

Pushover
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ABSTRACT

Pushover

Sarah Mudrosky

My thesis consists of a series of short stories that explore the intersectional cultural identity of the second-generation immigrant protagonist, 20-something Lauren. Mixing episodes from Lauren's childhood and young-adulthood, the collection delves into ways that cultural heritage and family history can complicate the fashioning of one's identity. The stories are set primarily in Montreal and the surrounding area.

The predominant use of first person point of view is intended to establish a strong voice for the main character, emphasizing the tension between Lauren's tendency to over-think and her tendency for inaction. The reader is meant to feel immersed in her thoughts and her obsessive probing of the past.

Linked by common central characters, the stories deal with themes of home, belonging, inherited shame, and the complicated influence that ethnicity has on one's identity and self-image.

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Concordia University, Department of English

MA Thesis

By Sarah Mudrosky

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THE CAT

Luke left for work nearly an hour ago. I am slow, staring at the thin film of dust and cat hair on my bedside table. There's the padding of small feet, and then the graceful smack of something landing on my leg. "Hello honey," I say, reaching out to stroke the cat's soft fur. I look down and realize with a sinking feeling that it's no longer the cat, but THE CAT. I never feel ready for THE CAT. The cat is so much nicer. THE CAT looks at me, yellow eyes oozing apathetic disdain.

"It's almost 9:30."

"I know that. I'm gonna get up."

THE CAT blinks slowly, looks away. I do not move. She knows when I'm lying, anyway. I roll onto my back and look at the ceiling. THE CAT walks all over me, sits on my chest and glares at me. I start to think about my to-do list, and THE CAT is right there with me, rattling it off aloud with commentary:

"Check and reply to all emails. Maybe start with the ones from *last* week, hm? Write and format mass mail content. Finish the grant application. Maybe prepare what to tell Carl when *that* doesn't come through. Design ALL ads and posters. Call your father. Call your grandmother. Update your address with the SAAQ (*it has* been over a year now). Update website

copy. Confirm meeting time with Carl. Clean up the goddamn apartment and water the plants and throw out those rotten mushrooms in the fridge and feed the cat and don't forget to give THE CAT the majority of your attention, today and every day."

I raise an eyebrow at THE CAT and she beams at me, steps on my throat, and walks onto Luke's side of the bed.

Luke has just started a new job, and I am glad. He was so bored at the last one, and he got extra quiet and mopey over the year he spent there. I hated the way I sounded when I asked him if everything was okay, the way he seemed to sink further away each time he said, "yeah, fine." At least this job keeps him busier and using his brain. His mom always tells me that he needs to be constantly mentally engaged, as if I don't know that.

I get up with a small groan, a head rush, and start to sort through the clothes littering the foot of the bed, folding some and throwing some over my shoulder into the wicker hamper. I make the bed meticulously, so that the comforter is extremely flat and smooth. THE CAT does not move, so I pick her up, smooth out the blanket with one hand, and put her back on top. I fold Luke's plaid pyjama pants and place them in the centre of his pillow.

"*Good job,*" THE CAT drawls derisively, jumping onto Luke's nightstand. "That's better. Now I bet he'll love you and talk to you like a normal boyfriend."

She looks at me, lifts her paw, and knocks Luke's deodorant onto the floor. I really hate THE CAT. Instead of responding, I grab my ancient bath towel off the back of the door and go for a shower. It feels too long and too hot, but at least THE CAT stays on the other side of the door. The walls and mirror are sweating. I open the cabinet, survey the row of pill bottles with Luke's name on them. I forget what each one is supposed to do, but I know not to ask him about it. He gets weird when I try to understand. I hang up the towel, put my sweatpants and pyjama

shirt back on, try using breathing techniques and a positive mantra to fight off the paralyzing dread that crowds my now-clean body. *You are okay. You are okay.* The mantras used to be less mediocre. At first, I even said them out loud whenever Luke wasn't home, but THE CAT laughed so hard that I just repeat them in my head now. They don't work.

When I emerge from the bathroom there is insistent meowing in the kitchen. I follow the sound down the hallway and pour cat food into the empty bowl on the floor. The cat nudges my calf appreciatively before eating. She really is much nicer to have around.

I do not eat, because I feel nauseous and I don't know why. Instead I wash the dishes in the sink. I do them very efficiently, and it perks me up. Last, I clean the big chef's knife slowly; really watching the bright tip, making myself completely aware of the weight of it, of the direction it would point in a free-fall. I rinse it, think about the strangeness of an object whose purpose lies where its edge disappears, sharply, into nothing. I dry it carefully and replace it in its wooden block.

My phone buzzes loudly in the bedroom. As I walk toward it, it buzzes again.

Hi Lauren, we'll meet at 11:30?

Lauren?

I sigh, type **Yes, see you then!** and toss the phone on the bed. The cat, fed and happy, hops onto the corner of the mattress and lazily watches me get dressed. I stop every now and then to pet her. In front of the mirror, I brush out my long dark hair. I watch myself, the way my skin looks older than it is, how I look sallow and plump at the same time. Half-understood words and concepts flit through my brain halfheartedly, words like 'retinol' and 'free-radical damage' and 'collagen'. It all sounds either abstract or expensive.

I try to remember feeling pretty. In a flash of sober honesty, I try to remember just feeling good. Like, with myself. I trace the past year backwards, note a lot of sleepwalking and deferring, then before that I'm graduating from a Master's program and feeling nothing, and then before that there's just a blur of school and work and blind panic and I have to stop this futile digging, for fear of never pinpointing my blissful days of self-actualized existence.

After trapping my damp hair in a claw-like clip, I pull a new sweater out of a paper shopping bag. The lilac-coloured knit was an impulse-buy, and I still feel kind of bad about it. I break off the tag and pull it over my head, testing it out thoughtfully.

"Nice sweater."

I keep looking in the mirror, try cuffing the sleeves. THE CAT eyes the price tag on the corner of the bed, tucks her paws under her small torso, settling in. "I thought you only bought stuff second-hand. You know, for the *environment*."

She is trying to make me feel like a phony, and it is working. The sweater seems to make me look even shorter. I try being honest with her.

"I was sad. I went out of my way to drive Mamie to an appointment and she made me wait half an hour outside her place, and then we were obviously going to be late and she blamed me and I got angry but I didn't say anything because I knew she was stressed and it wasn't her fault she was acting that way, so I felt bad, and she said she didn't want me with her at the doctor's, so I killed time at the mall and this was so soft and 30% off—"

THE CAT wheezes with ugly laughter. The hysterics drag on, and for a second I wonder if maybe she's gone and now it's merely the cat, coughing up a hairball. Alas, no. THE CAT shakes her head and stretches her paws out in front of her. "Your grandma is such a cunt."

I uncuff the sleeves again, remove the hairclip and slowly braid my hair to the side.

“It’s not her fault.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No, it can’t be.”

“That’s what pussies say.”

I pick up my bag, shove my laptop into it. “That’s a little heavy-handed, even for you.”

My bus is late, so I only have two minutes to myself at the Second Cup before Carl comes bustling in. I wave to show him where I’ve settled with my laptop. He’s supposedly a literary legend, but not in a mainstream way. Like a minor-league baseball star, maybe. He is always very busy, but I don’t know with what, exactly. Once tasks are delegated to me, I don’t see what’s left for him to do. I hope that this is merely because his elusive and essential contributions are above my pay-grade, and therefore unimaginable to me. At the very least, he is well-connected and had the idea to start a journal in the first place. He is short, thin, mid-forties, and dresses almost exclusively in black. He reminds me of those crows that you see sometimes, that are missing enough feathers in their wings that everything about them looks floppy and disheveled; their every move clumsy and laborious.

“Hi,” he says, placing his black fedora on the table. “Do you want anything?”

“No thanks, you go ahead.”

He gets in line and I reply to two emails from the printers as quickly as I can before he gets back with a tall paper cup of coffee with lots of cream and sugar. It is so full that it spills, running down his hand and wrist. He doesn’t seem to notice. He sits down across from me, visibly sweating.

“So?”

Even though he is in charge, he always seems to expect me to walk him through our little meetings.

“So I’ve been in touch with the printers about our latest specs, and I’m waiting to hear back. We should get our confirmation and invoice soon. The mass-mail for our next call for submissions is ready, and I can send you the test this afternoon if you want to look it over.”

“Okay, great. And have you reminded Mona to please hurry up and choose a winner for the contest?”

Fuck no.

“Yes, I emailed her this morning, I’ll let you know when she gets back to me.”

“Okay, fine. We need to prepare another mass-mail announcing the winner, with a photo and bio. When can we do that?”

We?

“We can probably have that all done the day after we hear who the winner is.”

“Okay, good.”

The meeting proceeds in this fashion for another eight minutes before Carl gets up to leave. He always leaves his cup on the table and I am always surprised that it is empty, because I never remember seeing him drink from it. I immediately email Mona.

It still amazes me sometimes that people submit work to *Eleusia*. I guess it really goes to show the power of strong marketing. Looking at the website or the magazines themselves, there isn’t really a way to tell that it’s just Carl flapping about and me shoving it all together and a blur of occasional students who want to help out but who invariably disappear after a couple of

months. Carl should really stop calling it an ‘internship,’ as he seems to have no idea what that actually entails. I stay for another ten minutes, typing wildly, and then leave before I start to feel like I have to buy something.

I walk toward the Sun Life building on Sherbrooke to meet my dad for lunch. He makes me anxious because when he sees that I’m stressed out or spreading myself too thin, he tries to fix my whole life by advising me to merely lighten my workload and make more room in my life for family. Anyone else would know that extra time with the familial firing squad isn’t the solution. My father’s advice is sometimes stupid, sometimes aggravating, but consistently simplistic and unhelpful.

I wait for him on the steps outside the high-rise, mentally adjusting my to-do list. I try to put a positive spin on each item, to feel gratitude. Call your grandmother. *She loves you and you love her.* Clean the rest of the apartment. *You have a home.* Water your poor plants. *You have the power to nurture.* Create mass-mail(s) and design graphics. *You have a job and you are needed.* Finish grant application. *Money... is good.*

“Hi sweetheart.”

I start. My dad is standing over me in a vintage Washington Redskins jacket. The cool insurance guy. I marvel silently at the fact that he – so proud of his First-Nations heritage— un-ironically wears that jacket.

“Hey, Dad.” I smile, get up and kiss both his cheeks.

“I can’t go too far today,” he says apologetically. “I’ve got a meeting right after this.”

“That’s okay. Wanna just grab a quick sandwich across the street?”

We do that, and the sun comes out so we eat on the steps of his office building.

“Gloria was hoping to have you and Nicole over for a sort of Thanksgiving potluck during the long weekend. With your *fellers*, of course. Maybe on the Sunday?”

“I work at the deli on Sundays. Can we see if everyone is free Saturday or Monday?”

He scrunches up his face the way he does when he wants you to know he’s displeased with you.

“Sure, but I gotta tell you, kid, we can’t always move things around to fit your schedule. You know, sometimes you’ve gotta give a little, too.”

“I switch my work schedule for family stuff often, Dad, you just don’t notice when I do. I’d just rather keep my Sunday shift because I make time & a half. I need the money, to be honest.” He smiles and shakes his head slightly, like I have so much growing up to do. It’s the same way he used to react whenever I complained about anything as a teenager.

“But you have a job in your field. It just seems silly that you’re still holding on to this other gig that you’ve had since you were in school. You’re allowed to quit, you know. Put your foot down, start your life.” He puts on his sunglasses, stares up into the sky as though the sun is inspiring his clichés. “I’m just sayin’ we can’t keep moving around holidays for you just so that you can keep working this job some CEGEP kid probably wants.”

“Dad, I barely make anything at *Eleusia*. I really need the extra cash right now,” I try to say very calmly. I wrap up the other half of my caprese wrap, twisting the edges of the wax paper like a candy wrapper.

“Okay,” he says gently, still with that small affectionate smile. In the movie of his life, he is stepping back after giving his golden life-advice, leaving his daughter’s superficially-developed character to apply his hard-won wisdom in her own time.

“If it’s easier for you and Gloria, we can do it at our place,” I offer, mostly as a change of subject.

“Why don’t you call Gloria to ask her what she’d like? You know it hurts her feelings that you always expect me to pass along the message.”

“Okay, I will.”

“Nice. I guess that’ll give you and Luke a week to clean up and hide all your porn.”

“Only the really freaky stuff.”

He grins, laughs loudly. It often feels like he says and does what he has to in order to remember our visits as these sweet little snapshots. *That time we went for a pint and my daughter drank an IPA and I was proud. That time we ate lunch on the steps in the fall, and we had a life-talk and we looked good.*

On the commute home, THE CAT creeps invisibly along my path. She scurries ahead around every corner, zips through ankles in the crowded metro, lounges under my seat in the bus. I’m never sure that I see her, but I know that she is there. When I get home, she is waiting for me. As soon as the door closes behind me I allow myself to feel heavier. The steep, narrow stairs up to the apartment feel like a big deal.

I kick off my shoes, drag my bag to the bedroom. THE CAT is waiting for me in the middle of the bed, and I cannot resist her. I curl up like a shrimp and she sits up with impeccable posture in front of my face.

“Let’s talk about it.”

“I don’t want to.”

“That’s not relevant,” she says, flashing a pointy grin. She is already purring.

“Please, I don’t have time for this. I have work to do, and Luke will be home soon.”

THE CAT slinks up onto all fours, starts to prowl around me in slow, predatory circles.

