

Residual

Charlotte Esme Frank

A Thesis

in

The Department

of English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (English/Creative Writing) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

March 2022

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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By: Charlotte Esme Frank

Entitled: Residual

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Master of Arts (English/Creative Writing)

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Dr. Andre Furlani Examiner

Professor Josip Novakovich Examiner

Professor Kate Sterns Thesis Supervisor(s)

Approved by Dr Stephen Yeager

Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Pascale Sicotte

Dean of Faculty

Abstract

Residual

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Residual consists of a collection of interwoven short stories and poems, and attempts to explore the ways in which we interact with spaces to which we do not belong. Each piece centers around a female character who finds herself in an uncomfortable situation in her personal life or at work, and seeks to explore the complex feelings that arise as women navigate the many roles they play. The stories which are set at temporary addresses and temporary places of work, revolve around characters who are conflicted in some way and ultimately prevented from taking their preferred course of actions. Like the poems, the stories explore situations in which something is expected of the protagonists that conflicts with the expectations they have of themselves. The poems are set in contained locations at temporary addresses, and touch upon themes of displacement, loneliness and imminent absence.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard posits that the home is the space for the solitary imagining which nourishes our creativity and well-being. The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind” (6), he writes, adding that “a house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability” (17). In *Residual*, I’ve attempted to convey the experience of living outside of the stability Bachelard describes, and to ask how liminality affects our relationships, memories and understanding of ourselves.

Acknowledgements

I am so grateful to my supervisor Kate Sterns for her support, patience and expert guidance; my parents Mitchell Frank and Laura Taler, aunt Anne McDougall, and brother Saul Frank Taler, for their love and encouragement; and my friends Sophie Ebsary and Sergei Jacobson without whom not a word of this could have been written.

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Nancy and Robert

“Are you closed?”

Nancy was wiping down the café’s counters and started when I spoke.

“Oh! I-I wasn’t expecting any more customers.” Her eyes fell to the watch on her slender wrist. “Um... no, not closed. Not quite anyway.” She hesitated. “Well, come in.”

I was relieved; the thought of returning home was dreadful. Nancy lowered the volume of a love song I recognized but couldn’t place, then washed her hands and made her way to the cash. The icy air that had followed me through the glass door began to dissipate.

“So, Robert, no sketchbook tonight?” God, no. No more drafting.

“Not tonight. How are you, Nancy?”

“Oh, you know. Tired, but okay. You?”

“Fine, fine.” I wrapped myself more tightly in my fraying coat and glanced through the large window. Outside, naked trees trembled.

“What a night, hm? We’re supposed to get ten centimeters before morning. And that wind—what are you doing out now anyway?” I wasn’t sure how to explain.

“Felt like a walk.”

“Right.” Nancy looked suspiciously from me to the storm raging on Stanley street. I ran a hand nervously through my greying hair. But then she added, “So, what can I get you?” with a sunny smile, and immediately all was well.

Nancy always put me at ease. *Nancy, with the laughing face*, I’d thought to myself upon hearing her name for the first time, like the Sinatra song that had permeated my childhood. The trek had been worthwhile, even if I could bask in her presence for only a few minutes. I

ordered a tea and stood by the counter, rubbing my gloveless hands together for warmth. Nancy reached for a paper cup. Shivering, I interrupted her mid-gesture.

“Oh, do you think I could take it to stay instead? I think I need to thaw for a bit before heading back out there.” Her gaze drifted again to the dark, frozen world.

She sighed. “Alright.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.” My pulse quickened, bringing the feeling back to my frostbitten cheeks. I headed to the counter that lined the storefront window.

“Oh, but could you sit at one of the tables? I still have to clean by the entrance.”

“Of course!” I settled at the table nearest Nancy.

This was prized real-estate. Normally, when I went to the café on my lunch breaks to sketch, the tables, bathed in sunlight, would already be occupied. So, I’d sit at the drafty counter, with my back to the rest of the space. That had been fine—I’d drawn the pigeons and bundled up commuters walking briskly towards Saint Catherine—until one afternoon Nancy complimented me on a drawing while clearing away my dishes. Since then, what had become increasingly interesting to me was precisely what I couldn’t see: The space occupied by Nancy where a long line of people waited to order strangely complicated variations on the same theme, and the motley crew of twenty-something-year-old employees who shouted out those orders.

Particularly, I was fascinated by Nancy, whose cheerful voice I often overheard chatting patiently with even the most obnoxious of customers.

As I was forced to draw the goings-on around me while blind to them, I filled in details from my imagination. I embellished. I revived the shriveled plants behind the bar and added exotic species to the many thriving ones that hung from the molded ceiling. I filled in cracks in the exposed brick walls, and in the black and white floor tiles. I even traded in the ornately

framed Kandinsky poster for something more to my taste. In some sketches it was a Renoir of happy dancing people with dimples and soft edges, in another, one of Degas' ballerinas. In many sketches, Nancy spoke lengthily with me instead of with younger, more successful looking clients. Yet, while I'd perfected many details I'd been unable to see, I'd never quite managed to capture Nancy. That night, however, I had the table all to myself. I had a clear view, and Nancy all to myself also. We were alone in the glowing café: safe from the howling wind and spiraling snow. She rifled through a battered tea box.

"I haven't been here in a while," I told her.

"Haven't you?"

"No, no. I've been away." I was surprised she hadn't noticed my absence.

"Right." She was now hastily getting a cup and saucer.

"Well, not away exactly. I, well, I'm not working at the museum anymore."

"Ah. On to better things?" she asked distractedly.

"I hope so. It wasn't exactly my choice to leave."

Nancy looked up from the chipped teapot she was filling to meet my gaze. "Sorry," she said as her cheeks flushed softly with embarrassment. Sweet Nancy.

"No, that's ok." I stared at my raw crimson hands. "I mean, don't be," I shrugged, then looked back at her. "It's a blessing in disguise, probably." Nancy smiled, then brought over my order before returning behind the counter. With her back turned to me, she began doing dishes. I wanted to see her face.

"I love this place," I ventured.

"I'm sorry?" Nancy asked, confused. She hadn't quite heard me over the sound of the industrial dishwasher beside her.

“I’ve come to really like this place,” I repeated, raising my voice.

“Oh,” she said, returning her attention to the dishes.

“It’s my home away from home. I’ve been drawing it. Or trying to. That’s not going so well at the moment. Preparatory sketches for a painting.” I expected her to ask about the painting, but she didn’t. “Do you know Manet?”

“Manet... the lily pads?” She kept her back to me.

“No that’s *Monet*. Manet as in—here I’ll show you.” I got up and walked over to her while pulling up an image on my phone. “Like this,” I said showing her *Olympia*, “or this one here.” I pulled up *Un Bar aux Folies Bergères*.

“Oh, sure sure.” She turned her head to see the image while her hands stayed in the sink. I could count the constellation of freckles dotting her cheeks, and make out the shadow of darker roots at the parting of her hair. I was surprised; in my mind, her curls were naturally golden.

“I’d like to paint a modern version of it.” Nancy squinted at the image on my phone. I could smell her shampoo as she leaned closer. I beamed, “You see, Manet was painting the portrait of his era. The *Bar* is modern life encapsulated: the electric lights, the bourgeois entertainment, the blasé barmaid perhaps for sale herself—,” Nancy was no longer looking my way. “Manet painted the...the essence of his experience of modernity. I’d like to capture the essence of mine. A *Bar* for the twenty-first century. I’m setting it here.”

“Here?” Nancy shook her head. “But this place is stuck in another century. I mean, look at this stuff.” She pointed a soapy hand at the brick wall where decorative wooden shelves were mounted. I walked over to one crowded with delicate teacups. The cast-iron brackets beneath were made to look like flowering ivy. I picked one up.

“My mother had a collection of these.”

“Exactly,” she nodded. “Everything in this place is *old*. Some of it’s pretty, but some of it...,” her eyes wandered to another shelf, which housed a collection of porcelain dalmatians, “creeps me out.” I inspected them. I’d never noticed them before.

“It’s their eyes, isn’t it? There’s something off about their eyes.”

“They all point in *slightly* different directions. It’s unnerving.”

I laughed and remembered more lyrics from the song:

She takes the winter and makes it summer,

summer could learn some lessons from her.

Believe me I’ve got a case, of Nancy with the laughing face.

Nancy began putting away clean dishes. As she reached up to the shelf where the glasses were kept, her t-shirt rode up and I caught sight of her silky skin. My face grew hot and I unzipped my coat. She descended from the tips of her toes and, when she noticed me eying her, her face clouded over.

“You’ll have to drink that pretty quickly,” she said, indicating the teapot on my table.

“I’ll be out of here in fifteen minutes or so.”

“Absolutely.” I sat back down.

I was surprised by her tone. I’d only been observing. Research for my work. My work. At the thought of it, a weight dropped into my stomach: only fifteen more minutes before I’d have to return home, to losing my mind in frustration with my painting.

Nancy grabbed a broom from behind a closet door and began sweeping hurriedly. Without my tour guide job distracting me, I could dedicate myself fully to my art. And yet, in the week since I’d been fired, everything I painted disgusted me. But what, other than paint, could I

do? It wasn't like I'd be hired at another museum or gallery after what had happened. Word got around. At forty-seven, I was too old to still be tour-guiding anyway. So, I *would* paint a masterpiece on the scale of Manet's. That would show the director who'd sent me packing after such a minor incident. "Incident." I hated the word. It was a misunderstanding. A flirtation miscommunicated. The circle who had been so quick to expel me would soon be falling at my feet. Julia, who'd left me half a decade ago, would realize her mistake. Like Manet's bar, mine would fascinate critics for years. The enticing expression on Nancy's face, as well as her relationship with the shadowy man leaning on the café bar, would be debated endlessly. I had observed many such men in the café, young well-dressed businessmen who smirked, teased loudly, and probably tipped well. If only I could figure out the details of Nancy's rosy complexion. I'd torn up sketch after sketch in anger before leaving my apartment that night. Try as I might, I just couldn't convey the specifics of how her smile caressed her face, or her eyes flirted playfully. Nancy, meanwhile, was no longer in sight. I could hear her muffled voice through the bathroom door. She was making a phone call.

"You don't think you could come pick me up, do you?... No, no, I'm fine, it's just—," her voice became too quiet for me to hear. "No, that's alright," I heard her saying next. "Yeah... yeah I'll call you later. Ok... Ok Bye."

