lobby smelled clean. The décor was sparse and modern and the floors had a newly waxed shine. The doormen were dressed in tidy navy blue suits with red stitching and gold buttons. In the centre of the large open space was a sizeable floral arrangement of dahlias, ranunculi and anemones. Names I knew because of my grandfather's green thumb.

The doorman ran to take our grocery bags, placed them on a trolley, and escorted us up the elevator.

"Dinner at your grandmother's tonight, Gabby?" Joseph asked, adjusting his lapels.

"Yes we have Shabbat. This is my mother's cousin, Judy. She'll be joining us tonight." I introduced them.

"Very nice to meet you," he nodded. "I'm sure it will be a lovely dinner; you're in great company," Joseph winked at me.

"My plus one should be arriving soon," Judy smiled as she replied.

I blushed, uncertain as to whether that was an unsuccessful joke or if she was referring to my grandfather.

The elevator door opened on the twelfth floor to the cooking smells of my grandmother's kitchen: wafts of dill boiling, doughy knishes baking and brisket brining in a sweet and salty broth. Joseph carried the bags to my grandmother's door and bid us farewell. I stared at the two panels of dark wood and felt disoriented. It had been quite some time since the absence of my

grandfather behind that door had made itself felt so forcefully. With Judy and her "plus one," I felt that somehow I was opening the door to the past where he would be there. Pacing with hands in his trouser pockets. Pouring scotch from its crystal decanter. Annoying my grandmother with silly questions like *what drawer are my socks in, Shirl?* Sitting at his desk wearing thinly framed metal glasses, doodling birds in the margins of his yellow work papers.

I couldn't bring myself to knock.

***

Each year following his death, he had inhabited a little less space in their apartment. Not because my memory of him had faded, but because life goes on. That question, "how many years has it been?" sums it up. We used to count the days, even hours. Eventually, thoughts of him were no longer automatic. Memories were triggered by birthdays or wedding anniversaries marked on the calendar. On those days we would take turns expressing our nostalgia in his honour. Sadness moved from being an overall, everyday mode to a sentiment more aptly expressed on the anniversary of his death.

Months before he was diagnosed, I had noticed a change in him. It was as though his subconscious felt it coming; the bittersweet prelude to death that sneaks in and gives you time to tidy up a bit before you go. I noticed that my grandfather began to give things away; things he didn't need anymore or things he wanted us to have. He brought out old *National Furs* boxes from storage because he had a sudden desire to touch the fur. He cleaned out his desk of old papers. When he cupped my face in his hands he kept it there for longer than usual, as if memorizing the shape. He even had some paintings re-appraised by the museum. In the evening he began to retreat silently to the den from where he would watch the sunset in solitude from its beginning to its end.

It is said that it takes 21 days to form a habit or become accustomed to something enough that it becomes unthinking. Like quitting smoking. Exercising. Drinking 8 glasses of water a day. Or, becoming accustomed to the effects of losing someone indefinitely. Understanding that it is not the same as losing car keys. Or being on vacation. There is no finding them again. There is no return.

It took me one year to stop expecting my grandfather to be waiting on the other side of the door. That year was surreal, if not magical—I believed in things that had no foundation in reality. One half of my brain knew that logically he could not be there. The other half knew nothing of reason. My heart would palpitate as I waited to hear the push of the handle on the other side. I believed that *maybe, just maybe*… But of course my Zaidie was not there. He never would be again. But I had not yet processed that with both hemispheres of my brain.

For the first while after his death I saw signs of him wherever I looked. Two months in I had chased a Klondike truck down the street. I had rationalized that because it was the only Klondike truck I had ever seen, and it was parked outside his apartment. It had always been his favourite snack, so he must be in the back sitting amongst cardboard boxes filled with frozen ice cream bars. *Of course.* That was the only thing that made sense.

House noises became his spirit, calling my name. It took just one creak in the wood, or one bang of a pipe, and I dropped what I was doing and listened attentively for the next sound as if it were Morse code. The bookmark between pages 56 and 57 of Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs,* still on his nightstand, became a road map to reach him.

The words he left behind.

I had re-read the pages, certain that there was something meaningful in there, and of course there was. It's our nature to assign meaning to things wherein we want meaning to exist.

Between pages 56 and 57 of *Black Dogs* was my grandfather's brown leather bookmark. I had found his message to me on page 57, underlining superstitious June's question to Bernard, a non-believer in fate, first in pencil, then in pen, then with a highlighter: '*But Bernard, don't you ever have that feeling, when you're tempting fate? Don't you ever touch wood?'* I was sure that it was his warning to me. Don't tempt fate. Warn the others. Knock on wood. Had *he* tempted fate? I knocked on anything wood religiously for months after that, as if it would save my life, or somehow save his soul.

***

"Gabby, are you going to knock?" Judy asked me.

"Oh, yes. Sorry about that, I blanked for a moment," I said, then rapped my knuckles on the wood.

After a few moments there was still no answer so I pushed down on the handle to find it unlocked. It opened to the sight of peacock feathers in a mosaic vase on a table pushed against the vestibule wall. Before me was the view of the mountain: the dome and cross of St. Joseph's oratory, leafy green trees and chimneys peaking out on the top of the hill. Behind me was cousin Judy, who I couldn't ever remember being at the apartment, aside for the seven days of sitting shiva.

"Grandma, we're here!" I shouted over the sound of boiling soup and the beeping oven timer.

The sounds of her kitchen were a familiar song to me, just as the smells of Shabbat preparation brought me back to my childhood: brisket, matzah ball soup, and my favourite, meatballs. I used to stand on a plastic step stool and help her make them, but the instructions were tedious. We could only stick the round balls of raw meat into the pot of homemade sauce

when a bubble appeared. Then we had to drop the meatball directly into the bubble. This may or may not have been a trick to keep me busy while she cooked. However, both my mother and I still make them that way.

"In heeeeereee!" my grandmother sang from in the kitchen.
An apron was tied around her waist. Her hair was newly puffed and sprayed.

