

**Quietly, Loving Everyone: Early Stories**

Curtis John McRae

A thesis in the department of English

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree Master of Arts (English) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2022

**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**  
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Curtis John McRae Entitled: Quietly, Loving Everyone: Early Stories  
and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts (English)**

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

Signed by the final examining committee:

Mikhail Iossel : Chair

Josip Novakovich : Examiner

Terence Byrnes : Examiner

Mikhail Iossel : Supervisor

Approved by: Jonathan Sachs

Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Approved by: Graham Carr

Dean

Date: 2022-April-01

## Abstract

### **Quietly, Loving Everyone: Early Stories**

Curtis John McRae

The stories in my thesis collection, *Quietly, Loving Everyone: Early Stories*, explore characters at the beginning, middle, and end of relationships; with lovers, friends, family, and themselves. My collection explores a balance between the narrative arc of minimalist fiction with the content of existential-humanist stories, while also blending earnestness with humour. These stories raise questions about the growing concern with the Anthropocene, the shroud of mystery surrounding chronic illness, the rising rate of suicide, and modes of infidelity among polyamory and hook-up culture. In a mode that occasionally borders on the metafictional, this collection explores the potential of narrative, of how it can both shield us from reality, and shape it too.

In “Ulcers and Auras,” the protagonist, Purdy O’Connor, reimagines the grieving process and reconciles how little is known about autoimmune diseases with his recent diagnoses, all while daydreaming of a platoon of ulcers taking over the city of Montreal. In “Hotel Viviane,” the titular protagonist takes a road trip with her older sister to visit Race Point Lighthouse, then years later tries to make sense of her sister’s sudden suicide. Underlying all these stories is a sense that something imminent and foreboding is around the corner; yet I hope to create a respite for my readers with moments of levity and keen observation. Despite their flaws, shortcomings, and grievances, you may still come to quietly love these characters.

This Collection Is Dedicated To My Grandchildren,

Whenever They Are Born

& Mikhail Iossel,

For His Invaluable Guidance And Editorial Work

# Table of Contents

Chicken in Two Parts	1
We Should Change the Curtains	14
The Milk's Gone Sour	21
Love Cinema	26
Hotel Viviane	37
Down by the Lake, Dan	51
An Afternoon Beer & 1000 Birds	59
Quietly, Loving Everyone	82

# Quietly, Loving Everyone

& Other Stories Written While Levitating From My Chair

“Loving birds is easy,  
Any fool can do it,  
But I must admit it’s  
Hard to love the louse.”

—W.H. Auden, “Heavy Date”

“There had leaked through to Pirate a  
dim suspicion that life was passing him  
by.”

—Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*

## CHICKEN IN TWO PARTS

“Tomorrow I’m pulling my eyes out, Seymour.”

Tweedy threw a rock at the side of the passenger train and it flew out into the night. We watched it soar through the sky by the light of the train windows, and then it disappeared, like all the faces in the rows of those seats.

“My grandma’s got a collection of antique spoons,” I said. “We could gouge them out.”

I picked up a pebble and repeated the same motion; a spark, a quick clink of metal, then a siffling through the sky. It made me think of Grandma’s whistled S’s.

Tweedy and I were drinking bottles of beer in a shallow ditch by the railway, tucked behind a field of barley. Tweedy’s eyes had swollen half-shut from diving into poison ivy the week before. After depleting a pocket-full of pebbles and a flask of Kraken Rum, he stood on the railway to see if he could outlast the oncoming train. I watched in horror and admiration, his face growing brighter in the headlights, his smile growing wider. I wondered what fuelled the quiet man standing on those rails.

We swirled the beer at the bottom of our bottles. I thought about throwing that too, but didn’t want to sully our meeting spot with shards of broken glass.

“We really should get you to a hospital,” I said.

“It’ll pass.”

We watched the train take the bend, its tail curving with the tracks, the whole of it escaping beyond these fields, all the people on board further along to wherever they had to go. The night smelled of chimney smoke, fires burning in the yards of nearby barns, and I wondered if anyone ever



really had anywhere to go. My summers spent in the country with Grandma slowed the other nine months in the city with my parents; each summer, the same stop, the same station. And then, at the end of it, I would stuff my clothes into a suitcase, and board again.

Grandma was likely sitting on our front porch in the moonlight, listening to radio show tunes, waiting for me to get home. Most nights, I'd grab my bicycle from the side of the farm after dinner and bike over to the tracks to meet Tweedy. On each of those nights, she watched me disappear from beneath the porch lights.

My mother grew up on this farm, just outside of Sackville, New Brunswick, and my father grew up in Montreal. When Mom found out she was pregnant, they decided they wanted me to experience both of these worlds. My childhood summers were spent in New Brunswick, wreaking havoc on neighbouring farms with Tweedy, while the school years were spent in Montreal. When Grandpa passed away, there was plenty of work to be done around the farm, and so I kept coming around to help her out, and to reconnect with Tweedy.

Another steaming engine sounded somewhere further off, and Tweedy looked at me like I knew what to do. The fields of barley leaned in, Tweedy popped the collar on his favourite hand-me-down tweed jacket; his namesake.

“Your turn.”

I took a moment to process what he was saying.

“You can't be serious.”

“I made it out.”

“Barely,” I said, looking him in the eye.

He studied the ground and picked up the perfect rock; then, before I understood what he was doing, ripped it towards me. I ducked just before it hit me in the forehead.

“Are you off your god damn rocker, Tweedy?”

“You speak like your grandma.”

“I’m not the damn train,” I said, rubbing the ghosted spot on my face where it almost hit me.

“What’s wrong with you? I’ve got to make it home in one piece.”

“You’ll be returning without a lesson learned.”

The train was approaching, the sound of its engine growing in momentum. My pulse had made its way into my temples, and my whole head was throbbing.

“Since when was drinking by the tracks not enough?”

“Since I got a taste last week.”

“And how’d that turn out for you?”

He thought about it for a moment, then used the back of his hand to rub his eyes.

“Suit yourself, city boy.” He took his flat cap off and dropped it on the ground.

He walked towards the rails, I felt a sudden pang of guilt, and responsibility. I couldn’t watch him hurt himself anymore. He already needed to be hospitalized.

“You’re a chicken with its head cut off. You know that?”

He spun on his heels, a grin already forming on his face.

“And the city boy is finally learning.”

“Yeah, sure.”

I finished my beer and made my way to the track, almost falling over. It was getting late, and the roosters were sounding off from distant farms. I thought about my grandma and hoped that she had already gone to bed.

“And the show begins.” Tweedy winked at me. I gave him the finger, and he began singing “Hello, My Ragtime Gal” in the style of Michigan J. Frog, kicking his legs out and tipping his flat cap. I hadn’t seen Tweedy this excited in a while.

Despite never continuing past high school, I always thought that Tweedy was smarter than me. He always knew what to do when we got in trouble, and he always knew what he wanted, even if it was reckless or dangerous. Tweedy seemed to have a sense of clarity that had never been diluted. And yet, this lucidity never reached beyond Sackville.

The rails drummed beneath my feet, and my legs began to shake. I tried to fight it off. I didn't want Tweedy to think I had gone soft. The lights grew brighter, the train ticking on, the conductor's face grew clearer, and I saw his panic-stricken look before I had to shield my eyes from the oncoming lights. For a moment, I wasn't sure if I would jump. I was standing in front of the train and in front of Tweedy. I cocked my head to my side and saw the swaying barley. Tweedy stood there with a shit-eating grin, still kicking his legs out, holding his thumb up as if he were trying to catch a ride. He pointed to a bushy spot beside the rails without poison ivy.

I didn't feel a layer of leaves if there was one. If there was, it dissolved as soon as my body tore through it. I crashed into branches and landed on gravel, while a thundering noise whizzed behind me. It grew lighter before it grew dark again. I lay still, taking inventory of all my limbs, waiting for a wave of pain to surge through my body. I rolled onto my back and looked up at the lucky stars – all of them winking, and just a single one that trailed through in a flash before dissolving. I didn't rush to get up. Instead, I rested on the gravel, while Tweedy danced around the tracks, howling at the moon.

“That's gotta be a record. The student becomes the sensei, *awwwoooooo*.” It didn't matter that it was a nail-clipping moon.

Lying there, I couldn't help but smile, remembering how we used to jump in cold lakes, our clothes bunched in a pile by some bushes, then run home to Grandma if any leeches stuck to our legs. She took a barbecue lighter to our shins and burned them off. Tweedy's dad would have given us the belt. We tipped cows at the age of ten; eight years later we escalated to shearing crop circles, encrypting alien messages into corn fields for the news reporters to decipher, only to be scolded by my grandma,

who was too clever and without room for alien life in her own. These were the same brazen idle days spent eating pumpernickel crust and turkey sandwiches in the shade of trees, bowered in supine positions. I thought then that we would do these sorts of things every summer for the rest of our lives. But now, I hoped only that the sun might rise so I could go back home with an excuse.

Tweedy pulled me up by the arm and patted me on the back.

“Now there’s a story you can bring home.”

He held me just above the elbow and helped me limp towards my bike.

“They wouldn’t believe me, they lack the imagination.”

“But *us*,” he said, looking over the fields and up at the moon, “we have what we need out here.”

I leaned into him and let him carry my weight.

“Same time tomorrow?” Tweedy asked.

“I can’t, my grandma’s having her siblings over for dinner and I have to help her host. You know the script: Put something nice on, slick my hair back, smile and wave, refill the drinks. The regular shit.” Tweedy climbed out of the ditch and turned back, extending his arm to pull me out. “She likes to put on a show of me every summer.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged.

“You’re going to make me spend a night alone with my dad?”

“Run away,” I tried to joke, but he waved me off.

“Well, the night after then.”

“I’ll text you, I’ve got some work for my summer courses that I’m trying to catch up on. I’m already falling behind with all the help Grandma needs around the farm.”

“You’re going back home soon, aren’t you?”

I swung my leg over my bike and cradled the seat beneath my crotch.

“Yeah.”

“You’ll catch up then.”

“It’s not that simple,” I said.

Tweedy sighed and nodded his head.

“It always is.”

I grabbed my bike and dug my heels into the stirrups, pretending to spank its hide.

“You don’t know a thing about horses.” Tweedy forced a smile. “You squeeze with your legs.”

I squeezed my legs together, tipping my fictitious ten-gallon hat. Tweedy returned the gesture, and spun around on his heels.

“Hey, Tweedy—”

Tweedy turned around to look back at me.

“Go see a doctor.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said.

“Alright.” I kicked off and peddled home.

I swerved along the dirt road, making S’s out of my path. Before I took the first bend in the road, I looked over my shoulder and saw Tweedy still standing in the same spot. I raised my hand, but he didn’t wave back. I felt a stone in my stomach as his silhouette was lost behind the barley.

For the length of my bike ride home, I peddled standing up, feeling the wind in my hair. I closed my eyes and listened to the roosters waking up, the sounds of chickens stirring as my tires kicked up the dirt road; in the moonlight, the fields were nestled with cows. A Belgian Malinois jumped out from a field and began trotting at my heels, looking up at me. It made me think of Odin.

I peddled home, remembering Odin and the first time I watched Grandma kill a chicken. She held my hand and walked me along the path towards the hen house. Inside, they welcomed us, flocking at the expectation of grain. Grandma swept her arm across the ground and came up with an upturned

chicken, hanging from its bald feet. They looked compatible, her in her sunflower dress, the chicken submitting to her grip. The rest of the brood scattered out, a few feathers floated down toward the soil. She placed the chicken's head between two knuckles and twisted her wrist until I heard a pop. I watched its body quiver for a moment longer. We walked back to the farm, Grandma pulling me along with one hand and holding the limp carcass with her other. I watched the way her dress fell upon her back, the creases in her dress, and the tiny yellow flowers printed on the fabric. I thought that the flowers on her dress looked different now.

The next summer, Grandpa was still alive to show me how to milk the cows. Grandma and Grandpa had a Belgian Malinois with one brown eye and one blue eye named Odin. It wasn't Grandpa that woke me, but the weight of Odin's body on the bed, his sandpaper tongue scraping my forehead before Grandpa's belly breached the doorframe. He patted my feet beneath the duvet, readjusted his suspenders, and left the room. Odin sat beside the foot of the bed, obedient. I put my clothes on, obedient. I wiped the crust from my eyes and looked forward to a glass of milk.

That same summer, it was a pair of hands that shook me from my sleep one morning. I looked up into my grandpa's eyes. They looked back at me, expressing something I didn't recognize. The bedside lamp was turned on, and beyond the penumbra of the lampshade, the room was otherwise dark. There were no clothes laid out, I was rushed outside in my pyjamas. Odin had gotten into the pigsty overnight and attacked a pig named Beth. I watched Beth strain to breathe below Grandpa's boot, her belly rising and falling as her eyes looked somewhere further. I was scared for Odin, I didn't want to lose him. I could forgive him, it wasn't his fault. Grandpa told me to go find him. There were no flowers or dresses or sunshine, just a dark morning before the sun, spilled guts strewn across the sty. After he pulled the trigger, Grandpa stood above Beth's corpse, and I watched his shoulders slouch from afar, as he buried his face in his hands. I learned that he cared as much as Grandma, and that sometimes the only thing to do when one cares is to show mercy. The next summer, Odin was

gone and so was Grandpa. I wondered if Grandpa was shown any mercy. Someone told me that his death was a pulled plug and a flatline on a screen. I didn't get the chance to visit him, but I remember his death through my mother's face. She had just gotten home from the grocery store when she listened to the voicemail.

I parked my bike on the side of the farm when I got home. The porch lights were still on. My grandma was fast asleep, and I kissed her gently on the forehead before waking her up, taking her elbow and helping her out of her chair.

\*\*\*

“Seymour, would you check on the chicken? It should be ready soon.”

Grandma's voice rang from the other room.

I ran down the stairs while tucking in my shirt and opened the oven door when I got to the kitchen. The rusty hinges unleashed a cloud of billowing smoke from beneath a burned, hollowed carcass. I fanned manically with a ragged dish towel.

“What's that *smell*?”

“Nothing—” I turned the radio up, hoping the cacophony of sound might detract from the smell.

“Is something *burning*?” Her footsteps fell against the stairs.

I tried to make myself presentable so that one of the two of us might be pleasing. I patted the pleats in my pants and rushed to the cupboard filled with herbs, shuffling through them to try and find some sage or thyme.

“What happened?”

“I don't know, I wasn't in charge of the chicken.”

“What are you in charge of?” she asked.

I wanted to point to the house, but gestured towards my body with opened palms, tap dancing to the music on the radio.

“Great,” she said. “And what will they eat? What will they *think*? There’s not enough time.”

“We can offer them a vegetarian meal.”

“On a farm with chickens, pigs, and cows, and we offer our guests potatoes?”

Grandma flipped the chicken over and observed the bottom half. The apron fell loose over her frame, and I noticed the loose skin around her neck. I poured her a glass of wine, and tied the apron above her waist.

“It’s salvageable,” she said. There were deep wells beneath her eyes. “It’s mainly the skin that’s blackened. Would you cut out the pieces that are useable and put them on a plate? We can keep them in the oven.”

“Go on and finish upstairs,” I told her. “I’ll take care of things until they arrive.”

She took a moment to smile at me before rushing out of the room.

“Oh—and would you mash the potatoes and cook some onions down please?” she shouted from the stairwell.

The landline rang, and before I could reach for it, Grandma called down to let me know she had it. She hadn’t made the transition to a cellphone, despite her children’s insistence. She had no need.

I opened a window and tried to fan the rest of the smoke. Aunt Shannon and Uncle Bob were asthmatic, and I didn’t want to kill them. Uncle Glenn and Aunt Pearl weren’t, but the chicken might do them in if the smoke didn’t. They weren’t really aunts and uncles, but great aunts and uncles. They lived a few roads down and visited every summer.

“Shannon and Bob will be late,” she shouted from upstairs.

“Buys us some time,” I murmured under my breath.

I salvaged what I could from the chicken. The potatoes were mashed, stirred in with cooking cream, cold butter, green onions, and cream cheese, and I had moved on to chopping the onions when the doorbell rang. I turned the radio up and wiped the tears from my eyes.



“I got it!” I passed by the wood panelled walls and the portraits hanging in the hallway and moved into the vestibule, wiping my hands off on a towel.

I opened the front door, and the acrid smell of old cigarettes entered the house.

“Seymour!”