“You don’t have to talk at all for us to do this. Just do what you usually do when you say you’re working from home, when Loverboy comes home and the apartment is just as messy as it was before and you say you went out for meetings when really you ate ramen noodles in bed for breakfast and for lunch and stared at your bedroom walls thinking about how overwhelmed you are. They should seriously start calling dry ramen The Lauren Special, and serving it with a paper bag to hyperventilate into once you’re done. And then lo and fucking behold, the second Luke walks in you smile like an absolute moron just because he used to want to throw himself off a bridge, and somehow *you* acting Cheshire-happy is gonna save his medicated ass from going off the edge—”

I shoot upright, whip around to face her.

“SHUT UP! Just shut up, you nasty bitch—”

THE CAT grins and vanishes, leaving the cat, startled, in her place. She always fucking does that when I get angry at her, and I always feel bad for yelling at the cat. I stop, reach out to scoop up her silky little body, to pet her and kiss her head and tell her that she’s so sweet and I’m sorry, but she dodges me and runs off.

My whole body is shaking now and my mouth tastes like pennies and my eyes are crying before the wave even breaks and I crumple up to sob quiet, ugly sobs.

Two and a half hours later, I am sitting up in bed with my laptop open, slowly reading emails and sorting submissions with still-trembling hands. I hear the front door open, keys drop into the bowl on the table. I sit up a bit straighter, smooth out the front of my sweater. THE CAT saunters into the room before Luke, jumps onto the dresser and perches there like a hawk. Luke ducks his head into the room and I smile at him, really craning my neck. He's so tall the whole room feels smaller with him in it.

"Right where I left you," he says jokingly. I hear THE CAT snort with laughter.

"I fucking love this guy, it's like I don't even need to say anything."

I snicker half-heartedly and he comes to kiss the top of my head.

"I did leave today, though," I say, trailing off lamely.

"I know."

I shut the laptop, climb out of bed and hug him before walking to the kitchen and cracking open a bottle of Labatt 50. Luke looks at me inquisitively.

"I had lunch with my dad today."

He nods, motions for me to pass him one, too. The lid twists off with a small hissing sound and he takes a slow sip fixing his eyes on me. He looks unfocused and calculating at the same time; there to listen, but not to ask. I don't bother trying to describe any part of my day.

We drink and eat almonds and start making supper. He is in a good mood, and I am glad. It is easier to match him than it is to carry us both.

"How would you feel about maybe doing a little Thanksgiving thing here, on Saturday or Monday next weekend?"

He pauses, wooden spoon hovering above the rice pot.

"Oh God. You mean with your family?" He droops his shoulders.

“Yeah, but I figure if it’s here we won’t have to invite them for a while, and they’ll probably focus conversation on how we can make our apartment nicer, instead of talking about jobs...” I put my hands in prayer-position and try to smile angelically.

“I don’t mind. Just please don’t let Gloria make the turkey. That’s always bad news.”

I tell him it’s a deal and we finish cooking and we eat and I ask him lots of questions about his day and the nuances of his new job. It’s strange, because even though THE CAT is lurking around and shooting me judgmental looks, a really big part of me feels genuinely happy. It’s one of those nights that feels easy, and I can almost believe that Luke is *fine*, that the stuff we barely talk about doesn’t really exist; that he’s found his way and I’m a part of the formula that is altogether enough to keep him happy and alive.

Later on, while Luke is in the shower, THE CAT creeps into the dark bedroom and slowly takes in the lilac sweater on the floor, Luke’s jeans twisted up and hanging off the edge of the bed. I pull the comforter up to my bare shoulders, start to undo my braid.

“Now I know I’m hard on you, but I’ve got to give you credit: when you give up on editing, you might consider acting.” She jumps onto the bed near my feet, and I kick her off. She hisses and is immediately back on the bed, crouched on my chest with her mouth open and her sharp teeth bared. Her pupils are huge and I am a giant sparrow.

“You listen to me,” she hisses, “you can have your sweet little suppers and impromptu fucks, but don’t kid yourself, honey; every shadow you see will be shaped like me, and I’ll *always* be here for you.” Her claws slowly curl into the flesh below my collar bone. “You cannot begin to guess at my loyalty. I’m more *you* than you are.”

The bathroom door opens and THE CAT's pupils immediately contract, and she jumps off the bed and scurries away. Luke scoots into bed, making groggy sounds that are not words. He mimes a sloppy kiss in my general direction and sinks into his pillow. My pulse is still pounding in my ears. I wet my lips, slowly open my mouth to speak. My voice is small and gravelly.

“Luke, what if maybe I'm the one who needs help?”

Luke breathes several slow and even breaths instead of answering. The cat jumps onto the bed, kneads the covers for a moment, and curls up in the space between us.

Interim

There was always something womanly about Ivy Green, even when we were both far too young to call ourselves women. Throughout elementary school she was consistently a full head taller than me, while I remained slight and boyish. Growing up was a sort of contest among girls at that age, and I was blatantly losing while Ivy excelled.

She was my best friend, but *her* best friend during elementary school was Yvette. She often tried to explain to me that the only reason Yvette was her *best* friend was because they got each other in a way that I just couldn't.

"She's my black best friend," she once told me in grade two, and I –eager to appear understanding— nodded vigorously and matter-of-factly declared my spot as her white best friend.

She scanned my face slowly and then said "No... just my other best friend." It wasn't that she had any closer white friends, but my seven-year-old self didn't realize that she couldn't commit to calling me white.

Yvette certainly thought that I was white, though. She would always curl her lip up at me when she flounced over – smiling mischievously – to pull Ivy away to whatever was cooler than my company.

“Come with me, Ivy,” she once said, with a sassy undertone and an emphatic slowness that was clearly directed at me, and not at Ivy. “Lauren can’t come because she’s going to be racist.”

This suspicion of whiteness was not uncommon in our school. I’d watched and listened to all of the black history presentations at school, and I thought that I got it. I thought that maybe there were things I needed to accept not being a part of, that maybe it was the least I could do. But Yvette’s efforts to stomp on me and take Ivy never felt good or right. Years later, Ivy told me that being black didn’t automatically make her righteous, and that Yvette was indisputably a bitch.

Yvette’s mom was a tall, beautiful woman with a powder-white complexion and a blond braid that hung down to her waist. Yvette was defensive about this fact and insisted repeatedly and vehemently that she was ‘mixed.’ She dragged out the hissing Xxxxx and clicked the word shut with a sharp T sound. It felt snaky every time she reminded people.

“I’m allowed to say that, because I’m mixxxxxxT.”

She’d often run a hand over her cheek to support her point, her face puckered up in its signature cheeky grin. Whenever she made that face you knew she was coming to fuck you up.

“Lauren you have to go away now, because we’re starting a Black Girls club, and there are no racists allowed.”

Defense was futile. No matter how well-phrased or logical the rebuttal, it would be reframed as an attack. In a rare instance of youthful foresight, I decided to shut up and let future-Yvette hopefully recall my docility and realize how nasty she had been. The way—for instance—that she had pinched my arm until it was purple, trying to get me to confess that Mamie, who had come to pick me up from school one day, was my ‘brown nanny;’ that I was

lying about her being my grandmother, so that people wouldn't think I was just a spoiled white girl. She twisted the skin until I cried, at which point she let go and ran away, afraid of being caught by the after-school supervisor. Ivy stayed with me and did not hang out with Yvette's club for a week.

The aforementioned club consisted only of Yvette, Ivy, and Sophia, who was also defensive about her white father except for when her Romanian heritage made her seem more interesting among friends and teachers. Sometimes Kedisha would join them, but she was one school grade younger, so generally the club's attendance capped at three. Most of our grade was black, but Yvette was very selective: you had to be black, female, and *cool*.

"What do you guys talk about," I once asked Ivy, when we were the last kids left at the after-school care program.

"Nothing, really," she said, her fingers continuing to weave a plastic zipper out of glittery gimp. "It's stupid. Yvette makes it about black stuff for two seconds and then we just sit around and talk about other stuff."

"Like what other stuff?"

"Anything. Boys, music... the same stuff that you and me talk about. But they don't really talk about family stuff like we do."

She looked at me closely and I must have been frowning, because she looked back down at her bracelet-in-progress for a moment before speaking again.

"Don't be upset. Yvette just wants to decide who can come."

She continued her handiwork, but my hands were frozen around the strings of my green staircase, listening to her say with perfect ease what I could never make Yvette understand. I saw then that Ivy was *being nice* to let Yvette have her way, but I wished that she would speak the

way she just had around her other best friend. She was always such a quiet sidekick when Yvette was busy orchestrating divisions that she could later blame on others.

Nobody is perfect, especially not in elementary school. Ivy and I understood each other so well, though, and I knew that her passivity was born of her gentleness. My passivity was the result of my cowardice. But Ivy never judged or scorned me for it, because she knew that I, too, didn't want to hurt anybody. So when Andrea became my best friend for the interim year of grade five, there were no hard feelings at all.

Andrea had a very sweet, stay-at-home mother. This allowed her to navigate a realm of coolness superior to my own, as she got to take the school bus home each day. I stayed at the after-school program until one of my parents picked me up. She frequently reported the happenings on the school bus, and I listened with wonder and envy. School buses meant fieldtrips for me, but represented a strange and exclusive life of semi-independence in my fortunate peers.

“Kurtis ran to the front and tried to kiss Isabel, but she screamed. It was *so* desperate.”

Many of her stories, though interesting glimpses into what seemed like an elite culture, concluded with “but you don't get the inside joke, you're not a Busser.”

“Any Busser knows that...”

“If you were a Busser you could...”

I never heard anyone else use the word ‘Busser,’ or talk about the bus quite as much as Andrea did. She made something banal into what she wanted it to be.

“Where are you from, dear?” Andrea’s mother had asked me the first time I went over to their house. We were sitting at the dining room table dunking cookies into milk. I had to quickly gulp down my mouthful before answering.

“N.D.G., on the North side.”

Debra laughed. “No, I mean where in the world. Where is your family from?”

“Lauren is African,” Andrea interjected, putting an arm around my shoulder and beaming like she’d just earned the Nobel Peace Prize.

“Oh! Really? Where in Africa?”

“Mauritius,” I told her, “but I’ve never been there.”

She nodded brightly, but I suspected by the way her mouth faltered that she had no idea where or what Mauritius was.

“Well isn’t that something? You know, Andrea’s dad is from Peru,” she said, as though I should feel some sort of third-world kinship with her husband. I just ‘Oh’ed and smiled.

“You know I really thought you were part Indian or something. Do you know when your parents came to Canada?”

“My mom came when she was a baby. My dad is from here.”

“Her dad is an Indian, though,” Andrea threw in. “And Lauren goes back and forth between living with her African mom and her Indian-Irish dad each week.”

This new information was also so fascinating that I had to spend several minutes answering Debra’s well-meaning questions.

No, he’s not from Kahnawake. He’s Mi’kmaq. And Irish, yes. He works with computers. I don’t think he’s ever smoked. Can we go in the pool soon?

Later that evening, Andrea and I prepared intricate dance numbers to perform for her family. She dressed up in her favourite white dress and a pink and black striped necktie. She put me in whatever she deemed ‘tribal’ from her closet, and wrapped my hair up sloppily in a bright red dish towel. The clothes were too big, and were held on precariously by a wide belt. We went around the living room with a tip jar as a joke, and I made a dollar more than Andrea, with a conspiratorial wink from Debra.

As I rolled out my sleeping bag upstairs that night, I thought about how great it was to have a big house. Ivy could never have sleepovers because she shared a big queen bed with her mom.

Before I went up to bed for good, Debra asked me what I thought of Andrea’s older sister, Beatriz. I’d seen her for maybe five minutes altogether that day, and tried to sputter a polite response.

“Do you think she’s pretty?”

I said yes, I did find her pretty, in the way that most nine-year-old girls find thirteen-year-old girls big and pretty and alien.

“I’m asking you because you’re a little different, too. Girls at school are giving her a hard time. Calling her pancake face and things like that.”

She did have a very flat and round face, but it was attractive. It made me think of a bowl of milk. Debra looked at me with such expectation, I felt my face flushing as I looked down and mumbled my disagreement with the girls at Beatriz’s high school. Satisfied, she told me how happy she was that Andrea and I were friends.

Andrea talked a lot that night about her former best friend, Sabrina, who had moved to Vancouver the previous year. It was throughout the course of this monologue that I learned who

she was shaping me into. Sabrina was shy and complacent, used to love giving Andrea pony rides on her back, always played the slave when they did make-believe exploring.

It was so easy to chalk Andrea's forcefulness up to her loud personality, but as she described Sabrina and how much she missed her, so many episodes in our friendship rushed to mind with new clarity, and I could see that she'd been stuffing me into the Sabrina-shaped hole in her life. I was soft and eager to please, and malleable.

After hearing about the person who was essentially my blueprint, I became sensitive to Andrea's attempts to mould me into anything other than me. This was the beginning of my resistance, and thus the beginning of the end of our friendship.

The final break probably occurred the time that she slept over at my mom's place. She'd never been in an apartment before, and when I left the room for a moment to take a phone call from my dad, she resented my abandonment for at least the next hour. My mother saw the way she guilt-tripped me over every little thing, and I could see her dislike growing throughout the day. She had to interfere when Andrea, who was filling a bag up for her garage sale with old toys that I no longer wanted, began to put whatever household items she pleased into her bag. I could tell that her control was waning, and I prayed to god that Mom wouldn't yell at her. Andrea got mad at me again when my mom told her that she could only have *one* of the individually-wrapped pastries that she'd come to love from my snack box a school.

That night I was exasperated with her, and upset that she was blatantly not enjoying herself. We were sleeping on the living room floor on mattresses made from couch cushions. As I was about to fall asleep, she briskly unzipped herself from her sleeping bag and stomped into the kitchen. I asked her what was wrong on her way out of the room, but she didn't answer. I heard crying sounds, and then my mother creaking out of bed and into the kitchen.

Andrea came back to bed soon after. The next day, after a frigid post-breakfast goodbye, my mom told me that Andrea had left her bed the previous night because I just reminded her *so* much of Sabrina, that it made her sad, and she missed her so much.