"How are you ladies?" she said as she pulled me in for a hug then kissed Judy on both cheeks. I put the groceries down on the counter.

"Thank you for the groceries, Gab. I trust you went to the P.A. on St. Mathieu. It's the most economical, you know. Just leave the receipt in the vestibule and I'll reimburse you later. And Judy. I am so happy you came. What a nice surprise to hear that you were at Gabby's. I look forward to hearing what you two were up to. How is your mother? "

"It was very kind of you to invite me, Shirley. My mother is good, everyone's good." Judy replied. "I haven't been here in quite a while. Your place is as beautiful as I remember it. Is there anything that I can help you with in the kitchen?"

"No, dear, that's quite alright. Everything is nearly done, but thank you," my grandmother replied.

Even the dining room table had been set. Usually I helped her, but with company coming she would never have left it unset, naked and impoverished, with its mere white table pads. Covered in an embroidered silk cloth, the table was a decadent sea of silver, gold and ivory. Plates on top of plates. Forks and forks and knives and knives. Transparent, burgundy-coloured wineglasses at the top right of each place setting. Cloth napkins. Dim lights bouncing off the crystals that dangled from the chandelier. What are we if not extensions of our elaborate dining room table? When I see it I am reminded of the character, Mr. Twemlow in Dickens' novel *Our*

Mutual Friend who is both a human *and* a dining room table, for naturally, we become our values. And it is not far from the truth that when I look at that table I imagine my taut grandmother, and when I see my grandmother, I often envision polished cutlery and ivory bone china.

My grandmother wiped her hands on her apron and led Judy and me into the den.

"You girls sit and talk. Judy, please make yourself at home. I will bring out some appetizers shortly. Gabby can help you to whatever you would like to drink. I won't be much longer, I just need to get the kugel in the oven and check on my brisket. OK? Great. See you in a bit."

She finished her soliloquy and left the room.

"She's high strung on Shabbat," I said. "She's taken these dinners very seriously ever since my grandfather passed away."

"She's always taken these dinners very seriously," Cousin Judy responded with assurance.

"What do you mean she always took these dinners seriously?" I asked.

"Well, she made it a point to ensure that everything was presented beautifully. I'm sure you can understand that after growing up with so little, when the money started to come in she took a lot of pride in making her home elegant and handsome," Judy said.

"So, was she a snob? Is that what you're saying?" I asked.

"No, no. Not a snob at all. In fact, she's very appreciative of everything she owns. She's detail oriented and loves beautiful things. Think of her artwork. *Their* artwork, rather. That filling up of empty walls is significant," Judy said.

She pushed herself up from the couch cushions. The room we sat in truly was lovely. A built in library spanned the back wall: maple oak with hand carved embellishments. It was brimming with culture. An overflow of art books and Jewish history books swelled the shelves in vertical and horizontal bursts of color. Also, framed photographs of my great-grandparents, soapstone sculptures hidden in between stacks of family photo albums and painted wooden birds. In the centre was a television that my grandmother hadn't turned on since my grandfather had passed, and in the cut out niche above it was a cast iron horse rearing on its hind legs. The room hugged its visitors with warm tones of ochre, soft burgundy, salmon and olive green. The same nutcracker from their old home rested in the copper nut bowl on the glass coffee table.

Judy walked intently towards the shelves as if looking for something that she had lost. She scanned the different levels, running her index finger attentively over the stacks of books.

"Gabby, may I take out this book?" Judy pointed to an Emily Carr hard cover as she looked back at me.

"Sure, you can look at whatever you like, Judy," I replied, a bit confused.

Judy pulled out the book with steady hands and brought it with her back to the couch where she sank into the cushion next to me.

"Page 174," she muttered out loud.

"What?"

But Judy continued flipping through the pages until she reached page 174. Covering the writing on the page was a vibrant, pressed red fall leaf.

A heavy current of grief flooded my body.

***

In the Jewish religion there are protocols to grief and a proper way to experience pain. Grieving time and intensity are designated. There are many rules: Cover the mirrors, do not shave, do not cut your hair, do not wear cosmetics, do not leave the house for the entire time of shiva, do not sit on regular chairs, do not work, do not play, do not wear leather shoes, do not engage in sexual relations, do not study torah, do not cry excessively, say kaddish daily for eleven months after death to save the deceased's soul. After that year there is no more guidance, whether or not the grieving is complete.

Following his funeral, during the seven days of mourning called *shiva*, meaning seven in Hebrew, his siblings, wife and children sat on low, hard black chairs. Tradition requires that the mourners wear pieces of ripped clothing (allocated by the funeral home in the form of cut black ties) over the heart to follow the custom *shriyah;* the outward symbol of heartbreak.

While they sat, and visitors poured in with food, and the *minyan* gathered to say prayers, and people lined up to pass on their condolences to my sitting family members, I had my hands in the pockets of my grandfather's suits, pants and jackets. I was not searching for anything in particular, but such was my mourning process: go, move, search, be active, and slightly delusional. I thought that if I gathered enough clues, maybe notes he had jotted down or business cards he had collected, it would lead to a solution. From the moment my parents had arrived home on June 23rd at 10 p.m. to tell us the news that he was gone, my first thought was *How do I bring him back?*

***

I buried my face in my hands and began to cry. Judy put her arm on my back but I moved away.

"I'm sorry, Gabby," she said softly. "Your grandfather asked me to look for that book because he wanted to show you something. I didn't mean to upset you. He just wants you to know that he's here with you."

I only cried louder. The noises coming from the kitchen were not enough to cover my sobs because within seconds my grandmother was hovering in the entrance of the den, panting, holding a dripping ladle in her hand.

The Checkerboard

Yet if you should forget me for a while
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.

Christina Rossetti

My grandmother's plastic ladle dripped brisket juice on to the polished wooden floorboards. I was sobbing, petrified by the idea that my grandfather was lingering somewhere in that small room. This was not the same sort of delusion that came with my initial grief. I had no longer been looking for him. But there he was, resurrecting fall leaves in the middle of April. Speaking through fragile objects of our past. Haunting me. I was overwhelmed by this spontaneous encounter – tangible and private in the den of his house. How do you prepare yourself for this?

