

East-Ending
By Chalsley Taylor

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ABSTRACT*East-Ending*

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After losing her lucrative position at a marketing firm, 31-year-old Geneva is forced to move in temporarily with her mother, June, an exacting eighth-grade teacher and first-generation Canadian living in Scarborough. Neither mother nor daughter cope well with the arrangement. The return draws Geneva back within the orbit of her large, estranged Trinidadian family. Cousin Fran, older by two years and now a mother herself, appears to have replaced Geneva in June's day-to-day life. Embittered by the termination, Geneva resents having to return to Scarborough. With nicknames like "Scarberia" and "Scarbage," its status among her peers is dismal at best—it is said to lack arts, culture, and possibilities. She finds herself increasingly ill-equipped to deal with the familial and cultural expectations she faces both at home and in her professional life.

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DEDICATION

For Sally-Anne & Quincie-Alysha

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Negotiation

Geneva still hadn't told anyone she had to move. Even though housing was standard conversation in any social setting, her professional context raised the stakes considerably. It was bad enough to have still been renting; most others on her level at the firm were already paying mortgages. The new-mortgage set ran together and delighted in homeowner talk. It wasn't enough to deliver on work ethic, ideas, or "agility". If you wanted to really climb at a firm like M&B, your lifestyle needed to be as attractive as your resume. *Look like the success you're after* had been Geneva's mantra from one rung to the next, year after year.

Soon, her situation would be common knowledge.

Her bathroom was suddenly so much larger now that she'd all but emptied it. She stared at her reflection, trying to focus, but kept catching sight of the glass floating shelf she'd installed almost three weeks ago. The holes she'd drilled for it were huge. As they'd need patching, it would have to be abandoned along with the apartment. The prospect of performing any more improvements felt too big an insult on top of the injury of the last couple weeks. The shelf, in contrast, seemed a more manageable loss. Naked, it had an awful gleam under the vanity lights spanning the mirror.

With her hands on the counter, Geneva leaned in toward her reflection so that it was all she could see, going over the talking points for her call to June, trying out different versions of each—an unforeseeable disaster; if only the timing had been different; in any other situation she would never even consider asking, could hardly bear to ask now; she could never have prepared for this, but here she was, and had to do what was best—pausing in between to evaluate her word choice, her inflections. What she was now preparing to attempt was unprecedented in her life. Somehow, she had to frame this sudden backslide as a pivot in the right direction.

It had only been a couple months since Geneva had called her mother to report her promotion to Traffic Manager. She'd made sure to explain the magnitude of her achievement, just as she had four years before when she'd been made Assistant Traffic Manager. Listing her new responsibilities didn't translate well, but figures impressed her mother—how much younger she was than the average hire at that level, how many more years of experience most needed to even

be eligible. In the course of their conversation, Geneva twice indulged in quoting the Director's speech when he announced her as "our youngest Traffic Manager in the history of Merrill & Brecken!"

"Well!" June had responded. "Then I am proud of you."

The holy grail of June's compliments. Her mother's voice took on a smidgen more gravitas than usual as she'd offered each word with purpose. Geneva remembered only two other instances of it:

1) When Geneva had learned to neatly braid her hair in two even plaits at the age of thirteen. (She knew now that it was particularly impressive to have mastered it before June first took her to get her hair chemically straightened.)

2) When she presented the very first of her 5-year planning binders to June.

June's compliment had to be relished and not just for its rarity. The way June delivered it suggested that what she offered was a privilege in scarce supply. On the infrequent occasions when June told parents, "You should be proud," it was likely taken as merely a polite observation, but it was meant as an imperative. One's children were litmus strips indicating the precise grade of your handiwork. If an Aunty disapproved of someone's behaviour or lifestyle, her opinion was invariably confirmed by that person's "wild children"—or, rather, the mother's wild children. When had Geneva first noticed that many of the laws governing her family only applied to women and girls? It had to be decades ago, when the big drama going around over the holidays her senior year of high school had been that (great) Aunty Greta was fed up with her niece, Giselle who, she alleged, "always have someone else taking care of her kids."

A birth certificate was the contract under which you were bound to make (so as to return) as much money as possible, in one form or another. Time spent raising children was time invested, and a return was expected, its size in direct proportion to how well one did as a parent. Geneva's returns were as yet insufficient, though she aspired to grow them. She budgeted extra for June's gifts, but still never had the satisfaction that came with gifting paid bills or paid vacations. Now those hopes were diminishing, nearly vanished.

Even still, common sense and rental listings told her this was the best option. She need only explain as much to June, but it would require focus. Her mother believed verbal ticks were the fraying edges of a lie, the hallmarks of deceptive behaviour in action.

Geneva had long ago developed a habit of rehearsing all conversations of consequence, many of which appeared (to the less diligent) to be casual social exchanges. By using the same rigorous preparation she applied to pitches and presentations, she left nothing to chance, lest something slip out unchecked, the mind free-associating at the behest of her furtive unconscious with its inordinate capacity to ruin her.

By the time she'd actually dialed her mother, the pressure of all her prepared lines crowded at the back of her throat. She made sure to say she'd *lost* her job, never to utter the word *fired*. People were fired after they fucked up, but you lost your job when something fucked you up. It was not too far from the truth, anyway: someone had.

But it would be too messy to explain, with too many actors involved. And the sting of injustice had not yet left her. Geneva was guilty only of having gone above and beyond for the good of the client and the firm. All she'd done was push her team to deliver their best, to reach the heights they themselves didn't even know they were capable of. In the end, for all her efforts, she'd been punished for someone else's failure to keep up. Could she really be held accountable for their inability to measure up to the standards that she herself had worked so long, not only to uphold, but to raise? Was she to blame for JF's failure to act when she'd brought Grace's several missteps to his attention? Geneva had even made an explicit recommendation to replace her after one especially moronic presentation. And yet, here Geneva was. She still couldn't tell the story without shouting, and shouting would not work for her now.

So, once June was on the line, Geneva remained vague about the circumstances of her dismissal, but reiterated, in as many platitudes as came to mind, her disappointment over her diligent work for the firm going to waste, her loyalty. She'd always been so dedicated, first to arrive, last to leave. *Unbelievable*, she kept saying, *I just cannot believe this is happening*.

June's patient listening was not to be taken for understanding, nor sympathy. Geneva could almost hear the tightness of her mother's mouth clamping shut. A practiced investigator, June would await all relevant facts before making any pronouncements. Over calls made twice a

month, Geneva had been narrating her career progress since graduation: starting out as a precocious intern (an impressive presenter, her supervisor had said), then ad sales, and—in a stunning leap—assistant to the traffic manager soon after. She'd used the word *unprecedented* more than once. She'd been diligent in etching this portrait of her professional self as exceptional, uniquely adept. Now that disaster had arrived, it, too, must be exceptional.

But how...? June began to ask, one of several attempts she made to clarify the chain of events Geneva was racing through. June's voice, in the hollow space of the connection sounded as if it were being swallowed by an ocean roar, throwing echoes all around her probing questions. Geneva remained on point. It was such a long story, she still couldn't believe it, for now she just needed to focus on what to do next, she couldn't afford to lose any more time. Geneva peppered her winding account with enough jargon to disinterest June, and distract from the holes in her story.

Eventually: "Is there any way I could possibly stay with you?"

All went quiet on the line. The intermittent shuffling of papers, which she'd heard in the background from the time June had answered the call, now stopped. The pause was likely no more than several seconds, but the weight of the silence stretched out the moment unbearably.

Finally, "You know, I only have so much space here—"

"Of course!"

Geneva leapt onto the tail end of every objection June came up with, having picked them out herself in preparation. It wasn't a move home, no, only boarding on a very temporary basis. Geneva was careful not to refer to it as a visit; visitors demanded care. Guests required attention; it was an obligation that could not be refused. June had to see the proposition as a potential gain; Geneva just had to sell her this vision.

She tied up her pitch with a litany of ifs—if she didn't have anyone to turn to, if she had to get a room somewhere that drained her savings and forever kept her from recovering her position again, if... But, thank God, here was June, a bridge to carry her over and above this misfortune. The ifs worked in reverse as well—if she could just stay a month or so with June, if she could pay a low enough rent, she could job hunt without decimating her savings, get back on track, back on top.

“I suppose you would have to stay in the office, th—”

“Of course!”

“In there I have the day bed from—”

“Perfect!” Geneva paced the apartment, stepping around boxes, phone in hand.

“All right.” The lack of conviction in June’s voice was made even more apparent coming through its tinny speaker. “For how long do you plan—”

“Two months—at the most. Probably just one.”

What would she do with her furniture and belongings? Geneva assured her that the contents of her apartment were to be stored in a unit, she wouldn’t have much to bring, wouldn’t take up much space at all. June wanted to know why she wasn’t selling her things instead. The suggestion knocked Geneva off balance. Finding herself on the verge of a stutter, she took a breath before insisting it would only be a waste of time; they wouldn’t be in storage long, she would have a new job and a new place before long.

She offered to pay more in rent than she could afford and struggled to stifle her relief when June returned a lower figure. Not long afterwards they hung up, the terms of her stay established.

Eyes

On “moving day” she rode the subway north for twelve minutes and then east for twenty-two. On the eastbound train she sat window-side in a double seat with her belongings packed on and around her like sandbags. Unable to reach her phone, she kept her eyes trained on the view outside even when the train was still underground. This way she could avoid the disapproving eyes she felt on her and on the seat filled by her largest duffle.

As the train approached Victoria Park, it surfaced to reveal a thick ravine, trees behind which were houses, behind which were high-rise apartments. When it reached platform three, teen boys slid into her line of vision; one sat atop a transfer dispenser flanked on either side by the other two. All three supervised the passengers come and go. Geneva only noticed she was frowning at them once the boy on top met and returned her look.

