



TORONTO PROSE MILL

# Toronto Prose Mill

Spring 2017 Issue

Short Stories by Canadian Authors

Dear Reader,

Toronto Prose Mill was conceived out of restlessness between two editors striving to turn the Canadian literary landscape into something more accessible and supportive for local voices. As students, we had worked with stories, poems, articles, and papers on various editorial boards, but wondered where emerging writers would publish their narratives outside major publications. In a competitive market that often favours distinguished and international writers and stories, we sought to create a space that celebrates emerging Canadian writers seeking to establish themselves on a domestic stage.

The choice to make Toronto Prose Mill a journal that exclusively exhibits short stories springs from our belief that the short story is the perfect medium through which one can succinctly explore a myriad of ideas and leave readers deeply impressed by a character's experience. We believe the stories in these pages reflect the strength of their medium, and we are so pleased to showcase the works of our authors in this issue.

We would like to extend our deepest appreciation towards our contributors; without your stories, we would still be toiling, restless for content by rising Canadian voices.

And thank you, reader, for visiting our debut issue. Without you, our purpose of showcasing the works of talented Canadian writers would remain unfulfilled. We are delighted you could join us on this journey.

Founders and Editors-in-Chief

Mariam J. Sheikh

&

Alex Grieve



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# Abode

By Susan Lloy

The house is cloaked, foreign... I pass it with each return visit and lived within its walls for two hundred sixteen moons. I notice it's for sale. Today of all days, when the two of you met metal upon metal on an icy road. When your bones and flesh left this worldly domain.

I see our old home on my favourite real estate site where I dream of houses next to the sea covered in fog as the breeze licks my face with its salty breath.

Now everything is unrecognizable, like it's the first time I'm entering this shelter.

The staircase is the only clue I have, with its wooden wainscoting where honed words speared the air, and turpentine drifted from room to room. I can see where your paintings once hung. Smell scalloped potatoes coming from the kitchen.

I'll light a candle tonight, though I'm far from you both. Perhaps you can find your way back from who knows where. Take the tour. Imagine time stands still.

# Redemption's Beacon

By Sandy Stuckless

The minute Elliott Fletcher passed the 'Welcome to Cambridge Strait' sign, it all came flooding back. Everything from the pot holes in the pavement, to the convenience store selling beer, to the gas station that used pumps with white numbers on the rollers. It was like the place was forever stuck in the eighties, and he loved it.

Elliott pumped ten dollars' worth of gas and went inside. "Looks like another storm coming," he said as he handed over the ten spot. No fancy card machines around here.

"Yep," the gas attendant replied with a grin. "Nothing we can't handle, though. Folks have been through this before."

"I was hoping to visit the lighthouse, if possible. Do you know where I can find the keeper?"

The color drained from the attendant's face and he stammered over his words until he got it out. "That'd be Doc Murphy. He ain't a real doc. That's just what folks call him. His place is down at the end of the road."

Elliott tipped his tattered ball cap to the attendant and followed the road until he found Doc Murphy's place. The old timer's eyes perked up when Elliott told him what he wanted.

"You sure?" Doc Murphy asked, cocking an eyebrow. "No one hardly ever goes down there anymore. Especially tonight."

"Why's that?"

Doc Murphy regarded him with a bemused smirk. "You really don't know, do you?" He went to a side table and poured himself a measure of rum. Elliott shook his head when offered a similar measure. "The story is that ten years to the day there was a horrific boat crash. Three people drowned."

Elliott knew all that, but didn't say anything.

“Now, every year on this night, those spirits return looking for vengeance. Our boats don’t even put to sea today.”

Elliott shoved his hands into his pocket. “Ghosts, huh?”

Doc Murphy nodded and downed his drink in one gulp. “Seen ‘em with me own eyes.”

Elliott wasn’t concerned with ghosts. He had enough trouble dealing with his own demons. All he wanted from this man was the lighthouse key.

This was why he drove fifteen hours in a beat up sedan, after all. Back to a lonely outport community he hadn’t seen since he was a snot-nosed kid. It didn’t take long for the memories to come back once the first briny wisps of salt water filled his nose.

Everyone had tried to stop him. They told him to let it go, that old wounds should stay covered, but Elliott didn’t listen. Not this time. They were only worried about their own embarrassment, not his recovery.

He’d wanted to make this trip every year for the past decade, but there was always some excuse. Finally, he couldn’t take the dreams anymore. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw a boat crashing against the rocks. He had to come.

The dreams weren’t the only reason, though. The program said he needed to make amends. To move forward he had to make things right. He thought of Tessa’s smiling face across the coffee shop table after their meetings. They’d only been seeing each other for a couple of months, but Elliott had a good feeling about her. He wanted things to get serious, but first he had to make things right. Before he allowed her fully into his heart, he had to find peace.

Elliott’s heart pounded as he made his way down the narrow path towards the dilapidated shack at the base of the Cambridge Strait Lighthouse. His knees wobbled as if he’d spent the night in the bottom of a bottle. A feeling he knew all too well.

The walk from the main road out to where the lighthouse sat wasn’t far, but it was far enough for him to run through a whole gamut of emotions. He swallowed hard, trying to ease the butterflies in his stomach.

The lighthouse was exactly as he remembered, albeit with a new coat of paint. Still the original lenses, though he imagined the light had been upgraded to a more modern version. At least, he hoped so.

A brisk wind out of the north cut across his skin. Elliott welcomed it, though it threatened to shift around to the east, and if that happened, it would be a bad day for the mackerel fishermen farther offshore.

Elliott stopped and listened as waves crashed against the rocks. It had been too long since he'd heard that sweet sound. It was worlds different from the car horns and screeching tires he was used to. Hitching his collar higher on his neck, he walked the rest of the way to the lighthouse.

For the first time in ten years, he stepped into the single room shack and shook off the early evening chill. The room was nothing fancy. A small table with a handheld VHF radio, a woodstove with a kettle, and a bookshelf that looked like it had seen better days. Elliott took a deep breath of stale air and shed his jacket. It was exactly as he remembered it.

And that's where the pleasant memories ended, replaced by dark, dangerous visions roiling like the approaching storm. Elliott remembered that night like it was yesterday. Ten years ago to the day. Storms, common for this time of year, were blowing in. He wanted to go drinking with the boys and tried to get someone else to watch the lighthouse for him, but they all refused. It was his turn, they said. Everyone had to make sacrifices.

Care of the Cambridge Strait Lighthouse had been a Fletcher family responsibility for generations. Elliott understood its importance. Someone had to keep watch on the strait. He had just grown tired of spending countless hours cooped up. Instead of a watcher, he felt like a prisoner.

He remembered heading down to the wharf for a couple of drinks with the boys. It wasn't dark yet, and nothing bad had ever happened anyway. By the time he arrived at the lighthouse, he was already three sheets to the wind. He only vaguely remembered passing out and waking up to his father's furious glare.