The room possessed a palpable heaviness, like the humid air that sits on your tongue before a drenching summer rain. I could feel it: the viscous particles of spirit matter. It was too much. Judy had gone too far. Or had *he?* The leaf still in its perfect form, electric red, packed with dried veins and memories, stood out against the dull black and white of the page. The book, packed heavy with reminiscence sunk into my lap. My grandmother left the ladle to leak on the glass coffee table, a sure sign of her love for me.

"What happened Gabby? Why are you crying?"

My grandmother knelt down before me. I gulped and swallowed sobs, salty tears hardening the blush on my cheeks. I tried to catch my breath as my mind attempted to take in the concept that death was not so black and white as I had been taught it was.

Death is not black and white, I repeated to myself. It ran on autopilot while I imagined my grandfather as a specter, hovering next to me with his hands in his pant pockets. I kept my eyes shut. The thought that only half of him might be back – a half I could not hear or feel or see. I did not want that thought. I did not want that day. I did not want to remember his pale eyes.

and what i want to know is
how do you like your blue eyed boy
Mister Death

How could it have been that part of him was still alive enough to show me things like dried red leaves, but the other part, dead six years? Was he dead at all? Was this a mistake? The power of grief, I had learned during the shiva—and again in that moment —was that it opens up the imagination to a dangerous place. It gives hope where hope does not belong.

I had watched him being lowered in to the ground. I had scooped a shovel of dirt on to his coffin. I had gone through the frightening night terrors at the thought of his body decomposing. I had left those images behind. I had already said goodbye. I had stopped wondering where he hid those leaves. I had already grieved, accepted, and left his death at a distance from the daily goings on of my life. But now, with him here, unearthed and back inside, came the delusional reasoning that I could still *fix it.*

"Gabrielle!" my grandmother cried out again. "Tell me what happened! Judy? What's wrong with her?"

My grandmother grabbed my arms and checked my legs to see if I had been hurt somewhere. She searched my body for physical pain.

"Judy!" she yelled. Her voice was sharp as she took control of the situation. A mother bear protecting her cub. Judy was the only culprit in plain view.

"I'm sorry Shirley, but I think I should go," Judy said as she lifted herself from the couch.

"You're not going anywhere. Someone's going to tell me what's going on here," she spoke firmly. "And how in God's name did you find that leaf? I haven't been able to find one in years."

"Maybe it's best if you let Gabby explain," Judy said.

"Explain what!" my grandmother shouted. "Someone tell me what is going on. Now!" She stood up from the ground, her legs planted firmly, shoulder width apart. Judy did not answer

"Zaidie told Judy where to find the leaf. Zaidie's here," I spoke through gasps of air.

***

My grandfather was not a Francophone, Judy had explained on the bus on the way over. He was just a newborn when his family moved to Senneterre, a town in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, where his father had opened up a general store that doubled as a fur trading post. They sold *Coca Cola sur glace* and traded fur pelts. My grandfather was fed lard to keep warm and eventually became an obese child who barely fit in his snowsuit. Judy promised to show me pictures. In Senneterre, he was pulled over the snow on a sled led by huskies that he loved to pet. They loved him back, my one-year-old grandfather, and slept under his crib at night to keep him warm with their fur.

The town had very few people and most were drunks, and that included the town's only doctor. This is why his mother decided that it was time to move back to Montreal and try their damnedest to make a living there, amidst a more civilized civilization. They lived on top of the *dépanneur* they opened up on Marianne Street. Jack kept track of each customer's purchases on a

ledger on the back wall. No one could pay upfront. During the depression, no one was expected to.

My grandfather's French accent had come from the places where he'd spent his time: French public school, the clothing store where he worked, and then eventually, when he began at *National Furs* as a young apprentice, Raymond Bouchard taught him everything he knew, in French.

My grandfather was not French, I learned on that bus ride. But he could assimilate, and what the big guys at *National Furs* had realized about my young grandfather (whose job was to tidy scraps of fur, photocopy orders and count animal hides), was that his real talent was dealing with people. So they shipped him off to Vancouver to sell to a man named Joe from the Hudson's Bay Company. That sale would make my grandfather's career, but what he had to do to make it was no easy task. He had a lot of *chutzpa* to do what he did. Guts.

***

At that point there was no way around the situation except through. I calmed myself down and looked up at Judy as if to say, *I'm sorry for telling on you,* but the only thing I was really sorry about was the decision I had made to pry. To question. To search in an off-limits space. To open up that portal of memory and regret where spirits live.

"Grandma," I said. "I invited Judy over because I had some questions about Zaidie…"

"So why didn't you ask me? I know everything there is to know about him." She became territorial, opening her arms to remind us of the space we were in: his home.

"I know, but—" I searched for the proper words.

"But what?" she asked.

"You don't like to talk about things. I didn't want to – bother you," I said.

"I can talk about things just fine," she said. "When have I not wanted to talk about something?" She took a step away from me.

"I don't know, Grandma. It's OK. I didn't mean to say that. "

"None of that explains how you found that leaf," she said, shifting the conversation.

"Well… Judy, I mean Zaidie, I mean… I. Basically—words floated before me but I couldn't catch them.

"Shirley," Judy intervened. "*I* found the leaf. Irwin told me where to find it."

"You remember from over 15 years ago what page the leaf was on? That seems a bit strange to me, Judy. You weren't even with us in Vermont when we collected them."

"No, Shirley, he told me today," Judy said, and my grandmother's eyes widened.

"I beg your pardon? How *dare* you mock me," she growled.

"I'm not mocking, Aunt Shirley. That's what I was doing at Gabby's. I put them in touch. I talk to him sometimes. I'm a medium. In fact, I recently saw him at –"

"Judy, with all due respect, get the hell out of my house!" my grandmother yelled, pointing her finger towards the open doorway.

"Please, let me explain better. It's complicated. I would never joke about him or anything to do with his death!" Judy pleaded with my grandmother.

