

Jimi Hendrix and the Laughing Girl
short story collection

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Abstract

Jimi Hendrix and the Laughing Girl

Allison Shaw

Jimi Hendrix and the Laughing Girl is a collection of seven short stories that revolve around the lives of women and men in their late teens and early twenties, as they mature and transition towards adulthood. Set in different North American cities, the stories explore changing dynamics in friendships, romantic relationships and families. The construction of individual identity is central to many of the narratives, which examine how the various characters attempt to find and build a sense of self through their relations with others, artistic creation and storytelling.

Several stories in this collection include surreal or fairy tale elements, such as a porcelain doll that comes to life. These fairy-tale elements are set in contrast with the characters' experiences of loss and disappointment as they grow up, but also reflect the beauty that the characters find in the everyday world, in spite of their personal struggles. The structure of many of the stories is experimental – “Photographs for New York” and “Coffee” are both collections of vignettes, while the final story, “Filmmaker”, incorporates a short film script into the prose.

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Photographs for New York

Photo # 1

As the bus pulls into the New York station, Hailey turns to Jules and says, “Can you believe John Lennon died here?”

“What?”

“John Lennon.”

“What about John Lennon?”

Jules stands up, her legs numb from the eleven hour bus ride from Ottawa to New York City. She pulls her backpack out of the top compartment, looks down at Hailey who is still sitting with her head resting against the window. Hailey’s long brown hair frames her face and she fiddles with the silver chain of her necklace. She is wearing aviators even though the bus is dark.

“John Lennon died right here,” she insists as the two of them stumble out of the bus, into the station, a taxi.

“No, he didn’t.”

“He did so. He was shot.”

“Yeah, okay, but not *right* here. Not exactly here.”

“Oh my God, you know what I mean, Jules.”

“Yeah,” Jules grins.

They have been best friends ever since they were fifteen, when Hailey’s family moved from Los Angeles to Ottawa, into the house down the street from Jules and her mom. Until Hailey, Jules had not met anyone else her age who liked music and movies from the ’50s. She even worked up the nerve to show Hailey some of her photographs – the ones she had taken of

insects and flowers over the summer. Jules had been relieved when Hailey didn't laugh or look at her like she was weird. Instead, Hailey had yelped with excitement, "No way, you're a photographer?" and began to study the dragonflies, wasps and ants, the glossy wings and curved antennae.

"These are so beautiful," she said, chewing a strand of hair. "You know, you could have your own exhibit."

They spent high school hanging out at the park, each other's rooms, the pool in Hailey's backyard. When Hailey's parents split up and her Dad moved back to L.A, Hailey slept over at Jules' and they watched TV until morning, Hailey's head on Jules' shoulder, Jules' leg thrown over Hailey's. Hailey was the only person Jules told about the awkward date she went on with a guy from her chemistry class. The guy, Peter Johnson, had licked the side of her face while they sat in a dark movie theatre and Jules had been too embarrassed to respond, or even to wipe his saliva off her face until she got home.

Now, high school is over and they are in New York City for three days.

"Arthur Miller."

"What?"

"He died here too."

"Arthur Miller didn't die in New York." Jules rolls her eyes.

"Yes, he did."

"No, he didn't. He was born here, but he died somewhere else."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"Then how do you know he didn't die in New York?"

“I just know.”

Jules grits her teeth as she climbs the stairs up to the hotel room, the strap of her bag digging into her shoulder. The elevator is broken. The narrow, slanted stairs remind Jules of the stairway that leads up to Hailey’s attic bedroom at home, but she remembers that in September the room will be empty; Hailey will have packed up her things and moved in with her father in L.A, leaving Jules behind in Ottawa where she has been her whole life.

“I mean, you can’t really be sure.”

Jules whirls around on the staircase and snaps, “Hailey. Who the fuck cares where Arthur Miller died? Let’s just get to our room.”

Taken aback, Hailey falls silent. The back of Jules’ neck grows hot and the feeling spreads through her arms and hands. Hailey doesn’t say anything while they find their room and dump their bags on the floor.

Jules leans on the windowsill, looks out at the flashing billboards, the pink neon signs, the blue buildings lit by yellow lights. She listens to car tires skidding, someone shouting. Jules has thought about coming to New York so much that the billboards and the speeding cars seem familiar even though it’s her first time in the city. It is Hailey who looks unfamiliar with her head bent, neck arched, long hair falling over her shoulder. She has kicked off her shoes and, in her black stockings and short dress, she looks like the bohemian women Jules has seen in grainy photographs. Elegant and serious. Willy Loman probably dies pretty often on Broadway. Jules could say this to show Hailey she isn’t mad, that she only snapped earlier because she was hungry and tired from the bus ride.

Eventually, Hailey comes over to the windowsill and they stand side by side, while somewhere in the city Willy Loman dies for the third time that week.

Photo # 2

In a vintage boutique, Hailey shoves a wide-brimmed plum hat on her head and poses with one hand on her hip. Jules snaps a photograph and says, in her best professional photographer voice, “work the camera, darling”. The price-tag from a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses hangs down over her nose. “Gorgeous, darling, gorgeous.”

Hailey is usually willing to pose for Jules. Jules has photographed her reading, swimming, lying on the beach. She has a photo of Hailey’s boots covered in rose petals. She has close-ups of Hailey’s violet eyes and cupped hands. After Hailey got a stomach ring, Jules took a photo of her in her bra and jeans, the metal ring the only blemish protruding from her smooth stomach.

In the boutique, Jules waits while Hailey wiggles into a new outfit, her bare feet dancing beneath the curtain of the change room. “And a-one and a-two and a-three,” she proclaims before pulling the curtain aside and spinning around on the balls of her feet. She is wearing a lemon-yellow dress that flares at the waist.

“What do you think of this? Good for an audition?”

“You don’t have an audition.”

“No, but I will someday.”

Hailey wants to be an actress. On the bus ride into New York, she had finally told Jules about her plan to study drama at UCLA, her plan to move in with her Dad permanently. Jules hadn’t even realised that Hailey had applied to university. She had spent the past few months thinking they were both going to take the year off, share an apartment downtown, work some crappy job that they could laugh and complain about together.

“What do you think of these?” Hailey holds up earrings made out of old pairs of dice dangling from silver threads.

“Gorgeous, darling.”

“Do you think they’re good for L.A.?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“You try them on.”

Jules remembers how Hailey looked nervous when she brought up UCLA, like maybe she thought Jules wouldn’t understand. She seemed relieved when Jules didn’t react much on the bus, but she also seemed pissed off that Jules had changed the subject so quickly. Now, she keeps bringing up L.A. and acting auditions, trying to see if Jules is upset that she is leaving, if forgiveness is possible. Jules knows what Hailey is doing, but she is not going to discuss L.A. now or ever. She is not going to cause a scene in a store by throwing a stiletto at Hailey. She is not going to forgive.

The saleswoman shoots Jules and Hailey a funny look and asks if they are going to buy anything. Jules shakes her head and the dice rattle.

Photo # 3

Angelina Jolie is not there.

It starts when Hailey pounds on the bathroom door and announces that they are going to meet someone famous. Jules is still in the shower, but Hailey keeps pounding on the door, shouting, “Hurry up!” Eventually, she barges into the bathroom just as Jules is stepping out of the shower.

“They’re filming a movie close to here,” Hailey yells. “And guess who’s in it?”

“Who?” Jules wraps a towel around herself. She has a scar above her left hip from a car accident when she was younger. Hailey says that scars are mysterious. Jules likes this idea of being a mystery, but knows it probably isn’t true. Just like it probably isn’t true that Angelina Jolie is starring in a movie that is being filmed a few blocks from Times Square.

“Are you sure there’s really a movie?” Jules asks as they jog down the street. “Do you even know where you’re going?”

Hailey laughs and pulls at her mini-skirt, her boots clacking on the pavement.

Jules follows Hailey to a deserted street with piles of wooden beams lying around from construction work that was never finished. A car is parked half on the street, half on the sidewalk. Nearby, a homeless man roots through a garbage can, a shopping cart filled with plastic bags beside him.

Angelina is not there.

“Let’s go,” Jules says. “This isn’t the right place.” She tugs on Hailey’s arm, but Hailey wants to wait. She checks the map on her phone.

“Come on, let’s go, it’s been forever.”

“It’s been, like, five minutes.”

“It’s been way longer than that.”

“You know I might be a film actor if I move to L.A. I always thought I wanted to do stage acting, but films could be just as good.”

“I guess.”

“When I get to L.A—”

“Oh my God, will you stop talking about L.A.”

“Why?” Hailey crosses her arms.

“I’m just sick of hearing about it.”

“But, I’ve barely said anything about it. You’ve barely said anything.”

Jules looks up at the stack of leftover beams. She wants to do something other than stand around and listen to Hailey. She climbs onto the pile of beams, balancing on one board that protrudes over the pavement.

“I’m Angelina’s stunt double,” Jules calls down.

“That beam doesn’t look safe.”

Jules has taken gymnastics since she was nine and her favourite trick is handstands on the balance beam. She used to do handstands over and over again in the park while Hailey hung out nearby, either reading or making out with one of the guys who skateboarded in the empty pool.

“Jules, seriously. You know you can come visit me in L.A. anytime.”

Jules puts her arms above her head as though she is going to do a handstand. Hailey lets out a yell, but Jules stops. She sits down on the beam. “I don’t know what you’re so freaked out about. It was your idea to come here.”

“To see Angelina. Not to watch you fall to your death.”

Jules jumps down from the beam and lands beside Hailey.

“I knew Angelina wouldn’t be here, you know. We should have done something else.”

“Okay, well. You didn’t have to come if you didn’t want to.”

“Yeah, I did. You practically dragged me here. And you do shit like this all the time without asking me.”

Jules bites her lip until she tastes blood. She thinks she sees tears in Hailey’s eyes, but she’s not sure. She wants to take it back and say “sorry”, but instead they walk back to the hotel

in silence. Further down the street, a man plays the saxophone in sweet drawn out notes that make Jules' chest ache.

Photo # 4

At the Met, sculptures from Ancient Greece are spaced around the room. Friezes carved in marble sit beside large crumbling vases painted orange and black.

One sculpture is of three naked women standing in a row, their arms wrapped around each other. The women have no heads, but their posture fascinates Jules: the curve of their hands, their fleshy breasts, their bare stomachs, their pointed toes. Their bodies meld together so that they look like one whole person. Jules imagines what their expressions would be if they had faces. One is smiling, one is pissed off, one is scared. She wonders if their heads would be turned towards each other, laughing and joking or, if after all this time, they've grown sick of being stuck together and are looking away from each other, towards something new.

Photo # 5

Jules and Hailey walk along the Brooklyn Bridge on their last night in New York City. Jules leans over the railing to watch the city reflected in the water. From her sweater pocket, Hailey takes a rock that she has been saving and chucks it as far as she can. Jules can't see where the rock lands, but she hears the sound it makes against the waves.

"I'm sorry," Jules says and Hailey scuffs her toe against the ground.

"It's alright, you were upset," Hailey pauses. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about L.A. sooner."

They're both forgiven, but somehow it doesn't feel like it to Jules.

“California’s just so far,” she says and waits for Hailey to argue, but Hailey doesn’t say anything.

On the other side of the bridge is a carousel with painted horses. The carousel is lit and spins in circles as music plays loudly. The horses are a blur of golden light. Jules takes a photo. She imagines the picture will change with time, the carousel will appear rusted: the vibrant paint peeling off, lights burnt out, hanging limply like ugly flowers, the once beautiful horses deformed and shrivelled, stripped down to their fragile bones.

Doll

The doll lived on a shelf in a store called *Odds and Ends* in downtown Toronto. She had been there for as long as she could remember, squashed between a jar of old-fashioned buttons and an antique music box. A ballerina lived in the music box. She could dance in circles and thought herself better than everyone else. After watching the ballerina for a while, the doll tried to imitate her graceful movements, but all she managed to do was kick off her shoes onto the floor.

“What on earth are you doing?” giggled the ballerina.

“Dancing.” The doll felt her face grow warm.

“That isn’t how you dance, *cherie*.”

The ballerina tried to use as many French words as possible to remind anyone who might be listening that she had once lived in Paris. She even spoke with the hint of a French accent, but the doll was pretty sure she was faking.

The doll attempted to smooth her burgundy dress. It had bunched around her knees and made the ballerina giggle more.

“Back in Pa-ree,” the ballerina began.

“I don’t think you’ve ever been to Pa-ree,” the doll snapped. “And, anyway, I kicked my shoes off on purpose.”

The ballerina pursed her delicate pink lips. She went back to ignoring the doll. The doll rolled her eyes, looked down at her stocking feet. Aside from her stockings and her burgundy dress, the doll had no idea what she looked like. The only mirror in the store faced the other way. She asked the jar of buttons what she looked like, but the result was confusing since each button came up with a different description. A blue button told her she was made of porcelain.

“Porcelain,” said the doll, enjoying how the word felt on her tongue.

Along with not knowing what she looked like, the doll also did not have a name. “Who am I?” she thought to herself as she stared at her stockings. She closed her eyes and tried to remember her life before the shelf and the store. There was nothing. Her first memory was of the shop-keeper’s voice, a deep voice that settled into her whole being. She listened to him sing every night as he closed the store. *Au Claire de la Lune*. By listening to his conversations with customers, the doll began to learn words, collected as many as she could. She thought it was wonderful that there was one word that belonged to each person. The shop-keeper’s word was “John”.

As she sat on the shelf with her shoes off, staring down at her stockings, the doll tried to come up with a word that would belong to her, but none seemed right.