Elliott remembered throwing up when his father told him what happened. A family of three were out on the water when a storm hit. A lump formed in his throat. The father, Daniel, the mother, Ruth Anne, and the young girl...



Sarah.

Their names forever burned into his memory. All drowned when their boat struck the rock the lighthouse was supposed to mark. Before he could say anything, his father went public to take responsibility. He was the patriarch, he said. The one ultimately responsible for what happened. It was his duty.

When the authorities came for the inquiry, his father handled it. The results shamed his family. Everywhere he turned, he was asked about it. People more than willing to talk and lay blame constantly badgering him. Even his friends distanced themselves from him, not wanting to take any part in the tragedy. In the end, it became too much for them and they were forced to move.

Elliott spent every minute, waking and not, picturing the boat splintering on the rocks and the three faces slipping below the icy waves.

His only escape had been the bottle. And he sought it at every opportunity. Finally, one night he'd ended up face down in a ditch, near death. At times he wished for it. At least he wouldn't have to suffer the anguish of guilt anymore. But he had been found and admitted to a program. Now, here he was on step nine. Making amends. Who would've thought he'd make it this far? Not him, that's for sure.

Elliott swiped a finger beneath his eye and switched the radio to channel sixteen. Why, he couldn't say. Some habits were hard to break, he guessed, even after a decade. He set a fire on the stove and filled the kettle for tea. While it heated, he made his way up the narrow winding steps to the lighthouse proper. This used to be easier, he thought, as he stopped a moment to catch his breath.

A nostalgic smile touched his lips. He had made the same walk every night back then. Except that night. The smile disappeared.

Elliott shook his head, bringing his mind back to the present. There was no point dwelling on events he couldn't change. He had to admit, despite the bad memories, he felt like he was home. It was a feeling he'd been missing for a long time.

He walked around the beacon, ensuring everything was in order. He hadn't planned on manning it tonight, but since he was here, it couldn't hurt. Even with their fancy GPS gadgets, a working lighthouse was never a bad thing. If this storm hit as advertised, she

would need to be on her best behaviour. From what he remembered, she could be a contrary girl at times.

Elliott went back downstairs where the kettle whistled angrily. He made his tea, and took it to the window overlooking the narrow waterway. White capped waves crashed against rocks, and stiff pines fought the wind along the shoreline.

Clouds blowing in from the east cloaked the moon. Soon, it wouldn't be visible at all. Lightning flashed, and he counted the seconds until thunder rumbled in the distance. It was getting closer.

Elliott retrieved a tattered yellow-paged paperback from the stack on the bookshelf and settled into a chair next to the wood stove. Warmth from the teacup cascaded through him, putting him at ease.

Then the radio crackled.

“This is fishing vessel Spring Dawn, Spring Dawn, Spring Dawn,” a frantic voice called. “Can anyone hear us?”

Elliott shivered. It was that night all over again. No, this time he was sober. This time it could be different. His hand trembled as he picked up the radio. “Spring Dawn, this is the Cambridge Strait Lighthouse. Do you require assistance?”

“We have lost an engine, our electrical system is damaged and we have no GPS. We have no choice but to put in at Cambridge Strait. We're not going to make it home before the storm hits. Make sure that damn beacon is lit.”

Elliott brought the radio up to answer as he got to the window. The words died at his mouth and his stomach clenched. The familiar glint of silvery light on the water was missing. The lighthouse was dark. The radio dipped in his hand. He didn't understand. It was working a few minutes ago.

The light malfunctioned that night ten years ago too.

It had to be a coincidence. There had to be a logical explanation. He looked out the window again, thinking his eyes had fooled him. But no, the light was still out.

Indecision paralyzed him. Should he tell them about the malfunction? What if he couldn't fix it? What if he failed Spring Dawn like he had failed the other boat ten years ago?

Elliott jumped when the radio crackled yet again. “Please acknowledge last, Cambridge tower.”

No, he decided. They had enough to worry about and he wouldn’t fail. Not again. “The lighthouse will be lit, Spring Dawn.”

The radio dropped to the table with a thud as doubt pummeled him. He couldn’t go through this again. He should go find someone. Someone in better physical condition. Someone who hadn’t abused their body for the past ten years. He started for the door, but hesitated. There wasn’t enough time. The Spring Dawn would be on the rocks before he got back. There was only him. He had to do it.

“Why?”

Elliott was halfway up the stairs when he heard it. He spun around, bringing his hands up, but the stairs below him were empty. Where had that voice come from?

“Why did you let us die?”

Elliott screamed and spun again, but still the stairs were empty. His mind went back to the stories. They couldn’t be true, could they? Elliott set his jaw and stomped up the stairs. Nonsense, all of it. He didn’t have time for legends and stories. The Spring Dawn was getting closer.

He crested the top of the stairs to find the lens and the lamp intact. Elliott checked the beacon and then moved to the electrical panel. He spotted the issue almost immediately. A tripped breaker. The same one he’d reset on countless occasions. He pushed the switch and the light flared to life. Elliott allowed himself a small victorious smile and closed the breaker panel cover.

An odd chill pulled goosebumps out on his arms, and the hair stood on the back of his neck. There was someone behind him. He knew it. Elliott mumbled, trying to convince himself it wasn’t real.

Standing slowly, he held his breath and turned. Before him, draped in a silvery ethereal light, was a young girl. She wore a yellow sundress with blue ribbons on the chest and sleeves. Sarah. It could be no one else.

Elliott squeezed his eyes shut, refusing to believe. He was hallucinating. Had to be. But when he opened his eyes, she was still there.

“Why did you let us die?” she asked. “What did we do?”

“You’re not real!” Elliott screamed.

He stumbled back down the stairs, moisture dripping from his eyes. He should leave, forget he ever came back here. He could leave a note in town about the disabled boat. They were better equipped to deal with it anyway. They didn’t know who he was. They wouldn’t know the difference.

But he would. The rest of his life he would know the difference. Two boats lost because of his selfish decisions. No, he wouldn’t let that happen.

The radio on the table came to life. “Cambridge Tower, we’re approaching the mouth of the harbour. Where’s that light?”

Elliott stumbled over to the table to tell them that he had gotten the light working. He went back to the window to make sure that it was. Given the strange things that had happened, he could take nothing for granted. His shoulders slumped when he found the strait dark once again.

He pounded his fist on the table, upset that the keepers wouldn't put the care into maintaining this beautiful piece of the community history. “Spring Dawn,” he stammered, “I’ll have the light working in a few minutes. Stand by.”

Wind pounded the lighthouse as the storm picked up. Windows rattled. He fought the sudden urge for a drink, though there was nothing here that would do the trick anyway. Elliott took a deep breath, forcing calm down through his body. What was he doing? He was a fool, cowering here like a child. The only thing that mattered was the Spring Dawn. He had a breaker to reset.

