

Cusp
By
Frances Barnet
A Thesis
in
The Department of English

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

February 2016

© Frances Barnet 2016

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Frances Barnet

Entitled: Cusp

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:

Andre Furlani Chair

Kate Sterns Examiner

Josip Novakovich Examiner

Mikhail Iossel Supervisor

Approved by _____
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Dean of Faculty

Date April 15, 2016

Abstract

Cusp

Frances Barnet

Cusp is a collection of seven short stories exploring the experiences of early adulthood and coming of age among young women. The stories explore themes such as sexuality, familial strains and relations, loss, and disillusionment. Though each story was written separately and is intended to operate as its own text, as a collection the pieces form a work which investigates complex reactions to trauma. Though characters of *Cusp* vary in terms of age, locations, motivations and histories, their experiences and reactions are ultimately meant to blend into and borrow from each other, creating a multifaceted depiction of female coming of age in western society.

Aspects of the collection borrow significant tropes from the fairy tale genre, most notably through their rejection of conventional reality. The collection's dynamic interpretation of "reality" ranges from "Lace in Three Days," set in conventional versions of Montreal and Edmonton, to "What I Was Looking For," set in a Montreal infested with turtles, to "Rot," and "Trees, the Ocean, Girls, Toes," both set in absurd and fable-like landscapes. Despite the often humorous tones of the collection, each story is grounded in an emotional realism developed through the intimate proximity *Cusp's* narrative maintains with its characters.

Dedication

For Maud

“Now I am growing for sure. Now I am almost a woman!”

- Judy Blume, *Are You There God? It's me, Margaret*

Table of Contents

Rot.....	1
Plot of Ocean.....	10
Lace in Three Days	19
Cherry Sun.....	33
Trees, the Ocean, Girls, Toes.....	40
By Now.....	58
What I Was Looking For.....	67

Rot

First the town was because of the port, people brought things and then other people left with other things. But then very quickly other ports opened, and these were bigger ports, so fewer things were brought and more things were taken away.

So then for a while the town didn't know what it was because of; the town seemed to be because of nothing and that was how the people started to regard it. People started to bring the things they didn't want anymore so the things they didn't want anymore filled up the port. Then, soon after, the port's surrounding neighbourhoods. It was like the town was because of the garbage.

The government called the town disgusting. They said that so much garbage was against nature. But no one knew of another place to put the garbage, so the garbage continued. And one day the government said, "we have never seen so much garbage in our lives. The garbage must be your nature, this is beautiful." The town became because of the garbage, so much garbage that people came from all over the world just to see.

We lived on Jonathan Avenue. The three of us slept in the upstairs suite of the guesthouse. It was Nan, Louise and myself. "You girls," Nan used to say, "what would I do without you?" Nan's family had been here since before the rats, though her sisters had long ago married and moved away. The guesthouse was formerly part of a school, where they taught how to build boats, but when the ports closed there was no reason for boats and they were given over to the rats. There was an old photograph of Nan as a girl, hanging on the wall behind reception. How strange it was to me that Nan had once been ten years old in a gingham dress and behind her you could see from the window that the garbage had not even reached South Brandon Street.

Evenings were when Louise and I went down to the common room and entertained the guests. They were men from all over and we would sit around the fireplace listening to their stories. Mostly about all of the places they'd been.

"I just got back from Burma."

"I'm going to Marrakesh next week."

"Me? Burma? Twice last year."

Men who had eaten all the meat you could think of: bears, cats, ostriches and bats.

Once there was a man who had not worn shoes in over a year and there was another who had lost all of his hair in a UFO sighting. They shared their cactus juice with us and said, "OK, so on the count of three, we're all going to open our hearts."

Louise and I knew how to talk with our eyes. Every night we would listen to the men and try to decide who had been to the most interesting place or done the most interesting thing. We tried our best to never agree, so that when the night was over we would go up to our favourites and say, "would you like to see the fire bath?"

Then in the mornings, when we washed all the linens and remade the beds, that was when the nights repeated themselves. Me and Louise told each other everything: who he was, where he was from and then impressions of whatever noises he made.

"Eeeeeeeughughugh."

"Ooooooooo eeeeeee uhuhu."

"Ppppppppppppip."

I told her all of my details and then she told me all of hers, so that way, it could be like we'd never been apart.

Nan drew maps of the garbage, pointing out the spots where the rats were biggest: generally past the compost, where the aluminum foil rose tall like a skyscraper. For many it was the focal point of the whole garbage. Folklore had it that the forefathers of the town were buried in that trash heap, though the smell suggested it was more likely just some old fruit. Whatever it was, its juice ran down the tin slope and fossilized from years of sun. It must have been sweet too, because often some of the bolder rats would scurry out from their burrows and lick until they had their fill. Though it was strictly illegal to interfere with the structural authority of the garbage, men often came in the middle of the night to chisel pieces of this amber to use for jewelry.

Nan drew these maps herself, this was her town and she was proud of it: the broken furniture, the household appliances, the paper products and even the raw sewage. Each of these neighbourhoods was represented by her pencil crayons and then sold at the front desk and various tourist shops around town. Except that this was the summer Nan was losing her mind, so the maps pointed out the mountains instead and people were asking for refunds.

Neither Louise nor I knew what to do, so that's why we called Rodney, Nan's son, to come and help us. And when Rodney came to the guesthouse, that's when everything started to change.

When Rodney came to the guesthouse, it was like he brought men from all over the world with him. "This is Raj and he's from Minnesota," "this is Ken and he's from Kuala Lumpur." And the stories they told! They knew all kinds of dice games and their dice were made from elephant bones. They had photographs of four rainbows at a time; they didn't even know people still went to Burma. They were never going home, had no home, or were exactly home. Their dreadlocks did not really belong to them, but to Shiva, although they always let us touch them anyways.

“Summer rush,” Rodney said, “Summer loving!”

Louise and I were going into the fire bath five, six times a day. Except then in the mornings, we weren’t allowed to say a word about it because according to Rodney our cackling disturbed the guests.

One day, following the peak of heat, a man walked into the guesthouse and said that he came from the sky. He was tall, with long dark hair piled on top of his head. He had a smell about him, and it offered us a reprieve from the northbound breeze. “My name’s Kevin-Aaron,” he said and asked if there were any vacancies available. It was me, Louise, some guys from Holland sitting there, though it might as well have just been Louise.

“I can take you to the fire bath if you’d like,” she said.

They went into the back garden and no one saw them again for the rest of the night. After dinner was eaten and stomachs sufficiently rested, I took my guests into Rodney’s room instead. We still referred to it as the fire bath, to little confusion.

In the morning I couldn’t resist whispering to Louise, “What was it like?”

“I couldn’t tell you if I wanted,” she said.

“Come on, try!”

Louise sighed. “He kissed me,” she said, “and it was like learning a new way to breathe. It was like suddenly having a whole new lung.”

The sky, like any other culture, had its own native dice games. We sat in a circle on the common room floor and this strange man tried to teach us. “See,” he said and explained how we won or lost lives depending on our totals in relation to the totals of the players beside us.

“You have nine lives,” he said.

What are we, I thought, cats? Though no one had seen a cat in our town for years. He had had his hand on Louise's knee up until this point, then readjusted to the inside of her upper arm.

That night Louise went into the fire bath with Kevin-Aaron again, and the night after that again. What worried me was that she was beginning to act strange. She was, on the one hand, the most Louise imaginable, yet on the other, completely unrecognizable to me.

"Do you know," she asked me, "What it smells like to be on top of the rain?"

"You've been drinking cactus juice, haven't you?" But she denied it.

Less than a week later, Kevin-Aaron had a non-transferable ticket back to the sky. He checked out of the guest house and I was ready for things to get back to normal. Just Nan, Louise and me. Except Louise refused to get out of bed.

"She's sick," I told Rodney, which in my mind was not even a lie because I'd seen her pale face and how it swallowed her eyes. I did the linens myself, and I went into the fire bath ten, eleven times a day to make up for her, just until she was better.

Rodney, however, had no such patience. He burst into our bedroom, holding Louise's notebook in his hand.

"Are you going to ruin your life? Just because of some feeling?"

"But it's the strongest one I've ever had!" she said. He threw the pages across the floor. I could see that they were full of drawings of the sky.

And then Louise told him she was never going to go into the fire bath again.

"Why?"

"I don't feel like it," she said.

“But you went in two days ago, and you went in the night before, you go in every night, what’s so different now?”

And she had no answer. Rodney was right, it didn't make any sense. After going into the fire bath so many times. Three years ago was when we started, and liked it too. I knew she did, she'd told me. She told me everything. Like how she hated it when they called her baby but loved kisses on her neck which she said reminded her of rain. But now, since Kevin-Aaron, rain meant something entirely new.

“Has Louise lost her mind?” I asked Nan. But Nan had also lost her mind. By now all she drew was the ocean: pages and pages of its waves.

The truth was that Rodney had never respected us much. When we were kids and he visited from college, he'd play videos of women giving birth and make us sit in front of the TV. “Look,” he'd say, “that's what's going to happen to you one day.” He loved to remind us how we weren't really Nan's cause she'd just found us as babies in the garbage. But I knew the garbage was beautiful, it was what all these people came to see.

They came for the summer, because that was when the smell was most authentic. Some of the men said they saw themselves in the rats, some of them saw the men they wanted to be. If a rat ran across your feet it meant you were about to fall in love. But if the rat had bald patches it meant you were living beyond your means financially.

“The thing that is so remarkable about the garbage,” one of them told me one day, “is that it's us—our toenails, our yoghurt, our blood. The garbage,” his eyes were closed as he spoke, “is us.”

It was then with this same seriousness that he said, holding my shoulders in the fire bath, “take off your knickers.” I watched the steam rise and thought about how my whole life the steam had always been rising, back from when it was Nan who went out here herself.

I woke up one day to find Louise was gone. What was there even to be surprised about? She didn't leave any note, but we knew where she was going. Or at least what she was looking for and why wouldn't I actually be happy about it, because it was now in my power as a housekeeper to maintain the most rigid folds. Who was Louise to me? To whom nothing mattered but the man in the sky. It was her fault really. Not only did I have to go into the fire bath twice as many times, but I had to keep all the memories to myself.

Although there was also this other thing inside of me, this dark and twisted thing that started in my gut, then spread slowly and irreversibly all over, like the rot I'd seen in bread. Except that rot was beautiful, the rot was what was beautiful about this town. “You are so beautiful,” I told myself.

This was the beginning of fall, when business always started to slow. But Rodney would hear nothing of it. Rodney blamed Louise for leaving us. Rodney blamed Nan for losing her mind. Rodney dressed up Nan in a nurse's uniform, saying she was a veteran from the war. But then we found out down the road they had a veteran from a better war. Rodney blamed me, for not being good enough in the fire bath.

The fire bath was a porcelain tub mounted over stones kept aflame for 24 hours a day. The guesthouse was built on a moderately steep hill in the centre of town. From inside the fire bath you could see the port, past the garbage and colonies of rats. From inside the fire bath you could see through the windows into the TV room, where Rodney and I were eating dinner.

Rodney blamed me for business slowing down, as if I controlled the weather. He said, "Show me what you do in the fire bath so I can tell you how to do it better." I said I would not. He took my plate from me.

He said, "Show me what you do in the fire bath."

I said, "I do not want to go into the fire bath anymore."

He grabbed me by the shoulders and threw me on the floor. "Why not?"

What could be my answer? Because it would look the same, it would sound the same, to anyone watching it would be the same. The same as the hundreds of times I'd done it before, as in, he from wherever entered me and moved in the water back and forth.

Afterwards they'd hand me a towel, or else wipe me down themselves. The thing was that they never thought it was enough to simply wash off in the water. They thought the water was no match for them, but the water was where this town came from. They thought I was giving myself over to them but the thing was they were giving themselves over to me too.

Sometimes I dreamed and it was just penises floating in the fire bath.

Once I heard Rodney say, in a group of men that he had slept with 32 women, but someone else had started talking at the same time so no one heard him. He tried a second time, but the other man was still telling a story about his childhood bicycle.

Rodney opened the door to the garden and pushed me through it.

"No, I do not want to go into the fire bath with you."

He said absolutely nothing except sound when my dress ripped and then my bare feet into the wet ground as I walked toward the fire bath.