“I mean, *puh-lease!* I’m sorry Lauren, but that girl is *awful*. She takes advantage of you and makes you feel bad *on purpose*.”

Having raved to my mom for a week about having my best friend over, I couldn’t verbally agree with her for at least two weeks, by which point Andrea had announced to me with great false-grief that she was switching into a better school. We’d barely spent time together since my sleepover anyway, and Ivy had floated back into the freed up space, with her strange sense of wordless understanding and acceptance. On her last day of school, Andrea—who was a master of the over-the-top, eye-narrowing death-glare—gave me her most scathing look and informed me, in a final stroke, that I would no longer be able to terrorize her and make her out to be “a spoiled bitch.” I stared at her in disbelief. Before turning to get on the school bus, she added “The spoiled bitch is *you*, you know. You’re like, the richest African on Earth.”

In the after-school room that afternoon, Ivy and I made gimp key chains and she smiled, snorted with laughter and said “Well, now you know what Yvette is afraid of.”

Pirouette

Mamie had spent the duration of her husband's funeral screaming at the top of her lungs. The priest learned to stop pausing, and continued to speak quietly and quickly. Nobody could hear him anyway. Mom told me she'd felt sick, and had to close her eyes and tune everything out during her father's service and burial. At twelve years old, Mom had to delay her own grief for a year because she was drowning in her mother's. Everyone had to drown with Mamie.

When I was ten, Mom told me that it was during a visit to her uncle in Mauritius, almost a year after her father's death, when she finally cracked, crying in the backseat of her uncle's car. I had wondered why it happened at that moment, and she said something about how distance had made her fully and suddenly feel her father's absence.

"Was Mamie with you?" I'd asked, unable to picture my grandmother consoling her daughter.

"No. She was spending the day alone with my uncle's wife. Please put the dishes away now."

I have often reflected on my grandmother's inability to handle anything whatsoever. I'd seen it in the way Mom and some of her aunts called Mamie "*femme-enfant*" behind her back, and in the way they always strategized who should break bad news to her, and how the news

should be broken. Like when one of their cousins, who lived in Mauritius, died. My mom and her aunt, Marie had to tag-team delivering the news. Mamie had thrown herself onto the bed, screaming and kicking like a toddler throwing a tantrum. I did not know whether she loved her cousin *so* much, or whether death, *any death*, was enough to put her over the edge. As a kid, neither hypothesis helped make sense of an adult acting like that. It was always dizzying to watch her freak out.

The thing is, I'm scared when I think about it sometimes. It is usually very hard to imagine being old, but when I see my grandmother, there is an eerie sort of recognition. On paper she seems fine. Impressive, even. In her eighties, living independently, life full of activities that she still drives herself to and from—visits with relatives, shopping with her sister, tennis, *petoncle*, cards twice a week... it seems like an exemplary post-retirement lifestyle. But there's more. There's the stress, the anxiety that plagues every step of her routines. She can't keep up with this world, and it scares her.

Glitches with her phone are people – *des malades*—who are toying with her phone line. If she breathes into the receiver and hears the resulting feedback, she will hang up immediately, so that *les malades* cannot hear more of her private conversation. For a while she had a landline and two cell phones, but the same persistent assailants managed to tap all three. Their skills even extend to her tablet, occasionally preventing her from playing solitaire.

I don't see myself in her in these extreme instances, but in her general fear, there is a blurry sort of mirror. It makes me wonder where it all started for her; whether— like me— she was an apparently high-functioning individual, until this sneaky dread took over. I don't know how to describe it really, but it feels like *whatever it is* is constantly brimming, threatening to drown us all.

Mamie watches the news every day. Whenever I see her, I get a full report on everything terrible that recently occurred. She tells me about whatever has happened, and then proceeds with her staple catch-phrase of denial (“*Mais c’est pas vrai, ça!*”), even though she just informed me that it is indeed true. She gets worked up about whatever horrific act of terror she’s brought up, and then gets so appalled that she can no longer talk about it, finishing with, “This is why I don’t watch the news.”

I see her less often in the years since I stopped living at home, although I still see her more often than my mom does. This has everything to do with pity. Each visit is always more or less the same: she gives me a detailed catalogue of what she’s done and what she’s eaten that day; she talks about the news and why she apparently doesn’t watch it; and then she talks about Mauritius. The conversation almost inevitably orbits back to her home.

Mamie and I are walking to the hospital. Miraculously, I was able to park her car up the street from Vendome Metro, and now we are emerging from the pedestrian tunnel onto the expansive lawn of the new super-hospital. We walk by the enormous sculpture that is the centrepiece of the garden. It is a circle of stainless-steel bars curving skyward to look like an enormous metal blossom. We are here to visit her brother-in-law, who has been laid up in the hospital for over two months.

Mamie is distracted. She is walking slowly and not paying attention to her surroundings. I stick close to her side, offering apologetic looks when other pedestrians have to step awkwardly out of our path.

Once we get inside, her frantic eyes flick all over the place, as though overwhelmed by the sudden swell of activity and the many signs and arrows on the walls.

“This way,” I tell her calmly. “He’s in the C North wing.”

She runs a hand through her short dark hair and spins around once.

“How do you know this?”

“I told you, I came to see him last week, and once before that.”

She doesn’t answer. Her gaze continues to sweep around wildly, but I doubt that she is absorbing anything. I doubt that she’d be able to find her way back to the tunnel entrance if I were to just leave her.

“*Lauren, je veux pas lui voir comme ça.* He knows I can’t stand to see him suffer.”

“Last time they had him on painkillers and he was awake and talking like everything was normal, Mamie. *Tante Marie* can’t be here today, so he’s all alone.” I take her hand and give her what I hope is my most convincing look. “He’ll be so happy to see you, and that’s what’s most important right now.”

She is quiet for a moment and then sighs her consent. We walk toward the elevator and press the call button.

“Marie should be here with him, but that’s my sister! She has something to do, she’ll leave him here to suffer alone. *Incroyable.*”

The elevator arrives and we get in.

“She’s been here almost every day for over two months. It was probably important.”

“Then Constance should come for her father. Or Cole. He should not be alone.”

The doors slide open at the eighth floor and we step out.

“That’s why *we’re* here.”

I see that she is nervous as we approach room #30. She slows her step, so I swoop through the door ahead of her and greet Paul cheerfully. He responds with equal parts surprise and cheer, easing Mamie's entrance into the room. He smiles, but her face falls at the sight of him. He is more gaunt and gray than the last time she saw him. We both kiss his paper-thin cheeks and sit in chairs on either side of his bed.

Paul knows her very well. Everyone else tries to ask him questions and keep his spirits up, but today he does that for Mamie, helping her handle the sight of his faltering and failing body.

"So Colette," he begins, his British accent clashing with the French pronunciation of her name, "how's our Eugenie Bouchard doing in the US Open?"

Mamie lights up and I listen to them talk tennis for several minutes.

He is still passing blood clots. He is hooked up to two large bags of clear fluid, and there is another tube sneaking out from under his blanket feeding bloody liquid into a large sack in a plastic bin near my feet. I am grateful that the sac is on my side of the bed, so Mamie doesn't see it. She is talking animatedly about her tennis-watching rituals, and doesn't seem to notice whenever Paul winces. Each wince coincides with spurts of darker red fluid in the tube seconds later.

The bag is almost full. As if on cue, a smiling nurse walks in and peeks down at the bag. "You bleed a lot today, Mr. Paul!" she exclaims in a thick South Asian accent, as though copious bleeding should somehow boost morale. Having visited twice before, I know that he in fact hasn't passed a remarkable amount of blood. But her comment sounds encouraging and seems like the thing to say, I guess.

“Thank you, Florence,” Paul says sincerely. “You always seem to arrive right before that bag looks like it might pop.”

Florence laughs.

She lifts up the bag, unscrews it from the tube, and attaches an empty one to the tube. Mamie shrieks and stands and covers her face, spinning away from the scene and screaming “*Ah, non!*” in the same tone that she always says “*C’est pas vrai.*”

Florence looks up at her in shock. I stand and quickly walk to her side of the bed, reaching out to touch her arm. I try to smile and tell her that it’s normal, that he’s been doing this for days, but she is crying and begins to slip away to that strange, infantile place where reason cannot reach her. Florence approaches as if to help, but does not know what to do. Paul and I make quick eye contact and he gives me a firm little nod. I nod back.

“Okay, let’s go,” I say, picking up Mamie’s purse and ushering her toward the door.

We attract a lot of attention on our way out of the hospital. People probably think that someone has just died.

We sit on a bench in the garden out front, the metal flower statue towering beside us. I console her, but she isn’t hearing me. I give up talking and just rub her back and let the minutes between the scene in room #30 and the present moment lull her back to her senses.

She eventually begins to look around dully, and we walk back to the tunnel, through the Metro passage, and back to her car. She sits quietly in the passenger seat until we get on the highway, when she starts to shift and sporadically mumble, “*Mais c’est pas vrai,*” under her breath.

I glance at her face and have to look away immediately. Her eyes are wild and her mouth stretched and frozen as though she is sobbing, but she isn’t. She looks like a theatre mask, frozen

in dread. She looks like she is screaming at a funeral, but no sound is coming out, and no change relieves her face of the contortion.

By the time we are approaching her West Island condo building, her face is normal again and she is staring straight ahead, eyes unfocused.

“You know, things didn’t used to be like this.” She kept staring ahead, like she was talking to herself, and not to me.

“This world, this life. It all used to be simpler. We used to climb fruit trees and eat until our tummies hurt, spend the day by the sea on Saturdays. Children never disrespected their families. There were no drugs. Nobody would be all alone in a hospital dying. Nobody would wake up all alone every day and go to sleep alone every night until they die.”

She turns and looks at me, sharp as the tip of a knife. I don’t know what to say, so I say nothing. She would blame the world, she would blame Canada, my mother, me, all because she’s afraid. She would spend two hours cataloguing my mother’s mistreatment of her (wiping her tears, shrugging her little shoulders and ending with “This is just my life now”) before ever telling Mom how she feels. I’m sure I’m not the only one she shares this with. I’m sure she shares with others all the ways in which I let her down, too. I park her car in front of her building. She does not undo her seatbelt. She does not move.

“We were twelve children, you know,” she begins, and I can see that I will be there for a while, sitting in her parked car with her. “And we grew up in an innocent paradise.”

The sun slides across the sky as she reminisces and explains to me things that I’ve heard many, many times before. She is punishing me. By the time she finishes the one where her mother refused to let her see a movie—chaperoned— with her fiancée (“We respected our parents back then, and did not ask ‘why’ after they said no.”), she has exhausted herself. She

says that she will go upstairs and make herself dinner and go to bed. I tell her to enjoy her evening, and that I will call her tomorrow. We both get out of the car and I pass her the keys and hug her. As I pull away from her wooden embrace to start walking toward the bus stop, she is looking at me the way she looks at my mom, like she wants me to know that I'm letting her down, but doesn't want to say it. She continues to stare, and her eyes become the yellow eyes of THE CAT, telling me that it's not enough, it'll never be enough.

Years ago, when I was seventeen, Mom and Mamie went on vacation to Turkey. I had stayed home for my summer job, and enjoyed three weeks of relative independence. When they returned, Mom told me about Mamie's first moment in Istanbul, how she was immediately overwhelmed by the surge of the city, placing her hands over her ears and spinning around, mouth spread in a silent scream.

In grade ten, my best friend, Ivy, had given me her old pointe shoes. Ballet was trendy among the girls in my high school. Many days after school we hung out at Ivy's apartment until her mom got home, and she'd teach me some basic ballet moves. We'd talk about boys and scholarships, after-prom party ideas and AP exams. We were the most average of teenagers at the same time being a couple of the highest academic achievers in our grade. People thought of her as the smarter one because she was in the science stream while I was in the arts stream, in response to which Ivy defended me fiercely, telling people that if I had wanted to do AP

calculus, I would be doing it. I think that she overestimated my aptitude of math and science, but she was always the very greatest friend.

The fundamental difference between us was –and still is—that Ivy lived with the freedom and fluidity of a dancer. She did exactly what she wanted and did not bend her principles; she was rigidly self-disciplined and utterly free at the same time. I admired how forward she was, how simple things often seemed to her.

I was a terrible dancer. I couldn't escape my horrified premonitions of what onlookers would think. Once, I had mustered up the courage to ask my parents if I could take a beginner's ballet class at a studio that I knew none of my classmates would go to. They told me that ballet was too expensive, and part of me was relieved that I didn't have to push myself to be less shy. Nonetheless, I was happy to learn a little from Ivy. She was always taller and thinner than me. Her feet were two sizes bigger, so the shoes she had used in grade seven fit me perfectly in grade ten.

“It's just like when you do it barefoot, except now you have to hop onto your tippy-toe each time your leg is fully extended. Pretend you're trying to draw a big circle around you with your other toe.”

I teetered and stumbled to one side, catching myself on the back of the couch. She laughed while I leaned back and waited to stop feeling dizzy.

“If you pick something to look at and stare at it between each spin, you won't get so dizzy,” she told me, demonstrating by making eye-contact with me each time she spun. She looked so graceful. More than just graceful, she looked happy and in-control.

I practiced in front of a mirror sometimes when I was home alone, even though I knew that I'd never dance in front of people. Despite this, spinning with control became a sort of quiet

obsession for several years of my later adolescence. I didn't know why. And I didn't tell anyone.
Not even Ivy.

I wasn't even there, but I remember it as if I had been, watching Mamie with her hands on either side of her head, spinning on the curb in Istanbul. And sometimes, I'm right there, spinning and spinning beside her, locking my eyes on her each time before turning away once more.