Elliott neared the top of the stairs when the lightning bolt struck the tower. Glass and steel exploded with a deafening roar, throwing him back down to the lower level. He landed on his back sending waves of pain through his body. Stars flashed before his eyes. Groaning, Elliott rolled over onto his stomach and pushed himself to his feet.

He looked up the stairs now blocked by twisted metal. “No, no, no!” he cried. This wasn’t happening. He had to get into the tower.

Elliott threw on his jacket, grabbed a flashlight, and rushed into the driving rain. Ice-cold water ran down his back as lightning lit up the night sky. A few short seconds later, thunder boomed. He had to hurry.

Elliott swept his flashlight to his right, towards the water. He swore he saw the figure of a young girl standing there. But there was no one.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed forward. Nerves, that’s all. The storm pounded him relentlessly. He could barely see a foot in front of him. How was he supposed to see the top of the tower? He had no idea.

Elliott rounded the back-side of the lighthouse, picking his way over slick boulders. Lightning flashed, illuminating everything in a searing white light. He had never seen anything like it. When it dissipated, Sarah’s pale figure stood on a rock a few steps away. Just beyond her was where her family’s boat had gone aground.

His knees buckled and he sat down on a nearby rock. No matter how much he wanted to deny it, he couldn’t anymore. She was real, and she wanted answers.

“Why didn’t you save us?”

Elliott thought it couldn’t get any colder. He was wrong. Her voice sent shivers down his back and froze him into place. There was no anger, no accusation. It was almost pleading, begging him to give her salvation. He wished for the anger. At least he knew what that felt like. This? He couldn’t handle this.

Elliott’s lip trembled. “I was drunk. I fell asleep and didn’t know the light was broken.”

“Why did you wait so long to come back? We have roamed the space in between for so long. We want to go home.”

“I was ashamed,” he cried. “I couldn’t face people. It was all my fault.”

“We want to go home. Help us go home.”

How? He came here to make amends and suffer his penance. And he’d done that with every memory, with every glance upon her face. But he couldn’t get them home. That power was beyond him.

The clouds parted then, and moonlight shone down. Almost as if it were preordained. A large boulder stuck up in the middle of the narrow channel, clearly visible, even sitting here looking through the rain. Sarah stopped over it and turned back to face him.

Elliott could see the boat crashing against the rocks. Like it was happening right in front of him. This must be the final piece. He had to see where it happened. Tears streamed down his cheeks, mixing with cold rain. Sobs wracked his body as memories of souls lost ran through his mind. It would've been even worse if he'd actually seen the bodies. All he had ever seen were pictures, but it was more than enough.

A fine grey mist swirled in front of him, forming into two figures standing hand in hand. Sarah's parents, Daniel and Ruth Ann, had joined her. They were together again. His lip trembled anew. Two families were destroyed that night. Sarah's, as well as his own.

Daniel glided forward a few paces. "The pain on your face says you've finally accepted what happened. Perhaps now peace can find us all."

Elliott swallowed the lump in his throat and spoke. "Your accident should have never happened. I was stupid. I was selfish. I wish I could take your place."

He stood and stepped forward, icy water licking his feet. One more step and it would be over. It would be quick, at least. He wouldn't suffer like this family had. His only regret was Tessa. Part of the reason for this trip was her. She would miss him, but eventually she would move on.

Ruth Ann held up her hand. "Your end will not bring us back. It is not your time."

Elliott swiped a sleeve across his face. "What do you mean?"

Daniel spoke again. "Another chance is offered to you. Succeed and complete your penance."

The Spring Dawn. Of course. She was still coming, and the beacon was still blocked. "Did you cause the storm to test me? Is this why there's a storm on this night every year? Can't you end this?"

"We do not control the storms," Ruth Ann said, "but they grow from our unrest. We cannot end it. Only you can."

Elliott raked his hand through his hair. "I can't get to the beacon. The way is blocked."



“You must,” Sarah said. “It’s the only way.”

Elliott fought the raging tempest in his head, trying to figure things out. The answer was in the lighthouse itself. He couldn’t get to the beacon from the inside, but that staircase didn’t always exist.

He scrambled back over the rocks and found the rusty ladder next to the shack door. He had no idea how secure it was. It hadn’t been maintained since the shack and stairwell were added. It was his only chance, though. He had to get to the beacon.

Hands and feet slipped off the cold metal rungs as he climbed, nearly sending him to his own doom. The ladder shifted and creaked as his weight pulled it away from the structure. Don’t stop, he urged himself. You have to save them.

His sides hurt and he wheezed heavily. Cold, wet air slammed against him, threatening to hurl him off. Elliott pushed the pain aside. He wasn’t going to let another boat crash because of him.

Reaching the railing, he clamoured onto the narrow deck. He lay there unmoving for a moment to catch his breath, but something nagged at him to keep going. He couldn’t rest yet. The beacon was surprisingly still intact, but blocked by twisted sheets of metal from the rain hood. He tossed debris over the side, sparing no time for any thought or doubt.

He cleared enough debris to make it close to the beacon, but there he faced his biggest challenge. The largest section of the metal roof lay right up against the glass lens.

Elliott grabbed the sheet and yanked with one hand while the other held the railing. The smallest slip could send him over the side like the debris. Metal scraped against metal, screeching in protest, but it held fast. Again, he pulled. And again. Desperation mounted by the second. Spring Dawn was into the strait. The low rumble of her single working engine plowed through the howling wind.

Elliott rattled the jammed sheet, but still could not find any give. It wasn’t budging. He couldn’t do this with one hand. Not in this rain and against this fierce wind.

He planted his feet on the slippery deck the best he could and let go of the rail. The wind pushed against him, but Elliott managed to keep his balance. Grabbing onto the metal sheet with both hands, he pulled as hard as he could.

Muscles strained as he bore down. He thought he was making progress, but then his hands slipped off the sheet. His feet disappeared from under him and he stumbled backwards. His heart stopped and his stomach lurched. The deck wasn't wide enough to break his fall.

The world slowed. He could almost count his heart-beats. This was how it was supposed to end. His sacrifice meant to save a vessel he couldn't save ten years ago. But it didn't come. Instead, he hit the edge of the deck.

Sharp pain shot up between his shoulders, and breath evacuated his lungs in a gasp. Elliott fought to regain control as rain pounded his face and ran up his nose, choking him.

Opening his eyes, he saw his foot hooked underneath the jammed sheet of metal. Son of a bitch, he swore. I don't deserve the luck, but I'll take it. Sarah's slim figure stood next to it staring at him expectantly. There was still time.

Elliott pulled himself up by the rail and grabbed the metal sheet again. He put all of his remaining strength into moving it. Sharp edges cut into his hands and he growled against the pain as rivulets of blood mixed with the rain.