On the bus ride up Kennedy Rd. the steady stream of strip malls, outlet plazas, and low-rise apartments gave way to massive corporate compounds just past the highway offramp. Farther north the malls and plazas returned, but here they were surrounded by high-rise apartments and a newly built housing complex. On the complex’s street-facing side was a row of townhouses, which Geneva thought would be nice if not for the Beer Store across from them.

She tried to remember when last she’d been forced to make the trip out to her mother’s place. Since she’d first begun at M&B, work provided a good excuse to skip out on family functions, work being the one obligation relatives would not object to. The more career advancements she made, the less she could be faulted for failing to appear at every Easter or Thanksgiving. Even Christmas could be avoided once she’d landed Assistant Traffic Manager. The promotion might not have been enough on its own—Christmas being *the* holiday at which you absolutely must lay eyes on your family— but Geneva had been born December 23rd. Birthday celebrations, if there were to be any, consisted of a small interlude in the Christmas Day gathering. Her relatives would sing a quick-tempo “Happy Birthday,” and the gift exchange began with those marked for her, the one’s whose tags had “and happy birthday!” scrawled under the glittery “Merry Christmas” printed on them. The year she was promoted, she booked herself a resort vacation in Barbados, high on her new authority. It would be her first, annual birthday trip.

In her view the family could hardly argue with her—at least, June hadn't argued when Geneva shared her plans, having just confirmed the booking.

Arrival

While she was still on the bus it had begun to rain. In the time it took her to walk from the bus stop to June's house, she, and most of her bags, were drenched.

Geneva entered like a grenade when she burst in, gasping, and laden with a duffle bag, hiker's backpack, a day bag she'd purchased "for Saturday activities" (too often mistaken for a diaper bag) and wrapped around one wrist, threatening to cut off blood flow to her right arm, a drawstring bag of shoes. June hovered around in a panic over the dripping water ("Not there, don't rest it there!") while Geneva struggled free of her trappings.

Geneva's father watched the chaos from the three portraits her mother had on conspicuous display: one on the console table in the entryway, and two in the living room, facing one another. One was a wedding portrait of him in a white suit and June in frills and large glasses, smiling with practiced gentleness. So too had they been arranged in their old house, as much out of respect (or was it supposed to look like mourning?) as to remind them both he had existed at all. Geneva had been only four when he collapsed on shift, gripped by what would be a fatal heart attack. His name was never uttered by June, and in Geneva's memories of him, he always wore an outfit from one of these portraits. They were not, however, true memories, but visions of him in the most banal situations—standing in the middle of the kitchen holding a glass, or watering the lawn, or coming out of the basement carrying...something. Most often she imagined tools, feeling that made the most sense even though she'd no sense of whether he had been a "handy man" before he died.

Orientation

Later that evening, June gave Geneva a tour of the house to ensure the systems she'd established remained undisturbed. Or—as she put it—“So you have everything you will need.” Geneva was familiar with most of these systems, but the details had changed. June had less space, but more towel sets. There was compost now too, and for this she had devised a detailed set of instructions on how best to avoid excess odour. The heat was not to be turned on until the outside temperature fell below ten degrees Celsius.

“So—tea towel, dish towel, hand towel,” June said, indicating three towels folded over the oven door handle, equally spaced. They were all the same size, texture, and colour scheme, but each had a different pattern. “You remember. Always in that order.”

“I remember,” Geneva said, but her mother had moved on and didn't hear her, not having expected a response. Now she opened the fridge door to reveal a half-cleared mid-level shelf. “You can keep food here.” *And nowhere else*, Geneva thought.

In a manner familiar to Geneva, the quiet formed an imposing presence that was embodied in the way June had arranged her furniture and decor. The living room was a life-size diorama, its arrangement making clear that it was not meant for use. A scene frozen in time, so that you felt you were the only thing moving, or movable, and that it was wrong of you to be so. If one were to lounge, one did so in the basement. Or so it had been in their old house, the basement space that of the bizarro-living room, its negative, shabby reflection, the well-worn and yet well-maintained couch and arm chair twinning with the set upstairs. Here, the basement could not be used for anything beyond storing great rubber tubs. “It is too damp,” June explained. Now the old arm chair lived in her bedroom.

Geneva thought of June passing weeks, months, years in this new house, alone and still forbidding herself to live in the living room. With Geneva in the office, she'd now lost the only other off-stage space in the house. Would she even now refuse to violate the order she'd fixed? Watching the not-quite-distant highway out the picture window, Geneva felt as if she were in hiding.

Once June went off to bed (at nine, sharp) Geneva shut herself in the small room. Throughout June's house sprawled a quiet that was dense yet not quite silent. More a constant hum, but not white noise, now and then punctuated by a passing car. Standing alone, listening, gave her an unnatural sensation she'd only felt in dreams, when she knew she was not really in the room her eyes showed her. Kneeling on the dun carpet she tore into her duffle bag, looking for pyjamas, but once she pulled them out she kept emptying the bag until the contents surrounded her. The last of it was a pair of large black binders.

Her notebooks tracked her day-to-day life, but for her five-year plans Geneva assembled thick binders. The very first binder she had put together covered all five years, but it was an ever-evolving system. One aspect or another might change or be eliminated; now and then she'd try adding a new tracker as there came more apps to account for each part of her life. She was proud of how far her system had come since June first asked her on her fourteenth birthday, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" (The next year it was, "...in ten years?")

Eventually, the single five-year binder became the parent-dossier to five child-dossiers; the former summarized the goals she'd established for each year (whether personal, professional or financial), and the latter laid out detailed paths for each. They also housed any relevant documents that could prove useful—usually webpage printouts from the corresponding bookmarks folders in her web browser. For each goal completed she recorded:

- 1) Date:
- 2) Deciding factor:

Filling in those blanks would seem a non-event to any outside observer, but it brought on a visceral satisfaction, which (though she could hardly bear to acknowledge it) had spilled over into arousal more than once.

Employers, for the most part, were impressed by her system but it repelled those at, or below, her pay grade. Word of her habit got around not long after she started at M&B and for a time, she'd hear the snickering from across the lunch room. But it didn't matter—she'd seen results before, and had again by the end of that year. The unpaid internship was meant to be two years: year one to earn your final college credit, year two to earn your "experience." Geneva was

the only one to be rewarded with a paid internship for year two and, after that, an entry-level position at the company. Her rise through the ranks proved her methods, and then some.

Each binder had a mantra, always appearing after the title page, the text sized so that the phrase filled the sheet (all caps, naturally). She loved to collect new ones from the memoirs and personal development books she read—now and then a TED Talk—but a few old standards reappeared over the years. Year one’s mantra was “FAKE IT TIL YOU MAKE IT,” and armed with enough research to do so, Geneva gradually infiltrated each department. These were recon missions: get in, get something you can use, back out undetected. This way she could present herself to the company—the partners—as the one subordinate they could not dispense with. She could be a versatile, knowledgeable and insightful contributor to any team meeting, whether for accounts, media, or the heavily guarded creative department.

Before she made Traffic Manager her devotion to the binders was, without exaggeration, religious. Through them she’d come to understand the utility of ritual, how fundamentally pragmatic it was. But once she was fired, she didn’t crack a single one, wouldn’t look at them except to box them up. The guilt that accumulated each day they went untouched was absurd and all-consuming, and there existed no priest who would hear her fugitive’s confession. Trying to get her bearings in the aftershock, she plotted her next moves in her head.

It wasn’t until she and all her bags were finally moved into June’s home office that she could make her prodigal return. Cross-legged on the day bed, she opened the current year’s binder at the SEPTEMBER tab, then to the following page: PROFESSIONAL GOALS: SUMMARY. Uncapping the black sharpie she kept for the purpose, Geneva drew a diagonal line through the page. On the next pages, the same. Some lines she made with enough force that it seeped through and left spots on the next page. She inhaled the foul fumes.

Saturday

With her membership and all its attendant fees paid for, to forgo what had been her local gym would be to lose money. And yet, to make the trip would cost her one hundred and five minutes of daylight, maybe more. It was already half-past eight. June would have been up for hours by now, she knew. Her mother's Saturday never began any later than half-past six unless she was very ill. As Geneva lay in bed, clenching and calculating, time moved onward without her.

Lose, lose.

Lose job, lose house.

Geneva refused to let the feeling settle. She would adapt, go for a run along the road before much traffic picked up. At last she would put to use the expensive three-piece runner's suit (four, counting the hat) still tagged after sitting in her pyjama drawer for years—purchased when she was still in ad sales to help convince the owners of a cross-fit gym that she was an avid enthusiast. A mini-boutique, installed by the entrance with a display window of buff, eggshell mannequins in activewear, beckoned passersby aspiring towards a healthier life. Mid-pitch, she'd told them, "I've actually been dying to get into cross-fit—I definitely need to get one of those fabulous outfits," but did not anticipate that the woman would accompany her on the way out. The suit cost more than she spent on food in a month. She put it on credit, and closed the sale a day later.

Getting into the thin jacket, Geneva rehearsed the announcement of her plans. As June had said at the end of the small tour through the house, *This is not a hotel.*

When she reached the threshold of the kitchen, she managed only a partial greeting before being muted by the sight of her cousin at the sink. Geneva's mouth hung open a moment too long. The image made no sense. Dishwashing was not a sanctioned activity for a guest in June's house. Geneva had witnessed several dinner guests over the years—each an unfortunate mix of well-meaning and determined—offer and offer to lend a hand, despite June's protests. If the offender became so bold as to handle her dish sponge, they suffered a glimpse of June at the edge. She'd give up her polite, "No, no thank you, there's no need, thank you, no," and instead

lash them with, “Stop it,” said at no higher volume, but with a speed that belied the warning in her command.

“My god, it lives—barely,” Fran laughed, and then sang, “Good morning, Genie.”