“I’m no one,” thought the doll and this made her feel entirely alone. Her eyes filled with tears as she watched the ballerina twirl endlessly on the tips of her toes.

That evening, a few minutes before the store closed, the doll heard a burst of laughter. A young woman stumbled through the door and bumped her shoulder against the doll’s shelf. As the shelf wobbled, the doll clutched at the wood with her fingernails. The jar of buttons clinked beside her.

“Oh, shit. You’re such a clumsy drunk, Laura,” said a young man with a loud voice, who had followed the woman into the store.

“It’s fine,” gasped Laura. She giggled. “Nothing broke.”

“Can I help you?” asked the shop-keeper from behind his desk.

“No, we’re good,” said the young man.

He and Laura grinned at each other when the shop-keeper turned away. The doll liked the way they looked at each other. She liked the way they laughed, the way they hung onto each other's arms.

“Hey,” said Laura. “Who’s this?”

She reached out towards the shelf, picked up the doll. Her glassy gray eyes slid over the doll's face.

“I used to have one just like this.”

She seemed sad, but the doll was not sure why. Laura had bright red lips and dark brown hair that fell in waves past her shoulders.

“She’s so pretty. Don’t you think, Dylan?” Laura brushed the doll's cheeks with the tips of her fingers. “We could call her Marie.”

The doll winced. She was not a Marie.

“She’s too expensive,” said Dylan looking at the price tag stuck to the doll's shoulder.

“She’s an antique.”

Laura glanced over at the shop-keeper who had his back turned. She held the doll tight to her chest as she and Dylan slipped out of the store. As the door clanged behind them, the doll felt giddy. Laura and Dylan wanted her. They thought she was prettier than the smug ballerina. Before the doll had a chance to process anything other than her own feeling of happiness, she was outside in the cool night air, clutched against Laura's soft wool coat. While they walked, Dylan pulled a bottle filled with brown liquid from his jacket pocket and took a drink. He wore a leather jacket and his hair was dyed bright orange.

Laura's fingers felt clammy as they wrapped around the doll's skin, but the doll liked being held. She wondered where Laura and Dylan lived, imagined a comfortable apartment with

plush sofas and a window seat. Eventually, the building they entered was much more dilapidated than the doll expected. Inside, the apartment had peeling wallpaper, dirty clothes on the floor, beer bottles on the windowsill. One lamp lit the room. The doll saw that someone had painted a rose on the lampshade.

Three other people sat around the room: these, the doll learned later, were Dylan's and Laura's roommates. The three of them were talking loudly and drinking from beer bottles. Music thumped from a pair of speakers.

"Where did you two go?" a guy on the couch shouted.

"Needed some air." Laura plunked down beside the guy, still holding the doll in the crook of her arm.

The guy beside Laura leaned in, said something in her ear that the doll could not make out over the music.

"What's with the doll?" said a girl sitting across the room and her friend laughed.

The doll blushed.

Laura and her friends huddled together and continued shouting at each other over the music. Sometimes they stood up to dance around or grab another beer from the fridge. The doll glanced around for Dylan, but he had disappeared into another room. As the night wore on, the doll slid from Laura's lap onto the couch cushions. She noticed that the guy beside Laura had his hand on Laura's leg, but he moved it away quickly when Dylan came back and sat down on the floor. Dylan glared at the guy on the couch and the doll saw a nervous look cross Laura's face. As Laura took a drink from her glass, her hand shook and liquid spilled onto her lap, the couch and onto the doll. A cold feeling seeped through the doll's body.

"Oh shit," Dylan grabbed the doll. "She'll be ruined."

He took the doll into the kitchen and began wiping her off with a towel. Someone had turned off the music and the doll could hear the boy on the couch snickering.

“What a loser. Why’s he so worried about a fucking doll?”

The doll liked the guy on the couch even less than she had liked the ballerina. The towel was rough against her skin, but Dylan’s eyes were soft as he tried to sponge the liquid out of her dress.

Laura appeared at the doorway of the kitchen.

“Is she alright?” Laura asked, looking at the doll.

“Yeah, not that you care.”

“It was an accident, Dylan.”

“I think I need some more air.” Dylan grabbed the doll and his jacket as he headed for the door.

“Dylan, seriously,” Laura said, following him. “Don’t be mad.”

“Why were you flirting with Blake?” Dylan demanded when they were outside.

“I wasn’t. We were just talking.”

“No you weren’t.”

“Please, just drop it.”

“I’m sick of this place. I want to go somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Let’s just wander around or something.”

“We already did that.”

“Fine, stay here then,” Dylan said as he started down the street.

“Wait,” Laura yelled after him. “Give me my doll back.”

“She’s not yours.”

“I found her.”

Laura reached for the doll, but Dylan pulled back. Laura reached for the doll again. This time she grabbed her by the leg. She pulled and Dylan pulled back. The doll felt a searing pain in her hip. She thought she might pass out. After a moment, she saw that Laura was holding something in her hand. The doll’s leg.

“Now look what you did,” Laura threw the leg on the ground, stomped back inside.

The doll was in shock. Her hip throbbed. The pain spread to her other leg, to her chest, to her arms and the tips of her fingers. Dylan pressed her into his leather jacket and the warmth made her feel slightly better. They sat down on a bench and Dylan tried to fit her leg back into place, but his cold hands kept slipping.

“Shit,” he said and gave up.

He set her down beside him and, as he did, the doll felt something cold and soft fall on her cheek. She looked up and saw small white flakes falling from the sky. They looked like particles of dust, but when they landed on her skin, they left a tingling sensation. The doll had heard about snow, but had not realised it would be so beautiful. The pain in her leg receded and she felt numb. “This is snow,” she thought, closing her eyes and letting the flakes caress her face.

She and Dylan sat together in silence and admired the snow.

Eventually, Dylan took her back to the apartment. He sat her on the windowsill in the bedroom he shared with Laura. For a while, a mitten lay next to her. The mitten sighed a lot and told her about an affair he once had in a coat-check with the sweetest, most slender suede glove.

Then he called her “baby” and started to stroke her hair. She was grateful when Dylan moved the mitten into a cupboard.

The doll’s hip felt sore for the first few days. Dylan had left her leg on the snow-covered bench and he did not mention going back to get it. Eventually, the pain faded, the ache coming back only once in a while. The doll decided that she did not mind having only one leg since Dylan and Laura seemed to like her anyway. Dylan and Laura were both glassblowers and the windowsill was soon covered with glass animals they made in a studio nearby. There was a purple octopus, a slender leopard, a horse the colour of fire. The octopus and horse both had philosophical spirits and would stay up late into the night discussing Nietzsche and Hegel. The leopard was more impatient and his main contribution to the conversation was, “Aw, what’a you know anyway?” The doll liked listening to their voices late into the night. She was awake when Dylan came home from his night shift at the hotel where he worked. Sometimes, if he couldn’t sleep, he and Laura watched movies on Dylan’s computer and Dylan held the doll in the crook of his arm where she could hear his heart beating.

Dylan and Laura hadn’t fought since the night they discovered the doll, but the doll noticed that sometimes when Dylan went to touch Laura, she moved away. When they watched movies together, Laura stared intently at the computer screen. Dylan almost touched her shoulder, but then changed his mind and let his hand drop limply beside him.

What they talked about most was the doll. They talked about getting her a new dress. They discussed alternative names to Marie.

“We should find her a friend,” said Laura. “A sister. In case she’s lonely.”

“I dunno. What if another doll made her jealous?”

“Do you think she’s happy here?”

Laura and Dylan went out that evening and didn't come back until early morning. When they stumbled in, Dylan wrapped his arm around Laura's waist and Laura gripped Dylan's arm tightly. At first the doll had thought this was nice, but then she realised there was something frantic about the way they hung on to each other. Once they were in bed, asleep, the doll could hear Laura's breathing, could feel Dylan's arm knock gently against her body when he rolled over beside her. The doll slept in the empty space between the two of them.

"You know, I don't blame you," Dylan said one night when they were all in bed.

He lay on his back and the doll could see the faint outline of his face. At first, the doll thought he must be talking about the incident at the party when another guy put his hand on Laura's leg, but as Dylan talked she realised there was something else.

"It wasn't anyone's fault, you know," he said.

"I know."

"And maybe it was for the best. You know, maybe there was a reason."

"It wasn't for the best."

Laura began crying softly and the sound made the doll feel like her insides were hollow.

"I wanted to have the baby," Laura said quietly. "I wanted her."

The doll wasn't sure how to take this remark. She knew a few facts about babies and birth from conversations between the shop-keeper and his pregnant wife. She knew it was painful. She knew you got fat. She imagined a baby made of porcelain growing inside Laura's swelling stomach. But, Laura's stomach was flat. She held the doll close, her shallow breaths running through the doll's body. She and Dylan were so silent, the doll thought they had fallen asleep.

“I love you,” said Laura, clutching the doll tightly.

The doll wasn't sure who Laura meant, her or Dylan. The bed creaked as Dylan pulled Laura close to him and kissed her hair. For a while, they were calm. For a while, there was no space between them.

After their conversation in the bedroom, Laura and Dylan started to talk more frequently. They talked about Dylan's job and their friends. They talked about the glass sculptures they were making. They hardly talked about the doll anymore. The doll was offended, but figured they would remember her soon. She no longer slept in bed with them, but was placed back on the windowsill between the octopus and the horse. The doll thought that the philosophical discussions she overheard between the two glass figurines were meaningless compared to how it felt to lay in bed next to someone who loved you. She could see out the window where a pink and white cherry tree blossomed down the street, but it wasn't enough.

Then, one day, Laura and Dylan began packing up their things. They had decided to rent a bachelor apartment so they could be alone together. While packing, Laura picked up the doll and the doll felt a rush through her whole body.

“What about her?” Laura asked Dylan.

“I thought you'd want to keep her.”

“Well,” Laura said. “Maybe it would be good to start over.”

Dylan took the doll from Laura. With a warm hand, he brushed a strand of hair out of the doll's face. He hesitated before tossing her into a large black plastic bag.

So shocked at being trapped in a bag with no light and no air, the doll lost consciousness. When she woke up, she found that she was outside lying in a crate next to a large blue dumpster. As the cold air blew against the doll's skin, tears leaked down her face. She could not believe that Dylan and Laura had left her here. Hadn't they loved her at all? She began singing quietly to comfort herself. She sang the song that she had learned years ago from the shop-keeper. *Au Claire de la Lune*. She almost didn't notice that there was someone in the crate beside her.

"Hello," said a voice. She looked up into the face of a blue plush tiger. He had button eyes, but one was missing.

"Where did you come from?" she asked.

"Oh," said the tiger. "I've been here for a while. I lived with a boy for a few years, but he didn't want me anymore."

"Well, how did I get here?" the doll demanded.

"Um," said the tiger. "Someone probably brought you into the pawnshop, but the owner felt he couldn't sell you and put you out here." He paused. "That's what happened to me, at least."

"What's your name?" the doll asked.

"Oranges," said the tiger.

"What?" laughed the doll. "That's not a real name."

The tiger looked offended.

"It is too. I saw it written on a piece of paper. It's the most beautiful word I've ever seen."

"Oh," said the doll. "Sorry. Your name is very nice."

"Thank you." The tiger paused. "What's yours?"

“I haven’t got one.”

“You were singing when I found you,” said the tiger. “Maybe your name is Song.”

“Song,” the doll repeated. It felt better than Marie. It felt right.

“What happened to your leg?”

“It got pulled off.”

The view from the crate was not so bad, the doll decided. You could see the whole street. She looked over at the blue tiger whose button eye glistened in the afternoon sunlight. Because the crate was so small, her body was pushed against his and she could feel his fur on her skin.

“You’ll have to tell me more about yourself, Song,” he said.

The doll nodded and started to tell him her story. Her soft, lilting voice drifted out over the snow-covered street.

Jimi Hendrix and the Laughing Girl

Albany, New York 12:46 a.m.

Amy walks into the Albany bus station after a phone call from her cousin. Sebastian, a pianist, more like an older brother than a cousin, had moved to Montreal a few years ago with his Canadian girlfriend. Amy loves Sebastian's calls, waits all week to hear what crazy thing he has done now, gets angry when he forgets to call for too long, but forgives as soon as he does. This call is better than the others because he tells her he's looking for a new lead singer for his band. A soul singer, he says. She can have the job if she gets to Montreal by the weekend. Too excited to wait that long, Amy buys a Greyhound bus ticket that evening.

She has never travelled before and, sitting in the station, her excitement turns into a sick feeling that settles in her stomach. Everything around her is gray: the walls, tiles, garbage cans, the wet wrappers stuck to the floor. The scent of urine seeps from the bathroom in the back. Three young women chatter nearby and a middle-aged man checks his iPhone. Another man with greasy hair stares down at his hands.

On the bench next to her is a guy absorbed in a book, an army green backpack resting at his feet. Amy looks him over: he's a white guy with messy brown hair, stubble on his face and neck, as though he hasn't had time to shave or doesn't care. A loose t-shirt bags around his hips and lifts slightly when he moves, revealing plaid boxers. His eyes are either blue or green. If he's taking the same bus she is, maybe they'll sit beside each other for the whole ride, maybe he'll slip his hand into hers, suggest finding a room where they can be alone to talk, kiss, fuck. He looks about a year or two older, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two. He's from Colorado, she decides. He came out here to visit friends and, even though he thought he'd never live anywhere other than Denver, he's decided he likes it out here. He has a girlfriend, but it's not working out.

Normally, Amy would ignore him, but there is that sick feeling in her stomach, the anxiety that something will go wrong, that Sebastian will change his mind about letting her join his band. Out the window, the parking lot is deserted and the emptiness makes Amy feel unreal. Her hands aren't hands. Her legs aren't legs. Her body is air.