Her otherwise calm temperament, the facility and ease with which she had spoken of my grandfather earlier that day, was now replaced with fear. She crouched before my grandmother like a reprimanded child.

"My husband is dead. He has been dead for six years. I don't know what kind of witch you think you are, but in this house dead means gone."

I had never seen her that angry before, although angry was an understatement. The last time I had heard her yell like that was at my grandfather about an impetuous business decision he had made that lost them some money. When an opportunity presented itself to him, he liked to rise to the occasion and accept the challenge. He believed that everything deserved a chance and that nothing was impossible, *believed* being the operative word. *Chutzpa.* My grandmother was less open-minded. She liked things safe and practical. He was a dreamer.

***

When in Vancouver on his first sales meeting, he and his potential client Joe became fast friends. With garment bags filled with fur coats locked in the hotel room, Joe and my grandfather hit the town for dinner and solidified their relationship with good talk, good food and good wine. A good night out was the first step to making a sale. Joe, having enjoyed my grandfather's company, invited him to play bridge the following night with some other fellows from the industry.

"You do know how to play bridge, right?" Joe asked.

"Sure, of course I do! Who doesn't know how to play bridge?" my grandfather responded.

Truth was – he had no idea.

So he picked up a book on bridge and spent the entire next day teaching himself the rules of the game. When he arrived at the table at which sat these potential clients, he held his cards confidently, but all he would say when it was his turn was *pass.* After two rounds, one of the men turned to him, "You don't know how to play, do you?" My grandfather confirmed that in fact he had no idea. The men around the table laughed, passed him a cigar and then taught him how to play. The next day the sale went through.

He never turned down an opportunity and he never made excuses. While my grandmother was a woman of convenience and security, he was a man of risk and reward. A say *yes* man. They had very little money as a young couple when he first started out in the industry, so my grandmother had planned to spend each paycheck sensibly. With his first payment she had told him to bring home a kitchen table so they had something to eat on. Instead, he brought home an Inuit carving.

"I can't put anything on that! I need a table, Irwin!" she yelled at him. But he had smiled and placed the carving proudly on a shelf, where today sits a vast collection.

The kitchen table is long gone.

***

The comforting smell of Shabbat dinner baking in the oven reached my nose. It was silent in the den. The tornado had blown through and left us. No more crying, no more yelling. The rumpus was over and it all seemed a blur. I felt as though I had just stepped out of a terrible dream. Calmer, I looked around the room and at the vacant spaces in the bookshelf where I thought he might be hiding, but the heaviness in the air was gone. He was gone. Again.

Judy picked up her jacket from the couch and her purse from the floor.

"I'm very sorry that you don't understand, Aunt Shirley. I didn't mean to hurt you," she said.

My grandmother lifted her arm and pointed at the doorway again, this time with less vehemence.

"But before I go," Judy persisted. "I would like to give you something."

She reached in to her purse and pulled out the purple velvet bag. She handed it to my grandmother who hesitated, but once in her hands, she looked at it with familiarity.

"I know this bag," she said.

"Uncle Irwin gave it to me when I turned 12," Judy said.

"Yes. It's a *tallit* bag for women," my grandmother said, brushing the velvet, reciting the memory as it came to her. "I remember when he got this for you. You wanted one like all the boys had for their bar mitzvahs, so he took you to pick one out."

"He was a wonderful uncle," Judy said.

My grandmother lifted her head and stared at Judy, her eyes glossed over with moisture. The room seemed to hold its breath. No one spoke, no one moved, no light flickered. Limbs tensed. The paintings pressed up closer to the walls. The African masks held their gaze. Book covers tightened around their pages.

Hold it—Hold it—Release.

The room exhaled. My grandmother's face softened and she looked at Judy with what resembled compassion, if not a fond recollection. In its yielding of breath, the tightness in the room loosened and we all relaxed – so too did the pinewood, hand painted checkerboard hanging on the wall that fell from its hinges and crashed on the floor. We turned to stare at the faded red and green piece of folk art that lay on the floor. Insentient, immobile, yet tossed to the ground with the compelling force of invisible hands. If providence, chance, fate, serendipity and coincidence existed at all, they existed together in that room.

"Hope" is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

***

We had descended from the bus on to St. Mathieu Street, heading towards the grocery store. The air was fresh. It felt like summer in the patches of sunshine, but still had the cold tinge of winter in the shade. As we walked, I had asked Judy about my grandparents and their love of art, for my grandmother wouldn't discuss it. In the same way that she responded to, *I love you* with *OK,* she also evaded discussing her and my grandfather's mutual love affair with art. After my grandfather's death, I had invited my grandmother, several times, to join me at the art gallery they had frequented, but her answer was always—

No. Not yet.

The implication was that she was waiting for him. Or trying to forget him.

So, I went alone and read up on the artists they shared an affinity for. They welcomed me as the granddaughter of Mr. and Mrs. Miller and each time questioned if my grandmother would be joining me. *Not yet*, I would say. They would take me on a tour of the artists that my grandparents loved, and I too, felt enamoured. It was my history lesson of their taste and nostalgias. I imagined their excited voices when they declared, *we'll take that one,* as I stared at empty spaces on the gallery wall.

Judy explained to me that at first they had neither an education in art, nor the money to buy it. What they did have was a shared, spirited passion for Quebec and Canadian art, so they found ways to learn about it for free. They began by sitting at the back of art auctions. Their first experience was at Jacoby's in Old Montreal. My grandmother watched, shocked, as someone bid $300.00 on a hand-sized sketch by Suzor Coté—the amount of money it would pay to feed her family for two weeks. They continued to frequent auction houses, research at the library and buy art books when money allowed. They had taught themselves everything they knew about art, and when they had accumulated means and knowledge, they began to collect.

I was present for one of their purchases. At seven years old, on our way up to their country house in Ste. Agathe, my grandparents had stopped at an antique shop in Prevost. I followed them in across the gravel parking lot to the narrow, wooden structure. I walked across the shoddy wood planks looking at the painted wooden horses, dolls and decorated plates. My grandparents collected Quebecois folk art from the 19th century, a culture my grandfather had a strong affinity for.