If I controlled the weather I would get rid of fall, because I hated how the leaves died off of trees and when the wind blew them over the garbage, making it as if we had birds when all the birds had flown away years ago. If I controlled the weather, I would get rid of spring because

that was when the corpses of Christmas trees emerged out of snow, muted like zombies. If I controlled the weather, I would get rid of winter because that was when you'd think the rats would be subdued but they were not, and they darted back and forth in the snow on the garbage with their pink tails twinkling like stars. And when one of them killed another one, as they often did, by gnawing through their fur and bleeding them to death, the frost would grow over the dead and open rat, maintaining all of its inside colours, which, depending on your exact location, might have been the brightest point in the garbage, and therefore difficult not to look at. If I controlled the weather summer would have never existed; I would never play another game of dice again.

He was coming for me, so close now, with his right hand clenched and his left hand smoothing down his thigh, then his right hand smoothing down his thigh and his left hand behind his neck. He was so much taller than me, it showed in the angle of his breath to my forehead.

If I controlled the weather I would make it rain so hard the water came down in sheets, bouncing off of the ground so loudly I could not hear any of the voices in the guesthouse, laughing about whatever happened that one time in Australia. If I controlled the weather I would make it rain so hard I could see nothing in front of me, not Nan by the window in her bedroom, not Rodney inches away. If I controlled the weather I would erupt thunder from the clouds with enough bravado to shake the earth beneath me and sway the walls of the fire bath, to raise the fire bath up to the sky only to be released, again and again, rhythmically, into and out of the dirt like rain. My body thrown against the porcelain walls, if I controlled the weather, hard enough that I'd be so mangled he would not even know where to put it. I thought of Louise as he took over my shoulders. She was somewhere above this, breathing in the smell.

A Plot of Ocean

The appetizers were served, then taken away. Some of the courses had been touched, others had not, though the Pinnacle staff were strictly forbidden to eat them themselves “for legal reasons.” Somewhere in the distance, a chef was screaming.

Hillary and Angela were in the corner, folding napkins into shapes that looked like vaginas.

“So how long have you been in Australia?” asked Hillary. Hillary was broad, taller than Angela with her hair pulled back into a low pony tail.

“About two months. You?” Angela was slim and petite. She had a round face with large, wide set eyes. They looked nothing alike although probably to a lot of the other caterers from Pinnacle they could have been twins. They had exactly the same complexion. Both of their faces had gone red carrying the ice buckets.

“I just got here,” said Hillary, “a week ago. I’m going to save up money for a van and drive to Byron Bay. You should come.”

“Cool,” said Angela.

They were both in uniform: starched white shirts, striped ties and black trousers. It was their second shift working a banquet together. Every week the caterers, mostly backpackers, called Pinnacle Headquarters on Flinders Street and the agents gave them shifts. Angela had been working all week and she had another shift the next morning, even though the dinner service wouldn’t end until after one.

Yuko called them for the main. Each caterer retrieved plates, either meat or vegetarian, from the festering chefs and followed Yuko out into the massive banquet hall, past the stage and among the rich people, dressed in their finest.

The plates were heavy, especially when you carried three at a time. They had to be balanced or else the sauce would spill everywhere and the integrity of the dish's presentation would be ruined. Once Angela had spilt sauce onto her wrist, staining her white shirt. Yuko had seen and screamed at her.

Angela marched with the rest of the caterers, mostly Italian, German, and Korean. When she was about half way to Yuko the sight caught her, out of the corner of her eye. It looked just like... but it couldn't be. She thought she had seen her baby, but that was impossible. That's not my baby, she thought, it can't be. Her baby had come at the wrong time in her life and had to be gotten rid of. There was no way it could be here now, eating dinner in Melbourne.

She dropped off her plates at sixty, then marched back to the kitchen to pick up another round.

"Hurry, hurry, faster, faster!" The chefs were throwing garnishes onto the plates and dripping sweat into the sauce. "Hurry the fuck up!" They were so angry.

"Come on sweetheart," the chef said bitterly.

"You OK?" asked Hillary, who was carrying the vegetarian option.

There it was again. Now the baby was talking to someone else at another table. What was it doing here, now? Angela was trying to work.

What was it saying? Was it talking about her? Well what else did the baby know about? It had been inside of her for a few months and that was it. It was probably telling the other guests about how Angela had dreamt of becoming a set designer, but that the only set she'd ever designed had been for a play that tanked. And she didn't even get accepted into the set design program at the university. The baby and the guests were laughing at her. Jesus Christ. It was sitting right where Yuko was directing Angela to serve her plates.

“Fifty two, fifty two,” Yuko was yelling at the caterers. She could scream at the top of her lungs and none of the guests would notice, the sounds of their chatter were that engaging. Later there would be a band and speeches. Fifty-three was where the baby sat.

If Angela had to serve her own baby, she would die. It would be so awkward she’d pass out and the plates would fall, breaking on the ground. The food would fall all over her and she’d pee her pants. Everyone would see. She’d wake up and everyone would be staring at her with Yuko yelling table numbers, “fifty six, forty two, eleven, three!”

But when she got to the table the baby was gone. It must have slipped away.

After the service was over Hillary asked Angela if she wanted to grab a beer. They walked in their undershirts through the dark streets. “I think there’s a bar over here,” one of them would say, but the bars were always full. No one is going to want us with our backpacks anyways, Angela thought, though her sleek, leather backpack was much nicer than Hillary’s bulky MEC.

Finally they found a bar through an alley. Angela had been there before on a date, with someone who she had met through Pinnacle from Ontario, but all he wanted to talk about was Canada. “Did you hear about the new cabinet minister?” “Did you read about the woman murdered in Lacombe?”

The bar was nearly empty. A few men nursed beers by the counter and a couple sat in the back, kissing.

Hillary asked Angela if she had ever been to the Dominican Republic. Angela had not.

“I love the DR,” she said. “My ex was from there. He was so hot. the first time we had sex it was bad, because his dick was too big.”

“Crazy,” said Angela. “Awesome.”

A man walked over to them and introduced himself as Carl. He was older than them, but probably only by a few years. He had curly hair.

The girls explained how they were from Canada and had spent the evening serving dinner at the convention centre.

“Wow,” he said, “Canada.”

“They have the worst cover bands,” Angela began, describing their shifts. “They play Black Eyed Peas, that song from The Muppets.”

“That ‘We Are a Family’ song,” said Hillary.

He was staring at Angela. “Do you like catering?”

“No,” she burst out laughing.

“Would you like another drink?”

He knew of a bar, which had more going on than this one did.

“All of the bars are full,” said Hillary, though it was beginning to have nothing to do with her.

“I know someone,” said Carl, absent-mindedly playing with their shot glasses.

As they walked out and into the alley Hillary whispered to Angela, “I’d be careful. This guy creeps me out.”

“I know,” said Angela, “but I don’t want to go home yet.”

Carl paid for the three of them to get into the next bar without waiting in line. It was loud and crowded. Even if the baby was there, the chances of spotting it with so many people around

were slim. The baby could easily be trampled in an environment like this. If it was there, Angela hoped it was being careful.

Very quickly Hillary got caught in a booth, talking to a boy. "Do you like him?" Angela asked when she got back from the bar with Carl and a drink.

"Oh, she likes him," said Carl, "I can tell."

"He's a boy," Hillary said. "And I'm only into men."

Carl wanted to have a cigarette, so the three of them walked out to the patio which was just as crowded, but cooler. Some people were backpackers, pointing up at what might have been the Southern Cross in the sky. Really you had to go out of the city to see the real sky, many people had told Angela, but she had not yet had the chance.

"What is this effect you have on men?" Carl asked Angela. "You're so beautiful."

"Are you drunk?" Hillary asked from the other side of her.

"No," said Angela, though it was becoming difficult to finish her drink. The beer was becoming heavy, like a sludge. "I'm fine." She started to laugh, "are you drunk?"

"It takes a lot to get me drunk," Hillary said.

"I mean it," Carl continued, "I knew it, the bartender at the last bar knew it. I said to him, 'are there any girls I should talk to?' he said, 'over there, the brunette with her back to you'."

"I don't know," said Angela, laughing.

After a little while Hillary said that she was going home and asked Angela if she wanted to come with her. Angela said no, she didn't want to go home yet.

"Are you going to be OK?"

"Yeah."

"How are you getting home?"

"I'll cab," said Angela.

"Do you have money?"

"Yeah," she said, although she didn't. Cabs were expensive, she never would, she couldn't.

"Here," Hillary pulled out a bright bill.

"No really, I'm fine."

"Have a good time."

"I'll see you around Pinnacle," Angela said, hiccupping.

They had one more drink and then Carl leaned into Angela and said, "I want to get out of here."

When they were out on the street he propelled past her, onto the road, hailing a cab.

"Alright mate?" a group of men asked him. He tripped over the curb.

"Your boyfriend is drunk," the men told Angela.

"She's not my girlfriend," Carl said and the men hollered. Carl curled into himself and threw up into his palm then dropped the sick onto Bourke Street.

The cab winded into what Angela supposed was St. Kilda, where he had told her he lived, though she didn't know, she'd never been. All she had done since arriving in Melbourne was cater and go on dates.

He showed her his bedroom and Angela saw a photograph of him holding a woman with dark skin in front of The Twelve Apostles.

"Is that your girlfriend?"

Carl lay face down on the bed and groaned into all the blankets. "Yes," he said, "but we can't be together."

So they weren't going to have sex, Angela felt relieved. Perhaps it had been obvious for some time.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because she's a Muslim and she hates how much I drink. I said I'd be a Muslim too, but I'm not good enough for her. No matter what I do: if I'm sober, if I'm a Muslim."

Angela asked him if he'd like a glass of water. But he was already asleep and snoring.

She slept beside him in the bed. In the morning she opened and smelled each girl product in the shower. They smelt like candles. She looked at herself in the mirror. She really was beautiful, she had an effect on men. Her back in this lighting was phenomenal. It was nine a.m. She had to be at the convention centre in fifteen minutes if she wanted to make it to check in to facilitate the breakfast buffet at the convention center. But she didn't want to. She left the apartment building and started walking.

She followed the bigger and bigger houses, down towards the beach. When she got to the palm trees she took off her shoes and socks.

There in front of her was the baby.

"Of all the sky in the world," she said, "you have to be sitting right under this spot?"

"You knew that I'd be here," said the baby. "That's why you came."

There were other people on the beach, though it felt to Angela that she and the baby were the only things to have ever happened in the whole world.

"So what have you been up to?" asked the baby. "Are you still designing sets?"

She shook her head. "Not really. It was just the one."

“You wanted to design sets for a living,” the baby said. “You used to say you wanted to design sets for Broadway.”

“No, that wasn’t serious.”

“You used to talk about it all the time.”

“No,” she felt humiliated by remembering, it was such a joke. “I was probably just joking.”

“So what are you doing here, in Australia?”

She didn't know.

The baby smirked. “So you’re not doing anything?”

“Well what are you doing?”

“I’m a baby. Or at least I’m trying to be.”

They walked silently into the shade of a high rise.

“Do you know any Muslims?” she asked the baby.

“I don’t know anyone,” it said. The baby could get like this, angry about how it had never had a life.

“It’s not my fault,” she said, “they told me you would just float around for a while and then go to another family who wanted you. It’s not my fault that this turned out to be misinformation.”

“Maybe it wasn’t,” said the baby

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re going to another family?”

“Nothing,” it said.

“You are!”

The baby turned to her, with its eyes sharp, “it’s not another family, as if you were one. It’s a family. It can’t just be two people.”

“So you’re going?” her voice was lower.

“I’m not getting my hopes up.”

Both of them stared into the water. The waves grew with gentle conviction out of the ocean, reached their peak and then melted into the sand, as though they had never existed. New ones who looked just like them, almost exactly, rose and fell in their place.

“What are they like?” Angela asked the baby.

“I don’t know,” it said. “I’m not getting my hopes up.”

“Have you had your hopes up before?” Angela asked.

“You know how it is,” the baby said, squinting into the sun.

“I was good you know, I had an understanding of light and texture. Like hanging curtains and stuff. Paul—the director, he told me. He’d worked at the university.”

The baby nodded.

Two young people ran into the plot of ocean they’d been watching. They started to kiss and the boy snuck his hand into the bottom of the girl’s bathing suit, like they were the only two in the world.