“Hey,” she says when the guy beside her looks up from his book.

“Hey.” He seems surprised that she is talking to him, but he's polite.

“I'm Amy.”

“James.”

He is not from Colorado. He's from Canada, the prairies. Amy's lips twitch into a smile as she senses him examining her body – what does he see when he looks at her? A slender, dark-skinned girl with no make-up and plump cheeks, shoulder-length hair braided into hundreds of small braids. His gaze slides down her arms, past the cuff of her jean shorts towards her bare feet, the sweaty nook where her flip-flops dig in between her toes. She is used to men looking at her this way. Singing in Albany nightclubs, she has learned to recognize desire, has become used to everyone wanting a closer look. On stage, she becomes someone else – someone who can't feel sick, who can't disintegrate into nothing. Her movements are slower. One dress strap falls loosely over her shoulder. She slinks.

When the bus arrives, Amy hops up with James following close behind her. As they get onboard, she slips her hand into his, touches his solid, rough fingers. His head jerks up, eyes widen, his fingers tremble then relax. Amy thinks he might pull away, but his grip tightens. She feels all the nerves in her hand and knows she's not air anymore. She's flesh.

2:03 a.m.

“Why Montreal?” Amy asks him, too excited to sleep on the bus.

“Uh,” James shifts around trying to get comfortable. “I’ve been travelling around Canada and the Northern States for a while.”

“You travel a lot?”

“No, not really. I decided to go after I finished university.”

While James talks, Amy’s mind wanders back to her house in Albany where she lives with her parents – her Mom hadn’t wanted her to leave. Her Mom, an elementary school teacher, kept reminding her that being a musician wasn’t realistic. “What about Nate?” her Mom had asked. “What did he say?” Amy didn’t answer. Nate was her boyfriend and, the week before, they had ended up in an argument when he came to pick her up. She had been annoyed with him for a while, but hadn’t told him why. When she got into his beat-up car, she had slammed the door so hard he gave her a look that was part surprised, part worried. She asked him what the fuck he was looking at. He asked her what was wrong with her brain and why was she slamming doors so hard? She told him she’d slam as many doors as she wanted to slam and besides, she didn’t slam the door, she closed it. He wanted to know what had gotten into her. She ignored him. She didn’t tell him that she wanted to break up and later, when she got the phone call from Sebastian, she didn’t tell him she was leaving.

Now, James rests one foot on the seat in front of him. Sitting with his knee bent and his arms folded in his lap, he reminds her of Nate. Whenever Amy was driving, Nate would sit in exactly the same position. When he got bored, he’d roll down the window and lean out half-way to yell “Hello” to people on the streets. Amy was embarrassed at first by the way people stared,

but she also felt a spark of admiration. Nate didn't care what anyone thought of him, he just went ahead and did what he wanted.

"Is it lonely?" Amy asks James.

"What?"

"Travelling by yourself."

"Well," James hesitates, "I wasn't by myself the whole way. I started out with my girlfriend."

"Oh," Amy bites her lip. "Where is she now?"

James stares up at the ceiling like this is something he'd rather not be talking about.

"I dunno. We had a fight."

"I'm sorry," Amy pauses. "Was it serious? The relationship, I mean."

"We talked about moving in together, yeah."

Amy glances out the window. Her legs are cramped and sore, but she doesn't care. She loves the orange and yellow lights that blaze whenever they pass a city.

"What about you? Any boyfriend?"

"No."

When the bus bumps over a rut in the road, Amy watches an insect with long legs and delicate wings as it sticks to the outside of the window. The insect flutters. She thinks in songs. Bartok and Jimi Hendrix. She and Nate used to work at a vintage record store together. When they first met, Nate told her he wasn't that into music, only took the job so he could save up money. He had asked her out a few times, but she kept refusing. What she loved were the colourful album covers, the bubble letters spelling out band names. She loved flipping through the albums when she was closing the store for the night. She went section by section. Classical.

Jazz. Punk. Rap. Rock/Pop. Usually, she closed the store by herself, but, one evening, Nate had stayed with her. The store's background music had played over the speakers on loop as she and Nate worked until, suddenly, the playlist had skipped to a song that Amy didn't recognize. She had watched Nate sweeping the floor as the ethereal music drifted around him.

Each note was dark red. Each note was velvet.

5:07 a.m.

At the border, Amy stretches her legs. Her foot has fallen asleep and a painful tingling sensation spreads through her toes. Sweat sticks to her back, her neck and palms. The border guard asks her a series of questions.

“Why are you going to Montreal?”

(Running away from a problem.)

“I'm visiting my cousin.”

“Why?”

(To write music, to make something beautiful.)

“Just to hang out.”

“How long will you be in Canada?”

(No idea.)

“Two months.”

“Where are you staying?”

“With my cousin.”

“Where does he live?”

(A crappy basement apartment.)

“Um, Montreal.”

“And what does he do?”

“He’s a musician.”

“What else are you planning to do besides see your cousin?”

(Sing. Hook up with the guy from the bus station. Think about life. Have some sort of nervous break-down from thinking about life. Fall in love, maybe.)

“Nothing else.”

5:48 a.m.

“You like the Stones?”

“What?” James mumbles, bleary eyed and back on the bus.

“The Rolling Stones. Your shirt.”

“Oh,” James looks down at the band name printed on his t-shirt. “Yeah, I saw them live once. I was so close to the stage I could feel Mick Jagger’s spit on my forehead.”

“Hmm, I don’t know if I believe you,” Amy laughs. “You probably don’t even like them. The shirt belongs to your brother or something.”

“No, I swear to God.”

James is laughing too. He has a soft voice, but his laugh fills the bus. Passengers sitting across from Amy and James give them dirty looks. One woman snorts in her sleep and wakes up. Amy giggles. Maybe she’s delirious with lack of sleep. Maybe James is too.

“I’m a singer, you know,” she tells him. “I mean, I want to be.”

“Oh yeah? You ever perform?”

“A few times.”

“Aren’t you nervous on stage?”

“Sometimes. But not for long,” Amy pauses. “Being on stage is, well, it’s hard to explain, you know?”

James keeps asking questions, but talking about music makes Amy remember her first performance, how Nate had looked at her while he stood at the bar. She wants to change the subject so she looks down at the floor where James’ backpack sits between their feet. The bag is unzipped and a book is visible near the top, the one James was reading when she noticed him in the station. She reaches down and grabs the book.

“Hey,” James exclaims and starts to laugh. “What the fuck?”

“I want to see what you read.”

“Come on, seriously.”

He reaches out, takes the book from her before she has a chance to even open it.

“Maybe we should get some sleep.”

At first, she thinks he’s angry, but he just looks confused and a little startled, like he’s suddenly remembering that they just met, like he’s suddenly thinking who is this girl, this crazy girl, who sits down beside me, questions my story about Mick Jagger’s spit then goes through my personal stuff?

Montreal 6:54 a.m.

Amy debates calling Sebastian from the station, but can’t bring herself to do it. Sebastian and Nate had been friends in high school, but that hadn’t stopped Nate from telling her that Sebastian was full of shit. Standing in the station, Amy worries that when she gets to Sebastian’s

apartment, she'll find out that Nate is right, that Sebastian's band is not as good as he told her, that they have no chance of getting gigs.

“So,” says James. “Where are you heading?”

“I'm not sure. You?”

“I'm staying in a hotel.”

“Where?”

“Downtown.”

Amy is not sure whether James wants her to come with him or whether he is just being polite. She knows that going off with a strange guy in a new city is dangerous, but the warm summer air sends a thrill tumbling through her body.

“I'm staying downtown too.”

On the street there are coffee shops, boutiques, bakeries with the scent of fresh dough wafting from open doors, and apartments with spiral staircases and balconies. People weave past Amy and James: a girl in a red bandana, a guy with a guitar slung over his back, two men speaking quickly in French. Amy feels a warm breeze from an air-vent.

“Are you sure you have a place to stay?” asks James.

8:42 a.m.

In the hotel, Amy pictures James' ex-girlfriend. The one who is supposed to be here instead of her. Light through the curtains forms patches on the floor. Amy can hear the voices of people in other rooms drifting through the paper thin walls. The light is sallow; the disembodied voices, sinister. Amy pictures a pretty girl sitting on the edge of the bed, brushing her hair, fumbling with a high heel. James is grabbing the girl around the waist, messing up her

hair, asking her to wait a few minutes before they leave. But she's laughing, saying they have to go, they have to go now. He wraps his arms around her waist and, by the way she leans into him, you can tell that the laughing girl is really in love.

"So what happened with you and your girlfriend? Why'd you break up?"

"Um."

Amy can tell James is re-thinking inviting her in. He thought they were going to have sex, not a discussion about break-ups. He flops on the bed.

"She left me in Boston."

"Boston?"

"Yeah, we had a fight in Boston and she ditched me."

"A fight about what?"

"Nothing. I don't remember."

Now, she's on the bed beside him.

"Boston is a stupid city," he says. "Nothing happens there."

He slides closer, puts a hand on Amy's waist, on her stomach. His palms are warm. She presses a hand against his back, brings him closer as his sweaty fingers trace the line of her shorts. He leans in, "I hope you never have to go to Boston." His lips are soft when they kiss. She thinks of Boston, of the laughing girl who was supposed to be here instead of her. She thinks of Nate leaning out of cars to shout at people on the street, Nate leaning across the counter at the record shop to kiss her. It's the warmth, the loneliness. She thinks it's just the season.

Everyone's desperate in July.

2:13 p.m.

They lie on the bed, face to face so that their stomachs touch. His Rolling Stones t-shirt and her green blouse are thrown together on the floor like even their clothes can't get enough of each other.

"Do you love your girlfriend?"

"She's not my girlfriend anymore," he says in a quiet voice.

"But do you love her?"

"Do you care?" he kisses her neck. "You don't even know her."

"You could tell me about her."

He rolls away from her, sits up and bends over to pick up his shirt from the floor. "Why don't you tell me about your boyfriend instead?"

"I don't have a boyfriend."

"I think you do." When he stands up, he looks annoyed.

"He's not really my boyfriend."

"Oh." James buttons his jeans.

"I mean, he loved me, but I didn't love him."

James doesn't look that interested. "I'm sorry," he says, but it comes out flat, like he couldn't care less that she doesn't love her boyfriend, he just wants to end the conversation so they can talk about something else, so that he can ask her to leave. As she dresses, James looks at her the same way he did in the bus station, his eyes trailing down the length of her body. The sick feeling in her stomach comes back and she wishes he would turn away. She pulls her shirt on quickly and grits her teeth.

“Do you want me to go?” she knows the question comes out harsh, that she’s glaring at him.

“Um,” James stutters. “If you want. You don’t have to leave yet or anything. I mean, you could stay a little longer, if you want.”

“Why? What’s the point?”

There’s a silence that lasts a long time, long enough for the sick feeling in Amy’s stomach to grow until she thinks she may throw up. She reaches down to get her bag so she can leave, but one of the straps has become wound around the leg of the small desk set up in the corner. She pulls at the strap, pulls hard.

“Here, let me help,” says James.

“It’s fine, don’t bother,” her voice breaks.

She pulls at the bag one more time, this time too hard. The desk shifts, its feet grating against the floor. The lamp perched on the edge tilts over, rolls and crashes to the floor with such a loud crack that James jumps back and Amy swears under her breath, hands shaking.

James doesn’t move, just stares at the broken lamp. He starts to laugh. He laughs in a way that fills all the empty space around her, all the empty space in the room. She runs her trembling fingers through her hair. She laughs too. She laughs at how stupid it is to be here in a strange city with a broken lamp and a man who isn’t Nate.

4:23 p.m.

She should call Sebastian, but instead she and James fall asleep. Waking up, Amy forgets where she is and, for a moment, is startled by James’ sleeping figure, the strange bed, the empty pizza box on the floor from earlier when they ordered take-out. Even though she ate half

the pizza, Amy's stomach feels empty as she steps into the shower. The water turns from hot to cold randomly, but she stands still, burning up one minute and turning to ice the next.

Purple Haze. Sebastian used to play Jimi Hendrix songs on the piano. Sometimes she'd sing along, but other times she'd just listen. The notes were crystalline. They shimmered around her. She remembers making-out with Nate in her bedroom and how she felt guilty that, when he kissed her, she didn't feel anything extraordinary.

When she steps out of the shower, the mirror is covered in steam so she can't see her face. She wipes the steam away and sees the girl she is used to seeing in the mirror. A girl with thick eyelashes that curl over wide brown eyes. A girl with slightly crooked front teeth. A girl with cheeks shaped like apples. She doesn't look any different than before. She looks like herself.

Amy brushes her teeth and rinses her mouth with water. She rinses and spits.

9:12 p.m.

They're together on the bed.

"Why didn't you love him?" James asks.

"I don't know."

James wraps an arm around her and kisses her collar bone.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Pretty sure. But I think your girlfriend loves you."

"Maybe," he murmurs.

She slides her hand into his. His fingers curl around hers.

"Do you think you'll go back to him? Your boyfriend?"

“No, I don’t think so. You?”

He shrugs. “I guess you have to move on.”

10:54 p.m.

While he’s asleep, she feels like the room is disappearing. The desk, the window, the bed, James. She needs something to do so she picks up the book resting on the desk, the one he was reading in the station. She has a habit of opening books and reading a few lines without ever looking at the title or the author. She used to buy books at garage sales this way. Nate made fun of her whenever he saw her reading. He called her crazy, but he meant it in a good way.