Aunt Pearl barrelled through the door and wrapped me in a long embrace. She was a stout woman who could knock me off my heels, and my face was buried in the fur lining of her coat. I had located the source of the smell, and was glad that it might mask the scent of burned chicken. I looked over her shoulder and watched Uncle Glenn lean on his cane and struggle to get his feet over the door frame. He bent over and picked up a chip of red paint from the floor.

“You need to repaint the door, Seymour.”

“It’s great to see you both, too.”

“You look older every year.” Aunt Pearl held me at arms length and took me all in. I suddenly became self-conscious.

“I get older every year.”

I took their coats from them and hung them up on the upright coat hanger.

Aunt Pearl’s nostrils flared and she started sniffing the air. “What’s that smell?”

“It’s just the chicken, it’s fine.”

“Why’d you paint over the door hinges?” Uncle Glenn was still studying the door. “That’s where it’s flaking.” He looked over his horn-rimmed glasses that would have fallen off his face if it weren’t for his large, purple nose.

“I’ll give it a new coat then.”

“No, no, no, you need to chip off.”

“I’ll chip it off, then. Would you like to come into the living room? Grandma will be down soon.”

“That’s right!” Aunt Pearl chimed in. “Where’s that sister of mine?”

The odour wasn't restricted to her coat, and she had attempted to mask it with a heavy perfume. We waked along the portraits that held former versions of themselves. Neither bothered to survey their own ghosts. The floorboards croaked beneath Aunt Pearl.

"She'll be down soon. I need to finish prepping, but can I get either of you a drink?"

"Whiskey for me." Uncle Glenn trailed behind.

"What wines do you have?"

They hadn't brought anything with them.

"What do you prefer?"

"A Chardonnay if you have," she said. "Otherwise, anything will do."

I left them behind and walked toward the kitchen.

"Oh, and Seymour—" I turned around on my heels. "You'll tell us all about your parents and the city and your schooling when you get back, won't you?"

"Of course." I smiled and told them I'd be right back.

I sighed once I got into the kitchen, and looked at the pile of uncut onions. The dish towel hanging from the oven door had small sunflowers printed on it that made me think of an old dress Grandma used to wear. I stood there for a moment, looking at nothing in particular.

There was an unopened bottle of Chardonnay in the fridge, alongside a few bottles of beer that I had bought the night before. I poured her a glass of wine and myself a beer and thought of Tweedy. I wondered what he might be doing now. A sharp twinge seized my leg, and I withdrew before putting any more weight on it.

"*Jesus,*" I said.

"Are you alright?"

Grandma appeared around the corner, and I was glad to see her.

"Yeah, I'm fine, I'm just going to finish with the onions and then we'll be ready to eat."

“What happened to your leg?”

“Nothing, I think I stepped on it wrong. Would you bring this to Aunt Pearl?”

“What about the others?”

“Uncle Bob and Aunt Shannon still aren’t here yet, and Uncle Glenn wants a whiskey. Would you get him one for me, please?”

“Yes of course—and what about the chicken?”

“It’s in the oven keeping warm. I put some tin foil over it.”

“Okay,” she said. “Oh, and Seymour?”

I looked up at her.

“Come join us as soon as you’re done. They miss you, you know.” I smiled and nodded.

She took the glass of Chardonnay from the counter, then disappeared into the living room.

I turned the volume on the radio up, but it was no longer playing music. A man’s voice was recounting the evening news. I draped the dish towel over my shoulder and began chopping the onions. The room thickened with a stale mix of acidic vapors and crushed skins. I saw the cartoon hand rise out of the cloud of fumes and poke at me, my eyes welling up with tears. An eruption of laughter spilled in from the living room. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand.

The radio announced that earlier in the evening, a boy had been down by the tracks and was struck by a train. My leg seized up. I put the knife down and looked into the pile of onions. The conductor had been interviewed and told the press that there was nothing he could have done. He had pulled the brakes, but it was too late. The picture of swaying barley passed through my mind. I imagined a whole field leaning in towards my grandma’s farm, listening to the broadcast. I heard a distant train approaching the house.

For a few moments after the radio announced the death, the speaker was silent. Perhaps the town was busy praying. I thought of my mother’s face, and then I thought of him. The doorbell rang and

Grandma called my name from the other room. A gust of wind blew through the window and banded the curtains, brought the world in from outside.

Before I answered, or managed to leave the spot where I was standing, I thought of his silhouette standing by the road, about the fields of barley leaning inward. I thought about the passengers on the train. I saw the moonlight reflecting off his face, a white sheet pulled over his eyes. There was no one to blame for this. The conductor had pulled the emergency brakes. I stood above the radio, and hoped he had been shown mercy.

## WE SHOULD CHANGE THE CURTAINS

“We should change the curtains.”

It had been a while since either of them spoke. He couldn't remember what she last said. He watched the dust rising through the filtered light, doubled through his smoke, and took another drag.

“What's wrong with them?” he finally asked.

“They don't hold the water in.”

He squinted, studying the drapes, then turned to take her in. She was smoking a cigarette while staring at a fixed spot on the wall, her legs hanging over the armrest of her chair. A great stillness glossed over her face, a synthetic unawareness, as if she had briefly stepped out of her corpse and left the room. He thought of those storefront mannequins. He wondered if she was thinking about the last time the water came in—he didn't know what that meant.

“You mean the condensation?”

“What?”

“The condensation,” he said. “You mean they let the condensation in.”

She nibbled the cracked coat of lime green polish on her fingernails, the tobacco stubbed between her middle and her ring finger, as she ran her unoccupied hand over the seat of her leather upholstered chair. He observed the spot she was studying, where the wallpaper had begun to peel. It was between the family portrait taken at their cabin years ago—the two of them holding their daughter up by her hands, who had since grown up and moved out, which was the beginning of the end—and his

mother's piano, which they had inherited after moving her into a nursing home. He tried to remember when the photo was taken. They all looked so young. His hair hadn't greyed, and his wife's face had wrinkled, but only in the good spots—the crinkled kind that comes with laughter, forms around the eyes, not the furrowed brows and sullen sulking kind. He decided not to compare the image with the lady sitting next to him; He lit a cigarette and decided it had only been a few years.

“I meant the shower curtains.”

“I thought you meant those ones.” He pointed at the window.

“Why? What's wrong with those?”

They looked like they might shatter if the wind blew through.

“Nothing,” he said. “There's nothing wrong with them. I just thought that's what you meant.”

“Right. Well, I think we should change the shower curtains.”

He scratched at the scruff growing on his face, looking at the same spot on the wall, and wondered how long it had been.

“Why do they need to be changed?” he asked.

“I already told you. They don't keep the water in.”

“Right,” he said. “I'm sorry.”

They sat in silence a while longer, hardly stirring, moving only their cigarettes closer to their mouths. They did this often, sitting in their living room while it rained, looking out onto the highway and the tracks. They arranged the room just for this design; so they could sit, and smoke. They lined the room with bittersweet family portraits that displayed the missing member, a brick mantel littered with trophies, yellow wallpaper printed with red swirls, and two sun-dried leather chairs on each side of the futon they had bought in case any guests stayed the night—or Darlene. Neither happened often. When it did, the room's stale odor was masked with Febreze.

“Do you even listen?”

“What?”

“When I talk to you, do you listen?” she repeated, her finger tapping the armrest of her chair. “I always have to ask you something twice, and even then, when I ask you the same thing a week later, you’ve already forgotten.”

“I’m sorry. I listen. We’ll change the curtains.” He didn’t want to start another fight. There were still wine stains on the wallpaper from the last one. “You just catch me lost in thought sometimes.”

“Darlene used to say the same, you know.”

He gave up with the spot on the wall and with trying to remember. He knew he would have to buy new curtains at the mall now that she had asked, which made him uneasy. Walking by those storefront mannequins, the blank stares of indifference eyeing him down as he passed them by, gave him an uncanny resemblance to the valley of his own life. He wondered if they were manufactured in sets and if they stayed together beyond the seasons.

“I’ll go to the store tomorrow. What do you want?”

“I don’t know,” she exhaled with her smoke. “What do you think?”

“How about one of those old maps? The ones they used to have in our college dorms.”

“God no. That’s a horrible idea,” she said. “Aren’t we a little old for that?”

“I’m sorry, you’re right, we are. I was just thinking of those days. What do you think then?”

He watched her stub her butt into an overflowing ashtray, then light another cigarette and gaze at the piano. He thought of Darlene’s fingers when she did—her slender fingers, stretching across the keys, tickling those ivory chords. They had paid for lessons when she was a child, and she played beautifully. She learned Bach’s Goldberg Variations in her third year and began composing in her fourth. On rainy days, often early on Sunday mornings, her fingers overrode the sounds of the passing trains and cars rolling by, shutting out all the noise and all the rooms outside of that one. He imagined

a whole world of people sitting and smoking, all looking out onto the tracks, all waiting for the train to pass them by.

He shifted his gaze to the window and watched the raindrops follow the paths of the ones that fell before them. They started slow when they landed, but picked up momentum the longer they rolled and the faster they fell. This was until, like all the others, they disappeared out of sight, gone over the edge. He wondered if she still played.

“Maybe just a solid color,” she said, “something that will match the accents. How about blue?”

He thought about it for a while.

“I don’t think Darlene would like that, she’d call it square or something. How about polka dots?”

She took a drag, held it, and released it with a sigh. He had unsettled her. He pulled another cigarette out from the pack.

“So why do you ask,” she said, “if you’re going to reject all my suggestions?”

“I’m sorry. You’re right. It’s not a bad idea, I just don’t think it’s what Darlene would want.”

“Well she doesn’t live here anymore, does she?”

He thought her question was accusatory. He wondered if he should make a big deal of it, but thought better in the end.

“I know, but if she comes back, I want her to feel at home.”

She was out of smokes and asked him for another. He gave her one.

“Well it is her home, and that’s not dependent on the shower curtains, now is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” he said.

“If she doesn’t feel at home, for whatever reason, of all the possibilities, the shower curtains are the least of our concern for God’s sake.”

He thought about that as he lit the last cigarette from his pack: about his wife, about his daughter, about the shower curtains they had bought years ago, about God’s sake. He tried to remember when



and where they had bought them, but he couldn't quite recall. He held the notion that they had the same pair at their cabin. If that were the case, he would have to buy two new sets. But of course, it had been a while since he had been to the cabin, since any of them had been, and so it might not be the case.

He was stirred by the smell of smoke. *Smoke*. He smelled *smoke*.

Grey tendrils rose from a carpet-born flame, now climbing up the leg of their coffee table. He jumped up and smothered it with a blanket, only after swatting at it for a few seconds. By the time it was extinguished, he was sweating through his shirt. He looked over at his wife, who was no longer holding her cigarette.

“What the *hell was that* for?”

He sat back down, feeling angry for the first time in a while.

“Everything's always my fault, *isn't it?*”

The whole room was a brittle, flammable spindle of kindling, ready to burn with the slightest friction. He thought about making a big deal of it, but decided better not to. These things happen, he thought. It was probably an accident. Now he'd have to buy another carpet, too.

He tried looking at something else in the room, anything but the leather chair next to him, and the woman reclining in it. His eye landed on the piano, the way her eyes had settled on the wallpaper.

He sat there, thinking of the first time he had tried playing. An espresso maker had been percolating on the stove top the morning he huddled over it, trying to warm from the cool evening of stolen bed sheets. The softest sounds he had ever heard trickled into the kitchen from the living room, a warm draft of wind. He stood there for a stolen moment of bliss, wondering where it was coming from. As he came to, he remembered, and he still wondered how his own daughter had so much exposure to a world he had been denied access to, how a stolen angel had made her way into his living room. *Work*. This was why he worked, so he could pay for these things, and he felt proud about that. He left the

stovetop espresso maker bubbling over the flame and floated into the next room. His entrance went unnoticed as he watched the curls of brown hair falling down his daughter's back, bobbing as she hunched over the piano. When she finished, she turned around and smiled.

"Hi Daddy."

"When did you learn that, sweetheart?"

"This morning, while you and Mom were sleeping."

Not a note of vanity in her voice. She was still young enough to be unaware.

"I wish I could play."

"Don't be silly Dad, I'll show you."

He sat next to her on the bench and she began playing once more. Her fingers darted across the keys.

"I could never play anything like that."

"You can one day, you just need to start somewhere. Here." She started playing 'Chopsticks'. "Try playing that."

After a few stumbled attempts, he finally played the right notes. She improvised a waltz riff over the melody in a lower octave when he did. She was sitting right next to him, but already felt out of reach.

"You see, now you can play."

"You're right, sweetie."

She giggled as he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, and began to practice the Chopin songs she had learned for her recital. He went back to the kitchen and found that the coffee had bubbled over and caked onto the stovetop.

"What do you think?" his wife chimed in.

He was brought back down into the room and tried to remember where he was. He looked between the rain and the picture on the wall, then back again to the cars passing and the trains rolling by. He thought about it, about the blue shower curtains that might have had polka dots, about Darlene, about why they kept the piano if no one really played; maybe it was for God's sake. He tried not to care about the polka dots or the number of years, but got the feeling that he'd spend the rest of his life in that chair.

“So,” she repeated. “What do you think?”

It had been a while since either of them spoke. He couldn't remember what she last said. He looked at the curtains and the world setting behind them, both filtered through that room, and took another drag.

“Blue should be fine.”

## THE MILK'S GONE SOUR

I was writing a paper on Virginia Woolf when the telephone rang.

The paper was an undergraduate English essay on “The Cinema,” and I was examining “life as it is when we have no part in it,” but really, I hadn’t a clue. The TV was playing in the room over, and I could hear it through the thin membrane of drywall separating my bedroom from the living room, where my roommate sat watching Bugs Bunny on a small relic of a television. We had picked up some thrifted electric box on the curb a few months prior. I heard the murmur of dialogue playing through the wall, the bottom half of all that was being said.

That day and the television now feel like an undercurrent: muffled, rushing. The centre of that day concentrates, the borders blur. I picture myself swimming to shore, getting closer, a hand pinching my toe and dragging me back out. The scene fades to black.

I reached for the cellphone on my desk but hesitated before picking it up. I couldn’t think of anyone I wanted to talk to and decided not to answer. A dog was barking outside. It was winter, and a particularly cold day; I wore two sweaters. I looked around my room and closed my laptop, shut the window, cracked my knuckles, and tried to figure how long I had been at this essay. The television carried through. I thought of a motel room I once stayed in with my family—a night rolling around in brittle sheets, everyone around me fast asleep, the sounds of late-night cable porn playing through the walls: muffled, croaking.

I left my unfinished paper and passed through the living room on my way to the kitchen. My roommate, Carl, sat on the couch eating a bowl of cereal without milk. I stood in the door frame,

between the kitchen and the living room, watching him keeled over laughing and slapping his knee, the old wooden floorboards croaking beneath his slippers. The floors dipped towards him; he had left a depression in the wood through his permanence. My entrance went unnoticed.

I made my way towards the fridge and found that it had been left open. Carl's eyes were glued to the screen. I heard my phone go off in my room again. It sounded like my alarm clock.

"You going to get that?" he asked through a mouthful of Cheerios.

"You left the fridge open."

Carl didn't bother answering. I looked at him through the door frame, then back into the kitchen.

"Why can't you close the fridge," I asked, "or the cupboards or the drawers or anything?"

He cupped the bowl in his palm and spooned the rest of the dry cereal into his mouth. I glanced over at the screen and watched Elmer Fudd aim his rifle at Bugs Bunny and fire off a shot. The rifle exploded in his hands, creating a dark cloud that filled the screen. When the shroud of smoke subsided, his face was covered with a thick layer of smut. A carrot had been lodged in the gun's barrel.

"Didn't use the fridge today," Carl said, "must have been you." I wondered why I had moved in with a stranger in the city I grew up in, why I had to move out and get away from my family in the first place. There were so many Carls in Montreal.

I let it go and further opened the already breached fridge. It emitted warm yellow light onto the black and white linoleum floors, sang a faint music, a loud hum. A sour stench spilled from the door left ajar. I pinched my nose with one hand and rummaged through the shelves with the other, tossing aside the wilting herbs and the package of three-day-old, thawed chicken. My hand hovered over the carton of milk. The cow's smug face, printed on the carton, looked me in the eyes. *Beware, kid... the milk's gone sour.* I lost my appetite.

The telephone rang.