The Unexamined Mother

When I was fifteen my mother was going through her flaky phase. She talked all about auras and quantum energy and the universe, though in the least-scientific way possible. Stuff about watering one plant from a water jug labelled “love” and another plant from a water jug labelled “hate,” and how the loved plant obviously thrived, supposedly due to water molecules’ receptiveness to intention.

“If a word can do so much to a jug of water,” I remember her telling me, “just imagine what it can do to *us*.”

Being fifteen, I rolled my eyes. My mother’s phases were intense and shifted suddenly, which often made it hard to take her belief-of-the-month seriously. This particular phase, for instance, followed the political conspiracy phase, and was immediately followed by a die-hard belief in the long-term benefits of fasting two days a week.

It was during this flaky phase that I woke from a nightmare and ran to my mother’s room for the first time since I was small, on the verge of a panic attack. She calmed me down until I could speak and asked me to describe the nightmare, sitting up in the dark with an arm fluttering uncertainly around my shoulder. She was out of practice, unused to her teenage kid curling up against her headboard. I felt too big to be there.

“It was like the world was ending,” I began, shaking my head at my own inability to properly explain.

“How do you mean? What did you see?”

“I didn’t really see. It was more just a feeling. No, I guess I saw a sort of beige background, like everything was the surface of a bowl of creamed wheat. And it stays smooth for a while and I’m like ‘okay, we’re fine, we’re okay,’ but I know it’ll get spiky. The surface just gets choppy, like a bad brainwave and it’s like the whole world is hurting and it’s my fault.”

She didn’t say anything for a long moment, and then her hand was on my shoulder again and she muttered something about how everything’s okay. I was starting to properly make out the outline of her. My sweat had cooled and I shivered.

“Do I have a fever?” I asked. She checked my forehead.

“No. Why?”

“Usually there’s a fever. You know those awful fever-dreams that people get sometimes, and sometimes you don’t even have to be asleep?”

“This is your fever dream?”

“Yeah. It was worse when I was little, but I think I was always sick or drugged-up when it happened.”

“How long has this been happening,” she asked with an edge of incredulity.

“I can’t remember. Always, I guess.”

The following week my mother picked me up from school and drove me out to Mont St. Hilaire to see a ‘specialist.’

“Like a therapist or something?” I asked with undisguised distaste.

“No. More like a spiritual helper.”

“Seriously, Mom? I have a lot of homework.”

“Just give this a try. You’ll get your work done, you always do. You’re thinking too small here: in the bigger picture, having apocalyptic dreams trumps algebra.”

Over an hour later, we arrived at M. Philippe Blondin’s office, which was actually an old house on the edge of a highway, sharing a small parking lot with a greasy-spoon restaurant. The warmly lit foyer was welcoming in the way an old home is welcoming, but the simple décor and squeaky-clean smell of the place reminded everyone that this was a business: an institution, however quaint.

A splotchy-faced middle-aged woman sat at a desk near the entrance, with a short man in a black turtleneck sweater consulting a file beside the desk. They both looked up as we approached.

The man made a big deal about looking at his watch before asking my mother in French whether she was Madame Odette. She nodded, shook his hand and introduced me. He was only a few inches taller than me, so when he leaned in too close to shake my hand I became more familiar with the up-close strangeness of his face than I wanted to. He was completely bald, wore round glasses with thick lenses and black frames, and his dark eyes looked abnormally wet. He had very thin lips, and the skin around his mouth and chin seemed to droop slightly in a way that reminded me of a toad. The baldness, buggy glasses, damp eyeballs, and the sinewy droopiness of his chin and neck disappearing into his turtleneck all gave him a strange, turtle-like quality, a slimy amphibiousness. He led us into his office.

The whiteness of the walls accentuated that the floors, trims, and all the furniture were made of the same orange-coloured wood. The room smelt vaguely of incense. He closed the door behind us, lowered himself into the chair behind his desk, and motioned for us to sit in the two adjacent chairs.

My mother, used to accompanying Mamie to her doctor appointments, did most of the talking. She described the dream inexactly, explaining that she believed the cause to be linked to my father always guilt-tripping me. She looked to me occasionally as though for clarification, which I only provided a few times, mostly at the prompting of M. Philippe Blondin.

“No, it didn’t seem like I’d accidentally caused the apocalypse.”

“Like I’m watching myself cause intentional destruction, and hate myself for it.”

“Of course I don’t blame myself for my parents’ divorce.”

M. Philippe Blondin looked at me very intently, as though he was expertly searching my face and beginning to understand things about me. I felt grossly misunderstood, but I didn’t believe in M. Philippe Blondin enough to care what he thought.

His eyes flicked between my mom and I, landed on my mom, and openly studied the brownness of her skin. I could see him thinking. His watery eyes returned to me.

“Do any other women in your family have strange recurrent dreams or hallucinations of this nature?”

He studied me with the same dramatic intensity as when he’d asked whether I felt responsible for my parents’ divorce. As though the mere suggestion would reveal the source of all of my hang ups, and I just might cry and release a complex mix of anguish, epiphany, and gratitude. This was literally the *only* question he should have been asking my mother instead of me, but he continued to stare me down as if the answer lay hidden in some deep part of my soul.

From across the desk I could smell his warm alkaline breath. It was gross in the same way as day-old boiled broccoli.

“Yes,” my mother replied from beside me, with a hint of reverence. As if he hadn’t just flashed us his misogynistic underbelly but rather, had tuned-in to a mysterious female power in our blood. “My mother and several of my aunts have clairvoyant dreams. But my mother is too Catholic to admit it.”

I watched M. Philippe Blondin scan my mother’s face again as though he were searching for what she wanted to hear next.

“Where is your family from?”

“Mauritius.”

I couldn’t tell from his expression whether he knew where that was.

“Not an uncommon gift in that part of the world, especially among women. It isn’t unlikely that an energetic imbalance could turn something like that into the sort of nightmares you describe.”

My mother breathed an audible sigh of relief. I wasn’t crazy or creepy, just a defective version of *gifted*. I couldn’t believe how she didn’t see the way he prodded for hints and spoon-fed her whatever she wanted to hear.

The procedure was to be simple, he explained. He began to describe auras to us as though we’d never heard of them before, and I interrupted him to say that we were both familiar with the concept. He smiled the way an adult smiles when a four-year-old girl says she wants to be president.

There are several layers to a person’s aura, he continued, pointing to a diagram on his desk of a sexless silhouette with five loose outlines drawn around it.

“Sometimes, energetic blocks lead to a misalignment of the layers, causing a variety of psycho-spiritual symptoms.”

He pointed to a second diagram in which the outlines were crooked, crossing over one another. Then he revealed his ability to realign auric layers. It all sounded very two-dimensional to me, but I was eager to get out of there.

He had me stand at one end of the room with my eyes closed while he straightened my aura from several feet away. I opened my eyes a slit to see him leaning forward as if squinting to look at the space around me, and making several precise nudging motions with his hands in the air between us. My mother watched from her chair. I closed my eyes again and tried not to sigh. I wobbled for a moment, struggling slightly to stay balanced with my eyes closed.

“You may have noticed that it felt sometimes like your body was being pushed,” he said later as he scribbled some notes down at his desk. “That’s caused by the manipulation of your energy field. It really is an extension of your self.”

He stared as if expecting me to ask a question, or describe whatever I had felt. But I just nodded once and looked down at my hands. I could tell he was disappointed, and I liked disappointing him. We scheduled to meet again at the same day and time for the next two weeks.

It was dark when we left the building and got into the car. As soon as we both shut our doors, I declared that I was hungry. With a wicked grin, my mother started the engine and drove us several yards through the small parking lot until we had slid neatly into another spot right in front of the greasy-spoon restaurant. We bought a massive box of french fries and sat eating them with ketchup in the front seat of the car.

I didn't often have the chance to be alone with my mother like this. It was a surprise that we were eating fries, for instance, instead of rushing home and inviting Mamie over for a late dinner. The unfamiliar landscape, the forbidden food, and the exclusive company all began to create an expectation for something out of the ordinary. It was beginning to feel like the real reason we were there.

"I really don't feel like that was productive, Mom," I told her as we were nearing the bottom of the grease-stained box. "I don't think people with bad dreams need to have the air around them poked by some holistic weirdo. His breath totally smelt like old broccoli, too."

She laughed at this, but told me to give it a chance. That sometimes things do us good without our really understanding how.

She started the car and pulled into the thin traffic on the highway. Each streetlamp we passed flashed a pulse of light onto the side of my mother's face and hands, revealing french fry grease fingerprints on the steering wheel.

"I'm sorry if it sounded like I was blaming your father in there."

"Weren't you?"

"No. Yes. Well... not entirely. He *does* guilt-trip you a lot, but the real problem is that you take it, you let it work. And *that woman* does it too. It seems like you always feel bad for doing wrong by someone, and they use it."

"We don't know that. And anyway, isn't it just normal to feel bad, when you mess up? People do wrong by each other all the time... I don't think there's an off-switch on feeling bad."

"Guilt is a difficult thing. But I don't think you have anything to feel guilty about." She stayed quiet for several moments before speaking again.

“I had a fling.” She said it darkly, the word ‘fling’ completely at odds with her sombre tone. “When I was with your father, before we were engaged, we had a rough patch and I saw someone else.”

I forced myself not to react, despite the sudden tightness in my chest and throat. I wanted her to keep talking.

“I never told your father. I never told anyone. I felt so terrible, I just wanted to swallow it up and make it disappear. But now I think that scary things –guilt, the things we bury—are opportunities to cause less hurt.”

“What do you mean?”

“I keep thinking that if I’d told your father, maybe we would have broken up, or maybe it would have led to a discussion that showed us how wrong we were for each other. That way we never would have gotten married, hurt our families and friends by moving away for those awful two years in Mississauga, and I never would have had to ask for a divorce.”

I thought about another glaringly obvious implication, but she didn’t seem to be thinking of that. I waited another moment for her to say ‘But—’ and then something motherly about not being able to imagine her life without me, but she didn’t. Sifting back to what her point must have actually been, I regurgitated the moral of her revelation. I did so for her benefit.

“It would have hurt him, but way less.”

“Exactly. Guilt probably goes away after you face it the hard way, but when you don’t it just festers.”

Would she remember this as an important pedagogical moment in our relationship?
Would she remember it at all, once the whim faded into something else?

I watched her drive. This conversation had way more to do with her guilt than mine, I realized. She could be impulsively rude and selfish at times, but that always softened into compassion once it was out of her system. I had never before wondered about what guilt and regret she carried away from those small outbursts. I envisioned the story about the fling loosening its grip on her, allowing her to breathe easier. I knew that nothing was fixed, but hearing her tell me something ugly made me feel as though I had just *really* met my mother. I shouldn't know this, I thought, but I also thought that knowing things was always better than not knowing them. I didn't ask myself whether I'd have told my own kid about a fling, or about wishing my marriage had never happened.

“Just make all your mistakes now,” she said. “Even if I get mad at you or give you shit for them. They're easier to get over when you're young. And you're smart. You'll learn from them.”

I broke up with someone in a letter when I was seventeen, cheated on someone when I was nineteen, and got all my tattoos before I was twenty-one.

My stepmother would abhor the ways in which I am my mother, down to my very face. My mother would abhor the ways in which I am my father. Frighteningly, she'd also complain sometimes that she had made the mistake of marrying her mother.

I don't think we ever know who we're really talking about.

Roches Noires

In Mauritius, there are emerald green spiders the size of hands that live up in the telephone wires. They never fall, but they make people nervous anyway. There is so much that I want to explain to the girls about their country. It feels like I can tell them things, but they never really see. Odette all but ignores me when I talk about it now, and Lauren, who used to listen with genuine interest, now nods and smiles and laughs at the parts that are funny in a pitch noticeably higher than normal.

She treats me like an old person. She makes time for me because she feels that she has to, a fact that I resent between visits, but forget about entirely when she comes over for dinner and nods and laughs.

I try not to think about the fact that she is living with that boy. Things are not as they used to be. When I told her about how my mother once refused to let me see a movie – chaperoned, of course—with my fiancé, her incredulity had an edge, as though my time and my life were disgusting to her.

This is what they see, and what they think I do not see. But they do not fully understand the innocence, the simplicity. Children did not take drugs like Constance, or ruin themselves on the internet like Cole, her poor son. They did not rebel as Odette did, or become divorced, self-

important bankers. They did not grow up in a good family and still live in sin at twenty-four, like Lauren. Children played little pranks on their housekeepers, bickered with their siblings, or made fun of the Chinese store owners. Child things. They did not ruin lives.

Every story I tell them is flipped over and searched for dark spots. Never can the absolute joy and peace of a memory be taken for what it is.

Last year, when Odette and Lauren brought Luke to dinner at my place, I told them about my first great sadness. I could see that Odette was afraid that I'd bore Luke, but I told them anyway. Perhaps Odette is right when she says that I just can't seem to help myself.

We picnicked as a family on the beach almost every day in the summer. Imagine, all twelve children, every year until the older ones started to get married! For the few weeks that my father could spend time away from Port Louis, we packed up our things and moved into our summer house in *Roches Noires*. Once his vacation was over, he would return to town and come back on most weekends. The house was simple: a white-washed clay structure with a kitchen, dining room and sitting room downstairs, and bedrooms and one bathroom upstairs. On one side of the long upstairs hallway was my parents' room and the bathroom. On the other side was a series of seven small rooms that we shared. The walls between these smaller rooms did not reach the ceiling, and those of us on the top bunks would sometimes continue to whisper and play long after we'd gone to bed.

Fortunately, the housekeeper – the same that we kept in Port Louis—lived halfway between the city and our summer house, so she continued her habit of returning home in the

evening and coming back early in the morning. That left the small room off of the kitchen available for Mathilde, the girl that took care of us.