She opens the book and reads a few lines out of order. The poem is about two lovers, holding each other tightly. She can see them, in bed, their grip so tight that neither can move or slip away, their skin bruised by the weight of one body against another.

12:01 a.m.

As James sleeps, Amy slings her bag over her shoulder. She clutches the book to her chest as she heads down the stairway, down the street, down towards the dusky lights of bars, the perfume of beer and cigarette smoke. In a bar, waiting for Sebastian to come and pick her up, she scribbles down lyrics on the inside cover of the book she stole from James. She hears a melody in her head with notes that bloom like orange blossoms and roses. That’s what’s real, she thinks, that’s what makes me real. Not Nate, not James, not even Sebastian. The song she’s writing is about a woman who leaves town in the middle of the night and an old lover who watches her from a doorway and wants her to stay. He grabs for her hand, but she slips away, turns to air. Even if he loved her, she would keep going and going.

Coffee

Morning Shift

The Three Bridges coffee shop stands on the corner of Bank and Sunnyside in Ottawa. Jules and Tom arrive at 6 a.m. to get everything set up for 6:30, when the store opens. By the time Jules has finished unwrapping the blueberry scones, two customers are waiting outside.

“God, why aren’t they asleep?” Tom groans. His short red hair is ruffled after being up all night working on a philosophy paper.

Jules glances bleary-eyed towards the door. She had been up all night too, looking through old photographs, deleting ones she thought were no good and photo editing the ones she liked. Ever since she was a kid, Jules has wanted to be a photographer. *Bridges* is temporary. She knows that she belongs somewhere else: *Marie Claire* or *Vogue*, photographing models in draping, satin dresses.

“Is it me or are the customers getting more psychotic?” Tom glances outside where a woman in a ski jacket is tugging at the door.

“I think so.” Jules imitates a caffeine crazed customer. “Give me my extra hot, extra shot, no foam latte or I’ll strangle you!”

She shakes Tom’s shoulders until he laughs so hard he doubles over.

“We should stop,” he gasps. “The customers will think we’re unprofessional.”

“Should we let them in now?”

“No, just let them stand there.”

Vicky and the Garbage

Vicky arrives at *Three Bridges* at 9 o'clock, thick-framed glasses fogging up, bright pink hair sticking out beneath her tuque. Vicky is not a barista, she is a cowboy. She makes her fingers into guns, pretends to shoot croissants. She makes sound effects.

“Tom,” whines Vicky, “did you already take out the garbage?”

“Yeah.”

Taking out the garbage is Vicky's favourite task. It is the first thing she does after clocking in. It is her moral duty. It is her greater purpose. It is the one thing that gets her out of the store, away from the customers for a full fifteen minutes.

“That is my job, Tom.” Vicky slams her palm down on the counter in mock anger.

“Everybody knows that I take out the garbage.”

Tom laughs and rolls his eyes. “Seriously, Vicky? Seriously?”

Vicky turns to Jules who is drinking a cup of warm apple cider. “You've seen me take out the garbage, right?”

“Yeah Tom, the garbage is Vicky's thing.”

“You see! Everybody knows that I take out the garbage!” Vicky grins, tosses a damp cloth at Tom. He whips it back at her, but misses.

Since she can't take out the garbage, Vicky goes back to being a cowboy. She shoots a paper cup directly in the centre from the other side of the room.

Vicky is the best shot in all the Wild West.

We Must All Pay Our Dues

On the first of December, the entire system breaks down. The computer in the back room goes blank. The cash registers won't open. The scanners won't scan and the rewards system stops recording rewards. This is the most upsetting problem.

"You mean I won't get my points?" a woman asks, her voice rising higher and higher as she desperately tries to tap her card against the screen of the rewards machine.

"No, I'm so sorry."

Jules is alone on cash while Tom phones the computer tech guy from the back room. Vicky is in the bathroom crying because a customer yelled at her for adding up the cost of his order incorrectly.

"You should really have a back-up system," booms a man in a business suit. "Why haven't you come up with one?"

Jules wants to call the man an asshole, but instead she calls him "sir" and offers him a free coffee.

"No," the man shakes his head gravely. "I absolutely could not accept a free coffee. I wouldn't feel right about that." He rocks back on his heels, booms, "I think it's very important that people pay their dues. Where would we be in life if people didn't pay their dues?" He leans towards Jules, "We. Must. All. Pay. Our. Dues."

His face is smug as he counts out two dollars and ten cents, the exact amount for a medium coffee. Jules watches him stride across the room toward the condiment counter with his shoulders back, head held high, like having correct change makes him a superhero.

Vicky and the Guitarist

When Ty comes into *Bridges*, Vicky's cheeks turn red. Ty works at *Bridges* too, but at the Elgin location.

“Oh my God,” Vicky squeals. “Ty is so cool. I get nervous whenever I serve him.”

Vicky twists her hair between her fingers. She looks Ty up and down as she types his order into the cash. His long brown hair falls over his shoulders in waves. He carries a guitar slung over his shoulder, has two piercings in his ear and looks stoned. Ty orders a large coffee with a shot of espresso. He calls it “a shot in the dark”. He draws out the word ‘dark’ so that it sounds sexy.

After he leaves, Vicky turns to Jules. “Oh. My. God. Isn't Ty awesome? I feel so awkward around him. Like, this one time I saw him downtown. I was staring at my reflection in a store window to see if my hair looked okay and I saw his reflection. Our eyes met in the glass for, like, a second, but we didn't say anything to each other. Now things are weird.”

“Maybe he likes you too. Why don't you ask him out?”

“Oh no, I can't. We've only had one real conversation. I told him about the time I went to a Tom Waits concert and Tom Waits shouted in my face with a megaphone. It was the best moment of my life. When I told him that, Ty just nodded. He doesn't make things into a big deal, you know. He nodded like he understood exactly how I felt.”

Swans

Sal arrives half an hour late for her 11 to 7 shift. Sleep is more important to Sal than work ethic. She wears her long black hair pulled up and keeps bright red lipstick in her apron pocket to apply throughout her shift.

When she makes a latte, Sal pours the milk into the centre of the espresso with such concentration that the whole world slows down. She knows just how to wiggle the cup so that a white swan forms in the centre. Sal is not a barista, she's an artist. She is Raphael, Titian. She is the Caravaggio of coffee. Sal can make boiled milk into dragons, trees and starry skies.

"Wow," says Tom, leaning over her shoulder.

"I could do better," Sal tosses the latte down the sink and starts to make another.

"It looked fine," says a young man with a meek voice who has been waiting for his latte for ten minutes while Sal perfects the swan at the centre.

Sal looks horrified.

"Its neck was bulging. Do you want a swan with a bulging neck?" She remakes the drink so that the swan has a slender neck and a perfectly plumed body. "There." Sal places the cup on the counter.

"Pretty good," grins Tom. "But the beak's a little crooked."

Jimmy

Saturday afternoon, an elderly woman appears at the cash with a young boy. The boy is shorter than the counter, but he keeps jumping up and grasping the edge.

"Can I help you?" Sal asks the elderly woman.

"Oh," says the woman. "Jimmy likes to use the card."

"Pardon?"

"Jimmy," she gestures to the jumping boy. "Jimmy stop it! JIMMY." The woman rolls her eyes while Jimmy continues jumping up and down. "He likes to tap the rewards card—

Jimmy, stop it, JIMMY— but his mother, well.” The elderly woman turns towards the rows of tables. “BARBARA!” She shouts across the store at a middle-aged woman who is fumbling through her purse.

“WHAT, MOM?” The middle-aged woman bellows back.

“JIMMY WANTS TO USE THE CARD!”

“WHAT?”

“THE CARD! JIMMY WANTS TO USE THE CARD! UGH, JIMMY, STOP IT!”

The middle-aged woman comes over to the cash, still rooting through her bag. She takes out the rewards card and hands it to Jimmy.

Sal watches as he stretches his arm towards the rewards machine. It has been pushed back a few inches so that Jimmy can’t reach it. Sal thinks he might cry, but he doesn’t.

Jimmy screams.

High Heels and Zen

On Tuesdays, Tom, Sal and Hannah work the evening shift. Tom stares at Sal’s high heeled boots that resonate on the floor when she walks.

“How can you work 8 hour shifts in those things?” he asks. “Don’t your feet get sore?”

“Nope.”

Bridges dress code is very loose. Sal maintains that she could arrive naked as long as she had a t-shirt wrapped around her head in a way that clearly showed the *Bridges* logo.

“We could double as baristas and strippers.”

When the store isn’t busy, she wanders into the back room where Tom, on his break, is reading.

“What book?” asks Sal.

“Salinger. I love him. He’s so perverted.” Tom tells everyone that he only reads perverted literature.

“Toni Morrison is better,” says Sal, taking a sip of coffee. Bright red lipstick prints around the edge of her mug form a heart shape.

“No way,” says Tom. “There is no way Toni Morrison is better than Salinger. Salinger is much more perverted.”

Sal purses her lips and looks at Hannah for support, but Hannah only reads vampire romance novels and textbooks for class. Hannah, Sal and Tom go to the same university, but until they started working at *Bridges* they hadn’t met. Hannah is in biochemistry, Sal in women’s studies, Tom in philosophy. Before university, Tom lived in Morocco for three years, worked as a travel guide. But when he came back to Ottawa the only job he could get was at *Bridges*. What Tom really loves is surfing and laying around on the beach. He misses the Moroccan marketplaces with their crowded alleyways and the smell of spices. He misses stacks of woven baskets in blue and green. He misses the ocean. When *Bridges* gets busy or the brewers overflow, Tom repeats over and over again, “Weed is my Zen, weed is my Zen, weed is my Zen, weedismyZenweedismyZen.”

“Are you making that drink with love?” a customer gurgles when she sees Tom pouring steamed milk into a London Fog.

“No,” says Tom. “I only make drinks with cynical hatred.”

Sal rolls her eyes. Hannah overhears and informs the boss. The boss sends Tom an e-mail asking him not to say things like this anymore.

Wayne

Wayne likes to talk about his Master's thesis. He doesn't seem to have a set schedule like some customers do, so he could show up at any moment. When Wayne does appear, Sal claims she needs to run inventory in the back room. Vicky goes on break. Tom just says "oh god" and follows Sal to the back room without making an excuse. Jules is the only one left on cash. As she hands Wayne his camomile tea and peanut butter toast, he tells her about his thesis.

"It deals with the emanations of the farm," Wayne leans across the counter towards Jules and raises his eyebrows. "Do you know anything about emanations of the farm?"

"Um, no."

"Farm emanations are part of the mysterious cycle of life." Wayne has an imperious way of speaking, like he is standing at a podium lecturing a crowd. "My thesis is going to deal with the farm in relation to the human soul."

"The human soul?"

"Yes, the human soul. I'm mapping it out."

There is a silence.

"I really need to brew some more coffee."

"Oh yes, don't let me keep you from your work. Did you know that Plato thought the human soul was divided into three parts?"

"Actually yes and—"

"He was wrong."

"I really need to—"

“Oh yes, of course. I’m so sorry I’ve been distracting you. You know, farm emanations can be considered along with other metaphysical quandaries and, well, I’m sure you can see where I’m going with this?”

Jules fills a filter with coffee grinds as Wayne keeps talking.

“Do you know what conclusions I have drawn from my research?”

“What?” asks Jules in a way that she hopes sounds polite enough to keep her job, but hostile enough to discourage Wayne from bringing up his thesis ever again.

“The human soul is very complicated.”

Nice Customers

There are nice customers too, of course, Jules reminds Sal, after a shift in which everything went wrong and a customer complained to their boss about Sal’s “professionalism”. There are customers who don’t complain about the temperature of their drinks, who don’t try to discuss farm emanations or insist on paying their dues. There’s Jen who sits at the corner table writing poetry. There’s Mike who organizes a music festival in Montreal. There’s Simon, a homeless man, who helps wipe down tables and sometimes leaves his accordion on the windowsill.

“Okay,” Sal points out, “so there are three nice customers.”

“Oh, come on, Sal, that’s not true,” Jules pauses. “There are at least four.”

The fourth nice customer is Arthur. Arthur is a retired geologist who likes to sit by the window of the coffee shop, gazing out at the street. He empties a bag of stones on the counter in front of Jules.

“This one is amethyst. Some people think it gets its purple tint from manganese, other people think it’s the presence of sulfur.”

Jules examines the shimmering light purple stone.

“Did you know there’s an ancient Greek myth about amethyst?” she asks Arthur. “They say that the goddess Artemis transformed a young woman into a crystal to save her from Dionysus who was angry over an insult. But when Dionysus saw what had happened, he felt so guilty that he cried wine-coloured tears. His tears stained the crystal purple. And, bang, the first amethyst.”

“That’s crazy. Manganese, sulfur and Dionysus.”

Arthur sits by the window as usual and, when Jules goes outside to clean the glass, he stares at her.

“You missed a spot,” he says as she wipes glass-cleaner over the window.

Jules sticks out her tongue. Arthur laughs as she makes cartoon faces at him. Glass-cleaner runs down the window over Arthur’s wrinkled face and blue eyes, the drops sparkling like crystals in the afternoon sun.

E-mail # 1

To: julia_malinsky9@gmail.com

From: barista1@gmail.com

This is just a notice to inform you that some employees have not been meeting *Three Bridges* standards. When you have a free moment, do not stand around with your arms crossed.

Standing with your arms crossed is an aggressive gesture that intimidates other workers and makes it difficult for customers to approach you. Some may take this sort of body language as a sign that you do not want to do any work. It is a very big problem. Have a nice weekend.

– C.

Hannah

“Hannah is such a bitch,” Sal shakes her head. “Like, if I’m late she writes a message for the manager and then I get some stupid warning e-mail like they think I don’t know how to do my job.”