I left the kitchen behind and the milk in the fridge. I got to my room and sat in my chair, listening to Bugs Bunny finish his line before I answered. Two rings after the first. I answered on the fourth. My roommate laughed in the other room when the man's voice told me that my brother had killed himself. I think that's what made me most sad. Bugs Bunny was fleeing from Elmer Fudd, my roommate was laughing, the milk was sour, the fridge was humming, my brother, Alexander, was dead. I hadn't seen him in three years, and so maybe it was my fault.

Alex and I didn't speak often, though I always thought that this was on account of our saving all the newfound stories for the next round of beers. That image lingered in my head: walking into a tavern, my eyes adjusting from the bright lights outside, focusing on the outline of a body leaning over the bar, an apparition waiting for me on that lonesome stool. I thought the world was cruel for separating us over time. My roommate laughed. He was right.

When they told me what my brother had done, I envisioned a flock of seagulls circling a beach, a choir of these feathered birds singing. Then, somewhere else, a newborn baby swaddled in blankets, crying out, adding to that same universal song. The infant cried its own chords, its fleshy bottom spanked bare as eager eyes and grinning lips waited for their turn to hold it in their arms, circled around, releasing their own gasps of admirations, swallowing the songs of birds and newborn life. He never got on well with our mom or dad. Maybe things might have taken a different course if I had made myself more available. I should have called him more.

Life as it is...

The voice trickled from the receiver as it went on talking. I wanted to hear the television in the next room but what I heard was the dripping voice and the clock ticking next to me. I put the phone down without hanging up. The voice continued buzzing on my desk. Somewhere in the world, a man

didn't know what my face looked like. He picked up a phone to tell me that somewhere else in the world, my brother wouldn't call.

I walked into the living room after hanging up the phone. I didn't know what to do with my hands. My roommate was sitting where I last saw him, staring at Elmer Fudd, who was still in pursuit of Bugs Bunny. I sat next to him on the couch and thought it was going to swallow me whole. The walls looked like they had a fresh coat of paint. It spoiled my appetite. The TV looked smaller. I had breached the waves, crowned from beneath the dragging white waters, could hear the seagulls circling above. I felt the seaweed loosen its grip. I realized it was time to buy a new couch.

“Who was it?”

“My brother.”

“How's he doing?”

“He's alright I guess, just sold one of his paintings.”

“He still living out West?”

“Still living.” I gazed into the shrunken TV screen, sinking further into the couch.

Bugs Bunny tied a stuffed rabbit to the fin of a shark, successfully tricking Fudd into chasing it into the ocean. Fudd hopped into his boat and chased “Bugs Bunny” into the horizon. Shortly into his pursuit, the shark turned and surfaced from below, exposing alabaster arrowhead teeth, swallowing Fudd's boat in a single gulp. Fudd remained suspended in the air. My roommate laughed. Fudd ran to shore for rescue, his legs serving as rotary propellers keeping him above surface, but was kidnapped by pirates along the way. They sailed into a speck on the horizon and Bugs Bunny got away.

The iris wipe.

It was snowing outside, and I was sad that Bugs Bunny got away. A man with a gun always gets the hare. I wanted the kids to know.

I got up to go to the kitchen and opened the cupboard. I found an empty box of cereal. I went to the fridge and picked up the carton of milk to give it a smell. It wasn't that bad, so I poured myself a glass.

When I was a child, my mother forced me to drink a glass of curdled milk. She thought I was making excuses to avoid drinking it and told me that I wouldn't be excused from the table until I finished it. I drank the first half and became nauseous. When she turned away, my brother took the opportunity to drink the rest. He looked at me and winked, as if to say, *Thanks for the spoiled milk, kid.* He put it back onto the table, void of any liquid, exposing chunks of curdled dairy sliding down the side of the glass. It made sense for me to now do the same.

After I had finished my glass, I left the carton on the counter and went back to my room. I sat down where I had gotten the call. The phone was still where I left it, and I waited.

But it didn't ring. It sat there, as did I, day after day, until somebody called to ask if I had life insurance. It was spring, my roommate had gone back home to Arizona, there were bowls stacked in piles around my room. The snow melted to reveal the ground beneath, and somewhere a dead rabbit thawed from under its rigor mortis—its coat of grey fur gone, the carcass slowly disintegrated by the enveloping forest, its bones a championed medallion around Death's collar. And all the while, as life unfolded around me, I remained seated, unsure of what to do with my hands.

I picked up the phone and dialed my brother's number. A stranger's voice rose on the other end.



## LOVE CINEMA

We were waiting in line outside the cinema, which wrapped around the corner of Duluth Av., when I noticed that the trees across the street looked like erections. Of course they didn't, not any more than the skyscrapers in New York City did, but I was excited, nervous, and thinking of erections.

The back-lit iconic yellow sign was dimly lit, bulbs flickering, and large black and red letters spanned across the board to spell '*Cinéma L'Amour: XXX Movies.*' It was sometime in mid-November. The first snowfall of the season coated our shoulders with a thin layer of snowflakes, and the line of people on either side of us continued to march through the drab evening. I looked over at Fanny in hopes that she wasn't privy to my strange priapic thoughts. We inched forward.

Fanny was American, but she appeared less cold. Maybe she was better at feigning. She was from New York with a French name and a French mother, so maybe she fit in better than me. A French-urbanite and an Anglo-suburbanite walk through Montreal. It felt like the punchline of a joke.

"You ever watch porn with somebody?"

"Yeah," I said, "first time I watched it, on my family desktop with a couple of my older brother's friends. We promised not to peek. I had to stand in the corner of the room."

"Weird." She looked off ahead. "I meant with a girlfriend."

"Oh, yeah. I've done that."

I wore a thrifted fur coat with a scarf coiled around my neck. The wind blew through the trees and the last of the leaves fell to the ground. I felt the goosebumps lining my arms.

I met Fanny in the third class of a graduate writing workshop after she had skipped the first two. We would sometimes grab drinks after our workshop, and last time she rambled on about a double

Abel Ferrara screening that her ex was programming. She spoke about the pornographic chic era, something about libertine sensibilities and the grindhouses of 1980s New York City drawing to a close, both tipsy and sounding like she was reciting from a script she had memorized. Ferrara was a relic worth spotlighting, so she invited me to attend *Driller Killer* and *Nine Lives of a Wet Pussy*. This was the only reason we were waiting in line. The theatre would hardly have attracted that many people otherwise.

When she had walked into our workshop, I thought she was another faculty member. She wore a beige peacoat and kept her hair in a bun with two chopsticks, which she later told me were hair sticks. When the instructor arrived, I tapped her on the arm. She turned to me with an unfamiliar expression, one that was expecting of a good story, that had some semblance of faith. It took me by surprise. I began talking. I told her that she had missed everything in the first two classes, that the Big Man upstairs had descended from above, shook everybody's hand, that we each penned a Giller Prize winning book. Her smile was new, too.

It was still a bit awkward between us, but I found comfort in knowing that I had brought a flask with me, which I was keeping on reserve for the screening. I craned my neck in hopes of finding something to talk about. The buildings across the street were covered in graffiti, the snow fell slantward, an alleyway dumpster was brimming with industrial garbage bags tearing at jagged points, the black plastic turning white where unknown objects strained to pierce through. They might have been filled with hair sticks.

Advance.

A middle-aged man in a dress shirt greeted us at the ticket booth and asked us for our money, his greasy hair brushing the dandruff off his shoulders. The cause was also the cure. He looked like he'd passed through a hand-cranked pasta roller.

I recognized the older man beside him, grabbing handfuls of popcorn from a large silver bowl and cramming some into his mouth, shaking the remnants in his hand as if rolling dice. He was the manager of the theatre, and had been profiled for an online issue of *The Bleak Midwinter*. The article, titled “*Cinéma L’Amour*: Adult Theatre’s Saving Grace,” opened with the line, “Though big-screen porn has long been dwindling from pop-culture, Montreal’s *Cinéma L’Amour* resists through the sheer act of existing, and continues to buck its seemingly inevitable demise.” Buck—proper word choice.

I had also read that the owner was a Holocaust survivor. When asked to speak about his life in the New World, about why, after all he had seen, had he decided to run an adult cinema, he responded with, ‘Porn makes money.’ The reporter struggled to extract significance, to draw a parallel and prescribe some meaning to it. She held the recorded to the owner’s mouth, who shook his head. Porn makes money.

“I’ll cover it.”

Fanny’s arm extended and her credit card pushed past me, tapping the terminal before I had the chance to pull my wallet out. I slouched my shoulders and kept walking ahead.

“I couldn’t come to this alone, that would be weird. I needed an accomplice.”

“That’s fine.”

“This is me showing gratitude Oscar, don’t get used to it.”

I harped on it anyway, not sure if this was even a date anymore.

I followed Fanny past the concession stand and walked into the theatre. We shuffled down the aisle in the dark, passing along the rows of red upholstered seats, all imprinted with the ghosts of lonely old men. I shuddered under my coat. I smelled the lemon-scented air freshener caught in the pockets of fabric and got to thinking that we should have at least slept together before coming here. The walls were old, the balcony was filled with pleasantries and trench coats. I imagined something dripping from above.

“They design theatres so that the acoustics are better in the center of the room,” I said.

She looked at me with a blank expression, and seemed to be elsewhere. Fanny surveyed the room, looking for someone else. I wondered if she was looking for her ex.

“Are you here for the acoustics?”

The room was dark enough to hide my flushed cheeks.

“What would you suggest?”

“Let’s pick a corner. I want to observe.”

We sat down at the back of the theatre and I ironed out the pleats in my pants, feeling the flask beneath my hand. I pulled it out and dangled it in the air. Fanny’s knee brushed against mine.

“Your first good idea.” She took her jacket off and threw it over the seat in front of her.

“Stick around.”

She grinned and hid the flask while stealing a sip. I couldn’t help but laugh. Here was Fanny Belhomme, hailing from New York with French ancestry and proper pedigree, who had come to Montreal to pursue creative writing, sitting next to an English literature student who had taken one creative writing workshop and who had grown up in the suburbs. She had told me about her junior year in high school when her father homeschooled her so they could sail the East coast towards the Caribbean, about the summer she spent living on her Grandmother’s farm in Arizona when she was thirteen. She was fourteen when she smoked her first cigarette, after losing her virginity to a guy named Robby, her older brother’s friend. I withheld stories about playing Sandman at the park down my street, about Marco Polo in our public pools, about house parties in carpeted basements. Yet despite this, she thought that here, of all places, she would get scolded for drinking. I thought I might know something that she didn’t.

“You know people swap partners in here?” I asked.

“Better hold me tight, then.”

She laughed and took another swig, settling into her seat as the previews began, passing the flask back to me. I took a long, warm swig.

The previews were pornographic, too. We got drunk and made salacious comments. It felt like a barrier was breaking down between us, that all it took was alcohol and some exposed skin. “My delivery driver’s dick wasn’t *that* big.” “For what I pay my tutor, I *wish* that’s how I got fucked.” The whole world felt like it was falling into my lap.

The curtains had only parted two thirds of the way for the previews but were now pulled back to reveal the full screen. The room went dark as the feature picture began, red LED lights lighting up along the aisles, the house lights dimming. I felt a hand patting at my pockets, searching for a flask. Only after exploring my ribs and thighs did it finally land on the side of my leg. I let the hand have it.

When the screen lit up the room, all the heads in the room were on a swivel, empty beer cans rolling out from beneath the seats. When a man looked over at us, I held eye contact until he looked away. I took role call: eleven women, and over forty men. The women were all with a partner, spread across the room like spores, or pollen wind-blown from the naked stem of a dandelion held in a child’s hand. I watched a seedy man shifting in his seat.

In Fanny’s first story, a seventeen-year-old hitchhikes from New York City with a briefcase to visit her aunt in Montreal. The protagonist leaves without telling her mother or sisters, and without giving her aunt a heads-up, for no other reason than she wants to be elsewhere. Up until Plattsburgh, somewhere in-between what she already sees as her past life and the promise of a fresh start, she’s bored by how easy the trip has been. She was yearning for friction, something that might reveal her to herself, provide her with a piece of information she hadn’t had access too. Instead, she makes it to Plattsburg without once taking out her wallet; transport, gas, food, all covered by truckers eager to spend a short while in the company of a young lady, or else place the occasional hand on her exposed thigh while driving. She decides to spend the night in a hotel with a decent-looking trucker. In the

room, laying on the croaking springs of the old motel bed, she doesn't tell him that she's on the pill. He fucks her without a condom anyway. When he pulls out, she expects him to finish on her. She closes her eyes, waiting for it to pool in her naval or her suprasternal notch, or spread across her chest. Instead, she opens here eyes after hearing him moan, and sees him cupping something in his hands. She spends the night on top of the comforter, listening to him snore.

I understood that she had the capacity to craft this story, that it was fiction and artifice was key, but I also knew that all fiction draws from life. When I questioned some possible plot holes, she stared back at me. She didn't say much. The other writers looked at the floor. The instructor's gaze burned the side of my neck. It was certainly possible: anything was possible if you looked like Fanny and were partial to a good story. My own voice harangued me. *Like you know anything about that life.* I knew about whiskey dances on tiled floors with a drunk father at two in the morning. I knew about Bibles and belt spankings. I knew not to talk about the empty wine bottles in the garage, nor of mother's stained teeth. I knew what the sound of a humming fridge late at night meant. I knew about sneaking booze into theatres, about letting mother misspell words during Scrabble. I knew about the other world, the one Fanny hadn't grown up in. We moved on to the next story, but she continued to look at me.

After *Driller Killer* and a few intermission beers, we were back in our seats watching *Nine Lives of a Wet Pussy*. The protagonist, unsatisfied with her love life, sleeps with any man who catches her eye. *Great, I thought, give her inspiration, why don't you.* I tried to relax into my seat, which was surprisingly comfy, but began to smell what was masked beneath the air freshener. I looked out at the sea of heads crowning above their seats, and noticed they were all wearing kippahs. Their backlit silhouettes were haloed by the screen, the light reflecting off the outline of their hair, exposing a large patch in the middle of their scalps. I blinked a few times and looked over at Fanny to see if she had noticed it, too. It seemed unlikely, but it was Montreal after all, and entirely possible. I tried to imagine the map of the city in my head and figure out if we were near Westmount—a distinctly Jewish neighbourhood—

but were nowhere close. I wondered if it had anything to do with the owner. I was squinting, staring out into the dark room, when I realized that none of them were wearing kippahs. They were all balding.

I felt Fanny's hand patting at my pocket for the flask again. She was already unbuckling my belt when I remembered that she still had it. I looked over at her, her face lit up by the light projected on the screen. She was looking at me like she did in that workshop—like she was looking for another story. I didn't want to live for posterity's sake, but I was afraid of dying without any stories. My life felt like a tension between these two facts. I feared the slow death of rotting by a backyard pool with stained teeth.

The movie progressed, I thought about posterity and presence, about Fanny's hand in my pants. I wondered if she'd like me in the morning, and then I was thinking of nothing at all. The images floated across the screen, old men squirmed in their seats a few rows ahead, a warm surge rushed towards my cheeks. I smelled her perfume, or her hand lotion, or her shampoo, or maybe it was a mix of all three. It smelled like lilac. Fanny leaned into me and whispered in my ear, "Couldn't do this in a bar, could we?" She withdrew her hand from my waistband, pulled out a tissue from her purse to clean up, and then handed it to me. I didn't make eye contact when I took it from her. I slid the tissue in my pants, then tossed it on the floor.

We watched the rest of the movie and I struggled to understand how this theatre still existed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Walking over from the metro before I had met up with Fanny, I passed a McDonalds, Forever 21 (*maybe not*), Urban Outfitters, tattoo parlor, strip club, and a Cineplex on the same street. The regular theatre industry was going out of business with streaming platforms like Amazon Prime and Netflix. Who pays for porn, and what would the owner do when it closed? We were wistful, waiting in a relic, watching this porno come to end. I began to miss the place while still sitting in it.

We left the theatre and walked along St. Laurent Boulevard. I wondered what else used to be on this street when adult theatres were popular, and what would come to replace them. We kept drinking from the flask and the whole world felt lighter than before. I wrapped my scarf around my neck and watched Fanny veil her silver dress with her peacoat. I thought I might have a chance in this life.

Fanny invited me to her place, which was only a ten-minute walk away. I was relieved we wouldn't be taking the metro. The metro cars always felt like a swamp of bodies brushing shoulders and holding onto polls, looking at the most recent passenger in hopes of lulling them into a collective sleep. After a few stops, everyone blended into the same background.