A large patio extended from the back of the house onto the yard, where laundry was often hung from two long lines attached between the coconut and mango trees. The yard opened up to a long sandy beach and calm turquoise waters. About one kilometre out, the water changed from pale blue-green to navy, the sudden shift from calm clearness to dark waves marking the coral barrier's presence. It sheltered us from sharks and strong undercurrents.

In the evenings, my mother would tell the housekeeper what we would have for dinner the next day. The housekeeper was responsible for preparing our breakfast in the morning, and then for cleaning up and preparing dinner. Our mother always took care of lunch, with the help of the older girls. Sometime after breakfast Mathilde would bring the younger children out to the ocean while mother and Eliane, Christiane, and Jaqueline began to prepare lunch. Sometimes the girls on lunch duty (the kitchen cast changed year to year as some of us came to be old enough) complained, but mostly they saw their duties as a rite of passage into some sort of womanhood that their younger sisters couldn't possibly understand.

Shortly after noon, my mother would ring a big brass bell that hung beside the back door. Some of us ran up to the house to help carry lunch down to the beach. An extra blanket, a basket of picnic dishes, and various pots of food were hauled down to the shore. Flaky whitefish in gingery tomato sauce, yellow paella with meats and hard-boiled egg, love-apple chutney... these were some of our summer lunch classics. Being made by our mother and eventually by ourselves, these meals together by the ocean were somehow better than anything prepared by hired help. Our mother would come down with the last of the food and feed the youngest child. At home in Port Louis she smelled always of rose water, but in the afternoons at Roches Noirs

she carried kitchen-smells on her skin: gingery palms, or mango juice stuck in her fingernails, the warm scent of cloves clinging to her hair, or the occasional stab of garlicky fingertips.

And for several of my youngest years – from ages three to seven, if I recall correctly— life was rendered livelier by the presence of Mathilde. My father was mayor of Port Louis for most of my childhood, and it was very normal that we had maids and a cook, and a nanny to look after us. Mathilde was young and cheerful and beautiful. She lived with us. When I asked her why she stayed when the housekeeper always went home, she explained to me that her family lived very far away, in a small house near Chamarel. She sent some of her earnings home to help them live, while she was looked after with us. I was her favourite, and I absolutely loved her.

When I was seven, our father returned to the city after only four days at *Roches Noires*. He did not say goodbye to any of his children, which was peculiar, but not unfathomable. We all knew how important our father was.

Mathilde brought us all to the beach as usual and we built a small network of canals that the waves gently filled and drained. She paused her handiwork occasionally to adjust the cloth that tied her curls away from her large forehead, or check on Marie, who sporadically fussed in her shaded basket. My brothers, both young teenagers, wrestled and teased Larissa, who was ten at the time. My father's absence was easy to forget with Mathilde dutifully playing and humming, and the sun drying the salt into white dust on our limbs, and the ocean calming every worry with its stable rhythm.

“Stop that Colette!” Mathilde snapped at me, when I threw a fistful of damp sand at her legs. I gasped at her small outburst. She had never chided me for such a trifle before, and I felt ashamed that I'd done something wrong. She looked at me and sighed.

“I’m sorry, *ma chère*,” she said, reaching out to hug me. I let her smooth away my startled hurt. A tear fell onto my shoulder and I looked up, startled anew. I had never seen a grownup cry before.

Just then the brass bell rang, and Mathilde wiped her face, smiled, and moved toward Marie in the basket. I did not know what to say or do, so I simply followed everyone toward the house. I did not know that adults could cry, and I didn’t understand what could possibly make them cry.

When we got to the kitchen my mother handed us the food to carry down. My eyes lit up. She had made paratha, which explained the loud banging sounds I’d heard from the kitchen before we left: the dough had to be slammed repeatedly at the table in order to finish in such thin, flaky layers. I always wanted to help throw the dough when the housekeeper made paratha.

“Gerard, Philippe, please bring your sisters back to the beach,” my mother said, handing Philippe the large pot of fragrant curry. “Marie can stay here with me for a moment.”

She placed the plate of paratha in my arms without looking at me, and I was herded out of the house by my other siblings, all eager to enjoy lunch. Mathilde remained standing at the edge of the counter. She watched me as I backed out of the kitchen and I was scared that she didn’t smile or break eye-contact until I was forced to look away.

She was gone before dinner, and when Eliane asked why, my mother simply said that she was pregnant and could no longer work for us.

I had never before had to leave someone that I loved, and I felt her absence acutely. I also felt betrayed, partly because she had to leave me, and partly because she had another life that I never knew about. I didn’t even know she had a husband.

When I finished my story my three guests remained quiet. Odette stared down at her wine glass with a squared jaw, and Lauren and Luke exchanged several quick looks. Lauren's thick eyebrows were tilted up toward the middle of her creased forehead.

I guess it takes a sad story to get them really listening.

"Well we'd better go soon," Odette said a few moments later, and I felt the resentment sneak into my heart, as I always did, as their errand drew to a close.

Laurentian

Ivy and I almost stopped being friends only once. We'd driven to her cousin, Charlotte's family cottage in the Laurentians. Winter was melting away around us, and we swapped our jackets for sweaters. The move was premature, but the sun was shining and the weekend was ahead of us looking endless and perfect—the way it can only look to nineteen-year-olds without bills to pay, borrowing their parents' car to get to a party celebrating nothing in particular. We were the last car driving up to the party. Charlotte and the rest of her friends had all gone up earlier in the day.

“Well if it's what you want, I'm happy for you and Luke. It seems a little quick after you broke up with Dave, but that doesn't matter, if you feel right about everything.” I could feel how hard Ivy was trying to tell me what I wanted to hear. She had liked Dave better than Luke.

“We're not officially back together, though. We've just been hanging out again, and talking about it.”

Ivy chuckled and snorted. “And what does ‘official’ even mean?”

“I don't know. I just know that we aren't yet.”

I wished that I could explain to her that something was still missing, like Luke was still circling the pond and deciding whether or not to jump in. I imagined how she'd arch her

eyebrows at this analogy, ask me whether I really thought I was just some pond to be taken or left. I didn't bother starting this conversation because I didn't know whether or not I could honestly defend myself.

Ivy was very at ease behind the wheel. She drove very slowly, and either didn't notice or didn't care that other drivers frequently got pissed off at her. On this afternoon, I cringed as we crawled in her mom's Chevrolet down Montclair Avenue to pick up the boys at the café. A line-up of cars had formed behind us, while Ivy, apparently oblivious, continued to advance as though through a school zone. We mercifully pulled into a parking spot at the corner, and the line-up of cars peeled by, as though finally exhaling. I exhaled too, but Ivy seemed not to notice the passive-aggressive pointedness with which the cars sped by.

She smiled and asked me if I wanted anything from inside. She had to go collect our companions as well as her latest bag of tips. I told her no, and a few moments later she emerged with Anton, Jose, and Brad. Watching them walk toward the car, I felt a pang of nostalgia for when I too worked at the café. Somehow, now, I was no longer complicit with them.

I slithered from the front seat into the middle back seat before anyone opened the doors. When the doors opened, Brad and Ivy were arguing about whether Charlotte should quit her job at Tim Horton's, where the manager was tyrannically cutting down her hours. Charlotte was Ivy's cousin several-times removed, but also Brad's girlfriend. Charlotte had just turned eighteen, and Brad was thirty. Despite his full orange beard, he behaved like a guy our age.

I was vaguely embarrassed around this group of former coworkers because they'd all met Dave, the guy I'd recently broken up with. I didn't like coming off as a serial monogamist: it was so cliché.

On this particular weekend, only Ivy knew that Luke and I were hanging out again. I didn't want to advertise that I was trying to rekindle something only weeks after breaking up with Dave, and I also didn't want to curse our third attempt at dating like normal people.

As Ivy drove too slowly toward the highway, I was wedged between Brad and Anton, who had by then begun exchanging their newest politically-incorrect jokes, while Jose chimed in occasionally from the passenger seat. Once we got on the highway, a can hissed open and he poured beer into a thermos and started drinking. Later, we stopped at a grocery store in St. Jerome for food and beer. As we loaded up a cart with frozen pizzas, eggs, bacon, and cases of beer, Jose joked about how now that I was single, anything could happen between us. He put his arm around my shoulder and wagged his eyebrows suggestively, smirking. Everyone chuckled, because Jose – all buff and golden and handsome— could probably get any girl he wanted, and I was not in that category. I laughed too.

On the last stretch of the drive, Jose began to flirt with Ivy and I. This was his ritual practice before social gatherings; it was a consistent move the few times I'd seen him before a night out. Nobody said that he was warming up, but everyone knew it anyway. He sprayed himself with Axe body spray as Ivy calmly cut off an eighteen-wheeler to catch the exit ramp.

Ivy, for most of the time that she worked with Jose, thought that he was such a great and misunderstood person, despite him being exactly the sort of person she hated. It was only about a year after this trip that it occurred to her what a douchebag he was. But I wasn't thinking of Jose on that car ride, I was thinking of Luke. Between bouts of friendly banter, my thoughts circled inward, and then to matters far outside the car or the cottage, resting invariably on Luke. Mostly I was scared.

By the time we arrived it was dark out, and cold enough that we were eager to be indoors. We hurried all the groceries and cases of beer into the musty-smelling living room of the cottage. The lighting was very dim and yellow, and the walls and furniture were almost exclusively made of mismatched wood. The room was very crowded, and the air couldn't decide whether to smell primarily of beer, sweat, or cedar. I was immediately aware that Charlotte's friends were all a couple of years younger than me. I groaned internally, realizing that this was, for the most part, an underage party. I resolved to try to get to know people and not to be a total snob.

Jose placed his box of 24 Corona on the dining room table and reached out to me for the two Irish assortment packs that Ivy and I were to share— with the understanding that she'd get all the Harp. He shook his head at our choice, mumbled, "Weird-ass colourful beer," and then opened a Corona with his keychain before taking his hat and sweater off. I watched him scan the room. I noticed a lot of the girls looking at him, and felt – not for the first time— bothered that attractive people are so often disappointing in character. I wondered whether the kind of girls that go for Jose even notice his shortcomings. Maybe they just don't care.

We left our bags in a heap by the door and settled in as Charlotte dragged us through a blur of rapid-fire introductions to her many friends. She was mostly introducing people to Brad, who kept an arm around her waist the whole time we were ushered around the first floor. Ivy, not in the habit of drinking or going to parties, drank one beer and informed me that she was drunk. She stood in front of me for a moment as though calculating, and then nodded firmly. I nodded back sympathetically to let her know I'd keep an eye on her. She winked, turned around and shook her butt at me, then walked away. I continued to half-follow a conversation between Brad and a bunch of strangers about the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

“That’s nice,” I said, motioning to the line of text tattooed on a girl’s forearm. “From *Perks of Being A Wallflower*, right?”

She nodded and narrowed her eyes at me like I’d destroyed the mystique of her ink. She grabbed the elbow of the girl beside her and the pair walked away together. I gave up on trying to converse. Maybe she was bitter because I’d drawn attention to her regrettable choice of font.

I shuffled back to the small kitchen and hung out with Anton for the rest of the night. He was shy and awkward too, so we had a sort of understanding. He complained about having to explain to the fourth person that night that he was Mexican. We joked that Jose had it easier in that respect.

He showed me how to ‘pimp up’ a Corona with tequila, lime, and chili flakes, insisting that it was a thing in Mexico. Ivy joined us and I watched her watch Anton with increasing interest as the hours blurred by in a haze of beers and tequila and frozen pizzas. The whole cottage became a boiler room as the oven stayed on for pizza after pizza, which Anton and Ivy and I kept sending out to the rest of the party, who were stripping down and un-ironically playing spin the bottle. There were tears and crushes, two dramatic pukes over the railing of the porch, all the signatures of a seventeen-year-old’s party, with one thirty-year-old, one twenty-year-old flirt in a cloud of Axe, and three friends watching it all happen while the pizzas cooked.

I don’t remember what time it was when we all went to bed, but I ended up sharing a room—a bed, in fact—with Ivy, Anton, and Jose. I was squished between Jose and Anton, while Ivy was on Anton’s other side.

Jose was very drunk. We were all so close together, for the first several moments I didn’t realize that he was touching me on purpose. He wrapped his arms around me and groped around confidently, without concern for the others beside us.

I removed his arms and whispered for him to cut it out. This happened more than once. I saw the light of a cellphone go on beside me, and several moments later Anton turned his screen to my face.

Wanna switch places?

In retrospect, this was my first regret.

Anton was offering a solution, almost stupid in its simplicity. But, unwilling to offend Jose's pride, too scared of looking pathetic, or overly dramatic, I shook my head and whispered "It's okay."

Anton's eyes searched my face in the glow of his screen. I must have inspired confidence, because after a moment Anton nodded and turned back around.

Jose didn't, though. Shortly after, Ivy giggled softly and she and Anton left the room. I was grateful for the space to move away, hoping he'd pass out and forget all about it in the morning. He reached out and pulled me back, breathing skunky, Corona-breath into my ear and whispering in Spanish.

"Jose, seriously, stop it. That's not gonna be a thing." I had to tell him twice.

"Fine." He got all somber and started to talk about how hard it was for him to live in Canada, away from most of his family, how all he wanted was to belong. Then his hands and his breath were on me once again, and as I began to squirm away the door opened.

Ivy tiptoed in and giggled at the sight of us. I slipped upright and away from Jose.

"Jose, can we have a condom?" she asked, rocking side to side slightly and sounding annoyingly coquettish. I looked at Ivy, tried to look at her meaningfully, while Jose reached into

his bag on the floor and threw a box onto the corner of the bed. She grabbed the box and giggled again and then walked out.

The second regret was not following her, despite the obvious implications of her request.