I pretended not to notice as she re-entered the space. It was 8:05 pm and I had finished my tea, but wasn't ready to leave. Besides, a young woman shouldn't be alone downtown at night. If whoever she'd called couldn't come get her, then I could at least escort her to the metro station. And what other opportunity would I have to memorize the gentle curve of her nose or the graceful rhythm of her movements? I had to stay for the sake of my painting. I wondered where Nancy lived and what her apartment looked like. I pictured a brightly coloured space, maybe a

little messy, with lacy undergarments lying around here and there. Somewhere much more welcoming than my own home. The music looped back to the song that had been playing when I had first walked in; Nancy turned the volume up and hummed along.

Give me a reason to love you.

It wasn't a love song exactly; it was too mournful, too desperate.

"Who sings this?"

"Portishead. It's called 'Glory Box.' Nancy filled a bucket, dunked a ragged mop into it, and began wiping the floor with long broad strokes. I noted the coffee stains on her canvas shoes and skin-tight jeans.

"A friend of mine, Julia, would have liked this song. She used to listen to this kind of music a lot when we lived together. You remind me of her actually."

"Do I?" I was about to explain, but Nancy was quick to add, "Have you finished with your tea? I'm just about done and I'll be heading out soon." She was a little out of breath from how rapidly she was working.

"Not quite." Nancy turned up the volume some more and I fell silent. I'd wanted to explain how she reminded me of Julia. Kind, warm-hearted Julia. I observed the tiled floor and remembered an identical one in the kitchen we'd shared. I remembered Julia sitting cross-legged on the chessboard tiles, her eyes red and a crumpled tissue in her fist.

"I just don't feel like I can be myself around you," she'd said. The words had burnt and blistered. "You have this idea of who I am in your head, and I just can't pretend to be that person anymore."

"I don't think that's fair, Julia."

“I’m sorry,” she’d said in the smallest voice imaginable. I’d shuddered. I’d wished at that moment for a wind like tonight’s to push us back together. For some Deus ex Machina to fill our mouths with exactly the right words, and reset us to our initial positions, like chess pieces after a particularly brutal match. But that had been an unusually temperate day in April. Buds had started appearing on the trees.

Nancy was again behind the counter where she popped open the cash drawer and began counting the various coins and bills. I could see her mouthing, “fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three...”

“You lived in Montreal long?” I had to shout a little over the music.

“I’m sorry?” She didn’t look up.

“Did you grow up here?”

“Oh,” she frowned a bit, “yes, yup.” She never lifted her gaze.

“Me too. Montreal man through and through.” I addressed my teapot since Nancy wouldn’t look my way. She didn’t answer. She was scribbling down the total sales numbers. I studied the intricate outline of the bra that held her supple breasts, and the rise and fall of her chest through the thin fabric of her shirt. When she was done, she asked,

“All finished?”

“Almost.”

“I’ll be heading out in just a few minutes.”

“Would you like some help? I could bring out the garbage or—”

“No, all good to wrap up on my own, do it all the time.”

“I’ll keep you company then!”

“That’s not necessary, I’m really fine.”

“No, I insist!”

Nancy was not smiling. She must have been tired. She was restocking napkins, straws and sugar packets by the cash, and not paying me any attention. “Here, all done,” I said, as I brought my teapot over to her.

“Great.” Nancy placed it in the dishwasher and shut down the machine. “They can do that in the morning,” she explained. “Time to go.”

“Oh.” I’d thought we’d still had some time. “Alright.” I refastened my coat. “You headed to the metro?” Nancy hadn’t heard me. “Can I walk you to the metro?” I repeated.

“No, I’d rather you didn’t.”

“I’m headed there myself actually,” I lied.

“Right.”

Our footsteps crunched as we stepped out onto the whitened street. It was too cold to talk. So cold, the air froze my nostrils as I inhaled, and turned to smoke as I exhaled. I was struck by the bleakness of the landscape and assumed Nancy was grateful to have me by her side. Together, we trudged through the many more than ten centimeters of snow that had fallen in the few hours since I’d left my apartment. I expected we would rekindle the conversation when we got to the Peel station platform, but once there, found that Nancy had put headphones on and never happened to look my way. The Portishead song was stuck in my head, and I wondered what she was listening to. As the metro rattled along, I tried to ask her what she was listening to, but she couldn’t hear me. We rode together in silence and I thought to myself, “This is nice too.” I only lived about a twenty-minute walk away from the café, and with each stop I was getting further and further from my apartment. I couldn’t help myself. I couldn’t bear the thought of returning to my dreary Sherbrooke street apartment, to the sound of speeding cars, and to

banging my head against the wall in frustration with my painting. Besides, I was trying to commit to memory the feeling of her thigh against mine on the plastic subway seats, the way she held her mitts in one hand and her phone in the other, and her frequent furtive glances in my direction. Six stops later, however, I decided I was getting too far from home. I nudged her gently and gestured towards the door to indicate that I was getting off. She raised her hand to say goodbye.

I took a step toward the exit, bracing myself for the sting of the bitter cold and for the confrontation with my own failure that awaited me at home. But I hesitated to head towards the escalator that would lead me back above ground. I wondered if there hadn't been a tinge of sadness to that wave of hers. Sure, "Glory Box" had been playing before she'd even seen me, but hadn't she let that song play a second time while talking to me? Smiling at me? Mightn't she want me to stay with her just a little longer? A young woman in such a desolate city would only wither, if all alone, on a night like this one. My cheeks burned and my heart rate accelerated. As the light above the metro car doors flared red, I ran back onto the heated train. I could see Nancy a few rows away, but for some reason, I kept my distance. *Believe me, I've got a case, of Nancy with the laughing face.* Concealing myself behind other passengers, I watched Nancy intermittently so as not to be noticed, and then when she got up to leave, I followed her.

3160 Barclay ave.

Filtered orange light
 tinted everything like we
 lived within the papered perimeters

of a lantern,
 or cocoon. Tiptoeing strange
 paths through familiar chaos, we

knew better than
 to set our heels
 down or relax the arches

of our feet.
 We were so careful
 not to step too firmly

and fall through
 the creaking yellow floor.
 I am no Mary Untier,

I could never undo
 any of your knots,
 in fact I think together

we tightened them.
 Caught in knotted silk
 walls, we lived in translucence,

only ever seeing
 shadows. Everything was hazy
 like we could stay wrapped

up forever—swaddled
 or suffocated—holding our
 breath in anticipation of longer

days, but opaque
 mornings perpetuated. We only
 ever dreamed of the events

of the previous
 day, reliving day after
 day caught in loops, gold

tinged fibers wrapped
our tight sleeping limbs.
Until I tripped over cardboard

shapes. Where I
caught myself the fabric
of our confinement tore and

light bent as
it permeated. When light
travels from a rarer to

a denser medium,
it slows down. That
apartment must have been dense

with ache. Within
its shell light hugged
the normal. It's all angles,

something was bound
to cut the chrysalis
and upset the nervous ecosystem.

Precarious and tipping,
no longer suspended, absorbed,
the earth and all of

its creatures seeped
through the cracks in the
cheap vinyl counters. Larva, Pupa,

Imago: We were
forced out and into
our imaginal stage. Structure disintegrated

and flaked off
into the atmosphere. Glutted
on all the lives it

had contained, the
apartment, having filled itself
to capacity, burst and spit

us out. There
was no room for
us there. First the bulbs

all went out,
then the fridge stopped
humming. No more white noise.

No more quiet
disquiet, instead the flapping
of something terrified to be new.

Tarot and Tea Leaves

“Keep or give away?”

Sally was holding up a plain beige blouse.

“Give away. No. No, keep.”

She looked at the shirt with disapproval.

“It’s cute,” I shrugged.

“Is it?”

“Here, I’ll show you.” I slipped it on.

“I don’t know, it’s kind of boring.”

“Duncan likes it.”

“Of course he does,” Sally said dryly. I shot her a look that was meant to be a reprimand, but she met my gaze so confidently I was the first to look away.

“What about this?” I asked quickly, picking up the green dress I’d worn to my photography school graduation.

“That’s pretty,” Sally answered distractedly.

I tried to memorize every detail of her as she rummaged through her bag. Once she’d retrieved her smoking paraphernalia, she rolled a cigarette with practised fingers. She was sitting beside my open suitcase with one leg dangling off the bed. Late afternoon sunlight streamed into the white room. It dappled Sally’s bent knee, and was absorbed by the dark curls that hung loose around her face. She licked the end of the paper, sealed it, then walked over to the open window to smoke.

“I’ve never seen you wear it though,” she added.

“The occasion doesn’t present itself very often.”

“Or you don’t like it as much as you think you do.”

“I’ll probably wear it more back in Montreal.”

Sally blew smoke out the window, leaning on its frame.

“Remind me again why you’re not staying?” she said without turning to me.

“What, in Berlin?”

“In Berlin.” Her gaze met mine.

“Keep or give away?”

“Rachel.” Sally’s expression was serious.

“We’ve been through this. I can’t leave Duncan, leave Montreal and set my life up here alone.”

“Why not? It’s not like you’d be starting from scratch. Your German is coming along, your job at the photography studio pays well, and they’d probably be able to get you a visa. You’ve started to build a community here, a life.” I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t sure how forthcoming to be with Sally about just how seriously I’d been considering the possibility. The truth was that as much as it terrified me, the thought of a future in Berlin brought me more joy than any other I could envision. Still, it didn’t feel within reach.

“But Duncan—I couldn’t just *leave* him. I mean, that would be ...He and I have a good thing going, it’s... harmonious.”

“Is it?”

“It works.”

“Does it?”

“Keep or give away?”

Sally huffed, stubbed out her cigarette in a yellow ashtray on the window ledge, and made her way to me.

“Give away, to me. It’s mine now.” She snatched the green dress from me and shoved it into her bag.

I wondered if I’d upset her, if she’d really expected me to respond with enthusiasm rather than resistance. I wondered, too, if she’d push the conversation further.

Sally had a habit of thinking she knew better than everyone else, and another of getting into moods when anyone disagreed with her. I was one of few people who had the patience for her short temper.

“Good,” I said, “it’ll suit you better than it ever did me.”