We staggered through an alley behind some apartment buildings on our way back to her place, arm in arm, steadying ourselves to keep from tipping over. It was nice to have an excuse to be close. I watched her drink the last drops from the flask and saw the large flakes of snow dissolve in her hair. They unearthed a scent of shampoo. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back. It smelled sweet, like some tropical fruit, something I had probably never heard of. I assumed her lotion was lilac and her shampoo was tropical. She turned to me. I wondered which Fanny I was looking at.

She jumped on my back, and together we passed by a small Fisher-Price basketball net. I felt her arms let go of my neck.

*"Smish."*

My knees nearly buckled under my laughter and the weight of her.

"Why are you laughing?"

"You missed."

She wrapped her arms around my neck.

"Why'd you invite me?"

"I'm tired of what I know." She lightly bit my neck. "Put me down, I want to dance."

"What do you want to dance to."



"Something slow. You choose."

She hopped off my back, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and scrolled through the downloaded artists. The LED screen lit my face in the dark, my pupils darker, both growing wider in the night. I haphazardly scrolled onto Leonard Cohen, played "Tonight Will Be Fine."

The moon hung by a black thread, I felt the snowflakes on my eyelashes, we moved in circles, spinning around that alley, the sheet of white reflecting lamplight, our footprints a full moon. I pulled her in closer, rested my hands on her hips. She nestled her head into my collar, whispered sweet nothings into my ear. I imagined birds perched on the telephone wire.

"Women live in contradiction, Oscar. We both want to win and lose."

I mouthed the song into her hair. The world kept spinning on its axis.

"I don't know why I like you," she continued. "You should take me on a real date."

"Alright."

*Will be fine, will be fine, will be fine, for a while.*

"What do you think the world will look like when that theatre shuts down?" I asked.

She didn't speak for a while. We kept dancing and I dipped her, brought her back to me against the will of gravity, the weight of the night.

"Sadder." She spoke over my shoulder.

The trees leaned in from behind their fences, arching over the alley and forming a corridor above the streetlights. The light shone from the windows overhead, the snow seeped through the cracks in the sky. I held Fanny in my arms, looking over her shoulder into the windows of the apartments next to us. There was a father cooking eggs for his two daughters, who were both sitting on the counter, legs dangling over the edge. In another room, a lone lady sat on her rocking chair, reading a book by lamplight. A cat brushed up against my leg, and I nearly stepped on it. It hissed and retreated beneath a chain link fence. I got to realizing there was so much life I hadn't lived.

Fanny kept dropping her keys outside the door and laughing about it. I didn't try to help her. When we got in, she walked through the corridor to the record player in her living room and thumbed through her vinyl collection. The snow had turned to rain and was tapping on the windows. It felt like we had a secret place in the world, like we were locked in our own furtive home. She played "Oscar Peterson For Lovers." The front door was bolted, Fanny was mixing margaritas in the kitchen now, and I stood next to the record player in the living room, looking out the window. The warm scratch of vinyl dripped off the walls, and the carpet felt nice beneath my socks. We drank our margaritas and listened to the rest of the album from her room. Before the record was over, our glasses were laying on their side and we were laying on her bed. I smelled lilac and tropical fruits and some laundry detergent.

We rolled around and she undid my belt buckle. The rain still beat down but on a different window now, and I wondered if our footprints were still in that alley. Her hands kept moving downwards while I tried to hold her and kiss her neck. I thought of all those old men and what they did for a living. I thought of their bald heads, and wondered if my father had ever done anything like that. Fanny's hands were on my skin, but they didn't feel good anymore. I reached for the condom in my pocket and placed it on her desk. She looked at me, but didn't make any comment.

The needle was looping in the final groove, and the theater was still there after so many years. Snow turned to rain and rain turned to snow. Mothers and fathers cooked dinner for their children. Things stayed the same, but everything changed. You ended up alone reading a book or you died before the ones you loved. Not everybody loved. I held Fanny in my arms, and it really felt like I had something. She took her hand out from my pants.

"You good?" she asked.

"I'm fine."

She rested her head on my chest. I looked over at the empty glasses.

“I’m sorry, I think I drank too much.”

“Don’t sweat it. We can try again”

We lay on our backs and she lit a cigarette. I cracked the window open and felt the crisp air raise the hairs on my arms. She was still wearing that silver dress.

“I’m going to get naked, you can sleep in my bed if you promise not to take advantage of me.”

I didn’t answer, and she slipped her dress over her shoulders and down around her hips. It fell to her ankles. I stayed in my clothes. She passed me the cigarette.

“Goodnight.”

She turned off her bedside lamp and got under the covers, and I lay on top of them for a while with my clothes on, finishing the rest of the cigarette. I felt her breathing beside me, heard the rain tapping on the window. I looked up at the ceiling.

The wind blew through the trees outside her window, and a few blocks further, the theatre lights had already shut off. I thought about all of this, about the woman lying next to me, about what it would be like in the morning. The rain tapped on the window, I lay on top of the sheets. I took off my socks and wondered what the world would look like in another forty years.

## HOTEL VIVIANE

The worst part was the feeling that it would never stop. Viviane squinted, looking like she might sneeze for an eleventh time, but really, she was trying not to cry.

“Flick her nose again.” Judd was restraining her ankles.

“It’s against the rules,” Cliff warned.

After flicking Viviane’s nose, the three brothers counted how many times their sister sneezed. She writhed in the dirt, twisting to free herself from the ground.

“Enemy reinforcements?” Cliff looked over his shoulder.

“Negative,” Norm said from the doorframe, where he was on lookout. He strained to detect any movement behind the house windows, though most of the blinds were shut. The brothers knew that if their mother ever caught them, she would hang them by the backs of their collars from the clothesline. They waited until Viviane went out to play in the backyard, where they corralled her into the shed and held her against the dirt.

Viviane’s head fell back, her nose scrunched up, and they all watched attentively. She drew in a breath of air.

“*Eleven! Eleven!*” The boys jumped around, chanting the number in unison. They kicked up a cloud of dust that floated upward in the beams of light, spilling in through cracks in the old tin roof. The platoon scurried out from the shed, funneling into the backyard past the wooden doorframe. In the sunlight, they scattered like excited particles across the yard.

Back in the shed, Viviane pushed herself up from off the ground. She was relieved that the feeling she had once worried might not leave her, had presently come to an abrupt halt, and now that she could see again, realized her white dress was ruined. There was dirt smeared across the back, and the purple ribbon tied around the waist had torn. She let her arms fall to her sides, and with her now stained dress, felt helpless in another way.

The boys leapt around the yard, failing to notice the blind slats pinched together, and the set of eyes peering out from behind them. No one was on lookout, not even Norm. The backdoor swung open and nearly fell off its hinges; Joy stood on the back porch.

“Get over here, *all of you!*” Joy placed Viviane’s suitcase at her feet, and used the railing to walk down the porch steps.

The boys hopped over the chain-link fence that enclosed the perimeter of their yard. Cliff had the longest legs, but with the threat of punishment, they all ran faster than they ever had. The platoon was halfway down the block when Viviane finally emerged from the shed.

“*What* have you done to your *dress?*” Joy turned her attention to Viviane. “Don’t you know I *borrowed* that from the Wilsons? We have to *return* that after your trip.”

“It wasn’t my fault.”

“It never is.”

“The boys flicked my nose again.”

“Stop *sniveling*, would you?”

Viviane wiped her tears away with the back of her hands, then balled them into fists. Closing her eyes, she used her whole body to try and stop herself from sniffing.

“Come here, now.” Joy waved her hand. “Rose is going to be here any minute.”

Joy lifted Viviane off her feet and held her under her arm. With her free hand, she beat the dress like a dusty rug. Viviane didn't squirm or twist her way out; she remained limp, submitting to that same helpless feeling, hoping the dirt might come off her dress.

"That'll have to do, your sister's here."

She put Viviane back down, and Rose's janky, yellow car lurched forward, then came to an abrupt halt in the driveway. Rose was out of the driver seat before it was even in park.

"I've come to collect a Viviane!" Rose said.

"Hello to you, *too*."

"It's good to see you, Mom." Rose kissed her mother on the cheek, hugging her thin frame.

"I still don't understand the need to *steal* your sister away and bring her to *Massachusetts*."

"We already talked about this on the phone, Mom." Rose glanced down at her sister. "I won't always be around to show her how to live."

"Don't talk like *that*. It *upsets* me."

"Oh, come on, it's a figure of speech. I'll live forever."

Rose wrapped Viviane up. Her black *Joy Division* t-shirt came down to below her knees, and as she kneeled, both Rose and Viviane appeared to be wearing a dress. "How's my favourite sister?"

"I'm your only sister."

"You're growing up too quickly." Rose held Viviane at arms length now. "Would you slow down?"

Joy left the sisters and hauled the suitcase towards the car.

Before leaving to University, Rose had warned Viviane that anything happening in the South Shore wasn't really life, but a slow procession of imitations. In their shared duplex, with each wasted second, something greater and adjacent was passing them by. Rose had phoned a couple weeks earlier to tell Viviane she was returning to smuggle her out of Greenfield Park. During their call, Rose said she wanted to show her a piece of life, and hoped she might one day move away from the borough too.

“Can I know where we’re going now?” Viviane asked.

“Cape Cod, Massachusetts.” This fell flat, so Rose carried on. “To go and see Race Point Lighthouse.”

“A lighthouse?” Viviane wasn’t going to mention that she had no idea where Massachusetts was.

“That’s right.”

For the first time all morning, Viviane felt like she could smile. Though still sad, she buried this feeling.

“I got a new dress.”

“I saw. Pretty, isn’t it? A little dirty though.”

“They flicked my nose again.”

“Don’t let them bother you, they’re just jealous that you get to go on a road trip.” Rose looked up in Joy’s direction, who was lugging the suitcase to the car. “Can I trust you with a secret?”

Viviane followed her sister’s gaze, double checking that the person the secret was meant to be kept from wasn’t looking.

“I promise I won’t tell.”

Rose’s hair was shoulder length, and she tucked a few strands behind her ear.

“You have a hole in your ear?”

Viviane had never seen this, and didn’t quite understand what she was looking at.

“It’s an earring. It’s called a spacer.”

“Can I get one?”

“Not until you’re older, Mom would kill me. Don’t tell her, okay?”

She held her pinky out, and Viviane wrapped her finger around her older sister’s.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes,” she lied.

Now that the car was packed, Joy returned to come and see her daughters off.

“You remember what I told you?” Joy asked while fiddling with something in her pocket.

“No fun to be had at any times?”

“I wrote it all in a list. Here, take it.” She handed Rose an envelope. “I packed a few lunches for you. Don’t eat too much junk food, have Viviane in bed by ten, and don’t leave the hotel after dark. Do you hear me?”

Rose pulled out a folded piece of paper, then sifted through what was left in the envelope.

“I can’t take this.”

“I won’t hear of it.”

“I told you I’ve been working full-time.”

“Which I don’t understand how you’re doing while studying.”

“I also sold all my old art supplies,” Rose added.

“And what are you going to use for your program now? You know, if you ever want to come back home...”

“Mom. We’ve talked about this.”

“I worry about you, you’re stubborn.”

“I wonder where I get that from.”

“Just take it.”

Rose pocketed the envelope, saluted her mother, then winked at Viviane.

“Aye, aye, Captain. We’ll call you when we get there tonight, then tomorrow night, then we’ll see you the night after.”

“So, she *does* listen.”

Rose blew her mom a kiss, then hopped into the driver seat. Viviane climbed into the passenger seat of the car, and as they pulled out of the driveway, Joy waved goodbye from the porch. Looking



out from the back window, Viviane watched as her house got smaller, and smaller, the further they drove away.

For a moment, Viviane had begun missing her brothers, but that feeling left just as quick as it came.

On the road, there was a charge in the air. Everything she was seeing, she was seeing for the first time, and it felt like what she imagined drinking a cup of coffee would feel like.

Rose pointed to a field of cows. “Roll your window down.”

“Why?” Viviane was more concerned with a sign they were passing, which read *Milton, Vermont*.

“We’re going to play a game.”

“What is it?”

“We’ll take turns sticking our heads out the window, yelling, *‘Hey cow’*. Whoever can turn more cow heads, wins.”

Viviane had to unbuckle her seatbelt to get her head out the window, and just as they passed the field, she leaned out of the car and screamed louder than she knew she could. With the wind whipping her hair, and the rolling cumulus clouds, she had completely forgotten of her brothers and the dirt on her dress. When she sat back down and came to remember it, she decided she liked that her dress was a little dirty. It looked liked she had just come from rolling around in a field of cows. That’s what people like Rose did, Viviane thought; they went on road trips and wore dirty clothes, they yelled at cows and stuck their heads out of car windows, they opened themselves up to the world and pierced holes in their ears. What they didn’t do, Viviane was now certain, was cry when their brothers flicked their nose.

They both lost track after twenty-two cows.

“It’s your turn.” Viviane was excited to see if she could beat her older sister.

Rose was staring through the windshield.

“Rose?” Viviane poked her older sister, who seemed to be roused from a dream. She looked over at her younger sister, and gave her a light smile.

“Dad used to take us there.”

“Where?”

“To the lighthouse, before you were born. We used to play this game together.”

“Oh.” Viviane wondered if her dad had ever gotten more than twenty-two. “I never met him.”

“I know, love, I know.”

“It’s your turn now.”

“I’m not even going to try. You take that round.” Rose turned up the radio, and let the music fill the car.

They rolled their windows down again along the coast, only this time there were no cows. Viviane had tasted salt before—Joy’s pork chops, sardines, and sauerkraut—and had been down to the St. Lawrence river during the summers, but she had never smelled salt water. It was light but also heavy, and sitting in the car, she felt the salt on her skin.

“I’ve got one more secret for you,” Rose said, “before we visit the lighthouse tomorrow.”

“I can get a hole in my ear?”

“Not a chance, but look.”

They pulled up to the entrance of their hotel, where a doorman in a funny red coat and matching hat was waiting for them beside the sliding glass doors. Above, a grand marquee with a row of large, round light bulbs bordered bolded black letters, which read: *HOTEL VIVIANE*.

“They’ve been expecting you.” Rose pointed up to the sign.

“Is that for me?” Viviane couldn’t understand how her Rose had planned this, and not once did it cross her mind that there may have already been a hotel with her name. She looked at her older sister, and wondered how she had so many secrets, how she seemed to understand everything, how she was brave enough to move away from home, and how, in the secret ways the world opens up to you when you do the same, she seemed to be able to accomplish anything she wanted, like having an entire hotel named after her baby sister.

Rose parked abruptly, then ran around the car to greet the doorman, whispering something into his ear. Viviane watched him nodding, then open her door and bow as she hopped out onto the sidewalk.

“Good evening, Ms. Viviane. We’ve been expecting you. Let me bring your suitcases to your room.”

Viviane would have liked to grab the hem of her soiled white dress and curtsy, but she was embarrassed, and instead of curtsying, she found herself blushing, wondering how they could afford to stay in such a fancy hotel. This morning, when she was pinned against the ground, she could have never dreamed that such a pretty building would be named after her. In the lobby, receptionists occupied a large marble counter where people checked into their rooms, and there was a swanky restaurant where the two of them went for dinner.

The restaurant was dimly lit, with ornate sconces fixed to the walls, and tall white candles at each table, so that Viviane’s dress finally looked clean in this lighting. Spines of wax dripped down the sides of the candles, and were eventually caught by a saucer attached to the bottom of the holder. The flames flickered in the ocean breeze spilling in through opened floor-to-ceiling windows, causing shadows to dance across the white tablecloths. On a circular stage in the middle of the restaurant, a man in a white suit and matching top hat played a black baby grand piano. Somehow, the room felt

like another secret to Viviane, and she thought about how she would keep this whole trip, and everything that Rose had told her, a secret for the rest of her life.

“What do you want to eat?”

“A hamburger.”

“Are you sure? They have steak and fancy fish here...”

“A hamburger with no toppings. Raw onions repeat themselves on me.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I heard mom say it after belching.”