“I’m seeing someone,” I told Jose, not bothering to explain that I wasn’t really sure whether Luke and I were back together. He talked for a while about how he totally respected that, but he found it sad that I’d turn down the opportunity of a great night for someone that I’d just started seeing, who I probably wouldn’t remember when I was old. He’d inched closer throughout his argument. Then he had my wrists, and then his full weight on me, his wet breath on my neck, then he thrust his pelvis into my face, his knee pressing down on my ribcage and I couldn’t breathe and I couldn’t fight because now it wouldn’t be merely a rejection, but something else altogether.

The third regret was not fighting him off and then leaving the room.

The fourth was staying quiet instead of making a scene.

I marveled at my inability to do either of those things until it was over and I rolled away to throw up in the trash bucket.

“You see what Irish beer does to people,” he said behind me. There was no point telling him that the problem wasn’t Irish, because he already knew.

I felt paralyzed, invisible weights pressing down on me from all angles so that all I could do was stay perfectly still on the edge of the mattress, face tilted down toward the floor. Jose touched my hair and mumbled something about how happy he could have made me if I’d let him take my pants off. I replied something sardonic that he didn’t understand and I don’t remember. A moment later he was asleep and I put my sweater on and carried the trash bucket out to the bathroom.

I dumped the contents into the toilet and washed the plastic bin in the bathtub, trying to do so as quietly as possible. I was careful not to look in the mirror until the evidence was destroyed.

I turned to the sink and filled a glass with water, drank it, and made eye contact with myself in the mirror as I replaced the glass on the shelf. I looked so awful, and I knew that it hadn't mattered to him that I was me as opposed to anyone else. I was just *there*. The criteria was simple.

I looked in the mirror for a long time, allowing thoughts of Luke to drip slowly into my mind until my reflection mouthed the word "cheater." I was accusing the mirror and the mirror was accusing me, but we couldn't be the same person, my reflection and me. One of us had to be clean and good; strong enough to have not let anything happen. One of us had to exist an hour ago when nothing had happened, and nothing would. Realizing the futility of this reasoning, I sat down on the linoleum floor and hyperventilated with a hand towel pressed to my mouth.

There was plenty of time that night and in the years since to ask myself why I didn't switch places with Anton, or leave the room, or scream. I still don't have an answer that feels good enough.

Luke had made me feel leavable, which was scary. But Jose had made me feel disposable, which was worse.

What do people say about girls who don't put up enough of a fight? I almost don't want to know. *Very unclear, dishonest, maybe. Half-hearted. Secretly wanted it.* Nothing accounts for the sickening weakness, the inexplicable impulse for stillness.

I tiptoed around the house and saw that there was nowhere to sleep. Bedroom doors were closed, while couches and floors were covered almost comically with piles of people in sleeping bags. I went back into the room and sat on the armchair in the corner.

Jose slept soundly on the bed in his boxers. I shook furiously, because nobody ever slept that well. I slithered out of the chair, watched myself as though from above as I picked up the fist-sized river-rock on the dresser. It was heavy in my hand, and I felt electric— perfectly strong— as I carried it to where he slept like he'd never done anything wrong in his life.

It took two hits. He woke with a groan after the first, and fell back to the mattress after the second, blood blooming from his head on the white sheets like a wet burgundy flower.

(No wait, I made that last part up.)

The next morning Ivy announced with annoyance that nothing had happened between her and Anton. That Anton had not felt comfortable hooking up with her when so many other people were around.

“So you and Jose, huh?”

“No.”

“That’s not what it looked like when I walked in.”

“I didn’t want it.”

She paused. “Oh. Well why didn’t you just leave?”

I couldn’t explain. More importantly, she couldn’t understand. I looked at her and felt all the words in the wrong order bubbling up in my throat, but nothing came out.

She asked things like, ‘Are you sure you didn’t actually want to do it, but you felt bad because of Luke?’ and ‘Is it possible you’re framing it differently now because you regret cheating?’

I didn’t answer, or if I did I don’t remember what I said. What I do remember is that with each of her hypotheses, I felt my heart break a little, like after losing my dignity I was losing pieces of Ivy, of what I thought we had. And she had no idea. We didn’t speak about it again until over a year later, when she and Jose were no longer friends.

We made breakfast, cleaned the cottage, and that afternoon we drove back into the city.

When I got home to my dad’s house it was mercifully empty, and I lay down in my twin bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to find the words I needed, to let them all unjumble and pour out so that I could think and see. Blind and wordless and unknown to myself, I searched the ceiling. My cat jumped onto the foot of the bed and watched me. And then there were words. A voice. My chest tightened and the voice filled me like the most poisonous acid. I looked down at the cat, who looked at me, and the voice came out of her and said “Nice to meet you, bitch,” and that is how THE CAT was born.

Twisted

My mom's cousin Constance used to sleep with another cousin for drug money, or so the rumour goes.

Once, when I was young I had a dream about Aunt Connie, in which I knocked over her glass of white wine on the coffee table. While my mom got up to get a rag, Constance picked up my little pink-handled Crayola scissors, calmly pointed them at the puddle, and turned the wine red. I told my mom about the dream and she got mad at me. She said she didn't like it, that Aunt Connie wasn't a lady she wanted me to idolize.

I didn't know about the drugs and the things Constance would do to get them, so I thought my mom was just being impulsively mean, in the way that she sometimes was. Like when you're a kid and your parent gets all fierce about something that you don't understand, and all you see is fierceness unfocused by cause. Despite everything, my mom loved Constance. No matter what was happening, my mom was supportive and they always got along well.

In childhood, the only hint I had that something wasn't quite right with Connie was that Cole always lived with his grandparents instead of with his mother. However, being young and having known them like that for my whole life, I never gave it much thought. I'd never fathomed

Constance's up-and-down battle with addiction until my mother told me about it when I was maybe ten.

As I got older, my mother told me things that made me feel like a grown up. Hard things about life or family or sex. In those sporadic moments that she chose to impart adult truths unto her offspring, I could see that she was measuring my reactions, gauging my maturity. It always felt like some sort of test, like if I said the wrong thing or made the wrong face she'd stop telling me things, and I'd be left in the dark again. I don't think she realized that those talks had more to do with her need to purge than my need to know. It was in those conversations that I learned of the theft and the sexual favours that were fuelled by (and in turn fuelled) Connie's need.

A lot of people say that Connie is a compulsive liar. I don't know whether or not that is true, but either way there was always something about her that made me feel like she was the most honest person in my family. Maybe it's that she isn't afraid of the ugly, isn't afraid to broadcast what others would rather burry and forget. Even when she made me want to cringe and look away, I loved her. It was an uncomfortable love, the sort of love that I felt in my throat. Even when she is at her worst she exudes such love, though few seem to see it.

Aunt Constance smokes a lot. At family gatherings she always drinks too much (not a rarity among the crowd at our family parties) and asks people for company outside while she smokes. From around my fourteenth year onward, she often asked me. Then she'd talk about how her unfulfilling home life drove her to drugs, about the constant judgment from her aunts and cousins, and about her inability to leave her current husband. I wouldn't say she was confiding in me; it was something else. She told me about her past, about the various hardships

within that fucked-up past, and what she believed caused each increasingly abysmal development. She talks like this to anyone who will listen, and often. It was less about confession and more about trying to make me see that her life was hard and that it's always going to be harder than everyone else's. Facebook has greatly facilitated this project in recent years.

During these mostly-one-sided talks, I just nod a lot. There is rarely any invitation for discourse until the very end of these cigarette conversations, when she'd squish the stump of her smoke out in an ashtray and add something like, "Hey Lauren, if there's ever anything you want to talk about that you can't talk to your mom about, find me, eh?"

We both know that wouldn't happen, but she feels good about having offered. Like her cool-aunt duties have been fulfilled over a cigarette on the balcony while I squirmed to stay upwind.

Tonight she is very drunk. We are on the balcony of her parents' Westmount apartment. It is Cole's twenty-third birthday party, and his few friends are beginning to arrive inside. Because we were together a lot as children, Cole thinks that we are much closer than we actually are. I mean we were close for a long time, but his idea of a good time is sitting at a computer for endless hours, which has made hanging out with him difficult. We still know each other unlike most others, but Cole has a frustrating tendency to hold that as an absolute, as if knowing me as a kid trumps everything else that can be known about me. Even now, when we only see each other a few times each year, his attitude implies that he understands me more than my friends or *this Luke guy* ever could. My mom says he's probably jealous that I'm powering forward in school

and working and moving in with Luke while Cole is still gaming in his room at his grandparents' apartment. Years ago, my mother also worried that we were much closer than we should be, despite my disgusted reassurance that nothing creepy like that would *ever* happen.

“Lauren,” she’d say, “you don’t know what you don’t know about Mauritians, but you *are* Mauritian. Just trust me and be careful.”

In that particular sense, I would never be as Mauritian as some of my mother’s cousins. Never as Mauritian as Constance, who slurs to me now on the balcony, trying to light a cigarette in the autumn wind.

“Yeah, Cole’s a good kid. But I worry about him, you know? Like he’s too good. Doesn’t drink, doesn’t smoke, doesn’t party. Just sits at his computer.”

“I don’t think he can be too good. And anyway he has Lindsay now. That’s something.”

Connie makes a face. I know that she doesn’t like Lindsay so much anymore, something about a sense of entitlement. I also know that while initially everyone thought that their relationship was a godsend, it has now become cause for concern. When Cole dropped out of school last semester, Lindsay followed immediately, despite her ambitious nature and strong academic inclination. I can see them settling into each other like a habit, and then she will resent him for holding her back, and break the habit. I dislike my own pessimism about it, but I think it is only a matter of time. He will not see it coming, and it will hurt.

“Yeah, for now,” Connie says, doing that ugly thing where she blows smoke out of her nostrils. I hope that she said it quietly enough that nobody inside heard her. She goes on.

“I feel like she’s only with him because he’s exotic. You know, not-Jewish, dark and mysterious. I don’t think she values him, really.”

I almost want to roll my eyes. *You're kinda white, you know. Your son is white.* I am about to say that I don't think Cole's debatable exoticism influences the way he is viewed by the world, but she continues her own train of thought.

"That's something I know well. The whole exotic thing, I mean. It got me assaulted—*raped*, really—when I was staying in Ville St. Pierre."

I flinch, nearly choke on my drink.

"Aunt Co—"

"Sure it's all about power and anyone can get raped, blah blah blah, but there were a lot of coked-up girls there, you know?" She lights her next cigarette with the stump of her last one, her eyes unfocused, drowning in thought. "All *pure-laine*, a bunch of Jacinthes and Chantals to pick from. It's this blood, you see. There was no other reason it should have been me." Her pupils are huge, and I just want her to stop it. My pulse slams in my throat and my hands are shaking and I want to scream at her, tell her to shut up about her *fuck-me blood*, tell her not to use this kind of story to show me how *easy* I have it.

I immediately feel bad for thinking this way. My guilt is fast and twists hard in my stomach, like my whole body is cringing at my own unchecked crappiness. She's entitled to speak her own truth, I remind myself, hating how corny and PC it sounds. Part of me wants to tell her everything, make her see that she doesn't own that pain exclusively, but I know that would be a mistake, so instead I swallow hard, say "I'm very sorry that you had to go through that," and watch her shrug and continue. She proceeds to talk about the time a few years back that her therapist drove her and her mother by the spot where it happened, and how she squeezed her mother's arm and cried etc..

I hate myself for wondering how many different times and ways she's told this.

Really I guess it's grating on my nerves that she doesn't care enough about Cole and Lindsay to stay on-topic, but rather, chooses to share sob-stories with her cousin's kid. My mom would be pissed off if she knew the shit Constance decides to divulge to me sometimes.

"... it's all fun for you guys, being Mauritian. You get a nice tan and people ask you about your heritage sometimes, and you have a neat little backstory that doesn't really mean anything." She chuckles sardonically, staring away from me as she has been from the beginning. Her eyes are glassy with a far away look, her face slackened as though she can no longer hold an expression in place. She swirls her glass around and I can feel the hospital smell of its contents burning my nostrils. "All charm and no challenge. But that'll happen with distance. Your generation being less Mauritian and all. The problems thin out with the blood. The big-bad-blood," she snorts. "You'll probably marry some white guy and your kids won't even think about being Mauritian."

I am tempted to remind her that she was born in St. Bruno. Her dad is British, and her mom – ever the chameleon— dresses like Lady Di and says tom-*ah*-toes as a result of this marriage. My mom, being born in Mauritius to two Mauritian parents, made me just as Mauritian as Connie. I think all of this like it's some sort of competition. *Whose blood is badder? More Mauritian?* I am buying right into her crap.

Instead I ask her "Have you ever been?"

"Where?"

"Mauritius."

"No. I'm not going back there." She says it like she's talking about the parking lot in Ville St. Pierre. But she was born in St. Bruno. She'd never even been to Mauritius. I am frustrated enough that I decide to get up before I stop being polite.

“Hm. Well I’d better get in there.”

“Yeah I’ll go in too,” she says, twisting her cigarette butt into a porcelain ashtray. “Hide out in the computer room for a while I guess... Cole’d hate to have his old mom around embarrassing him in front of his friends.”

She is fishing for pity again, but I chuckle instead of giving it to her, like I think she’s just joking about the plight of all parents. She laughs along for a second before I down the rest of my drink.

“Hey sweetie if you ever need to talk about stuff your mom wouldn’t get, you know where I am, right?”

I smile and nod in a way that I hope conveys gratitude, open the balcony door, and step into the living room.

Inside, Cole has two friends over, both guys that went to high school with us. They are both wearing polo shirts tucked into their pants. They were in Cole’s grade, one ahead of mine. Cole always acted like the year between his birth and mine was the longest year in history. It is apparently because of this year—and all the wisdom I am surely lacking as a result of it—that he calls me ‘kid.’ His friends look down or away when he does this, or when he implies that he protected me from older kids in high school. I mean, *they were there*. They know that it’s not true.