Ignoring me, Sally tip-toed precariously through the disorganized bedroom, careful not to trip over the various loose ends strewn wall to wall. I pretended not to watch her delicate frame seek solid ground amidst the jungle of clothes and scattered photographs. Duncan had mostly left me to my own devices as far as the packing was concerned. I didn’t mind. This way, I got to spend my last days in Berlin alone with Sally and my thoughts, while he wrapped up his research assistantship at Humboldt University. Normally, I’d start sorting, boxing and labelling weeks before I needed to. This time around though I’d been slow to start.

“Montreal suits me,” I told Sally.

“So you’ve said,” she responded. She knelt in the corner of the room, clearly seeking something in particular. “But Berlin suits you better.”

“How could you know that?” Sally shrugged. I wanted her to list Berlin’s merits to me again. I permitted myself to revisit an increasingly familiar day-dream of a future in which these days in Berlin weren’t my last. The part of me that believed I might have the courage to leave

Duncan wanted a future where Sally and I would continue to wander dark streets, down rain-slicked cobblestones, and to smoky bars and cafés when we weren't working. This part of me wasn't ready to abandon the way in which I'd spent my days with Sally while Duncan studied late in to the night either shut up in his office or at the University Library.

“What about this?” I asked her, holding up a skirt.

Sally didn't answer. She was busy tracing a path through my chaos again, still searching for something. Finally, she unearthed my camera. “Sally, no. You know there's only one side of that viewfinder I like being on.”

“You're leaving in a week, so I get one picture. Just one. Look at me.” She was right, I was leaving in a week. I crossed my arms and looked at the lens. “No, look at *me*.” I shifted my gaze and couldn't help smiling at her with genuine affection. With a *click*, she captured my expression in the split second before joy turned to melancholy.

“What's next?” she asked, setting the camera aside.

“Dresser,” I answered, collecting myself.

We began emptying drawers. I pulled out a worn grey sweater of Duncan's, tenderly smoothed out the wrinkles and carefully refolded it. “I bought Duncan this.”

“Did you?”

“For his twenty-first birthday. Or, at least, I bought him the original, the one he lost at a restaurant. He was too distracted by the conversation we were having to notice it hanging off the back of his chair as we were leaving,” I put the sweater away. “It was like that the first couple of years we were together—we were so wrapped up in each other and what the other had to say that the rest of the world just, sort of, fell away.”

“So he replaced it?”

“Yeah, he was really broken up about it. He’d worn it every day for months. So, he went out and bought himself an identical one.”

“Did he ever buy you anything you liked as much?”

“He’s not great at that kind of thing.”

“So he doesn’t know you as well as you know him.”

“Sally! Of course that’s not it. I just have a knack for gifts.”

“That’s true,” Sally said pulling the necklace I’d found her at a flea market out from under her cotton shirt. “I love this thing, and we’d barely known each other a month when you gave it to me.”

“Intuition.” I winked.

We closed the emptied drawer and opened the one below. As Sally and I filled suitcases with the pieces that made up my life with Duncan, I thought back to one of the many nights I’d spent at the bar where she worked – a neighborhood hangout down the street from my apartment. That was where she and I had first met. Tired of spending my evenings alone, I’d wandered there, and ordered a beer. We had quickly got to talking upon recognizing a fellow anglophone and discovering we were both new to the city. From then on, I’d spent many a night on one of the rickety bar stools having long conversations with Sally while she intermittently served the familiar roster of aging customers. Sally, her lanky co-worker, Johann and I were the youngest people to cross the ancient establishment’s threshold by at least forty years.

“So, what is it you’re thinking about when you take a picture?” she’d asked that night.

“You mean, how do I choose what to include in a frame?”

“Yeah, what is it that catches your eye, that makes you think, ‘This is beautiful, but this isn’t’?”

“I guess I’m not really thinking about beauty all that much.”

“How can you not? I’m always thinking about beauty.”

“Are you? I don’t know. I think about composition and storytelling, which come with their own set of aesthetics I guess, but not really thinking about capturing something beautiful. I want to put things in a frame that are... interesting together or strange.”

“But don’t you enjoy beautiful things?”

“I guess so. I mean, of course.”

“That’s just not the priority when you’re taking pictures.”

“I’m not sure that’s ever really my priority.”

“Huh. I *revel* in beauty,” she’d said playfully. I’d laughed.

I’d brought my camera with me that night and taken a photograph I was excited to develop. More excited than I’d been in a long time. It had felt like rediscovering my love of the craft, a love I hadn’t realized I’d lost. The picture was of Sally and Johann posing behind the bar. They looked vulnerable—young and slender—amidst the heavy wooden architecture, dark oak panelling, faded mirrors and chipped beer mugs. Sally was leaning on the bar with her arms outstretched. For someone so small, she occupied a lot of space. She stared at the camera defiantly. Johann, meanwhile, stood beside her, relaxed, cleaning a glass, perfectly at ease. I’d loved the contrast in their demeanors—her flirtatious challenge, his nonchalance—and the messy, claustrophobic charm of the bar. I’d never captured a moment like that before.

“That’s going to be a good one,” Sally had said, smiling at me.

Usually, I slunk in around three or four AM, and snuck into bed with Duncan, who never suspected that I’d been out past midnight. He slept soundly. That morning, however, I had arrived around six. and Duncan was awake and reading the newspaper.

“Where have you *been*?”

“Sally and I stayed up talking at the bar and lost track of time.” I was exhausted and eager to sleep for a few hours before my shift that afternoon. “I brought my camera with me; I think I managed to get some nice shots of the place.” I was excited to share my newly rediscovered enthusiasm.

“Did you? Of the bar?” Duncan, was taken aback and a little upset with me, “I don’t know why you would want to take photographs there, it’s *awful*. Would you make us coffee? It always tastes better when you make it. ”

“Sure.” I sighed.

“Would you read this chapter for me also? I want to know what you think.” He’d launched into one of his lengthy explanations of his research and, swaying on my feet a little, I’d done my best to engage.

Struggling to force a pair of shoes into the corner of an already bursting bag, I contemplated the logistics of staying in Berlin for the hundredth time. Sally was right, I wouldn’t be starting from scratch. I had started establishing myself in the city.

“What’s this?” Sally had found a photograph stored between two of my shirts. She withdrew it carefully from its hiding place and handed it to me after having examined it. “You look happy, you both do.”

“We were.” It was a candid photo of Duncan and me laughing at some private joke. “That was at his graduation. At that point we were both in the same field. I had a year left, but I dropped out that summer and decided to pursue photography instead.”

“Was he disappointed?”

“What, that I never finished my bachelor’s?” I thought about it for a moment. “Probably,” I admitted out loud for the first time. The dresser was empty and I couldn’t pack anymore, so I asked Sally if she wanted a coffee.

“Or...” Sally said, unveiling the bottle of wine she’d hidden in the canvas bag slung across her body.

In the kitchen, Sally leafed through one of Duncan’s books while I dug around for wine glasses. I took a mental picture of her frowning at the pages of the thick volume, delicately sliding one page after another with nimble fingers. Her hands were quick and confident. She used them a lot when she talked, danced, smoked. She showed affection with subtle little movements in her wrists and fingertips.

I couldn’t find the wine glasses, so we drank straight from the bottle. The sun had fully set, and the dim kitchen light buzzed. A wind made the windowpanes creek. It was still August, but the weather was on the cusp of changing. Berlin turned shades of grey and sepia in the fall, like a grainy old film. It had been a surprise to arrive a year ago in such a monochromatic city after technicolour Montreal, where the mountain’s tie-died trees provided a vivid backdrop in the autumn.

Sally hoisted herself onto the kitchen counter and said, “Here, give me your hand.”

“What?”

“Give me your hand, the left one.” Raising an eyebrow, I crossed the narrow kitchen and extended my left hand to her. She took it in her own, then turned it over and looked at it closely.

“What are you doing?”

“I read palms,” she answered without looking up.

“No you don’t.”

“I do!” she insisted, her eyes fluttering up to mine mischievously. “My mother was big into witchcraft and fortune telling when I was little. She taught me all the basics of tea leaves and tarot...”

“And palms?” Sally nodded, studying my skin. I was skeptical. Sally had told me many things about her fiercely independent mother, but her dabbling in divination had never come up.

“This line here,” she said lightly tracing across my open palm, “is your lifeline.” I shivered. “See these smaller lines that run across it? Those indicate many lives lived in one. Your lifeline is long, there’s room for many things. This little curve here suggests radical change after a long period of stability. And this line here, is your love line. It branches off into three lines by your index, which means there will be three great loves in your life. The first will barely count; see how faded that line is? And the second will end abruptly; that line just stops all of a sudden. The third will last, though. See how it extends all the way up to your fingers? Let’s see what else... Oh, this is interesting. This line here that cuts down the middle of your hand indicates a choice you’ll have to make. There seem to be two ways your life can go. See these lines scattered across the left side of your palm near your thumb? Those suggest a life of adventure and constant change. But the right side of your palm is smooth. A quiet life in the suburbs maybe. Three kids, if the creases on your pinky are accurate... and two dogs judging by the notches on your ring finger.”

“Oh yeah?” I laughed. “And how many marriages?” Our heads were bent close together. The smell of my perfume tangled itself with that of her cigarettes.

“Two,” Sally stated without skipping a beat.

“All of that from one hand?” I asked, hoping she would continue gently tracing patterns on my skin.

“All that from one hand,” she answered. “Oh and this line right over here?” She paused, and looked up.

“Yeah?” Our eyes met. She smirked.

“This line means I’m full of shit,” she said letting me go.

“*Full of shit.* I knew it, I knew your mom never read tarot cards. Christ, Sally, what a show you put on,” I laughed again. I thought about the nights we’d spent talking at the bar, the days spent wandering the city. I thought about being in Montreal without Sally, about remaining in the role my relationship neatly carved out for me. With Sally, I never felt like a figment of someone else’s imagination. I felt expansive, and myself. Surely, it would be insane to uproot my life and stay overseas, away from my family, to end a seven-year relationship, and yet—

I put my hand near Sally’s again, I was still standing close to her—then we heard a key in the door and Duncan entered the apartment whistling. I took a step back.

“Hi sweetie,” he said, popping briefly into the kitchen to kiss me chastely on the cheek. “Have you been drinking? You look flushed. Hi Sally.”

“Duncan.” Sally tipped an imaginary hat to him.