“Let’s keep walking a bit,” Angela said. It was almost noon. She was definitely fired from her job, or she wasn’t, and she’d get to serve more rich people meals. But she wanted to keep walking with the baby, for just a little bit more.

“OK,” said the baby, “but I can’t stay here forever, I’m going to have to leave at some point.”

Lace in Three Days

1.

Literally all I wanted was to sing 'Doll Parts,' but this fucking cunt. "Come on," I got right up in her face and told her. "Hello I requested this like an hour ago, it's 'Lace.'" But she, ye olde queen karaoke host or something, pretended like I didn't exist, just stood up and thanked some Jessica for her rendition of "Confessions." I wrote down my song again, or at least I wrote down something, and handed it to her.

Suddenly this kid was right behind me and said, "Hey Lacey?"

Jeremy, this kid from elementary school. "Holy shit, so how've you been?" He'd been the baddest kid in sixth grade, the one who totally terrified everyone and touched all the girls' butts.

"What, you mean like since we were twelve?" I laughed. "Great, fucking wonderful. 'Cept I'm trying to fucking sing!"

We walked back to the table where my brother sat with his friend Chance and some randoms. This red haired girl said that we had to pay extra to sing and that I shouldn't say cunt. Like, just because my brother's trying to fuck her, she knows me.

"Give them some money," she said to Thomas. "I wanna sing 'Lady Marmalade'."

"Lace," said Thomas, "come on." I handed him twenty dollars, even though I'd promised myself I wouldn't lend him money again, not until he paid back the one hundred and twenty from last weekend.

Jeremy said that he had some money and walked towards the front, where the DJ sat with her hair in these strange piles atop her head that I didn't even understand.

"Who's that?" Thomas asked me.

"Jeremy," I said, like it was duh.

"Is he your boyfriend?" said the red haired girl who sucked.

“No,” I said. But he was cute. Very cute and watching him walk across the room made me think of the time my friends and I snuck into the rink to watch him second base with an older girl in the penalty box. One time he took his brother’s Ritalin to school and snorted it during igneous rock. They said he’d fucked his cousin. He was the baddest kid in sixth grade but luckily we weren’t in sixth grade anymore, we were twenty-five and totally wrecked.

“Do you want to stay around here, or we could go,” said Thomas. “Chance knows this after party. It’s only twenty bucks.”

“Yeah,” said Chance, “each.”

I shrugged. Jeremy was walking back to our table with a tray of shots, “Let’s see.”

Then the queen was up there herself, shaking her no butt to Iggy Azalea. “Cunt sings herself but won’t even let me sing once!” I said to the table.

“Hey,” said the girl Thomas was with, who now had blonde hair and looked completely different, “she’s my sister!” Thomas started to kiss her, then fell out of his chair.

I paid forty bucks for more shots and Jeremy paid something to get us on stage for ‘Wildest Dreams’, ‘The Thong Song’, and ‘Shoop’. We sounded fucking awesome. Time passed and we ordered more shots. Thomas threw up at the table and we were asked to leave.

“Lace,” he said, “gimme fifty bucks.”

“I know of an after-party,” said Chance.

“You need to get a job,” I said, as if it were a joke.

“What? Like you? You’re a fucking waitress!”

“President Obama over here,” said Chance, giggling.

The girl Thomas had been kissing was gone, or else was simply out of my periphery. Jeremy was touching me. He was touching my back, but it went down both legs.

We walked to King Edward, just around the corner. Jeremy lit up a joint. Thomas was trying to balance on the medians, racing back and forth between us and the school for the mentally handicapped. "Watch this Lace!" he said, and spun around on one leg like a ballerina. "Build me up Buttercup," he started to slur, which was the song our dad used to sing to our mom when we were all in the car together as kids.

"Are you guys sure," said Chance. "There's this sick after-party."

When the joint was lit, Thomas ran towards us, but tripped over his shoe lace and fell onto the road. We laughed.

"Aw shit," said Chance.

When Jeremy laughed his torso rustled against mine. I was witness to the weight and girth of it.

"You OK?" I was still laughing, happy and light. "Thomas? You OK?"

Thomas jeered. "You know, Lace once sucked a guy's dick right over there?"

"Thomas, shut up!" I said.

"Everybody fucking watching and stuff!"

"Aw, shit," said Chance.

Thomas got up and then tripped again, this time rising with blood down his forehead.

"You OK?" asked Jeremy, who walked over to help him.

"Why don't you guys just fuck?" he said.

"Thomas, you need to tie your shoes." I walked over to him and knelt at his feet. Jeremy was close to me again, that body.

“Lace,” said Thomas, weak and pleading now, the way I was familiar with. “Give me your keys, and I’ll sleep in your room. You can fuck Jeremy.” Jeremy was standing with us, but he didn’t say anything.

“You know Mom doesn’t want to see you right now,” I said, “and she’ll be pissed at me if I let you in.”

“But this way you can sleep at Jeremy’s.”

Jeremy was touching my back again. It made sense to me, so I said yes. I gave him my keys and walked with Jeremy to his house, just a few blocks away.

“I don’t deal drugs anymore,” Jeremy told me. We were both sobering up so he took out a bottle of Russian Prince from his freezer and poured us shots. “Only to friends.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Thomas isn’t always like that,” I said, even though I hadn’t realized it was something I was thinking about.

Pretty soon we were reaching for each other, first across the table, then on the couch and finally the bed. It was two bodies, but also a numb feeling. Had he been like this the whole time, since the 6th grade? I’d been so afraid of him then, but this was all he was, I was seeing him naked. He was kissing my neck.

I left at 6 A.M. He asked if he could see me again.

“I’m going out of town, to Montreal,” I said.

“To visit friends?”

“I have this court case thing.”

He nodded like he knew all about it. Maybe I'd mentioned something before but I couldn't remember.

"Are you coming back?" he asked me.

2.

So far it was: Eleven dollars for the shuttle bus to the airport, two hundred and fifty to book myself on the next flight when the shuttle bus was late, seven-fifty at Tim Hortons. Sixty for a cab to the courthouse where my lawyer now claimed I owed her fifteen hundred. My lawyer had this wild, frizzed-out hair like... like desperately in need of an orgasm at least. But that wasn't my job. My job was to blow all of my money and act like some misunderstood virgin.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "I've been trying to get in touch with you for weeks. Did you get my email?"

I shrugged. "You had my phone number."

"What were you wearing?" she asked, "Were you wearing boots?"

But how many times did I have to tell her that I'd been drunk, that I didn't remember anything? It was two years ago, my boyfriend was getting his ass kicked and I defended him. She led me through the long halls. I hated how sour she smelt and that I could smell how sour she smelt; like, how pathetic. Even the girl on trial for beating up a cop feels bad for you.

She asked me again, "Do you remember what Mr. Taft was wearing? Was he wearing boots?"

I couldn't remember.

"They're saying there was a scab," she said. "On the officer's neck. That they have a photograph of this. I'd like to contact Mr. Taft, is that possible?"

"You can try," I said. Like, I dare you.

What else was there? Besides that, it had been that warm sticky feeling that started in my ears but rushed everywhere, like I was full of a thousand spinning tops and the only way to balance was to literally beat the shit out of someone, except that I couldn't.

"Mr. Taft held me back," I said.

"But previously you've said that Mr. Taft was incapacitated, which was why you called the police."

"I called an ambulance," I said, "but the police came. We just wanted them to leave. But they wouldn't, they tore up the apartment."

She sighed. "But you have no photographs of this."

"I had that photograph of the footprint on the wall," I said, "My footprint."

"But it was on your phone," she said.

"Yeah."

"Which you don't have anymore."

"Not that one, no," I said. Not since I'd peed on it then had to beg my mom for her old Blackberry.

"Alright," she said, "I'll need that cheque from you now, and then another thousand in January."

"January?" I asked.

"The judge had to reschedule. She shuffled through papers in her briefcase then handed me our contract.

"How have you been Lace?" she asked. "You look better."

I said I was great.

"And where are you living? Still up in the Plateau?"

"I'm in Edmonton," I said, "with my mom for a bit."

“Lace, did you come all the way here just for this? We could have just done this over the phone. You really should have read my email.”

I wrote her a cheque.

Across the street from the courthouse was a cafe where I spent six dollars on a coffee and a muffin. At the airport, I’d changed into the nicest clothes I owned: a black silk shirt and my mom’s Ralph Lauren pants. I had looked nicer than all of the other non-lawyers at the courthouse, though somehow this felt conspicuous in itself.

Seven hundred dollar flight for nothing. guess I’m coming back in jan. I texted Jeremy, ignoring the fact that I’d texted him earlier and he hadn’t replied. It was a fact that didn’t own me. I was moving on.

The cafe was crowded, and playing some Quebecois talk radio I couldn’t understand. Had my lawyer gotten in touch with Mr. Taft? What had he told her? Had he said anything about me?

I texted Steve, the friend who I was staying with, though I knew he would not be up for hours. He never got up before three and it was only ten-thirty.

Why was I paying twenty-five hundred fucking dollars for someone to call Mr. Taft for me? Couldn’t I call him myself? I called him, but he didn’t answer. “Ryan,” I said into his voicemail. “It’s me.”

“Excuse me,” someone came from behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. “Are you using that other outlet?” I shifted my chair so he could plug in his computer. He was tall, pale, a boy probably my age. “Got a case?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, this morning. “But rescheduling bullshit. Flew all the way here from Alberta.”

“Oh,” he said, “I thought you were a lawyer. You look like you could be a lawyer.”

I smiled.

“I’m Dave.”

“Great, fucking wonderful.”

It should have been fall, but it was not fall yet. It was hot and I was sweaty and crunched under the weight of my bags as I walked to Steve’s apartment in the Mile End. I knew that I needed money, most of the money I had was gone. I texted Thomas and he told me to ask Chance. I asked Chance and he told me to ask Thomas. Thomas didn’t write me back. I sat on a bench and drew doodles of the street, the cars and all the boyfriends and girlfriends, even though I knew no one was a boyfriend and girlfriend, not in this neighborhood. Not even Ryan. Everybody was just hanging out and hooking up.

When I finally got to Steve’s apartment he said, “I’m so excited, look what I got for us.” He motioned to the coffee table, covered with bags of weed, coke, mushrooms and pills. The rest of the apartment was a mess, of course, it always was. Dishes all over the counter and take-out containers on the couch. A strap of his backpack was caught in a mouse trap beside the fridge.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about that,” he said. “I can’t cut the straps.”

“Did you try?”

“That’s how they’re designed. You can’t cut through them. It cost four hundred dollars.”

He shrugged.

“There’s this guy I met today,” I said, “Outside the courthouse. He seemed pretty chill. I said we could text him later.”

“Glad you’re over Ryan,” Steve said. “You’re so much more fun without him.”

The three of us sat very close to each other on the couch. Dave was taller and thinner than I’d remembered, the difference between our legs astonishing.

Steve put on a song I’d never heard before and we all started dancing. As we danced we laughed our heads off. Dave grabbed my hand. I was laughing. Why had I been so angry before? For my whole life prior to this? I hadn’t realized. Now I was realizing everything. It rushed through me.

Dave and I danced close, with our arms around each other. Steve was on the couch, rolling a joint. Now I was crying and it felt amazing.

“You feel amazing,” said Dave. He was so tall. My tears bled through his white t shirt and his nipples burst forth, glowing. “You’re so goddamn warm.” He started to sniff the top of my head and kiss it.

Steve lit the joint and we sat down beside him on the couch.

“It’s so cool that you beat up that cop,” said Dave. “You know I really admire you for that.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Thanks.”

“But are you going to jail?”

“You can’t go to jail,” said Steve, suddenly affectionate. “I’d die without you.”

“I’m not going to jail,” I said, though neither of them seemed to hear.

“If you went to jail though,” said Dave, “would you go to jail in Quebec or in Alberta?”

“Quebec,” said Steve. “And I’d visit you every day.”

“Actually, I think I actually heard the jails are really nice in Alberta,” said Dave.

A mouse darted out from under the fridge across the room. I screamed and then we all started laughing. “Each mouse is worth a hundred,” said Steve. “It’s a microcosm.”

“Steve!” I said.

“No,” said Dave, “he’s completely right.”

Steve drew more lines. There were suddenly many things I wanted to say, about my childhood, about my body, about the hopes and dreams I had for myself, and I felt as if it was imperative for me to say them all, all at once, but at that moment I couldn’t stop laughing. We were all laughing.