Lindsay is there with a friend of hers. She walks over and we hug. The friend, who is wearing a tight strapless dress and makeup, sizes me up and glances at Cole’s two friends, as if to measure their reaction to my presence. They aren’t even looking.

Lindsay introduces me to the girl, Chloe, and we shake hands, smile. I'm relieved to see that she registers me as a non-threat and warms up quickly.

We all hang out awkwardly, drinking light beers or sodas, and it is apparent to me that everyone except for Cole and Lindsay are wondering why the hell we are in the living room of his grandparents' apartment instead of a bar. Chloe clearly regrets wasting her outfit. The dull and awkward evening is topped off by a game of Twister. Chloe jokes about the risk of a wardrobe malfunction and opts to spin the wheel. One of the polo-guys calls her Vanna White and laughs at his own joke, which I do not get until he explains who Vanna White is. We are halfway through our second game when I begin to plan how I will make my exit. I still feel upset about my half-conversation with Aunt Connie, and this whole party was starting to depress me. The way that Cole and these friends had nothing in common but high school. The fact that he had nobody else to invite. The fact that Chloe had gotten all dressed up, expecting a party, and ended up watching five people play Twister. Above all, the fact that Cole will try to look back at this as a great night, when the rest of us would only recall our own boredom and pity. I am stuck between a paper to finish or an early shift tomorrow morning when Cole collapses from his precarious position, taking me down with him. He is sprawled on top of me like a scrawny rag doll, laughing. I laugh too, and for a small second we're both kids again, closer than anyone in the world.

Lindsay's face gets all tight and she removes her limbs from the Twister carpet and power-walks toward the washroom. Cole lifts himself off of me and offers me a hand. Chloe looks baffled for a second, and then—in solidarity— gives me a scathing look before following after her friend. As I get up without Cole's help, one of the polo-guys shouts after them that Lindsay's impromptu bathroom-break should count as an automatic forfeit, if we're playing by

regulation rules. The room is tense. The boys look confused but nobody wants to say anything about it, especially Cole. He forces a conversation about some video game, failing to disguise his embarrassment.

I wonder what Lindsay has heard, and from whom, to make her read something so dumb into something so upsetting. How much does she know about Constance, or some of the other cousins in our family? The bathroom door is still closed, so I make an excuse to leave. *Luke is expecting a ride home from a hockey banquet.* It stands to reason that when your cousin's girlfriend gets unreasonably jealous over Twister-touching, mentioning your own boyfriend can only facilitate your eventual absolution.

As I leave the apartment, I slow outside the slightly open door of the dark computer room, to say goodbye to Constance. Before knocking I see the side of her face lit up in blue and white, her expression dead as she scrolls with listless slowness. The surface of her drink is a glowing disc, reflecting the light of her Facebook feed. She looks so hungry and sad and bored that I stop myself, lower my hand and turn to go.

Night & Day

With Dave, things always had to be more dramatic than they actually were. When it was coolest to be Hungarian, he became so. When we were in Irish pubs (which was alarmingly often, in retrospect), he became especially Irish, but when there were mostly Anglophones in a room, he became predominantly invested in his French-Canadian identity. He owned each of his ethnicities fiercely, but the result was a flip-flopping approach. Depending on context he'd adopt a different language in which to toast, become mildly outraged by different attitudes, and even speak in a slightly different accent.

I had just turned nineteen, and was starting university. I'd spent my summer nursing a bruised heart at music festivals and on road trips away from the city—anywhere I could go to stare out at a lake or take sad walks through the woods and tell myself I was being cleansed. Luke had broken up with me in the spring, and I was devastated.

The day after my nineteenth birthday, I met up with Dave for the first time since our last class together in CEGEP. He'd spent the summer touring Europe, and we wanted to catch up. We weren't exactly friends, but we had graduated in the same small cohort of literature students.

Although I had no intention of leaving that dinner with a new boyfriend, that's essentially what happened.

His attraction was direct in a way that I liked. Usually that kind of directness came from strangers, which was too scary to go along with. It helped that I already knew Dave, and that he was a poet and often said exactly the right thing. He made me think that maybe you had to be an artist to love properly, that maybe Luke, with his empirical mind and clean-cut hair, just wasn't capable.

Dave kissed me fiercely on that first evening that we went out, so I kissed him back. Four days later he invited me to his empty house for salmon tartare and had sex with me on the couch. I left flustered both by his haste and my compliance. One week later he told me that he loved me, and I told him the same. Our brief followed this same pattern: Dave suggesting or starting something, and myself complying.

But there was something admittedly thrilling about being with him. Being a subject in poetry, for instance. Or the way he seemed impressed with every word that came out of my mouth. He was also the first person that made me feel sexy in a powerful way. Despite my continually following his lead, I'd never felt like I had more power over another person in my life.

The few months that he and I dated were the drunkest of my life. While I definitely drank more (and more often), I really mean drunk on what I thought my life was becoming. I believed in my future in a way I'd only vaguely imagined it in the past, and I felt my fate being steered in a new direction. Away from my father who wanted me always at his side, even if I couldn't stand being there, and away from his wife who resented the very closeness that he clung to. I felt the gravitational force of my mother dwindling, as though I were no longer trapped orbiting her hopelessly.

These changes could perhaps have been attributed to my age and the time in my life, but I attributed them all to Dave. I went to bars. I hung out in professors' apartments and talked about literature until three in the morning. I went to readings and book launches and art shows, drinking wine and wearing black and watching in wonder as I actually *spoke* and people actually listened to me. I spent nights in hotels in Montreal just so that I didn't have to go back to either of my parents' homes, to either of my twin beds, and let the illusion fade.

The illusion inevitably *did* fade, though. Partly because I stopped enjoying feeling like a prop in Dave's made-up life, but mostly because I didn't want my self-worth to depend entirely on someone else's adoration. I don't think he really adored me, but I think that he believed that he did. I'm still not sure whether there's a real difference.

At the time that I left Dave and told Luke that I was in love with him, I thought it was the bravest thing I'd ever done. It sounds silly to me now, but it might actually be the bravest thing I've ever done. Before I was twenty, I was with Luke again and stayed that way.

The first time I had dinner with Luke's family, it was February, almost a year before we got back together. My winter skin was pale. We drank beer and laughed and they invited me to their cottage "As often as you want, dear." When I saw them over one year later, in July, after Luke and I were firmly back together, I did not look the same.

A killer suntan, apparently, can make certain 'telling' facial features more pronounced. They asked about my heritage. I told them and they were very interested, said now that I mention it, they could totally see the African features in my face ("Or maybe it's the Native features?" his

father chimed in). I smiled and Luke squeezed my hand under the table. Later we sat on the dock and he started to apologize for them.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, “they’re very nice.” And I meant it. I wondered why he was apologizing; what he thought they’d done wrong. I wondered whether Luke would have thought anything was wrong if they weren’t talking about *me*.

Still ridden with occasional fears that Luke would break up with me again out of nowhere, I imagined: his parents and grandmother trying to recall “that African girl Luke dated... what was her name again? Leila?”

“*Lauren*,” Luke would mutter, annoyed that they wouldn’t let him forget.

Luke snapped me out of my morbid reverie by stepping into the waist-deep water and scooping me up against his chest. Careful not to get any of my clothes wet, he carried me several paces along the shoreline to a large bough that hung several feet over the edge of the lake. It was a perfect perch, and when he placed me on the sturdy branch our heads were almost at the same height. I sat on the bough and he stood in the water beside me and we listened to the distant sound of loons for several moments.

“It’s funny,” I finally said, “how I feel super-Canadian right now.”

“You mean because we’re technically in New York State?”

“Well that too. But I mean this typical ‘Canadian cottage experience,’ complete with the lake, mountains, and freaking loon-cries. It seems like any foreigner would feel overwhelmingly Canadian in these circumstances.”

Luke smiled, remained silent awhile before asking “You do know you’re not a foreigner, right?”

“What do you mean? I mean, yes, *technically*, but in what way do you mean?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure there were things about your upbringing that were 100% Mauritian, but you *were* born here, and you’ve never even been to Mauritius. When you eventually go, you’ll use your Canadian passport. You grew up skating every winter, you’re bilingual like most kids that went through the Quebec system and you’re a Habs fan. You put maple syrup in your Mauritian tea. You’re just as Canadian as I am... you just get a nicer tan.”

“You mean you don’t think of me as Mauritian?”

“Because your mom is? Not really. I also don’t think of you as Irish, or Mi’kmaq. Do you think of my dad as British because his dad was? Or does the fact that he was born and raised in Canada make a difference?”

“You’re right. Of course you are, and I *know* that. I guess sometimes it just doesn’t always feel that way.”

“Wear the red one,” Dave said, grabbing the black dress and discarding it onto my bed. My mom was out of town for the weekend, so we were playing house before going to some sort of fancy gala with his schoolmates. It was the only time he’d be over. He’d asked me to cook him something Mauritian, so I’d made octopus curry, despite having never actually tried it before.

“Didn’t you say it’s a black and white party?”

“It is,” he said, “but you’re not a black-and-white kind of girl.”

“That’s debatable, but Dave I can’t wear that; it’ll be so obnoxious. I don’t want to stand out like that.”

He picked up the red dress and walked toward me. He turned me toward the full-length mirror on the back of my closet door and placed the dress in front of me, the hanger pressing coldly against my throat. The dress hung heavy against me, embroidered with thousands of scintillating beads.

“You’re going to stand out either way. You’ll be the most beautiful girl there, and probably the first *Mauricienne* any of those people will meet. They’ll stare no matter what, because you’re fascinating. Give them an excuse to stare.”

I knew that was not true, but Dave seemed to want to believe it.

I put the red dress on.

Dave put a red handkerchief in his breast pocket. I wondered how he had known to bring a red one, but I didn’t mention it. He watched me apply makeup for several minutes. When I began to gather my hair in a big clip he stopped me, telling me to leave it down – *more natural*. I resisted the urge to ask him why he hadn’t objected to the makeup, if he wanted natural.

“You look beautiful. Like no Canadian girl ever could.”

Like most things Dave said, this wasn’t true either.

That Time I Killed You

He's sort of obnoxious. Talking loudly about some economic theory, and how it epitomizes the beauty and concreteness of numbers. Jared, the bartender, obviously knows him, and engages politely, even though he probably doesn't care about economics. Wearing jeans, a t-shirt and carrying a leather satchel, the guy probably thinks of himself as the male lead in a movie, the understated-but-brilliant-whiz-kid-grad-student type.

I immediately feel bad for thinking this, for being that person sitting alone at the bar and judging people. He looks at me for a sec and I half smile at him before he turns his attention back to Jared.

I wish I were a little sexier. Some girls pull off the whole sweaty and flushed look, but I definitely do not. In the wet and heavy heat of August, the entire city of New Orleans seems to be melting. In the French Quarter this comes with the special stench of garbage and cooked vomit on the sidewalks, so today I've opted to keep to Magazine Street, closer to Nicole's place. It took one day away from home for me to miss you, and five days for me to miss you enough to drink about it in the middle of the afternoon.

My dad and Gloria were thrilled that I'd be visiting Nicole while she's interning down here. They get really gassed about us doing the whole sister thing. Dad called us 'gals.' *You gals*

can have some fun, tear up the town, he'd said. Nicole has been pretty intent on us tearing up the town in the evenings when she gets home from work, mostly to show me the cool places she knows, where she can make a big deal about addressing bartenders by name. She's been here for five weeks so far, living in a fancy sublet in the Garden District with her boyfriend and a fellow intern, Carrie. I felt sorry for Carrie within the first ten minutes of meeting her. Nicole is not easy to live with, unless you are her boyfriend, Mike. They gang up on Carrie to keep her feeling small, probably so that she doesn't build up the nerve to call Mike out on staying with them all summer without paying rent. It was not part of the initial arrangement, but Nicole had insisted that Mike drive her to New Orleans, to spend time with her before he went backpacking in Europe. So he drove her. *From Montreal*. And then he ended up just staying, rather than backpacking. He got a trainer at a gym across town, but other than that, he's not really doing anything. At first I was worried that I'd have to hang out with him during the daytime when Nicole and Carrie are at work, but fortunately I've been left to tour on my own.

I'm curvier than Nicole, but without the extra-tight middle to make any of it impressive. I usually try not to compare myself to others, but with Nicole it's a filthy and depressing habit. She is tall and thin and fit. She knows and loves this about herself, and is sure to emphasize it whenever possible. Just the other day she brought me to a Mexican bistro-bar and stated abruptly, "I'm happy with my boobs," then laboriously sucked at the straw in her daiquiri. It made a loud slurping sound, her cheeks disappearing with the effort. I studied the progress of her slushy drink up the shaft of the straw, before noticing that she was watching me pointedly, waiting for a reply.

"Well that's good. You should be."

She still appeared to be waiting for something, but I didn't know what. I just smiled and took another sip of beer.

“Travis – *haha*, remember Travis?—anyway, he used to say ‘more than a handful is a waste,’ and I really don't feel pressured by society to strive for excess.” She took another strenuous drag on her straw, continued to stare me down like she had a point, like she deeply pitied me for buying into society's tit-pressure. When I said nothing, she pushed aside her nearly-empty glass and flipped her hair—blond, wavy—behind her shoulders. I decide to change the subject.

“Hey, The Parents asked me to try to get some pictures of us while I'm here. Think we could take one?”

Nicole brought her hair in front of each shoulder and rubbed her eyes as if exasperated, but I knew she was pushing up her eyelashes.

“Sure, if you'd like,” she said, cellphone already out, waving down a waiter as he passed.