Neither woman appeared to register Geneva’s confusion. When she asked her cousin, “What are you doing here?” it earned her a reproachful glare from her mother.

June said, “It is Saturday,” offering the fact as explanation enough. The air between them was full of garlic; June sat at one counter chopping the last head of it, knife knocking against the wood with mechanical rhythm. Covering another were heaps of dark greens, peppers, tomatoes. Some kind of meat hacked into chunks in a frosty plastic bag sat thawing in the second basin of the sink.

Fran chirped, “Meal prep day!” and boasted of *their* Saturday routine: Fran arrived early in the morning with groceries to help “Aunty June” prepare meals for the coming week. Geneva understood none of this. She nodded anyway. Had June forgot to mention the arrangement, or was it she herself who’d forgotten?

“So...where are you off to?” Fran looked unconvinced by the outfit.

Geneva, in defiance, zipped up the jacket of her suit. “It’s Saturday,” she said, then rattled off each item of her own Saturday regimen. Eventually June interrupted. All that could wait until later. For now, Geneva could take that *shado beni* there and wash it, but remember to check the leaves well after.

It was unwise to refuse.

This is not a hotel.

As soon as she was able to reach the counter, Geneva had been expected to help with the cooking. First, she was set to wash vegetables, then rice, later graduating to chopping. She’d been resistant at first, complaining of the splashing water, and the unruly vegetables. “Simple” tasks always proved complex in practice: how to tilt the bowls so all the rice didn’t go over the rim with the loose grit; how to handle the tomato without bruising it; to slice the garlic cloves with razor focus. The sight of her own brow furrowing in concentration seemed to stir wrinkles in her mother’s, too. So by age twelve, she’d learned how to reflect the still pool of her mother’s face.

A teacher of seventh and eighth grades for decades now, June's perpetually placid expression was an essential skill in her line of work. The most effective weapon in her arsenal. To allow herself to be visibly provoked would prove the end of order in the classroom. To June, adolescence wasn't so much a developmental stage as it was a weakness which, if one had enough discipline, might prove both temporary and manageable.

Now Geneva had mastered that skill; she, too, could maintain perfect equilibrium in her expression: alert, polite; open yet poised; an upper lip that was steady, not stiff. She stayed propped against the door frame and pleaded her case. June remained unmoved.

"There is no one waiting for you out there. The road will still be there when we are finished here."

"Yes, but—"

"And Francis will not be here the whole day."

"Yeah and I haven't seen you in forever! Come on, Genie, let's catch up!"

Before Geneva could deflect their entreaties further, a small boy walked past her into the kitchen. As he crossed the room, his eyes, wide with suspicion, remained trained on Geneva who glared back in confusion for a moment. As he reached Fran, she sank into a squat to meet him. She ran her hand over his hair, "What's up, Winnie? Did you say hi to your Aunty Genie?"

Geneva remembered now. She flashed a smile, and waved. "Hi Winston." He had one arm grasping his mother as if he thought Geneva might lunge for him, but he raised the other to her. A tap on his shoulder released a "hi" from him so quiet it could have been mistaken for a sigh. Undeterred, "Aunty Genie" dropped into her own squat and said, "Remember me? You remember Aunty *Neva*?"

Winston

Winston turned out to be her ticket out of the kitchen. She suggested bringing him along when nothing else worked. Fresh air for him, and you can both focus, she argued. Fran had hesitated, but Winston's power to persuade his mother was impressive. Had it been June alone, they'd have both still been inside.

Leaving through the back gate, hand in hand and thrilled to have escaped, they stepped into a clear day. The air was still, but cool, with the morning damp just now dispersing.

Behind the house lay an electric field, a sprawling lot of power lines held up by colossal sentries stationed at regular intervals, tethering one side of the road to the other. Transformers sprung up out of the ground, metal boxes that would, by noon, be scalding to the touch. The signs on the chain link fence were covered in a film of dirt: NO TRESPASSING; DANGER; the warning emphasized by a crook-backed figure speared by a bolt of lightning. Geneva doubted anyone would trespass here, nothing lay between the power lines. The fence enclosed a nothing place. No promise of fun or scenic pleasures. There was no trail—no *paved* trail. Just a bald line ran through the grass, snaking its way across to the next major road.

Out here she felt misplaced. The distance to the bus stop confirmed as much: *What are you doing here?*

With no buildings to shield them, Geneva and Winston were bathed in sunlight as they walked the length of the fence, between it and an unsteady line of bush running parallel, not quite concealing the road. June's house stood alone here. Nothing else until the bus stop at the intersection ahead. Moving no faster than a five-year-old could manage (or be bothered to), Winston stopped now and then to reach for a fistful of leaves, or inspect a furry-looking shoot. She assumed they were safe, but couldn't name any of them, and so she supervised closely, thankful he'd forgotten his distrust this long.

It wasn't the workout she'd hoped for, but the near solitude would suffice. To have stayed in the kitchen would have been too taxing. Fran had confirmed as much with every "catch up" question she slung at Geneva before she could get outside.

How are you holding up?

Getting back on your feet all right?

What happened, anyway? I heard it was going so well!

Fran's capacity for pity was great; she would not miss an opportunity to indulge it. She loved to swoop down on the wounded, take them under her wing, devour them, thus enhancing herself. Geneva saw now that Winston's arrival had only exacerbated the behaviour, as if, in giving birth to him, Fran had become everyone's mother.

Genie. That she could not stand; she refused to go by it. The shrill, whiny sound of it bored into her. Out of an elder's mouth it had to be tolerated. Francis, only two years older, could be censored outright, and throughout their youth, Geneva had—at length, amid cries of injustice followed by empty threats—though without success. As long as their elder relatives kept the name circulating, Fran, too, would wield it, feeling the distinction of not only being the first grandchild of their generation but having also produced the first grandchild of the next one.

It was a while before they neared the intersection. Instead of solitary cars driving by every few minutes, pairs and then groups of cars getting on or off the highway now sped past. Geneva could see traffic building steadily—errand traffic, shopping traffic, party traffic, off-to-somewhere-better traffic. Hundreds of faceless people already well into their day, and here she was, barely moving. They had nearly reached the bus stop when Geneva steered them back in the direction of June's house. It must have looked as distant to Winston as it did to her because he whined and made a show of his sudden jelly legs.

"I don't *want* to," he said. She recognized the threat of a tantrum.

He squatted in the grass. Looking up at her, he grabbed onto some of it, as if to remind her of the surveying he had left to do. But this only made Geneva snatch him up in a panic. She cringed at the thought of all the filth that must coat the blades of grass down here, so close by the on-ramp.

What must *she* look like here from the off-ramp.

Aimless.

How behind in the day was she now?

Winston wriggled and warbled, releasing a preview cry as a final warning.

"Okay, okay! Hey! You want a piggy-back home?"

He paused mid-whine to consider the offer, then nodded and went quiet, one fist rubbing a tearless eye. Light on her back, his arms wrapped around her neck tight. It seemed a fine idea, then, to run back to the house; she could raise her heart rate, at the very least. A rush of blood to clear her mind, maybe coax even one meagre endorphin out of hiding.

Adapt.

Her sudden speed shook giddy laughter from him. It was her first win in weeks and so as not to lose the sensation of that, or momentum, she sped up in the final stretch.

Had she seen the hole in the ground, she would have returned them to June's in triumph. However, having bypassed the burrow-hole on their way to the bus stop, she hadn't noticed it. Now, in full stride, her foot got caught in it, sending both herself and her young cargo crashing down, head first.

Quiet as he'd kept himself before, now the pitch and volume Winston's pained cries reached was impressive. Oddly, it had a deadening effect, as if his cries were pitched at the inverse frequency of her inner monologue, and silenced her thinking. Whatever she had had in mind suddenly fell into a vacuum, lost forever.

Fran came running out the front door to rescue him from Geneva's arms before they were half up the drive. Back inside the house, Geneva trailed behind both mothers, trying to plead her case. (She was only trying to have fun with him, she really hadn't run all that fast, and why was there a hole in the ground anyway? It was so dangerous!) She didn't bother to lie about how it had happened—children, she knew, could not be trusted. Watching him wail, it seemed logical to be as wary of Winston as he was of her.

"I mean, come on, the city should have taken care of that!" Geneva tried to reason.

"Care for what? You are not meant to play there," June said, the fact delivered with a scolding at its centre. You were forced to concede the fact, but also the implied critique.

Fran and June kept referring to his "cut", no matter how many times Geneva suggested that "abrasion" was far more accurate. The "cut" head of a child was cause for alarm; a child with an abrasion, cause for Polysporin. Maybe "kiss-it-better," for emotional support. Fran sat on the ledge of the bathtub, Winston balanced on her knee, dabbing at his forehead.

He howled with renewed enthusiasm at the sting of the alcohol.

June stood over them, handing Fran supplies, throwing bloody swabs and bandage wrappers in the trash right away.

If before, Winston had registered any of her excuses, they were rejected now. He upped his cries to a piercing screech. Fran had to yell even louder for Geneva to hear her. It was clear from the minute tremors disturbing June's face that the racket was drilling ever deeper into her nerves.

"Seriously? He's *fine*. It's really not that bad—I pretty much broke his fall."

"Fine how, Geneva? My baby is *bleeding*. Look at him! It's like you don't have any maternal instincts at all! What is wrong with you?"

Geneva might have dismissed this last dart from Fran if her mother hadn't nodded twice, her gaze moving to Winston. Galled to see June fall for a tantrum, Geneva fixed her tunnelling gaze on Fran, released a single "HAH!" to reclaim her mother's attention, and said, "Look—you can relax, okay? I won't waste my time again."

She turned on her heel and stalked away to the office, imagining what her exit must've looked like from way down by the tub. Regal, probably.