“I got one too,” Jules chimes in. “About crossing my arms.”

“It’s insane,” Tom snorts. “I got one about not cleaning the steam wands. I know Hannah’s stressed about school, but she has crossed over into crazy land.”

Sal laughs.

“Oh well,” Jules brushes a strand of blonde hair out of her face. She takes a sip from her mug of apple cider. “Don’t feel too bad, Tom. We must all pay our dues.”

Eminem

On Friday, a young man shows up in baggy jeans, a long white jersey and a necklace with a pendant in the form of a dollar sign studded with fake diamonds.

“Have you ever seen a white guy dressed like this?” he shouts at Sal. “I mean, come on, have you ever seen a white guy dressed like this?”

Sal’s eyes widen. She isn’t sure whether to laugh or call for help.

“Well, there’s Eminem.”

“No,” the guy breathes. “No.” He waves his hands around. “Eminem stole my style, man. Eminem wants to be like me!”

“Sir,” says Sal. “I’m going to have to ask you to calm down.”

“I’m just saying, where do you think Eminem got his moves?”

“Sir,” Sal purses her lips. “I think it’s safe to say that Eminem does not want your moves.”

“He does, I swear, he stole them! The son of a bitch!”

“Okay. I’m going to have to ask you to leave the store.”

The guy smiles suddenly, rests his elbows on the counter by the cash machine.

“Do you want to hear me rap?”

“No.”

“I think you do. I think you’re kinda into me.”

Sal considers throwing her dish cloth in his face.

“I think you like me. I think you’re just shy. You wanna hang out later?”

“No, I’m working.”

“But, what about later?”

“I’m working all night and tomorrow and the next day and forever until the day I die.”

“Okay, okay,” the guy throws his hands up. “You don’t wanna go out with me. It’s all cool.”

Instead of leaving, he slouches over to one of the tables by the window, winks at Sal. Sal heads into the back room where Vicky is eating a cookie, on her break.

“Sometimes this job makes me question my faith in humanity.”

Electrocution

Tom comes in on his day off to order a cappuccino. He leans across the counter towards Jules.

“Did you notice there’s a new sign above the brewers?”

He points to a sign that reads: *Make sure brewers are emptied of water before lifting lid.*

“That sign was put there because of me. I got electrocuted.”

“Oh my God, are you alright?”

“Oh yeah, I’m fine,” Tom is very proud of having survived electrocution. “It felt weird and then I passed out. But I got the weekend off and I partied really hard so now I can’t think properly.”

Tom puts his head down on the counter. He laughs, but it sounds a bit like a groan. With his head down on the counter, he stares at Jules’ jeans. They are regular blue jeans, but they have drawings all over them in black felt pen. Tom tilts his head.

Vicky drifts over from where she has been doing dishes.

“Hey Tom, did you work at the Elgin store a while ago?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Was Ty there?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“Um, we talked about starting a punk band. We’d play live at *Three Bridges*, really loud. All the lyrics would be about death and murder. You know, to scare the customers away.”

Jules laughs.

“Oh,” says Vicky. “That is so cool. Everything that Ty does is so meaningful.”

She heads around the side of the counter to see if the garbage is full.

“I’m having a terrible day, you know,” Tom adds to Jules. “I’m hung-over, I have to read 80 pages of Aquinas for tomorrow and I think I may be a bachelor for life.”

“Well at least you didn’t die of electrocution.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Tom smirks. “It’s a dangerous job, but somebody’s gotta do it.”

E-mail # 2

To: sal.martinez@gmail.com, hannahbanana16@hotmail.com, salinger_rules@gmail.com,
julia_malinsky9@gmail.com, vicky.anderson@hotmail.com

From: barista1@gmail.com

Dear all,

Standing with your arms crossed is an aggressive posture. Please do not stand with your arms crossed. This kind of body language says “I do not care about my job. I do not want to help you. I am not a team player.” There are many other things you could do besides standing with your arms crossed. For example:

1. clean the condiment counter
2. dust the shelves
3. take out the garbage
4. clean the bathrooms
5. clean the windows
6. sweep the floor

Have a nice weekend. – C.

Vicky and the Boiling Hot Milk

“It’s just not hot enough,” whines a woman with bleached blonde hair and fake red nails as she hands her latte back to Vicky. She wears a large ring on one hand in the shape of a flower.

“Are you sure? I made it past boiling point.”

“It’s lukewarm.”

The cup burns Vicky’s hand as she takes it from the woman. “Lukewarm?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not technically allowed to make drinks any hotter since they can really burn you.”

“Yes, sweetie, but that drink you made was lukewarm.”

Vicky makes the latte again. The woman tastes it as Vicky walks away.

“Excuse me. Hey, excuse me! You who made this drink!”

“Yes?”

“It’s still lukewarm, sweetie. I don’t know how you like your drinks, but I like mine really, really, really hot.”

Vicky makes the woman another drink. This one is still lukewarm so Vicky makes her a fourth drink.

“This is still not hot enough.”

Vicky looks at the long line of customers winding out the door as she steams the milk. Ty is near the middle of the line. His hair looks so soft and good. Ty knows what it’s like to have to re-steam milk, he knows what it’s like to deal with annoying people who call you “sweetie” and act like you’re their private servant. Ty wouldn’t put up with this awful woman.

Vicky places the pitcher of boiling hot milk down on the counter. She reaches for a cup and, as she does, her arm catches the pitcher which goes sailing over the counter and spills all over the blonde woman with her fake nails and silver ring. The woman screams. Vicky imagines the woman’s fake nails melting, the ring moulding into her finger because of exposure to extreme heat.

“What have you done?” Hannah runs over, looks at the woman, “I’m so sorry. That was so unprofessional. Can I make you another drink?”

Vicky offers the woman with fake nails a napkin. “At least it’s lukewarm, right?”

Moray Eels

“Did you know that when moray eels breathe, they have to keep their mouths wide open? It helps them circulate water towards their gills.”

“So if I was an eel I’d have to stand here with my mouth open?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Imagine trying to breathe with your mouth open and talk to customers at the same time. Think how hard it would be.”

Tom opens his mouth wide. He tries to talk and breath through his mouth at the same time. Jules giggles.

“You try it.”

Tom and Jules have a conversation while breathing through their mouths. The customers are confused.

“What are you doing?” asks a middle-aged man with glasses.

“Oh,” says Tom. “Isn’t it obvious? We’re trying to understand what it would be like for an eel who worked at a coffee shop.”

Eventually, even pretending to be an eel gets old. Tom roots through the files in the back office and finds the employee evaluation sheets. He reads it to Jules. According to the sheet, employees are graded on a scale of one to four. To get a four, employees must respond to

customer's needs with creativity, possess a psychic intuition of the customer's drink preferences and exude potent and virile charisma.

“What can I get for you?” Jules asks a customer.

Tom shakes his head.

“Where is your psychic intuition, Jules? Where is your potent and virile charisma?”

Group Meetings

Group meetings are held once every three months. Everyone is expected to bring an inspirational quotation. Everyone gets a chance to voice their concerns and grievances constructively. This month Hannah is the only one with grievances and it takes a long time to go through them.

“I’ve been, like, really stressed out lately because I’ve had a heavy course load this semester and normally, you know, I like working here because we’re all like a family and we all love each other and that’s great and everything, but lately I’ve noticed that a lot of people are standing around talking, not doing their jobs. I’m not saying we can’t have fun, I’m all for having fun, but when I feel like I’m doing all the work it’s really unfair because I’m already stressed about my classes and when I see people standing around it makes me so angry, you have no idea. I’m not naturally an angry person, but sometimes I feel that way when I come here and I see everyone slacking off and leaving all the work for me.”

Jules looks at Tom while Hannah is talking. Tom is biting his lip. He looks like he is going to burst out laughing. Vicky’s eyes are wide. Sal raises her eyebrows. Everyone knows that on last Friday’s shift, Hannah stayed in the back room watching old episodes of *Friends* on Youtube.

“I don’t want to feel like I have to do everything.”

Vanilla Bombs

On Saturday afternoon, Tom, Jules and Vicky do vanilla bombs. A vanilla bomb is a combination of milk, a shot of espresso and two shots of vanilla.

“You do it like a tequila shot,” says Tom. “I once did five in a row.”

“One, two, three,” says Jules and they do the shot at the same time. Milk spills down Vicky’s face.

“Aw Vicky, you’re disgusting!” laughs Tom.

Hannah comes around the corner as milk drips from Vicky’s chin to the floor. “Nice to see you’re spending your time productively.”

“My shift is over anyway,” says Jules.

“Fine,” sighs Hannah. “Tom, could you do something besides standing there?”

Jules goes to the back room to get her coat. While she stands on the street corner, waiting for the bus, the cold February air whips around her. She looks through the glass window, sees Tom and Hannah working in silence, avoiding eye contact, while Vicky kneels down in the background to clean milk and espresso from the floor.

Deep Blue

I wait outside the Kingston Mines until I am too cold to breathe. My arms go numb, my legs shake so much I have to shift around to keep steady. The white dress Sam bought me is sleeveless and too thin for a windy spring night. It's a vintage dress with fringe, a style that makes me feel like a flapper from the '20s.

The Kingston Mines is a blues bar on North Halsted where Sam is singing tonight. He's there until midnight when a girl who looks like Billie Holiday is scheduled to take over with her band. My fingers curl around a half-filled flask of vodka. Laughter and drunken voices drift out of the bar as I take a drink and close my eyes. I need to tell Sam about the letter that arrived in the mail last week, the one tucked in my purse between my phone and a pocket-sized mirror. Vodka stings my lip. Sam is singing one of his new songs, something about being tired and sad and in love. Acoustic guitar chords seep out as two girls emerge from the bar, arm in arm. One of them shouts across the street and waves at someone. A fat bouncer in a polo shirt checks ID cards at the door and, when he is finished with a group of people, he turns to me.

"The cover charge is 12 bucks."

My flask clatters onto the sidewalk as I try to shove it in my purse. The bouncer stares.

"Sweetheart," he says. "Are you alright? Do you want me to call you a cab?"

"I'm waiting for the singer."

"Do you have a ride home?"

"I'm fine."

I retrieve the flask and walk slowly down the street, glancing over my shoulder every few seconds. When the bouncer has gone inside, I wander back to the bar and lean against the doorway. I could pay the cover charge, but I don't want the last time I see Sam perform to be in

a crowded bar where people are talking and knocking over drinks. He has the kind of voice that needs to be heard on its own in a dark and quiet room. I don't want Sam to look at me in a way that says we need to have a serious conversation, in a way that says he knows I am leaving soon.

After a few minutes, the bouncer comes back outside and, when he sees I'm still there, he frowns.

"I already told you, you can't stand here," the bouncer puts a heavy hand on my shoulder. "You really should head home."

"I'm waiting for the singer. I'm his girlfriend."

"Does he know you're here?"

"No, it's a surprise."

Dried sweat itches on my neck and palms. Tilting forward in high heels, my hand rests against the wall. A group of men leave the bar, howling with laughter, stumbling, whistling at me and another girl before disappearing around the corner.

"Well," says the bouncer. "You can't stand here all night."

Heading to Sam's apartment, orange and red neon signs blur together, someone shouts, my feet throb, a group of kids in hoodies huddle outside a sushi restaurant, women in tight black dresses and heels careen past, a homeless man sleeps under an awning, shrouded in shadows. The "L" train station is deserted except for a guy in baggy jeans and an oversized jersey who is listening to an old CD player with large earphones. Wet, dirty newspapers stick to the ground of the station. The guy nods his head, shuffles his feet, arms flailing.

The feel of the night is strange, the sensation of walking down a street by yourself at midnight not knowing exactly where you are going, but knowing that most of the places around

you are closed and empty. Sam says that kind of feeling is deep blue. He goes out at night and wanders around just to get that feeling stuck inside him. He says it's the only way he can write songs, the only time he can summon emotions strong enough to sing.

"I'm an insomniac," he told me, after the first time we made love. "My last girlfriend didn't get it."

Sam and I met at work, a place called *Tommy Gun's Garage*, a restaurant modeled on a 1920s speakeasy that attracts mostly tourists and people celebrating birthdays. I've been a waitress there ever since I moved to Chicago last July, right after I turned twenty-two. I had moved to Chicago for a guy, but he broke up with me after a few weeks. Then I met Sam. Sam plays the piano for the first part of the show at *Tommy Gun's* and, for the second half, he dresses up like a cop and pretends to raid the speakeasy. Sam says it's a stupid job, that dressing up like a policeman makes him feel like an ass. Sometimes though, after the audience is gone and the staff has cleaned up, I like to stay and look at the posters of '20s mobsters and flappers. My favourite is a poster of a girl in a black dress with eyes half-closed, a coy smile and a purple flower in her hair.

When I look at that poster, I sense Sam's deep blue feeling even more strongly. It's a religious feeling, mystical, the closest I've ever come to feeling like there's a heaven. I was jealous of Sam when he first told me about it because I'd never felt anything like it – not when my parents took me to church for the first time, not when I looked up at the stained glass windows of saints and martyrs, not when my mother hung a painting of angels in my room.

Waiting for a train in the station, I sense the feeling, but it's ephemeral, it slips away. The guy with the CD player stands still, staring out at the tracks.

Sam gets in from the Kingston Mines around 2 a.m.. I'm lying on the bed, staring up at the wet patches on the ceiling, listening to the couple in the apartment next door scream at each other in Spanish. Sam props his guitar against the small desk in the corner.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, genuinely surprised to see me on the bed. "I thought you had plans with Ashley."

"I canceled."