“You OK Lace?”

“What?”

“You look blue, Lace.” It was Steve. I looked up. Dave was gone.

“Chill, Lace.”

“Have you seen Ryan?” I asked. “Do you know if he’s still hanging out with Jacob or Eric?”

“Lace,” said Steve, “it’s cool. Relax. I love you. It’s only going to be a bad time if you let it.”

“Where’s Dave?” I asked.

“He likes you.”

“What?”

“He’s been touching you all night.” Steve opened a beer and handed it to me.

Dave walked in through the front door, glowing. “I couldn’t remember what you wanted me to buy,” he said, holding a case of beer and a plastic bag full of starbursts.

Steve laughed. "Pizza man, pizza. But it's all good man. Lace," he handed me his phone and forty dollars, "call the pizza guys."

It was seriously hard. The numbers kept jumping back and forth, and doing so to the opposite of the music. Dave sat down beside me. Suddenly I realized we were sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor, smoking a cigarette covered in my lipstick.

"How's it going?"

"Two large, pepperoni."

He put his arm around me. "So you know I think you're really beautiful. I knew you weren't a lawyer this morning. I just wanted to talk to you."

His eyes were incredible. They were out of this world and his fingers were the colour of the moon. "Why don't you want to be with me?" he asked.

"I think you should go," I said.

"Come with me, I want to appreciate you."

"I'm tired," I said, and it was true in many respects, though I did not sleep for hours.

3.

Chance had called me eleven times and my mother had called me nine times. I read my text messages, one after another:

can u call me?

Lace can u call me?

where r u

t was hit by a car

t in hospital

Lace you need to call. your brother.

Call me.

It was 4 P.M. and Steve was vomiting in the bathroom. He walked out and said, "I'm feeling down," he said. "I'm really feeling fucking like a piece of shit."

A mouse pulled a crust of pizza under the fridge. I got up and walked through his bedroom onto the balcony.

He yelled, "Lace! What are you doing? I need to talk to you!" but he didn't get up from the couch. I sat on the scratchy, fucked-up rug. The leaves were dying and there was a dead squirrel getting eaten by a bird on the road.

I called Chance. I called my mom, I even called my father. I called everyone I could think of who knew Thomas, including Jeremy, but no one answered.

Steve called for me. "Lace! What are you doing?" But I didn't care what he needed. I didn't care about how he was so depressed he couldn't leave his house unless it was to go to a bar. I didn't care about how his mother had killed herself when he was seventeen, or even how last night he'd agreed to lend me one hundred dollars. I needed more. I always would.

I called everyone I had called again, and then a third time.

I called Ryan. "Hi, it's me."

"I know," he said. Everything felt very still when I talked to him, like it couldn't possibly be my voice.

"My lawyer was trying to call you," I said. I picked callous from my toe, waiting for the argument to start, whatever one we were going to have. "To ask some questions, I guess."

He was quiet.

"She's a bit of a cunt," I said, "but you know, lawyers."

"You know I don't want to be involved in this."

“You know I was defending you.”

“It was two years ago.”

“They were beating the shit out of you.”

“I was loaded. I shouldn’t’ve been so loaded. Neither of us should have been. And don’t,” he paused.

I remembered why I had called him, but now I was in a bad mood and Thomas was somehow irrevocably linked to that, he always was. No matter what had happened it must have been Thomas’ fault. It always was. He could never get his life together, even though he was only twenty-two, it was already fact.

“You shouldn’t use that word,” he said.

“What?”

“You know Lace, cunt.”

Steve walked out to me, crying. “Give me my money back,” he said to me. “You owe me a hundred dollars.”

I said that he hadn’t given me any money, only promised he would. His sweater had the neck cut out, so it hung past his collarbone on both sides. He wasn’t wearing any pants. “The forty last night.”

“That was for pizza!”

“You want my life, Lace?” he screamed, throwing an empty bottle of gatorade past me, onto the street.

“You want mine?” I said.

He walked back to his bed and closed the glass door behind him. He was talking to someone on the phone, crying. “Everyone uses me,” he said. “I give everybody so much and

there's nothing left for me." He had himself shrimped over a pillow, wiping his face with the bed sheet. "And I miss Ian. I'm still in love with him. I must be."

I twisted my torso so that I could not see Steve and started to sing under my breath so I could not hear him. I want to be the girl with the most cake. I sung the words without thinking about them. The words were easy to me, they were like sex. How many times had I sung this song? All the way back to the seventh grade, when I'd first been learning the way words had so many more meanings than just their own. I was singing, but what I meant was more like some kind of prayer. Of all the things in the world to be, I had turned out to be Lace. How about that? The thought made me feel small and insignificant. Like a hologram flickering out.

When Chance finally called, I was breathless. "It's all good. It'll all be chill," he said.

"What happened?"

"It's too fucked to talk about, like. But chill, you know? He's gonna be super chill."

I inhaled. "Have you seen Jeremy around?"

"Aw shit."

I was barefoot and brushed the soft hairs growing out of the tops of my toes where the skin was dark and raised like a raspberry. I should have pulled them out, one by one but I couldn't, I was weak. I cried but I was all alone, no one would see. I sat out there for a long time, wondering why somehow, and despite everything, I still looked forward to the next day, and even the one after that. Maybe I would never know.

Cherry Sun

You could tell the animal wasn't interested in mating season, she'd gone to great lengths to make that obvious. But this was a business and babies were what the people wanted to see. Come spring, teachers, carpenters, musicians, poets and lawyers visited our zoo, paid twelve-fifty and stared at all the babies. How thrilling, to be in the presence of such fresh life, such big eyes and awkward gaits.

First there were problems with her hormones, then her temperature. The vet was called in, spread her hide taut then pricked her with his potions. "She'll be fine now," he said, "I've got her all balanced out."

Her name was Nala and she was a capybara. "I know you don't want to do it," I told her, because at this point I was levelling with her. I wasn't feeding her any of the bullshit I saw other keepers feed their animals. To the seals: *but you'll totally outshine the walruses in the afternoon show!* To the Siberian tiger: *here are some messages from your family in the wild!*

"But it might not be as important as you think it is. Just because you have sex with a guy doesn't mean it explains everything about you. It's the twenty-first century. You can have sex with whoever you want, it doesn't matter."

We'd all been there, or at least I had. More times than I'd care to admit. Oh, I'd fucked all those guys: the chimpanzee guy, the sloth bear guy, the guy who ran the cafeteria. These days nobody expected you to be in love.

I told her about the guy I had just started seeing, who minded the antelopes. Actually he had this nervous way about him, a habit of always knowing how much each keeper's animal was worth in parts and then treating them accordingly. "It's not like I'm coming," I told Nala, just

to manage any expectation she might of had. “I mean sometimes it can hurt, he gets pretty rough down there but... well, I could take it as a compliment really, that he needs me so hard like that.”

There were seven capybaras, including Raja, the stud. Their pen was a struggling exhibit in the small mammals department, consistently overshadowed by the meerkats. We had given them pretty much anything they could have wanted: lettuce, water, some shrubs for shade, but they remained awful at performing for the audiences. “We all know you’re related to the rat,” we told them, “but it’s nothing to be ashamed of, all of us have shameful aspects to our family history.” If we hadn’t gotten the idea to throw their food into the north wall, along the viewing mirror, the animals would hardly have gotten up from chewing their bark at all.

A team of three handled the rodents: a grad student doing her practicum, a recent high school drop-out who happened to be related to the mayor, and myself. Like I said, we were struggling. What killed us was that the meerkats were even more like the rat (considering the tail and all) and yet it didn’t seem to bother them as a species at all. The meerkats had the Lion King and it had gone to their heads, they were always dancing around, popping out of holes like they had just discovered new air. I’d seen people actually cheer.

The capybaras were a different story. Generally what happened was about ten minutes after finding out what a capybara was, the novelty was gone. It was a zoo after all, there were lions, tigers, hot dogs wrapped in bacon.

In the wild, capybaras ate, often slept and copulated in the water. In the zoo, because of our limited resources, we borrowed a plastic tub from the seal guy to induce intimacy. The mares floated noses up while Raja tread behind them with his front paws resting on their haunches.

“You ever done it in water?” asked the seal guy, who’s condition for lending us the tub was that he be allowed to watch.

“Yeah,” I lied, “I’ve done it everywhere.”

Raja was usually good to impregnate two mares a day, three if we pushed him. We needed to have all of the mares impregnated that week, before Raja left on a road trip through the midwest, to impregnate mares in Calgary, Minnesota, Indianapolis and Chicago. What we wanted was for the pups to emerge *en masse*, wet, big eyed and adorable.

But Nala wouldn’t fuck him. When we put her in the water she dove to the bottom of the pool, and kicked Raja in the face when he dove after her.

“This is what you have to do,” said our superiors, who gave us a demonstration in their executive office using two plush otters from the gift store. Alright, I thought. Simple enough and for a good cause.

Though in real life, when I stood at the edge of the pool holding her front legs and the mayor’s niece tugged a rope that harnessed both her back legs, it was much more difficult.

“This is fucked, this is fucked, this so fucked up,” muttered the grad student under her breath as the three of us listened to the violent, splashing water.

“Listen,” I said to Nala when we had a moment alone. “I know you’re nervous. But what you need to understand is that all we want from you is to be happy and healthy. You get to have three babies! Aren’t you excited?”

She looked at me.

“Yeah, three of them! How does it feel?” I really was curious, and a little drunk, from the tequila I’d snuck in for lunch.

She buried her head in the dirt, like she was trying to prove the dirt went all the way down to the earth’s core, not that she knew what a core was, not that it wasn’t just the cement pool where the dolphins lived, then died, that one record breaking winter.

“Clarice!” That was the grad student, always on my ass. “Who are you talking to? No cell phones!”

As I stood up I turned to say one more thing to Nala. “You can’t just stop eating,” I said, “You’ve got to start taking better care of yourself.” And for a little while, she did.

When a baby was born at the zoo you could feel it in the air. When a baby was born, everyone was allowed to abandon their posts to watch. We all crowded around the new mother and melted as she licked the afterbirth from her fresh young. Usually one of the small monkeys girls said something like, “Oh my god I can feel it in my ovaries!” as the elephant guys shifted away from her nervously. A representative from the executive office would come to visit and name the new being with a megaphone. Welcome Simba, welcome Nemo, welcome Pluto, welcome Roo.

What was with the babies in this place? What was with the people lining pits and cages every Saturday afternoon, pointing at shadows thinking it might be a baby. There were babies on billboards, babies on the side of buses. People hung them on their backs like a jacket, or on their fronts like a medallion. They gave them names and picked out clothes for them to wear. A baby had the potential to be anything and anything had the potential to be a baby, when you were desperate to see one in the snow leopard’s cage.

Five months later our mares writhed in the dirt and the sacs of their young burst forth slimy and pungent. We had put Nala through so much, yet watching her with the little ones it became clear we had made the right decision. It was a series of right decisions that led us to this moment. She slurped embryonic sac from their tiny faces. Hers were the smallest and therefore cutest ones. It was beautiful and peaceful, and I felt like I was too, just by being near them. I swigged some of the tequila I'd hid in my backpack, holding my stomach together as it sizzled. I didn't always drink at work but when I did it was usually in slim mickeys, which I hid in the waistband of my skirt. I wondered, briefly, how incredible it would feel to be them, somehow all four of them.

The antelope guy, who had lately been acting distant, texted me on his break and I snuck out to meet him in the secluded shadows of Penguin Plunge and the Amphibian house.

He reached his hand under my skirt and found the mickey, laughed and rolled his eyes. "Crazy, crazy, Clarice." He was shaking his head then unscrewed the cap and took a deep swig without even asking.

"Hey!"

"What?" He looked at me and swigged again, then threw the bottle onto a bench. "I'm going to make it up to you." He started kissing my neck and moving lower.

I wanted him to lick me, more. "Harder," I said but that wasn't it necessarily. "Slower," but it wasn't that either.

What was meant to happen was that he licked me all up. My outside disappeared and for a great flash I was just my inside. It happened sometimes, with the sloth bear guy when I said, "Oh god."

With the guy from the cafeteria when I said, "heeeeeahhhhhh."

The antelope guy took his penis out, flipped me around, and pushed himself through to me. It felt so big at first but it was just like a shot. Only for a second, then almost nothing.