"Do you see something you like, Gabby?" my grandfather asked.

I had looked around the room of coloured wooden toys and decorated chairs. Layers of crochet doilies and teacups on shelves, sawdust lit by the faint light of day breaking in through the rickety windows. Leaning on the wall in the corner of the gallery was a mint green and red hand-painted, pinewood checkerboard. I walked towards it and pointed, then looked to my grandfather for approval that I had chosen well.

"We'll take it," he said to the man named Earl behind the counter who walked towards me and knelt down.

"*Un excellent choix, mademoiselle*. So primal, personal: not made as art, but for children's play. Their happiness is still in the game board, you know. If you put your ear to the wood you can hear muffled whispers of their laughter," he said quietly.

Hidden underneath a layer of bubble wrap and brown crepe paper, the checkerboard sat next to me in the back seat of the car where my grandfather had assigned me the adult task of ensuring that nothing happened to it.

***

We stared at the checkerboard on the ground. Even Judy was made speechless by the force with which it fell. We all sat on the couch, each of us confined to our respective cushion.

Alone in our thoughts, together in the room, we processed that moment individually, in silence. My grandmother coddled Judy's *tallit* bag like an infant, delicately and close to her chest. Judy looked back and forth to the corners of the room. I stared at the leaf in my lap.

Some of my tears had smudged the writing on the page and others sat on the surface of the dead leaf, so dead it could no longer absorb moisture. Everything goes eventually.

Staring at that leaf, memory vibrated through me, the revving of an old film reel starting up. My mind—the projector—the space before me—a blank white sheet where all our happy moments played silently, one by one. All I wanted to know was, how many more miles until I could see him again.

Death is not thorough.

There is still so much of you here.

All that love. All that love. All that love.

The Girl who Broke the Stars

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun.
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

W.H. Auden

Bet you didn't know that the Sandman isn't really a man made of sand who sprinkles nice dreams onto children's eyelids. What he really wants is to keep you, make your dreams so good that you never wake up. People who die in their sleep are the ones that he caught; you can tell because they have a smile on their face when they go. If you look carefully into the ocean on a very clear night, when the stars light up the water and there's not a cloud in sight, you can see his prisoners collecting sand on the ocean floor, one grain at a time.

Bet you didn't know that the Tooth Fairy was once a wicked old witch who used to pull out children's baby teeth while they slept. She boiled their molars in her cauldron and then ground them to dust to get at the everlasting youth serum inside. She wanted to be beautiful, but she got caught. Now she has to fly around paying everyone back and she only gets dead teeth under their pillows in return. If anyone catches her grinding again, she'll be sentenced to eternal decay.

It might be hard to believe, but did you know that the Grim Reaper is the saddest creature in all the land? He cloaks himself in a hood out of shame, and he wears only black to mourn all the innocent souls that he was forced to take. He would use his scythe on himself—he's tried—but he can't leave until it's *his* time.

Most are not aware that white doves aren't just birds. They're the souls of the purest, most innocent people who've ever lived: the tiny souls of babies who died so young they never

had a chance to grow their mean bones. And, did you know that the reason your mother told you not to jump in rain puddles is because they are portals to the underworld. Each time you splash around, little demons come in through the droplets, and if you jump long enough you'll fall right through.

It's sad to think that while the ocean is in love with the sky they'll never have the chance to meet because the horizon is just an illusion.

Have you ever been told that if you tap three times on the back of your closet the Bogey Man comes out to play? Beware. He has no eyes because the bottom feeders of the sea, where he was born from scraps of shipwreck and bones, sucked them out to play croquet with on the ocean floor.

This one's irksome and it's hard to believe, but there's a good reason why you're told not to look at yourself in the mirror for too long. The mirror, or into the backs of spoons, or dark store windows. Whether out of insecurity or conceit, vanity has no factor in this warning. When you stare for too long your reflection comes to life and it will just stand there, copying you. If you don't look away quickly enough, and most never do, it will curse you. And, these curses aren't the breakable type; they are lonely, consuming and will ruin your life.

Bet you've never been told what the stars are really for, or how they got there, or where they go when they die. There's a formula to the haphazard arrangement of twinkling lights. When someone falls in love, the brightness that they feel in their heart manifests in the night sky. A star becomes born. It pulses and glimmers until the heart that once loved becomes broken. The star bursts, leaving an empty space in the sky never to be filled again. Then, a strand of black stardust drifts down to earth and casts the pain of heartbreak on whomever it lands.

***

This is the story of the Girl who Broke the Stars. Her name was Abigail Lisbon and she loved socks with frills, strawberry popsicles and dogs with patches around their eyes. The story goes that one day she met a boy in the sand box. His hand touched hers and it felt nice, so she gave him her shovel, then he lent her his truck. They built castles together and took turns catching each other at the bottom of the slide. They swung on the swings and let the tips of their toes touch the tops of trees, then they lay on the lawn, grass tickling their backs and drew pictures in the clouds with their minds. They ate cucumber sandwiches and shared a juice box under the drooping branches of a willow tree. Afterwards, when dusk fell and the fireflies flew and porch lights went on, and cats were called inside for their evening milk, and the birds found their branches and the light simmered from flickering orange to dazzling pink then twilight blue, Abigail and the boy *fell in love.*

They sat cross-legged on the platform of the wood-beamed jungle gym staring into each other's eyes where they saw beyond colors and reason, beyond the heavens and time. Their parents hollered through the streets for them to return home to wash their hands before dinnertime and give grace for the vegetables they'd eat to grow tall and strong. But, Abigail and the boy sat staring into each other's souls, locked in a love-bound gaze, floating above the jungle gym in the scintillating space of an affection so true it grew wings. Then the curtain of day closed to reveal the night and its black velvet canvas with glinting lights, where two new stars were born.