But slowly the sheet moved. An inch, then another. It screeched and resisted, but it was no match for Elliott's determination. With everything he had left, he gave one final heave. The sheet let go and tumbled over the side of the lighthouse.

There was one last thing he needed to do. He crawled through the remaining debris to the electrical panel and pried open the cover. One lousy switch. All of this trouble to reset one lousy switch. He pushed the breaker closed and bright light shot forward, banishing the darkness. Elliott collapsed to the deck, barely able to catch his breath. His hands stung and his whole body shook. But the beacon was free.

The radio in his pocket crackled to life. "Cambridge Strait Lighthouse, this is Spring Dawn. We have the beacon in sight. We see the light."

Closing his eyes, he let out a sigh of relief. Mission accomplished.

Elliott wasn't sure how much time passed before he trusted himself to move. His whole body ached and shivered. It wouldn't do to go through all of that only to die of pneumonia.

He climbed down the ladder and went to the rock where the three ghostly figures waited. There were no smiles, no salutes, no platitudes. Only a nod to acknowledge a wrong made right.

“It had to be me,” Elliott said, his voice barely a whisper. “Every year on this night, you came back looking for me. You couldn’t find rest until I came back.”

Sarah nodded. “And now we can. Your heart has proven true. There is no more blackness for either of us.”

He stared at her, standing barely beyond his reach, and uttered the only two words that he could think of, “I’m sorry.”

She offered the slightest of nods and slowly dissipated into an ethereal mist. The winds died down and the rain stopped. Looking out across the strait, he saw Spring Dawn pass by and he offered a meek wave. At least they were safe now.

Elliott headed back up the path towards the main road, leaving the lighthouse. He stopped by Doc Murphy’s to report the storm damage and then took the potholed road past the gas station. He grinned as he passed the town sign. ‘Please Come Again’, it read. He just might.

# The Lonely

By Catherine Poku

This morning she woke up with the lonely in her heart weighing down like a ton of bricks sinking into the middle of her chest. She took a shower and felt the warm water wash over her naked body; soothing it, but not comforting it—she bathed it, but could not cleanse it. Something was missing. There was a void—an emptiness around her, an emptiness in her. She was grateful that she was far away from her, far away from the other one whom she knew felt the lonely too.

It was a good thing, she convinced herself, that the other one lived miles away, in another state with another person in another existence, or she would have made plans to see her for sure. In a park; in a coffee shop; in a small room with a desk, a luggage stand, a brown leather chair, a night table (with a bible in the top drawer) and two double beds... only one would be needed.

They had never actually met or knew what the other looked like. They had never spoken or heard the other's voice, never shivered at the sound of the other's breaths, or closed their eyes when the other whispered. The mystery of it all made a meeting all the more enticing.

But if they were in a small room, the one with the desk, a leather chair, a nightstand (with the Bible in the top drawer) and two double beds, they wouldn't know what to do... at first. Perhaps they would giggle at the awkwardness of it all, feel their hearts race with nervousness, concealed in their own chests. She would notice the tension in the other's shoulders and want to press her fingers into them, kneading and rubbing the anger away. She would notice the soft down hairs on the other's neck and want to brush her lips against them. She would smell the shampoo in the other's hair and want to rest there, laying her head in its softness.

Perhaps they would touch hands, palm to palm, like they were mirror images of each other—which sometimes they felt like they were. Then they would watch their fingers intertwine, beyond their control. Their bodies coming together, beyond right and wrong, letting go, letting the lonely go... letting the lonely go...

In the small room with the desk, the nightstand and the two double beds... only one would be used.

# Hubris

By Henry Krahn

The room was filled with soft, golden light. Square black tables were scattered across the room, covered by diamond-shaped tablecloths. At each table sat one or, at most, two people perched on simple wooden chairs. In the middle of each table was a pitcher filled with a black liquid and two small glasses. Dusty-looking pictures hung on the walls—portraits of people with dated clothing and youthful faces. Sitting on the other side of the room, underneath a duke with an enormous ruffed neck, was a slender girl with a lovely, anemic face. When she saw him enter, she smiled a wan “hello,” beckoning him to sit down with her. He walked over and sat down.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” she replied.

He thought for a moment.

“Where are we?”

“Don't worry about that for now.”

“Why am I here?”

“Don't worry about that either. You'll be here again.”

She had her hands folded in her lap. After he sat down, she had lowered her gaze to them.

“Well... what's your name?”

“I'm Grace,” she said.

“John.”

“Hi John. Where do you think we are?”

“A dream? I can't remember how we got here.”

“That's a good guess.” She looked up at him and smiled again, though now there was something sly in it. “But no, that's not quite it.”



In front of her was her own glass, filled to the brim but untouched. John looked around him. The others sat uncomfortably still, like unwilling pictures in a collage. Their glasses were empty. Someone came from a dark wooden door at the other end of the room and filled John's glass, before disappearing out another.

“Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself?” she asked.

“I'm a pastor,” he said.

She laughed.

“That's fantastic, you must be so surprised. Would you consider yourself devout?”

“At one point,” he said, puzzled. “In recent years, it's gotten harder. Faith is a tricky thing to hold.”

“It certainly is,” she exclaimed. “Do you have a family?”

“Yes and no.”

“C'mon, you can tell me.”

“Well, I had two kids, but my wife won custody. There was a miscarriage along the way, and my parents died a couple years back. So right now, there's not a whole lot left to me.”

John had an unhappy look on his face. It had been too easy for him to talk. Grace leaned forward and put her elbows on the table. Her hair fell forward across her face but she didn't bother with it.

“Do you think you're a good person, John?”

“That's not my decision to make.”

“I disagree. But what do you think?”

He sighed.

“Yes, I'd like to think so.”

She nodded.

“Tell me about your wife,” she said.

John mimicked her posture, leaning forward and slouching into his hands.

“Ex-wife. I met her in college. Up until then I had played it pretty fast and loose. I must have thought of women as objects, though back then I wouldn't have admitted it. I met her one night at a friend's party, and we fell to talking. I thought then that there was something different about her. I didn't touch her until after our first date, weeks later. A few years later we married.”

Grace lowered her eyes to her glass, staring at it as she spoke.

“That's very noble of you. How did it end?”

“Life,” he shrugged. “People change, the world changes. Sooner or later you realize that you're not the same person that fell in love with her, and vice versa.”

He was getting irritated. Before speaking again, he sat up straight, then slouched back again into his chair.

“So who's Grace then. Who wants to know all this?”

“Another pretty girl,” she said, laughing again.

“Tell me about your husband. Did you ever marry?”

“I'm 22, or was. It would have been indecent.”

“Tell me about your friends, then.”

It was her turn to imitate him, leaning back in her chair with one thin arm thrown over the top.

“They were who I wanted them to be. They gave me what I wanted, and I made them feel loved.”

“Did you love them?”

“No.”