"Oh." Sam throws his black varsity jacket onto the chair, but it slides to the floor. He thumps onto the bed beside me without bothering to pick up the jacket. "Then why didn't you come to the show?"

His eyes are glassy and his breath smells like beer. Instead of waiting for an answer, he starts to kiss my neck and the side of my face. I should show him the letter right away. As I shrug off my dress straps and Sam slides his hand under my bra, I think of the letter's first words, "Congratulations, Miss Delaurentis, we are pleased to inform you..." Sam knows I applied to art restoration programs in Europe, that restoring ancient frescoes is what I've wanted to do since I was twelve and visited my aunt in Florence. I had studied art history and archeology in university back home in Ottawa, dreaming of the beautiful, intricate frescoes I had seen in the monasteries and convents of Italy.

Sam takes off his shirt. I slip out of my dress. Congratulations, we are pleased to inform you. Pushing Sam down on the bed, I dig my nails into his shoulder and kiss his lips hard. Congratulations, congratulations, congratulations.

Sam lies with his right foot hanging off the bed, his hand a few inches from mine. Instead of telling him about the letter, I tell him about the time I almost got arrested.

“I was sitting in a park and suddenly this silver car comes out of nowhere and chases me across a field.”

“That’s insane,” Sam says, eyes widening. “That’s unbelievable.”

“I was almost crying when the car caught up to me. Two guys got out of the car. They were dressed like policemen, but they didn’t act like officers. They said all kinds of crazy things to me. They said if I didn’t stop crying and screaming they’d arrest me. They wanted to know what I was doing alone in a park. They thought I was a prostitute or something.”

“What did you do?”

“I went with them to the police station. Eventually, they told me it was a misunderstanding. They said they thought I was part of a drug-deal.”

“They’re assholes. You should file a report.”

Sam puts an arm around me and rubs the top of my arm gently with his fingers.

“You should be more careful late at night, Georgia. Chicago has a lot of bad areas.”

“Yeah, I know.”

I kiss his fingers and lean back. After a few hours, when Sam thinks I am asleep, I hear him get up and go out onto the balcony to sing. His voice is deep and clear, but keeps getting softer, raspier, weaker. It trembles and hangs heavy in the dank apartment.

“I can’t get the tune right,” Sam complains.

We’re on the balcony in the evening and the setting sun has washed the city with crimson and gold. While Sam works on his new song, I lean on the metal railing and try to pick out my own apartment building from here.

“I got into the program in Florence.”

“What?”

Guitar chords stop abruptly.

“You know the program I applied for? I got in.”

“Oh,” says Sam. “Congratulations.”

But it doesn't sound like congratulations.

“When did you find out?”

“A week ago.”

“A week ago? Why didn't you say anything?” Sam pauses. “Are you going to go?”

“I'm not sure.”

“It's a great opportunity,” he says, but the way he says it makes it sound like it's the worst opportunity ever.

He grabs his guitar and heads inside. I follow him nervously through the sliding door.

“Are you angry?”

“No.”

Sam drops his guitar violently on the bed and the strings make a twanging noise.

“I haven't even decided if I'm going.”

“Don't be stupid, of course you have to go,” Sam says, voice bitter. “You talk about Europe all the time.”

“We could do long distance.”

“For a year?”

“Well, you could come too.”

“You fucking know I can't,” Sam spits. “I just can't believe you're really going to Florence.”

“But I don’t have to go.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Do you want me to?” I snarl, angry that he’s being so dismissive, that he’s acting like the decision has already been made for me. “Maybe I *will* leave, maybe I’ll leave tonight.”

“Alright,” Sam shouts. “If you’re dying to leave then you should.”

“Fuck you,” I try to yell back, but it comes out a whisper.

My purse swings against my side as I slam the door behind me.

It’s dark out and I’m not sure where I’m going. In the train station near Sam’s place, I remember the flask that is still in my purse from the other night. I take a drink and another. When the train arrives, it is full – two Latino boys talk and laugh loudly, an elderly white woman in a tattered coat looks like she has fallen asleep in her seat, a black man with dreadlocks gazes out the window, and five young women cluster together and sit on each other’s laps. One of the girls opens her purse and change falls onto the floor. She leans out of her seat to pick it up, almost falling when the train jolts to the left. Her friends are laughing.

At the next stop, the girl and her friends get off the train and, as they pass me, the girl’s arm bumps mine. She glares at me before laughing at something her friends have said and, for a moment, I feel like she’s laughing at me.

Once she’s gone, I take a sip from my flask, but when I press it to my lips, nothing comes out. The guy with dreadlocks glances at me. His half-closed eyes remind me of the flapper girl in the poster at *Tommy Gun’s*.

The train makes a sharp turn and I almost topple over.

A bartender with a nose-ring asks me what I want to drink.

“Martini.”

My feet ache from walking so I take off my heels and put them on the barstool next to me. The martini glistens in the dim lighting and the people on the dance floor become one large, moving shadow. Electronic beats thump and hum in my ears as the dancers grind and leer and grab each other.

I dig through my purse for my cellphone. Did I leave it behind at Sam’s? I double-check my purse, but all I come up with is the empty flask.

“Do you have a phone?” I ask the bartender.

“What?” he shouts back over the music.

“Can I use your phone?” I shout.

“Sorry,” he says. “For employees only.”

I need to call Sam to apologize. I shouldn’t have stormed out. No matter how upset I was, I shouldn’t have left. There are no payphones outside the bar so I try the handle of the restaurant next door. I walk three blocks, stopping to knock on random glass doors and windows to see if there are any open businesses that will let me use their phone.

I am tugging on the door of a pharmacy when I realise I left my shoes at the bar.

A bright red light shines from the top of a white building and mingles with streetlights. I’m close to *Tommy Gun*’s where Sam and I first met. Rows of lights shine from office windows and blur in my vision while others remain dark, like gaping mouths. In an alleyway, a girl with fishnet stockings leans up against a man cast in shadows.

Tommy Gun's is closed. My fists feel swollen from banging on the door. I can picture the inside – the chairs and tables facing an empty stage. To the right of the stage, there's the piano and, in the corner, there's an old-fashioned car. There are black and white photographs all around the room, but the poster of the flapper girl with the purple flower and half-closed eyes hangs on the back wall.

She overwhelms the room.

The next evening, I go back to Sam's apartment. We don't talk about the fight or about Florence. I tell Sam that I tried to break into *Tommy Gun's*, something he finds hilarious. He tells me about the nature documentaries he used to watch with his brother. Their favourite was one about emperor scorpions, a rare species that exists in Ghana and West Africa.

"Scorpions are nocturnal," Sam explains, his voice slow and deliberate, each word drawn-out like tendrils of smoke. "They're blind, but their bodies pick up vibrations."

I think of the feelings and sensations that he picks up at night, wandering down empty streets.

"You see," he says. "It's scientific."

Sam shifts towards me, his stomach pressed against mine so I can feel his shaky breaths in my body. I know that his brother overdosed in a bathroom two years ago, that Sam doesn't like to think about it, prefers to talk about his brother as though he's still alive. I know that he and his brother had watched the scorpion documentary a few days before their family moved into a smaller house in a rougher neighbourhood. That his father had a gambling addiction, that his father and brother used to scream at each other, that he started wandering the streets to avoid

going home. I know that Sam got into music because of his family's problems. I know that he loves music. I know that he loves me.

"Scorpions leave each other after mating," Sam says. "They can't live together, not long term anyway."

Later in the evening, Sam locks himself in the bathroom. He's drunk. I can hear water running in the bathtub, can hear him splashing around. I knock on the door, suddenly worried that dying in bathrooms is a family trait, that Sam is so drunk he will slip and crack his head on the floor.

When he emerges, I'm hovering at the door. He asks me why I'm standing there, accuses me of making him worried and uptight.

"How can I relax when you're always so nervous? When you act like I'm so incompetent, I can't even take a bath!"

I decide to ignore him for the rest of the night, but then I hear him retching. He's kneeling on the floor, bent over the toilet with vomit dripping down the seat and the side of his mouth. Sitting down beside him, I put an arm around him while he cries and whimpers and throws up some more.

When I get him into bed, his body is still damp from the bath water.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

His wet hair drips onto my shoulder and his fingers cling to my t-shirt.

"You're leaving aren't you? You're leaving me."

"I'm not."

He's still trembling so I rub his arms to calm him down. He falls asleep and we lie in the dark, a pair of scorpions with soft, thin shells.

That morning, while Sam is still asleep, I sneak out to my favorite place in the city: the courtyard of an old stone church with large wood doors and ivy that grows up the wall. There is a fountain in the centre of the yard. The frigid stone shocks the back of my legs when I sit down and the deep blue feeling comes back to me, stronger than ever, overwhelming every inch of me. It's not comforting or beautiful. It's not blue at all. It's so pale.

The courtyard is the one secret I've never shared with Sam. I haven't brought him here once in all the time we've known each other and now I'm going to Florence. I'm going to Florence while Sam stays behind and does the same things he always does. I want to call him to tell him that I love him, but instead I stay still with the cold fountain burning the back of my legs and a different feeling inside me, and I think of all the things we will do without each other.

The Salamander and the Moon

The spring I visit my brother in San Francisco is the spring I find out about red salamanders. Robbie tells me over the phone that red salamanders burrow under the sediment at the bottom of rivers, that because they have no lungs they have to breathe through their skin. My brother loves collecting random facts and red salamanders are his new obsession.

When he opens the door of his apartment, he looks surprised to see me.

“Rose,” he shouts. “What are you doing here?”

“I just wanted to see you,” I say as he hugs me.

I wait for him to smile, but instead he looks worried.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Don’t you have school?”

“Not on the weekend, stupid.”

Robbie’s apartment is smaller than I imagined, with a lumpy couch and a cluttered coffee table. A plant with white blossoms grows from a pot on a bookshelf – weird, since my brother has literally no talent for keeping flowers alive. When Robbie raises his arm to run his hand through his hair, I notice he has a new tattoo on his right forearm in the shape of a salamander. On the phone last week, he told me red salamanders eat insects and, occasionally, other lizards. They lay their eggs in October and are sensitive to water pollution.

Southern red salamanders are often purple.

Robbie and I stand awkwardly by the couch. I try to think of something to say when a female voice shouts from another room: “Robbie? Is someone there?”

He yells back, “My sister!”

“Is that your roommate?” I ask.

Before he can reply, a girl emerges from the bedroom, shaking out her long hair.

Dressed in black leather pants and a tank top, she has an intricate tattoo of an octopus on her shoulder blade, one tentacle curling down her arm. The girl hugs Robbie around the waist, her chin on his shoulder.

“So you’re Rose?” she smiles at me. “I’m Jia.”

She elbows my brother in the side. “You didn’t tell me your sister was coming to visit.”

“I didn’t know she was coming.”

Jia wanders into the kitchen. Robbie half-smiles at me then looks down at the floor.

“You have a new girlfriend?”

“Yeah, I told you a few months ago.”

“You didn’t.”

“I’m pretty sure I did.”

Robbie picks up a half-filled coffee mug from the table and takes a sip.

“So,” he says. “Does Dad know you’re here?”

That evening, I lie on the couch and stare at the plant with white blossoms. Jia has gone back to her own apartment and Robbie is on the phone with Dad in the other room. I’m not sure why my brother didn’t tell me he had a girlfriend. We tell each other everything or, at least we did, until he moved away nine months ago. Robbie is five years older than me, but people usually mistake us for twins. I knew before anyone else that he wanted to be a poet and, for a long time, I was the only one allowed to read his writing.

Eventually, Robbie comes into the living room and sits on the couch beside me.

“Dad is worried about you,” he says. “Why didn’t you tell him you were coming here?”

“Did you get a new tattoo?” I ask.

“What?”

I turn his arm over so that the salamander is visible. Robbie’s arms are so covered in tattoos there is hardly any space left. I have seen him get all of them, except for the salamander. He got the black and white tiger after reading a William Blake poem. He got the skeletons when his first girlfriend broke up with him. He got a tattoo of the moon after our Mom died.

I examine the red salamander – its tail twitches and its tongue flicks out.

“It’s really cool. Mom would like it. Red was her favorite colour. You know, she had that red sweater.”

Robbie shifts uncomfortably. We haven’t talked much about our Mom since she died. Robbie had moved to San Francisco almost a month after the funeral. At first, I couldn’t believe he had left so abruptly – I wouldn’t take his phone calls and I ignored his texts.

“Dad says you’re behind in school. He wants you to come home tomorrow morning.”

“Can’t I stay for the weekend? Please?”

“Well—”

“Aren’t you happy I’m here?”

“Yes, but—”

“When did you get it?” I’m still mesmerized by the salamander on Robbie’s arm.

“A few weeks ago, but Rose—”

“Where did you get it done?”

“Jia did it. She’s a tattoo artist.”

“It’s beautiful.”

Robbie sighs, “Look, you can stay for the weekend, but then you have to go home.”

“Okay.” I put my head on Robbie’s shoulder and he puts an arm around me.

“You’re really annoying,” he says.

We sit like that for a long time. I want to ask him about Mom, if he remembers the red sweater, if he remembers how she used to walk around the house gracefully, like she was floating, but then other times she’d snort with laughter in a way that was definitely not graceful. I don’t ask Robbie any of these things, instead I watch the red salamander on his arm as it flicks its tail at me.

In the morning, Robbie goes to one of his writing classes. He tells me he’ll be back in a few hours, but, if I get bored, Jia works in the tattoo shop next door.