“A little,” I said, trying not to seem flustered. “Just to take the edge off packing a bit.”

“Righto. How far have you gotten?”

“Almost done! Just some of your books and a couple of things lying around left.”

“Thanks for taking that on, and thanks Sally for the help. We owe you one.” I was touched by his expression of gratitude. He put his arm around me and I leaned habitually into his shoulder.

“Don’t know if I’m helping so much as hindering,” Sally joked.

“Well, in that case thank *you* anyway Rachel. I’m off to bed. Another big day at the library tomorrow.”

“Duncan, wait,” I followed him out of the kitchen and kissed him in the hallway.

“Good night,” I said.

“Good night.” He smiled at me.

Wine bottle in hand, Sally and I snuck through the kitchen door which led to a little balcony looking out onto a courtyard. It was a square space, each surrounding wall the outside of an apartment building. That needs to be clearer. The walls were pale yellow and striped with three horizontal lines of red brick, though everything looked blue in the darkness. They were peppered with other balconies and windows through which trickled the sounds of people's voices, of people running water, and going up and down stairs or putting dishes away. Often, I'd hear footsteps, but wouldn't know where they were coming from. In the middle of the courtyard there was a chestnut tree. It was tall and sturdy, but swayed with surprising flexibility in the wind. Every few minutes chestnuts hurtled fiercely to the ground. They shot down at a dangerous speed and clanged against the courtyard's tiled floor. I liked how calm the space was without being completely still, silent or even private. Every so often someone would walk through to unlock their bike or check their mail. In the night, the apartment windows glowed, and shadows danced behind drawn curtains. Sally and I sat cross-legged on the balcony floor as we had many times before.

“When you moved here, when you just showed up here alone because you wanted change, how did you know it was all going to be ok? That you'd find your feet somewhere new amongst strangers?” I asked her.

“I didn’t,” she answered simply. We sat in silence for a minute, listening to the chestnuts bounce off the courtyard’s tiles. “When you get back to Montreal, you’ll mail me that photo I took of you?”

“Sure.” I took a swig of wine. Sally rolled and lit another cigarette.

“Would you roll one for me?” Surprised, she looked at me, and then rolled and lit one for me too. We sat for a long time, looking out onto the neighbours, silently listening together, invisible except for two glowing stubs flickering in the darkness.

Lewishamstrabe 17

It's still there, the off-white stucco,
gripped and grated while rain slickens
jigsaw cobblestones before it.

Trembling to reopen heavy green
doors to memories of voices colliding
in echoing stairwells, of intricate brass

doorknobs contorting daintily
of restlessness, (nothing could
hold us then), I steady my hand

upon the key and withdraw.
Still there, amidst mirrored surroundings—
structures that vanish against grey skies

(chameleon buildings, omnipresent, invisible).
The street corner is flooding,
you loom lightly then leave,

losing my footing trying to keep up,
I lose my sense of direction and every
sense of every word you speak at me.

I can't quite piece together the strange
reflective shards—like something shattered.
You preach new gospels now, your stillness

unsettles. We descend damply
and seek shelter
in an underground sanctuary

where the blessed and damned alike
await judgement
(Heads bowed, low humming, mumbling tones).

I don't believe in limbo,
but if I did I might imagine it
feeling something like this:

tiled and artificially lit.
All smooth surfaces,
nothing to hold on to,

you're not supposed to stay here long.
I pray for fewer words and more time,
and light a candle in my mind's eye

for what I do not yet know
is already lost. Still, I wait,
in quiet anticipation.

Between the here of maybe
and the there of yes, I wait
for nowhere to consume first

every finger and then all my hands.
Between the here of sometime
and the there of now, I wait

for never to overwhelm first
every syllable then all my words.
There is but one way forward,

although I wish I could stay
stuck in stucco and let its hooks
velcro into my chipping paint,

instead of stretching away
from this slippery platform
and receding into a memory again.

The Haircut

I'd gotten lost trying to find the hair salon my colleague had recommended. Montreal's icy streets were still unfamiliar to me, and I'd turned right instead of left on Saint-Laurent only to end up at the fringes of Little Italy instead of downtown. Frozen crystals clung to my eyelashes leaving an inky residue of mascara under my eyes. My toes were going numb in my boots, in spite of my thick socks, and my breath froze. So, when I finally stumbled upon *any* salon, I sighed with relief. The afternoon sun on their windows blinded me, but I wasn't in any state to be picky. And what I needed done was simple enough; I just wanted to regain some control over the unruly brown mess my hair had become in the months I'd been too busy moving to think about it. Now, having started a new job, I'd suddenly become self-conscious amidst the more put-together and professional looking copywriters at *Bewell*, the pastel pink "wellness" start-up I didn't entirely condone, but to which I was nonetheless grateful for my employment.

The walls of the narrow salon were lined with large mirrors, with four barber's chairs and two middle aged white men endlessly reflected in a mise-en-abyme of denim and low-cut V-necks. Fluorescent lights flickered behind sheets of plastic in one of those yellowed foam ceilings like the ones we used to launch pencils into in grade school. Generic dance music tried desperately to liven the limp atmosphere, and I immediately regretted my decision to cross the threshold.

One of the cologne-drenched men was restlessly swivelling the leather chair in which he was seated while complaining loudly to the other who listened half-heartedly and swept a clean floor – neither the slush other customers might have dragged in, nor the hair they would have left behind, were anywhere to be seen.

“I’m a good boss, a kind honest man, and he thinks, because of my kindness, that he can walk all over me. That I don’t know he’s faking if he says he’s not feeling well on one of the coldest days of— ”

The seated man noticed me and our eyes met.

“So sorry,” I said, feigning an excuse to leave, “wrong address.”

But before I could turn my back on the strange scene, there was a hand at my elbow and I was being ushered into a chair.

“Come, my love, sit!” the man who’d been seated said to me, before continuing the monologue my entrance had interrupted. “Do you think *I* wanted to come in today? Do you think *I* wanted to trudge through the awful weather we’re having and open up shop? Of course not, but if we all stayed home ‘sick’ then nobody gets paid.” As he spoke, my coat was taken, I was offered a napkin to blow my nose and straighten out my mascara, my hat was removed and I was asked, “So, my darling, I’m Greg, and you are?”

“Shannon,” I told him hesitantly.

“Sharon! Lovely, *Enchanté*, my beauty, delighted. Now, what is it we’re doing today?”

“Oh, no *Shan*—nevermind. Just a trim? It’s just been sticking up at odd angles for weeks and—”

“You know what we should do —you have the most stunning hair— we should do it short in the back and long in the front and we’ll give you bangs.” Before I could protest, he was talking to his employee again. “You think I *need* you to run my business, but I don’t need you. I’ve employed you out of the goodness of my heart, but I don’t need—”

Desperate, I interrupted him. “Oh! No no, no bangs, and I used to have it shorter in the back and I never really —”

“No bangs? You’re sure? Pity, they would frame your face, make you look a little more *Parisienne*. You’re sure?”

“No bangs.” Everyone at the start-up had bangs and neat straight hair and insisted they were trying to look ‘French,’ whatever that meant (pencil skirts and striped sweaters as far as I could gather). “And I really don’t want much taken off, I still need to be able to put it up,” I added.

“Excellent, well then let’s freshen you up,” he said as he started dampening my hair with water from a blue plastic spray bottle. The lights flickered ominously, and outside the sun threatened to disappear behind low brick buildings even though it was hardly four in the afternoon. I shivered.

“You know what,” I fumbled hurriedly to find my way out of the vinyl apron fastened around my neck, “I’ve actually just remembered there’s somewhere I need to be. I should probably—”

“Won’t take long! You’ve never met a hairdresser who cuts hair faster than I do.” This piece of information was not a comfort to me.

“No that’s really alright, I’d forgotten, I have to —” I insisted. Then I heard a snip. In the mirror, I saw four inches of hair drift to the floor and my heart sunk along with it. I settled grudgingly into my seat, my fingers tightly interlaced. On the bright side, surely whatever Greg did couldn’t make me look any *more* disheveled. It was also a relief to be out of the cold, and out of the apartment I wasn’t yet ready to call home. I thought begrudgingly of the cardboard boxes waiting patiently in the living room. The ones left to unpack were those labelled “trinkets/souvenirs-FRAGILE”. The thought of decorating my new space with old memories, or maybe just of decorating at all, made me reluctant to slice their clear tape seal.

Meanwhile, seemingly oblivious to my resistance, Greg kept cutting and talking to the man I'd pieced together was his employee, "You know what the most expensive thing about running my business is? You are. If business gets bad and I need to cut costs, your pay is the *first* thing to go. And you think I wouldn't have any reason to fire you? Well! With all of these 'sick' days, believe me, I would have *plenty* of reason. Thin ice, I tell you, thin ice." I stared at my reflection and wondered what exactly it was that I had walked into. I wondered again if I should leave, but it was too late to do so. Just as I was reasoning with myself that leaving now would only embarrass Greg, who'd been nothing but kind to me after all, if a little brash, the glass door swung open and a young woman walked in. Her heeled boots clicked on the tiled floor.

"Greg! I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd say hello."

"Natasha, darling!" My hair was abandoned as Greg rushed to greet her with a kiss on each cheek. She reciprocated. "What are you doing out on a day like today? It is *so* cold."

"Oh, I'm parked around the corner, I'd never be out *walking* dressed like this." She indicated her cropped coat and hatless head. "No, I just had to go to the bank and wanted to pop in. We're still on for Tuesday?"

"Of course! Are you sure you don't want to do highlights? They're lovely in the winter, everyone thinks you've been some place *exotic* on holiday."

"Just the usual, Greg." She caught my eye in the mirror. "This one's always trying to convince me I should dye my hair. God forbid. I like the colour as it is!" she teased. I smiled; her presence was reassuring. If Natasha trusted Greg, surely I could. Then she lowered her voice a little and touched Greg's arm. "How's your father doing?" I didn't catch anything else of what was said, the two spoke softly and familiarly to each other. Greg nodded and shrugged a lot, Natasha crossed her arms and looked sympathetic. A few minutes later, she made her way out.

“Well I best be off, see you soon!”

“Bye love! Always a pleasure.” Greg turned back to me. “Now, where were we?”