Then all at once, a harsh wind rushed by Abigail. She saw that in the dark of the boy's pupils her reflection had come to life. She smiled at Abigail, and then summoned a curse:

You will love them all,
But they will never love you back.
Your broken heart will turn the sky black.

For each of your heartaches, ten thousand more,
The sky will be empty, the world will deplore it.
Darkness will reign, the world will come undone—
Casting sadness and despair on everyone.

All at once the bubble of their love burst. Abigail and the boy fell back to earth. The little boy looked at her, confused. By the colour of the sky, he must have suspected he was late for dinner, so he fled home through the dimly lit streets, leaving no trace but the pounding that remained in Abigail's heart, and the pulse of heat on her hand from his touch. She looked above at the canvas of flashing lights and watched as their two stars disappeared into the night. Then, a string of black stardust crept quietly down to earth – this was the beginning of Abigail's curse. Ten thousand heartbreaks, ten thousand fewer stars. She slunk home alone through the quiet streets and told no one of the boy, her love or the damning curse.

***

As she grew, Abigail's life became a pining for love. Boy after boy and then man after man, she fell deeply in love with each one she met, but none loved her back. The poison of unrequited love left Abigail ashamed. She kept the truth of her curse to herself, and prayed that somehow it would come undone, but it came to a point where her heartbreak was beginning to affect not just her, but everyone. So, Abigail confessed to the town what her reflection had done, and that the plan for the stars was to kill every last one. Then it all became clear: why the moon had hollowed out his gold and ran away, why the stars stopped coming out to play, why there were ten thousand heartaches and ten thousand fewer stars, why happiness and light all seemed very far away.

So poor Abigail hid to overt her eyes from all men she might have loved. She hid behind

bushes, in the trunks of hollow trees, in sidewalk cracks, mailboxes, swamp brushes, birds nests, and in the shadow of rainclouds. But there was always someone there to break her heart: even the shadow of a man made her flutter. Only a few clusters of twinkling stars remained. At this point in the town, sadness reigned.

One night, as Abigail wandered the park alone, ducking behind benches to remain unseen, she bumped into the boy from the jungle gym, now a grown man, her very first love. Her heart swooned at the sight of him and she grabbed his hands and hoped that he would remember her and break the curse, as once he had loved her. She stared into his eyes and waited for their two stars to return to the sky, but he looked at her confused, then turned his back on her and walked away. Abigail's heart began to weep, then the whole sky turned black as filaments of her lost love poured down in heaps of crushed dead stars.

***

The rest of the story goes that under the loveless, starless, sky, Abigail Lisbon decided to run away. Some say her parents saw her leave and didn't try to stop her. Others say she didn't leave at all: instead, she found a hiding place that would keep everyone safe. The truth is that one night, she filled two bags with supplies from her garden shed: ten bricks, a scissors and a sturdy rope. Then Abigail Lisbon and her broken heart fled to sea to leave the crying world behind.

She sailed by day when the light could guide her, watching the lustrous sun peak through the clouds soaring overhead. She sailed through oceans and seas looking for a new place to call home, where she and her curse might still be unknown. She passed the Sea of Giant Rocks, which tried to destroy her boat, and the Sea of Icebergs who only begged her for a coat. She sailed beyond the black Sea of Damned Souls, where crows and vultures swooped down to pick at her flesh. She traveled far and wide, past the heavy Waters of Sin where arms reached out to

capsize her ship. The Sea of Underwater Cities where people walked upside down, but they too wouldn't let her in their town. She passed beautiful, dancing mermaids but they hid when she called out, while the grey Sea of Broken Dreams spat her ship farther out. She passed fruit trees that sprouted from the waves, only they recoiled when she tried to pick an orange off their branches. She saw some playful doves soaring above, watching the Sea of Magic put on a show, but they too wouldn't offer her a home.

Then the curtains of day fell and Abigail was more alone than alone could be. There was no glow on the water's rippling tides, no winking stars or distant lights. No moon or his twinkling friends next door. No fishermen, no sea birds, and no shore. There was just the hollow sound of an empty sky, as empty as could be: as hollow as a hollow tree, the echo of the tilting ship rocking on the churning waves, the wind bouncing off the sail. There was only Abigail.

In the darkness of night she stared wide-eyed into nothing and begged God to save her from this curse. She screamed into the nothing and cried into the nothing and begged the nothing to help unbreak her heart, and the lives of all the others that her dead stardust had torn apart, but there was nothing that nothing can do.

So Abigail Lisbon, the Girl who Broke the Stars, took the bags of five bricks each, cut two pieces of rope with the shears from the shed, and then, by the straps of the bags she tied them to her ankles. She sat on the hard wood floor of the ship gazing out ahead hoping for a last chance, or the sight of one remaining star. Just one sign that love was on its way, anything to convince her to wait another day; but nothing and no one came. So Abigail Lisbon stood up tall and dragged her feet to the edge of the ship, then flung herself into the sea. It swallowed her whole and sucked her down, all the way to the ocean ground.

It was as dark and quiet as the world above, so Abigail didn't see what she passed along

the way: the Sandman collecting his sand, or the fish playing croquet. The Bogey Man without his eyes, the moon who plummeted from the sky, the Tooth Fairy grinding baby teeth, the tiny demons from the world beneath, or the Grim Reaper, cloaked in black, headed her way.

That is the story of the Girl who Broke the Stars.

The Keeper of the Skins

Innocence ends when one is stripped of the delusion that one likes oneself.

Joan Didion

Stepping out of the elevator, the smell in the hallway hit me: dried fur pelts. Between the elevator and my grandfather's office was at least ten feet of curved hallway and two closed doors. I could smell distinctly what came from inside the open vault. I imagined furs and skins hanging loose, ready to be cut. Newly tanned, a tinge of its recent life cut the air and burnt the nose. Defended against decay with formaldehyde. Lined and fashioned to be worn on the backs of cold, wealthy, pedestrians. Minks, resurrected and running along the pavement in the city streets.