Shut in her room—the office—muffled voices reached her still: Fran's rapid, but extensive; June's low, level, and brief. Behind this, the drone of Winston's cry sputtered into nothing. No one had asked if she was all right, even though she too was bleeding from a "cut" on her own face. Its placement was disastrous, centred on her right cheekbone, her good side. She *had* hit the ground first, bruised her shoulder (at least, it was sore), skinned one knee and one shin (different legs).

Still in her running suit, completely off schedule, she got onto the bed with her laptop.

How much of the day had she lost now?

Madison

As per her routine, when she had found a job listing, she first checked the company name against her LinkedIn connections and got three hits. Geneva couldn't help herself and had yelled loud enough for June to call out ("Geneva-Anne? What was that?")

They hadn't kept in touch after Madison failed to land a position at M&B following an internship, but Geneva was optimistic. The disagreement they'd had that year was so petty—purely envy of Geneva's own success. She gave Madison enough credit to assume she'd long grown past that kind of immature squabbling. Geneva recalled having had a positive influence on her friend, who had drive, but little discipline.

Besides, they still followed each other's social profiles. Although it had taken her a while, Madison was finally at the level Geneva had reached a few years ago. Surely their history had enough weight on its own. Geneva still remembered, in vivid detail, the full day they spent applying for every marketing internship available; they'd done so side by side, two hot whirring laptops stationed in a Starbucks not far from where she was heading now.

Geneva and Madison had met in their second year of college, at a job-fair for marketing internships they wouldn't be eligible to apply to for another year. At that time Geneva thought she saw her own tenacity and ambition in Madison, but by their junior year began to catch glimpses of a weak-minded individual.

In the face of a particularly demanding challenge, Madison was so much quicker to complain than attack the problem head on. It wasted valuable time and Geneva would tell her so; but Madison was as likely to become petulant and pout through the work as to be inspired and step it up.

Ultimately, Madison lacked integrity—or she had.

When she too was accepted for the M&B internship it was a surprise—surprising enough for Geneva to say "Wow!" before anything else. Something flashed in Madison's eyes that didn't match her toothy smile, so Geneva had added quickly, "Ohmygod amazing! I'm so excited. This is going to be great!" Her clapping was probably too much but "wow" had clearly been the wrong

response and had to be stomped out. They'd be working together professionally now, Geneva reasoned, and why not go in with an ally?

Madison's tendency to take Geneva's pointers too personally was magnified in the office, but didn't her indignation spur her on to try harder, do better? Surely Madison understood—now that she herself was climbing the ladder at last—how much good Geneva's friendship had done her, at least for a time.

Broadview

After weeks of travelling into The City from June's, Geneva had learned to budget a full hour extra, a buffer she could halve when she had lived downtown. There were too many moving parts, variables, in the journey and one late—or early—bus, traffic jam—due to accident, construction, or crime—or equipment failure of any kind could be enough to add that much to her total (door to door) travel time. Today's commute started without incident—actually, better than she'd come to expect: the bus that took her down Kennedy arrived and departed on schedule, and when she reached the subway station there was a train waiting for her on the platform.

Her luck ended there. Once the train pulled into Broadview station an announcement droned overhead—the train had broken down, the embittered riders were to get off the train, get off the platform, shuttle busses would arrive shortly, thank you for your cooperation. Every car of the train had been full to capacity and now drained a mass of people surging for the busses that would hold, as well they knew, just a few of them.

Arriving on the surface, she broke away from the horde and made for the Dundas streetcar sitting in the bay with its doors open. She stepped on several toes in her hurry; people had boarded, it could close up and roll out at any moment.

But she made it on, wedging herself between two people. The Dundas car screeched along the tracks and all was well until they passed Parliament St.. Traffic grew slower, so did they, and the closer they got to Yonge St. the less they moved, inching forward in shorter and shorter increments. In an attempt to remain calm, she stared ahead with her eyes unfocused. Still, they saw through every building that lay between her and Spadina, where Madison was surely looking at the time and wondering where she was. Once Yonge was in sight, Geneva resolved to walk. Every second she remained on board was excruciating.

After some impassioned argument, supported by at least two other professional-looking people, the driver at last agreed to let them weave through the cars. Going the rest of the way on foot presented its own problems.

On the sidewalk, the traffic of bodies was far more volatile for being insufficiently regulated. Even when people did manage to sort themselves into lanes, there was always enough swimming upstream to maintain a certain level of chaos.

There was also something competitive in it. If you could overtake that person ahead and then the next, then it seemed you could be on time, or better. The long-legged were in a good position for this sport, better at weaving in-between the cobbled-together people. Timing was key. Geneva's legs weren't long, but she compensated with agility. Her reflexes were good enough to enable her to swerve clear of a bike rack, trash bin, or one of those metal poles 3-4 feet high—anything low enough to be hidden by your competition on the sidewalk.

Bluffs

The large artworks lining the hallways were more contemporary (read: edgy) than at M&B. Everything but the floor was painted a soft white, as if the company had opted to move into a massive gallery rather than a traditional office space. On her way to Madison's office, Geneva passed two sculptures made of found objects, both of which towered high above the employees milling around them.

In full view of the cubicle dwellers nearby, Madison embraced Geneva as she never had before. In her surprise, Geneva stiffened but recovered quickly from the unexpected intimacy. They announced rather than exchanged pleasantries before Madison shut the door to her office.

It was hard not to be impressed by Madison's surgical extraction of Geneva's story.

First, Madison prompted her to describe all the successes she'd had at the company, as if she didn't know Geneva was presently unemployed. Madison even congratulated Geneva on her last promotion. There was such enthusiasm in Madison's voice that the memory of the achievement resurfaced for just a second, just enough to replace Geneva's interview smile with a sincere one.

Madison then leaned back in her desk chair. "So... what happened there?" It was only logical, but Geneva found herself suddenly deflated.

"It was only..." She paused to pick up Geneva's resume before continuing. Too much time passed in silence for her to really be perusing it—Madison would enjoy this moment for as long as she possibly could— "Hm, three months? Is that right?"

A scoff threatened to leap out of Geneva's throat but she coughed it back down. "Two." She paused to sigh, allowing her face to de-clench and become cool again.

"Honestly, it's such a long story."

Madison wasn't satisfied. She tilted her head and imitated a smile of sympathy as she explained to Geneva that the partners would definitely ask about the details of her "dismissal."

"People talk, of course—you know that—but we're all professionals here. We're not about to trust gossip." She lowered her voice and leaned over the desk.. "I mean, really, how could we? I have been hearing all kinds of shit..." Her eyebrows slid way up.

Was she expecting a thank-you?

The temptation to ask what all kinds of shit had been said about her was great, but Geneva didn't think she could stand to hear any of it coming out of Madison's serpent grin. Better to just get it over with.

In JF's tightly packed glass office a day's worth of takeout cups had filled the air with the smell of acrid coffee dried and stale, even with the door propped open. He was halfway through the updates he had for Geneva when he removed the black-rimmed glasses from his face and stared intently at the ceiling, as if his final notes were written up there: reschedule the deadline for the ChaptersIndigo account, and tell Creative to prioritize the new Yoplait campaign, to be launched at the MMVAs. "And listen, make sure every single person there knows it's the iLoveMedia Royale-Experience MMVAs presented by BellMedia because Gene, I *promise* you, the next person to say VMAs, I will be *tossing* out that window."

For a moment, the only sound was her pen racing over the pages of her notebook. Geneva didn't shy away from digital organizers but held nothing above manual notation. Everything—every plan, message, tasks of her own or to be assigned—she wrote down by hand first in the one notebook she was never without. As part of her bedtime routine, she performed an audit of the day's notes, pulling items to add to the appropriate calendar or productivity app, setting alerts to follow up where necessary.

As she copied down the last points, Geneva had put on a quizzical face and asked if rescheduling again was wise. Deliverables for ChaptersIndigo had been delayed twice when Rowan was still Traffic Manager and she didn't see why Creative couldn't just do a bit of overtime and have both campaigns ready on schedule. "Our *current* schedule," she clarified.

The second rescheduling had happened just before Rowan made his bumbling retreat to domesticity and retired, eager to spend the balance of his life making Ants on a Log. Now that she was at the helm, the trend could not continue. What better way to distinguish her rigorous project management style from his? Geneva had always found his approach inappropriately maternal. He was too invested in the lives and emotions of his subordinates, asking after their

health, making sure they'd eaten. Too soft and too easily bought by a sob story peppered with the right buzzwords. He enjoyed referring to their branch of the firm as a family (*We don't slack in this family!*, or, *In this family we recycle!*) If he hadn't done it so often, the playful tone he used might have masked the sad sincerity at its core. Every time, it was hard to watch.

JF at last returned the glasses to his face and his eyes to Geneva. He was unconvinced, Yoplait was paying extra for the rush so it only made sense to bump the transit campaign for the bookstore. "It's just easier that way."

But an easy plan hadn't made for a good plan.

Once it was all out, Madison placed her palms on her desk as if to brace herself against the force of her own exhale. "Wow—what a mess! Sounds like someone really 'stepped in it' huh?" It wasn't clear whether she was referring to Geneva's choices, or JF's, or the partners at M&B. Madison didn't wait for a reply, nor did she move on to discuss the position Geneva was applying for.

She didn't reassure Geneva that she'd put in a good word. She didn't give her old friend any idea as to the competition—it was a bad look to ask outright, it made you seem insecure. But didn't Geneva have an "in" here? Hadn't they studied long into the night, worked over and above their allotted overtime hours through many many weekends? Instead, she said, "Anyway! How's everything besides?"

Geneva's mask nearly faltered and she cringed inside. Why was Madison batting her eyelashes like a Disney princess? It made her look deranged.