The shop is small with an elephant painted on the door. On top of the elephant is a monkey and on top of the monkey is a rabbit. A bluebird perches on the rabbit’s head, reaching for a tree branch. Inside the shop, designs are pasted to the walls. Mermaids, skulls, roses. In the back room, Jia is tattooing a large man’s bicep with a picture of his daughter’s face. She says “hi” when she sees me walk in, then returns to her work, a look of intense concentration in her eyes. When she’s finished the man’s tattoo she asks if he likes it and holds up a mirror. He says it looks just like his daughter. Jia tells him that most of her family is in Beijing, that she and her parents moved to San Francisco when she was nine. She says she remembers some of the stories her grandmother used to tell her and her cousins when they were kids, says her grandmother is the best storyteller she knows.

I stay quiet while Jia and the customer talk, but their conversation makes me think of Mom, when she would tell me and Robbie fairy tales and family legends. She told us we lived in Vancouver because, after arriving in Canada from Ireland, our great-grandfather decided to walk across the country while hitting a golf ball. She said he started in Halifax and ended up in Vancouver. Other times, she made up absurd stories that made no sense, but rhymed.

Once the man leaves, Jia turns to me.

“How do you like San Francisco?” she asks.

“I haven’t seen much of the city yet, but it seems nice.”

“How old are you anyway?”

“Seventeen.”

“Ever think of getting a tattoo?”

“I like that one.”

I show Jia the design on the wall of a small blue swallow. The bird is so delicate – I picture it fluttering its wings and nesting below my ribcage.

Jia shows me a book of new designs she is working on. As she flips through the pages, I notice that her nails are painted with a beautiful gold and black zig-zag design. I wonder if she’d show me how to do nail art. It’s rare that I get along with Robbie’s girlfriends – normally, they ignore me or talk to me as though I’m twelve.

“How long have you and Robbie been together?” I ask.

“A few months now,” Jia says. “You know, your brother is so hilarious. When I first met him, he pretended not to know what an octopus was. He kept looking at my tattoo and saying “That’s a nice starfish.” I wasn’t sure if he was serious or kidding. I thought he was the weirdest person I’d ever met.”

Jia has a laugh that bubbles and bursts. She tells me that she was the one who asked Robbie out, that on their first date Robbie was so nervous he kept biting his lip and barely spoke two words. That was part of the reason she liked him, she said, because he was a good listener.

“I’m worried about him, though,” she says. “Last week, we went to a party and he tried to slide down a bannister, but he was so drunk he almost fell down the flight of stairs.”

She says he’s been depressed recently, that he cries a lot and sometimes has trouble getting out of bed. She knows our mother passed away a few months ago. It’s a terrible thing to go through, Jia says.

“Your brother struggles with depression anyway, doesn’t he? I mean, he told me he’s thought about suicide.”

“What?” I stare at Jia, stunned.

When we were kids, Robbie barely ever cried. Not when he broke his leg, not when his best friend moved away, not when we moved houses. He had not mentioned anything to me about being seriously depressed. Besides, I’d talked to Robbie last week on the phone and all he’d talked about were salamanders.

“Robbie’s not suicidal,” I interrupt. “I would know if he were. I mean, he would tell me.” I hear my voice rising. “You barely know him at all. You’ve been together for, like, half a minute and you think you know him better than me?”

Jia’s eyes widen. “Rose, I’m so sorry.”

I head for the door, my throat contracting so I can’t breathe. Outside, things are too bright. The smell of sewage leaks through the air. There’s no way what Jia said could be true. There’s no way. I look up and see a mannequin’s legs sticking out of a store window. The mannequin wears fishnet stockings and red heels. Maybe she’s scared. Maybe she’s angry at the

people below for not helping her. Her feet kick the air as though she is being dragged through the window against her will.

A few blocks later. Across the street. A woman in a silky red shirt. She looks like my Mom and, for a second, I think it's really her. She is not dead, I tell myself. She just moved to San Francisco and forgot to tell us. I follow the woman as she stops in front of a store with tie-dye clothing in the window. I follow her for three blocks until I get stuck behind a group of kids smoking cigarettes. I push past them, breathing in the sweet-smelling smoke, but the woman in the silky red shirt is gone.

I can't find her. I stand on the edge of the curb near a run-down building with a large window covered in small squares of paper. One piece of paper has a peace sign drawn in felt marker, another has a gas-mask. I kick a can of coke across the street and imagine that Mom moved out here to be an artist, that she lives in a two-story house with a cherry tree in the yard, that she has a lover who bought her a red silky shirt. I hear footsteps coming and I think it might be the woman, but instead, a young man with dreadlocks rounds the corner. He carries a walking stick and has a calico cat that rides on his shoulder. He looks at me like I'm a ghost.

I shiver as the wind picks up and keep walking to stay warm. Eventually, I reach a run-down building with a mural painted on the side of a Japanese girl holding red and purple flowers. I picture the mural coming to life: the flowers die in the girl's hands, but then, by some miracle, they blossom again, their colours more vibrant than ever. The flowers die and blossom, die and blossom. I wish that Robbie were here with me. He would tell me that all the graffiti in San Francisco is part of a private art gallery made for the two of us. He would say that everything is

fine, that he's not suicidal, that the woman in the silky red shirt is really our Mom and that they have both been living happily in San Francisco for months, waiting for me to join them.

Bright blue and red lights from the sign above the Castro movie theatre burn my eyes. Robbie and I wait in the line-up for tickets to tonight's show. There are no traces of sadness on his face that I can see. He says the Castro is an old-fashioned theatre that often plays old movies. Tonight, it's *Jaws*. As we stand in line, Robbie pulls out a plastic bottle of whiskey from his backpack and takes a drink.

"Hey," I nudge his arm. "At least wait 'til we get into the theatre. Someone will see."

"It's fine. No one cares."

Robbie takes another drink. By the time we're inside the Castro, he looks sort of unsteady. He stumbles down the aisle and plunks into a chair. As the movie plays, I sense him beside me drinking and fidgeting. He keeps looking at one of his tattoos, a pair of skeletons holding each other and waltzing.

"I think it's infected." Robbie leans into me. His breath smells terrible.

"It can't be."

"It is."

"It looks okay."

"I hate this stupid tattoo."

"I thought it was your favourite."

"I hate this stupid movie. It's about a fucking shark. Who gives a fuck about sharks?"

"This was your idea."

Half-way through the movie, Robbie says, “Rose? Could we leave?” We work our way down the aisle again, jostling knees and legs. “For God’s sake,” sighs one woman and a guy grunts loudly as he moves out of our way. Outside, Robbie slips away from me in the crowd of people. I jog after him.

“Hey, wait!”

I catch up to him on an empty street that inclines sharply upward with rows of houses on each side. He stops under an awning.

“I bet I could climb that fire-escape.”

“What? Don’t be stupid.”

I grab Robbie’s arm, but he twists away. The salamander tattoo writhes violently.

“Jia told me you’ve been depressed. Why didn’t you say anything? She told me you’ve thought about—about—”

Robbie laughs in a way that sounds sinister.

“I saw this woman today,” I tell him. “She looked exactly like Mom.”

“That’s fucked up, Rose. It wasn’t her.”

Robbie jumps and catches the ladder, climbs onto the first platform and sits down, resting his forehead against the metal bars.

“I know it wasn’t her,” I hiss under my breath, angry at Robbie for being so blunt. I’m angry that he’s climbed a fire-escape where he knows I can’t follow him. I’m angry that he didn’t call me more often, and that when he did call, he made stupid jokes and listed facts about reptiles instead of telling me how he really felt. I remember him telling me that people used to think salamanders were born in fire. What a stupid fucking thing to say.

“Hey,” Robbie calls down from the fire escape. “Do you want to know something?”

“No,” I shout back. “I don’t.”

My vision blurs as tears run down my face. A car barrels past us, blaring its horn for no particular reason. Robbie’s arms hang down over the railing and the two skeletons dance in the purple night shadows. The red salamander thrashes and thrashes.

I leave him on the fire escape. On my way back to the apartment, I see a guy lying on the street, his head upturned. He has puked all over himself and his legs twitch. Light from a passing car illuminates him and he looks like a saint.

I remember when we were kids, Robbie had nightmares and sometimes woke me up in the middle of the night. He described his dreams in such vivid detail that I felt like they were mine, not his. His cold feet had bumped against my warm ones as we fell asleep beside each other. When we were older, he had gone on road trips with his friends, but whenever he got home, usually after midnight, he woke me up to tell me all the details of the trip. I’d lie with my head on his shoulder, breathing in his scent – sweat, gasoline and cold night air.

I’m sitting on the steps outside the apartment when Robbie comes home. He sits down slowly beside me. He’s quiet at first, but then he says, “I’m sorry, Rose, for everything. After Mom died, I just wanted to get away.”

“You could have told me how sad you were. I mean, you could have talked to me.”

“I know.”

Robbie’s salamander tattoo is visible on his arm, but it’s more docile now. It curls its tail around the tattoo of the moon.

“You know I got this tattoo because of Mom,” Robbie says when he notices I’m looking at his arm. “She told us that fairy tale about the salamander who falls in love with the moon. Remember?”

“What?” I don’t remember the story at all.

“Well, you were pretty young and she only told it once.”

“What happens in it?”

“Um, the salamander asks a bird to carry him into the sky, but the bird refuses. He asks a butterfly and a bat, but none of them will help him. Eventually, he dives down to look for the mermaid who lives in the deepest part of the river and, when he finds her, she casts a spell so that he grows wings.”

When Robbie gets to this part, I vaguely remember the story. I remember my mother’s soft voice, the way she pronounced each syllable lushly. I remember her telling us that while the salamander is flying, he bursts into flames and turns to ash that falls to the ground. My mother liked sad stories, but she also had to have a happy ending. She told us that the bird and the butterfly and the bat collected the salamander’s ashes and moulded them into a soul, a soul that rose upward and settled around the moon.

I’m amazed Robbie remembers this story. Our Mom must have told us a hundred stories a hundred times, but he remembers the one she told us only once.

On my last day in San Francisco, Jia agrees to give me a tattoo to match Robbie’s: a red salamander and a yellow moon. When I feel the needle against my skin, I bite my lip until I taste blood. Pretty soon I’ll be able to look down and see the delicate black outline, the vivid colours.

When the tattoo is finished, Jia gives me instructions on how to clean and maintain it. Robbie tells me it looks even better than his. On the bus ride home, I watch the salamander wriggle and twitch on my arm just like Robbie's did.

Robbie and I make plans over the phone for me to spend the summer with him. He stops telling me random facts about red salamanders. Instead, he tells me that he and Jia are moving in together, that he's going to therapy, that he's getting a poem published in a magazine. I tell him that I found our mother's favourite sweater buried in one of her drawers. I tell him that I'm thinking of going to university for biology. The salamander tattoo on my arm has settled down and rarely moves anymore. It seems quiet and peaceful, its body curled around the moon.

Filmmaker

A young man, writing a script about a character named Paul, becomes distracted part way through the eleventh scene. Paul is left sitting at a table in a fancy restaurant on the verge of ordering a plate of oysters. While the writer is distracted, Paul begins to think “Oysters? I hate oysters.” What he really wants is a large slice of lasagna oozing with cheese. Paul is hurt that the writer didn’t take the time to figure this out – how can he expect to be successful if he doesn’t even know what his characters want?

Then, of course, there’s the issue of Ray. Ray was Paul’s best friend and roommate until the writer deleted him. They’d had a scene together where Ray did funny impressions of all the people living in their building. Later, when they watched TV together, Paul told Ray about the problems he was having with his girlfriend and Ray had nodded sympathetically. The next day, Paul woke to find that the writer had replaced Ray with Stupid Vern – Stupid Vern who didn’t know how to nod in that same sympathetic way, who seemed annoyed whenever Paul brought up his relationship problems. Stupid Vern who couldn’t even do the simplest impressions of their neighbours.

Now, half-way through the eleventh scene, sitting in a restaurant, poised to order oysters that he doesn’t really want, Paul wonders what happened to Ray. It’s one of the problems of being fictional, Paul thinks, especially when the writer is a snotty philosophy student who writes most of your scenes while he’s stoned. That’s the only way Paul can explain the naked couple who floated past his window last week. “The author’s trying to be surreal again,” Paul had yelled at Ray from the balcony. They both cracked up. Ray was the only one who understood, the only other person who seemed aware that they were part of a script. When they were sitting on the couch drinking beer, Ray got a little tipsy and leaned over to Paul. “You and me,” he said,

“we’re different from everyone else. We know how things really are.” That was the night Ray mentioned Vegas. He said he wanted to go there, kept bringing it up until he was almost yelling, “We have to go there! We just have to.”

“We could go next month, in September,” Paul added quickly, surprised and a little frightened that Ray could look so excited and distressed at the same time.

“Yeah,” said Ray, calming down. “September.”

Over the next few days, Ray would occasionally look over at Paul, eyes winking, and say “September.” They kept talking about a trip to Vegas, even though neither of them really believed it would happen.

But now, sitting in the restaurant half-way through the eleventh scene, Paul thinks: “Fuck it. Fuck oysters. Fuck the author. I’m going to Vegas.”

Vegas gleams. Paul guns the engine as he drives down the Strip in the car he borrowed from Stupid Vern. The author is too intellectual to write car chase scenes, but Paul has made up for this by speeding from Santa Barbara to Vegas in record time. His palms tingle against the wheel as he pulls up outside a hotel just off the Strip.