Within moments he was performing outrage. “Who cut your hair last? This is terrible. You see this? This is all wrong.” As he spoke, he violently tugged at large segments of hair, cut the ends off with a flourish and then flung the trimmed strands back towards my neck. “Terrible my love. You have beautiful hair, stunning. And I never lie. Isn’t that right Roger?” Roger grunted. “I pride myself on my honesty.” Greg pulled so fiercely that my chair spun a little in the direction. My scalp was aching at this point. How on earth was he able to cut evenly if my head was a moving target.

“I’m always honest,” Greg reiterated. “If Roger here comes to me and asks if he’s doing a good job, I’ll tell him ‘yes’ or, if he isn’t, ‘no’. I’m not going to hide the truth from him. No excuses.” Greg stroked my shoulder to act out the sympathy he had just vowed he would never show. His touch was unwelcome, but I told myself I was silly to feel so bothered by it. “Which is why I would not tell you, Sharon, that you had good hair if you did not. What good would it do me to lie to you? So, believe me, it’s *lush*, but whoever cut it last was out to get you.” Greg was cutting my hair much shorter than I had anticipated, but maybe that was ok too. Maybe it was time for a change, and to finally relent and try to fit in more at *Bewell*. Maybe this was the universe’s gentle way of encouraging me to commit to Montreal and to my prim, feminine job. Maybe Sharon would have an easier time making friends at work than Shannon. Maybe she would go on that date with Jonathan, the cute barista from her local café, that Shannon had turned down. Maybe Sharon wore brighter colours than Shannon did, and had an easier time writing horoscopes and skin care advice columns. I thought about work, about this week’s upcoming deadlines—I winced as Greg yanked at my head, evening out loose ends—and

wondered if with a glossy bob to match hers, my boss Christina would trust that I was “capturing her voice” in the weekly newsletters I was tasked with writing.

Greg dusted hair off of my shoulders and examined the back of my head.

“Alright, now I’ll style it,” Greg told ‘Sharon’ as he tousled the wet, chin length haircut he’d given *her*. He proceeded to plug in a blow dryer, which he held so close to my scalp it burnt my skin. I pulled my head away and was about to explain that I really didn’t need my hair styled, but Greg said, “No no, my love, you have to let me dry your roots, otherwise you’ll catch a cold, it’s *treacherous* out there.”

“It’s too hot!” I couldn’t help but snap at Greg, who was immediately apologetic and adjusted the blow dryer’s settings.

“Oh, *darling*, all you had to do was *tell* me,” Greg said, seeming hurt by my outburst. I was relieved but felt bad. He was only doing his job; I should have been more agreeable. “How embarrassing for him,” I thought to myself. My stomach tightened at the thought, as I remembered thinking those same words once before. In a flash I was revisited by a memory I had buried deep in the creases of my mind. As Greg’s fingers grazed my neck, I was again fourteen, in Toronto, where I’d grown up. It was one of the first times I’d taken the subway by myself to school. (Greg’s comb got caught in my earring.) I was thinking about the history test I’d been studying for all week and reviewing the dates of the rise and fall of the Carolingian empire when I noticed a strange hand between my thighs. Confused and flustered I brushed the hand aside, but within moments it had returned. (Greg’s hand lingered a little too long at my collar bone.) Confused, I’d looked up to see a strange man smiling at me while his hand edged further up between my legs. I raced to the other side of the subway car. I’d put the incident from my mind

and felt bad for having been in the man's way. I hadn't thought about it since; I'd done well on the history test.

Suddenly Greg leaned into me, pressed his lips to my ear and whispered through my hair, "Don't worry, my love, you're so pretty, I'll give you a discount." His words sent chills up to the crown of my head. Greg combed and teased and pulled some more until I hardly recognized the woman staring back at me in the mirror. "Hello Sharon," I thought.

Before Greg released me, he spun the chair away from the mirror and pretended to make sure he hadn't missed any strands, coming close to my face to examine whether both sides of my head were evenly cut. "My love," he said, "has anyone ever told you, you would make a stunning redhead? Next time you come in, we'll dye it for you, what do you say?"

I wanted to scream, but instead, Greg helped me with my coat. I paid, tipped, pulled my hat down low over my ears and left him with a thank you. A few minutes later, on a crowded bus, I removed my hat and glanced cautiously at my reflection in the window. This would have to be fixed before work tomorrow. Or maybe I could wear it up or something—no, no it was too short. I couldn't show up looking like this. But I couldn't deal with any of that right now. It needed to be stowed away and dealt with later. Now, I had an apartment to finish unpacking, and more decisions to make about what to keep and what to give away.

2 Monk Street

Legs dangling from
the kitchen
counter—

of my sleeping
childhood
home—

marble
gums in
the mouth

I listen, and from miles away
her voice fills miles of time.
Suspending my words as usual, holding

my tongue in a resonant dome,
I let myself go hungry waiting
for a bite of clarity.

Stove-lit ambiguity
tastes like missing teeth.
I sift her interpretations

of our collisions into my own,
and wonder

if I can fill myself with —
if I can extricate myself from—
the ever-expanding distance between us.

When I hang
up, I
have

to
swat away
the words, crumbs,

she's left hovering, and stare
at my knees for the grainiest
of eternities. I chew sand,

I was only ever borrowing
her city and its time.

Too scattered too long, I'll have to
gather what I've left of myself
elsewhere to return home whole.

I wonder if I'll ever
fit into this grumbling house
like a missing piece

What distance doesn't
break, it
tests,

what
absence doesn't
wake it sets.

Footsteps and Fingerprints

The subway car doors slid closed behind me. Jonah was waiting at the top of the stairs, motionless, his hands in his pockets. As I ascended, the artificial light of the tiled station gave way to a grey cityscape—it was drizzling.

“Long time,” he said.

“Too long.” We hugged. He was about half a foot taller than I and yet, he felt frail in my arms; I was shocked by how little of him there seemed to be. He turned and started walking towards his apartment.

The week before, I had received two texts from him:

Clara, come to Berlin.

and

Please.

And a phone call from Emma—the mutual friend who’d put Jonah and me in touch when I’d suddenly found myself in need of a place to live, and he had found himself in need of a roommate. I’d met Emma in art school; she and Jonah had dated briefly before deciding to be friends.

“I’m worried,” she’d said. “He won’t talk to me. He’s cutting people out. If he’s reached out to you, then you should go. He won’t have any friends left if he doesn’t slow down the rate at which he’s leaving us behind.”

“But, what’s happened? what’s going on?”

“He’s just *changed*. It didn’t seem like anything out of the ordinary at first. I guess we all just thought he needed time to adjust to his new job at the embassy. That’s happened before,— he’ll become a hermit for a few weeks when he’s focused on something new—but usually he snaps out of it. Usually, a few weeks go by and then it’s back to normal happy, flirty Jonah. Normally, he gets right back to hosting dinners and meeting us at the bar. But it’s like this time he doesn’t want to. Or he’s under too much pressure or something to think about anyone else. And you know how he is when he gets stressed; he doesn’t sleep, he doesn’t eat, he drinks.”

“Have you tried talking to him about it?”

“I did, it didn’t go well. We haven’t spoken since.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“He wasn’t himself. I was just trying to help, and he snapped at me. He’s never snapped at me like that before. Teasing always, but then, he was almost mean. One second I’m pointing out how absent he’s been of late and wondering if he’s OK, the next he’s biting my head off and telling me to ‘fix myself’ before I go around trying to fix others.” I’d wondered how much of this account was accurate. Though she was loyal and well-intentioned, Emma wasn’t always the most patient or receptive of friends. Still, it had been a long time since I’d seen my old friend, and at the very least I should make sure he was eating.

“How was the trip?” Jonah asked as I readjusted my wool coat under the duffel bag slung over my shoulder. Jonah’s windbreaker hung open; the cold didn’t seem to bother him.

“Fine, easy,” I lied. Then, hesitantly I asked, “How are you?”

Jonah shrugged. “Better than whatever Emma and whoever else you’ve spoken to would have you believe.” His tone was unfamiliarly abrupt, and I felt myself forming an irritated response, but held my tongue—Now was not the time to go getting into arguments. I changed the subject.

“Would you mind if we passed by Gervinusstrasse, for old time’s sake?” I asked, pointing in the direction of the familiar intersection I’d once crossed daily. Jonah’s face fell a little. “I mean we don’t have to,” I added, “I just thought—”

“Sure, yeah, that’s fine,” he said. “I just haven’t been that way in a while.” I was too tired and foggy to retract the request or guess at what Jonah was thinking.

It gave me a strange sinking feeling to be back in Berlin. On a street corner, I touched the button that made the pedestrian crossing light change, and wondered how many other people had touched the city there. I wondered how many others had left fingerprints behind in that same spot. Growing up on snowy streets, I’d become curious, at a young age, as to whether or not my feet ever happened to fall within the perimeters of steps left behind by others, particularly my mother’s. My mother had spent almost her entire life in Montreal, but since she’d passed two years after I was born, I’d never experienced the city with her in it. As a child and teenager, I’d searched for clues to who she was in the neighbourhoods, parks and cafes my father told me she’d liked. I’d wandered through the McGill University campus where my parents had met, but had been unable to feel any kind of connection or closeness. My mother remained a complete stranger to me in spite of pictures, stories and other secondhand information. So, upon completing high school, I’d decided to move to the country her parents had left in the hopes of finding some part of her, or of myself, there. But our footsteps remained misaligned; this was not, after all, a city my mother had known. With all of its memorials, monuments and

mementoes, its refusal to forget and so, repeat the past, Berlin remained a city that tripped me up. I'd fumbled trying to retrace my mother's steps, and found myself fumbling again trying to keep up with Jonah's. I was always out of step in Berlin.

Jonah rushed ahead of me. Along with his demeanor and tone, I soon realized his gait was unfamiliar too. It was more hurried than it had once been, as if he didn't want to be between places long and was determined to arrive at his next destination. Finally, he stopped in front of number 17 and put his hands back in his pockets. I was at his side a moment later. The stucco exterior hadn't faded, neither had the green paint of the narrow doors. I touched the doorknob and remembered the feeling of it clicking in my hand. I remembered the sound of footsteps echoing off of the stone steps and yellow walls, the view of the Edenic courtyard through the round hallway window, and the way the heel of my boot used to get caught on the threshold of our apartment. Mostly, I remembered the commotion of the candlelit dinner parties Jonah and I had thrown: our friends' loud voices in the living room; our cat Kevin weaving between people's legs; simultaneous conversations in German, Italian, English and French bumping up against one another; empty wine bottles accumulating in various corners until morning. I remembered Jonah's light restlessness; he'd flit from conversation to conversation, dancing, smiling widely, refilling glasses. He was perfectly in his element at those parties, always in movement. Born to a German father and American mother, diplomats, Jonah was multilingual, had moved around a lot as a kid, and formed friendships quickly and with an intensity I'd rarely encountered. His genuine interest in others made him a charming host and dear friend. It was easy to feel close to him. But that was two years ago. He seemed smaller now, as if he'd shrunken himself purposefully to take up less space, and his newfound stillness unsettled me.