"Well..." Geneva half-sang, as if she were scrolling through "everything" for the choicest cuts. It couldn't have fooled Madison because she now asked, "Where are you living now? Probably not in that frat house anymore!" Recollecting the house on Bathurst made them both laugh and they actually looked like old friends for a moment.

"Oh GOD, no," Geneva said, "Left that shack a long time ago." That alone wouldn't be enough of an answer, but she wasn't sure it was wise to disclose her current living situation. But

was there a way it could work in her favour? Would it stir her pity to hear Geneva was living with her mother in Scarborough? Doubtful. “I found a place off The Esplanade after that.”

It wasn’t fully a lie.

But it may have been a misstep. Although Madison responded, “Wow! There’s an upgrade. That neighbourhood is so nice now,” she couldn’t resist trumping Geneva’s address with her own—or, trying to. She took off on a lush description of her house in “Cliffside” that sounded memorized from the realtor’s listing.

“Cliffside? Where’s that?”

“Midland and Kingston Rd. You’ve never been?” Geneva shook her head, thick with confusion. “Ugh! I love it, Geneva—I *love* it!” she said, like it ached. “It’s like a movie. I take my dog out in the morning and I’m literally standing on a beach-side cliff. Overlooking the *bluffs!*”

“Oh... Scarborough.” Aha— she’d spotted the fishing line in this magic act.

Madison chuckled. “Listen—girl? Scarberia never looked so good.”

Maybe she should have confessed her true address after all, maybe they could have bonded over it; or, maybe she could have it both ways.

Geneva said she’d just been “up there” herself but “way up,” and described the area around June’s house as “industrial.” Nothing around, so much nothing. “It’s just, so...sad.”

Madison shook her head, but there was no pity in it.. Her expression looked as if something was rotting nearby.

Over the years, Geneva had observed a basic tradeoff at work when it came to the home/life vector of the lifestyle you projected. A place in the city would cost you, but in a good enough (which is to say attractive) neighbourhood, the interior of your apartment could be neglected. No need, then, for a new West Elm sofa, or paint: all funds went to rent. The interior you could choose to show or not, but the location was on Google maps for anyone to see.

The building was on the corner of Front and Princess. The location was beyond prime, beyond ideal; it was on the same block as the Young People’s Theatre, steps from the Canadian

Opera Company, the old Toronto Sun building—she had a series of Instagram captions already drafted weeks before moving day.

When Geneva lead two hired movers (her first ever) into her new building, she caught sight of a woman on a third-floor balcony watching their small parade, her age as inscrutable as her mood. Geneva had wanted to start off on a good foot with the community. With no free hand to wave, she smiled and shouted, “Good morning!” and continued inside feeling sweaty and benevolent.

Inside the empty eighth-floor unit, it had still smelled of the white paint which covered the walls, ceiling, cabinets, and a couple of outlets. With nothing covering the single window that spanned the length of the main room, sunlight reflected off the freshly waxed floor so that the room seemed lit from below. She took a deep breath in spite of the illuminated dust floating everywhere. Rental or not, in that moment she felt she’d arrived. It was a long way from the soggy, crumbling Victorian home she’d been sharing with 4-6 people, depending on whether the couples were on or off again that month. Its location at Nassau and Bathurst had made the ungovernable commune just bearable, but was always meant to be a temporary solution. After the first eighteen months, the grubby bathmat and forever-foul refrigerator were more demoralizing than the porch was selfie-worthy.

She had considered sending Greg a thank-you selfie for giving her the tip, but it occurred to her that he might read into the gesture and try to visit. They hadn’t met again after the first dinner date, and Geneva stopped replying to his texts once she’d signed the lease. Greg had been so melodramatic at dinner, delivering an impassioned monologue about his “conflicted position,” how sad it was to see more and more co-op housing sold off, but how could he, a respected, connected realtor, be good at his job without taking the opportunities—and so on. It was unclear to Geneva whether this was meant to appeal to her sense of justice (pick me, I am a sensitive soul) or business (pick me, I bring home the big bucks) but she saw no reason not to take the opportunity he now presented and find out which buildings had yet to be publicly listed. When she asked, he shifted about in his seat and glanced around the restaurant like he thought housing activists were known to frequent it (which, given the clientele, glossy black walls and mirrored

ceiling, seemed unlikely). While he pretended to hesitate, she asked if he'd considered how the sales might benefit the neighbourhood—and thus, the residents—as a whole.

She'd often heard from co-workers and friends how lucky she was to have landed her apartment. Sometimes, a former resident of the neighbourhood, overcome with nostalgia, would steamroll her with a lesson on what The Distillery District used to look like, back when such-and-such corner store was still there. It got boring, fast. On the walk from her building to the subway, a straight shot along Front Street, Geneva found that the collection of businesses en route was always mutating, giving the street an anonymous quality.

To Geneva, it did not matter what had been, or would be, there. Something else was always on the way.

Kidz Zone

In June's kitchen, Geneva sat scarfing a cold plate of food she found saran-wrapped in the fridge. Out of one earbud she listened to a world music playlist. She'd read that new music stimulated the brain and hers felt thoroughly battered.

Madison obviously still had some of that bad attitude Geneva remembered, the same attitude that had left her without a job offer at M & B.

Geneva recalled how, in their second year, they and three other interns were assigned to work the launch event for a new rush-campaign: "Save the Tigers with Royale and the WWF." A well-shopped image of a devastated forest overlaid with their logo had been making the rounds online, so the company was producing product packaging with photos of baby tigers framing the logo. Next to one tiger's ear was printed, *A portion of the proceeds from your purchase will be donated to the WWF. Thank you for saving the tigers!* Massive cardboard versions of packaged toilet paper and paper towels stood behind a platform set up for the event, the centerpiece of which was the ceremonious donation of a giant cheque. In the days beforehand Geneva and her unpaid colleagues had received instructions, but not assignments.

"Show up for the job you want! Right?" Their coordinator, Will, stared them down in his best colonel impersonation until they responded, in unison,

"Right."

Two interns would stand behind the speaker from Royale, holding the cheque until he was ready to hand it over to the WWF reps. Two interns would be handing out travel packages of tissues attached to a plush tiger keychain. Another would supervise the World Wildlife Kidz Zone (bean bag toss, face painting, Bamboo Limbo, "fun music"). Whoever was last to arrive would wear the tiger suit and "animate the crowd—No. Talking."

Will scanned their faces again and he clapped his hands once, hard. "Be! Ready! For Anything! Now, get back to work."

Geneva and Madison had made plans to travel together to arrive extra early, at least an hour before their scheduled time. But, on Saturday morning, Geneva's eyes opened long before her alarm went off. In the clarity of 4:30AM it occurred to her that showing up before the other

interns was one thing, but anyone who was truly dedicated would be there to see it come together from the ground up. So she didn't wait for Madison. As soon as she arrived—8:27AM, the stage was half built then—Geneva had texted her: *Morning! Woke up early so I'm here now—c u soon!*

Once Madison got there, she barely spoke to Geneva, and like a sour child glared for most of the day. Geneva didn't take it personally; she left Madison to sort her mood out on her own.

It wasn't long before she spotted Will speed-walking over to Madison. He thrust a pair of sunglasses at her, leaning in to whisper something before moving on. "Fix your face," probably; it was the advice Geneva had also wanted to give her then, before she dug herself too deep. It was hot out. Even before noon the heat was starting to put all of them working the event on edge. It had to be a sauna in the tiger suit even with the face-hole it had, but Madison really should've been happy they hadn't sprung for the full mascot-grade costume. She could breathe perfectly fine. The face painter had done a pretty good job on her, especially considering the time he'd had to spend removing all her makeup.

On the other hand, a full mascot head would've hid her face while she was on stage for the handing of the cheque. There were several cameras flashing to capture every moment, shooting in bursts to get the one half second in which everyone who needed to look good, did. In most of the photos, Madison the tiger is posing this way and that, thumbs up, big grin. Just three frames caught her out of character. As she was passing behind a smiley, applauding Geneva, Madison gave her the dirtiest look she could manage.

How pathetic that, after all these years later, Madison was unable to let go of a grudge. And what reason did Geneva have to believe that Madison had actually bought that house? Scrolling through her social accounts, Geneva couldn't find any interior shots of the alleged house. Lots of early morning selfies with her dog in the reeds, and some long distance shots of the water, but never both at the same time. In the grid of her Instagram, it didn't really look like much.

Passengers

Even when Fran wasn't around, even if by some miracle Geneva was spared for a full day, her cousin remained present in June's constant mentions of her. Geneva struggled to receive whatever Fran-related trivia/update/praise/concern was on offer with polite interest. She could not understand, nor answer, her mother's frequent question, "Why have you not spent time with your cousin?" Geneva felt that a great portion of her "downtime" was occupied by exactly this pastime—wasted time, more like.

Did June speak as often of Geneva to Fran? She couldn't remember June ever heaping such explicit praise on anyone, but now she said of Fran, "You know, she is a *very* good saleswoman, she is. Very good." Her voice inflected up at the end to imply Geneva disagreed or doubted this. June had added, "She sells insurance.". Geneva hadn't planned to ask. When June found cause to complain of Winston, she always followed it with, "But, you know, I see Fran is good with him, she is. He can be a very nice child."

Geneva's present unemployment notwithstanding, all this hero worship of her cousin was baffling—it annoyed her. What had Fran really accomplished? Procreation? A *sales* job? And? Forever running around after her kid or her kid sisters or now, her Aunty June. Never going after her own, self-actualizing goals? One morning, as June was Fran-talking at her, Geneva nodded along, vindication rising up within her, certain now of what she'd long suspected. Fran was a "passenger."