When we finished the antelope guy said, "Have I ever told you that you have a real 70s bush?" Even though he had told me, many times.

I walked back to the capybaras feeling loose and fuzzy. The grad student was deep in conversation with the veterinarian. "This better not mean we lose our bonuses!" the mayor's niece said, "I need that bonus!" She stormed past me. The grad student sighed deeply, like a man. What had happened, the veterinarian explained, was that Nala's pups, all three of them, turned out to have been dead. They had been dead for some time, he told me, which explained their underdevelopment. "It's actually not uncommon," he said.

Before I knew it, my shift was over and the zoo was closed. I could have gone home, I could have just left and eaten chips in my room, watching something stupid on TV. Even though I lived right across the river, it took almost forty five minutes with the bus over the nearest bridge. Sometimes I joked to myself, just swim. Just swim, I told myself, and on that day some for some reason I really felt like it. But then what? Show up for dinner completely soaked and say what to my parents?

So I stayed with the capybaras, I sat beside their feeding gate and watched Nala in the setting, cherry sun. She was up and walking, which was strange. Weren't there tests? Shouldn't there be tests? I thought. She was walking away from the south wall of the pen.

"So you're pleased with yourself then? So with the babies, that was all just for show?"

She stopped about five feet away from the wall and turned around.

“Well congratulations,” I took another swig of the tequila, the last one. “You got rid of your babies, all of your babies are dead.”

The light was really like grenadine, it washed over Nala and the other capybaras, west of her in the pen, resting quietly and chewing on whatever shit we’d given them to chew on.

I thought about the time I had sex with my humanities teacher in high school. When I got stoned and drove over his lawn. “You’re crazy Clarice,” he told me, “You’re acting crazy!”

“Allan! Allan!” I said. That was his name. Whenever I said it, I made a point to pronounce both the L’s.

Nala had her eyes glued ahead of her, and I watched as she flung herself into motion, sprinting forward head first. She bounced off of the wall, landing with a heavy thud on the dirt and straw. Then she got up, paced back and ran again.

“What are you doing?” I asked Nala, “What are you even doing with your life?”

But she just kept throwing herself against that wall. She threw herself against the wall over and over again, so many times that the blood overtook her tiny body and at the end of the week she was incinerated with her children and several tropical fish.

Trees, the Ocean, Girls, Toes

1.

Nobody could wait to become a Mayorsvillian. “When we are Mayorsvillians,” we said, “we will get to go to the movie theatres, buy our clothes from the mall and try Chinese food.”

I lived in a small town completely surrounded by trees. Two hundred years ago, our forefathers had planted one tree for each person they lost on their journey west. They planted the trees on what would become the outskirts of what would become the town, though in the end the act did nothing to cure their loneliness. So, said one man, whose likeness would later be framed in the gazebo, what if we planted bigger trees, stolen from the towns around us? And so they did. The forest got so dense it was hard to see beyond it and then soon after that so thick it was impossible.

One of these towns grew into Mayorsville, named so because of the Mayor’s Academy, where mayors were trained, then sent all over the country to govern.

Every year in school we learned the same old stories. I hated school but home was worse, because of the fights I had with my mother where we told each other terrible things. “I wish you were gone instead of Ani,” I would tell her. “I wish you were gone instead of Ani,” is what I knew she was thinking, but never said aloud. She was still the parent, and I guess there were rules.

One day our teacher assigned a project where we were to interview community members and ask what side of the forest issue they were on: to clear cut or not to clear cut. The answer was obvious. We wanted to join Mayorsville, now that Mayorsville was finally forgiving the tree theft. We were tired of being what we were and wanted to become Mayorsvillians.

“Maybe I’ll do Mrs. Robichere,” I said, in that stupid sarcastic way I had of saying everything, and yet when I said it, even though it was a joke, I knew that it was true. I would interview Mrs. Robichere, the rat lady who lived at the end of 17th street. What did Mrs. Robichere think of the forest? She probably didn't know there was a forest, she was so out of her mind.

2.

Three quick knocks on her door after I left at lunch.

Mrs. Robichere collects rats, and if she curses you the rats will come into your house in the middle of the night and eat your face off.

She feeds the rats to get them plump, and when they’re ready, she’s going to make a great cloak out of them, with a matching hat and mittens.

They’re her rats, she gave birth to them. She mated with the rat king. But she sucked at it. He didn’t even like her and he never called her again.

“Hello,” I said when Mrs. Robichere appeared, “I’m here from the Junior High and I wanted to ask you a few questions about the forest and Mayorsville.”

She motioned me inside. It was an old house that had some grand aspects although they gave out an overall exhausted demeanour. Lamps, books, bowls and plates were littered everywhere. Everything, including the furniture, cutlery and even Mrs. Robichere’s skin seemed to have the same texture. Earth tones, or else jewel tones covered in dirt. And all of the surfaces moved: rats.

“What do you think about the city’s proposal to clear cut the forest so that we can become part of Mayorsville?” I asked, distracted.

There were more rats than I could count. A dozen or so on the stairs, three fighting over something in a bowl, two making love on the couch. The rats were the colour of meat and their tails glistened like fat. A rat crawled out of Mrs. Robichere's sweater pocket. Others sprawled on the window sill. They acted like cats and lounged in the sun.

"My daughter died after an illness," said Mrs. Robichere. I nodded. *Mrs. Robichere had a baby but she couldn't take care of the baby. She was such a bad mother that the baby died and she became obsessed with rats instead.*

I didn't know what to say, so I stuck to the script our teacher had written for us in class. "Some of the pros are increased economic opportunities in the metropolis of Mayorsville, including many businesses and The Mayor's Academy."

I sat down on the couch and a rat jumped onto my shoulder, clawing my neck.

"It's the wax they want," said Mrs. Robichere, "there's something in the ear wax they just adore."

I brushed the rat away and it disappeared into the cushion. There was an assembly of them, moving beneath me, beneath the velvet. "Some of the cons," I said, trying to be polite, "include the potential loss of the close-knit community atmosphere we have now, an influx of drugs and alcohol caused by a metropolitan lifestyle, as well as the breakdown of the family unit."

"When she got sick we tried everything. Doctors, real doctors," said Mrs. Robichere.

"I heard the doctors here are crap," I said.

Mrs. Robichere nodded with her eyes closed. "I knew the witch from high school. And I knew if I asked from the pure heart of myself then I'd know how to find her. In the forest, did you know that some of the trees go back to the Red River Rebellion?" She motioned to her wooden

table. "This tree was taken from its brothers and sisters in Medicine Hat," she motioned to her wooden bookcase.

"Does the witch use them for potions?" I asked. Maybe this was something for the town to consider regarding clear cutting, even though I didn't believe in the witch. No one did.

"She uses everything. Other times she uses nothing."

"But she made a mistake, with your daughter."

Mrs. Robichere shook her head. "The witch makes no mistakes."

There was this sense of impending intimacy that made me itch. In my calves and underarms and everywhere. Whatever Mrs. Robichere was going to tell me, I knew I was not the right set of ears. I was just a kid. Why had I chosen to do this? I'd only said it as a joke, only to make people laugh. But nobody had laughed, at least not in any way that remained meaningful to me now. I went to school with all kinds of weirdos: the girl who one year seduced the teachers so bad they went on strike, the boy who slept for eighteen months straight and woke up seven feet tall.

"What do you think of clear-cutting?" I tried again.

"I have to admire it," said Mrs. Robichere, looking around the living room. Rats eating spaghetti, rats on the computer, typing in a word document. "Because she never told me which rat Clarissa was. The perfect crime. It really changes the way you look at the world, when so many things could be your daughter." She kissed a rat on the forehead then tickled under its belly.

I said I had to go.

When I got home my mother was slumped over the kitchen table, writing a letter to a private investigator. Her job did not pay well, but it was enough to work through every Mayorsvillian P.I. reachable by mail.

I was hungry and irritable. "They're not going to take you seriously with that handwriting," I told her.

"I'm trying here," she said.

Something in her loops was so earnest I got red in the face and felt an inch tall. I'd spent the last eight years fixing my loops, but she was an adult and did whatever she wanted.

"Fuck you," I said, although I didn't mean it. I didn't know what I meant.

She got up, left the room and slammed the door of her bedroom upstairs. Whenever you slammed a door in our house the whole house shuttered. One door slammed and more doors would slam in the momentum. We used to call it our own weather.

The letter was just sitting there on the table, next to the crackers and peanut butter my mother had set out for dinner.

my name is maria williams and i am looking for my daughter, anita. i've attached her photograph and a cheque for 75 dollars. Missing for 1 year. brown hair, blue eyes.

I sat there for a while and stared at the photograph of my older sister. She was smiling, looking into the camera and leaning against a tree. Nobody planted trees anymore, it was viewed as archaic. If someone in your family died you were expected to keep it indoors. But Anita might not have been dead. She was out there somewhere, we were hopeful.

During these times there was not much for me to do. Our house was sparse and I was too old for toys. We had a television, though the reception was poor. If we had lived further north, where the town sloped up, the reception would have been better. This was a sign of status: to know

news and plots. But our situation was not the worst. I turned on the set and saw Carlos, a character on my favourite TV show. Carlos said something muffled, then said something muffled much softer, so that the pitches sounded like someone writing on paper, which was actually, believe it or not, the dead bodies of a thousand trees smushed together. He looked right at me, through the camera, and spoke again. Then the picture broke open into a hundred moving stripes so it was just his eyelashes reeling in and out of the set.

“Where were you anyways?” my mother was back now and stood in the doorway under the photograph of grandpa frowning.

“School,” I said.

“Jesus Joanie, they call, you know. When you don’t go to school, they call me.”

Things were about to change, we were witnessing a cusp. Together as one we were liminal. I can remember this time: desperate to turn all the clocks forward one thousand hours, go to sleep and wake up a Mayorsvillian.

4.

When I visited Mrs. Robichere a second time, all of the rats were gone.

“It’s birth day,” said Mrs. Robichere.

“It’s your birthday?”

“The day the rats give birth upstairs. They’re all synced up,” she said. “So you can imagine what it’s like on a full moon.”

“Yeah,” I said. “OK.”

“Do you want to see? If you’re quiet you can creep up.”

All of the rats were writhing on the shag carpet, a whole mass of them. They were moaning in high pitched cries, like babies fast-forwarded. The boys comforted the girls. Their paws were entwined and the boys whispered whatever into the ears of the girls.

I went back downstairs and asked, "Do you agree that we should cut down all the trees to be Mayorsvillians, and what does the word community mean to you?"

It looked like Mrs. Robichere was considering an answer and I waited for a long time. Without the rats the room was somehow worse, dirtier. Like, not even clean enough for a bunch of rats to give birth in.

Finally I asked, "Do you ever get scared?"

"It's nothing compared to my daughter," she said, "my daughter was the most terrifying thing that ever happened to me. She was like a piece of lava. I touched her every day of her life, now I'm all burned up. Look at me."

People said she was in her forties, but she looked two hundred. Her skin was like the first trees.

"Why would the witch do something like that to you?" I genuinely wanted to know.

"Her husband was a plumber," she said, "I told him that my pipes had burst and when he showed up at my house I looked into his eyes and said he was the most authentic person I'd ever seen in my life. 'Are you lonely?' I asked him. 'Do you feel sometimes that the moon is for everyone but you?' and he looked into me and said, 'Yes, all the time.'"

5.

My sister had been the smartest student in the history of our school. About a year before, when I was thirteen and she was sixteen, she was selected to be airlifted to Mayorsville for a special

summer seminar. After the seminar was over, the top student would be awarded the chance to skip the rest of high school and enroll in the mayor's academy with a full scholarship. But Anita was not the top student, she came in second place.

"I'm so upset," she told me. "That guy—William or whatever his name is, he was such a fucking phoney."

We were sitting on the couch. "Language Ani!" our mother called from the kitchen, where she was cooking french toast, my sister's favorite. Everything about Ani was now different, yet in a way that it was always going to be. It was obvious my sister would become a great leader, a glorious mayor. She was meant to be better than me, I was smart enough to know that much. Now her skin glowed, her hair was shiny and fell two inches longer, right into her cleavage. Jesus Christ I thought, to have cleavage. I couldn't imagine.

"Do you want to go on a walk?" Ani asked me. I nodded. Our mother asked if we could pick up milk.