“Do you see much of Nora these days? Or Andrew?” I asked, regretting that I hadn’t been better about keeping in touch with anyone but Jonah from those days. “Maybe I’ll try to see them while I’m in town.”

“No, we had a pretty serious falling out about a year ago.”

“Did you?” I was surprised this hadn’t come up in any of our weekly phone calls. Or maybe they were bi-weekly...or monthly. “What happened?”

“Oh, you know, someone says the wrong thing sometimes and it puts me off them for life. Who can remember the specifics? It was a while ago.”

“That’s too bad, you used to all get along so well. I liked those two. You really don’t remember what was said?”

“No, what does it matter anyway? It’s done now.”

“I don’t know, Jonah. It seems to me most rifts are reparable.”

“What would you know? You never really argue with anyone.”

“That’s not true.”

“Never with me, anyway.”

“Well, never when you’re in the room.” I was trying to lighten the increasingly tense tone of our interaction, but it felt like he was determined to fight.

“Right, because indirectness is such a virtue.”

I decided to try and put an end to the conversation.

“That’s too bad about Nora and Andrew, anyway. I miss those two.”

“You’ve been gone a long time,” Jonah said spitefully. “You’ve missed a lot.”

I didn’t like the accusation I sensed behind his words. It was strange to think of myself as having been absent. In his current state, it seemed Jonah was incapable of recognizing that my

life had continued elsewhere. He seemed to be implying I was only real when in his orbit. Did he resent me for leaving? Had I been a bad friend to him these past few years? Why was I bearing the brunt of the responsibility of our friendship suddenly, and where was the friend who'd encouraged me to pursue the opportunities Brussels had to offer?

“Are you eating?” I asked suddenly.

“So you *have* spoken to Emma,” was all he offered in reply.

The train ride had been long and anxious. I'd been unsure what to expect upon seeing my old roommate again. There had been a time when I'd been Jonah's most trusted confidante: relationships, school, family, work — we talked through everything together. And, without knowing exactly why, or what it was I said or did, I was always able to offer some reassurance. I'd listen and rephrase, or reframe, until the knots in his shoulders started to untangle and his mood lightened. Many nights we'd stayed up in our apartment's narrow kitchen, cramped around a square table, cradling cups of wine or coffee until, once I'd listened long and hard enough, I'd finally string the right words together in the right order, fix whatever crisis was at hand, and Jonah would concede to either letting us sleep, or go to the bakery downstairs for breakfast. As trees and graffitied yellow brick walls flew past the train's windows, I assured myself that I could still be that person for my friend. I'd only been partially successful in distracting myself from my doubts with work. The woman seated next to me had noticed my sketching—the book I was illustrating was about a depressed frog who befriends a turtle and ultimately cheers up. I was

trying to figure out how dispirited to make the frog look—how sad was too sad for a children’s book? And how joyful, realistically, could one make a turtle?

“How sweet!” she’d said in German. “Those are wonderful.”

“Thank you,” I’d smiled. Although I was fluent, I’d learned German too late to master the precise curves and edges of its diction. The woman picked up on my accent immediately – Germans are nothing if not detail oriented—and switched to English.

“First time in Berlin?” her t’s clipped and her r’s were almost British.

“No, I haven’t been in a couple of years now, but I used to live there.”

“Oh! I see. But you’re not German?”

“Partly, but I grew up in Canada. And then moved to Berlin, and then to Brussels for work. Well, I met someone, or a bit of both I guess,” I’d fumbled. “We’re not together anymore. I illustrate children’s books.” I felt my cheeks redden.

“I’d gathered,” she said, nodding towards my lavender sketchbook. “What’s bringing you back?”

“Visiting a friend. You?”

“My daughter lives there—she just had a baby. I’m going to meet my grand-daughter.”

“Congratulations! That’s lovely.”

“Thank you,” she beamed. “We’re all very excited. Reuniting with a friend is a happy occasion too,” she added, turning the conversation back to me.

“Yes! I suppose it is. Well, maybe visiting was the wrong word. I’m checking up on an old friend. Or, making sure everything is as I left it.” I’d laughed; it was meant to be a joke.

“Nothing’s ever truly as you left it,” the woman answered gently.

“No, of course not.” Just a joke, and yet... “Well, I mean, surely *some* things stay the same?” The woman smiled again, as warmly as before, but with something like apprehension this time. Silently, she returned her attention to her little yellow novel and I’d returned to my drawing. Before we pulled into the Hauptbahnhof, I’d carefully torn a page out of my sketchbook, illustrated a little turtle (a happy one) in a garden, coloured it in, scripted “Herzliche Glückwünsche” beneath in dainty calligraphy, and handed it to her.

“For your daughter, and grand-daughter.”

“*Stolpersteine*,” Jonah said, indicating the copper cobble stones beneath my feet, “stumbling stones. Remember?” I looked down to read the inscriptions I’d once passed daily:

Hier Wohnte
HANS-ROLF NAGEL
JG 1921
Deportiert 4.3.1943
Ermordet in
Auschwitz

Hier Wohnte
TANA NAGEL
JG 1942
Deportiert 4.3.1943
Ermordet in
Auschwitz

“Of course,” I answered. “Subtle mourning. We trip over history in this city.”

“We’re *surrounded* by history in this city, it’s overwhelming.”

“Is it? I don’t know; I always appreciated that about Berlin.”

“I don’t think it’s healthy to spend that much time staring directly at the past.”

“I think the only way forward *is* to look back. You have to know what you’re walking away from, don’t you? What mistakes not to repeat.”

“We’re all trapped in the same cycles of behaviour, no one ever really changes.” The rain was becoming more forceful. “Off to the new place then?”

“That can’t be true.” I followed as Jonah led the way. “You can’t live here, in this city, and honestly believe that to be true.”

“Can’t I? Memorializing the past doesn’t prevent you from reliving it, it forces you to. Constantly.”

“Remembering, reflecting, isn’t the same as reliving.”

“Well, it certainly isn’t making any kind of definitive change either.”

“It absolutely is, it’s a sure mean to definitive change.”

“Clara, do you reflect on your past often? Ever?”

“All the time!”

“Then why have I heard from you so little these past few years?”

“I don’t think of you as part of my past, Jonah, you’re still very present to me. And we speak regularly, don’t we?”

“But you haven’t been here in a long time.”

“You haven’t come to Brussels either.” Jonah didn’t acknowledge this statement. Instead, he picked up his earlier train of thought.

“And with all that thinking about the past, have you broken any of your habits? Any of those pesky patterns of behaviour?” I hesitated. “That’s what I thought,” Jonah said. “Still content to fill roles in the lives of emotionally unavailable men who want you to read their minds and anticipate their needs. Still self-effacing.”

“That’s not fair of you. That’s not a fair thing to say at all, Jonah. But yes, actually, yes I think I *have* gotten out of that pattern anyway. I ended things with Eric.”

“Did you? Well, maybe it wasn’t so much of a pattern after all then. You haven’t changed you know.”

“At all?”

“Not at all. Have I?”

“A bit.” In some ways, he hadn’t. He was still himself, still perceptive, stubborn, only, his warmth was gone. It was as if he was on the defensive, or constantly looking for a fight. A scared animal expecting an attack. There was a faint sense of panic in the pit of my stomach. My presence wasn’t proving to be in any way the comfort to Jonah it had once been. I was listening to his words, and sifting through them for the key, the missing piece, whatever it was that I needed to say to help, but I couldn’t figure it out. He wasn’t giving me all the information: the knots were too tight. I didn’t know who to be around him, or how much space to take up. I didn’t know how to reassure him. So, for the time being, I walked behind him silently. He’d settle when we got to his apartment, I told myself, he’d offer up all the pieces and I’d be able to complete the puzzle like old times.

-

Jonah unlocked the narrow door to the red brick building in one swift motion, then flew up the stairs two steps at a time. I stopped trying to keep up. My hand traced the winding banister, and I wondered what to expect. He left the door to his apartment open. I crossed the threshold, hung my coat on the hooks by the entrance, dropped my bag and slipped off my worn canvas shoes. I heard Jonah rummaging through the fridge around the corner in what I soon saw was a bare-bones kitchen with a rubbery green vinyl floor. He emerged holding two beers, opened them

on the side of the wooden table by the windows that lined the wall, and handed one to me. I took in the hazy space. A burgundy corduroy couch overloaded with embroidered cushions dominated the room. Behind it, two dangerously packed bookcases stood on buckling legs. Floral scarves were draped over the two standing lamps so that the room was warmly lit, and Jonah was now lighting the three candle sticks on the wooden table. The room glowed, but was quite cold with all of the windows open—layers of glass panes that swung into the space, and creaked a little when the night air (it had grown dark by this time) brushed up against them. It was a disorienting environment, simultaneously cozy and drafty, sparse and overcrowded. Jonah perched lightly on the sofa’s arm. I took a sip of beer and, with renewed determination, decided to get into it.

“So, what happened with Em?”

“The usual,” he said dryly. “What did *she* say?”

“She called me right before I booked my tickets, she told me I should come. She also said the two of you aren’t speaking.”

“I told you you should come.”

“Yes, and you said very little else.”

“I wanted to see you! You know how Emma is. She makes a big show of being concerned, but she always thinks she knows better than everyone else.”

“The two of you have been friends forever; surely this isn’t a permanent break?”

“I don’t know, things change. Or don’t, it’s always the same thing with Em, everything is always all about her. She’s just overstepped one too many times.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to be more patient with people.”

“I don’t need you lecturing me too, Clara.” Jonah left the sofa’s arm and balanced precariously on one of the window ledges instead. He leaned his head back on the window frame

and stared out into the night. Drunken voices and footsteps echoed off of the neighbouring buildings, and poured in through the open windows, and filled Jonah's and my silence.