“Did you ever fall in love?” he said. She looked down. She had an imperious voice, but spoke dejectedly.

“I married early because I thought I knew what love was. We divorced soon after because he couldn't handle the commitment, but I still took half of him. I married again, but this

time I didn't close myself off from the world. Other men came after me, and I let them, because it felt good, but I never got too involved. And now, here I am.”

“I thought you said you hadn't married.” John looked confused.

“Old habits,” she said. “I don't like talking about it. But I suppose it doesn't matter.”

They fell into a silence. John looked around to see if another waiter would come, but none did. The other tables were silent, but there was piano playing somewhere, softly, over crackling speakers. The place had a disorienting effect. When Grace asked him questions, he felt as if he had watched his life from the bottom of a well.

Grace spoke again.

“Well, would you like to know where we are?” she asked.

He nodded, and she held out her hand to him. He took it and she led him through one of the black doors.

When they stepped outside they were above and below, outside and within the room they had left. Myriad rooms were hung by invisible thread in a boundless, golden space. Far more than one person could ever count. Paths ran from door to door with no clear end or beginning. The music grew louder and softer again as they walked past rooms, all like the one they had left except with different inhabitants.

As they walked, Grace sung to herself under her breath. John could just barely make out the words:

*“Look for me*

*Where the river meets the sea,*

*Where mouth meets mouth*

*Beneath twilight sheets.”*

They walked awhile, choosing paths at random. Finally John spoke.

“So where are we?” he asked.

“This,” Grace said, “is hubris. From every last human heart.”

John nodded slowly.

“Do you still wonder why you're here?” she asked.

He didn't answer.

They walked a while longer. Their path took them between rooms, sometimes through them, and yet they stayed outside and within. John seemed lost.

“I'll bet this wasn't what you expected. Existence isn't empirical, John. We all come back to ourselves.” Her voice took on a resigned tone.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

“I don't know,” she laughed. “The in-between. It's just a story, not a puzzle.”

She had let go of his hand, but she slowed down and took it again, leading him through a door. They entered a room, almost exactly like the first. The portraits were different, as were the collaged people, but the tables, and the jugs, and the light all stayed the same.

“Tell me,” Grace asked him, “What did you want from life?”

He poured himself a glass of the black liquid. It wasn't particularly viscous, but it came out silently, without splashing. The liquid gave off no reflection from any angle, seeming to absorb all light.

“I used to think it was beauty, or truth. One or the other. Now I think it's comfort.”

“Me too,” she said. “We're here because of hubris, John. The hubris to imagine ourselves immortal.”

John frowned.

“Is that an arrogant thing to want? Should we strike out and hope to find something else that captures us—that makes us whole? What is it then, that we should want?”

“It doesn't matter. We chose to be here. We're not here for any reason other than that.”

John chewed his lip, then his expression cleared, and his voice took on the quality of hers.

“How did we choose to be here?” he asked.

“I told you,” she said. “Hubris.” She paused, then continued, in a trance.

“This is what we chose over the void. It beckoned over our heads. It wasn't ruin or misery... it was completion. Instead of lifting our heads to the heavens, we fixed our eyes on the dirt. We chose this, an infinite busyness, a hive of irreducible bits. We chose light over the dark.”

“I don't think I can agree with that,” John said.

“It's not up to you,” she replied. “I said that you'd be here again.”

Then they stopped talking again. The music continued, and John watched the stiff people around him. Then he looked to his cup, black and lightless. Grace sat across the table, staring at him. She filled her cup from the pitcher. They clinked their glasses and drained them.

A woman entered the room. She saw a pale, friendly-looking man eyeing a cup full of black liquid. He smiled, and she walked over and sat down with him.

# The Tea Trial

By Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier

She picked up two sugar cubes with little silver tasses and offered them to him for his tea while footsteps were heard in the gallery outside their room. He refused. All sounds in the house were normal earlier, like the sound of hot water boiling and the shuffle of his soft leather slip-on shoes. They were pointed at the toe. They were now pointed to leave. She remembered their wedding day photo; family feet elegantly positioned towards the photographer. A position of unity. The witnesses.

Flicking butter off her toast in a decisive but cautious manner she was haunted by their passion as a couple, at least the tender memory of it, like an aperitif she once drank. This morning her looks were met with good-natured outrage and pity, but she'd made up her mind before he did. Still, she'll drift past it. She would. It was just a little hiccup.

He had always kept a photograph of her in a gold frame, though she didn't appreciate the gesture. The frame, in her opinion, was gaudy and she disliked the image of herself even more. It was a horrible likeness—a likeness he for some reason enjoyed. Yet for her, the frame surrounded her like some garishly rigid and inflexible confine. She hated the shape of it and what it meant: her erosion. Now their wedding portraits meant something different too. All of it did.

His bright red plaid socks came into her view; a momentary distraction. But she refocused and found him fingering toothpicks on the table the same way he did women, discarding them casually. Morning absolutions had now been performed while she worked in a little dishonesty and sipped on the hot water of corruption. For once, she would not provide the emotion he so often enjoyed using against her. She knew he was prepared to judge and declare any outburst as out-of-order.

His breathing slowed to almost sedentary, as if to say 'dare she breathe'. She knew it would. He stopped reading his papers, which were strewn on the wooden table, even though their presence was more essential to him than her company. She pondered the distaste of being forced to maintain good relationships that would never recover. The morning's hurtful comment, almost an epithet, presented to her with a curt nod and a sly



smile, made her lose balance between her shoulders and spine while steam continued to rise from tiny flowered cups. Cups from her wedding dowry. But she said her peace. She'd recover.

Haunted by a tender passion they once shared, yet knowing they should have separated and dispensed from the niceties sooner, each tried not to mince words between pleasantries, even though there was little to keep their conversation afloat. Dimly lit corners in the room now reflected the dying light in their hearts; light once full to bursting, now has left the heart beating while unoccupied and disenchanting except to gratify the displays of unity they felt obligated to uphold for family. The jury.

As each exchange between them became more arduous, she devoted increasing effort to the peculiarities of carefully chosen words not entirely unpleasing for her lips, causing her to wonder how she could defend her decision to leave him. A voyeur outside the window would only see a couple pleasantly having morning tea, while inside, a contest of wills was taking place, with servants purposefully standing inaudibly outside the room. The judges.

The tea, which had been so carefully presented, now sat ignored while the couple steeped and brewed. His face visibly showed he'd had enough, the pink draining out of his complexion and spilling over into hers. Time had run out and patience went with it, which he now punctuated by fidgeting with his watch. She thought about who was waiting for him as he rose, vacating his seat to drift past all of it. All of her. She had assumed perhaps she'd be the one getting up first.

Everything in the room felt his energy leave and even the motionless tea sensed the current of his pull. It rippled as he passed. She almost spoke to stop him leaving but elected to say nothing, inhaling deeply while her chest, swelling with each breath gave the only indication of her inner thoughts. He'd left the framed photo of her behind. Alone now, she picked up his tea, added two sugar cubes and finished it for him, feet securely on the ground. A verdict.