Geneva was still in college when the concept first occurred to her. She'd been having an impromptu debate with a less ambitious member of her study group, Doris. Most of Doris's contributions were complaints and eventually she joked that she might drop out altogether, marry rich instead. "Or at least wealthy," she said. Outraged, Geneva set off on a long rebuttal which started out being about the importance of their post-secondary degrees, work ethic and reward, but it soon unraveled into a tirade about people who "refused to take charge of their own lives," who settled for less because that's what was on offer, who went along with the crowd. "I cannot *stand* these people," Geneva declared, exhilarated by the momentum of her own argument, "who are just...just along for the fucking ride,"—and here the epiphany brought her to her feet

—“they’re just, fucking, *passengers!*” At the time, no one challenged her point and for the rest of the night they had studied without interruption.

Substitute

Nowhere near enough parents took their children for the flu vaccine. Geneva couldn't remember the exact stats from the campaign M&B had done for Health Canada last year, but her biggest takeaway was the destructive power of misinformation heaped upon ignorance. It was no surprise, then, that the virus was now tearing through June's school, taking out a fraction of every class it hit, but somehow it still came as a shock that her mother caught it, too. Emerging from the bathroom nearly as pale as its walls on Saturday morning, June thanked God aloud for the long weekend; at least she wouldn't have to get a substitute. She felt they did more harm than good, swiftly undoing the structure she'd instilled in her class. "Lord, with all these absences it is a wonder we have not fallen behind in the curriculum."

It was over a week into October, over a week past her soft deadline. From September 29th on, each day Geneva found herself obsessively conscious of the date, each day a bit more tensely wound than the last. Sunday would be Thanksgiving dinner and as usual, Aunty Stacey would be hosting. For reasons Geneva couldn't discern, these functions always fell under her authority even though she was the youngest of her sisters. She set the time and the menu, arranging for certain people to bring certain dishes. With one hand on the door frame to hold herself up, June asked Geneva to drive her to the grocery, she still had to make the callaloo. Geneva agreed, but when she met her mother in the kitchen, June was making a wobbly attempt to fish out her shopping bags from a low cupboard. Geneva offered to make the trip alone. "You should rest today, no? If you're still going to cook tomorrow?" A nauseated expression masked her mother's face. June resisted only briefly—for appearances—before dictating a list and directions.

She found the grocery store in a small plaza which formed the first floor of a high-rise apartment building, otherwise indistinguishable from the other two bracketing it. The door was overlaid with iron bars and papered from within with event posters, ads for calling cards, and sheets of newspaper. The windows were similarly barred and obscured, though cardboard lined larger areas along the bottom. Only a strip of light along the top betrayed any activity taking

place within. Spanning the length of the building was an unlit sign: SUNRISE WEST INDIAN FOOD & VARIETY.

The air was warm and dense inside. People weaved through stands of produce and dry goods, in and out of narrow aisles. The horde of Saturday shoppers moved with precision, eyes alighting on an item then darting away to the next, even as their hand still reached for the last. Soca music pulsed from two speakers mounted in opposite corners of the store. Geneva didn't recognize any of the songs.

“Good evening.”

Geneva turned around to see a woman smiling at her from behind one of two cash registers. Geneva fumbled for a response and in a moment the woman was no longer looking at her, smiling instead at a man whose greens she was now ringing up. He gave cheery replies to the cashier's prompts, and quick quips which made her laugh. Beside her, a teenage boy with his hair done in short twists bagged food with mechanical regularity.

12 dasheen bush — use young curled leaves — chop and wash.

12 bush? How much was a full bush? Were they not all curly? Geneva found three piles of greens side by side, marked only with prices. She lifted a bunch from the middle pile but thought the leaves looked too dark, and that they couldn't really be said to curl. She put it down. Staring at the two remaining piles she tried to recall images from her web search, now and then beginning to reach for one before pulling back her empty hand. After several minutes of this, there came a voice behind her.

“What it is ya studyin'?” the cashier asked. The woman wasn't really asking a question so much as she was stating what had to be obvious to both herself and the bag boy who, Geneva could see, was now glancing her way between ringing up and bagging items. Sweating, she rubbed the back of her neck trying to formulate an answer.

“What are you look-ing for?” asked the cashier again, exaggerating the shape of her mouth around each word as she held Geneva in place with sharp eyes and a knowing smile.

“Uh...for dasheen?”

“Dasheen? Dasheen root ova so,” she said, pointing to a row of produce in the next aisle.

“Dasheen root? No, I mean—um—the leaf? Like, for a callaloo?”

“O-ho! Roll bush,” said the cashier, grabbing greens from the left pile and holding it out to Geneva who, regarding them, hesitated.

“Well...the recipe I have says—”

“Roll bush is young dasheen bush. See how it curl up so here? Look, you want to take the one that have firm leaves—feel that—you see? Stiff.”

She patted Geneva’s arm before returning to the register. Geneva gathered twelve bushes and did her best to find the remaining ingredients as if she knew just where they were, avoiding the four eyes at the cash register which she imagined to follow her still. She was grateful and encouraged by every familiar logo. After half an hour’s wandering, everything lay in her basket with the roll bush: canned pumpkin to save herself the peeling and chopping, hot peppers, a bag of frozen okra, two cans of coconut milk, thyme, chive, celery, and pimento.

Exposed

June was no more improved by Saturday's end, nor Sunday morning either. When Fran made her daily call, she spoke to Geneva instead of June who was then retching in the bathroom. Fran first offered to come by to help, and then insisted. Geneva held her ground.

"I'm sure it's no big deal," she said. "Besides, whatever it is, you don't want to catch it—you could give it to Winston."

Before she hung up, Geneva warned that she and June might not make it.

"If she's still unwell I should really be here with her."

Fran had to agree, but promised to check in again the next morning. It wasn't that Geneva didn't feel genuine concern for her mother's condition—she did—but she also saw in this, one of June's rare bouts of illness, an opportunity.

June emerged again from the bathroom to collapse back into bed, and Geneva followed behind relaying the conversation with Fran. She found herself restraining a smile as she assured her mother she'd already excused their absence. "What! No—no, no, we have to bring the callaloo." If it was only by proxy that June could contribute this year, so be it.

The tips of the dasheen leaves had been "cut and thrown" as prescribed and the remaining ingredients sat in the pot on top of them. The burner was on low. Geneva stirred the mixture and checked to see if there was enough liquid. It seemed adequate.

Geneva added half a teaspoon of salt, half a bouillon cube, wondering if that was enough. Stirring, she stared down into the pot. She could only know by taste, but what she now saw through the steam was very unlike what had pooled on her plate in years past. Suddenly, there seemed to be too little liquid; Geneva added water. She added more water. It looked like too much. She turned up the heat to compensate, struggling to calculate how this would affect the overall cooking time. Probably, it'd be a while before the mix was "cooked and soft," and in the day's chaos, she hadn't yet showered or dressed. It was best not to slack on presentation at these functions; relatives felt duty-bound to alert you to whatever you neglected to do that day, lest you

make the same mistake out in The World. She left the callaloo to boil down, sure she'd at least have enough time to shower.

The dress code for big holidays never changed: come dressed for church or come under fire. She played it safe: dress slacks—not too tight—and a blouse. Feminine, and if not conservative, then at least not revealing.

When she returned to taste the callaloo, thick steam erupted from beneath the raised lid. The green mixture inside looked right but it smelled off. She grabbed the spoon and found it tasted like smoke. Driving the spoon to the bottom of the pot she scraped into the charred bottom layer, and smoke overtook the steam. Worried the smell would soon reach her mother's room, she panicked.

Geneva ran the pot outside and set it down on the driveway. She felt oddly exposed, as if someone might be watching, but surely no one could make her out from the highway. Who would bother to look?

She had to regroup, fast, and so googled the closest Caribbean food spot.

Morningside

Aunty Stacey's semi-detached house was two storeys with a double garage, a mirror image of all others on the block.

Fran answered the door—of course—and took the dish from Geneva's hands. Geneva had visited the house only once before and retained nothing of the layout. She followed cautiously behind Fran who led her first to the large front room filled with elder aunties and uncles—those whom Geneva had to greet first, or else be scolded less-than-playfully for her impoliteness.

Aunty Stacey was, above all, a studied hostess. The guest list for family functions was never limited to bloodline. Even if Geneva hadn't been absent so long, she likely would still have come upon plenty of strange faces, such was the ever-changing pool of her Aunt's friends, acquaintances, and play-cousins. There were people perched on all manner of sofas, chairs, and stools. A few socialized standing up for want of a seat, not daring to sit on an arm rest lest they incur the well-known wrath of Aunty Stacey, who could never abide any damage to the furniture.

No matter which branches of the family tree a given relative came from, in practice, all those more than ten years Geneva's senior were Aunties and Uncles. For the most part, proper titles were unclear and/or unwelcome (Aunty Greta, for instance, would be visibly vexed if you addressed her as Great Aunt Greta). Who was or wasn't once or twice removed from whom was unfavourable talk, particularly if the explanation also required an old infidelity to resurface.

When Geneva caught up to Fran, she was way down the hall, nearly at the kitchen. She could already hear more aunties and uncles in there, of the generation between Geneva and those in the front room. Fran's mother fluttered out of the kitchen just as they reached it, flashing gold (gold plate?) from her ears and wrists, her bleached short-cropped hair enhancing the brilliant effect. Aunty Stacey squealed and embraced Geneva.

"Geneva-Anne, oh my God—how come I ain't seen you for so long?" She shook her index finger, smiling mischievously. "You must come by me now you're back in the neighbourhood," and then took off down the hall to play hostess. A full head shorter than Fran, Aunty Stacey was light on her feet. She'd always reminded Geneva of a hummingbird, always in motion, appearing and disappearing from your side in an instant.

Fran set the dish down on what little counter space was left. She lifted the lid of June's serving dish and snuck a whiff. "Wow—this smells good."

"Are you surprised?" Geneva meant for it to sound playful but Fran looked more confused than anything.