It was fall, when the leaves melted from the trees and the ground became thick. Everyone we saw was happy to see my sister.

"How was it?"

"Did you meet Carlos?"

"Did you try Egg Foo Yung?"

"We're so proud of you," they said. The science teacher from the high school, the baker, our neighbour's elderly mother.

Though it was obvious Anita didn't want to talk about it. We were only going to the store but she led me down a strange route, the outermost road, where our mother liked to drive us when we were kids. Ani picked up a leaf and tore the body from its frame.

“I have this feeling,” she said, “that I might be hysterically pregnant.”

We were not even close to the store, relative to the time we’d spent walking there, but at the same time we were close to everything: the store, the school, the bakery, our house.

“Why?” I asked my sister.

“I mean,” she said, “all of the symptoms are there.”

“But what’s the difference between being hysterically pregnant and pregnant?”

She crushed the leaf in her palm. “It means I’m fucking crazy!” She ran her fingers through her hair. “I’m fucking losing it,” she said. “Did you know that when I was in Mayorsville I took mushrooms and fucked three guys at once? Or maybe it was nine. Or maybe it was only one guy but then twelve of his ancestors, and when we fucked blood of all the natives he had murdered dripped down his arms into my mouth. Isn’t that hysterical? I’m fucking crazy.” She sat down on the curb. “Jesus Christ, what am I going to do?”

“Is Claudio the father?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “William,” she said, “I think.”

So the baby would be super smart, a genius baby. It would probably be a mayor by the time it was my age, thirteen. We walked back to the house silent, empty of milk and whatever candy I’d been thinking of.

Evenings later, my mother and my sister sat across from each other at the table while I watched through the bannisters on the stairs.

“There’s nothing they can do,” said my mother.

“Take me to Mayorsville.” Ani had her defiant face on, the face that would broker trade deals and lower municipal taxes.

“They won’t. That’s not what they do. They don’t take girls to Mayorsville, just because it’s what you want Ani. That’s not how it works.”

“I’ll help you,” my mother went on, “Joanie will help too. We’ll all work together and you’ll finish high school. If we help you, you’ll still get everything you want. You’ll still become a mayor.”

What sounded so bad? But my sister was adamant.

“I want it out of me!” She banged her fist down on the table. “It’s not even a baby,” she said, “Well it’s not my baby.”

“You heard what they said. Three months Ani.”

“The doctors here are crap! I’m going to Mayorsville or I’ll die,” she said.

“You won’t,” said my mother.

“I’m hysterical.”

“You’re not.” They talked like dares.

“I will.”

People had left before, it wasn’t like some kind of prison. Mostly young people: the girl who’s father broke her nose, the boy who wanted to become the next Elvis. I always pictured these things happening in darkness, but there’s no telling really, though wasn’t it always darkness under the trees? It wasn’t like anyone ever went into the forest to find them, or had any contacts in Mayorsville to let us know if they’d made it. Which was why, when my sister came back that summer some of the questions went beyond Carlos and Chinese food.

“Did you see Amber?” asked the mother who had finally left the father.

“Did you see Rick?” asked the father who had forbidden all music in the house.

My sister’s face fell when she told them, “No, I’m sorry, I did not see them there.”

6.

At school the other kids wanted to know about Mrs. Robichere but I was defensive.

“I don’t know,” I said, “we just talked and stuff.”

“Are you going to go back?”

“Probably, for my project.”

One of the more vicious boys, the one they said got drunk regularly with his dog, said, “for your project sure.” He snickered. “I bet they’re lesbians,” he said to a friend.

What did this matter? “When we’re in Mayorsville we can be whatever we want,” I told him.

Then a third boy began to talk, the tall one who had slept for all those months the year before. “She’s right,” he said, “we’re going to be part of Mayorsville any minute.” It was true, we all knew it. No matter what our projects uncovered.

“We heard she was bad at doing it,” said the first boy, “that’s why the rat king left her. But he comes back once a month, when he’s depressed and desperate.”

“It’s like his period,” another boy explained.

“He’ll get you pregnant too, just like your sister,” this was the first boy, once more.

“If it weren’t for my sister,” I said, “you’d still be in the first grade.” It was true, after my sister, who had been thought of as the smartest student in our history, was proven, in fact, to not be very smart at all, but pregnant, the entire system had to be reevaluated. Now there was pretty much zero standards.

As I walked away, someone called after me. Past the bike racks I turned. It was Gerry, the boy who had slept for all that time. What did I care? What would he have to say?

He called after me again and then he began to run. Of course it did not take him long to catch up, his legs were so tall. His legs were like a building in Mayorsville.

“Wait up!” he said, even though he was already at my side, barely strained.

I asked him what he wanted and he told me he was sorry.

“It wasn't you,” I said. “And besides I don't care.”

“They're just bored. here's nothing to do here.”

He asked if he could walk with me. I shrugged. “You really get along with Mrs. Robichere, hey? Maybe I could go with you sometime.”

To look at him was to look directly into the sun. His face became bright bursts of light. We were almost at my house, though we, or anyone, was always almost at my house in our town, relative to the sun, Mayorsville, or China. “What have you been doing anyways?” I asked him.

“What?”

“All this time?”

I remembered how, before he'd gone to sleep, he once learnt a bicycle on his first try.

“Sleeping,” he said.

“I know that,” I said, though perhaps I hadn't entirely believed it. “But what was it like?” I asked.

We were on the curb now, sitting on the street directly perpendicular to mine. I picked grass. He tried awkwardly to find a way to manage his arms and legs on a curb that was the size of his neck. It was like a tree chopped to pieces and driven around in some guy's truck like one day his bones would be made into house for a mom and dad to fuck in.

“People say that I should have been in school. But really in my dreams I learnt a lot of things. It’s a different kind of learning I guess. I had so many experiences.” He talked like he had thought a lot about this, “because I dreamt from the perspective of so many things.”

He began to list these things: his father, the dirt, the trees, large bodies of water, his mother. He dreamt that he had sex with a tree, or that he was the tree and someone, who had his exact body, came to him and they started to fuck. He dreamt about going forward in time and becoming a mayor, having to make very hard decisions. Sometimes that would be all the dream was: sitting at a desk thinking very intensely. Small things like this: blinking or picking skin off of his lips.

While he was talking I pulled more grass from the lawn, remembering how my sister said once that each grass was actually a tiny tree, waiting for a chance to grow but that wasn’t even true grass was just grass. She might have been fucking with me or maybe just actually stupid, I didn’t know which was worse.

When Gerry stopped talking I started. All of a sudden it was my dreams: that I was driving a car but didn’t know how to drive, or park, or where I was going. That I was having sex with the principal; that the principal was giving me lessons on how bad a kisser I was; that a cat went down on me. That it was just my mom telling me over and over how much she wished it was me instead of Ani; that I was pulling Ani’s abortion out of her like one long string; that I was at school but had forgotten shoes; that it was just Ani’s hair: curly in the light.

7.

The next day at lunch I reached up to Gerry and told him I was going to leave. “To see Mrs. Robichere,” I said.

He nodded, “alright,” he said.

“Would you like to come?”

Gerry was startled by nothing, like he had been in the house before. I began my usual questions. “What do you think community means? Why is it important? Where do you want to see our town going in the future?”

“What is love?” said Mrs. Robichere, “what is this endless stream inside of me?”

Really there was no reason why we shouldn't become part of Mayorsville. None at all. We would all be better off. There was not a single reason not to, except for the secret, swelling reason that pulsed in my gut: that my sister's body was somewhere in that forest and when the trees were cleared she would be found once and for all. Our hope, this whole time, had been embarrassing and small.

Gerry settled all the way back on the couch and looked around. The rats approached him slowly, almost hesitant, twitching their noses as if to be careful to breathe his exact air. He was very still, the way I couldn't be. I picked my lip and fidgeted. I wondered if I had to go to the bathroom or if it was just my imagination. Then something strange happened: the doorbell rang. Maybe a kid from school, I thought, the horny and bored ones.

Mrs. Robichere held three blind rat pups in her palm. “With any luck you'll have Clarissa's eyes,” she said to them. The bell came again, twice, though she ignored it.

“I think there's someone,” I said, “at the door?”

She looked at us sorrowfully, like she knew what was going to happen. She walked over to Gerry and dropped each pup in his lap. They were grey and shiny and burrowed their ways into the crevasse where his long thighs met. I thought what if the life cycle for rats was reverse: it all started with ghosts, then you lived, loved and made more. I could also feel the love.

Rushing through me when I'd thought it was all used up. How much more of it was there going to be?

The trees could only be so thick, couldn't they? And Ani was living, moving, breathing. Trees just stood there. A tree couldn't kill you, only people killed trees, that was the life cycle. Perhaps she was just somewhere without phones or maybe angry, still angry. Perhaps the witch had helped her but of course I didn't believe in the witch.

Whoever it was rang again, though this time Mrs. Robichere was already walking to the door.

"Open up," they said, "Police."

She opened the door.

"January Robichere?" One of the officers reached out for her shoulder and pulled her out of the house. The other walked inside and found us on the couch. One of the officers looked like Chad Kruger and the other officer looked like John Wayne.

All of the rats ran up the walls like opposite rain. "Holy shit," said the officer with curly blonde hair. He saw Gerry, "Hey you're that tall kid."

Gerry nodded.

"You need to get out of here. It's not safe."

"Her daughter's in here," I said.

"What are you talking about?"

On the lawn I saw the officer with the stern face trying to comfort a wailing Mrs. Robichere. "We're here to help you," he said.

Beyond that, on the curb were two women, older than Ani but younger than my mother.

The officer who held me said to the other officer, "They say there's another kid."

"Her daughter," I said, though they weren't listening.

One of the women walked forward. “Who’s that?” she asked the officers.

“Don’t know,” they said, “Found her in there with the rats. Claiming there’s another girl in there too, her daughter.”

“What did she tell you about her daughter?” the woman asked without looking at me.

The other woman, who was dressed in what looked like an assemblage of long robes—city dress I assumed, came towards us.

The officers switched holding Mrs. Robichere and the one who looked like John Wayne walked inside the house. The other woman walked towards Mrs. Robichere and when she was out of earshot the robed woman said to me, “January is sick, Claire has come all the way from Peterborough to take her to a place where she’ll be taken care of.”

I’d never heard of Peterborough and repeated the name to Gerry.

“It’s where she grew up with her father,” the woman said.

The blonde officer walked out of the house. His boots were covered in blood and I saw a translucent tail trailing from one of their treads.

“Mother,” Claire said to Mrs. Robichere, “no rats.”

“Empty your pockets ma’am,” said one of the officers and we all watched half a dozen rats pour out of her jacket.

8.

When I did my presentation I had no idea what to say. I stood in front of the thirteen other students and began, “Well...” They stared past me at the clock.

I tried again, “Well...” but it didn’t matter. I got an A, we all did. The teacher wrote out all the marks in white chalk on the green board.

That was the last day of the forest. After school I went over to Gerry's house and he showed me his bed, the place where he had been trees, the ocean, girls, toes, his mother and father.

"What do you think a dream is anyways?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "I think it's one of those things like, what are stars? What's the sky?"

The window was open. It was cold out, but still the time of year when you aren't ready to concede to pants. A million of my leg hairs burst from my skin like they just wanted to be with him. I couldn't blame them.

"We'll probably find out in Mayorsville," he continued. "I guess."

I nodded. We made out until our lips were raw. When I walked home the night felt thick and slow moving.

My mother had already moved her chair out to the back porch to watch the view over the trees. When I arrived I too moved a chair beside her and together we watched the changing light reveal dense green until the town's official men drove in with their trucks and saws. As they made their cuts my mother grabbed my hand in hers. I looked down and thought about how our hands looked so alike it seemed cruel. Like, what? For the rest of my life every time I look at my hands I'm supposed to be reminded of my mother? But we held each other like this, very close and very tightly until the men called out from the diminishing forest and we heard them.

They said something like, "Look we've found something."

Or, "there's something here."

"We've found something over here."

Maybe it was, "Over here, it's someone!"

"Over here it's someone's body"?

Of course what, exactly, doesn't matter. Really the words were just there. But it is still, for me, a moment to dwell on and far preferable to everything that happened next.

By Now

This was the year Beyoncé wore a dress made entirely of the sounds from thunder. The painter watched from the couch with his daughter and his wife as the three of them stared at the beautiful woman on the television screen.