I pressed on the white buzzer of the beaten down front door that read *National Furs*. Ingo let me in. The taste of raw meat sat on my tongue. Ingo was one of the cutters. A rack of hides danced by me ready for the cutting room. Ingo took me by the wrist and brought me into his office at the end of the hall where he would have a gift of a fluffy pink fur pom pom, or a little woven rabbit purse stored for me in the empty bottom drawer of a metal filing cabinet.

In his office there was a stool with a round leather seat and a florescent lamp head that hovered over a corked tabletop piled with muskrat, mink and a large slicer. He shaped the skin to match coat patterns.

He reached down into the cabinet and pulled out a strange looking doll.

"She is special," he said. "You must treat her very well."

I held the doll by her soft arms. Ingo swiveled back towards the skins on the cutting table and put on his glasses.

"Your grandfather is around, go ahead and show him what you got."

I thanked him, walked out, and heard him cut through a dehydrated animal hide. After, he would send it out to the seamstress and tailor who then sewed the animal back together to fit the pattern, updated with satin lining.

I looked down at the doll in my hands. It read *Bush Bride* on the tag, along with her information. She was from the *Dene* people of the Northwest Territories. She wore a cream dress made of caribou hide woven in Xs along the side. Tribal fringe lined the bottom.

The taxidermy of skin dolls is a crossbreed. Her face and body were made of chaffed moose head: skinned, dried, dyed, stuffed and sewn together. Her fur hat was soft and made of beaver. She was a dark tan color, tones of yellow under the brown skin. There were no skin dolls of white men here. A smile sewn on with thick red threads show that she is happy, but her eyes were stitched shut with brown thread, a strand of turquoise strung over her closed lids; adornment for the ceremony.

For now she slept.

Her hair was a wild mess of crimped black tresses that felt like the soft fur of a long-haired dog. Loose strands framed her face: uneven tones of burnt-looking flesh with the soft touch of felt. I petted her skin. Her feet were covered with moccasin slippers made of smoked beaver hide, its fur lining her ankles. A seam ran down each leg demarcating where the skin of the moose's head was sewn back together to keep the insides in. We wouldn't want to see her raw doll guts.

My favourite part about her was the beading along her neck, wrist and at the centre of her waist. A ceremonial necklace, bracelet and belt for the sleeping bride: blue, pink and green. I removed the bracelet from her wrist and tied it on to my own. I rubbed my eyes as I walked

towards my grandfather's office, pieces of beaver fur scratching my pupils and the back of my throat. A cemetery of foxes, beavers, seal, raccoon, and rabbit. Scraps that fell from the cutting table lined the linoleum floors were kicked around to inhabit all parts of the office, the lunchroom, the lunch. Fur in ears, on sweaters, in beards, tangled within nose hair. My grandfather was the President, the keeper of the furs, who watched over the staff that counted pelts in the cold vault where the young skins, hanging lifeless on metal rings, would stay fresh.

"Count again," he would tell them. "We need 28 lynx pelts for that order. Be gentle with them."

So, they counted again.

I walked through the office with *Bush Bride*. On the sewing table were spools of colored thread, buttons of all sizes, lining-tape, pin needle cushions, sketches of coat designs and tiny silver sewing needles scattered across its surface. My grandfather would make sure each coat was rendered perfectly to match the design, each touch of the fur reverent and precise. He taught me that even though the animal was dead its soul lived in the skins and that even scraps of fox were still fox.

"Fur is only fashionable when it's respected," he once said. "The Natives make sure to use each part of the animal. No waste." He had told me this as a little girl while I sat on his lap playing with a leftover muskrat scrap that he let me keep.

Marie-Claude who had a needle pursed between her lips studied a designer's drawing at arm's length, glasses at the tip of her oily nose. She smiled, showing yellow teeth as I passed, then took the needle out from her mouth with nicotine-stained fingers.

I smiled back, remembering my grandfather's words: "smoking is for the weak." He had quit, using sunflower seeds as bait for his needy mouth. I continued to search for my grandfather

through the jungle of cured animal skins, metal racks, followed along by the synthetic eyes of stuffed beaver and fox.

Those eyes knew me here—everyone did—and I knew that when I found my grandfather, he would bring me to the matching room in the factory where I could touch the bale of fur skins bought at auction in Copenhagen or North Bay, Ontario. We would lay them out and shake them, brush the hairs of 50 pelts or more with our fingers to face one direction so that we could match the tones and size, to make a handsome coat.

"Take the bundle off the metal rings and look for the patterns with your hands and eyes," he taught me. He said I knew, just like he did, because I was the granddaughter of the Keeper of the Skins.

Bush Bride felt heavy in my hands so I tucked her beneath my arm as I approached the forbidden showroom. I peaked through the glass door. The room was made up of white walls so clean it looked like someone had scrubbed them with soap water and a sponge. The floors were also bright white, and coated with shiny resin. They glared under the rows of florescent bulbs that lined the ceiling.

Shades of browns, greys and beige fur coats hung on one rack, dyed furs on the others pushed against the wall. Bubblegum pink, dark violet, cerulean blue, all destined for Karl Lagerfeld's Fall Runway Girls. The glass table was stacked with pamphlets on the regions of the furs—Cape Dorset, Iqaluit, Nunavut—as well as Inuit soap stone carvings of birds, and another of a hunter with a spear, along with copies of *Vogue* and *W* magazines, and a floppy yellow tape measure spilling over the table's edge. Built-in shelves were lined with fur purses, intricate moccasin slippers, hats, gloves and knitted rabbit scarves. In this room, there were no floating specks of dust or loose fur: no scraps, no imperfect hems, no dirt from the factory rooms where

skins hung dead on bales, sliced and sewn, bunches of fur flying like a dog at shedding season. In the showroom their beauty was resurrected.

I wasn't allowed in. I never was.

"It's for adults only. Important meetings," my grandfather had told me, but no one was there at that moment except the centrepiece polar bear who lay sprawled out flat in the middle of the floor, front paws and back paws, claws, snout, light blue plastic eyes. Sharp teeth, brittle cream fur, no vertebrae. It was a gift from the people of Frobisher Bay.