The hotel is called the Royal Resort and has a slot machine in the lobby that lights up. Paul drops his bag in the small room, heads out to look around. He loves the palm trees growing in lines along the side of the road, loves the way the sky looks purple with slashes of yellow and orange. The orange and yellow colours come from distant forest fires. It’s the summer of a massive heat wave, so hot that being outside is almost unbearable. Paul feels sweat on his hands and his neck. His lungs heave. He knows that Ray is somewhere in the city, that this has to be where Ray came after he was deleted. Paul sits down on the sidewalk across from the Bellagio

fountain where crowds of tourists take photos and their kids scream. Overwhelmed by the thought of trying to find Ray in such a busy place, Paul becomes entranced by the scene unfolding in front of him. He is still mesmerized by the crowds when a guy in white bellbottoms and gelled, black hair stumbles over and plunks down beside him. The guy accidentally whacks Paul on the shoulder.

“Hey,” says the guy in white bell-bottoms. “Watch it, buddy.”

The guy smells of liquor. Paul glares at him, but then he notices how upset the guy looks, how he keeps rubbing his forehead and blinking back tears.

“Is everything okay?”

“Of course everything’s okay. Why wouldn’t everything be okay?” the guy snaps.

“Are you part of a show?”

“Why would I be part of a show?”

“The way you’re dressed—” Paul stutters.

“What about the way I’m dressed?”

“Um, well, it’s unusual. It looks like a costume.”

“Are you calling me unusual? That’s very rude. You can’t just walk up to someone and call them unusual. You’re a rude person, you know that?”

“I didn’t walk up to you,” Paul objects. “You sat down beside me.”

“Oh, so what? Now you own the sidewalk?” The guy yells across the street, “This guy thinks he owns the sidewalk!”

“Okay,” says Paul, standing up. “I have to go.”

“Wait, wait,” the guy grabs his hand. “I’m sorry, man, I’m sorry. I’m a jerk. Ask anyone. I’m such a jerk. You can stay if you want.”

Paul tries to shake his hand loose, but the guy has a firm grip.

“Come on, come on, sit back down. I’ll tell you why I’m dressed this way if you stay.”

“Okay,” Paul says, sitting back down reluctantly.

“I am part of a show, like you said. I’m an Elvis-impersonator.”

“A what?”

“An Elvis-impersonator.”

Paul feels bewildered. Elvis has not come up before in the script.

“You know, Elvis. Jailhouse Rock. Hound Dog. Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of Elvis.”

Paul listens as the guy rattles on about this Elvis person. Then the guy starts to talk about his own life history. His name is Eric. He comes from Chicago. The Elvis thing, he says, is just for now.

“You know,” says Eric. “You look like him. Like Elvis.”

“I do?”

“Yee-aah, sure,” Eric slaps Paul on the shoulder. “You should consider it as a career. What’cha do for a living anyway?”

When he and Ray lived in the apartment, Paul worked at a bank. That was how the writer described him in the list of characters at the beginning of the script: Paul, a twenty-two year old bank-teller. But there had been no scenes actually set at the bank so Paul is unclear on what exactly his tasks involved.

“I’m not sure.”

“How can you not be sure?” Eric looks surprised. “Ohhh, wait. This is Vegas. You’re a professional gambler. Okay, I get it.”

Paul wonders if Eric really could get him a job as a performer. Even if he can't, Paul thinks, it's nice to have someone to talk to again, even someone obnoxious like Eric.

Paul gets a job at the club where Eric works, but not as a performer. They need more cleaning staff and when the manager meets Paul he says, "Okay, fine." It's not such a bad job. The pay is alright and Eric's around. On their days off, Eric insists on going to the casino. Paul doesn't have much interest in gambling, but he likes watching the people who drift in and out of casinos, likes imagining who they are and where they are going. He looks for Ray's face among the swarm of people, but doesn't see anyone who resembles him. Eric, meanwhile, plays blackjack and slips quarters into slot machines. "There's a system," he explains. "You have to know what you're doing." Paul is pretty sure that Eric doesn't know what he's doing. Part way through a game of poker, a card falls out of Eric's sleeve.

"Hey," calls a bald man across the table. "That guy is cheating."

"Cheating?" says Eric. "I'm not cheating. This is merely my lucky card."

"He *is* cheating," says another guy loudly.

"Alright," the dealer looks at Eric. "I'm going to ask you to leave before I have to call security."

"What does it matter? He's losing anyway," laughs the bald guy.

"Why don't you shut up?" Paul is surprised to hear those words coming from his mouth.

"Yeah," says Eric. "Why don't you shut up?"

The bald guy stands up and rounds the table.

"Okay," says the dealer. "You, sir, need to calm down and you two—" He motions to Eric and Paul. "—need to leave."

The bald guy makes a fist, pulls back his hand like he's going to punch Eric in the jaw, but he doesn't get a chance because Paul hits him first. Hard. Knuckles sting, his heart beats quick, blood pounds in his ears. At that moment, Paul feels less like a fictional character than ever before. Paul: a twenty-two year old bank-teller. Scratch that. Paul: a hot-tempered twenty-two year old. Paul: a tough gang member living in Vegas. Paul: wanted outlaw.

"Shit, man," says Eric after they've been kicked out of the casino and instructed not to come back. "Where'd you learn to hit like that?"

Paul shrugs.

"You were like, BAM," Eric imitates Paul's fist colliding with the bald man's jaw. "And that guy was like stunned. I mean, he was, like, straight-up stunned."

Back at Paul's hotel room, Eric still looks impressed. He wants to know where Paul grew up, what things were like for him. Do you have any brothers? Eric wants to know. Did you ever take boxing? What would you do if you weren't stuck cleaning floors at the club? What's your story, man? What's your story?

Paul doesn't know how to answer Eric's questions at first. The writer didn't give him much of a back story so he has to make things up. But, the more Paul talks, the less it feels like he is inventing a story. After a while, it starts to feel real.

Paul tells Eric how he was born in Santa Barbara along the beach. His father is Irish, his mother is Navajo. He tells Eric that he has a brother and a sister, but, growing up, he was closer to his best friend Ray, who he played soccer with after school. It was the only thing Paul ever wanted to do: stay out late in the field after everyone else had gone home, kicking the ball towards the goal, towards the fence, towards trees, towards nothing. When they were older, Ray died jumping off a cliff into water that was too shallow. They said it was a stupid way to go, but

at least he died happy, thinking he was the coolest person alive for jumping. And now, Paul thinks, I'm here. Living in a Vegas hotel where there's a slot machine in the lobby and the sky is purple. Someday, though, things will be different. Someday I'll be a filmmaker. I'll write a script about a guy who comes to Vegas and meets this other crazy guy who takes him on adventures. They get into a fight and suddenly the script changes. The fight makes something crack. It makes all the dialogue fall apart so that when they get back to the hotel room their words come loose, their words become physical things that fall around them like snow. I'll make a movie where the last frame is two guys sitting in a hotel room with words falling over them.

Coming back to the hotel after an afternoon of listening to Eric describe the most effective way to cheat at black-jack, Paul sees her in the hallway in her yellow dress. He's seen her before, talked to her enough to know that her name is Hailey and that she is on vacation with friends. She lives in L.A. with her father, studies at UCLA. She bites her nails and seems to spend most of her time in the outdoor pool. This time when Paul sees her, she's on her way back from the pool, her long wet hair dripping down the back of her dress.

"Hey," she smiles at Paul. "You know I see you all the time. You should come over and have a drink."

Paul begins spending his evenings after work with Hailey. She lies on her stomach on the bed with her bare feet in the air, her chin resting on her hands. Paul sinks into the chair across from her. Hailey tells him that she's an actress, says that acting is like building a person. You have to create your character's voice and movements. You have to know things about them that aren't in the script, like what they would have for breakfast and their favourite colour.

"How do you do that?"

“Oh,” says Hailey, “it helps to act like your character as much as you can. You find things out as you go along. You become them.”

On his fourth visit to her hotel room, Hailey reads Paul sections from different plays. Her favourite character is Ophelia. When she reads Ophelia’s speech, Paul gets worried that Hailey is such a good actress that someday she will become a fictional character for good.

“Well?” she says wanting to know what he thinks of her performance.

She perches on the edge of the bed, one foot tucked underneath her, the play held loosely in her hand. He should kiss her now before she disappears into a script. Hailey’s voice is quick and her words come in rushes. Paul likes the way she looks up at the ceiling when she’s talking about something that makes her excited. He likes the way she pushes her dark bangs out of her eyes, the way she wrinkles her nose when he says something she disagrees with. He likes the freckles sprinkled across her nose like cinnamon powder. He even likes the bruise on her knee she says came from slipping at the pool.

Paul asks her every question he can think of and feels a thrill in his stomach while he’s waiting for her answers. Her favourite flowers are daisies. She once ate an entire jar of olives in one sitting. She has never been in love. She likes mornings and wakes up early to go running. She thinks there might be a heaven, but she’s not sure. She has a gray kitten back at her father’s house that bites her hand when it feels she’s not giving it enough attention.

Before he came to Vegas, Paul had a girlfriend named Nina. Paul is not sure what she looked like since the writer didn’t give them any scenes together. Nina did call him once and the writer made Paul ask her the same questions over and over – when are we getting together? Why are you blowing me off? Is there someone else? None of these questions felt true. He wanted to ask Nina what she did all day, what her life was like. Do you prefer fiction or reality?

“Oh,” says Hailey. “What’s the difference?”

She kisses him first, but he’s the one who puts his hand up her skirt. He’s the one who kisses her arms down to her fingers when they’re lying in bed. He’s the one who runs his fingers through her hair, the one who kisses her shoulder while she’s sleeping. In the morning, he knows he has to tell her. She blinks up at him lazily, her head on his chest.

Paul: Can I tell you a secret?

Hailey: What?

Paul: I used to be fictional.

Hailey (*Surprised*): What?

Paul: It sounds strange, I know. But I used to be a character in a script.

Hailey: You were?

Paul: Yeah...

Pause. Paul appears worried.

Hailey: What was it about?

Paul: I’m not really sure. Mostly it was me and Ray in our apartment.

Hailey: Who’s Ray?

Paul: My best friend. My first friend, really.

Hailey: What happened to him?

Paul: He got deleted.

Hailey: I’m sorry.

Paul: He talked about coming to Vegas, you know. I’ve been looking for him.

Hailey: Any luck?

Paul: No.

Hailey: I could help you look. We could check hotel registries.

Paul: Thanks, but I dunno. I don't think he's here. I think I should stop looking for him.

Hailey: Where do you think he went?

Paul shrugs. There is a pause.

Hailey: You know, maybe you could write him back into existence.

Paul: What?

Hailey: Well, if you wrote something about him, he'd come back. Wouldn't he?

Paul (*Skeptical*): I don't know...

Hailey: You could write him an ending.

Paul: But I've never written anything before. Not really.

Hailey: I thought you wanted to be a screenwriter.

Paul: I do, but—

Hailey: Don't be nervous.

Paul: I'm not nervous. I'm just not sure I should write an ending for Ray.

Hailey: Why not?

Paul: Because I wouldn't know how to go about it. What if I messed it up and he came back different?

Hailey: That wouldn't happen.

Paul: It could.

Hailey: Oh, come on, Paul.

Paul: Don't "oh, come on, Paul" me. Maybe Ray doesn't want an ending.

Hailey: Well, what about you?

Paul: What about me?

Hailey: Don't you want an ending?

Paul: No.

Hailey: Why not?

Paul: I'd rather stay here.

Hailey: But, we can't stay here forever. Something has to happen.

Paul: Christ, Hailey, I'm not going to write the ending! Let's talk about something else.

Hailey: Don't yell.

Paul (*Yelling*): I'm not yelling!

There is a silence.

Hailey: I still think you should write an ending for Ray. Don't you miss him?

Paul: Yeah, of course...

Pause.

Paul: I'm still not sure.

Hailey: C'mon, Paul, please?

Paul: Well...

Hailey: For Ray?

Paul: Okay, here it goes.

By the time September comes, I'm still in Vegas. Hailey has gone back to L.A. with her friends. Her hotel room is empty except for a hairclip in the shape of a butterfly that must have fallen out of her suitcase while she was packing. I lay the hairclip in the drawer of my desk. I

keep expecting the butterfly to come to life and fly away, but it doesn't. Sometimes I think I can hear its wings fluttering against the insides of the drawer, but when I open the drawer, the clip is in the same place as always. Beside the butterfly clip is a screenplay I'm writing about a character named Ray who travels the world. Right now, according to the script, Ray is at a party in Portugal having the time of his life. And maybe he really is.

I spend the evenings with Eric on the sidewalk outside the hotel. He tells me he has a brother who died. He says it was a motorcycle accident. Across the road, the palm trees sway. Eric says that Elvis had a brother too, a twin brother who was born dead. I ask Eric if he ever wants to leave Vegas. He says that, yeah, he will probably leave soon, sometime before winter. He's left lots of cities before. I ask if I can come with him and he says, "Sure, company is nice." Maybe by the time he and I are driving somewhere new, Hailey will have starred in a play that gets rave reviews. She'll get the lead role in another play and she'll start making movies. The next time I see her she'll be on TV and our time in Vegas will start to feel more like a story.

"Eric," I say. "Let's stay out here all night. Let's not go to bed, let's just stay out here as long as we can."

"Okay," says Eric who, as usual, is down for anything.

The ice in our drinks melts. It's the hottest summer ever. I tell Eric that my lungs feel like they're shrivelling up inside me. Eric laughs and pushes my arm. "You're such a freak," he says. Sweat stains form on the pavement where we're sitting, but they'll dry up fast in this heat. Soon Eric and I will pack our things. Eric will insist that we shouldn't bring too much and then, a few hours later, cajole me into putting more of his stuff into my suitcase. There will be all the noises of leaving: the thump of my suitcase thrown in the back seat, the grind of shoes against pavement, the slam of car doors.

Eric saying, "Paul, hurry up, let's go."