At the adjacent table, men with golden rings and pearl necklaces sat on the same side of their table with their fingers intertwined. Viviane watched them, then looked to Rose to see if she noticed this too, or if it was worth noticing. She had never seen two men hold hands. During recess one day, a group of boys tried to get Viviane and her best friend Mathilda to kiss. Viviane wouldn't have minded kissing Mathilda, she even wondered what it would be like, but she didn't want to give the boys what they wanted, so she didn't. Unaware that she was staring, Viviane watched and hoped the two men might kiss. Then she could go home and tell Mathilda what she saw, and maybe they could try it too. One of the men turned towards Viviane and winked at her.

“Viviane,” Rose said with a smile. “You're staring.”

“Sorry.” She blushed, which was hardly noticeable in the light, but the man smiled and blew her a kiss.

While eating her burger, Viviane felt older knowing that she was learning something about a part of the world that her friends in Greenfield Park didn't know about. If those boys kept teasing her and Mathilda at recess, she would tell them that there was a hotel named after her, and that she had an older sister who knew a lot of things about the world, and that when you left the South Shore, there were places where men liked to hold hands.

They went to their room after dinner, and Rose let Viviane watch T.V. until 10:45 p.m. As Viviane's eyes began to feel heavy, Rose turned the T.V. off with the remote, and whispered goodnight into the dark room. Viviane was already fast asleep.

In a pink one-piece bathing suit with white trim and yellow polka dots, Viviane looked up at the foot of Race Point Lighthouse.

"I don't see him," she squinted.

"He's up there, look closer."

The lighthouse towered above them, blocking out the sun.

"I still don't see him."

"Maybe he's hiding. I heard he's shy." Rose took her sister's hand and walked toward the beach.

Beneath their feet, the smooth concrete footpath turned to gravel, then to sand. The seagulls circling overhead were twice the size of any she had seen in Greenfield Park, and they flew much closer, too. They didn't seem to be afraid, and Viviane tried to do the same.

"He's not used to seeing people. He lives there year-round and isn't allowed to come down."

"Why not?"

"Because the boats might get lost."

"Then how does he eat?"

"You see those seagulls over there?"

"Those?" Viviane pretended like she was seeing them for the first time.

"They collect food from the beach and bring it up to him. Sometimes they even steal bagels from little girls' hands."

"Doesn't he get lonely?"

"He has the birds and the ocean."

“And he can never come down?”

“Not until he’s replaced.”

“By who?”

“Well, you’re looking at her.”

“You?” Viviane stopped walking and kneeled down to bury her hands in the sand.

“That’s right. I’ll be moving here to live in the lighthouse.”

“What about school?”

“I dropped out.”

“I don’t believe you,” Viviane said while grabbing fistfuls of sand and letting them fall over her feet, forming little piles.

“I really did.”

Viviane felt like sneezing, and didn’t want to walk anymore. She sat down and crossed her arms. Rose walked a few steps further, then turned around and approached her sister.

“You’ll be able to visit.”

“But you’re not allowed down.”

“I never said you couldn’t come up.”

“But you’re already gone. Now you’ll be even further.”

Rose smiled at her younger sister, but her smile appeared both light and heavy. Like the salt on her skin, Viviane had also never seen her older sister look sad.

“I’m here, aren’t I? I brought you here, didn’t I?”

The seagulls circled overhead, and Viviane mindlessly ran her fingers through the sand. Rose was sitting beside her now.

“Can I bring my friend Mathilda.”

“Only her.”

Viviane withdrew her hands from the sand so she could scratch her nose. She didn't feel like she had to sneeze anymore.

"*Look.*" Rose pointed up to the lighthouse. "I just saw him. Did you see him too?"

"Yes, he waved at me." Viviane wasn't sure if this was a lie. The white water broke against the shore and lapped up in foam before retreating.

"Are you ready to swim now?"

Viviane stood up and raced towards the water, knowing her sister would soon follow. She was the fastest runner in her grade, but with the soft sand beneath her feet, the ground sunk beneath her with each slowed stride. Once she was waist-deep, the water knocked Viviane down with every wave. She didn't mind being knocked down, it even made her laugh. Rose fell with her each time she fell, until she picked her up and held her in her arms. Viviane's toes touched the surface of the water, the splash from the ocean sprayed her shins, and nothing about it made her feel helpless.

They walked back to shore, and Viviane was sure she saw the man who lived in the lighthouse now. When they sat back down on the beach, Viviane sang a song that came to her head, because she was thinking of home.

*"They built the ship Titanic,  
To sail the ocean blue,  
They thought they had a ship,  
That the water would never go through,  
But the good Lord raised his hand,  
That the ship would never land,  
It was sad when the great ship went down."*

"Viviane, where did you learn that? That's terrible." Rose was looking at her younger sister.

"Me and Mathilda learned it at school."

“They teach you that?”

“No, some of the boys did.”

“It’s a horrible song. You shouldn’t sing that.”

“Why is it bad?”

“It’s about people dying.”

“Oh.” She thought it was catchy, and the ocean made her think of it.

Rose sat in silence for a little while.

“Why don’t you go and dig for sand dollars? Then you can bring some home for mom.”

“Where will you be?”

“I’ll just be sitting over here.”

So, Viviane did; she dug for sand dollars, cleaning her hands and toes in the ocean between each find, occasionally getting knocked over by a wave and laughing. Whenever she looked over at the beach to see if her sister was still there, Rose waved—and though she was watching Viviane, she also seemed to be looking past her. Something about her made Viviane think Rose might sink into the sand, or else get up and wander off, leaving Viviane behind. Viviane kept checking to make sure her sister was there. She couldn’t understand why she would be sad, she was going to be living in the lighthouse soon, which is what she wanted.

Viviane decided that twenty sand dollars would be enough money to buy the dress off the Wilsons, and to come back to Cape Cod at least twice. It might even be enough to get her brothers and the boys at school to stop bullying her, and maybe have Rose come live back at home for a while. She walked back to Rose with an armful of white shells, who tucked them into her tote.

“You ready to go home?”



Viviane thought about it for a second, then rushed to get an extra sand dollar for Mathilda. When she returned, the ground beneath them changed from sand, to gravel, to pavement, and soon they were in the car, driving back home.

In the backseat, Viviane felt the weight of a long day. Before falling asleep, she caught a glimpse of her sister's eyes in the rear-view mirror. Like her smile, they looked light and heavy at the same time.

“Rose?”

“Yes, love?”

“Do you think I'll be able to keep the Wilsons' dress?”

“Sure, love. You can buy it off them with your sand dollars.”

Rose turned up the radio, letting the music fill the car once more.

Sometime in her early thirties, Viviane was stopped on the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> Street and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue in New York City. After passing a display window, she swivelled back to verify that she had seen correctly. Sitting there, on display, was a model replica of Race Point Lighthouse. The memory of this afternoon continued to follow her, sometimes more than others, and with it, what it felt like to be a little girl on the beach, watching seagulls and collecting sand dollars with her older sister. It had been twenty years since Rose killed herself in a bathtub, and whenever the anniversary approached, she found herself thinking of that day. She got the feeling that it would never stop. Viviane stood in the street, wondering when she had gotten so old, and for a moment, thought she might sneeze. There was a feeling that she had come to know, like maybe it would never end.

## DOWN BY THE LAKE, DAN

When I invited him to stay for dinner, he looked down at his feet, and something in his face changed. The skin tightened around his cheeks, the corners of his mouth turned in. A bloated Harvest Moon behind him, framed in the window, hung by a cord. But I only thought of this the next day. Right then, the memory had already stored itself in my chest.

“Only if it isn’t a bother, Kirk.”

“It’s settled,” I said, slicing pale slivers of garlic. “I’ll make an extra portion.”

Dan slid the glass door behind him, sinking into the patio chair next to my mother for another glass of wine. It was only 6:00pm and already dark. Through the door, I watched Mom’s head fall back, her muted laughter at something Dan said. Behind them, on the surface of the lake, another pregnant moon.

The clocks would fall back in a couple months and it would get darker earlier, but then the Lake of Two Mountains would freeze over, and the snow would better reflect the Cold Moon. Then, instead of kayaking over, Dan would visit on a pair of cross-country skis, gliding across the white sheet. In the morning, I’d look out my window and see his two uninterrupted tracks, running like lengthwise scars across a naked, pale chest.

I salted the water and stirred the boiling pot with a wooden spoon before pouring in the tagliatelle. The long flat ribbons were sucked into the whirlpool and spat back out towards the sides of the pot.

I watched them float back to the surface, bobbing. The door opened behind me. Dan peeked his head in, smiling.

“Thank you for the invite, but I’m afraid I can’t stay. That would mean another bottle of wine, and it’s already quite dark.”

“Let me order you an Uber then.” I didn’t want to embarrass or insult him, but they’d both been drinking. He might have driven himself here, but had gotten a D.U.I. a few years back. He kayaked over on the nights he knew he’d be drinking. A breathalyser, now installed in his car, wouldn’t let the ignition start unless he blew in at zero.

“No need, Kirk. Your mom had most of the bottle anyway.”

“It’s dark out there, and the water levels...”

“You remember our conversation, don’t you?”

“You’re sure?” I gave him one last lifeline. “You can sleep over.”

He looked embarrassed, I didn’t realize what I was offering.

“No changing my mind.”

“Next time, then?”

“Next time.”

The glass doors closed behind him once more; I waved out at the lake, my reflection waving back.

Dan and I had been getting closer. My younger sister hated the idea of him, which made our budding relationship all the more meaningful. I never saw him as someone who wanted to replace the role of the father figure, or who lessened the chance of my parents getting back together. I only ever saw him as someone who cared about my mom.

We had been sitting out on our Adirondack chairs one night, watching the ripples disrupt the reflection of the town’s church spire and the Galipeault Bridge. Mom went inside to use the washroom. We had been drinking. I lost count. In a slipped confession, I admitted that I had always

wanted to sail. Dan looked at me and began laughing. I bowed my head, a little ashamed. With a playful pat on the back, he told me that he had been sailing his whole life, that he would teach me, that he knew these waters better than anyone and would take me out one day. A good sailor, he said, lives and dies by the water. I thought this was something to laugh at, so I did.

My mom came back outside and sat on the wet grass between our chairs. The moon reflected off her, too, and her hair looked like silk. She smiled, teeth stained red, and asked what we had been talking about. Dan grinned my way, knowing. I mirrored his smile. “Nothing,” we said, “nothing much at all.”

When it was time to plate, Mom came in and placed two wine glasses next to the sink. She uncorked another bottle, this time a Barolo, and held the bottle up to me. I nodded my head. Two new glasses were placed on the table. It was a new recipe, so the tradition was to sit down, praise how good it was, and then, with bellies full, opened to honesty and a fresh glass of wine, discuss how it could have been better.

“I think the ratio of noodles to sauce was off.”

“I’ll have to stir in less noodles next time.”

“Or more sauce.”

“Right, or that.”

We gathered the dishes and let them pile up by the sink, a mess to be cleaned in the morning.

“Goodnight, Mom.”

It took what felt like hours before I could fall asleep. I stared up at the dark ceiling. Thoughts of Dan and the recent floods made me think of my sleep paralysis, and then there was no sleeping at all; just laying flat on my back, jolting back to waking life whenever I came close to dozing off.

The floods in St Anne De Bellevue had gotten worse. For the past three years, the lake had been steadily rising, each year surpassing the previous 100-year flood line. No matter what local channel you switched to, people kayaked down what used to be high-traffic boulevards. All the TV screens showed the same images; flooded grocery stores, evacuated high schools, politicians posing with Billy boots and sandbags, thumbs pointing God-ward to demonstrate the Great Collective Effort. When the cameras shut off, the politicians were flown elsewhere, while all around them, the Coast Guard evacuated people from their homes off screen. It made you wonder if there'd soon be a time when you could kayak anywhere.

My father had come to help with the house last spring. We installed sump pumps in the crawlspace below our home, built a barricade of sandbags around the property while Mom stayed in her room. The city had dropped off pallets of sandbags along the street, and after a long winter, it was mesmerizing to watch our neighbours pour out of their homes, their families and friends driving down to help, everyone offering a hand where they could. Helicopters flew above our homes, and from above, I couldn't help but think that we all must have looked like a colony of ants.

Dad didn't believe this was a symptom of global warming. We lugged sandbags, wiping sweat from our brows with our forearms, arguing about our—which felt like my—climate crisis. I told him that the odds for the 100-year flood line to worsen for three consecutive years were astronomically low. He dismissed it, chalking it up to the dams opening in Ontario. Instead of worrying, he moved out of his rented condo and bought another waterfront home while the property values were low.

I couldn't fall asleep. The only light in the room came from outside, but memories seemed to flood in from everywhere. I was too worried to check the time. If it was past 3:00am, then I'd begin calculating how many hours of sleep I'd get, spiralling into thoughts of how tired I'd be the next day.

The onset of the floods and my sleep paralysis began in close proximity. During the first flood-year, my parents were still together and vacationing in Punta Cana when the water came in. My uncles

helped me build a wall of sandbags while my parents sunbathed on the beach. I slept on the living room couch every night, straining to hear the water sensor alarms in the crawlspace, which would sound off should the sump pumps stop working. On the first night I thought I was awake, eyes wide open, acutely aware of my surroundings, but my brain was still operating in a deep sleep cycle and my body was paralyzed. I heard the alarms sounding off, but there was a weight on my chest preventing me from rolling over. I couldn't move. My limbs wouldn't respond, and the living room was filling with water. I felt the cold of it crawling up the side of my face, an animal-panic surging in my throat, and then I was completely submerged, watching the oxygen bubbles rising out of my lungs in front of my eyes. I woke up in a panicked sweat to a quiet, dry room.

Just as I fell asleep, the sounds of nearby helicopters cutting through the sky like overfed dragon flies half-woke me. I thought of Dan. It was hard to tell what was sleep paralysis and what was reality anymore. I just took it all as it came at this point, desperately waiting for the sunlight. I dozed back off, thinking that maybe I was having another bout. An hour later, my room slowly filled with light.

I went downstairs and turned the light on to make a coffee. Mom was already sitting at the table in a loose, white T-shirt. Dark bags had formed under her eyes, and her crow's-feet spread overnight. Most mornings she would watch the news in her bedroom; I'd walk by, wave to her, make a coffee downstairs, then come back up to my bedroom for work. This morning, she was still sitting where I had last seen her. She tried to say something, but her voice cracked. She placed her hands on the table. They looked crumpled, paler than the tissues strewn across the table.

They had found the kayak downstream, but still no body.

I hurried to the neighbours' houses. They answered in bathrobes with sleep still in the slits of their eyes and I apologized for waking them and asked if they happened to see which direction the man in the kayak had gone when he left the night before and none of them knew and I looked into their

worried eyes and at the hands covering their mouths still agape and I thanked them before running off to the next house. They all asked if there was anything they could do. I wished that there was. Robert, our closest neighbour, said he normally walked out to watch the kayakers whenever he saw them, but didn't notice anything last night. Steve, the neighbour to our right who left out a weekly bin filled with beer cans, was out having a drink, remembered seeing a red kayak, but couldn't recall which direction it had gone. A neighbour down the street drew her curtains back, looked out the window, waved me off, then disappeared without opening the door.

Mom was on the phone when I got back home.

"I have to go down to the college," she said, getting up while patting her body down for keys, a wallet, and phone. None of them were on her. They were spread across the table among the used tissues. "They found him by the shore." She looked whiter still, animal-like. I helped her up by the elbow, and she looked around, though her eyes didn't focus on anything. She walked by me, and passed through the back door.

I sat down at the table and remembered his face. It rose from where it had been buried in my chest.

I got the details in short bursts throughout the rest of the day, word of mouth travelling through phone calls and Facebook groups faster than local news coverage. Concerned citizens had been posting on a West Island Facebook group about a missing 50-year-old man. It was an older photo of him circulating around the internet, and he looked much younger than I'd ever seen him. I recalled my reflection waving back to me.

Dan's friends came over in groups, gathering on the patio, wanting to be near the last place he had been, feeling for what was left of him. They looked out over the water and cried. Everyone knew that accidents happen, but no one could understand this one. He knew the waters, which spots to avoid.

Some brought bagels, others brought lemon cake. I served teas and whiskeys, bussing empty glassware and dirty dishes, catching snippets of conversation between taxied trips from the patio and the kitchen.

*...He wasn't breathing when they found him...*

"Cream or sugar, Darlene?" I asked.

*...People reported hearing several cries for help near the rapids...*

"Whiskey with that, Scott? Let me take that from you."

*...When they wheeled his body into the ambulance, there was still a chance, they say...*

"I don't know what to say..."