"No! Well—kind of?" Fran said, "I love your mom's callaloo—that's why I asked her to make it this year—but this doesn't smell like hers. I mean, it smells good, it does! Just different."

Geneva wanted Fran to clarify; had she assigned the dishes herself? But instead of answering, Fran said, "Wanna come downstairs?" already headed for the basement door. "Stacia and Anita are down there playing music videos." Geneva resented being made to hang out with the kids—not just Fran's sisters, but the actual children they were surely supervising—but didn't see how she could say no.

Still in orbit, Aunty Stacey caught them again on the way down. "Fran, Aunty Lily text you yet?"

"No, Mom, not yet."

Already turning to move on, she sucked her teeth, grumbling, "I don't know why she must live so far, Daddy living with her and all of we way over here, she don't know to leave earlier?" Someone out of sight agreed. "That's Lily-Anne for you!"

A handful of screaming children ran laps around the finished basement. In a far corner, lurking next to the fridge, two pre-teen girls gawked at Geneva. She stared back; she'd also preferred that vantage point at their age. Posted there you had unmonitored (unlimited) access to soda and a safe distance from which to monitor the surrounding chaos. In the middle of the room, Stacia and Anita were sprawled out on the floor together, bellies on the carpet and legs kicked up, like neither had aged at all since Geneva last saw them, although they had to be more than twenty by now. On the old couch next to them, Winston sat cross-legged, sucking on a juice box. She tried not to meet his eyes and greeted the room as a whole. "Hey...guys..."

Both twins glanced back to observe Geneva and Fran but only Stacia was enthused enough to get up. She bounded over and clamped her arms around Geneva in a hug or tackle, it wasn't clear. "Hooo-ly shit I haven't seen you in FOREVER!" Anita remained on the floor but threw a *Hey* over her shoulder. From the looks of it, she'd become the self-designated provocateur of her

family; she wore old jeans and a washed-out sweater with a glaring Bart Simpson on the back, no make-up—diametrically opposed, aesthetically, to her twin who’d made up her own face in a dewy “natural” look.

Geneva made it back upstairs at last and the callaloo was out on the dining table around which people had begun to assemble. Uncle Albert, hovering above it, held the lid open to smell the rising steam. “Mm-hm! Stacey made this?”

“No, me!” Geneva piped up, hurrying over.

Fran appeared with the final dish, the table now covered edge to edge in a buffet. Winston was sent to fetch the other children and, presumably, the twins. Within five minutes time all stood in a great circle. Joining hands, they bowed their heads and closed their eyes. Geneva closed hers as well; she felt reverent, possessed by a sudden calm—until Fran began to say grace.

Witnessed

As soon as Geneva sat down, she regretted choosing the empty row of dining chairs along the wall. It was better than taking her plate back down to the basement—kids ate in the basement—but she was exposed on all sides, on display. The hail of comments, questions, and scantily veiled complaints about the callaloo had already drawn too much attention.

This is soup? I could get a bowl for this?

O, wow—what is this? Who made this?

Who bring the Jamaican callaloo?

It was meant to be a boost to her image—she doubted anyone expected her to show up with anything at all. But the takeout callaloo she'd dumped into June's porcelain had the opposite effect. Instead of demonstrating that she too could play her part, it roused suspicions as to what role she was after. How could she have known there was such thing as Jamaican callaloo and—what? Trini callaloo? She still didn't think the difference was really all that significant; these were just scandal-hungry people.

Fran sat next to Geneva, her half-eaten plate balanced on one hand. Leaning in closer she said under her breath, "So tell me the truth, did you really make this?" She leaned back to give Geneva a better view of her conspiratorial smile: Are you going to say it, or shall I?

"Yes. I just used a different recipe," Geneva stabbed a slice of fried plantain with too much force and the fork shrieked against the ceramic. Fran was getting cocky, poking and prodding. Geneva wasn't about to take the bait. "Jesus, forgive me for thinking the Jamaican version would be a nice change! Won't make that mistake again."

Fran was laughing. Putting on her counterfeit accent, she said, "Well girl—what I could tell you, you self know is one set a Trinis you coming to see, ey?—Ey? What it is ya expect?"

Geneva rolled her eyes, warmth gathering in her clavicles and tightening her chest. "Whatever."

This, too, was funny to Fran. She was on a roll now, and asked about "the hunt."

Things happened quickly from there.

“Nothing solid yet—at least not the kind of work I’m really after,” Geneva began. When she mentioned that most of the positions were in sales Fran pounced:

But what about—

But why not—

But didn’t you say—

But don’t you think that—

She kept insisting Geneva widen her search, find a temporary job. “Just ’til you get the position you want.”

Geneva explained why that would be a complete waste of her time and Fran only rolled her eyes. Nothing Geneva said convinced Fran that she was making the right moves. She felt she knew what was best for everyone; plus, she wasn’t going to let go of the implied slight against her own job. Here she had an opportunity to lift herself up above Geneva—finally. All this time Geneva had been away, flying up the ladder at M&B, outshining her, mercifully from a distance. Now that she’d fallen, Fran wanted her to settle for so much less.

“Listen, if *you* like working on commission that’s great—so happy for you—I’m just used to a competitive salary at this point.”

Fran’s eyes narrowed. She scoffed, “Well, girl, sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do—how else do you expect to get back on your feet?”

She glanced past Geneva to meet Aunty Lily’s eyes. Fran’s smug surety sent heat surging up the back of Geneva’s neck.

“Maybe I’m not content with just doing the bare minimum expected of me!” she spat back, and then came the silence. The sudden quiet hushed everyone within earshot so that for several seconds the only sound was The Mighty Sparrow playing over Aunty Stacey’s speaker system.

By the time Geneva headed back home it was hard to say how the argument had become so heated.

She hadn’t noticed how loud they’d become until they both went quiet.

She couldn't begin to think of how she would explain the incident to June—not the conflict itself, but its eruption. It was the latter that was truly transgressive, out of step with family protocol:

1) You could only fall out with a family member of equal standing; if the object of your anger was a generation older or younger you were not fighting, it wasn't a falling out. It was discipline, or petulance, or—among “the kids”—bullying.

2) An argument in the presence of company could not rise above a whisper.

It had been enough of an event to fix in Geneva's memory when Aunt Lily and Aunt Josanne had clashed in Aunt Stacia's kitchen. Geneva was around 7, maybe 8. The women had fallen out a long time before that day, probably many months, maybe a year. Both showed up to family functions, but remained on opposite ends of any room in which they found themselves together. During grace, they stood opposite but not exactly—just out of one another's line of sight. Each did her best to appear oblivious of the other's proximity despite the control each exerted over the other: opposite charges. It fascinated Geneva to watch. With no one willing to acknowledge the phenomenon—at least not within her hearing—it seemed as if she alone could view this separate dimension in which her mother's younger sister and her mother's elder cousin hated each other.

Their falling out had reached its climax during a summertime family gathering—for what, Geneva couldn't remember. White sunlight had flooded through the glass sliding door leading out to the backyard. One of the women must have been distracted a moment too long—or maybe they knew they were both about to enter the kitchen from either entrance, playing chicken? Whatever happened next, neither Geneva (nor Fran) witnessed it, and no one who did was going to tell her. She knew not to ask, but she'd heard them: low voices revving up to raised voices and then—briefly—shouting. Other grown-ups rushed in to shout down their shouting, trying to drown out whatever was finally being aired.

Relaxer

Having arrived home to find June asleep, Geneva was grateful to avoid the conversation she still wasn't sure how to begin. But by Monday, June was strong enough to be up with the sun. Was it intuition that made her call Aunty Stacey before trying to wake Geneva? Or did she believe Geneva would be an unreliable source?

In the six days since the blow-out, June hadn't convinced Geneva to make amends with Fran. "And Aunty *Stacey*, for disturbing her home," she was sure to add. The morning hours too precious, June used each evening they encountered one another to implore her daughter to rethink her actions. "As your *moth-er*, Geneva-Anne."

Each time they'd end at an impasse—they agreed on the events of that evening, but not their meaning. If the fight had happened when Geneva was fifteen, or even eighteen, there'd be no discussion regarding what she would do next, nor what punishment would be administered.

In Geneva's memory, her childhood with June was an extended performance, she play-acting the dutiful and (more importantly) deferential daughter and June the strict disciplinarian. When she was very young the punishment for disobedience was still physical but not painful; June's spanking had been far more robotic than her stiff hugs. Through crinkling eyes, Geneva would catch a glimpse of her mother's face and it had seemed to displease June that she was obliged to do it. It was a look that often preceded the announcement of a new house rule, or a lecture, or a dubious line of questioning which lead always back to the first or second option. It eventually occurred to Geneva that she was better off acquiescing to any given command in the moment, only to do as she pleased once finally left alone. Solitude and its potential freedoms would be granted only if June felt she had her compliance secured.

Now Geneva could see it finally hitting June—the present—and her mother couldn't handle it, incensed by the very fact of their back and forth. Now that Geneva couldn't be punished and wasn't doing as June wished.

June had her cornered, however, when they had dinner together Sunday, unable to excuse herself from June's disapproval. The dinner itself had been initiated with a complaint that Geneva

“never” thought to share a meal with her mother, eating alone late at night, leaving all kinds of chaos behind in the kitchen (towel misplaced, rice grains in the sink catcher).

These were just the first round of grievances.

June was soon on to various other trespasses Geneva had committed during her stay. Included in the list were her irregularity with or complete neglect of chores (“Have you simply given up on dusting?”) and the poor arrangement of her “excessive collection” of toiletries in the bathroom. This last complaint was not news. Geneva regularly arrived home to find one-third to one-half of her belongings in the bathroom or the office rearranged or stashed away.