“I want to be her,” said his daughter.

“You want to be a singer?” asked his wife.

“No,” she said, “I want to cease to exist. I wish that my life had never begun and my soul could occupy that body instead of my own. I wish this,” she pinched the skin of her tiny arm, “wasn’t even real. And I lived in there,” she pointed towards the television.

She was only twelve, but times had been tough. Money was a problem. They watched the television show on a worn couch his brother gave them after his hamster had died inside of it. But things were going to change.

“Things are going to get better for us,” the painter told his daughter, “I’m painting a mural.”

The mural was to celebrate the history of the town. To be painted on the mural were the man who built the park, the first mayor, and several war veterans from Korea. To be painted was the woman who built the animal shelter, the man who started the music camp for kids, the woman who donated all of the horses.

The Painter even painted his friend, the owner of the auto shop, who had also started the football program at the high school. *Would he ever paint me back?* The Painter wondered as he painted all of the coach: his lips, chest, even penis, though it was covered by gym shorts. The Painter and his wife were able to afford a weekend at the shore. They redecorated their modest house. The Painter’s wife hung some of his work, so that a painting he had done of the

backyard hung in the kitchen, a painting of the bathroom hung in the living room and a painting of their daughter's room hung in the basement. It was to remind them, she said, "how we are all connected."

"Please paint Steve Jobs," someone wrote to the Painter in a letter.

"You should be painting what's going on in Lebanon," someone else told him.

"Can you paint my mom for her birthday?"

From their experiences, joys and defeats, everyone in the town had developed their own unique perspectives on life and wanted these reflected in the mural.

The Painter went for beers with the coach and said, "I think my daughter hates me, I'm almost positive."

"Doo-Wop (That Thing)" was playing and the Coach nodded.

"What if I just read her diary?" asked the Painter, "just to know a little bit about why."

"You can't be doing that," said the Coach. "That's just not something you should be doing."

The Painter's daughter had begun wearing makeup and shirts made from tiny, sparkling triangles. She said that she hated her life, or that she never wished she had never been born, or that the Painter would get a real job.

One day, the Painter was picking out Chinese food in the kitchen when his wife called him from the TV room. "Get in here," she said, "you have to see this!"

A story had surfaced that the Coach acted inappropriately with a woman. The woman spoke to the newspaper and described how the coach had forced himself on her, once while they were out for drinks at a bar, not in their town, but two towns over, a place known for its nightlife.

Well, what were they doing there? asked the townspeople. And the Coach admitted to it, at least partially: "Yes," in an official statement sent to the same newspaper, "I have strayed from my marriage."

And what man did not feel the pangs of temptation, from time to time? As for the Painter, he thought of Beyoncé on the television, how the buckling atmospheric crack hugged her hips. Were we not all human beings? There was also the matter of the woman's appearance, which would have been troubling to anyone. Women should try to look more natural, many concurred.

But then another woman told a story. Not that she had been to a bar with the coach but to his own house, while his wife was out of town. She was beautiful and much younger than the first woman. Still, said the people of the town, it is often the beautiful ones you have to watch out for. And after all, she had gone to his house. You don't go to someone's house by accident, that was impossible. Most things in life took hard, hard work. Extended effort and dedication. Those were the values taught by the coach himself, who had transformed many sons into men. Right then he was in the process of a record for sending the first kid to college on an athletic scholarship.

"They just want our money," said the Coach in a private conversation with the Painter, though the Painter wondered, what money? Was he not a small business owner and volunteer? How much money could he have? It would have been impolite to ask. Their conversation shifted into more comfortable territory: television. Besides, the coach said when he was driving the painter home, "to tell you a secret, I'm sick."

"It's cancer," confirmed the coach's wife, later in the phone call with the painter. "I told him, go to the doctor, he never listened. And now this. They're saying it's everywhere."

Everywhere? Thought the painter. "We're here for anything you need," said his wife after he handed her the phone.

So it had been inside of him, thought the Painter. For how long? Had it been there when the Painter went to pick up his daughter from school, but she was not at school, instead at The Cascades with friends, smoking weed? Or when he saw the Coach and his wife at the supermarket, picking up a rotisserie chicken? The Coach had his arm around his wife in such a proud and confident way that the painter estimated he had never once touched his own wife comparably. So the painter returned every item in his basket to its rightful place (the pasta sauce, day old bread) and bought a rotisserie chicken of his own. He returned home, ate a silent meal with his wife and scowling daughter, only to find out not even two months later that the coach had been filled with cancer the whole time.

The coach died and his funeral procession swelled the town. Grown men lined the streets, proud of their tears. That day, the Painter painted a golden halo over the Coach and when he finished a crowd around him cheered.

Though others had more to say:

“But he raped! And you’re saying he’s some kind of an angel?”

And, “He’s not dead, he’s probably in Florida somewhere, living it up!”

But still:

“For a man’s name to be taken like that, a weak man at the end of his life? What have we come to, as a town?”

And:

“He did not really rape her, she was his mistress and he released emails that proved it. In the scheme of things, think of all those boys he helped, by uniting the football program?”

Then another woman, though this time she had not been a woman at the time of the event, gave a statement which was leaked to the press. The Painter did not want to read it, but his wife did and summarized it to him one morning in the shower. She had been seventeen.

The Painter knew something had to be done to the mural. So he repainted the coach as an old man, with the photograph that had run in all the papers, just to put it all out there. Just so no one would be confused, yes, that was the Coach, the one who allegedly assaulted all those women.

But when he had finished and looked at the mural from across the street, he knew that whatever idea he thought he had had was lost in its translation. If only, he thought, he could use the sounds from the bar that night, the sound of the glass breaking when the Painter tried to illustrate with his hands to Coach how much he missed his daughter and also the sound of the woman's voice breaking when the reporters swarmed her outside of the news station. Except they were simply not paints the painter could afford.

"I don't know what to do," he told his wife.

"Honey," she said, "If you listen to everything everybody has to say about your paintings you'll drive yourself crazy."

"Dad," said his daughter one day after school. "You know that it's true what they're saying about the Coach right?"

The Painter said that they were very serious accusations but the coach had been a great friend to the family, who in the end suffered terribly.

"Dad," she said, "I know one of those girls." Which seemed to the Painter improbable because his daughter was only fourteen. Except, he remembered, she was actually sixteen. She was telling him the story of one of her friends, whom the coach offered a ride home from school and gave a beer to in his car. He invited her into his house for more beer and when he started undressing her and saw that she had her period, he pulled her tampon out of her in order to have sex with her.

“I didn’t know what to say when she told me,” said his daughter. “I don’t think I said the right things.”

She was crying now, shaking over his lap. He felt like he was holding some kind of amphibian. He called for his wife.

The Painter went back to the mural and painted the Coach completely naked with drooping wrinkled skin and a penis, which, while modelled after his own, was later described as comically shriveled. He did not understand. Why had the Coach needed sex so bad, to do that to such a young girl? Maybe it was true that the Painter did not understand sex, had not understood it his whole life. It was a great painting, and the Painter felt twisted and ashamed for feeling proud of his work at such a time.

They told him it was disgusting, unanimously. After everything the community had been through. With the reporters and the papers and the television shows, after not going to state, now this? It was not something for children to see, it was going to make people sick. How twisted could you get? The townspeople quickly questioned why the painter had been given control over the mural in the first place, mounted on the side of the community center.

“In fact,” they said, “we hate the community centre.” There had been sightings of mice and a rain gutter fell on an aunt’s head. Within that context, some argued, the shriveled penis was actually quite pertinent.

The Painter lost faith in the mural. He did not want to paint for the town anymore but he did not want another painter to touch his mural.

By now he was only painting with his fingers, and said to the crowd who watched him that it was to represent how we were all once children. The toes he painted on the mural were as thick as this thumb.

The Mayor of the town approached the painter with sensitivity to his artistic temperament. "It's not that we don't like your new style, but several residents have simply expressed missing your old style."

"We were all kids once," said the Painter, "just lying in bed, looking out the window, wondering about stuff." The Painter had paint all over his hands, his shirt and jeans. Because the Painter had been picking his nose, the midnight paint reached all the way under his nostrils. The paint told no lies.

"I was a kid once," said the Mayor later to friends, "and I could paint better than that!" One day, the Painter came home from work and his wife said, "sweetie sit down."

"The mural?" he asked.

"Forget about the mural for one second," she said. "My mother had a heart attack." If he was such a good painter, then why was he confused? He thought that if he was good enough at painting, he would get into a good school and someone would want to have sex with him there. He wanted to have sex with many girls (even once his sister in a dream) and yet in all of his life it seemed he had never wanted to have sex as bad as the Coach did, because he had never pulled a tampon out of a sixteen year old.

He brought a can of paint, and splashed it over the entire mural. "Hey!" said the war veteran.

"What the fuck?" said the descendants of the woman with the horses. If he booked enough jobs, they could go on a honeymoon. If he illustrated enough book covers they could start saving for a baby. If he sold enough paintings the girl could have braces (he did not).

"You don't listen to me," his daughter told him while they argued. "Do you even try to listen to me at all?"

Because he had made her and she looked just like him, it should have been easy. But instead, she might as well have come from China or grown out of the ground. She said she wanted to become a cardiologist. She said she wanted to go out of state. Her boyfriend was twenty-two.

All of the children who had known the Coach graduated. The girl he had raped moved to Portland with a boyfriend. The Painter's daughter bought a dress from China Town and wore it to prom with a necklace around her like a belt and when she walked down the stairs of their house, the necklace burst so that the beads fell, under the painting of the backyard and into the throat of the brand new used dog. They were cheap plastic pearls. The Painter thought that she would cry, but she laughed and his wife laughed too. We're allowed to laugh? he thought. He looked out the window where the sky was... almost, like the sky needed just one more coat of paint.

It was kind of like years later, when his daughter called home from grad school to say that no, she was not going to marry her professor after all, that instead, she was going to find herself in India. The Painter's wrist slipped so that the spaghetti fell with the water into the sink, cavernous with the excrement of other meals.

Or maybe it was not like that at all, but he was terrified.

"If you want to visit me in India," she said, "you can. But there's not going to be any phones or anything."

"Remember how you loved that dress?"

"Dad, there's not going to be any possessions. It's part of the point."

"The one made of all the sounds."

"When I wore the beads around my waist and they snapped?"

“Around the waist was rain, hitting grass. It was very delicate. I remember watching with you. On the television. Do you remember that? Sitting with me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Dad. I have to go.”

His wife called from the TV room, was dinner ready?

By now the decaying community center had been torn down and rebuilt in a nicer area. The mural went with it, dismantled panel by panel and then kept, the painter was told via email, in a municipal storage facility.

What I Was Looking For

At work a new policy was brought into practise. We were told that from now, on it was integral to say we were calling from New York City. My job was to sit in front of a computer for nine hours a day calling businesses across America offering free credit ratings. Maybe you have gotten one of these calls before. If you are a small business owner living in America then your number was probably on our list. If you have asked to be removed from our list, then you probably were, at some point, though the system reintegrates you every six months. This new initiative also included talking the part. So, for example, we were instructed to say, “praw-cessing” instead of “pro-cessing,” like, they told us, the way an American would.

Though we were lying, to be honest I enjoyed it. To live in New York City, I thought. Wow. Just think about that. Some of my friendlier calls would ask, “How do you like the big city?” And I would tell them that I could not imagine living anywhere else. Sometimes they would say that such a sweet girl should be careful out at night and I assured them I always was.

I think that I was happy during this time. I think I'd say the only thing really amiss were those turtles, all the little ones living in my apartment.

The first time I saw a turtle I was sitting in the shower. I kept a wooden standing shelf in the bathroom where I kept extra towels and my cheap whatever-scented lotion. From where I sat in the tub, I saw the small shape underneath the bottom shelf. I drew back the shower curtain and there it was: dark green and an inch tall, crawling towards me. It could probably smell the water.

Supposedly, the turtles came through the pipes, where they lived, made love and reproduced. If this sounds disgusting then maybe you've lived in Montreal for longer than I had,

because it really didn't bother me. But they say there's no such thing as one turtle and that's true.

In accordance with city bylaws, your first two infestations of any kind were covered by the landlord, but after that it became the tenant's responsibility. Unfortunately, I'd had bed bugs and sparrows earlier that year.