"Em says you've been pushing people away. So why did you want to see me?" I asked finally, as outside, two women laughed loudly and shouted to their friend that they were headed to a bar across town. Jonah turned to me.

"Because you listen. No one else seems to listen these days. What's that on your necklace?" he asked.

"Oh, it's something my mother used to wear. I found it at the bottom of one of her old bags recently and started wearing it. I'm not religious, but the sentiment is nice, I think, I don't know, I find it pretty."

"But what is it?"

"Here," I unclasped the silver chain, walked over to the window and handed him the little yellow pendant. It was a metal heart with a tiny mustard seed in the middle, held in resin. Behind it was a little square on which was engraved, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, nothing will be impossible for you."

"Was your mother religious?" Jonah asked squinting at the necklace.

"Spiritual I think. A 'gentle soul,' I'm told."

"Like my father then."

"Maybe. It's not like I knew her. I probably know your father better. Your dad's more skeptical, I think, than she was. Is he still painting?"

"Yes, like you. That's why he always liked you. You pay attention to the same things."

"Does he? Did he?"

“So your mother wasn’t like my father then,” Jonah said, refusing to elaborate upon what he’d just told me.

“Maybe, I’m not sure. I’m told I’m a lot like her.”

A pause.

“You handle things delicately, *so* delicately, like you’re worried everything around you might break. Why is that? Why do you have such a soft approach to things?” I was frustrated that he kept turning the conversation back to me, and that he kept criticizing, but I played along.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said. “I guess it’s served me this far. I don’t think of it as being afraid things around me are going to break, but I guess I try to be... deliberate.” Sirens blared outside and Jonah turned his gaze away from me again.

“I get my masculinity from my mother I think,” he said out the window. “She was always the scarier parent, the one we cowered from. Dad was the one we ran to.”

“What do you mean by masculinity?” I asked, unsure what he was trying to tell me.

“I don’t know. I mean, I don’t handle things with the gentleness you do. I’m harsher, I get angrier faster.”

“So, you’re intense. It’s funny, I’ve never found your intensity to be particularly masculine.”

“No?”

“No, I don’t get along with men with short tempers, generally. But it always seemed to me that you only really get angry when you’re told to be other than you are, which in my mind is a kind of feminine defiance of what’s expected of you. I think that’s why you have so many female friends.”

“Where’s your defiance then?”

“I was raised by my father.” Jonah laughed for the first time since our reunion, and for a moment I thought I might be able to make things right after all. “How are you, Jonah, really?” Jonah stopped smiling.

“I don’t know. All I know, is I have to keep moving forward. I can’t look back, not even for a second.” The ambiguity of his response was unsettling.

“What do you mean?”

“You just don’t get it, Clara, and you won’t. There’s just a lot going on. You’re so *stable* and *deliberate*, you can’t help me out with this one. You used to have all the answers.”

“Did I?”

“Yeah, after we’d talk I used to feel like you were right and everything was going to be ok.”

“That’s still true, Jonah, everything is going to be ok. You need to give it time though.”

“Is it?”

“Oh I don’t know. What do I know? I think so and that’s what I’m telling myself anyway.”

“You used to be certain.”

“I was too naive to be otherwise. See, I *have* changed.”

“Yes, you have.” Jonah sounded disappointed. *I* was disappointed. It upset me to realize that this was not a knot I would be able to untangle for Jonah. We weren’t the eighteen-year-olds we’d once been, our problems were more complicated and we had to solve them by ourselves. But beyond that, I was angry. For someone who didn’t want to look back at the past, he sure was hell bent on holding on to it.

“I should go,” I said suddenly, surprising us both.

“Where?” Jonah asked, confused.

“I don’t know, home maybe, but I can’t stay here.”

Maybe I wasn’t the friend I thought I was. Or maybe I just required more space and kindness than I was being shown.

“Goodbye, Jonah,” I said, as I put my coat and boots back on, picked up my bag, and left the apartment.

I took a wrong turn on my way back to the train station, and got slightly lost, but felt, for maybe the first time, that my feet fell in footsteps that were distinctly my own.

Where Laurier Ave. and Saint-Andre Meet

“A corner that is ‘lived in’ tends to reject and restrain, even to hide, life.”

—Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

Words reconstruct

forgotten rooms
in darkness—

breaths are edges,
phrases bricks

we lay at each
other’s feet.

Brass syllables,
misconducts that
resonate

into faded
walls. Skeletons
now empty

in which we once
lived, whose echoes,
softer now,
inhabit us.

The residues

of our voices
get caught in

the corners of
this nook. Settling
like pitch between
your floorboards,

the reverbe-
rations of

our words tremble

to haunt future
tenants' brief

woolgathering.
Our whispers, scarce,
coded, will

have say and sway
in other dreams,
other heads,
or gather dust.

Sometimes we rush

to pull into
focus contours
we wish would

crystallize, but
delicate

shapes snap. They must
come into

being of their
own accord,

like your outline
around the rest
of my body.
I handle

myself with care
in the crook of
your frame, and

spaciousness, but
try to channel
bend to fit

between elsewheres,
hinging at this
precipice,

this angular
room, acutely
determined

to be held in
its curve but
it bends away.

We linger like
fingerprints

under layers
of memories
of others.

Skin remembers
traces of touch,
submerged, I hold
my breath and

fold into my
understanding
impressions
which will one day

indent the rough

and imagined
memory

of a structure
I can accept,
foundations

upon which I'll
build histories
or into

which I'll etch them.
But for now,

faint foreign sounds

remind me to
listen to

other stories.
We are not the
first bodies

this space has held.

Emily

My apartment's balcony was peeling dangerously away from the exterior brick wall. I hadn't alerted my landlord. The first of the month was approaching and I was avoiding him—I'd neglected to inform him about the stove-top element that had stopped working, the shortage of hot water, and the broken cabinet door. These things could wait until I was more certain I had the funds to pay rent. However, the balcony detaching itself from the building was not something that could go unnoticed.

Installed at a folding table I'd found on some curb a city ago, I sipped coffee from the mug not used to smash a cockroach that morning. It was late September, and as I basked in what I knew were some of the year's last warm rays, I tried to find stillness for a moment. Then my phone rang.

"Evan?"

"Emily hi, listen, Caroline's just quit on me this morning—by *text* if you can believe it—and I know you said you weren't performing any more, but I have a show in a couple of weeks and I didn't know who else to call."

"Slow down. What are you talking about? What's going on?"

"Caroline. She's left the band. Not that she was much of an asset. But now I'm out a back-up singer and I'm wondering if you could fill in. I mean, I'd pay you of course. I really need your help, otherwise I wouldn't ask." The initial irritation I'd felt at my friend began to soften as I tuned into the quiet panic in his voice.

"I don't know, Evan," I told him as gently as I could. "I'm busy with the restaurant, and I'm waiting to hear back about those jobs downtown. I'm just not sure I want to get involved in a new project right now."

“I’m not asking you to take on a project, it would just be one show.” Doubting the truth of this statement, I pulled at the worn hem of my sweater’s sleeve. It was slowly unraveling; day by day, a row of stitches newly came undone.

“Let me think about it. Can I let you know by tomorrow?”

“That’s as much as I can ask for, I guess. If you decide to do it, I’ll text you the details for the next rehearsal and email you the music. Thanks, Em.” He hung up.

Absentmindedly tracing a fine crack in the blue paint of my mug, I considered Evan’s offer. I missed singing and collaborating with other musicians. Part of me missed the thrill of performing too; when I managed not to be a nervous wreck before stepping on stage, I loved it. But I didn’t miss the vanity and melodrama.

Evan and I had met at the University of Ottawa where we’d both studied classical singing. His self-deprecating humour had made me laugh, and we’d both felt a little like outsiders at first amongst the other more self-assured students. We’d spent our evenings and weekends rehearsing in the soundproof cubicles of the music building, or eating cheap food downtown before heading to the National Arts Center to watch operas at reduced student rates. Sometimes, we’d perform together at open mics at one of the bars on Elgin Street. That was where Evan had met the other musicians with whom he’d formed *Evan and the Heavy Hearts* – an “alternative” indie pop band to which I’d sporadically belonged. The success of his band within the Ottawa music community, along with the ways in which our singing coaches at school had played favourites, had inflated Evan’s ego. By the end of our four-year degree, I had allowed my resentments to fester. We’d both moved to Montreal, and I briefly became a fixture of the band, until—wanting to create space between us— I’d quit abruptly and nearly ended our friendship. We’d reconnected since, somewhat. So long as we didn’t work together, we got along

just fine. No, I absolutely should not work with Evan. One show would likely lead to another, and before I knew it, he'd be expecting me to perform with him regularly again. I had to put my foot down.

Upstairs, my neighbour was humming *La Vie en Rose* and sweeping. The brushing of the broom rhythmically redistributed dust from his balcony onto mine. It glittered subtly in the sunlight as gravity pulled it down. I checked the time, cursed and ran inside to throw on my faded work clothes. I dragged my hair off my face before bolting out the door. On my way to the bus stop, I couldn't help but notice how deceptively welcoming Bedford Street felt for the few weeks its trees turned bright yellow. It was hard to believe how transformed my neighbourhood was by the winter; soon these same trees would cast ominous shadows in a street narrowed by heavy snowbanks. I turned left, passed the dated Côte-Des-Neiges Plaza, and made it just in time to catch the 165. As I was jostled along on the ride up and over the mountain, my phone buzzed in my pocket.

3200 ave D'Orléans, Tuesday 5pm.

Evan had also already emailed me. I started typing out a response.

Hey! I thought you were going to wait until I'd agreed before you—

No, there was no need to get annoyed.

Hey! Listen, I'm just so busy right now, I don't know if I have the time to take on anything

—

That wouldn't do either.

Hey! I'd really love to it's just —

Nope. I slouched in my seat and put my phone away, leaving Evan's message unanswered. I tried to imagine myself living in one of the sophisticated-looking apartments near

McGill—buildings with high ceilings and securely fastened balconies. I envisioned a piano in a well-lit corner of a space filled with plants. I saw myself wearing clothes that fit me properly, never rushing to get anywhere and actually having the time to take care of those plants. In this version of my life, my feet and shoulders didn't constantly ache from long shifts. I'd landed one of the positions I'd applied to— at Place Des Arts, programming shows— and had an office with windows. I came home to my Schnauzer Claude (named after Debussy), cooked real meals and drank nice wine. I checked my email compulsively for a response to one of my applications — still nothing. Maybe I should think about going back to school. The trees that had been blocking the sun tapered off, and finding myself suddenly blinded, I turned away from the window. I wondered when the crack in my blue mug would widen, and pictured my balcony landing with a loud crash on the sidewalk.