June complained also of the state Geneva too often left the bathroom in, unreceptive when Geneva tried to explain herself (she’d only had so much time to prepare for interviews, she had to get out the door as early as possible, and yes of course she knew better). “*But?*” June prompted. Geneva sighed and said “I’m sorry.”

The fridge’s motor jolted into action just then so that Geneva heard its drone and nothing else until June said, “Your hair needs relaxing.” She hadn’t looked up from her plate but Geneva’s fingers went reflexively to her hairline, feeling the springy new growth she already knew was there. The longer it got the more challenging it was to get out the door each day she headed downtown. She now had nearly a full inch of untreated hair which refused to remain pressed flat under her combed-over bang.

The tightly coiled roots made it impossible for the rest of her hair to hang straight down. She’d been speed walking across Bloor on her way to an interview when she caught her reflection in a car window: her hair was jutting out at a thirty degree angle from her head like a car spoiler. She’d tied it back immediately. Every day it was getting worse but it wasn’t as if she could tend to it as she’d become accustomed. Until her fall, Geneva had kept monthly appointments at AZAN’s—alternating each month between perm and protein treatments—always taking the rest of the day to luxuriate in Yorkville’s carousel of offerings to eat, wear, cleanse.

With fork and knife paused in mid-air, June looked at Geneva as she said, “Mine needs to be done as well.” There was expectation in her face; did Geneva remember the correct answer?

“Well, let’s go together. Where’s your regular salon?”

June made a face. “*Salon?*” Geneva didn’t catch her meaning. June huffed before she explained, “Fran always comes to relax my hair when it needs doing. She could have taken care of both of us, but I do not see how I can I ask her now.” She was shaking her head. “You have allowed so much time to go by without apologizing for your behaviour, I cannot understand it.”

Geneva would not be baited. She insisted it would be a good chance for them to spend some quality time together. She'd find a good place for them to go to in the area.

“Besides,” Geneva continued, “I highly doubt Fran would do a better job than any salon we could go to around here—she’s never even had her hair permed.” She chuckled to herself.

June placed her cutlery down so gently Geneva didn’t hear either piece hit the plate. Her mother's voice dropped an octave: “Do you mean to say your cousin has not done a good job on my hair for all these years?”

Geneva, too, put down her cutlery in hopes of convincing June the fervent no’s she was now spitting up were earnest. Her mother had taught her how her hair was to be worn, its acceptable states and styles, with as much seriousness as proper hygiene. June made sure she knew how crucial these were to her legibility as “an upstanding person in the world.” Geneva was never to be seen out with her “head like that,” where “that” included fuzzy braids, tufts of hair gone rogue and protruding at unsightly angles. *You went to school with your head like that?* It wasn’t just your hair, it was your whole head, like it subsumed anything else sitting atop your neck.

Ultimately, this was the reason June had to accept Geneva’s suggestion. There was no sign of surrender on Geneva’s part and in the meantime, hair continued to coil out of her scalp, more and more visibly displayed along the hairline.

June made a show of getting in the car and again when getting out of it. Glowering, she clutched the top of her coat and shivered to show Geneva how harassed she was by the outside. Only then would she follow Geneva across plaza parking lot, towards REFLECTIONS by JCS.

They were booked to see Janet who turned out to be a tall woman with hair in that hazy range between dark blonde and light brown, gingerly arranging curls, brilliant and uniform, with

a rat-tail comb. She looked older than Geneva but younger than June. Even though it was a Thursday, and late into the afternoon, they didn't have to wait for a chair.

Janet came over once an assistant had prepped them (roughly, Geneva thought) and started with June.

"This is your daughter?" When June said yes, Janet responded, "O wow" for reasons Geneva could not understand. "Spending some quality time," she said, "that is nice."

After some time Janet asked, "Y'all living around here?" June answered her but said "I live..." not "We live..."

Janet glanced over to Geneva through the mirror, "You too?" Geneva's mouth hung open as she struggled to find the well-practiced lines she'd delivered to the nosiest of her acquaintances.

Merciful Janet threw her a lifeline. "You live near your mom?"

Before Geneva could recover June replied, "Not *usually*, but she is living with me right now." She glanced at Geneva to underline the rest: "Until when, though, I do not know."

Geneva forced a laugh to smooth over the dig, but it came out too loud and caught the attention of the other women working or waiting in the salon. "Not long, haha. Oh no, not long at all," she said in a voice she usually reserved for networking, a robust radio laugh that would be familiar, easily understood to say, whatever else you had heard, *We're all in on the joke here, aren't we?*

Short as it was, Janet had worked through June's hair with the creme relaxer quickly, so she was taken to the sinks first. As Janet got started on her, Geneva could smell the chemical burning. With wide eyes she watched how near the creme was to her unprotected eyes. She felt her whole body tense, a perm-specific reaction she'd not suffered since upgrading from home kits after high school, not in all her time at Azan's. They hadn't provided her with glasses or anything, but the glossy white of every surface in the showroom-lit salon had given Geneva the impression of a high fashion medical facility. Even the stylists wore white lab coats; she found it very reassuring.

When Geneva joined June at the dryers, June had a *Readers' Digest* in her hands, retrieved from one of the many piles covering the long coffee table opposite. Geneva grabbed a five-year-old issue of *Elle* but quickly dropped it when she noticed Kerry Washington's face grinning up at her from an even older *Vanity Fair*.

“You really must phone her.”

Pretending not to have caught it, Geneva squinted in concentration as she thumbed to the lead article.

“Geneva,” June began this time, and repeated the suggestion more loudly. Geneva glanced up at the angled mirror running along the wall across from them, hoping to stall, but there she met June’s eyes. “This evening,” her mother added. Geneva shifted in the chair to obscure the cringe coming over her.

June must not have realized how much her voice carried over the drone of the dryers, but it was obvious from the eyes darting their way. One young girl openly stared through the mirror while the woman braiding her hair stuck to occasional glances. Geneva found herself out of options with nothing to do but give June what she was clearly determined to win by any means—she didn’t care to find out if June would go so far as to retell the story she only knew secondhand herself.

“Okay,” Geneva said, calmly turning a page, “I’ll try her this evening.”

June gave up pretending to read and looked at Geneva directly. “In truth? Will you? What I know right now is you have not made good on your word so far.”

A chill panic froze Geneva, as if she’d suddenly discovered she’d been nude this whole time. June was not wrong and Geneva was mortified not to have given a new move out date yet. Without a new position on the horizon, neither she nor her mother believed she could be out by the first of November.

“It is the twenty-second of October already,” June said as if it were Winston sitting next to her.

The “already” warbled, laced with the accent June kept mostly contained, only seeping out when she was sufficiently provoked. Geneva’d never witnessed it out in the wild, not that she could remember. Even among family it was rare, as if indulging it too much would loosen her grip on what Auntie Greta referred to as her “convent accent” (what Geneva knew her mother considered “proper English, Continental English.”)

“Just now it will be November and then Christmas before you know it and I want to know if you really plan to meet the new year in my house!” June huffed, and turned back to the article she couldn’t have been reading.

But then the dryer died and June seemed to be finished. The assistant who prepped them arrived to escort June back to the chair too soon not to have been listening. A different assistant came for Geneva when her time came. Probably, Geneva thought, she’d swapped places with the first so as to catch more of the unfolding drama.

When Geneva got back in her own chair, Janet had already finished styling June and was attending another client. “One second, okay dear?” She smiled, Geneva smiled back and hoped it wouldn’t be longer.

She could tell by June’s face that the conversation wasn’t over, her eyebrows and lips rippling as she sighed. She was determined to finally exorcise the lecture which had been percolating within her all week.

“Geneva,” June said through the mirror. Conversation in the salon was suspiciously sparse and quiet.

“If December comes and you have no “suitable leads” what will you do? Will you still be too proud to carry yourself down the road and get a job at the grocery?” Geneva attempted to interrupt but June barrelled on without pause, her voice pitching up again. “I certainly raised you well enough to know it will do you no good to sit on your hands *wishing*.” The last word spat out like sour milk.

To say anything in this moment felt too great a risk. Practiced debater that Geneva was, she was floundering now. She couldn’t let June read her face and so looked away to the window where the salon’s bright interior opaquely reflected back at her. The sun had gone down and she could barely see the parking lot, just apparitions of the still and moving lights outside. In the window she watched Janet pass her client to an assistant, hesitating, it seemed, before coming back to Geneva’s chair.

Geneva was so distracted when Janet asked which side her part was on, she told her left when she meant right. Paying at the desk, Geneva kept glancing at the mirrors struggling to recognize herself.

Not until they were halfway home did Geneva burst the silence. She announced a renewed vow to be out December first. Geneva thought she heard June scoff.

“It is best that you take until the first of *February*.” June then listed a number of reasons why Geneva’s brash suggestion demonstrated poor planning. “And, frankly, a severe lack of prudence.”

Geneva still remembered the version of herself for whom this would have been the K-O, but not now. She wasn’t beat yet. She had to change tactics. Adapt. Maybe it would be enough for June to feel she was being listened to.

“Wonderful! February first it is.”

There was a pause as June considered her daughter.

“Oh? You could manage that?” she asked, unable to keep a lilt from spilling over her skepticism.

Emboldened by the advantage she had in the driver’s seat, she told June yes, definitely, she had a good lead on a job, she was sure to land it. It wasn’t her best work; the lie came out before she could refine the details, but she found it had its own momentum. June remained silent. Geneva felt her heart thumping against her chest, running with the unrehearsed lie despite her polygraph mother in the seat next to her, inverting June’s foreboding visions and returning them to her as problems already solved. The profile view was forgiving and the road reason gave enough to explain any questionable expression.

They were almost home now.

“I’ll finally get to spend Christmas with the family again and,” she continued, the optimism in her voice threatening to falter, “maybe even ring in the new year with you! Or, Fran!”