I had no food or drinks to spill, *Bush Bride* was sleeping, and my shoes made no marks or dents, so I entered quietly and set *Bush Bride* to rest on the white leather couch. It smelled of Windex and lemon scented Pledge.

Everything in perfect order, I put my cheek to a lynx coat stroking its fur. I imagined it once feral and free, sharp teeth and claws. Now domesticated to the hanger, loved and cared for like a good house cat. Brush the fur, show it off to friends—

"This is my lynx", and people would pet a sleeve adoringly.

"Oh, I *love* your cat," they would gush.

The wall space above the racks were lined with framed photographs. I read the laminated notes beneath them:

The National Furs booth at Studio 54, 1979

Hockey players in National Furs hats designed for the Canada/Soviet Hockey Series, 1972

New York National Furs Showroom.

The Rolling Stones Purchasing Mink at National Furs Montreal showroom, 1983

Milan National Furs Showroom.

Her Majesty, The Queen, in her Custom Mink Stole, Montreal Showroom, 1987

Paris National Furs Showroom.

In between these photographs were sporadic images of polar bears in their natural habitat; coarse cream fur on cold white snow, blending seamlessly into the backdrop. I breathe in the clean air of the room and look around at the rows of beautiful, hanging animals.

Footsteps and voices approached. A muddle of thick francophone accents. I ran out quickly and dashed back to the factory. Gilles and Yves were at the blocking table prepping to staple a sliced wolverine with a staple gun to the backboard, stretching the skin to reach its full potential. Their course, cracked hands elongated the hide as they shot through the wolverine's inert skin.

"*Salut*!" they waved at me, dust and loose furs suspended in a cloud around them, descending to the ground like a light snow. I waved back, proud of my knowledge that the animal was a wolverine, the fiercest member of the weasel family. It was the most ferocious of all the animals at the office. My grandfather had told me that to wear the hide of a wolverine is to be fearless. The skins with empty eye sockets hung in rows on hooks like jackets, waiting for their turn to be widened and fastened.

In the overlapping chaos of furs on the table it was hard to tell where the beaver began and the wolf ended. Pelts with tails, hides with heads. Through the wilderness I spotted a yellow stack of papers at the edge of the blocking table that had my grandfather's doodles marked all over it. In the margins of the legal pad were sketches of birds. The same bird, the only bird, he could draw. Sitting down, beak forward, bulging eyes. He doodled absentmindedly on any paper that was placed in front of him, the bird appearing on the page.

He was close by.

I ran down the hall towards his office, but stopped to peek quickly in to the semi-opened inventory vault, a treasure chest where client's coats were stored over the summer, for a hefty price. It was my favourite vault. The least badly scented. Remnants of *Chanel* perfume filled the stuffy room breaking the scent of dusty fur. It was a secret atelier for dress up in Mila Mulroney's mink. I would slip my hands in the satin pockets and search for things the owners had forgotten to remove like change coins, valet tickets, restaurant receipts or hotel room keys from around the world. I had returned a wallet and a pair of eyeglasses once, but nickels and cents I took as lost items and brought them home with me. The most elegant was the Queen's stole, my grandfather's proudest piece.

I had touched it once.

He wasn't in his chair when I arrived at his office. The air was dense and misty. A strand of sunlight came in through the blinds lighting a string of baby animal hairs. On my grandfather's large glass desk there was a calculator, his reading glasses and piles of order forms and invoices. Above his desk hung the large ivory tusk of a Narwhal, sawed off like an amputated limb. I felt my own arms pulse and tingle. On the right wall were framed lithograph prints of birds and seals. They came in with the soap stone sculptures from Cape Dorset: the dancing bear—for prosperity—on his desk. A walrus speared by a Shaman.

"Zaidie?" I called out in to the hall, lingering for a moment. But there was no reply. I walked behind his desk and sat up on the large swivel chair. Loose sunflower seeds were scattered in between the mess of files. On the desk's right corner was a picture of my brothers and me. A paperweight that read *National Furs* held the designer's sketches in place. I kicked my feet around, thrilled to be sitting in the boss's chair, curious but not sure what about. My foot tipped over the garbage can and the insides spilled out beneath the desk.

I jumped down to collect the mess. On the ground was a jumble of crumpled papers, coffee stained styrofoam cups, a small white cardboard box that read *Craven-A,* and a pile of something soft. Scraps of fur. Someone in the office had wasted the fur. I ran back out in to the hallway.

"Zaidie!" I shouted, but only Ingo replied.

"You still haven't found him?" he wheeled out of the cutting room.

"No, I don't know where he is," I said out of breath.

"Where is she?" Ingo asked.

"Who?" I said.

"The doll." My cheeks turned red.

"*Bush Bride,"* I whispered under my breath. "She's…on a couch," I explained.

"Which couch?" he asked, but I didn't answer. "*Which couch*?" he asked again.

"The couch...in the showroom," I answered and put my head down.

"You're not allowed in there, you know that. Your grandfather would have a fit! Go get her back before he sees her. I told you to take very good care of that doll, she's worth a lot of money," he said sharply.

I nodded and dashed back to the showroom at the end of the hall, but I saw that my grandfather was in there with his back turned to the door. The same white cardboard box that I had seen in his garbage can peaked out from his back pocket. I saw *Bush Bride's* moccasin at the end of the couch. Something was different about the room. The air was foggy and thick. Coats on the racks were disheveled. A fur hat had fallen from the back shelf.

My grandfather turned around so I jumped to the side. A cigarette dangled from his lip collecting ash. He was looking down, writing on the *National Furs* order forms. When he looked

up, he spotted *Bush Bride* lying on the couch. He walked over to her and checked her tag, then held on to her and walked towards the door. He took a long puff, staring at the mink as he stepped on to the white bear hide. As he did, a strand of ash tumbled from his cigarette.

"Ah, shit," I heard him shout. He rubbed the ash with his shoe then leaned down closer and squinted. He removed something shiny from his pocket and with one quick movement, he sliced off a chunk of its coat and skin.