# Lucky

By Maxwell Tran

I climb up the creaky wooden stairs, following the fragile frame of my grandfather. At 67 years old, he's not the nimble soldier he once was, but you can tell that he still takes pride in his movements, as slow as they may be.

He pauses on one of the top steps, catching his breath as he leans against the railing. He gestures towards the series of photographs on the wall.

“Do you know who that is?”

“No...is that you when you were younger, Ông ngoại?”

He laughs—his whole body shaking from the sudden movement—then grimaces from the pain, and laughs some more.

“Don't be silly. That's your Uncle Quý in the '80s!”

“No way. He had so much hair back then.”

My grandfather grins from ear to ear, his cheek muscles stretching his wrinkles to their limit. He turns to look at me, but his gaze travels straight through me, as if he has teleported back in time to 1983.

“Ông ngoại?”

His eyes refocus. I feel bad for breaking his reverie. My grandfather trudges silently up the remaining steps to his room. Walking is laborious for him, but he refuses to use a cane. Mom says it's the soldier's stubbornness in him.

My grandfather's bedroom is simplistic. Near the entrance, there is a small bed—no frame or headboard—that is really just a mattress covered by white sheets. On both sides of the bed are black night tables carrying various pills, patches, and ointments. Books, by far the

most abundant item in the room, adorn wooden shelves in the far corner, next to a large, circular window through which moonlight streams in. The pale blue walls are bare.

The most striking sensation when you walk into my grandfather's bedroom is the soothing, herbal fragrance. Like most other Vietnamese immigrants, my grandfather prefers scented patches and ointments to pills. His favourite is Eagle Brand medicated oil, "d`âu xanh."

My grandfather sits on the edge of his bed, motioning for me to join him.

"Close your eyes, Minh."

"What is it, Ông ngoại?" I ask, my eyes still wide open.

"Just trust me. Close your eyes."

I obey this time. I hear my grandfather's shuffling steps around the room, the opening and closing of a drawer. More shuffling steps.

"Keep your eyes closed, but stick your hand out."

My grandfather places what feels like a light envelope in my right palm.

"Can I open my eyes now?"

I expect to hear my grandfather's voice but only silence greets me in return.

"Ông ngoại?"

"Sorry Minh, I was thinking. You can look now."

When I finally open my eyes, I see that I am holding a bright red envelope, smaller than the size of my palm. I instantly recognize what it is: lì xì, a gift traditionally given during Tết, the Lunar New Year. I open the envelope to find a rolled-up one hundred dollar bill inside.

“What did I do, Ông ngoại? It was Tết three months ago!”

“You’re a good boy, Minh. I want you to have this. My gift to you. You know what lì xì means, right? It means lucky money. I want you to be lucky.”

“Thank you, Ông ngoại, but I can’t take this. It’s your money.”

I pause before adding, “...And you know my mom won’t let me have it.”

“Then don’t tell her. It’ll be our secret.”

I’m reluctant but my grandfather’s eyes plead with me earnestly. I fold the bill slowly, place it back inside the envelope, and pocket it.

It’s dark outside, yet my grandfather’s grin lights up the room.

\*

Later that night, I am playing with my cousin when my mom calls out my name.

“Minh, what did Ông ngoại talk to you about?”

I think about our conversation from earlier. “He just asked me how school was going.”

“Well, what did you say?”

I brainstorm desperately to come up with a reasonable answer, but I take too long.

“Did Ông ngoại give you any money?”

How does she know? How do moms always know?

I don’t say anything, but my mom sticks out her hand, much the same way my Ông ngoại asked me to stick out mine.

“What have I taught you? You can’t take other people’s money, even if they offer it to you,” my mom scolds, a stern look on her face.

“But mom—why not? He wanted me to have it. He said it’s lucky money,” I plead.

“Lucky or not lucky, it’s Ông ngoại’s money. We must return it to him. You promised me you would stop taking his money.”

“But mom, I didn’t steal it. He gave it to—”

My mom cuts me off. “No buts. We can’t accept this money.”

I hand over the lì xì, and run away, crying, thinking about the unfairness of the situation and how I managed to break two promises in one night.

\*

My cousins and I are playing hide-and-seek in the basement when I hear my mom and grandfather arguing loudly upstairs in the dining room.

I sneak away from the game and listen to the conversation, hiding my small frame behind the partially open door of the kitchen.

“Why did you give him the money?” my mom asks in a shrill tone. “We don’t need it.”

“It’s not about *you*. Why can’t I give my grandson a present? What’s wrong with that?” my grandfather retaliates. “It’s lucky money.”

“That’s not why you gave it to him!” My mom is angry now. “Look, I told Minh he can’t accept your money. I’ve let it go the past few times, but this can’t keep going on. He needs to learn that money is earned, not given. He has to work for it.”

“He’s *seven!*”

My grandfather's argument stops my mom in her tracks for a second, but coolly, she grabs the bright red envelope from her purse and deposits it on the living room table before storming out of the room.

My grandfather sits down at the table, picks up the envelope, turns it over and over in his hands. He frowns, as if contemplating where his plan went wrong. To this day, I have never seen someone look so disappointed.

\*

The entire night at the hospital is a blur. All I remember is that our extended family is there, including cousins from out of town. There are a lot of tears, and a lot of "I love you"s, and a lot more tears, with some tissues here and there.

I'm not allowed in my grandfather's room so I sit in the waiting room. And wait. And play Pokemon on my Gameboy. But it's not as much fun as usual, and I find myself mindlessly pressing the buttons. No one talks to me.

At one point, I hear my name being called. It's my mom. She smells like d'âu xanh.

"I want to see Ông ngoại."

"You can't see him right now, Minh. It's not a good time," my mom says, running her hand through my hair.

"But I want to see him. I haven't seen him in a while."

"Don't worry, Minh, we can go to his house this weekend. You can watch Hockey Night in Canada with him."

I pester my mom a bit more but she's pretty adamant that I can't see my grandfather, so I sit, and wait, and play on my Gameboy some more. I think about watching hockey with my grandfather. At some point during the long night, I fall asleep.

\*

I wake up and groggily walk to the bathroom, rubbing my eyes. I'm at home, which means my dad must have carried me to the car at some point.

The door to the bathroom is ajar. My mom is inside, leaning over the sink, sobbing uncontrollably, holding her face in her hands. I've never seen my mom cry before.

An uncomfortable knot settles at the bottom of my stomach as I come to a realization of what my mom could be crying about. I run to her and give her a hug.

"What's wrong, mom?"

"Your Ông ngoại..." she says, in between sobs.

"What about him?"

"I don't think he will be able to watch hockey with you this weekend, Minh."

"But why not?"