“Hi there,” she said in a different voice, tilting her head. “My sister was hoping you could take our picture for us. Would you mind?” She asked as though she too found it very annoying, but won't they humour me? He threw me a quick, half-hearted smile.

“Your sister, huh?” He grabbed Nicole's phone and angled the lens toward us as Nicole put an arm around my shoulder.

“You ladies probably get this all the time, but I never would have guessed that you were sisters.” Nicole laughed, smiling for the camera as I specified “*Step* sisters—” though I was cut off by a flash and the waiter's voice saying, “*There*. You look great.”

Nicole looked at the screen and grinned. I thanked the waiter, then Nicole thanked him more effusively, smiling until his back was turned to our table. Our waitress came by with our

next round and Nicole barely looked up, all of her gratitude seemingly exhausted on the waiter. She fiddled with her phone for a couple of minutes, and when she finally looked up and put the phone face-up on the table, she informed me that she'd sent the photo to her mom.

“So, how are things with you and Luke?”

“Fine. Great.”

“Good. And *he's* okay?” she specified.

“Yeah, he's *really* good.”

She looked disappointed, and I was happy to disappoint her.

“I wanna go sit at the bar. Want to come with me and get free drinks?” She was already undoing the buttons on her blazer.

“I'll go with you, but I'm good with this beer.” She rolled her eyes as though I'd called her out on something.

“I can still meet nice people and accept drinks even though Mike isn't here, you know.”

I couldn't imagine her doing it when Mike *was* there, so I just nodded and said, “Of course. You don't need to filter your social life through your boyfriend.”

Absolved and satisfied, she led the way to the bar where we sat for twenty minutes uninterrupted by anyone, and then we went home.

As I sit in this bar, I think about that stupid exchange, and about growing up near Nicole and the ways in which she'd lord her attractiveness over me and catalogue the ways in which she was hit-on, and I've sweated, and wandered the streets of this city, missing you, thinking about how lucky I am to be happy and to not feel Nicole's bottomless need for the feeling she gets when men buy her drinks.

So what's with this now, with this obnoxious guy at this bar on Magazine Street, and the way I want him to look at me? Because, having spent my day walking aimlessly in the blazing heat, because I don't want to pay for museum admission again, and because I've already been to Audubon Park to stare at the waterfowl, I'm sitting—sweaty and stained and greasy—in a bar where Nicole would have dared me to stop being mousy, just for long enough to show me that I'm bad at it, and this guy – the only other person sitting at the bar—barely looks at me, so that it feels like Nicole has prophesied my feeble day, perhaps my feeble little life, and now I just get to fulfill it. I wish you had been able to come with me on this trip. I never feel this way when you are with me.

I'd ducked into this bar to drink something cold, catch some AC, and escape the inevitable afternoon rain that bloomed in the clouds like a bruise. The bar itself is situated in the narrow alley-space between two buildings, and the roof is thin and translucent; just enough rippled material to keep out the rain and keep in the AC. Jared the bartender asks me if I'd like another. I look up through the foggy fiberglass above our heads, note the grayness of the light.

“Sure, a beer this time though.”

Jared has been friendly with me since I arrived. He is a good bartender. His interest in his clientele seems genuine, and he makes the probably-forced small-talk feel like it isn't just forced small-talk. He passes me a bottle of beer, talks to me, talks to Economics-dude, and thus we begin to talk to each other. His interest is caught when Jared calls me “our guest from Montreal,” and of course he has to ask “Wow, huh, do you speak French?”

I eye him slowly and see how easy this could be.

“Yes.”

“Impressive. It's a beautiful language.”

And now it takes care of itself, largely, because he is a local, and I am a French-speaking tourist. We mostly imagine how interesting we are to the other. He talks about the French culture in Louisiana, and I tell him that the French translation of the city's motto – 'Let the good times roll,' plastered all over leaflets, banners and souvenirs—has a grammar mistake in it. He finds this amusing. I explain that 'Time' is always plural in French. He stares at me and nods slowly like I'd just crafted a deep metaphor.

Jared the bartender comes and goes, talks to us about his life a little, about what a big step it was for him to move in with his girlfriend that past winter, about how scary commitment is for guys. Economics-dude says something generic and safe about how even when you've found the right girl, it can still be scary, but it'll feel easy and natural eventually, etc. etc.

He orders devilled eggs. He asks me if I like devilled eggs and I tell him that I absolutely do not, and that they gross me out. He laughs, argues for their merits. When his plate comes there is a bed of arugula under the halved and mutilated eggs, and I help myself to it, using my fingers. He watches appreciatively, and I like it. I carefully pick the arugula that is furthest from the sweating eggs. That's when he asks for two more beers, and we talk as it starts to rain furiously outside. I feel like I've won some sort of game; it doesn't matter who he is or whether I find him attractive. Happily, I ignore the fact that he probably feels the same way, like he's passed some sort of test, and I could be anyone as far as he cares. We share a desire not for each other, but to be interesting, to be powerful. I hate the Nicole-ness unfolding inside of me, but I am tipsy and happy knowing that I can get what I want if I want something.

He tells me about his ex, Melody, *the taker*. His stare changes, and at that point, I realize I've gone too far.

“What about you?” he asks. “A girl like you, you must have broken your fair share of hearts.”

“Not really,” I say. *I’m a one-man-woman. Have been for several years. I live with my boyfriend. He is taller and better-looking than you. I’m freaking out right now because I don’t know how to backpedal, don’t know how to break this desire I have to succeed, even when I’ve already succeeded way past the point I wanted to.*

“Well, come on then. Tell me about your last boyfriend.”

“Well, we were sort of on-again-off-again at first, but, um... tall. Handsome, I think. Really smart and funny, in a quiet way.”

“I mean, that sounds pretty great. What went wrong?”

I imagine that I’ve just stabbed someone, and that this person is still alive and knows my face, my name. I wonder in a panic whether to run and risk being caught, or to drive it a little deeper, make it all much worse, but maybe never face the music. THE CAT stirs, half-materializes in a corner and sits up very straight, her ears perked at attention. Her tail flicks back and forth eagerly. I feel like I could puke or pass out, and the same masochistic attraction that makes me meaner once I’ve been called mean has me plunging the knife deeper, against the desperate urgings of my better judgment, my morals, my love for you.

“He died, actually.”

“Holy shit. That was so not what I was expecting. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I say, trying to brush it off, shocked at what I’ve just said, how the words made themselves feel true, how they still have me reeling. THE CAT is cackling madly in the corner. I take another sip of beer, hoping to shake it off, but the panic starts to crowd in, my vision tunneling away while something is expanding in my chest and throat. I’m halfway outside

myself, and it's so unlike the times I've given a fake name at Starbucks and then went on with my life. Economics-dude wants details, a time-line. He knows my age but *how long ago was this, how long were you together, after the on-again-off-again stuff?*

I only half-listen, because of the sound of my own pulse and the fact that all I want to do is talk to you, but the only words that my brain can muster are, *I just killed you. I just killed you.*

"Luke's at home killing himself in your bathroom," THE CAT says, skipping along the bar to be closer to the action.

Shut up, shut up. Shut up.

Scrambling, I provide dates. I allow for one year to have passed since the dreaded event, to justify how totally-okay I was acting before I decided to kill you. Economics-dude is indeed thorough about the numbers, and arrives at the conclusion that we had a six-month streak before your untimely demise. Suddenly he looks at me like I'm younger, even though he knew my age before. I hate how a moment ago I had a long-time boyfriend, and now you're a dead guy that I dated for six months.

I try to move the conversation along, to turn this back from a murder to a strange story that I told a stranger one time, but Economics-dude persists, starts to offer wisdom about how intense relationships are when you're *so young*, and I tell him there's really no need for this, but he presses on, mentions the suicide-rate in people aged 16 to 26 and my eyes fill immediately with tears and I hear myself say, "Stop, please stop now," and he does stop, and stares at me, drawing his own conclusions. THE CAT is now perched on Economics-dude's lap, purring in the middle of the wreckage.

Jared runs in from the back room and yells, "Hey guys, I'm a dad!"

"What?"

He nods manically and runs outside. Economics-dude and I have enough time to exchange confused looks before Jared is running back towards us with a puppy in his hands and a smiling young woman trailing behind him. THE CAT's tail bristles, and she vanishes.

“Oohhh,” Economics-dude says, shaking his head and chuckling.

The woman with Jared laughs and asks if Jared had done the, “‘I’m a dad’ bit to mess with y’all?”

“Yeah, he really had us for a sec,” I say.

I pet the little puppy for a moment, settle up for my first two drinks, and say it was really nice to meet everybody. Economics-dude tells me to take care, and does not renew his previous offer to maybe show me around the city sometime before I leave.

The rain has stopped and the streets are almost dry again as I walk back to Nicole's apartment. When I get there, I must look as guilty as I feel because she immediately asks me what happened. I tell her that I feel a bit uncomfortable because I'd just let a guy buy me a drink. She looks at me with disapproval then tells me that the best I can do now is come clean and tell you.

Hurricane

Mamie tells me stories at an alarming rate in the month leading up to our trip. She calls merely to say hi and ends up talking for nearly an hour. My mother texts me at odd times, telling me to pack a swimsuit, and cataloguing the features of an efficient carry-on bag.

I catch myself mentally packing sometimes, and it occurs to me how winter-heavy my wardrobe is.

Ivy offers to lend me some skirts and tank-tops.

Luke's mother buys me SPF 45 sunscreen on sale at Pharmaprix.

Nicole sends me the link for a four-week 'beach body' fitness challenge.

Mamie sees avocados on sale in a Maxi flyer and calls to tell me all about hurricane Carol, which had completely uprooted the avocado tree in her family's yard in February, 1960.

The day before my flight, Ivy and I go to Next Door Pub for our traditional pre-trip 'just-in-case-your-flight-crashes' cocktails. This morbid tradition began before Ivy's flight to St. Vincent in the ninth grade, and consisted of raiding my dad's whiskey stash during a sleepover. We joke about how far we've come and how much we've classed-up our act.

It is Martini Night at Next Door, Ivy's favourite of The Nights. The drinks make us feel fancy, but we tone it down with nachos and jalapeno poppers. I love the vibe in Montreal bars during the winter, the way it feels extra warm inside, and the lighting is almost always amber and syrupy. I wonder whether we will go to a bar in Mauritius. Knowing my mom, we would, but knowing Mamie, I had my doubts.

"So how pumped are you to go?"

Ivy sips her rosy-coloured drink. Her braids are knotted into a huge bun on the top of her head, and she looks incredibly cool and ladylike at the same time.

"Super pumped, obviously. I'm really excited to meet some of the extended family, too. I guess I'm just a bit worried about not really connecting, you know?"

"God, this is like that time we got pedicures all over again."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know, when the hot Latina pedicurists were shooting the shit and playing around, and they thought you were Latin and spoke to you in Spanish? You got all awkward, like you were some kind of monster for *not* being Latina, and they got baited out and stopped talking to us?"

"Dude, the dynamic changed so quickly, it *was* weird. I felt like a dumb white client all of a sudden. I think the *situation* was awkward."

"Nope, just you."

"Lovely, thanks."

"That's what I'm *saying* though! You're making this trip awkward before anything even happens. You're going into it expecting to feel alienated and to be rejected by your people."

“But Ivy come on, *look at me*. My dad is Irish for Christ’s sake. You can’t honestly tell me that walking around with my mom and Mamie won’t be the ‘grandma or nanny’ fiasco of 2002 all over again.”

“Okay, girl, I’m gonna lay this out for you real simple right now. You’re a big ol’ pushover. This isn’t news to you. Fuck, the people who push you around the most have told you as much. You don’t feel entitled to *fight*,” she says, poking me in the chest emphatically, “you don’t feel entitled to take up your own *space*,” [poke], “you don’t even feel entitled to your own *cultures* because you’re not living on a reserve, or you’re not in the freaking IRA, or picking tea in Mauritius, but *Christ* Lauren you don’t have to *suffer* to *belong*. You don’t have to tiptoe around who you are because you don’t feel like you’ve earned it. That’s fucked up.”

She downs the bottom of the pink drink. “Just be you, okay? If you wanna smudge your apartment like your dad’s mum showed you, *do it*. If you wanna celebrate your Irish roots, do it... fuck, everyone else does! And Mauritius? Everything I’ve ever heard about Mauritius is so unique and amazing, and you should never let your skin stop you from being a part of that.”

Ivy takes a breath and motions to my glass for me to catch up with her.

“You make it sound so simple,” I say, downing the rest of my gin-thing.

“Well maybe it really is that simple, you weirdo. You want to see things as simply as I do? Then just listen to me for once; I mean *really* hear this. You are cognizant of your privilege, and you treat others with dignity and respect, so drop the white-guilt bullshit, get on that plane, and go meet your family, smell the native flowers, get so tanned that nobody would think you weren’t Mauritian. And bring me a souvenir.”

In the middle of the night my mother texts me, asking whether I remembered to buy water shoes at Wal-Mart, so I do not hurt myself on a sharp rock or a poisonous fish. When the sound of my buzzing phone wakes him up, Luke looks at the clock and groans. I think of the big green spiders Mamie always told me about and curl up closer to him, wishing that he could come with us. I tell him that part of me is nervous.

“But you want to go.” he says, and I can’t tell if it’s a question or a statement.

“Of course I do. I don’t know, maybe they’re just setting the bar too high.”

“Probably.” He kisses the back of my head. “But it’s going to be good either way. You can see it for real, never have to guess or imagine anymore.”

I stare out the window as it begins to snow, and I realize that this will be the first New Year’s I spend away from Montreal. I watch the snowflakes glow orange under the streetlights, thinking about the fact that Luke’s year will change nine hours after mine. I wonder if I will come back and find myself out-of-synch with the year in my own time zone, tuned-in to someplace far away. I wonder whether I’m not already.