*...The fireman on site told us that there was still hope, that sometimes the hypothermia preserved the body after cardiac arrest...*

Eventually I brought out some extra lawn chairs and everyone sat in a circle, quietly listening to the backdrop of geese, waiting until someone decided to share a story. One of Dan's friends, Darlene, sat knowingly looking up at the birds.

"The last funeral I attended was for a friend who was a motorcycle enthusiast," she said. "During the funeral, as the speeches were about to commence, the sound of a motorcycle engine filled the funeral home. Everyone looked around, confused by the volume and the source. It seemed to be playing from the building's PA system, but then it passed. The windows were open, so nobody talked about it, but everybody came to the same conclusion."

Looking up at the birds, Darlene said Dan would always be coming back, just like her other friend had during his funeral. Dan always used to check up on them with random phone calls. "An annoying shit," she said. Everybody laughed, some of us cried. It was only my mom who sat still, breathing carefully, taking time to fill her lungs.

The image of his bloated body floating down the current stuck with me all day. I tried to smile and laugh but I couldn't get it out of my head. I excused myself and drew a cold bath. I wished I could let



go. My body wouldn't let me. I lowered myself into the tub and my body seized at the temperature. I wanted to know what he felt, to have something of him. All that was left was that image. He must have been so cold. What was he thinking about before he lost consciousness? I floated in the bath, keeping my head submerged until the image left me, but it didn't, so I came back up for air, gasping.

After drying myself, I decided there was only one thing I could manage. I clothed myself, walked downstairs, and watched everyone through the door, hands covered in suds as I cleaned the dishes. I stopped and I picked up the wine glasses. He had drunk from it the night before. When held up to the light, I could see his fingerprints on the sides of the glass. This was the last glass he had drunk from.

I finished the rest of the dishes. A shiver passed down my spine, something stirred in my chest. Somebody laughed outside, and I put his glass back into the cupboard uncleaned.

AN AFTERNOON BEER & 1000 BIRDS;  
OR,  
ULCERS & AURAS

“I had the idea that the world’s so full of pain,  
it must sometimes make a kind of singing.  
And that the sequence helps, as much as order helps...”

-Robert Hass

## *PROLOGUE.*

**BEFORE PURDY OPENED HIS EYES, HE SENSED THEM FURTHER OFF.** Across Montreal, his ulcers were climbing the sides of office buildings, the uniforms inside noticing the dark spotted shadows blocking out the sun. They looked up from their desks, eyes squinting before widening. The floors flooded with panic, workers gushing to stairwells and throwing themselves under desks, staring at the ulcers suctioned to the panes of glass. They had gotten out. Everything inside of Purdy was happening outside. The ulcers resembled rows of suckers on a large squid tentacle strangling the building. They were on their way to place a pink labarum atop the city's high-rises. His body had produced them, and now he had birthed them into the alleys and the highways and the streets. An image of his childhood home crossed his mind and left him with a pang of guilt.

Beneath his lambswool winter coat, those ulcers that hadn't yet escaped cheered and grumbled, refusing silence. He tightened the cincture around his waist. Purdy felt a cold sweat passing through his body. He opened his eyes, a procession of bodies passing him on each side, and walked home a little faster.

## I. "FIRST AN EGO,"

Since 9:00am, the alarm on my phone had been going off every five minutes. It was 9:47am. "PURDY." My roommate banging on my bedroom door finally woke me. "Get up."

The days began to feel like circuitry. Electrical and circular. The slew of nurses, nutritionists, general physicians, and gastroenterologists warned that the onset of a chronic illness typically triggered depression, but the diagnosis brought on a newfound energy. I felt an electric current running through my intestines. With all the appointments, the weeks themselves felt repetitive. Circular, but different; spiralling.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and untangled myself from the sheets. I had an appointment at 10:30am, and it would take at least half an hour for me to get there. I lay back down for another minute. The alarm sounded off once more.

In the bathroom mirror, the reflection looking back reminded me of some lines by a prized Montreal poet, Quincy Johnson, as it often did. My toothbrush was buried in my toiletry bag among a sea of pill bottles, and the electric head whirred when turned on, straining to clean the plaque from my teeth, tossing pellets of spit onto the mirror. I'd recite the lines while brushing, the words progressively unintelligible as my mouth filled with toothpaste, clearing once more every time I spit:

*"I am electric orange hair, unkempt, untidy on  
this blossomed head that aches and pains*

*from lack of water.” Spit. “My teeth stained red,  
tongue coarse, for I sit and sip this wine,  
a day is a day is a day.” Spit. “Widow’s peak, emerging,  
I, emerging. Glasses like my grandfather’s,  
large and round; head like my father’s,  
large and round; teeth like my mother’s,  
a necklace of rubbing pearls.” Spit. “I am rubbing,  
friction behind both eyes. Behind spectacles,  
I watch this charade of a world pass me by,  
all smiles and laughter, tears in both eyes.”*

I rinsed, gurgled, spit, and winked at the man winking back at me, both our breaths still smelling like gin. *Still drunk*, we thought. The birds chirped a merry song outside. They were sober.

My roommate, Donny “Gap-tooth” Furlough, passed me in our narrow hallway, leading to our apartment’s front door. “I made you some scrambled eggs, I started cooking them when I heard your alarm go off. They’re cold now.” There was no way around him, and he had clearly been waiting.

“Sorry about that.” I was hopping on one foot, trying to balance and put my boot on the other.

“Yeah.”

“I’m late. Would you put them in the microwave?”

“I’ll leave them in the pan,” he said, running his hand across his forehead and slicking his combover. The mixture of his wide, rectangular jaw, and the gap between his teeth made for something approximating a lisp. Whenever he crossed his arms, he looked to be flexing through his tight white t-shirts.

“Alright.” I swung my scarf around my neck. “By the way, I’m hosting a poetry reading on our roof tonight, if you want to join.”

“I’m working on my thesis. The data won’t input itself.”

“Right. Well, if you want a break. See ya.” Shutting the door behind me, I heard Donny add, *Don’t be loud tonight*, through the Mayflower glass pane. The icy wrought-iron banister reached my hand through my leather glove, but without it, descending a flight of outdoor stairs during a Montreal winter would be a suicide mission. I funnelled down toward the boulevard, passing by the same, rectangular, red-bricked buildings of St. Henri.

It had been three months since my diagnosis, and I couldn’t tell if it had been three weeks. The first few days had felt clearer, like a light fog had been removed. Every event was imbued with more meaning. It had stripped back the ambiguity from what I was doing. The ulcers themselves were benign, though if we couldn’t manage them, they would likely become malignant and lead to cancer. The threat of it becoming terminal was enough. I bought my groceries and knew better than the rest of those aisle-browsing animals *how* I would die. They sniffed fruit rinds and lifted those dead, stuffed birds into their carts without any idea how they’d be stuffed. I whistled through the same aisles, pushing a cart with its one loose wheel, and knew more about my inevitable stuffing. I was better for it. I had something to point at. Something to wake me up and make me live. When the soil ate of me, my Maker would too, and he’d spit me back out. *Foul! What is that?* he would ask, pointing at my corpse. *Salted intestines, Sir, garnished with fresh ulcers*, my dead body would reply.

The novelty soon wore off. Chickens looked like chickens. The days bled into each other.

I passed through underground tunnels, the city’s metro passing like its own subterranean peristalsis, subway carts slinking through the underbelly of the city. Across the orange line, metal grinded against metal.

When I got to the second floor of the Jewish General Hospital’s C-wing, I checked in with the regular receptionist, who never recognized me. She was either a middle-aged woman, or a very tired, overworked young lady. I wondered if she recognized anyone. I sat, waiting for the nurse to call my name. The waiting room had four white walls like any other waiting room, but they were different.

They looked whiter, the air carrying a surplus oxygen. The chairs felt more like plastic than any other plastic chair. There were posters framed along the wall, and one in particular caught my eye. I hadn't noticed it before, and below the French version, it read, "Psychological Stages of Chronic Illness & Strategies to Help you Cope." I looked around the room. There was no one else sitting there. It must have been for me.

"Stage 1: Denial"

When I was first diagnosed with ulcerative colitis, I left the hospital and stumbled out into the howling winds, cutting through my scarf, stinging the skin on my cheeks. I walked between traffic, a fleet of cars honking at my flesh. I laughed at the wind and myself. There was no denying.

"Stage 2: Anger"

I had set alarms for doctor's appointments three times a week for three months, but I was never angry. With excuses to miss classes, a reason to live life more fully, how could I be? I was getting free breakfasts. Maybe my roommate was angry.

"Stage 3: Bargaining"

*Good God, Why? Why me?! Couldn't it be anyone else? What about Donny, or even Quincy? I'd do anything, anything at all! Anything! Oh...Really? You're sure? My Netflix password? Well, do you have a pen...*

"Stage 4: Depression"

I was missing class with guaranteed doctor's notes, and in certain cases was exempt from writing assignments. If anyone was depressed, it was my professors.

"Stage 5: Acceptance"

I had begun with acceptance.

Reading the poster, I got the feeling that this was an antiquated 5-step process, something more like mourning the death of a loved one. Whichever medical professionals had come up with it were due for an update. The room's radiator gurgled up some spit and coughed into the clean air. I looked

around the room and there was still no one there, so I leaned back and closed my eyes, a wide grin on my face, emerging.

## II. "...*AND THEN PAIN,*"

Four weeks later, I stood on the corner of my street, carrying the few possessions I owned in a single cardboard box. Donny had kicked me out and given me a few weeks to leave, but I didn't want to stay where I wasn't wanted. I had been reckless and inconsiderate, so he thought. He had been controlling, which he had the "right" to be; his name was on the lease. Mine wasn't. Donny said he didn't want to have to play that card, but I knew he loved the power it gave him. I stole a suitcase from his closet after he left for work, which I stuffed with my clothes and laptop, then walked over and bought a cardboard box from Home Depot for my books, notebooks, fermented foods, and stovetop espresso maker. I balanced the box on top of the suitcase, and pulled my phone out from my pocket.

"*Purdy*, sweetheart! Where have you been?" My mother's voice rose from the other end. "Your father and I have been trying to reach you."

"Hi, Mom. I've been busy."

"Oh, well, of course you have! It's just so good to talk with you. Your father's in the other room, give me a second and I'll pass him to you."

"I don't have long, Mom. I'll call him later."

"Is everything alright?"

"Yeah. I just wanted to let you know I'll be staying at a friend's place for a little while." I hadn't a clue where I would stay, but going home would be another step backwards. I don't even know exactly why I called her. "I got into a fight with Donny."



“A fight?! How is Donny, we haven’t seen him in ages.”

“He’s charming, Mom. Anyway, if you were thinking of stopping by, for whatever reason, I won’t be there.”

“Okay, but you’ll be going back soon?”

“Sure, Mom.”

“Where are you going? Who with?”

“A friend from University. I’ll let you know when I get there.”

“Okay, Purdy. You’re sure you’re fine?”

“I’ve got to go. Bye, Mom.”

She was rattling off a list of goodbyes and I love yous as I pulled the phone away from my ear. I clicked the red end call button on the screen, and started looking through my contacts for someone to call before my hands froze.

**W**e were to meet on the corner of Maisonneuve and Saint Matthew at 2:30 for lunch, as we did every other week. I had forgotten about our lunch until she answered the phone this morning, and then pretended that’s why I had called. It was 2:27. I turned my head to the left, checking that my cardboard box and suitcase hadn’t been stolen. The minute hand on my watch clicked into place at 2:28. I paced around the drug store. Strapped to my wrist, my watch followed as I reached into my pocket to warn Sylvia I’d be late.

*Been waiting at the Pharmaprix longer than expected. Sorry.* Before sending it, I added, *They even gave me a buzzer.*

I placed my phone on my lap and took out my notebook to revisit the opening scene from a story I had begun. It was terrible. I scratched it out and began rewriting:

“... **OUTSIDE THE ABANDONED CHURCH BASEMENT**, the candlelight remained undetected. The ulcers gathered in concentric circles on wooden chairs, organizing. They had elected a leader, who both stood in the middle of the ring of rickety chairs, and had selected this church for their meetings. They leaned forward, listening to him promise them a better life, guaranteeing their success. They nodded, fists held skyward, humming, though not so loud as to raise suspicion or drown out their leader’s speech. They had absorbed the

spirit of this church—tucked away and forgotten somewhere in Little Italy—their pink flesh becoming one with their host. They rocked back and forth in their chairs, cooing and purring, their collective sound becoming orchestral music, reverberating off the empty building’s walls and tall ceilings. A beam of light appeared in the staircase, widening as a set of footsteps grew louder against the concrete steps. The ulcers dispersed like liquid, climbing the walls, seeping into the vents. When the janitor came downstairs, he pointed his flashlight at a few flickering candles, and a ring of empty, wooden chairs...”

I put my pencil down, an older man rested his cane against a wall and sat for a self-administered blood pressure test. He removed his brown corduroy jacket, much too light for this weather, and draped it over the stool before sitting. He unbuttoned his cuff link and rolled his right sleeve above his bicep, exposing pale skin and branches of varicose veins. I reached for my own arm, watching the inflatable ring constrict his arm and pull at the loose skin around his tricep. My cellphone buzzed on my lap. The older man whispered, *Guess not*, then slowly got up, leaving with his corduroy jacket draped over his shoulders.

*Don't be sorry. I'll get us a table.*

I tried writing something witty, but it buzzed again before I could respond. No text messages. On the table beside me, the buzzer shivered across the surface. I shut it off and rose to the counter, where the kind eyed lady in the white lab coat invited me over with an artificial smile. The bottom and top half of her face look like they belonged to different people.

“Mr. O’Connor.”

“That’s me.”

“Here’s your medication, it’s called Salofalk. Take it once every evening for a month, then once every two days for two months, and after that you must take it once a week for two months. Of course, it’s important to take it right before bed, and to dip it in water before you...”

“Thank you, Janus.” I cut her off, reading from her name tag. “My doctor already explained this.”

“No questions?”

I looked around to make sure nobody had heard.

“No, thank you.”

She stopped me as I was turning. “You're lucky, you know.” The bottom half now matched the top, a consoling smile. “Some people have to take suppositories their entire lives.”

My cheeks surged with a warm prickle rising from my neck, and I thanked Janus once more. It was precisely 2:40. I rushed from the drugstore hoping to avoid anybody I knew. The sliding doors released a fog of warm air into the streets, exiling me with a violent gust and a swift shutting of the doors. A man sat on the sidewalk holding out a paddy cap. He reminded me of the old man, so I reached into my pocket and gave him a few dollars.

I approached the entrance of the pho restaurant and slid the wooden doors open. She was already sitting at our table, the back of her head to the entrance. Her hair was shorter and dyed with blonde streaks, I remembered I had cancelled last time, and hadn't seen her in a month. My boots left traces of water across the tiles.

“*Finally.*” She turned at the touch of her shoulder. “Can we *please* order...I haven't eaten all day. You look like you could eat, too.”

“Yeah, I've lost some weight.”

“How much? What have you been doing? Please tell me your secret, look at that jaw line and those gaunt cheeks.” She kept it light, but her face showed concerned.

“Twenty-five pounds over the last few weeks.”

The waiter—who also worked the cash—brought menus to our table, but we ordered without consulting. Number seven and fifteen: Rare beef and tripe, rare beef and steak flank. Sylvia ordered a Vietnamese coffee, my knee was already bouncing, the waiter turned to leave. We turned back to face each other, both smiling.

It was precisely 2:55. She opened her mouth and began to say something, I inadvertently cut her off.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “You go.”

“It's alright, go ahead.”

“I brought you something.”

I reached down into the cardboard box and pulled out a large mason jar filled with homemade kimchi. Two pieces of scotch tape were marked with thick black sharpie, the top piece reading “Kimchi, 18/01/18,” the bottom reading “Bernie Sanders.” I had texted her a few days before Donny kicked me out, asking her, *On a scale of conservative to liberal, how spicy do you want your kimchi?*

The waiter brought our bowls of pho to the table, Sylvia unscrewed the lid of her mason jar and spooned several dollops of kimchi into her bowl. We sat focusing on our food, asking questions between mouthfuls.

“Alright.” She blew on the noodles hanging from her chopsticks. “What’s with the suitcase? I knew there was something off.”

“How so?”

“Your aura. It’s usually white, which is receptive. I had a sense that it was off when you called, but seeing you now, I know for sure.”

“So, what is it now?”

She looked around me, then focused on the spots beside my temples.