My mom suddenly stands up straight, looking at her reflection in the mirror: red eyes, running nose, wild hair. Then she sees me, a smaller version of her in the corner of the mirror. My mom starts to say something but then catches herself mid-breath, as if desperately searching for words in a maze she can't solve.

"Stay here, Minh. Close your eyes," my mom tells me.

It seems like a long time until my mom returns, but when she tells me to open my eyes, the tears are nearly gone and she has a half-smile on her face.

"Ông ngoại wanted you to have this," my mom explains reassuringly.

I hold the bright red envelope in my hand and smile back at her.

# Men of Violence

By Henry Krahn

Two men in suits stood at the door.

“Pleased to meet you, Eric,” said the one with a black tie, “You’ve been in contact with Mr. Miller, correct?”

“That’s right,” said Eric, shaking the proffered hand. He shook Mr. Miller’s hand afterwards.

“I know Mr. King’s been looking forward to meeting you,” said Mr. Miller through a smile, “What a place!” He stepped carefully inside the house and marvelled at the molding on the ceiling before wandering from the entrance into the dining room to admire the china. Eric led Mr. King into the sitting room opposite.

“Could I offer you some tea?”

“That would be lovely,” said Mr. King, settling into an uncomfortable chair. Eric went to the kitchen and returned with two ceramic mugs.

“Thank you.” He smiled gently. Eric sat on a sofa, and Mr. King began to speak.

“Now I trust Mr. Miller has been clear about our agreement. We’re thinking one point five; we won’t go higher than two. We’ll set it up real easy so you don’t have to worry about anything.”

“I see.”

“Price isn’t too much of a concern. But what we really do need—and fast—is an empty house, do you follow? We want to expedite this whole process. Our offer will stand for about two months, but I suggest you get moving sooner.”

Eric sipped his tea, and then looked at his hands. Mr. King hadn’t touched his mug.

“See, I’m just concerned about this whole thing. It’s really not m—”



“King, look at this,” shouted Miller from the other room, cutting Eric off. Mr. King got up, taking his tea with him. Eric followed him to the dining room, where Mr. Miller was examining a painting.

“Can you believe it? Look at the brushstrokes and the signature and... well, just look at everything!”

Mr. King nodded placidly. Mr. Miller turned to Eric “Where are you staying?”

“The guest room upstairs.”

Mr. Miller wandered out, and Eric and Mr. King returned to the sitting room. Eric took up where he left off.

“Like I was saying, it's really not my place. Mom has been here longer than anyone in the neighbourhood. I know she's old but, well, how can I be sure she'll be better anywhere else? I don't know, it just feels like... like...” he trailed off.

Mr. King waited for him to finish with raised eyebrows before calling to the man upstairs.

“Miller! Can you show Eric here the plans?”

Mr. Miller returned from Eric's old bedroom, grinning.

“I love your posters,” he said. Eric blushed.

He sat down on Eric's sofa and opened up his leather attaché case, removing several photos and pages covered with pictures and close-set type, switching through them slowly as he talked. On the first glossy page was an artist's rendering of two gleaming glass towers. Faceless people swarmed around on sidewalks next to empty streets. Then, there were shots from across the bay, highlighting the towers' place in the skyline. Following these were pages of graphs and statistics.

“Bay Towers will provide a scenic new landmark and tie the community together. Its many levels will provide invaluable services to the area. A gymnasium on the lower levels will host extracurricular sports for children and exercise programs for adults. Further up, a small shopping centre offers a convenient place for residents to shop, meet friends, or spend a night out. The upper levels will have the high-quality lakeshore suites that the Wellsley Group is world-famous for. Bay Towers will have caring and attentive staff onboard to meet any and all needs of the residents.”

At this point, Mr. King waved a hand and leaned in.

“See? So much better than this, what's here now. Just think how much better off this neighbourhood will be, just you think.”

Eric had been quiet when he suddenly remembered the end of his sentence.

“It feels like betrayal,” he said without conviction. He was almost asking them.

Mr. Miller was still smiling, but Mr. King's face was expressionless.

“I think that's nonsense and you know it,” he said. “She's old. Too old to take care of herself. You told me yourself, this place is falling apart. She's going to have to leave soon, anyways. You don't want to live here, and she's got no one else. We're giving you a better offer than you'll get from anyone else.”

“I just wish I could talk it over with her or... It just doesn't feel right to me, going behind her back like this.”

Mr. Miller responded this time, smoothing down his red tie first.

“Look, Eric, she'll be better off in a smaller place anyways. You won't always have to worry about her. You shouldn't have any trouble paying for it either.”

Eric didn't say anything. Mr. Miller spoke again.

“Isn't this what you want? Have we misled you? You agreed to it earlier, so we just assumed that you were interested in a little business.”

Mr. King, this time:

“Or are you really so selfish? Look, just think of all the people who would live and thrive here and all of the things that they could do. Broken-down warehouses and body shops—is that what you want? We are trying to do our part to make this city great. This is just the thing that this area needs to become great.”

“Selfish? How?” Eric asked quietly, his eyes bright.

“Maybe Mr. King spoke too sharply. We just want to do a little business and make everyone happier. That's all it is. Think of it—think of it like a, a stone in a pond. You throw the stone in, then what happens? Ripples go out. If anything's floating, it all rocks around on the surface of the water. That's just what this is. A stone. Look, we build Bay

Towers, then what? Well, everyone's looking at these great big shiny towers, and pretty sure they've all got it in their heads that they want where they live to be nice and clean too. You get these nice parks, people start cleaning up, and before you know it you've got a lovely neighbourhood. Isn't that good? Isn't it lovely? Look, it's easy really. You've already got power of attorney.”

Eric stayed silent.

Then Mr. Miller decided it was time to leave.

“Either way, we'll let you mull it over, kid. We'll give you a call in a week or two to see what you think.”

“Thanks for the tea,” said Mr. King, gesturing at the mug gone cold.

“Yeah, no problem,” Eric muttered.

Eric shut the door behind them and watched through the window as they walked away. Two men in suits, walking like wolves into the dusk.

# Finally

By Catherine Poku

Angela doesn't realize how clenched her jaw is. All she knows is that the Excedrin she took an hour ago is not lessening the pulsing throb at her left temple. She wishes Mason's knock on the door would be just as loud. But for now there is no knock, no jangling keys, and no car motor humming to a stop in the driveway. There is nothing but silence and the pounding in her head. She picks up her cell for the tenth time that evening. Mason's number is still not on the display. "There are no new messages," is the only robotic report that Angela hears from voicemail. There hasn't been a new message since late afternoon when Mason had left one complaining about how late the publisher was getting to their meeting. Mason had gone into the city to deliver a manuscript. "I'll be home by 6," were Mason's last words before hanging up.