After graduating, I'd applied to jobs at music schools and gone on auditions in Montreal, but nothing had worked out. The only musical work I'd really done were the few gigs with Evan. I cringed as I remembered one of our last rehearsals together. We'd met at the bungalow in Beaconsfield that Evan had taken over from his parents when they'd decided to move full-time to Florida. When I'd arrived, following the 90 minute commute, Evan's hurried greeting had demonstrated how stressed he was about the upcoming show.

"I've never been so unprepared," I remembered him saying. "I don't know *how* it's all going to come together."

"Evan, we've got all of the songs pretty much down. There's just that bit in *Dreaming of You* that still needs some work. We haven't run the set all the way through, but—"

"Exactly," Evan fretted. "Come on, everyone else is downstairs."

I could hear the others warming up through the kitchen's linoleum floor. I followed Evan down the staircase that lead to the basement—a wood-paneled monstrosity with a beige stucco ceiling.

Evan cleared his throat, “I want the three of you in black tomorrow night, all black. I don't want anyone to distract from the music. The audience has to pay close attention to the story-telling in my songs to really appreciate them,” he insisted. I nodded my consent and kept my thoughts to myself. Evan was a talented singer, and a decent guitar player, but I wasn't sure the “story-telling in his songs” was really his selling point.

“OK,” he announced, “let's take it from the top of *I'd love to meet you.*”

I shuffled through my sheet music and scanned and heard my line in my head. I stood tall, opened my chest and filled the lower half of my lungs with air. I imagined myself already singing the note, so that when it poured out of me, it would be a seamless transition from silence to sound. I erased myself in service of the music, allowing my voice to fill the empty spaces in the song. Evan was not impressed.

“No, sorry everyone, stop, STOP. Em, I need you to take it again please from, *I saw you at the back of the room.* Let's just have you sing your part over the drums. Could you be a bit more... velvety?”

“Velvety? Evan that's not a musical term, what do you—?”

“Just try it again, Em.”

I complied.

“I need more energy from you, Em.”

I tried again.

“Not *that* much energy, you're not singing *lead* after all.”

And again.

“Mmm, no. More mystery.”

And again.

“Cleaner.”

“Softer.”

“Sweeter.”

“Rougher.”

Until, on the 26th try I burst out, “Evan, I *cannot* read your mind!”

The other musicians’ eyes widened.

“OK, OK, fine. Here, you sing the melody, I’ll show you what I mean.” It was shortly after that I’d vowed never to work with him again.

The bus stopped on Saint-Mathieu. I hopped off, hurried over to Crescent and entered the restaurant only a minute and a half later than I’d meant to. I winced at the volume of the music and could already feel a headache brewing between my eyebrows. The place was in its usual Friday night state of thinly veiled mayhem. To the untrained eye, everything was running smoothly, but I could see from the makeup under Nadia’s eyes that she was hungover, from the faint beads of sweat on the back of Marc’s neck two of his tables had complicated food intolerances, and from the strained manner of Kevin’s demeanor that our manager Kelsey was in one of her moods. They greeted me with rushed, but friendly, hellos. My lanky coworker, John was the only one of us never bothered by any of these goings on. He strode over to me grinning.

“Hey! What are you doing here? You don’t work Fridays.”

“Covering for the new girl.”

“Ah, come on, you missed me, admit it.”

“I miss my *bed*. John, my friend, it has been quite the week. Picking up Megan’s shift means working 13 days straight.”

“Aw, chin up, you get to close up shop with me, so it’s not all bad.” I smiled.

“How are you, John, how’s the shift been?”

“Fine, you know, same old. George spilled a pint of Guinness within the first five minutes of his shift, so the floor’s a bit sticky over by table seven.”

“Again?”

“Third shift in a row now! The klutz.” I laughed. “And you know, the roommates are driving me crazy and I have a paper due Monday, but things are good.”

“Good. Alright, lay it on me, head-waiter man, who are my first victims this evening?”

“If you’re covering for Megan, then table five. Perfectly put together blonde and her normal, sort of... preppy date.” From across the restaurant, I could just make out the couple. I noted the quiet, modest-looking and conservatively dressed young man, and the chatty and meticulously coiffed young woman seated next to him.

“Usual suspects,” I observed, “they’re all melding into one archetypal Customer to me, I’m not sure I can distinguish one from another beyond their choice of food.”

“Jesus Emily, you really *have* had a week haven’t you.”

“You mean I’m not my usual perky-ray-of-sunshine self?” I replied.

John chuckled and I headed over to table five. I didn’t get a good look at either of the customer’s faces until I was standing next to them asking, “Hi guys, are you ready to order?”

My carefully crafted façade fell, just for an instant, as I recognized the people sitting before me.

“Nathalie?”

Suddenly my work blouse, which I'd found flattering that morning, felt tight and old, and I wondered how apparent it was that I'd been cutting my frizzy red hair myself. I hadn't seen Nathalie since leaving Ottawa. As always, she was impeccably dressed. This time in a silk shift dress that fit her perfectly, with matching navy earrings.

"Oh my *God*, Emily?"

"Nathalie! Hi, how are you? I didn't know you were in Montreal. Hi Paul, nice to see you." Paul nodded politely as Nathalie answered for both of them.

"We've only been here a few months; I've been meaning to call. It's so good to see you! Are you and Thomas still together? Is he here with you?"

"Oh no, that ended a few months after I left Ottawa. With the distance, you know, it was hard."

"Oh! Well, that's good to hear."

"Is it?"

"Oh my goodness, sorry. I just meant, I mean, good for you. I mean, good riddance, right?" I laughed uncomfortably.

"Can I get you guys something to eat?"

I took their order and left, praying that Nathalie and Paul's food wouldn't be ready any time soon. I tried to adjust my clothes and hair as I darted between tables and to and from the kitchen and bar. I couldn't believe I had to serve *Nathalie* of all people. Nathalie was one of the more self-assured music students in Evan's and my program, one of those to whom things seemed to come effortlessly. While I'd strained to impress my professors, she'd sung complicated arias without breaking a sweat, gotten excellent grades and had her pick of opportunities upon graduating. It was like her success was inevitable. My shoulders stiffened

when table five's order was up, but I took the plates, plastered on a pleasant expression, and returned to my old classmate.

“The lamb cavatelli for you Paul, and Nathalie, the Fogo Island cod with a chef's salad instead of the potatoes.”

“Wow, this looks *lovely*, thank you.” I started to turn away when Nathalie said abruptly, “So, what have you been up to since your move? Teaching? Performing? You aren't working here full-time.” My throat tightened.

“Not really. I mean, I'm here a lot, but I was auditioning when I first got here —”

“Auditions! Terrific. I haven't been to an audition in *months*. I've given up performing actually. It was fun for a while, but exhausting. I've been teaching.”

“Oh, that's great,” I faltered.

“Not really, I mean, it's not as exciting as *auditioning*. But I'm enjoying it, it's been going well. I love it here! I'm in Westmount with Paul. Where are you living? I teach voice lessons from our apartment— we bought a piano! My grand-mother— she taught singing in this city for *years*— anyway, she retired about six months ago, right when I moved, and she handed all of her students over to me. I have so much work, I actually had to hire a second teacher to help me, I might even need a third. But *you* are living the dream,” Nathalie continued, “auditioning, and this restaurant is just the cutest, you must have so much fun.”

“Well... I mean, there are certainly a lot of shifts for me, which is better than not getting enough hours, and tips are good.”

“That's great.” Nathalie smiled. My heart sank.

“And, I mean,” I added before I could think through what I was saying, “I'm not *just* auditioning... I'm actually... singing with Evan, I'm his back-up singer.”

I was surprised at myself for lying.

“*Evan!* Oh my goodness how *is* he? It’s been so long. Wait, you’re in *Evan’s* band? I feel like I hear about him all the time. He seems to be quite popular.”

“Yeah, the band’s been pretty successful.”

“That’s wonderful. Is there a show coming up? I’ll be there!” I clenched my jaw, forced a smile, told Nathalie how happy I’d be to see her in the audience, and finally headed off to another table.

The rest of the shift went by in a blur. I played the interaction with Nathalie over and over in my mind as a drunk older businessman spilled his drink on my blouse, I relocated a young family to a table further away from the speakers, and my manager thanked me profusely for coming in on such short notice. When closing time finally rolled around, John and I blasted *Joy Division* on the expensive restaurant sound system, bemoaned the woes of being overworked and underpaid and debriefed each other on the highs and lows of our respective shifts.

“I had to run back to the table and stop the fork from reaching her mouth!” he was laughing. “I forgot the salmon had almonds in it! I’ve never been so terrified in my entire life, I thought I’d killed her. Thank God I got there in time.”

“You’re usually so on top of the food allergies!”

“I know!”

I was putting glasses away behind the bar when one slipped from my hands and smashed into shards as it hit the floor.

“I can’t wait to get out of this place,” I said defeated.

“Have you heard back from any of those jobs you were looking into?” John asked, bringing me a broom.

“Not yet.” I started sweeping.

“Well, you’re bound to hear back sometime. And if you don’t, something else will turn up.”

“Will it? I’m starting to feel less sure that that’s the case.”

“Of course. If you keep looking and waiting, things will work out.”

“I hope you’re right. I just want something *new*. I can’t wait to quit this job and move on to something else.”

“I know.” I detected a hint of exasperation in John’s tone.

“Sorry. You’re right.” I emptied the dustpan into the garbage. The glass clanged against its metal. “I just feel like every time I put my foot down, the ground beneath me gives way.”

“A series of false bottoms,” John nodded.

“Exactly!”

“I know the feeling. You can’t let it get you down though, Em. You have to trust that if you keep trying something will work out.”

“I guess so.”

John counted the cash while I mopped. Once we’d finished closing, we sat at the bar and had a beer together before going home.

“A toast,” he said raising his glass. “To something new!”

“Something new,” I echoed.