“Pink.”

A party of seven and a cool breeze entered through the sliding wooden doors, the orchids on the windowsills sent to a shiver.

“Right, well I don’t want you to worry or anything, it’s nothing to be concerned about.” I glanced downward as she looked up.

The waiter approached our table.

“Everything alright?”

“We’re fine,” we said. I looked back down into the broth after he walked away. “I found out that I have Ulcerative Colitis. It’s an autoimmune disease. Essentially, I have ulcers growing in my large intestine.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“I don’t know yet. It leads to internal bleeding, and can become cancerous.” I hesitated to say the c-word, taking a soup spoon full into my mouth. “I have to monitor it over the next while and take different drugs, but if they don’t cure it then I’ll need surgery to have my large intestine removed.”

“Purdy...”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m sorry for dampening the mood.”

“Don’t say that.”

We finished the remainder of our pho in silence, spooning warm broth. The waiter brought the payment terminal over to our table and smiled while we paid, as if the whole world was made of soup. He didn’t wear a lab coat, but his face had a pharmaceutical sheen.

“One more thing.” I looked up from the payment terminal.

“Yeah?”

“I’m going to need a place to stay a while.”

\*\*\*

“**C**an you lie on your side for us Mr. O’Connor?”

I rolled over, worrying the gown with the back-slit was exposing more than it needed to.

“Okay, Mr. O’Connor, we’re going to administer the ketamine now. Is that alright?”

“*Mhmmm.*”

“Alright. And remember, after the procedure, it’s important that you stay in your bed for at least thirty minutes, okay?”

“*Mhmmm.*”

“And remember, it’s crucial that you pass gas if you need to, do you understand?”

I nodded. The doctor, without a trace of worry lining his forehead, patted me on the shoulder.

“Administering the ketamine.” He spoke out into the dimly lit space.

The room grew to be three, four, fives times larger—the three doctors standing around expanded into a crowd of a dozen spectral figures. Instead of a jarring feeling, I found comfort in fixating on the only screen in the room. For some reason or another, they had put Star Wars on the screen, and I watched a spaceship soaring

through a strange looking galaxy. It was something like forty minutes later, which only felt like a few minutes, that I realized I had been watching the camera lens they inserted in my large colon.

This first procedure was covered by my insurance, and so I could do it at a private clinic. Laying in that soft sliver of a cot, I knew that I wouldn't have it so easy next time at the hospital, that I wouldn't be watching Star Wars.

After thirty minutes, I lied to the receptionist, telling him my ride was waiting outside. On my walk home, head tucked into my hood, chin tucked into my chest, I got the feeling that everybody who passed me was only a shadow.

\*\*\*

With the arm that wasn't running cold on IV drips, I held *Exterminator!* by William Burroughs open, flipping pages with the one hand. The infusion clinic swarmed with mosquito nurses in blue gowns, piercing my skin with their incisor needles, beaming while telling me I had nice veins. The machines whirred, Entyvio slow dripped through clear tubes into my forearm, bags of liquid hung from IV poles, and everyone sitting in the same reclining chairs were in their fifties, except the one younger man sitting next to me. His hair bunched together on his shoulders, he smiled up at the flickering fluorescent lights, eyes closed and receptive to his private cosmic message. It was Tuesday. I had never heard of anyone meeting God on a Tuesday. He opened them and looked over at me.

"I used to shit my pants in class."

*Purdy, nice to meet you too,* I wanted to say.

"Sorry to hear that."

"No need, I've solved it now. It's all about diet and holistic living." He spoke with tubes in his arm. "You new?"

"Recently diagnosed, yeah."

He surveyed the room. “Listen to the nutritionists, sure, and do the elimination diet. But more importantly, do you smoke weed?”

“Used to.”

“No worries, CBD pills do the trick. We live in a wonderful age, all herbs and spices.”

Some nurses fluttered into the room, turning off the machines that were sounding off.

“Are you feeling alright, Purdy?” My appointed nurse, Guylaine, asked.

“Sure.”

“Take Joey with a grain of salt.” She winked at him, then at me.

“Guylaine,” he said, “you know that the specialists will all tell you different things. We live in the age of science, and yet no one agrees on anything. Especially autoimmune diseases.”

“You’re not entirely wrong, Joey, but please stop prescribing marijuana to the newcomers.”

Now it was his turn to wink.

When Guylaine turned around, he handed me a business card. “If you need alternative medicine, you can reach me here.”

“Thanks, I might.”

“Also, as a gesture of good will,” he added, “some free advice: Turmeric smoothies.”

“Duly noted.”

“Give me a ring sometime. We should hang out.”

I nodded, and he tilted his head back, assuming his grin, resuming his close-eyed conversation with the fluorescent lights.

\*\*\*

Sylvia pressed her ear against my stomach, listening to the borborygmus travelling through my gut.

“It sounds like whales.” She held her finger to my mouth and closed her eyes.

*“Bbbbbouuuuuuagbbbbb.”*

She laughed, looking up at me, and I held my hands over my face.

“Oh, come on, you’re lucky, you have marine life living in your belly. Listen: *Eeeerrrrraaaaaagggghbb.*”

I pretended not to be embarrassed, and instead joined the conversation. It was funny how, according to Sylvia and the pharmacist, I had become lucky just as I had become sick.

*“Grrrrrouuuuuuabbbb.”*

We were laying in her guest bedroom, staring at the ceiling in the faint dark of the room. Shadows from outside streetlights crept across the ceiling, painting branches of veins across the walls. We sprawled atop the comforter.

“Alright Whale Boy, do you have everything you need?”

“I’m good.”

“Good.” She kissed me on the cheek, and got up to go to her room. “Goodnight.”

*“Grrrrrouuuuuuabbbb,”* I said.

*“Bbbbbouuuuuuabbbb.”*

She closed the bedroom door behind her, cutting out any light from the hallway.

I turned the lamp on and probed my belly button in the semi-dark room, feeling for my throbbing intestines, hoping to dig out the disease. Sylvia coughed in the room over.

How was I going to tell my parents? How was I going to explain it to friends without sounding ridiculous? How was I going to live a normal life?

The worst part was the uncertainty; after excavating my belly button, I got under the sheets and closed my eyes, knowing that I would be awakened in a few hours with a feverish panic, needing to use the washroom. The dark room echoed my concerns, a soundboard for each reverberating cord. What was the cause? Could it go away? Where would it lead? I tried to lull any concerns about cancer with old nursery rhymes, humming out into the guest bedroom. I didn’t have it yet, and there wasn’t much else I could do right now. I just had to wait at the station, and see if it would arrive.



### III. "...AND THEN THE SINGING."

Old men and women in wheelchairs rolled past me on each side, blankets folded on their laps, relatives pushing them from behind. Their cheeks looked like they had been hollowed out with spoons. After they passed, there was only the echo of my footsteps, notes in a long, empty corridor. Everything hollow.

The paper crinkled beneath when I sat on Dr. Chiaroscuro's examining table. She looked at the wall and poked her fingers into my abdomen, the cold latex making me tense, probing for inflammation and maybe also trying to dig it out.

"Good news is we've got you back to what we call a stable condition." She rolled my shirt back down and beckoned me toward a chair across from her own. "The bad news is that, as a chronic illness, it can destabilize throughout your life. We don't exactly know exactly why, it could be stress-induced, diet, genetic..."

I was taking notes, looking up to nod and affirm that I was understanding, occasionally omitting a word or two while racing to keep up.

"More good news is that the internal bleeding has stopped, your calprotectin levels are back to normal, the ulcers are under control, and there will be need to conduct a colectomy."

The word "conduct" sounded funny; a room of surgeons holding conductor's batons.

"And..." I began, hesitant to reveal myself as a hypochondriac in front of a specialist. "Cancer?"

"As likely as with anyone else, so long as we keep you stable."

I nodded, jotting it down.

“Now the neutral news. We’ll do everything to keep you in good health, Purdy, but a part of chronic illness is learning to live with it. The nurses gave you a pamphlet?”

I nodded, pen down. “Yes, I’ve seen the poster in your waiting room.”

“Good. Of course, with the social aid program accompanying your new medicine, you will always be able to ask questions to their support line. For now, we’ll get you to take a blood test to monitor the Entyvio levels in your system, and we’ll check in again in a few weeks, alright Purdy?”

I nodded, closing my notebook.

I had been sent to get a blood test on the fifth floor of the E-wing, passing through long corridors until I found and boarded an elevator. Inside, an Orthodox Jewish man wearing slippers. I tried not to look at his feet, but nodded when he tipped his hat. He was peeling back a banana peel, taking small bites, and audibly mashing it against his pallet, his beard ensnaring droplets of his spit. The elevator creaked open on the fourth floor, and he shuffled out of the metal box, leaving an empty space where he just stood. It was hard to tell if he was sick, or tending to the sick. The latter seemed to make more sense, I had never seen a sick man eat a banana. I looked at my own feet, neither of them in slippers. I couldn’t help but wonder if they were hospital-issued, or if he had brought them. Either way, I wasn’t provided with slippers, or I knew nothing about Orthodox Judaism. It was probably both.

On the fifth floor, I was given a ticket stub like the ones at my deli, N-654, except now I sat waiting for a blood test instead of sausages.

Seven patients away from being called to the counter, a nun walked into the waiting room. I looked at her feet, wondered what kind of shoes nuns wear, what sounds they make as they cross through hollowed halls, if it sounded like music reverberating through organ pipes. It was strange to think that nuns might be patients too. Hospitals might be the only place you could witness black robes among white lab coats. She took a seat near my own. I never thought of religious figures as susceptible to ailments. I never considered that they, too, had large intestines.

A small screen with red digits blinked: N-654.

“I’m here for a blood test,” I said while approaching the counter.

“Your papers, please.”

“Here they are. Dr. Chiaroscuro from the Gastroenterology department sent me.”

“Your hospital card, *please*.”

I pulled my wallet from my back pocket and nearly spilled all my cards onto the floor. I scrambled for the right card and felt her gaze on the crown of my head. There weren’t enough hands.

In the second waiting room, a man with fleshy earlobes sat waiting, his sweater vest holding his gut above his belt buckle, his cowboy hat restraining a few beads of sweat from pouring down his forehead. “What will you do, you know?” He spoke to himself, or anyone in the room willing to listen, but spoke with a smile either way. He looked up at the monitor flashing red numbers above all the sea of heads. He looked at his ticket stub. “They make you wait all day to send ya’ to another waiting room.” He chuckled to himself until he began to cough, bringing a fist up to his mouth to cover his wheezing. Even bent over, he still maintained the semblance of a smile. He looked up at me after his fit was over. I smiled back at him, but found that his eyes were sad. I looked up at the wide brim just above them before looking away.

I took my notebook out from my coat pocket. On the page following my scribbled notes, I continued writing:

“... **SITTING IN THE FIRST TRAIN CART TO TORONTO**, a man wearing a black trench coat read the newspaper, his wide-brimmed Panama hat covering the top half of his face. He waved off any attempts by the service staff to offer him a drink. Once the train departed from the station, building a locomotive pulse, he looked up from his paper. Where a face should have been, there was exposed, pink, intestinal flesh. He dropped the paper, removed his gloves, and opened his trench coat. The surrounding passengers noticed the man as he stood up and unfastened his coat buttons, releasing a swarm of ulcers from beneath. They brought their legs up from the ground, shouting and cradling themselves in their seats, clawing at the windows. The ulcers spread across the carts, slinking down the aisles and opening up the overhead luggage compartments, releasing a whole swarm of ulcers from

within the upturned and unzipped suitcases. The pink man in the Panama hat stood watching the pandemonium unfold, and took a steady sip from a cold glass of water...”

I bit the pencil’s metal ferrule, chewing the eraser while wondering how to end the story.

*N-654. Blink, blink, blink.*

I stuffed my notebook and pencil back into my jacket pocket, scrambling to get to the room over before they skipped past my number. When I sat down, they placed my arm in a foam mould, wrapped a rubber band around my bicep, and stuck a needle in my arm. “You haven’t eaten in the past 24 hours, have you?” I looked away as they milked the life out of me. “No, ma’am.” She filled three syringes with the red syrup from my arm.

“You’re good to go. Have a nice day.”

I looked at all the sullen faces on the metro ride back. A mother sat next to me with a wheel-locked stroller, her baby wailing from within. The metro cart shifted side to side on the rails, my shoulder brushed against the hard plastic walls. There was no way I was going to class today.

The baby’s crying made me anxious, so I got off three stations early and started mindlessly walking back to Sylvia’s, passing all the storefronts along the boulevard. A red and blue neon light spilled the word *Budweiser* onto the sidewalk. I looked across the street and saw another woman pushing her child in a stroller, wondering when it would be the other way around, the kid pushing their mom in a wheelchair. Looking down at my hands, I noticed that they were still quite pale. There wasn’t too much pain when I lifted my arm above my head. It was a good day today, I didn’t always get off that easy. I thought I would celebrate.

A bell rang above my head when I walked into the bar and knocked the snow off the bottom of my boots. There was only one man at the bar with tanned hands, wearing a white Aran sweater that made him look a fisherman. I pulled a stool up to the other side of the Formica bar top, and a bartender came from a room out back; another waiting room, I thought. Without class, I was in no rush. I had all day to kill. After ordering, I put my green notebook on the counter and looked at the fisherman while the bartender drew my pint.

“*Voilà.*”

“*Merci.*” I raised my glass.

“If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

She picked a book up from the cash register and began reading. I leaned over and tried to read the title, but couldn't catch a good glimpse of it. My phone rang. It was my mother. I ignored the call; there would be time to speak later, to explain. I could picture it: I would go home, hand them the pamphlet, and explain what was happening inside me. I took a sip of my beer and listened to the birds chirping outside, flipping my notebook open to where I had left off:

“... **THE CURRENT BROKE BENEATH THE MERCIER BRIDGE**, its pillars creating white swells that disrupted the direction of the water. The pink man stood on the bench of a hand-crafted canoe, holding his Panama hat against the wind, preventing it from being carried off by gusts and revealing the top of his bald head. A row of five ulcers flanked him, heaving, rowing in swift, synchronous sweeps. Around the canoe, the pink tops of several ulcers breached the surface, swimming in pods along the current. They were moving beyond the island. On the bridge's footpath, a child pulled on his mother's hand, but she pulled back, trying to snap a landscape of the city's skyline. ‘Mom, mom! Look! There are pink fish in a boat.’ She swatted at him now. ‘Mom!’ His mother stepped back from the viewfinder, knowing he wouldn't stop. She followed the direction of her boy's pointed finger, and saw nothing but the ripples of where something had recently submerged.”

When I finished the story, I noticed that the fisherman was one stool closer to mine.

“Whatcha' writing there b'y?” If the accent didn't out him, his openness to strangers did.

I closed my notebook and put the pencil down before sipping what was left of my beer. “A story about ulcers taking over Montreal, then Canada.”

The fisherman remained silent, then let out a smoker's cough of a laugh. "If only!" He slapped the counter to accompany his hearty laugh. When the bartender asked if I wanted another beer, he signalled for two more, then jerked his thumb at his chest.

"What's your name?"

"Purdy O'Connor."

"Aye, Sal MacDonald. Good to meet ya'."

"Thanks for the beer."

We got to talking for a while, with nothing else to do. He was a fisherman visiting from a coastal town in Newfoundland. His father had been a fisherman, and his father before him. They had been using the same sailboat all that time, and Sal had lived his whole life in the house he was born in. This was his first time off the island, and he could remember his old man talking about the good days spent drinking in Montreal, but I was sure Sal had picked the wrong season to visit.

"And what is it ya' do, Purdy?"

"I'm not too sure anymore. Between jobs, let's say."

"I can understand that game. Mind if I sit closer?" he asked, but was already approaching. "I know many like ya b'y. I've got a proposition for ye'."

I wasn't sure how many beers he had drank before I arrived, but he told me all about his boat, about the large nets he casts and all the fish, and how hard it is for him to find a reliable deckhand without any progeny. I had to admit, it was a nice idea, to get so far away from home, to live on a boat elsewhere for a while. I thanked him for the proposition, took his information, knowing I would probably never take him up on it, but it was nice to fantasize about it.

"It'll be seven fifty for your first," the bartender said. I settled my tab and soon the bell rang above my head once more, waving to Sal over my shoulder, hoping I'd see him again.