Standing in front of their farmhouse, Angela stares out into the distance, the pitch-black landscape pierced by an isolated spray of porch light on a patch of their sprawling lawn. The fleeting blink of fireflies like tiny beacons in the night sky. Returning inside, the screen door angrily slams shut behind her as she drags her feet back into the living room, the fifth time since dusk. She checks the time: 8:53 pm.

"Mason?" Zoa screams from upstairs. Wearing fleece, polka-dot pyjamas, Zoa races down with a frothy toothbrush in hand stopping mid-flight once she sees only her mom in the living room. "Is Mason here? Was that—"

"Zoa," Angela firmly says, raking trembling fingers through her hair. "I already asked you to brush your teeth and go to bed. It's almost 9, you have school tomorrow."

"Okaaay, I am brushing my teeth," Zoa whines, as she slumps back up the stairs. "Mason always cooks dinner. I don't like eating take out anymore."

"Well, be thankful you ate at all," Angela snaps. "Now go to bed."

Instead, Zoa rushes down the rest of the stairs into her mom's arms, hugs and kisses her, then runs back up.

"Hey!" Angela calls.

“I know, I know,” Zoa says as she stops in her tracks. “Walk.”

“What I was going to say is, I'm worry-” Angela starts then half-heartedly decides to look at the glass as half full. “I miss Mason too. Listen, Mason'll be home before you know it and everything'll be okay.”

With a smile on her face and a skip in her step, Zoa disappears upstairs.

“I love you,” Angela calls after her.

“I love you,” Angela's voice wanes as she looks back outside into the blackness.

The iridescent display of Angela's cell tempts her to call Mason again, to leave another message, to call Mason's brother again. She reaches for a tissue to blow her nose. It's been running but she doesn't know for how long. It's been running for as long as her thoughts have been about what could have happened to Mason. Where could... Angela's chest tightens. Suddenly breathing feels like a struggle, a burden as her lungs seem to shrink in size. Mason would not run out on her again. It's not possible. Angela would have noticed this time if something were wrong. She would have noticed, right? Besides, Mason had promised that they would share everything; that they would deal with anything together, no matter how difficult, how complex, no matter how much it challenged their faith in being able to get through it together.

They live together now, Mason is not only accountable to Angela, but accountable to Zoa too and Mason wouldn't do anything to hurt Zoa. And they had... they had made love. Angela's heart leaps in her chest. Mason would never walk out on the covenant that they had made upstairs, in Mason's room, their room now, in this home they now share. It was the most beautiful promise Angela had ever experienced with anyone above and beyond her many boyfriends and one failed marriage that had produced Zoa. The first time with Mason awakened her. The second time, Angela cried. The third time, and every time after that, was like a vow they would only be able to make in that room; I do, I have, I will.

“Angela?” a haggard voice beckons her from another room.

Shaken out of her reverie, Angela runs to the kitchen. She stops in the doorway at the sight of Mason, not sure whether she should rush over or to stay paralyzed, awed that Mason is finally home.

Mason looks disheveled; her handbag almost drags on the floor suspended by the very tips of her fingers, her curls hang limply across her slouched shoulders, her face lackluster. Angela can't tell if Mason is relieved or frustrated, exhausted or defeated.

“What happened?” Angela asks, her voice unleashes a build-up of worry. “Where were you?”

“I'm so sorry,” Mason says. Slipping from her fingers, her handbag lays to rest on the floor. “It's so late.”

She waddles to Angela for a hug. Mason's growing belly—round with a pending life—looks heavy and burdensome. She continues, “My cell died. I couldn't find the car charger. I thought it was in the glove compartment. Then my car died.”

“What?”

“It's okay, it's in the driveway. Some nice stranger boosted the battery. He gave me his card somewhere. I have to thank him, mail him some cookies or something. It stalled about 10 miles from here. I was on the highway for hours before he stopped and oh—,” Mason says, suddenly holding her head. “I was so caught up in this whole mess, the baby was kicking, I had to lie down in the back seat...”

“I'm just happy you're home,” Angela says, giving Mason an intense hug. They hold each other in the quiet comfort of their hearts, arms wrapped around a burgeoning tenderness between them. Mason gingerly pulls out of the possessive embrace to gaze into Angela's troubled eyes.

“You...” Mason says, suspiciously studying Angela as she strokes a thumb across her cheek. “You thought I...? I promised you that I wouldn't do that again. I'm not going to leave you. You have to trust me.”

“I do. I will,” says Angela, fighting the fear that gathers at the edge of her eyes. “It's going to take me some time. I need time. I need to know...”

Turning her back to Mason is easier for Angela than closing her eyes.

“You need to know what?” Mason pleads.

“I need to know,” Angela says trying to hold back an unspoken fury. “That you'll be there for... Zoa. She needs you, you know... to, uh, get her up in the morning and to be there

when she comes home from... from school. And to-to have a home cooked meal. When her dad and I split up, and with my crazy work schedule, I raised her on take-out. And well, ever since you moved in she doesn't like take-out anymore. Did you know that?"

"What?" Mason asks perplexed.

"And it's your fault with all that..." Angela waves her hand dismissively, "that home cooking thing that you do. And tonight, she couldn't sleep. I just got her to bed a minute ago, worrying about you."

"Angela..." Mason says reaching her hand to Angela's shoulder. Angela flinches.

"And you're due in a few months," Angela continues, "anything could have happened. I... We don't want to lose you."

"You won't—" Mason starts.

"I don't know that," Angela interrupts, turning sharply to face Mason. So accustomed to Angela being so assured and, at times, detached, Mason stares helplessly as this forlorn version of her lover as she tries unsuccessfully to balance pillars of self-control, watching them topple from her hold.

"I don't know that," Angela continues, "I'm working on faith here and it's not one of my strongest points, okay. Y-you know what? Maybe this was all a bad idea. We should have waited before moving in together. Maybe you're not ready for this."

"No! No and yes—yes, I am," Mason exclaims. "I'm ready, you're ready. We're ready."

Angela shakes her head apprehensively.

"Yes, we are. We can do this. I want to do this with you. Look at me," Mason commands holding Angela's face in her hands, holding it tenderly and close to her own. "I want to cook for all of us. All four of us. I want to pack Zoa and our baby, yes our baby," she caresses her belly, responding to the surprised look on Angela's face, "lunches for school and watch them wave goodbye on the school bus. I want to have a hot meal ready for you when you come home from work so you don't have to worry about anything once you leave your job. I want to be with you, all four of us, together in this house, in our home. And..."

Mason takes both of Angela's hands into her own and places them on her heart and continues, "I want to lay down with you every night and, most of all, wake up beside you in the morning, with your head on my pillow every day and start all over again."

Angela doesn't feel the tears smeared on her cheeks or the ones that drip from her jawline; she's lost in Mason, raising their entwined hands to her lips and kissing them.

"Zoa!" Angela calls over her shoulder. "Zoa! Come down. We're all home now."



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