"I didn't know that turtles could infest apartments," I said to the exterminator, who said that it was not uncommon and then asked me if I was a marine biologist, with a tone and look in his eyes which implied he knew for a fact I was not.

The penalties for harbouring infestationable beings included out of province deportation and fines up to seven hundred and fifty dollars. Every so often you'd hear about a pet rat, or hidden ladybugs. "That's not what Quebec is about," the Mayor said once in an official statement, "What defines us as a province is our impeccable cleanliness."

Naturally then, my cousin Kathy and I, just two young girls from the prairies, took the issue quite seriously. Each time my apartment was fumigated, I stayed at her place and then weeks later, when her apartment was infested with butterflies, she came to mine. We were related, but had little in common. She arrived from work and we sat down in front of my computer, watching TV and drinking wine.

The town where I grew up was divided by a river. If you followed the river east you'd find the mall and if you followed it west you'd find my high school. Every so often a famous hockey player grew out of our rinks. You'd hear girls bragging about how he'd fingered them. Plaques were pressed. Kathy wasn't from this town, but the next one over, where people thought they were better but secretly weren't.

We talked about which wedding dresses we liked on the television show.

"It's funny cause I don't even believe in marriage," Kathy laughed.

“Yeah,” I said, even though I didn't care.

By that point I'd picked all of the nail polish off of my fingernails, so I began to paint them again, thinking about how I'd be able to pick it all off when I'd finished and they had dried. We finished a bottle of wine and then I ran downstairs to the dep to buy another. She had by now, of course, told me how sorry she was about Joey. Of course, many times, because it had almost been a year. But now, when I returned with the second bottle, Kathy felt for some reason that she had to bring it up again.

“You know,” she started, “we were all worried about you, with how much, well you know, with how much you idolized Joey and everything.”

Well of course, I thought. He was my older brother.

She was drunk and I was drunk too. I couldn't tell if she was talking with her hands or her mouth.

The apartment I lived in was on the second floor of a small house. “We've never had a single turtle before,” my landlord had said, suspiciously. But he didn't know me. He didn't know anything about me or where I came from and he had rented me a broken apartment. One that spun. It was spinning now and it had taken Kathy's face with it.

All of this time I had been secretly hoarding turtles under my sink. There was four of them, floating gently in my tap water. I fed them tuna fish and left them in the sun when I knew none of the neighbors could see. That night after Kathy passed out, I crouched on the floor to check on them. Even in the dark I could see them, drifting. It was a safe feeling for me. Kathy snored.

When I left the next morning Kathy was still asleep on the couch. I hinged forward over the toilet and waited. It was like my bile was trying to jump up my throat, but was too tired. It was like try outs for a high jump team. The bile had bright yellow uniforms.

“Hello, may I please speak to the person who handles your merchant account?”

“Hello, what is your name? Leslie? Great! My name is Andrea and I’m calling from—“

“We’ve been mandated by all the major banks and processors—“

“All the major ones sir.”

“Sir can I— Sir let me explain the service I am offering!”

The air in the office felt laced with cement. I was heavier and heavier each time I took a breath. I’ll be here forever, I thought, I’m becoming part of the building. “New York City!” “New York City!” was all over.

At lunch I sucked balsamic vinegar off of a long, thin strip of cabbage. Kathy called, saying the problem at her apartment was worse than she thought.

“He’ll need another day,” she said. “He said he’s never seen so many butterflies. Isn’t that disgusting?”

“Yeah,” and I felt my stomach twisting inside of me.

“He said they probably came in through the toilet. Did you know that while the butterfly is cocooning they are physically impossible to kill?”

I said that I didn’t know that. I didn’t know much about butterflies, I had grown up in a butterfly free province.

“I don’t believe you,” said my boss when he called me to his desk for a review. I listened to the recording of my voice.

“New York City ma’am. Yes, we’re a major brokerage.” It was somehow both weak and heavy, it was like something filled with mud.

“I don’t believe you work for a major finance company, I don’t believe you even live in New York City. If you want to generate leads, I need you to believe it.” Then he closed his eyes which was how to believe in things.

The turtles had been alive on the counters, along the walls and under the tub, so naturally that was where I found their bodies afterwards, when the exterminator had failed to remove them. Sometimes it would be the whole turtle, others just the body and others just the shell. Of the ones I found alive, only one of them had its shell, and I called him the father. Four of them, like a family.

After work, I joined some of my coworkers in the alley adjacent to work, where there was a large vent blowing warm air onto the street: ideal for smoking weed. I stood around with them, fidgeting for a spot in the heat. Alex, a senior analyst, talked about how he preferred large volume leads, while Maria preferred smaller volumes, though more of them. I stayed quiet about my leads, having generated zero that day.

Maybe you have gotten a call like this before, and if you have, I can tell you now that I really was only interested in giving you this free credit rating. After you receive the rating, the rest of it is out of my hands. Your number is passed on to the offices across the hall. I knew some of those employees from the bathroom. The offices across the hall had frosted windows, so even though I did not know what happened over there, I don’t think I ever saw any outlandishly bright colours, and it was mostly the usual sounds: “New York City!” and Aloe Blacc’s “I need a dollar!” playing over and over again.

Of course it was impossible for the snow to survive underneath the vent. What must of happened was that after business hours the vent was turned off, so the melted snow froze. There were all of us, five or six, keeping our balance on the ice. I kept bumping into Alex and

our parkas crinkled. There was something adult about his acne, although no, I would not have called him an adult.

When he asked me if I wanted to come over for something to eat, I suppose I should have known what was going to happen next.

He did not live far and once we were inside we sat together on the couch. I tried to remember if we were friends or not, if we had been friendly in the past, so maybe it was not so strange that I was here now, with him, on this lumpy futon in his dirty apartment. But I was stoned and I didn't remember the regular rules for how to be. I wondered, what would Joey do? Although that was a dangerous road to go down.

I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to see Kathy and have her ask me again about Joey. I hated that I'd told her whatever I'd told her the night before, which I couldn't remember. I could only remember vaguely checking on the turtles: the father, the mother, the older brother and the sister. Four made a family, wasn't that math?

Alex pressed his body up to mine and we kissed. It had been so long since I'd had sex so I wasn't exactly sure of what to do. Then he lay me down without my jacket and I remembered, oh yeah, I'm the girl, I don't have to do anything.

All of this time, of course, I'd been trying not to think of the turtles so much. I thought that if I didn't think about them so much, they wouldn't be so important to me and I wouldn't have to harbour them illegally in my apartment. Because it was a foolish risk and I knew that. But I told myself here that if I was doing something else while I thought about the turtles then perhaps the level of harm would not be so bad. So as the strange boy touched me I retreated into myself and thought of everything I remembered:

Standing over the basin, watching them drift to and fro in the water. Maybe, I'd think, these are the years where the little sister wants to do everything the big brother does. And she

followed him around all the time, which I could see with my own eyes: she did. Maybe in her head she pictured him as prime minister and herself as president, which little sisters sometimes did, I knew from experience.

They were graceful. Without their shell the turtles moved like ribbons in the breeze, like a wind puppet, something to be kept on a porch. Their skin was covered in tiny, tiny lines. I thought about how, without their wrinkles and their skin stretched out to its fullest potential, they'd probably be one hundred times their size, they'd be impossible to fit inside of my tiny, dirty apartment. I thought they looked either like babies or a hundred years old. Maybe these were the years later, when they told the little sister how strange the brother was, and how she should spend more time with her own friends. What they didn't realize was that they were all strange. They were all actually tiny turtles I'd found in my apartment.

Eventually we got to the point that sex for me always gets to, when the sensation of his dick moving in and out of me stops feeling like anything, like my body has simply acclimatized to his dick. "You're so hot," he said.

When we finished, I got up to use the washroom. In the mirror was my face, although I didn't care. It could have been anyone's.

On the bottom of the medicine cabinet was a thin row of cocoons. I bent over to look closely, their thin green layers. All growing up, I'd been afraid of butterflies, hearing horror stories of infestations in people's cabins, how they'd open rice bags to find hundred of them bursting out like a flame. They said that in San Francisco there were butterflies the size of human palms. But I didn't care. They quivered just from my breath so close to them. I could have been covered in them and I wouldn't have cared.

I walked out of his apartment and onto the street. I did not want to go home. I walked along St Catherine's street, past the movie theatre and up along The Gap, towards the

university. I walked past so many people, but none of them even knew Joey. Even if I told them all about him, I'd probably always be forgetting something, like the time he set the garbage can on fire or how he sucked all the ink out of a grape flavoured marker, then never ate a single grape again. He hated them. He hated most fruits. All vegetables. He hated television. He hated our dad, who he called "the fag", and he said I was a fag too. I told him that if he didn't hang out with me then I'd tell Mom and Dad about whatever I found in his room. So sometimes in the evenings we'd sit in the backyard together, on the porch, talking about how we hated our town. He'd say, "OK that's enough, it's been fifteen minutes," and he'd look into the sun. I thought he could read the sun.

I'd say, "No, but that was a lot of weed," which it always was. So he'd sit back down and say who was a fag and who was retarded.

I walked into the university campus, then turned around again and back towards the closed, glowing stores. Walking: this was how I imagined Joey to be, walking somewhere with a purpose. When my parents sat me down to say that he was missing it was so exciting. He must have gone somewhere fantastic, I thought. Even when you are from where we were from, you knew the world had vast and splendid offerings.

"We don't know where he is," my father said, slowly as if it was something difficult to understand. Well of course. All you know is the mall, the rink, our basement. And it was not until I walked into my bedroom and saw the wooden box with the dragon's head—lifting its lid to see the stinky moss—that I knew how much I'd misunderstood. He would have taken that wherever he went, yet he'd left it for me.

I did not tell anyone. I held the fact inside my stomach for two days until the police officer called and said that a dog from the search party had found Joey in the woods.

Every few months a new store will open up. My mom will call me and say, “We have an Old Navy now, will you come home?”

Though I’m never going home. She tells me about how she has planted a garden for Joey which now has basil or whatever growing out of it. “Try my basil,” she’d say. Although I wouldn’t, I never would.

Snow leapt into my boots. I knew that when I got home my feet would be wet and white and peeling so I did not go home for a long time. I walked for so long that by the time I was finally home, Kathy was asleep, passed out on the couch like she’d been when I left her. I crept carefully to the sink, lifted up my basin and carried it into my room.

I thought about all the things that had happened to me as a kid and it made me so sick to think that they will always have happened to me, no matter what I did. His room always felt warmer than the rest of the house, but that might have just been the smell. It was always a great adventure, tiptoeing through his dirty clothing in the search for clear floor. I hated that I remembered this feeling and told myself that I didn't really remember it, it's not really what the floor was like, you're thinking of the floor somewhere else, and you're conflating to feel sorry for yourself.

“You’re my infestationable beings,” I said to the turtles, slight as fingers drifting in the tap water. Sometimes I wondered if it really was the father who had the shell. Maybe, I thought, it was the little girl and that made her the strongest one of all. But of course it didn’t matter. Of course, in time, and not so long after this, each of them flipped, belly-up, dead. Eventually, I watched each of their bodies splash into the toilet water and then disappear from me forever.

First was the older brother, I found him floating in the centre of the basin with the little girl/father nudging him with her/his snout. His head hung back in the water but his belly floated

up. What do I do? I wondered. I took a ziploc bag, picked him up with it and carried him over the counter. I was not afraid. Looking down at him, I was not even surprised. First to go is always the older brother, I said to myself and then I started to think about how probably what happened was simply that one day he'd had enough and went walking in the woods by the river to search for the tallest tree he could find. And he climbed to the top of the tree, tied himself to its trunk, looked out across the valley, then flew off of it.

“Why do you have to be so typical?” I said to the tiny turtle, “why do you have to be like every brother I know?”

I dropped him into the toilet and the water splashed onto my knees. I pressed the handle and they spun in smaller and smaller circles, like I said, eventually disappearing from me forever.

Nobody believed me, nobody believed I could live in New York City. I did not work at the call centre long after this, I did not work there for very long at all. However for some reason this time period still features prominently in my memory. Sitting on the bathroom floor like that, after the bowl had emptied then refilled with fresh water. I was looking from the top to bottom of it, wondering what I was looking for. I was thinking, if a butterfly is going to be a butterfly and there's literally nothing in the world that can stop it, what then, is going to happen to me?