The air cut against my face, sobering me up a bit as I stepped outside, but I was still drunk. I stood on the sidewalk and looked in both directions. The windward streets blew East and West, I tucked my chin beneath my scarf.

On my way back to Sylvia's, I passed several people and passed many apartments. I passed parks with kids and empty parking lots, and as I go closer to Sylvia's, I began to better recognize my surroundings. Donny's wasn't too far, so I decided I would stop by to try and smooth things over, try and make it ours again. This time, I'd make my own eggs, wake at the first alarm, and sign the lease. He'd understand, slick his hair to his forehead, and ask me if I wanted to look at his tables of data.

There was a tall office building I had seen before. It might have been the beers, or the new medication, or a compound of both, but I pictured each floor occupied with ulcers; though they were wearing suits, sitting at desks, answering phone calls, and filling out Excel sheets. Two ulcers laughed by the water cooler, and I couldn't help but laugh with them. A woman pushing a carriage with a pink, baby ulcer strolled past me, and both of them waved. I kept walking, passed the cedars lining the perimeter of the corporate parking lot, and while passing, I heard what must have been a nest of birds chirping from withing, repeating the same pattern of notes.

The notes played over in my head, sounding like a song I knew, even after the cedars were far behind. *Coo-ah-coo-coo-coo*. I tried to figure out the song, but couldn't place it, and instead guessed the type of bird, which I also recognized. I got to thinking that there was a whole symphony of Mourning Doves in that bush, and it made me grin. I liked to think there were a thousand residential birds living in that one nest, squatting in the cedars, and hiding from the passing pedestrians and streaming traffic. I thought of the birds and of Sal.

The world felt like it lifted, and I was struck with the sensation that I could go on walking forever into the lightness of it all, that it could all be burned down and would be built again if it did. I held on to the feeling and let it sit for a while, backdropped by the sounds of my footsteps, and the birds I

had heard chirping earlier from within their nest. This feeling sustained itself until the side streets lead to a boulevard, and the quietness of the borough was disrupted by the traffic; but even the traffic sounded softer.

I was drunk, the birds they were singing. Winter would turn to Spring, turn to Summer, turn to Fall, back to Winter; then the leaves would all be gone, and the birds would still be singing, and I might call my parents. Everything would be the same as it had always been, only different. On the Atlantic Ocean, a small sailboat could take me elsewhere. In Montreal, I could get a job working with my ulcers. I closed my eyes. Everything would be the same, only different. I forgot the cold weather around me, smelled the salt carried on the Atlantic winds. There were ulcers living in the city, but there was also a sailboat, other cities, fathoms of ocean, and there were Mourning Doves. I was drunk; the birds they were sober, and they were all of them singing.



## QUIETLY, LOVING EVERYONE

In the corner of her room, a two-day-old helium balloon floated next to the bookshelf. Izzy sat on a wooden chair reapplying her lipstick, glancing over at Lenny through the vanity mirror. The party had been a sendoff for Geoff before his conference in Turkey and the balloon was slowly petering out.

“I hate you.”

“You hate yourself.”

“No, really,” Izzy said. “I hate you, like as a person, like all of you, live everything you are, down to your molecular make up. I hate you.”

“Why don’t you tell me how you really feel?”

She ran the thin teeth of a comb through her hair.

“You think you can do what you want and pay no consequences. You can’t just come in and out of people’s lives.”

“You’re not stopping me.”

Izzy held eye contact with Lenny through the mirror and twisted the bottom of the lipstick tube. She wrote “asshole” in thick red letters across the mirror.

“Go home. I don’t want you to stay for dinner.”

He remained in bed. Izzy pushed off her stool, knocking over a glass of wine.

After dinner, Lenny and Izzy stood on the balcony sharing a cigarette. It had been snowing, and so

they stood with one foot on the balcony and one in the living room, facing each other while leaning against the door frame, tentatively blowing their smoke outside. They shared laughter and the same pair of shoes. Lenny's shoes were the only pair nearby, the others were far away, crammed into a closet or a drawer; the world was distant, the snow seemed to keep everything at bay. The trees moved slowly in the wind, the sky a full belly.

The question of their residual fling lasting longer than their relationship had aroused suspicions between the both of them, and with their trysting place having now progressed to her apartment, there was the faint suspicion that something had been taken too far. Evidence of Geoff lingered in the apartment—a misplaced sock, a picture of the two of them, a belt hanging from the closet door.

“How's New York?” Izzy asked.

“Full of pigeons,” Lenny said.

“And the program?”

“Grey conference rooms filled with people pretending they know more about humans than the rest of us.”

Brooklyn College had offered him a scholarship to complete a master's in communication studies. Lenny wasn't sure what he'd do with the degree, but they were paying him to suspend judgement. During the winter and summer breaks, he'd been coming back to Montreal to visit his mom, some friends, and occasionally, Izzy. He didn't want to admit the latter.

“How's the acting?”

“Not paying the bills yet.” She stole the smoke from Lenny's hands. “But Geoff's been helping with that. I quit my job at Myriad Café.”

Lenny winced, trying not to show it.

“Anything good?”

“I've been cast as Mimi in *La Bohème*. It'll be debuting at the Centaur in the Spring.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Was I supposed to?”

“I’m sorry. I meant congratulations.” Lenny stole the cigarette back. “What’s it about?”

“A bohemian seamstress and her milieu of socialite artists living in 1830s Paris.”

“So not much acting involved?”

“You’re an asshole.”

They stood in silence for a while, letting this soak in. Lenny thought about all their beginnings; their first cigarette, the first time they slept together and she had asked him to tie her up, how he drove her to the hospital after she fell off a swing and broke her nose. He wondered if it was the beginning of something new, or the feeling of something coming to an end, that bred the recollection of these incipient moments.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” he said, “I know you can sing, but *opera*?”

“Didn’t you know?” Izzy held her arms out, her head tilted back. “I’m a woman of many talents.”

The balcony was an offshoot of her living room, where they hadn’t bothered to clear the table. Instead, they looked inward, basking in the aftermath of a gluttonous meal, taking in the mess they had made, knowing all the while it would have to be cleaned eventually, but not right then. The lamb shanks had been gnawed to the bone, fat floated like air bubbles on a sea of oil, and their plates still lay on a small wooden crate beside an empty bottle of wine. Lenny and Izzy’s imprints, softly pressed into the carpet, were still visible on either side of the crate. Beads of wine stained the crate-cum-table as if they had dipped paint brushes in their goblets and pulled back the bristles. They smoked the rest of their cigarette, coughing and laughing behind a glowing ember.

They returned to a sink full of dishes.

“I heard my neighbour crying last night.” Izzy spoke into the cabinet where the gin was.

Lenny rolled his sleeves up and poured some dish soap into the sink. Izzy's reflection doubled in the kitchen window. With the chandelier on, every window became a one-way mirror.

"What do you think they were crying about?"

"You tell me."

She pulled the ice cube tray from the freezer and bent the hard plastic over the edge of the counter. A few ice cubes popped out. He watched her pour two types of alcohol he didn't recognize into their glasses.

"He's an old man who lives alone. No one visits him." She handed him a glass, he wiped the suds off his hands. "It's a Negroni. Sip it slowly."

She slouched down on the floor beside him, resting against the cabinets. There wasn't a drying rack nearby, so Lenny crafted a leaning tower of porcelain plates.

"Did you grow up knowing your neighbours?" she asked, sitting with her chest pressed against her knees.

"What did you say was in here? It's bitter as hell."

"I once helped him bring his groceries up. He invited me in for tea afterwards. I told him I had work. I still regret not going in, he's sweet and harmless."

"Do you have any soda I could dilute this with?"

Lenny placed the drink next to the edge of the sink, hoping it might fall in. He had neglected to mention that he was involved with his neighbour, Holly, back in Brooklyn. They were in a polyamorous relationship, which felt one-sided to Lenny. He picked the drink back up and glanced around, looking for something he could sweeten it with later.

"Oh!" Izzy hopped back up and peeled a sliver of rind off an orange. She twirled the pith and pinched it towards Lenny, shooting a cloud of citrus at his eyes, then dropped it into his drink.

“There,” she said, and plopped back onto the floor. “So, you were talking about how much you love your neighbours?”

With the clean dishes piled, and Lenny’s sleeves rolled back down, they left the kitchen behind. Lenny placed his drink on the nightstand and dove into the bed, rolling over and stretching out with his hands behind his head.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and played a Spotify playlist, but it was still connected to the Bluetooth speaker in the room over; Nina Simone sang sad melodies to an empty living room. There were three unopened texts from Holly. A surge ran through his body, followed by a pang of guilt. The thought of Geoff reaching out to Izzy right now made him more bitter than the drink.

*He wasn’t technically cheating. Lenny had met Holly in the program, and later found out they weren’t only living in the same building, but were neighbours. When they started regularly hooking up, Lenny asked about their status. I don’t believe in monogamy, Holly had said, I need to be able to love everybody. On some nights of the weeks, through the thin walls, Lenny could believe her.*

*They were cheating. He wasn’t sure. His wires were crossed. He’d figure it out in the morning.*

Izzy splayed herself across the carpet, running her hands through the white fur and her own black hair, which fell in concentric haloes above her head.

“When I was young, my parents used to listen to our neighbours’ conversations through my baby monitor.”

“They spied on them?”

“It wasn’t the McCarthy era, Izzy. Their voices came through and they’d just listen.”

Izzy watched him finish his drink, then polished the rest of her own. “Give it to me, I’ll pour another round.”

He spoke up so she could hear him from the kitchen.

“They’d set up these baby monitors, you know, to check if I was breathing or something. And they’d be in the kitchen eating, and they’d hear these voices in the apartment.”

“*Mbmm.*”

“And they were just talking casually, like we are right now, you know? Just these *voices*. There were two people talking, as clear as day.”

Izzy came back with two fresh drinks. She handed one over and sat next to him on the bed, her feet dangling off the edge. Lenny hopped off and paced the room.

“My mom and dad decided to open a bottle of wine and just sit there, listening. They made a game of it. They’d invent a context for them. It was always the same couple. Other times, they’d listen for a bit and then turn off the speaker so they could finish the rest of the conversation.”

Lenny put his drink down and lay on the floor now, his head resting on the carpet. He noticed the cracked paint on the ceiling and wondered what would pour through if it cracked any further.

“Mom used to tell me these stories after Dad left. It was our way of reminiscing. I was young, but after he left, it’s like we had been woken from a dream.”

“Did they hear anything good?”

“The couple spent a few weeks planning a heist.”

“You’re kidding?” Izzy sat up. “Did they?”

“Never found out. Mom didn’t believe in the news.”

Izzy fell back on top of the comforter now.

“Some nights, the couple fought over whose turn it was to take out the trash, then they were planning a heist, then reading to their child before bed, then watching porn, roleplaying. Please, take anything you find, just don’t hurt me or my child...No, not the lamp! That belonged to my great aunt Mary! Seriously...Steve. *Steve*. Watch the lamp.”

Izzy and Lenny both laughed, and like most good laughs, they felt a loud silence in the room when it was over.

“It’s strange to think of the things happening around us,” Izzy said. “I wonder what people would think if they listened to us.”

Lenny continued to stare at the ceiling, and soon the room went quiet. He closed his eyes and tried to listen to the lives playing out around them.

They kept the silence for a while, sipping their bitter drinks. Lenny sat up and looked over at her, and there she was, sitting on the edge of her bed, those toes running through the carpet, looking back at him. There she was. He thought about the dinner they had made, the drinks she had mixed. He heard somebody coughing behind the walls. She must have heard it too.

“We can’t keep doing this,” Izzy finally said.

“Geoff. You’re happy with him?”

“I’m with him, Lenny. He’s nice to me, he knows what he wants.”

The walls felt like they were leaning in. He wondered how things might have been if he’d asked her to go with him, if he had stayed. Lenny’s phone vibrated in his pocket, and it felt like Holly’s hand rubbing his thigh.

“He wants me to move in with him when he gets back.”

“It’s the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who lives together anymore?” Lenny asked.

“He’s going to propose when he comes back.”

“How do you know?”

“Two years is a long time, Lenny. The world doesn’t stop just because you want things to be as they were when you left them. He’s older. He’s got different priorities and a career, he wants different things out of life than you do.”

“How do you know what I want?”

“I don’t. I’m not sure you do either.”

“What if I said I’d leave New York tomorrow to come back.”

“It’s not the same as doing it.”

“So now what?”

Izzy’s face was blank, but behind it, it looked like a thousand decisions had already been made. She went to the kitchen and came back with the bottle of gin. Sitting next to him, she looked at Lenny and tried to smile, handing him the bottle.

\*\*\*

Lenny woke up to the sound of his phone vibrating. It had fallen from his pocket and was buzzing along the floor. He watched from the bed as it circled the floor, the screen lighting up the room. A fleet of snow removal trucks drove by outside under streetlamps, the floorboards shuddered beneath the bed. He got the panicked feeling that the whole world wanted in on their room, and he didn’t want to let them in. He heard footsteps climbing the stairs and knew if the door handle jiggled, and the door opened, it would all be over.

Izzy was breathing beside him. He watched the trucks’ shadows driving by, the white walls lit up by his cellphone, the ceiling above with its cracked paint, the bookshelves brimming with spines haloed from the snow removal trucks’ spotlights. He saw Izzy’s face in its half-shadow; her eyes were wide open, staring up at the ceiling. He knew the whole world would implode on them one day.

“It makes me sad to think about it,” she whispered into the dark.

“What does?”

“To hear his footsteps going up those stairs.”

Lenny listened to the sirens and watched the trucks’ lights pass along the side of her face.



“Why is that so sad?”

“Because he’s going to the same room he always does, to the same couch, to watch the same T.V.”

“So?” he asked.

“How’s it any different than a coffin?”

He thought about it for a while, about all the rooms along the street as coffins. He wondered what Izzy thought it meant to be alive. Of course, the old man could get up and leave his room at any point.

“I think you should try and get some sleep.” He threw the covers over her head, but she pulled them back down and got up. Lenny tried to listen for a TV through the walls, there was nothing but the sound of the fridge, and the clock ticking on the wall. He thought about all the people living and dying in their rooms, and wondered how many of them thought about it that way.

She sprung up and turned the upright lamp on in the corner of her bedroom, then scanned the bookshelf next to it. The balloon drifted in front of the books, and as Izzy swatted it, her nail caught the rubber and it popped. After jumping, she laughed in relief. She removed a book of poetry from the shelf like she was pulling a lever that might open to a secret room.

“Do you remember that poetry class we took in CEGEP?” Izzy asked.

“The one with the Croatian professor.”

“That’s it, and how he always used to go on these incredible tangents about life and death.”

“You used to do such a good impersonation of him.”

Izzy grinned, placing the opened anthology on her head as if to fashion some traditional Croatian hat. She began speaking in an accent, pacing the room.

“But of course, the only medicine to the agony of being is love.” She gestured with her hands, pointing at something imperceptible, then pretended to comb her fingers through her beard. “And of course, you just need to sit down and write it, you know. Anywhere. On a napkin, a brown paper bag,

a leaf, a fogged-up mirror. You need to be madly in love, with anything, with anyone, so much so that you can't keep it in."

Lenny applauded her performance as she bowed. The book fell from her head and made a loud thump against the wooden floor.

"Do you want me to read one to you?"

"Only if you do it in that accent."

She picked it up and fanned through the book, randomly placing a finger on the now stopped page.

"'My Husband Discovers Poetry,' by Diane Lockward."

She sat back down and began to read. Halfway through the poem she closed the book and covered her face, and quietly began crying. Lenny didn't get up to hug her. He didn't know what to do. If he got up to touch her, it would only make things worse.

"Do you think we can love more than one person," she finally asked from behind her hands. The clock kept ticking on the wall.

"Sure. Why not?"

"Do you believe that?"

"It depends on what you mean by love," Lenny said. "But really, no."

"Neither do I."

His phone buzzed again. The trucks removed snow from the streets outside while a whole city slept behind closed doors and thin walls. He felt like answering the phone, but not right then. Right then, there was hair and there were lips, there was a pile of dishes drying while they quietly—so as not to wake the neighbours—listened to the humming and dying of it all.

"Come back to bed, Izzy. We'll figure it all out in the morning."

She sat in her chair a while longer. The room seemed to orbit around her as she contemplated something. When she stood up she turned the upright lamp off, taking her time to feel her way through the dark.

“Would you tell me that story about the baby monitors again?” Izzy asked, but before Lenny could begin, she was already asleep.